

The Free Press Short Story

The Two-Twenty Yard Race

By EARL REED SILVERMAN

PERRY DORLAND turned neatly at the near end of the pool and gave freely of his strength. In the last desperate sprint toward the rope which barely touched the surface of the water. As his arm came in contact with it, George Kelly, veteran swimming coach, clicked the stop watch in his hand. "Two minutes and twenty seconds," stated Kelly, with grim satisfaction. "That's fast enough to win any man's race."

Perry, grinning happily, kicked his way to one side of the pool where he lifted himself to the tiled flooring.

"You ought to beat Henderson by ten yards at least," declared the coach. "Get a good rest to-night and don't come down to the gym at all to-morrow. That ought to put you right on edge for Saturday."

Perry picked up a towel which lay near by, ran it over his face and hair, and stroled into the varnished locker room. It was deserted except for Tom Lindley, the team manager, who sat in one corner puzzling over some figures on a sheet of paper. "How did your trial go?" he asked.

"Two-twenty for the full distance," answered Perry and the other youth nodded.

"You'll win the furlong without any trouble. And, believe me, we're going to need those points of yours."

Perry looked up curiously. "Is this meet going to be as close as all that, Tom?"

"I'll say it is,"

"You can count on me," said Perry. They relaxed into silence, while Perry dressed hurriedly. It was five-thirty and he was due at the Commons in Willetts Hall at six. He found it hard at times to train properly for swimming and fulfill satisfactorily his job as a waiter. The work gave him his meals free, however, and he knew that he could not afford to be late.

"Be seeing you soon," he said, as he started for the doorway, but Thomas stopped him.

"Haven't heard any peculiar rumors about this Steelton Tech meet, have you?" he asked, watching Perry closely.

Perry's face puckered into a puzzled frown. "What do you mean, peculiar rumors?"

"I heard this morning that some one from Steelton is anxious to bet a lot of money they'll beat us."

"I don't see how they could," answered Perry. "The students here at college won't bet."

"But there are people in town who will," continued the other. "They're pretty confident that we'll win, of course and they wouldn't be adverse to picking up some easy money."

Perry pondered over the rumor as he hurried across the campus. During his three and a half years at Raritan, he had never come in contact with gambling of any sort. That kind of thing simply was not done on the campus. It certainly would be ridiculous, he told himself, for anyone to bet money on the result of the Raritan-Steelton Tech swimming meet anyway, for, barring accidents, Raritan was almost certain to win. When he reached the Commons, he changed into his white waiter's coat and promptly forgot about the matter.

After supper Perry went upstairs to his room on the third floor of the dormitory and switched on the light. A letter from his mother lay on the center table. He slit open the envelope, wondering how affairs were going at home. They were not going well at all he learned. In fact, affairs had suddenly and unexpectedly reached a crisis. The Bridgeton bank, which held a two-thousand dollar mortgage on their house, had given notice that the mortgage must be reduced by five hundred dollars within a month and that repairs totaling approximately the same amount must be made to the building.

Perry laid down the letter carefully and stood looking at the significant sheet of paper with dull eyes. The officials of the bank knew that his mother was a widow and had no surplus funds. They knew that he himself was working his way through college and that only a few months were left before his graduation; yet they were asking this impossible action.

Perry sank down upon a chair and cupped his chin in his hands. After a long time he decided that there was only one course for him to follow. He would leave college, go home and try to find a job that would supplement his mother's earnings from her little shop and perhaps the bank would carry the full mortgage for a while longer and give them additional time for the repairs.

"I can leave for Bridgeton Saturday night after the swimming meet," he reflected. "After all, I'm captain of the team and I can't desert them in the most important meet of the season."

Having made his decision, he reached for a book and tried to study, but found it impossible to keep his mind from the tragedy that had enveloped him. He told himself, without great hope, that possibly he might persuade the bank to postpone any action until after his

graduation. Times were hard however, and even banks were forced to protect themselves against danger of financial loss.

His thoughts turned to the coming meet with Steelton and to his own race against Robert Henderson in the two-twenty-yard swim. Robert and he were old friends; they had graduated in the same class at Bridgeton High School. Robert's father, in fact, was president of the bank which held the mortgage on the Dorland home. Mr. Henderson was always friendly.

The thought occurred to Perry that he might have a word with Robert about it before the swimming meet. Robert would understand how crucial the situation was; perhaps he could persuade his father to show some leniency in the matter.

"I'll ask him, anyhow," Perry decided. Somehow, the problem seemed less acute and the prospects of solution brighter. Throughout the next day, however, Perry was conscious of vague forebodings.

After supper he went down town for a while with Thomas Lindley. Thomas announced in answer to his question, that he had heard no more rumors about gambling. "I imagine everything will be all right," he said.

When they returned to the dormitory, Perry noticed from the campus that there was a light in his room, although he had left it in darkness. When he pushed open the door, he was surprised to find a stranger sitting at the center table.

"Hello," he said uncertainly.

The man stood up and grinned into his puzzled eyes. He was about Perry's age, with sleek black hair and a pointed chin. Instinctively, Perry disliked him, but the unknown visitor smiled disarmingly and held out his hand. "Please forgive me for disturbing you," he apologized suavely, "but I happen to be a friend of Bob Henderson and I'd like to talk with you."

Perry nodded, wondering what in the world a friend of Henderson's would want to talk with him about. "My name is Lloyd Bergman," continued the visitor. "I and I live at Steelton. Until last year I was a classmate of Henderson's and have been very friendly since."

Perry leaned against the edge of the table. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

"The swimming meet to-morrow," Bergman looked up smilingly. "I know that you want to get to bed so I'll come straight to the point. It so happens that Bob Henderson has a special reason for wanting to beat you in the two-twenty."

"What's that?" asked Perry quietly.

"His father's coming down to see the meet. What we want you to do is to let Henderson win."

"Who are we?" asked Perry.

"Bob and his father—any myself, of course."

"How do you happen to be in this?"

"I'm Bob's friend. He asked me to come over to see you."

"Oh!" Perry was tempted to point to the door and order Bergman out without further comment. First, however, he wanted to get at the bottom of the affair. "I can't very well do that," he said. "I'm captain of the Raritan team you know."

"Yes. But after all, a swimming race isn't of such great importance." Bergman spoke persuasively. "And I happen to know that it will be to your advantage not to win to-morrow in the meet."

Perry gripped the edge of the table

"Just what are you driving at, Bergman?" he demanded.

"I'm trying to tell you," answered Bergman. "That if you let Henderson win to-morrow, the Bridgeton bank will give your mother an extension of time both on the mortgage and the repairs."

Perry's heart began, suddenly, to beat double time. "How—how did you learn about that?"

"From Bob, naturally," Bergman stood up. "I am not here to try to persuade you to do anything against your will. But surely you must understand that your college degree is infinitely more important than a swimming race. And you would want to save your mother from unpleasantness."

"Yes," agreed Perry miserably.

"Then, that's all, I guess. However, I have one request to make. You are not to say anything to Bob about it. But after the race, if he wins, things will be all right—at home."

Perry made no answer. He simply stood beside the table while Bergman picked up an ivory-colored hat, drew on a tweed coat and prepared to leave the room. At the door he halted. "You will use your head in this matter of course. There are more important things in life than winning races, you know."

After he had gone, Perry walked over to the single window in his room and looked out across the deserted campus. Contending thoughts swirled in his mind, but one thread of reasoning ran clearly through the chaos. His first duty was to his mother.

In all his long career as an athlete, however, he had given his best to his team. In football he had plunged doggedly forward, revelling in the clash of padded bodies, accepting painful punishment without complaint—for the team. In swimming he had given all that he had, and his teammates had elected him captain. They believed in him, had faith in his honesty. He was going to find it hard not to stand true to his obligations.

When he reported in the varsity locker room early the following afternoon, his eyes were heavy from lack of sleep. Coach Kelly regarded him anxiously. "Feeling fit, Perry?"

"Okay," answered Perry. He felt like a traitor, however, knowing that for the first time since he had reported for swimming, he was not playing the game as a sportsman should. When, eventually, the time for the meet rolled around he led his men through the shower rooms to the gym pool where they were greeted with a long "yell" by the five hundred Raritan roosters massed in the balcony.

The meet as he remembered it later, was a series of rather vague pictures. He discovered Mr. Henderson in a reserved seat near the finish line. The sight of the man who had such power to harm him filled Perry with a dull fury which he fought successfully to overcome.

After the hundred-yard swim, which a Steelton entry won by a scant two feet, Robert Henderson came out of the dressing room, discovered Perry and approached him with outstretched hand. "Glad to see you, old man!" said Robert cordially. "How are things going?"

"Not so good," answered Perry, and turned away, not trusting himself to speak further.

He noticed that Bergman was sitting in the second row, almost directly behind Mr. Henderson. As he glanced in that direction, the former Steelton student waved at him and smiled significantly. Angry almost beyond restraint, Perry went back to the locker room and stretched himself upon one of the rubbering tables. The meet was progressing as he had expected and Raritan was enjoying a comfortable lead. Barring accidents, the team would win irrespective of what happened in the furlong swim.

A feeling of discomfort, almost of shame, possessed him. He shrank from contact with his teammates, and when Thomas Lindley came hurriedly into the room, Perry frowned. Thomas, wide-eyed with dismay, addressed him excitedly. "We've just lost the relay race. Ernie Marston, who swam third for us, was disqualified for an illegal turn."

Perry leaped to his feet. The relay

race counted eight points and Raritan had expected to win easily. Now defeat in the meet itself was more than a possibility. "What's the score?" he demanded.

"Twenty-eight to twenty-four in favor of Steelton," answered Thomas. "It means we have to win the last two races, or we're licked."

Perry followed the manager out to the pool just in time to see a Raritan entry finish first in the breast stroke. A visiting swimmer was second, however, and with only one race, the two-twenty, remaining, Steelton led, thirty-two to thirty. A first place in the final event would give them the meet.

Dimly Perry heard the harsh voice of the announcer: "Last call for the two-twenty!" He drew off his bathrobe and took his place at the edge of the pool.

He raised his eyes toward the balcony and noted that Mr. Henderson was watching him. Bergman was leaning forward, tensely, his eyes shining. Perry clenched his fists at his sides and looked straight ahead. The cheering section gave a short yell for him. Suddenly Raritan's hand was on his arm.

"Just swim your race, Perry," the coach said. "We're depending on you."

He nodded, without turning, standing motionless at the starting line. For an instant his mother's face flashed before him. Amid the silence of the stands awaiting the bark of the gun, he seemed to hear her speaking. "I would want you to do what is right, Perry."

It was only his imagination, of course; yet he knew without further reasoning, that the right thing to do would be to win for his team. Even though it meant that he would be forced to leave college, he must keep his faith. Later, when he told his mother about it she would understand.

He was suddenly himself again, cool and alert. When the gun sounded, he dove cleanly and crept into the lead before the end of the first length. Swimming with machine-like precision, he increased his advantage with each succeeding lap, while the roar of the Raritan roosters sounded dimly in his ears. When, finally he crossed the finish line a winner by fifteen yards, he turned upon his back and drifted in pleasant relaxation. He saw Mr. Henderson joining in the applause, as though the older man were glad he had won; but in the second row, Bergman had leaped to his feet and was shaking his fists angrily. Perry only grinned. A second Raritan swimmer had finished third in the race, and the team had won the meet, thirty-six to thirty-five.

When, after a half hour or so, the excitement had died down, Perry drew on his sheepskin coat and prepared to leave for the dormitory. He had kept the faith and now he was willing to make the sacrifice. "I'll be leaving for home to-morrow," he thought, and stood in the doorway for a last look at the

(Continued on Page Seven)

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SLAT'S DIARY
BY OLIVER N. WARREN

Sunday: Well, school will soon be out. That is the school what you study readin' & ritten & spellen & etc. But I reckon it will never get out & it are the which one that interfere the most with my affairs.

Monday: I was a chewen the rag with Jane this a.m. & sed to her sed I that I believe I have a purty big hart I am so kind & etc. She sed she that mobby I don't take up so much room, that I been layin it at her feet a long time & she didden see it. She thinks she's smart.

Tuesday: Bleders was out with Elsy last evening & she sed she aso hungry for love he told me. But from the way she performed in the ice erm, store Bleders sed he thot she are just plane hungry.

Wednesday: Jake had a new girl last nite, he I weth has just arived in town on a veeb. Jake sed she at onet told him she are a girl of few words & he sed he had to believe it for all she sed to him were Slop, Dont & No.

Thursday: I partly even with Jane for what she sed about my brat. She sed I sum times acted gurlish & I up & sed Well why not. 1/2 of my parrence are men & 1/2 are wimmen. So that lunched her up.

Friday: I seen in the noosepaper that the U. S. army gets neerly a billyen from the govt-for not ften I suppose. Emney how, it dont do as much ften as I & Jake & Bleders does with them tutt kids down by the R. R. tracks.

Saturday: Ma was a talken about sum boddle with a habble 13 mos. old & it dont talk none. At all. Then it not a gurli bable sed Pa & Ma look like she are about 1/2 sore.

THE ROAD TO A FARM

Many things of one kind and another have been said about Premier Hepburn of Ontario. There is one point which has not been sufficiently stressed. That point (and it is one of considerable importance when one remembers other roads and other administrations) is that road leading to a famous onion-farm in Elgin County is a very poor road. It is unpaved. It is full of pitch holes. It needs gravel.

Perhaps we made our pilgrimage to the farm by the wrong way, perhaps Mitch has a secret paved highway hiding among his onions, but our fixed impression will continue to be that that road into Mitch's farm is a very poor one indeed. It is a disgrace, but a respectable disgrace.—The Printed Word.

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