

I could tell somethin' was up when I went through the back door and heard voices comin' from the parlor. The voices stopped when I got in the kitchen and when I walked into the parlor they was Billy Gastin sittin' by the fireplace and Pa was standin' cross the room, all worked up in a conniption.

His face was red as a beet and the first thing he says to me was, "I reckon you ain't got that fool notion of playin' ball out of your system after all."

I felt like the underside of a turnip green.

"No, sir," I said, facing up to the chore. "I still mean to play ball."

The air in that little parlor got tighter than Uncle Dick's hatband and I shuffled my feet, not knowin' what to do.

It was Mr. Gastin who broke the spell. "How are you, Joe?"

I reckon I had swallowed my tongue 'cause all I could do was nod my head.

"I heard about your little trip to Visalia and so have other people," Mr. Gastin said. "Right now I'm chief scout for Mr. Samuel Gwenn, who owns the Evansville team in the American Association. He wants you to come pitch for him."

That threw me for a loop and I couldn't think of anything offhand to say. When you're in a spot like that, then nothin' is the best thing to say to my way of thinkin'.

Mr. Gastin smiled and went on. "I told Mr. Gwenn some great things 'bout you, Joe. I showed him this newspaper clippin' I brought with me from Visalia."

Mr. Gastin held out a piece of folded paper and I took it from him and read the account of that one game I pitched for Visalia. It was the first time I had ever seen my name in print. Smokey Joe that writer called me, and I was sure impressed by it. I just stood there with it in my hand, starin' at it.

Mr. Gastin asked, "What do you say about comin' to pitch for Evansville, Joe?"

"That's for me, all right," I told him, lookin' at Pa, who still had his back turned. "But I'll have to get paid a lot of money."

"I've been authorized by Mr. Gwenn to offer you a hundred dollar bonus right now to sign and seventy-five dollars a month if you make the team. How 'bout it?"

That offer almost floored me. It was all chicken but the bill 'cause by a lot of money I was thinkin' of that thirty-five dollars Mr. Gastin had mentioned to me the summer before I had gone to Visalia. I'd of been happier than a dead pig in sunshine to take Mr. Gastin's offer but I seen Pa look over his shoulder at us and I took it in my head right then that I was gonna shoot for a bigger bale of hay.

"I want one hunnert dollars a month, Mr. Gastin," I said, tryin' real hard to speak plainly through the lump that had come up in my throat of a sudden.

His face didn't betray a flicker. "You want a lot of money, Joe. You haven't even

proved yourself. Its a big step from Visalia to Evansville.”

“I’ll prove myself, Mr. Gastin, and you know it. But I won’t pitch for less’n one hunnert, and if I don’t make the team I’ll give you back the hunnert dollars.”

Pa had turned around to face us and they was a long silence then as ever’body just looked at each other. Finally, Mr. Gastin broke out into a big smile and nodded.

“Okay, Joe. You got an attitude I admire. One hundred it is, and no matter what you keep the hundred for signin’ ’cause I think you can make it. No, I know you can.”

Here it was, the moment I had waited for since Noah was in knee pants. It was the chance I knew would some day come. Pa and me looked at each other and I said, “It’s what I want, Pa.”

“It’s prostitution and we’ll have no part of it,” Pa said firmly. “You’re goin’ to college.”

“One chance, Pa. Just one, that’ all I want. If it don’t work out I promise you I’ll go to college and I’ll forget playin’ ball.”

“From what I’ve seen, Mr. Hood, your son Joe is a great pitcher,” Mr. Gastin said. “Surely, you won’t stand in his way of makin’ a name for hisself. I promise you we’ll take great care of Joe. Your son’s got a chance to become a famous baseball player and to make hisself a lot of money in the process.”

Pa appeared not to have heard Mr. Gastin. “You’re not of age, Joe. What if I refuse to sign a contract for you?”

“Pa, I’ll go on to college like you want, but when I’m old enough I’ll sign my own contract and I’ll play baseball.”

Me ’n Pa stared at each other. We might’ve differed like corn and sausage over this baseball thing but mostly we was like two peas in a pod and I reckon at the time Pa understood that even more’n I did.

After what seemed to me to be an eternity, Pa said to Mr. Gastin, “Give me those papers. I’ll sign them.”

Mr. Gastin spread the papers out on the table in the kitchen and Pa signed wherever he was showed and when it was done he looked back up at me.

“Joe, if you walk through that door don’t ever come back. If you go off to play baseball you’ll never amount to a thing. You’ll be no son of mine and you’ll not be welcome in this house again.”

I could hardly talk but I got my tongue to push out the words. “I’m goin’ to be a ball player, Pa.”

“I reckon you’re a man, now,” he said and left the house like it was afire.