

The Wonder Hitter*

He did not have the build associated with a home-run hitter. He was plump in a youthful way, attractive rather than handsome, with a beautiful singing voice which he would exercise in private and occasionally in the dressing room after a game. Sometimes during his singing, his voice would waver strangely, and he would suddenly enter into an ecstatic trance, only returned to his taciturn normality by a cold shower. He possessed a changeable character, marked by fits of deepest gloom vying with moments of exaggerated joy. Sometimes he doted on company; mostly he sought isolation.

Yet when he stepped up to the plate, bat¹ in hand, his face grew rosy, even glowing; it was then that he was capable of unprecedented feats. Once, still in the minors, he hit four home-runs in a game, thereafter carried from the ballpark on the shoulders of the fans. “The Messiah of Mobile,” they hailed him; deservedly, he had saved the season for the hometown team.

Even then in the minors, he was a person apart, as if in exile from everyone and everything but the game, a tendency which increased when the Mets called him up. A Jewish slugger for New York seemed like a bestowal of divine providence. “His time has come,” announced with quivering lips the Mets’ coach, the electric Norton, to the press. The Mets were languishing in fifth place. Ted Sabin was immediately dubbed “The Savior” by the media and “Saving Sabin” by the fans, names he never denied. It was his skill with the bat which saved Sabin from being thought of as an ‘oddball’, though some called him eccentric. Eccentricity was an honorable tradition with the Mets.

He was uncanny. Opposing pitchers had long since exchanged “secret” information on how to get his number. Nothing helped – the baseballs continued to fly from his bat out of stadia as if propelled by a force not of this world.

*What follows I did not witness: it was revealed to me by a sports commentator, now retired, whose name is well-known. I cannot proclaim with certainty that none of it is apocryphal.

¹ No one knew where he had procured his bat. Long and hard, reportedly cedar wood, it proclaimed authority. Someone once stole it but returned it the next day with a note begging forgiveness. Perhaps this is only legend. Baseball stories abound.

His every move at the plate was studied from the moment that he entered the batter's circle until the completion of his marvelous swing. Invariably he touched the dust of the plate with the end of the bat before lifting it to his shoulder. The catchers strained to see what mark he had made. One even dared to ask him. "It's not a cross," he replied, the catcher unable to discern if in levity or seriousness. But Sabin was a hard guy to figure. Rumors told of a book he read constantly, thought to contain his secret.² Still he inspired not scorn, but awe.

Some noticed that his lips moved or seemed to move imperceptibly before he swung the bat; others denied this, contending that he was simply moistening his lips or engaging in a nervous gesture; one more riddle in a game steeped in signs, arcane movements, masked meanings. That his face was illuminated, everyone agreed, illuminated with – some described it as determination. One witness, a Baptist from somewhere in the Bible Belt, called it a nimbus, but this account is without authority as the describer, after a brief trial, was sent down to the minors. In baseball, as outside of it, the veracity of the tale depends on the authority of the teller.

Some attributed Sabin's success to his ability to read the signs given by the catchers, although he stood in front of them when at bat. Especially his ability to discern the four-fingered sign for a fast ball. Ballplayers are famous for their devotion to the mysterious.

Even the faithful Norton (a man said to almost worship Sabin), who had kept an eye on him from his earliest days in Mobil (after refusing at first to credit the euphoric scouting reports) was once heard to confess that Sabin was unfathomable. "Like no player I ever knew," the words attributed to him. The closest he came to defining Sabin took place on a shimmering hot August afternoon when Sabin hit two home-runs in each end of a double-header. "He isn't a natural," he explained to a sportswriter, "he seems to will home-runs. "Maybe," jibed the scribe, "it has something to do with that rainbow." The rainbow in question, of brief but brilliant duration, hung beyond center field like an epiphany.

Norton was tight-lipped about one aspect only of Sabin's: his periods of depression (his periods of elation disturbed Norton but did not worry him). Prone to depression himself, Norton knew its danger; in battling Sabin's depression, however,

² Yet no one ever found this book, not then, not later.

he had largely escaped his own. A fact realized only years later, when Sabin was a legend³, if a failed one. No, not failed, only, somehow, a fallen one.

No one ever knew (not even Norton who was closest to him, to the extent that anyone could be close to him) that what Ted Sabin's mouth uttered just before he swung the bat was the forbidden Tetragrammaton. Nor that he desired devoutly a home-run, not to win ballgames for the Mets, nor the home-run championship for himself, nor even to justify Norton's faith in him, but in order to circle the bases: to complete by act, the four-based manifestation of the utterance, the ultimate substantiation of the emanation of the Name. Only in this way could he prove himself.

After each game he would disappear, as though he regretted his success at the plate; but before the next game he returned, full of renewed enthusiasm. What part Norton played in his renewal can be conjectured.

His fans of course knew nothing beyond the fact of his prodigious powers in the batter's box. He had taken the country by storm, had become the property of the many, his name hossanaed at every stadium in the nation. In New York, city of his team, he was king. At the moment of his fabulous swat, all nine players on the field were frozen in tableau; Ted alone moved in a whirlwind, as if time itself were frozen and he were outside of time.

Sabin had in the year that was to be his apogee approached the home-run record. At the season's mid-point he had thirty. Two months later, he had reached fifty-eight, Greenberg's feat. It was not until the final game of the season⁴ that he tied the legendaary Ruth's record, with a clout that caused the ball to seem to ascend to heaven itself, swallowed in the pale radiance over mid-center.⁵ But in order to break the record, he would have to hit a home-run his last time at bat.

His last time at bat, thunder and lightning were heard and seen despite the pure blue sky, a mystery not explained to this day, nor that of the bunting draped on the third base stands being rent at the same moment. The count reached two and two. Hushed were the stands as if in witness of a sacred ritual, as if the batter was about to

³ Having disappeared to – no one knew for sure where. Some said he was in a mental institution; others that he was in prison, though not many were able to believe this of Sabin the Magnificent.

⁴The last game fell on the Day of Atonement. Before the game a sportswriter asked Sabin about playing on this day. "This day and no other," he answered. The scribe deemed it unquotable and offensive to Jewish readers. Nor did he print Sabin's laconic reply upon the reporter's venturing that he didn't understand: "I sometimes conceal in order to reveal."

⁵ It was early noted that his home-runs favored a point in mid-center, only rarely did they seek out left center, rarer still, right field.

confront the universe itself; the lower tiers plunged into darkness, as though in an abyss, redeemed only by the sparks of cigarettes; the higher tiers bathed in light. Everyone watching the figure who had crossed from the darkened portion of the field to the lighter part of the diamond to stand in a kind of interlineared splendor at the plate, the plate white as a shroud.

Against him, the pitcher, nervous but not without courage, caught up in a situation in which he could not purposefully walk Sabin, the bases being loaded, and he, blessed with a two run lead, in reach of his twentieth game win. He went to his best pitch, his fast ball. When he wheeled and released it, the ball seemed to leap forward toward the plate. Blazing it was, and true, dividing the plate with Manichaeian precision.

Yet to Sabin, the ball seemed not to move at all.⁶ The sphere hung there like a sun standing still, a glowing wheel held in the radiance of eternity. Suspended, waiting for him. Suddenly his lips went dry, he was not able to utter even the first letter of the Name. He stood in terror of it. The bat never left his shoulder. He seemed in a trance. The “strike three” call of the umpire, shouted along with his sign, the shriek of Norton, were subsumed in the silence.

Sabin retired from baseball, despite everyone’s (not excluding the President’s) efforts to reverse his act of apostasy and keep him in the game. Only Norton, to everybody’s amazement, did not try to convince him. When asked why, he would only reply, as if privy to some great concealment, “It is his decision.”

But was it?

Perhaps the time has not yet come to reveal the meaning of these things.

⁶ Some in the great assembly of onlookers later reported that they witnessed a similar phenomenon.