

Offside Play, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

The sun shone bright on Kiki, a brisk November sun, blue in the drifting cigarettes of the crowd. It rendered her full justice as a lovely person radiantly happy, but she assured herself such a state of things couldn't last.

"—because at present I'm one of those dreadful people who have everything."

She exaggerated, of course—other heads grew the same golden thatch to brighten northern winters, other eyes had been steeped in the same blue smoke of enchantment. And hers was by no means the only rakish mouth in the Yale Bowl. Also there were doubtlessly other hearts around that had stopped being like hotels. But here at the beginning picture Kiki as the happiest girl on earth.

And as the moment endured, glittered, then slipped into eternity—the man beside her, the infinitely desired, the infinitely admirable Considine, said something which disturbed her balance on the pinnacle.

"I want to talk to you very seriously after the game," was what he said. But he did not press her hand or look at her as he said it—he simply gazed straight ahead at the teams on the field, yet not staring at something, only staring away.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Tell me now."

"Not now." A scrimmage came to earth and his eyes dropped to the program. "Number 16 again—that little guard Van Kamp. Weighs a hundred and fifty-nine and he's stopping every line play by himself."

"Is he on our side?" she asked absently.

"No, he's on the Yale team, and he ought not to be," he said indignantly. "They bought him, by Heavens! They purchased him body and soul."

"That's too bad," she said politely. "Why didn't Harvard make an offer for just the body?"

"We don't do things like that, but these people haven't any conscience. Here they go—look! See him jump over that play—heads up, never gets buried."

Kiki was not paying much attention—she had guessed that there was trouble on the sunny air. But if things were wrong there was nothing she wouldn't do to right them. Alex Considine "had everything," he had been the Man of Promise at Cambridge the year before—also she adored him.

Between the halves big drums beat and the sun went out and people pushed past them, shouting from row to row.

"I've never seen a lineman dominate a game like this Van Kamp," said Considine. "If he had on a crimson jersey he'd be beautiful."

In the third quarter the paragon blocked a punt and recovered it himself—within a few plays his team scored, and the rest of the game was a breathless flight of long passes through a stratosphere of frantic sound. Suddenly it was over; Kiki and Alex moved with the hushed defeated half of the crowd out of the stadium, met friends for a hurried half hour and rushed to the train. They should be alone now, but they found only a single place and Considine sat half on the arm, half in the crowded aisle.

"I've got to know what's on your mind," she said.

"Wait till we get to New York."

"Oh, what is it?" she demanded, "you've got to tell me—is it about us?"

"Well—yes."

"What about us—aren't we all right? Aren't we on the crest? I simply won't wait two hours to find out." Lightly she added, "I know what it is—you're throwing me over and you don't want to do it in public."

"Please, Kiki."

"Well, then let me ask you questions. First question—do you love me? No, I won't ask that—I'm a little afraid to. I'll tell you something instead—I love you, no matter if it's something awful you're going to tell me."

She saw him sigh without a sound.

"Then it is awful," she said. "Then maybe it is what I thought—" She broke off; there was no gaiety left in the suspense. Close to tears she had to change the subject.

"See the man across the aisle," she whispered, "the people behind me say it's Van Kamp, the Yale player."

He glanced around.

"I don't think so—he wouldn't be going to New York so soon. Still it looks like him."

"It must be, with those awful scratches—if it wasn't for that he'd be beautiful."

"That's because he plays heads up."

"He's beautiful anyhow—really one of the handsomest men I've ever seen. You might introduce me."

"I don't know him. Anyhow he doesn't understand any words—just signals."

It was the first light remark he had made all afternoon and she had a flash of hope but immediately the gravity came back into his face, as though he had laughed at a funeral.

"Maybe he's a great mathematician and thinks in numbers," she rambled on unhappily. "Maybe Einstein teaches him—but he's at Princeton."

"I'll bet he had a full time tutor to get him through."

"I had one myself when young. You can't convince me that man's stupid."

He looked at her quizzically.

"You like all kinds, don't you?"

She gave up trying to talk and borrowing his program turned to the players' statistics.

Left Guard - Eubert G. Van Kamp—Newton H.S.—5'11—159—Age 21

He was Considine's age but only a sophomore in college. At twenty-one men had written masterpieces, commanded armies.

—at eighteen girls had killed themselves for unrequited love—or gotten over it or pretended that it had never been love in the first place.

At the next station people debarked and Considine could at last drop into the seat beside her.

"Now can you talk?" she said.

"Yes, and it's going to be very frank. Kiki, I'm fonder of you than of any girl I know. Last summer when we—"

"Did you see him play last summer?"

"See who play?"

"That man Van Kamp. I mean if you saw him play last summer why didn't you just offer him more money than they did?"

He looked her unsmilingly.

"Seriously, this is something that has to be faced—"

"Oh, shut up."

"What do you mean, Kiki?"

"Go and face it yourself. I've known what you were going to say for two hours."

"I—"

"—and I'm very particular about the way I'm thrown over. Here's your ring—put it in your archeological collection—put it in your pocket. The man over the way is looking at us—this is a picture that tells a story."

"Kiki, I—"

"Shut up—up—up—up!"

"All right," he said grimly.

"Write me a letter instead and I'll give it to my husband. I may marry Van Kamp. As a matter of fact I'm glad you spoke, or didn't speak, just when you did—or didn't. I'm stepping out with a new number tonight, and I want to feel free. And here's the station—"

The second they were on their feet she left him, threading her way up the aisle swiftly, desperately, running against people, finally with a passionate intention of eluding him at any cost, catching at the arm of a swiftly moving passenger who seemed to have the right of way, and being borne with his momentum out the door and on to the station quay.

"I'm sorry," she panted, "I beg—"

It was Van Kamp. Confused she ran along beside him, returning his smile.

"Really you played the most gorgeous game," she panted, "and there's someone after me, the most frightening person. Will you walk with me to a taxi? I really haven't been drinking but he's broken my heart and all that and the symptoms are much the same effect."

They hurried up the runway into the hushed marbled tomb of the Grand Central.

"Can't you win him back?" His question was half serious but Kiki disregarded it.

"Your poor face!" she exclaimed. "Really you were wonderful. I was with a Harvard man and he was simply overwhelmed. No, I'm not going to try to win him back. I thought at first I would, but at the last minute I decided not to."

They reached the taxi stand. He was going uptown—could he take her?

"Oh, please do!"

In the cab they looked at each other by the exciting first lights that twinkled in the window. Van Kamp was blue of eye, made of wrought iron and painted ash gold. He was shy and in that sense awkward but he had most certainly never made a clumsy movement in his life.

And seeing this, Kiki, who had been plunged into a sudden vacuum, made herself over suddenly into his kind of girl. She was alone with him with no plan except such plans as they would make together. He had a date but after a few minutes there seemed to be no hurry about it—she was calling him Rip before they ordered dinner.

"I almost went to Harvard," he told her. "For a while I thought I'd play pro football, but I decided to get an education."

"How much do they pay you?"

"Pay me? They don't pay me anything."

"I thought that was the idea."

"I wish it was. Some boys get a hundred a month at a college out West. All I got was a loan. And of course I eat at training table, but I have to work too—I've got half a dozen jobs around the campus."

"That isn't right," she said, "they ought to pay you; you draw people to the games to watch you. You have something valuable to sell, just like—like—"

"Just like brains. Go on, say it. Sometimes I wonder why I went to college."

"Anyhow they should pay you for staying there."

"Would you mind telling them that?"

Every few minutes Kiki thought of Alex Considine with a start, wondering if he were sorry now, wondering what it was that made him not love her, something she had done or some way she was, or if there was another girl. But each time she looked very hard at Eubert G. ("Rip") Van Kamp, weight 159, height 5'11", and thought that no one had ever been so beautiful.

They went dancing and when the orchestra played "Gone" or "Lost" she felt empty and frightened inside, for last month she had danced to those pieces with Considine.

But when they played "Goody-Goody," it was all right because dancing with Van Kamp was very odd and fine in quite another way. Then in the taxi she kissed him, completely, almost with abandon, as much as he wanted her to. She played the whole game until within a few hours he had become that strange dreamy figure of one whom we have been very close to and who is neither a stranger nor quite a friend.

II

At four o'clock next day he called at Kiki's house, shy at its splendor.

"What do you suppose I've been doing all day," she said. "Reading the papers—the sporting section. Have you seen this?"

David was a lineman. And there was not one Goliath but seven. That's what they are saying at New Haven today after one of the hardest fought games in the sixty years of the Yale-Harvard series. A one hundred and fifty-nine pound guard stole the spotlight from the fleet backs—

"It can't be me," he said lightly, "I weighed a hundred and fifty-seven. And let's not play that. I came to see you—I spent all morning explaining to someone where I was last night."

—He must have many girls, she thought. Aloud she said:

"I'm interested in what we talked about at dinner. It's ridiculous that they don't pay you money for what you can do."

"The bowl would be full whether I was there or not—they've managed to carry on without me for sixty years."

"Full for the big games, yes—but not for every game. I'll bet you'll make them thousands of dollars extra."

"Oh no, I'm just one man out of eleven."

"The papers say you were the whole team."

"Oh no—it just looks that way because after the first plays I can usually tell where they're going."

Then suddenly, to Kiki's eyes, Rip's corporeal person began to grow dim, literally to fade away to the end of a long perspective. And she was alone there with Considine who had just walked into the room.

For a moment she was numb, and so controlled by her most intimate instincts that if he had come up to her she would have risen and walked like a stunned fighter into his arms. But the indirect consequences of yesterday decided the matter—he was overwrought and desperate and even more unfit than Kiki to cope with the situation. Not perceiving himself the wild relief that sprang into her eyes he talked words, words that were like bricks, building up a wall between them.

... I've got to see you for a minute ... everything was such a mess... before I leave for Greece... explain why I was so absurd...

—And as he stood there, blind and fumbling, the expression faded from Kiki's eyes and hurt and humiliation surged back over her. When he did look at her she was as steely and formidable as her voice.

"This is Mr. Van Kamp... I'm sorry but I can't see you now— There's nothing I want to

discuss, Alex. You'll have to excuse me."

Incredulously he looked at Van Kamp, realizing his presence for the first time. Then, perceiving too late that this was not a matter for words, but rather a struggle against what had been said, he went toward her—and just as quickly she retreated, as if revolted by his proximity. Even Rip bristled slightly and Alex stopped, his half raised arms falling to his side.

"I'll write you," he whispered. "This is such an awful mistake."

"It might have been," she said. "Please go away."

He was gone—and for a minute, in the awful reverberating thunder of his absence, she looked toward the door thinking that he had come back, that he couldn't stop loving her, that she might have forgotten everything in his arms. A great shiver went over her—then she turned to Rip and answered a question he had just asked.

"Yes, that was the man."

"He looks awful sorry."

"Let's not talk about him. I don't know him any more. Come here, Rip."

"Here?"

"Don't put your arms around me. Just sit where I can look at you." She was like a stifling person come to a window for air. Thinking with grim pleasure how intensely Alex would have disapproved, she said:

"Rip, in Hollywood there are dozens of people your age without half your good looks, making fortunes."

"You think I ought to go in the movies?"

"No, you ought to stay in college. But you ought to get a great deal of money for this thing you can do better than anyone else—and save it up for the time when other people can do things better than you."

"You think I'll end up as a night watchman or something?" He frowned. "I'm not so stupid—I've thought of that. It's kind of sad, isn't it?"

"It's kind of sad, Rip."

"But of course you can't be sure of anything. There must be a place in the world for people like me."

"There is, I'm sure of that—but you ought to start now to build it. I'm going to help you. Don't worry—I won't fall in love with you."

"Oh, you won't?"

"Certainly not—I've been thrown over once and I haven't faintly recovered—if I ever do." She moved away from him gently. "Please stop. Don't you understand that was last night, it wasn't even me—you don't even know me, Rip, and maybe you never will."

III

That winter there were many men for Kiki, but her heart was empty and she paid them

off in deflated currency. As if asleep she walked through a February inspection of the colleges, but at New Haven she opened her eyes long enough to search for Rip Van Kamp through the swirling crowd, and not finding him sent him a message to his room. Next day they strolled through a light blinding snow, and his face, statuesque against the winter sky, brought a sudden renewal of delight.

"Where were you last night?" she demanded.

"I haven't got a white tie and tails."

"How ridiculous!" she exclaimed impatiently. "But I've got my plans for you—gross material ones. I think I've found you an angel. Wait till you hear."

Sitting in his study before a wood fire she told him.

"It's a man named Gittings, class of 1903, a friend of the family. Well, last month he was staying with us and one day I found him writing something very mysterious that he tucked away when I came in. I had to find out what it was and I did. It was a list of names—Ketcham, Kelley, Kilpatrick, and so forth—and he finally confessed it was a football team made up of old Yale players whose names began with K. He told me that whenever he had a little time to kill he chose a letter of the alphabet and picked a team. I knew right away that we had our man."

"But even if he got down to the letter V," said Rip, "I can't see how—"

"Don't be dumb—football's his passion, don't you see? He's a little crazy on the subject."

"He must be."

"—And he ought to be willing to pay for his fun—I mean pay you."

"I certainly appreciate your interest."

"You don't—you think I'm pretty fresh, but you don't know all yet: I've started the ball rolling. I've planted the seed in his mind. I told him you'd been offered a lot of money to go to college out West—"

He jumped to his feet.

"Be calm, Rip. Though I must say Mr. Gittings wasn't. He stormed around yelling that it was criminal. Finally he asked who the offer was from—but I thought I'd better stop there. Are you angry?"

"Why no—but would you mind telling me why you're doing all this?"

"I don't know, Rip—maybe it's a sort of revenge."

They walked over the old campus through the early twilight and she stopped where a bracket lamp made a yellow square on the blue snow.

"You've got to use intelligent self-interest." She said, as if to herself, "For one thing it'll help you get the girl you want, when you decide you want a girl."

"I've never known a girl like you," he said, "After I left you last fall I couldn't stop thinking about you, even when you told me it didn't mean a thing."

"Did I say that?"

She looked very lovely and he told her about her cheeks.

"So pretty. Very white."

"So are yours."

They took a step together out of the light and their faces touched in the frosty darkness.

"Somebody's waiting for me at the Taft, Rip," she said. "Come to our house in New York next Saturday afternoon. Mr. Gittings will be there."

IV

In spite of his alphabetical football teams, Mr. Cedric Gittings was not soft-minded. He was one of the many Americans whose mother had liked Little Lord Fauntleroy and the sportive ideas that obsessed him at fifty were a simple and natural reaction. Every autumn the eleven young men who ran out on the football field of a crisp Saturday represented something very lovely to him that he had not found in life.

He was glad to meet Rip—honored and impressed.

"That was a beautiful game," he said. "It seems I grabbed the feathers from a lady's hat and threw them in the air. I think I went after the feathers because when you made that touchdown I felt light as a bird. When we lose it makes me physically sick. Tell me, young man, what's this about your leaving college?"

Kiki spoke up:

"Rip doesn't want to leave—it would almost break his heart—but he hasn't any money. And anyhow, Yale won't have much of a team next year."

"Why, of course they will," exclaimed Mr. Gittings.

Kiki looked hard at Rip who said obediently, "There's not much in the line."

"There's you, man—you're a line in yourself. I can see you coming out and leading that interference—"

"But if the team doesn't win," Kiki interrupted, "the professionals won't be after Rip. I think he ought to accept the offer of this western college."

"What college?" demanded Gittings fiercely.

Rip looked at Kiki and managed to say:

"I'm not at liberty to tell."

"This buying up players is an outrage. I'd rather see us lose every game than think the team was bought and paid for."

"Rip's got to think of the future," said Kiki mildly. "You hear of so many players getting to be night watchmen or bouncers and even landing in jail."

"In jail! I've never heard of any good football players going to jail. Why, you're remembered forever. If I was a judge and some football star came up before me I'd say 'this must be a mistake'—any man with such beautiful muscular coordination ought to have the benefit of the doubt."

"If I ever sink that low," Rip said, "I hope the judge will agree with you."

"Of course he will. Judges are human just like anyone else."

Kiki felt that the conversation was becoming somewhat gloomy.

"Rip only wants to go where alumni are more liberal so he can earn a living."

"What do they offer you out West?" asked Mr. Gittings.

"An awful lot," Kiki said promptly.

"Well, you'd be a fool to accept, young man."

"I'd hate to leave college," said Rip. "Still, anything's better than jail."

Gittings groaned.

"There you go on jail again. I'll keep you out of jail. I'll leave a fund in case you go wrong."

"Now that's sensible," applauded Kiki. "A fund is something he could depend on."

"I'll get him a chance with some good firm as soon as he's out of college."

"The fund idea seems better to me."

"It seems to me you're pretty mercenary about this, young lady." He sighed. "When would he have to go?"

"Right away, I suppose. He has to enter now in order to be eligible next fall. They're very particular."

"Particular!" cried Mr. Gittings disgustedly. "Particular! Just tell me this: How much do they offer?"

At the moment it was a great disadvantage to him that he had never before bribed an athlete. He had no idea what they were paid, and the whole matter seemed so lawless and obnoxious that the question of how much was of relatively little importance. Kiki finally closed the deal at five thousand dollars.

V

And now Kiki went away for six months and things happened to her of which there is no room to tell here. There are idealists who would take it amiss that she suffered with the moonlight in Honolulu and on the Italian Lakes and almost married a man who does not even come into this story.

He had a certain break in his voice or he dressed with humor—and then he did something or failed to do something and after that he had no more connection with the dawn, wind or the evening stars. Late in October she called it off and hurried back to America.

Arriving Kiki looked around tentatively, what she expected to find she didn't know—certainly not Considine who was on an archaeological expedition in Crete. But there was a lost feeling and she was glad to find a wire from Rip Van Kamp. He wanted to see her urgently and suggested she come up to the Dartmouth game. She went feeling that she was going to find something she had left there—the first youth and

illusion lost in the Bowl a year ago.

If any college player was ever worth five thousand Rip was worth it that season. It was a poor team, light backs behind a raw line, and this brought Rip's play into high relief. He had a style of his own which no coach had ever tried to change—it was like nothing so much as a legal form of holding and many an official laid for him in vain. His charge was quick and rather high with knees and hips in it and elbows loose, so that he seemed at the crucial moment to be wrapped around the defensive man, yet with such a small area of actual contact that he was free even as the play passed. And when a man outweighed thirty to sixty pounds gave such an exhibition Saturday after Saturday even Mr. Gittings could ask no more.

Tingling with expectation, Kiki met him after the game.

"When I watch you play I'm just the adoring high school girl," she said.

"I wish you were."

"So do I. At least I could lead the cheers. At present I can't be any help at all. I wish you had some real problems."

"I have," he said, frowning. "I'm in a terrible mess. That's why I wired you."

"Why, Rip—what's the matter?"

They were at the Sachem Tea House with many men and girls oddly quiet after the game. First glancing around, Rip took out a newspaper clipping and handed it to her.

"Read it and I'll explain," he said. "It isn't about me."

CAMPUS JEWEL THIEF RETURNS LOOT
YALE DEAN GETS ANONYMOUS PACKAGE

Frightened by an aroused campus swarming with Philo Vances and Hercule Poirots, the thief who has been operating in the Yale dormitories yesterday sent about three hundred dollars worth of his booty to Dean Marsh through the mail. It was in the form of watches, pins, wallets and miscellaneous jewelry. From the thief's knowledge of the students' lecture hours, etc. he is believed to be an undergraduate.

"So what?" asked Kiki.

"I told you about my brother Harry being a sophomore. He had some hard luck—broke his knee in freshman football and he can't play any more. So he turned thief. I can't understand it. A man in his class spotted him and came to me and I took every cent I had to buy the stuff back. Now I need more."

"Out of the five thousand? Oh, Rip—I thought I was to take care of that and you weren't to touch it till after college."

"I can't help it. Harry's my brother. He's not going to jail."

"But you've sent the things back."

"I haven't told you everything. The man who knows about it is a low skunk, and he has to be squared."

They seemed to have descended suddenly into another world. Kiki had thought of Rip

as detached from any past, the masterpiece of an anonymous sculptor. Now the shadow of the brother fell across his shoulders.

"Wouldn't it settle it if your brother leaves college? He oughtn't to be here anyhow if he's—" She balked at the word.

"It wouldn't satisfy this man. Of course I could break his neck—"

"You can't get mixed up in it, Rip." She sighed with distress. "How much does he want?"

"He mentioned a thousand dollars."

"Oh Rip! I almost wish you'd broken his neck."

"I will if you think it's best."

"No—we'll have to pay him. But you've got to send your brother away before he gets into more trouble."

"If he leaves college it'll look funny." He frowned. "I can't stand to send him away. I never told you but he and I were brought up in an orphanage and I've always looked out for him."

Now she knew all about him—she had never liked him better than at this moment.

"But sooner or later he'll get you in a worse jam just when you've got this start and I've made plans to get more money for you—Rip, you've got to send him away."

"Anyhow, you see I've got problems," he said.

"We'll deal with them," she said brightening.

After supper, walking along the shady darkness of Hillhouse Avenue she turned to him suddenly:

"Rip, I'm so very fond of you."

"Fond of me? What does that mean? The people in the Bowl are fond of me."

She heard herself lying to him.

"I've thought about you all summer—so much."

He put his arm around her and drew her close. The moon was up rosy gold with a haze around it and bells were pounding through the Indian summer darkness. Thus she had stood with the love of her girlhood, with Alex Considine, a year ago, with another man on a starry deck last summer. She was happy and confused—when you were not in love one attractive man seemed much the same as another. Yet she felt very close to Rip—what he had said about his brother reminded her of all that was missing in his life and for a moment she felt that she could supply it—it would not be hard to fall in love with him. She was plagued with her bright unused beauty.

"You couldn't love me," he said suddenly. "It'll be somebody with a head on his shoulders."

But she was full of new thoughts about him when they said goodbye in the station and she took her seat in the parlor car. As the train started, the seat in front of her swung about and she faced Alex Considine.

Her first reaction was that he was not the man she had seen ten months before, but rather the very stranger whom she once met—the stranger with kind keen eyes and a face alive with the appreciation and understanding that had first attracted her. Then she remembered and gave him a smile that began charmingly so as to be all the more chilling when it suddenly stopped.

"You look fine, Kiki," he said quietly.

"Did you expect me to be withered away?"

"I've thought about you a great deal this summer."

It was what she had said to Rip—she supposed it was equally exaggerated.

"I was going to phone you tomorrow," he said, "Then I saw you after the game."

"There's a vacant seat up the car," she suggested. "Would you mind moving up there?"

"I'd rather not. The expedition is going back to Crete in December and I think it would be fine if you'd come along—just to prevent any talk we could get married."

"Perhaps I'd better move," she said. "This seat is over the wheels."

"You wouldn't want me to apologize," he said. "That would be merely revolting."

"Just why did you throw me over?" she asked. "I don't give a darn about you now but I'd like to know."

"I wanted a little time alone out in the world. Some day I'll explain, but now all I can think of is that I've lost ten months of you."

Her heart made an odd reminiscent tour of her chest.

"Did you like the game?" she asked. "For a Harvard man you show great interest in Yale."

"I was doing a little scouting. I played football as a sophomore."

"I didn't know you then."

"You didn't miss anything. I wasn't any Van Kamp."

She laughed.

"I think it was from you I first heard the name. You told me Yale bought him."

"They did—but I'm not sure it'll do them much good."

Instantly alert she demanded, "What do you mean?"

"I shouldn't have said that. We don't know anything for certain yet."

Kiki's imagination raced over the possibilities. Had Mr. Gittings in his cups boasted of his bargain? Did it have something to do with Rip's brother?

"It may come to nothing," he said, "and it doesn't sound well from me, because I suppose I ought to consider him a rival."

"That's all right, I've learned not to expect much from you, Alex."

She got up suddenly and went to the other seat but he followed and bending over her said: "I can't blame you, Kiki—but I'm very concerned with your happiness."

"Have I got to go into the day coach?"

"I'll go up there myself."

She hated him and for a moment she wished Rip was there, coolly and gracefully "breaking his neck." But after all this was no football field and Rip wouldn't show to advantage. Poor Rip—who had done nothing except risen in the world on the leverage of his magnificent body.

From the station she tried without success to get him on the phone—finally reached him next morning at training table. In masked words she told him what Considine had said. There was a long pause at the other end—then his voice with a desperate note:

"I can always leave college."

"Rip, don't talk like that. But I want you to be careful. Have you ever told anyone about Gittings?"

"No."

"Then don't admit anything. And Rip—remember that whatever happens I'm with you."

"Thank you, Kiki."

"I mean it—whatever happens. I wouldn't mind if everyone knew it."

Flushed and exalted she hung up the receiver. Her protective instincts were marshaled on his side and it was beginning to feel real. She was proud and pleased when he performed brilliantly against Princeton. There, three days later, she opened to the football news to find a shocking headline.

INELIGIBILITY RUMOR DENIED AT YALE MAJOR STAR BELIEVED INVOLVED

New Haven, Connecticut: The Chairman of the Yale Athletic Association today denied the rumor that a certain varsity star would not play against Harvard Saturday.

"The same line-up that faced Princeton will start Saturday's game," he said. "We have had no official protests against the eligibility of any players."

The rumor stemmed from Cambridge and has been traced to the Harvard Club in New York. The material at New Haven has been under par this year—only twelve "iron men" were used against Princeton—and the loss of any one of several key players might considerably affect...

Kiki's heart stood still. Again she ran over all possible avenues of leakage. Mr. Gittings had denied any indiscretion, but the check, drawn on a New York bank, might have passed through the hands of some Harvard man who recognized the name. Yet it would be difficult to produce evidence. Beyond that, Kiki was sure that Rip had been careful—had shied away from an offer to play baseball for a hotel last summer.

In a sudden panic she looked up Alex Considine's number—startled at the familiar

digits. He was in Cambridge but expected back today and off and on all day she called without leaving her name—just missed him at six to find that he would be at the Harvard Club for dinner. Slipping into a dinner dress she drove down to 44th Street and asked a suspicious doorman to take him a note. He came out surprised, without his hat, and seated in a grill nearby she came to the point:

"I saw the paper this morning. It's Rip Van Kamp they mean, isn't it?"

"I can't tell you, Kiki."

"You did tell me on the train. I want to know what you've got against him."

Alex hesitated.

"I can say this—if we had absolute proof against him we'd have acted by this time."

"Then you haven't got proof?"

"At this moment I personally don't know any proof."

From his phrasing she guessed at the truth.

"You're waiting for some proof right now."

"Are you in love with this man, Kiki?"

"Yes."

"Somehow I can't believe it."

"Can't you? Well, if you do anything to bar him out I'll marry him tomorrow night—if he wants me."

He nodded.

"That I can believe—you're a stubborn girl, Kiki, and you're one of the best. But I don't think you're in love with Van Kamp."

Suddenly she was crying angrily because she knew it was true. She was only getting started at being in love. It would be all right, it would come soon, it would atone for everything. But just now until it came she was so vulnerable. She could not avoid comparing Rip, boyish and unoriented, oblivious to so much, to Alex Considine, a grown man, confident and perceptive, with a will of his own making and his own mistakes.

"You'll see," she said chokingly, "You've always had everything and he's come up from nothing, and so you try to drag him down. It's so cruel, so mean."

"Kiki, I didn't start this. The information—" He broke off. "You sound as if you knew something—"

"Oh, no," she said quickly, "But even if there is something I'll stick by him."

She got up and left him with the untouched cocktails. Utterly confused she stopped at a telegraph office to send Rip a message of tenderness and cheer.

VI

Rip had given her four tickets and she went up to Cambridge with friends, arriving

at the stadium in a thin grisly snow. Remembering last year, the floaty joy and the sunshine, she was sad—even though the morning papers had relieved her worst apprehensions. Neither Athletic Association had given out any statement and the official line-up included Rip's name. She opened a program.

Left Guard: Van Kamp, 5'11", 159, 22, Newton High

The short history of a life—the boy from an orphanage with his brain in his nervous system. He was out there now in mid-field facing a crimson player in a white helmet, while a half dollar flipped up and fell in the snow. Yale strung out across the turf behind the ball—the leather boomed and Rip led the race down the field, skirting one blocker, sliding around another to make the first tackle of the game.

"He ought to be an end," said a man behind her. "He could be anything."

"But who can play guard like that—watch any halfback and you're just watching the ball, watch Rip Van Kamp and you're watching the game."

The snow fell thicker—when a man slid twice his own length in the muddy mush it made a sentence for paper or radio, giving the game a wild haphazard quality, making it into an obstacle race and a winter sport. The tricks and laterals that were breath-taking anyhow assumed a miraculous flickering aspect in the chalky haze.

She watched Rip sitting on his haunches while the other team huddled. Quick as the play started he was on his feet, borne backward momentarily on a shoulder, then free and over at the other side of the line, running smack upright into the play. That was why the crowd could see him, because he went in like that, it was why his face was ribbed with scabs all through the season.

The half ended with Yale leading, 10-3. It was growing colder, the people next to Kiki were taking measure to keep warm and their voices rose—the girl beside Kiki said to her companion:

"I don't know him but that's his brother Harry with the black hat two rows down."

Kiki looked. Harry was one of those blue faced men who shave futilely twice a day and who have contributed their affliction to our conception of the ungodly. He had no redeeming points—his eyes were set far apart as if pushed out by the spreading and flattening of his nose—yet Kiki felt disloyal as she saw a certain undeniable resemblance.

With the opening of the second half Harvard came to life—within ten minutes roars of triumph tolled across the field from the crimson side and the faces around Kiki were frowning and foreboding. She peered at Rip through field-glasses; as ever he was cool, white and impassive—as the game went into the fourth quarter with the score tied, there was a time when he was the only man on that weary team who seemed alive. That was when he knocked down a dazed Yale man who was trying to run out an intercepted pass from behind his own goal.

Ten minutes to play. Yale, taking the ball on its own twenty, came out of the huddle with both tackles on the right side of the line. Suddenly the left end was in motion running toward the side-line, but two seconds before the ball was snapped cutting back toward his own goal while a halfback stepped up into the line on the right. This made the guard eligible for a pass and Rip caught the soggy ball almost in the clear for a forty yard gain and a first down.

The Yale stand came alive with hope, but almost immediately time was called and there was a puzzled murmur from the crowd. Three men with an air of a delegation

had appeared at the Yale bench and the coaches were on their feet talking to them while the substitutes, shrouded in blankets, gathered around the argument. A moment later one substitute threw off his blanket and dashed out of the group, warming up; then seized his head guard, ran out and reported to the referee. The murmur grew when he spoke to Rip Van Kamp and the voices around Kiki were asking:

"What is it?"

"Taking Van Kamp out?"

"They're crazy. He isn't hurt."

"Can you beat it? With the score tied!"

Kiki saw Rip tear off his headgear and run to the sidelines. Still ignorant of what had happened the crowd rose in a wild thundering cheer, which died away in wonder as he exchanged words with the coach, turned and ran toward the showers. The murmur broke out again—this time the guesses bordered on the truth.

"Was he put out? Did he foul somebody?"

"They didn't pull him out because they wanted to."

"It must be Van Kamp that the newspapers—"

It was all through the crowd in a minute—the connection was made by everyone at once and the confirmation drifted up from the seats closest to the field. Rip Van Kamp had been taken out on a protest by the Harvard Athletic Association.

Kiki shrank down in her seat covering her face as if she were the next victim of a mob. It had happened—here at the very end they had taken it all away from Rip, sent him off like a disgraced schoolboy. In a second she was on her feet pushing past her friends, running up the aisle and down the dark entrance and then along under the stand in the direction he had taken.

"Where's the dressing room?" she cried. A vacuous drunk looked at her blankly and there was a roar overhead as the game resumed its course. She ran from gate to gate along the snowy cinder walk until a guard directed her, adding:

"You haven't a chance of getting in there. They don't even let old players in."

"When do they come out?"

He told her and she went to an iron grill and waited. After a long time she heard the game end with the perfunctory disappointed cheering of a tie score and then saw the first dribble of the crowd come down the runways, then the great waves of it, surging past her as if it were rolling, careless and insensible, over her and over Rip...

Time passed. There were only streams, then trickles and finally individuals like drops. A truck marked Harvard Crimson drove up in a rush and a boy jumped out with a bundle of papers.

"Final game score! Harvard protests Van Kamp! Yale Guard played in West!"

Kiki bought a paper and held it with trembling fingers. The thing was in hasty large type just under the score.

Van Kamp was removed from the game on Harvard's claim that he played with Almara

College in Oklahoma in 1934. Identification was made by his co-ed wife...

That was all, but Kiki could have read nothing more. After she had said aloud in a fierce voice "That's a lie," she knew suddenly and without question that it was true.

VII

Much later she wondered how Alex Considine knew where to look, for it was he who found her sitting against a cement pillar with the paper in her lap, staring at nothing.

"I have a car," he said, "We can walk to it if you'll let me help you."

"I'm all right. I just sat down to think things over."

"I've been looking for you, Kiki. Just at the end I hoped it wasn't going to happen. At first the girl wouldn't talk until—"

"Don't tell me," Kiki said quickly. "What will they do to Rip?"

"I imagine he'll have to leave college. He must have known the rules."

"Oh, poor Rip—poor Rip."

Suddenly she told him about the money from Mr. Gittings, everything.

"And I wish it had been more," she said passionately. "He deserved it. I didn't want him to die like Ted Coy with nothing left but his gold football."

"He was a great player—they can't take that away from him and he'll probably play professionally."

"Oh, but it's all spoiled now—and he was so beautiful."

They drove into Boston through the twilight.

"It's a long trip to New York," he said. "Why don't we go out in the country to some friends of mine. I know you don't want to be engaged to me again but supposing we just get married? I can vouch for the weather on the Nile."

When she was silent he said:

"You're thinking of Van Kamp."

"Yes. I wish there was something I could do. If I could only think that he wasn't alone."

"You love him?"

"No. I was lying to you that night. But I keep thinking of how they'll turn on him—when he's given them so many grand afternoons."

He pulled up the car suddenly.

"Shall I take you to him—I know where the team's staying."

Kiki hesitated.

"I haven't got anything for him now. It was all wrong—the directions were different. I'll go with you, Alex."

"I'm glad."

The car sped on through the city, turning the right corners, stopping at the right signs, and then into the country, always gathering speed—on the right road at last.