

The characters and events in this novel are creations of the author's imagination. What likeness they may bear to persons or events living or dead, present or past, is the likeness of coincidence.

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C. P.

When a trout rising to a fly gets hooked on a line and finds himself unable to swim about freely, he begins with a fight which results in struggles and splashes and sometimes an escape. Often, of course, the situation is too tough for him.

In the same way the human being struggles with his environment and with the hooks that catch him. Sometimes he masters his difficulties; sometimes they are too much for him. His struggles are all that the world sees and it naturally misunderstands them. It is hard for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked one.

— Karl A. Menninger

True happiness  
Consists not in the multitude of friends,  
But in the worth and choice.

— Ben Jonson

Book One

I was a son to my father . . .  
And he taught me and said to me,  
'Let your heart hold fast my words . . .'  
- Proverbs

## Chapter 1

For the first fifteen years of our lives, Danny and I lived within five blocks of each other and neither of us knew of the other's existence.

Danny's block was heavily populated by the followers of his father, Russian Hasidic Jews in somber garb, whose habits and frames of reference were born on the soil of the land they had abandoned. They drank tea from samovars, sipping it slowly through cubes of sugar held between their teeth; they ate the foods of their homeland, talked loudly, occasionally in Russian, most often in a Russian Yiddish, and were fierce in their loyalty to Danny's father.

A block away lived another Hasidic sect, Jews from southern Poland, who walked the Brooklyn streets like specters, with their black hats, long black coats, black beards, and earlocks. These Jews had their own rabbi, their own dynastic ruler, who could trace his family's position of rabbinic leadership back to the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism, whom they all regarded as a God-invested personality.

About three or four such Hasidic sects populated the area in which Danny and I grew up, each with its own rabbi, its own little synagogue, its own customs, its own fierce loyalties. On a Shabbat or festival morning, the members of each sect could be seen walking to their respective synagogues, dressed in their particular garb, eager to pray with their particular rabbi and forget the tumult of the week and the hungry grabbing for money which they needed to feed their large families during the seemingly endless Depression.

The sidewalks of Williamsburg were cracked squares of cement, the streets paved with asphalt that softened in the stifling summers and broke apart into potholes in the bitter winters. Many

of the houses were brownstones, set tightly together, none taller than three or four stories. In these houses lived Jews, Irish, Germans, and some Spanish Civil War refugee families that had fled the new Franco regime before the onset of the Second World War. Most of the stores were run by gentiles, but some were owned by Orthodox Jews, members of the Hasidic sects in the area. They could be seen behind their counters, wearing black skullcaps, full beards, and long ear-locks, eking out their meager livelihoods and dreaming of Shabbat and festivals when they could close their stores and turn their attention to their prayers, their rabbi, their God.

Every Orthodox Jew sent his male children to a yeshiva, a Jewish parochial school, where they studied from eight or nine in the morning to four or five in the evening. On Fridays the students were let out at about one o'clock to prepare for the Shabbat. Jewish education was compulsory for the Orthodox, and because this was America and not Europe, English education was compulsory as well – so each student carried a double burden: Hebrew studies in the mornings and English studies in the afternoons. The test of intellectual excellence, however, had been reduced by tradition and unvoiced unanimity to a single area of study: Talmud. Virtuosity in Talmud was the achievement most sought after by every student of a yeshiva, for it was the automatic guarantee of a reputation for brilliance.

Danny attended the small yeshiva established by his father. Outside the Williamsburg area, in Crown Heights, I attended the yeshiva in which my father taught. This latter yeshiva was somewhat looked down upon by the students of other Jewish parochial schools of Brooklyn: it offered more English subjects than the required minimum, and it taught its Jewish subjects in Hebrew rather than Yiddish. Most of the students were children of immigrant Jews who preferred to regard themselves as having been emancipated from the fenced-off ghetto mentality typical of the other Jewish parochial schools in Brooklyn.

Danny and I probably would never have met – or we would have met under altogether different circumstances – had it not been for America's entry into the Second World War and the desire this bred on the part of some English teachers in the Jewish

parochial schools to show the gentile world that yeshiva students were as physically fit, despite their long hours of study, as any other American student. They went about proving this by organizing the Jewish parochial schools in and around our area into competitive leagues, and once every two weeks the schools would compete against one another in a variety of sports. I became a member of my school's varsity softball team.

On a Sunday afternoon in early June, the fifteen members of my team met with our gym instructor in the play yard of our school. It was a warm day, and the sun was bright on the asphalt floor of the yard. The gym instructor was a short, chunky man in his early thirties who taught in the mornings in a nearby public high school and supplemented his income by teaching in our yeshiva during the afternoons. He wore a white polo shirt, white pants, and white sweater, and from the awkward way the little black skullcap sat perched on his round, balding head, it was clearly apparent that he was not accustomed to wearing it with any sort of regularity. When he talked he frequently thumped his right fist into his left palm to emphasize a point. He walked on the balls of his feet, almost in imitation of a boxer's ring stance, and he was fanatically addicted to professional baseball. He had nursed our softball team along for two years, and by a mixture of patience, luck, shrewd manipulations during some tight ball games, and hard, fist-thumping harangues calculated to shove us into a patriotic awareness of the importance of athletics and physical fitness for the war effort, he was able to mold our original team of fifteen awkward fumblers into the top team of our league. His name was Mr Galanter, and all of us wondered why he was not off somewhere fighting in the war.

During my two years with the team, I had become quite adept at second base and had also developed a swift underhand pitch that would tempt a batter into a swing but would drop into a curve at the last moment and slide just below the flailing bat for a strike. Mr Galanter always began a ball game by putting me at second base and would use me as a pitcher only in very tight moments, because, as he put it once, 'My baseball philosophy is grounded on the defensive solidarity of the infield.'

That afternoon we were scheduled to play the winning team of

another neighbourhood league, a team with a reputation for wild, offensive slugging and poor fielding. Mr Galanter said he was counting upon our infield to act as a solid defensive front. Throughout the warm-up period, with only our team in the yard, he kept thumping his right fist into his left palm and shouting at us to be a solid defensive front.

'No holes,' he shouted from near home plate. 'No holes, you hear? Goldberg, what kind of solid defensive front is that? Close in. A battleship could get between you and Malter. That's it. Schwartz, what are you doing, looking for paratroops? This is a ball game. The enemy's on the ground. That throw was wide, Goldberg. Throw it like a sharpshooter. Give him the ball again. Throw it. Good. Like a sharpshooter. Very good. Keep the infield solid. No defensive holes in this war.'

We batted and threw the ball around, and it was warm and sunny, and there was the smooth, happy feeling of the summer soon to come, and the tight excitement of the ball game. We wanted very much to win, both for ourselves and, more especially, for Mr Galanter, for we had all come to like his fist-thumping sincerity. To the rabbis who taught in the Jewish parochial schools, baseball was an evil waste of time, a spawn of the potentially assimilationist English portion of the yeshiva day. But to the students of most of the parochial schools, an inter-league baseball victory had come to take on only a shade less significance than a top grade in Talmud, for it was an unquestioned mark of one's Americanism, and to be counted a loyal American had become increasingly important to us during these last years of the war.

So Mr Galanter stood near home plate, shouting instructions and words of encouragement, and we batted and tossed the ball around. I walked off the field for a moment to set up my eye-glasses for the game. I wore shell-rimmed glasses, and before very game I would bend the earpieces in so the glasses would stay on my head and not slip down the bridge of my nose when I began to sweat. I always waited until just before a game to bend down the earpieces, because, bent, they would cut into the skin over my ears, and I did not want to feel the pain a moment longer than I had to. The tops of my ears would be sore for days after every

game, but better that, I thought, than the need to keep pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose or the possibility of having them fall off suddenly during an important play.

Davey Cantor, one of the boys who acted as a replacement if a first-stringer had to leave the game, was standing near the wire screen behind home plate. He was a short boy, with a round face, dark hair, owlish glasses, and a very Semitic nose. He watched me fix my glasses.

'You're looking good out there, Reuven,' he told me.

'Thanks,' I said.

'Everyone is looking real good.'

'It'll be a good game.'

He stared at me through his glasses. 'You think so?' he asked.

'Sure, why not?'

'You ever see them play, Reuven?'

'No.'

'They're murderers.'

'Sure,' I said.

'No, really. They're wild.'

'You saw them play?'

'Twice. They're murderers.'

'Everyone plays to win, Davey.'

'They don't only play to win. They play like it's the first of the Ten Commandments.'

I laughed. 'That yeshiva?' I said. 'Oh, come on, Davey.'

'It's the truth.'

'Sure,' I said.

Reb Saunders ordered them never to lose because it would shame their yeshiva or something. I don't know. You'll see.'

'Hey, Malter!' Mr Galanter shouted. 'What are you doing, sitting this one out?'

'You'll see,' Davey Cantor said.

'Sure,' I grinned at him. 'A holy war.'

He looked at me.

'Are you playing?' I asked him.

'Mr Galanter said I might take second base if you have to pitch.'

'Well, good luck.'

'Hey, Materal! Mr Galanter shouted. 'There's a war on, re-member?'

'Yes, sir!' I said, and ran back out to my position at second base.

We threw the ball around a few more minutes, and then I went up to home plate for some batting practice. I hit a long one out to left field, and then a fast one to the shortstop, who fielded it neatly and whipped it to first. I had the bat ready for another swing when someone said, 'Here they are,' and I rested the bat on my shoulder and saw the team we were going to play turn up our block and come into the yard. I saw Davey Cantor kick nervously at the wire screen behind home plate, then put his hands into the pockets of his dungarees. His eyes were wide and gloomy behind his owlish glasses.

I watched them come into the yard.

There were fifteen of them, and they were dressed alike in white shirts, dark pants, white sweaters, and small black skull-caps. In the fashion of the very Orthodox, their hair was closely cropped, except for the area near their ears from which mushroomed the untouched hair that tumbled down into the long side curls. Some of them had the beginnings of beards, straggly tufts of hair that stood in isolated clumps on their chins, jawbones, and upper lips. They all wore the traditional undergarment beneath their shirts, and the tzitzit, the long fringes appended to the four corners of the garment, came out above their belts and swung against their pants as they walked. These were the very Orthodox, and they obeyed literally the Biblical commandment *And ye shall look upon it, which pertains to the fringes.*

In contrast, our team had no particular uniform, and each of us wore whatever he wished: dungarees, shorts, pants, polo shirts, sweat shirts, even undershirts. Some of us wore the garment, others did not. None of us wore the fringes outside his trousers. The only element of uniform that we had in common was the small, black skullcap which we, too, wore.

They came up to the first-base side of the wire screen behind home plate and stood there in a silent black-and-white mass, holding bats and balls and gloves in their hands. I looked at them. They did not seem to me to present any picture of ferocity. I saw

Davey Cantor kick again at the wire screen, then walk away from them to the third-base line, his hands moving nervously against his dungarees.

Mr Galanter smiled and started toward them, moving quickly on the balls of his feet, his skullcap perched precariously on the top of his balding head.

A man disentangled himself from the black-and-white mass of players and took a step forward. He looked to be in his late twenties and wore a black suit, black shoes, and a black hat. He had a black beard, and he carried a book under one arm. He was obviously a rabbi, and I marveled that the yeshiva had placed a rabbi instead of an athletic coach over its team.

Mr Galanter came up to him and offered his hand.

'We are ready to play,' the rabbi said in Yiddish, shaking Mr Galanter's hand with obvious uninterest.

'Fine,' Mr Galanter said in English, smiling.

The rabbi looked out at the field. 'You played already?' he asked.

'How's that?' Mr Galanter said.

'You had practise?'

'Well, sure -'

'We want to practise.'

'How's that?' Mr Galanter said again, looking surprised.

'You practised, now we practise.'

'You didn't practise in your own yard?'

'We practised.'

'Well, then -'

'But we have never played in your yard before. We want a few minutes.'

'Well, now,' Mr Galanter said, 'there isn't much time. The rules are each team practises in its own yard.'

'We want five minutes,' the rabbi insisted.

'Well -' Mr Galanter said. He was no longer smiling. He always liked to go right into a game when we played in our own yard. It kept us from cooling off, he said.

'Five minutes,' the rabbi said. 'Tell your people to leave the field.'

'How's that?' Mr Galanter said.

'We cannot practise with your people on the field. Tell them to leave the field.'

'Well, now,' Mr Galanter said, then stopped. He thought for a long moment. The black-and-white mass of players behind the rabbi stood very still, waiting. I saw Davey Cantor kick at the asphalt floor of the yard. 'Well, all right. Five minutes. Just five minutes, now.'

'Tell your people to leave the field,' the rabbi said. Mr Galanter stared gloomily out at the field, looking a little deflated. 'Everybody off!' he shouted, not very loudly. 'They want a five-minute warm-up. Hustle, hustle. Keep those arms going. Keep it hot. Toss some balls around behind home. Let's go!'

The players scrambled off the field.

The black-and-white mass near the wire screen remained intact. The young rabbi turned and faced his team.

He talked in Yiddish. 'We have the field for five minutes,' he said. 'Remember why and for whom we play.'

Then he stepped aside, and the black-and-white mass dissolved into fifteen individual players who came quickly onto the field. One of them, a tall boy with sand-coloured hair and long arms and legs that seemed all bones and angles, stood at home plate and commenced hitting balls out to the players. He hit a few easy grounders and pop-ups, and the fielders shouted encouragement to one another in Yiddish. They handled themselves awkwardly, dropping easy grounders, throwing wild, fumbling fly balls. I looked over at the young rabbi. He had sat down on the bench near the wire screen and was reading his book.

Behind the wire screen was a wide area, and Mr Galanter kept us busy throwing balls around.

'Keep those balls going!' he fist-thumped at us. 'No one sits out this fire fight! Never underestimate the enemy!'

But there was a broad smile on his face. Now that he was actually seeing the other team, he seemed not at all concerned about the outcome of the game. In the interim between throwing a ball and having it thrown back to me, I told myself that I liked Mr Galanter, and I wondered about his constant use of war expressions and why he wasn't in the army.

Davey Cantor came past me, chasing a ball that had gone between his legs.

'Some murderers,' I grinned at him.

'You'll see,' he said as he bent to retrieve the ball.

'Sure,' I said.

'Especially the one batting. You'll see.'

The ball was coming back to me, and I caught it neatly and flipped it back.

'Who's the one batting?' I asked.

'Danny Saunders.'

'Pardon my ignorance, but who is Danny Saunders?'

'Reb Saunders' son,' Davey Cantor said, blinking his eyes.

'I'm impressed.'

'You'll see,' Davey Cantor said, and ran off with his ball.

My father, who had no love at all for Hasidic communities and their rabbinic overlords, had told me about Rabbi Isaac Saunders and the zealousness with which he ruled his people and settled questions of Jewish law.

I saw Mr Galanter look at his wristwatch, then stare out at the team on the field. The five minutes were apparently over, but the players were making no move to abandon the field. Danny Saunders was now at first base, and I noticed that his long arms and legs were being used to good advantage, for by stretching and jumping he was able to catch most of the wild throws that came his way.

Mr Galanter went over to the young rabbi who was still sitting on the bench and reading.

'It's five minutes,' he said.

The rabbi looked up from his book. 'Ah?' he said.

'The five minutes are up,' Mr Galanter said.

The rabbi stared out at the field. 'Enough!' he shouted in Yiddish. 'It's time to play!' Then he looked down at the book and resumed his reading.

The players threw the ball around for another minute or two, and then slowly came off the field. Danny Saunders walked past me, still wearing his first baseman's glove. He was a good deal taller than I, and in contrast to my somewhat ordinary but decently proportioned features and dark hair, his face seemed

to have been cut from stone. His chin, jaw and cheekbones were made up of jutting hard lines, his nose was straight and pointed, his lips full, rising to a steep angle from the center point beneath his nose and then slanting off to form a too-wide mouth. His eyes were deep blue, and the sparse tufts of hair on his chin, jawbones, and upper lip, the close-cropped hair on his head, and the flow of side curls along his ears were the color of sand. He moved in a loose-jointed, disheveled sort of way, all arms and legs, talking in Yiddish to one of his teammates and ignoring me completely as he passed by. I told myself that I did not like his Hasidic-bred sense of superiority and that it would be a great pleasure to defeat him and his team in this afternoon's game.

The umpire, a gym instructor from a parochial school two blocks away, called the teams together to determine who would bat first. I saw him throw a bat into the air. It was caught and almost dropped by a member of the other team.

During the brief hand-over-hand choosing, Davey Cantor came over and stood next to me.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'They're a snooty bunch,' I told him.

'What do you think about their playing?'

'They're lousy.' (all)

'They're murderers.'

'Oh, come on, Davey.'

'You'll see,' Davey Cantor said, looking at me gloomily.

'I just did see.'

'You didn't see anything.'

'Sure,' I said, 'Elijah the prophet comes in to pitch for them in tight spots.'

'I'm not being funny,' he said, looking hurt.

'Some murderers,' I told him, and laughed.

The teams began to disperse. We had lost the choosing, and they had decided to bat first. We scampered onto the field. I took up my position at second base. I saw the young rabbi sitting on the bench near the wire fence and reading. We threw a ball around for a minute. Mr Galanter stood alongside third base, shouting a little and feeling very good. Then the umpire, who had taken up his position behind the pitcher, called for the

ball and someone tossed it to him. He handed it to the pitcher and shouted, 'Here we go! Play ball!' We settled into our positions.

Mr Galanter shouted, 'Goldberg, move in!' and Sidney Goldberg, our shortstop, took two steps forward and moved a little closer to third base. 'Okay, fine,' Mr Galanter said. 'Keep that infield solid!'

A short, thin boy came up to the plate and stood there with his feet together, holding the bat awkwardly over his head. He wore steel-rimmed glasses that gave his face a pinched, old man's look. He swung wildly at the first pitch, and the force of the swing spun him completely around. His earlocks lifted off the sides of his head and followed him around in an almost horizontal circle. Then he steadied himself and resumed his position near the plate, short, thin, his feet together, holding his bat over his head in an awkward grip.

The umpire called the strike in a loud, clear voice, and I saw Sidney Goldberg look over at me and grin broadly.

'If he studies Talmud like that, he's dead,' Sidney Goldberg said.

I grinned back at him.

'Keep that infield solid!' Mr Galanter shouted from third base.

'Malter, a little to your left! Good!'

The next pitch was too high, and the boy chipped at it, lost his bat and fell forward on his hands. Sidney Goldberg and I looked at each other again. Sidney was in my class. We were similar in build, thin and lithe, with somewhat spindly arms and legs. He was not a very good student, but he was an excellent shortstop. We lived on the same block and were good but not close friends. He was dressed in an undershirt and dungarees and was not wearing the four-cornered garment. I had on a light-blue shirt and dark-blue work pants, and I wore the four-cornered garment under the shirt.

The short, thin boy was back at the plate, standing with his feet together and holding the bat in his awkward grip. He let the next pitch go by, and the umpire called it a strike. I saw the young rabbi look up a moment from his book, then resume reading.



'Two more just like that!' I shouted encouragingly to the pitcher. 'Two more, Schwartzie!' And I thought to myself, Some murderers.

I saw Danny Saunders go over to the boy who had just struck out and talk to him. The boy looked down and seemed to shrivel with hurt. He hung his head and walked away behind the wire screen. Another short, thin boy took his place at the plate. I looked around for Davey Cantor but could not see him.

The boy at bat swung wildly at the first two pitches and missed them both. He swung again at the third pitch, and I heard the loud *thwack* of the bat as it connected with the ball, and saw the ball move in a swift, straight line toward Sidney Goldberg, who caught it, *bobbled* it for a moment, and finally got it into his glove. He tossed the ball to me, and we threw it around. I saw him take off his glove and shake his left hand.

'That hurt,' he said, grinning at me.

'Good catch,' I told him.

'That hurt like hell,' he said, and put his glove back on his hand.

The batter who stood now at the plate was broad-shouldered and built like a bear. He swung at the first pitch, missed, then swung again at the second pitch and sent the ball in a straight line over the head of the third baseman into left field. I scrambled to second, stood on the base and shouted for the ball. I saw the left fielder pick it up on the second bounce and relay it to me. It was coming in a little high, and I had my glove raised for it. I felt more than saw the batter charging toward second, and as I was getting my glove on the ball he smashed into me like a truck. The ball went over my head, and I fell forward heavily onto the asphalt floor of the yard, and he passed me, going toward third, his fringes flying out behind him, holding his skullcap to his head with his right hand so it would not fall off. Abe Goodstein, our first baseman, retrieved the ball and whipped it home, and the batter stood at third, a wide grin on his face.

The yeshiva team exploded into wild cheers and shouted loud words of congratulations in Yiddish to the batter.

Sidney Goldberg helped me get to my feet.

'That nomanzer!' he said. 'You weren't in his way!' *leit*  
'Wow!' I said, taking a few deep breaths. I had scraped the palm of my right hand. *aveled*

'What a nomanzer!' Sidney Goldberg said.

I saw Mr Galanter come storming onto the field to talk to the umpire. 'What kind of play was that?' he asked heatedly. 'How are you going to rule that?'

'Safe at third,' the umpire said. 'Your boy was in the way.'

Mr Galanter's mouth fell open. 'How's that again?'

'Safe at third,' the umpire repeated.

Mr Galanter looked ready to argue, thought better of it, then stared over at me. 'Are you all right, Malter?'

'I'm okay,' I said, taking another deep breath.

Mr Galanter walked angrily off the field.

'Play ball!' the umpire shouted.

The yeshiva team quieted down. I saw that the young rabbi was now looking up from his book and smiling faintly. *skelt*

A tall, thin player came up to the plate, set his feet in the correct position, swung his bat a few times, then crouched into a waiting stance. I saw it was Danny Saunders. I opened and closed my right hand, which was still sore from the fall. *skelt*

'Move back! Move back!' Mr Galanter was shouting from alongside third base, and I took two steps back. *skelt*

I crouched, waiting.

The first pitch was wild, and the yeshiva team burst into loud laughter. The young rabbi was sitting on the bench, watching Danny Saunders intently. *skelt*

'Take it easy, Schwartzie!' I shouted encouragingly to the pitcher. 'There's only one more to go!'

The next pitch was about a foot over Danny Saunders' head, and the yeshiva team howled with laughter. Sidney Goldberg and I looked at each other. I saw Mr Galanter standing very still alongside third, staring at the pitcher. The rabbi was still watching Danny Saunders. *skelt*

The next pitch left Schwartzie's hand in a long, slow line, and before it was halfway to the plate I knew Danny Saunders would try for it. I knew it from the way his left foot came forward and the bat snapped back and his long, thin body began its *swing* pivot. *skelt*

I tensed, waiting for the sound of the bat against the ball, and when it came it sounded like a gunshot. For a wild fraction of a second I lost sight of the ball. Then I saw Schwartzie dive to the ground, and there was the ball coming through the air where his head had been, and I tried for it but it was moving too fast, and I barely had my glove raised before it was in center-field. It was caught on a bounce and thrown to Sidney Goldberg, but by that time Danny Saunders was standing solidly on my base and the yeshiva team was screaming with joy.

Mr Galanter called for time and walked over to talk to Schwartzie. Sidney Goldberg nodded to me, and the two of us went over to them.

'That ball could've killed me!' Schwartzie was saying. He was of medium size, with a long face and a bad case of acne. He wiped sweat from his face. 'My God, did you see that ball?'

'I saw it,' Mr Galanter said grimly.

'That was too fast to stop, Mr Galanter,' I said in Schwartzie's defence.

'I heard about that Danny Saunders,' Sidney Goldberg said. 'He always hits to the pitcher.'

'You could've told me,' Schwartzie lamented. 'I could've been ready.'

'I only heard about it,' Sidney Goldberg said. 'You always believe everything you hear?'

'God, that ball could've killed me!' Schwartzie said again.

'You want to go on pitching?' Mr Galanter said. A thin sheen of sweat covered his forehead, and he looked very grim.

'Sure, Mr Galanter,' Schwartzie said. 'I'm okay.'

'You're sure?'

'Sure I'm sure.'

'No heroes in this war, now,' Mr Galanter said. 'I want live soldiers, not dead heroes.'

'I'm no hero,' Schwartzie muttered lamely. 'I can still get it over, Mr Galanter. God, it's only the first inning.'

'Okay, soldier,' Mr Galanter said, not very enthusiastically. 'Just keep our side of this war.'

'I'm trying my best, Mr Galanter,' Schwartzie said.

Mr Galanter nodded, still looking grim, and started off the

field. I saw him take a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipe his forehead.

'Jesus Christ!' Schwartzie said, now that Mr Galanter was gone. 'That bastard aimed right for my head!'

'Oh, come on, Schwartzie,' I said. 'What is he, Babe Ruth?'

'You heard what Sidney said.'

'Stop giving it to them on a silver platter and they won't hit it like that.'

'Who's giving it to them on a silver platter?' Schwartzie lamented. 'That was a great pitch.'

'Sure,' I said.

The umpire came over to us. 'You boys planning to chat here all afternoon?' he asked. He was a squat man in his late forties, and he looked impatient.

'No, sir,' I said very politely, and Sidney and I ran back to our places.

Danny Saunders was standing on my base. His white shirt was pasted to his arms and back with sweat.

'That was a nice shot,' I offered.

He looked at me curiously and said nothing.

'You always hit it like that to the pitcher?' I asked.

He smiled faintly. 'You're Reuven Malter,' he said in perfect English. He had a low, nasal voice.

'That's right,' I said, wondering where he had heard my name.

'Your father is David Malter, the one who writes articles on the Talmud?'

'Yes.'

'I told my team we're going to kill you apikorsim this afternoon.' He said it flatly, without a trace of expression in his voice.

I stared at him and hoped the sudden tight coldness I felt wasn't showing on my face. 'Sure,' I said. 'Rub your tzitzit for good luck.'

I walked away from him and took up my position near the base. I looked toward the wire screen and saw Davey Cantor standing there, staring out at the field, his hands in his pockets. I crouched down quickly, because Schwartzie was going into his pitch.