

PARSON HARWOOD'S CURVES

By Bert Estes

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GALLIA CITY, like most Ohio river towns, had a mixed population full of sharp antagonisms, social, political and religious. Notwithstanding, there was one local institution about which there was only one mind. The Gallia City Baseball Club, the apple of the municipal eye, was felt to be set for the city's defense against the world in general and the nine from Centerport in particular.

Centerport, a few miles down the river, was a high headed little town given to taunting itself unseemly and challenging other towns to come out and meet their doom. Worse than that, Centerport had in hand a large stock of doom and was liberal in applying it—over the diamond. The mutual scorn of Centerport and Gallia City had something tragic in its intensity. To beat Centerport was the summit of Gallian achievement; Centerport lived only to repeat its victories over the hated foe. In both business of all sorts was transacted as a sort of adjunct to the larger mission of life.

Brent Harwood came to Gallia City to supply Dickson's pulpit while Dickson, poor man, was away in hospital. Dickson was the Presbyterian minister. Harwood was to live in the vacant parsonage and take his meals over with the Potters. Dickson had arranged all that. Harwood hoped he had arranged also for some one to meet him, but when he stepped off the boat from Cincinnati early one Saturday morning and looked about he found none to welcome him.

When the dock had been deserted by all but roostabouts and chronic loungers, Harwood made up his mind that there was some hitch—his letter of announcement had possibly miscarried—so he walked up to an old river man in the freighthouse and said:

"I believe I am to board with a family here named Potter. Do you know of any such people?"

"Know 'em? Why, sonny, they ain't man, woman nor child—doggone it, even er orneray yaller purp' nor sensely ef on that purp—livin' in these here parts that I don't know! You bet I know 'em—all family, includin' the cat—ple chap, with b'lies on his nose; nice ole gal for his missus, son, the gol-afamed cuus in seventeen states fer all plannin' an' orgins, an' the son's wife, Annie, who is jegger great big hunk o' the salt o' the earth. Say, what d'ye want with 'em? Be ye one o' them drummer chaps tryin' ter sell Pot some more goods?"

Harwood shook his head. "I've come to spend the summer here," he said. "I shall take my meals with the Potters and live at the parsonage."

"Why, it's shut up! Dickson's gone ter New York ter have some big doctor cut him open an' right him up inside," the river man said.

"I did hear that was a—say, young fellow, you ain't the new preacher that's comin'?"

"I am going to try and preach," Harwood said modestly. "My name is Harwood."

"Brother Harwood," faltered the river man, "heme beg your pardon the durndest way I. had no idee—you don't look like a parson, you don't dress like a parson, you didn't let on you was a parson—how in tunkit was a fellow to know? I hope you'll ferget I called you sonny. If you will, by grab, you can hit me if I don't come to church—not next Sunday, but some time before you go."

"That's a bargain," Harwood said, shaking hands before he made his way to breakfast at the hotel.

Upon his second Monday morning in Gallia City Harwood strolled down to Stevenson Potter's music store. Ste-

ven Saturday, and Tom Jordan is off on a big, big bat. You know, there ain't another man in the whole darn town that can pitch a ball within four feet of the plate. Centerport knows it too—that's just why they've run this challenge on us."

"Round up Tom. He can get in shape," Potter said confidently.

Colonel snorted: "Round nothin' Tom's a holy terror when he's on a spree—besides, he's gone. Maybe the Lord knows where he is—I don't, for sure. It's the very cussedest luck—I'd rather lose a hundred dollars, than have them fellows come and wallop us—and we've got to play 'em. If we re-fuse they'll crow over it forever and the day after."

"Great mud!" said Potter—he never said anything stronger—"that mustn't happen. Can't we import a pitcher? What's the matter with Stevens of the Riversides? He's a bird—no mistake." Colonel shook his head. "Never do in the world," he said. "Twouldn't be a square deal for one thing; for another, they'd be sure to get on to it—and then—"

"Well, we've got to accept the challenge," Potter said. "Do it right away and throw in a big bluff. Tell 'em we've got a new pitcher that will take all the kinks out of 'em. Then we must rustle for a pitcher—we've got to—that's all."

"Lord, Pot, it makes me sick abid thinkin' of the luck of those Centerport scrubs," Colonel said. "They've beat us, Colonel said. "They've beat us and the heat on this way—we've not had a fair show in the longest time. And now, just as Tom Jordan was pitching in such great shape, off he goes and gets full again."

"If you'd only put on the mitts,"

"Well, whining nor cussing, don't help us, as I see. I'm going back to talk with the preacher," Potter said.

"Preacher be hanged!" Colonel said irreverently. "Are you going to set him praying against the Centerports?"

Potter did not answer—the last word caught him half way across the street.

"Who is your military friend?" Harwood asked, smiling.

Potter explained briefly that Colonel was not a military man. He had been baptized that way and was the "son" of Rodsill & Son. Moved by an impulse he did not understand, he told also of the challenge and of Gallia City's predicament. Harwood listened, thumping softly on the strings of a fine guitar. At the end he said:

"I'm feeling pretty dull and blue this morning. Do you think your friend Colonel would let me toss ball to him long enough to set my blood circulating?"

"Great mud, parson! Do you play ball?" Potter asked.

"I did at college, also at the seminary, whenever I had the chance," Harwood answered. Potter whistled.

"Dickson almost had fits if you named baseball to him," he said. "Why, he preached against it and came near losing his job. He did lose half the congregation. But come on, I want Colonel to see you."

Colonel stared a little at Harwood, but invited his two visitors out into the alley back of the store, where they might toss balls to their hearts' content and not a soul be the wiser. But to Harwood's suggestion of gloves he only said, "If it gets too hot, I'll put 'em on, but I reckon there won't be any long whiskers on the balls you pitch."

Harwood nodded and pitched the ball, but he said nothing, only stripped off coat, vest and collar and began to toss. He played lightly, but easily. Colonel caught with an air of condescension and returned the ball with a great show of consideration for the minister's soft hands. After a little Harwood asked if Colonel would mind catching a bit while he tried his hand at pitching.

Potter lined up his forces before the pitcher. Harwood winked at Potter; then, with a motion like the "uncolling of a steel spring," he sent another in-shoot to Reed so swift that Reed had no time to react. Bill managed to get his hands up in the instinctive movement of self defense. He caught and hung to the pitcher's pants, which had marked at the proper distance. A ball or two went over the plate true as an arrow.

"Good enough, parson!" Colonel laughed, still patrolling. "You've got the ball under bullet control, sure."

Harwood said over his shoulder to Potter: "Open your eyes and get right behind me. You'll see something. So will Colonel." Then in a louder voice: "Do you mind if I pitch a few stiffer ones? I want to see if I have lost the hang of it."

"Let 'em come, parson!" Colonel shouted back, almost convulsed that a little man, whom he could fling over his shoulder, should be so considerate.

Harwood nodded, saying:

"Thank you. Of course I would not put twice in them unless I knew you did not object. I wish you'd put on gloves for a parson's pitching, you know. Soak your hands in very hot water; it will set them all right. Now, is there an other gentleman who cares to play ball?"

In the soft, warm twilight of that

evening day Harwood sat countless and comfortable in the parsonage study.

He was smoking and trying hard to keep cool. He was also very lonely and, it must be confessed, blue from staying alone in the deserted house.

He was genuinely glad to hear heavy steps upon the gravel and a little later to welcome Potter. Colonel, Reed and some more men he did not know.

"This isn't exactly a social call," Potter began, "yet we can't exactly call it business, and the fact is we're all afraid to begin."

"Oh, ho! Somebody going to commit matrimony?" Who is it—Colonel or my friend Reed?" Harwood asked, his eyes twinkling. Reed grinned broadly. The day before he would have thrashed the man who had named him friend to a parson. But a man who could play such ball—that was another matter altogether.

"You'd done wrong, parson. That sort of thing comes right in your line and ours is way off it," Potter said.

"We are in a hole. We want your help, but we don't know how you'll take our proposition."

"But you do know—at least you ought to—that if I can legitimately help you or any one in this town I shall be both proud and happy to do it," said Harwood.

"But this is clean outside ministerial duty," Potter began. Harwood smiled. "I am a man as well as a minister," he said.

Bill Reed broke in: "Now, looky here. Ain't no use chawin' longer on

"That's right where they would go if you didn't get out of the way. Stand still and keep your eyes open," Harwood commanded. "Now!"

"Biff! Another sizzling inshoo! Crack! Colonel was in the air dancing like a wild Indian, trying to blow on his hands and rub his elbows at the same

that rag. Parson has give out fair an' square he wants to be took on the dead level—a man same as we are, only a dashed sight—excuse my French, parson—it gits the best o' my United States, before I know it. The case is this—we want you to help us tick them down—

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