



Screwball

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "Spin Down, Spin In," etc.

WHEN the Old Man called me into his private doghouse, which is the open corner of the city room where he crouches at a battered desk and hands out the daily assignments to the scribes of the *New York Chronicle*, I didn't expect to get a free trip south. I expected to get roasted a luscious brown for having faked an interview with a visiting poetess.

But we live and learn.

"Pat," the Old Man said, "do you like baseball?"

I said: "I'm nuts about baseball, chief."

"Sure, sure," he said. "But do you *know* anything about the game?"

"Know anything?"—I fixed him with a dirty look. "Maybe I never told you, chief, but my father was. Three-Fingered Allen in the Tinker to Evers to Chance days. I

was fed infield flies for breakfast, pitch-outs for dinner, and double steals for supper until I was knee-high to a batting cage. I know more about baseball than you and Abner Doubleday combined."

"Huh," the Old Man said, disagreeing slightly with that last crack. "Are you just giving me double-talk or are you on the level?"

I said, "I'm on the level, chief. Why, I still know most of the old-timers. Ask Ty Cobb about my dad and about me. Or Tris Speaker—"

"Did you ever," the Old Man asked, still regarding me with frankly open suspicion, "know Hughie Marranton when he was playing with the Braves?"

"Of course I did," I told him. "Hughie Marranton played alongside Dad for two

seasons in Baltimore. He was the best first-sacker in the league before he turned in his glove and took up managing the Green Sox. Why, he's in training camp right now, down in St. Pete—"

"Okay," said the Old Man. "That sells me. I've already sent Jimmy Lane to cover the Green Sox training camp for this office, but he says he needs another scribe to help him out. You're hired, Pat. Pack a bag and grab the Orange Blossom Special tonight. I'll have a guy at the station with your ticket and some cash. You're to stay with the Green Sox and follow them north. I want a story every day. Any further instructions will be wired. You got that?"

"Got it?" I exclaimed. "Gadzooks, chief, I'll never forget it! Is this all on the level? You mean I'm really going south?"

"Wait a second, Pat," the Old Man said suddenly. "I almost forgot to tell you. I want you to cover a certain angle."

"Angle?" I said, smelling a rat. "What kind of angle?"

"Well," he said, "Jimmy Lane will handle the regulation stuff—the games and the box scores and the training. So you've got to hit another slant." He coughed. "I'll tell you how all this came about. Wilston Kenyon's wife is a baseball fan. And she told Kenyon—who happens to publish this newspaper, lest you forget—that she thought the sports reporters seldom covered baseball from any sort of a woman's viewpoint. The color, the glamor, the personalities. She wanted the *Chronicle* to send down some one who would do that—" he smirked at me—"and you, Allen, old thing, are elected."

I goggled at him. "Aw, chief—" I said. "I can't do that. It's mutiny—it's skull-duggery—"

He read dryly from the pale green page of Kenyon's memorandum: "Last year's attendance records show an increase of twenty-one percent in feminine interest in the Green Sox. The average Ladies' Day draw was 1,800 ahead of 1935. In view of the *Chronicle's* policy to pioneer in news-gathering—"

He slammed the memorandum down. "It's orders from the Lord High, Pat," he said. "Yours not to question why. So scram, kid, and no more lip out of you."

He gave me his gargoyle grin and the jut of his Simon Legree jaw. He was laughing when I staggered away from there, and for all I know he was still laughing, a day and a half later, when I chugged into St. Pete aboard the Orange Blossom Special.

BASEBALL gets into your system, I guess. If I needed a pick-me-up, I got same that afternoon when I made up my first visit to the Green Sox camp to give my all for the she-fans of the Bronx and Broadway.

It was a scene to stir your heart and set your blood to tingling. The warm Floridian sun lighting the lush green grass of Mitchell Park. The resonant crack of seasoned ash meeting horsehide. The solid *chunk* of the ball plopping into the socket of a catcher's mitt. The voices of the players rising up with strange clarity against the hollowness of the empty grandstands. The brown dirt of the skinned infield pock-marked with cleat tracks. And out in the pitcher's box, a lanky lad bracing himself against the rubber and smoking the ball across.

"Gadzooks," I breathed, "this is heaven!"

Jimmy Lane had met me at the train. At lunch time, at the hotel, he introduced me around—rather apologetically, too, the louse. I suppose he resented the fact that I was a symphony in summer blue and white while he looked like a ragman's stepson in slacks and a soiled sweater. We taxied to the training field together, and James departed to seek out his own sources of he-man information. I hit the trail of glamor by hunting the person of Hugh Marranton. I found him in the dugout below the grandstand.

Old Hughie frowned when he saw me coming. He started to say: "Who in hell—" and then he stopped. He took a good stary look, then yipped like a Sioux and came war-dancing out on the grass.

"Pat Allen!" He bellowed. "Glory be to the snakes of St. Patrick! How the devil—why the devil—where the devil have you been?"

"Glory be to the wife of the publisher of the New York *Chronicle*," I said. "She's the Jezebel who condemned me to this chain-gang. . . . How are you, Hugh, you old buzzard?"

We carried on like that for quite a while. We sat in the dugout and talked about the good old days when Hugh and my dad were setting the old league on fire. Finally Hugh said, "What are you doing down here, Pat?"

"Covering the Green Sox," I said with a wry face, "from a woman's angle."

Hugh peered to see if I was serious and then burst out laughing. "That's good!" he said between guffaws. "That's great! Pat Allen covering fashions in baseball! Pat Allen, whose old man chewed the biggest hunk of eating-tobacco in the game!"

"I didn't ask for it," I said. "It was handed to me. And when you're making your bread and butter in the Fourth Estate, you say yowzuh and you cover your stint. How's the gang this year, Hugh? Are you going to cop the pennant again?"

"In the bag," Hugh said, trying to make his leathery old face look nonchalant. But his eyes were troubled and evasive.

"Look, oldtimer," I said, "you can't pull the wool over these optics. I've seen the elephant and heard the owl. What's the catch?"

"If there was one I wouldn't tell a newspaper," Hugh said dryly.

"Consider me just the progeny of Three Fingered Allen then."

"If you put it that way. . . ." A row of lines crossed Hugh's forehead. "I can't say what it really is, Pat. Times have changed so much. You take this team. They're tops—as fine a bunch of ball hounds as you'll find. But they ain't clicking."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Have you read the papers? Some college team from Orlando took us over last week. We've dropped three in a row to our own AA farmhands.

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The boys are sloppy. They try to hog the plays and get to be big-shots so that they can hold out for more dinero next season. They're jealous of each other's ability and salary. It don't make for teamwork, Pat. There's money in their minds first—baseball second."

"Hmmm," I said.

"Then they fight. They toss words in the lockers and on the field. The batting is so-so, pitching fair, fielding downright lousy. . . ." He sighed and looked at me. "You know what that means? You know what it means when a team doesn't pull together?"

"No pennant," I said. "No world series."

Hughie shook his gray head. "And me with six years to go on my Social Security payments."

WE sat there for a few seconds in a gloomy silence. Out on the diamond the infield was drilling and the gardeners were shagging flies. Gus Frederick, the Green Sox catcher, was starting a hot verbal battle with Joe Dilling, the first baseman, about a cut-off play that went sour. Mike Grady, from his shortstop post, was chiming in with a couple of choice remarks about Frederick's catching, insinuating in pungent words that the backstopping was no better than Dilling's throw.

Hughie sighed. "There they go again. Five minutes and the outfield will be in on it. Just listen to that."

I listened, though there was no grist here for my woman's-angle mill. Bits of that repartee would have shocked Ernest Hemingway. I said: "A couple of those words are strangers even to me."

Hugh nodded. "I'm living and learning myself." He got up and out of the dugout and began to bellow. You could have heard him in the next county:

"Listen, you imitation bunch of croquet experts! Cut out the beefing and get back to work! This is a training camp, not a pink tea. . . . If you want to barber, join a debating club! If you want to fight, join the marines! But if you're going to stay on this team—*play ball!*"

The hot words stopped and the infield sullenly went back to work. The drill was dispirited and sloppy. I was watching it and doing a lot of wondering. Hugh Marranton came back and sat down, breathing heavily. It was at this choice moment that the Voice descended upon us: "Is theah a man by th' handle of Mister Marranton 'round heahbouts, seh?"

The Voice, polite though it was, had an accent you couldn't have cut with a Damascus blade, as the swordsman used to say, and there was R.F.D. in every oozing word. I could smell the farm and the hay ricks. I had visions of plows and barns and wheat waving in the field.

We looked up. The owner of the Voice smiled down upon us. He had nice teeth, but that was all. Yet, as I ogled him, I saw that he was just homely enough to be charming, if inclined that way. His face was very long and sun-bronzed. It looked gaunt and yet it looked naively friendly. But the bozo was all out of proportion. His arms hung down to his knees and that was length, my friends, because he must have been six feet-four in his cotton socks. When I looked at him, I thought of Abraham Lincoln, except that this version was shuffling back and forth like an embarrassed kid.

Hugh Marranton winked at me. "Get a load of this, Pat." He leaned out of the dugout and called up: "Here, boy. I'm Hugh Marranton."

The gangling guy's eyes nearly popped out of his head and he leaned over to look down at Hugh and me, neither of us being more than five and a half feet tall. "Yo' are, seh?" the hick said. "Yo' really are the great Mister Marranton—manager of th' Green Sox?"

Hugh looked at me. "We've got a case here," he said in a low voice, and then: "In the flesh, General Lee. What do you want?"

"Wall, Mister Marranton," said the hick, "mah handle's Lemuel Bickel, seh. But the boys call me mostly Lem. Howdy."

"All right, Lem," Hugh said, smiling. "This here is Pat Allen, the best damn re-

porter in the business, bar none." Which was very extravagant of Hugh, him never having read a word of mine in print. "Now what's on your mind?"

Lemuel Bickel smiled thinly as though he were going to tell you the truth though you might not quite believe it. "Wall," he said slowly, "I reckoned I'd jine up with yo' team, seh. I come all the way from Paraminton, Arkansaw, jest t' do it."

"Well, well," Hugh said with a straight face. "That was very kindly of you."

"Yayah," Lem Bickel nodded. "I waited nigh onto two years t' pick th' team to jine. When yo'-all won the pennant three times runnin', I reckoned I'd sigh on with the Green Sox."

"Now look, son," Hugh said. "I'm awful sorry, but I don't just need a ball player right now. We're full up, understand? But you just follow the want ads and when we need a man, we'll advertise."

The kid didn't know he was being taken for a ride. He looked very surprised. "Yo' mean t' say you ain't goin' t' take me on?" he said. "Yo' won't find a ball player like me any day, Mister Marranton. Why, I was voted th' most valuable player in the Arkansaw Amateur League for two years runnin'!"

Hugh stared hard at Bickel and saw from the honest glow in the hick's eyes that it wasn't a rib. He turned to me: "We've got a 19-karat screwball here, and I don't mean the kind that Hubbell throws, either."

"More on the Dizzy Dean side," I said.

"Yeah," said Hugh. "Except with Dizzy, it's an act. Take him out of my hair, will you?"

So I grabbed the conversation by the slack of the pants. "Look, Lem," I said, "how did you get to Florida?"

"Bus," Lem Bickel said, frowning. "Ain't they th' most expensive things though? Nigh to busted me flat."

"Have you any money now?"

"Shore," he said. "Eight bits."

I looked at Hugh, who shook his head sadly.

"But Mr. Marranton can't use you," I

said. "How are you going to get back home?"

"Can't use me?" Lem Bickel exclaimed, looking panicky. "But he's *got* to use me! Ain't a question of me gettin' back home—I kin hitchhike theah. But Mister Marranton is got t' think of his team! Why, down home they used t' make me bunt all th' time on account I broke so many bats hittin' homers! And pitch—why, man, when I pitch a ball I throw it so doggone fast I can't hardly see it mahself!" He paused. "Besides," he added bashfully, "I'd kinda like to see New York. They say it's a big place. . . ."

Hugh began to grin. I was smiling myself. "Okay," Hugh said suddenly. "We'll try you out, Lem."

IT was time for the fielding drill to wind up anyway, I gathered. Hughie gave a blast on his tin whistle and the pepper games came to a halt. The regulars began to straggle in as the batting cage was wheeled into position. Lemuel Bickel, of Paraminton, Ark., peeled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, accepted a pair of spiked shoes from a grinning clubhouse boy. Some of the players gathered curiously around.

"This is Lem Bickel, boys," Hugh Marranton said dryly. "He's going to show us the latest brand of fancy pitching."

The rookie scuffed a toe modestly. "Shucks, Mister Marranton, I didn't aim to go braggin'—"

"That's *all* right," Hugh said, tipping off the boys with a wink. "If a man can out-hit Ruth and outpitch Hubbell, you can't blame him for admitting it, can you, boys?"

Dilling, the first-sacker, chimed in promptly: "I should say not! We need a man like Elmer—"

"Lemuel," Bickel interrupted. "But yo' jest call me Lem."

"Sure," grinned Dilling. "We certainly need a man like Lem!"

"I'll say!" said Frederick, the catcher. "I haven't had a real high hard one to catch since the Federal League blew up."

Zinco, the center-fielder, a ponderous

guy who figured himself a wag, put in his penny's worth. "Say, Lem, maybe you could give me some practise catching flies out near the fence. Can't none of these boys reach it. I'm afraid I'll go stale."

"Anythin' you fellers say," Lem Bickel replied modestly. "I only aim t' help th' team, that's me!"

"All right," Hugh said. "You go out there and limber up, Lem." He turned to Zinco, his clean-up man. "You try to hit this wizard, Pete, as soon as he's ready."

"I'll sure try," Zinco said soberly, hiding his grin.

A conglomeration of battery men lined up on the diamond. Mr. Lemuel Bickel went to the mound and lobbed a few at Gus Frederick. The others gathered near the batting cage.

"This is dirty work," I said to Hugh Marranton. "Why the rib? The kid is taking this in deadly earnest. It'll break his heart."

"Just a screwball idea, Pat," Hugh said softly. "For a solid month I've been riding the tails of these lugs of mine. Six hours a day I'm telling them how hammy they are. I've been watching them fight each other and yell at each other until I thought I'd go nuts. So why shouldn't I grab a little chuckle when it comes along? We all can use a laugh."

"Sure," I said. "You deserve a laugh. But what about the kid?"

He gave out a grunt. "You're going soft, Pat. . . . Look—he's going to cut loose. Great Scott—get a load of that windup!"

And indeed the contortion was wondrous to see. Frederick was receiving, Zinco was poised at the plate. Lem Bickel, toeing the rubber, looked taller than the Chrysler Building out there on the mound. He moved his right arm in a series of convoluted arcs. He reared back slowly on his right foot until his left toe pointed at a fleecy cloud that floated in the Florida sky. A statue of suspended animation. Finally he unwound and his foot descended. His arm swung through—

Pete Zinco did a Nijinski prance and hurled his bat away. He raised a yell unto

the skies, hobbling in a semi-circle with the seat of his pants gripped firmly with both hands.

The laughter was spontaneous. We had to roar. Frederick sat down in the batter's box and rolled in the dust. Hughie Marranton gave out a guffaw that made the dugout echo, and I had my own little giggle. After it was all over, Lem Bickel kept apologizing. He was sorry, he said, but Zinco looked just like the home plate to him. That crack convulsed the gang again.

They finally quieted. Frederick tossed Lem the ball and there was another pitch. This one was good. It was a smoke ball, so fast I couldn't even follow it. Hugh grunted. Frederick and Zinco ducked. The ball went over their heads and hit the foul net behind them. It was a good fast ball, but it just didn't happen to be within four feet of the plate.

Zinco finally gasped: "Are you trying to bean me?"

"Honest," Lem Bickel said, "it was jest a slip. I couldn't see the plate so well."

He pitched a third one. It was still wide but Zinco caught it where he wanted it and slapped the pellet against the right field stands. A triple in any man's league.

"Oh, Lord," Hugh Marranton gasped, laughing, "He's terrible."

After a while they let Lem Bickel take a bat, and Reg Lamont slogged a few across. Lamont had a nasty curve and he took particular delight using it on Lem who would bounce away from the plate every time he saw it coming. It got so he was bouncing even when a floater sailed over. And the Green Sox just about perished from mirth. But the hick snapped them out of it when he smacked one lustily and then stood by the home plate while the ball sailed out over the center field wall, completely out of the park.

"Wish theah wasn' no wall," Lem Bickel said slowly. "I like to see 'em bounce."

"See that?" I asked Hugh.

"A fluke," Hugh said. "Lamont put one down the slot. Even you could have hit it, Patsy."

"All right—" I was annoyed at the way they were taking the kid for a ride. "You've had your big laugh, Hugh, so now what?"

He was grinning peculiarly. His eyes were thoughtfully narrowed. "I think you've given me an idea," he said slowly. "What would you say, Pat, if I told you I was going to sign Laughable Lemuel to a provisional contract? Suppose I decided it would be good for the Green Sox just to have him kicking around?"

"But listen—"

"You listen to me," Hugh said. "I have little enough amusement in this vale of tears, Pat. I need a jolt in the funnybone now and then, and the boys could likewise stand one. As a matter of fact, Lem will probably teach those buzzards a thing or two. Maybe a couple of his beanballs will take some of that cockiness out of their craws. Lem's got the old pizazz, kid, and as long as he makes me laugh he stays on. I'll even take him to New York, maybe, for the opening game. There he gets a hundred bucks and we ship him back to Paraminton, Arkansas. What do you think?"

"I think you're Simon Legree," I said, "with the heart of Viper Fagin."

He just laughed at me.

And that is the way Lemuel Bickel joined the Green Sox. . . .

I USED to go over every day and watch the slaughter. Poor Lem never seemed to get tired of the ribbing. He took it all with a puzzled smile, always apologizing for his mistakes—which were plenty. It was awe-inspiring to hear him say he was going to line one out over Zinco's head and promptly lay the ball in the back stands on a terrific foul.

Once I talked with Frederick, the catcher. I asked him what the kid had.

"Boy," Frederick chuckled, "that kid has everything!" And then he'd laugh and laugh.

I said: "That smoke ball of his is pretty darn fast, isn't it? I can't even see it when he tosses it."

"It is fast," Frederick said. "Especially

when he throws it at your dome and you have to duck. . . . Say, Pat, are you trying to make a pitcher out of the guy? Cut it out! He has a jughandle curve and a fair smoke ball and sometimes even a very decent downer. But no control, no control. He can't tell the home plate from a batter's fanny! He's terrible, Pat, don't kid yourself."

Then we started north. We were barnstorming with the Indians and two games were scheduled in Richmond, Virginia, over the weekend. After the first game, I found Lem Bickel sitting alone in the hotel lobby. He looked very sad: I stopped to talk with him. I felt rather sorry for the guy by then. He was a nice kid; you couldn't get away from that. He had a lot of charm.

"Hiya, Pat," he said quietly this night.

"Hello, Lem," I said. "Why aren't you out with the boys?"

"I reckon yo' know," he said. "They jest been makin' fun o' me th' whole time. Looka here." He held up a copy of the *New York Chronicle*. It was two days old but that didn't mean anything. He'd found it in the lobby apparently. He had it opened to the sports page and there was a story about himself among other Green Sox data. Jimmy Lane, of course, had been sending in some hot and funny stuff on the Green Sox' screwball and it made good copy.

"I reckon," Lem Bickel said, "I'd better be headin' on home soon. . . ."

I said, "I'm sorry, Lem. That's the truth."

"Thanks," he said quietly. "Yo' been awful nice t' me, Pat. I shore 'preciate it. But it ain't so much th' newspapers I mind. After th' first week, I knew they was jest takin' me fo' a ride fo' th' fun of it on 'count I played such terrible ball. Why, down in Paraminton I was a good ball player. I could hit 'em a mile and pitch like thunder, too. But I guess they tossed 'em slower for hittin', and the pitcher's box usta be nearer th' plate back home."

I frowned. "What do you mean, Lem?"

"Why," he said, shrugging, "somehow I

jest can't keep track of the ball when they throw it up heah. And when I'm pitchin', I jest can't manage to see th' home plate."

I said: "You mean it's your eyes?"

"My eyes?" he said. "Now I never thought o' that. Suppose I might requah specs?"

"Listen, Lem," I said, quietly excited, "tomorrow you and I will run downtown and see an oculist. Ten o'clock. How about it?"

"Why, shore," Lem Bickel said. "Thet's mighty nice o' yo'."

We went down at ten next day and Lem was examined by a fussy little medico. It took about half an hour and when it was over, the medico told us: "This man is suffering from acute myopia. Nearsightedness. He should have been wearing glasses long ago. Here is the correct prescription. You had better fill it as soon as possible."

We were due to pass through Richmond again in three days. We dropped the prescription at an optician's, and in due course dropped in ourselves. Lem Bickel had a pair of white gold spectacles affixed to his face. He gasped at the result.

"Why, Pat," he said, "I never seen you like I see yo' through these specs. Why, good gorsh, Pat, yo' look swell! I kin see a mile with these specs!"

After that I got hold of a second string catcher named Crum who was good stuff and a nice guy besides. I swore him to silence and after the boys on the field had had their daily rib with Lem, I took Lem and Crum down under the grandstand and Lem would practice. I'd expected a lot then, but no go. The kid stayed bad. He had the stuff but he needed lots of work on it. I made Lem promise he'd never wear the glasses while he was on the field with the others and he didn't. After that we were together most of the time and it got so I was crazy about that kid and would have argued for him at the drop of a hat.

OPENING day! It came quickly. We pried loose the season against the Dodgers at the Green Sox Stadium. It was a beautiful blue-skied day and over the

U-shaped grandstand the flags were flying gayly. Down on the left field bleachers the National League pennant flag was flying. It looked impressive. The place was loaded, especially the sun-seats. There was a band on the field and at one o'clock the music started. Both teams did a sloppy parade. Then Ump Mac Moran bellowed: "*Play ball!*" and the Mayor tossed out the old apple for the benefit of the photographers. The melee was on.

And what a brawl, what a brawl!

I watched the horrible details from the field box of Mr. Wilston Kenyon, no less, which meant that I was practically sitting in the Green Sox dugout. My job was to cover—oh, the indignity of it! the fashions and fancies of Miss and Mrs. Big Town as represented upon this gala occasion.

The batteries were Lamont and Frederick for the Sox, Frankhouse and Phelps for the Daffiness Boys. Frankhouse was a wily veteran who had given the Sox trouble over the years, and the fans were expecting a pitchers' battle. A hush settled over the stands as Buddy Hasset, the Dodger first-sacker, stepped to the plate.

Mr. Hasset sang the theme song of that afternoon's program by blasting the first pitch over Heinie Kraus' head at second. He stretched it to a double when Zinco fumbled momentarily in right field. What a yell rose from the throats of those fans from Greenpernt and the Gowanus!

Lavagetto was Dodger No. 2. He worked Frederick into the three-and-two hole, and then swung from his heels on the "must" pitch. His liner rifled into the upper right field stands just inside the foul line.

A homer, two runs across, and the game still wrapped in swaddling clothes.

You couldn't hear yourself think above the uproar. Those Brooklyn fans were cutting loose like a bunch of dervishes in the throes of delirium tremens. Winsett kept the heat on with a single off Shortstop Mike Grady's shins. Babe Phelps, the Human Blimp who handled the receiving for the minions of Burleigh Grimes, whacked a prodigious double against the left field fence. The panic was on!

Hugh Marranton, wild with fury, stormed out of the dugout. He signaled Lamont to the showers, and Lefty Kleng strolled in from the bull-pen. Joisey Joe Stripp, the Brooklyn third-baseman, greeted Lefty with a sizzler that almost tore his leg off. Manush poled a potent triple. And before the inning had come to an agonizing end, Lefty Kleng was consoling Lamont in the clubhouse and the Dodgers had chased six runs across the platter.

The grandstands, loaded with Brooklyn rooters, were having a wonderful time. Their seventh-place heroes were humbling the champions, and if you ever heard the Bronx cheer rendered in crescendo, fortissimo, you heard it that day. They clapped the pitchers, they booed Hughie Marranton—mister, they were hog wild.

To cap the climax, the Dodger manager came out of the dugout and guffawed at Hughie for all to see. That bit of ridicule made Hugh the meanest, maddest man in all the world. He blew his top.

He wheeled on the string of pitchers that adorned the Green Sox bench. "Out to the bull-pen," he roared. "Out there—every damn' one of you!"

The hurling brigade, eight strong, waited not upon the order of their going. Even Lem Bickel, dazed with pride at the unexpected honor of being with the champions on this opening day, grabbed his glove and trotted along. I saw him go and my bright idea clicked. But I didn't let a peep out of me—not then.

Frankhouse had control, and the Sox were so riled they were biting at bad ones. Three up, three down. But the Dodgers still had their hitting clothes on. A double by Malinosky drove in three more runs and finished another Green Sox pitcher for the day. The team was jittery in the field, all thumbs. The players glared at each other—a first class example of big league heebie-jeebies.

By the time the fourth inning rolled around the score was eleven to nothing, and Hugh Marranton was a candidate for a straitjacket. He wasn't raving any more. A cold and silent anger held him. He stood

near the bat rack with folded arms as his team came in at the end of the Dodger fourth. His glare would have made a good model for any inventor interested in developing the death-ray.

It was then I made my gamble. I hopped over the box rail and grabbed him by the arm.

"Scram, Pat!" he growled.

"You dope!" I yelled. "Don't you see what you're doing? You're going haywire—making a laughing stock of yourself. You'll ruin your team if you don't snap out of it!"

"I'll trade every man I got," he belted. "They can't lay down on me like that. I'll stop this bunch of Brooklyn semi-pros if I have to get in there myself!"

"Keep your shirt on, Hugh," I yelled. "They've got your nanny—got you on the run. They're laughing at you. So why not hand 'em back the laugh in spades? If they want clowning, give 'em clowning. Throw Lem Bickel in there."

His jaw dropped. He goggled at me. "That screwball—?"

"Yeah, that screwball! Don't you see? It'll make the game ludicrous. It'll show you're intentionally giving the fans some fun and they'll love you for it. It'll show you got a sense of humor. This game is dead duck—let it go. Put in the screwball and let the boys have sport."

He frowned at me. Then his jaw bulged with resolve. "Damned if I don't do it!" he roared. "They want to laugh—? All right, I'll give 'em something comic!" He bellowed to the field boy: "Tell 'em to have Lem Bickel ready to go in when we take the field." He glared around at his regulars: "All right, you clowns, let's see you laugh that one off!"

A MURMUR ran through the stands as the loud speaker opened the fifth inning with an announcement: "Bickel now pitching for the Green Sox. Bickel for O'Rourke." The sound swelled to a roar as the spectators caught the name. They remembered the newspaper stories about the rookie from Paraminton, Ark., and

laughter was mixed with their hooting:

"Screwball! Screwball! Give us good ole Screwball!"

It was a tough moment for the kid. He had come in from the bull-pen dazed. He stood in the pitcher's box all jittery. He looked over at me once and grinned. I smiled back at him. Then I knew it would be okay. What Hugh Marranton had forgotten, I had remembered. Hugh Marranton had kept Lem Bickel along as a personal jester and hadn't seen that Bickel made the whole team laugh. I watched and waited.

Lem had a tough man to start with. Babe Phelps at the plate, swinging a bat as long and heavy as a telephone pole. Phelps looked the kid over, then grinned. "Come on, Screwball," he said, "lay one down the groove. We've got lots of balls to lose today."

Lem went into his dizzy windup and shot the ball in. It went like a streak. If a good hurler had used it, that pitch would have been a wow. Instead it hit Babe Phelps in the you-know-what. The Dodger catcher yipped like a wounded coyote.

Gus Frederick promptly laid down behind the platter, howling with laughter. Dilling nearly died at first. He clenched his stomach while he roared. Phelps trotted down to first, sore as a boiled owl.

Joe Stripp next. The first speed ball nearly took his head off. He dove into the dust, bellowing shrieks at Lem while the Green Sox roared from home plate to center field with riotous laughter.

"Is this a gag?" Stripp demanded, waving a bat. "Put one in here, hick, or else! And never mind the bean balls!"

"It's the sweat on my specs," Lem apologized. "I'm awful sorry I hit yo' befo'. I shore didn't mean to. I've wiped mah specs now and I'll see better."

He did. He saw too well. The third ball went straight over the plate. A sweet fast one. And Stripp walloped it high out into right field. It looked like a homer—but it wasn't.

Even Hugh Marranton said it was a miracle. But Zinco, running harder than

he ever had in his life, speared the fly about three feet off the ground and then rolled onto the turf, still laughing at the picture of Phelps dancing around after that ball had hit him earlier.

"Hey—" Frederick yelled to Lem. "Never mind the sweat on your specs! Leave it there—leave it there, you hear me? Try to find the plate without seeing and maybe you won't put 'em over so straight!"

"I thought Dilling would split wide open at that.

Manush, the old Detroitier, came up. He spent so much time ducking the balls that Lem threw that he missed three which happened to edge over a corner of the plate. A strikeout.

Johnny Cooney dove away from the first ball, a wild son of a gun that nearly caught him in the liver. But when he fell, the tip of his bat accidentally hit the pill and sent it bouncing easily down to first for a put-out.

You get the idea? It was that kind of a game. Absolutely, positively screwball from then on.

THE Green Sox got two runs in the fifth. They loosened up and started to hit. They were grinning from ear to ear and the ball game had become a big lark to them. They scored four more in the sixth, with Hugh Marranton getting the spirit of the thing and tossing in pinch hitters at the slightest provocation. A second-string catcher was playing third base when the seventh inning opened.

"You see?" I told him when he leaned against the box for a moment. "Lem Bickel is bad, sure. He's got the stuff to make a pitcher but he's got to learn and learn. But right now he's funny. He's so bad he's funny to his own team. It's made your boys loosen up and relax. They're playing *ball*! That's why Zinco nabbed that honey. That's why Heinie caught that last one ten feet—maybe it was less—over his head. They're playing baseball, Hugh, and all because their tension is gone and they feel good. Watch 'em now!"

We watched and marveled. Sometimes Lem would clean the perspiration off his glasses and put one over and it would be socked and socked hard. But the outer gardeners were all Tris Speakers, it suddenly seemed, and sure triples became miraculous outs. The infield was plucking line drives out of the stratosphere and converting them into double plays. Yep, the Green Sox had found themselves—and with a bang.

When the ninth inning rolled around, the Dodgers had sore knees from ducking bean balls, the Green Sox had sore ribs from laughing, and the stands were manicacal. Burleigh Grimes had seen Frankhouse blasted from the hill, Henshaw massacred, and had finally been compelled to call on his speedball ace, Van Mungo, when a Green Sox rally tied the count at 11-11.

There wasn't any getting away from it. The gag had worked. Lem Bickel was so mixed up in his deliveries himself, the Dodgers never knew what was coming. They were too ready to duck and that spoiled their batting eye. And when they did hit—which was often enough, Lord knows!—why, the Green Sox would work black magic.

The Dodgers came up with the first run off Lem in their half of this stanza—though they needed a hit batsman, a single, a double and a long fly to eke out this lone tally. Score: twelve to eleven—and Mungo strode to the mound to hold that winning edge.

Dilling faced him for the Green Sox, faced him with a broad grin. "Come on, guy," he called. "Put it within reach and I'll pin your ears back."

Mungo was not in a trifling mood. He threw two dusters that had Dilling on his spine. "Why, you big hillbilly," Dilling said, mad, and he slapped the next one down the center and left field alley and made second on it before he saw the outfielders were arguing about the ball. He went on to third then.

Next came Grady. But Mungo was pouring it in now. He struck the Irishman out with four pitched balls. Nice work.

Then Gus Frederick. The catcher tossed a couple of swings but didn't do more than foul tip into the left field stands. He finally popped an infield fly that Lavagetto gobbled.

Two down. Man on third. Last inning. And Screwball Bickel coming up.

Here was a spot that wept for a pinch-hitter. Any kind of a hit would tie. But Hugh Marranton had swept his bench clean long before, and it was up to Lem to do or die.

Van Mungo looked the rookie over with a gleam in his eye. This guy had been spraying wild tosses at Mungo's head, and it was about time to fix him up with his own medicine. In a small way, of course. You couldn't take chances on a wild pitch with a man on third.

Mungo tossed in his famous speed ball and it must have clipped a whisker off Lem Bickel's chin. Lem dove into the dust with a wild yell and everybody roared. Umpire Moran cautioned Mungo, who said he was so sorry. The pitch, of course, was a ball.

The next one whizzed on a line with Lem's stomach. Lem fell over backwards, rolling away. But the outcurve had fooled him. It was a strike, a beauty.

Lem got up. You could almost hear him mumble: "Specs all sweated up a'gin. Better clean 'em so's I kin see the ball." He stepped out of the batter's box and cleaned his glasses on his sleeve.

Mungo had a wide grin. He knew he had Lem's number. He poised, then whipped over a pitch which sent Lem flying into Phelps as he ducked. The catcher caught the ball all right and Dilling didn't try to come home, but Lem and Phelps were a mass of spikes and twisted legs before they got to their feet.

The crowd was rocking with laughter. But my heart plummeted like lead.

Lem had broken his glasses in that fall.

He didn't say anything. He picked up his bat and stood in the box again, waiting. Mungo shot out his arm and pulled the ball in close to his chest. He watched Dilling for a moment, then turned his head,

took in Lem Bickel from head to foot and finally flipped the ball. It came slowly, a great big beautiful floater. I winced, then groaned.

Lem started swinging blindly before the ball had reached the plate. I thought he had missed it altogether.

But uh-uh—

The very tip of his bat caught it, poked it down into the grass and sent it trickling toward third base at about five-tenths of a mile an hour. Lem dropped his willow and started sprinting wildly. Phelps went after the ball which had slowed down and was twisting toward the foul line. Phelps finally caught up with the pill, scooped it up, and wheeled and fired it at Buddy Hasset.

It should have been a beautiful put-out. Instead, it struck Lem on the right shoulder as he ran and glanced off to go shooting down the right field foul line.

The Green Sox coach at first base waved Lem on and he started churning dirt from his spikes! Dilling came home with the tying score and stood by to watch what would happen. Hasset had faded back after the ball; Heinie Manush was coming in fast from right field. They reached the ball at the same time and had the most exquisite collision these young eyes ever beheld.

Lem Bickel passed second and was churning on to third.

Hasset, clenching the ball, finally reached his feet. He had had a severe shock and he was badly dazed. He threw to third with everything he had. He had more, I must say, than he should have had. He threw the ball high over third on a straight line and right into the left field grandstand.

Lem Bickel trotted home and the nightmare was over.

TWENTY minutes later, I was in the press room with the sports writers of all the other New York rags, waiting for the boys to get dressed and come out. I spied Hugh Marranton and he waved me into his office.

"Pat," he said, "you must have prayed hard in that ninth inning."

"No harder than you did," I grinned. "The kid was all right, wasn't he, Hugh?"

"Nobody," Hugh said, "ever played in such luck before."

"Luck?" I said. "Oh. . . . Then you're turning him loose like you said you would? A hundred dollar bill and a ticket back to Paraminton?"

"Do I look like a dunce, Pat?" he growled. "He's terrible, kid, but he's got a load of what the Green Sox need. I'm keeping him on as a batting practice pitcher and pepper-upper. He's our good luck. The club secretary's drawing up a new contract at fifteen hundred iron men for the season."

"Not enough," I said. "Lem's worth twenty-five hundred."

He stared at me. "Says who?"

"Says me," I told him. "Lem's got new expenses now. There's an apartment to furnish, and a lot of other things. As Lem's manager I refuse to sign for a cent under twenty-five."

"Manager—?" he grunted. "Since when did you become Lem Bickel's manager, Patty?"

"Since," I replied candidly, "I became his wife three days ago. How do you like them berries?"

"His wife—" Hugh gasped.

"As sure," I said, "as my name used to be Patricia Helen Allen, the one and only daughter of Three-Fingered Allen!"

Crickets Seek Sponsor

YOU may think you've heard crickets chirping, but until you've listened to them over the public address amplifying system of the American Museum of Natural History you have no idea what the sound is really like.

Installation of a microphone in the crickets' glass case in the insect hall did the trick nicely, and the world, or so it seemed to those attending the broadcast, was filled with music. At least with what crickets think of as music.

Amplification of the familiar sound enabled Dr. Frank Lutz, the museum's entomological curator, to discover that the chirp attains a note two octaves above High C, or quite a way north of Lily Pons. A single chirp, according to the human ear, turned out to be, of all things, three distinct chirps, all sort of run together. Each part of a chirp, Dr. Lutz explained, takes about one two-hundredths of a second. There are three fast chirps, three preparations and four pauses to be got through before the cricket has finished with a chirp. No coda, though. The average chirp has a rate of about four thousand vibrations per second. Since the chirp is produced by the insect rubbing its wings together, the phrase "Lively as a cricket," takes on a new significance.

The cricket's noise, Dr. Lutz declared, has no emotional overtones. The theory that it is a love call, according to the scientist, is untenable. The female cannot chirp back and in fact doesn't seem to pay much attention. So it would appear that chirping is just something a cricket does to while away the tedious hours. Unless Major Bowes gets to hear about it.

—Albert George