

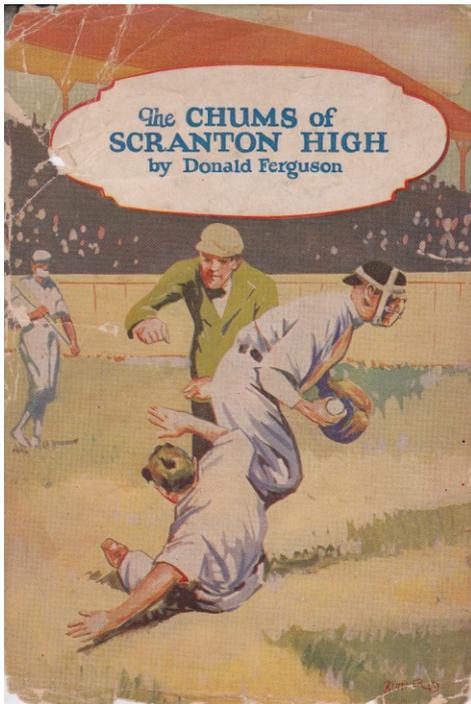
The Chums of Scranton High

The Series is a Century Old, But Still Pleases

By David M. Baumann
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2,586 words

I don't know how the first book in this series came onto my shelves. Most likely, someone sent it to me, but I don't remember who it was. Or maybe I bought it for a dollar at a used bookstore. I don't even remember how long I had it before I finally took it down to read it. It was a thin volume with faded red boards and a spine that was loose and ragged. If it had ever had a dust jacket, that had probably returned to its constituent atoms before I was born. I noted that the book had been published in 1919, so it seemed fitting to be reading it about the time it was approaching its first century mark.



Now I've read other books from that era and although some were eyebrow-raisingly entertaining, I found most to be rather ho-hum—just too dated in style and uninteresting in plot really to capture my affection. So when I began to read *The Chums of Scranton High*, I was not automatically expecting anything much. That was the reason it took me so long to pull it off the shelf.

Fortunately, I was wrong. There was a definite old-timiness to the story, but there was also a distinct charm. The writing was skillfully done and the story was engaging. So I set to learn more about the books and the author.

The author is identified as Donald Ferguson, and that's about all I could learn about him. Whether this was a pseudonym or not, I don't know. His words and his style come across now as somewhat formal and in places a bit stilted, but in a good way.

He doesn't read like a dusty uptight smughead at all, but more like a grandfather telling a story to enrapt grandchildren, his own eyes sparkling with the rapport he is creating. Whoever he was, he was a good storyteller.

There are four books in the series. Curiously, they all have the same title, sort of, the distinction being either in a subtitle or in an extension of the title. They are

The Chums of Scranton High (with the subtitle *Hugh Morgan's Uphill Fight*)
The Chums of Scranton High Out for the Pennant

The Chums of Scranton High on the Cinder Path
The Chums of Scranton High at Ice Hockey

To add to the confusion of the titling, all four books were published in 1919, and all have the same artwork on the dust jacket. Booksellers have to pay attention to detail if they want to list their offering correctly, and not all of them do. Several simply listed their item as *The Chums of Scranton High*. Before I figured out that this could be a problem, I bought a few books that were not the ones I thought I was ordering, which gave me some duplicates and therefore the benefit of having several books to give to others. Eventually, once I learned the ropes, I was able to find all four books in uniform format in original dust jacket.

Fortunately, that was not difficult or expensive. Now how often do you hear that? There are many copies of these books available in impressive condition for their age, and they cost anywhere from about six to fifteen dollars. They have also been reprinted in paperback; I have no interest in such reprints personally, but offer that such things give evidence that there is still interest in these old stories, and that they are in the public domain.

What are they like? Well, they're sports stories, but they're a lot more than that too. They wouldn't fit into the genre of the Chip Hilton or Bronc Burnett books. They're really the stories of a small set of friends, high school boys, who like sports but more than that, like adventures. The small set of friends is the eponymous "chums of Scranton High". The four books are set in the four seasons of a single twelvemonth, which I thought was pretty clever.

The Chums of Scranton High, or Hugh Morgan's Uphill Fight

This introductory story of the Scranton High Chums introduces Hugh Morgan as the leader of the set of boys who will be featured in the series, along with several of those same chums, especially his closest friend, Thad Stevens. We are also introduced to Nick Lang, the town bully and an habitual malefactor, and his two close buddies. In a fresh springtime, the chums are involved in putting together a worthy baseball team for competition in the local high school league. However, although this plot item appears frequently throughout the story, the primary tale is about how Hugh solves a mystery.

Because of his reputation for honesty and hard work, the local dowager, a Mrs. Pangborn, asks him to investigate thefts from her valuable and prized teaspoon collection. Mrs. Pangborn, an elderly Frenchwoman with a career in Red Cross work, organizes much of the charitable tasks that the ladies of Scranton perform. This volume (and the other three as well) was clearly written while the first World War was still going on; the war is mentioned as a backdrop a few times as the four tales unfold.

Mrs. Pangborn is described as "very wrinkled and old", but is obviously a kindly soul who has given some work to a reserved and lonely boy who is unpopular at the high school. She wants to do right by him, but has good reason to suspect that he has been taking teaspoons from her collection. She asks Hugh to investigate quietly so as not to embarrass the boy.

One scene that moved me in the course of Hugh's investigation was when he and Thad rescue a black child from drowning. The passage includes these words:

Black or white, it made not the least difference to [Hugh] just then; that child's life was as precious in his mother's sight as if he were the pink and white darling of a wealthy family.

Hugh and Thad are conscious of the racial strata of society that were commonly accepted at the time, but more than once they make bold to cross them and show respect and tenderness to black servants and their children, and to visit the neighborhoods where they live. Their warmheartedness and courage become crucial for the solving of the mystery.

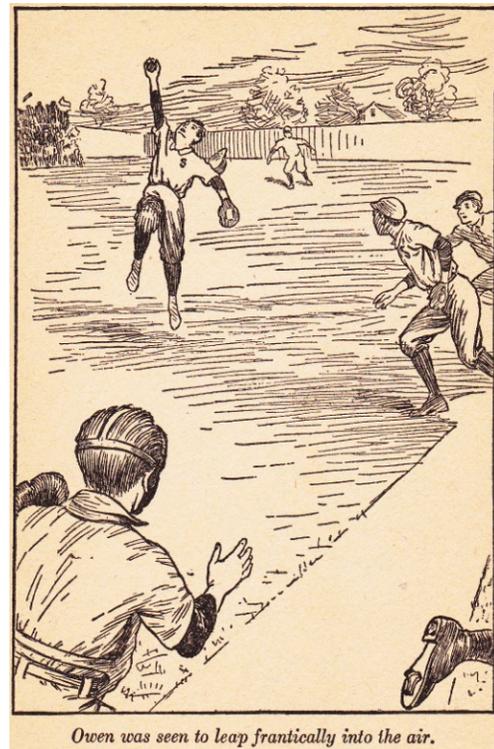
The Chums of Scranton High Out for the Pennant

This book, set in a bright and warm summertime, continues the story recounted in the previous volume, in which the lads of Scranton High follow up on their training and practice, and finally get to the competition and playoffs which will determine which high school will win the pennant. Will it be Scranton, Allandale, or Belleville? The baseball games are described with gusto and skillful attention to detail, and surely emerge from the author's familiarity with the game.

The companion plot has to do with a respected but down-and-out elderly couple who live in Scranton. The man is disabled and unable to work, so his wife supports them by taking in laundry and mending. They barely subsist, so the town is outraged when the woman's long-absent hobo of a brother shows up and moves in, taking advantage of his sister's kindness to find a life of ease. Hugh and Thad particularly are brought to the flashpoint of anger several times over the sponginess of the woman's brother, and devise an ingenious way to put an end to it. But, as in all the books in the series, what could have been a simple plot easily told becomes complicated and full of surprises.

The writing was skilled enough to move me to emotional responses, whether excitement over the description of plays in the baseball games, or anger at the rank injustice of the situation suffered by the long-suffering and patient elderly couple.

One thought I had is that the book was published years before Alcoholics Anonymous got started, and the subsequent insights that emerged and gave us terminology like "codependent", "denial", "enabling", and "addictive personalities". What I thought was strange, and which also made me feel some frustration and anger, was that the description of these behaviors in many books of a century ago often saw them as entertaining or humorous. I have been stirred when reading episodes in such books in which manipulating sponges repeatedly take advantage of caring but naïve relatives and cause them great hurt, but which are presented as if their behaviors were a comedy routine.



Owen was seen to leap frantically into the air.

Fortunately, and to its great credit, this second Scranton High Chums book does not do that. The sponge is presented as a genial but genuine lout right from the start.

The Chums of Scranton High on the Cinder Path

It has long been agreed among most series books fans that some of the best writing in the original text Hardy Boys canon is found in the opening paragraphs of the wintertime tale, *The Mystery of Cabin Island*:

Driven by a stiff breeze from the west, a trim little ice-boat went scudding over the frozen surface of Barmet Bay. The winter air was cold and clear, the hills rising from the shores were blanketed in snow, and although a patch of black water away off toward the east gave evidence that King Frost had been balked at the Atlantic, the bay itself was a gleaming sheet of ice.

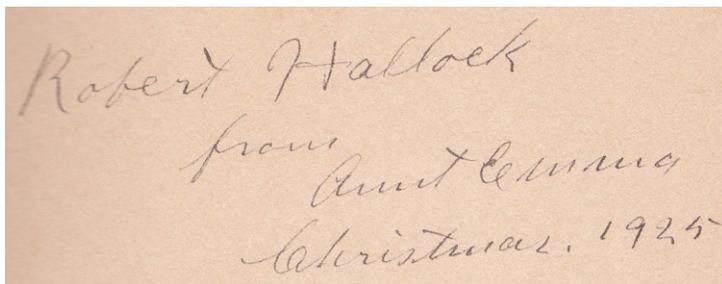
The long cold snap had caused rejoicing in the hearts of the young folk of Bayport. Although the ice in mid-bay was not solid, along the shore and in the numerous coves of the indented bay it was frozen to a safe depth. The dark figures of skaters sped like swallows in flight on the miniature natural rinks close to shore, and farther out the speeding ice-boats with their billowing sails resembled huge sea gulls as they raced before the wind.

So when I read the opening paragraphs of this Scranton High Chums book, set in a colorful autumn, I was transported and impressed:

The bright October sun was half-way down the western sky one Saturday afternoon. Two-thirds of the Fall month had already gone, and the air was becoming fairly crisp in the early mornings.

All around the forest, trees were painted various shades of bright scarlet, burnt umber brown, and vivid gold by the practiced fingers of that master artist, the Frost-King. Flocks of robins and blackbirds were gathering rather late this year, preparatory to taking their annual pilgrimage to the warm Southland. They flew overhead at times in vast numbers, making a tremendous chatter.

A noisy bunch of crows cawed unceasingly amidst the treetops as a large, lumbering old automobile passed along the country road, the same filled with lively boys, and also a number of sacks stuffed to their utmost capacity with what appeared to be black walnuts, shell-bark hickories, butternuts, and even splendid large chestnuts.



Added to this is the inscription on the front endpaper, written in a slender-nibbed fountain pen, that reads, “Robert Hallock from Aunt Emma, Christmas 1925”. This volume instantly became a valued treasure.

In this story, sports authorities in Scranton have decided to host what we might call today a cross-country meet with competitors from the local high schools in “all manner of stunts, from sprinting, to leaping hurdles, engaging in the high jump, with the aid of poles; throwing the hammer;

and, in fact, every conceivable exercise that would be apt to come under the head of a genuine athletic tournament." To that end, a cinder track had been laid down, measuring precisely one-eighth of a mile in length.



He encouraged Claude to show his grit.

The meet, however, only takes up the last thirty-some pages of the book; it is only the backdrop to several subplots, viz. what is behind the reputation of being haunted that is attached to the local quarry that had been abandoned some ten years before? What will happen to Claude, the "Momma's Boy" who is never allowed any kind of manly physical exercise? What reprehensible plans have Nick Lang, the local ne'er-do-well, and his cronies devised to cause harm to the popular Scranton High athletes, Hugh Morgan in particular? And what happened to "K.K.", one of the inner crowd of athletes, who failed to return from a practice run on the lonely backroads the day before the big meet?

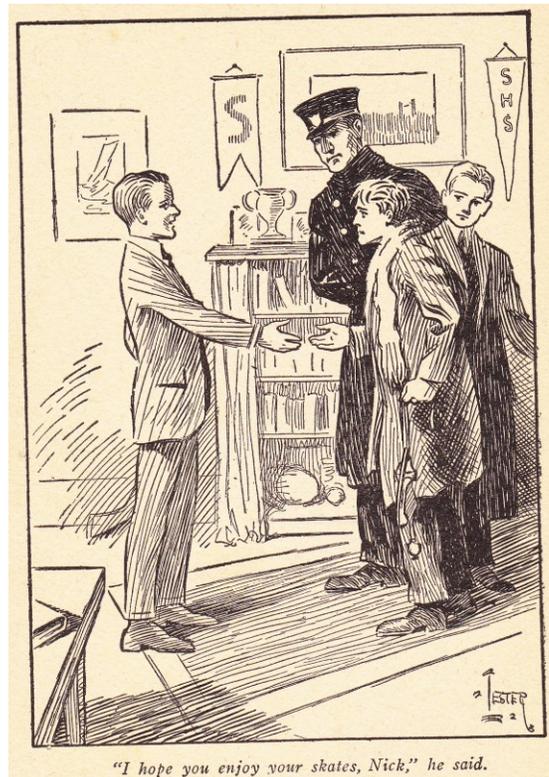
The Chums of Scranton High at Ice Hockey

The final Scranton High Chums story begins in January, with the temperature falling rapidly and thereby giving hope to the youth of Scranton that some enjoyable ice skating is

imminent. The sports-minded boys are not content with mere pleasure skating, and set out to organize a competition with the hockey players of neighboring high schools. Ice hockey practice takes place most weekday afternoons.

But there are two subplots as well; come to think of it, the ice hockey game only takes up one chapter in the middle of the book and two at the end, so the subplots can hardly be seen as secondary to the story in spite of the books' title. What are these subplots?

Given a chance to make good, will Nick Lang actually draw upon some inner resources and overcome not only his antisocial behavior but the reputation that that behavior has earned him? The subplot unfolds in pieces throughout the book, and is wonderfully and movingly recounted. Reading one particular passage stirred my emotions deeply as accounts in previous books had done. There are no trite or easy answers here, and the unfolding of this subplot is engaging and by no means obvious. The burglary of a sports



"I hope you enjoy your skates, Nick," he said.

shop that bears all the hallmarks of Nick's style skillfully complicates the storyline. Some of the fine sentences in this train are, "There never yet was a fellow who nobly redeemed his past but what a bunch of wolves set up a howl on his heels"; and "I'd have ten times as much respect for the fellow who's been down and climbs up again through his own will power, than for the one who's always been shielded from temptation and never really proved what he had in him."

In the other subplot, the character of Deacon Winslow, the town blacksmith who is a very minor personage in earlier volumes, takes on a significant role in this book. He is an influence on the aforementioned Nick Lang, but the subplot has to do with a tragedy that had occurred in his family forty-five years earlier. Winslow is now eighty-five but still hearty and active in his work; yet he and his wife are profoundly marked by the tragedy they had experienced nearly half a century before. This being a series book, it is not difficult to conclude that things will resolve well before the last page is turned, but how the resolution comes is heartwarmingly told, and the wrap-up is satisfying.

The Chums of Scranton High is a most satisfying series, each volume presenting its own charm. The writing is high quality; perhaps the standout skill in the author was his ability to describe scenes and events in a way that evoke emotion in the reader, whether outrage; admiration; sympathy with those who suffer loss, joy, love, or even deserve the penalty of wrongdoing; and satisfaction that things will turn out well but not tritely. He presents goodness as an admirable manly virtue, and describes the exuberance of teen boyhood of a century ago admirably, even as a timeless reality.

As I wrote above, the books are plentifully available even in original format, and they are inexpensive.