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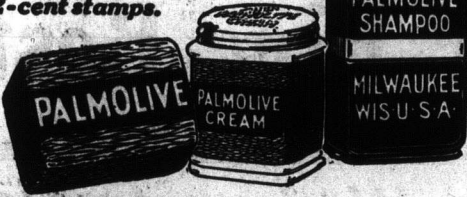
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"Another Rank Counterfeit!" the morning papers howled a few days later. "These fellows don't want me in this town," said Hardy to the manager. "They never did want me. They've been knocking me from the start. If it hadn't been for that tin-can thing—and Hardy broke off miserably. "Tell me the truth," he said. "Are these fellows right about me? Am I too slow for this company?"

Daly swore heartily. "You've slumped, that's all. If you could only get going once, you wouldn't have any trouble. Quit reading the papers, put some cotton in your ears when you get out there, and play some baseball."

Hardy tried to follow the directions, but met with flat failure. At the end of his first month he was hitting below .140, and the fire had been turned on Daly. Day after day he was hammered for carrying a counterfeit on the pay roll. The manager stood it for two weeks more, and then he did something which he expected to regret.

When the arrangements were completed he walked into Hardy's room at

the hotel just as the young man was going to bed.

"You know Catterson?" he asked. "Well, he wants to trade me that lopsided, splayfooted outfielder Harmon for you. The Reds have been a tail-end team for the last four years, but it's a good town to play in, and Catterson treats his men well. If I didn't like you personally, I'd probably send you out to some minor league, but I've got a notion that you'll get into your stride one of these days and—well, what do you say?"

"Anywhere to get away from here," said Hardy bitterly. "I won't forget how decent you have been about this thing, Ben. Most managers would have kicked me out a month ago. If I can ever do anything for you—"

"Aw, shut up!" said Daly gruffly. "Only when you get going right, don't bust up too many games for us, that's all!"

Hardy tried to smile at the pleasantry, but his heart was too full for words. He had been expecting his release.

Catterson, a square-jawed, red-headed man, met Hardy at the train.

"Hello, youngster!" said he. "Glad to see you. First time I ever skinned Ben Daly in a trade in my life."

"The fellow you traded must have been pretty bad," said Hardy.

"No," said Catterson, grinning. "He was all right from the head up and from the feet down. Feel like going right in this afternoon?"

The Reds gave Hardy a warm welcome. His old chum, Moles, was the shortstop of the club, and he had been doing a little advance work for the recruit. Hardy, dispirited and doubtful of his own ability, scented a new atmosphere as soon as he entered the clubhouse at the park. It was like walking into the heart of a big happy family. By the time he was ready for the field he felt better acquainted with the Reds than he had ever been with the Blue Sox. The Reds had no foolish pride; they had been walloped so hard and so often that they had learned to be philosophical about it. Baseball was more or less of a joke to them and to the whole town.

Hardy was dropped into sixth position in the batting order, and it happened that when he went to bat for the first time two men were on the bases, and the local fans were roaring for a hit.

"Come on, Blondie!" they yelled. "Come on, boy, and give us a hit!"

The welcome warmed the newcomer's heart. "Lightning Bug" Martin, the opposing pitcher, had worked against Hardy before, and held no high opinion of him. He "grooved" the first ball, and Hardy "pulled" it down the first-base line like a flash of light. It was a cracking double, and it drove a brace of runs to the bench, and little Moles screamed himself hoarse.

"Didn't I tell you this bird was a ball player?" he said. "Oh, I guess he can't hit nor nothing! No-o-o! He's perfectly miserable, he is!"

Catterson grinned and looked up in the air. He was wondering what Ben Daly would say when he discovered that the Red discard was a man with a solid ivory skull, mahogany legs, and a glass arm.

The next morning the Blue Sox, on tour, examined the box scores over the cantaloupes and coffee.

"Sweet Jemima!" ejaculated Jaggs Callahan. "What do you know about this? The Goat gets three hits yesterday off Martin! Hey! You s'pose that stiff was laying down on us?"

Daly grunted sarcastically.

"Well," said Jaggs, "I'll bet he don't get three hits in another game this season! He was playin' better'n he knew how yesterday. Just a streak of luck."

It proved to be a long streak, and Jaggs changed his mind when the Blue Sox, swinging around the big circle, dropped in for four games with the meek and lowly Reds. Jaggs pitched the opening game of the series, and Hardy, who had been moved up into the "clean-up" position, buzzed a line drive between Jaggs' shoulder and ear for a neat single.

"Hey, you discard!" roared Jaggs. "What you tryin' to do? Murder somebody?"

Hardy, dodging about off first base, answered with a bellow which amazed every man on the Blue team.

"Get that one in your tin can!" he shouted. "The next time I'm going to hit you in the eye!"

Ben Daly, playing second base, shook his head.

"Full of pepper," he thought to himself. "I ought 'a' kept him, doggone my fool soul!"

The Reds actually broke even on the series, thanks to the heavy stick work of the cast-off. A triple with the bases full sewed up the last game of the series, and Callahan was the victim. Even "Old Folks," the negro masseur who traveled with the Blue Sox, commented upon the startling change in Hardy's playing.

"Mist' Callahan," said Old Folks, while he was working on what Jaggs referred to as "the old soup bone," the same being the salary arm, "hucome Mist' Hardy to git that triple when the bases wuz densely populated? Accident, meb-be?"

Jaggs grunted and turned over on the slab. Hardy had made five hits off him in two games, which is getting out of accident and into design.

The season progressed, and the happy-go-lucky Reds fought their way to the head of the second division. They made no secret of the fact that they were playing better than they knew how, and first-division teams found them an unexpected stumblingblock. Hardy's terrific hitting was attracting attention, and it began to be broadly hinted that for once Benjamin Franklin Daly had made a mistake. The manager smiled grimly when the papers in his own town began to censure him lightly for allowing such a "sweet hitter" to escape.

As for the Blue Sox fans, they had some trouble in recognizing Hardy for the same man they had once tormented. They roared at him, and reminded him of the goat and the tin can, but Hardy only laughed at them with his thumb at his nose. He was noisy, aggressive, and almost cocky.

"Didn't I say that fellow would make trouble if he ever got into his stride?" asked Daly.

Down the home stretch they went to the close of the season. The Blue Sox were tied up in a driving finish with their old enemies, the Grays. By taking their last three games the Blue Sox could win the pennant, even if the Grays won their last two, which seemed likely, as no pitchers seemed to be able to withstand the terrific onslaught of the heavy end of the Gray batting order.

Curled up in the corner of a Pullman smoking compartment, Hardy read the sporting pages, and turned the situation over in his mind. It was pretty tough luck, he thought, to have to play against a man like Ben Daly in such a crisis. One more game won meant nothing to the Reds. A pennant meant a bonus for the manager, besides a fat slice of the post-season profits.

Catterson loafed into the smoking compartment, and cast an eye over the headlines of Hardy's paper.

"I wish it was the Grays we had to play," said Catterson. "I like Ben Daly, and I want to see him win out, but—we've got to spill the beans for him if we can. You remember what an awful belch there was two years ago when they said the Pinks laid down to let the Grays win? I never believed there was a word of truth in that, but the scores made it look bad. Cost the Pinks a barrel of money the next season, though, Jee-rusalem! I wish it was any man but Daly!"

Hardy looked out at the flying landscape, one knee doubled up, and his bony shin in his powerful hands. Catterson had been putting his thoughts into words.

"My own brother couldn't have been whiter to me," said the boy at last. "I owe him a lot; more than I can ever repay, but—oh, thunder! You know what I mean. I'll do the right thing if it breaks a leg!"

"Good stuff!" said Catterson. "I hope we drop these three games, but they've got a baseball team to beat. None of that scandal stuff in mine!"

This was the situation when the final series opened on the Blue Sox field.

On the first day the Sox alighted upon Cunningham, the Reds' spitball artist, and hammered him for four runs in the opening inning. The hits were nearly all clean drives. A thousand miles away the Grays were doing the same thing to their opponents.

On the second day the Blue Sox, still hitting like fiends, drove two Red pitchers to the bench, winning by a score of eleven to three. The Grays won their last game by a shut-out score. It was all up to the final game.

Catterson, always an early riser, picked up the morning papers at breakfast on the third day, and thereby ruined his appetite. On every sporting page he found an article telegraphed from his home town. It began:

Are the Reds throwing the pennant to Daly?

The afternoon newspaper men followed hard on the trail. They wanted to know what Manager Catterson had to say, and when he said what was in his mind they found that they could not print it.