

Little Chris

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At nightfall the children of Highland Hills played in the park. They played every day except Sunday, because then the grown-ups were present and there was no place to play. But from Monday to Saturday, between four and six, the groups which played together acted as they pleased. In the midst of disputes, they improvised games from the traditional, innocent kind to the novel, almost brutal kind. Scattered here and there in the play area, one group played blindman's buff, another skipped merrily through London Bridge, and still another ran happily around in a circle playing drop-the-handkerchief. But most of the available space was taken by the group that played baseball.

All the children, at one time or another, played baseball. Or, rather, they all played except little Chris. Little Chris went to a public school. His family was not in the financial or social group from which all the other children came. They were all students at private schools, and their fathers were all landholders, business men, or public officials.

It was little Chris' father, Pop Chris, who sold the candy and soda pop which the children ate and drank between baseball games. Pop Chris had installed his stand at one of the gates to the park. Besides being the "candy man," Pop Chris was a man in whom the children had confidence, for behind the counter of his stand was a safe depository for caps, books, balls, and the rest of the things pertaining to the world of little people who frequented his place of business.

Little Chris did not play with the children in the park. Though he lived across the street from the park, he lived on the wrong side. Highland Hills itself was the wealthy section of town, but Highland Hills Park bordered on the street which separated the exclusive district from the rest of town.

As soon as little Chris returned from school, he went to his father's refreshment stand. Afterwards, while peeling an orange, he sat on the curb watching the other children playing baseball. From his position, he was enthusiastic. He shouted, applauded, whistled, kicked his feet, and waved his hands. But he did not dare move from his place. Nevertheless, when a player threw the ball too far, often to the oak trees in the courtyard, the children would shout at little Chris, "Go and get it, Chris!" And little Chris would jump up

quickly and run after the ball. He would pick it up and press it again and again in his hands. More than once he had intended to throw it through the air and cry, "Here it comes!" But he had always restrained himself, fearful of being rebuked. He contented himself with handing the ball to them.

Then little Chris waited anxiously for those errors to be repeated, so that he could run happily after the ball again. After each chase, little Chris, satisfied, smiling, again sat alone on the curb. Later, when he entered his house, he would say to his little sister, who was mending clothes, "I sure did play a lot today."

But it happened that one day the ball flew so high that it went over the top of the church toward his house. The children cried to little Chris, "The ball fell in your yard."

Little Chris jumped up and ran to the yard. He looked and looked everywhere. He stamped the grass, moved rocks, picked up branches, examined bushes. A terrifying anxiety gradually took possession of him. He wanted to run back and tell them the ball was not there. He stopped himself, and searched the corners of the back yard very carefully. While he was searching, he heard the cries of the children. His throat was tight, his forehead damp. His hands, now dirty, were becoming tense. Someone beat on the gate. He heard a clamor of voices. His little sister shouted to him from within, "Chris, they are looking for you."

By now little Chris was beside himself. He ran to his room, opened his trunk, and took from a box the brand-new ball his father had given him. He held it as if it were a fragile relic. He had never played with it. It was clean, silky, and cool. He hardly had time to take off the wrapping. When he carried it outside, the children snatched it from his hands.

Little Chris, smiling, again seated himself on the curb to watch the children play. When he entered his house that evening, he said to his little sister, who was sitting at the window mending clothes, "I sure did play a lot today."