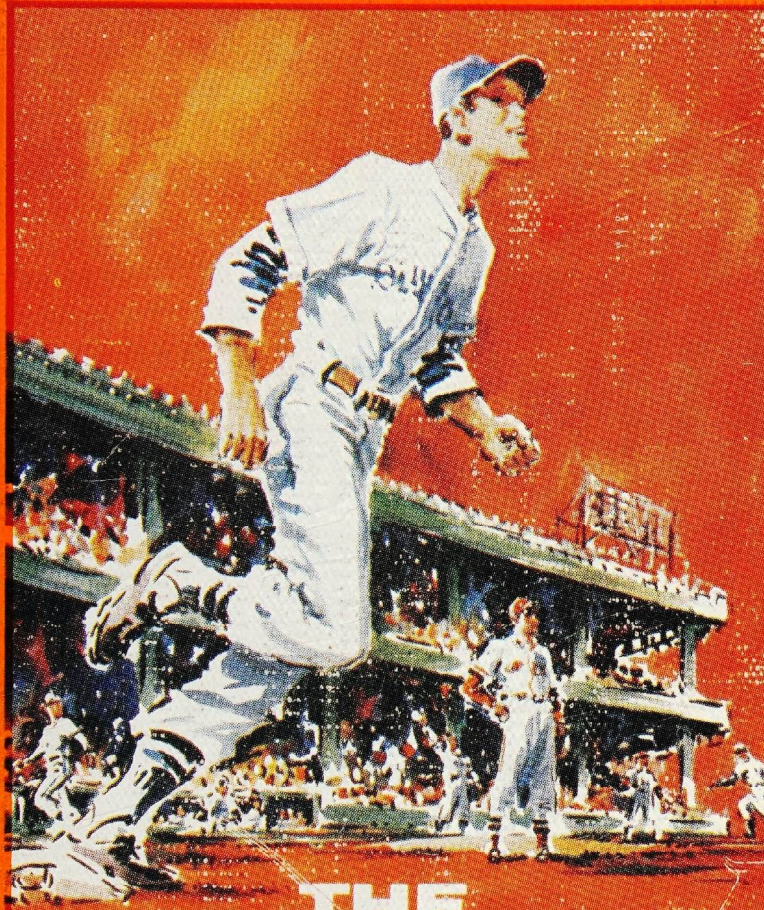

THE GRAND-SLAM KID

ECKER

THE GRAND-SLAM KID

By the Same Author

THE CATCHER FROM DOUBLE-A
FAST MAN ON A PIVOT
HIT AND RUN
LONG BALL TO LEFT FIELD
MISTER SHORTSTOP
REBEL IN RIGHT FIELD
SHOWBOAT SOUTHPAW
STARTING PITCHER
SWITCH HITTER
THIRD-BASE ROOKIE

THE GRAND-SLAM KID

BY

DUANE DECKER

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For the Turkey Hill Mob
—Bracken,
Dennis,
Christopher,
and Trevor
O'Neill—
four who have booted
the Blue Sox
into almost as many pennants
as Jug Slavin has.

THE GRAND-SLAM KID

CHAPTER 1

SOMETHING happened deep inside Bucky O'Brian one hot, dusty afternoon on a pebbled sandlot hundreds of miles from a major-league ball park. When he thought about it later, he knew that was the moment he stopped being a kid who merely wanted to make the grade in the big leagues someday, and started being the kid who was sure he'd end up among the great ones.

He was catching for his town team, the Branford Giants. At sixteen, he was the only one on the squad under voting age. And he was the only one who could catch fast-ball pitching.

They were playing the Perryville Pirates, from north of the rapids on the Rennys River, just a short salmon run from the Canadian border. This far down East in Maine was no place for a kid to expect

a big-league scout to uncover him. Somehow, though, Bucky O'Brian knew it would happen eventually. It had to.

Perryville had three runs. Their pitcher, a thirty-year-old man, had a shutout going into the last of the eighth. There were two outs. Then a walk and two ground balls that struck pebbles and bounced over infielders' heads filled the bases for the Giants. Bucky emerged from the shade of the big oak whose leafy branches made a cool roof over the home team's bench. He carried a black bat, taped around the handle. Before he reached the plate the Giants' coach walked from the first-base line to intercept him.

"Better lay off his fast one, Bucky," he said. "Wait for the slow curve. You can come all the way around on that one."

Bucky nodded, but his eyes, as they squinted into the sun, had a faraway look. He knew he wasn't going to wait for a slow curve, which might never come. He always said, "I'm no waiter, I'm a swinger."

He watched a high hard one go by. When the second pitch started to come in, looking just about the same, he triggered his shoulders and biceps into

action. His bat came around. His wrists snapped. The ball suddenly behaved like something released from the pocket of a taut slingshot.

It took flight in a rising line that cleared the infield with yards to spare. It started to gain altitude so fast that its power seemed unlimited. Soon it was a sparrow-sized fleck in the bold blue summer sky. The Canadian border appeared to be its ultimate destination. The spectators who rimmed the infield became utterly hushed, as if transfixed by some magic spell.

In sudden panic the Pirate right fielder ceased to backpedal; he turned his back on the plate and started to race straight out, as though trying to break a sprint record in a track meet. Knees pumping high, he shot past the line of demarcation that separated the part of the outfield that had been mowed from the distant section where the tall grass waved in the breeze.

Finally the ball disappeared from sight in a vast pocket of green. The right fielder frantically began to track it down. When he finally rooted it from its nesting place and threw mightily toward the infield, it was obvious that he had wasted his strength.

Bucky O'Brian had already rounded third; he could have crawled the rest of the way on hands and knees and still have beaten the ball.

Three Branford Giants were waiting at the plate to pound his back. The horns in the parked cars that circled the field began to blast. Bucky heard the unhappy Pirate pitcher shout a protest to the Giant coach. "They should have mowed the *grahss* out there!"

When he returned to the bench the team surrounded him, shouting their admiration. Bucky said nothing. He merely grinned. He didn't want to talk about it. They no doubt thought it had been just one of those lucky swings. But he knew better. The Mantles, the Marises, the Williamses—he guessed they had known it wasn't just luck the first time they belted a big one.

Winter came and went. By spring he hadn't changed much physically, even though he was seventeen now. He'd always been too short and stocky for his age, with ears so big they looked as though they would flap in a breeze, and almost no visible neck. His ankles were thin; his calves were oversized.

On a ball field he seemed to be all feet, and he was slightly knock-kneed. His arms were so short he usually turned up the sleeves of his sweat shirt to keep them from getting in the way of his fingers. Those fingers were stubby, but the hands were strong.

Sometimes the sandlot wits on the other teams jeered that he looked like a sack of Maine potatoes on the way to market. He was deeply aware that he cut no handsome figure, but he knew his lumpy look concealed broad shoulders and big biceps, which were hard and rhythmic in action.

Then there was his nose, which was too large, and —for the time being—the pimples on his face. Added to all this, or perhaps because of it, he could never find much to say to people. He wanted to show them that he was no comical character, as they seemed to think. The only way to do it was on a baseball field. He became dedicated to his power with a bat, and created a picture of himself in his mind, which was far from the picture other people had.

His secret image of Bucky O'Brian was a lot to live up to. But he was sure he could do it. Everything that happened to him on a ball field, from the

day he hit that first grand slam, only served to confirm in his mind that he was a truly great hitter in the making.

The spring of his seventeenth birthday a team of semipros thirty miles away heard about him. They asked him to catch for them in their weekend games. Bucky was offered fifteen dollars a game, which meant thirty dollars a week, plus bus fare. It didn't surprise him the way it surprised the rest of the Giants that he, the kid of the club, was the only one the semipros wanted. He accepted his teammates' congratulations without gloating. He had premonitions of glory already, but kept them safely hidden inside. He intended to be everything the semipros expected—and a whole lot more.

In his first year as a semipro with the Pine Staters he hit .332 and led the team in home runs. The next year he was made clean-up hitter, and his slugging reputation spread all over the county. He finished high school in June, and in July a man in city-looking clothes appeared at the Pine Staters' bench before a game. The man walked over to Bucky and held out his hand.

"I'm Bam McHugh," he said. "I scout through New England for the Blue Sox. Down in Bangor an

old friend of mine advised me to drive up and take a look at you. Your fame is growing, Bucky."

Bucky nodded his pleasure.

"I saw the game yesterday. You can hit a long ball. Did you always catch?"

"That's about it, Mr. McHugh."

"Don't talk about yourself much, do you?"

Bucky shrugged. "What's there to talk about?"

"Come on now, Bucky—nobody's *that* modest. I'm glad you're a catcher all the way. They cry for them in the big leagues. Kids come up outfielders, infielders, and pitchers by the barrel. But catchers —and especially catchers who can hit—ahhhh! That's a real choice item!"

"Glad to hear it," Bucky said.

"Headed back to Branford after the game?"

Bucky nodded.

"I'll give you a lift. Going that way myself."

The Pine Staters won a slugging match, 11 to 8. Bucky hit a home run and two doubles. After the game, on the drive to Branford, Bam McHugh asked, "Ever think about turning pro, Bucky?"

"Just all the time," Bucky said.

"You live with your folks?"

He nodded.

"Let's have a chat with them about it. What do you say?"

"Sounds fine to me, Mr. McHugh."

Before Bam McHugh left Branford that evening, Bucky and his father had signed the contract that made him the property of the Blue Sox.

He was certain by now that the magic carpet was really spread wide for Bucky O'Brian.

CHAPTER 2

In the spring following his second complete year in the Blue Sox farm system Bucky was ordered to report to the parent club's training camp in Glensota, Florida. He was not surprised to be there; he knew he had created talk in the front office that second year because, in midseason, they had removed him from the roster of their Class-B club and moved him up to Double-A. The year before, in Class C, he had broken the league record for the number of grand-slam home runs hit in one season. The nickname, Grand-Slam Kid, had been given to him by a reporter, and from then on it was his advance billing wherever the Sox sent him.

He found that the nickname was known in the Glensota camp. Reporters had always written that though a man had to be lucky enough to find run-

ners ahead of him to set such a record, there still must be something special about a hitter who took advantage of the breaks.

Privately, Bucky felt quite certain of that fact.

Upon arrival, he discovered that most people connected with the Sox—players and press—were extremely curious to get a look at him. Their first-string catcher of the past dozen years, Pete Gibbs, obviously had no more than a year—or two at best—left. Gibbs had always been a power-hitting catcher, and the Blue Sox did not want to settle for less when he hung up his glove. And the only power-hitting catcher in the vast Sox farm system was Bucky O'Brian. Bucky kept abreast of such vital information by reading *The Sporting News*.

Ten o'clock was the magic hour set for the first workout. When Bucky walked into the clubhouse at nine, it looked like a disorganized gym class back at Branford High. The place seemed to bulge with ballplayers, most of whom looked young and slightly lost. No one seemed to know who anyone else was. Some were in uniform and some were half-dressed. He hunted the long length of lockers that looked so narrow they didn't seem roomy enough to hold his civvies, and found the one marked for him. By the

time he had suited up, he heard a hush fall over the room, a hush that told him someone important must have put in an appearance.

He turned and saw Manager Jug Slavin, whom he recognized from pictures, striding toward the center, with three men at his heels. These three, Bucky decided, had to be coaches.

"All right, fellows," Jug Slavin said. "I want to welcome all of you and I want all of you to know, right from the start, that every man in this room has a chance to make the club."

Bucky doubted that, because the Sox were well set with tested veterans at every position—anyone who read the sports pages knew that. Of all the rookies in the big room, he probably had the best chance. Pete Gibbs was the one veteran who was undeniably near the end of his playing days.

Then Jug Slavin introduced his coaches, Johnny Madigan, Rip Radjecki, and Chip Fiske. "Anything these men tell you," Slavin finished, "it's just the same as if it came from me."

Madigan spoke in clipped tones and with a bristling manner that made Bucky think of James Cagney. "We're used to winning pennants on this club," he said, "and when we don't, then we do something

about it the next year. Well, last year we didn't win, so this is next year—right now!" He waited a moment for that to sink in. Then, as he saw a tall man whose hair was gray at the temples push through the circle of players, he added, "Here's our pitching coach, Bix Hanson, who may want to say a few words to you young pitchers."

Hanson nodded and began to speak in a quiet, unhurried voice that contrasted sharply with Madigan's. "What Jug said about the rest of you, I'll say about the young pitchers. You all have a chance to win a job with the club this year, starting or relieving. You won't make me think you're the answer to any of our problems by throwing hard the first week or so. All you'll do is hurt your arm and quickly wind up back where you were last year. Take it easy, bring yourself along slow, and don't think you won't be given the time and the chance to show us what you've got—*after* you're in fit shape to show it. That's all for now."

Behind him Jug Slavin cracked the palms of his hands together and barked, "All right, let's get out there and start shooting for that pennant."

It didn't take Bucky long to find out what the im-

portant people were saying after that first look at him. He guessed he was a surprise to them, because of all they'd heard. He knew he was usually something of a shock to people at the beginning.

The years hadn't changed his odd, clumsy appearance much. He was hardly any taller than he had been in high school, and his added poundage gave him a squatty look. The ears still flapped, and always would. The uniform still clung to him like a sack. The nose remained just as prominent.

"Hey, Lion!" he heard a voice shout to Willie (the Lion) Simms, the elderly and portly bull-pen catcher of the Sox. "Here's a catcher who looks even less like one than you do!"

"You won't win me over with no such flattery, hear now?" the Lion called back.

The remarks floated across the field at a distance, and no one seemed to think he heard. But he had rabbit ears for every jibe.

"When they made that guy they forgot to paste a neck on him!"

"You can even tell time by him. Get a load of how his toes point to ten after ten!"

"He looks so homely I thought he was an umpire!"

What he didn't hear spoken by the people who

sized him up, Bucky read later in the newspapers. He came upon a comment in a column by Len Robinson, who had covered the Blue Sox for twenty years. "This great white hope named Bucky O'Brian will never make it. No matter how fearsome a hitter he may become, he'll never be a Blue Socker, simply because he doesn't *look* like a Blue Socker. With this club you don't just have to have talent, you have to have style and class, too."

Bucky acted as though he had neither heard nor read any remarks about the way he looked. When reporters tried to interview him, they failed to draw him out.

"Don't you want publicity?" one asked.

He wanted it, but not the kind he would get from them right now. Later, perhaps, after they had discovered for themselves his greatness as a hitter, he would give an interview.

"I don't talk too well," he said, and walked away.

He was lucky to have a roommate who seemed to know just how to cheer him up. Oklahoma Crane was his name. He and Bucky made quite a contrast when they walked into a dining room together. Oklahoma was a tall, skinny left-handed pitcher, with a

prominent Adam's apple, a crew haircut, a snub nose, and an owlishly solemn look about him.

"You think they call *you* peculiar to look at?" he said with a grin. "You should have been around the first time I showed up at this training camp. They said I was a candlestick that walked like a man. They'd shout bright remarks like, 'Hey, Mister Bones, why don't you crawl back in that test tube you came from?' and stuff like that. But it only lasted a couple of weeks."

"What happened then?" Bucky asked.

"Those comics ran out of material."

Bucky laughed and felt much better. Oklahoma said he was gradually becoming known as the perennial rookie. Bucky could guess why. After three years Oklahoma was still not good enough to make a spot for himself on the regular Sox pitching staff; yet he showed so much promise that the front office turned down chances to trade or sell him. He had dazzling speed and showed flashes of brilliance—followed by periods of complete lack of control. The Sox's thinking was that if Oklahoma suddenly found the control, he'd become, overnight, one of the best pitchers in the league. He had everything else except the

control—and the confidence that came with winning a big game when the team needed a victory.

Another thing about Oklahoma that impressed Bucky was that he had continued college in his off seasons and had wound up with an engineering degree. On top of that, he was an official member of the American Rocket Society. He was always drawing diagrams of machines and wind currents and things like that. In the dugout one day he started to explain to Bucky just what made a baseball curve. Jug called to him to come on the double, and Bucky didn't find out—just then.

Several days later Len Robinson, the columnist, walked over to Bucky as he leaned against the metal pipes of the batting cage watching big Mike Jaffe, the Sox clean-up hitter, take his cuts at the ball.

"I want to offer you an apology, Bucky," Robinson said. "Something I wrote the first time I saw you here at camp. About how you didn't look like a Blue Socker."

Bucky shrugged. "You were right. I don't. I know that."

"Well, you look like one when you swing at a ball. Let me be the first to admit it—if I am the first."

"You are," Bucky assured him. "But reporters, nobody, really sees me. I'm the only one who does that."

Robinson looked at him in a puzzled way. But the next day he wrote some nice things about him. Bucky especially liked a paragraph that said: "I apologized to Bucky O'Brian privately yesterday for my crack that he didn't look like a Blue Socker. This is my public version of it. He looks more and more like one, after you watch him hit awhile. I found him to be an enormously likable young ballplayer. He's about as unsophisticated as they come, but he has a wholesome naturalness that grows on you. He has no pretensions and no prejudices, and what there must be of ego, he seems to have well bottled up. With Bucky, black is black and white is white. It's as simple a world as that. He may not be ready for the Sox this year—certainly not defensively—but the chances are he'll be back with us to stay in due time."

"Due time," as Len Robinson had put it, wasn't that year. Not that there was any question about the authenticity of Bucky's power in the weeks that followed. "The kid can hit a ball a ton," a reporter said,

after Bucky slammed one against a palm tree just beyond the right-field fence in Bradenton.

As a catcher, though, he was so far from being a polished performer that there was talk of trying to convert him into an outfielder. That talk died fast. The Sox were rich in outfielders right down through the farm chain, but they were poor in catchers who could hit.

Jug Slavin talked to him one day in March. Because he was a direct man, he started the conversation by saying in an offhand manner, "We both know you won't make it this year, Bucky. But I have hopes. Right now we have the best catcher in the league, Pete Gibbs, and he's got at least this year left in him. He knows how to catch. You don't. You just know how to hit. So until we ship you to the camp of the Blues, our Triple-A club, Pete Gibbs is in charge of you. Listen to what he tells you, do what he shows you. Who knows? You might wind up being one half the catcher Pete is. And if you wind up being even that good, you're for the Sox."

Bucky felt somewhat awed by Pete Gibbs. It wasn't just that Pete had been the All-Star catcher for a good many of his dozen years in the league. Pete was an educated man, who was seldom seen

without a book—usually a thick one—under his arm. He was also mentioned as the man most likely to succeed Jug Slavin as manager of the Blue Sox, if Jug ever retired, which was doubtful. Pete Gibbs was also the player who was called "Mr. Sox," because he was looked up to by the whole team, even the oldest veterans.

"Pete Gibbs," the saying went, "sets the style *and* the class for the Sox. When he bows out, it can never be the same team."

This was Bucky's teacher.

The first day, Pete Gibbs said, "Bucky, I've been told that you haven't learned much of anything about catching after two years in the farm system. They say you just like to hit and you suffer the annoyance of playing in the field for your chance with the bat. Is that so?"

"No," Bucky said. "I do like to catch."

"All right then," Gibbs said. "We have a working organization going here. Let's go out to the bull pen." He turned. "Hey, Phil—you busy?"

Phil Doyle, a veteran Sox pitcher, walked from the dugout. "I'm always busy," he said cheerfully. "Between my oil interests in Oklahoma and my bowling-alley chain in California I don't find too

much time left for baseball, but I could spare you maybe a half hour."

"Good," Gibbs said. "Follow us out to the bull pen and bring a baseball. Get one that isn't covered with black tape, huh?"

There were no wasted moments with Pete Gibbs. Doyle kept throwing and Bucky kept catching him. On every pitch, Gibbs told him—and showed him by demonstration—how to stand, receive the ball, throw, crouch to reach for the pitch, block the bad pitches that he ordered Doyle to throw.

Finally he said, "That's enough for today. Bucky, I've found just about everything wrong with your catching style that it's possible to find in one catcher, but I think we have a glimmer of hope—you're trying."

Doyle opened the bull-pen gate and called back, "When a guy named George Bernard Shaw wrote about this bit he called the thing *Pygmalion*."

"See you later, Phil," Gibbs called.

The next day Gibbs told Bucky to catch batting practice, while he stood behind the cage and watched.

"Get up closer to the plate!" he yelled. "You can be a couple of feet closer and you still won't get hit

by the bat or interfere with it. You left Maine two years ago, remember?"

Bucky nodded.

"And when you stand closer to the batter, you're less likely to get hit by the foul tips. Then those mean slices will skim by. They won't smack you on the body and arms, the way you're used to having them do."

Bucky soon saw how true that was. He worried less than he ever had in Maine or in the minors about getting hurt by foul tips.

The next day Gibbs had him do it again, and this time he shouted at Bud Walker, the Sox second baseman, to cover the bag for throws. "Now," Gibbs called to Bucky, "every time you get a pitch the hitter doesn't hit, throw to Walker."

"No, no!" he shouted, the first time Bucky threw. Then he walked out to the plate and took the glove and mask. He showed Bucky that now, since he was closer to the batter, he could step across the plate before he threw to Walker, which would help his throws.

"Just get that habit," Gibbs said. "Soon it will be automatic. Pretty soon you'll figure just how high to throw, and before you know it, Bucky boy, all the

throws you make will be identical. Like cookies, coming out of a cookie cutter."

Bucky forced himself to become more interested in the defensive side of baseball. He knew he'd have to become a better catcher before he could get his chance to join the slugging super stars. Last year, in Double-A, he'd been accused of throwing curves to second base, because he was throwing off balance.

Now he practiced, over and over—until he was sick of it—every movement Gibbs had taught him. He knew he was improving, but he knew there wasn't time for him to master all these mechanics in spring training.

It wasn't until the Sox broke camp and prepared to head north for the season's opening that Jug Slavin gave him the final word. It seemed to Bucky that Jug did it with some reluctance.

"It had to come sometime, but I held off to take a good long look at you, Bucky," he said. "You know how much you still have to do to get the polish of a big-league catcher. Well, you'll have a whole season to do it with the Blues. That's Triple-A and a fast league. So, any questions, son?"

"One, Mr. Slavin. I—I can hit with the best of them right now, can't I?"

Jug frowned and didn't reply at once.

"I haven't seen anybody on the club who can hit a ball harder than I do," Bucky persisted.

"You learn to catch," Jug said finally. "Nobody cares if you can hit a ball harder than the whole league put together, not if you can't catch. Just be the best ballplayer you can be; don't try to be more than you really are."

"No harm in trying, is there?"

"Yes," Jug said, "there is. I knew a ballplayer once who built up this image of himself as one of the greatest, when he really was just one of the best—and that's being a lot. In the course of building up the image, he wound up in the bush leagues again. He lost something, trying to be more than he was."

"What did he lose? His timing?"

"No, his identity," Jug said, and those were the last words Bucky heard from him until September.

CHAPTER 3

In mid-September the Blues were eliminated from the league play-offs during the semifinal round. Bucky, who had batted .327 for the season and hit 33 home runs, was in the club car aboard a train taking the team back to the home park to pick up gear and scatter for the winter. Somebody turned on the radio to listen to a sports news program. He remembered later, for no special reason except that the news flash changed the entire course of his life, how the sound of the radio voice had interrupted a book he was reading about ballplayers who had wound up in the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown.

"It was announced by the Blue Sox front office today," the voice said, "that manager Jug Slavin has called up for immediate use three players from their Triple-A farm club, the Blues. The players are: Dick

Martin, Chico Rodriguez, and Bucky O'Brian. Sox fans may remember O'Brian better than the other two. He acquired the nickname of the Grand-Slam Kid in the minor leagues, and showed in spring training that he could hit the long ball against big-league pitching of the Grapefruit League variety. With Pete Gibbs about ready to turn himself out to pasture, the significance of O'Brian's call up is clear to scholars of the Sox. It just might be a preview of next year and. . . ."

There were only two weeks of the major-league season left, but Bucky knew how vitally important every game would be. The Sox had eliminated the Panthers from the race, but the Clippers—as usual—hung in there. Two games now separated the teams, since the Clippers had chopped three games off the Labor Day five-game bulge of the Sox by winning seven in a row. Every game would be a crisis from here on in. Minor-league rookies were not apt to see much action, but if they did—

"We're not in it yet," Jug Slavin said as an opening remark, when Bucky faced him the next day in his office at the Stadium, "but no Sox team I ever managed muffed a World Series when they had a

lead in late September. However, that isn't precisely what I wanted to talk to you about, Bucky."

Bucky waited.

"I hear you're a catcher now. Thank Gibbs. But are you over those delusions of grandeur?"

"I don't know many of the big words, Mr. Slavin. In Maine we didn't use them much."

He saw Jug smile, and felt pleased. "I mean, are you willing by now to be a good ballplayer—but not the greatest?"

Bucky nodded.

"You know, I believe you. Well, son, chances are we won't try out any rookies in the heat of this miserable thing they call a pennant race, but if it becomes expedient—pardon, if we have to—use you, tuck your hero dreams in your hip pocket and just run fast, throw hard, and pray for a single. You know what I'm talking about?"

"I think I do, Mr. Slavin."

"Good boy. Now plan to sit on the bench and see how a team plays, talks, and acts, when every move may mean a million dollars, more or less. Because next year you may be one of the men who has to do it. That's mainly why I called you up. Go see Pete

Gibbs. He wants to talk to you. Don't salute him. Just listen and be respectful."

"Yes sir," Bucky said.

"And don't call me 'sir.' This isn't the Navy."

He felt good. He felt accepted. After his talk with Pete Gibbs he felt even better. Pete knew just how many runners he'd thrown out stealing, how many he'd missed. "But they steal on the pitchers, Bucky," he said. "Never on us, huh?"

"Every time," Bucky said, knowing that they both knew better. Sometimes they really *did* steal on the catcher, even if the sports writers always said it wasn't so.

He felt good. The dreams he'd nursed about being more than he was, the greatest—well, these talks with Jug Slavin and Pete Gibbs had shown him they didn't expect that much. So if they didn't expect it of him, why should he expect it of himself?

When he reached the dugout the first player he saw was his old roommate, Oklahoma Crane. It almost seemed that he was back at the training camp in the spring, because Oklahoma was picking up the conversation just where he had left off. He was

explaining what made a curve ball curve. Only this time he was explaining it to the veteran Eddie Lasky, the league's acknowledged master of the sharp-breaking curve.

"It's very simple," Oklahoma was saying to Lasky, "for me to explain to you just how you do it. It is, however a lot more difficult for me to do it myself."

"I'm all ears, like a private eye in the district attorney's office," Lasky told him.

"You see, Eddie," Oklahoma said, "you make that old pill spin counterclockwise, and because of the direction of your spin, you put more pressure on the left side of the ball."

"I do *that*, no kidding?" Lasky said, startled.

"Yes. And because the air on the right side is moving faster than the ball, there's less pressure there. So your pitch breaks to the right—and those big sluggers swing away at a pocket of air."

"You know, Oke," Lasky muttered, "if I could only convince my kids I'm this smart!"

"Tell you what you do," Oklahoma said. "Inform your kids that you use the same principles on your curve ball that engineers use to keep an airplane in the air. Because that's a fact. I'll give you proof to show them."

Oklahoma reached for the pad and pencil he always kept in the dugout. Bucky saw the old, familiar concentrated stare in his eyes as he scratched out rough diagrams and sketches. Then Oklahoma went over the diagrams with Lasky, explaining what each one meant. A reporter and a photographer stopped by to listen. Finally Lasky stuffed Oklahoma's diagrams, neatly folded, into his hip pocket.

"I can hardly wait to show this to those kids of mine!" Lasky said happily.

"Now," said Oklahoma, with a wistful expression, "if *I* could only learn to throw your curve myself—"

"Never mind what you throw, Oke," Lasky said, patting him on the back. "You're the thinking man's pitcher."

The reporter called, "Will you two pose for a picture?"

They obliged. After the photographer had snapped it, the reporter said, "I've already got the caption worked out. It goes like this: Lasky—P.S. 146, E.R.A. 2.96. Crane—A.B., A.R.S., E.R.A., 5.87. I thank you gentlemen!"

For the first time Oklahoma saw Bucky. He walked over and seized Bucky's right hand and began to pump it. "My old roomie's back!" he shouted.

"Good to be back, Oke," Bucky said.

"And something tells me you're here to stay, Crasho!"

That game was the first time Bucky had ever had the experience of sitting in a major-league dugout during a major-league game. The Grapefruit League stuff—that didn't count. This was real—this was what Pete Gibbs had told him a writer he liked had named "the moment of truth."

Once you came out of that clubhouse and walked into the dugout something seemed to happen inside you. Even if you were not going to go out on the field in front of all those people, you still *felt* in the game.

The dugout was properly named. It was a hole dug out of the ground. In it was a long plank of wood, and towels and gloves hung on hooks behind your head when you sat down. It had a drinking fountain and a bat rack and a couple of steps that led to the level of the playing field.

Inside the dugout, once the game started, every man was busy doing something. When everyone became noisy, it meant they were trying to help Jug

Slavin give his signs to Johnny Madigan in the third-base coaching box. They were trying to distract attention from Jug. If Jug thought the other team was getting the signals, he'd transfer them to some utility man on the bench. The utility man might seem to be half dozing on the top step of the dugout, scratching an itch on his shoulder or on his chest. The shoulder itch might tell Madigan that the take sign was on from Jug; the chest itch might tell him Jug wanted the hit-and-run.

It all seemed so complicated at first that Bucky wondered how anybody got any sign from anybody else. But somehow precision of movement on the field was synchronized between hitter and runner. Sometimes a ball game was quietly won that way.

Occasionally the loudest mouth on the bench, the one the umpire called the Chief Jockey, might be giving a vital sign. There was always a key to his shrill cries. He might use the hitter's nickname to tell Madigan that Jug Slavin wanted the hitter to hit away with three balls and no strikes on him. In that case, he might yell, "Come on, Basher!" The key word was "Basher." If he yelled, "Come on, Ken!" then Madigan would tell the Basher to take.

Hitters were always keeping track of an opposing pitcher, making sure a familiar veteran hadn't picked up a new pitch somewhere along the line. When a hitter flashed the news that a veteran had developed something brand-new, the word spread fast. One day Mike Jaffe, the Sox clean-up hitter, struck out on a three-two pitch with the tying run on third. When he came into the dugout, his eyes were full of pain.

"What was it he threw you, Mike?" Pete Gibbs demanded.

"I swear it was a slider," Jaffe said.

Gibbs called down the bench, "You heard it? He got Mike on a slider. Just remember, he isn't strictly a fast-ball pitcher any more."

And so it went. The Sox pushed their lead to three games, dipped back to two, kept it that way until the final week. During that week the pressure became so enormous that Bucky could feel it in the dryness of the voices, the strained look of the attempted smiles when a funny remark was made in the clubhouse. Then the bottom seemed to fall out.

The Clippers won two straight double-headers, while the Sox split a two-game series with the last-place Chiefs. It was a dead heat finally, and, as so often happens, the two contending teams had to

close out the season facing each other in a three-game series. Sometimes the schedule makers seemed to have had a crystal ball.

It was a break for the Sox that the series was in their own park. But the Clippers came in, cocky and arrogant, because they had been season-long third runners, and now they were all even with the front runners. The World Series was bound to be an anti-climax when this series ended, and every one of the sixty thousand seats in the Stadium had been sold out for a week.

Bucky still had never stirred from the bench. Pete Gibbs looked drawn and drained, but he was in there. No one would have thought of letting any other catcher rest him for a single inning, as long as he could still put on the tools of his trade and stand behind the plate, directing the team.

The Sox took heart when they won the first game, 3 to 1, behind superb pitching by Eddie Lasky, a spot pitcher, who had been saved for five days just for this effort.

The Clippers roared back and knocked the best left-hander the Sox had, Sam Sloat, for a five-run seventh inning, to win, going away, 7 to 2.

That brought the whole season down to the wire on the final day, and the general feeling was that the Clippers were on the upsurge, the Sox on the downgrade.

CHAPTER 4

BUCKY remembered hearing a veteran say once that in a pressure-packed ball game the laws of civilization and the laws of the jungle were both in force, which was what built up the pressure to the explosion point.

"I mean," he had explained, "nine men are working together, but at the same time each man is alone —terribly, terribly alone."

By the twelfth inning of the game the Sox and Clippers were playing to settle the winner of almost seven months of combat, Bucky understood for the first time just what the veteran had meant. The sixty thousand people in the stands sometimes became as totally hushed as if they had been turned to stone. At other times they roared loud enough to drown out the noise of a squadron of planes.

When the batter stepped into the box, the laws of civilization automatically began to operate on the field. The catcher squatted and signaled the pitch. As the man on the mound nodded agreement, the swift-roving shortstop picked it up. He raised his glove to his face, pressed his lips tightly together to tell the infield the curve was coming. Then, as he turned to walk back to position, his back to the plate, he pounded his fist into the pocket of his glove and thus informed the outfield, too.

That was civilization at work. But jungle law replaced it as soon as the pitcher delivered the ball. He was all alone on the mound then. The batter was all alone at the plate. And when his screaming line drive headed for deep center field, the man racing to intercept it far out by the barrier was as completely alone as a man could get. Civilized teamwork could no longer help him. He was as much on his own as the tiger in the forest of the night.

Through eleven long innings and almost three hours, every move a man made on the ball field was made with almost unbearable suspense. Never more than a single run had separated the two teams for eleven innings, and now it was 4-4 in the top of the twelfth.

The Clippers had used three pitchers; the Sox had used four. None pitched badly, but as each team took turns finding itself one run behind, they were replaced by pinch hitters, who beat a path from the dugout to the plate. Bucky hoped to hear his name called every time. But with the whole season at stake, Jug stayed with his spare veterans on the bench. By now, though, Bucky figured Jug had almost run out of veterans.

Phil Doyle was the man of the moment on the mound for the Sox. He had gone three innings, more with his knowledge of many campaigns than with his arm. His curve had not been breaking sharply, his fast ball was a thing of memory, and all he had to go on was control. If that broke down, Doyle had very little left.

As the entire Sox dugout had feared, the control finally did break down. Doyle ran Bernie Glaser to a three-two count, but Glaser showed a burglar's nerve by watching the sixth pitch just barely miss the outside corner.

Glaser was on first base, and Gibbs was walking slowly to the mound. On the bench this was called a Summit Meeting, and Bucky knew what usually went on, because he'd taken part in many.

A catcher had to adjust to the moods of the man he went out to see. Gibbs knew Doyle well. Doyle was impatient and often said, "I know what I know." Bucky was sure, when he saw Doyle make the opening remark, that Doyle had probably said, "Just catch, Pete. I'll pitch. They pay me well for doing it."

Bucky saw Pete Gibbs nod. He remembered Pete's telling him once that if a catcher wasn't a philosopher he wasn't anything. "Confidence is the secret of good pressure ball playing," Pete had said. "Never disturb it in a pitcher."

Consequently he could imagine Pete saying, "Sure, Phil, sure. I just came out, so you could catch your breath. For that lousy call, the man in blue will go down in infamy." Bucky remembered how Pete always liked to use that phrase. He wasn't quite sure what it meant, but he knew it was a knock on the umpire.

Gibbs turned around and strolled back to the plate, carrying his mitt under his arm as though it were a picnic basket and he was on his way to a country frolic. He spoke briefly to the umpire, who promptly scowled at him and made a menacing thrust of his finger toward Pete's chest protector. Pete squatted and gave the sign.

The Clipper hitter was Ralph Sutton, a magician

with the glove around third base, but not the greatest hitter on the club, which accounted for the fact that he batted eighth, behind the catcher. He played jazz piano with his own band during the off season, and was usually called Rags.

"Here comes that ragtime man with the banjo bat!" Madigan shrilled from the far corner of the dugout.

That was the signal. The whole bench began whistling, thumping bats in waltz time, shouting, "Ain't he sweet?"

Sutton wore glasses. He took them off and peered through them until the noise died down. Gibbs signaled. Doyle pitched. Sutton belted the slow curve on an ominous line into the left-field seats, twenty yards foul, but well tagged.

Once more Gibbs walked out to the mound, and Bucky knew what he would say even before he said it. Somewhere along the line Bucky had picked up the words almost every catcher used when he thought his pitcher was fading fast. "Did you see the last sign?"

Doyle's irritated pawing of the ground with the toe of his left shoe convinced Bucky that Gibbs had asked the only possible question.

Doyle continued to look annoyed as Gibbs re-

turned to his position and crouched again. The likelihood of Sutton's bunting seemed to have been ruled out by that first vicious swing, but there was still the chance of a bunt on the second pitch. The infield remained drawn in.

Doyle threw a surprise fast ball, but it did not seem to surprise Sutton. He came around in no great hurry and met it on the fat part of the bat. It drilled its way in sinking fashion over the second-base bag and into center field. A clean single. Glaser pulled up at second, Sutton at first. Sutton stood on the bag and glanced at the Sox bench. He made fluttering motions with his hands, as though playing a piano. The crowd was silent.

Jug climbed the steps and hurried out to the mound. When he hurried out, it usually meant he would not call in relief. If he took his time, that meant he was stalling for the relief man to get fully warmed up. Jug held a brief conference with Gibbs, Doyle, and Scalzi from third base. Then he trotted back to the dugout, and the players resumed positions.

Now the Clipper pitcher, Dinelli, was due to bat. But Dinelli never appeared from the dugout. Instead, the Clippers' fourth pinch hitter of the game

emerged from his oblivion and walked toward the plate, swinging two bats with vigor. Everyone in the stadium, including the pigeons in the eaves of the grandstand, knew that this time there would be a bunt without any possible alternative.

At third base Scalzi crept in. At shortstop Pearson moved his feet toward the plate. Walker edged over toward first from his post at second, to cover the throw. Stretch Stookey, the towering first baseman, moved so close to the plate that he looked almost on top of it.

Doyle pitched high twice, and then he had to come in. The Clipper pinch hitter laid it down, almost flicking the powder off the third-base line, but on the inside edge. Scalzi pounced, grabbed it with his bare right hand, and, ignoring the possible play at third where Pearson had run to cover, made a daring move for the double play.

Walker reached the bag in time, but Sutton hit him hard. Walker's throw went off, true and straight, but slowed down by the impact. The double play missed, and men were on first and third, with only one out.

Now Jug strolled to the mound, and Doyle's removal from the game was an accepted fact. It wasn't,

Bucky knew, that Jug thought Doyle was rattled. But a right-handed hitter was coming up and Doyle pitched left-handed. In this spot, at such a moment, a right-handed hitter had to be handled by a right-handed pitcher.

Doyle understood. He kicked up no fuss, but patiently waited while the bull-pen gate opened. The crowd screamed as the unexpected figure of the veteran Eddie Lasky emerged, windbreaker hung carelessly across his pitching arm.

Jug was not going according to the book, and Bucky knew it. Lasky was thirty-nine years old now, and he needed five days of rest between games he pitched. Yet he had beaten the Clippers, gone the full nine innings, just two days before. Jug was certainly playing it scared. When he called Lasky he was trying to fall back on the First National Bank of America. But—was Lasky ready after one day's rest? Even for an inning or two?

The conference at the mound was short. No one had to tell Lasky about the Clipper hitters, or what to do in any given situation. No matter what the situation, Lasky had been through it fifty times before.

He had a way of lifting his right leg, even in the

warm-up throws, that looked dramatic. He had the angry look, when he faced a batter, of a man who has been asked to beat down the forces of injustice. He was 17 games short of joining the charmed circle of pitchers who had won 300 in their careers.

Nobody worried about whether Lasky's nerves would bother him. They just worried about whether that tired, rubbery old arm still had it at this moment for another dozen pitches.

He glanced at the crouched Gibbs, nodded, and adjusted the peak of his cap as exactly as he had done it so many thousands of times before that even the professional statisticians had to look it up.

The hitter was the Clipper lead-off man, Joe Keiffer. Keiffer was not the traditional kind of lead-off man; he wasn't a specialist at spraying singles or getting hit by pitched balls. He had power, but he was a good two-strike hitter, and that was why, despite the power, he led off.

Lasky had already won 200 games before Keiffer had appeared upon the big-league scene. He experimented with Keiffer on a slow curve, which missed the outside, then tried again with a fast one that was almost chin high. Keiffer seemed in no hurry, and that wasn't a good sign.

Lasky and Gibbs had a conference. The minds of two veterans were working together against that of a hitter in only his third season. Lasky's pitch was not bad. It was inside, but it still had a piece of the plate. It moved fast—but not as fast as Keiffer's bat.

The ball that left it could have been a quickly forgotten foul, except for one important point: it never swerved on the wrong side of the chalk stripe. It was just a low liner, but high enough to sail above the leaping reach of Danny Redd in right field. It nestled, with unimpressive force, into the waiting hands of a fan in the right-field bleachers, barely beyond the mark that said: 325.

It was probably the cheapest home run hit in Blue Sox Stadium all year. But there you were. Three runs crossed the plate, the Stadium became silent as a morgue, and Lasky stood on the mound like a man encased in a film of ice.

In the dugout Bucky watched Madigan walk over to the water bucket. Bucky expected to see him kick it all the way to home plate. Instead, Madigan picked it up, glanced around, and poured it over his head.

CHAPTER 5

LASKY struck out the next two Clipper hitters. The Sox came in from the field, heads grimly up, three outs away from second-place money. The Clipper infield looked like a shooting gallery as the practice ball snapped its way from man to man. The crowd sat like a huge captured turtle that had lost all desire to fight.

Even the sight of the Sox clean-up hitter, big Mike Jaffe, failed to bring their voices to life. Jaffe belted a long drive to deepest center, and the noise began. But it died fast. Jaffe's fly was too high, and it went straight. Mansell, in center, pulled it down without too much effort.

Scalzi tried to claim he was hit on the sleeve by a pitch, but his protest went in vain. In the hole, one-

and-two, he hit a routine ground ball to Sutton at third.

The crowd stood now, not in expectation of a rally, but in readiness to head for the exits. Somebody shouted, "O.K., then, next year it is!" The wake was on.

Stretch Stookey brought on the final, hopeless, dismal groan. He swung at the first pitch, and it trickled its way toward second base. Richards rushed in. He surrounded the ball, scooped it—and then he had some trouble getting it out of the webbing of his glove.

Stookey was a frightened deer—not a swift runner, but an earnest one. He hit the bag a split moment before Richards' hasty throw was grabbed overhead by the Clipper first baseman. A polite murmur from the crowd spread across the field.

Pearson stepped in. Pearson had hit .273 for the season, and was taken lightly by no pitcher in the league. He didn't break up a ball game often, but he almost never gave up. He frequently said to reporters, "I figure to get on. The fireworks can be worked out by other guys, if I just get on."

He tried to swivel his hip into the first pitch and was warned by the umpire. Looking hurt, he took a

called second pitch—a strike. He pushed the count to three-and-two, then fouled off seven straight pitches. In utter frustration, the Clipper pitcher finally missed. Pearson trudged happily to first, and Stookey moved on to second.

Pete Gibbs pointed out to the umpire that there seemed to be some loose threads on the sleeve of the Clipper pitcher, the left-handed Dutchman, Fritz Huber. Huber shouted something at Gibbs, and Gibbs started to laugh. Huber advanced upon Gibbs, the umpire moved into the middle, and Shanty Millikin, the Clipper manager, decided that Gibbs had left Huber in no frame of mind to make the next pennant-clinching pitch.

From the distant bull pen came a right-hander, Monk Cosgrove, who looked like the wrong man to meet in a head-on collision. He had three pitches, the story went: fast, faster, and fastest. For three innings he could be trouble.

Monk warmed up while Gibbs stepped back and had a conversation with the Sox bat boy. When Gibbs finally faced him, Monk made a surprise, quick pitch.

Gibbs somehow seemed to have anticipated the quickness. His bat came around. The ball skimmed

across the ground between third and short, deep in the hole. Gibbs was not a fast man, never had been even as a rookie. But Keiffer had to go very deep to come up with the ball. Keiffer made his skidding stop, whirled, and got the ball off. Gibbs had it beaten before it had left his hand.

Stookey was on third, Pearson on second, and Gibbs stood on first, glancing at the bench for a pinch runner. Slavin sent the speedy Cuban, Chico Rodriguez, to take over for him. Then he glanced down the dugout. As Lasky headed for the bat rack, Jug called, "Sit down, Eddie. I got a left-handed hitter here who might just be quick enough to come around on this big gorilla."

He merely pointed at Bucky. Bucky went to the bat rack, walked out swinging three. The noise that poured over him was beyond anything he had ever imagined.

Now the crowd was not on its feet to head for the exits. They were looking for a kill. Bucky wondered, as he stepped into the box, if any rookie had ever made his first major-league appearance at the plate with a pennant all his to win or lose. He doubted it.

There were a lot of phrases that seemed to pop into his mind, ones he'd heard so often they were

stale. But stale or not, there was truth to them. "Here's where we separate the men from the boys." That was one. Another was, "Between the foul lines the boys turn into men." A third was, "If you're one of the greats, you don't scare easy."

Well, here it was. Every dream he'd ever dreamed in down-East Maine and points south and west—it was all wrapped up right here. Monk Cosgrove *versus* Bucky O'Brian. The jungle it was, and nobody could help you. Somebody pounced first; that was all there was to it.

The roar of the crowd grew dim. And the louder it grew, the dimmer it became to him. He saw Monk Cosgrove, a huge man who needed a shave, staring down from what seemed to be a terribly tall hill. Monk looked close, and his arms looked endlessly long. He saw Monk nod at Glaser, take his stretch, and look around. The ball left his hand, and it seemed to be past Bucky, pistol-cracking into Glaser's mitt, before he knew it. A joke crossed his mind, one he'd heard from a ballplayer once. "He throws a radio ball. You hear it, but you never see it." That described the first pitch from Monk Cosgrove.

He heard Glaser's jeering voice behind him: "Get

yourself nice and comfy, busher. Here comes Big Number Two."

Big Number Two came in with the confidence of a man who thinks he's very much in charge. Bucky had figured it that way. It didn't curve and it didn't dip. It just came straight through, like a jet plane in the night.

As Jug Slavin had said to Eddie Lasky a few short moments before, he had a left-handed swinger who just might be quick enough to come around on a big gorilla. Bucky came around. He knew it was gone. The crowd's roar didn't tell him, the quick glimpse of the Clipper right fielder turning his back didn't tell him—nothing told him except the solid feel of the ball as it met the bat.

He ran hard halfway down the line to first, and then he saw it, rising, arching, lifting itself on magic wings dozens and dozens of seats high in the right-field bleachers. After that everything was a blur, except that he made very sure he touched the bags as he rounded them.

He was being thumped on the back and pushed and shoved. Cameras were flashing. People were shouting. He was up in the air, propelled on the

shoulders of many ballplayers. It was a crazy dream, but it had happened, and above it all he heard a voice shout: "The Grand-Slam Kid! There's the greatest!"

CHAPTER 6

THE World Series was just an anticlimax, and a dull one. The Sox went on to win it in five games, and none of them was close or exciting, not even the one they lost. Bucky watched it all from a corner of the dugout, but he never broke into the line-up. During the three games that were played on the home grounds, fans constantly shouted at Jug Slavin, when he emerged from the dugout, to give them a chance to see Bucky O'Brian again. Jug did not oblige.

"This isn't a Broadway musical comedy," he was quoted as saying. "It's a contest between two ball clubs playing for a difference of maybe three or four thousand dollars a man. To win it we put our best team on the field. Gibbs is our top catcher and our only experienced one. As long as he can stand on

his feet, he'll play every inning. And we haven't played a game close enough in the Series to need a pinch hitter, except once—when the other fellows had a left-hander going and I sent in a right-handed hitter. They'll get to see O'Brian next year—if he makes the team."

Bucky guessed Jug's final remark must have been some sort of a joke. If he made the team! The reporters called his pinch-hit home run "the shot heard 'round the world," and from the stacks of mail that suddenly appeared from nowhere, all addressed to him, he began to think maybe the sound of it *had* carried that far.

The day after he hit his home run, he acquired an agent. The agent's name was Harry Jones, usually called Dealer Jones, because he had worked out so many off-diamond deals for important ballplayers, in which they were paid for endorsements of products and for personal appearances. Dealer Jones handled only the biggest and most glamorous names in the league. To be sought out by him meant only one thing: fame had become yours.

"I got 'em all lined up for you, Bucky," the Dealer said. "Breakfast foods, razor blades, dandruff killers, headache powders, candy bars, orange

drinks. The only offer I turned down was from the cigarette bunch. I told them it would damage your image."

"Image? Me? Are you kidding, Mr. Jones?"

"I am not kidding," the Dealer said. "With one swing of that bat, you established an image. The Grand-Slam Kid! The greatest clutch hitter of the year! From here on in, like it or not, kid, you've got to be what people expect you to be. And you can get rich being it; that's the wonderful part of it!"

It was too much money to turn down. Bucky signed all the contracts and found that, just by signing them, he'd made twice as much money in ten minutes as he'd made all season playing ball. He felt as though he'd walked through an open doorway into a brand-new world.

As Dealer Jones walked out, contracts in hand, Bucky became aware that Oklahoma was watching him with amusement in his eyes.

"You feel pretty rich now, Bucky?" he asked.

"Well, sort of," Bucky admitted.

"Just remember, you've got a friend at First National. You may never see that kind of loot again."

"I don't know," Bucky said. "Russ Woodward,

Mike Jaffe, Eddie Lasky, Pete Gibbs—they collect it every year."

"They do, yes. They're ten-year stars. Who else on the club collects it? Do I? No. But I did once, just as you will now."

"What happened?"

"King for a day, that was old Oklahoma Crane," he said. "I struck out sixteen batters in one game. Never did it before or since. Oh, but I helped sell a lot of bubble gum and stuff for a few weeks there."

"You may again," Bucky said. "And I may too."

"Sure, sure," Oklahoma said. "Only I'm not spending next year's loot in my mind. I'll wait until then and see if I've got it in my mitt again."

When the Series ended, Bucky found that the team had voted him a full share of the money. Even though he'd only been to bat once in the whole season, they said he had earned it. "Without that once," Vic Scalzi told him, "we would never even have been in it."

He had planned to go home to Maine right away, because his old town team, the Giants, wanted to have a banquet in his honor. But he found he couldn't do it. Dealer Jones had three TV appear-

ances lined up for him the first week. A national magazine was paying him a fat price to spend a few days with a ghost writer from their staff, who would write his life story. It would be published with Bucky O'Brian's signature over it. Then the Dealer had signed him for appearances at banquets and luncheons. It didn't look as though he could visit home for a month at least.

The day after the Series ended he went to the dressing room to pack up. It was almost deserted by then. Most of the team had scattered after the victory celebration the night before. The lockers were stripped bare, the name plates removed. The odor of oil and liniment was already starting to evaporate. Pickles, the wiry, wizened little clubhouse man, stuck his head inside the door, looked around, and waved.

"See you in February, Grand Slam!"

"So long for now, Pickles."

Everything he wanted to keep he packed inside a large canvas bag: two gloves, one pair of spike shoes, a windbreaker, a can of oil for rubbing into the gloves, a small packet of unanswered fan mail, held together by a rubber band. That was about it.

Lying at the bottom, though, he saw a crumpled

page of a newspaper. He picked it up and smoothed it out. He grinned. It was page one of the *Star-Herald* the day after the pennant had been won. There was a picture of him, and underneath, in large black type, it said: Final Season Batting Averages.

Directly below the headline was listed one average—his own:

	AB	H	R	RBI	HR	BA
O'Brian, Bucky	1	1	1	4	1	1.000

He smiled as he folded it carefully and put it inside his jacket pocket. That was quite a beginning for somebody to live up to. But if people thought it was all pure luck—well, they'd find out in the spring.

He heard steps behind him, and when he turned he was surprised to find Nate Tufts facing him. Tufts was the general manager of the club, the man who engineered the trades, did most of the hiring and firing that went on inside the organization, and, most important of all, set the figure on the ballplayer's salary. He was holding something toward Bucky, something that looked very much like a contract.

"We didn't want you to wait until January to find

out how much we appreciated what you did, Bucky. Read it, and if you like it, I've got a fountain pen handy."

Bucky read the only line that mattered—the one with next year's suggested salary for him. It was almost double what he had been paid this year.

"I—I sure wouldn't turn down a contract like this, Mr. Tufts."

"Then here's the fountain pen."

Bucky signed, and they shook hands.

"I didn't offer that big a raise just because of the hit you made," Tufts said, as he turned to leave. "We're expecting big things from you next year, Bucky. Pretty big things."

He didn't wait for a reply, which was just as well, because Bucky didn't have one. He expected big things too, but he knew he couldn't find the right words to say that to Nate Tufts, or to anyone.

He picked up his bag and crossed the room to where he saw Chico Rodriguez cleaning out a locker.

"So long, Chico. You playing ball this winter?"

Chico nodded. "Puerto Rico. And you?"

"I had some exhibition offers. Maybe. I don't know."

"See you—*Señor* Grand Slam!" Chico chuckled, and Bucky laughed.

The only other person left in the big room was at the far end. He was methodically packing an endless amount of equipment into a trunk. It was Pete Gibbs. Bucky walked down to him, but Pete, with his back turned, didn't hear him coming.

"I wanted to say so long, Pete."

Gibbs turned around, and it occurred to Bucky again, as it had when he'd first met the big catcher, what a physical contrast the two of them made. Gibbs, in his early days, had been called "a picture-book ballplayer with a cowboy look." He was tall and rangy, and even after all these years his waist remained narrow. He had steady gray eyes and even features and a quiet air of confidence about him. He thrust his hand out. "Well, Buck, you had a season for yourself."

"Tufts—he just had me sign next year's contract."

"A good one, I trust."

"He nearly doubled my pay."

"I think you earned it," Gibbs said slowly. "I suppose the Dealer has you all lined up for the gravy train?"

"Yeah. Endorsements and TV and like that."

"Well, get it while you can, Buck. I don't need to tell you that what happened to you doesn't usually happen twice."

"Maybe not *often*—" Bucky began.

"Look," Gibbs said, "you were a good ballplayer before you hit that big one, and you'd be just as good right now if you hadn't hit it. I told Jug that next year I had to be a reserve catcher only, that somebody else had to carry the main load. You're the only one who fits into the scheme."

"Well, thanks, Pete. See you in Florida."

"You bet. And I'll make an agreement with you, Buck. I won't expect too much of you at first, if *you* don't."

Bucky nodded, but Pete's final remark didn't make much sense. Of course a lot was expected of him—by the team, by the fans, and by himself. The grand slam he'd hit was just the beginning; yet Pete talked as if it had been a climax or something.

CHAPTER 7

He reported to the advance camp in mid-February when, for the most part, only pitchers and farm-club hopefuls were around. Then the rinky-dinks, the invaluable bench men, arrived. Finally—alone and in groups—the regulars appeared.

Bucky discovered that the regulars greeted him as one of them; he could tell, because they didn't waste polite words on him, but merely made passing, tongue-in-cheek remarks.

"Hello, veteran pinch hitter!" Russ Woodward, the switch-hitting center fielder said.

"Old Mister Moneybags got here early, I see!" Stretch Stookey said, shaking hands.

"I saw you on TV one night," Mike Jaffe told him. "And boy, you don't look like much with the mask off!"

"All I said to Pickles," Danny Redd told him, "was 'Take me to our leader.' I wanted to talk to Jug, and Pickles brought me here!"

Jake Brennan, the big no-nonsense trainer, came around with slips of paper and handed them out—dates with the X-ray technician. When he handed Bucky his slip, he said, "Just give him your name, rank, and serial number. Medical questions should not include the one about what kind of a ball you hit off Monk Cosgrove on that day you achieved manhood."

After the first few days, Doc Dougherty said he had a feeling that he ran a free clinic. Everyone had his own special misery—feet blisters, sore arms, pulled muscles. "I could take care of the Peace Corps after their first week in the mountains of Peru with less tape and liniment," Doc Dougherty said.

It was a daily grind in a little world of sun, sand, and sweat. But Bucky liked it, because this year he knew he was one of the lucky ones—the tight little group who were sure they had made the team. This was not like the last time.

At seven-thirty in the morning the telephones be-

gan to jangle in the hotel rooms. Within a half hour, the horde of players filed into the private second-floor dining room reserved for them. Bucky ate slowly and well, because it would be four hours before he'd eat again. Then there would be only soup and cottage cheese or other dull dishes that added no fat.

By nine he was in the lobby, asking for mail. Then he went outside, where other players waited at the curb for the chartered bus. By nine-thirty he was in the knotty-pine clubhouse at the field, slipping off his slacks and colored sport shirt in front of his open wooden cubicle. He checked his wallet and watch in the name-tagged box in the trainer's room. Then he climbed into clean gray flannels with a single blue stripe down the side of the trousers and blue letters that spelled *Blue Sox* across the chest. Even in practice, Jug allowed no one on the field in a dirty uniform.

He picked up his spikes and mitt and walked out to the concrete apron on the field side of the clubhouse. It was another of Jug's special rules of etiquette that no spikes were worn inside the clubhouse. Bucky sat down in the haphazard circle of

players already putting on their shoes. When he'd finished, he heard Madigan's voice bark, "O.K., once around the field! Let's go, go, *go!*"

After Bucky completed the circuit of the field, he rested and inserted a stick of chewing gum in his mouth. Then he heard his name called. "Hey Buck —over here!"

He knew it was Pete Gibbs, because Pete was the only one who called him Buck without adding the *y*. Pete was standing on the north diamond, a practice field away from the main one. Clustered about him were a half-dozen rookies. They were staring at a machine that looked brand-new and strange.

As Bucky reached the circle, Pete was saying, ". . . and the mechanized age continues to take over baseball. This year, added to our Iron Mike for pitching balls at batters, we have this new gizmo which, as you will see, is designed to lift pop fouls to catchers. Fire when ready, Lion!"

Willie (the Lion) Simms knelt by the gadget, which looked like a mortar gun set on a tripod. The Lion blasted three baseballs into the cloudless sky. They went out of sight.

Pete said, "Too much, Lion. Much too much."

The Lion made adjustments on the machine, and

the gadget began to pop up fouls that looked like the kind that torment catchers in ball games. Gibbs assembled his pupils. Each in turn squatted in front of the machine. With every pop, the mask came off, the catcher whirled and scampered under the ball as it came down about thirty feet away.

On his first turn, Bucky got under the twisting foul only to see it squirt out of his mitt.

"There!" Gibbs called to the group. "That's what happens when you turn the mitt the wrong way. Get under the ball in time to hold the mitt palm up. Then you've got a big area for the ball to drop into, and all you have to do is put your right hand over it. But if you hold the mitt like a fielder's glove, the ball has to land in one small spot or you lose it. Try again, Buck."

Through the long hot morning, Jug Slavin was always in sight. Whenever Bucky spied him, Jug was moving, making the rounds like a foot patrolman protecting his beat. When reporters tried to block his way, he always spoke, but he seemed to finish his sentences by speaking over the back of his shoulder. He kept his cap pulled so tight over his eyes he seemed to be a man perpetually peering between the slats in Venetian blinds.

By noon Bucky drifted back to the clubhouse with the rest. He took off his shoes at the door, then joined the line at one of the two tables, covered with containers of hot soup, cottage cheese, carrots, celery, and apples. He ate the training fare with no appetite and slumped on the bench to wait for the afternoon session. Training-camp workouts went on twice a day, seven days a week. Tomorrow it would start all over again.

But despite the grind, Bucky had a growing sense of well being. It was great to be young and to be a Blue Socker. In his mind, filled now with comfortable Florida dreams, this was his team for the next dozen years.

The early days of sheerest drudgery finally ended. The regular practice games against the other big-league clubs began. The Sox played their first pair with the Robins, the team they had beaten in the World Series. Bucky tasted a new and exciting experience in the second game.

The Robins held a one-run lead in the last of the eighth. Jaffe was on second with the tying run. Two outs. Bucky, batting sixth in the order, stepped in.

Stretch Stookey had been dropped to seventh, Pearson to eighth.

Pavlik, the Robins' pitcher of the moment, threw two fast balls that just missed the corners. Bucky set himself for the two-nothing pitch. It would have to come in if Pavlik wanted to avoid facing Stookey with the winning run on first base. The pitch was a curve that came in too low, and Bucky let it go. On the fourth one, the Robins' catcher simply stepped outside the box, and after the waste pitch, Bucky was waved to first.

He felt the thrill of it, the recognition that was part of it—Pavlik and the Robins had told the whole park that Bucky O'Brian was a clutch hitter of major-league consequence, one whom they feared more than Stookey, the veteran.

Sure, it was just a practice game. But practice game or not, the teams wanted to win. The Robins especially wanted to win from the Sox, who had made them look bad in the Series. They were playing for keeps, even this early. Waving Bucky O'Brian to first base with the winning run pretty well proved that. The crowd's disapproval rolled from the skimpy stands, and Bucky saw the pleasant

picture: they had wanted to see him hit. They, as he, had anticipated the long ball that would have turned this practice game upside down.

Stookey flied to right, and the Robins won the game.

The next day, in a pleasant 12-to-3 win over the Redskins, Bucky hit two home runs against rookie pitching. One of them went so far out of the park that the Sox publicity man had the tape measure put on the spot where a fan said it landed. The story he gave the reporters was that it had traveled 520 feet in the air. No one believed him, but it made a good story to file back home.

In the cool of the dugout shade during batting practice the next day, a tall and slouchily graceful man sat down beside Bucky, and said, "I saw you hit that one yesterday, Bucky. My name's Augie Marshall."

Bucky turned to stare with his mouth wide open. Augie Marshall was a Blue Sox legend, the one whom players always referred to as the Big Guy. He was the last man in the league who had ever hit .400, and his home-run output might have been second to the Babe's if a war hadn't interfered. Blue

Sox veterans talked with the awe of schoolboys when they talked about Augie Marshall.

"I guess you know how I feel about meeting up with you, Mr. Marshall."

Marshall nodded and pointed to a row of tall palm trees, beyond and above the right-field fence. "You see that tree?" he asked. "The second from the left?"

Bucky nodded.

"The first time I was in this park," he said, "I hit a line drive and bent that tree all out of shape."

Bucky looked at him uncertainly. He thought Augie Marshall was kidding, because the tree looked straight. But the older man squinted through the glittering afternoon haze in a perfectly serious manner.

"Now," Augie Marshall said, "there's only one possible thing you can do if you want to live up to your press clippings, Bucky. You've got to step up to that plate and straighten out that old palm tree with an O'Brian line drive. That way you can make me the ex-champ."

Marshall started to laugh at Bucky's bewildered glance. He slapped him on the knee, and said,

"Don't mind me, Bucky. I still like the old training-camp gags. Seriously, what I wanted to say was, don't let the tape-measure talk fool you. Too many kids get this silly picture of themselves as super strong men, and wind up leading the league in strike-outs—if they stay in the league long enough to do it."

"I just naturally always hit a lot of home runs, Mr. Marshall."

"Sure, but remember that they count as much when they drop in the front row as they do when they drop in the last row. And over a full season, singles win more ball games than home runs. See you, Bucky."

He left the dugout, and three reporters followed him.

Bucky slammed the exhibition pitching for a .340 average. Before the team broke camp and headed north, Jug Slavin had pushed him up to the number-five spot in the batting order, right behind Mike Jaffe and ahead of Vic Scalzi.

"I wanted a left-handed hitter between those two right-handers," Jug explained to the press. "It had to be O'Brian or Stookey, and Stretch seems to be off to a slow spring start."

The only incident that really bothered Bucky on the trip north was one that happened in Atlanta. They were playing the home-town Crackers, who surprisingly came up with fine pitching that day. The Crackers had them, 3 to 2 in the ninth. Oklahoma Crane, who had pitched the last three innings, was due to lead off. But he never reached the bat rack, because Jug called for Pete Gibbs to hit in his place.

"And me—I'm what they call a *good* hitting pitcher," Oklahoma said in sorrow, as he slid back on the bench beside Bucky. "Man, I really slash that ball."

"What did you hit last year?"

"Oh-seven-eight," Oklahoma said cheerfully. "It wasn't my biggest year with the stick. But when I hit 'em, they go a mile."

Bucky laughed. It was no sports writers' gag that pitchers always talked about their hitting. He'd never known one yet who didn't do just that. The worse they hit, the more they talked themselves up.

"My secret is all in my wrist action," Oklahoma added.

"Any year you hit .300," Scalzi told him, "I'll hit .600."

Gibbs drilled a ground-ball single into left. Wild

Bill Davidson, a utility man, ran for him. Redd forced Wild Bill at second. Walker flied out softly to center. Then Woodward beat out an infield roller, and Jaffe was safe on a throwing error by the shortstop. Redd had rounded third with the tying run, but he retreated swiftly as the alert first baseman picked up the dropped throw and pegged it home.

When Bucky stepped in, he glanced down the line to the coaching box at third. Madigan had the day off; Chip Fiske stood there. He made no signal, which didn't surprise Bucky. It was a hit situation if there ever was one.

The Cracker pitcher looked worried. He threw three straight balls. That left him one bad pitch away from forcing in the tying run. Something told Bucky that if he looked at Fiske he'd get the automatic take sign. He didn't look. He pretended to be all wrapped up in his concentration on the ruffled Cracker pitcher. He heard Fiske yell his name, but it was quickly drowned in the roar from the stands. This enemy crowd was yelling for him; they wanted to see the Grand-Slam Kid get a chance to do it again.

So did the Grand-Slam Kid.

The Cracker pitcher tried to please the crowd. He

came in with his fast one. It looked as defenseless to Bucky as a crippled bird in flight. Automatic take? Maybe it *wasn't* on for all he knew, because he never glanced at Fiske. The pitch was a frightened bush-league nothing ball. It was hanging there, asking to be hit out of the park.

He had committed himself to the pitch, already broken his wrists with the swing, before he realized that the nothing ball did have something. It seemed almost to rise. He knew, as he swung, that he was undercutting it.

The ball shot high into the air, straight above the pitcher's mound. It went so high and took so long to come down that all three Sox runners had reached the plate by the time it swished into the glove of the Cracker shortstop, waiting patiently beside the mound.

The ball game was over. All of Atlanta was happy, but Jug Slavin was not. When he cornered Bucky, Chip Fiske hovered in the background.

"That ball didn't blow as sky-high as I did!" he snapped. "It's off the strike zone! It forces in the tying run! You didn't get the automatic take sign from Chip?"

"It was a hit situation when I went up there,"

Bucky said. "I guess I forgot that the situation had changed after he threw me three straight balls."

"You didn't hear me yell to get your attention?" Fiske demanded.

"The crowd was making such a racket—"

"It was your job to look to third for your orders!" Jug said, and his usually quiet voice was almost an angry bellow.

"I should have done that, Mr. Slavin."

"You're mighty darned tootin' you should have!" Jug said. "And the next time, you'd better do it. If you're confused, ask your third-base coach to give it to you again. He's in no rush. He's got all afternoon. He's not going anywhere. You got that straight?"

"Yes."

"We had that nervous kid knocked out. His control was gone. All you had to do was take the three-nothing pitch, and we're in. Well, we're the world champs everywhere but in Atlanta—here, we're second best to the Crackers."

It had been a bad day. But the fact remained, he was hitting the ball hard and often. When the club reached the home stadium, his was the only Sox

picture that was run in the morning sports page on opening day. He smiled with unconcealed pleasure as he read the caption below it: The Grand-Slam Kid Comes Home!

CHAPTER 8

"This kid, Bucky O'Brian," a sports columnist had written from Florida in March, "looks at a pitcher as though he'd never made an out in his life."

It had sounded great to Bucky then and he'd almost believed it. Now he knew better. There had been nothing to warn him, in what happened on the ball fields of Florida, that he'd be hitting .209 and getting boos from the Sox fans in June.

As he knelt in the on-deck circle of Blue Sox Stadium he watched Mel Dinelli, the Clippers' curveballing right-hander. He remembered the ease with which Dinelli had struck him out three times when they'd faced each other last. True, Dinelli had struck out thirteen Sox that day. But brother! What had happened to the golden Sox rookie of the Grapefruit League, the one who could, quote—look at a

pitcher as though he'd never made an out in his life—unquote?

It wasn't just a slump. Bucky had stopped trying to convince himself of that because, in his mind, the word had begun to sound like an old 78 rpm with the needle stuck. By now the sound of the word, echoing in the vault of his mind, gave him a quiet sense of desperation. The trouble was something much deeper than a slump, and he thought he had a fair idea of the source.

It wasn't his current .209 batting average that bothered him most. It was the realization that when he faced a pitcher these days, he pressed, always and always pressed. He slashed away, with the bat that was supposed to be so highly feared, as though a line-drive single would be no good—as though the ball had to go out of sight to prove anything. The dismal result was, he knew, that he bit at the bad balls and popped up the good ones by aiming for the bleachers. He seemed to act out the role of the comic busher for every cute pitcher with a nickel curve. Like Dinelli. No, that was unfair to Dinelli, who was a real craftsman with a sharp break, and who had a quiet, unruffled head.

He watched Dinelli come in with a high, tight

pitch. Andy Pearson, the Sox shortstop, leaned back from it, and shrugged his impatience as the umpire called it a ball. It was the last of the ninth, and Dinelli nursed a 4-to-2 lead. There was one out, but the Sox third baseman, Vic Scalzi, leaned off the bag at first, making Pearson the potential tying run at the plate. Dinelli gloved the return throw from his catcher, turned, and gazed thoughtfully at the position of his outfield.

The crowd in the stands was surprisingly large for a weekday, but then it was always surprisingly large when the Clippers came to town. The two clubs had finished one-two in the league standings so many times in recent years that even their June games took on the flavor of impending crisis. High up in the third-base seats a harsh voice shrilled, "Any way to get on, Andy! Any way to get on, boy!"

Pearson had left boyhood some years behind him, but the resolute look on his face belied it. He went into his semicrouch, and his jaw jutted out. He wasn't playing for the marbles championship any more, but earnest determination was in every line of his face and body.

Dinelli threw again. This time Pearson had to jump back. Dinelli laughed at him, and Pearson took

a few steps toward the mound, shouting something. Dinelli turned his back. The crowd let out a rumble of angry voices. Pearson returned to the box, rubbed dirt in his hands, then cocked his bat and his arms with the trained, set precision of a pointer dog who has picked up the scent.

The shrill voice cut across the field again. "Belt the bum, Andy! Belt him!"

Dinelli nodded the affirmative to his catcher's signal. Obviously he thought he had Pearson set up for the pitch across the outside corner. It was the predictable strategy, and yet sometimes it was daringly —and successfully—flaunted. But Dinelli followed the book.

It was outside, yet so close to the corner it had the makings of a called strike. Pearson bent slightly forward, brought the bat around with no explosive quality. It met the ball exactly where it had been pitched. There was a soft, looping line of white into right field, just past the frantic last-minute leap of the back-pedaling first baseman. It fell much too short for the right fielder to have even a ghost of a chance. Scalzi was winging his way around the bag at second.

By the time the ball came back to the infield,

Scalzi stood on third looking cheerful, and Pearson was on first. Bucky O'Brian stood outside the batter's box swinging two bats—the one he was going to use and the practice one with the lead weight in it.

As he discarded the practice bat and stepped inside the box, the shrill voice high in the third-base seats screamed, "This is where I came in! The pop-up kid! Two outs!"

Bernie Glaser, the talkative Clipper catcher, said, "Well, well! The pop-up kid? Didn't they used to call you the Grand-Slam Kid, lad?"

Bucky didn't answer. Most ballplayers seemed to have a quick, witty way of replying to jibes, but he had never learned the trick. The only answer he knew to the taunts of the bench jockeys was silence.

Glaser didn't want the enemy hitter, in this crucial spot, to become relaxed in any way. "You would have been the greatest hitter of all time, son, if you had only never left Florida."

Bucky heard the umpire say, "You must have been real big on the banquet circuit, Glaser. But this is a ball game."

It was the first time Bucky had ever felt warm toward an umpire. He glanced at Dinelli, then at Johnny Madigan, the third-base coach of the Blue

Sox. Madigan, in his day, had been the most durable third baseman and peskiest lead-off man the Sox had ever developed. As a coach, his judgment was rarely second guessed by the team or the reporters.

As he peered down the line, Bucky saw that Madigan was, as usual, instantly in motion. Madigan never stayed still in the coach's box; he was a firm believer that his demonstrations of perpetual motion were vital to flashing the batter his sign without giving it away to the other club. He was forever tugging at his uniform, manipulating his hands and arms, talking it up, and moving around like a chicken scratching for feed. And all the while this was going on, Bucky knew he was stalling, waiting to get the orders from the dugout to relay to the man in the batter's box.

Bucky felt pleased to note that, slump or no slump, the Clippers still went into the shift on him. Both infield and outfield made a flanking move toward the right-field foul line. When they had finished it, the second baseman was almost playing a short right field, the shortstop was on the first-base side of second base, and the third baseman had very nearly become a shortstop. Bucky had always liked to see the shift, accepting it for the tribute that it

was to his startling ability to pull a ball sharply. It was a challenge he'd accepted all through the minor leagues, and he had always felt a wonderful glow of triumph when he ripped the ball through them, or over them, to make their strategy look foolish.

He kept his eyes on Madigan and concentrated. All he wanted was to be sure he had the sign to hit away. One big blast in this spot, and a Sox defeat would be a win. Manager Jug Slavin and the whole team knew he was overdue, that this was his big chance to redeem himself for his recent weeks of failure.

Then, too, he'd noticed that Dinelli pitched him in a sort of pattern: fast one inside, slow one outside, curve down low. That first pitch, that inside fast one, was the ball to pull. Let Madigan give him the hit sign, and he'd be set. Dinelli wasn't apt to switch a pattern that had been working so well—not in a spot like this.

He saw Madigan tap the left side of his chest and his left thigh with his left hand, then do the same on the opposite side with his right hand. It meant nothing. There was no signal in it yet. Madigan was merely putting on his preliminary act to confuse

sign stealers in the Clipper dugout. Then, almost imperceptibly, Madigan delivered the message.

His left hand barely touched his cap peak before he went back into the same involved motions at chest and thigh. None of it meant anything. All that mattered was that touch of the cap peak. Madigan had "touched blue," as they said in the dugout.

Bucky could hardly believe it, but it was so. Madigan had ordered him to lay down a bunt. Touching blue, according to today's special set of signals, meant that and only that. Madigan wanted him to roll a soft one down the third-base line, because the third baseman was overshifted. He, Bucky O'Brian, was supposed to play this the way the banjo hitters played it. And Dinelli, he knew, was set to come in with the predictable inside fast one that was made to order for him to break up this ball game with one sudden-death swish.

He watched Dinelli go into his stretch motion, taking a look at Scalzi and Pearson as they danced off the bags. He saw the ball, big and creamy white, leave Dinelli's hand. It was aimed straight for the spot where he had aimed that first one over and over to Bucky O'Brian, to register a quick strike.

It took two seconds, perhaps even less, for the pitch to travel from Dinelli's hand to the strike zone. But during that brief instant Bucky had time to see a whole picture form in his mind.

He saw the gaping hole by third base. But what if he did dump one down there, even beat it out? What would they say? They—the fans and the writers—would say that he had quit on himself. The Grand-Slam Kid was no grand-slam kid at all—just another overrated rookie, trying to buy a base hit the easiest way he knew how. At such a moment as this one the true sluggers did not bunt, they slugged. They knew who they were and what they could do under pressure.

Dinelli's pitch was coming in exactly where he had looked for it. It was fast and inside and just about perfect for a pull hitter to pull.

Almost without conscious mutiny in his mind, he tightened his grip on the bat handle, down at the very end of it, where it was poised nearly on a level with his chin. His taut shoulders shifted slightly toward his left. He swung with a whiplike lash, releasing the wrist snap just as the bat met the ball.

It went on a screaming line, hugging the first-base

foul line, just barely fair. It started to rise, and he knew, from the feel of it when it had left the bat, that once in orbit it would never stay inside the park.

He heard the crowd's quick shriek, and then the instant death of it as he saw—straight ahead of him—the incredible leap and reach of the Clipper first baseman, who had shifted almost to the foul line before Dinelli's pitch. He came down with it, and when he did, Bucky saw Pearson desperately trying to reverse his swift flight toward second. Pearson covered the last few yards back to first in the air, landing on his chest with his right hand frantically extended to reach the bag. The Clipper first baseman's toe had already touched it, and the whole Clipper team was racing in toward the dugout.

Pearson stood up, batting dust from his uniform. He stared at Bucky, who had pulled up short of the bag. Bucky saw the tight lines around Pearson's mouth. Pearson's voice was as filled with accusation as his eyes when he snapped, "That was a *bunt*, O'Brian?"

Bucky started to reply, but Pearson brushed angrily past him. When he reached the dugout,

Johnny Madigan and Jug Slavin stood there looking at him as the players disappeared into the tunnel that led to the dressing room.

"You *couldn't* have missed the signal!" Madigan said.

"No, I didn't miss it," Bucky said.

Jug Slavin said thoughtfully, "Let's have a talk in my office after your shower, son."

Bucky nodded. He turned slowly, and his steps lagged. He hated to go into that dressing room. He wished he didn't have to look at anyone for a while. Confusion, misery, and fear all seemed to be mixed up inside him in just about equal proportions.

CHAPTER 9

He sat in front of his locker, and he still had not removed his uniform. The hiss of the showers had turned to silence, and the muffled conversations of the day of defeat had died out. He was almost alone in the big room now and, in thinking back, he found that his sudden sense of quiet desperation hadn't eased at all.

He was doing the same things in the same way he'd always done them. Before this season had started, everything had worked out. Now nothing worked out.

Jug had batted him fifth in the order through April, dropped him to seventh in May, and all the way down to eighth early in June. He had been cheered by the fans in April, greeted with indifference in May, and now he heard boos in June. What

in the world had happened to that magic carpet?

He remembered how in the early weeks of the season enemy pitchers had been afraid to throw him a good pitch when he'd come to bat in the late innings in a tight situation. They had drawn the resentful roar of the crowd. Bucky had grown to resent them, too. By May he hadn't had a single chance to prove to the fans that his grand-slam home run of last October had not been a fluke. Then in a game with the Panthers he went for a bad ball—knowing it was bad—in a spot where a walk might have helped, but where a long ball would have won it all.

He had almost made it. The fly traveled to the very rim of the right-field barrier. The Panther fielder leaped and swooped it in. But the crowd got a thrill. He got one himself. At least they had seen again that the long ball in the clutch was no accident where Bucky O'Brian was concerned.

He tried it again and again. The word seemed to be around that Bucky O'Brian would go for the bad ball in the tight spot, if you refused to show him the good one.

That had been the beginning of the sense he had these days that he pressed. Pitchers stopped walking him in the late innings with the vital runs on base.

They didn't throw good pitches, but they didn't throw him waste balls, either. It became a habit. Anything close to the strike zone was a pitch he went after.

One day he read in the sports section of the Sunday newspaper a story about the Blue Sox statistician, who kept track of just about every detail that concerned Sox pitchers and hitters. In the story, buried somewhere near the end, he read:

"In the last month my figures show that, given a chance to pick up r.b.i.'s—that is, coming to the plate with men on the bases—the underrated Bud Walker has the highest percentage of driving those runs in. On the other hand, the player whose public image is that of a clutch r.b.i. man, Bucky O'Brian, has the lowest."

It was a dismal record so far this year for a rookie who had only wanted to do what the fans expected him to do. On opening day he had heard their yells and the way they had picked up that nickname of the Grand-Slam Kid. They didn't buy tickets to watch the Grand-Slam Kid hit singles or beat out bunts, did they? Run-of-the-mill ballplayers could please them that way. But he couldn't. Not Bucky O'Brian. A lot more was expected from him.

He had not been very bright today in ignoring Madigan's sign. But he had something to live up to, and the pitch had looked right—the kind he had hit a mile so many times before. If he had bunted in that situation, he would have looked like just another hitter. He had created a legend, and he had to live up to it. Madigan should see that. Jug Slavin should see it too. But they didn't. They surely didn't.

He heard himself saying, "What? What did you say?"

Pickles, the clubhouse man, was standing a few feet in front of him as he raised his eyes. He hadn't even heard Pickles approach.

"Sorry to break in on you all of a sudden, Bucky," he said. "Didn't know I'd startle you."

"Oh! No, you didn't startle me. I was off somewhere."

"I could see." Pickles glanced away, sort of apologetically.

"What's up, Pickles?"

"Well, I was wondering if maybe you forgot that Jug was waiting to see you. I mean, everybody's showered and gone, practically, and he's waiting in there. If you showered fast. . . ."

"I can shower later," Bucky said quickly, and stood up.

"Bucky—"

"Yeah?"

"Johnny Madigan is in there too. I—I just thought you might like to know."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot, Pickles."

In his loafers he didn't create much sound as he made the long walk down the deserted room and turned left at the cubicle that adjoined the far end. He heard low-pitched voices. He coughed to let them know he was within hearing distance. Then he walked in.

Jug's office was all green—walls, carpets, and even the big metallic-looking desk. It was neat and tidy, the way Jug was and the way he insisted that his players be at all times. He sat behind the desk in a swivel chair, dressed in a dark gray suit, smoking a carefully clipped cigar. His long jaw was thrust forward as usual. There were wrinkles around his eyes that gave him the leathery look of a rancher who spends much of his life outstaring the sun.

Madigan wore a sports jacket and a collar that looked too tight. Madigan only looked comfortable

in a uniform, never in street clothes. He sat on a chair, which he'd propped against the wall facing Jug.

Bucky tried to set himself for words of sharp accusation, words with a sting to them. Casually, so that Madigan would not think he was some frightened rookie, overeager to defend himself, he merely nodded at both of them, Jug first. This was no time to panic. He'd made a mistake. He'd be calm about it, admit it, and indicate in some firm, dignified way that it had been just one of those things, the result of a good hitter temporarily trapped in a slump. They were veterans. They should understand about that.

Jug's voice, when he heard it, surprised him. He seemed to speak more in sorrow than in anger when he said, "First things first, Bucky. The fine is a hundred, out of your next pay check. It's a cheap price, I might add, for running through a traffic signal from third base."

"I guess my sick batting average has me a little mixed up these days, Mr. Slavin."

"Well," Jug said thoughtfully, "Johnny here and I were talking about just that very thing when you

walked in. Obviously *something* has you a little mixed up these days."

"I never hit .209 before."

Jug nodded. "That can be a worrisome thing. But I feel you're oversimplifying the problem of Bucky O'Brian."

"Just the same," Bucky said, "two inches higher, and that ball would have been out of the park. Just two inches."

"That's why they call baseball what they do—the game of inches. But, out of the park or not, the hundred fine would still have been slapped on you. A game-winning home run would have been just as flagrant a case of mutiny as the double play was. That's the main point, Bucky—not that it missed by inches, but because you decided to play by your rules, not ours. Do you know why you did that?"

Now he felt on the defensive. Jug was being too kind; Madigan was being too silent. He began to feel like a patient in a mental hospital. He wished Jug would talk tough, not soft.

"The crowd . . . maybe," he said at last.

Madigan leaned forward and shot the next question at him. "What *about* the crowd?"

"They didn't want to see me bunt. They don't expect me to bunt."

"And who are you, that you're above bunting?" Madigan demanded.

Bucky saw Jug shake his head sideways at the sharp-talking coach. "Are you trying to say that the crowd—and *you* too—have the idea—"

"The image. Say it," Madigan cut in.

"—the idea," Jug repeated, "that you have to be Frank Merriwell *all* the time, because you were Frank Merriwell cnce—by a dramatic accident?"

"Accident!" Bucky said. "You think that grand slam was a fluke too?"

"I didn't say that," Jug told him quickly. "It was great. I'll never forget it, the way it looked, the way you looked. It was practically the American dream come true. Unknown rookie comes out of nowhere and wins pennant. But that was just the beginning of your career, Bucky. You can't spend the rest of it trying to live up to that. Nobody could."

"I try to do what's expected of me," Bucky said.

He saw Jug and Madigan exchange glances. Then Jug shrugged and stood up. Bucky knew the talk was over.

"Just don't do what you *think* is expected of you,"

Jug said. "I'm the boss man here, as the Lion calls it. I don't expect grand slams from you, Bucky. Why do you expect them of yourself?"

"I'll be hitting again," Bucky said. "It's just this slump, like I said."

"Well," Jug said, "maybe Pete Gibbs can oil up those old bones and spell you a little more—until you pull out of the slump. I guess we'll have to do it that way for a while, Bucky."

Bucky nodded. He still didn't like all this kindness. He turned and walked out of Jug's office and, in delayed fashion, he saw the picture of what was happening. He had been dropped gradually from fifth to eighth in the batting order. Now the old veteran was being pulled back to help carry him. The next thing would be a pinch hitter sent up to the plate for Bucky O'Brian.

If that ever happened, then the minor leagues would not be far behind.

CHAPTER 10

BUCKY listened to the sweet sound of the ball hit Pete Gibbs' mitt with pistol-cracking finality. In the same moment, Pete's feet shifted his body to face third base. He plucked the ball from the mitt and snapped it off his finger tips in what looked like a single motion. It shot down the line, at the bag and only inches off the ground.

Scalzi picked it off his shoe tops, straightened, and unleashed it on a line toward the second-base bag, which seemed unguarded. But before the ball could skim into the outfield, Bud Walker crossed the bag at the very moment the Scalzi throw reached it. Walker yelled, "Yippee!" and rammed the ball through the empty pitcher's box, straight back to Gibbs' mitt. Gibbs thrust the mitt, face up, behind his back where Madigan stood, fungo bat in hand.

Madigan picked it from the pocket of the glove, and shouted, "You, out there, come alive!"

Then he belted a mean, grass-cutting ground ball toward the hole between short and third. Pearson skidded to a stop on the far edge of the infield's skin, slapped his glove backhand as though swatting a bug. He picked the ball out of it and, without taking the added half second to straighten up, released it on a straight, true line to first base and to Stookey's webbed glove, which was extended as far as it could go and still allow Stookey's foot to maintain contact with the bag.

After that the ball was a white, whizzing thing that seemed alive, as it shot from base to base, before it finally nested once again in Gibbs' mitt.

It was the daily marvel of pregame infield practice, which Bucky never failed to watch in wonderment when Gibbs had the duty. And Gibbs had the first part of the duty today, because he was going to catch and Bucky was going to ride the bench. He knew that, beginning today, he no longer had the first-string catching job. He'd had it for almost two months, and now he'd lost it back to a veteran whose age and increasing ailments had slowed down his running, throwing, and hitting. Bucky knew now

that what he thought he had proved in Florida he hadn't proved at all. Then he'd had confidence going for him, helping him along. Now the confidence was shaky, if not gone, and his sudden lack of it was a brand-new liability.

Bucky sat and brooded on the dugout's spike-scuffed bench, tucked away from wind and sun and the all-seeing eyes of the early-bird, dyed-in-the-wool fans, who came out in time to watch practice. Dust blew across the field and made his eyes squint and his throat feel dry. The weather was chilly, and batters came back from the plate with the old complaint of "bees in the bat handles." The phrase described the problem well. Hit one off the handle or right on the end of the bat, and your hands really stung.

Bucky didn't see how Pete Gibbs stood up the way he did under the punishment of steady catching, especially on the road trips. With new teams added and the schedule makers chasing them from one coast to the other, the ballplayers' hours were so irregular and mixed up that it seemed they were always eating when they should be sleeping and sleeping when they should be eating.

After losing the final, rain-interrupted night game

at home, they had boarded a plane to be here at Redskin Park for an afternoon game that started at one. The rains had forced the plane to detour. The winds had made it a bumpy trip all the way. When they finally landed at the airport, they had to spend almost an hour more on the bus to the hotel. By then it was two A.M. Everyone was hungry. By three A.M. they had eaten and gone to bed. Five hours' sleep was all they could afford and still have time for showers, breakfasts, the trip to the ball park, and the required practice.

Despite all that, Bucky was glad to get away from Blue Sox Stadium. The next few games he played —when Jug gave him another chance—would be crucial to him, and he knew it. Far better to face such tests away from the home fans. It was funny. If you were going well, the home fans were a help; if you were going badly, they only made a rough situation rougher.

The Sox finished practice as soon as the warning bell rang, and trooped in from the field. The Redskins promptly jogged out for their final session. Some of the Sox filed through the tunnel in search of dry sweat shirts or soft drinks. Pete Gibbs sat down wearily beside Bucky, breathing hard.

When he had caught his breath, he said, "Buck, I don't know how long I'll stand up, still trying to act like the first-string man with the mitt and the mask. You've just got to plan to help me out."

"I sure want to, Pete. But you know I'm in the doghouse, and you know why."

Pete nodded. "*I* know why. But I'm not sure you do. Not because you disobeyed a signal. Not because your batting average is way down there. But I expect Jug told you why."

Bucky shrugged. "He said a lot of things. He seems to think I'm not as good a hitter as I know I am."

"I doubt that," Pete said. "We all know you're a good hitter. But you'll never prove it until you come out of that dream world you're in. Forget you ever hit that grand slam last fall. Can't you do that?"

"You sound like Jug. How could I forget it? Could you?"

"Well, yes, I think I could, if I found it had me swinging away when I should bunt, hitting at bad balls when I should take and get a base on balls. Some players are born bad-ball hitters, but you're not. And pitchers know it."

Just then Jug called Pete's name and pointed to

Eddie Lasky, who was completing his warm-up throws. Pete picked up his mitt for the customary ritual. The starting catcher always caught the starting pitcher's final warm-up throws.

As he turned to go, he called back to Bucky. "Next time you hit make up your mind you won't swing at a bad ball, no matter what the count, no matter what the situation."

"Well—if I ever get a chance to hit again, I'll think about it, Pete."

Danny Redd opened the game by lining a two-strike pitch safely into center field. Walker quickly bunted him to second. Peterson, the Redskin pitcher, made two cozy corner pitches to Russ Woodward, who played the waiting game. In the hole, two-and-nothing, Peterson unzipped his fast ball, but Woodward not only had the hit sign, he was in the proper mood for it. His bat lashed around, and the ball, on a line, found the pocket between right and center.

Redd crossed the plate standing up; Woodward made it all the way to third, with the help of a hook slide. That brought up big Mike Jaffe, the clean-up hitter, who looked and swung like one.

Since Jaffe's patented specialty was the very long

ball to left, Peterson pitched him low. Too low. He was down, three-and-nothing, in a hurry, and he called a conference with his catcher.

Bucky watched Madigan go into his rhythmic act at third, and saw that he had given Jaffe the hit sign, despite the count. They figured that even if Jaffe flied out, he'd fly out deeply enough to bring the swift Woodward home with the second run. Bucky could see that reasoning. But he was thinking that it would be a very cold day indeed when Madigan ever gave O'Brian the hit sign with the three-nothing count.

Jaffe acted unimpressed with his freedom. He watched a pitch sail by, which was close, but just touched the strike zone for a called first strike. Bucky shook his head. He knew he could never have let that one go by, given Jaffe's chance.

Then, to Bucky's amazement, Jaffe did the same thing again, and the count on him was all filled up at three-and-two. Where in the world did Jaffe find such patience? He'd had every right to belt both those pitches. But they hadn't quite suited him. He waited now, eyes on Peterson, a huge and relaxed hitter.

The pitch was a hummer, and it reached Jaffe in

precisely the same spot as the other two. But this time he did not take it. Apparently certain in his mind that he had set Peterson up for just such a repeat, he met it with his bat with perfect timing. It was slashed down the left-field line for a clean single, and Woodward romped home.

Pete Gibbs rose from his seat by the cooler and walked up. He pushed in beside Bucky and sat down. "Did you get the message, Buck?" he asked. "There's a man can hit a ball farther than you can. He's free to hit, but he makes that pitcher come to him three times running to be ready for a sure thing. He didn't want to be a hero. He just wanted a measly single to get Woodward home."

"If I waited a pitcher out that way, I'd go down looking."

"How do you know until you try?" Gibbs demanded.

That second run began to look very large by the sixth inning. The Redskins had dented Lasky for a run in the third, but that was all they had. And the Sox had only their original two. Bucky settled back and watched Lasky work.

Lasky was called the pro's pro. True, at his age, he needed four and five days' rest between starts,

and his fast ball was pretty much a thing of the past.

"Easiest man in the league to catch," Gibbs had told Bucky. "He does all his own thinking. A catcher practically has the day off. Nothing to do but catch. When they get runs out of Lasky, they have to bleed them out. Even with the speed gone, he can make the best hitters in the league look like a bunch of pat-ball badminton players."

Then, in the seventh inning, the Redskins filled the bases on Lasky, with one out. He glanced around at his fielders, tugged at his cap visor, and nodded at the crouching Gibbs.

The Redskins' third-place hitter was up. Lasky curved two strikes past him, and the third was fouled straight up, then straight down into Gibbs' waiting mitt. The clean-up hitter was next. Lasky worked on him, making the pitches good enough to hit at, but only good enough to result in foul ground balls. Then a curve strike nicked the outside corner, and Lasky was out of the ominous inning.

He trudged into the dugout looking impassive and as coolly professional as a surgeon. He was a burly man with spiky black hair and dark eyes that glared balefully at every hitter who stepped into a batter's box to face him.

"Rough inning," Gibbs said, as they reached the dugout step.

"So what's the difference?" Lasky asked. "Bases filled, bases empty, there's still only one man up there with a bat, and he's the only one can hurt you. Why, I practically never get three men out in a row any more. What of it?"

He saw that Bucky was listening to him, and suddenly added, still addressing Pete Gibbs, "Of course, I don't say a hitter doesn't get lucky against me once in a while. I remember a kid the Clippers had one year. He hit two grand slams off me in the month of May alone."

"What did he do to you in June?"

"Nothing," Lasky said, "because he wasn't around any more. Seems like those two grand slams he hit off me were the only hits he got that month. Nobody ever heard from him since. Sometimes I think I was the ruination of that boy, you know?"

As Lasky laughed Bucky heard his name called from the far end of the bench. Jug crooked a finger at him, and he walked down.

"Grab your mitt and get out to the bull pen, Bucky. Lasky often has eighth-inning troubles."

He nodded and went back and picked his mitt

off the hook on the wall where he'd left it. Then he went at a dogtrot toward the distant right-field sector. It was the first time he had been asked to join the Lion's forces out there, and he rated it one step lower than warming the bench. At least on the bench you might be used in the game, one way or another. Out here a catcher could consider himself practically living on a pension.

CHAPTER 11

THE Sox took two out of three from the Redskins, and they were feeling good when they boarded the plane for the long haul to the west coast. Bucky asked for a writing table to be inserted into his plane seat. He had a fistful of postcards that he wanted to mail back to Maine from the coast. He knew how adventurous that postmark would look to his old Branford Giant teammates, and—well, why not?

The roar of the motors outside seemed to help him concentrate. On the completion of the fifth one, he paused to read it over. "Dear Walt, I can almost hear the Pacific Ocean in my ears, but was thinking about how the salmon must be jumping after those black flies on the old Rennys River. Tell the bunch I said hello from sunny Calif. Yrs., Bucky."

He looked up from the writing table and saw

Pete Gibbs watching him with a smile that seemed to say he knew just what Bucky was doing. He proved it by his next words.

"'That old gang of mine,' huh, Buck? Giving them the word from the world traveler?"

Bucky felt his face get a little bit warm. "Anything wrong in sending postcards?"

"Of course not," Pete said. "Not if you send them in the right spirit. But Buck, I strongly suspect you of building your image again."

"*That* word again!"

"Oh? Jug used it on you?"

"He didn't. Madigan did."

"Oh, the pesky one. Well, I'm prejudiced, Buck. In Madigan's favor. So remember, any words you use may be used against you, as the district attorney always says."

Bucky shrugged. "I know he was a great ballplayer and all that, but—"

"Not great. Madigan would be the first to deny it. No Hall of Fame for Madigan, ever. He was merely very, very good."

"Well, I can't help it if he doesn't happen to like me."

Gibbs shook his head sharply. "A funny thing,

but I think he really does like you. He wouldn't waste his time criticizing you to your face unless he did. When Madigan thinks somebody is nobody, he just ignores him. Be flattered by his critical attention."

"I could do without it," Bucky said.

"You know, you talk more than you used to."

"I've got more time for it," Bucky said. "I used to be busy playing ball. Now I got time on my hands."

Bracken O'Neill won the first game for the Sox under the lights. It was an important win, because the Clippers had lost to the Panthers, and now the Sox were only a game out of a first-place tie.

Bracken O'Neill had been a winter trading acquisition from the Chiefs. He had come high, costing the Sox two fine farm hands plus Max Fitelson, their bull pen's most dependable "long man" of the relief brigade. Bracken seemed worth it. With the last-place Chiefs, his record had been only nine wins against twice that many losses. But he had pitched fine ball against the Sox.

Bucky had caught him once, in a Chicago game. When the amplifiers announced the battery of

O'Neill and O'Brian, a fan had shouted, "Are we playing a ball club or the Gaelic soccer team?"

It had bothered Bucky that he did not catch Bracken in this coast game, because Jug Slavin knew that his only shutout had come that day in Chicago when Bucky had been behind the plate. Superstition alone said he should have caught the opener of this series. And Pete looked drawn in the face, slow on his feet.

The next day Pete spent a half hour in the whirlpool bath, and announced he needed the day off. Still Jug did not use Bucky, who saw by then that he was being treated as an untried rookie—all over again.

Instead, Jug used Ray Zeitler, usually called Zip. Zip was a catcher everybody knew was never going to make it big. He was earnest and he could handle a pitcher and he had seven years of minor-league ball behind him. Put him in the line-up and he'd never damage the team, but he'd never lift them to any heights, either. By this time the record showed that about Zip. There were dozens of ballplayers on the rosters of big-league clubs who fitted into Zip's category: dependable and good enough to

keep around for emergencies, but without a chance in the world of becoming regulars, not even on a second-division team.

Inwardly, Bucky burned. To bench sit for a real, if fading, star like Pete Gibbs was one thing. But to bench sit for a ballplayer who had never been a regular and never would be—that was a lot to take.

As soon as he saw the day's line-up posted on the bulletin board by the Coke cooler, he sat on the bench in front of his locker and felt as though steam were rising from his body. Players walked by and spoke, but he didn't reply. He didn't even look up to see who had spoken. He sat among them, feeling alone, and the blue, printed letters across the chest of his uniform meant nothing. He was not one of them.

Bracken O'Neill came by, and said, "C'mon, Bucky, it's not as bad as all that."

"Don't tell me how bad it is," he snapped.

"Remember that day in Chicago?" Bracken asked. "You made every call right."

"That was twenty years ago," Bucky said.

Bracken shrugged, and as he turned away, Bucky saw he'd been given up—even by Bracken, who had

gone on record as saying he'd rather have Bucky for his catcher than Pete Gibbs. He had said it in front of Pete, and Pete had laughed. "You sound out of your mind, Bracken, but you know, I don't think you really are!"

To play second fiddle to a journeyman, old, old rookie like Zip Zeitler—brother, how low could you sink? It occurred to Bucky that he had never really felt anger before. No wonder. He'd never known anything except smooth sailing. And he didn't like the rough weather, now that he'd found it existed.

He took his turn in batting practice after Zip. Zip had hit a couple of line drives and some routine fly balls and had laid down a neat bunt. He had looked about as exciting at that dish as the ninth hitter in a picnic softball contest.

Bucky followed him into the cage, and it pleased him to note how the players in front of the Westerns' dugout stopped the pepper games to watch him swing. That happened often, in lots of parks.

He hammered three into the right-field seats and hit a couple of long ones to deep center. He returned to the bench, feeling satisfied with the picture he had presented in contrast to Zip's.

Gibbs walked by him, and said quietly, "You look

like you're feeling ugly, Buck. On you, it doesn't fit. Who do you think you are, anyway—an umpire?"

In the fifth inning of the game the Westerns had a 7-to-1 lead. Phil Doyle stood on the mound with a helpless, bewildered look. He seemed to be talking to himself. Western base hits seemed to drop in wherever they were blooped. And blooped they were—not a solid blow among all twelve of them. The wind blew across the park from the Pacific Ocean. It carried erratic gusts. Easy fly balls fell for doubles. Pearson, at short, couldn't seem to pick a ball out of his webbing. Everything was going so wrong it seemed like some kind of a sickness.

Danny Redd threw to the wrong base after he retrieved a bloop single. Woodward and Jaffe crashed into each other on a fly to left center, which fell for three bases and two runs. Scalzi batted out of order, and his run-scoring double was an out. Stookey caught a fly ball in foul territory deep behind him, and stood frozen while a runner on third tagged up and scored.

When it finally ended, the Sox had lost, 13 to 3, and everybody on the team had pulled some kind of a rock except Zip Zeitler. But the fact remained, as Bucky saw it, that all their bad luck had happened

on a day when a second-rate catcher was directing the team.

He had a feeling that on Pete Gibbs' next day of rest he, not Zip, would be in the line-up.

CHAPTER 12

He was right. Jug must have decided that Zip was not the answer to the problem of a catcher who could fill in for Pete Gibbs on those days when Pete had the aches and miseries that went with his age group. The only trouble was, Jug had further ideas. Bucky found them out when he read the sports page two days later. There had been a rain out of the second game with the Westerns. Apparently it gave Jug time to think and the reporters time to find out what he was thinking.

The story that Bucky read said in part: "We've won a lot of pennants in the last dozen years. You can't win pennants without a good catcher. It's been said so many times I shouldn't waste my breath saying it again. But that's the answer to what's wrong with the Blue Sox this year. We're the best team in

the league, position for position—except behind the plate. Our great one has slowed down, and we don't have the replacement—or if we do have, he hasn't proved it yet. I only say Pete Gibbs has slowed down, because I'm quoting his words to me, and you can check me out on that with Pete. He keeps carrying the burden, but he just can't keep it up through the hot months and the long double-headers ahead.

"We've got O'Brian, who could be a good one, and Zip, who gives it all he's got, and the Lion, who is a bull-pen and pinch-hit man. But so far we haven't got a replacement for Gibbs.

"Now there's a young fellow, named Tony Lane, down on one of our farms. We looked at Tony this spring and decided he was a year or two away. But the kid has come fast in Double-A, and we are thinking about him. Meanwhile, Gibbs will play every day he feels good enough to play and, with all our trouble, we are still only a game out of first place. So there you are.

"But mark it down—the name Tony Lane, I mean."

Bucky didn't need to mark down the name of

Tony Lane to remember him well. A big, strong, willing boy, who had never played above Class B, Lane had only lasted a few weeks in the Sox camp before taking his departure along with other rookies headed for farm clubs in the higher classifications. No one had taken him as a serious threat, because it was assumed that Bucky O'Brian had a lock and key on the first-string job, backed up by a part-time Gibbs, a sometimes Zeitler, and a matured insurance policy called the Lion. Bucky hadn't given Tony Lane a second thought. Now, apparently, he'd come along fast in Double-A, and was still one more danger sign in the descending path Bucky had followed since opening day.

What had been happening to him since that day seemed to be a series of chain reactions. Pitchers made a myth out of his reputation as a long-ball threat with men on bases. His manager gradually dropped him from the heart of the batting attack to the bottom of the order. Fans' cheers turned to derision, as though Bucky O'Brian had been some kind of a joke played on them. The feeling grew inside him that no matter what he did with the bat, it wouldn't be enough to restore the picture he had created with a single swing last fall. Finally he'd

been benched, sent to the bull pen, demoted all the way from first string to third string. And now, to hit a new low, he found himself in danger of falling back to the minor leagues in favor of a Double-A whiz kid.

He didn't think things could get much worse, and yet they did—just when he thought the chain reaction had finally run out of fuses.

When the team reached the home grounds of the Panthers, it was Bracken O'Neill's turn to pitch, according to the regular rotation. Pete Gibbs had caught two in a row, and he needed a rest. Bucky didn't see how it would make much sense, under the circumstances, for Jug to ignore Bracken's favorite receiver. Furthermore, Panther Stadium was tailored to perfection for a left-handed pull hitter. It was no coincidence that the Panther line-up included three left-handed pull hitters, all of whom had been carefully developed in the Panther farm system. The right-field barrier was only 320 feet at the foul line, and it veered out at a pleasantly gradual angle. It had to be Bucky's day.

It seemed that way at the start. About an hour and a half before game time, most of the team was

sitting around in underwear after their showers. The bull sessions sounded happy, mainly because the Clippers had been shut out in a night game by the seventh-place Grays. Scalzi, who had such a dark beard he was sometimes referred to as the Five O'Clock Shadow, was shaving. Pete Gibbs was working a crossword puzzle. Jug Slavin walked in with Rip Radjecki behind him. He stopped in front of Gibbs, and Bucky saw Pete shake his head in a firmly negative manner. Jug then glanced at Bucky and nodded for him to join him. Bucky arose and followed him into the cubicle that passed for the visiting manager's private office.

"You're back in the line-up today, Bucky. You did a good job last time you caught O'Neill. He likes to pitch to you. We need to win this one."

"I like this park," Bucky said.

"I know. The home of the Chinese home run for left-handed hitters. Bucky, I don't expect even one measly home run from you. Singles suit me fine. So do bases on balls."

"Well, I'll look 'em over."

The Panthers had been having trouble beating anybody lately, but, as Pete Gibbs said, that made

them doubly dangerous. He walked over to speak to Bucky after Bracken O'Neill finished warming up.

"Buck," he said, "don't let that close fence or that nice wind throw you off. Don't swing at any bad balls today. Believe me, Jug will be watching you like a hawk in *that* department."

"It's so long since I swung a bat in a real game I may not remember how."

"You were born with a built-in memory for that," Pete said.

A good right-hander, Irv Neiman, was pitching for the Panthers. Bucky had never hit against him before, but he knew Neiman could hit the strike zone without giving away anything too good. In the first inning he retired Redd, Walker, and Woodward in order. As O'Neill finished his preliminary throws and Bucky snapped the ball down to second, the Panther lead-off man stepped in. It was Rykoff, the veteran second baseman.

"Where you been keeping yourself, old buddy?" Rykoff asked. "Aren't you the fellow who half scared all us old folks near to death down there in Florida?"

Bucky ignored him, and crouched to give the signal. The count ran to two-and-two on Rykoff. Bucky called for the curve. As Bracken was about to release the ball, Bucky shifted his weight slightly to the right. Bracken had an occasional tendency to hang a curve ball, and Bucky knew the weight shift helped him to avoid it. That made Bracken realize he had to throw the ball with the shift, and it helped him to hold on to the ball long enough to correct the hanging of it.

Bracken's curve broke nicely, and Rykoff popped sky-high toward second base, where Pearson camped under it for the first out.

Wade hit next. Bracken threw three balls, all low pitches that barely missed. Wade walked, and Bucky went out to the mound.

"Low-ball trouble, Bracken."

"Some days that low ball just won't go in."

"Don't quit on it. Remember what we did about it in Chicago that day?"

Bracken nodded eagerly.

"Let's try it again," Bucky said, and returned to the plate.

Keller, the free-swinging first baseman, moved in.

Keller was one of the Panthers' pull-hitting left-handers. He needed to be pitched low to, to avoid those Chinese home runs.

Bucky signaled for the low ball again. Then he set himself to catch from a higher position than he had caught the ball on Wade. This time Bracken's low ball came in just that slight fraction of an inch higher. Keller turned to glare at the umpire when he heard the emphatic strike call.

Bracken threw it again. Keller swung, and the ball beat a path across the infield to Walker, who tossed to first for the out. The fourth hitter flied to left field, and Bucky felt sure that Bracken would have a good day.

It worked out that way. But Neiman was just as sharp, and the two teams rolled into the bottom of the eighth inning all tied up at 3-3. Then disaster, in the form of his hanging curve, struck Bracken. There were two Panthers already disposed of and no men on base, when the free-swinging Keller caught the curve that hung. It went high and deep, past the 320 mark in the right-field corner, and landed in the seats, fair by feet. Although there was

no further scoring in the inning, the Panthers now led 4 to 3.

The Sox bench was buzzing when Jaffe seemed to tee off on the first pitch in the top of the ninth. But his blast went to straightaway center field, and was pulled in for a long out near the base of the flagpole. Scalzi lined to short, and the Panther fans headed toward the exit ramps.

Stookey stopped their march by singling to right, and when Pearson craftily waited Neiman out to draw a base on balls, bats began to bang against the Sox dugout steps. Men were on first and second, two outs. Bucky moved slowly from the on-deck circle toward the batter's box. This was the first time in the game he had been confronted by a critical situation, and he half expected to hear Jug's voice call him back for a pinch hitter. But no such sound came. He stepped in, feeling grateful and eager.

"Didn't I used to see your picture in the paper, kid?" the Panther catcher asked.

Bucky kept his eyes on Neiman and did not reply.

"I could have sworn I saw you someplace before," the catcher said. "I guess it was a long time ago."

The first pitch was very low, and Bucky took it for a ball. The second looked outside as it came in, but the umpire called it a strike. Neiman then broke off a curve that Bucky fouled back into the net. He threw a waste pitch, which Bucky disdained. He set himself for the curve again, ready to defend the strike zone. Just in time he saw it would miss. It did, and the count was full, three-and-two.

He stepped out of the box and glanced at the way the brisk wind blew the flag toward right field. That barrier out there looked close and inviting. Behind him he saw the Lion rattling bats in the rack, ready for pinch-hitting duties. He stepped back in.

Pete's words floated through his mind. "Don't let that close fence or that nice wind throw you off. . . . Don't swing at any bad balls. . . . Jug will be watching you like a hawk. . . ."

Neiman went into the stretch. He released the ball. It loomed large and white. Bucky's shoulders set; he was ready to come around.

The ball was going outside. In a split instant he saw the picture: O'Brian refused to take a walk; O'Brian had to swing away; O'Brian had to be a hero again.

He fell back and tossed the bat behind him. He

started toward first on the jog, until the roar of the crowd told him something was wrong. He turned around.

The umpire was shouting after him, "Out! *Out!*" His thumb was jerked aloft. The crowd was moving happily through the exit ramps.

CHAPTER 13

WHEN he awoke in the morning, he told himself that he would not look at a single sports page. After the game no one had said a word to him in the clubhouse. There had been no sharp remarks, but, on the other hand, there had been no sympathy. All he could think, before he'd finally gone to sleep, was that the Grand-Slam Kid was not only failing to get that late-inning long ball any longer, but he wasn't even threatening to do it. He was staring at the third strikes as they went by, like a man paralyzed.

He feigned sleep when he heard his roommate, Oklahoma Crane, in the shower. After Oklahoma had departed, he arose and showered and dressed. By the time he went down to the lobby of the hotel he felt sure no one on the club would still be in the coffee shop. He looked inside and saw that it was

almost deserted and that no one was in sight except civilians, as Pete Gibbs called all citizens who did not play baseball for a living.

Despite his good intentions, he went to the cigar stand to buy a morning paper. Once settled over his bacon and eggs, he turned to the page with the story of yesterday's game. It was written, of course, by a Panther sports writer, but he knew his part in the climax would not go unnoticed. It was not. Near the end of the account he read:

"While the Panthers managed to break their losing streak, Bucky O'Brian, the once-famed and feared clutch slugger, did a complete about-face and left the winning runs on base without even making a pass at a good third strike. This is what is known in the trade as total form reversal. Previously this year O'Brian put himself in Jug Slavin's doghouse by swinging at bad balls in just such critical spots. Perhaps he's been talked to more than is good for him. At least yesterday's dying-swan act on Bucky's part makes it seem that he's bending over backward a little too far. It doesn't really make too much difference what a kid like Bucky does. After his shot heard around the world last fall, any move he makes is bound to be an anticlimax. The lad

probably is aware of this fact, if not consciously, then deep down inside there where it does even more harm. . . ."

It was too early to go to the ball park, so he went back to his room. Oklahoma Crane sat at the desk drawing sketches on a pad. As he looked up, he glanced at the newspaper in Bucky's hand. "When I have a bad day, I don't want to read about it. You caught a fine ball game yesterday, but I'll bet it was never mentioned in that story."

"No, it wasn't."

"Sports writers!" Oklahoma said, holding his head in mock anguish. "The seeing-eye dogs of the fans! They can't see the gold, jewel-encrusted palaces for the moats and drawbridges!"

Bucky sighed. "There you go again, Oklahoma. I don't know what you're talking about. What's a moat?"

"It's an obstacle," Oklahoma said. "It's a murky ditch that conceals—well, you could look it up. Let's go to the park, and I'll bet you Jug Slavin thinks more highly of you than that reporter did. Want to bet?"

Oklahoma's prediction about Jug was right. As

soon as Bucky had climbed into his uniform, Jug called him to his office and said, "Bucky, I could see yesterday why Bracken likes to have you catch him. You were helping him keep that curve from hanging and helping him adjust that low ball of his. It was obvious from the bench. Well-handled ball game."

Bucky said, "Well, I learned one thing yesterday."

"You did?"

"Yeah. It's better to swing at bad balls than *not* to swing at good ones."

"At least you were thinking."

"What good is thinking if it only loses ball games? I'm not a waiter, Mr. Slavin. I'm a swinger."

"You've got to learn to be both, Bucky. You made a mistake in judgment yesterday, but at least it's a mistake I can understand—for a change."

Maybe, Bucky thought as he headed through the tunnel to the field, it was a mistake Jug understood. But he, Bucky O'Brian, didn't. It was a mistake he didn't intend to make again. If he had to go down to the minors again, at least he'd go down swinging.

CHAPTER 14

THE Sox wound up the long trek with a three-game series at the home grounds of the Chiefs. "And they still call these coast-to-coast marathons *road trips!*" the Lion said. "Man, the closest you ever get to a road any more is when you fly under Cloud Seven!"

The team was looking forward to settling down in the home park for a stay and to a return to fairly normal hours. But they needed to take two out of three to close out the trip with a better than .500 average. A pennant winner, the old saying went, had to play at least .500 ball away from home.

The Chiefs had a batting order that was top-heavy with left-handed hitters, and Jug selected the left-handed Sam Sloat to open the series. Sloat, with a slightly rested Gibbs behind the plate, pitched a cagey though not brilliant game. He was constantly

behind the hitter, and he couldn't seem to get the lead-off man out in any inning except the first one. But he always managed to come in with the big pitch when he had to have it. The frustrated Chiefs left thirteen men on the base paths, and Sloat choked off their ninth-inning two-run burst with two game-ending strike-outs, to squeak through, 6 to 5.

"Just a laugher, huh, Pete?" he said to Gibbs, as he collapsed on the bench in the visitors' dressing room. "I don't think I sweated off more than ten pounds. Yup, a real laugher."

"I still don't know how you got the lead-off man that one time in nine tries," Pete said.

The second game was played under the lights. Phil Doyle pitched, and Gibbs caught again. Doyle had been having a poor season for him, under the .500 mark, but he had been pitching good games. "Every time I set foot on that mound," he said, "our hitters take the day off. I've lost three games by one run and four by two. But don't get me wrong—I love our burly sluggers."

The burly sluggers tried in vain to give him a big lead before he threw his first pitch. Redd led off with a sharp single. Walker punched a hit-and-run

ground ball between first and second, and Redd went into third standing up. Woodward, in the hole on a one-and-two count, lofted a high rocket off the launching pad, and though it wasn't too deep, Redd was fast and he tagged up. It looked from the bench as though he beat the throw, but the umpire said he hadn't. Jug was out, jaw to jaw, discussing the decision with heated words and physical gestures. Naturally it got him nowhere. Now two men were out and Walker was on second, where he'd dashed during the throw-in to the plate.

Jaffe walked, making it first and second. Scalzi slapped a clean line-drive single to left, but Madigan, apparently figuring the Doyle jinx was on again, held Walker at third. That brought up Stretch Stookey, bases loaded, and the game sitting around waiting—still patiently—to be broken wide open.

Cutty Cutshall, laboring manfully for the sagging Chiefs, seemed to have reached the point of nervous exhaustion. He threw three straight wide ones to the left-handed, swinging Stookey, whose bat was coiled as though ready to beat bull snakes to death.

The fourth pitch came in, but Stookey, of course, had the take sign under such circumstances. The next pitch came in, and Stookey did not have the

take sign. He lashed. The ball was long gone and far away from the moment it left Stookey's bat, but it was viciously pulled. It kept going out, but slanting to the right, and when it finally dropped anchor, high in the right-field seats, it was foul by inches. But foul. Long strike two.

Out on the mound Cutty looked like a man who had taken a long chance on plastic surgery and it had all turned out fine. He motioned his catcher to come toward him. George Wettling, the Chiefs' third manager in the past three years, strode out of the dugout and joined them. He put one arm around Cutty's troubled shoulder and tried to act the part of a very calm man.

"Call the Marines—there's no other way out!" Madigan shrilled from the coaching box.

"Bye-bye, Cutty!" Radjecki bellowed from the top step of the dugout.

Bucky watched Jug. In tense situations he was a dugout pacer, and he had a nervous habit of walking around picking up scraps from the floor. He saw a balled piece of paper from a stick of gum, and reached down to snatch it. He thrust it in his hip pocket and studied the length of the dugout for further signs of debris that he might clean out.

The umpire finally broke up the conference at the mound. Wettling left, slapping Cutty on the hip. Stookey stepped back inside the box. The tempo of the crowd noises picked up in volume and rhythm.

Cutty nodded acceptance of his signal, then glanced around and held the ball so long that Chip Fiske screamed from the first-base coaching box, "Don't lose him, Cutty! Make him hit! Fast one, down the pipe!"

Cutty stretched and threw. Stookey fouled it off. Cutty threw again. Stookey fouled it off again. This time Cutty shook his catcher off. When he finally pitched, Stookey swung for the fourth straight time, and this time he hit no foul.

It shot straight back on a line, fast as a bullet, and Cutty dropped toward the ground like a man trying to avoid a bayonet thrust. As he did, his glove instinctively went up to protect his face. The screaming line drive hit it, dead in the pocket. It stuck. Cutty sat on the ground in a daze, looked inside the glove, and in utter amazement held it up for all to gaze upon.

Three outs, no runs, three hits, one walk, three men left on base. Time consumed for first half of first inning: forty minutes.

Doyle picked up his glove and called down the dugout to Jug, "Better take me out after I pitch to that one necessary batter, Jug. You know by now the fates have put the knock on old man Doyle."

And the jinx seemed to remain. Doyle allowed the Chiefs three runs in eight innings, when he was removed for the pinch-hitting Lion. The final score was Chiefs 3, Sox 1.

That left the final game of the series, the one that would settle whether or not the Sox went home with a winning road trip behind them. Because the Chiefs' main power was in left-handed hitters, Jug went to a southpaw again. This time he gave Oklahoma Crane one of his rare chances to start a game, and he named Bucky to catch him.

Warming up before the game, Oklahoma said, "That old ball feels light, Bucky. And when it feels light, that means I've got my stuff. Even the curve is breaking."

Bucky nodded. He could tell by the relaxed, confident way Oklahoma threw that he was feeling right. By the fifth inning there no longer was any question about it.

Neither team had scored. The Sox had threatened

twice, but the Chiefs had put only two men on base —one walk and one error. No one mentioned, in the top of the sixth, that Oke had a no-hitter going. But how could he not know it? Every time he marched to the mound, straight ahead of him the huge scoreboard showed the totals: Chiefs: runs—0, hits—0.

Nothing happened in the sixth. In the seventh, the Sox put two men aboard on a single by Walker and a base on balls to Jaffe, but Scalzi popped out to end the inning. The Chiefs' pitcher, F.D.R. Jones, seemed to be tiring.

In the bottom half of the inning, Oklahoma showed no signs of fatigue whatsoever. He struck out the first man. The second hitter fouled out. The third hit a comebacker to Oklahoma. Five pitches and three quick outs.

By this time Oke had to know that he was six outs away from a no-hitter. The Chiefs' bench was making sure of that. They wanted him to know, to increase tension as much as they could. It was much more likely to work *for* them than against them.

Stookey flied to right. Pearson made a daring bunt with two strikes on him. It rolled down the third-base line, wavering at the powder line. The Chiefs' third baseman let it roll, thinking he had no play. The ball stayed fair and Pearson was on.

Bucky, so far, had reached base on an error and had lined to right. The wind was good, blowing briskly toward center. He took a ball and a strike and then hit one deep to right center. It had distance, but that part of the outfield was a big, vast pocket. The center fielder took it with a sloping, one-hand grab. Oklahoma struck out, and the game went into the last of the eighth.

Oklahoma walked the first man, then struck out the second. F.D.R. Jones was due to bat, but he had apparently tired too much. A pinch hitter came up in his place. Oklahoma pitched low, and a spinning ground ball went to short. Pearson swooped it in and flipped to Walker. Walker grabbed the flip as he touched the bag, went high in the air to avoid the flashing spikes coming at him. He made the throw straight and true to Stookey to complete the double play.

Rube Heller, the Chiefs' new pitcher, came on strong. Redd grounded weakly to the box, Walker flied to left. Woodward beat out a topped roller to third, but the best Jaffe could contribute was a sky-high out to left center.

As Oklahoma trudged wearily to the mound once more, the crowd, almost as though by signal, came to its feet and the applause rolled out. By now there

could be no secret about his no-hitter. Yet even if he managed to get past the ninth-inning hitters, he still would never go down in the record book as a no-hit pitcher. He'd have to make it through ten innings for that, or eleven or twelve—until the Sox could get him a run.

It was obvious that his energy was near an end. He hadn't started a game in three weeks; his pitching had been in short stints of relief work; he hadn't had a chance to build up the staying power that could carry him much longer.

He missed the corners and walked the first hitter. Bucky went out to the mound, Scalzi walked in from third. The three talked briefly.

Bucky said, "You're not throwing as hard, Oke. You've simply got to throw harder."

Then, somehow, Oklahoma summoned the remnants of his sense of humor. "Are you kidding?" he replied. "Bucky, I'm throwing as hard as ever. The balls just aren't getting to you as fast, that's all."

"You break me up," Scalzi said, and slapped his glove against Oklahoma's back.

"I think you're ready," Bucky said. "Let's get 'em, Oke."

But Oklahoma's words were braver than his pitches. The next one left on a vicious line toward

the right of center. Woodward was a flying shadow and Redd was a compact rocket. Woodward was taller and nearer. At some precise moment, which only a gifted big-league pro could ever hope to know, Woodward went into the air, gloved the flying speck, and came down to earth with it safely in pocket. The runner, almost at second base, turned and raced back to first.

Oklahoma pitched two curves that missed. He came in with the next one. It was drilled to the left of Pearson, also on an authentic hit-labeled line. But Pearson dove, and the ball was his. He flipped to Walker, who wheeled and rammed it to Stookey, stretching far from the bag in his direction. The throw beat the runner back, and Oklahoma was out of the inning. But both balls had become outs only by means of minor miracles. Oklahoma was near the end. Yet how could a manager remove a pitcher this close to a Hall of Fame record?

Obviously Jug was not the manager to do it. But if the Sox could not break into the scoring column in the top of the tenth, Oklahoma would never last eleven.

Scalzi led off.

Madigan clapped his hands and jumped up and

down in the third-base coaching box. "Come on Five O'Clock! Let's roll!"

Scalzi needed a hit as badly as he needed a shave. He had been in a slump for a week, in the kind that hurt most; he had hit the ball well, but a fielder always seemed to be exactly where it went.

Scalzi leaned back from two inside pitches, fouled the third one off, and then smashed a ground ball over the third-base bag. The left fielder had played him to pull, and Scalzi had to halt midway between first and second, trot back, and settle for a single. The Sox bench came alive.

Stookey tried twice to bunt and failed. Behind nothing-and-two on the count, he was forced to go for a pitch he didn't like, and popped it high in the air behind the plate. The Chiefs' catcher smothered it, and Stookey returned to the bench looking like a man who has been caught robbing the poor box.

Pearson was definitely up there to hit away. He slashed the first pitch foul, down the third-base line. He took the second for a ball. Then he made his patented move on an outside soft one. He blooped it into short right field. Scalzi reached third as Pearson pulled up at first.

Bucky stepped in. He looked at Madigan. There

were no orders. He blasted the first pitch far and deep, but it was curving foul into the right-field seats from the moment it left the bat.

He looked at Madigan again. Madigan went into his involved action, and Bucky felt slightly shocked to find that Madigan wanted him to lay down a bunt.

This pitcher was weakening. That was clear enough. He had just got a good piece of the ball, and he only needed to straighten it out. Scalzi, on third, was not a fast man. Unless he laid down a nearly perfect bunt, there was a good chance that Scalzi would be nailed at the plate. It didn't make sense. But those were the orders.

The pitch came in around his neck, and he jumped back. He looked at Madigan for a switch in the plans. There was none. He saw the ball coming in. It seemed to sail, with no stuff on it. It was a cripple if he ever saw one. It must have slipped when it left Rube Heller's hand. It was too high to bunt properly, but it was perfect to come all the way around on. It was such a hopeless pitch, no more than a batting-practice lob, that you could shut your eyes and hit it out of the lot.

He came around. The ball suddenly dipped. It

was a crazy pitch, a knuckler or a dipsy-doo of some kind. It didn't take to the air at all. It skimmed across the ground, straight at the second baseman. He whipped it to the shortstop at the bag, who fired to first. The throw beat Bucky by three steps, and that was the end of the top of the tenth.

CHAPTER 15

He listened to the bottom of the tenth coming out of the shower, where Jug had sent him without a word, just a gesture, after he returned to the dugout to put on the tools of his trade. Jug had merely jerked his left thumb toward the tunnel. Bucky didn't need any words from him to understand.

It was beyond thinking about. He just wanted to dress fast and get out, before the team came in. He toweled his body roughly as the voice came out of the radio speaker:

". . . and Jug Slavin must be given credit for a sentimental gesture. You can see the kid, Crane, has nothing left. But he's got that no-hitter still going for him, and to take him out would be just as smart as it would be inhuman. This kid has earned the chance for the Hall of Fame even though nobody

in this park thinks he'll make it. If Bucky O'Brian had given him a run, given him anything, who knows? O'Brian was supposed to squeeze in that one run that would make the difference. O'Brian slashed away, into a double play. This kid Crane can't make it now, even if he pitches his heart out. He'd have to go another inning and—here comes his first pitch. Outside. Ball one. He looks pale. He looks like a secondhand ghost. Here comes the windup, the pitch, and—inside this time, way inside. Ball two. The kid is crumpling, but Slavin is bound to stay with him just as long as he holds onto that ticket to Cooperstown. He's waiting for the signal. . . ."

Bucky pulled on his slacks and reached for his sport shirt. He looked around the room. Not a soul, not a sound. Of course not. Who, but Bucky O'Brian, was not up there pulling for Oklahoma to do the impossible? He put on the sport shirt and started to button it. The voice was saying:

". . . and that's ball three. Gibbs is at the mound now. Gibbs is talking to him. Now Slavin is out of the dugout and, believe it or not, folks, these Chief fans are actually rooting for the kid, the opposition! Well, they don't call this game the national pastime for nothing and, believe me—"

Bucky reached for his jacket. Oklahoma couldn't last. He thought of what it might have been like if Oke could have gone back to that mound with a lead, with the knowledge that only three outs—not six or nine or twelve—stood between him and what every pitcher dreamed of. Some of the greatest in the game had spent a dozen and more years in the game and never come this close. Oke had really made it, but the records wouldn't show that he had. If he didn't go all the way, he wasn't a no-hit pitcher. Not in that big book that counted.

". . . so they broke it up at the mound," the raspy voice was saying. "Slavin's back in the coop, and Gibbs is back with the mask on. He's crouching. There's the nod from Crane and, believe me, brother mourners, that tall, skinny left-hander looks like a bad case of virus X in the month of March. I mean, folks, this boy has really been greased for the chute. You can blame it some on those big hitters on his team who didn't hit at pre*cise*ly the correct moment in this little contest. But you can blame it mostly on his battery mate *and* roommate, Bucky—here it comes!"

There was a silence, and Bucky stood at the door, waiting to run. The silence was probably no more

than two seconds. It seemed unbearable to him. He stood rooted, hoping and praying, and knowing the prayers would do no good.

". . . going, going, going, going, and . . . gone! That's it, friends. History just spoke. Heller belted that about ten country miles, and there goes Oklahoma Crane's no-hitter, his shutout, his ball game, and his dream of whatever pitchers dream when they come this close. And now a word from our sponsor, the makers of good old—"

Bucky slammed the door and ran for the players' gate.

"Sorry, Oke," Bucky said.

They were at the airport, waiting for the plane back to Blue Sox Stadium. The words were the first Bucky had spoken to anyone on the team since he'd left the park.

Oklahoma Crane shrugged. "You do or you don't," he said.

"I—I wanted to bust it wide open for you, honest," Bucky blurted.

"Forget it, forget it," Oklahoma said, and he turned away. Bucky watched him go. Then he followed him onto the plane. It was a short hop, and

he buried himself in the back. There was hardly the sound of a voice on the whole brief trip—just the hum of the engines.

When they landed, back home at last, three games out of first place, the silence remained thick. Bucky didn't really care. At the hotel he checked in and went directly to the room. Oklahoma hadn't come up yet when he fell asleep.

It was not until he reached the Stadium the next noon that the first word was spoken. The first word came from Pickles, who nudged him as he suited up. "Jug wants to see you in his office."

"It's about time," he said, and he felt sudden relief. The thing had been hanging in the air, and nothing could be worse than that. He wanted to have it out, get it settled. Nothing could be as bad as the way he imagined it.

As it turned out, it was fully as bad.

"I guess you know I've had it," Jug said. "Your fine this time is tripled, three hundred. But three hundred means nothing. You're finished with this club, Bucky. All done, boy."

Bucky walked to the door.

"A couple more things before you go," Jug said.

Bucky turned around and faced him.

"I told Nate Tufts, the G.M., I wanted you to trade places with Tony Lane, down there in Double-A. I meant to have your plane ticket to give you. Unfortunately for us, Lane got hit on the wrist, and he won't be ready for action for a week or so. I just want to have it straight out with you—you're hanging around here on borrowed time now."

"Mr. Slavin—"

"Yes?"

"I swear I didn't know Rube Heller had a knuckle ball. I watched him pitch before. I thought I knew everything he had, and when that lob started to come in, I thought—"

"You thought wrong. We didn't know he'd picked up a knuckler either. But does it matter? You had your orders. Bunt. Squeeze the run in. I give you my word, O'Brian, I didn't half so much get sick at losing the ball game as I did at seeing the rug pulled out from under Oklahoma. Do you know what you may have done to that boy? Do you know he's got a million-dollar arm if he ever gets the head to go with it?"

"I wanted to bust it up for Oke," Bucky said. "The ball looked like a cripple. It was too high to bunt, but it was perfect to put out of—"

"It was a double-play ball," Jug said. "Son, don't you know even yet what's the matter with you? I could go along with you on this false image you have of yourself—"

"Image! That's Madigan's word!"

"He got it from me, and I got it from my psychiatrist," Jug said. "You're not Bucky O'Brian, and you never have been, not one minute since you hit that grand slam. You're a guy you dreamed up, and you didn't dream him up real good, either."

"Mr. Slavin—"

"These are the last words I'll waste on you, son, so you better listen. I could go along with you after I saw that you couldn't take all that success in one gulp. What kid could? I asked myself. I strummed it cool, like they say. But now you've reached a point where you're not just damaging yourself, you're damaging the people around you. And those people are my special family group. So I won't have any more of it."

Bucky felt his body sag, along with his mind. He said in a dull voice, "I'm ready to get on the plane now. All I want is the ticket."

"Lane will be maybe a week. You're here until then. Not that I intend to use you, but the rules say

a team's roster has so many characters on it. Maybe next year—"

Bucky shook his head. "Next year was this year."

"Kid, you could be so good, do you know that?"

"No," Bucky said in a flat voice.

"You really handle a pitcher. And you're so alert, which is what a catcher—above all—has to be. You know what's going on out there. You could hit maybe .290. You could hit maybe 15 or so home runs. But you're not *great*, Bucky. You're just good, just a pro, like the rest of us. If only you could see that."

CHAPTER 16

He was through trying to see anything. The more you tried to figure, the more tangled it all became. He was the guy who had picked up the winning sweepstakes ticket and, when he went to collect the prize, found that the promoters had skipped town.

Now the home fans even got on him in batting practice—which was the only time they saw him. They had never before shouted remarks about his physical appearance. But now they even resorted to that. The ringing jeers stayed in his mind—in the shower, in the dining room, in the bed.

"Hey, Ape Man, where'd you get those ears?"

"Here comes the hydrant that walks like a man!"

"Hello, Ugly. I bet *you* were no beautiful baby. Huh, buddy boy?"

He knew the remarks came only from an ill-

chosen few, but they came. He guessed other ballplayers, better ballplayers—he conceded that much now—had been picked out by the small group of fans who took out on ballplayers their own personal problems and hopeless sense of shortcomings. Pete Gibbs said all ball-park hecklers had unhappy lives, one way or the other.

"So they buy a ticket to the ball park," Pete explained, to sooth the troubled souls in the dressing room, "and that's how they take it out. It's healthy enough. Just don't take it as a personal matter. Don't let it disturb you. Feel sorry for the loudmouthed slobs. They don't make as much money as you do, and they don't like the work they're in. But you like the money, the work, *and* the hours. Chin up, joker!"

It all sounded good when Pete said it. But nothing sounded good to Bucky now. He was marking time, waiting for the ticket. He was a man alone, a tight little island of deep regrets and massive brooding.

The Sox beat the Grays in the home opener, 7 to 4, with the combined pitching of Bracken O'Neill and a bull-pen discovery-of-the-year, Fred Cushing. It was the game that convinced Bucky, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that his number was up. If ever

a catcher had been the logical choice for that game, Bucky had been the man. A right-hander had been pitching for the Grays; Bracken O'Neill, his special man, was on the mound; the wind was blowing right—to the right. Yet Gibbs had been behind the plate. The only pleasant point it all made was that Jug did not trust Zip or the Lion, with the club clawing away at a three-game deficit, because Gibbs needed to rest.

In the second game, the bonded Eddie Lasky went the whole way, and lost it on a six-hitter. He was 2-2 in the ninth when Russ Woodward, of all people, lost a long fly ball in the slanting sun of late afternoon. It went for a two-run triple, and that was the old ball game.

"That happened to me once before," Woodward told Lasky, in the dressing room afterward. "It was in Bridgeport, and the pitcher told me to cheer up, I could always get a job at the Jenkins Valve Company there."

"Well, in this town, this pitcher is telling you to go drop very dead," Lasky said.

"You're harsher than they were in Bridgeport, Old Pro," Woodward called back, as he ran for the shower room.

Despite the loss, the Sox bounced back to give Sam Sloat a six-run first inning the next day, and he breezed to a 9-3 win.

"And to think *I* have to work for a living," Phil Doyle told him, after it was over.

It rained the next day, which made no difference, as there was a break in the schedule. Then the Clippers marched in, three games in front, three games to play, and the Stadium sold out.

CHAPTER 17

DOYLE pitched the first game, and the Sox presented him with two runs in the second inning. Like a spendthrift who has come into a modest inheritance, Doyle promptly gave three back to the Clippers in the third.

The score hung that way until the lucky seventh. Then the Sox bats began to rumble.

Jaffe lined a double off the left-field wall, a shot that would have drilled its way into eternity if the wall had not been there. Scalzi scooped a late-swing single into right, and Jaffe checked in at third. Stookey hugged in until the count reached three-two. Then he hit a ball the way the broadcasters mean when they use the word "cream."

It dug a hole in the turf near the 400-foot marker at the base of the barrier in right center. Jaffe loped

in, and Scalzi confounded Bernie Glaser, who tried to block the plate and went all the way over onto his back as the Five O'Clock Shadow hit him amidships.

With Stookey on second, Pearson broke a bat lofting a silly-looking fly ball to center, which fell in for a single. Gibbs, like Jaffe, whaled the left-field wall. Stookey scored, Pearson dove into third, and Gibbs chugged into second.

Doyle came to the plate looking as amazed as Alice on the far side of the Looking Glass. He watched three straight strikes go by, and retreated to the dugout to sit down.

Redd was purposely walked. Walker hit a deep fly to center on which Pearson strolled in. Woodward flied to right, but the damage had been done. Doyle made the Sox lead stand. And they were two games out of first place, with a night fight coming up.

Jug was hard-pressed for pitchers in this series, inevitably called "crucial," even in July. Lasky and Sloat were out of the question this soon after the series with the Grays. Doyle was now used up. That left Bracken O'Neill among his front runners, and

—coming off his magnificent attempt—Oklahoma Crane.

Bucky watched—and thought. He was only taking up space on the bench, and he knew that. Jug would not use him in this series. Jug would use the bat boy first.

But there was a lot going on in his mind, and he was aware of it. Thoughts drifted like crosscurrents. Certain words that Jug had used stuck, like driven spears, in his mind. Jug had said, "I could go along with you on this false image you have of yourself. . . . You're so alert. . . . You really handle a pitcher . . . but you're not *great,* Bucky. You're . . . just a pro, like the rest of us. . . ."

And what was so wrong about being "just a pro"? If only he could get one more chance, as the song said. But that no longer seemed likely. As soon as Tony Lane's bum wrist mended, he'd take a plane back to Double-A. Not Triple-A. Double.

The chance that seemed to loom up died the next day. Bracken O'Neill started the game. If he'd ever get a chance, it would be to handle Bracken. Jug knew—had told him—how well he handled Bracken, what confidence the big, young right-hander had in him.

But Pete Gibbs was behind the plate when Bracken made his first pitch. It was clear, from that first pitch, that these two teams considered the pennant a private contest between them. Bracken brushed back the lead-off hitter with a high, hard one. The Clipper shouted at Bracken, spoke out of the side of his mouth to the umpire, and slammed the second pitch deep to left.

Jaffe went back. It looked like a double off the wall to everyone in the packed park but Jaffe. He was a huge man, six feet four and 220 pounds. But, back to the wall, he went into the air, made a spearing motion with his glove, and came down with the ball.

The next hitter bunted the first pitch. It trickled down the third-base line. Scalzi, caught by surprise, darted in and swooped it up with his bare hand. He threw with an underhand motion, and the ball went like a dart to Stookey, who one handed it in a casual manner for out number two.

The next Clipper hitter took the opening brushback pitch from Bracken without a murmur. He hit the second one on a slingshot line into the pocket between left and center. Woodward's speed held it to a double.

The Clipper clean-up man took four pitches, variously inside and outside, and shrugged his way to first base.

Bracken and Gibbs had a conference. The result was a quick strike, a slow curve that missed, and then a long fly ball to center that Woodward did not lose in the sun.

But every blow, every move, every shout, had a sort of World Series atmosphere about it. "Only July," the Lion said, as the team trotted in, "and we're in one of those close breathers again. The bind is on."

Redd rifled a shot to left, but his power was mainly in his feet and the left fielder caught up with the ball at the base of the wall. Walker was dusted twice and walked halfway to the mound, shouting expletives. The umpires surrounded him, and he went back to the plate.

He fell back on the old trick and bunted one between the mound and first. When Whitey Lord, the Clipper pitcher, tried to field it, Walker swiveled against him with his hips, and Lord juggled the ball. Walker was on.

Woodward slammed a ground ball that didn't quite find the hole between first and second. Rich-

ards, the Clipper second baseman, came up with it. He shot it to second, where Keiffer stamped on the bag. Walker hit him like a ten-ton truck, and Keiffer went down in the dust, nullifying the possible double play. Keiffer pulled himself off the ground and advanced on Walker. Walker swung. Both benches emptied. The umpire at second broke things up before anyone was hurt. Play resumed.

It was that kind of a game for nine innings. Watching it, Bucky saw what it meant to be a pro when the stakes were high. Back in Maine they had pride going for them in this kind of a battle. Here, in Blue Sox Stadium, they had the same pride going and next year's salary on top of that. This was fiercer than anything Maine had ever thought of. The sandlots didn't know what rough competition really meant.

These men were taking risks that would not make them great heroes in the eyes of the crowd. They were fighting in the bared-tooth way of animals. The fact that Walker had taken Keiffer out of the double-play chance at second would never be entered in the record books.

Point Number One.

Point Number Two was that Pete Gibbs came to

bat in the bottom of the seventh, the Sox trailing 2-1, with two outs and not a man on base. Gibbs had never been a fast man; this year he was just plain slow. But the third baseman played him deep and, with two balls and no strikes, Gibbs laid one down the third-base line.

It was not a clever bunt. Gibbs wasn't even a good bunter. But the Clipper third baseman, Sutton, had expected anything except that. With no one out, two balls and no strikes, a slow man and a solid pull hitter to left, Sutton was almost on top of the outfield grass. Gibbs' bad bunt was a good one, at that very special moment. He reached first base without benefit of a throw from Sutton.

The Lion batted for Bracken. The Lion, in his judicious way, sliced a soft fly into right field. The slow Gibbs held at second, but Lord looked worried.

He had good reason to look that way. He suddenly couldn't seem to find the plate on three straight pitches. Then he came in, strong and simple, with a fast ball down the middle that had nothing except its speed.

Redd had the hit sign from Madigan. He swung. The ball looped over the left fielder's head, smacked

the wall, ricocheted crazily. Before it was all over, two runs were in and Redd was on third base.

That was the ball game. Bracken wasn't in at the finish, but the win went into his column. After a long haul, the Sox were a game out of first place. And a ridiculous, almost inept bunt by Pete Gibbs triggered the whole rally.

Bucky pondered that, along with the fact that Pete had been the league's All-Star catcher for most of his dozen years of service.

The evening paper's sports headline said: Tony Lane Due to Leave Hospital. Below that it quoted him. " 'I'm ready,' Lane told reporters at General Hospital today. 'The Sox think I'm ready, and I do, too. From what I've read, Gibbs needs some relief. I think I can furnish it.' "

CHAPTER 18

THE third game meant the money. At least, that was how the team seemed to feel. If the Clippers won it, they would leave town with a two-game lead. If the Sox won it, the Clippers would leave town all tied up and with the memory of a three-game lead pulled suddenly out from under them.

Jug called the circle closer in the clubhouse before game time. "This is it, as the reporters say," Jug told them. "Maybe it won't mean a thing in September, but we all know better. This Clipper crew can go out of here on the upbeat, or it can go out a whipped dog. Today's game decides that."

Bucky stood near the back. He wished he could be a part of it, but he knew he wasn't. He might be, someday. But as things stood he was years away from it.

"Now the man who is going to pitch this very big game for us today is a fellow who pitched us his greatest game last time out. Certain things went against him. He should have won when he lost. Today we make it up to him. Right?"

The voices were an angry buzz.

"So what we do," Jug said, "we get Oklahoma Crane about four, five runs in the first inning. He coasts home, and we're all even with our debt to him. Am I right or wrong?"

It was like a high-school pep rally, Bucky thought, but it had real feeling. He could sense it all over the room. Some of these ballplayers earned half as much as the President, but that didn't matter today. Today they wanted to win the way the little-leaguers wanted to win.

He drifted around the outfield during batting practice, shagging flies. A fan, deep in the left-field seats, shouted, "Hey, O'Brian! Remember me? I used to know you when."

Bucky turned his back. There would be a lot of people in the stands today who had known him when. That was only last October, but it seemed more like fifty years ago.

"There's O'Brian!" another voice shouted. "The has-been that never was!"

He heard the roars of laughter that followed. He didn't feel angry, for some strange reason. Maybe the man had spoken the truth.

Oklahoma had his control. That was always his major worry when he was starting pitcher in a game. But it was doom itself if he didn't have it in a game that meant as much as this one surely did.

Oklahoma disposed of the first three Clipper hitters with dispatch. Pop-up, strike-out, and soft fly to left.

Redd fouled off five three-two pitches, as if to prove why he was the Sox lead-off man, and then walked. Walker bunted him to second. Woodward rang a line drive that could be heard in the distant seats, but it was grabbed off the top of the barrier by the Clipper center fielder. Jaffe was hit by a pitched ball, but Scalzi grounded to short.

It became a monotonous game that way, except that first place and a fast run for the pennant were at stake. Everybody threatened, but nobody scored. Oklahoma seemed to be up against the same prob-

lem he had faced in his last time out. This time he did not have a no-hitter. But he still had a shutout going into the top of the seventh.

However, Mel Dinelli had a shutout for the Clippers.

In the top of the seventh, Oklahoma found himself in sudden trouble. Sutton opened with a single. Dinelli pushed a bunt toward first, and Stookey fumbled. There were men on first and second, no one out, and the top of the Clipper batting order to be reckoned with.

Keiffer watched two go by and then slashed. The ball shot into right field. Sutton was around third. Redd threw to the plate. Gibbs got the ball on the bounce and planted himself in front of the plate. Sutton barreled in. Gibbs went over on his back, and the ball popped out of his glove. The umpire gave the safe sign, and the Sox bench could not legitimately protest.

But Gibbs was out. Jake Brennan rushed from the dugout, Jug Slavin following. It took time before Gibbs rose to his feet, and when he did, his body seemed to waver. That was enough for Jug. He shook his head at Gibbs, and the whole park knew that Gibbs was out of the game.

Bucky waited in the far end of the dugout. He knew it couldn't happen, but he could hope. Jug walked back, watched Gibbs disappear inside the tunnel, and then he looked around. He pointed a finger. He pointed it at Zip.

Zip was busy putting on the shin guards when Oklahoma walked off the mound and called to Jug. Jug went up the steps and met Oklahoma midway. They talked. Both kept shaking their heads. Oklahoma, Bucky noticed, made the final shake.

Jug came back to the dugout, and said, "Forget it, Zip. He wants O'Brian." He looked down the dugout at Bucky. "So—your roommate has called. You're in."

Bucky ran for the tools. He was in. Obviously over Jug's dead body. But he was in. He was *in*.

CHAPTER 19

DRESSED to catch, Bucky walked out to the mound. He glanced around. The situation was not a happy one. The Clippers had scored once and now had men on first and third with nobody out. Certain pitchers could go all to pieces in a situation like this one.

He heard the shrill cry of a Clipper bench jockey. "There's a load of brains out there now! With all those rocks I could build a patio!"

Fans, Bucky had read, often wondered what the pitcher and the catcher talked about at the Summit Meetings. It was funny, but such a conversation could never be quite classified. It depended upon what kind of person the pitcher was, what the mood of the catcher was, and what the general situation was.

In this case, Bucky opened the conversation by saying, "Oke, I'm not going to forget about this. You know what I'm talking about?"

"Bucky," Oklahoma said, "I'm in trouble. Deep trouble. That's why I told Jug it had to be you."

Bucky shook his head, as if to clear it. Oke was in trouble? Oke had men on first and third, nobody out, but that wasn't real trouble. Not the kind Bucky O'Brian was in. Of course, Oke knew that. Oke wanted to help him. And he wanted to help Oke.

"Let's concede that run on third," Bucky said, "and just plan to get the hitter out. So they make the second run. But we can get two runs. Suit you, Oke?"

"Sure. We got three at bats left."

"Then pitch me fast."

He went back to the plate. Richards gave him a smirky smile, and said, "You'll be a lot happier next week, kid. Down there in Double-A is where they hang the curves. I bet you burn that league up, no kidding."

For the first time ever, Bucky found he had an answer. "You ought to know about Double-A, Richards. You spent enough time there."

He laughed out loud at his own joke. It was the

first time he had ever been able to think one up on the spur of the moment as long as he could remember. And he could remember all the way back to Maine.

"You're pretty sharp today, lad," Richards said.

Oke threw the hard one, and it went right past Richards. He looked stunned. "Where did that boy get that?" he asked no one in particular. "And he's just a stripling that never even threw a no-hitter in his life!"

Richards banged a skimmer at Pearson, who made a feint toward the plate and then settled for the easy double play. The next hitter looped Oklahoma's good curve ball high in the air and it settled in Bucky's mitt.

They came in, last of the seventh, on the short end of a 2-0 score. The crowd stood up for the lucky seventh. They shouted. They clapped on the beat. They implored. But the Sox went down, one-two-three.

The black clouds quickly grew blacker. The Clippers, after one out, loaded the bases on a walk, a single, and a bunt that turned into a hit. Ralph Sutton stepped in, but as he did, the wind started to blow swirls of dust from the direction of second

base. The wind and the dust continued, and the umpire at the plate called a momentary halt.

The wind died and play was resumed. Bucky called for the fast ball, low. Sutton seemed to figure the first pitch would be quick and in. He stroked a solid line drive to right field. Danny Redd raced in to field it. Bates, the Clipper runner on third, started toward home with the crack of the bat. Then, apparently afraid that the drive might be catchable, he retreated, to tag up if Redd reached the ball.

Redd rushed in and took the hit on the first bounce. Bates saw by then it was a hit. He started for the plate. Bucky had been watching Bates more than he had been watching the ball.

Redd saw there was a chance at the plate, so he fired the ball. It hit Bucky's glove on the high bounce, but as it did Bates slid across the plate.

There was no question that Bates had beaten a tag out. The throw had bounced so high Bucky had no chance to make the tag. Sixty thousand people moaned that another Clipper run had been recorded. They were on their feet. Players from both benches were adding to the roars. But all the time, a strange thing was happening.

Amidst the clamor, Bucky stood with his foot

planted firmly on the plate. He did not budge an inch. He held the ball high in his bare hand and, still with his foot on the plate, he swiveled his body to shout at the umpire. "He's out, he's out, he's *out!*" Bucky screamed.

The umpire looked bewildered.

"*He's forced!*" Bucky screamed again. "The throw beat him! I don't have to tag him! I don't *have to!*"

Up to that moment the umpire had made no decision with his hands. The thumb had not gone up, the palms had not gone flat. It had all happened too quickly for that. Now he shot his hand high into the air to show that Bates was out, no run had scored.

The Clipper bench emptied in protest. Even the bat boy joined the throng around the umpire.

Redd ran in from right field. Redd shouted, "Doesn't anybody around here know the rules except Bucky and me? Sure, I threw to stop the next runner from scoring. I didn't know what was up. He—" Redd jerked his thumb toward Bucky "—he was the only one smart enough, alert enough, to take the throw I gave him with his foot on the plate, instead of trying to tag Bates. You guys have been out masterminded!"

The play broke the Clipper rally. Oklahoma bore

down and struck out the pinch hitter the Clippers sent up for Dinelli. In the dugout Jug walked over to Bucky, and said, "When I told you you were alert, I didn't know you were *that* alert. The ump didn't see it and I didn't see it. But—you did."

Bucky nodded. His interest was now fixed on the mound. A huge man named Monk Cosgrove had come from the bull pen in relief of Dinelli.

CHAPTER 20

SHADES of faded glory! Bucky sat in the cool of the dugout and stared at the frightening figure of the mammoth Monk on the mound. He had a fast ball that approached those jet planes that took the team to the coast. Monk Cosgrove was the source of his fame and the source of his failure. He wasn't sure just how Monk had tied him up in these many knots, and he was even surer that Monk had no idea. All Monk knew, when he looked at Bucky O'Brian, was that here came a bush kid who had caused a cut in his salary of several thousand dollars.

Last of the eighth, Clippers still in front, 2-0. Oklahoma was due to hit and Jug, after some deliberation, let him. Oke blooped a single to center. Danny Redd dented the wall in left, and Oke came

all the way around, arms as well as legs flying. Walker grounded to second, and Redd came in. The score was tied, and Monk Cosgrove looked angry. He struck out Woodward and made Jaffe pop up.

Top of the ninth now. Everybody had two runs.

Oklahoma wanted a conference even before the inning began. "I never knew how to pitch to this Keiffer," he said. "Pitch him tight and he slams you. Pitch him wide and he goes with the pitch. Give him something off the zone and he looks at it. What do you say, Bucky?"

"Nothing off the zone," Bucky said. "He's got to hit. We can't fool with the lead-off man."

Bucky decided that Keiffer must have been listening. The first pitch was in and Keiffer swung. It went deep to left, off the wall, and Keiffer reached second.

Nobody out. There was Keiffer astride second. Bucky called for the high hard one, figuring the bunt. It came anyway. Richards was out at first on Scalzi's quick flip, but Keiffer was on at third. Now there was Mansell, who hit the long one.

Mansell powered a long fly to center. Woodward took it, but there was no chance of a play at the

plate. Oklahoma struck out the clean-up man, but even so, it was now the bottom of the ninth and the Clippers had that big run going for them.

Scalzi deadened the crowd's hopeful roar with a high loft to center for a routine out. Stookey fought Cosgrove down the line on a duel of close pitches. Stookey won and trotted to first base after a three-two pitch missed by such a narrow margin that big Monk ran all the way to the plate, screaming his agony. The crowd hum built up.

Pearson asked to look at the ball before Monk even threw one. The gesture so angered Monk that he shouted to Pearson, "How would you like to step outside?"

Pearson called back, in apparent confusion, "But Monk—we're *already* outside!"

Pearson seemed to have achieved his purpose. He lined Monk's first pitch into the center-field backdrop between second base and the outer man with the glove. That brought Bucky to the plate.

He glanced back at the dugout. If Jug lifted him for a pinch hitter—but there was no sign of motion at the bench. He stepped inside the box.

"I've got real serious news for you," Glaser said. "Monk remembers last fall. And now he knows you were just a lucky chump."

Bucky said nothing. The noise was building in the stands. The crowd remembered the last time he and Monk Cosgrove had come face to face. He set himself for the jeers. Instead, he heard the yells he hadn't heard since last September.

"Come on, Bucky boy! It's your cousin out there!"

"Slug one, Bucky! Do it again!"

"You own this guy, Bucky! Prove it!"

They really were pulling for him to give Monk the double knockout. He hadn't heard yells like that in so long he could barely remember how wonderful they sounded.

Bucky looked down the line at Madigan. Madigan was doing nothing. Nothing at all. Madigan—meaning Jug—was leaving him on his own. He was face to face with Monk Cosgrove once more, the man who had somehow made his destiny. This time he could prove, once and for all, that it had not been a fluke, that he had not been just another rookie illusion.

"Better get out of the way, kid," Glaser said. "He

may throw his fast one right into your ear. You made him mad last fall."

Bucky thought of a reply, and knew he felt all right. "Call off your dogs," he said. He looked again at Madigan. Madigan made no move. Whatever he did in this spot, he was on his own.

He saw the swing shift—as usual. Third to short, short to second, second to short right field. They knew his inevitable batting pattern and behavior. They were laughing their defiance as they made their moves.

Monk looked as though he was the front of a subway train coming around the bend out of a tunnel, front lights glaring. Monk, like Scalzi, always needed a shave. On a TV western he would have been the menace guy. Well, he was a huge cloud of menace out there on the mound right now.

Monk grazed his chin with a ball that really seemed to whistle. Bucky didn't hit the dirt. He leaned back in a hurry and turned to Glaser. "First compliment I've had all season. Monk dusted me, didn't he? Didn't know Monk scared so easy."

"Tell it to the Double-A catchers," Glaser said.

"I just did," Bucky told him, and he suddenly felt confident.

Again he heard the roar from the stands. They

had forgiven him for all mistakes. They just wanted him to do the thing he'd done last fall. They believed in him. He had murdered Monk Cosgrove before, and he could do it again, their cheers said. They were living in a dream world, those fans.

But Bucky O'Brian wasn't. He knew the next pitch would be low. Cosgrove had once given him a pitch that he could ride high and proudly into the air in such a critical spot. That pitch was burned into Cosgrove's mind as deeply as it was burned into the mind of Bucky O'Brian. He would never again see that pitch from Cosgrove.

I've grown up, he thought. I've figured it out. It will be a pitch you can't ride, but you can bunt.

The pitch came low. He slipped his hands down the length of the bat. The ball rolled lazily toward first, hugging the line. It was Cosgrove's ball to field, but he stood immobile as a statue. He looked like a man who had just put money in the bank and saw the building start to burn as he left it.

Nobody even touched the ball. Stookey galloped in, and Pearson stood on second, jumping up and down. Oklahoma walked to the plate, and the scoreboard ran up a yellow-colored figure one for the Blue Sox.

From the coaching box at first base, Chip Fiske said, "Bucky, you sure bunted that one a mile!"

Monk Cosgrove looked lost, and proved it. His first pitch to Oklahoma was fast, straight, and across the letters. Oklahoma swung, and the pitch was hard to miss. Oklahoma did not miss it. The ball he hit was not majestic, but it traveled close to the foul line and settled in the front-row seats, just past the 330 mark. After he had circled the bases behind the runners, Bucky was the first to greet him.

"You know, Oke," he said, "you and me and Monk, we ought to form a club. We were meant for each other."

Jug stopped him after the shower, when he started to head toward the door.

"Even I," Jug said, "thought you had it coming to you—I mean, a free swing at Monk. Why didn't you take it?"

"I sort of sensed it was the time to bunt," he said.

Jug's big paw felt good on his shoulder. "Don't worry too much about that Tony Lane. Pete says he thinks we need you, and he's breathing down my back on this job I've got—"

Oklahoma pushed his way between them. "Make

way!" he said. "Guess who's the new home-run hero around here?"

"You are, Oke," Bucky said. "And I wouldn't be in your shoes for one million bucks."

"Amen," said Jug.