

THUNDER FROM THE STANDS

by Vincent Richards

CHAPTER IX

Synopsis
Len Rollins, tennis ace, dreamed of being on the Davis Cup team. Then he fell in love with Grace Worthington, but Grace wouldn't marry a man who regarded tennis as his life's work. Len gave up his cherished ambitions—partly because of his love for Grace, partly because of a bad injury to his ankle—and they were married. But when his recovery was complete he joined the Davis Cup team, in spite of Grace's threat to leave him if he goes abroad.

As Len walked off the court Swanson, Hughes, Clark and Frank Wheatley came rapidly forward, faces beaming, congratulatory. Through lips tightly set he murmured: "That's number one!" And though the others did not altogether understand they laughed and slapped his shoulders and told him how splendidly he had played.

The next day he sat silently between Clark and Swanson and watched the French doubles team vanquish Hughes and Wheatley in a torrid five-set struggle.

In the clubhouse Hughes was slowly undressing; Wheatley seated on a bench looked up as they approached and there were tears in his eyes. "Tough luck," Swanson said truthfully, with kindness. "The sort of match either team might have won. They had the breaks." Neither of the doubles players spoke. The captain slapped Wheatley on the back. From further down the hall came the cheerful, exultant voice of the victors. France now only needed one more match to keep the Davis Cup from being taken across the sea to America.

Len received two letters that night. He opened the one from Dan Worthington first. Enclosed within a plain sheet of paper was a check for fifty thousand dollars. Automatically he put it in his wallet. Then he slit the lavender envelope, slowly opened the folded sheets and read:

"Len: Father has arranged for a speedy divorce. Richard has asked me to marry him on the second of August, his birthday, and I see no reason . . ."

Slowly, tenderly he folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Tears, hot and stinging, shamelessly burned his cheeks. He thought: "I must show them I'm a good sport, a good loser. I'll send some flowers. Yes, I must

not forget that—to send Grace flowers. And also send back that check tomorrow."

Clark, covered with perspiration, eyes wild but happy, came through the door. "Got him!" he said breathlessly and fell heavily into the chair next to Len.

"That's fine," Len said without enthusiasm.

"Now," said Clark, still breathing hard, "if you can do what no one expects you can possibly do—" he paused abruptly.

"Didn't you get any sleep last night?" Swanson added. "You look wrecked. I'm almost inclined to send Wheatley out there in your place."

Len smiled grimly and went toward the door. "I'm all right," he said, and went out.

At another time he would have been conscious of the full weight of his responsibility. But on this particular day, at this particular time, he felt free from it all. He was just going out to play a couple of sets of tennis. He would do the very best he could. There would, he knew, be little dash or fire to his performance; it would be the cold, mechanical play of a man who had been trained to be accurate.

So there had been a baby. Perhaps a boy. And he was—would have been—the father. But it was dead. Dead because—

The sun was terribly hot and there was little air. The stands remained strangely, ominously quiet. Soon he realized that Lefevre, white teeth gleaming against dark skin, was before him offering a hand.

He walked to the far end of the court and as the ball came toward him stroked instinctively. He was responding without volition. But the racket met the ball squarely, evenly, and sent it spinning over the net within the boundaries of the other white-chalked area. How long they warmed up he did not know.

The referee's voice came questioning from above. Len did not move. Then suddenly Lefevre, like a bird in flight, was rising on one toe and his racket made an arc in the air. The ball missed the service box. "Fault!" came from above in French. Again Lefevre was up on one toe and again the ball came toward Len. This time it landed inside the white line and mechanically he swung at it. The gut meeting soft ball seemed to vibrate through his entire body—the switch which electrified him into action . . .

Len remembered how Grace had come to him from the train

the evening she had left home. To live on twenty-odd dollars a week—with him. Incredible! Wasn't that bravery? Why, she was the most courageous, the loveliest—he swung but the ball seemed suddenly heavy and landed in the net. "Monsieur Lefevre leads," came the shrill French voice from above, "one love; 'change, please.'"

One love. One love. It reverberated through his brain. One love was all he would ever know. Grace. Except, of course, this other and (as she claimed) greater love—Oh, yes, it was his service. He threw the ball above his head. The racket was light in his hand as he swung. The ball hit the ground on the other side and twisted sharply. Lefevre, off balance, knocked it aside. Len felt suddenly elated and as quickly depressed.

So she was being married today. Today of all days. To Richard Whyte. By the time he walked off the court, in victory or defeat, she would no longer belong to him. He felt a soft, small hand trembling on his arm as the paternal, kindly minister read from his Bible; and outside it was raining. It was raining, drumming against the window panes—and the radio played on—opening in the far baseline corner! The racket swept the ball toward the spot; Lefevre reached it but could not return the ball with strength. He went to the net and smashed, slanting it off at a sharp angle. There was sudden thunder from the stands and the boy was handing three balls to Lefevre. Were they even up in games then?

She was being married. And he was here in Europe, playing tennis. "Father has arranged for a speedy divorce." He, Len Rollins, was worth fifty thousand dollars now, if he cared to be.

Well, he could do a lot with fifty thousand dollars. Travel. Keep on playing without worry about the future. There it was again, damn it! Tennis. Always tennis. Grace had left him because of it. And now she was marrying Richard Whyte.

The ball sped back and forth across the net, its soft hardness against the gut causing the rackets to sing. And then it was past him and there was a roar from the stands which continued, short but awe-inspiring, as they changed courts.

"I love you, Len, terribly." And the way she quivered when he held her close to him. How difficult it was, after all, to peer into the future. That first time they ever had seen each other, did either believe then that their lives would have turned out like this?

Another game was over and the Frenchman smiling slightly as they passed each other, led four to one. Yet somehow it did not seem important; it did not matter much whether he won or not. He returned the smile automatically.

And that idyllic week they had known together in Florida. Shoulders touching as they sat on the beach overlooking the blue-green water, trembling. He had loved her very much then—and always would. He did not know the ball had passed him. It was the wind in his eyes, of course, that blurred his vision. But there was no wind. Grimly he gritted his teeth and stood waiting, but something was wrong.

At last he realized that Lefevre must have won the first set and that he was standing foolishly at the baseline awaiting the serve. He walked slowly to the net and sucked a lemon, washed his face with a towel though the perspiration, despite the heat, was slight. He had not yet cabled the flowers. Perhaps he should have done so before coming here to the Stade. He must remember to attend to it immediately the match was over . . .

They were playing again now and the Frenchman was pressing the advantage he had gained by winning the first set. His attack was relentless, his recoveries magnificent. Only Len's service saved him from rapid annihilation. That and his occasional net play. But it was impossible for him to concentrate long upon the little white sphere Lefevre kept persistently returning to him. Always a picture of Grace's face—smiling and radiant, or a bit frightened and tearful—intervened.

He chased back, back, after a long lob, hit it from over his shoulder. Lefevre at the net "killed" the sensational return. "Monsieur Lefevre leads in the second set, two games to one."

Two games to one! That all the margin of difference? Oh, yes, and there was one set already to the Frenchman's credit. But what matter? Eventually he, Len Rollins, would win or lose. He'd much rather win, of course, but if he lost—

Would Justin still give him that manager's job in Indianapolis if he wanted it? In New York it was only early morning. Let's see, the match had started at 2:30; it must be shortly after three now. Why, in New York it was only seven o'clock. Plenty of time. Plenty of time to cable Justin—and Grace. She still loved him. More than she did Whyte. Of that he would be sure, always. Perhaps if he—

It was too late. Yet was it? Why not feign sudden illness and—no, could not, must not, do that. It was—well, it just wasn't what the English called cricket. Yet he

might, during the next change, jot down two messages and have the boy send them. He might. But he knew he never would. In motion pictures, perhaps, things were done that way, but not in real life. Real life was different. Conventional, inexorable, cruel.

Zing—zing—zing—sound of perfectly timed racket meeting a white fuzzy ball. Lefevre dancing on legs that were spry and tireless; himself, long-limbed, cool, deliberate, moving back and forth, up and down, arm making arcs and circles as the ball shot off his racket. Perspiration was beginning to come only now, and vaguely he wondered at it. His country's cause should stir him to greater efforts, but there were other things—other things which crowded all else out of his mind.

He won the next two points. Lefevre frowned. If he had gone out to Easthampton after her at once, they'd never have gone for that ride in Hugh's car. And if they hadn't—but what use thinking of that now! It was too late. The sharp intake of her breath, the shriek of fright as the small car swerved, were in his ears; the taste of blood was salty on his lips. He laughed shortly; it was not blood on his lips, of course, but perspiration. And Lefevre was still dancing on the other side of the court like a satyr grinning—

Len could do nothing with the ball. His racket had gone dead and heavy. He could not control his motions. Legs and arms were listless. Lefevre was constantly pushing him to the baseline, bombarding him with scorching drives. And the insufferable singsong voice from above kept up its chant in French: "Monsieur Lefevre's game. Monsieur Lefevre leads one love in the third set."

The ball came toward him and he slashed it back at Lefevre's feet, the force of the drive knocking the French player off balance. His next service was deadly, with more spin than any previous service in all his career. He crossed over to the opposite side of the baseline poised and again served. Vainly Lefevre strained to reach the ball—and failed. Two successive aces—"Monsieur Rollins' game. Score in games two-all in the third set. Monsieur Lefevre leading in sets, two-love."

(Continued Next Week)
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