

Baseball From the Outside

By Homer Croy

Drawing by Gibson A. Shay

LAST fall during the great championship series at the Polo Grounds between the Giants and the Chicago Cubs, when Coogan's Bluffs were like ant-hills, an unknown man climbed up a telegraph pole on the outside of the fence. He climbed clear to the top, and wrapped his legs around the post. The people on the ground had to laugh at him, he made such a comical sight. He looked like a monkey. But it was hard work hanging on there, inning after inning. The man's legs began to cramp, but his enthusiasm would not let him come down. When a good play was made he held his elbows tightly against the post, and clapped his hands. He was seeing a great game of baseball; nothing else mattered. But the unknown man's legs became cramped, and he fell to the ground. He was killed.

Why was it that this nameless man risked his life to see a score of men throw and knock a wad of leather around over a field?

The answer is hard.

But everybody else is just like that unknown man; only everybody doesn't climb a pole. Everybody, whether young, old, or halt, likes baseball. It would take some subtle psychologist like Hugo Munsterberg to tell just why everybody likes baseball. It is like love—it defies analysis.

One time at a banquet Mark Twain was suddenly called upon to tell just what all his life he had most wanted to be, what his one great ambition was. He arose and brushed back his hair, then said: "This is something of a confession. But all my life, since I was in my watermelon stealing days, I have wished to become a good, reliable veterinary surgeon!"

But Mark Twain is different from most men. Otherwise he would have wanted to become a baseball player. He is one of the few exceptions to the rule.

A few days ago I was talking to a Broadway theatrical star over a planked steak, discussing the whys and wherefores of life. Said this man who has his name in electric bulbs: "Everybody in this world of ours thinks he can do something besides the something that his hand is turned to. I don't care whether you take Jim Jeffries, the Emperor of China, or the man who struck Billy Patterson—every single one of them down in his heart thinks he can either write, act, or play baseball. If you would take a canvass of the able-bodied men in the United States, you would find only about a half dozen who would admit that they did not believe they could play baseball. And if you would probe deep, these half dozen would admit that they had ambitions."

From the time a boy puts on long trousers until as an old man he settles back in his Morris chair, a victim of the gout, he believes that he has the qualifications of a ball-player. But this is only a good healthy sign. If a man didn't want to play the great game, it would mean that he had lost all interest in life. It would mean that his name was close to the suicide's list.

They say that there is only one final test for a great work of art. It makes no difference whether that work of art is a painting of the crucifixion, the writing of an editorial, the planning of a tunnel, or the playing of a game of ball, there is only one test as to its greatness. That work of art must make the one seeing it, or experiencing it, wish

to be the person taking the part. A person seeing a great actor wishes to be one himself; or when one hears a masterly bit of music he wishes to be a musician. When a person sees a man on the diamond, every bit as much of an artist in his sphere as the man before the pipe organ, he wishes to be a ball-player.

Not long ago, while interviewing Wallace Irwin—who writes Hashimura Togo, the Japanese school boy, and who has the divine power of making people laugh—I asked him with a smile on my face, "What would you rather be?"

His face drew down into seriousness, as he answered, "A baseball player."

It is a queer thing, but as a general rule men, wish to be some thing outside of their own line. The butcher wants to be a baker; the baker wants to be a candle-stick maker; and the candle-stick maker wants to be a butcher. De Wolf Hopper—who made "Casey at the Bat" famous, or should I say whom "Casey" made famous?—confessed to a party of friends once that he hoped some time, somewhere, somehow, something would happen so that he could become a baseball-player.

While men in other fields are always sighing for other worlds than their own, I have never heard a baseball-player say he wanted to be anything else than just a diamond star.

One day last fall I overheard one Englishman, who was just new to this country, tell another Englishman about a game he had seen at the Polo Grounds. Said the first Englishman: "It was a fine game. Somebody threw a ball, and somebody hit it, and somebody else caught it, and then somebody else picked up the same mallet and tried to hit the ball again. It was a great game." He didn't know a home-run from a shot-out, but still there was something about the game that he liked.

Not many weeks ago a celebrated literary critic and lecturer, while making an address, said in speaking of the Great American Novel, which is yet to be written: "We are all anxiously awaiting the Great American Novel, and we are



HE LOOKED LIKE A MONKEY

all wondering just what it will be about, what phase of life it will cover, whether it will be of horse-trading in Indiana, or of finance in Wall Street. But I wish to make the assertion that the Great American Novel will have to cover baseball. Baseball is the most typical phase that characterizes Americans."

In St. Louis a few years ago there was a baseball editor, who had been wounded in the ankle while playing ball. He was a cripple. He was a very talented writer, a man of unlimited ability. But he spent his days in writing baseball. When questioned by friends as to why he did not take up fiction, he would reply: "I can't play baseball any more, and I want to be as near it as I can. Fiction is all right, but baseball is better."

That is the reason why that unknown man climbed up the pole—because.