

His Conscience is Clear

(New York)

Press Row at the Polo Grounds is down low and directly behind home plate, just a short distance from the batter, a fact that had been of only professional interest until the Chapman business. Then I wished press row was in the upper deck. Or maybe at a Midtown dive...someplace with gin so I could just get a drink and forget it.

You don't come to the ballpark to see a guy get it in the head, even if you're paid to be there. There were 18 grand in the stands on a Monday and lots of them were kids, and they were all there for one reason: because this was a hell of a pennant race. Two teams that had neither of them ever won anything going at each other fractions apart in the standings. The Babe out in right for the Yanks, the Polack against Mays on the mound. Yank fans were mad enough about the race themselves that they might not have admitted it, but they admired the visitors for their spunk. Cleveland's been hanging on to first most of the year with the Yanks and Sox on their tails, and then last week the Yanks clean them out in Cleveland, and you still can't get the Indians out of first.

You come out to the ballpark to see a team like that, especially if you think your guys can beat them. Which explains 18 grand spending a nickel to make the 12-

minute ride up from Grand Central to Harlem on an overcast Monday afternoon. You come out and you cheer and yell and even scream if the Bazoo's up and he might pop one. You don't figure some guy's gonna get it in the head. And then it happens and the place goes somber.

Because Press Row is right down in the front we have a better view than any of us want at this moment. Chapman is first up in the fifth and he approaches the plate swinging two bats. He tosses one, sets his cap and takes his place in the right-hand box. He bends his knees and leans in. He always leans in. From the mound Mays sees this as plainly as any of us. He sees it, but he does not let it pass. He takes it as a challenge; it is his nature. He already trails 3-0 and is not of a mind to let anyone else get a good look at the plate, so his first pitch rides up and in, up and in. Mays is not having a good day and Chapman is digging in and we are not surprised that the first pitch is up and in.

The sun is high and in our faces, and since we are directly behind him I suppose it is right in Chapman's face too, which perhaps explains why he does not move. There is a thud and it is only through hindsight that I can describe what next occurs because too much happens too quickly. Mays reacts first. He races toward the ball, which has caromed onto the field. His are the focused senses of a trained athlete, and those focused senses tell him to field the ball and throw it to first for the out. It is only when he sees Chapman collapse in the batters box – it is only when we all see him – that what has occurred is revealed. He lies there

for a long time. Then he tries to rise and we are close enough to see the injury. The ball has opened the left side of his head above the eye and near the temple, and it is a mass of blood and bone.

Most of us are paid to be writers and not reporters, and this kind of thing is where you see the difference. Runyan, who is two seats from me, tells his readers he saw Chapman try to talk but nothing came out. I did not see this myself, and while he is a great observer I also do not put it past Runyan to embellish such a moment if he thought it might sell a paper. Hanna said in the Sun that Chapman tried to run to first, but this is plainly for color. Chipman said Mays told him that John Henry – he was pals with Chapman, used to catch for the Senators and went to the clubhouse after he got hit – that John Henry told Mays Chapman had said, “I’m all right; tell Mays not to worry.” All I can say is maybe Mays said it to make himself feel better or maybe John Henry said it to make Mays feel better or maybe Chipman just threw it in for an angle. But if so it must have been the last thing Chapman said because he went out three or four steps past the mound as Graney and Morton were helping him toward the clubhouse. I saw his legs go limp. Personally I don’t suspect he ever came to again. But I suppose if it makes people feel better to believe different then that is somehow the job of a good writer. At moments such as those, the reporting part isn’t very important.

I don’t want to sound like a sap; it isn’t the first time I’ve seen something like this. I saw Fewster get it in the spring down in Jacksonville. Pfeffer hit him right in the

head. He was out for 10 minutes right there in the box and they didn't think he'd make it. They had to operate, then they sent him up to Johns Hopkins, and the doctors up there operated again, and he didn't come back to the team until July. But he did come back. I've seen plenty of guys get it in the head and they all of them came back, all of them. Until Chapman.

The whole thing just makes me want to puke. Seeing it made me want to puke. Thinking about the fans, the kids seeing it makes me want to puke. At least we get in for free and we're there doing a job. Not the kids, the fans; they pay to get in and they're cheering for their team and then the sun shines and Mays comes in tight and a guy doesn't move. At the time we don't know for sure that he isn't gonna make it, so I guess that's the only good part of it. Maybe the fans have seen guys get it before, too, and they all came back. But there's 18,000 bugs in the stands and there's some kids in among them, and I feel bad for those kids. Some of them never been to a game and they begged their pops to take them and their pops did and now this happens. I just hate it, that's all.

So Morton and Graney carry Chapman into the clubhouse and then the game starts up again with Lunte running at first and sure enough he scores and that makes it 4-0. There ain't much racket from the stands or the field at first, but after a while you forget if you've been around long enough and you've seen guys get it – or even if you ain't but you just assume he'll be OK. The Babe's coming up so you forget that stuff and start cheering again. Which is what happens.

By the ninth it's still 4-0 and there is no sign that Coveleskie is allowing anything, so the crowd begins to leave, only they do so slowly as the Infant is first up. He does not hit for the circuit, but he does smack one for a single and Pratt follows with a pass. Two hits later there are three runs up for the home team, but three will not beat four in baseball or much else, so the home crowd leaves disappointed. I leave the park wondering whether Chapman is aware that the run he put on base has won the game.

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The baseball writing fraternity does not as a normal course do death watches, preferring to mourn over liquids rarely found in medicinal supply at hospitals. Under the circumstances, however, it is collectively determined that we should divide the evening and night in the halls of St. Laurence Hospital in two-hour increments and alert colleagues in the event of developments. For those of us – which is most – working for morning papers, this is especially sensitive because we face midnight deadlines. Igoe gets the 11 to 1 a.m. block, a comfort because Hype not only writes for the World but he is also an honest jake and will do everybody square under the circumstances. I draw 5 to 7 a.m., a time of no consequence except insofar as it disrupts my rest. When midnight passes with no further developments we are on the press with news of the game and injury and I am home with the meager portion of sleep that the straws have allowed.

Considering the taxi ride, that is little more than four hours. I arrive at the hospital early because the truth is I did not want to sleep; I wanted to know whether he had been hurt as bad as it appeared and whether he would play again this season and perhaps whether he would play again at all, and most importantly how any of this would affect the pennant race. The thing had been so much fun, so much fun, and now this had to go and happen and I didn't want the race to be spoiled.

Die? Didn't occur to me. Not until I actually got to the hospital and talked to Dan Daniel – he had the 3 to 5 a.m. shift. Daniel said the X-rays showed a bad fracture and he was doing OK at first but then he got worse so they called in the chief surgeon, a doc by the name of T.M. Marrigan. He was in the operating room more than an hour, but even so it didn't help and now they didn't think he was going to make it. Speaker was there – he'd been there all night – with Doc White, who was the house doc keeping watch, and O'Neill and Graney and a couple of the other Indians. Daniel and I were waiting in the hall. The queer thing was it sounded like they were arguing in the room. We couldn't make out the words, and couldn't figure what teammates like Speaker and O'Neill would be arguing about if Chapman was actually dying, on top of which it didn't seem like good medicine under the circumstances. Then Speaker comes out and leaves; he doesn't say anything, just leaves. So Daniel and I looked at each other puzzled. It wasn't but a couple of minutes after I got there that Doc White came

out and said Chapman had died and there hadn't been nothing they could do to help him and that was about it.

So I started making phone calls. I called the World first and told Gavin, then started in on the afternoons: the Post, Telegram, Mail, Evening Journal and the Daily News. Daniel picked up most of the other mornings, the Times, Sun, Herald, American, and the Tribune. I didn't mind the extra work, not even a bit because I knew as long as I could keep dialing and talking and working I wouldn't have to stop and think about it. And thinking about it – just sitting and thinking about it -- was the one thing I did not want to do. It's a funny thing about being a reporter: You can be in the middle of a fire or a shooting or any other kind of bloody mess, but if you're putting a story together right at that moment, doing so helps you look right on past the gore. Gavin calls it "focus." As long as you're focused on the story, you don't have to think about the people actually getting killed. So I was glad to be busy.

We were just about through the calls when we saw Graney and O'Neill come out of the room and I started over to talk to 'em but O'Neill was leaning on Graney and they were both of them blubbering – just blubbering – so I didn't have the heart to ask them anything. Just followed them downstairs and got 'em in a cab and made sure the driver knew to take them to the Ansonia and I gave him a fiver for the fare and told him whatever he did not to ask no questions. I never

before seen two pro athletes just blubbering and I didn't know how to handle it so I gave the cabbie a fiver and took the next hack home myself.

There was supposed to be another game at the Grounds that afternoon, but they'd call it off sure once word got around. Speaker wasn't gonna play, nor O'Neill nor any of the Indians as much as I could see. I didn't have any stomach for the ballpark myself. Sleep sounded a lot better.

By afternoon the papers were full of the story, and so were the streets. Word was around that Mays had gone to the DA's office. Joyce didn't say anything for the public, but you can still guess the talk that started. He's going up for manslaughter or maybe murder, they were giving him the third degree, they made him a deal that they wouldn't push nothing if he agreed not to pitch any more. Then a story started that he was a basket case anyway, so none of the rest made any difference. You could hear any of them stories for a nickel on 5th Avenue. The wires said Boston and Detroit had both voted not to play if Mays wasn't kicked out of the game, and St. Louis and Philly were supposed to be talking about it. One of the papers quoted Ban Johnson as saying he didn't think Mays would ever pitch again.

It was all a mess to me. First off, what were the chances of Mays coming back, and could the Yanks win if he didn't? For pitchers they still had the Gob, but after him there was only Picus and Thormahlen and the Ranger and Mogridge.

Thormahlen wasn't much more than a kid, and Collins had been catching bad guys in Texas the year before. That left the Gob, Quinn and Mogridge. Picus was having a good year, but he was already 37, so his arm could fall off at any time. Mogridge hadn't been more than a fill in for Hug so far, and not a very good one at that, and his 4.30 ERA sure wasn't going to win any medals.

No, if Mays cracked the Yanks were through. The real question was whether Mays would crack. If it was me, I would. I couldn't stand out there with everybody watching, and knowing what had happened, and keep my wits. As for going on the road, any pitcher in that spot was sure to get a Class A working over from the bench-jockeys, the fans and the press. There wouldn't be anybody taking his side, either. Then again Mays wasn't me. He was a hard bird. Sometimes your dad dying young will make you that way. Mays' dad died when he was 12. Maybe it was traveling around the country all those years riding freights and playing semi-pro. Mays did that from the time he was old enough to pitch until he was nearly 20. Maybe it was just a mean streak. Some guys are that way. But I could hear him saying that if the guy died he died, it ain't no nothin' to me and no reason not to do my job. Mays didn't have too many friends, and that was all right with him, so he didn't have anything to lose by coming back and pitching. Personally, I guessed he'd be back.

To me, the question was whether he should. I didn't know the answer to that one, but lots of guys in my line did. In the Tribune, McGeehan called talk of giving

Mays the boot “cowardly,” and wrote that Speaker himself said Mays wasn’t to blame. I’m not privy to every word that Speaker tells every reporter, but that one was probably a stretcher on McGeehan’s part. In the Post, Chipman said “fair-minded people” would assure him that he was not at fault. The Times wrote an editorial defending him. Look, I sure ain’t saying Mays was trying to hit Chapman, much less kill him. Let’s just say he didn’t much care. So does that make him guilty? For me, I guess it just means I ain’t in the mood to defend the guy, and let’s leave it at that.

Only I can’t leave it at that. If I don’t defend him, the fans think I’m a cold-hearted jerk. But if I do, I’m not sure I’m telling the truth. The nice thing about writing sports is that the fans don’t expect you to tell the truth...not really. They want that yarn like Runyon weaves or Granny. There’s such a thing as morals and ethics in other parts of my business, but we don’t worry about them too much in sports because what people care about is whether the Yanks will win. And then this sort of thing happens and gets in the way of the story.

The only thing I can think to do is go up and see Mays himself. He, Freddie and their baby had an apartment in the Roger Morris at 158th and Edgecomb, up on top of Coogan’s Bluff. I’d known him since he came over to the Yanks, and while he wasn’t any joy to talk to he’d never done me wrong, nor the other way around either. So I got the idea to stop by and find out for myself. Reporters are curious that way.

I knocked. He let me in and sat down. Freddie was there, but when she saw me she repaired to the bedroom with the baby. He looked worn, but he wasn't unhinged or deranged and he was willing to talk. While he didn't mind me coming by it looked like he'd have been just as content to hole up alone there and not come out for a while. You could see the Grounds through the uncurtained window. I took the chair with my back to it.

"I wasn't tryin' to hit him," he starts out.

"What were you trying to do."

"Move him back, of course. First pitch, we're down three, and I ain't got my best stuff, so I needed some room. Been pitchin' to Chapman for years," he said. "I knew he'd be leanin' in. If I didn't push him back, the way I was goin', he'd take me to right all afternoon. So I pushed him back first pitch. Only I ain't got my stuff."

I looked at him and tried to read his mind the best I could. He looked worn by the whole thing, but not shook up by it, as if it had been one more unfortunate, regrettable play on a bad day. This was the Mays I guess I'd actually expected – not very admirable, not the least bit sympathetic ...but by no stretch nuts. It seemed to me that as far as Mays was concerned, the problem with actually

beating the guy wasn't simply that Chapman had been killed but that Mays had put what turned out to be the winning run on base.

"Why'd you run in and field the ball?"

He shrugged. "Because that's what I was thinking about doing. I heard the crack and the ball came toward me and I went for it. I wasn't watchin' the batter and I wasn't watchin' what the ball hit. I couldn't tell anyway. His bat was up there and it could have been the one as easily as the other."

That also fit with Mays' reputation. On the mound he didn't let anything distract him. He thought about pitching and if the ball was hit he thought about fielding, and if somebody hit it hard he snarled. If Mays had been a reporter, Gavin would have said he had great focus.

"What'd Joyce tell you?"

I figured I better see him before the cops came lookin' for me. I just told him what happened. There must have been 18,000 witnesses, so it wasn't like he wasn't gonna find out. Let him hear my side, too."

"Which is...?"

“That I wasn’t trying to hurt him. You pitch a guy tight. That’s what you do. I threw it tight and it missed and the rest just happened.”

“And he said...?”

“He put it down for what it was, an accident. And that’s the end of it.”

“Now what?”

Mays looked at me like he didn’t understand the question. “Now what? Now the pennant race.

I lost the game, so we’re a game and a half back. I shouldn’t have lost. I let the team down.”

“The papers say you’re so broke up about this business you may not be able to pitch all year. Huston and Ruppert say you’ll need some extra time...”

“They’re fat and they’re wrong.” He said it in a studied, almost detached and therefore slightly inhuman way. “About bein’ a wreck...what do you think?”

“The papers say the Tigers and Sox won’t take the field if you’re pitching. They want Johnson to toss you out.” I don’t suppose the Indians feel too good about you either. That’s three teams. One more and Johnson might have to do

something. If I was on the White Sox and I was smart, I'd make it a majority and turn up the heat to get you suspended."

"The Red Sox was a bunch of gutless pansies last year. That's why I quit 'em. They still are. The Tigers are just old and tired. They're afraid of Cobb and all he does is pop off. I've fought that bastard before and I'll do it again if I need to. As for the White Sox, who says they're smart? After last year, those guys couldn't agree to take a piss."

So you're saying you'll be back by the first of September?"

"My conscience is clear," he says. "My next turn's Monday against Detroit right down on that mound." He points out the window. "I'll be there. You?"

Mays wasn't there on Wednesday for the second game with Cleveland, and neither was Speaker. He'd taken the Lake Shore Limited back home with Mrs. Chapman and the body. I felt bad for her, and not just because of what happened. Word was she'd gotten the wire Monday evening about the accident, took the first train here, probably didn't sleep a bit, got to the hospital too late, and then had to turn around and go right back with her dead husband. I felt bad for her.

They had the flags at half staff and all the players on both teams wore mourning bands, and there were 18,000 fans but hardly any of 'em knew whether to cheer or not because they didn't want to be impolite to the dead. "Won't be any yellin' today," McGeehan told the rest of press row, and he was near to right. The Indians were up 3-2 going into the ninth and with Bagby pitching a lot of the fans started to leave. "Glad to see 'em get it," I heard one of the bugs say after the first batter made out in the ninth, as if the victory was the consolation prize for Chapman's death. But then Duffy popped a single, Pipp came up and over to the side you hear somebody stand up and yell "give us a hit, kid" and that started sort of a buzz that was between "we shouldn't be sayin' stuff" and "yeah, let's go." Well Pipp does get hold a one and smacks it out to left. It gets between Graney and Jamieson and around comes Lewis and then around comes Pipp himself and with each base the roar gets louder until by the time he comes home it's an ovation. As far as the fans are concerned at that point the period of mourning is over. Bagby has lost 4-3, the Yanks are back within a half game and the business has been put behind.

But if that is so with the Yankee fans, it is not so elsewhere, and my schedule involves running from one distraction to another. The Indians win on Thursday, rendering even the Infant's 43rd hardly worth writing about. In Cleveland, the Plain Dealer delights its readers by repeating the rumor that Mays has suffered a nervous breakdown. The funeral is Friday, and Shore, Lewis and Pipp volunteer

to represent the Yanks. The Tigers come to town Saturday and Cobb makes a big public show as to how he's got no grudge with Mays and all the hubbub about walking out against Mays is the press's fault and the fans shouldn't believe any of it. I've seen Cobb operate for a long time and if he says it didn't happen it did. And if he gets really angry and swears and gestures and insists it didn't happen, that's the surest sign that it did.

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We didn't see Mays at the park over the weekend, which pretty well let all the talk circulate around the league that he might have cracked, or that Johnson might have got to him and told him to take a long vacation. But Hug said he was going to pitch him on Monday, and Hug's word is generally good for anything in New York. "He deserves the chance to set things right...his conscience is clear," Hug said. So when 1:30 Monday came sure enough there was Mays warming up and getting ready to take his turn. You got to give the guy credit for sand; he didn't know how the fans would react, not to say all the other players.

The Yanks, of course, they liked it just fine. Mays may never have been their favorite, but Hug wasn't exactly rolling in 18-game winners, either. If New York wanted to make a chase they needed more than the Infant; they needed Mays. The crowd? We figured there was about 12,000 there, a nice crowd for a Monday. They give him a hand when he went to warm up in front of us, and they

kept up a polite cheer all through the game. As for Mays himself, on press row we all watched and watched for any sign of emotion – maybe he'd react to the cheering or maybe he'd look tense or stiff or relieved or nervous. But danged if we didn't see any of that. Runyon thought he looked a little pale warming up, but his hand was steady and his focus never strayed up into the stands or toward the batters box or into the Tiger dugout, where the truth is they was letting him have it pretty good. Detroit isn't much good at ballplaying, but when it comes to riding the other guy it's hard to top Jennings, Pinelli, Bush, Cobb and Stanage in volume or variety of language, the strength of which often eliminates the need for salt at the evening table.

As to the game itself, there wasn't much to it. The Yanks hit up Leonard for three in the first, and you could tell right away Detroit wasn't getting that or more against Mays. The final was 10-0, a decision that pretty much put to rest questions about the big pitcher's mental state or recuperative powers.

In the 10 days since Chapman's death, the Indians hadn't been worth shucks, so Chicago hit town two and a half to the good of Cleveland with the Yanks just a half game farther back. Given the mental and physical state of Speaker's team, you figured it as a fight between the two teams in the run for the pennant, a fact attested to by the presence of 22,000 for the opener. This sense, however,

apparently did not befall upon the Yanks themselves. Tarzan socked one into the lower stands with Peck and Pipp on in the first, his 44th, but by then the Sox had already scored four times, and the way Mogridge was giving up runs the Infant could have hit one every time up and it wouldn't have mattered. Kerr only gave the Yanks one more after that, and some of the fans took the opportunity to make it home on time for dinner. Mays went back out for the Friday game against Cicotte. He got another nice reception from the fans, and the Sox left him alone, too.

The only heat all afternoon was between Bodie and McMullen, the latter coaching at first when Ping fanned in the second. McMullen offered a critique of Bodie's swing that did not sit well with the Italian, who responded with a challenge to McMullen's manhood. At that moment the fans would have been treated to mortal combat but for two obstacles, those being McMullen and Bodie. Neither desired to demonstrate by deed the terrifying physical skills to which each boasted.

'I don't care what they call me,' remarked a still-distraught Signor Bodie after the game, "but they got to cut out the personalities." The Yanks had fun with it the next day, presenting Bodie with two boxing gloves, one of them stuffed with a horseshoe, the other with a rivet. It was all the same to the home fans since the Yanks won 6-5 in 12, then Shawkey shut out the Sox 3-0 in front of a Saturday

crowd of 45,000. Cahalane said there was another 15,000 outside that wanted to get in but couldn't.

This interest is even more remarkable as the Babe did not play in the Friday game, and was not to play in the Saturday game either. His sidelining is an unintended consequence of the recent filming of 'Heading Home.' That is the title of his debut on the celluloid circuit. Buggsy Baer's been bragging about this story because he took time out from covering the pennant race for the American to write it. As Buggsy tells it, The Babe is a hick up in the woods who meets up with Samanthly, whose property will be confiscated and her honor forfeited to the scheming villain of the piece unless the town team can win the big game. The Babe does what any gentleman would do under the circumstances; he chops down a tree, fashions it into a bat, heads to the ballyard and arrives just in time to strike the blow that saves Samathly's farm and honor. That Baer can sure spin a tale, huh?

As far as the Yanks are concerned, neither the Infant's acting ability nor Samanthly's honor are the real concern. It turns out that the real concern is that filming took place over about six mornings in a vacant lot near a swamp in Haverstraw. That meant the Infant had to get up early each and every one of those mornings to climb in his roadster and drive the half hour or so across the river to where they were shooting, then turn around and make it back in time for the afternoon's games. The Infant don't regularly get much sleep as it is, and his

work with the bat during the Detroit and Chicago series suggested he might be leaving some of his best efforts in the swamp.

The second problem was that some part of said swamp was inhabited by a chigger with a particular liking for the Babe's right hand to the extent of dining upon it. That, at any rate, is the Infant's story for why his hand has swelled to something far larger than the recommended size. He missed the last two games of the Sox series, and also missed the Browns series, and that in turn has caused much chatter concerning whether the Infant should have been at home resting his hands from the perils of chiggers rather than romping around in front of cameras in Jersey reading Buggsy's script. The Babe's best argument is that the producers offered him \$15,000 up front to make the film, plus another \$35,000 from the proceeds. He'd have to have been a sap to turn that down. At least he would have if the check for \$35,000 hadn't bounced harder than one of his shots off the cornice. Anyhow, it ain't as though the Babe was going to be fortified up in his room if he wasn't in Jersey. I can only testify from personal experience to having examined many of the finest Midtown speakeasies for chiggers without never having encountered same. Some guys just like to live dangerously.

The Browns were another of the teams talking about sitting out against Mays, and they got their chance when he relieved Quinn after the latter allowed three runs in the sixth inning of the Sunday game. There were 37,000 on hand when

Hug called the Browns' bluff. Shocker, the batter at the time, made a brief consultation with manager Jimmy Burke and then stood back in to hit. He went down, the Yanks tied it in the seventh and won in the ninth when Ward sent Lewis home from second with a double. With the Sox slumping up in Boston the Yanks are now standing just a game out with a month to play. All doubt as to Mays has been dispelled by his whippings of the Tigers, Sox and Browns. Neither, according to the reviewers, is there much fear of the Yanks losing the Infant to a Hollywood career. Most agreed his performance was the best they'd ever seen given by a man who had hit 40 home runs. The only concern is the status of the Infant's arm. Hug said a doc cut into the infected area between the thumb and forefinger this morning, and now nobody's too sure how long he's gonna be out.

If that costs New York the pennant, I guess Yankee fans can blame Bugs Baer and the American. I may suggest to Gavin that he put that in our masthead: "Protect Babe Ruth: Read the World."