



The Present

Joe was waiting at the clubhouse when Christopher came with his present. Soupbone, Joe's dog, was chasing a tar-taped baseball which had rolled behind the basin in which Shortstop, the turtle, lived. He was scratching and howling and trying his best to get to the ball. When Christopher burst in, Joe forgot all about Soupbone.

"It's from my uncle in New York," Christopher said excitedly. "Arrived this morning parcel post."

"Let's open it," Joe said. "I sure hope it's a catcher's mask or a chest protector."

"Are we all present and accounted for?" Christopher asked. "Remember our rule—no presents opened unless all members are here."

"Umpire is here," Joe said pointing to a cardboard box with holes in the top that held a frog. "And so's Centerfield,

our rabbit. There's Soupbone and you and me—all present."

"What about Shortstop?" Christopher asked.

"For Pete's sake," Joe said. "He's in his basin. Where would you expect a turtle to be?"

Christopher took off his glasses and wiped them with a clean white handkerchief. "You have to check everything. A scientist takes nothing for granted," he said.

He adjusted his glasses and started unwrapping the present. Soupbone continued scratching after the tar-taped ball.

"Say, it isn't your birthday or anything, is it?" Joe asked. "I thought your birthday was last month."

"Precisely," Christopher said. "Only Uncle Harry forgets sometimes. He's a genius."

Joe laughed. "Just like you," he said. "How about that time you gave me my birthday present in March when you know I was born in October—"

"An inspiration," Christopher said. "We scientists are exacting with our facts but we often do things on impulse."

"Just like a base runner stealing home on the pitcher's windup," Joe said.

"How's that again?" Christopher said as he took the string off his package and neatly wound it around one of his fingers.

"Skip it," Joe said. "You just never will learn about baseball."

The present was wrapped in slick blue paper with gold stripes across it. Christopher removed the paper slowly, careful not to tear it. There was heavy brown paper under that. He took that off just as carefully.

"Rip it open," Joe said.

"No excuse for careless method," Christopher objected.

When the brown paper was removed Christopher came to a large flat packing box. He opened it and there in the center of the box was a smaller box carefully packed on each side with shredded newspaper.

"It's breakable," Christopher said happily.

"Well, one thing for sure, it's not a catcher's mask or anything to do with baseball," Joe said. "Some uncle."

Christopher opened the smaller box and inside was a chemistry set, complete with test tubes, a scale, and small containers of chemicals.

"It's opportunity," Christopher said. "This present is frontiers unlimited—"

"It looks like a chemistry set to me," Joe said. "If I were you, I'd send it back to my uncle and ask him to send me something useful." He started to the basin to get the ball for Soupbone but Christopher blocked him. Joe was taller than Christopher. He had broad shoulders and a lean tapering body. His black hair tumbled across his forehead and he always seemed to need a haircut. Christopher was a redhead with freckles across his nose. His hair was slicked back and even though he had a bulging waist he looked neat. His natural expression was a smile. That is, until his temper flared. And—it was flaring now.

"Listen here, my baseball-happy colleague," Christopher said, "don't you make accusations against chemistry. Chemistry is a basic science. Where would we be today if it wasn't for science?"

"Now, now, Christopher, temper, temper," Joe patted his friend's shoulder.

"Don't you push me," Christopher clenched his fists

and held them up in front of him. "Put up your dukes," he said to Joe. "I'll fight to defend the honor of chemistry."

"What's the matter with you? All I said was that a chemistry set was useless," Joe said. "After all, what can you do with it? It's not like a baseball or a bat or a catcher's glove or something like that."

"It sure isn't. And I'm glad of it. You can keep your baseball. Give me a chemistry set any day." Christopher's fists were still waving in front of his face.

"All right, so you have your chemistry set. Let's see you do something useful with it," Joe said.

Christopher's temper left him as quickly as it came. He turned back to his chemistry set with a look in his eye that was pure enthusiasm. "This is a great set," he said. "Really great. It even has a Bunsen burner."

Joe pulled the ball out from the basin and flipped it into the air. Soupbone caught it in his mouth and brought it to him. "Say, what is a bunion burner?" he asked his friend.

"Not bunion—Bunsen," Christopher explained slowly. "It's a gas burner named in honor of its inventor, R. W. Bunsen. It has a straight tube with small holes at the bottom where air enters and mixes with the gas. That way it makes a very hot flame. It looks sort of blue."

"That's interesting," Joe's expression was anything but interested. "Say, not to skip the subject, but would you like to have a catch?"

"Not now, Joe," Christopher said, "I'm going to work. I have to start inventing something."

"What do you mean inventing something?" Joe said. "With that?"

"Sure. Didn't you ever hear of Louis Pasteur discover-

ing the bacteria that contaminated milk? How do you think he did it? With chemistry. The Curies were chemists too. Everybody knows about them."

"Well, I don't," Joe said, "And I'll bet Babe Ruth didn't, or Grover Cleveland Alexander or Soupbone McDexter, who just happens to be the world's greatest living pitcher."

Christopher shook his head. "That's all you ever think about—baseball."

"All you ever think about is science," Joe shot back.

The two of them glared at each other for a moment and then Christopher smiled. "Come on, Joe, what's the use of fighting. I'll tell you what—I'll dedicate my first invention to you. You just tell me what it is that you want invented and I'll get right to it. What do you say?"

Joe was interested. "Anything?" he asked.

"Anything," Christopher said confidently. "You just name it."

"Does that mean I can ask for something which has to do with baseball?"

"That's O.K. too," Christopher agreed. "You just tell me what it is you want invented and I'll dedicate myself." He thumped his fists against his chest.

"I'll have to think about that," Joe said. "In the meantime, how about you and Soupbone and me going down to the Neversink for a swim?"

"You and Soupbone and *I*," Christopher said.

"That's what I just said. Well, how about it?"

"You didn't say that. You said you and Soupbone and *me*. That's the objective case pronoun. You should have used the subjective case."

"Boy, oh boy," Joe said, "Isn't that the limit. Correcting

my English—that's the limit."

"I didn't mean to offend you, Joe," Christopher said. "It's just that I'm your pal and don't you think it's better for me to put you straight than somebody else?"

"Dizzy Dean didn't worry about his English and neither does Soupbone McDexter," Joe said. "I'll bet you're just raring for school to start. Deep down inside your heart, you just love school."

"I'm always interested in improving my mind," Christopher said.

"Well, you just go ahead and improve your mind," Joe said, "Soupbone and I are going for a swim."

He left the clubhouse and slammed the door after him. "Isn't he just the limit? Just the limit—" Joe said to Soupbone. Soupbone wagged his tail and thrust his face toward Joe's hand, trying to get the tar-taped ball.

"You're the only pal I really have, Soupbone," Joe said. "I sure am glad I named you for the world's greatest living pitcher."

Joe and Soupbone ran down the hill from the clubhouse and through the flat lands that were part of the Murdock farm. Christopher's father, Mr. Murdock, was in the field tending to his farm and he waved as Joe came along.

"Hi, Joe," he called. "See Chris's present?"

The Murdocks were the only people who called Christopher "Chris"—to everybody else his full name seemed more natural.

"I seen it," Joe said and then quickly corrected himself. "I mean, I saw it." Darn that Christopher anyway, he thought, he has me correcting my English even when I'm not in school. "It's a chemistry set," he called to Mr.

Murdock.

Mr. Murdock made a motion with his hand that indicated that he was no more in favor of the chemistry set than Joe was. "Chris will have us all blown to kingdom come before we know it," he said.

Joe laughed and waved again as he and Soupbone left the field. It was a half-mile walk to the Neversink River. Joe talked to Soupbone all the way. Talking to a dog was all right but he kind of wished Christopher was there. He needed a pal. If only Christopher wasn't so scientific and interested in things that were useless.

