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FEATURES
Home Reading
Comics—Sport

The St. John Standard,

NEW BRUNSWICK, CANADA

ST. JOHN, N. B. SATURDAY MORNING, AUGUST 9, 1919.

FEATURES
Society—Fiction
Children's Corner

By CHARLES E.
VAN LOAN

He is not playing baseball now; occasionally the name of G. Audubon Spencer appears in magazines devoted to scientific pursuits, and he has been known to address women's clubs upon protective coloring as applied to leopards. G. Audubon Spencer has a small but highly interested following; Slug Hardy was frantically worshipping him, and he was not a day without caring very much either. Yet G. Audubon and Slug are one and the same person.

He called himself Hardy when he decided to become a professional baseball player, and he became a professional baseball player because he needed the money. There was a date when he played the national game for love. He began as an star pitcher on a high school nine and when he was seventeen years of age he was writing washing semi-pro organizations and letting real leaguers down with two and three hits. Then he went to a university where he made baseball history, and was in a fair way to graduate with some letters after his name when Spencer, senior, took it into his head to die. He left a large family and a larger mortgage, and young G. Audubon packed his traps and disappeared, to turn up a thousand miles away as Slug Hardy, the star pitcher of a professional team.

He was a sensation for two seasons, partly because he could wear a ball around a batter's neck and partly because he could hit at a .340 clip from one end of the season to the other, and walking pitchers are rare birds. At twenty Hardy was a veteran pitcher and beginning to feel the effect of too much work. He would have been an exploded phenomenon at twenty-two but for the strongest of every pitcher when the strongest pitcher weakens and the former star is left out of the ball with nothing but a glove and a prayer, so he prepared himself for a new position.

Day after day "Dusty" Moles, his chum, put in his spare time hitting up "fungoes" to the outfield, and Hardy galloped after them. When Slug was ready to stop pitching he was a seasoned outfielder, and it was as an outfielder that he joined the Blue Sox and entered the big league.

There was only one thing the matter with Slug. He was born without a sense of humor. On the other hand, John Henry Patrick Callahan, "Jags," Callahan of blessed memory, had too much humor. That was where the trouble started.

Jags was not the worst fellow in the world, and not the best, either. His humor, largely of the slapstick variety, often fell upon his team mates, but they endured him because he could pitch a baseball in seven different languages.

His best joke was the one he saved up for whiskey yokes at country stations. When the train stopped, Jags would say out a buccolic leader with long whiskers and beckon him to approach, engaging him in close conversation about the town and the price of real estate. Still talking when the train began to move, Jags would lean far out of the window, entangle his iron frame in the rustic's beard, and hold on for dear life. The sight of the outraged citizen, racing along and screaming with pain and rage, was one which never failed to give Jags with pleasure. Sometimes the pitcher lost his grip. Sometimes the yokel lost his face curtains, but whatever happened it was very fine line.

The first encounter between Jags and Hardy was what a small thing may put a ball player in "wrong" with his associates. When a player begins by getting "in bad" he nearly always gets out worse. Hardy got out worse. Jags selected the big, red-headed white-crowned stranger as the softest thing among the recruits, and scrupled an acquaintance with him. One evening on the hotel porch at the training camp, Jags told his famous story of the goat and the tin can. Hardy, silent and thoughtful by nature, overlooked the improbability of the incident, and concerned himself solely with the baseball problem involved.

"If you see it was like this," said Jags. "I was playing right field that day, and this blame goat kept edging in an' edging in—you know how them coun' try fair ball grounds are; no fences or nothin'—and he got in my way. I chased him, an' he picked up the can he was nibblin' at and started to run toward the diamond. Just then Ma ginos hit a line drive right down over first, an' the ball hit square in the can an' stuck! Maginies tried to make a home run, but I got him."

"Ball rolled out!" suggested Hardy.

"Nope," said Jags. "Had to get it out with a can opener afterward. I just picked up Mister Goat, run to the home plate, an' touched the goat's foot to the rubber. Zing! The ump's all over as how Maginies is out!"

There was a deep silence, and then Hardy broke into speech.

"Why the rule says—"

That settled it. The new man was a farmer or worse. Hardy was amazed when he saw the papers from the home town. The war correspondents seized upon the incident of the goat and the tin can, and made it good for column. Hardy was angry. He reproved one of the reporters.

"But I didn't say all that stuff!" he persisted. "It makes me—well, ridiculous. It isn't fair!"

Then that reporter told his fellow workers that the new outfielder was a rube who objected to press notices and had threatened to punch the head of any correspondent who took his name lightly between the bars of his typewriter.

Hardy was already "in bad" with several members of the team; he was now "in bad" with the press.

"If he drops dead on the field, we'll print (on lines about him)," said the press gentlemen. "Otherwise, not!"

So it happened that all the home fans knew about Hardy was the incident of the goat and the tin can. It was not an auspicious introduction.

The season opened on the same grounds, and Hardy, playing a sun field to which he was unaccustomed, dropped a fly which he should have "caught in his teeth," as Callahan reminded him and the error lost the game. This was unfortunate, for a certain clique of leather-tugged rosters on the rightfield bleachers decided that the new man would not do.

If a dozen baseball fans select a first idea and their voices hold out, they can do almost anything. By the end of the first game two hundred "rogs" were after the new right fielder, and it pleased them to see that Hardy resented their efforts.

Any ballplayer knows what it means to have enemies in the home town. He expects to get the worst of it on the road, but when he performs at home he expects loyal support and encouragement. One hundred hostile rosters in the home town can sound a player out of the club, and it has happened in almost every city in the league, and will happen again so long as performers are susceptible to outside influence.

The constant chorus of "Tin Can! Tin Can!" on Hardy's nerves and worried him. Every time the ball was hit in his direction there went up a sarcastic chorus. The boy was unused to the sort of treatment. In fact, he was unused to the sort of treatment he had been somewhat of a local deity. A bad cigar had been named after him, and small boys followed him about the streets. He had never been a grandstander, but it is one thing to play ball before a friendly crowd and quite another to do one's best when that best brings only jeers and abuse.

Hardy began to make inexcusable errors. He missed his batting eye, and swung wildly at "bad ones." Opposing pitchers quickly diagnosed his case.

"The buster is swinging at 'em," they said.

Overanxious, and fretted until his nerves were raw, Hardy played like a schoolboy, lost his strike, entirely, and brought down upon himself the wrath of those stern owners of the press who edit the most interesting pages of the paper.

Wise old Ben Daly, manager of the club and team captain as well, a great infielder in spite of a dash of gray hair, tried to put some sense into the heart of the pitcher.

"You've let the knuckers get you going," he said. "Didn't they chase you at Louisville years ago, and didn't he play three times as well as soon as he struck a new town? There wasn't anything the matter with you, either. You'll hit your stride one of these days, and show these dinks mouthe what a regular outfielder looks like. Buck up, kid!"

Hardy shook his head.

"I don't know what the matter with me. I go up to take and can't see a ball any more."

"You only think so," soothed Daly. "Don't you know a sweat trick? A man show up better in sweat training! You're just worried, that's all. That ain't you, kid. You'll get started one of these days."

"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.

"Well, me the truth, he said. "Are these fellows right about me? Are they stumped, that's all. If you could only get going once, you wouldn't have any trouble. Quit readin' 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 little success. 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 counterfiet on the payroll. 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 Caterston?" he asked.

"Well, he wants to trade me that top-sider, spayfooted 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 Caterston 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 that you have been about this thing. Ben, most managers would have kicked me out a month ago. 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 pleasant words, but his heart was too full for words. He had been expecting his release.

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

"Hello, youngster!" said he. "Glad to see you. First time I ever skinned a cat, and you're a trade in my life."

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

"No," said Caterston, grinning. "He was all right from the head up and right in the afternoon!"

The Reds gave Hardy a warm welcome. His old chum, Moles, was the

series, thanks to the heavy stick work of the cast-off. A triple with bases full saved up the last game of the series, and Callahan was the victor. Even "Old Polka," the negro mascot who traveled with the Blue Sox, commented upon the starting change in Hardy's playing.

"Mist Callahan," said Old Polka, while he was working on what Jags referred to as "the old soup bones" the same being the saucy arm, "hoo come Mist Hardy to get that triple when the bases was densely populated? Accident, mebbe?"

Jags grinned and turned over to the slak. Hardy had made five hits in the last game, which is getting off him in two games, which is getting off of accident and into design.

The season progressed, and the hap-

pies, 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 the fence, drove two tied scores of seven to three. The Grays won their last game by a shutout. It was all up to the final game. Caterston, always an early riser, picked up the morning papers at breakfast on the third day, and thereby ruined his appetite. On every sports page he found an article telegraphed from his home town. It began: Are the Reds throwing the pennant to Daly?

The afternoon newspaper men fo-

side. Suddenly there came the "break," that strange madness which attacks the best ballplayers at times and spreads like a contagion until the whole team is involved. There was no warning. Jags, picking like a fury, retired two men, and Moles, known as a dangerous man on the bases, dropped a pretty hurt along the third-base line, catching the infielders asleep.

Callahan started the trouble. He should have been satisfied to let Moles reach first base, but when the big pitcher saw that the third baseman was not moving on the play, he raced forward, scooped the ball, and, almost without looking, hurled it across the diamond.

Moles would have beaten a perfect throw; Callahan threw the ball ten feet over the first baseman's head into right field. Moles, rounding the bag like a ghost, scuttled along to second. The Blue Sox right fielder came tearing in, the ball struck the tips of his gloved fingers, and bounded out of his hand, falling ten feet behind him.

Moles, signaled by the coacher on third, crossed second like a rocket, and was almost at third base when the right fielder straightened up and whipped the ball in the general direction of the home plate. He had caught the contagion, and as the catcher ran back for the wild throw, Moles let out the last link in his stocky legs, and slid over the plate just as the catcher whipped the ball savagely to Callahan.

Hardy on the bench found himself repeating:

"We didn't do it! They beat themselves! They beat themselves!"

Caterston was cursing in a whole-hearted fashion; along the Red bench there was no sign of exultation. High and clear over the muttering in the stands rose the joyous whoop of a lone Red rooster:

"There goes your old pennant! How do you like it?"

A loyal home fan reached over and mopped the offending one's hat down over his eyes, and he lapsed into silence, chuckling to himself and muttering now and then under his breath. It was no time for loud hilarity.

Callahan raved; the first baseman threw his glove on the ground and jumped on it, and the right fielder walked around in little circles, making motions with his throwing arm. Ben Daly alone remained calm. The Blue Sox got the last man on a pop fly, and in dead silence the teams changed sides for the last of the ninth.

Hardy, trotting to his position in the outfield, passed within ten feet of Ben Daly. The manager was walking slowly toward the bench, his cap in his hand, and it seemed to Hardy that the man had suddenly grown gray and old. There were deep lines in his face, and all the spring had gone out of his step. Hardy wanted to speak to him, but could think of nothing to say, and he did not want to break the coacher's first glimpse of a real baseball tragedy, and it hurt him to think that this thing had to happen to a man who had been a great player, and was now a coacher. He was conscious of a thankfulness that he had no hand in the play.

In the coacher's box a blue-clothed warrior was yelling that the game was still young.

"It's not over yet!" he shouted. "Not over yet!" There was no reassuring bellows from the grandstands where the fans were sitting huddled together, still stunned by the magnitude of the calamity that had overtaken them.

Thomas ambled out to the box to face "Budge" Tipton, put in to hit for Callahan. Jags could have done no worse. Budge swung at two slow ones and then popped up a weak foul ball to the catcher. Harrison, the next man up, took a strike, and then dropped the ball neatly over the third baseman's head for a single. The fans in the stands suddenly came to life with a sharp cheer. They screamed madly when the Red Catcher dropped the ball. Ben Daly chose Callahan as the one best bet. The game opened with the Blue Sox keyed up to the breaking strain and the Reds sullen and dejected.

Callahan whipped over a lightning-fast strike on Moles, the first man to face him; a great roar went up from twenty thousand rosters and eighteen men settled down to the final contest. Inning after inning slipped by without a score. Thomas, flapping about in his loose-jointed, ungainly fashion, kept dropping his slow twisters across the plate, and the heavy-hitting Sox popped them into the air. Hardy's ball was hit to the outfield. Thomas had "something on the ball," and for that matter, so had Jags. Callahan was pitching for his life and the post-season money thrown in. In the fourth inning, after Hardy had doubled to centre, Jags fanned two men, retiring the side amid thunders of applause.

The last of the seventh saw the twenty thousand on their feet, "pulling for luck." The luck came, but to the wrong side, for Patrick, of the Sox, slammed a line drive into a lightning double play.

The end of the eighth found players and spectators keyed up to a savage pitch. The Sox were fighting for a pennant, and everything which goes against this side, the Reds were fighting for their reputations. During the last of the eighth Jags abused his team mates like pickpockets.

"What have I got to do for you stiffs?" he growled. "Here I go out and hold these tramps down to three hits for eight innings, and you won't stake me to a single so I give me one run and I'll win this game!"

To the end of the eighth inning there had not been an error on either

Ben Daly stood at the plate, waiting for a short, heavy hit in narrowing circles. Twice he gripped his bat between his knees, patted his hands in the dust, and wiped them upon the front of his shirt. Thomas knew all about Ben Daly. He had been pitching to the veteran for seven years. Thomas had many theories about Daly's hitting and only one certainty. He knew that Daly might hit anything anywhere.

The battery signals passed: Thomas was to try a fast drop. The ball broke like a wounded swallow; broke between his knees, patted his hands in the dust, and wiped them upon the front of his shirt. Thomas knew all about Ben Daly. He had been pitching to the veteran for seven years. Thomas had many theories about Daly's hitting and only one certainty. He knew that Daly might hit anything anywhere.

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Out in right field Hardy could hear the voice of the tornado of sound. Only a baseball miracle could cheat Ben Daly out of his pennant now. Thomas at any rate whatever happened, they could not say the Reds had not been trying.

Just then Thomas delivered the next ball; Hardy, following it with his eye, saw Daly shorten his grip on the handle of the bat, and chop wickedly. The next he saw of the ball it was sailing toward him, ten feet over the first baseman's head. Hardy heard a tremendous bellow, which seemed to beat down on him from above, and then he found himself running at top speed toward the diamond.

The boy realized the situation in one sickening instant. Daly had chipped the ball just beyond the infield. Before Hardy there lay the choice of two things. He might "play the ball safe" by hitting it on the first bound, but if he did, Harrison would tie the score, and it would take a perfect throw to catch Kennedy at the plate. On the other hand, he might try for a fly catch. Should he get his hands on the ball before it touched the ground, it would be an easy matter to throw to second base and complete a double play. If he tried for the catch and missed, both men would score and the game would be over.

Hardy was conscious of the monstrous unfairness of the thing. Why should this play be forced on him, of all the men on the team? Why hadn't Daly popped that ball to centre? It would have been safer there, for the coacher, fiercer was playing deep. Without taking his eyes from the ball, Hardy saw that the coacher and the runners were willing to gamble that he could not make the catch. Harrison was almost a sure thing. Kennedy was running down dirt, watching Hardy over his shoulder. Confound Daly!

Hardy measured the shortening flight of the ball with his eye. He knew if he made that catch it would be the greatest fielding play of his life as well as the most important one. Over the tin of the rightfield bleachers he beheld him, the wild, hysterical yell of his old enemies, he caught the ancient refrain, lifted now in triumph.

"Tin can! Tin can!"

So they thought he had no chance, too, did they? Maybe he would show them something about fielding. He tried! That was the spur which shorted him over the final forty feet. With a bound, Hardy doubled forward and dropped both hands to his shoe tops. Something struck the palm of his glove hand with a stinging snap. The leather fingers snapped shut and with the triumphant yell of the rosters still quivering in the air, Hardy straightened up and, running a few steps, whipped the ball on a line to Moles, who was waiting on second base. The end of the game and the end of the Blue Sox pennant hopes came with the suddenness of a thunderclap.

Twenty minutes afterward Hardy was sitting in front of his locker in the clubhouse. Caterston entered.

"Throwing the game, eh?" he said. "Kid, that was the greatest play ever made in this town!"

"Oh, shut up!" Hardy burst out. "I wish I'd dropped it!"

"No," said Caterston softly. And then, under his breath: "Joe-rusalem! I wish he had!"

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"With one last bound, Hardy doubled forward and dropped both hands to his shoe tops."

psy-lucky Reds fought their way to the head of the second division. They made no secret of the fact that they were playing easier than they knew how, and when he said what was in his mind they found that they could not give it.

"This article mentions Hardy," said one of the reporters. "He's known to be very friendly with Ben Daly, and may have given rise—"

Caterston exploded with a mighty roar.

"Something will give you a rise in about three seconds," he said. "I will be this number thirteen boot of mine! Now, get out of here!"

Naturally that young man, in a two-bushy article, pointed out that Caterston flew into a rage when questioned about the statement from his own town. The Hardy incident drew a subliminal, and his friendship with Daly was mentioned.

It was an angry team which trotted out for the warming-up practice before the last game of the season. Caterston had been reading the riot act to his men.

What if there ain't a word of truth in it? I know it, and you know it, but if these fellows beat us by a big score this afternoon, we'll never hear the last of it. Let's dig in and show 'em some baseball!"

When it came time to choose the pitchers, Caterston picked Thomas, a tall left-hander with slow, puzzling delivery. Ben Daly chose Callahan as the one best bet. The game opened with the Blue Sox keyed up to the breaking strain and the Reds sullen and dejected.

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