

My Friend Babe Ruth

By Arthur Robinson



FOR some years I have enjoyed a peculiarly intimate friendship with Babe Ruth. I have traveled with him as a New York newspaperman, lived with him, in and out of the baseball season, and helped him write his newspaper articles.

We have developed, totally apart from business relations, a friendship which has thrown us together in a sort of Boswell-Johnson capacity. We have been trainmates and playmates on trips around the big circuit, in the baseball hinterland, and in the obscurity of private life.

To the alternately idolatrous and jeering millions who have watched this modern Beowulf at bat, driving out his great smashes, it may have appeared that he was just a thick-skinned ball player, schooled to deafness on the field.

The skin of my friend Babe Ruth is not thick. I have seen hundreds of men, women, and hero-worshipping boys get under it. Like me, they discovered that Ruth, in the raw, is as likable as a human being as he is interesting and fascinating as a ball player and psychological study.

For ten years I have done widely diversified newspaper work in New York, meeting all kinds of characters in and out of sport, on and off Broadway, around and about the country, but never have I met one who has sustained my interest from day to day and year to year as has Babe Ruth.

He has very few secrets from me. And knowing all his faults I am genuinely helpless in my affection for him. In short, I like him and often apologize for him; at other times, it is impossible even to apologize. He is a human being apart from all others of the species. He is more than unique; he is really a phenomenon. And I like him.

What manner of man is that Gargantuan sporting character that only two or three people really know?

Wherein do his private life and private mannerisms, habits, and customs differ from the public impression?

How does he look and act and sum up under the X-ray of close and constant scrutiny?

Mrs. Ruth calls him George, and it is of George Ruth, mainly, that I write—the Ruth that neither the public, nor the newspapermen, nor even his fellow players know.

He has a gruff manner about him. He deals profusely in horse-play. He is something of a physical clown—a good-natured personification of Brute Force.



But he is ever so gentle and tender, too. I have seen him in a boxing match with Mrs. Ruth in the room of a Boston hotel at which only one other person and myself were spectators—a match in which he allowed himself to be decisively outpointed and slightly wounded. I have also seen him wrestled to the floor by his blond-haired three-year-old daughter, Dorothy. I myself have tapped him on the head with a golf club without any serious aftermath.

But just as he is a success even when he fails on the baseball field—that is, a sensation and a source of dramatic interest even when he strikes out—so is he equally interesting in Pullman, trains and in hotels on the road.

Often he travels with a little portable phonograph and gives concerts in the baggage-rooms of some wayside railroad station while waiting for a train. At such times he will sing bass in a quartet and do quite well indeed with his favorite song, "My Darling Lou," and not so well with others. He has a special fondness for the ukulele and likes to dance. He plays bridge, stud poker, and draw poker the way he hits a baseball—wildly, freely, forcefully; and more often than not he loses.

And How He Does Eat!

H E EATS as very few men can. He eats often—probably on an average of ten times a day. Railroad engines consume an enormous amount of fuel. So does he, and it is a wonder that he manages to survive the amount and sort of food he eats.

He is a little temperamental. He has a deep, abiding suspicion that he always suffers from stomach trouble. Before almost every game he complains to the club trainer about this and then devours huge quantities of bicarbonate of soda. I don't believe there is another human being alive in all the world who has actually eaten so much sod and chewed so much tobacco as Ruth.

He reads very little but is amazingly well informed on baseball statistics. Of all the big-league players I know, I don't think there is a one who has a keener analysis of the records statistics. And I know of no player who is so fundamentally well-liked by his team-mates or is so genuinely considerate of them.

He does not wear underwear, winter or summer. One of his favorite decisions is bull-frog hunting at night with lights attached to the front sites of the rifles. He is immaculately groomed and always has his barbering done in his hotel room. He is manicured frequently and pays high for everything. A Texas barber once charged him \$1.80 for a shave and a few wet towels.

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And, as you might expect, he's superstitious. Hendrik Van Loon author of "The Story of Mankind" "The Story of the Bible," gave him a silver dollar two years ago—the day he dedicated the Yankee Stadium by hitting a home run—and for a long time the Babe carried the coin with him.

He does more autographing of souvenirs than probably the ten most pertinent movie stars combined. He writes an enormous number of letters to his fans all over the country, and no "city" ever received such queer requests—from get-rich-quick promoters, than charitable organizations, from strangers who want to share in the richest attribute to him, and from clubs, schools and churches—asking him to assist in various functions, or possibly make a little speech. Incidentally, the Babe is an astonishingly good after-dinner talker. He has perfect poise and presence and a free flow of talk.

Consider his superstitions. The sight of a yellow or white butterfly on the field of play will either terrify him in forebodings of ill luck or exalt him with a plane of ineffable anticipation of assured good fortune on the diamond.

On the road, a few years ago, he pitched to the Yankees in batting practice following the loss of a few important games, and that day the Yankees, then engaged in the thick of a pennant fight, won. The next day and every day thereafter until the Yankees lost again he pitched to the players in batting practice because he was convinced it was lucky.

When they lost he tried warming up the pitcher before the game—for luck—and found that successful. He kept on warming up the pitchers until the Yanks again lost, and then he tried hitting fungoes to the outfield. When all other expedients failed he went out on the coaching lines.

These are his special superstitions; but with Miller Huggins, the Yankee manager, he shares another. If the team wins he returns to the hotel and goes through the same door he used on his way out. If it loses he tries another door. And in common with most ball players he believes that a load of empty barrels, seen on the way to the ball park, is a sign of certain victory.

He rarely answers letters but sometimes the thoughts of his correspondents stick out in his mind. Fans tell him he has a wrong stance or a right stance or a bad swing for a curve ball. "I guess," he says, "that most of the baseball scientists sit in the bleachers."

He is solicited by vaudeville agents, who offer attractive tours on little time and big; by committees of fraternal organizations who want him to appear on the coast in exhibition games. To these requests Ruth turns the cold ear of a business man. He'd be foolish if he didn't. An athlete's financially productive life is short.

But there are innumerable requests to which the Babe does not turn a cold, businesslike ear. They come in shoals. Daily, when the team is at home, Christy Walsh, who syndicates

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his newspaper articles, carries to the Yankee Stadium loads of balls and bats—all for the bold and legible signature of the recognized Sultan of Swat. Out in Los Angeles there is a high-school league. It means something in the lives of the winning team if each member receives as a trophy of victory a bat signed by Babe Ruth.

In Indiana the Knights of Columbus, of which the Babe is a member, are building a school for delinquent boys. Baseballs signed by the Home Run King can be sold to advantage for the home. In Nebraska the Elks, and in Oklahoma the Masons, have similar charities, and balls and bats similarly signed have added market value. Or a ladies' organization desires him to attend a bazaar in some town where he is scheduled to play, and will he make a talk and sign souvenir programs? He will and does, gladly. By mid-July, this year, Ruth had signed eleven hundred bats and about jammed with thousands of boys and grown-ups eager and ready to scramble for the balls.

Baseball leagues for boys bearing his name are organized by newspapers. Some youngsters in a hospital would like to see and meet the Babe in the flesh; newspapers arrange that, and the Babe is happy to oblige.

And what is the significance of all this? It's this: Babe Ruth to-day is a milestone in the progress of American life—yea, even a vital economic and social force and factor. The Yankee Stadium cost several millions and is appropriately called, "The House That Ruth Built." He has drawn more people to baseball than any player in the history of the game. Everywhere larger ball parks have been built simply because of the interest he has attracted to the game. And baseball salaries have gone up because of him.

No sporting figure has ever received the publicity he has. He is before the public, as a player, one hundred and fifty-four days a year. But there are some stories concerning him that have never been told. The one which follows, told here for the first time, involves the most dramatic moment I have ever shared with the Babe.

It was somewhere in Texas, on the special train in which the Yankees were making their spring training trip north from New Orleans, playing exhibition games en route.

My friend the Babe was suffering from an attack of "The Misery" which was critically and alarmingly acute. "The Misery" is peculiarly a baseball disease. It is a compound of all the ailments known to the ball player. It includes a long and concerous batting slump and general debility. In short, it is a Terrible Thing.

Physically the Babe was in better shape than he had ever been. He had spent the winter on his farm at Sudbury, Mass., chopping wood, building hen-houses, hunting and plowing through miles of snow-covered roads. He had gone back to nature and to wide open spaces to reform and to forget and live down his colossal failure in the world series against the Giants in '22; and he reported

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for training at New Orleans weighing only 200 pounds—a weight which presumably attuned his tremendous hulk to the celebrated “pink of condition.”

The newspaper correspondents with the Yankees said he would have his greatest year. Then *The Misery* attacked him, feeding at first upon the memory of his failure in the world series and then gnawing at his inability of the moment to hit a baseball with anything approximating his former violence and consistency.

Day after day the Babe went without making a hit; a week passed and he made no homers. Another week of pitiful effort. The king—the Home Run King—was tottering on his throne.

He brooded almost insanely. Huggins diagnosed his condition and case over and over again, and finally arrived at a decision in his drawing-room on the special train in which we were touring the South and Southwest.

The Babe, Huggins, and myself were the only ones in the room.

“Babe,” said Huggins, “I want to tell you something. I think you ought to know. I have been in baseball for more than twenty years. I have seen ball players come and go. No man lasts forever. This slump you have been having is no ordinary thing. I have been trying to figure out just what is the matter with you. Apparently you swing the bat the way you used to. Apparently nothing is the matter with your eyes. Physically you’re in great shape. But for a month you have looked worse than the bushiest bush-leaguer in the outfit.

“The symptoms are all familiar. There are times when dying men should be told the truth. Babe, I don’t like to say it but I think it is best that I should. Babe, you’re slipping! You’ve seen your best days. Babe, you’re just about through. Make up your mind to it—you’re just about *through!*”

A strange, fugitive look came into the Babe’s eyes. He did not gasp but his huge body stiffened almost imperceptibly at the shock. He glanced incisively at Huggins. Then, almost savagely he growled, “Hug, you’re crazy!”

But the manner in which he spoke indicated he believed that Huggins *might* be right. For several minutes he sat there silently, staring out of the window into the dark shadows of night, alternately puffing on a cigar that was not lit and chewing tobacco.

Huggins said (*Continued on page 28*) nothing. I said nothing. The situation was funereally oppressive. Babe Ruth—the Home Run King—the greatest and most picturesque figure baseball had ever known—was dying and had been told so! The public, through the news bulletins issued daily by observing and expert baseball writers, knew that the Babe was ailing and had “*The Misery*,” but the public did not know just how seriously indisposed he was. Even the baseball writers themselves didn’t know.

The next day the Babe struck out a few times. He acted like a man who had been told he was dying. But he also acted as a man who said over and over again, “I won’t die—I won’t die—I won’t die; I’m not slipping—I’m *not through.*” And toward the end of the game, in overwhelming ultimate desperation, he reached out with the big bat for a ball that was wide and high of the plate—virtually a wild pitch—and made one of the longest home runs I have ever seen him hit. He caught the ball two or three inches from the end of his bat, swung the full force of his great shoulders and back behind it and drove the ball high and far above

and beyond the roof of the distant bleachers—accomplishing a feat which had never even been approximated before. That home run was oxygen to the dying Home Run King.

In 1921 the Babe made his record of fifty-nine home runs. Every baseball fan in the country followed the sensational composition of his record from day to day. Newspapers in tiny, obscure towns carried telegraphic, ball-by-ball descriptions of his turns at bat, at great expense. Millions and millions of words were written about him. He had as much secrecy as the goldfish Irvin S. Cobb tells about. He was becoming a Great American Idol, followed everywhere by crowds, worshiped by boys and besieged by all kinds of promoters and schemers.

ONE day Huggins went to him and said, "Babe, you've got this country goofy. You're drawing the biggest crowds that ever went to baseball games. You have been doing some things you shouldn't do—things that other players do not do. So long as you keep on doing well I don't mind. But that isn't the point. I'm thinking now of you. You're fat. You have been keeping bad hours. All this success may spoil you, turn your head and ruin your career when it's just starting. Let's get organized right, Babe. Cut out the fast living. Go to bed early. Be careful of what you eat and drink. Take off twenty-five pounds and you'll get more base hits; your eye will be clearer; you'll get more home runs. You'll do better every way. What do you say?"

That night the Babe went to bed at nine o'clock. The next day he failed to get a home run, to say nothing of a measly little ordinary base hit. But again he went to bed early, and once more he had the same experience. He did this twice again, with the same result, and finally he exploded. For a greater love of home runs and base hits hath no baseball player; and the Babe could not tolerate an abstinence from them.

Ping Bodie, his room-mate, came to me in Detroit and said, "Come on. We're going out. The Babe is in an uproar. The panic is on." So out we went. Then we came back and played cards all night. Virtue alone was not a satisfying reward. The Babe simply could not sleep.

In between he ate probably fourteen sirloin and hamburger steak sandwiches, with some odds and ends thrown in. And I know it to be absolute fact that he did not get more than two hours' sleep. But what happened?

What happened illustrates precisely the utter freakishness of the man. Where for four days he had gone to bed early and gone hitless and home-runless he now went to the ball park visibly affected by the change of habit and drove out two home runs in one game—one of them over the scoreboard in deepest center field; something that had never been done before!

THAT fall he defied Judge Landis and was suspended for the first six weeks of the 1922 season. But in the intervening months and until the end of the year he earned about \$250,000—and spent most of it.

He went to the race tracks and gambled high, betting as much as \$26,000 on a single race. In Cuba, following a disastrous experience with book-makers, he found himself about "broke" and in an awkward situation. He owed \$65,000 to the race-track hawks and vultures. He had transportation for himself and Mrs. Ruth back to the States but he had that obligation of \$65,000 to take care of, and what little money he had left was tied up in investments which Mrs. Ruth had made for him.

Finally he was compelled to take Mrs. Ruth into his confidence. "We'll have to cancel our passage," he said, "until I can dig up that sixty-five grand."

But they did nothing of the kind. Mrs. Ruth calls the Babe "Hon".

"Hon," she said, "here's a check for \$65,000. Go out and pay your debts."

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And the Babe did, after an almost miraculous recovery from the shock of discovering his wife had somehow managed to save \$65,000 from the wild wreckage of his first year's great successes. And since then Babe Ruth has learned many things—and failed to learn a few others.

It was necessary, following this, to protect him from himself and the attacks of the army of confidence men and women which constantly intrigued against him. So detectives employed by the Yankee owners and by the powers that be in baseball began to watch him and those who insinuated themselves upon him.

But that—as they say—is another story, spun of the fabric of an old-fashioned dime novel and equally as thrilling in its melodramatic developments.



Between times he signs bats and balls which young athletes ardently desire. The upper picture was taken while Arthur Robinson, who wrote this article, and the Klout King were having a talk at the Yankee Stadium. Mrs. Ruth and Dorothy Ruth (with her favorite toy) appear in the circle. To the left we see the Babe as he looked when he was with the Red Sox, before he ascended the throne

