

How a Practical Joke Came Near Wrecking Organized Baseball

An Incident Which Befell Ban Johnson on a Hunting Trip and its Momentous Consequences to the National Game.

By M. V. B. LYONS

Ban Johnson has been for years one of the foremost figures in baseball. In many an instance which the public has not fathomed, his dominant personality has been impressed on contemporary history. The tremendous power he has wielded gives to even his minor acts an importance which they would not otherwise possess. But amid all the instances where the power of Johnson has been a potent factor in baseball politics, there is none more singular than the incident occurring on one of his numberless hunting trips, which, for a while, completely demoralized the American League and threatened to endanger the national game itself. The story of this unique adventure is graphically narrated in the following article.

BAN JOHNSON is a famous hunter, a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool lover of the chase. Anything that savors of the woods or of the stream is a delicate morsel to the palate of the supreme Mogul of organized baseball. So, in view of his remarkable attachment to the great outdoors and the alluring sports it offers, it is perhaps not to be wondered at that these sports have played a far more important part in the career of baseball itself than most people imagine.

In the days of Queen Anne, when the celebrated campaigns of the Duke of Marlboro were overturning the thrones of Europe, it was a common saying of the cynics of the court that the destinies of the continent were irretrievably altered by a petty quarrel between two ladies-in-waiting in attendance on the British crown. The strange thing about this rumor of the early eighteenth century in the light of history, was its absolute truth.

On a par with this remarkable state of affairs it is strictly and literally true to state that the whole complicated structure of baseball was stirred to its very foundation and a momentous conflict that might have wrecked the game averted only with the greatest difficulty,

by an incident, petty in itself but momentous in its consequences, which occurred on one of President Johnson's numerous hunting trips.

It sounds incredible until we analyze the situation and see its simplicity. For Ban Johnson is so much the head of organized baseball that even a fancied whim on his part is more than likely to be reflected with treble force on the fortunes of the great game he so intimately directs. In fact, the status quo in baseball is only to be compared with European history in the early part of last century, when Napoleon Bonaparte dominated the entire civilized world. In his day friends and foes united in saying that the reigning sovereign of the pettiest principality in Europe could take part in no enterprise that was not felt at the court of France, while any act, however unimportant, on the part of the great conqueror himself created an immediate and profound impression throughout the length and breadth of the continent. This is the best possible commentary on the state of affairs in old world politics one hundred years ago, and shows more plainly than anything else could show the remarkable influence which the great Corsican wielded on contemporary his-

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tory. Conversely it is an equally convincing sign of the bigness of Ban Johnson that an inconspicuous hunting incident, in which he was the principal actor, should result in the threatened disruption of the American League and the imminent peril of organized baseball. Such, however, are the playful pranks of history, whether of world or baseball.

Next to a well-won triumph over the National League, next to the firm establishment of baseball on an enduring basis, Ban Johnson loves the chase. Nor is he alone in his allegiance to the Goddess of Hunting. Almost all the players, managers and magnates are also devoted worshipers at this shrine of the open air, but Johnson stands conspicuous even among a class whose hobbies are identical. Whenever the opportunity offers he may be depended upon to steal quietly away from the irksome duties of his responsible position at the Fischer Building, in Chicago, the White House of the American League, and bury his troubles for a while in the solitudes of upper Wisconsin. Upon these adventurous tours to his favorite hunting grounds Johnson's usual companion was his lifelong friend and associate, Charles Comiskey, the fighter of the American League, and the man who exerted an influence at its organization scarcely inferior to that of the Baseball Czar himself. Also certain other individuals accompanied these two great potentates of baseball dominion, and to the wild prank of one of these lesser courtiers is traceable an act which might, but for a kindly providence, have caused results the most disastrous.

If there is one thing more than the discipline of an unruly player, or a sight at the rapidly-filling coffers of the American League, that delights Ban Johnson's eye it is a good shot, particularly when made by himself. Every great man has his weakness, and in Johnson's case this weakness is his marksmanship. He prides himself upon his shooting ability, and not without reason, for he is in very fact far more than commonly adept at handling either a rifle or a shotgun.

On this particular occasion the president of the American League put on his cartridge belt, took in hand his favorite Parker shotgun and sauntered out to do great deeds. And he did. All day he

banged away, and all day the startled birds rose in haste and ambled off through the echoing air. Never before had the chief magistrate of baseball had such an experience. At first he marveled, looking cautiously about him to see if any other than himself had witnessed his disgraceful marksmanship. Then he carefully examined his trusty gun (it never had failed him before), shook his head and wondered. He blamed the gun; why not? Surely he could not have made such a blunder himself, but he determined next time that there should be no repetition of the experience. But alas! It was a beautiful shot—the veriest novice could not miss such a chance blindfolded. He smiled in a confident way, though he nevertheless aimed with the utmost care. And he was absolutely astounded, mentally paralyzed to see the birds rise unharmed and flutter off into the underbrush. In desperation he blazed away, wondering, doubting, all at sea as to his uncanny marksmanship. The easiest of shots proved as abortive as the rest, and his mood took on a tinge of savagery which augured ill for someone. But it was not until nightfall, when, utterly weary and crestfallen, he returned to camp, that he discovered the cause of his discomfiture. Someone had filled his belt with blank cartridges, and he had been shooting all day without ammunition. The mystery was solved.

Now it may have been that Comiskey had chuckled a little too openly at the discomfiture of his friend. It may be that he had let fall a few innocent remarks which he judged appropriate to the occasion. At any rate, Johnson's suspicions were aroused and he blamed his friend for his humiliation. Other things occurred to water the seed thus securely planted, and an estrangement grew up between the two old friends. The ranking feeling did not come to the surface at once. It smoldered, however, in secret, and the old time friendship which had been the strongest and most important in baseball seemed due for an open rupture. However, even yet the difficulty might have been smoothed over had it not been for an unfortunate occurrence in connection with another of Ban Johnson's outing trips. This time the president of the American League

had escaped from the perplexities of his office and sought relaxation with the fishing rod. And as a flag of truce he sent an enormous bass which he had captured to Comiskey, with his compliments. For a time it seemed that the damage done with the gun might be wiped out by the spoils of the rod, but only for a moment. Unfortunately Johnson had felt impelled in the discharge of his duty to suspend one of the White Sox's most valued outfielders, and the dire news of this event came to light only a few moments after the arrival of the conciliatory bass. The good effects of Johnson's Christian deed were immediately erased and Comiskey, full of wrath, summed up the situation with the taut epigram, "Does he expect me to play that bass in left field?" Kind friends spread the reception of his trophy to Johnson, and the smoldering flames of war broke out anew.

The consummation of this struggle was truly Homeric. At the annual meeting Johnson, backed by the seven other magnates of the American League, rose to read Comiskey out of baseball. The latter, apprised of the danger, burst into the meeting, embraced the whole situation in one sweeping exclamation, and stated in a tense, terse style that he was going out to organize another league. The meeting broke up. Better counsels prevailed. Mutual friends of both men took the matter in hand. The delicate situation was met with diplomacy, and the grand catastrophe averted. But it shows, just the same, how great results may flow from an incident trivial in itself.

A man's hobbies do not get him bread and butter, nor do they serve to increase either his power or fame. But for all that they are liable to be more important in his own eyes than any other topic whatsoever.

Fortunately all this is but an episode,

one of the many in the stormy history of the game. Well it is that the last effect of this odd occurrence is completely erased from the minds of all concerned, and that peace now reigns in the councils of organized baseball. And it is specially worthy of note that the two principals in this little drama now hunt together in mutual good fellowship, where there is no illicit stuffing of cartridge belts with bogus goods.

Johnson's excursions into the woods are as frequent as ever. Characteristic of the man is the fact that after the world's series of this past season had been fought and won—the most momentous occasion in the whole annals of sport, the most grueling and the most financially successful—Johnson, flushed with the spoils of victory over his old-time rival, sought the wilds of upper Wisconsin as the scene for the celebration of his triumph. And thither went also Jake Stahl and James McAleer, manager and magnate of the new world's champions, with various other celebrities of baseball. Johnson took his favorite rifle (he uses a Savage. All baseball personages, players and otherwise, have their favorite brand of gun, just as they do of tobacco, and stand up most zealously for the respective merits of their artillery). Johnson took his rifle this time, for he hoped to see a deer. But the party broke up while the closed season was still on. The only deer in sight was the pet antelope Pete, while Garry Hermann in a letter remarked that "as for deer he didn't see any," and "as for guns the only shots he made were shots out of a decanter."

However, this merry-making tour was hardly a sample of Johnson's real skill, for he is a devoted hunter and takes more genuine pleasure in an excursion to the woods and fields than he does in a triumph over the National League. And that is close to the limit.

