

HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



6. Two O'Cat

It was hard to be called a “kid”—harder still to be left out of the game. And, besides, it wasn't fair. Marmaduke knew he could catch that ball as well, and hit it as often as any of them.

This is the way it began:—

That morning Jehosophat had gone with the Toyman to Sawyer's Mill over on Wally's Creek. Marmaduke felt lonely, for there was nobody but Hepzebiah to play with, and she wouldn't leave her dolls, and he had long ago gotten past playing with them. As he was wandering forlornly around the barnyard, wondering what he could do, he heard a shout over by the Miller farm.

“You're out!”

It was a very fascinating cry, an inviting one as well. Looking over the field he saw boys—at least six of them—playing baseball. So he hurried over to get in the game, too.

But his old enemy “Fatty” told him that they didn't “want any kids hangin' around.”

And Dicky Means agreed with that.

“Naw, we don't want any kids !”

“I can catch an' I can pitch—curves, too,” Marmaduke protested, but they wouldn't believe him.

“You can't, either,” Fatty yelled back. “You'd muff it every time. Wouldn't he, Means?”

He was talking to Dicky Means, but he called him by his last name just because he had heard grown-up men do that sometimes and he thought it was very smart.

Again Dicky Means agreed with Fatty.

“Sure he'd muff it every time.”

Reddy Toms and Harold Skinner didn't take Marmaduke's part, nor did Sammy Soapstone, though he had borrowed Marmaduke's mouth-organ and lost it, and had Marmaduke's appendix all pickled in alcohol in a big bottle and wouldn't give it back, either. But they were all bigger than Marmaduke, so what could he do but sit on the fence and watch them, while his fingers fairly itched to catch one of those “flies.” And the crack of the bat against the ball did sound so fine across the field.

At last he couldn't stand it, so he got down from the fence, and shouted at them,

“I wouldn't play in your ole game—not for a million dollars !”

And off he walked towards his own barn, swinging his arms all the way, as if he were holding a bat and showing them just how well he could play. My, what long “flies” he would knock, if he only had the chance—over the dead chestnut tree, over the Gold Rooster on the top of the barn, and even above the Long White Finger of the Church Pointing at the Sky. Maybe, sometime, if he hit it hard enough and just right, the ball would sail on and on, and up and up, to the Moon: and the Ole Man there would catch it and throw it down to

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him again.

But he would have to practice a lot first, so, when he reached the house, he went in and found a ball of his own. He turned it over and over in his fingers, admiring it. It was a fine one, with leather as white as buckskin but very hard, and thick seams sewed in the cover with heavy thread, winding in and out in horseshoe curves.

It had a dandy name, too,— “Rocket,” that was it. And he threw it up high up, up, up, until it reached the eaves of the barn and startled the swallows, who flew out and swept the sky with their pretty wings, chattering angrily at him.

He watched to see where the ball would fall, and ran under it, holding his hands like a little cup. It fell into them, but it fell out even quicker than it had fallen in. Jiminy, but that ball was hard! Marmaduke thought the man who made it should have left the “et” from its name and called it plain “Rock” instead. It was just like a rock covered with hard leather.

He tried it again, but he didn't throw it up quite so high.

“Crack!” it went against the side of the barn, and little clouds of hay-dust from the loft danced in the air, and the swallows chattered still more angrily:

“He persists—sists—sists—sists—sists,” they called to one another.

This time the ball fell on his cheekbone and raised a lump as round and as hard as a marble.

He didn't cry. Oh, no! For he was trying hard these days to be a regular boy and never to cry even one little whimper. So he just went in the house and Mother put a kiss and some arnica on it—it is always more effective if mixed that way—and out he came and tried it all over again. For regular boys never give up. Of course, at first he threw the ball a little lower than before, but that was only wise. And this time it did fall into his hands and he held it tight. Over and over he practised until his hands were pretty red from catching the hard “Rocket” ball, but he felt very happy inside—which is what counts, for one doesn't mind being sore outside if one is all right within.

However, all the time he could hear the sound of that bat over on the Miller lot. Then—all of a sudden—he heard an altogether different sort of noise—more like a crash and a smash than a crack.

“Glass!” That was it!

“Hooray!” he shouted in delight. “Now that Fatty's going to get it.”

But he was wrong. Fatty was too plump to hit a ball so hard. It was Dicky Means that had done it. And, like Fatty, he was always up to tricks, only usually Fatty planned them and Dicky did them.

Yes, it was Dicky Means who had hit that ball right through Mis' Miller's window, the big parlor window, too, and she expected the Methodist ladies of the Laborforlovesociety that very afternoon. There was Mis' Miller now, running out of the house and shrieking,—

“You younglimbosatan, you'll pay for that!”

“Pleeze, Mis' Miller, I haven't any money,” Dicky was saying, very politely, with his eye on the broom she held in her hand, “I'll pay you tomorrow.”

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"No, you'll settle it now," she told him—very cross she was, too,— "or I'll tell your mother, and your father'll paddle you in the woodshed." Then she added,— "an' you won't get your ball."

Dicky seemed to be more worried about the ball than about the woodshed, for he whined.

"Aw, pleeze, Mis' Miller, have a heart!"

You see, "Have a heart!" was an expression he had heard down in the city, and for the last week the boys had been using it every chance they got.

Still it didn't work on Mis' Miller, for she only shook her head angrily and took her broom and shouted,—

"Scat, get out!"—just as if they were so many cats— "an' don't come back for the ball till you come with the money in your hand."

And as everybody in the neighborhood used to say, "Gracious, but Mis' Miller has a turrible temper!" or "Whew, but can't she get mad?" and because she was flourishing that broom right in their faces, why, they did scat like so many cats, just as she had told them.

Across the field they all came running, straight towards Marmaduke, who pretended not to see them at all, but just kept passing his Rocket ball from one hand to the other, trying to juggle it like the trick men in the circus.

When they saw that ball, all the boys suddenly grew very polite to Marmaduke.

"Lend us your ball, Marmy!" they said.

"Wouldn't you like to have it!" he replied, still juggling the ball, but he watched them out of the corner of his eye. They had been pretty mean to him, but he supposed he ought to be decent even if they weren't, and besides it would be fine to play a real game with "sides" instead of one just by himself.

"All right," he said, after making them wait long enough to want that ball very much, "if you'll play 'sides' 'stead of two o' cat,' and let me be captain."

"Aw!" said Dicky, "you're not big enough."

"All right," replied Marmaduke, still juggling that fine Rocket ball, "you'll have to play with some ole rock then."

"Aw, come 'n, have a heart!"

Marmaduke thought it over for a little while. To "have a heart" was like "heaping coals of fire" on people's heads, in minister's language, he supposed. And he wasn't so fond of that. But anyway he gave in.

"All right," he agreed, "come 'n, where'll we play?"

"Here," said Fatty, "this big rock'll be home-plate, and that one over there by the chestnut tree 'first.' An' we'll choose up sides—first choosin'!"

Then Dicky, who insisted on being the other captain, picked up the bat and threw it with the handle uppermost to Fatty, who caught it around the middle. Then Dicky clasped his fingers around the bat just above Fatty's hand; then Fatty put his left hand above Dicky's right; and Dicky his left hand next; and so on until their fingers almost reached the handle of the bat. There was just a little space left. If Fatty could squeeze his plump fingers in be-

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tween Dicky's and the top he would win, and he could have first choice of the best players for his side. But his fingers were much too fat.

"Your pinky's over," said Dicky, and Reddy Toms picked up a flat stone and scraped it over the top of the bat, and Fatty howled and let go.

So it was Dicky's turn to choose, and Marmaduke waited breathlessly. He hoped that he would be chosen first, second anyway. He ought to be, for wasn't it his ball they were going to play with?

But—

"I'll take Reddy," said Dicky;

"Sammy," said Fatty;

"Skinny," chose Dicky next;

"Froggy Waters," chose Fatty—and poor little Marmaduke was left to the last, as if he were the worst player in the whole world.

"Well," said Dicky, "I 'spose I've got to take him. But he'll lose the game for us."

He turned to Marmaduke.

"I'll tell you what, Marmy," he said, "you can be the spectators—a whole pile of them—in the grand stand. Wouldn't you like to be a grand stand? That's great. Isn't it, fellows?"

"Sure," they all said, grinning, but Marmaduke didn't want to be any spectator, not even a grand stand. He wanted to be doing things, not watching. Lose that game, would he? No, he'd show them, he'd win it instead. He'd hit that ball clean over the fence—so far they'd never find it. But whew! That wouldn't do. He'd better not hit it quite so far or he'd lose his dandy Rocket ball.

But they had to give in and let him play before he would give them that ball. Then the two captains told their men to take their positions.

"I'll pitch," declared Dicky, "n Reddy'll catch. Skinny you play 'first,' and Marmaduke out in the field. You kin go to sleep, too, for all I care—for you can't catch anything even if you had a peach basket to hold it in."

"Play ball!" shouted Fatty, and they all took their places, Dicky's team in the field, and Fatty's at the bat.

Marmaduke had to stand way out, and he didn't have much to do for a while, for the other team either struck out, or hit the ball towards Dicky, the pitcher, or Skinny at 'first.' Once a ball did come his way "Hold it!" shouted Dicky, but Marmaduke was so excited that he threw himself right at it, and the ball rolled between his legs.

"Aw! didn't I tell you?" said Dicky in disgust, and all on the other team shouted:

"Butterfingers!"

And, as every boy in the world knows, it is a great disgrace to be called "Butterfingers."

When the first inning was over the score stood six to five, and Fatty's team was ahead.

In the next inning the ball never once came towards Marmaduke, way out there in the field. All he could do was to watch the other boys catch the "pop-flies," stop the grounders, or run back and forth between first base and home. It was hard, too, when Marmaduke wanted so much to be in the thick of it.

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Before long the score stood seventeen to fifteen, still in favor of Fatty's team. At last they were put out, and it was Marmaduke's turn to bat. If he could only knock a home run it would bring Skinny in and tie the score.

"Strike one!" called Sammy, who was catching.

Marmaduke swung at the next one too wildly.

"Strike two!"

And then, sad to tell,—

"Strike three!"

He was out—no doubt about it!

"Aw!" exclaimed Dicky, "what'd I tell you—you ought to be fired."

Marmaduke felt very much ashamed as he took his place out in the field again, with the score thirty-six to thirty against them.

Just then the Toyman and Jehosophat came up the road on their way back from Sawyer's Mill, and the Toyman stopped his horses to watch the game for a minute. Marmaduke gritted his teeth and clenched his hands. He would have to do well now when they were looking on.

Before he knew it, two of the other team were out. Then, all of a sudden, he heard a loud crack. Looking up, he saw the ball sailing through the air. It wasn't sailing towards Dicky or Skinny. It was coming straight in his direction!

He formed his hands in the shape of a cup and waited. He was going to hold that ball—if it ever got there. And, sure enough, it fell in his outstretched hands. My, how that Rocket ball stung and burned! But he hung on for dear life.

"Butterfingers!" he heard Fatty call to "rattle" him. And that settled the matter, for, if he hadn't heard that word, he might have dropped the ball after all, but he was so determined to make Fatty take it all back that he made his fingers tight as a vise around the ball—and it stayed—it stayed there!

When he came in to take his turn at bat, Dicky patted him on the shoulder.

"Good boy, Marmy!" he said, and Outfielder Green felt as pleased and proud as before he had been ashamed. But he felt even happier a little later.

It was the last half of the last inning. Reddy and Skinny each made one run and Dicky made two, and now the score stood thirty-six to thirty-five. Fatty's team was only one run ahead, and Dicky was on first with Marmaduke at the bat.

Now was Marmaduke's chance to win the game—the chance of a lifetime!

Fatty twirled the ball in his hand. Though he was fat, he could pitch like a regular pitcher. At least his motions were just as funny. He would curl up his fingers in a strange way to make what he called a curve. Then he would hold the ball up to his chin and look wisely over at first base, watching Dicky. Then he would curl his arms around his head several times, and at last he would let the ball fly.

Marmaduke tried hard to hit it, but he just tipped it.

"Foul!" called the catcher.

And Marmaduke missed the next one and the next. He had only one chance left now.

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And Fatty twisted himself up almost in knots, to make an extra fine curve, I suppose, for Marmaduke's benefit. Six times he did this before he let the ball go.

It came towards the home-plate and Marmaduke, as fast as an arrow. He gritted his teeth, and gripped his hands tight around the bat, and hit at that Rocket ball harder than he ever had in his life; and all the time his ears were listening for the "crack!"

Of course, it all happened very quickly, more quickly than we can ever tell about it in words, but—to make a long story short—he heard that crack!

He had hit it! And away the Rocket ball flew towards the dead chestnut tree, up, up, by the old crow's nest, and plop! right in the nest it dropped.

And Dicky came racing home, and Marmaduke not far behind him, his face red with excitement and his eyes shining.

And how the team cheered him now, and patted him on the back, and said "Good boy, Marmy!" again, and how happy he felt!

There was a nice ending to it too, although the dandy Rocket ball was lost in the old crow's nest. For, when he told them about it all at the supper-table that night, Father turned to the Toyman, and, reaching into his pockets, where some money jingled, said:—

"So the home-team won, did they? Though they lost the ball? Well, Frank, there are some more 'dandy Rockets' where that came from, aren't there?"

The Toyman was quite sure there were, and Father added,—

"And that baseball glove, that big catcher's mitt that Marmaduke always wanted—do you 'spose that's still in the store?"

Again the Toyman seemed rather hopeful, and the promise was fulfilled on the following Saturday. And many a time the hard Rocket ball and lots of other balls, too, thumped in that big leather mitt.