

The Rejuvenation of a Fan

How I Became an Admirer of the National Game

By Lillian Russell

IT required only a trip to the Polo Grounds during the recent upheaval to discover that there is one sort of a fan a woman doesn't want to have anything to do with.

In case you should inadvertently pick one up you will need no injunction from me to put it right down again, and pass over into the next aisle. Of course, you may encounter a stampede of women looking for a \$2.00 article that can be had that afternoon for \$2.24, but beside this bedlam that fan collection in Mein Herr Coogan's bailiwick is as the roaring of the ocean to the ripple of a brook, barely noisy enough to be called by that name.

Yes, I went looking for fans last summer. Had I known what they are, it would have been far from my desires to break into such celebrated company. We had a touring car and it might have been much better to have kept straight ahead to Bloomingdale. You see, there are trained keepers up that way and you have some sense of protection in the juxtaposition of a uniformed and commanding-looking attendant.

Late in August, when one of Joseph Brooks' wonderfully condensed requests that amount to a command, found me in Paris, I supposed it meant to hurry home to New York for rehearsal. A sad farewell to the Champs d'Elysee, a sigh for the Rue de la Paix and on to Cherbourg and then the sea, with home in the offing.

New York seemed strangely abstracted when I got there. Friends met me with almost surly indifference. Of course, I didn't want to rave about my glorious trip, but I did expect some friendly inquiries as to what sort of a time I had. Instead, about the first question that I encountered was:

"Well, I guess Mike is bad—eh?"

I have recollections of boys of that name getting into trouble, but on *my* soul I couldn't see the vital importance of the theme at this juncture.

"They look like pipes, don't they?" was the greeting of a true friend. Quickly shifting my gaze from his under-pinnings, I refused to answer and tried to shift the subject.

"Now please be generous," he persisted, "and admit we have it on all the Pirates and Cubs that ever roamed the deep."

Overlooking the insult to metaphor, I could not figure out whether my friend was improvising a fantasia, or was just mildly daft. If he was doing it for my benefit, he could declare it spades and get off light.

For days I wondered in a maze of perplexity. Had Paris gone to my head or had something happened to everybody in New York during my absence? I am not much of a believer in the realism of physical ills and I like to sift things for myself from top to bottom and so I refrained from asking questions. I thought I might make an exception when my daughter came down to breakfast the next morning. By the time the eggs were served I was about to broach the subject, when "Daughty" looked up from her paper to inquire:

"I wonder if we ever had any one quite so good as Matty?"

"Margaret you mean," said I, thinking of my really good and faithful maid, and rather proud that daughter shared my opinion, when with an indignant look she swept from the room and half sobbed in parting:

"Why, mamma, how can you be so frivolous!"

I had come to the point where I began

to feel that I was slipping. Something had gone wrong and it must be me. Surely all New York was not topsyturvy. But I had my work and here would I find solace in sweet endeavor. En route to the theatre afternoons I often passed groups of men who were gazing upward, all attention riveted upon a workman apparently lettering some signs overhead.

From the cab window I saw the pillars of a temple-like building that recalled scenes in the orient. It didn't require much imagination to hear seemingly the monotone that comes floating down from the mosque and summons the faithful to the Koran. In my ears re-echoed the slogan:

"Come to prayer—prayer is better than sleep."

Over and over in Arabic it had smitten my aural sense until I knew it by heart. But here instead of a crowd of turbaned heads and sunburnt countenances, religiously facing the East, I saw a typical New York gathering, and in place of the white-robed figure and the muffled voice on the parapet I discovered a fellow in overalls fingering a stencil case. Now and then he would mark up a figure in little squares that were numbered above. If he struck the right space with a figure, a mighty cheer was given by the gaping throng.

"What a silly game to cause such a hub-bub," I was thinking, when suddenly I spied at the beginning of the lines the names "New York-Pittsburg."

A load lifted from my mind as the light of intelligence broke in. I knew that I was normal. The others were the ones in trouble. They were caught in the delirium of the great National fever. It may be sinful to glory in some one's misfortune, but you have no idea of the joy this discovery brought me. Now I could easily discern the symptoms and it seemed that the attack was more virulent this time.

Brick walls and iron casements, the dreary chill of an empty theatre and even the watchful eye of our stage doorkeeper could not bar this intruder. It had caught our company in worse form than any. I found in this short time that my hurried trip from Paris was not for the purpose of rehearsing our play, "Wild-

fire," but to talk baseball. As I listened, the reason of some of those queer questions began to peep through the haze of enshrouding mystery. Curiosity dragged me into the first steps of an awakened interest. I could catch snatches of conversation as we made brave efforts to put "Wildfire" through the preliminary paces of preparation. What a fatal mysticism there is in a strange language when you have a predestined aptitude to listen!

The boys of my company were evidently bent on setting up a language to rival Esperanto. At least from what I heard, it sounded that way.

"Yes, Si is all to the mustard. He can lay on it but he ain't got the nut to negotiate the route."

"Aw, give me de gezabo wit'a bingle in his repertoire, when it's 'Eliza de dogs is barking at de ice,' " was the extremely lucid manner in which another of the boys disposed of the aspersions on Si's fair fame. I gathered these deductions from the spirit of the conversation rather than from the Standard or Funk & Wagnalls excerpts encountered.

"You are right there," said another regarding this odd commodity, "I like to see them meet it. Don't go coaxing and flirting with it, but give it a good hearty smack on the face and send it out with a whiz and noise that have all the sound of welcome as it travels to the land of safety."

"That's fine in theory, but, my boy, in fact there is a person on the rubber who is inclined in an opposite direction. Now and then you can batter down his defense by a bombardment, but the real battles these days are won by strategy. It's the noodle that deposits the golden Pulliams in the great totalizer. You got to keep the noodle oiled and working smooth. The weeds and the festive highball, likewise the scuttle of foaming suds are not in it any more. Brains and brawn are the requisites in place of native talent and cobweb draperies."

I was a lover of baseball in the days of Buck Ewing and Johnny Ward. I had always admired intelligence, but was rather surprised to find that baseball had become academic. I thought in the old days that the sand lot was where they taught the game. By taking a hand at this stage I was soon interested in the

new game. In reading about it I am compelled to admit that most of the language was Sanscrit to me for I never encountered such expressions before in all my travels. Most everything is evolution, and the next step for me was to join the crowds then cheering the "Giants" on their way.

It was during those tense, nerve-racking days that I made the acquaintance of the twentieth century genius—the fan. The fan is a paradox, for he is the joy and the pest of the national game. Among the emotional few I must say that well-behaved and otherwise well-mannered gentlemen I had long known in stage life were the offenders. Not mentioning any names: but if brother lambs want affidavits that some of the fold are not the gentle lot they should be, just consult the papers for my travelling route and I will specify. It seemed to me that the fever had caught the entire actors' colony in New York, both men and women. Of course the latter were doubly interested, because little Mabel Hite had married Donlin, and I suppose some of them were even jealous.

It was fellows of our set who treated me to the surprise of the year: the development of a fan that I could not care for. From that marvelous way that they have of expressing pages in a paragraph, I found that the habitués of the Polo Grounds referred to my well-meaning associates as "dem actor bugs."

"Bug" as thus applied I find means a person of peculiar eccentricities, born of frenzy and expressed in wild, incoherent shrieks that develop a monomania called baseballitis. Now that the tense, awful struggle is over and soothed nerves are again performing their functions, I can't find it in my heart to blame the fans. In a short space of time I found myself caught in that vortex and often felt that nothing in the world would give me such satisfaction as to get up on the chair and let out one genuine whoop.

I am not prepared to go into detail, for my comment in your technical magazine devoted to the sport would sound as

silly as trying to bring culture to Boston. But from a new fan's way of seeing it, the tragedy and the comedy and the terrific dramatic interest of the thing appalled me. I caught myself trying to fathom the psychology of those great crowds. I saw staid old bankers get up and do things that were astounding. I saw faces drawn in the agony of a death struggle at some moment in the contest and unconsciously the line "What is he to Hecuba" leaped to my mind.

The mystery of the thing fascinated me. What was this terrible force that drew out such breathless and tumultuous interest? What genius of appeal had outlined this drama, had awakened an interest that awed you and had battered down the walls of native reserve?

Surely it was more than the mere efforts of eighteen plain, everyday-looking men to strike at a small sphere, and, having occasionally met it, go scampering about a square of proscribed confines. There was nothing so sensational nor startling in that.

No, it was more than this. There were the commingled elements of surprise, of eager expectancy, of emotional efforts to anticipate kaleidoscope possibilities, of civic partisanship, of personal admiration for a favorite—oh! there were so many contributors that the whole keeps you guessing.

We rush along under such a terrific pressure that I marvelled at the energy with which these rooters tackled the game. They had swarmed out of busy marts and forgotten tickers, trades and transports, to get into a fight afresh—and the thought came to me that perhaps it has its economic usage, and is the national safety valve. I wonder if there can be anything in this theory?

Whatever else it is, the game is wholesome. Its very vital call is its unquestioned integrity and it gives one the chance to "smile out loud" under God's clear sky and to take in life-giving breaths of fresh air every time one empties the lungs with a lusty cheer.

