

THUNDER FROM THE STANDS

by Vincent Richards

CHAPTER X Synopsis

Len Rollins, tennis ace, dreamed of helping win the Davis Cup for America. He fell in love with Grace Worthington who would only marry him if he gave up tennis. He did—partly because of his love for Grace, partly because of a bad sprained ankle. His ankle healed unexpectedly and he joined the Davis team. Grace threatens to leave him. On the eve of his sailing she is injured in an automobile accident, but he sails—knowing that the accident is not serious. In the tournament he cannot keep his mind on the game. He has heard that Grace is seeking a divorce to remarry.

From below where he paused momentarily to bite into a piece of lemon, Len raised his head toward the umpire and laughed. Slapping the racquet challengingly against his flannel trousered leg, he went out on the court. So she wanted him to be a great player, did she? Well, she'd read in the papers about him tomorrow!

Lefevre seemed to sense a change in his opponent. The wry, almost pitying smile disappeared. He knew, as did Len, that many a Davis Cup match had been won by the man with two sets against him. Hadn't Cochet triumphed over Big Bill Tilden in just such a manner not so many years ago? And as quickly and correctly as Lefevre sensed the change in Len, Len also sensed the change in his opponent. The Frenchman had tightened up, was pressing, trying too hard.

There was no stopping Len. He swept through Lefevre in that third set with relentless and devastating accuracy. There was acclaim from the boxes as the referee made the announcement: "Monsieur Rollins wins the third set 6-3. Score in sets now is two to one in favor of Monsieur Lefevre." He caught a faint ray of hope in Swanstrom's eyes when their glances met over the sunbaked marquee as he and Lefevre left the court.

When he returned to the court following the rest period Len sensed the change in the spectators, the ball boys, the linesmen, even the referee. There was a lack of confidence in their

ger. His face was grim with determination. But Len did not fear him. The Frenchman won the first game and they changed courts. Len noticed the set expression on the faces of his teammates. He himself felt no strain. He would win because he had to win. Knowing that gave him strength. The fourth game and the fifth were over; they changed again. Racquets flashed, feet scurried over clay; there were cries from the linesmen, bursts of applause from the crowded stands.

Monsieur Rollins' game; games are three all in the fifth set. Len smiled, and winked at a linesman as he went by. Another game, Lefevre was playing as if inspired, but the Frenchman's inspiration sprang from no such deep and demanding wells as did Len's.

"Monsieur Lefevre's game; games are four three in favor of Monsieur Lefevre." Back into the referee's voice crept some of the enthusiasm that had been there previous to Len's stupendous rally. But Len merely took a tighter grip upon the handle of his racquet. A sizzling passing shot which Lefevre courageously but vainly attempted to reach. The match was squared. Four games each.

Their world now was the tennis court. The spectators might have been on some distant planet. Lefevre knew only that the man on the other side of the net must not be allowed to win; and Len just as keenly knew that Lefevre must be driven to defeat. Len stalked Lefevre now as a beast of the jungle stalks its prey. Not a move did the other make that did not mirror itself immediately in Len's mind. He was close on the trail now, waiting for his quarry to falter. And when he did—swift and sure would be his death.

But Lefevre throughout the ninth game, though it was deuced seven times, did not falter. It was Len instead who finally left an opening. And the Frenchman took quick advantage. "Monsieur Lefevre leads five games to four Change, please." The crescendo of the referee's voice was startling. One game, the mere matter of ten points at the most, remained between the squaring of the match and defeat. But Len would not fall; he would win. He had to win.

Lefevre was serving. Back and forth. Doggedly Len pursued. Eventually one of them would crack. And this time it would be the Frenchman. With a scorching drive Len made the score thirty-fourty. And on the next return throwing caution to the winds he rushed to the net. Jumping high in the air he killed Lefevre's lob with an overhead smash which evened the match. The announcement came again, concern once more evident in the French accent: "Games are five all in the fifth and deciding set . . ."

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Clark and Wheatley were hugging each other; Hughes and Swanstrom were standing. From the stands came long and tumultuous applause. The partisan French spectators now cheered wildly the blond young American's magnificent uphill struggle. And now Len had the advantage. He was serving. Not once during the afternoon had his terrific "screw" ball deserted him. And it did not desert him now. His first shot was a brilliant ace. The frown that creased Lefevre's forehead deepened. The expectant hush that settled over the gallery after the spontaneous tumult was balm to Len's ears.

The next service, though, Lefevre returned expertly along the sideline. It was Len knew as he started for it, practically ungettable. But he must not fail. Somehow he reached side court just as the ball was bounding past, threw his racquet at it viciously from the backhand, and knew happy amazement as it hurtled back safely into the Frenchman's court. He had been drawn out of position by the seemingly impossible recovery. And now the area left open in which Lefevre would put the ball away yawned terrifyingly as he wheeled. There was no alternative. This was the time for daring and not finesse. He bounded toward the net. The bravado of the maneuver momentarily unsettled Lefevre. The lob, which floated over the American's head, missed the base line by a foot.

The shrill sing-song voice from above . . . "Thirty-ten." Len stood, panting hard, behind his own base line. He took a long, resuscitating breath, a fresh grip on the racquet. Then, like a spring, his body coiled and released, swiftly uncoiled. The ball went wide. The second ball found the box. The invincible Frenchman made it good, however, and after a spirited volley won the point. "Thirty-fifteen."

Again up on toe—and that terrific spinning service nicking the white line so the chalk flew high in the air. Lefevre bit his lip as the ball bounded off the retaining wall and rolled away . . . "Forty-fifteen" and after a long volley—"Forty-thirty." A daring cut of a trap-shot. Len watched, almost amused, as the French star heartbreakingly tried for it—and missed . . . The drone of the referee:

"Monsieur Rollins leads in the fifth set, six games to five . . ."

Lefevre must fight now with his back to the wall. True, the Frenchman was serving. But Len preferred it so. The psychology was all in Len's favor. The man in the hole was serving. Splendid! Lefevre had to make his services good, or . . .

The first ball came and Len drove it off his forehead to the far base line. He laughed confidently to himself as he rushed in, picked up the return at his feet on the half-volley, sent it spinning along the sideline. Took it again on the short volley, this time off his backhand, slashed the ball at the Frenchman's feet. The return came back too high, perfectly angled for a kill. "Love-fifteen . . ."

Four more points. Four little points. Please God! His body trembled, but his hand was firm and sure on the handle of the racquet.

A double fault! Lefevre saw him smile. The next ball came at him savagely. He drove it back and Lefevre's return just inside the sideline, he could not reach. "Fifteen-thirty!"

How quiet it was! Lefevre's service game again, a twisting, treacherous ball this time that bounced high. But returned it safely. The French ace took it prettily on his backhand, sending the ball to the deep corner. But Len was there and angled the ball to the other corner. Lefevre got off a blasting drive which nicked the line. Len just managed to reach it; his return was weak. Lefevre, eyes gleaming, came quickly forward with panther-like grace. He swung from above, his racquet a mere flash in the sunshine.

The ball had all but passed Len before he had an opportunity to gauge or time its flight. Instinctively he thrust out his racquet, wrist stiff. He felt the vibration of the ball squarely striking his racquet; it made a singing noise as it left the gut and dropped inches within the base line. Sudden thunder from the stands. There was no favorite now. Here was drama, tennis history in the making!

One point. One point more. One little point between him and the Davis Cup—"I wish you great things, Len, in your chosen field"—Suppose, just suppose Grace should suddenly step out upon the court from the packed stands and ask him to lay aside his racquet? Would he . . .

But here it was; The service which might bring victory and all that such a victory would mean. He was confident. His legs did not feel tired, even after these five torrid sets. His arms felt strong, his eyes clear, his wrist sure. (Concluded Next Week)

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