

STORIES

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Three Detective Stories

- PARTNER'S PAYOFF** Roger Dee 6
The guy had the gun—but Al had the guts! A short short story
- THE MURDER TAP (A Novelet)** M. E. Chaber 26
Private Eye Hamil had only one client—but that one was plenty
- VENGEANCE IS NOT ENOUGH** Bruce Elliott 67
Henry cradled his dead son in his arms, and his mind went blank!

Three Western Stories

- TIME FOR VIOLENCE** Hascal Giles 51
They were waiting for one thing, a chance to kill the squatter!
- HAWK IN THE SUNLIGHT** Robert Stephens 84
He was about to lose his best friend, and find— SELF RESPECT
- BRANDY ON THEIR MINDS** Paul Randell Morrison 102
Cruelty meant one thing to C. C. Sisters, another to the burro!

Three Sports Stories

- CHEESE CHAMP (A Novelet)** Bill Erin 10
The fight fans called Welter yellow, so he took on a man-killer
- DIAMOND OUTCAST** T. W. Ford 55
Was it any wonder the hapless Bulls made an outcast of Carlson?
- THEY'RE DEAD AT COOPERSTOWN** Fletcher Flora 98
It certainly looked like a no-hitter for good old Southside Drum

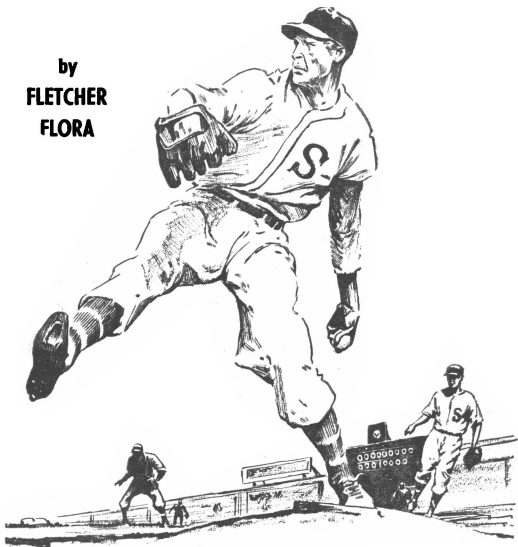
Three Science-Fiction Stories

- EARTH PERSON SINGULAR** Charles A. Stearns 43
Sometimes, a space alien's bark can be worse than his aardvark!
- KING LODGE REVISITED** Herbert D. Kastle 76
The kid from the future insisted that Tim King was his ancestor
- BANNION'S CAVE** Margaret St. Clair 90
Lycias paid a heavy price for his daring in tinkering with time

See "A Word to Our Readers" on Page 83

ALEXANDER SAMALMAN, Editor

by
**FLETCHER
FLORA**



THEY'RE DEAD AT COOPERSTOWN

OLD SOUTHSIDE DRUM was setting us down. Going into the bottom of the eighth with a 1-0 margin, he'd faced exactly twenty-one batters. The minimum. Back in the third, Jackie Shannon had coaxed our only walk and was rubbed out at second on a quick double play. In the fifth,

Dave Burns had reached first on an error and was cut down stealing. That's all. No hits. No runs.

It was funny. Because, you see, we had the highest team batting average in either league, and old Southside was supposed to be through. It was pretty generally known

It looked like a no-hitter for good old Southside Drum!

that this would be his last season in the majors. He was winding up his third consecutive losing year, and this time the number in the loss column was bigger than it'd ever been. He'd been around a long time. Too long, maybe. Fifteen years. He'd hit the majors when he was twenty-five.

It was a pleasure to watch the old man work. Slow and easy. Smooth as grease. He didn't have the snap, the blinding speed, that had made him the greatest in the game in his younger days. But he was hitting the spots with uncanny accuracy, and he had plenty of junk. His curve was working like a trained seal, and once in a while, when he was behind the batter, he smoked one through with something like the old speed.

As we went down in order in the bottom of the eighth, a big hush settled over the fans as they began to realize what was making. You know. The big hush that every pitcher hopes will come his way just once in his lifetime. The big hush that means there's a no-hitter just around the corner.

We were quiet on the bench too. The game didn't matter much to us. We were out in front at the tail end of the season, with the last contender mathematically eliminated. All we had to do was to coast into the pennant. But old Southside was playing for the final curtain. It was his last major league appearance. With the season so far gone, he wouldn't come up for duty again. What a dream ending! To pitch a no-hitter against the most powerful bats in the game in his last go. If he pulled it off, they'd be making room at Cooperstown tomorrow.

We always play to win, of course. Even the games that don't count. But in his heart, every player on the bench was hoping nobody got hold of one.

As for me, I was glad I didn't even have to try. Yesterday, chasing a long fly out in center field, I'd slipped and twisted an ankle. It didn't amount to anything, but Matt Flanagan had decided I'd better rest it for the games that counted. For us, at this stage, that meant the Series.

The top of the ninth was three up, three down. Two routine catches in the outfield and six to three.

IT LOOKED like it was all over. The weak end of our order was coming up, with Corey Munsen, the pitcher, in the hole. But no one said anything. No one even looked at old Southside when he ambled out

to the mound and stood there waiting, his jaws methodically worrying his cud of tobacco. You know the old baseball superstition. Mention a no-hitter in the making, you jinx it. No one wanted to jinx Southside today.

Dave Burns flopped beside me on the bench and stretched his legs.

"Pretty soft," he said. "Wish I could take a vacation."

"Yeah," I said. "It's a great life."

"How's the ankle?"

"Okay. I might as well be in there."

"Nuts. We do better without you."

"Yeah? It looks like it."

I bit my tongue and stopped. That was the closest I came. Dave turned quickly to the man on his right, and I shifted my eyes out to the mound.

Southside went back to work calmly. It was in his mind, all right. The no-hitter, I mean. The finish in a blaze of glory. Southside Drum going out as he'd come in, the greatest pitcher of his time. His heart must have been aching with the beauty of it. But you'd never have known it to watch him. He'd been around too long to let anything work on his nerves. He'd seen too many no-hitters slip away in the final frames. Slow and easy. Smooth as grease. He fingered the resin bag for a few seconds and let it drop. Working his cud, he stepped onto the mound.

On a 1-0 pitch, the first batter lifted a little blooper that looked for a minute as if it might drop in. At the last second it curved foul by inches, and a big sigh of relief rolled out over the diamond from the stands. We were playing at home, too. No mistake about it. This was one the fans wanted us to lose.

The batter went on to work a full count, and then the ump denied Southside the corner on a close one. That put a man on with a free ticket, and routine tactics called for a sacrifice. The next batter dumped a bunt down the third baseline. Southside, swooping off the mound, made the only play he had. Out at first. But he was in trouble now, with a man roosting on second in scoring position and only one down.

Everyone knew what the situation called for. Everyone waited to see what Matt Flanagan would do. Corey Munsen, swinging a stick, hesitated for the word. When Matt kept silent, Corey shrugged and started for the box. I took a quick look down the line at Matt's face. He was leaning forward, elbows on knees, looking quietly out across

the diamond. His face was brown and tough as leather, with dozens of little sun wrinkles fanning out from his eyes. Player and manager. Matt had looked out across baseball diamonds with those eyes for twice the years I'd been alive. I turned my head away, watching Corey amble toward the box.

"Corey!"

Old Matt was on his feet, looking down the line. His eyes caught mine and came to rest. A pinch hitter was obvious. There I was on the bench, with a season's batting record of .352. Pretty good for a first year rookie. What would any manager do? Even before Matt spoke, I knew the answer to that one.

"Okay, kid," he said. "Get a hit."

Usually the other players give you a good word. Today no one said anything. I walked down the line and out of the dugout in silence. Bending over the pile to pick a stick, I felt Corey Munsen's hand lie for a second on my shoulder. He didn't have anything to say, either.

In the box, I dug in my cleats and put the wood on my shoulder. Behind me, the loud-speaker announced my name to heavy silence. The light crowd this afternoon had stumbled onto what the sports writers call a situation tense with drama. Bill Stern stuff. A situation new in baseball. One that would never come up again. There were no cheers. No demands for a hit. Remember Casey? With me, it was just the opposite. A whiff would put me solid.

Out behind the mound, old Southside fingered the resin bag and tossed it aside. His teeth worked in and out of his cud in lazy rhythm. Hands on hips, he studied me calmly for thirty seconds and stepped up to toe the rubber.

HE BROKE a beauty over the outside corner for a called strike one, and then wasted a duster, high and inside, to drive me away from the plate. A good trick. Never give the batter a chance to get set. Digging in again, I watched another one break away from me just above the knees. It might have been called either way, but the boss behind the plate saw it missing. Two and one.

The next pitch evened the count. I had my eye on it all the way, and when it got to the point where it should have broken inside, it just didn't break. The ball looked big as a basketball going over the plate. I could have knocked it out of the park with a ping pong

paddle. With the wood on my shoulder, I watched it go by.

Okay, I thought. Okay. One more does it. One more strike and one more batter and Southside goes to glory at Cooperstown.

I looked out at the old man. He was standing behind the mound with his back to the plate. As I waited, he took his cap off and stood there for a minute with his head bared, staring way off into center field.

He knows, I thought. He knows that last pitch didn't break. He knows I should've given it a ride.

And then I began to understand clearly what I was doing. I began to understand, and I began to hate myself in proportion.

Look, rookie. Who the hell do you think you are to hand a great old competitor like Southside a phony no-litter on a dirty platter? Why don't you walk out to the mound and call him a crummy has-been bum? Why don't you walk out and spit in his face?

Stepping out of the box, I reached down for dirt and felt it turn to mud in my sweaty palms. I rubbed my hands dry on my pants and got set again. On the mound, his face inscrutable, Southside peered down for the catcher's signal and began to wind. Right leg coming up high and jerking suddenly down. Left arm snapping over with the body behind it.

The pitch was a repeat of the one before and I had it tagged from the wind. The ball was supposed to break sharply over the inside corner, close to the hands. But it didn't break soon enough, and when it did break, it didn't break sharply enough. It came in fat across the heart, and I knew as I swung that it was a souvenir for a knot-hole fan. I'd have known even without the sudden tidal groan from the stands. Even if I hadn't glanced over from second on the circuit to see old Southside walking slowly toward the dugout from the mound.

In the dressing-room, I got a few claps on the shoulder, but no one had anything to say. No one but Matt Flanigan, that is. I was lacing my shoes when he stopped and looked down at me.

"Good work, kid. You're a ballplayer."

For Matt, that was tops. He wouldn't go farther than that with his own wife.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks a lot."

I finished lacing my shoes and listened to Jackie Shannon and Corey Munsen argue about the pennant race in the other league. Over there, it was staying hot right down

to the wire. Jackie and Corey were still arguing when I put on my coat and left.

Southside was waiting for me by the gate. Seeing him standing there alone, I felt my heart tie itself in a sudden hard knot, and resentment against Matt Flanigan was bitter inside me. The old man took me by the arm and gave it a strong squeeze.

"Nice clout, kid. You looked good."

"I don't feel good," I said. "I feel lousy. Matt shouldn't have used me."

"No? What should he have done?"

"It wouldn't have hurt to let Corey take his turn."

His fingers dug deeper into my arm.

"Matt and I have been friends for a long time," he said quietly. "I guess he wants to keep it that way. Look, son. Maybe you've got ideas about Cooperstown immortality for the old man. Forget it. They're dead at Cooperstown. I'm not. As long as I've got

a son who plays the game the way his old man's always tried to play it, I'm alive. And I guess I'm about the only big-leaguer who ever managed to hang around until his boy got there to take over. Old Matt's not so lucky. He hasn't got any son at all. But there on the bench today, he tried to figure it the way he thought he'd want it if he were me and had a boy hitting over three hundred on the bench. He figured it right. His way and mine. Time you've been around as long as Matt and me, you'll understand."

He stopped and looked at me with quiet eyes that you wouldn't have expected in a guy who'd just been kicked by his own fat pitch out of the park and out of the majors.

"I've got to hustle for a train," he said.

"I guess you'll be home after the Series?"

I didn't feel lousy now. I felt the way I'd looked at the plate. Good.

"Sure, Pop," I said. "I'll be home."
