

Big League Stories

By CHARLES E. VAN LOAN



VI.—M'CLUSKEY'S PRODIGAL

From "The Ten Thousand Dollar Arm and Other Tales of the Big League" Copyright, 1912, by Small, Maynard & Company

MIKE M'CLUSKEY might have known something was wrong with Rick Keene when that high-salaried artist asked for a raise on his first month's pay. Nothing new for a bush league pitcher to get a thousand dollar a month, but Mike should have noticed that the pitcher's eyes were open. And Keene's was the very Methusalem of all men. I've lost my check book, said Keene. "Can I tap you for a couple of hundred?" "If I had that much money a third I'd speak to you? Dog! I believe I'd speak to myself!" as he saw the look of real disquiet in the face of the pitcher, Keene added: "I was only kidding. Will a couple of hundred do you? I'll get it for you tonight." "A man who could think as fast as Mike Keene, who had been directing his camera from the bench Mike was sitting on, looked at him and he had formed his opinion of a character nothing short of an angel would budge him. Mike had known Keene for six years. He always was steady and reliable. By Mike's reasoning, he always was so. Mike had been the man to notice things off the diamond as well as he would have seen that Rick's pants were missing. He was a fixed star in the base-innings. For three years he had the Nonpareils pitched in the dugout, and whenever the "ice wagon" went into the box the pitcher sat back, unloosed their roots and cooled their gloomy prediction of defeat. The same feeling existed to the team. Mike was blind there were eyes on the team. Tim Finch, a little second baseman, observed the absence of the out-signs of prosperity. He saw Rick blow in without the Finch remarked the next afternoon that the players were removing their soggy flannels and roaring in service of the overworked pitcher. It had been Burchard here, with the sheets and his method of the races. I'd say that the pitcher some winter track had been along the old boy. Foster, the mainstay catcher of the club, also had his eye on the star

call them to me any more. I suppose he'll warm out of it, all right, but he ain't like he used to be." "If Peg could have looked through the keyhole of Keene's door at that precise moment he might have been enlightened. The thing which ailed the star pitcher was the same thing which has driven so many brilliant performers out of the big leagues and back to the bushes. In Rick's peculiar case it was a brown quart bottle with a red and yellow label on the side. During the winter the habit gained strength. Lacking the check of training and hard exercise, Keene hid himself in a small southern town and gave himself up to self-indulgence. Keene hoped that with the beginning of the spring training the appetite would desert him and he'd set himself about the annual task of "unlimbering the old soup bone." The arm was as strong as ever, but the steadiness and the control which made him a great pitcher were missing, and nobody knew it better than Keene himself. Rick believed that when the strain of a game was put upon him he would find his old control. It was because of this that he asked M'Cluskey to let him pitch one of the first games against the club team. He was driven from the box in the third inning. "Little wild today, old horse," said Peg. "Little wild. You'll be all right in a few days." Rick did not answer, but gloomily slipped on his blanket coat and trudged toward the dressing room. That evening he did not join in the usual "fanning bee," which is an institution of the training camp. Ball players, like all other performers, talk shop at every opportunity. The Nonpareils opened the season against their old enemies, the Gamecocks. M'Cluskey, anxious to win the opening game, watched his old pitcher as they warmed up and selected Fargo. The crowd had been yelling for Keene. They yelled still louder in the fifth inning, when Fargo gave two bases on balls, and Rick, on the bench found himself wondering what they would say to him if he went into the box without the control which had enabled him to win from the Gamecocks the last seven times he had faced them. Fargo won his game by virtue of a heavy bombardment in the eighth inning, and the Nonpareils trotted to the clubhouse with an inaugural victory to their credit. That night, aided by the bottle, Keene decided to call for a showdown. "If I can get out there and beat a club or two," he thought to himself, "I'll get over this nervousness." The next day he asked M'Cluskey to send him into the box, and in warming up he showed remarkable speed and his old time control. The roar which greeted Keene when he entered the diamond went to Keene's nerves like a tonic, and when the first ball shot twisting over the inside corner of the plate and the umpire's right hand went into the air the entire Nonpareil infield began to bark: "The old boy's there!" "Git at 'em, Rick!" It was this sudden yelling behind Keene which informed the big pitcher that his teammates had not been sure of him. They were encouraging him just as they encouraged Delaney and the other doubtful ones. It was a shock to Keene's professional pride. He set his jaw at a fighting angle and began to find the corners of the plate with his curve ball, and for six innings he made the Gamecocks wear a path from the visitors' bench to the plate and back again. He would show 'em that there was nothing the matter with him. In the seventh inning Rick began by missing the plate with his first ball. He followed with two more curves which went wide; tried a fast ball and just grazed the batter's shoulder. The Gamecock coaches whooped derisively as their man jogged down to first base. "You know what they said about this fellow?" they shouted. "No control! Goin' to be a bad year, Rick, a-b-a-d year!" "Make those fellows shut up!" Keene growled to the umpire, whereupon the coaches, seeing that they had hit the mark, redoubled their efforts. Keene waited as long as he dared in the hope of steadying himself and then flashed Foster the sign for a straight, fast ball. Peg nodded and dropped into position. Rick put all his speed on the ball and let it fly like a bullet. He knew when the ball left his hand that he was taking a gambling chance on getting it over the plate, but Hennessey, the batter, stood still until it was too late. Hennessey was an old timer. He had batted against Keene for several seasons. Very few pitchers ever hit a batter purposely and then usually with

a curve ball, and Keene's control was so well known that batters stood up to the plate without fear of him. This was Hennessey's undoing. Rick saw him drop his bat and dodge, but the ball caught him on the side of the head, and Hennessey went down like a log. It was two minutes before he recovered consciousness, two minutes of agony for Keene. This finished the last shred of Rick's nerve. When the game began again Keene walked the next man with four balls in succession and had thrown two wide ones to the next batter before M'Cluskey sent Delaney running to the rescue. The bleachers received the blow in wondering silence. Rick Keene taken out of the box for wildness! "Pretty tough luck," said one of the younger pitchers. "You had a no hit game going too." Keene did not answer. "Too bad," said M'Cluskey. "If you hadn't hit that fellow you'd have been all right. But I had to do it, Rick." Keene slipped along the bench to the water bucket, took a big drink of cold water and squared his shoulders. "Mac," said he, "the next time I get at these fellows I'll be right or"— He left the sentence unfinished and started for the clubhouse. Before he reached the gate the Gamecocks had completed their work of annihilation, and Keene's three presents had turned into runs at the plate. Next morning Keene did not appear at breakfast, and M'Cluskey, who lived at the same hotel, went up to Keene's room. Rick's bed had not been disturbed, and all his belongings had disappeared from the room. An envelope lay on the dresser. It was addressed to M'Cluskey, and the manager ripped it open with nervous fingers. There was little enough of it: "Dear Mac—I've got to go away for a while. If there is anything coming to me take it in part payment of that two hundred." R. KEENE M'Cluskey dropped the sheet of paper with a low whistle of amazement. Then he picked it up again and spelled out each word. It would not have surprised him more to have received such a communication from his wife, Rick Keene gone? Where? What for? It was unbelievable. M'Cluskey hurried down to the desk. "Where's Keene?" he asked. "His key's gone," said the clerk. "Isn't he in his room?" "His key was in the door," said M'Cluskey. "Where's his trunk?" "Some of the players, lounging about the lobby and reading the morning papers, gathered around the manager. "Rick's gone!" said M'Cluskey. "Gone!" said Fitzpatrick. "Mike, you're crazy." M'Cluskey produced the note. At the same time the hotel porter arrived with the information that at 7 o'clock the night before Keene had asked that his trunk be taken to the storage room. The man who had taken the trunk was exhaustively cross-examined. "There was nothin' strange about his manner that I see, sir," ran his testimony. "He's always quiet like. No, sir, he didn't say anything else besides tellin' me to put his trunk in the storage room." No one had seen Keene leave the hotel. The afternoon papers "played the story" on the front pages. Some brilliant imaginations were loosed upon the disappearance of the star pitcher. The city boiled with excitement, for a great baseball player is almost as great a personage as a president and twice as popular. For a week the papers were full of the Keene case, and then it gradually died away into the paragraphs headed, "Notes of the Diamond." The affair remained as much of a mystery as ever, and among the players from one end of the league to the other there was but one topic of conversation. The Nonpareils, upset by their bereavement, fell into a slump and were forced to fight hard to win games from teams which held permanent leases on second division positions.

"What for?" "For a change." "U-m-m-m!" said Obadiah. "You look healthy, all right." Obadiah retired into the house, where he held a whispered conversation with his wife. "Something's wrong with him, mother," he said. "He ain't no farm hand like he's not he don't mean any good." "He looks honest enough," said Mrs. Hoskins. "Anyway, there ain't a thing he can steal. Give him a chance." Obadiah came out and moved down the steps. "Show me your hands," he said. The young man spread a pair of broad brown paws palm upward for inspection. "U-m-m-m!" said Obadiah, touching the caissons with his forefinger. "I was mistook. You have worked some lately, ain't you? What's your name?" "Brown," said the stranger—"Henry W. Brown." Obadiah thought a moment. "All right," said he at last. "When do you want to begin?" "Now," said the stranger. "In them clothes?" asked Obadiah suspiciously. "They're all I've got with me," said Henry W. Brown. "I left my suit case at Centerville, but I haven't any working clothes in that—nothing but shirts and things." "U-m-m-m!" said Obadiah. "I'll git mother to fix you up some of my old overalls and a shirt. There's a right good room in the barn. You won't mind sleepin' there?" "Not at all," said Brown. "Hold on!" said Obadiah sharply. "You ain't asked me how much I'll pay." "I don't care," said Brown shortly. Then he went toward the barn. "I can't make him out," said Obadiah to his wife. "Did you hear what he said about wages?" "Kind of loony maybe," said Mrs. Hoskins charitably. "I'll hurry up and git him them things. It would be a shame to spoil that nice suit." The new hired man put in a busy afternoon. There was a great deal of work to be done, and Obadiah wondered at the graceful ease with which the "city feller" swung through his tasks. "He's as strong as an ox," said he admiringly to his wife. "Took right a-holt too. Supper 'most ready, mother?" The hired man had been sitting on the back steps looking at the sunset. Obadiah had to call him twice before he raised his head. Henry W. Brown ate his way into the good graces of Mrs. Hoskins at once. He could have found no surer road to that kind and motherly heart. The hired man sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the lithographs on the wall. "It's a flish fight," said he between his teeth. "Either I'm going to beat it this time or it'll lick me." He had expected a restless night, but twenty minutes after he blew out his candle the hired man was snoring. The afternoon's work had not been without its effort. In an inconceivably short time Obadiah was pounding at the door. "Breakfast!" he said. The hired man sat up, rubbed his eyes and stared about him. "I slept like a log," he said to himself. There was a tone of surprise in his voice. That was the first round of the fight to a flish. Obadiah was still wondering at the end of two weeks. "Sometimes," said he, "he acts as if he was possessed. I never see a man work so hard in my life. He wears me out findin' things for him to do. I told him today he'd better let up and take it easy. What do you think he said? He turned on me like a flash and kind of spit it out like he was mad. 'I want to work hard,' he says. 'That's my only chance!' What do you think of that? You s'pose he got into trouble before he come here?" "He's got something on his mind," said Mrs. Hoskins. "I don't know's you've noticed how nervous he's been the last few nights. He jumps when you speak to him, and then he kind of hangs around as if he didn't want to go to bed. Father, it wouldn't surprise me a bit if he'd been crossed in love!" Out at the barn the hired man was sitting in the doorway fighting an enemy which he could not see. Day after day he drove his body to the point where it seemed he could go no farther; night after night he lay awake, his teeth set, his eyes staring into the darkness, fighting against the craving which seemed to run through his veins like liquid fire. At any rate, he had not surrendered. That was something gained. For a full month the agony continued, and then gradually began to die away. "Not yet!" said the hired man. "I've got to know this time!" At the end of six weeks "mother" wondered if the hired man was forgetting his love affair. "He's a lot friskier," she remarked. "Don't you think so, father?" "U-m-m-m!" said Obadiah. "He tells a lot of funny stories now. Funniest stories you ever heard." At the end of three months the hired man went to Centerville and returned with a square package from the express office. It contained several red pasteboard boxes. Brown opened one of them the next day and took out a round object covered with glittering tin foil. Later he chalked a circle on the side of the barn about three feet from the ground and, carefully stepping off a certain number of paces, began to throw a ball at the mark. "Land of love!" said Mrs. Hoskins. "What ails the mare that she's kicking so?" Obadiah went out to see and returned chucking to himself.

"What do you think Brown's doing?" he asked. "Standing out there throwing a baseball against the side of the barn. Go look at him through the window. It's as good as a circus!" This strange performance happened several times a day. Obadiah asked a thousand questions. "Oh, it's good for the arm," said the hired man. "U-m-m-m!" said Obadiah thoughtfully. Then commiseratingly: "Too bad you don't git enough exercise! I'll have to see to that." "It's a fool thing," said Obadiah to his wife. "I don't know what ails the fellow, but the way he throws that ball around is a caution. I watched him ten minutes, and he didn't miss that circle once. Maybe it's the way he kicks his right leg that does it. And the way he can make that ball twist around! It don't seem possible!" Later Obadiah slapped his thigh. "I've got it!" he said. "You know the way he reads them city papers and all the sporting pieces? I'll bet he wants to be a ball player. That's what ails him. He better stay where he's well off." The middle of August came, and still the hired man persisted in his strange target practice. He was lean and brown and hard, and his eyes were clear. Not a trace of his old nervousness remained. Toward the end of August he looked up from the table one evening. "Mrs. Hoskins," said he, "I'm afraid you're going to lose your star boarder." "I knew it," said "mother" calmly. "You been itchin' to get away for days." Obadiah argued and preached a sermon from the text of the rolling stone. The two men talked long and earnestly on the front porch. In the end it was settled that Brown was to leave on Saturday. He had refused an offer of \$40 a month and his board. "I feel like I was losin' one of the family," said Mrs. Hoskins, wiping her eyes on the edge of her apron. The hired man had come into the kitchen to say goodbye. He was dressed in the brown suit in which he had made his appearance; he had shined his shoes and tied his new cravat with a smart twist which gave him a very civilized air. "Goodby, mother," said Henry W. Brown. "You've been very good to me, and I'm never going to forget you. Goodby, Mr. Hoskins. If I ever want another job I'll come to you." Then he shook hands quickly and walked out of the house. After he had gone Mrs. Hoskins found a package upon the table in the kitchen with her name written upon the wrapping paper. It contained half a dozen silver knives and forks of a pattern to match her best spoons. Her eyes overflowed again as she looked at them. "Bless his heart!" she said. "Spendin' all that money on foolishness for an old woman! And didn't give me a chance to thank him!" Meanwhile the late Henry W. Brown tramped down the road, swinging his suit case at his side. His head was in the air, his shoulders were thrown back, and the light of freedom was in his eyes. It had been a fight to a flish, and he had won.

September is the month when the close pennant races tighten up to a certainty and the baseball writers begin to talk about the home stretch. It is also the month when the writers who have been desperately supporting third and fourth place teams begin to write about "next season" and the strengthening of the pitching staff. The Nonpareils finished August in third place, with a bare fighting chance depending upon the remaining games to be played with teams which were leading them. Undoubtedly Keene's loss had cost them a better position in the race. The Nonpareils, playing at home, were to open September with a series against the leaders, that tough aggregation of fighters known as the Gamecocks. Everything depended upon the showing of the Nonpareils in the four games with their rivals. By winning the entire series they would be within two games of the top, with an excellent chance to win out in the remaining month of play. Three games would help amazingly, but it was gloomily pointed out that during the season which was closing the Gamecocks had beaten the Nonpareils as they had never beaten them before. Here again cropped up the specter of the missing pitcher, for the baseball fans, with pencil and paper, were able to demonstrate to a mathematical certainty that this strange reversal was due entirely to Keene's absence from the pitching staff. The Gamecocks had always been easy plucking for Keene. The opening day of the important series rolled around and the Nonpareils went to their dressing rooms in the clubhouse with the weight of responsibility heavy upon them. Fargo's arm was sore, for he had borne the brunt of the season's work, and it was beginning to tell on him. Delaney had been having a "bad inning" in his recent games. Powers was steady, but at best no better than an average pitcher, requiring hitting behind him in order to win a fair percentage of his games. The new pitchers had not turned out as well as had been expected—if new pitchers ever do as well as they are expected to do—and Kelliber was the only one who was really available. M'Cluskey, an optimist on the surface, felt in his heart that he was "up against it good," but that did not keep him from trying to instill some ginger into his charges before he sent them out on the field. "It's all right to talk, Mike," said Fargo sourly, "but it's a shame to ask me to get out there and open this series with my arm as sore as a boll." There was an immediate chorus from the other pitchers. Evidently they were not anxious for the fling at the Gamecocks. Their turn would come, they knew that well enough. Finch boozed in, as alert as a wasp. "Heaven knows," said he, "I ain't very heavy in the vest just now, but I'd give all the money you crap shooters owe me if we had Rick Keene to slip into this series. What he'd do to these Hoosters would be a shame!" "Ah-h, shut up!" came the chorus. "Not that we won't lick 'em anyway," said Finch. "These fellows ain't no devils, you know. And the toughest bird in the world can be picked. Gee, but they're cocky! Listen to 'em singin'!" The Gamecocks, dressing in the other wing of the clubhouse, were making merry. "Cheerful, ain't they?" said M'Cluskey. "Well, boys, we'll teach 'em to sing another tune." There came no enthusiastic response. The Nonpareils were sullen but not sanguine. They knew how, once start-



McCluskey Felt That He Was "Up Against It Good."

ed, the Gamecocks marched down the batting order and a team with a crippled pitching staff was— A step sounded on the runway outside, the door banged open, a shadow fell across the door and there came a voice which brought every man to his feet. "Hello, Mike!" it said. "Got a uniform here that'll fit me?" For the fraction of a second amazement held them dumb; then there came a yell that made the windows rattle, and the Nonpareils, as one man, threw themselves upon the tall stranger who stood just inside the door. "Rick Keene!" they yelled. "Rick!" "Why, you old devil, where have you been?" The yelling swelled until the Gamecocks came running from their side of the house. They found their hated rivals—this to be considered purely in a professional sense—dancing and yelling around the tall young man who was doing his best to ward off the friendly assaults of Mike M'Cluskey and Fitzpatrick, and the Gamecocks paused in the doorway, their eyes bulging. Over in one corner little Finch was standing on his head and wiggling his feet, all other means of expression having left him. For two minutes the tremendous uproar lasted, and at last there was a reasonable amount of silence. Keene, surrounded by his old teammates—not less than ten of them had hold of him at the time—looked across at the Gamecocks grouped about the door. "I said I'd get you fellows the next time out," said Rick, "and by the seven gods of war I'm ready for you! You'll get a skinning in this series that your great-grandchildren will talk about in their sleep. Mike, leggo of my arm and fish me out a uniform. I want to show these league leaders where they get off." The Nonpareils laughed, but from the group at the door there came an answer to this bold defiance. It was the young Mr. Potts who spoke. "They never come back!" he said. "The prodigal son came back, didn't he?" demanded Rick. "Well, that's my middle name!" Passing over the most tremendous ovation ever given a ball player and skipping all minor details, it is a pleasure to record that Rick Keene was correct in his diagnosis of the case. Not only did he show the league leaders where they got off, but he literally booted them from the steps. After he had pitched and won the opening game by a shutout score he rested and watched Fargo win the second game. He then demanded that he be allowed to pitch the third, which he won, and finished by insisting that he was as fresh as green paint and must be sent in a third time on the fourth day. That is how the Nonpareils came to take the entire series, which placed them in the running for the pennant. Shortly after the close of the league season the mail carrier left a package for Mrs. Hoskins. She examined the postmark carefully, untied the string and took out the photograph of a young man in the uniform of a ball player. "Well, I declare!" said she. "Father, come here! He got a baseball job, after all!" "U-m-m-m!" said Obadiah. "He'd be better off here. Them sporting characters never save any money. He'll be back some day, looking for his old job."



wanted to talk to you about Rick," said by Frank Chance, New York American. Mr. Ke gave his opinion to the team captain and third baseman at the end of the second week of the season. The men had been discussing the ab squad, as the recruits were called. "You know what they said about this fellow?" they shouted. "No control! Goin' to be a bad year, Rick, a-b-a-d year!" "Make those fellows shut up!" Keene growled to the umpire, whereupon the coaches, seeing that they had hit the mark, redoubled their efforts. Keene waited as long as he dared in the hope of steadying himself and then flashed Foster the sign for a straight, fast ball. Peg nodded and dropped into position. Rick put all his speed on the ball and let it fly like a bullet. He knew when the ball left his hand that he was taking a gambling chance on getting it over the plate, but Hennessey, the batter, stood still until it was too late. Hennessey was an old timer. He had batted against Keene for several seasons. Very few pitchers ever hit a batter purposely and then usually with