

The Free Press Short Story

PARDON THE HOME RUN

By HARRY GOLDBERG

WAYNE DIXSON was just going out to the baseball field for the daily practice session when his roommate stopped him. "Say, Wayne, I want you to do me a favor."

The captain of the baseball team grinned. "I was just going to ask you for one, too."

"Yes, Well, listen to mine first." A light of enthusiasm shone in the tall fellow's eyes. "You know how I've been practicing my magic, as I call it, the last year. Well, wouldn't it be a great idea if I started a club or society, or something like that? It's been called The Miracle Men, S. Tremont Simms, Founder."

Wayne's voice was sarcastic. "Tremont," he laughed, "Tremont! I must even give that name to my dog?" Samuel pretended to be insulted. He looked even more hurt when Wayne laughed at him and demanded, "What do you want me to do?"

"You know Russell, and he has to approve of a new society. Suppose you talk to him and fix things up."

"It's a crazy idea," decided Wayne. "It is not," Samuel was emphatic. "It is a great idea. I've been thinking of it for a long time. There are many useful tricks the fellows in school here could learn."

"The baseball captain put his hands on his hips and with serious eyes regarded the eager face of his roommate. "Listen, Sam," he asked, slowly. "Just how much do you want to found this club? Are you in earnest?"

Samuel grabbed him. "I'm deadly in earnest. Think of the honor of founding a new club here, a club that will live forever, and that will get bigger and bigger every year! I want to do this more than anything else in the world. His enthusiasm died out and his hand dropped from Wayne's shoulder. "But the whole trouble is, Russell says no. I've talked to him twice, but I can't budge him. You know him well, Wayne. Won't you talk to him for me?"

"One one condition, Sam. That is, you play baseball with us this year."

Samuel made a helpless gesture with his hands. "I can't play." "No? You didn't play for three years on the varsity in high school did you? And you didn't make the squad here the last two years did you? The only reason you haven't showed up this year is because of the magic you've been learning, Sam, I'm worried. This is the worst team Bellaire has ever had. Why don't you help by coming out?"

"Oh, I guess it's because I don't have the time, and—"

"Yes, you have. You can find the time," Wayne's words were clipped. Samuel slapped the other's back. "Sure, I'll be out. But you promise to talk to Russell?"

Wayne stared into his lanky roommate's eyes. "Sam, if you hit one home run during the whole season, I'll make Russell give his okeh."

Samuel grabbed his hand. "That's a go. Come on, get me into a uniform."

While they were walking down to the field, Wayne suddenly clamped his hand to his head. "Say, where did my baseball cap go? I had it when I left our room."

"I have it," grinned Samuel taking it out of his pocket. "When I stuck my hand in your coat pocket before, and you grabbed my right hand, I just slid off your cap with my other hand."

Wayne looked surprised. "You're pretty slick, Mr. Simms," he said, pretending to bow.

"You'd better laugh. The neck is kind of strappy, and you wouldn't get much pleasure out of wringing it!"

The first game went by but Samuel did not get his home run. All the team knew what was up and they teased Samuel every time he picked a bat when it was his turn to face the pitcher. He scowled, grimaced, and made all kinds of faces when he was in the batter's box, but still the best he did was to knock a two-base hit.

Samuel approached Wayne after the game, and the two walked to their room in the dormitory. "Suppose I don't hit a home run this season?" demanded the outfielder.

Wayne shrugged, turning his face to hide a smile at the other's worried manner. "Then I don't talk to Russell for you and your club. The Miracle Men will be a—ho, let's say a fragment of your imagination."

"It's nothing to laugh about," Samuel came back. His shoulders drooped, his eyes were sad, and he was the picture of despondency. "Suppose I don't hit a home run this year?"

"Remember," Wayne pointed his finger and pretended to be serious, "we have an agreement, and you said you'd stick to your part of it."

"Of course I will," Samuel said indignantly. "You thought I'd back out, didn't you?"

"No, I knew you wouldn't." "But I've still got to hit a home run!" Daily, on the field, Samuel tried his disappearing tricks, just to keep in trim, as he said. When one of the fellows demanded to know where his cap had gone, or how Samuel could have swapped gloves with him while he was talking to Samuel and holding the glove in his hand, the lanky fellow simply replied that if he was going to be the founder of such a club as he was planning, he would just have to be better than the rest.

Bellaire won the second game on its schedule, even though Samuel nearly threw it away by the wildest exhibition of base running ever played on the Bellaire field. It was the end of the seventh inning and the score was tied at four all. With one out Samuel got up to bat and clouted the first offering high into the outfield.

He was off like a streak, and he sped around first, full steam ahead. A wild hope shot through him. Maybe this was going to be his home run!

Head down, he plowed past second and swerved to his left to go to third. Coach Cooper, standing on third, was violently waving Samuel back to second. Samuel could not see him. He had visions of a home run, his Miracle Men club! He could picture the meeting of the club in full swing, with S. Tremont Simms presiding.

On the bench, the Bellaire squad was threatening to go into convulsions. The players doubled up with uncontrolled laughter. Some were sprawled on the ground, helplessly kicking their feet, with tears running down their faces.

"They pointed at Samuel and tried to speak, but always a yell of laughter choked their own words. Like an ungainly sprinter, Samuel was hunched over and running straight at the third baseman, who was calmly holding the ball in readiness to tag him. Samuel was not looking at the third baseman, or at the coach, or at anybody. He had his mind on reaching home plate.

The enemy third baseman reached out his hand and touched the runner with the ball. The umpire waved his hand, indicating that Samuel was out. The latter never felt the touch, nor did he

hear the umpire. He kept right on running, speeding down the home stretch as though a mad dog were chasing him. He crossed the home plate, straightened up with a wild whoop, and yelled "Home run!"

He was stopped by the sight of the Bellaire players. A puzzled scowl overspread his features. He shook Wayne. "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

Between gasps the captain explained to him that his hit had been only an ordinary double and that the third baseman had tagged him out before he had reached third.

Samuel scratched his head. "Well, I'll be switched. Can you imagine that? And I had my mind made up that I was going to get a home run!"

At the beginning of the final game of the year, with the "Tech" Aggers, Samuel, who had not yet achieved a home run, was a picture of nervousness. He stood up and sat down in the dressing-room no less than a dozen times before the team ran out to the field. He dropped two flies while warming up for the game.

"Maybe you'd better not play to-day," suggested Wayne. "You look nervous." The captain kept his hand over his mouth, to keep from laughing.

"Hi?" "What? No, I feel great. Honest, Wayne, I feel great. I've got to play to-day. The coach isn't going to bench me now, is he?" Immediately Samuel dashed off to see Cooper, who reassured him.

The first time up Samuel struck out. He had abandoned his usual type of swinging. To-day he was out to murder the ball. Even a triple meant nothing. It was either going to be a home run or nothing.

Bellaire went into the lead and was never in danger. The score went from two to five, then seven, then ten to nothing. Coach Cooper changed the whole line-up with the exception of Samuel. The later was making as though his team were one run behind and the state battling.

The eighth inning was his last turn at bat. It took Samuel fully a minute to choose a club. Only the umpire's warning to hurry up made him decide on his choice.

The pitcher threw a fast one that the umpire called a strike.

"That had a hop on it," Samuel told the umpire. "He's tampering with the seams. I want to see the ball."

Under the baseball rules, tampering with the seams is not allowed and a batter may demand to inspect the ball being thrown to him. The umpire called for the ball. The batter looked it over and threw it aside. "I want another ball," he said, and the umpire produced a new sphere.

On the next pitch, the same thing happened. "I want to see the ball," Samuel requested and again it was handed to him.

While inspecting the ball, the batter sneezed. He grabbed for his handkerchief. A wave of laughter rippled through the crowd of fans when they saw the huge piece of linen he carried. He then threw the ball back to the pitcher and stepped into the batter's box.

The ball came over. He caught the ball squarely in the middle. The crowd was up with a roar and the Bellaire players stood up and cheered their team mate. The ball had disappeared over the fence.

The lanky player was in high good humor in the dressing-room. "Well," he reminded Wayne, "you be sure to talk to Russell—to-night. I can get the Miracle Men club started before this semester is over, so that it'll be in full swing when school starts next year."

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were so far ahead it didn't matter and I—well, I had to hit a home run!" "Don't start me laughing again," begged Wayne, "or I'll burst my appendix! Boy, how clever. I knew you wouldn't have done it if we hadn't been that far ahead. I just want to tell you that I talked to Russell three days ago and fixed it up with him."

FAR MORE IMPORTANT
"Why, Tommy, what's the matter?" the fond mother asked her young son, who had just returned from his first football match with his junior school team.

WHEN WORDS FAIL
The golfer stepped up to the tee and drove off. The ball sailed straight down the fairway, leaped onto the green and rolled into the hole. The golfer threw his club in the air with excitement.

AMONG THE "MIZZEN"
The captain of a sailing vessel was questioning a rookie sailor regarding his knowledge of ships and the sea. After repeatedly receiving wrong answers, in desperation, he asked: "Where's the mizenmast?" "I don't know," replied the aspiring seaman. "How long has it been mizen?" "Jazz is like America; the skyscrapers, the big cities, the speedier way of living. It expresses the excited, nervous tempo of the age."—Irving Berlin.

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