

The Silent Welcome

(Chicago)

I came to the big leagues with Mr. Mack in 1908. I was 19, a kid off the local sandlots and wet, but I learned. It was that or get the hell back out. Watching Murphy and Collins, Hartsel and Nicholls, Bender and Plank helped. But they had the jobs you wanted, and they didn't get paid to teach. I remember batting practice the first day. There wasn't any...not for me, anyway. It was September and I met the team in Cleveland. We were sixth and we weren't going any place except Detroit and then home. Mr. Mack wanted me because Hartsel was getting old and he'd only hit .240 and Coombs had too good an arm to keep him in the outfield much longer, but Hartsel and Coombs didn't see it that way.

Batting practice wasn't much different than it is now. The regulars hit first and for as long as they wanted. If there was any time left the Yannigans got it. And nothing is more Yannigan than a 19 year-old busher. Only nobody told me. This is what Krause told me: "Kid, Davis has had plenty of licks. You got to let him know who's in charge up here. Just go up to the cage, tell him to get the hell out of the way and stand in. That's the sand Mr. Mack wants to see in a kid."

So I did. Anything to impress Mr. Mack. I pushed past Nicholls and Hartsel, moved up to the plate and tapped Davis on the shoulder between pitches. "What's a guy got to do to get some cuts in around here?" I asked.

Davis took his cut - I dodged the swing - then turned but didn't say anything. He just spat a gob of tobacco juice on my shoe. The fellows on the bench all had a pretty good cackle at that one, and none moreso than Krause. I couldn't go back to the dugout like that so I gave it another shot. "Just got here and I'd like to show Mr. Mack what I can do." More tobacco juice; now my shoes matched. Davis dropped his bat and grabbed mine.

"Let's see what you've got for lumber, busher," he said. "You don't want to get stuck up here with bad lumber." The first pitch came in from Dygert, Davis cut at it and pieces of the bat went flying in six directions. I am four feet away and I'm dodging splinters and on the bench Krause couldn't be having a better time if he was at the burlesque.

"Busher, you need better wood," was all Davis said. I'm his size, younger and ready to brawl him but I can also see Nichols and Hartsel moving in to take up Davis' cause so I pass. This brought more tobacco spit. The A's may not be good ballplayers but they are good shots, so by the time I get back to the dugout I look like I'm playing for the Polka Dots.

From that day until the season's end the only cuts I got were in the game, about a dozen of them. I was up and down again in '09 and '10, made it in '11, got a regular's job in '12 and have been here ever since. Played in the Series in '10, '11, '13 and '14. Hit .316 in '16; that was fourth in the league. The top of the hitting stats were Speaker, then Cobb, then Jackson and then me. That was the year after I married Ethel. I was making good money by then, and what with Ethel's portraits selling so well I suppose you'd say the Strunks were doing all right. Nice place in Philly. Nothing plush, but nice. Of course I haven't seen much of it the past few years; ballplayer's life, you know.

The Federal League broke Mr. Mack so he traded Bush, Schang and me to Boston for some second stringers and cash. We didn't want to sell the place so Ethel stayed in Philly and I got a room. It wasn't bad; I made the Series in '18. Then Frazee got into money problems himself so the veterans had to go again. I was one of the first and Mr. Mack took me back for Roth and Shannon. I knew I wouldn't be in Philly long this time. The A's had a permanent lease on the cellar and with all the kids Mr. Mack was running through a 31-year-old past-his-prime outfielder didn't figure in his plans. I was hitting .297 when the A's waived me, but Welch, Wyatt, Witt and Frank Walker were all there and all in their early 20s so I said good-bye to Ethel again.

The one thing you learned playing for the A's: You played hard and smart and level. I don't know if I picked that up from Plank and Baker, or from Mr. Mack, or maybe from my mom. But they were clean and tough and square, and I liked that. A brainy bunch. Eddie Collins was an Ivy Leaguer. They called Coombs Colby Jack because that's where he went to school. Plank was Gettysburg Eddie...same reason. Barry came out of Holy Cross and Bender went to Carlisle, same school Thorpe came from. Being from the sandlots, I was the exception. You might out-slug us, and maybe even on a good day you could out-pitch us. But you weren't going to out-think us.

I heard Al Spalding once say baseball was the great American game. Me, I play it because I can. Wanted to since I was a kid in south Philly. Never learned to do anything else anyway, so I had to like it. When I was a busher and then when I was good and even now, all I ever asked was a clean shot. You play your best and I'll do the same. If my team wins, maybe on the way home I'll cross paths with some kid and he'll say, "Hey Amos...saw you at the park today. Man, you guys were great!" That's the best feeling there is.

I suppose everybody doesn't see it the same way. The past few years it seemed like there were always bugs hanging around the hotel looking for action, and some of them were the swell kind. You could pick them out because they looked a little too slick

for themselves. Most of the guys didn't want to be seen with them, but a few were chummy. Word was a couple made extra money. You'd hear the talk that a certain pitcher would shave a little for this game or that. Of course if the bugs were around us they were probably most everywhere, because since Mr. Mack broke the team up after the '14 Series you didn't have to work the A's too hard to get us to kick a game or two...we could do that on the square.

All I know is they never had any use for me, or me for them. Baseball's a fair game, and you have to play it fair. That's how I see it. Of course I'm just a so-so player now, so nobody's coming after me anyway. In a sense, that's how I like it, too.

When Connie waived me the other day Comiskey and Barrow both wired, but there was nothing to be gained by going back to Boston so I wired Commy that I'd buy a train ticket and meet the team in Cleveland where they were stopping off after the July eastern swing. I didn't have a future in Chicago, either - not at my age and not with the team they had, but at least I might pick up a World Series check. I thought I could help them. Leibold was hardly hitting his weight in right, and ever since Gandil left the team Shano Collins wasn't available out there because they needed him at first. Besides, when you're coming off a .240 season like I hit in 1919, you're an athlete and you're in your 30s, you want to win right now because you don't know how many

more chances there will be. And that was all I wanted - to win. I wasn't going to do it in Philly or Boston, but I might in Chicago.

The Sox were the league champs in '19 and they hadn't lost much...only Gandil. Beyond that, Faber was healthy. True, they were five games back but there was more than two and a half months to go. Nobody had a middle of the order like the Sox. Jackson was hitting .390, Eddie Collins .350, Weaver around .340 and Felsch .325 - that was two through five. The team lacked only a leadoff man who could play right field, and that was maybe where I fit in.

I wasn't naïve. I read the papers like everybody else and I saw the team in the other dugout all season. So I knew about the talk. How the team wasn't always on the square. How some of them didn't do their best in the Series. How they may have been tight with the money boys. How they hated each other's guts. I heard it, and I wondered. But not enough to stay off the train. I knew it was the Sox or Boston and the Sox were five out and had Jackson, Weaver, Felsch, Cicotte, Faber, Collins and Williams. Boston? They were 20 out and they had Frazee and a bunch of guys he wanted to unload. One team had a chance and the other didn't and I was getting old. I told Commy I'd buy a ticket and meet them Sunday in Cleveland.

I'd ridden a lot of trains, been in a lot of visiting lockers and seen a lot of guys come and go. I was no kid, but I've never seen anybody get a welcome like the one I got walking into the locker room at League Park that Sunday.

An hour before a game a big league locker is a noisy place. You got two dozen guys and it's "let's go get 'em" and "what'd you do last night?" and "who was the dame?" and "lemme borrow your bat, just for today." When the new guy walks in, if he's a veteran, one of the regulars will show him around, introduce him to the guys, bring him into the skip's office, and make sure his stuff gets back to the team hotel or the train or wherever it ought to be.

I walked in to the visitors locker at League Park and you'd have thought they were holding church it was so quiet. Except they'd have had to be holding it in Roman and Protestant versions because one group was in one corner and a second group was in another corner and only a few guys, mostly kids, floated around in the middle. Nobody's talking outside their group. So finally one of the floaters came over and said, "I'm Jourdan" and I said, "I'm Strunk" and he holds out his hand and we shake and he motions me to an empty hanger and a nail near a spare uniform. I had never walked into prison, but my strong sense was that fact had just changed.

Having been in the league a dozen seasons I did not really need to be introduced for I knew all the faces and had crossed paths with several before. The one group are Jackson, Felsch, McMullin, Williams, Cicotte, Risberg and Weaver. Jackson was a kid with me in Philly. It is pretty much the core of the team: the heart of the lineup, the two best pitchers, the shortstop and McMullin the only hanger-on. In the other corner is Collins, my old teammate. I was one of the last Mr. Mack sold when money got tight, but he was one of the first. The other Collins was in that group, too, plus Schalk, Faber, Kerr, Leibold, Murphy and Wilkinson. Catcher, second base, a fill-in outfielder and three more pitchers. That didn't leave much as a welcoming committee, just McClellan, Byrd Lynn, Shovel Hodge, Payne and Jourdan. Jourdan apparently had drawn the straw to welcome me.

I didn't know him. He was a kid, no more than 25, and he'd been up and down with the Sox in '16, '17 and '18, then finally got a full chance this year when Gandil quit. He couldn't hit, part of the reason I was here. Lately Gleason had moved John Collins in from right and let Leibold back out there. But Leibold wasn't hitting either. The only thing I knew about Jourdan was that my arrival ensured he wouldn't be around much longer and wouldn't have much to do while he was. The same could be said of McClellan, Lynn, Payne and Hodge...and they knew it. In that locker room, though, the Sox looked every bit like two closed brotherhoods with our little knot as the remnants of

civilization, such as it was. So I shook Jourdan's hand and put on the flannels he gave me, and stopped off at Gleason's office. Gleason didn't say much other than hi and he'd see about playing time, but as I was probably tired from the overnight from Philly that might not go for today. For a geezer I'd been hot in Philly, with a .297 average that was second among the regulars behind only Dugan. It was my best season since '16 and I felt good and told him so, but he was the boss, he wasn't making any promises and he wasn't saying much. "We're gonna catch New York and Cleveland and you're gonna help, Strunk," he says, and that was it.

Gleason didn't say much. Jackson didn't say anything. Felsch - I'm supposed to be playing alongside him in the outfield - he didn't say anything. Eddie Collins remembers me from Philly seven years ago. He didn't say anything. Collins had the goods. Serious, tough, competitive. On the field he was the kind of teammate you wanted. We won four pennants and three worlds titles together, Collins and me. Off the field was another story. Maybe because he was an Ivy Leaguer, he always seemed pretty stuck on himself. In Philly we called him "Cocky," because he strutted around the rest of us like the banty rooster. The word was when he came to Chi he held up Comiskey for good money, and there isn't anybody else I heard of who had done that. The clubhouse walls were saying that right there was enough reason for Jackson and Cicotte and their crowd to hate his guts. Maybe Collins was happy with it; I don't know. I'll say this, the guy could still

play. He hit .320 last year and he's banging .350 right now. He still struts, but I see a quiet, angry kind of strut; it says, "I'm good and I'm surrounded by stinking bastards I got no use for." On the whole team, Schalk and Kerr are about the only ones he looks at...maybe Leibold and Shano. You wonder how a guy can be so happy and so miserable at the same time.

The Sox are five out with the best players in the world and they're playing the team right in front of them and the locker's like the French and the Germans had dug in.

I felt cold. It was July and the place was cold.

I took up a seat with Lynn on the bench because at least he was somebody to talk to. He was the backup to Schalk so he wasn't doing anything better and neither was I. They had the ropes up in the outfield and there must have been 5,000 behind them with close to 25,000 more in the stands. Cleveland is nuts about baseball right now, moreso when Speaker puts one onto Lexington in the first. Williams isn't going bad - just bad enough. He gives up two more in the third and we come back with a couple ourselves against the big Polack, but that don't matter because Williams gives up three more in the seventh. Lefty's due in the ninth and Gleason motions to me and says take a hack but Covey gets me just like everybody else and the game's over. Schalk's fuming but the rest of the team prefers a shower to listening to

Schalk so it isn't long and we're 19 guys carrying bags for the train station so we can catch the train to Detroit. We aren't getting' in anybody's way, especially not each other's.

Cruisenberry's on the trip for the Tribune. Hang around the league long enough and you get to know even the visiting reporters a little. Most of the team hates Cruisenberry because he stirred up some of the stuff about the Series last fall. Risberg and Felsch wouldn't talk to him because they figured he ratted. Kerr and Collins wouldn't talk to him because after all the talk died down they decided he didn't have any pull so there was no point. The only guys who'd talk to him were the fringe guys, Hodge and Payne and Jourdan - and nobody cared what they said.

So when the train pulled out and Cruisenberry found a seat he found it next to me because I was the only passingly familiar face that didn't think he was a jerk or a fink or a pansy. If I had learned one thing in my day with the Sox it was that on this team you watched what you said, and that's what Cruisenberry did the whole four-hour ride. "See me in the morning." That was it. Not much entertainment for four hours, so we get to our hotel and since I am the new guy and the 19th I am also the odd one and rooming by myself. See you in the morning, Jimmy, and lights out.

But I make it a point to look up Cruisenberry Monday morning. He's been around since 1910, long enough to have seen Walsh, Chance and the good Chicago teams on both sides of town, and all that time at the Tribune, So he knows what's he's doing and you can talk baseball to him. The Sox have been up and down so far. They have hit Detroit at 55-36, which is .604. That isn't far off what they did in '19 when they won the pennant. But they are five back of the Indians and about as far from the Yanks. They can't get anything stringing. They came to Cleveland from Boston, where they won three out of four but it should have been four of four. They lost to Jones 2-1 and their best sticks left men all over the bases in the third, fourth and fifth. Before that the Yanks beat 'em four out of six.

"Let's take a walk," says Cruisenberry in the lobby. Not only does nobody on this team talk, but nobody wants to even be seen talking. So we walk.

"Anybody on this team get along?" I ask.

"They hate each other. Wouldn't you if they were throwing you over?"

"You said that last year, but you forgot to make it stick. Anyway, Jackson's hitting .390, Felsch and Weaver are way up,

Cicotte's won nearly 15 and so has Williams. This team may even cop. So you have no case."

"Nah, they're still in the tank. The whole team knows it. The gamblers let Risberg know when they see a cherry and he puts in the fix. Cicotte's winning but he got killed twice at the Polo Grounds. You saw Risberg tank a relay a couple weeks ago in Philly that gave you guys a game..."

"He muffed it..."

"He tanked it and then he nearly threw it into the dugout. They're real good...when they want to be. The way I see it the gamblers are playing the Sox to hang close all the way, don't get too far out front or too far behind, then see which way the odds work in September and clean up. If you don't believe me, ask Gleason."

"Gleason knows?"

"We was in New York last week. Lardner and me are at the bar talking over the game when we get a call. It's Gleason. He's at Dinty Moore's. 'You guys know Attell?' he asks.

"'We know him...he don't know us,'" I said."

You may remember Attell because he cut something of a public figure last October when all the scandal talk surfaced. Used to be featherweight champ. Word is he's Rothstein's bagman now. Some say he carried the grease to the Sox.

"Then get over here,' Gleason says. Attell's at the bar spillin' his guts to me right now and I want you to hear it.'

"So we walk over and there's Gleason and there's Attell next to him at the bar. We take seats close enough and the Kid starts pumping Attell.

"Rothstein put up the cash, huh?'

"Kid, I was sorry to do it to you,' Attell says. 'I wouldn't have, but I had some things going and I needed the bundle. You gotta see it my way, Kid.'"

"If you heard it, why haven't I read about it?," I said to Cruisenberry. "I thought you were the big tough newspaper guy."

"I wrote it but the desk spiked it," Cruisenberry said. "Lardner said they would and he was right. You got no proof and Attell's got libel lawyers, so forget it...that's what the sports editor said."

"So you're saying the team's crooked and the Kid knows?"

"Knows...hell, he's known since the Series," Cruisenberry said.

"Commy, too. But what are they supposed to do? They think they've got a shot this year so they ain't gonna tear the team up and lose their whole investment, And even if Gleason and Commy wanted to let it out the public doesn't give a shit...not the way Ruth and the pennant race are bringing them in. Haven't you been watching the turnstile counts? That's Johnson's game, too. So Commy and Gleason can sit there and take it and hope for the best or quit. And here's another news flash you won't read in the Trib; the Kid thinks they might win, too. He thinks the gamblers might decide if the talk's bad enough there's money to be made going the other way this year."

I got back to the hotel, looked up the Kid and knocked on his door. I may have been on the team less than week but I was no busher any more and I knew how to look a skip in the eye.

The visit was brief.

"What about what Cruisenberry says?"

"You're here a day and talking to Cruisenberry already, Strunk? Get the hell out! God-damned trouble-maker!"

"Yeah, but what about Dinty Moore's and Attell?"

"I said get the hell out! I gotta get ready for the game."

We beat Detroit 6-4 that day and I had a nice, quiet view from the bench, which I used to try to pick up on anything fishy. Nothing. We won 3-1 the next day and climbed the train for Chicago, where my old teammates were waiting. Cicotte shut them out on a three-hitter 3-0, then Lefty beat Rommel 4-2 in the first game of a Thursday double-header. We were on a four-game win streak that should have been five with Kerr going against Naylor in the second game that day. Based on the way that second game went, I'd have bet anything the fix was in except the wrong guys were the fixers. For starters, Kerr didn't have it and Mr. Mack's kids led us 6-2 going into the last of the eighth. We made a move when Nemo led off with a hit and Eddie rapped a hard double. Then Weaver grounded an easy one to Galloway, who had no interest in anything except the batter so he threw to first for the out. Nemo, however, had chosen that moment for a nap so when Eddie came over from second - assuming Leibold was going home, we had two men on third base and no runs. The throw back made it an easy double play. Jackson followed with a blow into the right field stands, but it only counted for two runs instead of three, and when we scored two more in the bottom of the ninth those runs only tied the game rather than winning it. By then Kerr was

gassed. The A's got six off him and Hodge and Payne in the tenth and we blew one we should have won.

I wonder whether the gamblers took a bath.

I went looking for a room that night, and Jourdan put me on to a place in Hyde Park, only a couple miles along the trolley line from Comiskey. It was decent and the landlady threw in supper so I took it. Mailed a letter off to Ethel first thing. Where I was, that sort of thing. There were three fellows around the parlor when I came down, and they seemed a pleasant enough group. One was in town making sales calls for a couple weeks, and the second was over at the university. I guess the third got the boot from his wife, but he didn't want to say much about it and I didn't ask much, either. Nice bunch of fellows, though.

We were settling in, lighting up and jawing like guys do. The egghead was reading the Daily News, but I don't think it was the sports page, and the landlady came in and made sure I was introduced properly, which we'd already seen to by ourselves. "And what do you do for a living, Mr. Strunk?" she asked.

"Well, ma'am, I'm a ballplayer," I respond, and that got a bit of a rise out of the gentlemen, who are familiar with the race, if not exactly with me. They wanted to hear all about Jackson and Williams and Collins and Schalk and Weaver, but as I did not wish

to say much I availed myself of the excuse of being new in order to defer on a question of that delicacy. There is nothing, however, delicate about our landlady.

"All I want to know, Mr. Strunk," is whether you are one of the honest ones?

In all my years of playing baseball, that's a question I never heard before, much less from a lady. But I was too flustered by it to not answer.

"Yes, ma'am, I am," I said.

"Then you are welcome to stay here."

Jackson came up sore the next day so Kid wrote me in batting cleanup. I went three for five and doubled home the winner in the 10th and we won 6-5. But Keefe beat Wilkinson 5-1 the day after that so we only got three of five against Philly. Three of five against the A's doesn't sound right, but if you thought anybody had the fix in it would have to have been Leibold and Kerr.