

## The Inning

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

On a lazy dog day of August summer night, center fielder Dalton Pierre follows the baseball from the crack of the hitter's bat as it dances in the evening twilight toward the warning track. Back-peddling sideways toward the deepest part of the ballpark, he jumps and extends his left arm in a blind lunge, barely snatching the blurry speck of leather and lace in the web of his mitt, just before it tumbles over the fence for a three-run homerun. Jogging back toward the dugout, he tosses the ball into the infield, high-fiving the right fielder for his fine run-saving snow cone catch. As he reaches the dugout, the manager of his AAA ball club gives him a spirited fist pump.

"Great grab Big D! Just got off the phone with Carson Hughes from our affiliate in 'The Show'. They need a back-up center fielder for their upcoming home-stand against the Knights. Apparently, their regular center fielder Paul Price got caught spying for the division leading Smyth Town Gladiators. They secretly investigated and caught him wearing a wire and transmitting Red Hawks' plays and signs through a small top-secret hand held messaging device. Since he's now facing a fine and court-time, they need a replacement just in case anything happens with incidents or injury to their regular utility outfielder James Caghart."

"Sure thing Coach. Felt the whole time that Price was keeping me out of 'The Show' by illicitly holding down center fielder since the day I got drafted. Do I have to bus out there?"

"We've got you on a flight tomorrow morning. You'll be reporting to Manager Hughes tomorrow evening at Paxton Field in time for batting practice with the Red Hawks. Good luck! You're gonna need it!"

After finishing the game with two extra base hits and a walk, Pierre high-fives his teammates for the nail-biter victory on the field and heads through the tunnel into the clubhouse. After finding his locker, he notices a brand new Red Hawks uniform folded neatly on his clubhouse bench. His friend and teammate Arthur O'Neill seated next to him taps him lightly on the shoulder and says: "Big D, this is your one shot in 'The Show'. Don't want to see you here ever again. They say Price is never coming back. This is your chance to get out of the Minors for good. Been stuck here for 15 years and I can tell you, you sometimes never even get that one opportunity. My old man's dad once played in the Negro Leagues back in the 1930s and told me once that it's still goin' on, only nobody knows it. He told me that AAA baseball these days is still like the Negro Leagues for a lot of forgotten and stranded ball players. They took the trouble of stitching your name and number on one of them Red Hawks jerseys, so don't disappoint me!"

"Thanks Art! Really 'preciate the pep talk! I'll do my best on this big road trip."

After leaving the ballpark located in the suburbs of Villanueva, Dalton Pierre heads back to his downtown apartment, carrying his large duffle bag with his cleats, ball glove, batting gloves and his newly issued Red Hawks uniform. The next morning, he rises early and finds his way to the airport to catch his special 7am flight to Spark City. As the plane takes off, Pierre looks out at a matrix of corn fields and woodlots thinking of his mother, who always told him to keep wearing the number "45" in honour of his late father Winston who died of cancer at that early age. After dozing off for a few hours on board the flight, the plane finally touches down in Spark City's main airport, where Pierre retrieves his large suitcase and duffle bag. After reaching the arrivals waiting area, he notices a man dressed in a dark suit and chauffeur's cap, carrying a sign that says "D. Pierre" with the logo of the Red Hawks on the top left corner.

"Good afternoon Mr. Pierre! My name is Cecil. I'll be your chauffeur today."

"Good day Cecil! I guess you're my ride to Paxton Field today."

"Yes, but first we drop off your things and get something to eat before you take b.p. today with the rest of the team. Do you like Chinese food?"

"Chinese food sounds good. Do you know a place?"

"I know a good place in the east side of town. Shall we get going?"

"Sure thing. Slept on the flight over and missed the meal on board. I'm pretty hungry."

After dropping off his suitcase and duffle bag at a hotel next to Paxton Field, Dalton Pierre has his late lunch at Sim Ling Cantonese Restaurant. After finishing his noodle, Asian vegetable and sweet and sour chicken platter, Cecil drives him back to his hotel room where Pierre grabs his duffle bag and heads directly into the ballpark. After going through security and finding his way to the empty clubhouse, he stops to take in the bright red big league lockers along with the large logo of a feisty bird on one of the walls. Pierre then sits down on a black bench where his name is taped to the wall and puts on his new baseball attire along with his trusty red cleats. He then heads into the tunnel leading to the Paxton Stadium field of play. After skipping energetically up the steps of the home team dugout on the third base line, Pierre does a few sprints in the outfield and joins the Red Hawks team already doing their stretches in right field. During the stretches, Pierre is approached by Coach Hughes who introduces him to the rest of the team.

"Guys, this is Dalton Pierre. He's here with us till we figure out what's going on with Pricey and the Gladiator ordeal. Tonight, we've got Hunterton playing in center and batting sixth, but Dalton will be here as the back-up. Show him around the Paxton turf and treat him like he's one of us Red-Birds. Right now we've got 'im here just for this homestand but be by his side to teach him and offer advice on how to be long term at 'The Show'."

After being introduced to the team, Dalton finishes his group stretches in the big team circle and runs to get his batting gloves from the dugout. He then heads to the cage for batting practice with one hour to go before game time.

“That’s it Dalton! Just plant that foot and turn on the ball!” Finnegan, the Red Hawks’ batting coach hollers from directly behind the plate.

“We want to see plenty of line drives. Don’t swing for the fences! We need you on base and ready to scare their catcher with your speed!” Finnegan adds eyeing Pierre’s hitting mechanics.

“That’s good for today Dalton! Warm up that throwing arm and take some fly balls. We may need you later in the game in center.” Coach Hughes shouts out from the third base line.

Soon, the early bird Spark City fans start to fill the seats around the field of play with game-time approaching. After the starting lineup announcement and the national anthem, the Red Hawks take the field with Dalton Pierre in the dugout eyeing the action near the water coolers, soaking in every precious backstage moment in ‘The Show’. As the game progresses, Pierre becomes a dugout cheerleader, hollering out from the dugout steps at every big play. With Red Hawks down 5-1 going into the bottom of the seventh, Hunterton comes to the plate for the fourth time.

“Good job Hunter-Tee! Way to get on base!” Pierre shouts toward first base as the starting center fielder reaches base on a walk. Soon, Hunterton gets a steal sign from the third base coach and takes a large lead off of first base. On the mound, the lefty side-arm relief pitcher winds up from the stretch, quickly turning his head toward first, then commits his stride to the plate. In that split second, Hunterton takes off of first, diving headfirst into second base. After being called out at second on a bullet throw by the back catcher, Hunterton winces, feeling some discomfort in his lower back as he makes his way back to the dugout.

“Pierre! You’re going to be in center this inning! Get your glove and give it everything you’ve got!” Coach Hughes shouts out, rapidly making changes to his scorecard. After playing catch with the right fielder, Pierre settles in as the top of the order comes to the plate for the Knights. After a full count, the Knights’ leadoff hitter hits a soft liner into center field. As the ball descends into shallow center, Pierre charges toward it and makes a diving catch. He then lightly tosses the ball back into the infield as the pitcher points toward him, crediting him for his stellar grab. After a double into the right field corner with two out, the Knights’ clean-up hitter comes to the plate. After fouling off the first two pitches, the power hitting first baseman hits a single up the middle. Pierre immediately charges the ball as it skips toward him and fires a long strike on one bounce to home plate. With the man on second running on contact, the play is close at the plate but the runner is called out. Running back toward the dugout, Pierre gets a round of high-fives from a crowd of teammates for his timely plays filling in at center field. As the Red Hawks come to the plate in the eighth inning still down 5-1, Pierre spins his cap around in the dugout, trying to spur a late game charge out of his rally cap. Soon, other teammates do the same with their black and red ball caps and the Red Hawks manage to come within one run, loading the bases with two outs. With Pierre set to hit in the on-deck circle, the substitute center fielder puts pine tar around the handle of his bat, and with the bat weight fastened over the bat’s barrel, he eyes the

relief pitcher's delivery, trying to time his swing rhythm to both his fastball and off-speed pitch. When the fifth hitter reaches first on a walk, it is now Pierre's turn to hit. Looking up at the dark skies beyond the left field bleachers, he approaches the batter's box with the bases now loaded.

"Come on forty-five! Show us you're a big-leaguer!" A fan hollers from the first base side.

"Don't choke Big Dolt!" Another fan screams directly behind the backstop. After taking the first pitch for a strike, Pierre settles back into the batter's box, trying to make the moment and everything slow down as he digs his cleats in and tries to find a hitter's groove. Taking the next two off-speed pitches, he expects to see the heater next as he does his usual bat twitch, eyes wide open to pick up the ball from the pitcher's release point. As the pitcher goes from the stretch with a quick look at the runner on third, he starts up his wind-up and throws a two-seam fastball over the left corner of the plate. After quickly planting his foot, Pierre takes a cut at the 92 mile-per-hour pitch, sending a hard line drive into opposite field corner to clear the bases. After sliding into second base with the crowd buzzing in the bottom of the eighth, Pierre takes off his helmet and acknowledges his lively audience. With the score now 7-5 for the home team, Pierre decides to showcase his foot speed, taking a large lead from second base. After bluffing on the first pitch, Pierre anticipates an off-speed pitch and takes another lead from second. As the pitcher throws a slider, he darts to third base and dives in just ahead of the throw, causing the crowd to erupt approvingly all over again. With the pitcher a bit rattled at the late inning heroics, Pierre then scores on a bloop single to right field. Running back toward the third base dugout, he is congratulated by his ecstatic teammates and coaches for keeping the inning rally going and cashing in the much-needed runs.

"Replace Pricey! We want Pierre!" A fan hollers as the Red Hawks' closer gets a save and finally cements the win in the top of the ninth. As Pierre joins a long line of players and coaches in the infield, he is met by a long series of enthusiastic high-fives for his eighth inning heroics.

"Pierre! Just got a call from head office. They are going to send Price into probation while his court troubles continue. We really like how you showed up tonight! You're going to be with us on our next road trip. You've just earned a spot tonight in our 40-man roster! Good job!" Coach Hughes says to him as the 28-year old call-up jogs off the field and toward the dugout steps.

Soon, Dalton Pierre would find his way to the number two spot on the Red Hawks batting order as their starting center fielder. After finishing his short first big league season with a .314 average and six stolen bases, he would go on to be an All-Star for the following five full seasons at the big league level, with two world championship rings. Those serendipitous eighth inning heroics on that fateful August night would soon be enough to establish number "45" as one of the top outfielders in Spark City Red Hawk history.

The End