

A Chigger in Conspiracy With Gamblers

(New York)

The Yanks were in Cleveland Sept. 10 for the last series between the teams when word filtered into town about the Babe. New York was a half game out and the Sox another half back, so you knew right away pretty much anything was possible. But we didn't count on this. I went up to the Infant in the hotel dining room and I just asked him flat out whether it was true.

"Babe, did you get killed in a car accident last night?"

He denied it most strenuously. Given the weight of the allegation, however, I felt obliged to conduct further investigation. I touched him. He did not feel dead. I watched him eat. He did not eat like a corpse. I watched him rise from the table and belch. He neither rose nor belched like a corpse. I followed him to the restroom. He did not piss like a corpse. For a full 15 minutes I spied, probed and observed, detecting no signs that the Infant had passed to a better world.

Yet even so, the evidence to the contrary was imposing, namely the wire from Cobb alerting his correspondent to rumors rampant in New York of the sad event. This was said to have occurred on a Cleveland street some time following the club's arrival Thursday

evening. Ruth and unnamed other parties had succumbed to injuries sustained in a motorcoach ... and with Babe at the wheel no less. The news was, I was assured, all over town.

Any sap in that Cleveland hotel at the time could figure out what had actually happened. Some punk gambler needed a sure thing so he put the bug out about the crash to the right folks. They spread it to some more folks and they spread it to some more and before long the odds against the Yanks for Friday's game were as long as Huston's belt. They wouldn't stay that way for long; only as long as it took the Yanks to put the word out that Ruth was fine and would be playing the next day. But that was all some punk needed. With three teams wedged tight, the whole country's looking for an angle, and the Babe getting knocked off would be a big one.

You wouldn't think people'd be such suckers to fall for it except for three things. First, you pretty much got to trust your bookie or why are you even doing business with him? The only problem is when your bookie gets taken, too. But the second problem was the Babe had only just come back from the chigger bite a few days earlier. So if somebody comes along and whispers dirges in your ear about the world's greatest slugger and tells you to keep it quiet, this sort of thing makes sense. And the third problem is the way everybody's hinky about the gamblers these days. You figure the gamblers might just do anything. Cars leave the road

for funny reasons. If the grand jury's turning on the heat in Chicago, what's the chances some two-bitter in need of a big score might set up the Babe for a hard fall?

Nobody thought the fix was in with the Yanks themselves. The local gamblers laid hands off the home team because they did not want to get run out of town. And the out-of-town punks wouldn't have had the cash to fix the Yanks even if they'd wanted to. Huston and Ruppert saw to that. All the Yanks were well-paid, but none moreso than the Babe, who hauled in close to 20 Gs. Plus the way the Polo Grounds filled up for most every game they were only going to make more. And that didn't just go for Ruth; it went for Mays and Shawkey and Pipp, too.

No, the problem was the other teams. I told you before the White Sox were rotten. Word was you could get to some of the Tigers, too. Maybe it was the hangover from leaving Boston in a big hurry last year, but Mays told he thought some of the Boston players sold him out once they quit the race themselves. Where Ruppert and Huston used their own wallets as insurance policies against the fixers, Frazee was more like Comiskey. He paid his players on the cheap and took his chances that they wouldn't sell out to the fast payday. So even if it wasn't true you could see how a guy could get the impression.

With the Babe still out the first few days of September, Mays had pretty well taken over and carried the team. Three days after he beat the Browns in relief he started against them and the Browns couldn't hit his truck worth a cent. That made it four appearances since the Chapman business, and all of them great. The guy was up to 21 wins.

The only issue was that all four of those games had been at home, where Mays had the benefit of some very considerate crowds. Everyone knew that would not be the case for his next start in Boston. On the other hand, they finally got Ruth back for that series. Turned out that the Boston crowd was on the whole decent, although there was some South Enders who put up their usual stink when he came in to relieve Quinn in the eighth inning of the opener. Mays was still looked upon in Boston as a Confederate.

It was 3-3 at that point, but the Yanks got lucky with two out in the ninth after Bodie dented the left field fence for two bases, and Ward drew a pass. Hug redeemed Meusel from his long exile on the bench in order to hit for Ruel, and Meusel worked the count full. Karr let one fly up and into his face and Meusel ducked, whereupon the ball contacted his bat and took flight for short right center. It nestled nicely between Foster and Hooper for two bases, both runners scoring. With that hit, such as it was, the Yanks leveled themselves with the Indians, the Sox lagging a half game.

Despite having relieved the previous afternoon, Mays took his scheduled turn the next day in the second game of a doubleheader. Doubleheaders are encouraged in Boston, where community niceties prevail against the tarnishing of the Sabbath by offenses of the nature of ballplaying. The Yanks had won the first 5-3 behind Collins, and looked good for the second as well when they scored twice in the top of the ninth to lead once again 5-3. The truth is Mays had nobody to blame but himself for the defeat, first for allowing four hits in the bottom of the ninth and then for in his failure to back up Ruel on Bodie's throw to the plate. In this omission he allowed the winning run to score and prevented New York from taking over the top place from Cleveland.

This failure spoiled another grand day for the Babe, where the citizens recall him fondly for his exploits of previous seasons. They put 33,000 into the Fenway by game's start, and the local scribes said thousands more were turned away at the order of those in official circles. The Infant began the day on the threshold of the world's record for home run hitting, having batted 44, which was one fewer than Werden hit for Minneapolis in the Western League in 1895. To the delight of the Boston fans he drew even with that record in the third inning of the first game with a ball that surmounted the large barrier in left field.

Some of Ruth's cohorts and acquaintances from the Boston chapter of the Knights of Columbus used the occasion to present their departed hero with a set of diamond cuff links between the two games. The Babe was quite appreciative of the gesture, one suggesting the benevolent spirit of the rivalry between the two clubs. (Although on-field success to this point has all fallen to Boston - five pennants and five world's titles measured against none for the New Yorkers - many of the Sox partisans are sincere in their hope for the Babe's success in New York. They believe the Babe may help the Yankees compete on a more level field with Boston for American League glory for years to come.)

Such would normally have been celebration enough for the day, but the Infant insisted on more. In the sixth inning of the second game he resumed and concluded his chase of Werden, and although this ball merely exceeded the bounds of the wall in right, it was sufficient to count for his record-breaking 46th and for three runs on the scoreboard.

The week leading up to the trip to Cleveland was spent toying with Connie Mack's juniors. Thormahlen and Shawkey dispatched them twice on Labor Day, then Mays dusted them off on Tuesday with a shutout. The sense is that some of Connie's boys have a chance to lead good, upright lives when they grow up, although it is unclear whether this will aid them on the ball field. Their visit to the Big City, however, yielded a total of one run. The

Yanks pitched Mays ahead of his usual turn because Hug, Ruppert and Huston already had decided not to let him make the trip to Cleveland out of sensitivity to the sentiments of the city. He would instead continue on the overnight boat to Detroit and rejoin the team there.

Also on board the overnight train was the Boys Band of St. Marys Industrial School in Baltimore, the facility which numbers the Infant among its graduates. They were there at the behest of Brother Matthias, who discovered the Babe's baseball talents, and who had gone to the Babe with the request that the band be allowed to make the trip as a fund-raiser. Seems they had a fire down there and it burned up some of the sleeping space. They would play at the visiting parks, salute the Babe, and pass the hat. If the Babe was feeling well, he might go out with them and urge the patrons to pony up, a gesture that was worth thousands all by itself. The motto of the trip was "For the brothers of the old school." The way the Babe packs them in, it was a sure money-raiser.

The Babe never said no to anybody on anything if it sounded like fun - and certainly not to Brother Matthias. So he said hell yes, or - given that he was speaking to the Brother - perhaps a close variation thereof. Which meant Ruppert and Huston had to say hell yes whether they liked it or not - and they didn't, because it cost them the kids' meal bills, train fares and hotel rooms. They

reasoned, however, and quite correctly, that all this was a pittance compared to the price of angering their star slugger, so they smiled and told the Infant they'd be delighted to host the band on the western swing.

They should have said hell no to playing an exhibition in Pittsburgh on the way west. But they could not resist the lure of coin, and paid for that urge in the loss of Bodie that afternoon. Pingus had tripled and then tried to score on a wild heave, but caught his leg on the slide at home and fractured it. This forced the shift of Ruth to center, with Lewis taking over in right and Meusel back on the field in left.

With the two front-runners separated by one-half game, League Park held as many as it was capable of holding for the Thursday opener, none of them - save for the St. Marys band -- offering encouragement to the visitors. Like Yankee partisans, Clevelanders have waited the entire history of the American League for a pennant, and not even the loss of their shortstop has caused more than a temporary slowdown in that enthusiasm. Barely two weeks ago the Indians were locked in a perfectly understandable losing streak that had set them two games back in the standings. As short as they were on pitching and with only Lunte to play short, they appeared ready to concede the race to the Yanks or Sox. Instead they have since won seven of nine to retake the first position. Mails, a failure in Brooklyn, has

emerged to fill out the rotation nicely, and they are showing off a kid named Sewell they think will help at short. You may if you choose take the position that these Indians will not stand up to the pressure of the final month, but it is not something to be said among the polite society that frequents Euclid Avenue.

Quinn drew the opening against Coveleskie. The Yanks started quickly against the Polack, and led 3-2 after three innings thanks to his Royal Nibs, whose 47th departed the right field wall for Lexington Avenue in the third and landed on the roof of somebody's house across the street. It is to be hoped the occupants were not late sleepers when the Babe came knocking. Picus, however, failed to take any advantage of this circumstance, departing in a hail of Indian hits soon after, and giving way to a succession of relief, all of it ineffective. The final was 10-4, to the pure delight of the home fans.

Between them Shawkey and Ruth made certain such an outrage upon the Yanks' chances did not occur again on Friday. In front of 26,000 who had plastered themselves into the park in such fashion that movement was impossible, the Bazoo again transcended the right field barrier in the first inning against Caldwell with Pipp on first. This ball, his 48th, made haste for the same house as the one Thursday, but this time in deference to the sensitivities of the residents it merely bounded up the porch. It turned out to be all the Gob needed, for he allowed the hosts a

single run in the seventh, by which time Caldwell was long gone, followed by Uhle, and Mails presided over a six-run shortage.

Generally the Yanks is a bunch of good guys, and Shawkey's one of the best. Even though he was already a big league star, he'd done his part when the war broke out, enlisting in the Navy and giving up most all of the 1918 season. Then he came back and won 20 last year. Other than Mays he was the best arm the Yanks had, but the boost was he was also pretty smart, easy to get along with and generous. The perfect dinner companion. Since I knew a great chophouse just off Euclid downtown, I offered the Gobbert a seat in my cab.

"But we're gonna make one stop along the way," he says. Normally I am an easy sort on such matters, but the locale Shawkey gives the cabbie is not normally one I frequent. He wishes to go to the cemetery.

"It's a favor for this guy I knew in the Navy," he explains along the way. Name was Mahay. We were shipmates."

I had to ask the "what happened?" question.

"He died."

Under the circumstances, it seemed like a simple, straightforward insult to my intelligence. Except Shawkey said it so matter-of-factly that what it really told me was most of his brain was thinking more about this Mahay and less about the question. Thinking I might come across a heroic story that would make good copy, I felt obliged to pursue the issue.

"Spanish Flu," says the Gob. I knew about the flu, of course. It ran through the troops that fall and from them through the rest of the country. They said the flu killed 100,000 more than the war itself. I read there was 500,000 dead in the U.S. alone. "It hit our boat in October, just before we were shipping out and just before the war ended," Shawkey told me. "I don't know if you lost anybody to that thing," he said - reporters are lousy family people, and I didn't have much to lose, although he didn't need to know that. "It just swept in and hit everybody and they went almost from being fine one day to gone the next."

Shawkey said that's the way it went with Mahay; chipper and whistling and doing his job at 9 one morning; dead by 9 the next morning. "The docs were powerless," he said. "And anyway, there was too many getting sick too fast and not enough docs."

Even to a chump like me, it was a touching thought that a kid he'd barely met had made such an impression on a famous athlete like Shawkey. "He didn't have any family," Shawkey says, "so when

they issued his Service Medal they sent it to me. They figured as well known as I was and as often as I'd get back here maybe I'd know what to do with it." Then he reached into his vest pocket and showed me the medal.

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked.

"I'm going to give it to him," he responded simply.

The hack entered the cemetery and stopped at the office. It was coming on to 6, just before closing time, but Shawkey cornered the sexton and got the location of Mahay's grave. We left the cab there and walked two sections over to the site.

Every cemetery's a quiet, green sort of place, lots of trees and glens and maybe a bird or two chirping, and this one was no different. It was easy to pick out the final resting places of the town's elite by the size of the rocks, some of which were 10, 12 feet tall or more. Mahay wasn't one of the elite, just a kid who got in the way of the war. All he got was a simple stone set into the ground. There was a flag cut into it to show he'd died in the war and the dates: 1898-1918. The poor kid was 20.

I stood a few steps back of Shawkey and gave him his time at the site. For several minutes, all he did was stand and stare. What runs through a guy's mind at a time like that, do you suppose? It

was quiet enough. That late in the day there wasn't but one other body around, a kid a couple rows over doing the same thing as Shawkey, just standing and staring at the ground, alone with his thoughts. Who'd he lost, I wondered. A favorite uncle? A grandparent? Whoever it was must have meant a lot to the kid to bring him out at this hour of the evening.

I turned back to Shawkey, who'd kneeled near Mahay's headstone. He took a small spade from his pocket, then scraped away pockets of dirt from in front of the stone. Six inches worth, I suppose. Out came the medal and just as quickly it disappeared into the hole, covered by the dirt.

The medal Mahay had earned had been returned to him. Privately I chalked it up as Shawkey's second victory of the day. He didn't say anything, either, just got up and we went back to the cab for what I knew would be a very quiet dinner.

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Any sap would realize the Yanks had to win Shawkey's game, for the matchups certainly did not favor them Saturday. With Mays at rest in Detroit, it fell to Thormahlen to stand in against Bagby, already a winner 27 times. The Indians fans hardly could be blamed for counting the game as good as won even before it was started, and there were estimates that as many as 31,000 of them

showed up to be part of the fun. Scenarios of this sort are the best reasons why the heady set does not bet on baseball, for when the sun went down and the park cleared out Thormahlen looked like the 27-game winner and Bagby like the fill-in. New York won 6-2, but the game was only that close because Pipp let his mind wander in the ninth, committing two errors that let as many runs across. For his part, Bagby was slugged from the mound as a casualty of a four-run sixth inning.

The Infant failed in his effort to add to his home run total, but it was not for lack of effort. In the first inning, with Pipp aboard and one retired, the Babe plastered an emphatic foul against the right field wall. The next pitch was deposited among the riff-raff occupying the roped off portion of the field in front of the wall, counting for two bases under the ground rules and sending the St. Marys Boys Band into its musical interlude.

Combined with Chicago's defeat at the hands of Boston, the result left circumstances atop the American League as crowded as a Bronx subway. For purposes of formality, Cleveland, with 82 wins and 51 losses, held the upper hand by a single percentage point at .617. New York, although at .616 based on its 85-53 record, actually stood a half-game to the good of the Indians. The Sox' defeat had left them at 84-53, four percentage points behind Cleveland and a half-game behind New York. The team crossed the lake that night

into Detroit and settled in to rooms to await the start of that series the following afternoon.

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That such a race should be intruded upon by the sort of rumors and innuendo emanating these days from Chicago is the reality these days. It was all there in black and white for those reading the morning papers the next day. Whatever the truth regarding last October's play, when nothing blew up over the off-season saps like me put it behind and concentrated on the race at hand. So much the easier with Ruth full in his glory. Now, however, it appears that momentum is once again building for some straight answers into the talk of a fix. Here in Detroit, the irony is that while the Tigers are locked securely into seventh place, the city's own sporting set, in its pre-occupation with a meaningless National League game, apparently has provided the gasoline to start the explosion that all the dirty talk of an entire off-season could not start.

I never liked coming in to Detroit because the town was as thick with the Smart Boys as Manhattan, except they didn't keep their distance. We were breakfasting in the hotel on Monday, the Yanks having won easily the previous afternoon, when a guy I knew as Silk pulled up a chair. Even by Detroit standards, Silk was not one of the big boys, but he claimed to know folks who knew folks who knew big boys, and was much impressed with his importance. He

certainly dressed the part, attired in hats and shirts from which he acquired his name. He enjoyed showing off a stickpin that gave the appearance of being 10-caret diamond, and he was careful not to brush it up against anything lest it scratch.

Although he and his type sickened me, on the surface he was as pleasant as are all who make their livings being rounded on the edges. Silk and the guys he worked for had friends of this sort around the league, many of them ballplayers and many of those purchased. Word was that Gedeon was into Silk, and that Zimmerman had been. The stench around Zimmerman finally got thick enough last year that the owners very quietly declared him *persona non grata*. For his part, Silk approached this occurrence as a business loss and an acceptable one since he still had Benton on the Giants. Since nobody on the Yanks was purchasable, the mantle of providing conversation for Silk when the Yankees came to town apparently had fallen to me.

"Lemme buy you a coffee, Monitor."

I pretended to have gauze in my ears, but Silk does not take discouragement easily. He pulled out a chair, set down the lid and smiled the easy smile of a smart guy.

"They say the Wop's out for the year."

"Who says?"

"The walls."

"Then the walls have been talking to the walls in Pittsburgh, because all I know is that's where he got off the train. Maybe he's got a dame there; you ever think of that?"

Given the state of the pennant race and the fact that there are capable news reporters in Pittsburgh, it was lame dodge. But Silk already knew that if Bodie could have played, he'd have been in the lineup the previous day. "You'll have a hard time hangin' on if you got to play Meusel and Lewis both," he says. "Meusel can't field and Lewis is getting' too old to run."

I never had much patience for Silk, but with the morning papers full of talk about the grand jury in Chicago I wondered whether he could tip me. The outside word was the jury was looking into whether the smart boys here in Detroit had tried to fix a game at the end of August between the Phillies and Cubs. Since the Phils were as secure in last in their league as the A's were in theirs, and since the Cubs were nothing more than a .500 team, only a hard core gambler would care about such a game. On the other hand, if you had a pitcher in your pocket and needed a quick score, it might be the game you'd play.

"You the one who got to Hendrix?" I said. Silk didn't trap easy, and I didn't see any point in trying. With his type, the best approach is straight ahead. Hendrix was the Cubs right-hander who was supposed to make that start against the Phils. Mitchell, the Cubs skipper heard Hendrix had been bought off and pulled him an hour before the start. Hendrix had been good once - he won 29 for the Chicago Federals in 1914 and 20 for the Cubs when they won the pennant two years ago. But he was past 30 now and watching the string play out. There were a lot of players in the game like Hendrix, probably past their time, hanging on, and sometimes you wondered why. It didn't make sense to bet big on a garbage game like that...unless the pitcher was in your pocket. Yet there was big money coming out of Detroit on the Phillies for that game. So Mitchell pulled Hendrix and started Alexander instead, and the Cubs still lost 3-0. That must have given Silk and his buddies a good chuckle; their bets pay off and they don't burn their pitcher.

"I didn't have nothin to do with that," Silk says. He's discrete, but he also admires his handiwork, so if he was involved he'd find a way to take credit for it. "Ain't never met Hendrix, either. I don't know who's got him."

"Who you got on the Cubs?"

I was surprised when he answered the question. "Carter," he said.
"I don't work the Cubs too much."

"Must not," I agreed. Nobody was going to get rich on Paul Carter, Mitchell's No. 6 guy. He'd only started eight games all season. That explained why Silk was willing to own up. He didn't have hardly anything to lose.

"I hope you take good care of him," I said. "When the grand jury gets done in Chicago, he and Hendrix are both likely to be looking for another line of work."

"The jury don't worry me," Silk says with an easy shrug. "They don't care about the Cubs and Phils. They're goin' after the Sox. That's New York money. You know it as well as I do."

"Rothstein?"

"Who else? We couldn't pull that off up here. And I'll tell you somethin' else, too."

"Tell me."

"The inside dope is the Sox are just as funny this year."

"Funny to lose?"

"What we hear is New York ain't figured that out yet," Silk says. His tone is the relaxed, thoughtful tone of an investment analyst at work. "Word is after Chapman got hurt they was payin' 'em to win, then when they started edgin' out front they paid 'em to lose. You remember Boston?"

"I have a hard enough time keeping track of the Yanks."

"Chi went up there the end of the month and blew three straight; couldn't a hit worse if they'd been usin' rolled-up copies of the World."

"I have known a lot of New York gamblers," I said. "Most of 'em figure out pretty early what they want, and then don't often change their minds."

"Did I say they changed their minds? All I said was they paid 'em to win and then two weeks later paid 'em to lose. That's just playin' the odds, pal, that's all. "Keep it close, keep the interest high, read the morning line and go where the score is."

"They gonna let the Sox play for keeps down the stretch?"

Silk leaned back on the rear legs of his chair. "I don't suppose they know that yet," he offered. "I wouldn't if I was them. No

need to decide that now. Just keep it close, that's all. That way you can go either way. If the fans want to go with the Yanks or Indians, the big money can still go with the Sox and probably clean up. If not, just pay 'em to lose. That's the better bet anyway because it's the sure thing. You tell 'em to win and they might not because the Yanks or Indians still have somethin' to say. But if you tell 'em to lose...well, the Sox are good at it. They blew the whole Series and didn't get caught."

He came off the rear legs and back to the table. "That, pal, is some damn fine ball-playing."

"But if the jury jumps in," I says, "it could queer the whole deal. Or you bet 'em to win and then they get bounced."

I have learned some, and of equal importance I have succeeded in boring Silk to the point that he now desires the company of others. "Which," he says, "is why I'm glad it's Rothstein's problem and not ours. He can't control 'em if they ain't on the field." Silk drops a nickel on the table - he said he'd pay for the coffee and is a man of his word - and exits.

"Say hi to Carter for me," I says.

Mays went after his 24th that afternoon against Ehmke. The home team shook him for a run in the first and another in the fourth,

and they led 2-1 when the Colossus came up in the top of the sixth. Pipp had singled, but Mays and Peck had each gone down. Ehmke's been one of Detroit's front-liners for three seasons, and while he does not have Johnson's swift he's the kind of savvy pitcher who can hang around. His first wants no part of the plate and registers as ball one. Then a slow shoot that barely makes it up there. The Babe could have swung twice, but the rules only require once to register a strike. The third came tight enough to send the visiting hero sprawling into the dirt. A fourth misses outside as Ruth expresses indifference. A fifth pitch tantalizes. The Babe swings and in the stands the great whoosh and roar is as if Mighty Casey himself has taken a cut. Having exercised his brain to its fullest extent, Ehmke now seemingly loses control of his wits, for the fifth pitch is a fast one. There is a sharp crack and the ball becomes a white pellet streaking for the flagpole in center field. It counts for No. 49, and is all that Mays needs.

The Yanks have now beaten the Tigers twice, but it is all to no advantage because the Sox and Indians are also fattening up on the league's under-belly. This makes Tuesday's final game of the series all the more critical. The New Yorkers play like it, thrashing Dauss to the tune of seven runs in the first three innings and winning 13-3 for Shawkey. We are headed for Toledo - another exhibition game - and there is better news on the boat across the lake. Connie's kids have pulled one over on the

Indians in Cleveland and the Senators - not likely the gamblers, since the Sox were already one and one-half back -- have done the same in Chicago. This puts New York in the top bunk and heightens interest greatly in the upcoming three games. Of all the contenders, the Yanks have by far the easiest schedule for the final two weeks...just three games in St. Louis, then home for four with Washington and off to Philly for a final four. It would not be unreasonable to expect the Yanks to go 8-3 or even 9-2 through those final games. Meanwhile the Sox and Indians still had three to play with each other. Under the circumstances, leaving Chicago in first place would count for gold. But the gamblers are not likely to make it easy on the Yanks. With the Sox two and one-half back, they will be playing to win.