

Here's a Story That Is Not Easily Forgotten

The Ghost of Silent Smith

An Uncanny Tale

By C. FRANKLIN MILLER

SILENT SMITH was dead to begin with. Of that there could be no doubt. The story of his tragic end was featured in the first column of every sporting sheet in the country and was officially verified, in due course, by the physician, the coroner and the clergyman.

Furthermore, the tragedy itself was visioned by some twenty thousand eyes. They all saw the blinding speed of the ball as it left the pitcher's hand. They saw the melancholy indifference of Silent as he stood at the plate. They saw the ball crash into his right temple and they saw him fall. Some said that he wanted to die, but that is beside the question. Of one thing we are sure. Silent Smith was dead.

I, myself, saw his corpse two days later. It was laid out in sombre black. His coffin was black, his suit was black and black was his hat-winged tie. Black was his favorite color. It harmonized

perfectly with the gloom of his disposition and to it he clung, consistent in death as in active life.

The time of his death is likewise certain. It occurred at precisely twenty-two minutes after three, Eastern Standard time. That fact I have verified. It is important. Had it occurred five hours later, there would be nothing unusual to tell about. Silent Smith would have been duly buried, mourned and finally forgotten except for the brilliant record which will always stand as a monument to his pitching skill. As it was, he died at the time stated and his corpse was in the hands of the coroner exactly one hour later.

That same hour found him staging the most remarkable comeback in the history of the national game and this at a point three thousand miles away!

I make that statement with a full knowledge of the actual facts. As a member of Johnny Morkan's Bears that year, I saw the weird occurrence with my own eyes. It happened out on the coast in the presence of some eight thousand fans.

Those in the assembled throng who knew Silent and his mannerisms could only stare and wonder. At the time they had no knowledge of his death. I had. So had the rest of the players on the Bears' bench. A telegram from the East had borne the tragic news. That message shed a ghostly light on the astounding phenomenon and lent to the affair a vague tinge of plausibility, however amazing.



Understand, I do not deny the evidence of written records. That would be useless. I know that talkative Andy Gregg was on the mound for the Bears that day. I realize that he was credited with the victory which brought to the club the first pennant we ever flaunted along the coast. And I agree that he deserved the credit. For all practical purposes the voluble lad had labored nine full innings, giving one of the most sensational exhibitions of hurling ever witnessed. Nevertheless, I insist that Silent Smith pitched the Bears into that pennant as surely as his death occurred two hours before the game was called.

Let us see:

Silent Smith had been our twirling Ace the greater part of the season. Anyone who ever saw him in action will tell you he was a pitching marvel. He could work in turns every fourth day, do relief duty in between when called upon and still win the vast majority of his games. Notwithstanding his proclivity for hard work, he was strangely lacking in enthusiasm and possessed no more sociability than an ancient tombstone.

Mind, I do not profess to have any first hand knowledge as to the sociability of a tombstone. My head never rested within the shadow of one. It may be that their communion is confined solely to the realm of departed spirits, but so far as the human eye can see they are extremely unsocial objects. And so was Silent.

I will remember the veil of gloom which accompanied his advent into our Spring training camp. He came wandering into upon the field like a lost sheep, trailing a big, black bat—the most dismal-looking rookie I ever laid eyes upon. His face was a masterpiece of dark despair, sketched in deep, weary lines ill-fitted to carry a smile. Shrouded in sack-cloth, he could have done justice to the role of chief mourner at anybody's funeral.

The chief had been busy all morning, looking over a number of "promising" young pitchers whose efforts would have ruined the disposition of any trainer. We had been banging their offerings all over the park. Not one of them had enough stuff to last in a triple-A league. The chief's ire had been mounting accordingly, and the sight of Silent gazing dismally on had no soothing effect on his temper.

"Say, Smith," he growled, "you're supposed to be a pitcher, not a monument. Snap out of it! Let's see your stuff!"

Silent produced a ball from his hip pocket and nursed it sadly for a moment

or two. I thought he was going to cry. Instead, he answered the chief in a very meek and tired voice:

"Yes—sir, Mr. Morkan!"

Some of us may have grinned in secret, but no one laughed outright. We knew the chief too well. He was fairly boiling inwardly and the lid was due to pop at any moment.

Silent, however, paid absolutely no attention to him. After uttering those surprising words, he ignored the chief completely. Slowly he made his way out on to the vacant mound and started a slower wind-up. The chief swore that this latest addition must have served a term on the box of a funeral cab.

Slowly-motioned or not, the lad was uncommonly graceful for a southpaw. That we could see; but what he did to the ball no one ever knew. The thing he threw with that left arm of his was the biggest puzzle I ever stood up against. As if enmeshed in gobs of gloom, the ball came floating up to the plate and drooped dejectedly into the catcher's mitt. It was more like a sigh than any soundless thing I can think of. It eluded our hate like a scaring phantom and had us doubled in knots in our efforts to deal it a solid blow.

Within fifteen minutes the chief knew that he had a marvel in tow. I could see him melt as he watched the lad's solemn performance and his face began to beam.

"All right, buddy," he sang out genially. "But what do you call it?"

This time Silent made no answer. At least, he did not speak. He merely raised his shoulders and sighed—a long, deep sigh. That settled it.

"The sigh-ball," someone suggested.

And the "sigh-ball" it was henceforth.

THE boy could likewise hit. Not that he ever set the league on fire as a slugger, but he revealed a deadly punch with his big, black bat which made him a prince among pinch hitters.

This unmannly ability of his in a pinch was first demonstrated in our opening game of the season. Up until the eighth inning his batting performance had naturally classed him as another weak-litting pitcher. He had struck out on two occasions and had raised a puny fly in a third attempt. The fourth time he stepped into the box, however, the winning run was resting on third and he brought it in with a pretty single.

How he did it was as much of a mystery as his sigh-ball. His woeful stance at the plate certainly would never have labeled him a batter of any quality. The picture he presented as he clung to his

big, black bat was one of utter hopelessness and might have been captioned "The End." Yet, in a pinch he could deliver.

We simply had to accept Silent as he was. There was no changing him. His actions were entirely too unexpected and unnatural to be fathomed. He could strike a batter out and look painfully unhappy over the deed. He could win a game with a timely drive and go into mourning. His normal atmosphere was gloom—deep and mysterious—and it never varied.

With our first swing around the circuit the fame of Silent Smith began to spread. That left arm of his slow-balled its way into the hearts of thousands of fans along the coast. The wild enthusiasm with which his appearance in the box was greeted amounted to a mania and his sigh-ball became the topic of household discussions.

There could be no doubt as to his popularity. He was the biggest drawing card in baseball anywhere at the time. It may have been the sad appeal of his miserable existence which intrigued; it may have been the veil of mystery shrouding his character which fascinated; but, win or lose, he was idolized.

Behind his spectacular hurling we climbed to heights we had never known before. The completion of three-fourths of our schedule found us trending closely on the heels of the flying Leafs who had been perched proudly at the top all season. Small wonder that the town went baseball mad. For the first time in our history we had pennant visions.

Then came the set-back and our visions went a-glimmering. Silent Smith was drafted. With the spreading of the news a howl of disapproval went up along the coast. From three states came the same cry—"crooked baseball!"—and the very popularity of the sport itself was threatened. Outside efforts were made to have Silent recalled, but the trade had been consummated. Our Ace was lost.

With the passing of Silent, the Bears fell upon evil days. We developed a losing streak which threatened to force us out of the running. Even the despised Bisons made a clean sweep of a four game series and a pall of gloom spread o'er the camp.

Both the press and the paying public added to our misery. "Only a flash! The Bears have hit their stride!" That was the consensus wherever fans collected. The thing began to peeve the chief, and in an effort to redeem the club he went out into the sticks and brought back Andy Gregg.

NO doubt you have heard of Anly Gregg. He was known as the gamest man in baseball. But when the chief pulled him out of nowhere he was just a big, green, awkward, hitless wonder. He couldn't bat and his fielding was worse. He had just two outstanding accomplishments. He could pitch and he could talk. It was hard to tell in which he excelled.

Regardless of his ability, he labored under difficulties from the very first. A man of lesser courage would have wilted under the strain. Whenever he lope in sight as the pitcher for the day an unreasonable chorus of "boos" greeted him, followed by the sing-song call for Silent Smith. Not that he was unpopular. His spirit was really admired. It was the public's method of voicing its outraged feelings over the loss of an idol. They resented the release of Silent and called for him as only a rabid baseball mob can call. The management was there target — Andy only the goat.

The lad simply laughed and went on pitching. But behind his fine indifference there lurked the ambition to stifle that cry for Silent Smith. Secretly he accepted it as a reflection on his own ability and fought courageously to change the tune. He fairly talked the team out of its woeful slump and hurled it back to its place in the sun.

When the Leafs again invaded our territory for a final series of three, we stood within a half game of being dead-locked for first place. It was the end of our playing schedule, and things did not look so rosy as might be supposed. Our pitching staff had cracked. Talkative Andy was the only dependable hurler we had left after a grueling month of struggle to maintain our position as runner-up. But Andy was in splendid form. He could still chatter away like an eight-day clock and that was the sign.

To him was given the mound in the first of that deciding series and he won. Four pitchers were hammered unmercifully in the second and we lost. Again we were trailing by a narrow margin, but who was there to hold the enemy in check? Husky Harris was down with tonsillitis. Lefty Lefferts had a broken thumb. Curly Weinert's arm was sore from too much use. As for the rest—

but what's the use!
In that hour of need we were all wishing for an iron arm—the arm of Silent Smith. Even the chief had his former Ace in mind. He as much as said so afterward. At the time, however, there was only one thing he could do—and he did it. Talkative Andy was given the

assignment. The lad was ready and advertised the fact with his ceaseless jabber.

"We got them going, Johnny," he kept repeating to the chief. "Winter's coming and the leaves are falling. Just keep your eye on the tree!"

We were all gathered in the dug-out, awaiting the call of the gong. That peculiar hush which seizes a crowd immediately before playing time had already descended. Out on the sunswept field a number of white-wings were putting the finishing touches to the sparkling diamond. Behind the plate stood one-armed Jimmy Flynn wielding a megaphone. His booming voice could be heard above the buzzing silence, crying the batteries.

Jimmy got no further in his announcement than the name of Gregg when a spontaneous roar rolled out of the stand and completely submerged the rest. It was the howl of the pack for its idol. Unsportsmanlike, yes; but Andy only chuckled.

"Can you beat it, Johnny," he chirped. "They'd rather have the morgue out there than a live one. We'll bury that bird right now. Come on, you cubs. Watch my smoke!" And he trotted out on the field amid a shower of "boos."

Andy had plenty of "smoke" and displayed it in his own awkward style. All through the inning that call for Silent Smith went on with varying crescendoes, but the nerve-racking din had as much effect on the spirit of Andy as water has on the back of a duck. He worked along methodically and effectively, setting the enemy down on exactly six pitched balls. Small wonder that the lad was beaming when he climbed down into the pit after the last "out" had been called. He knew he was right.

And he stayed right. For seven innings he went on talking and pitching, waxing more loquacious as the game progressed. There was no reason for acting otherwise. His smoke-ball was working nicely. It went whizzing past their bats with monotonous regularity. They couldn't even see it. Two hits were all he allowed along that entire stretch.

Apparently the feat meant nothing to the mob. They were entirely engrossed in their favorite pastime. They seemed to take a fiendish delight in heckling the club, individually and collectively, for the release of a star. If we won we were simply playing in luck. If we lost—well, we deserved it. They told us so in as many words. And they howled for Silent Smith.

Andy still held his temper. His control was marvelous. He showed no signs

of wavering under the strain. As he came trailing into the dug-out for our turn at bat in the eighth, he was chattering away like a magpie.

"I told you we'd bury that melancholy bird," he told the chief. "He's got one foot in the grave right now. And when I'm done that bunch of fat-heads up there will be throwing in the dirt. 'Twas ever thus, Johnny!"

The chief's face was uncommonly sober as he listened to Andy's chatter. In his hand there fluttered the familiar blue of a telegram. Without a word, he handed it over.

Andy read the news and his countenance fell. . . . Silent Smith was dead. . . . That was the break which went against him. From that moment on Andy's star began to fade.

"I'm sorry I said what I did," he murmured. "I was only kidding. I didn't know about this, Johnny."

"Of course not," answered the chief, perking up. "Don't let it trouble you now. All you've got to think about is the winning of this ball game. . . . Come on now, let's go, boys!"

BUT Andy was troubled nevertheless. His helpful chatter ceased and that was the sign. When we again took the field after a fruitless inning it was quite evident that he was not himself. Even the resumed call for Silent Smith seemed to irritate. He dug into the dirt with his spiked shoes; he pulled up blades of grass and started chewing; he moistened his fingers against the sod; he did a number of things which were not his wont, but which, strangely enough, had characterized the pitching of Silent Smith.

From behind the plate the umpire was calling for action. So was the crowd. And Andy finally got going.

That final inning was a nightmare. Andy walked the first man up and a low rumble of dismay swept the field. The next ball he grooved and Sammy Dawes dropped it over second for a pretty single. The rumble spread to a roar.

Andy spat savagely into his glove and glared up at the stand. That persistent cry for Silent Smith had finally penetrated. The lad was riled.

The crowd saw his action and uncorked a veritable flood of jeers. As if the pennant wouldn't have been clinched ere this had Silent been retained. Now look what's happening! Maybe they were right—who knows?

In a rage, Andy sped another over the plate only to see it turned into a tantalizing bunt. In his clumsy effort to field

the ball he stumbled and fell. The ball rolled clear. I pounced upon it from my position at third and kept the Leafs from scoring. But the bases were full with no one out and Andy our only hope.

By this time some eight thousand lusty throats were raising the very—yes, indeed, they were going to that extremity in their frenzied howl to "take him out" and their unreasonable demand for "Silent Smith." Bedlam had broken loose.

I handed the ball to Andy and begged him to take his time.

"It isn't fair, Ken," he exploded wrathfully. "What had I to do with the loss of Silent? I ask you!"

I assured him that every member of that howling mob belonged in a padded cell and added a word or two about our pennant chances.

This latter had a sobering effect. Andy took a time-saving hitch in his belt and seemed to settle down. But the Leafs were not to be denied. They pounded out two successive singles and scored as many runs.

The stand was fairly rocking with the din of stamping feet and shouting voices. Above it all could be heard the name of Silent Smith, but Andy no longer heeded. His rage had apparently subsided. He stood quietly in the center of the diamond and watched big Jess Winters carry his 390 bat to the plate. Here was the biggest batting menace in the league and it required a world of courage to face it.

For a moment Andy never moved, and then he did a characteristic thing. He started talking. He told big Jess to go get a plank. To me it sounded as if the bantering tone were forced, but my heart warmed at the sight of the lad fighting to regain his stride.

"At-a-boy," shouted Tommy Leech from second. "Make him hit it, Andy. We're all out here!"

Andy made no response and we knew that his confidence was not at par. He took one glance at the runner on third and suddenly let go with blinding speed. Big Jess swung with all his power and the ball snapped back at Andy like a rocket. Instinctively Andy raised his arms, but the ball sped through his guard and landed with a sickening thud. The lad crumpled up like a rag.

The clamor of the crowd was instantly choked as they came to their feet in a startled wave and stood staring at the motionless form in the center of the diamond.

I THOUGHT the boy was dead. His face was pasty and his lips bloodless. Apparently his heart had ceased to beat. His eyes were open and staring with that fixed expression commonly associated with sudden death.

For ten minutes we worked over his lifeless form. The only perceptible sign of animation was a faint fluttering of the pulse in his wrist which occurred at intervals of about a minute. The condition was strange enough to make even the club physician look puzzled.

Then, with surprising force, Andy's heart began to pound along like a trip hammer. A patch of color spread in his pallid cheeks. Another minute and his eyelids fluttered weakly, his broad chest heaved and he sighed.

With glassy eyes he stared at the anxious group which circled him. His brow was furrowed as if he were unable to comprehend the meaning of it all. He attempted to climb to his feet, but got no further than his knees. Two of the boys caught him by the arms and started to lead him to the club house. He would not have it. He shook them off and swayed uncertainly into the pitcher's box.

A gasp of astonishment went up from the crowd. No one had ever dreamed that he could resume play. It was unbelievable. They stared at him in silent awe, a mute tribute to the sheer grit of the man.

And then a roar of admiration proclaimed a new idol. Silent Smith was dead!

"Sure you're fit, buddy?" inquired the anxious chief.

For a moment there was no answer. Andy turned a haggard face and gazed at the chief with strangely sad eyes. He looked as if the troubles of the world were resting on his shoulders. Then:

"Andy's all right!"

The words sounded queerly detached. The voice was toneless.

The chief shook his head and slowly left the field. He was going to take a chance. He had to. He sent two of the boys out to the bull-pen to warm up, however, in case Andy couldn't make the grade.

The crowd settled down in the stand and started buzzing like so many bees. Nothing like it had ever been seen. A blow like that would have crippled the spirit of most men, but there was Andy willing to go on. Was he able?

All eyes were glued on the lad as he started digging a hole with his spikes in front of the rubber. He ignored everything else completely. That the team was on the small end of a three-to-noth-

ing score and that a runner was waiting on every speck just itching to swell the lead was of no importance. He scraped and he kicked at the dirt with a slow, measured effort, as if the digging of holes was an art. All this with hanging head and downcast eyes.

At last the hole was perfect and he picked up his glove. To me it looked as if he were still in a daze. He appeared to be uncertain of every movement, as if he were unable to decide just what to do next.

"All right, Andy!" I inquired doubtfully, handing him the ball.

He made no response. He ignored my query as completely as he had everything else. Turning his back, he started a slow, graceful wind-up, every motion of which was perfectly familiar. Deliberately, methodically, he threw five balls over the plate and then waited for the batter to take his stand. And he did not utter a sound.

I shall not attempt to explain it. The facts are all I can deal with. And the fact in this instance was that Andy threw those five balls with his left arm—not in a ridiculously awkward manner, but with perfect ease. Furthermore, his style was identical with that of Silent Smith. And Silent Smith was dead.

But this was no time for theorizing. The batter was set. The umpire was waiting. We fell into position and play was resumed.

Andy's amazing change of pace certainly worked havoc with the enemy bats. Lanky Andrews stood up to the plate like a statue and watched three perfectly good strikes float across. His bat never left his shoulder. Chubby Wilson did a little better. He at least swung. In fact, he swung three times and then followed his lanky teammate back to the pit for the second out. Pinch-hitter Collins nipped the ball for a puny fly, which Jordan, our catcher, smothered in his big mitt, stranding all three of the runners who jammed the bags. And the ball that did it was the "sigh-ball."

THE wonder of the thing held the crowd spell-bound. They watched Andy's weird performance with gaping astonishment. Had the lad changed his style? Could he have perfected that famous delivery in secret practice? Had he been holding out for the past few weeks, thinking to spring a surprise at the psychological moment? Questions were flying fast. Answers were scarce.

Had they known of the fate of Silent Smith their thoughts might have taken a more gruesome channel. Had they read that telegram from the East they might

have agreed that Silent was answering their call at last. As it was, they could only stare and wonder.

When we again trailed into the dug-out we found the chief in earnest consultation with Dr. Barrett, the club physician. The word was spread that Andy be left alone, and he was.

He came shuffling off the field with hanging head and settled down into a listless attitude at one end of the bench. Dr. Barrett studied his drooping figure for a moment or two and finally shook his head. So did we all. If the dead can come back in any form, Silent Smith was sitting there in his accustomed place radiating as much gloom as he ever had.

But the most unnatural twist of the whole affair was still in the making.

Pudgy Ayres lined a pretty single into right to start our half of the ninth and the crowd started pulling for us at last. Tommy Leech pushed Pudgy around with a well-placed bunt and beat out the throw to first. Both of them advanced a bag when Marty McGowan walked and the bases were full.

All that we needed now was someone with a punch—someone who could uncock a drive that would sweep the bags and tie the count at three all.

Andy was the next man up and everybody was looking for a pinch-hitter.

With victory at stake, it would not do to take a chance on the listless wonder, but the chief must have been playing a hunch. He never said a word when Andy climbed out of the pit and surveyed the batrack with melancholy eyes.

Mine was the only black stick in the lot, and Andy picked it up.

Amid a silence as dead as a graveyard, he dragged the bat up to the plate. Every movement he made was followed by the crowd with straining eyes and bated breath. The moment was fraught with something beyond their knowledge, and the mystery of the thing held them fascinated.

A newspaper photographer took up his stand along the foul line and focused his camera on Andy as he entered the box. If Andy saw him he made no sign. His eyes were glued to the ground. Dolefully he sidled around to the left of the plate, grasped his bat with a weary effort and stood waiting.

Blondy Vance, the opposing slabsman, was visibly shaken. Andy had always been a right-handed batter, and to see him fall into that woeful, left-handed stance with a big, black bat was like looking at a ghost. For a moment Blondy stared and Andy gazed sadly back.

The umpire brought Blondy back to earth and he finally started his wind-up. That was his last pitching effort of the season. The ball went sailing toward the plate with absolutely nothing on it. Andy connected with a resounding crash, and three runs came trailing in. The score was tied while Andy with the winning run was rounding third.

He staggered the distance between third and home. His feet were dragging as if loaded with lead. He managed to make the plate with the deciding tally, and then collapsed like an empty sack.

It was fully a half hour before Andy recovered and started jabbering away like the lad we knew. The doctor took him in hand, and Andy was puzzled over the discovery that he himself had finished the game. His last recollection was that of being hit by a batted ball.

I might add that a picture of Andy starting the ball on that home-run journey appeared in the *Daily Mail* issued on September 11, 1912, and created much discussion throughout the country. While somewhat blurry, Andy's face is sufficiently clear to be identified. Covering his face like a veil is a misty something which closely resembles the melancholy features of Silent Smith.

And Silent Smith was dead!

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