

BEANPOLE & FRIENDS

SOCCER
SLEUTH

DICK BOHRER

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*To the real
Joseph William Pruitt,
my second grandson, who has
turned out to be full of jokes
and sunshine and laughter and
the love of soccer and drawing
and of building all kinds of
models and of playing games
on his dad's computer.
He loves the Lord
Jesus, too.*

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1

Dog House

Why can't you do *anything* right, Bean? You know better than that! It's not as if you didn't have a good brain and don't know how to think—"

Mr. Scruggs, our principal, was mad.

At me.

"He was a guest of our school. He was an invited speaker. He deserved every courtesy we could give him. And then you come out with *this!*" He was holding a copy of our school paper, the "Chronicle." He had already wadded it up in a ball, thrown it on the floor and stomped on it. Now he opened it up and spread it on his desk. He was pointing to an article I'd written. It was a review of a speech that was given in assembly.

"You wrote this headline? 'Assembly Speaker Wins Big Bore Award.'"

"Yes, sir. You told us he had won a big award for his work on the fruit bore, and I—"

"And you took this picture?"

"No. Tony Carrero took it."

"But you wrote the caption."

"Yes, sir."

"Sunny Hills students dropped like flies in student assembly Monday when science award winner Dr. J. Arthur Rade from the state university in Hampton lectured on the permea—(wheet)—permeabobil—(wheet)—permeability of the litmus filangea of the Brazilian orange fruit bore.' You wrote that?"

"Yes, sir. You can see in the picture that everyone is asleep. We were just reporting the honest facts."

"And what is this 'wheet' business?"

"Oh, that's the sound I make when I can't say some big word and I have to try again. You know—wheet." I gave him the whistle sound I use when I say that word.

"And I suppose you think that's funny."

"Oh, I don't know that I do. The guys that have read it can't stop laugh—"

"Well, I don't think it's funny. I think it's a disgrace."

"Yes, sir."

"And this article! You wrote that, too?"

“Yes, sir.”

“This insulting, pernicious, vilifying—why, we could be sued for defamation of character for printing something like this.”

He started reading it out loud.

“Sunny Hills students lost their battle to stay awake in assembly Monday when a zoologist from the state university in Hampton read a long paper about the Brazilian orange fruit bore.’ You think that’s funny, do you?”

“But that was just exactly the way it was. See? You can tell from the pic—”

“The professor,” he read on, “held his speech in front of his face for 35 minutes while he read about the permeabobul--(wheet)—bility as it relates to the fruit bore’s anatomy. Students were confused when the professor held up a large picture of his subject. They couldn’t tell which one was the bore.”

Mr. Scuggs’s eyes were narrow slits. “*I will not have writing like this in our school paper. Do you hear me?*” He was yelling.

“Yes, sir.”

“How could you do this to me?”

“How?”

“Yes. How?”

“Well, first you tell the ‘who,’ who did it, and then you tell the ‘what,’ what he did, and then you tell the ‘where’ and ‘when,’ and finally you tell the ‘how.’ See? That’s how I did it in the lead here. ‘Sunny Hills students lost their—’”

“You’re not funny, Bean! You’re not *funny!*” He was yelling again.

“Yes, sir.”

“It is insulting to the speaker.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will not expel you for this, Bean. You have a good record of service to our school.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But I am going to put you on probation. The next outlandish thing like this that you do—it’s *out*. Understand?”

“Probation?”

“Probation.”

“Won’t that go on my permanent record?”

“It will.”

“That’ll keep me out of the FBI. They look back through your records clear to the ninth grade.”

“Should have thought about that before you wrote the article.”

“But the article was true.”

“Being true doesn’t make it fit to print.”

“But probation?”

“You deserve more.”

“Can’t I appeal?”

“You may not.”

“There’s no mercy?”

“No!”

“None?”

“Absolutely none.”

“May I leave now?”

“You may.”

I left. Probation! What a bummer.

Actually, the reason I wanted out of there was that today was the first day of soccer season and I didn’t want to be late for the game.

But probation?

I might as well skate on thin ice.

2

The Juggler

Joseph Pruitt is a ninny. That's short for nincompoop, an old-time word for an idiot. There's no other way to describe that guy. It was that first game of our varsity soccer's spring season when we saw just how crazy he was.

Thing is, this was supposed to be Charlie Tacker's year. But it's not. It's Joseph's.

We were all there—the entire student body—with our yell squad and our pep band building up enthusiasm. The band was playing our fight song. The cheerleaders were spelling out “S-U-N-N-Y H-I-L-L-S.” We were all screaming our heads off for the team to “Beat Newton! Beat Newton! BEAT NEWTON!” because we were behind 1-0.

And so what did Joseph do? He started juggling the ball with his feet in the middle of the field when he should have been driving for a goal.

How he did it, who knows! He got the ball going—rolling it on the inside of his right foot and giving it little kicks up in the air. Every time the ball came down, he'd make a high sound like an owl's hoot—“Woop!” and kick it again—higher.

He was out there in the middle of the field bouncing and bobbing while he ducked and squirmed and danced a jig, keeping that ball moving. The Newton players were trying to get their feet in there so they could intercept the ball, and our players were screaming for him to pass so they could score.

But then Joseph got the ball bouncing off the top of his head like a yo-yo on a string. When it came down, you'd think it would split his head. But he was right there to hit it at just the right angle and send it straight up again as he hooted, “Woop!”

We rooters didn't know whether to laugh or cry. We wanted a goal, and this show-off was out there playing around with the ball.

Only he wasn't showing off. He was having fun. This was his idea of a way to make people laugh. He couldn't tell jokes out in the middle of the field, but he could do silly things like this. If he could get laughs out of a crowd, it made his day.

A Newton player gave him an illegal shove when the ball was coming down, but Joseph broke loose and got back in position to send it up high again. He had some inner sense that told him where to put his head, his knee, his ankle, his foot so he could get that ball to sail wherever he

wanted it.

We were ready to send someone out to wring his neck when, with a quick move, he let the ball drop to his feet. Before it hit the ground, he “wooped” and kicked it up field to Win Willems, who faked around a defender and scored.

We went wild!

And what did Joseph do? He stood there in the middle of the field, jumping up and down in little jiggles and slapping his legs and hooting, “Woop! Woop!” He knew he had put one over on everybody. He’d gotten Newton strung out with frustration. He’d gotten us screaming like we’d gone bananas, and then he’d set up the score.

Now, if you want my opinion, Joseph didn’t care a diddly about winning. He was just out there to have a good time. We wanted the gold. Joseph wanted to play. That’s what it looked like to me, anyway.

Coach Crowley was dancing up and down the field line, crowing, “Way to go, Joseph! Way to go!” And then he’d hoot and holler. He thought it was great.

What I didn’t understand was that he was making more over Joseph than he was over Winston Willems. After all, Win was the guy who scored.

I shook my head. *Beats me*, I said to myself.

Well, the goal that Joseph had just set up tied the score 1 each, but there seemed to be no way we could win. Those Newton guys were all muscle. They had thighs like watermelons. They were fast. They knew how to fight you off with their hips and elbows and shoulders and knees. And they were mean!

But we also had Charlie Tacker and Tafessa Mulugata.

Charlie had kicked the winning goal in a lot of our games. As I said, this was supposed to be Charlie Tacker’s year. Everybody knew Charlie. He was our hero. He was All-State last year. He was even on a national “High School Juniors to Watch” list. And now that he was a senior, we knew he would show his stuff. He wanted to go to college, and he was counting on soccer to be his meal ticket.

Tafessa Mulugata was an Ethiopian boy whose parents had defected to the U.S. He’d been kicking a soccer ball around since he learned to walk. He could run like a deer. Living in a mountainous country like that, he’d developed great lungs. He was a real boost for our team.

But it was Charlie we rooters loved. He was a fanatic. Talk about temper. He was a bull. He got angry at his own teammates, and he got furious at Newton. But he was getting insane over Joseph. He actually turned purple when Joseph started juggling. We didn’t know who to

watch. These two guys were characters. Charlie was the driver. Joseph looked like he was all back seat, just coming along for the ride.

One time Charlie started for Joseph, who was juggling near midfield. Joseph saw him coming and started a stiff-arm, stiff-legged running and juggling act, keeping the ball in the air with his feet, legs, and head, and hooting, “Woop! Woop!” every time he kicked the ball.

It was like a bull running after a matador that didn’t want to fight. Our entire student body was clapping and screaming. We knew we would turn out for every game. We wanted a third State Championship, and we wanted to see Charlie and Joseph put on their show.

All the rest of first half it was Charlie faking, Charlie dribbling, Charlie passing, Charlie shooting. But none of it was Charlie scoring. He knew all the right moves. He had power and speed—all the right things for soccer. But he just simply couldn’t score.

We rooters did our best. We spelled out “C-H-A-R-L-I-E.” We shouted, “Charlie, Charlie, he’s our man! If he can’t do it, nobody can!” But he couldn’t do it, and nobody could. In fact, as far as I could see, nobody was even trying. The other players seemed to be letting Charlie hog the ball. I guess they felt that if he was the All-State player who was going to win all the college scholarships being given out that they’d let him do all the work.

Either that or he was showing off to let the world know how really good a soccer player he was.

But it wasn’t working.

Our game was still tied 1-1 at the half.

3

Halftime

There's something about sports writers that draws me like a magnet. I spotted Bill Boozer, one of the guys from the sports desk of our local newspaper when I was walking around during halftime. He was sitting on one end of the bleachers.

"Going to give us a good story, Mr. Boozer?"

"Why should I?" He was old—fifty, I guess—with a speckled-gray mustache and wisps of feathery hair trying to cover a bald spot. He looked at me through his horn-rimmed glasses. I knew he didn't want to talk.

"Cause we're good," I said. "We're going to win the league. We're going to win State."

He laughed. "Says who?"

"Says Bean Spencer, sports writer for the Sunny Hills 'Chronicle.' That's me."

"Haven't I heard that name?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "What matters is the Daily Star. You going to start giving us some good stories?"

"You don't deserve good stories."

"Come on!" I said. "Two state championships in one year, and we don't deserve good stories?"

"Beginners' luck."

"But we beat Grant, and Madison, and all the old schools around here. It's the new blood that's winning all the games."

"It won't last," he said. "Quality shows. The good old schools in this town—Grant, Madison, Washington—they'll rub your nose in the dirt yet."

"What do you think of our soccer team?"

"Kid stuff."

"Why's that?"

"They don't play as a team. They're all out there trying to make the big time by themselves. Soccer's a game of give-give-give. Pass the ball to the other guy. Let the other guy score. Besides, you don't have the players. You've got to have good athletes to begin with."

"We got Charlie Tacker."

"Well, I admit Tacker's not kid stuff. But he can't do it alone. There's no way this team is going to give Tacker the support he deserves."

"What about Tafessa?"

“Who’s he?”

“Our Ethiopian.”

“Like I said. Who’s he?”

“And Joseph? He’s going to get us the gold.”

The guy leaned forward and pointed his pencil at me. “You know what that guy should be playing? Chess—or stamp collecting—something where he could take a long time to make up his mind. Soccer’s a game for guys that can make decisions in a split second. Pruitt’s just a klutz.”

“Mr. Boozer, you just don’t know Joseph like we know Joseph. He tells jokes and plays pranks all the time. Why—”

“They ought to lock him up.”

“Naw, not Joseph. Even the teachers laugh at Joseph. Like I said, he has a joke for everything. Life for him is just fun and games. That’s not saying he’s not smart. He’s on the honor roll. But he just wants to play soccer to have fun.”

“And you think he’s going to get you the gold? Hah!” Mr. Boozer shook his head.

“Well, I admit, we’ve really been worried at school about that. We’ve had articles in our school paper and everybody’s talking about it. We just don’t know what Joseph’s gonna do. He’s a terrific player. He can run circles around any team in our league. But he’s so relaxed. We just don’t know if he’s gonna work to win our games.”

“There’s no way you guys are gonna beat the big schools in this town. Not with that light-weight out there.” He cleared his throat and spit.

“Come on!”

“Nope. He’s too spacey. Look how he just wanders out there. He doesn’t even keep his eyes on the ball.”

“But Joseph’s gonna get us the gold.”

“I give you 100 to 1 he won’t.”

“I don’t bet. I’m a Christian. But I know you’re wrong.”

“Christian? Hah! Well, I’m a lion. Get out of here before I eat you alive.”

“Someday you’ll thank me I didn’t take your bet. ‘Boozer’ rhymes with ‘loser,’ right?” I laughed.

He lifted his arm to give me a karate chop.

I can talk to him like this and not be rude. He’s a sportswriter. I’m a sportswriter. He’s “family.”

But I had hit a nerve. He actually was a loser. And what I learned in all this is that losers don’t forget. And they know how to get even.

Boy, do they!

Well, the whistle blew for the start of second half. Charlie got things

started by kicking the ball out of the center circle. And it was war!

The battle raged up and down the field. Our guys got off some good shots at the goal, but something always happened. Either they missed by inches or the ball hit the crossbar or the goalie caught it and kicked or rolled it out of there.

The score remained tied until we had only a minute or so left to go.

The ball came at Joseph. He went for it. A Newton guy pushed him. But he kept his balance and didn't push back. Why the Newton guy didn't get a foul called on him, I don't know. I guess the official can't see everything.

Joseph with a "Woop!" kicked the ball toward Tafessa, who had gotten behind the defenders and had a clear shot for a goal. But Tafessa tripped over his own feet and sprawled in the grass.

The goalie kicked the ball out to midfield where Charlie intercepted it. He kicked it to Joseph, who started dribbling back toward the goal, "wooping" with each little kick. He was fast, and he was getting in the clear.

I got so excited, I screamed "Go, Joseph, go!" at the top of my lungs.

Joseph heard a voice he knew. It was me, his old buddy Bean. He stopped in mid-stride, looked over to see where I was sitting and waved.

Charlie had been expecting him to follow through so the two of them could work the ball in toward the goal. "Idiot! Goof-off!" He had a fit right there in front of the world. He swore and stomped and then he came up and kicked the ball right at Joseph, he was so mad.

Our clown pretended to be mad that Charlie had gotten mad. He shouted and stomped and had a pretend fit right back.

But time was running out! We were screaming, "Goal! Goal! Goal!"

Newton hesitated a second to watch, because Joseph took his eyes off the ball, clenched his fists, and danced up and down like he was going to knock Charlie's head off.

The Newton players took their eyes off the ball, too. They loved a good fight.

Then Joseph, shouting and waving his fists, reared back his left foot like he was going to kick the ball right through Charlie's head. In a flash, he shifted his weight to his left foot and with a "Woop!" kicked the ball at the goal with the outside of his right foot. His move caught the Newton goalie watching the pretend fight and leaning the wrong way. He wasn't expecting—

Well, who cares what he was expecting!

The ball swooshed right by him and went into a corner of the net.

Joseph had scored. The place went wild.

And what did Joseph do? He was out there shaking hands with the players and bowing at the goalie and then at us rooters. He was hooting, “Woop! Woop!” again. All of us started to hoot, “Woop! Woop!” right back at him.

And Charlie! He didn’t know what to think. He wasn’t used to having somebody else score. He was used to being the big hero.

Joseph had put us ahead with only seconds to go. Our guys bottled up Newton and didn’t even let them get to mid-field.

The stands were rocking. “Fourteen! Thirteen! Twelve!” We counted down the seconds remaining.

Newton broke loose. A shot zoomed up field. Their forward stopped it with his chest. The ball dropped to his feet.

“Eight! Seven! Six!”

He pivoted and faked around our defender and sent a smash at our nets.

“Three! Two! One!”

Muskowitz, our goalie, caught it. The game was over.

Did we ever roar. And did we run off those bleachers and mob our team. We piled on Joseph and buried him, we were so happy he’d scored. We lifted him up and paraded him around the field. We were delirious.

Newton was the defending champion in our league. They were a fantastic team. I knew we’d see them again in the finals if we could get our act together—if Joseph would play to win and if Charlie and Tafessa could score.

Trouble is—those ifs were big ifs.

As far as I could see, they were too big for Sunny Hills High. But on this day, you’d think every Hilltopper would be really thrilled with that marvelous win. Well, we were. That is, everybody but one of us was.

And I’ll bet you can’t guess the name of the one of us who wasn’t. It was—Tafessa.

He didn’t stick around for the ceremony of singing our school alma mater. He just cut right for the field house.

Someone who passed him told me later.

He was crying.

4

Man of Steel

All over school the next day, kids were blaming Joseph for dancing around like an idiot when he should have been scoring, blaming Charlie for being such a brute, and blaming Tafessa for falling down when he had a clear shot at a goal.

These arm-chair quarterbacks all knew what the players should do and how they should do it, but none of them were out for sports.

Some guys had the Daily Star sports section laid out on a table. Old Boozer was getting his revenge, all right.

Under a headline that read, “Sunny Hills Ekes Out Soccer Win,” he said that it was a case of “A-tisket, a-tasket, a brown and yellow basket.” He said that was the way it should be because Joseph was a “basket case.” He said our team played like it was on a church picnic with juggling acts and “Steal the Bacon” and “Cat and Mouse” games instead of hard-charging high school soccer. He said that good teams like Newton often lose when they have to play weak, undisciplined schools like Sunny Hills.

He said he had it on good authority that Joseph didn’t even want to win, that he just wanted to play games and have fun. He said letting children with that kind of attitude play varsity sports was a sign of ineffective coaching. He said that the parents of the other kids on the team should protest the weak coaching at Sunny Hills.

He said that he even caught the coach cheering for Joseph-the-clown more than he was cheering for Willems when Win scored on Joseph’s pass. He called that proof that the coach was promoting a low view of soccer. He said the state interscholastic association should either discipline Coach Crowley or see that he is dismissed.

He called the team “cheap” and “degrading.” He said Joseph’s winning goal was accidental, because Joseph distracted the Newton team with his pretend fight with Charlie.

And, speaking of Charlie, he said Sunny Hills’ only hope for the gold was Charlie Tacker, the team’s All-State forward. Every move he makes says “champion at work.” He’s brilliant and forceful—a real power on the field. Crowley would do himself and Sunny Hills a favor by cheering for Charlie Tacker instead of Joseph Pruitt.

He liked Tafessa. He said he was a find.

He runs like a gazelle. But he’s tight. He’s all tied up in knots. A better coach would untie those knots and let the real Tafessa Mulugata run

free.

He said the other schools should insist that Sunny Hills be dropped from the league.

New schools like Sunny Hills should have time to season. They shouldn't be allowed to inflict their little practice sessions on the major schools in the city.

He ended with another call to the parents to do something about the "dreadful situation" at Sunny Hills.

You can be sure college scouts will make a wide detour around this school when it comes time to identify high school players who will qualify for rich scholarships.

"Hah!" I said. "Hah!"

* * *

We were eating lunch on the lawn near the gym the next day. I wanted to talk about Joseph, but Joseph just wanted to tell me some jokes.

"No," I said, "I've heard enough of your sick jokes. Tell me why you dance around out there and go 'Woop.' You're supposed to be mean and tough and run up the score and win big."

He shrugged his shoulders. "That's no fun. I just want to have fun."

"But this is high school. The colleges are looking at you. The professional scouts are looking at you. You don't have time to have fun." I made those last two words sound like dirt.

"What did one math book say to the other?"

"Joseph!" He wasn't listening. "We're talking about your career!"

"Come on," he said. "What did one math book say to the other?"

"I don't know. What did one math book say to the other?"

"Don't bother me. I've got my own problems."

"You sure do have problems," I said. "You're sick. You should be out there with a serious mind, working to win, and all you do is play."

"What did the astronomer say when he was asked about flying saucers?"

"Charlie's right, you know. You deserve to have the ball kicked through your head for the things you do. Just because you know how to juggle like a clown doesn't mean you should take everybody's time and put on an act."

"So what did the astronomer say when he was asked about flying saucers?"

“How would I know? What did he say?” I was shouting.

“No comet.”

I took another bite of my sandwich. His jokes didn’t even deserve a groan.

“Hey, Bean, why don’t you come out for soccer?”

I opened my eyes wide. “For once you say something that’s funny,” I said.

“Why don’t you?”

“No way. I’ve learned my lesson. There’s no way I’ll let you or anybody else talk me into anything again.”

“Come on,” he said. “It’s fun.”

“Look, already this year, I’ve fought the football coach and the volleyball coach. I’ve had enough battles. A guy ought to be able to enjoy ninth grade and not have to fight the world. Besides, I’m on probation.”

“Probation? You?”

“Yeah. Mr. Scruggs didn’t like my article about the guy that put us to sleep in assembly.”

Joseph laughed. “Well, everybody else did. But why probation?”

“I embarrassed the school.”

“But we need you in soccer. Charlie goes crazy. He could really hurt somebody. Coach doesn’t know what’s wrong or what to do about it.”

“Of course Charlie goes crazy. I would go crazy out there playing with you. I want to win.”

“We do win,” he said. “We beat Newton. What do you want?”

“I want you not to make a fool of yourself.”

“But my coaches where I went to high school before I came here always wanted me to make a fool of myself. That’s the way they trained me.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Honest. They had played on an All-American college team, and they said we should go out on the field to play and have fun. They didn’t want us to care if we won or not. They said we would win more games if we were relaxed than if we were angry. Crowley says so, too. He really likes the way I play.”

“Is that why he was crowing over you instead of Winnie yesterday?”

“I wasn’t watching what he was doing, but he wants us to have fun. He says high school is for fun and games. College is for getting serious.”

“And what does Charlie think about that?”

“He doesn’t like it.”

“Well, that’s why he goes crazy.”

“Nope. Charlie’s crazy is a lot deeper than that. Coach is really wor-

ried about him.”

“Well, have him tell Mr. Scruggs. He’ll take care of it. Principals always know what to do.”

“He tried that, but Mr. Scruggs told him that he would have to solve the problem himself. He said if Coach would bench the guy for a couple of games, he’d come to his senses.”

“So what’s wrong with that advice?”

“Coach thinks it would make him worse.”

“But I wouldn’t be any good at soccer.”

“You’ve got good legs, Bean. And you’ve got big feet. You can run. Rob Pitts couldn’t catch you, and he’s our fastest man in track.”

“But that was just because I was scared. Grunt was going to mash me.”

“So will you do it?”

“I told you. I’m on probation.”

“But when you get off probation.”

“No. I don’t have the lungs. You guys run up and down for hours every time you play. I had asthma as a kid. I’m only good for sprints. Besides, I don’t know the rules.”

“They’re easy. We’ll teach you.”

“But you don’t want me. There are a lot of guys that are older and stronger.”

“We need you. You can figure things out.”

“What’s there to figure out about Charlie?”

“He’s not normal.”

“So he gets a little mad. So what?”

“It’s not just ordinary mad. It’s boiling mad, blistering mad. Maybe he’s sick.”

“What’s sick about a little temper?”

“Charlie does what Charlie wants. One day, he’s fantastic, the greatest guy you’d ever want to meet. The next he’s a mess. He’s got something on his mind he isn’t telling anybody about.”

“He has, huh?”

“Like I said, Coach can’t figure him out. We could get Sunny Hills its third state championship this year if Charlie stayed on top. He’s that good.”

“So tell me about this mess business,” I said.

“Well—” Joseph ran his fingers through his dark hair. “It’s like he’s always mad. He’s as nervous as a flea. You just say hello, and he’s down your back with some mean answer.”

“But we’ve all got days like that.”

“But every day? Every week? Every month? Every year?”

“Isn’t he ever easy-going?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I never just sat down and figured him out. Sometimes on Fridays, maybe. Sometimes on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I don’t know.”

“So I join the soccer team and sit on the bench and study one player. What fun is that?”

“Oh, Coach would teach you our plays. You could play till you got winded. Besides, we play zone. You only run when the ball’s in your zone.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. I’ve really got a lot of other—”

“Like what?”

“I got homework.”

“You’re smart. And, besides, ninth grade homework isn’t much.”

“Not for you, maybe. You’re a junior.”

“Come on, Bean—”

“Well—”

“Hi, guys!” It was Danny, Joseph’s older brother. “Did you sign him up, Joseph?”

“He’s on probation for writing that article about the Brazilian bore. You know.”

“Do I ever,” Danny said, laughing. “Everywhere I go they’re laughing about it. But soccer needs you, Bean. There’s a mystery over there that needs a J. Edgar to figure out.”

Danny was the one who first called me “J. Edgar” when I figured out a problem our football team was having. I guess the name sort of stuck when I helped the volleyball team, too.

“But it’s no mystery,” I said. “So a guy’s got problems. We’ve all got problems.”

“But we need Bean to open them up and let in the light,” Danny said.

“Will Scruggs let you pick up towels? Be a manager?” Joseph said.

“Nope. Nothing,” I said, picking up my books and standing up. “Probation means you do homework until it comes out your ears. I get to sit at home and watch old re-runs on TV.”

“Aw, come on, Bean,” Joseph said. “Come and just observe. Be a super-sleuth. Figure out what’s wrong—like Sherlock Holmes used to do.”

“No. Even if I wasn’t on probation, I wouldn’t do it. Every time I say yes, I get in a pile of trouble.”

I walked away a few steps. Then I turned and came back. “You know, there’s one thing I never understood.”

“What’s that?”

“How come you Pruitts are always in the middle of trouble? First, it was Danny in football. And then it was Becky who roped me in on that volleyball mess. And now it’s Joseph with soccer. Where there’s bees, there’s honey. Where there’s Pruitts—”

“Yeah,” Joseph said, his eyes lighting up. “Where there’s Pruitts, there’s—action!” He looked at Danny, and they both laughed.

“Well, why isn’t there any action getting our Bible club going?” I asked.

Both Danny and Joseph were helping me start a Bible club in our school.

“We’ve got to get it approved,” Danny said.

“Well, I approve it,” I said.

“We need Mr. Scruggs and the Board of Education.”

“They’ll approve it.”

“Well—they’re just not too sure. They’re bothered by this separation of church and state business.”

“Well, the Supreme Court’s taken care of that. So let’s get with it.”

“So are you going to change your mind and help us with Charlie?” Joseph asked.

“Nope. I’m a man of steel. I’ve got a backbone like a steel blade. When I make up my mind— See you!”

I started walking to my next class.

Steel blade, hah!

As it turned out, I had as much backbone as a bowl of butter.

5

Venus

We were all sitting quietly in our seats—well, quietly for us—when a lady wrestler marched into our English class with a book bag as big as a laundry hamper. She had big shoes, and she wore a tweed suit and horn-rimmed eye glasses.

“Good morning,” she said. “Your teacher, Mrs. Ewoldt, has taken an extended leave of absence to have her baby; and the Board of Education has appointed me to replace her for the rest of the semester.”

She turned, picked up a piece of chalk and wrote her name on the blackboard, “Miss V. Knurr.”

Everybody burst out laughing. There was no way they would call her “Miss Knurr.” They’d call her “Miss Nerd” and make her life miserable.

I don’t know what it is about substitutes. Let one walk through the door, and a perfectly normal, well-behaved class goes bonkers.

Little did we know that that laugh of ours was going to be the only laugh we’d get all semester.

“OK, kids,” she said, sitting on the edge of the teacher’s desk. “My name is Miss Knurr, but you can call me Venus. I know the kind of torture you can put a name like Knurr through. I’d probably do it, too, if I were in your shoes. But Venus is OK with me.”

I suppose we could have laughed then, but she’d caught us off guard. We’d never had a teacher let us call her by her first name.

“Another reason I’m going to let you call me Venus is because there’s a whole lot of mystery out there in the universe that you need to get your hands on.”

Oh-oh, I said to myself. *Here comes another Coach Stumpf*. We’d had a lot of this New Age stuff in volleyball.

“I was making a play on words, my friends, when I said that it’s something you need to get your hands on. Actually, it’s something that’s already printed on your hands. Each one of you has a map of life printed in the little lines on the palms of your hands.”

“What about your feet?” Bobbie Jo called out.

“Number one, you raise your hand, young lady, and wait till I call on you before you speak in this room. I’m a black belt in judo, and I know moves that can turn you into a lump of putty without leaving a mark on your body. Now, everybody put your hands, palms up, out in front of you where you can look at them.”

We did what we were told.

“Now, if you look closely, you’ll see that the lines on your left hand are not exactly like the lines on your right hand. They’re similar, but they’re not exact.”

“Mine aren’t even similar,” Bobbie Jo said.

Miss Knurr lowered her chin and looked at Bobbie Jo over the top of her eyeglasses. “You don’t listen, young lady? You just speak up whenever you want?”

The way she narrowed her eyes like a wolf, tightened her lips on her teeth and pointed her finger at Bobbie Jo made you know that this lady was in charge. There was threat in her voice that we didn’t know what to do with.

“I’m sorry,” Bobbie Jo said for the first time in her life. She had never, ever backed down to a teacher since kindergarten. This Miss Knurr was something else.

“That’s better. Now, was there something you wanted to discuss?”

“No, ma’am.”

A murmur of surprise went around that room. Bobbie Jo had never used “ma’am” before either.

“Well, let me comment on the statement you so rudely used to interrupt me. Rarely do we find an individual whose hands don’t match a little. When we do, we know we have an unusual personality, an independent thinker, a bright mind, a strong will, and an exceptional future. Let me see your hands—what’s your name?”

“Bobbie Jo.”

Miss Knurr walked down the aisle and looked at her palms.

“Oh, Bobbie Jo, how wonderful!” She bent over and kissed Bobbie Jo’s hands. “These are marvelous hands. You’re one in a million. What’s your sign?”

“Gemini.”

“Of course, Gemini. It has to be the twins. You will pack two lives into one, Bobbie Jo. I predict you will have a brilliant future.”

Boy, did those two ever smile. Most of the class burst into applause.

I didn’t. This sounded spooky to me. I’d seen all the damage the gods and goddesses business had done to the volleyball girls, and I didn’t want any part of this.

Miss Knurr lifted her book bag to the desk beside her and began pawing through it.

“Ah, here they are.” She lifted out some sets of papers, stacked criss-cross to separate them. “I have some sheets I want you folks to study. A lot of good material has been written on palmistry, and it’s time you read

it for yourselves.”

She handed a set to each of the kids sitting in the front seats. “Will you hand these out, please?”

While they were passing them out, she said, “These sheets will tell you about the Mount of Venus and the Mount of Lower Mars and the significance of each of these in your life and personality.”

When everyone had a complete set, she said, “I want you to notice that you will have writing assignments based on these information sheets. For tomorrow, I want you to write a one-page paragraph on the meaning and importance of the Mount of Lower Mars.”

I groaned inside. This was all we needed here. I was having enough trouble getting kids interested in coming to Bible club. And now we were going to have palmistry and horoscopes in English.

I had to do something to stop all this, but I didn’t know what. I felt I was in the path of an avalanche of evil that was going to sweep all of us away.

Lord, help me know what to say. I don’t have a clue. You said You’d give us words when we need them. I’m just in ninth grade, Lord.

I raised my hand.

She was looking for something in her bag. Then she looked up and saw me. She nodded.

“Miss Knurr?”

“Venus.”

I smiled. “Venus.” And then I said, “I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but I’ve never put much stock in palmistry and horoscopes and such things. Is there a scientific basis for all this or is it something that people have put together because it sells?”

“Good question. And I have a—what’s your name?”

“Bean. Bean Spencer.”

“Bean? Short for—?”

“It’s just that I’m skinny—like a beanpole, I guess.”

She smiled too. “Well, Bean. I have a short answer for your good question. There isn’t really a scientific basis for this. But there’s an ethereal basis, a mystical basis, a spiritual basis.”

“But I didn’t think you could teach religion in a public school.”

She laughed. “Oh, this isn’t religion. This is—” she paused. “It’s a wedding of the mind and the heart. It’s very appropriate for public school. This is how we enrich the curriculum and enrich our lives here and now.”

“Well,” I said, “I believe that God forgave my sins when I accepted Jesus as my Savior—and that was a wedding of the mind and the heart too, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well—” she shrugged her shoulders. I’d caught her by surprise.

“The Bible has a verse,” I went on, “that says, ‘If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus’—that’s the mind part because we say what we know—‘and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.’ That’s a wedding of the mind and heart, too, isn’t it? Only this gives us eternal life, not just a nice life here and now.”

She was on her feet with her hand on the back of my neck before I could swallow.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said. “I’ve had run-ins with you Christian fanatics before. You’re nothing but a bunch of trouble-makers, and I’m not putting up with this for one minute. You’re getting out.”

I had no choice. She had her fingers on a nerve in my neck I didn’t know I had.

“But can’t I—”

She marched me to the door, opened it with her other hand and pushed me. “Out!” she said. She pointed down the hall. “Scruggs.”

“But I’m already on proba—”

She slammed the door.

Oh, Lord, I prayed. What’ll I do?

I had to go and face the music. If I went home without going to the principal’s office, I’d be in more trouble than I was now. I walked slowly down the stairs and along the hall to his office.

“Go right on in,” his student secretary, Jennifer, said.

I hadn’t ever been sent to the office before by a teacher. Venus must have called the office on her classroom telephone.

I knocked.

“Come.”

I walked in.

“Oh, Bean. Where’s Kim?”

Mr. Scruggs was at his desk. He had his telephone in his hand and a worried look on his face.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.” I didn’t know her schedule.

“Then sit down.”

I sat.

He was talking on his phone. “No, this is no time to call a special meeting, Bill. Things like this need time. Keep them waiting. Let them cool down.”

He paused, listening.

“No, just tell them it’s impossible. I will not call a special meeting. They’re the ones that missed last week’s Board meeting. They’ll just have

to wait for the next—Do what? Postpone the next Board meeting? Tell them what? Too many board members will be out of town? You think they'll forget all this by then? Not that crowd."

He paused, listening.

"Well, we'll just get Crowley to win all his games. That'll do it." He laughed. "Talk to you later, Bill."

He hung up.

"People!" He said it as if it was a swear word.

"What's up?" I said.

"It's parents." He stood up. "Why can't we have kids without parents?"

"Well—"

But Mr. Scruggs didn't want an answer. "It makes me sick," he said. "Some people believe every word that's printed in a newspaper. That Boozer from the *Star* is trying to turn our parents against us. Did you see his column today?"

I nodded.

"Just because some rabble-rouser who doesn't like our team says we have weak coaching, some hysterical parents are going to march on our next Board of Education meeting and call for Coach Crowley's resignation. They're spoiled. They want another state championship, and they want us to hire a coach who will win it."

He stood up. "It's ridiculous. Why do I have to put up with things like this? Why can't we just have a nice simple earthquake where we could stack the bricks and sweep up the mess and have it over and done with?"

He was pacing around the room. "It's not as if we lost the game. We won the game with brilliant strategy, designed by a brilliant coach. Why don't people think?"

"But is there a reason you don't want the Board to meet?"

"Oh, I've lived through things like this before," he said. "People read something and get all riled up. Give them time, and they'll cool down."

"Is there a ringleader? Some parent who—"

"Yes, and I won't mention her name. She says her kid is being abused because he's being forced to play with weak players and he's being denied the opportunity of qualifying for college scholarships as a result. She wants Crowley fired."

"Is she going to cool down if you keep her waiting?"

"I hope so. I don't know the woman."

"Is this the first you've heard of this problem?" I took notes.

"No. Crowley talked to me about it earlier in the semester because

the kid—uh—student in question was trying to run the show. I told him to bench the guy for a couple of games so he'd buckle under authority."

I knew he was talking about Charlie Tacker.

"Is that the abuse that's got his mother mad?"

"So far as I know. Crowley doesn't manhandle his players. And she hasn't mentioned physical abuse."

"Then it's words? Does Coach shout at and insult the players?"

"No more than any coach does with teenage athletes, I guess."

"Do you know any students on the team who could tell you what's been happening?"

"No. I don't know who's out for soccer," he said. "But I could go down the roster and call them in one-by-one, I guess."

"Do you know Joseph Pruitt, Danny's brother? He's on the team. He talked to me about Charlie."

"Charlie? Charlie who?"

"Charlie Tacker. You were talking about Charlie's mom."

Mr. Scruggs shook his head. "Do you know—everything?"

We laughed. "I just put two and two together. That's all. Anyway, Joseph said Charlie's a bunch of nerves. Sometimes he's a terror, and sometimes he's OK. But it's nothing you can count on. He said Coach can't figure out what's wrong with him. That was why they wanted me to get on the team—so I could find out what was going wrong. He said if Charlie would straighten up, there was no reason why spring soccer couldn't get Sunny Hills its third state championship this year."

I didn't like the smile that came across Mr. Scruggs's face when I said that.

"And you said?"

"To Joseph?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I said I couldn't. I have to study. I have homework."

"That hasn't stopped you from helping me before," Mr. Scruggs said. "And from what I know of the honor roll, you're already an A student."

"Well, a guy can't—"

"Oh, but a guy can," he said. "I want you to go out for soccer tomorrow, Bean. Do for soccer what you did for volleyball and football."

"But—"

"I need my own personal representative out there, Bean. I need someone I can trust."

"But—"

"And if we get a third state championship out of this, Bean—"

"Yes?"

“I’ll give you half.”

Big deal, I thought. *What good is half a championship?* And then I had an idea. “I’ll make you a bargain.”

“What’s that?”

“You know why I’m in here just now?”

“Sure. I sent for Kim. She couldn’t come so she sent you.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s Miss Knurr, the substitute for Mrs. Ewoldt. Well, she got mad when I asked questions about the palmistry she’s teaching. She called me a ‘Christian fanatic’ and threw me out of class. She sent me down here. You didn’t know?”

He pushed a button on his phone. “Jennifer?”

The door opened. She stuck her head in. “Yes?”

“Any messages for me?”

“Miss Knurr called about Bean. She said he challenged her. She won’t put up with him—unless he apologizes.”

“Thank you, Jennifer.”

She went out and closed the door.

“Seems to me we have a second infraction for a student on probation. Hm? And you were saying something about a bargain?”

“I find out what’s wrong with the guys playing soccer, and you drop the probation.”

“I can’t just drop probation, Bean. You’ve insulted a guest speaker, and now you’ve insulted a teacher. You’re a time bomb looking for a place to explode.”

“Well, shouldn’t I get some reward for helping the guys win their games?” I turned to leave. “It’s not every high school that gets to win three gold medals in one year.” I put my hand on the doorknob. “I hope you find someone who can do the job.”

“Yes, I hope so, too,” he said sort of sadly.

I turned the knob and opened the door slowly. I wanted to see if he was going to rise to my bait and change his mind.

He didn’t say anything.

I walked through the door and turned around.

“Well, I’ll see you,” I said. I closed the door and sighed as I walked across the secretary’s office to the hall door.

“See you around, Bean,” Jennifer said.

I had my hand on the knob when I heard Mr. Scruggs open his office door behind me. “Uh—Bean?”

I turned quickly. “Yes?” I said with a wide smile.

“I think we can arrange something. You get us even close to the gold, and I’ll drop probation and erase any mention of it from your record.”

“Whoopee!” I shouted. “FBI, here I come.”

But the look on Mr. Scruggs’s face stopped me short.

“Not so fast, J. Edgar,” he said. “On this one, you’ve got to really use your head.”

“If I get us into the championships, will you give me a bonus?”

“Bonus?” He didn’t look too pleased.

“Yeah.”

“What kind of bonus?”

“Ask the Board of Education to approve of our having a Bible club.”

“You don’t know the Board.”

“Well—” I turned to leave again. “Hope you find someone who can help our team win the gold.” I put my hand on the doorknob.

He didn’t say anything.

I opened the door.

He still didn’t say anything.

I started to walk out.

“Uh—Bean?”

I turned.

“It’s a deal.”

6

New Kid on the Block

Joseph was the only one I told about Mr. Scruggs's sending me to spy on the soccer team. I wanted it to be business-as-usual when I walked into the field house where the soccer team was getting dressed.

It was. And I could tell that it was one of Charlie's bad days.

"...tell you to leave your cotton-pickin' hands off it."

"Come on, Charlie!" Joseph was saying.

Tacker, his eyes flashing and his fists clenched, was standing near his locker. A deodorant stick was sitting on the bench near Joseph.

"I just wanted to see what brand—"

"I don't care what you wanted to see. It's mine, and you don't touch it. What I say, you do. Y'hear?" He grabbed Joseph by the shirt and lifted him to his feet. "And that goes for games, too. When I say to pass, you pass. What I say, you do. Or I'll split your head wide open." He gave Joseph a shove, and he sat down, hard. "And you juggle one more time—"

He didn't finish the sentence, but we all got what he meant.

"But—"

"You heard him," Bill Evans joined in. "Leave him alone."

"Keep out of this," Taylor said.

"Who said so?"

"I did."

"Who are you, wise guy?"

"Yeah, leave him alone."

"Knock it off!"

Guys were arguing and shoving each other all over the locker-room. I'd never seen a team fight like this before. Maybe Boozer was right. These guys aren't a team.

I caught Joseph's eye. I shook my head. This Tacker guy was a bundle of nerves. I went over to Joseph to talk about it, but he shushed me. "Wait'll we get out on the field."

"I heard that, Pruitt!" Tacker said. He came over toward us. "And what's gonna happen when we get out on the field?" He grabbed our heads and knocked them together—hard.

"Come on, Tacker. That hurt," I said, rubbing my head.

"That's not all you'll get. You don't talk about me. Hear?" He walked back toward his locker.

I wanted to crack him one, but Joseph hooked my elbow. "Have you

heard this one?" he said. And then he started to sing,

"You can talk about me
Just all you please.
I'll talk about you
Down on my knees.
I ain't gonna grieve my Lord no more.
I ain't gonna grieve my Lord no more.
I ain't gonna grie-e-e-e-ve my Lord no more."

He turned to the rest of us. "Come on, sing the chorus, guys." And he started to sing and clap, "I ain't gonna grieve my Lord no more. I ain't gonna grieve..."

Some of the guys picked up on it, and then more did. Pretty soon he had most everybody singing. When we were through, he laughed and went, "Woop! Woop! Woop!"

Some guy threw a wet towel, and it landed on his head. We all laughed. But that's Joseph. When guys want to fight, he cracks a sick joke or he sings a song and gets the guys laughing or groaning.

"You're such a funny bunch of guys," I said out loud. "Here you should be walking on air after your big win against Newton, and you're as nervous as a bunch of cats."

Joseph had walked up to Charlie. I heard him saying, "I mean it, Charlie. I do pray for you."

"Not for me, you don't."

"I do. You need the Lord."

That Joseph! He wasn't afraid to go right up to a guy and tell him something like that. Me? Usually it takes me a month of Sundays to get up the nerve to speak to somebody about the Lord. But, if Joseph could do it—

I said, "Amen," out loud so Charlie would know I was a Christian too.

"And just who do you think you are?" Tacker was swinging a towel as if he was going to give me a whack.

"New kid on the block, I guess."

"What do you know about soccer?"

"He's faster than Rob Pitts," Joseph said. "Look at his feet. He's tricky."

We heard a whistle.

The coach came in with his clipboard and took roll. Then he said, "OK, twice around the field. Then Tacker take the warm-ups."

The guys finished dressing and tying shoes and hustled out the door.

"Joseph? Bean?"

We looked back.

He called us over to him with a jerk of his head.

He held out his hand. "Glad to have you coming out, Bean," he said. "Mr. Scruggs told me he was sending you out to help us. You met Tacker yet?"

"He was his usual self when Bean came in," Joseph said. "I just wanted to see what brand of deodorant Charlie was using. You'd have thought I wanted to kill his mother."

"How do you stand this guy?" I said.

"Sometimes he's just great," Joseph said. "And sometimes he's not. It's like he was two different people."

"You've been coaching him since he was in ninth grade, haven't you, Coach?" I said. "Has he always been like this?"

"No. He's been a great kid all along. But something seems to have happened last summer. He's been—it's been a white to black reverse."

"Have you asked him about it?"

"Lots of times. But he clams up. He won't say a word."

"But does he know he's different?"

"He knows that we think he's different, certainly."

Coach put his clipboard and roll book on his desk. He slipped his whistle cord over his head. "Boozer called it straight, you know," he said. "You read Boozer today? Charlie really is our key to the gold. Without him, we're nothing. But with him acting like this, we're still nothing. We just don't know what to do about it."

"Do the guys on the team know?" I asked him.

"Oh, probably. You can't keep much of anything secret around here for long. But they may not know the details."

"Well, they'll know when the 'Chronicle' comes out," I said. "Kim's putting the story on the front page."

"We'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it," Coach said. "Meantime, we'll just proceed as if nothing has happened and try to ignore his outbursts."

I shook my head. "And just let him get away with it? I thought sports were supposed to teach you self-control and things like that."

"Well, they used to—in the old days," Coach said. "But, now, if Mama threatens to get the coach fired, we've got to walk on eggs to keep things quiet."

"You said Charlie passed his physical," I said. "Do I have to get one?"

"Yeah. You have to have medical clearance before you can play in a game. I have a form the doctor can fill out. Pick it up before you go home."

Right now, go do your laps.”

The other guys were finishing as we started out. They lined up in front of Tacker, and he started them off with jumping jacks. Joseph and I kept our eyes on them as we ran.

Normally, you jump twenty times and do knee bends twenty times and twist twenty times and push-ups twenty times. But Tacker was running these guys into the ground. He was having them do a hundred. And did they ever groan. Coach had come to the rescue by the time we finished our laps, and we finished the exercises with him.

He sent the rest of the team downfield, skins and shirts, to practice. Me, he put right to work dribbling the ball up and down the field. He said he wanted me to get the feel of working a soccer ball with my feet. He liked the idea that I was a fast sprinter. He said the team needed that.

I was glad I didn't have to be part of team practice. Charlie was like a bull, knocking guys down and running right over them. There was shoving and pushing and fighting. Coach was in the middle of them, blowing his whistle and pulling them apart. I'd never been on a team where the guys couldn't get along. But with Tacker acting like this, I could see why. He was in the middle of every ruckus.

But he didn't seem to frighten Joseph one bit, and that was something I couldn't understand.

When a guy like that says he'll split your head open, you know he'd do it too.

7

I Get to Suit Up

Anyone who didn't know the "Chronicle" would think it was mass confusion. I had journalism lab last period every day, and it was always like this.

Kim was behind her desk checking on assignments. Kids were coming and going and talking and eating and reading the town newspaper and laughing and writing stories on our computers. A couple of photographers were talking cameras at one table, and a cartoonist was making sketches on a pad at another.

I had a sports column to write for the next edition. I thought I could get it done on one of the "Chronicle" computers. But Hud DeArmond was standing in front of Kim arguing when I walked in.

"I don't like it. We don't need it. We got enough clubs. We get enough religion in church. Get rid of it." He didn't like it that I was trying to start a Bible club at school.

"You're entitled to your own opinion, Hud. Just put it in a 'Letter to the Editor,' and we'll see that the world knows what the great Hudson DeArmond thinks." She pointed him to a computer. "You sure you know how to spell 'editor'?"

She didn't like him. She turned toward me and rolled her eyes.

"Dear Dum-Dum," Hud said aloud as he began to type. "Why should some high school students be able to promote and impose their brand of religion on other—"

"Hey, Bean Mother." Kim held her arms wide for a hug. "You're going out for soccer, I hear. Since when did they let freshmen play on varsity teams?"

I didn't hug her. I don't hug, period.

"Oh, Coach Crowley has a special program. He works us in slowly till we know the game."

"Well, if he lets you play, we'll expect to put your name in headlines when you win all the games. We'll tell the world our Bean Mother has made it big."

The volleyball girls had called me that name, and it had stuck.

Hud looked up. "Hey, Dum-Dum, how do you spell 'fanatic'?"

Kim turned to the staff. "Did you write the story on the choir, DeDe?"

"I put the hard copy in your in-box," a reporter answered, looking up

from the newspaper she was reading.

“Casper?” Kim called out. “‘Red, White, and Blue’?”

That was the name of a new patriotic club that was just now getting organized on campus.

“Yo,” he said. “Hard copy in. Only they’re not calling it ‘Red, White, and Blue.’ It’s ‘Red, White and You.’ And it’s only if you’re white.”

“Hey, racist, huh?” Kim’s eyes got wide.

“They didn’t like having me do the story,” he said.

Kim laughed. “They don’t like African-Americans?”

“Oh, they like the white ones. They just don’t like us black ones.”

“Hey, Hud,” Kim said, “you in that new ‘Red, White, and—’”

“What’s it to you?”

“How come you like it and you don’t like the Bible?”

“Separation of church and state.”

“What about separation of white and black?”

“Facts of life, lady. Facts of life.”

“Hey, Hud,” she said. “How do you spell ‘bigot’?”

“B-i-g-g-i-t-t,” he said, not looking up from his computer screen. He didn’t catch on that she was calling him a name.

“You get your column done, Bean?” she asked me.

“I’ve got to do it now.”

She pointed toward the computers. “You have to wait your turn. Just make sure I have it by the end of the period.”

I scribbled notes while I waited for Hud to finish. I didn’t really know what angle to take. I needed to figure out why Tafessa was crying. I needed to figure out why Charlie’s always on edge. I needed to figure out why people were worried about Joseph.

And then there was Venus.

That got me thinking of hands, and that gave me an idea on how to handle my column:

HANDS

It’s funny that hands are so important in soccer—important because they’re the one thing players can’t use.

All the guys have a full set. You’d think you’d get to use all the equipment you’ve got. Every other sport from old maid and tiddledy-winks to professional football requires a player to use his hands as well as his head.

But in soccer it's different.

Funny. The thing you could use best is the thing you rarely use, and the two clumsy flaps that most of us stumble over are the things soccer players use best.

And soccer players get to use their heads.

That should be an example to us. We've been doing a lot of mischief with our hands, pointing at players and asking why we didn't run up a huge score against Newton. And we've been reading too much garbage from a certain downtown sportswriter.

We need to sit on our hands. We need to start using our heads as rooters. Some of our players are as nervous as a bomb looking for a place to explode. They need our support.

Let's cut out the empty chatter and use our head to tell our guys we believe in them.

We play Jefferson tomorrow.

Let's show those guys that Sunny Hills is right behind them all the way, and BEAT JEFF!

It wasn't great writing, but it said what I meant to say. As I finished, I was conscious of someone standing behind me and reading over my shoulder.

"They let you print that stuff?" It was Hud.

"Yeah. They'll let you, too, if you can do any better."

"That team'll never win. Not win big. They fight all the time. They can't stand each other."

"That'll change," I said. "With Joseph out there, it'll change."

"No, it won't."

"Why not?"

"He's a Christian."

"That's just the reason why it will. He's a Christian."

"Nah. You don't know Christians like I know Christians."

I remembered what Joseph told Charlie. "I'm praying for you, Hud," I said. "You and I have been through a lot together. But what I don't understand is—your father's a pastor, and you don't know Jesus. You're a sinner, Hud. You need to ask Him to save you."

"Nope. Not this kid. I've seen too many hypocrites in church."

"Hey," I said, "you can't blame Christ for what Christians do. You don't blame Ford or Chevy for what drunk drivers do. Christians aren't perfect. But Jesus is. He loves you, Hud. He died for you."

“Yeah.” He walked out. “That’s what they all say.”

I knew PK’s—Preachers’ Kids—were a lot of times the hardest to reach for Christ. They’ve overheard bad things about Christians all their lives because some Christians don’t treat their pastors very nice. But I prayed for Hud, and I thanked the Lord for the example Joseph gave me when he talked to Charlie.

* * *

Now Kim had too good a head on her shoulders for me to ignore. So I went right out to the field house to see Coach Crowley.

“Did you know I’m only a freshman?” I asked him.

“Sure. Everybody knows that.”

“But I can’t play on a varsity team, can I?”

“No, you aren’t going to play on the varsity team. The state requires you to be fifteen to play on the varsity team. The state requires you to be fifteen before you compete in varsity sports. But I have a program for ninth grade boys like you—boys with good legs and big feet and speed. You know about that.”

“Did you know I’m on probation?”

“Yeah, Mr. Scruggs told me. But you can still suit up. Did you play soccer as a kid?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, soccer’s not something you do overnight. You’ve got to learn the rules and the techniques, and practice, practice, practice. It takes years to get players up to where they can compete in interschool sports. You’ve got a lot to learn. And it takes time to learn it. Does that bother you?”

“I didn’t expect to come out and win all the games the first day,” I said. “But I did think I’d get to play.”

“We’ll need you, Bean, to help us win championships down the road when you’re an upperclassman. But we need you now to help us figure out what’s wrong with Charlie. Think you can get along with him?”

“I’m not out here to get along with him.”

“You’re right,” Coach said. “Teachers and coaches can’t always find out, the way another student can, what’s disturbing a kid. He really is the key to our winning the state championship, you know.”

I wasn’t much interested in helping them clean up Charlie Tacker. I didn’t like him before, and I didn’t like him now. But if it meant getting off probation and getting an OK for our Bible club, I’d do anything.

“What about Tafessa?” I said. “Old Boozer says Taffy’s tied in knots. He have problems too?”

“I didn’t want to load you up with too much at one time,” Coach said. “But, yeah, he won’t open up either. He’s scared of something or someone. I can’t figure him out.”

I told Joseph at lunch that I could suit up but not play.

“Well, that’s the program I was in at my other school. You learn a lot and get to practice with guys your own age. You just don’t get to compete till you’re in upper division. You’ll like Coach Crowley. He really makes soccer a lot of fun. He’s not like some coaches who ride you into the ground to make you win.”

“And I can learn to juggle like you do.”

He laughed. “And you can help me crack the Charlie Tacker case.”

“I’d like to crack Charlie Tacker. My head still hurts.” I rubbed the bump.

“You saw him yesterday. Why do you think he acts like that?”

“He’s jealous of you.”

“Never. He’s a much better player than I am.”

“You kidding? He’s not half the player you are,” I said, giving his shoulder a friendly push.

“Maybe it’s his blood sugar. Maybe he doesn’t eat breakfast because he gets up late and has to rush off to school.”

“But he eats lunch. That solves that problem by the time he gets to practice.”

“Maybe he has driver’s ed the last hour of school. He has to drive with girls, and they make him nervous.”

“Yeah. Could be.”

“Did you ever hear what the grandpa said to the student driver?”

“Another joke?”

“He said, ‘Years ago, when we learned to drive, there were no automatic transmissions. Our generation had to shift for themselves.’”

I didn’t laugh. “You’re the joke, J.P. That doesn’t help us figure out what’s wrong with Charlie.”

“Maybe he’s taking chemistry,” Joseph said, “and he’s allergic to something in lab.”

“We should get a copy of his class schedule,” I said.

“What can I do, J. Edgar?”

“Well, we need to know where he goes and who he sees. We’ve got to find out if there’s any kind of pattern in his week—like what days he gets mad. Maybe he’s doing something on Sundays and Wednesdays so he’s mad Mondays and Thursdays. Is he ever nice?”

“No comet.”

“OK, astronomer, have it your way. But let’s just hope this’ll be easier to figure out than we thought. Hey, one more question—what’s the story on Tafessa?”

“Like what?”

“He’s been playing soccer all his life. He gets a chance to score. The goalie’s been tricked out of position. What does Taffy do? He falls on his face.”

“It can happen.”

“And you get up and keep going. Right?”

“Right.”

“You don’t break down and cry.”

“Course not.”

“Jimmie Bigelow told me he saw Taffy running to the field house after the Newton game, and he was crying. Why would he do that?”

“Beats me,” he said.

“Two sickies on one team. Maybe old Boozer was right.”

“You’re wrong,” Joseph said.

“Oh?”

“Three sickies.”

“Three?”

“Bean makes three.”

“Joker!”

8

Lower Mars

I made peace with Venus, and she let me back in class. She even said I could talk about God as long as I wasn't a smart-mouth. I told her I was sorry if I'd sounded like that before and that I hadn't meant to be.

Still, I dragged my feet about going to class. I was beginning to hate English. She was running it into the ground.

For one thing, she didn't like my composition on the Mount of Lower Mars. She gave me a D-.

I'd written:

Atlantis, fabled city of the past (I knew she would love that word), has mystified the world through the centuries since it mysteriously disappeared. No one has found its ruins. Historians say they lie beneath the oceans that swept over them. (I made that "oceans" plural so she'd get a sense of a lot of water.)

Shangri La, another fabled city of the past, has also mystified the world. Travellers say it lies just over the next mountain. It is supposed to be a paradise. It is the dreamy destination of people who want their own heaven their own way rather than having a real heaven with a real Savior. (I knew she wouldn't like this part. Fortune tellers hate Jesus.)

The Mount of Lower Mars is another mystery. Like Atlantis and Shangri La it is a fairy tale for the dreamers of the world, dreamers who want little lines in the palms of their hands to tell them the truth that can only be found in the Bible.

People who have the Mount of Lower Mars line sign are supposed to be quarrelsome and hard to get along with.

Actually, if they are trusting the Lord Jesus as their own personal Savior, they may really be sympathetic and easy to get along with.

Like me.

She said I misspelled "travellers." She said that when the accent falls on the first syllable of a two-syllable word—like "travel" and "focus"—you don't double the final letter when you add a suffix. It is "traveled" or "focused."

I raised my hand.

“Bean?”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “I never knew that before. But I have one problem with it.”

“What’s that?”

“I looked up ‘travelled’ in the dictionary before I handed my paper in,” I said. “Webster says it can be spelled with either one ‘l’ or two and still be correct.”

“Now don’t go pulling Webster on me,” she said. I made her angry. “This rule works, and this rule is what’s being taught in this class. It’s always correct. In this class we will spell by this rule, and that’s that.”

I raised my hand again. “Did I get a D- for one misspelled word?”

“No, you got a D- for not meeting the assignment.”

“But I—”

“You were told to write on the meaning and importance of the Mount of Lower Mars. You (she made that sound like a nasty word) wrote about Atlantis and Shangri La instead. When you don’t meet the assignment, you can expect to get a low grade.”

“But, look,” I said, “the Mount of Lower Mars has no importance. No more than Atlantis or—”

“Bobbie Jo, would you read yours out loud to the class, please? Yours is one of the finest compositions I’ve ever had a student write in my classes over the years.”

Bobbie Jo read her trash. She’d fallen for this palmistry schmuck, and she spread it on thick.

I knew it was my testimony that had gotten Venus upset. I could have had a perfect paper, and she would have found something to mark it down for. It wasn’t fair, but I didn’t know what to do.

Lord, I prayed with my inside voice, You know what to do. Help me to be a good testimony to this lady. She needs You just as much as all the rest of these guys do.

Other students read their papers.

“Can’t we hear one of the D- papers read now?” I asked. “I’ve got a good one here—”

She ignored me. “I’ve got some more papers for you to study, class.” She continued talking while they were passed out. “These papers will show you what some noted authorities are saying about the importance of the lines in our hands.” She gave me a long look when she said “authorities.”

Then she started her lecture.

“The Mount of Venus line—for those of you who have a prominent

Mount of Venus line—gives you a calm and unruffled temperament.”

She interrupted herself and looked around. “Are you people taking notes? You’ll need to remember this material when you write your paper for tomorrow.”

Then she continued. “The Mount of Venus line gives you power to respond to attacks and threats and crises with a calmness—a stillness in your soul—that will cause other people to marvel.”

I raised my hand.

“Yes, Bean?”

“Does this Mount of Venus line actually give you the power, like you just said, or does it show that you already have the power?”

“You’re splitting hairs, Bean.”

“But you seem to be saying it is the source of the power. Can a wrinkle in the palm of our hand be a source of power?” I said it in a way that showed I thought it was strange.

“Well, it certainly conveys power to the person lucky enough to have it.”

“But isn’t God the source of the power? The hand is just something He created.” I said it nicely, but I just had to stick up for the Lord.

“My, what would we do without Sunday School?”

“But—”

“For your homework, class, I want you to write another composition on the meaning and importance—did you hear that, Bean?—the meaning and importance of the Mount of Venus.”

I wasn’t the only one who didn’t like this stuff. But Venus was smart and quick. I’d have to go some to show these kids that she was just full of hocus-pocus.

But I had to go easy.

I was still on probation.

9

Jefferson

You could hear the noise even before you opened the locker-room door. Not that that was anything new. Every day we suited up, Charlie acted like a bull in a dish factory.

But the day the “Chronicle” printed the story about the mass meeting Charlie’s mother was organizing, that dish factory had about thirty angry bulls.

“There’s no way we’re going to play on the same team with you, Tacker.” Evans was standing in front of Charlie with his index finger pointed right at Charlie’s chin.

“Yeah. Who do you think you are?” someone else said.

“Thinks he owns the place.”

“Mommy’s little brat.”

Remarks were flying from all over the room. The guys didn’t like the bad things being said about Coach.

Charlie was trying to pretend he didn’t even notice. He bent his head down over a shoe in his lap. He was working on a knot.

“What did your momma do? Believe Boozer?”

The guys laughed.

“Can’t she see through Boozer?”

“What did Coach ever do except teach you everything he knows?”

Still Charlie kept his mouth shut. I couldn’t believe it.

“No college is gonna want you.”

“Yeah. You can kiss any scholarship good-bye. You know that, don’t you?”

“They won’t take a guy with a momma who cries.”

“This goes down on your permanent record, Tacker.”

“Oh, you’re Charlie Tacker, whose mother hassles coaches.”

But even that didn’t get a rise out of Charlie.

I saw that Joseph wasn’t paying any attention. He was telling Tafessa some jokes and giggling and singing and dancing around like it was the first day of spring. Talk about being relaxed. Nothing seemed to upset that guy.

“Why did the chicken cross the road, Taffy?”

Joseph was trying to make him laugh. He was sitting by himself with a worried look on his face.

“Come on, Taffy,” Joseph pestered. “Why did he?”

I gave Joseph a disgusted look. “Don’t tell him that one. It’s too old.”

“To-gat-to-ze-udder-side.” Our Ethiopian had heard that one.

“Good going, Taffy,” I said. “See, Joseph, he’s not so dumb.”

“But that’s not the right answer.”

“Sure it is,” I said.

“Nope. He wanted to prove to the possum that it can be done.”

I leaned down to Tafessa. “Don’t try to understand J.P.’s jokes.” I pointed my thumb at Joseph. “Even those of us who have lived here all our lives don’t get the point a lot of times.”

Tafessa still didn’t smile. I didn’t smile. “I don’t even get it, J.P.” I said.

“You’re out for a ride on the highway. What animal is the one usually lying dead on the road?”

“The possum.”

“See? Why did the chicken cross the road? To show the possum it can be done.”

Taffy and I joined the chorus on the last line.

A whistle sounded. Coach came in from his office.

“Outside. On the double.”

“We’re not playing with Tacker,” Billy Evans said.

“Oh, yes, you are. Outside.”

“But his momma’s going to lynch you.”

“That’s none of your business. Outside.”

“But you are our business.”

“That’s right, Evans. But my business is not your business. Now, get.” But, when he saw that the guys didn’t want to move, he said, “OK, let’s talk it over.”

“Want me to leave?” Charlie asked.

“No. Stick around,” Coach said. “What I have to say is for everybody.” Then he looked at us. “Mrs. Tacker has misunderstood what we’re trying to do here. That’s all. No more, no less. Soccer is fun. I want you guys to go out and have fun. Soccer is using your head. Soccer is technique. Any ape player can knock somebody down.”

He pointed his finger at us. “But the guy who gets the college scholarship is the guy who can think on his feet. That’s why, when Joseph lolligags all over the field and distracts Grant and then passes to Willems for a score—I go crazy. That’s wonderful. That’s what I’m trying to get across to you guys. Relax! Have fun working together. That’s the way to win.”

He looked at his whistle and then stuck it in his shirt pocket. “I don’t teach brute force here. I teach the fine art of soccer. I turned down a job to coach at the university last summer so I could watch you guys win it all.

You've got the makings of an Olympic team, but you're letting some personality problems kill your chances."

He took out the whistle and held it near his mouth. "You've got a game to win today against a tough opponent. So, forget this piddly stuff. I'll take care of it. You go out and win the goal."

We yelled and cheered and ran out the door.

Coach had let me suit up for the Jefferson game. He said he wanted all his players, the varsity, the junior varsity, and what he called the "white shirts" (those of us still in ninth grade) to dress for every game. He said we had to be close to him so he could tell us what was going right and what was going wrong.

He walked with me out to the field. "You're at a disadvantage, Bean, because you missed all the weeks of practice the other guys had. I want you to watch and learn all you can and practice like a fanatic. Dribble the ball off your instep. Then practice off the inside of your toes. Practice putting English on the ball. Put your foot on a dead ball, and get it to leap up in the air."

He looked at the bleachers that were filling up with students and townspeople.

"Pick up anything on Tafessa or Charlie yet?"

"No, sir."

"Well, keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

The guys huddled with their hands together, broke the huddle with a shout, and the starting team scattered out on the field.

"We're using a 4-2-4 strategy today, guys," Coach said to us white shirts. "We've got four guys on offense, two in the middle, and four on defense, plus the goalie. Joseph, Charlie, Tafessa and Win Willems are our forwards on offense. But in my overall strategy, every player has got to know both offense and defense. Our league is full of wild bulldogs when it comes to soccer."

Jefferson won possession at the whistle, and were they ever good! These guys looked as if they'd been playing together since first grade. They had a sense of where each other was, and they guarded and advanced the ball in groups. One guy would kick to another, and he would kick it back, and then someone else would slip in and take the next pass and kick the ball upfield.

Before we knew it they were in scoring position, and the ball was in mid-air. But they didn't count on Bernie Muskowitz, our goalie. He had his hands on the ball and had it kicked out to mid-field before the Crusaders knew what hit them.

One of our mid-fielders took the ball and passed to Charlie. He dribbled

down to the Crusader goal all by himself. He was going to score and show Joseph up. He was rearing his foot back to send a hot shot into the net when a Crusader slid to the ground behind him and hooked his foot on the ball. It skittered to one side, and Charlie kicked air. Was he ever surprised!

The Crusaders started in again, kicking and passing, faking and dribbling. Our guys darted in and got the ball, but the Crusaders got it right back. It was their ball, our ball, their ball, our ball the whole first half. Both teams looked good, but neither one scored. Part of the problem was that Charlie was hogging the offense, and Joseph and Tafessa and Win were letting him.

Coach really lit into Charlie at halftime.

“This is a team sport, man. Pass that ball off. We’re not going to have any prima donnas on this squad. We are not a one-man team! And, if you keep on playing like this, I’m going to kick you off this squad so fast you won’t know what hit you! Your ma doesn’t scare me!”

You should have heard us cheer. This showed us Coach was in charge, and he would put up with no nonsense. That was what we wanted to hear, and we charged out for the second half like we were on fire.

Bill Evans got the ball and kicked to Tafessa. He passed to Charlie. He passed to Joseph who “wooped” and dribbled it forward as if he was walking a dog on a Sunday afternoon. I knew Joseph. I knew he knew where every player around him was. He has those quick eyes and quick reflexes a soccer player’s got to have. He told me later he noticed that the Crusader goalie was a little too far to the left in front of his goal. Without changing pace or his “nice doggie, nice doggie” manner, he suddenly cocked his foot and sent the ball curling into the upper right-hand corner of the net.

Score! We roared! “Woop! Woop! Woop! Woop!”

But the Crusaders had power and style. There was no way we could keep them from scoring. They got a ball past Bernie. And then they got a penalty kick for another score. That made it 2-1 Jefferson.

We began to get nervous because time was running out. We needed two quick goals like we got against Newton.

Jefferson captured the ball off Win and started moving it upfield from one player to another. But quick Joseph intercepted it and sent it to Evans with a “Woop.” He passed to Willems, who passed to Charlie. Tafessa broke for the goal, and Charlie sent the ball ahead of him. Taffy had a clear shot, but he sent the ball back to Charlie. By the time Charlie got control, Jefferson stole it.

“Why didn’t Taffy take that shot?” I asked Coach.

“I can’t figure that out,” he said. “He’s not afraid of the goalie.”

We watched as Charlie fought for the ball. He got it and sent it over to Joseph. J.P. “wooped,” passed it to Win and ran straight upfield toward

the goal. Win tried to kick it in himself, but the goalie got it. He kicked it out, but it went off the side of his foot.

That Joseph! He headed the ball and, with a “Woop!” sent it right back into the net.

He’d tied the score.

Our rooters made those old bleachers rock. “Woop! Woop! Woop! Woop!”

This Joseph kid was a sensation.

Charlie was fit to be tied. He went up to Joseph and—we could tell—he was giving him some words that would curl your hair.

Anyway, we had a minute to play.

Everybody was shouting, “Goal! Goal! GOAL!”

Jefferson tried ball control again, darting in, dribbling, and passing the ball to one another. Bill Evans somehow got into the lane and faked so that the Crusader went one way and Bill and the ball went another.

He kicked to Taylor, who passed it to Win, who faked around a Crusader and passed to Joseph.

The rooters were counting down the seconds. “Twenty! Nineteen! Eighteen! Seventeen!”

Joseph kept control of the ball while running along the edge of the field toward the enemy goal. Only he was running with his wiggly fingers held out wide on each side and singing, “Woop! Woop!” every time he kicked the ball.

“Twelve! Eleven! Ten! Nine!”

He saw Win running parallel to him out in front of the goal. The goalie was watching Joseph because he was making an idiot of himself and because he had the ball.

Joseph was watching Win and at “Five! Four! Three!” he gave the ball a sharp kick that sent it straight to where Win would be when the ball got there. And sure enough, at “Two! One!” the ball got to Winnie, and he faked it past the goalie and zipped it into the net. Talk about roar! Talk about cheer! Talk about flying out of those bleachers and grabbing Joseph and Win and carrying them around the field.

We were shrieking, “Woop! Woop! Woop! Woop!”

This was soccer country, man! Soccer country!

Our guys were terrific!

* * *

Well, we sang the school song with the student body, and then everybody started leaving the field. We members of the team headed back to our field house.

I didn't know that the team got together after every game and had a recap. That's where we were going now. Coach would be covering strategy—what the Crusaders had tried to do and what we had had to do to stop them.

But as we walked, all Coach could think about was Charlie. He had him by the arm, and he was talking mean. I'd never seen Coach so mad.

"I told you, Tacker, that we're a team. You are not running this show. I am! So what were you beefing to Joseph about out there?"

Tacker jerked his arm out of Coach's grasp. "You tell me to bug off and not hog the ball. But you yell and cheer when Joseph hogs the ball. Did he pass it off on that second goal? No! He gave it a header. When I do it, you say I hog the ball. You've got some kind of double standard around here, and it's not fair. I mean it. It's not fair!"

His eyes were flashing. He was really mad.

"Charlie!" Coach shook his head as he put his hand on the door to our locker-room and opened it wide.

We crowded through the door and went to our own lockers.

"Sit down a sec, guys."

We sat and started taking off our shoes and socks.

Coach put a foot up on a bench and said, "I need to teach you guys one more thing, I guess. It's called 'a sense of soccer.'"

He pulled a pencil out of his pocket and rolled it back and forth between his fingers. "This game is made up of split-second decisions. They're what win this game. When the goalie's out of position and you've got a clear shot, you kick it in. You don't turn around and ask me. You don't pass it to another player. You do it. And, Tafessa, you're not doing it. I want you to do it."

He looked each of us in the eye. "And when the goalie intercepts the ball and kicks it out and it goes off the side of his foot and sails at you through the air, you hit it with your head and score."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, team strategy is pass, pass, pass. But I want you guys to loosen up and come together as a team."

He pointed at Charlie who was getting dressed quickly without taking a shower. "We won this game because Joseph passed the ball to Win. He scored the winning point. For the world of me, Charlie, I can't see why you have any beef about Joseph's hogging the ball."

"Yeah!" several of us said.

Coach whirled around. "You keep out of this," he said. "This is be-

tween Charlie and me. But, I admit, it's a team matter, and that's why I'm talking about it now."

He pointed at Charlie again. The guy was leaning over, tying his shoe. "You're an important part of this team, Charlie, but you've sure been hyper about something. And I'd sure like to know what it is."

Charlie tightened his lips and didn't say a word. He just bent over and tied his other shoe.

"So what is it with you, Charlie? Why are you nervous as a cat?"

Charlie didn't answer. He stuffed his clothes in his bag and zipped it up. "Did you hear me?"

Charlie didn't say a word. He just walked over to the door and reached out to open it.

"Oh, no, you don't." Coach followed him and caught his arm. "I'm not letting you just walk out on me. I want an answer, and I want it now. I've got a winning team, and you're part of it."

Somebody moved past me. It was Joseph.

"Coach," he said, "there's another way to look at this that may help things. The other day Bean said he was the new kid on the block. I think that's the real problem here."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm really the new kid on the block, not Bean. I just came this year. Charlie and Win and Warren and the other guys have been here all along. They've grown up in your program since ninth grade, haven't they? They've got a right to be scoring the goals and winning the games."

Coach scratched his head. "So it's a case of plain jealousy, is it, Charlie?"

Charlie was dancing like he had ants in his pants. "Can I leave, please? My folks are waiting, and they have fits when I'm late."

"I want an answer, Charlie."

"I don't know why I get hyper, Coach. I'm sorry I yelled at you, Joseph. May I go now, Coach?"

"You guys have got to jell as a team, Charlie. Yeah, you can go. Tell your ma hello for me."

We all cheered, and some guys jeered and whistled.

"Cut it!" Coach shouted, drawing his finger across his neck.

We cut it.

We just hoped Charlie got the message.

10

Charlie's Mom

I dressed just as quick as Charlie. I followed him out the door. I nodded my head at Coach as I went so he knew I was going to follow Charlie and find out what I could. I had to solve this mystery.

He went down the hall and out the front door without looking back. I opened the door that slammed behind him.

His folks weren't there. It was just a woman alone, standing outside on the sidewalk.

"What took you so long?" she said. She shook her finger in front of Charlie's nose. "I told you not to keep me waiting. You get right out here the minute you get dressed." She was a big woman—not fat but big-boned and—well—meaty, I guess you'd call it. "What held you up this time, Charles?"

"Coach went over some plays," he lied.

I let them get a little way ahead, and then I went out and walked slowly behind them. She walked on the street side of Charlie. She was on a case, and you could hear her for a city block.

"I saw the way the coach was dancing around and shouting for that Pruitt boy. What was Crowley saying to you at the half? Was he mad? What abuse was he heaping on you? I'm not going to stand for it, Charles. You have every right to kick those goals and win those games. You've been playing soccer for seven years, and I'm not going to simply stand around and watch while he ruins your chance for a college scholarship."

"Aw, Ma!"

But she was talking a mile a minute. "I haven't made you go out and practice all these years for nothing, I tell you. I see the way Crowley has favorites. I see the way he lets those boys just play around instead of building up impressive scores that will catch the eyes of the university scouts. He doesn't want you to succeed in life, Charles. He doesn't want you to better yourself. He doesn't want you to use your soccer to help your poor mother send you to college. He has it in for poor mothers, doesn't he, Charles? We know Crowley's kind, and we're not going to stand for it one minute. Are we, Charles?"

Charlie was just walking along quietly beside his mother. He sort of looked kind of helpless, I thought. Every once in a while she would lurch, and he would put his arm around his mother's waist to steady her. Once or twice, when she did that, he looked back over his shoulder at me.

“I said, are we, Charles?” She waited for him to answer, I guess. “Well, speak up, Charles. You’re the man.”

“No, Ma. We won’t stand for it.”

I fell back as far as I could, but I still kept close enough so I could hear every word they said. I know it was eavesdropping. But I’d told Mr. Scruggs and Coach Crowley that I would find out all I could about why Charlie was acting the way he was.

I wondered if his mother hammered at him day and night like this. Any normal guy would be a nervous wreck with a woman like that around the house.

“Stand up straight, Charles. I will not have you walking all hunched over like that. You swing yourself like you had marbles in your shoes. Stand up! Walk like a man!”

She walked a few steps like she wanted him to walk. And then she looked at him again—only closer.

“And just what do you mean by wearing that shirt? I didn’t put out that shirt for you to wear today. I put out that pretty blue and white one. I simply will not have you looking like—looking like—a hoodlum. You’re a Tacker, Charles, and you will look and behave like one.”

She leaned closer and smelled him. “Phew! Charles! You smell like a pig sty. Didn’t you take a shower before you dressed?”

“No, Ma. You told me to come right out—”

Evidently she’d seen me out of the corner of her eye when she turned to smell Charlie.

She gave him an elbow and pointed back at me with her thumb. “Who’s that boy? Do you know him?”

Charlie didn’t need to turn around and look.

“His name is Bean. He’s just a new kid on the team.”

I bent over and picked up a stone. I aimed it at a tree and threw it. I wanted her to think I was just moseying home, paying no attention to her or anything she was saying.

“Well, that’s the last game you’ll ever play here,” she said. “You’ll go out for baseball where you’ll have a real chance of winning a scholarship.”

“Aw, Ma!”

“Don’t you ‘Aw, Ma’ me, young man. You’ll do as I say. I haven’t sacrificed all these years to hear you say, ‘Aw, Ma’ to me!” She shook her finger in his face again. “I will not have you going near that field house again. You wait for me on the front steps of your school. I’ll be there when the bell rings. I don’t trust you, Charles. You are not to play soccer. You hear?”

“But—”

“No buts, Charles,” his mother said. “I’m right—very right. Baseball is just what you need.”

“OK. Whatever you say,” he said brightly as if he loved doing everything she said.

“That’s better. I appreciate your being so agreeable.”

“Of course,” Charlie said, “I’ll use different muscles in baseball. My legs will get out of condition because I’ll use my arms more in baseball.”

“Oh?”

“That’s all right, because this way I’ll be able to sit around the house all day after I get out of high school. I can help you cook, and I can straighten up your things. And I can go with you everywhere you go so you’ll have someone to watch out for you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. No baseball scout will want me because I’m a senior, and I’ve never played baseball. And no soccer scout will give me a second look. He won’t want a player who’s out of condition. He won’t give a big college scholarship unless the guy is ready to play the minute he reaches the college campus.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. So this way I’ll be able to sit around the house all day—like I said—and help straighten up your things.”

“Well, maybe you were right at the beginning, Charles,” she said thoughtfully. She brightened. “All right. You can practice with the soccer team. But I will not let you play in the games—at least, not until the Board of Education meeting when we can get Crowley fired and a new coach hired in to take his place.”

She put her arm around his neck and patted him on the shoulder. “He can’t win games without you, Charles, dear. So if you don’t play, he won’t win—and parents will see what a weak coach he really is. I’m just so glad that Mr. Boozer opened our eyes.”

“Are you still going to come by and wait for me in front of the school, Ma?”

“I most certainly will.”

“But what if you’re late? Can I go suit up and play?”

She stopped and slapped her foot hard against the sidewalk. “Most certainly not! When I say I’ll be there, I’ll be there.”

“OK. Whatever you say,” he said again brightly. “Don’t worry about me. I can talk with those girls that hang around there after school—you know, the ones who drink and smoke and—”

“Well,” she said again thoughtfully, “I suppose if by chance I might

be held up—which, of course, I won't be—but, I suppose, if I was a little late, it would be better if you went and played your game. But, mind me now—don't score."

"But will you be mad if the ball ricochets off my shoe and sort of goes into the net?"

"Well, I guess you can't always help that—if it ricochets. But try not to let that happen."

They walked a few steps more. "Yes," she said. "I've made the right decision. This way, you'll have something to do after school on game days if I'm not able to show up. We don't want you running around after those awful girls, do we? We don't want you getting mixed up with drugs, do we?"

"So I'm to wait those five minutes and then, if you haven't come, I'm free to go."

They turned onto a sidewalk, up porch steps, and onto the front porch of a small, painted brick house.

"Yes, Charles. But I'll be there." She roughed up his hair with one hand. "You're such a good boy, Charles. You're so good to your ma."

And then she started to bawl. She cried in great, heaving sobs about how good he was to her and how she didn't deserve to have him be so good. She was hanging on to him and clawing at his hair.

He looked around fast to see if I had heard her. I'd stopped in my tracks and was staring. I'd never seen a woman cry like that in my life.

Charlie put his arm around her and urged her through the front door and into the house. He shut the door with a slam.

I stood there. I didn't know what to think.

While they were walking and talking, I'd thought Charlie was really clever. He was going along with her demands and then talking her into doing what he wanted to do all along.

Looking back, it seemed to me that he'd been babying her.

I didn't know what to think.

When she was carrying on, I'd thought of some ideas I could use to help Charlie keep his mom from coming to school on time. But now I realized Charlie didn't need tricks.

He needed help.

As I said, I stood there a minute. I was stunned. I didn't know what to think. The lady was sick.

Of course, this would explain why Charlie was such a mess. Living with a mother that was down your throat one minute and all over your back the next would drive any kid wild.

I started walking slowly on to my house.

What would I do? Call Coach Crowley? Call Mr. Scruggs? What could they do?

And then I heard a shrill whistle behind me.

I turned and saw Charlie, standing on his front steps. He waved to me to wait up.

He trotted across a couple of lawns and came out to the sidewalk.

“I don’t want you to tell anybody what you saw just now,” he said.

“Has she been sick?”

“It doesn’t matter what she’s been. I don’t want you to tell anybody what you saw. You hear?” He grabbed my shirt like he’d grabbed Joseph’s shirt that day they’d argued over the deodorant stick.

“Well, I don’t know, Charlie,” I said. “She needs—”

He pushed me hard so I went down backward.

“Well, you better know! I’m not gonna have you telling everybody what you saw.”

He had a mean, fighting look in his eye. “And what were you following us home for, anyway? You spying?”

He made me mad. “You got a monopoly on this end of town?” I learned a long time ago you can’t act weak in front of guys like this. I try to give them a lot of lip and then get out fast. “You think you own going home this direction?”

“You get out of here or I’ll take your head off.”

I got up and brushed off my pants.

“Joseph’s right, Charlie. You need the Lord. Your mother needs Him, too. What’s her problem? Is she on drugs?”

“Get out! Get out!”

“She’s sick, Charlie. You need to get her help.”

“She’s fine. She doesn’t need a shrink.”

“Open your eyes, man. She’s really sick. Healthy women don’t act like that.”

“She’d never forgive me for turning her in.”

“You’re killing her if you don’t.”

“What do you mean killing her? I’m not killing her!”

“You are if you don’t get help. You’ve got to get help, Charlie. She been like this long?”

“Last summer. My old man ran off with his secretary. She got depressed. She started drugs, and now she’s hooked.”

“Get help, guy. See a doctor. It’ll save her life.”

“You tell, and I’ll—”

“Look,” I said. “I promise.”

He turned his back and started walking home.

“I’ll be praying,” I said.

And now I had a big problem. I told him I wouldn’t tell anybody.

But Coach needed to know.

So what should I do?

I’d witnessed to Charlie. I had to keep him trusting me. He’d never learn to trust the Lord if he couldn’t trust me.

Father, I prayed, that guy needs the Lord. His mom needs the Lord. And she needs help. I don’t know what to do except trust You to work it all out right.

I went on home, and I didn’t tell a soul.

But I sure wanted to.

11

Boozer Again

Saturday morning's paper showed us that old Boozer was not impressed with our win against Jefferson.

High school soccer hit a new low Friday when Sunny Hills forward Joseph Pruitt, using "Dance of the Seven Veils" gyrations, passed the ball to Win Willems for a game-winning 3-2 score against Jefferson.

Outplayed all afternoon by a strong Jefferson team, the Hilltoppers recorded their fluke win in the last second of regulation play.

He went through a recap of the game, but all the way through his story he praised the strong Jefferson team and made it look as if the Hilltopper win was just luck.

He called us "upstarts." He said the established schools were downgrading themselves by playing us. He said the league should throw us out.

What he didn't seem to consider was that the schedule had already been set, and there was no way we would get tossed out before the season ended.

The thing he couldn't forget was the upcoming Board of Education meeting.

Seldom do parents get to register their contempt for a coach as will happen at the next Board of Education meeting (he gave the date and time) when irate moms and dads will urge the Board to fire the feather-weight Crowley. This district is tired of his flim-flam just-have-fun philosophy of interscholastic sports.

The sooner we get rid of this kind of attitude in our community, the sooner this district will earn the respect of people all over the state.

But that was Boozer for you. He couldn't see farther than the end of his nose.

I knew Coach wouldn't care what Boozer wrote.

As long as the teams we played thought our wins were just luck, the more chance we'd have of winning.

Way to go, Boozer. Pile it on.

We'd show him!

12

Mount of Venus

My paper on the Mount of Venus wasn't going to be much better than the one on the Mount of Lower Mars. I just couldn't get any ideas that would show Miss Knurr—Venus—that I made an effort even though I didn't agree with what she was saying.

I wrote an acrostic. But I knew it wasn't anything I could hand in.

I tried a poem. But I couldn't get my words to rhyme, and, when I did, they didn't make much sense. I didn't think it was anything I could hand in either. But I needed something. I needed to get to her and make her think.

Lord? I prayed. What would You have me do?

I walked around the house, inside and then outside. I had to do something.

I sat down at my mother's typewriter to think. I needed a beginning that would state the topic, a body that would explain it, and a conclusion that would repeat the topic and give a solution or result.

And then it came to me. I typed everything I knew in single space. I hitched the roller down a few lines and started again. I wrote in double space:

The Mount of Venus sign on the palm of a person's hand, authorities say, identifies people who are sympathetic, kind, and unruffled.

I wanted to get a verse from the Bible in somewhere. I knew God's Word could get to her heart in a way my words could never do. But at this point, I didn't know which one.

People all over this world are looking for sympathy. They are looking for kindness. They are looking for peace. They would like to find the ones who have the Mount of Venus sign on the palm of their hand, but they cannot find them. In our culture, we do not go up to a person and examine his hands.

We need to either change our culture so that it is polite to ask people if we may see the lines of their hands, or we must find another way to identify the people who are sympathetic, kind, and unruffled.

Now that made sense to me. I hadn't said much, but I figured it was at least a good start. I had to start telling the truth about the way I really felt. So I wrote some more:

Actually, lines can't tell people that you're sympathetic half as well as your sympathy itself can tell them.

Lines can't tell people you're calm and unruffled. No one looks at the lines in your hands when trouble comes. People look at what is inside of you and not what's outside. That's why it's important to have God in your heart.

The Bible says, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee."

When your heart is unruffled, calm and sympathetic, your life will show it.

I put three items from my first sentence in reverse order in my conclusion. I heard somewhere that that keeps the last sentence from reading like a repeat of the first—even though it pretty nearly is. I found my grades got a lot better every time I did this.

And then, when I finished, I went over and over the paper to make sure there were no mistakes.

When we all handed her our papers on Monday morning, she looked through them to see if there were some that she might want to read out loud.

"Ah, here's one that is neatly typed," she said when she got to mine. And then she noticed the name. She glanced at the paper, and that hard look came into her eyes. She looked at me and said without smiling, "I always appreciate it when students type their papers."

Then she turned to another paper and read it out loud. She read papers until class was almost over. But she didn't read mine.

That was all right with me. I wasn't looking for praise. I wanted her to get the message.

At the end of the hour, she gave us another assignment. We were to describe the actions of a made-up character whose Mount of Venus is almost not there and whose Mount of Lower Mars is very prominent.

Yuck. This stuff was getting impossible.

I had to think of some way to stop her.

If I let her get away with this, the next thing she'd probably bring in would be witchcraft.

13

Grant

Monday was the day we were to play Grant High School. We didn't usually have Monday games. Normally, it was no big deal. But with Mrs. Tacker threatening to pick up Charlie at 3:05, I had to think of something—and fast.

I worked my way through classes all day long, thinking what I could do to get her not to come. I could call a used car dealer and tell him Mrs. Tacker was thinking of buying a car. I could tell him she wouldn't want to talk very long and would try to cut him off; but, if he would keep her on the line and be really friendly to her, I was sure she would buy one from him. I would tell him to call her about 2:45.

But that would be a lie.

I could call a vacuum cleaner salesman and send him to her house about 2:45.

I could call a cosmetics saleslady and send her.

Kitchenware, carpets, fences, screens, termite control, lawn care. I could send a real stream of people to call her at 2:45.

But I would be lying to them that she was a customer.

I certainly didn't want to lie to get Charlie out of his pickle. I knew the Lord wouldn't honor me if I lied. One of my memory verses in Sunday School was "Lie not one to another." If the Lord said it, I'd do it. The Bible was to be obeyed by guys like me who love the Lord.

But what could I do?

I had to think-think-think.

But nothing would come. Nothing at all!

I finally dragged into my last class--my lab in the "Chronicle" office.

"What's got you looking so blue?" Kim said.

"Just thinking."

"Get your column done?"

"My column?" I looked at her wide-eyed. "I forgot all about my column."

"Get busy." She pointed at the computer.

I sat down. I had no idea what to write. I put my wristwatch in front of me. I had to keep remembering to come up with an idea to keep Mrs. Tacker from coming. But how could I do two things at once?

I'd written about hands before. Now maybe I should write about feet.

It was 2:20.

So what's there to write about feet?

All I could think about was Boozer. I started to diddle on the computer keys. I wrote his name: "Boozer."

And then I just began to write what happened when I met Boozer during the halftime of our game with Newton.

I talked to Mr. Boozer, sports writer for the *Daily Star*, during halftime of the Newton game. I asked him if he was going to give us good press this year. He said we didn't deserve good press. He called our two state championships "beginner's luck."

I laughed. I told him we'd beaten all what he called "the good old schools around here."

It was 2:30. I still didn't have any ideas about Mrs. T.

I told him we had great players, good moves, class. I told him we were going to get the gold.

He laughed. He said Tafessa Mulugata wasn't much and that Joseph Pruitt was just a "klutz."

It was 2:35. I thought I'd be through by now.

He said he'd give me 100 to 1 we wouldn't win State. I didn't have any money, and I'm not a betting man. But I did tell him some day he'd thank me I didn't take his bet.

It was 2:40. Still no ideas.

He told me to beat it. I told him Boozer rhymes with "loser."

Was I right?

It was 2:45. I still had no ideas. But I had to do something! I reached for the phone book. I quickly looked up "Tacker." There was only one in the book.

I dialed.

The phone rang and rang. And then a woman said, "Hello."

Lord? I prayed with my inside voice. I needed help.

"Hello, Mrs. Tacker?" I decided I'd just be myself.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to know if you're the mother of Charlie Tacker, the great Sunny Hills High School soccer player."

"Why, yes," she said. "I am."

I could tell she was pleased to hear him called “great.”

“I’m a reporter for the Sunny Hills student newspaper, the ‘Chronicle.’ Could you tell me something about him? He seems so ferocious on the playing field. Is he like that at home?”

“Charles? Never. Why he’s the dearest son a woman could have. He’s so thoughtful and kind. Why, I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have my Charles.” She made a noise that sounded like a sob.

I had to keep her talking. If I could, she’d miss her 3:05 appointment with Charlie.

“But doesn’t he ever lose his temper? I don’t see how he could be a lion on the field and a lamb at home.”

“Well, Charles knows how to play soccer. He knows you have to concentrate. He knows you do your best when you are angry. Your adrenaline runs higher when you’re a little angry. Haven’t you ever heard of that before?”

“No, I can’t say I have.”

“So Charlie just turns on his ‘little bit of anger’ button, and he becomes a powerhouse on the soccer field. Who are you? What’s your name?”

“Well, like I said, ma’am, I’m a reporter at school. Actually, I’m in the ninth grade. I go to all the games, and a lot of Hilltoppers think Charlie Tacker is a real hero.”

“Oh, I forgot!” she said with a gasp. “You said games, didn’t you. Isn’t today a game day?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’re playing Grant today.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I’ll have to hang up now. It’s important for me to get down to the school early on game day. Thank you for calling. Good-bye.”

“Oh, but, Mrs. Tacker—” I just had to keep her talking.

“Yes?”

“Is Charlie going with any girls? I mean—does he have a girlfriend?”

“Not that I know of. Now, good-bye.”

“Could you put in a good word for a friend of mine?”

“I’m sorry. Charles chooses his own friends. Now, good-bye.”

“But this is a really nice girl. High class and pretty.”

“Oh?”

“And talented. She’s editor of the school newspaper.”

“Oh?”

“And she’s really smart.”

“Oh?”

“Her name is Kimberly King. She goes by Kim.” I looked at my

watch. It said 2:56.

Kim heard her name mentioned. She looked up, and then she came over to where I sat with the phone. "Are you talking about me?"

"Well, it's nice to hear about her. I'll tell Charles. Thank you. I really must go now. Good-bye."

"Tell him that she really likes boys who score lots of points. Why doesn't Charles score more points for Sunny Hills, I wonder?"

"Well, it's that coach. Haven't you heard? Oh, I really don't have time to talk now. I must leave. Good-bye."

I heard a click. She'd hung up.

I looked at Kim and smiled.

Mrs. Tacker would never make it. She'd be late, and Charlie would play.

I felt a set of fingers cutting through my hair. I felt my hair tighten on my scalp. A hand jerked my head back, and I was looking up into the dark, flashing eyes of an angry editor.

"You were saying?"

"Oh, I was just telling Mrs. Tacker what a wonderful person you were. She's so concerned that Charlie meet some nice, high class girls. I heard she's afraid he'll meet girls who smoke and drink and are—you know—low class. So I was just telling her about you."

"What business do you have with Mrs. Tacker?"

"Well, I know she likes to talk about Charlie. I guess you could say I was doing research for my next column."

"You guess you could say, huh? It sounds fishy to me."

"Whale! Whale! Imagine that," I said.

"Get out of here."

We both laughed.

Charlie had already suited up and gone out to the field by the time I got to the field house. There was no way he was going to loiter around the front of the school once his five minutes were up. I dressed and went out too. We white shirts did warm-ups with the team.

As we were gathering around Coach in the pre-game huddle, Charlie nudged me with his elbow. "One word out of you!"

I didn't say a word. I just drew my thumb and forefinger across my mouth as if I was pulling a zipper. That seemed to satisfy him.

"Did you call anyone?" I asked.

"No. I just can't do it."

"Do it!"

Coach told us Grant was looking to run right past us. They had hopes for an undefeated season, even though they'd lost a lot of guys to gradua-

tion. He felt they'd read Boozer's column several times and were expecting an easy win.

Well, Charlie met his match that day. It wasn't a great player with hambone legs and the speed of a cat that got in his way. It was the crossbar. Time and again, when he kicked or headed the ball into the net, it hit the crossbar.

Coach called time out.

"What do you think is happening to Charlie?" I asked Joseph.

He was taking a long drink. He wiped his mouth. "Maybe he's dehydrated. Maybe he's got lead in his shoes. Maybe he's anxious about his homework." He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Well, he should just relax. We've got plenty of time."

Coach got us together when the guys had got their drinks. "Let me point up one thing so you guys in ninth grade can understand what's happening," he said. "Grant has switched to a 3-2-5 formation. They have five defenders. They don't care if they don't score. They just want to make sure we don't."

"So what do we do?" I asked him.

"We keep pressing. Who knows? With that many guys downfield, they may commit more fouls. Our free kicks may win this game. Just keep cool, guys. Don't let them rattle you."

Now even though Charlie couldn't score, we realized that Grant wasn't what it was last year. A lot of the better players had graduated. The guys that were left really knew their defense, but they didn't know their rules. This was where we had the advantage. Joseph caught them flat-footed.

He was coming downfield on offense when, with a "Woop," he kicked the ball to Charlie. Charlie kicked it back. But as it came back, an opponent slipped in the grass, and his hand touched the ball.

"Hands! Hands!" our guys shouted. And everybody expected the referee to blow his whistle and stop the play. But Joseph kept on running, dribbling the ball toward the goal and "wooping." By the time Grant realized the referee wasn't going to stop the play—because it's legal for him to ignore a foul if it's to the advantage of the player who was fouled—it was too late. Joseph had dribbled past three defenders and was within easy shooting range of the goal.

The goalie came out and made a desperate sliding tackle as Joseph faked, aimed, and "wooped," and hammered a low shot into the net.

Coach turned to us on the bench and said, "See? Joseph knows the rules. You've got to know the rules."

Well, from there on it was easy. It was the bottle of olives rule all

over again. You know how you can never get the first olive out of a jar? And how, once you get the first one, the rest come easy?

Even though Grant had five defenders, our guys had more experience and a feel for their teammates. They knew where each other would be on a drive. Charlie would kick the ball out ahead, and Win or Tafessa would be there to pass it on.

You won't believe this, but the final score was 5-0 in our favor.

But, you know? Something funny happened on our fifth score. We had a cluster of guys down near the Grant goal, fighting for possession. Somehow Tafessa's foot hit the ball and sent it into the net. Of course, we were dancing around and cheering. We wanted to run up the score on Grant all we could.

But then something seemed to go wrong with Taffy. J.P. told me later that the guy seemed really upset. He started to tremble. He was shaking as if he thought the sky was going to cave in on top of his head.

Of course, I couldn't see that from halfway across the field. But I sure could see Taffy wilt. For some reason he didn't seem to even want to score.

That sure seemed strange to me. I remembered how someone had seen him run crying to the field house after we won our first game.

This guy needed help.

I kept my eye on him as we dressed and got ready to leave. I thought that since I'd learned so much from following Charlie, maybe I should follow him today.

He didn't talk to anyone when he showered and dressed. He put his clothes in his bag, zipped it up, and headed for the door.

"Tafessa?" Coach called.

"Master?" Ethiopians call their teacher "Master."

"Everything all right with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No, sir."

"You don't like to score goals?"

Taffy's eyes darted around the room in front of him. He didn't want to answer.

Coach waited.

"No, sir. I like ze ozzer players to score ze goals."

That seemed to satisfy Coach. "We'll see you tomorrow, Tafessa."

"Yes, sir."

I was about to follow him out the door when I heard Coach say, "Bean?"

“Yes, sir?”

“Find out anything?”

I looked around to see if Charlie was there. He’d gone.

“Yes, sir.”

“What was it?”

I hesitated. “I can’t say.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“I promised not to.”

“Promised who?”

“Charlie.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he guilty of something bad?”

“No, sir.”

“Is he guilty of anything?”

“No, sir. I’d really rather not talk about it, Coach.”

“I’m trusting you, Bean.”

“Thank you.”

“You won’t fail me?”

“No, sir.”

“Just remember, I don’t have much time. We’re getting into the hard part of our season. You saw how Charlie did today. He’s not a team player, and we’re not a team. We can’t win State unless we’re working together.” He pointed his pencil at me. “We need Charlie the star, sure. But we need him more as a member of our team. See you around.”

As the door closed behind me, a hand grabbed my shirt.

“I told you I’d take your head off if you told.” Charlie raised his hand to give me a karate chop down the neck.

“Hey!” I yelled. “I didn’t tell. Go ask him.”

“You were talking to him. I saw you look around to see if I was there.”

“He called me over. Come on. Let’s go back in. Ask him yourself if I talked about your ma.”

“What did you talk about?”

“He asked me if I knew anything about you. And I said yes.”

“See? You told.” He reared his hand back again to hit me. He was still holding my shirt.

“No. I told him I wouldn’t tell. I’d promised not to tell. He wanted to know if you were guilty of something and that was why you made me promise not to tell. I told him you weren’t. Listen, man. I’m a Christian. I don’t lie. And I don’t go back on my promises. That’s not the Lord’s way

of doing things.”

“The Lord! Ha! Forget the Lord!”

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Charlie. If it wasn’t for the Lord, I would have told him everying I knew. You can just be thankful I know the Lord.”

He let go of my shirt.

He shook his head. “You and Joseph—I don’t get you guys. Why are you so different?”

“I told you, Charlie. It’s the Lord. He forgives sins. He saves sinners. He changes people. He gives us a chance to start all over again. And He even helps mothers who have problems.”

“I wish!”

“Count on it. He does.”

“See you around, Bean.” He went out the front door.

I looked up just in time to see the door to the locker-room move shut. I swung it open. Coach was just turning to move away.

“You heard?”

“I heard you yell, so I opened the door. It’s his mother?”

“Did I tell you?”

“No. You didn’t tell me. I might have figured it out myself if I’d thought it through. Is she bad?”

“You’ll see.”

With that Board of Education meeting coming up, I knew he’d see that fireball in action—unless something or somebody kept her away or the Lord pulled off a miracle.

14

My Letter

The words came easy. I knew what I had to do, so I sat right down at my computer in the “Chronicle” office and did it. “Dear Sir,” I wrote. I wanted it to sound formal.

I am Bean Spencer, and I am in the ninth grade here at Sunny Hills High School. In my English class, my teacher, Miss Venus Knurr, has one copy of your book on palmistry.

I made a new paragraph. I knew short paragraphs are easier to read than long ones.

I noticed when I looked at the book the other day—she had it on her desk—that it said no part of the book may be reproduced in any form. Well, that is what I am writing you about.

I wanted to get right to the point. I knew I had to keep this letter short if I wanted the editor to read it.

My teacher reproduces pages of the book and then hands us printouts of them. I know that you would want to know if someone was doing this to your books. I am enclosing some samples of what I mean.

Kim came up behind me. I felt her lean over to read what I’d written. This was all right with me. I didn’t care. She’d already told me it wasn’t legal for Miss Knurr to copy a book that’s copyrighted. That was how I got the idea to write this letter in the first place. I just kept on typing.

If I can be of any further assistance, please let me know.

Then I put a “Yours truly” and a place to sign. So they would spell my name correctly when this hit the newspapers, I typed it below the space I left for my signature.

Then Kim spoke. “Is that the right way to go about it?”

I turned around and laughed. “Sure, why not? She deserves it.”

“Why?”

“Look at these crummy assignments she gives us. We’re supposed to

learn the lines of the hand and then describe the actions of a made-up character whose Mount of Venus is almost not there and whose Mount of Lower Mars is very prominent.”

Then I looked her right in the eye and nailed her. “Is this American? I don’t want to learn this occult stuff in school. Besides, you already said the handouts aren’t legal.”

Her eyelids narrowed, and she got a hard look in her eyes.

“And it’s killing our idea of a Bible club,” I said. “I’ll never get the guys in my class to come now! They say all this gobbledy-gook is so much more interesting than the Bible. They say they don’t want pie-in-the-sky-bye-and-bye. They want something that works—now!”

I knew I’d scored. Miss Contrary wouldn’t be able to say a thing. She always tried to talk me out of everything I wanted to do. I’d get to mail my letter. The publisher would bring action against Miss Knurr. She’d get dismissed, and I wouldn’t have to do those dumb old papers anymore. It was simple. It was brilliant. And it would save the day for our club.

The old wheels inside Kim’s head were grinding. I could almost smell the smoke. She didn’t like what I was doing. She was trying to think of a way to tell me so I would flip the switch and kill what I’d written. I could feel it coming.

She was going to say, “But what does your conscience have to say about this?” And then she was going to have me go to Miss Knurr first and then to her department head and then to the head custodian and then—right on up the ladder to the principal, the superintendent, and even to the Board of Education.

But I knew how to cut out all that red tape. Write the publisher like I was doing.

She didn’t speak for a minute. Then she said, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Huh?”

“Sign it.”

“Sign it?”

“What did you write it for?”

“Oh, sign it. Yeah—sure.”

I signed it.

“Well, fold it up, and let’s go mail it.”

“Mail it? Now?”

“Listen, Bean,” she said, “if you’re going to take matters into your own hands like this, you’ve got to act with decision. Let’s go.”

Man! You work all year for your editor, and you know her inside and out. And then she goes and pulls one on you. How can she expect me to

understand her when she goes and acts different from the old Kimberly King I know?

We got on our coats and went out the door. There's a mail box down two blocks.

"You think you're calling my bluff, don't you?"

"Your bluff? What did you write the letter for if you didn't want to mail it?"

"I want to mail it."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"What should I worry about?" I learned long ago to always answer a question with a question. That way you never get tricked into a wrong answer.

"Have you thought of how she's going to feel when the publisher sends her a copy of your letter?"

"He wouldn't! He has no right!"

"How do you know?"

I didn't know.

"Well, I won't look at her, and I won't talk to her," I said.

"How about in court?"

"In court?"

"Where else will this lead? They'll probably sue her for fifty thousand. She's a young teacher. She probably doesn't have insurance. She'll be in hock for the rest of her life."

We reached the mail box. She held the lid down for me.

"You sure know how to make a guy feel like dirt," I said.

"It's your decision."

"Well, it's the right decision, isn't it? She's doing wrong. And, besides, why should I have to study palmistry?"

"Is this the only way to take care of that?"

"And what about Bible club?"

"Like I said. Is this the only way to take care of that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Why don't you give me that letter for a while until you come up with some creative options."

I gave her the letter.

We turned back toward school.

"Why am I always such a coward?"

"You're not a coward," she said. "You've just decided to let the Lord you're always talking about have a little time to work. You'll see. He'll take care of everything."

It was nice of her to say that, but I felt like a failure just the same.

Why couldn't my solutions be the right solutions for a change?

15 Tafessa

Old Booze didn't know what to make of our win against Grant. He hated us with a passion, but he couldn't put down the only team in the league with an undefeated season—especially since we'd beaten last year's champion, Newton, then Jefferson, and now Grant.

He reported how the game went and who made the goals. He said Joseph wouldn't have had that first goal if the referee had had his eyes open. He said that that goal unnerved Grant, because they saw the referee was prejudiced against them and was giving the game away to Sunny Hills.

He saluted Tafessa Mulugata, our Ethiopian. He told how his father was an Olympic marathon runner who had defected to the U.S. after the last Olympics.

If that boy has his father's speed, he will be a player to watch. Too bad he has to train under a coach like Crowley, who hasn't the slightest idea how to handle players with superlative abilities.

Boozer also knocked the fever that the Sunny Hills student body was showing for soccer. At most of the other schools in our county, the teams were lucky if they got ten spectators. But the entire Hilltopper population turned out for every one of our games.

These upstarts think they've invented a new sport the way they show up for games. You can measure a school's maturity by the way its teams play in peace and quiet.

Just because the old schools around us were dead didn't mean everybody had to lie down and die.

And then he got on his kick again about the Board of Education meeting. It seemed he was trying to keep everyone riled up over it. He didn't want parents to forget they could get rid of Crowley if they came.

Count on heads to roll—at least one head to roll—when the Board of Education finally gets its act together and stops postponing meetings. That's certainly an indication that it fears "parent power" in this community. It is also an indication that the Board knows it is having a problem with Crowley.

Parents, under the very capable and courageous leadership of Mrs. Charles Tacker, are already planning strategy for the upcoming meeting.

Let this be a warning to all interested parties: Parents these days will not put up with nincompoop coaches.

There was my favorite word again. Joseph was in good company. I wondered if—before this whole thing was over—people might be calling me a nincompoop, too.

It finally came to me. I knew just the thing to snap Tafessa out of his blue moods. I'd write him up in my column and show him the student body really liked him and respected him.

I wrote:

DEERSPRINTER

Blink your eyes, and he's down at the other end of the field. Blink again, and he's back.

Sunny Hills has a soccer player straight out of the Ethiopian highlands. His parents defected from his communist homeland and have found asylum here in our suburb.

Modest, quiet, thoughtful and really fast, he makes the ideal soccer player. Against Grant, he scored the final goal and earned a place in the Sunny Hills record book.

Even if he didn't score any goals, Tafessa Mulugata would have a place in the school's records. He's an essential part of our championship team.

Welcome to Sunny Hills, Tafessa Mulugata—Taffy. All us Hilltoppers admire and respect you.

You're our kind!

I figured that would show him how glad we are that he's at Sunny Hills. I could just see him relaxing and feeling more at home. What I didn't expect is what actually happened.

The day the paper appeared, Tafessa appeared in the door of our "Chronicle" office. He just stood there, trembling and saying nothing.

I went up to him. "Taffy, what's wrong?"

He didn't say a word.

He just dropped the paper, put his face in his hands, and began crying.

None of us said a word. None of us knew what to do.

I led him to a chair and helped him sit down. He leaned over and rocked back and forth, wailing now more than crying.

When he had seemed to calm down, he stood up and walked out the door. He didn't look back. He didn't say a word.

Kim motioned me to follow him.

He walked a short way down the hall, and then he started to run. He was fast, like I said. I found it hard to keep up with him. He went down the stairs to the first floor and out the door. By the time I got outside, he was far down the street.

I knew I couldn't catch him, but I thought maybe I could keep him in sight. I kept jogging along. I noticed he turned a corner and went down a cross street. I turned it when I got to it and saw that he was already down three blocks.

I didn't understand why this guy wasn't at practice. We have soccer practice every day after school. What was he running away for? Better yet, what was he running away from?

A black sedan passed me. It was going slow. I guess that was why I noticed it. It drove up behind Taffy and seemed to slow down even more, as if it was pacing him.

I saw him turn and look back over his shoulder. From the way he threw up his hand as if he was trying to keep something from hitting him, I figured he knew who was in the car. And from the fact that he doubled his speed, I knew he was scared to death.

Then I saw him pivot and turn in beside a house. The car stopped, and some men in black suits got out and followed him. They disappeared behind the house. The driver got out, leaned on the roof, and read something on a piece of paper.

I jogged up. "Anything wrong?" I asked.

He was a foreign-looking man, not black like Tafessa but with the same handsome features. In fact, I always thought that if Taffy had been white you wouldn't have been able to tell him from any aristocratic Englishman. He had a finely shaped thin nose, thin lips, and very straight white teeth. And his hair was soft and wavy.

This man was just like that but he was a lighter color. He was wearing a black suit, too.

"No," he said. "Nothing is wrong."

He had an English accent.

He stood there quietly, looking at me as if I was an intruder and what was going on was none of my business.

The other men came back.

"Nobody."

“Didn’t he go in there?”

“Not a sign.”

“You sure?”

“Vanished.”

“You rang the bell?”

“No answer.”

“Did you hear it ring?”

“It rang.”

“You sure he was the right boy?”

“What other boy was there?”

“This is where he went in, isn’t it?”

“You saw him yourself.”

“Strange. What would you suggest?”

“We’ll have to go door-to-door.”

“Do we have enough time?”

“They’ll shoot us if we don’t make the connection.”

“You sure this is the right address?”

“Eleven sixteen Putnam Avenue.”

The two men who were talking turned and looked at the numbers on the house. It read “1116.”

I stepped forward. “Excuse me, but this isn’t Putnam Avenue. It’s Putnam Court.”

The man I’d talked to gave me a sharp look. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Where’s Putnam Avenue?”

I told him to go down Kensington, and it would cross Putnam.

The men all got in the car in a hurry.

“Hey, what are you guys?”

“Caterers,” the man said.

“Why were you following my friend?”

“We can’t take time to talk to you. The people who called said a boy would be standing in front of the house to lead us to a party room behind the house.”

He drove off fast.

“Thank me for my help,” I called after him. I was disappointed. I’d thought they were spies looking for the defector and his family. I had visions of a quick flight in a taxi to an airport. I could see myself waving the defectors off as a black sedan, guns blazing, careened down the runway after the plane.

I looked around. I didn’t know where Taffy had gone if he wasn’t in that house like the men said.

I didn't know what to do, so I went across the street, sat down on the curb and looked at the house. I don't know how long I sat there. I was still a little winded. I just wanted to finish catching my breath before I jogged back to school and practice.

When I was ready, I stood up, looked left and right, and then started back across the street. A curtain in a front window was pulled aside, and Taffy looked out as if he was waiting for someone or something. When he saw me, he quickly pulled the curtain back.

I had to talk to him. I had to know why he'd become so upset because I'd written him up in the "Chronicle." Actually, Boozer had written about him first. I didn't like having him mad at me, so I walked over to his house, went up the steps and rang the bell.

The door opened a crack. I could see Taffy's eye. "Yes?"
"It's Bean from school. Could I talk to you a second?"

The door shut a little, while he talked to someone in another language. Then the door opened a little again, and he said, "Go down to the corner, and go behind the corner house. Then come back across the lawns to our back door. We'll let you in there."

He shut the door.

I wondered what I'd gotten involved with. Maybe this really was a spy story with foreign agents in black sedans and the good guys running for their lives.

Maybe that guy had lied when he told me they were caterers. Maybe the sedan had parked nearby, and the agents inside it were watching me from far away with powerful binoculars. So I went out to the curb and looked at my watch. And then I looked far down the street as if I was waiting for a bus or for a car to come pick me up. Then I leaned against a tree and looked like I was waiting.

After a couple of minutes, I shook my head and wandered down to the corner. I kept looking back down the road as if I was expecting a car to come. I tried to look as unconcerned as possible.

I looked at my watch again when I got to the corner. I waited a minute and then gave a big shrug that looked as if I was giving up waiting. I walked down the side street until I got to the back of the first house. Then, without looking back, I walked behind that house and then darted down to the back door of Taffy's house. The door opened, and I stepped inside.

A lady—I took her to be Taffy's mother—stood there smiling. "Zat was very nicely done," she said. "You looked very natural. You should be a spy someday?"

She made it a question so it sounded like a believable suggestion.

"What happened, Taffy?" I asked him. "Did I do something wrong?"

“Who were zose men in black suits?” his mother asked.

“They were caterers—waiters—people who serve food at fancy parties. They were lost. They thought this was Putnam Avenue.”

“Is zat all?” She sat down on a suitcase and started fanning her face with a piece of paper.

“What’s going on, Taffy? Why did you run?”

He looked at his mother and then at someone else. I turned and saw a tall, lanky man. All around him were suitcases. These people were about to go somewhere.

“Am I interrupting something? Are you moving?”

“No. You are not interrupting. Yes, we are moving. We cannot stay in zis town any longer. Zey have found us. We must run.”

“Found you? Were you hiding?”

“We escaped. We tought we could hide here, but Tafessa scored a goal by accident in his game and ze newspaper printed his name. Agents are everywhere. Even zo Etiopia has srown off Communism, its agents follow us everywhere.”

“But where will you go?”

“We don’t know. We’re waiting for a taxi. You saw Tafessa looking for ze taxi. We tought we would ask ze driver to take us to another town.”

“But you can’t leave Sunny Hills. We need you here. We need Tafessa on our team.”

“Where can we hide?”

“You don’t need to hide at all. This is America. We don’t hide in America.”

Taffy’s father turned away. “You don’t understand.”

“Sure I understand,” I said. I pointed to the TV set in the living room. “You’ve been watching too many movies. Nobody’s going to get you here—unless you’ve got the crown jewels. You got the crown jewels?”

“No,” the mother said—sadly, I thought. “We don’t have any jewels at all.”

“Well, then. What are you afraid of?”

“Agents. Communist agents are all over zis country.”

“So what? We’ve got the FBI. Just look them up in your phone book and give them a call if you think someone’s watching you. They’ll protect you. That’s what they’re for.”

“But zose men in black suits,” the mother said. “Zey could have been lying to you. Zey could be coming back right now.”

“Is that the way spies act? Like waiters?” I asked her. “I’ve never seen a spy. Have you?”

“We’ve seen many spies.”

“You said when I came in that I should be a spy. Why do you think that?”

“You can’t tell a spy is a spy. Zat’s ze secret. Zey look like what zey are pretending to be—” She shrugged. “Waiter. Barber. Mechanic. Neighbor. You can’t tell.”

“So you learn never to trust anybody,” the father said. “You always have to look over your shoulder—and hide.”

“Listen,” I said. “I’m just fourteen, but I know America, and we’re free here. You can hide all you want. But you don’t have to. In America you can come and go all you want—because you’re free! Don’t you understand?”

“But we’ve always had to hide. If the Communists find out where we are, zey’ll come and get us and take us away.”

“Is that why you haven’t wanted to score any goals, Taffy? Were you afraid you’d get your name in the papers and the Commies would come and get you guys?”

He put his eyes down and nodded.

“And that’s why you were so upset about my column?”

He nodded again.

“Hey, man.” I could have cried for these folks. “You’re free. Can’t you understand? You’re free!”

* * *

I think I finally got through to Taffy and his folks. I opened the phone book to the government pages and showed them the FBI entry in the “Federal Government” section.

“Any time you suspect trouble, call the FBI. They’ll come running.”

They were so relieved they started to laugh. We all laughed.

They really thanked me for my help. They told Taffy to come back with me to practice, and they told him to go ahead and score all the goals he wanted.

Well, he and I started to jog back to school. But this guy—I couldn’t hold him back. He was just realizing how free he really was, and he couldn’t wait to get back to the soccer field. He was down the block and halfway into next year he was so excited. I just let him go.

At least I’d done one thing right for Coach and for Mr. Scruggs. If I couldn’t get Charlie turned around, at least we had Taffy.

With Taffy, Joseph, and Win we had three of our four horses in

shape.

If I could only get Charlie on the stick.

Lord? I prayed. *It's Charlie's turn now.*

The change in Tafessa electrified our team.

Coach danced with me around the locker-room after practice. He said if I'd never done anything for Sunny Hills High before, I'd done it now. He'd see that my name went down in the history books. He even called up Mr. Scruggs and told him. They both decided to have a banquet in my honor.

"But we're not done yet." I had to get him to see that Charlie wasn't a lost cause. "We've got one more to go."

Coach shook his head. "He's getting worse and not better, if you ask me."

I didn't tell him—he's not a Christian so he wouldn't understand—but a lot of times when a guy is under the conviction of the Holy Spirit he gets worse than he ever was before. It's like he's running away and doesn't want the Lord to catch him.

I had a lot to pray about that night.

Venus was getting worse.

Charlie was getting worse.

Charlie's mom was getting worse.

And our game with Lincoln was the next afternoon.

16

My Second Phone Call

I hadn't gotten much sleep Thursday night, so I didn't fight Venus in English Friday morning. I'd do it Monday when I was fresh.

I thought all through the day how I'd get Charlie's mom tied up so he could get to the game. He hadn't said anything to me about my other phone call, so I guess either his mom hadn't talked about it or she'd gotten the facts all mixed up.

Nothing much was going on when I got to the "Chronicle" office Friday afternoon. Kim was behind her desk working on some plans for the next issue. Guys were sitting around, jawing and eating, laughing and talking. One thing we all liked about journalism was that the atmosphere was relaxed. And journalism, so far as I'd found out in school, was the only course that put the emphasis on what you yourself produced. In all my other classes you had to learn what someone else had produced, and your grade depended on how well you memorized the textbook or the teacher's notes.

In journalism we talked to people and wrote up their stories. Even grammar and punctuation were a lot more fun when you came at them through journalism. And the great part was seeing your own article in the student newspaper. My columns said, "By Bean Spencer." Hey, man. What could be greater?

Well, 2:30 came around, and I didn't have any ideas.

At 2:40 I looked up her phone number again.

At 2:45 I dialed.

The phone rang and rang and rang.

I'd missed her.

Why hadn't I called earlier?

I was just about to hang up when I decided to let it ring three more times. At the end of the third ring, just as I was taking the phone away from my ear, I heard her voice. "Hello?"

"Hello, Mrs. Tacker," I said, "how are you today?"

"I'm just leaving the house, young man. You kept me from an important appointment the last time you called, and I can't let you do it again. I wasn't going to answer the phone, but you rang and rang. I thought it must be important the way you let it ring."

"But it really is important when I talk to you," I said.

Lord? I need help.

“I really must go.”

“But I have just one question.”

“Yes?”

“At the Board meeting next Tuesday, do you think you’ll have any other parents there with you who know that Sunny Hills is the only team in the league that hasn’t lost a game?”

“Will I have other parents with me—you can bet your last dollar on that, young man. Why, parents all over the district have been calling me up and telling me what a wonderful crusader I am. They say they’ve been wanting to get Sunny Hills to fire its coaches for a very long time, and they are going to come out in full support for what I’m doing. We’re going to have a mass meeting that will show this Crowley person just who is in control here.”

“What are they complaining about?”

“Joseph Pruitt most of all. They think it’s terrible that the Coach doesn’t stop that boy from making a fool of himself and the team by dancing around and juggling the ball like a clown. They don’t like having their boys playing a serious game with a boy like that. They feel just like I do that, if we’re going to get the university scouts looking at us, we’ve got to play as if we want to win. This business about having fun! Why, I never—”

She was on a roll. I’d gotten her hooked. I just had to say, “Really?” and “Oh, my” and “That’s terrible” and she’d keep going. At 3:00 I let her begin winding down. I knew there was no way she could get to school by 3:05.

“You’re with the newspaper, didn’t you say?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m with the Sunny Hills High School ‘Chronicle.’ We’re doing a story on this, and we wanted to hear from you yourself what support you were getting from parents. It’s important that we contact the people who are making the news and not just rely on what other people are saying about them.”

“Yes, that’s so right. That’s good. Thank you, young man. And you can call anytime you want to. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, ma’am.”

I hung up.

“Lincoln,” I said out loud. “Here we come!”

* * *

Boozer knew we would play Lincoln. He’d gone to Lincoln when he

was in high school. He knew Lincoln would cinch the league with a win against Sunny Hills, and he was already plotting its path to the State finals. They'd play this team and that team, and by this time next month they'd be wearing the crown.

Crown! Hah! Boozer had just never taken a close look at Joseph. He didn't know what to make of him. He'd never seen a high school soccer player who could look like he was just playing around and having fun but who could put on a burst of speed and score whenever he wanted to.

But Boozer would never admit it. To him it was all—the right foot in the right place at the right time. He couldn't see skill or training or “soccer sense.” He just saw Joseph as a Cinderella—a nobody who just happened to meet the fairies.

Take what happened when we hit the field against Lincoln.

You would think Joseph was out in a daisy field reviewing his Bible memory verses from the way he was just rambling around. He was letting Charlie and Taffy and Win control the ball whenever our offense made a drive.

We were behind 3 to 0. The Rail-Splitteres were good. They were tied with Newton for second place. We'd beaten Newton, but Newton had beaten Lincoln. Both had one loss apiece. At this point in the season, we were undefeated.

Coach had asked J.P. at halftime if anything was wrong.

“Nope,” he said. “I'm just waiting for the right time.”

Coach knew enough to let well enough alone. He trusted Joseph and his “soccer sense.”

And sure enough, Joseph started on a roll about five minutes into second half.

Charlie was dribbling the ball, and he sent it on a quick pass to Win. Win moved it to Joseph, and Joseph moved toward the goal. But a Lincoln defender was in the way.

And what did Joseph do? He put his toe under the ball, and with a “Woop” lifted it into the air over the head of the defender. Then he faked to get around the guy and got to the ball on the other side before it touched the ground. A sharp kick and a sharp “Woop!” sent it into the net.

The bleachers went wild. They'd never seen a score like that before. Neither had I—and here I thought Joseph was just playing around and not wanting to win. This guy had so much talent he could afford to play around. He knew he could come through at the end and win every game.

And what did he do when he scored this goal? He started to tap dance right out there in the middle of the field. He was singing, “Woop! Woop!” and his arms were dangling and swinging like a puppet on a string. What a

goofball. But we loved him!

We all sang, “Woop! Woop!” right back at him.

Well, if that didn’t take the starch out of Lincoln, Joseph’s second trick did. Charlie and Win took the ball down to the goal and drove for a score, but the goalie caught it and kicked it out. Joseph didn’t even let it bounce. He caught that ball in mid-air with a swinging left foot and a “Woop!” and sent it into the net from twenty yards out.

We had two goals in less than two minutes.

Their coach called time out, and, when time came back in, you knew he’d told his guys to double up on Joseph. But they shouldn’t have done that because it freed Tafessa. In two more minutes we had another score when Charlie intercepted and headed it to Taffy. He faked past one defender, and then another, and boom! He faked the goalie out of position and scored.

We were all tied up at 3 apiece.

Our rooters were dancing in the aisles and out on the grass. A ton of them had left the bleachers and were ringing across the field. They wanted to get as close to the action as they could, I guess. Or else they wanted a head start when they ran to pound our guys and carry them around the field. Old Boozer was going to have to break down and tell the whole world about the “Sunny Hills hysteria” over soccer.

Man! We had reason to go bananas!

Now, we had to watch and see how our guys were going to win this game. We had to keep Lincoln bottled up—and our defense did just that. We fought for the ball every inch of the way.

I could see that Charlie was getting frustrated as the minutes ticked away, and we hadn’t scored. Lincoln was putting up a tremendous defense to keep our guys away from their goal.

And when Charlie gets frustrated, his anger begins to boil. Any little thing trips his trigger, and he shoots off in all directions.

And wouldn’t you know, along came a little thing—

Joseph.

Now, you’re not going to believe this. Things like this just don’t happen in civilized countries: Charlie has the ball. He’s dribbling it downfield toward the Lincoln goal. He passes to Tafessa who passes to Win. He passes to Joseph as Charlie comes straight for the goal. Charlie is expecting a pass back from Joseph so he can score.

But the rooters are going crazy, and the craziest one is Becky, Joseph’s sister. She’s running around and screaming “Score, Joseph, score. Score, Joseph, score.”

He’s just “wooping” and kicking the ball out ahead of him when he

hears her. He stops in mid-stride and waves.

These Pruitts! What guy driving for a goal in the closing minutes of a game is going to stop and wave to his sister? To his sister! It just didn't make sense.

It didn't make sense to Charlie either. He forgot all about scoring. He got to the ball, and he was going to teach Joseph a lesson he'd never forget. He kicked that ball at Joseph's head as hard as he could kick.

The ball went crack against the side of Joseph's head and ricocheted--

Now, I told you you wouldn't believe this. Things like this are impossible, but that ball ricocheted right off Joseph's head and into the net for a score.

Like I said, no one believed it. The Lincoln players just sat right down on the grass. Some of them lay down. How could anyone play with a guy like this?

"Hey, Boozer. Did you see that?" I wanted to yell. Things like this just don't happen in high school soccer.

Well, our rooters couldn't wait to get to Joseph. They streamed across the field, shouting, "Woop! Woop!" They picked him up and paraded around that field as if they owned the place. "Woop! Woop!"

The officials ran after them, blowing their whistles and shouting.

Talk about a circus!

"Woop! Woop!"

Even Charlie was laughing.

Well, they restored order and got the fans off the field. Time was called in, but the game was really over. Our players were so hyped, there was no way Lincoln or anyone else could ever score.

"Seven! Six! Five! Four!" Our fans counted out the remaining seconds and then streamed again across the field. But I got there first. I got to Joseph and gave him a hug that almost brought up his lunch.

We were delirious, man! Delirious!!

But it wasn't the win against Lincoln or even Joseph's fantastic goal that changed our lives that day. You won't believe this either. The great thing that day—the "Hallelujah Chorus" of that day—was the fact that Charlie laughed. It's as if he gave up fighting—fighting Joseph, fighting the team, fighting Coach—even fighting the Lord.

I just hugged Joseph, and there was Charlie. He had his arms open wide. He gave Joseph a hug and jumped up and down, laughing.

Once the student body had given J.P. his ride around the field, Charlie walked Joseph off the field, his arm around his neck, talking and jabbering as if they'd been old friends since kindergarten.

The rest of us couldn't believe it. Charlie was acting like a human being.

“It won’t last,” Evans said to me as we walked off. “Charlie is Charlie. A rat is a rat.”

* * *

Well, Joseph didn’t need me to tell him Charlie had turned a corner. He realized—as we all did, that Charlie was accepting Joseph as an equal and that’s what was making the difference.

And, boy, did they have a lot to talk over. It seemed as if Charlie had memorized every play, every kick Joseph had made and he wanted to know what he did and how he did it. They talked about timing and balance and technique.

They went out the door all showered and dressed still talking about how you measure a ball’s speed and when it’s coming right at you and you don’t have time to think.

The rest of us just stood there half-dressed wondering at what had happened right in front of our eyes.

I knew what had happened. The Lord had heard our prayers for Charlie, and He was working on His case.

I wanted to follow them out the door and listen in on all they were saying. But I knew that Joseph needed time with Charlie alone. Joseph knew how to lead that guy to Christ. He just needed peace and quiet and no interruptions from a nosey ninth grader like me.

If there was anybody that was gonna get the rats out of Charlie—we knew Who it was.

And that’s the business the Lord is in, when all is said and done, isn’t it?

17

Reluctant Dragon

Some old dogs just can't learn new tricks. Old Boozer couldn't believe that Sunny Hills had beaten his Lincoln. No way was he going to admit that Joseph was a real player with world class skills. To Booze, he was just playing ring-around-the-rosie after school.

A boy like that doesn't belong on the same field as Lincoln. The idea of stopping to wave to some female shouting from the sidelines. The idea of scoring a goal from a ball ricocheted off your head. This is child's play. This is nonsense.

Then he went on with his old line about getting our school kicked out of the league. The truth of the matter remained that Sunny Hills had out-scored Lincoln and that we were leading the league. Nothing Boozer could say could change that fact.

He ended his column by encouraging all the Sunny Hills parents and others in the community who were concerned about our soccer program to turn out for the Board meeting on Tuesday. He said that Mrs. Tacker had the most to lose of anybody if Crowley stayed because her son would be overlooked by college scouts.

He said Sunny Hills needed more crusading women like her, women who were courageous enough to take an unpopular position against a popular coach.

He wanted everyone to let her know of their support.

18

The Rocket's Red Glare

I'd had my fill of palmistry and horoscopes. I knew I had to do something about it, but I didn't know what. I called up Danny Pruitt and asked him what I should do.

"You've prayed about this?"

"All semester."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"I've been putting Bible verses in my compositions and trying to show her what God thinks about it."

"And she says?"

"D-. She doesn't give me F's, but she might as well. A D in English is gonna pull me off the honor roll. But I don't care about that. I just want to get to her."

"Have you thought of just facing her? Up front?"

"In front of the whole class? I wouldn't know what to say. She's quick. She's got answers you wouldn't think of. She could get the whole class laughing at me and the Lord, and no one would ever think seriously about Him again. I just don't know what to do."

"I'll pray for you, Bean. Our whole family will pray for you."

"Thanks, man. But what'll I tell her? What'll I say?"

"Well, that's one of the Lord's promises. When someone is attacking the gospel, He tells us He'll give us the words to say. Believe it, guy."

In English the next day, I went up to the teacher and said, "Uh, Miss Knurr?"

"Yes?" she said, looking right at me. I could imagine what she'd be thinking if she knew about the letter I wrote the publisher.

"I was talking to my editor—you know, Kimberly King?—the 'Chronicle' editor?—and she saw my handouts and said it's not legal to copy something that's copyrighted. You could get in trouble with the publishers."

"Spoken just like a Lower Mars," she said. She took my hand and turned it palm upward. "See how high your Mount of Lower Mars is?"

I could feel my face turning red in front of everybody.

"You've got active courage, Bean. Sometimes you're quarrelsome, and sometimes you're quite rash. And see? Your Mount of Venus is almost non-existent. That means you're not too sympathetic."

"But I know what's right," I said, snatching my hand away.

“Oh, you do, do you?” Now her face was getting red. “And since when do you think you have the right to tell me what I can and cannot do? I didn’t take four years of college and major in secondary education just so that you could stand there and tell me what I can do, young man. I’ve studied school law. I have a master’s degree in English. I know what I’m talking about and what I’m doing in this class, and I’m not about to let you spread your religious bias around this room and interfere with our freedom of expression.”

I knew I should keep my mouth shut. I knew I should. There’s a time when ladies rant and rave that a man’s got to keep his mouth closed. One innocent word—any word—snaps her trigger. But I couldn’t help it.

“But my mother said—”

“I don’t care one diddly what your mother said.” Her trigger clicked again, and she started firing roman candles. The whole class froze. This was better than Fourth of July.

“In too many school systems in this state, parents who have no degree in education and who may never have even been to college, think they can go around telling educational professionals what they can and can’t do in the schools. They think they know all the answers. They think they can interfere with teachers and the whole educational process whenever they want.

“They wouldn’t think of telling a dentist how to drill their teeth or telling a doctor how to take out their appendix or telling a mechanic how to fix their car. But they come right into the school and tell professional educators how to teach. Why, if I were a mere parent, I wouldn’t have the nerve to—”

I knew she was about to start on my mother, so I had to head her off.

“But the publishers say in the front of their books that—”

And it worked.

“And that’s another thing I can’t stand—publishers who try to keep teachers from doing a good job of teaching. We spend our lives studying their books. We spend our hard-earned money buying their books and teaching from their books, and you would think they would have the common decency to let a teacher alone. Just because we don’t have all the money in the world in every school district, they have the nerve to try to prevent us from teaching the next generation the things they’ve put in their books. They stick in their little restrictions and threaten us poor teachers with legal action just because we try to teach the truth.

“I don’t have endless hours to do the research their authors did. I don’t have the time to take off to spend in the library finding these things out for you. I’ve paid the price for their books, and I ought to be com-

pletely free to use that information. This is a dictatorship, that's what it is. It's intellectual dictatorship when a publisher—"

You would have thought she was a politician the way she took those publishers apart.

And it made me mad. She was stealing their material and lying her way out of it.

"But the Bible says--"

"The Bible? Since when—" That one set off the rocket's red glare. She turned scarlet. When will I ever learn?

I knew she would make a holy war out of this if I didn't do something. Anything. We were having enough trouble getting our Bible club going without her ripping God's Word to shreds. What could I do? My mind was blank.

Lord, help me do something. Help me say something.

And then—talk about quick answers to quick prayers—I held up my hand to stop her. "I didn't know you were a Lower Mars, too."

"I am not!" she snapped. "I don't have any Lower Mars. I'm a Venus. See?" She held up her palms for me to look at. She put them right under my nose, in fact.

"A Venus? You're a Venus?" I asked her. "That means you're sympathetic and not easily ruffled, doesn't it? At least that's what you've been telling us in these handouts."

"I don't see what—that's—got—to—do—with..."

The light slowly dawned, and she saw how she herself had blown her superstitions sky high. She was acting just the opposite from her "Venus."

The bell rang then, and she let us go. She didn't have one more thing to say.

And do you know? That was the last day she handed us those duplicated handouts. We still had to write compositions, but she never mentioned palmistry again.

I sure thanked the Lord for showing me what to do. I'd never have thought it up by myself.

When I told Danny that the kids had seen her palmistry was just a lot of hokum, we started finalizing our plans for a Bible club.

I knew our guys would win the gold, and the Board would give us permission. But then there was Charlie's ma. She could wreck everything.

19

The Board Meeting

I got there early. Kim was with me. The “Chronicle” was going to cover this meeting as it had never covered a Board of Education meeting before.

Parents started coming in early. Students were not allowed in because they were expecting a ton of adults, and they didn’t want kids taking up all the seats.

“These are all nice looking people,” I told Kim. “I can’t see how they’d be so mean. Crowley hasn’t hurt them. Why are they like this?”

“Beats me.”

Members of the Board came in one at a time. They seemed to know one another really well. The men laughed and joked together and teased the ladies on the Board. They talked to the secretaries who were sorting papers and making piles of hand-outs. They greeted Mr. Scruggs when he came in. You’d have thought we were going to have a party—not a lynching—the way everybody was loving up to each other.

The superintendent of schools was in charge. He kept looking at the clock. I guess he wanted to start right on the second. Mr. Crowley came in and sat in a front seat that was reserved for him. Mrs. Tacker came in. There was a loud murmur from the parents when she walked down the center aisle.

I knew she was enjoying the attention. I just wondered if her emotions would be able to handle it. She had broken down over a lot less when I’d seen her cry in Charlie’s arms. Only she didn’t have Charlie here now to help her.

Mr. Scruggs sat beside her. She could cry all over him, as far as I was concerned.

The superintendent called the meeting to order on the dot of eight o’clock. He had the clerk call the roll, and then we had the Pledge of Allegiance. I was expecting the fat lady to come out and sing “The Star Spangled Banner” before we had the first pitch, but no one did.

He announced that the Board would take care of incidental decisions it had to make before it took up “the matter of evident public concern.”

So they considered buying plumbing fixtures for a grade school and whether to buy dark curtains for an elementary school classroom. They decided to buy computers for Lincoln High and to build a ramp for handicapped students at Washington. Since ours is a unified school district, this

board had to make a lot of decisions for a lot of people in a lot of schools.

I began to get the idea that the Board was taking this long deliberately so that, when prime time was over, some of the people would go home. Mrs. Tacker was getting this feeling, too. She kept turning to Mr. Scruggs and pointing to the clock. He would lean over in her direction and pat her arm and tell her, I guess, to just be patient.

Finally, she ran out of patience.

She stood and said, "Mr. Chairman."

The parents behind her burst into applause and cheers. They were tired of all this monkeying around on their time. They wanted action.

"Yes?" the superintendent said.

"My name is Rosalie Tacker, and I represent a number of parents in this school district. We have children at home who need to be put to bed, and we would like to have the Board of Education interrupt its proceedings and deal with our problem—now."

She got more applause and cheers.

The superintendent said, "Just a moment, please, Mrs. Tacker." He leaned over to talk in a low voice to the other members of the Board. Then he turned to her and said, "All right, Mrs. Tacker. Members of the Board feel that we have gotten our necessary work done and that we can take up the matter you wish to address at this time."

More cheers and applause.

"I'd like to call on Mr. Ronald P. Williams at this time, Mr. Chairman," Mrs. Tacker said.

Mr. Williams stood and walked to a podium set up at the front of the hall for witnesses like him to speak at. He was asked his name and address by the clerk, and then he was given permission to address the Board.

He told how shocked the community was when the one team that had a chance at a third state championship was being coached by a man who had more interest in his players' having fun than in their winning games. Mr. Williams was Boozer all over again. He was Boozer's column wired for sound. He talked about the scouts and the scholarships and said it was time to get rid of a coach that had no interest in the future welfare of his students.

He sat down, and Mrs. Tacker got up and introduced Mrs. Lavinia Thurman. Mrs. Thurman gave her name and address, and then she started in with her side of the garbage dump.

When she sat down, we had another and another and another.

Boy, was Mrs. Tacker organized. I hadn't realized she had so much on the ball. She had looked like an alcoholic or an addict to me that first day; but she had built a case, and these guys were packing it in with cement.

I looked at Crowley.

He wasn't saying a word.

I looked at Scruggs.

He had a face like a mask. He wasn't showing any emotion at all.

Mrs. Tacker's witnesses droned on and on. I noticed some of the Board members looking at the clock. And you never heard some of the junk these people were shoveling on Crowley's lawn. One guy accused him of being against minorities because not many black guys were on our team. I wanted to tell him we used all the guys that came out, no matter what their color.

Why didn't Crowley defend himself? I couldn't figure him out.

They said he didn't know soccer technique. They said scoring goals off a ricochet to the head was proof.

"Come on," I said to Kim. "What kind of proof is that?"

Well, they went on for at least an hour.

Finally, the superintendent said that he would have to put a limit on testimony. He gave Mrs. Tacker four more minutes.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, before I introduce my last parent, I want to thank all of you for coming out.

She turned and talked to the crowd. "This has been a wonderful show of support. I can't tell you how much it means to me that you have demonstrated your convictions before our Board."

She turned and addressed the Board. "And I want to thank you ladies and gentlemen for considering this case. My own dear son, Charles, has worked so—hard—" She had to stop and take a deep breath. "It means so much to me that Charles will get to go to college—" She took another deep breath. "He means so much to me. He's such a dear, dear boy."

Her mouth was twisting. She was losing control. She knew she was slipping. She yielded her time to another speaker and sat right down. She was beginning to shake.

She leaned over and said something to Mr. Scruggs. He got to his feet and helped her up. He took her arm and led her out the door.

There was another murmur from the crowd. The man speaking said, "And you ladies and gentlemen on the Board of Education can see how deeply Mrs. Tacker is affected by all of this. I call upon you to deal with this serious situation. I particularly call on you to recognize how much Mrs. Tacker herself will lose if this situation is not corrected.

"She is a single mother with one son. Her only hope of sending him to college is for him to get a good scholarship where he can use his soccer to help pay his bills.

"I implore you, on her behalf, to dismiss this—this—this man, this

coach, this—uh—nincompoop and bring in someone with experience, with courage, with the expertise that will bring Sunny Hills more gold.”

There was more applause and more cheering.

The superintendent quieted the crowd. Then he said, “Mr. Crowley, do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“No, your honor.”

Another murmur swept the courtroom.

“Why doesn’t he speak?” I asked Kim. “He knows all this is just a bunch of junk.”

“Because he doesn’t have to,” she said. “He has an undefeated team. He doesn’t have to say anything else.”

“But will these Board members see that?”

“Mr. Scruggs,” the superintendent said, “do you have anything to say since Mr. Crowley is a member of the faculty in your school?”

“Yes, Mr. Chairman. Let me say first that Mrs. Tacker does not need to worry about her son’s winning a college scholarship. I know for a fact that college scouts are watching him closely—and with great interest.

“Regarding Mr. Crowley—let me say he has proved that he is an able coach of young men and an able administrator of an athletic program at our school. His record speaks for him. He has an undefeated team. Also, he gave up a position at the university so that he could see this team go all the way to the State finals. I believe we need to give him a vote of confidence.”

“Yay!” I shouted. And I applauded—until I discovered that Kim and I were the only ones applauding.

Everybody else was groaning, “No!” and booing.

That made me mad. Real mad!

I got to my feet, and I said, “Mr. Chairman, may I speak?”

The superintendent said, “I’m sorry, young man, but time for testimony has ended.”

Mr. Scruggs stood up. “I believe, Mr. Chairman, I did not take all the time you allotted to me. I would like to yield a few minutes to Bean Spencer of our student body.”

“Proceed,” the superintendent told me.

I stood there a moment while my heart calmed down.

Lord? I prayed silently. He’d answered me before. I needed Him again.

“I have one question I’d like to have you ask the parents meeting here—no, two. And they are short.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to know how many of them are parents of Sunny Hills High

School students, and then I would like to ask how many of them have sons on the Sunny Hills High School soccer team.”

There was a groan of protest from the crowd.

“That sounds reasonable to me,” the superintendent said. “How many of you are parents of Sunny Hills High School students?”

Four hands went up.

That groan of protest now turned to a roar.

“And how many of you are parents of Sunny Hills High School soccer players?”

Not one hand went up.

People were standing and shaking their fists at me.

Someone had lifted me up and was dancing with me in circles. I looked down. It was Mr. Scruggs. He and Coach were laughing and crowing. And so was Kim.

It was pandemonium.

We heard the ring of the gavel.

“Case dismissed,” the superintendent shouted.

We’d won. We’d won. *We’d won!*

Scoring a goal couldn’t be half as thrilling as this!

Now we would get to keep Coach Crowley.

Now we really had a chance to win the gold!

20

Northridge

You won't believe this. But Coach and Mr. Scruggs and I have a theory. We think all those parents came from the soccer teams of the other high schools in our league. They wanted their kids to have a chance at the gold, and they saw getting rid of Crowley the way to do it. They'd used Mrs. Tacker as their cover, and they came within a whisker of succeeding.

I guess I was a minor sensation around school the next week or so. Kim ran the story in the "Chronicle," and kids from everywhere thanked me and congratulated me. I could have run for student body president that week and been elected for all the good things I had going for me.

I heard that Mrs. Tacker wasn't very happy. But she saw a change in Charlie's attitude, and I guess that calmed her down a little. Not that Charlie was saved yet. Joseph told me all about it. He was still talking to him and praying for him.

He said Charlie thought he was good enough and that he had as much chance of making it to heaven as anyone else.

Joseph said, "I told him that if he was good enough the glory of God would be shining around him like it did around Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. And then I looked all around Charlie and said, 'Hey, man. I don't see the glory of God. You sure you're good enough?'"

"He said, 'I'll make it.'"

"And I said, 'You're a sinner, Charlie, and you know it. And God says in Romans six twenty-three that the payment for sin is death. You won't make it, guy. Sinners never do.'"

"And he said, 'You're a sinner, Joseph, so you won't either.'"

"And I said, 'Man, I'm a forgiven sinner.'"

"And he said, 'Forgiven?'"

"And I said, 'Yup. I told God I was a sinner and I was sorry. I said I couldn't be good enough for heaven because I was a sinner. And I asked Him to forgive me and save me because I was receiving the Lord Jesus as my own personal Savior. That's all you have to do, Charlie, but you don't get it unless you ask for it and mean it from your heart.'"

"And he said, 'Well, I'll think about it.'"

"And I said, 'Man, God died for you. What can be greater than that?'"

"He said, 'I've got time.'"

"I told him, 'You don't know if you'll even have tomorrow.'"

One other thing Joseph did was change his style. Before, he wanted

to help the team win. Now, he wanted to help Charlie make the team win. Maybe that would wake Charlie up.

Joseph could see Charlie needed praise. He wasn't getting it at home the way his ma was saying, "Stand up straight," and, "Phew! Didn't you take a shower?" and things like that. And he wasn't getting any glory in the classroom. At least his name was never on the honor roll. So Joseph decided he really did need it on the soccer field.

Whenever he could, old J.P. passed off to Charlie, especially down near the goal. And it paid off, because not only could Charlie see that Joseph was a different kind of guy but Charlie had a great hook shot that most goalies couldn't handle.

We were playing Northridge near the end of our season when Charlie showed what he's made of. He'd gotten fouled down near the Northridge goal. He got a free kick.

Four Northridge players locked arms across the penalty area between him and the goal. The goalie stood in one corner of the net to cut off the only straight shot that Charlie had.

But that guy! He slid into the ball as it was sitting there on the grass and gave it his hook.

And wouldn't you know, it curled around those four players and went into the opposite end of the net from where the goalie was standing.

Talk about the sky falling! We went crazy.

The final score was 4-1 our favor.

* * *

Sunny Hills is still talking about Joseph's winning goal when we played the Washington High Regulars.

They were the toughest team we'd met all season. We were in a 0-0 tie near the end of the game.

Joseph was standing with his back toward the Washington goal. Then with a "Woop" and a short swinging kick from the knee down, he arched the ball up and over his own hunched-down head.

It bounced off the body of a surprised Washington player.

Joseph spun around, and, swinging his left foot from the hip, he "wooped" and smashed the ball into the Washington goal. The ball never touched the ground.

Hey, beat that, world!

This team's going to go down in history.

21

Newton Again

In the final game of our league's season, we were the team to beat. We'd come through undefeated. Newton had one defeat—from us in the first game of the season. We had run up more scores, but we knew these guys were strong.

Now Coach had a secret weapon. He'd gotten through the entire season without using it. He didn't want to use it. Then, when scouts from opposing schools came to watch our games, they wouldn't have anything to report back home that would include this formation.

I had expected him to make a lot more of Tafessa after he got over his fear of making goals. Coach let Tafessa do his thing in games, but he didn't deliberately couple him up with Charlie to run a formation. He did in practice, mind you. But he made sure to tell them not to do it during games.

He also teamed Joseph and Win. The two of them practiced just as much as Charlie and Taffy to escort the ball down the field and into scoring range.

Then, when the guys had mastered those techniques, he merged them into one group and had the four of them usher the ball down the field like a fleet of trucks on the freeway.

It was interesting to watch the four guys. They had no trouble merging, because Charlie had finally decided to be part of the team. Actually, this made Charlie look good—really good—because he had strong legs and he was usually the man nearest the goal when their formation got within striking range.

Wham! He'd kick it and send it through the defending goalie into the net. He developed a lot of control. And don't forget he had that hook.

I wanted to find Boozer and tell him it wouldn't be long until he was back, thanking me for not taking that 100 to 1 bet of his.

Well, against Newton we just played an ordinary game. But there were scouts in the bleachers, and the guys knew this. One thing I can say for Charlie—even though he knew his star would rise if he put on a good show before these guys, he had team spirit now. It was "all for one and one for all" with him. And, like I said, Charlie showed up better doing this than when he used to hog the ball.

The other guys all liked him now. It wasn't a big change—*boom*, we like you. It was a gradual thing as they saw him settle down—first with Joseph and then with Taffy, his partner. Then he became pals with Win,

and soon it spread to the rest of the team. We didn't have fights in the locker-room anymore, and we didn't have fights on the practice field.

The guys were enjoying one another.

Well, like I said, Newton had just one loss. Those guys were tough. It was 0-0 all first half.

"Just relax, guys," Crowley told them at the half. "Have fun. Laugh. Play. Forget those guys in the stands. They're looking for guys that can relax under pressure. Goof off, Joseph. It'll work."

So they did. Joseph took one dribble down the field, hardly looking at the ball. He was looking at the bleachers and waving to the girls and singing, "Woop! Woop!" And the rooters were all singing, "Woop! Woop!" right back at him.

He must have watched the ball out of the corner of his eye, because he never missed it when he gave it his little kicks.

Then Newton intercepted when he got down near the goal.

Even Tafessa joined the fun. Remember the stiff-legged race Joseph had getting away from Charlie early in the season? Well, Taffy ran stiff-legged after the ball and gave it a quick kick when he got down near the goalie. That guy went one way, and the ball went the other, and there went the 0-0 tie.

The bleachers came loose on that one.

Joseph kicked the ball toward the net another time. The goalie caught it and kicked it out. But it was a low kick. Charlie dove between two defenders and headed the ball right back into the goal.

Sunny Hills went wild. 2-0.

I heard a woman screaming and cheering louder than all the other guys. I looked back at the bleachers. It was Charlie's mother, waving a red towel and cheering her boy on.

"Hey, that's your mother, Charlie," I said the next time-out when he came over to get some water.

"She's going to be all right," he said with a big grin. "She saw a doc. He's working with her, and she's going to be all right."

Another time when we were together, he said, "I wouldn't have made her go if it hadn't been for you, Bean. Thanks! I really appreciate it. I can't tell you."

This was Charlie? I couldn't believe it.

The Lord had really been working.

Hey, isn't that just like Him though?

He doesn't give up on a guy.

* * *

Well, we cut through our league like a hot knife through butter. Now we had to face the pack. There were soccer wolves all over our state, and they were ready to roam all over Sunny Hills.

Old Boozer had to print our roster of games, not Lincoln's. He had to give us some glory because he was "home paper" and we were "home team." He'd have been fired by public outcry if he'd hung onto his "down with Sunny Hills" attitude.

All I got was a long look when I asked Coach Crowley if we would have any easy games.

"Even if we did, Bean, we'd attack like Jonah in the lion's den."

I smiled inside. Even that much Bible talk from Coach Crowley was worth the season. He thought of himself as a "tough guy." Well, he'd seen a tough guy in Joseph, and he respected him.

Coach found he could get through the first couple of games in our play-offs without using his secret weapon. Our team didn't have any trouble until it reached the semi-finals of our southern section of the state.

We hit a referee who had a favorite of his own. Coach Crowley wouldn't say that, but I would. When Mayfield fouled, he was looking the other way. When we even thought of fouling, he was down our throats. He was giving free kicks to Mayfield like it was the night before Christmas.

But that was Tafessa's night. He'd been overlooked by the newspaper reporters—but no more. He was phenomenal. He could have shut his eyes and scored. He put English on the ball for special effects. He looked one way and kicked the other. He faked the socks off opposing guards. He had the goalie dancing like a cat on a griddle.

Old Boozer gave him three-inch type for a headline. Even the president wouldn't have gotten that if he'd come to the game. It was like Boozer felt he discovered Taffy himself, personally.

Well, that got us into the southern finals.

And that was war.

It was still 0-0 with one minute to go in the second half. But what's to worry?

The entire population of Sunny Hills was at the game. We were roaring like a hundred jets. We knew our guys could do it. We started counting down. That always seemed to raise the adrenaline of our players like nothing else did.

"Twenty! Nineteen! Eighteen!" Our forwards seemed to be scattering for some reason.

"Thirteen! Twelve! Eleven!"

Tafessa faked and got the ball in control at midfield. He shouted, "Woop!" and kicked a diagonal smash to Win Willems. Willems shouted,

“Woop!” and kicked a smash over to Joseph. Joseph shouted, “Woop!” and kicked a smash to Charlie.

“Four! Three! Two!”

Charlie faked a defender out and shouted, “Woop!” as he rammed a line drive into the upper corner of the net.

Our fans scrambled out of the bleachers, shouting, “Woop! Woop! Woop! Woop!” They swarmed all over our guys.

It was bedlam.

The papers all over the state had pictures of our team and stories about our “Woopers.”

And then Crowley pulled out all his chocks in the state finals and let his great machine roll free. Bible Club, here we come! Scruggs promised me a bonus if we got into the finals.

We were playing Hippityville High from out of the northern hills. These guys did nothing from the cradle to the grave but play soccer. They had swooshed out of the hills like Vikings on the warpath to sweep their way into the finals.

And then they met Sunny Hills. Our four horses had practiced to perfection. They controlled that ball like they owned it. It was like Venus in my English class. We knew moves that could turn Hippityville to putty without leaving a mark on their skin. And we moved! And we left the putty! But we lost. Their free kick at the end of the game broke a 0-0 tie.

But you know whose night this one was? It was Charlie’s.

His mama was going to get well. He would go to the college he wanted on a full tuition, room and board scholarship. And he realized finally he had done none of this himself.

Joseph led him to the Savior before the game.

To those of us who had prayed, Charlie was the real prize.

But in the ceremonies at the end of the game, Charlie refused to take the silver cup alone.

News pictures the next day showed his one arm around the cup and the other around our ninny—Joseph.

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