The Fix

By

Daniel Fustin

I wrote the following short story when I was a junior in high school. Subsequently, it was published in the school’s 1954 annual literary publication. Although the setting is outdated by several decades, the message is still applicable.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

THE BRISK WINTER AIR beat unmercifully upon Ted Bratcher's face. He was returning home from the gym after a heated basketball practice session with the Wildcats and their coach, Tom Randall. Although the mercury was hovering just over the zero mark, Ted seemed unaffected by the intense cold. More serious thoughts occupied his mind. Chief in importance was the championship game next week between his high school basketball team and the highly-rated and very powerful Panther pack. No other game would mean so much to Ted as this one since it would gain for the Wildcats a berth in the state tournament and for Ted, a sure offer of a college scholarship.

Ted was a well-developed player. He had loved and played basketball ever since his fifth year of grammar school at St. Boniface Parochial. Under the capable tutoring of his college Coach Randall, Ted had developed into a well-fashioned ball-handler and a clever foot-work artist. And now, in his senior year, he had been elected captain of the team.

These distractions raced quickly through Ted's mind. In fact, they so absorbed him that he didn't take notice of an approaching automobile. As Ted started to cross the street, the car glided around the corner and halted directly in his path. The back door opened and a man stepped and out and commanded, "Hop in, kid." Another man who was sitting in the back seat aimed a gun in Ted's direction! A gun is nothing to argue with so a startled Ted Bratcher clambered into the middle of the back seat as indicated. The man who ordered Ted into the car followed him inside and locked the door. Ted glanced at the driver as the car sped off. He was dwarf-like in size and the overcoat he wore was much too large. His aquiline nose was all that could be seen under his over-sized hat.

The man in the back seat pocketed his gun and continued the conversation which so far had been anything but friendly. His voice was now calm and steady. "Aren't you Ted Bratcher?" he inquired. "Yeah," Ted answered in a quivering tone. "You're quite a star for the Wildcats, I hear?"

"Could be," responded Ted.

"According to the morning newspaper," the man continued, "Randall's team depends upon your performance at the pivot spot. Without you, the Cats would not be able to play its game."

"Possibly", Ted replied.
"I was talking to your father in his hardware store last week", the man continued. “It seems that his business has fallen off considerably and he may have to sell out. How would you like to give your old man a lift and help him out?”

Ted hesitated and then responded slowly and deliberately. “Naturally, I’d like nothing better,” The man next spoke firmly and deliberately, "Throw next week's game and I'll give you twenty-five thousand dollars."

The words pounded at Ted's mind like a battering-ram! He had read about basketball scandals in the past, but never did he think that his name would be connected with such business. Ted's first thought was, "Twenty-five thousand dollars! Why, that's more than enough to get Dad back onto his feet. Maybe I could even get Mom a big present and a new car for myself. And, perhaps..."

No! Ted thought. I couldn't possibly do it! He finally concluded, “No, I won't do it.”

Ted turned and boldly addressed the fixer. "Look, Mister, whoever you are, basketball is a great sport. It doesn't need to be tampered with by guys like you. Now, how about letting me out?"

The fixer appeared visibly irritated and somewhat astonished at Ted's outburst. He attempted to conceal his feelings and responded slowly and deliberately in a calm voice, "Now let's be reasonable, Bratcher. Twenty-five thousand bucks is a lot of money. It would do plenty for you and your family and, if you don't string along, something bad could come about. Now, we wouldn't want to see your father's store wrecked and him laid up in the hospital for two or three months. Would we?"

At last, the fixer had stymied Ted. A brief pause ensued. Ted didn't want to say yes, but...? He thought — thought hard, "Oh, God! Why couldn't they have picked someone else? Why couldn't they have threatened me instead of Dad? No! Not Dad! He didn't do anything! They can't hurt him! They won't! I can't let them. I've got to think! I must make sure there will be no slips."

Once again Ted turned to the figure sitting behind him. "How am I going to do it? What about the cops?"

"You needn't worry. Let the finer details up to me. All you have to do is fake getting sick just before the game. It will be a cinch. The risk is less than shaving points. And without you — those Wildcats will be nothing but a litter of kittens!"

The fixer said this last sentence slowly and meaningfully as he flashed a wad of bills that made Ted's eyes sparkle. The fixer continued. "Here's a thousand dollars — cash! The rest will be forwarded to you after the game. Do we have a deal?"

Ted seemed to be in a trance. If there had ever been any doubt in his mind, it had now visibly disappeared. His blue eyes glistened in the evening dusk. "I... I can't say just now. Let... let me think it over."

The fixer responded with a tone of confidence, "Just as you say, kid. Be at Sperzel's Drug Store at 12 o'clock noon the day before the game. I'll call you up on their pay phone. Then, he concluded convincingly, “Think it over carefully. Now, what do you want — money or trouble?”

Ted appeared to be in a daze as he stepped out of the automobile and trudged homeward. The same thoughts replayed themselves over and over in his mind. "... Dad, laid up in a hospital for
four or five months . . . Everything ruined ... I wouldn't be able to play basketball any more ... I'd have to go and work somewhere ... Mom, brokenhearted..."

By the time Ted arrived home, his father and mother were just finishing their evening meal. Mr. Bratcher looked up at Ted. "Hello, Son! You look pretty well worn out. Has the coach been drilling you too hard?"

Forcing a smile, Ted replied in a strained voice, "Not hard — just a lot."

Ted's mother then remarked: "Why, Ted, you're very pale. Are you feeling well?"

". . . Are you feeling well?" The words rolled through his brain. Then he recalled, "All you have to do is get sick before the game." What a set-up this could be. An alibi from his own mother! . . . "As a matter of fact, my stomach has been acting up lately. If you could, just warm me some soup. I'll eat a little and then just go up to my room and rest."

Once Ted finished his light supper, he proceeded upstairs. He was already feeling like a hunted criminal. He, among such righteous people as his mother and dad! As he climbed between the covers, the words rang out again . . . "All you have to do is get sick before the game . . . five thousand dollars . . . money or trouble..." Ted pondered these thoughts briefly, then laughed lightly to himself and said under his breath, "There's hardly a decision to make; my mind is made up." Then he fell asleep.

***********

Ted's Big Ben sounded like a fire alarm when it clanged in his ear to announce a new and brighter day. He dressed quickly and a few minutes later entered the kitchen.

"Morning, Mom!" he greeted.

"Well, good morning, son! You're looking quite cheerful."

"And why shouldn't I be? This is Friday, the day before the championship game with the Panthers. Coach Randall wants me to meet him at the gym to talk over some strategy for tomorrow night's game. He said he's gotta scheme that can't fail."

After a quick breakfast, Ted put on his jacket and headed towards school. It wasn't long before he arrived at Sixth and Walnut. The sight of the corner sent a chill scurrying down his spine. It was the same spot where he had encountered the fixer and the dwarf. His whole expression altered. His face now displayed worry — worry caused by the remembrance of that unhappy event which had occurred just five short days ago. Again he toyed with the thought in his mind. He had gone over the matter more than once and assured himself that nothing could go wrong. Hesitantly, Ted walked across the street and into the auditorium.

When Ted entered the back office, the coach and team members were already there. Some cheerful "hellos," a couple of jokes and the team meeting began with deep seriousness. In no time at all, the hands on the wall clock pointed to 11:40. Then, Ted asked the coach,

"Do you mind if I go now, Coach? I have an appointment I have to keep."

"Sure, Ted. That's okay. We're just about finished here. See you tomorrow night. Get lots of rest!"

"You bet, Coach. See you, fellows!"
"... Get lots of rest." How could he, with the load he had to bear? But, thank God. It would all be over by Sunday.

Moments later Ted walked into the drug store. "Give me a hot chocolate, Slip." A brief moment later, the phone rang and Slip announced, "It's for you, Ted."

Ted hurried to the booth. He snatched up the receiver. "Hello!"

The voice on the other end asked, "Well, what do you say, kid?"

"You're positive that you will let Pop alone?"

Positive!"

"Okay — I'll do it!"

***********

The Armory was jammed with people. The cheers and yells of the fans could be heard a block away. All was in readiness for a memorable evening. A great hush fell upon the crowd as the public-address announcer slowly gave the Panthers lineup and then started on the home team — the Wildcats. There was a brief pause, then, "I have a brief announcement. We are sorry to inform you that Captain Ted Bratcher has taken ill and will be unable to participate in tonight's classic."

Meanwhile, around the corner, in the shadow of the big Armory, a car was parked. In it were seated two men. Just as the announcer finished his address inside the building, one of the men spoke. "Turn off the radio," the Fixer said to his pal the dwarf. "Let's go in and enjoy ourselves."

The racketeers bought two tickets and sat in the top row by the exit stairs. The game was already under way. When they first turned their attention to the floor, they saw that the Panthers had taken an early 12-6 lead over the Wildcats. When the gun sounded to end the first half, a huge smile of satisfaction gleamed across the clean-shaven face of the Fixer. The score was in favor of the Panthers, 43-32. But the smile vanished in an instant when he was tapped on the shoulder by a tall, well-built man who flashed a chrome-plated badge bearing the inscription, "CAPTAIN: RACKET-SQUAD". The Captain had two associates. One of them held his hand in his pocket to conceal a hidden instrument that could spell the fixer's death should he attempt an escape.

Accompanying the three officers was a lanky lad who gave one an impression that he must have just won the lottery. It was Ted.

"You dirty double-crosser!" exclaimed the fixer. His dwarf-sized partner just gazed in wide-eyed amazement. "Not a double-crosser," the Captain responded. "Just a good citizen. A sportsman who intends to see justice executed where justice is due — even when it may have meant sacrificing a championship basketball game and possibly a brilliant career. Ted has been working with us ever since the first time you approached him. The next morning he contacted us and spilled the whole story. He had to string along with your scheme. It was a case of either spotting you here at the game or putting the finger on you later. Our gamble has paid off, but yours has not."

The Captain then turned to Ted. "Go on to the dressing room, Ted. And good luck!"

Turning to his prisoners, he continued, "As for you bums — let's march!" As they pushed their way through the crowd and down the stairway, one of the lieutenants remarked, "That Bratcher sure is a swell kid!"
There were still five minutes left before the second half was to get under way. The Wildcat squad roared mightily when Ted burst frantically through the dressing-room door. Ted slipped on his famous uniform, number 23, and took the floor with his beloved team. The fans strained their eyes. The public-address confirmed the fact that Ted Bratcher was now in the lineup! The Wildcat fansrocked the arena with a tremendous burst of applause.

Ted took over the pivot position and made his first shot, a spinning hook that brought the spectators, clapping and cheering, to their feet. The score was now 43-34. The two teams traded field goals and then a spirited Wildcat guard sank a thirty-foot set-shot from the far corner of the front court. Although the opposition fought desperately, the Wildcats still forged ahead. With Ted back in action, the fighting Wildcats now had a strengthened defense and an offense that was operating at its peak best.

Twenty-two seconds were now left in the game. The Scoreboard read: Panthers47Wildcats 45. In a leap of desperation, Ted broke up the Panther freeze, stole the ball and raced towards the basket for a power lay up. But a fleet-footed guardplaying an alert defense was on Ted's heels as Ted dribbled speedily forward. The trailing guard sprang high in the air and fouled Ted on the wrists just as Ted's finger-tips released the ball. The ball bounded with force upon the backboard, smacked the rim, and slipped through the net. The score was knotted, 47-47! The referee signaled a flagrant foul. Ted now had two free throws.

Ted strolled to the free-throw line. One point and the game with all of its glory was his. He toed the line, grasped the ball, eyed the basket and shot the ball towards its destination. The ball sailed through the air, rolled hesitantly around the rim of the basket, then slid off to one side.

Ted had another try. The pressure was now even greater and bore heavier on his nerves. Feverish sweat covered his face and trickled in great beads down his entire body. He paused, eyed the basket and then let the ball fly. The crowd gasped as the ball floated through the air, hung momentarily on the rim for a second, and then slipped through the net.

The hometown fans went wild! The game was won! Ted’s jubilant teammates mates hoisted him onto their shoulders and carried him around the basketball court — a hero! The echo of the cheers continued on and on in one deafening roar. Ted was happy now, more than ever before. He was bubbling over with joy. And he had reason to be. For he, Ted Bratcher, had won a DOUBLE victory. He had also triumphed with JUSTICE!

Copyright 2012 Daniel Fusting