

Two Lucky Stiffs

(Cleveland)

The Dago and Schultz and me dreamed it up Friday afternoon over at old man McGregor's. We like to hang around McGregor's store because it's a neat place. He's got this sliding ladder that moves so he can pick the canned goods off the high oak shelves. Or he's got this big hook at the end of a long stick and if he wants to he can reach up and knock the boxes off the shelves one by one, and sometimes he lets us catch the boxes, which is how I developed my shortstop's hands. I don't hardly ever miss a pop fly. Or sometimes we take turns seein' who can slide the ladder along the tracks the fastest.

He's got a pickle barrel and a big old pot bellied stove in there, but this bein' August there ain't much use for the stove. In winter you see the men come in and them and McGregor's swappin' stories about the Indians. Most of the stories go back before my time, that's for sure. From the sounds of it, I'd say old McGregor's favorite was Sockalexis. I never seen the guy personally, but McGregor says Sockalexis and Cy Young nearly won the pennant single-handed for Cleveland in '97. I asked Old McGregor once what happened to Sockalexis, but he kinda just hemmed and hawed around and finally changed the subject, so I figure he probably died. That's what happens some times when you was playin' long ago.

The other good part about McGregor's is the side of it is a brick wall that faces a vacant lot. You can't really play ball too good because the lot's all full of cinders and bottles and weeds. But if you only got three or four guys, the wall's a great backstop. So you clear away the broken glass as best you can, then the batter just stands in front of it and you chalk off a strike zone and if you got a shagger you can pretty much just go at it. You better use a rubber ball because the bricks'll flatten a league ball, and then they won't be no good for the games. But boy, you can sure practice. And if you want a drink or some candy old McGregor's got a bunch of stuff, and most of it's just a penny.

Anyway the three of us was out there – I was hittin' and Schultz was pitchin' and the Dago was shaggin' – and Schultz says he read in the Press where The Babe's comin' to town on Monday.

"The Babe! Well, I'm goin' to see him," I says. "he's got 30 home runs."

"Ah, you ain't goin' neither...not to see the Babe," says the Dago. "You'd be too ascared."

"Ascared a what?" I says.

"Ascared he'd see ya and think you was a puny runt," the Dago says.

“Ain’t scared a the Babe,” I says. I wasn’t, neither. Mighta been except I knew from the papers that everywhere the Babe went there was 20,000 or 30,000 people, so I didn’t figure there was much likelihood of runnin’ into him. “Well, I wanna go too,” Schultz says. “Me, too,” says the Dago. “Hey,” says Schultz, “let’s get the gang together and maybe we could all go.” So we said we’d meet at 11 Monday over at the trolley stop near the church because we wanted to make sure we got there in time to get seats.

Most Friday nights I just hang around the neighborhood. If it’s winter, dad might need some help haulin’ coal from the bin over to the furnace, but that ain’t much of an issue in August. But this Friday Father Nash had left a message with my mom wantin’ to know could I come over to St. Philomena’s at 6. He didn’t say why, and Mom said I should go because if Father Nash said he needed me it must be the Lord’s work...but I could tell by her look she figured I was in trouble somehow. I didn’t think I could be because you didn’t get called to church on Friday night for leavin’ during Communion, and I couldn’t think of nothin’ worse than that I done and hadn’t confessed. So I walked over. I like walkin’ through the alleys on Friday evenings because Friday’s when the neighborhood burns their trash, and so if the wind’s right all up and down the alleyways you can smell the ash and see the embers. I love the smells of the city, whether it’s the wash on Monday or the embers on Friday. To my way of seein’ it, folks who don’t live in the city miss an awful lot.

The church is always open so sinners can come in and pray, or people that needs stuff can light a candle, and there was a couple in the front pews. I seen Father up near the altar talkin' to a man, so I tip-toed down the side aisle toward 'em. Father saw me comin' so he got up and the man turned toward me and I didn't recognize him at first in that suit.

"Mom said you wanted to see me, Father," I said.

He did, he said, and he was hopin' I could help him with some instruction. Then the fellow in the suit turned toward me and I'd a known him anywheres. It was Chappie.

"I am told this lad is your biggest fan in our parish, Mr. Chapman," Father Nash said with a smile.

I stammered a "how do you do?" It was a quiet stammer bein' as how we were in church.

"Mr. Chapman is taking instruction, and is going to be baptized next month, just as soon as the team comes back from the East," Father Nash explained. Getting' baptized is a big deal in the church. I know this because I was baptized when I was just a baby. But sometimes adults don't get baptized – I guess their mothers

forgot – and that’s bad because if you die and you haven’t been baptized you can’t get into heaven. That’s the rules from God himself, so they’re pretty much final.

“How do you do,” Chappie said, offering his hand. I was tremblin’ so bad I swear if his hand hadn’t been attached to his arm I’d a dropped it. Wouldn’t that have been a heck of a thing for a shortstop?

Chappie said how if I was his biggest fan in the neighborhood he’d have to have me out to the park before the season ended if that’d be OK with me. “Would it!” I said. “Well we’re goin’ east after this week,” he said. “But we’ll be back in September, and it looks like the pennant race should be pretty hot then. How about if I fix you up with some tickets for a series?”

“Could you?”

“Sure,” Chappie said, like it was nothin, and he said he’d look me up at church after mass when he got back and I said that would be fine because you can always find me right out in front of the church afterward sayin’ hello and generally visitin’. “It’ll have to be an early mass,” Chappie said. “You know I’ve got a ball game to get to so I usually go to 7:30.”

“You too? Me too,” I said. That was a fib, but I decided to confess it tomorrow.

I didn't figure Father Nash brought me over so I could get tickets to a game, and it turns out he didn't. He said ever since he got married last year Chappie'd been taking lessons on how to be a Catholic, and they was just about over. If you're a kid and your parents want you to be Catholic they send you to Catholic school and the nuns teach you everything you need to know – or else you just get whacked a few times and learn it that way. But if you're an adult you can't go to school so Father has classes. Chappie had been brought up a Protestant, so he had to learn the same stuff I already knew: sin, sacraments, the commandments, how you have to go to mass every week, even if there's a game that afternoon. Well I guess Chappie'd been studyin' when he wasn't playin' shortstop and now he was basically done with the lessons and Father Nash wanted to show him some of the rituals, but for that he needed an altar boy. He decided if I was Chappie's best fan I'd be the least mad about bein' at church on a Friday night...boy did he ever get that one right! I gotta be the luckiest stiff in town.

So I went up on the altar while Father Nash and Chappie stayed in the pew and mostly I just did what Father Nash told me to do. We went through the Mass – about Communion, and sittin' for the Sermon, and when the bells rang and what they meant. There's three bells at the Sanctus, then one just before the Consecration. Then they ring three more times when the priest holds up the Host and three more times when he holds up the Chalice. The last is the *Angus Dei* right before Communion. Ringin' the bells is tricky because there's five of 'em all

banded together, and if you're a little nervous you can touch 'em off too soon. Father don't like that. But if you don't ring 'em loud enough they can't hear 'em in the back of the church. Usually whichever altar boy is older gets to ring the bells. I am an excellent bell-ringer if I say so myself.

I must have been up there 15 or 20 minutes, but after a while I guess they got done with their instruction because Chappie gets up to leave and Father says good night and Chappie waves good night to me and says he'll be sure to look me up and like that he's out the door. Then it occurs to me: I didn't even think to ask him for his autograph? Jeez, am I stupid. Then it occurs to me: You can't ask a guy for an autograph in church...that just ain't right. Jeez, am I stupid. Then it occurs to me...I ought to run after him and get it outside church. Only you ain't allowed to run in church so I can only walk fast and by the time I get outside Chappie's gone. I figure maybe I'll see him on Sunday.

Sunday mornin' comes and I'm up early for 7:30 mass but there's a big crowd and if Chappie's there I can't pick him out. I'll get him next week; the team don't leave town until next Sunday night.

There was nearly a dozen of us Monday morning at the ballfield. Cuttin' through the alley to the trolley corner's always more interesting on a Monday 'cause the

neighborhood's got their wash out on the line, so the whole alley smells like it's had a scrub. That's the main reason you can't play much backyard catch on Mondays around here, 'cause the sheets are always hangin' in the way. Anyway, we walked over to the trolley corner and rode from there. Schultz and Mitch and a couple of the other guys brought their gloves in case they caught a foul ball. I didn't say nothin' about meetin' Chappie because it bein' in church and all I didn't think it'd be right to brag. We didn't get far before it started to drizzle – I was glad I wasn't home because mom would have wanted me to help her get the laundry inside -- and it didn't stop all the way out to 66th. But that wasn't goin' to make no mind to us. It was a Monday and League Park never sold out on a Monday, so we were sure to get decent seats, and maybe even good ones.

Even with the Babe in town. Probably. But we wanted to get there early just in case.

I can't say for the other kids but at my house there was odd chores gettin' done all over the place just to save up some extra cash for the Babe. And now we're on the trolley and headed toward the park and danged if it ain't rainin'. I knew mom was worried about the laundry gettin' wet, but I was worried about somethin' else. I said a prayer. Please, God...You can't rain out the Babe, God...you just can't. It ain't fair. It ain't right.

We didn't have much goin' against him, only Morton. Covey, Sarge and Caldwell had all pitched the last three days against Philly. We'd a won all three if Chappie hadn't booted that ball in the 9th on Friday that let Philly tie it; otherwise Covey's got 'em 1-0. But he did and they scored and then they scored again in the 10th and you can't win all of them, not even against the A's. No matter, we were still three and a half to the good and we was all talkin' on the trolley and I remember we was all thinkin' the way Spoke and Elmer and Cuckoo was hittin' the pennant was as good as copped already.

"We win all four of these and New York's finished," says McGuire, and he don't get no argument.

"Yeah...but I still want to see the Babe bust one," Mitch's little brother Bobby chimes in, and from that comes a chorus of "me too."

"Just as long as we win," says Mitch, but most of the rest of the guys looked at him like he was queer or something.

"Shoot," says the Dago, "that'll be easy. They can't hit the Sarge or Covey, neither one of 'em." "Yeah," I pipes. "Why the Sarge has already got 23, and Covey 18. And Caldwell'll get 'em for sure, so that just leaves Morton today.

"Oh, oh," pipes Schultz.

“What?” I says.

“Morton. How come we gotta pitch him? The guy’s a stiff.”

Schultz’s right. We got a whole staff of great arms, so how come it’s gotta be Morton’s turn today? He weren’t too bad a few years ago, but this year his ERA’s about twice everybody else’s, and the only time he wins is when we score six or eight. All in all, since we have time on the trolley, it might be smart to pray a little for Morton. Then a thought occurs.

“Who they pitchin?”

“The Gob,” says Mitch. He always checks the morning Plain Dealer to see who’s startin’.

“Well then it’s a cinch,” I says. “Detroit hit him up for seven last week, so we’ll probably score a dozen or so. I figure Shawkey’s about used up, anyway. The war does that to you, y’know.”

“D’you suppose he got gassed?” Mitch wonders, and three or four guys agree that’s probably why Detroit scored seven off him last week. “I know a guy who’s uncle got gassed and he ain’t breathin’ right yet,” says the Dago.

“I don’t know if you get gassed in the Navy,” says Schultz.

Damn Huns...why couldn’t they have gassed Shawkey’s ship. Not so’s he’d a got hurt real bad...only enough to lose today.

We doped it out a few more minutes and pretty much decided the game was a lock, but since we was comin’ up to 66th by then and since the Babe was there we decided to spend the money and go anyway. For Monday, there was a big crowd – I think they said 15,000 – and there probably would have been more if it hadn’t been rainin’. For a few minutes we kicked about challenging whoever was over at the field down Lexington, but decided it’d be more fun to get inside, get our seats and see battin’ practice, so that’s what we did.

To welcome the Babe and his home run record, they’d been plannin’ a big tribute before the game, so batting practice was already going when we got in. The Yanks was hittin’ first, although the Babe must a come out early because we didn’t see him. We saw Ward and Peck and Ruel, though. The Dago tried to get Bodie’s autograph, but bein’ as how the visitors almost never pay us any mind even the Dago’s yellin’ couldn’t get no response from Bodie. So he started razzin’ him. Ain’t nobody can razz an Italian like the Dago. He knows all the inside stuff to say.

Meusel lined a couple into the new seats in left. They're puttin' those seats up on account of they're gonna need em for the Series.

I never thought much of the Yankees' uniforms. Just plain grey with "New York" across the front and the blue caps. The socks is funny; solid blue on the top and solid white on the bottom. I like ours better, especially with the pinstripes. They got that blue block "C" right over the heart and the cap and socks both a solid, dark blue. But it's the pinstripes I really like. After a while we come out to hit. We're hittin' in order, so it's Cuckoo then Chappie and then Spoke. Smith tries out the wall in right, Gardner lines a few up the middle and Doc, Wamby and O'Neill, and they all look good.

It is still rain' when practice ends and Jack Dunn comes out with a megaphone to begin the ceremonies. They say Dunn was a good ballplayer in his day, but all I know is he's the best owner because he got Spoke and Smith and Caldwell. They brought out a bunch of old guys Dunn said had been with the team back to when it just started and he gave them each a ball. The camera guys wanted the old men to throw the balls toward home plate, so one tried but he dropped it and started holdin' his side, and we couldn't help but laugh but I don't suppose it was funny to the old men.

They brought Spoke out next and Dunn gave him an Indian head made of flowers in honor of taking the team into first place. Then Dunn motioned and a

crew of men came out from under the stands carrying a huge bat made of red and white carnations. The handle was covered with blue silk and the bat almost reached from the plate to the pitcher's box. It was three feet in diameter at the large end and there were so many you could smell it from back where we were sittin'. And when they brought that out, they brought out the Babe.

He looked like a god. I know it's a sin to say that, but it's the truth. Even from where I was he must a been 6-foot-three, maybe 210 and with shoulders this wide and hips this narrow, and I looked and my jaw dropped, then I looked just for a second over at Mitch and he was just starin' too, and so was the Dago and Schultz and Tommy and the whole gang. But only for a few seconds; then we started screaming.

Then Dunn calls out for Donald Dixon to come up. I never heard of no Donald Dixon on the Yanks, and I know the Indians don't got nobody by that name, and then here comes this kid – he can't be no more than 11 or 12, close to our own age -- out of the stands. He walks right up to the plate and he's standin' right there next to the Babe. So Dunn introduces the two of them and tells the crowd that Babe Ruth is the home run champion of the world and Donald Dixon is the home run champion of Cincinnati and he and his dad have driven all the way up here to Cleveland to meet the great Babe Ruth and would they like to shake hands. Which they do. It is very near to everybody havin' a stroke in our row because Dunn says this Donald Dixon has hit 39 home runs so far this year in

Cincinnati, but Mitch has 85 right here in Cleveland, so I don't see how any Donald Dixon is more deserving of shaking hands with the Babe than Mitch. All I can say is he better not wash that hand even once at least until school starts. The lucky stiff.

The rain stops just about then, but unfortunately the game don't work out like we all doped it out on the trolley. Morton's so wild you'd figure he came from Borneo rather than Alabama. He walks three and the Yanks get four runs before we even have a shot. Smitty hits one out, but otherwise we don't do nothin' much against the Gob and get beat 6-3. It's a quiet ride home because there ain't much to talk about: The Babe didn't hit one, we didn't win, and Mitch got a bum deal.

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We do not realize it at the time but things are not about to get better. There's more rain on Tuesday and this time the umps call it after two innings. On Wednesday we get up 4-0 in the first on Smitty's grand slam and with Bagby pitchin' you figure that one's banked, but it ain't. They come back on the Sarge and we don't do nothin' the rest of the day against Mays and they score three in the 10th to win it 7-4. (I tried throwing underhand once, but I pretty much threw the ball over the backstop. Mays can do it, but I'll be danged if I know how. The guy can hit too. He doubled in the fifth when they scored off the Sarge, then he doubled again in the 10th and set up the winning runs.)

I'll tell you somethin'...we was trying too hard that day. We should have got them out in the fifth when Ruel puts this dippy little fly out into short right. Smith is gonna get it, but Wamby runs out into him so the ball falls. After they cops the first couple, a guy's dauber can't help but get a little down, so I wasn't really surprised when they beat Caldwell, too, on Thursday. Chappie saved us in the second. He made a play on Ruel's smash and then he stopped Shawkey's liner that was gonna be a hit for sure. But they got a couple off Slim in the third, and another in the fourth.

We should have scored ourselves in the fourth, but Nallin being spineless cost us the run. Gardner had walked and went to second on Wamby's sacrifice. Johnston grounded out to Pipp and Gardner went on over to third. O'Neill took a called strike and stepped out of the batting box as Shawkey started to throw the ball. Spoke knew that should have been a balk, and he and Nallin went at it for five minutes. But Nallin's running the game like Dad says the Bolsheviks run Russia, so the only thing that matters to him is what he says and not what the book says, and he ain't lettin' Gardner come in

We was down 4-1 in the eighth, but nearly got back at them. Wamby sent one down the line with Gardner. That brought up Johnston, and he singled to get those two home. That was it for Shawkey, with Mays comin' in. But I guess Huggins knew what he was doin' because rain was startin' to fall again and by

this time it was getting' so dark that our guys couldn't hardly get a good fix on Mays, who was just throwin' fast shoots. Jamieson and Spoke both whiffed and to tell the truth I don't think either of them had much of a chance.

So anyway the Yanks left having won all of 'em, which is not what we said on the trolley would happen. We was quiet most of the time on the ride home after the last game, and got all the way out to Doan's Corners before anybody said anything. Then:

"Well get the Browns tomorrow," said Schultz.

"Yeah," said the Dago, "we'll get the Browns tomorrow."

And everybody agreed. "The Browns don't have a chance," and "we'll show 'em," and "I'll bet Elmer hits a couple."

I was brave, too. Well, I tried to be anyway. But the truth is – and I wouldn't a let them know it – I was a little scared. Maybe more than a little. So I was glad when we finally got to the corner and I could get off and say good-bye and run home and go up to my room and I didn't have to be brave no more. So I could sit on my bed and tell myself I was too a little scared. I been watchin' the Indians for six years, now...just about as long as I could remember. They was awful, then. They didn't have nobody good. Oh, they had Doc and Chappie and O'Neill, but they

was young and just learnin'. They had Jackson then, but he left. But then they started getting better. That's what my dad says is important, getting better. It wasn't much at first, but one year they was seventh, then they got Spoke and they was sixth, and then third. And that's when I started thinkin' maybe they could win the pennant. Then two years ago they was second and they had Sarge and Covey and I thought they'd win it last year, only the Sox beat 'em and they got second again.

So I figured this year for sure they'd win. Then came opening day and they beat the Browns bad, and then Covey beat the Sox and just like that we was in first place and I knew we was gonna win. The Yanks came in in June and they was full a themselves like always and the Babe even hit one, but I knew we'd beat 'em and we won three out a four and we was two games up. Then it went back and forth between us and the Yanks for a while but there weren't no stoppin' Spoke...he goes and gets seven hits in that double-header against Washington and we go back into first and we been there ever since until today.

And now we're just barely hangin' on. And now I don't know. I mean, we've got Covey and Sarge and Spoke and Chappie and Elmer and Wamby, but they've got the Babe and Mays and Shawkey and Meusel and the Wop, but mostly they got the Babe. Nobody got nothin like the Babe. As bad as I'd like to think Spoke's better, the truth is there ain't nobody like the Babe. And the Sox got Shoeless

and Cicotte and Williams and Collins and Faber and all the guys that won it last year.

I want us to win the pennant. I figured all the way we're gonna win the pennant. And now I'm not sure. Father Nash says pride is a sin and you get punished for it. And maybe I'm being punished for bein' too proud like thinkin' we'd win four for sure, but now I'm afraid. I'm afraid somethin' bad's gonna happen, like we're gonna lose or somethin'. Maybe if I go to confession next week that'll help. Maybe. But I don't think I'm gonna get too much sleep tonight.

I didn't get too much sleep last night. None I think. That's why I didn't get to 7:30 to see Chappie. We lost again to St. Louis today. That made it seven of nine and five straight. The standings this morning are funny. We were 69-40 and .633, and the Yanks were 72-42 and .632, so the papers said we were in first by a percentage point but even so we were still a half game behind the Yanks. It makes a kid want to give up on math. Meanwhile the Sox are comin' up, too. They're 71-42 and .628, so they're basically tied with us.

We get the Browns again today, then it's on the train for the East Coast. The first stop is New York. The Yanks say they beat us because we figured we had it copped and they played harder than us. Well, maybe that's so. But if it is, I ain't never doin' it again. And I'm goin' to confession next Saturday...ain't takin' no

chances. I ain't a prideful boy, no sir. And I don't want the Indians to lose on account of me.

I'd give anything to go to New York for that series. But there ain't enough chores to be done in the world to pay for a ticket on the Lake Shore Limited, much less a hotel room. And anyway, mom and pop wouldn't let me go alone, and they ain't got near the money to go with me. So I'll have to watch the papers. All I know is it's three more games and first place is on the line. I hope nothin' bad happens...and especially not losin'.