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Redd Boggs'
SPORRODNEGE

HEROES, VILLAINS, AND CLOWNS

*"Time is of the essence. The crowd and players
Are the same age always, but the man in the crowd
Is older every season. Come on, play ball!"*

— Rolfe Humphries,
"Polo Grounds"

I'm always eager for Opening Day, and at last it's almost time for baseball spring training to begin in Florida and Arizona. To ready myself for the new season I have been reading *Collision at Home Plate*, James Reston Jr's "definitive" account of the famous confrontation of 1990 that culminated in Pete Rose's banishment from baseball and the death of baseball commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti only seven days later. It is a complete and scrupulous dual biography of these two unusual persons, both complex, both admirable, both contemptible, whom Reston treats with ironic accuracy. At the start I was drawn to the side of Pete Rose, a working class boy, and his "balls-scratching primitivism," although he is a "narcissistic man-child," "the quintessential male chauvinist." I thought I had a lot more in common with him than with Giamatti, the Ivy Leaguer who played at Yale the same sort of role that Sleepy Sam Hayakawa played at San Francisco State during the era of student unrest in the late 1960s. But it is hard to feel unsympathetic toward one who wondered, as Giamatti did, how "a man with so little evidence of intellectual substance [i.e., Ronald Reagan] could be president." Ultimately it is hard to take issue with Giamatti's decision to ban Pete Rose from baseball, difficult and controversial as that decision was. Surely Pete Rose got what he deserved.

It's a big and thorough book, and Reston even has room to reproduce some of the late great Casey Stengel's remarks when he testified in 1958 before a Senate anti-trust subcommittee. One of the senators asked Casey "whether you intend to keep on monopolizing the world's championship in New York City," as manager of the New York Yankees. Casey replied, "Well, I will tell you. I got a little concerned yesterday in the first three innings when I saw the three players I had gotten rid of, and I said when I lost nine what am I going to do and when I had a couple of my players. I thought so great of that it did not do so good up to the sixth inning I was more confused, but I finally had to go and call on a young man in Baltimore that we don't own and the Yankees don't own him, and he is doing pretty good, and I would actually have to tell you that I think we are more the Greta Garbo type now from success...."

"We are being hated, I mean, from the ownership and all, we are being hated. Every sport that gets too great or one individual -- but if we made 27 cents and it pays to have a winner at home, why wouldn't you have a good winner in your own park if you were an owner? That is the result of baseball. An owner gets most of the money at home, and it is up to him and his staff to do better or they ought to be discharged."

Yankees star Mickey Mantle was then asked for his opinion. He replied, "My views are just about the same as Casey's." I am sure that we all concur with Casey.

I love the loony characters in baseball; that's one reason for loving baseball. Casey Stengel and Yogi Berra, who allegedly said, "Predictions are difficult, especially about the future," always made the sports page worth reading. I had great hopes for another wonderful wacko named Turk Wendell, who in 1991 pitched for the Richmond (Virginia) Braves of the International League. I don't know what happened to him. He had great potential. He was a little superstitious. Before the start of every inning -- yes, every inning -- according to the *Atlanta Journal*, "he always crosses the foul line with a three-foot-high kangaroo leap. He circles the mound counter-clockwise, then walks to the rubber and squats until the catcher stands up. Then Wendell walks off the mound, looks to center field, says a prayer, crosses himself and points to the center fielder, who *must* wave back. Wendell draws three crosses in the dirt behind the rubber and then licks the dirt from his fingers. He won't catch a ball thrown to him by the umpire before the game. He demands that it be rolled to him. If the umpire forgets and throws the ball, he'll let it bounce off his chest or let it roll until an infielder picks it up.

"He chews licorice and then brushes his teeth in the dugout between *every* inning. He has thrown to first base as many as eight or nine times a game *with nobody on base*. And once he took a camera out of his back pocket and shot a picture of the opposing batter before pitching to him." Wendell had an 11-3 record with a 2.53 ERA with Greenville (South Carolina) of the Southern League before being called up to Richmond. He had lost his first two decisions for Richmond, the last I heard of him, and I suppose he will never make it to the big leagues. Maybe his supply of licorice gave out. I was looking forward to seeing him.

WALKING AROUND

"I walk about; not to and from." -- Charles Lamb

"A plena luz camino por la sombra." -- Pablo Neruda

Ever since I arrived in Berkeley almost 30 years ago I have known that it's a mad mad mad world, as the title of that 1963 movie proclaimed, give or take a few "mads." But when I set forth this morning I had no inkling that in the course of my adventures I would refuse to give money to a 12-year-old boy but bestow money on a woman who ran after me with a baby in her arms, fish vainly in a trash-barrel for Change of Address forms, and step over a woman lying in a puddle on the sidewalk. But I wasn't surprised. After all, it was just another day in Berkeley.

In the dappled morning I stopped at a newspaper box by the "donut" shop to buy a San Francisco *Chronicle* to read on the BART train. The shop was not yet open, but two large black women from Jehovah's Witnesses were already on duty on the sidewalk in front. Their proffered copies of *The Watchtower* fluttered in the morning wind. I touched my cap to the poor gulled women, having no animus toward them even if I have toward their faith. I juggled some coins in my hand to buy a *Chronicle*, but decided not to buy when I saw the graffito scrawled across the top of the box. I don't think it was there yesterday. It said, "Dee -- Serve Bictth hoe me. -- Big Tee." I marveled at the mental and physical effort some poor madman had summoned to write such a message, and thought dismally that perhaps illiteracy is preferable to marginal literacy.

At the BART train station I was accosted by a young boy, about 12 years old, just as I was about to thrust a dollar bill into the change machine. "Will you give me a quarter?" he asked. I try to help people in need, but he was well-dressed, well-groomed, not a street urchin. "No," I

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said. "Will you give me a quarter after you get change?" he said. "No," I said. I pocketed the coins and walked away. I needed some of the change to obtain the *Chronicle* I faunched for. I stuck 35¢ into the newspaper box, but the damn contraption gulped down my money and wouldn't open or return my coins. I suppose God was punishing me for refusing to help the boy.

When I arrived at the main BART station of Berkeley I encountered a young woman named Lauri to whom I have given money over several years. Last time I met her she was pregnant, and she had told me with great relief that her father had at last agreed to pay her medical expenses for the birth, but nothing else. "He says that I'm 32 and should take care of myself," she said cheerfully, not looking too sorry for herself. She always exhibits a mixture of whimsy and common sense that I find refreshing. She has a grasp of reality, but it is a gentle one that does not bruise its wonder. "Does your father live around here?" I asked. "Oh no, he's a doctor in Beverly Hills," she replied. A doctor in Beverly Hills! That certainly changed my picture of this waif of the streets. I knew that if she were my daughter I would not begrudge her anything I could give. Not being a doctor in Beverly Hills, however, I gave her only a dollar. I have much sympathy for her, whatever her affluent origins. Truly the rich are as mad as we are.

Today she told me that her infant daughter, born six weeks ago, was in the care of her male companion, who had gone to Moe's or the Shakespeare to sell some art books. Shoplifted copies, they were, she implied. She said she wished that she had the child with her so I could see her, a beautiful baby, the most beautiful baby in the world. I said politely that I was sorry the child wasn't there, finding it remarkable that I should know the mother of such a Guinness Book baby. Talking with her I sat beside her on the window ledge of Waldenbooks and while I lingered, a disreputable-looking black man approached us and panhandled us both. He looked like a man who might have written the inscription on the *Chronicle* box. He spoke in a rumble like the voice of graffiti itself. Lauri told him a sad story that she had already told me, about her cousin being in Santa Rita jail. The man remarked a few depressing things about jail -- from personal experience, I am sure -- and balanced them off with some sympathetic assurances. He said sincerely, "I hope you get him out." I was impressed enough that I gave him a dollar too.

Around the corner and halfway down the block to the post office, I heard a woman shouting to me, "Here's the baby! Here's the baby!" and turned around to behold Lauri running after me with an infant in her arms. I felt the accusing eyes of everybody else on the street, and was about ready to protest, "It wasn't me! I was in Katmandu at the time!" She was followed by her nondescript male friend, who had arrived a moment after I left. He had sold the art books and had money to give her. She pulled back the blanket so I could see the face of the baby, peacefully asleep in her mother's arms, oblivious to the troubles of the world. She was so young that she had no visible personality, but to please Lauri I praised her generously.

At the Berkeley post office I was glancing over my mail at one of those high stand-up tables in the lobby when I was bumped into by a very dirty and unshaven character who was muttering to himself. In Berkeley, on every busy street and in every shop, people babble to themselves, out loud, and often in very loud voices, stringing together syllables that never before were spoken one after the other in the whole history of humankind. Are there so many important topics and too few people to discuss them with? Perhaps. But no one listens or pays much attention. This is Berkeley, after all. Discoursing incomprehensibly to me or to the world at large the man reached across to grab a postal form from the rack at the back of the table. I moved out of the way, then saw that he was taking all the postal forms of all sorts out of their receptacles: Return Receipt forms, Custom Declarations, Registered Mail, Change of Address, Certified Mail, Certificate of Mailing, even the Notify Publishers forms.

As I watched in dumb amazement he took the whole handful of them and dumped them into the trash basket. It had one of those flipflop tops and closed with a metallic snap. I said to the man in reasonable tones, "Why did you do that?" He looked at me with eyes that somehow managed to be both muddy and burning, and muttered that something -- I couldn't comprehend what -- was "illegal." As the man wambled away I opened the trash basket and tried to retrieve the forms -- I realized later that he had discarded all the forms from all the tables in the lobby --

but they were lost amongst the heaps of discarded junk mail. The postal system is a sick organization, but I couldn't think that its failures reside in their Change of Address forms. More likely it has something to do with junk mail.

Rain, which had been threatening all day, began to fall as I walked down Shattuck avenue to the bank. I returned in a cold steady drizzle, thinking Great Thoughts (don't you find that walking in the rain inspires Great Thoughts?), and nearly stumbled over a woman lying in a puddle on the sidewalk. Stepping over her to keep from falling, I looked down at her with consternation. "This is Sylvia," a Berkeley cop told me. "She does these things to call attention to herself." He was standing under an awning, out of the rain, and I hadn't seen him at first. He had a jaw like the grill of a truck, but he spoke courteously enough, perhaps glad, like other Berkeley madmen, to share his thoughts with someone. To call attention to herself, poor Sylvia lay on her side in the falling rain, shivering as if she were suffering a seizure. Bay Area rains are usually grey and cold, as relentless as the rhythm of Ravel's *Bolero*, and it was that kind of rain. The rest of the passersby were hurrying around her, or stepping over her as I had, more concerned about getting wet than about the woman on the sidewalk. I alone paused to look at her with astonishment and dismay, wondering, Who is Sylvia, what is she?

"Come on, Sylvia, cut it out!" the cop urged her in a jolly sort of way. He might have been ordering his little daughter to stop wading in the gutter. "What ails you, anyway? Come on, *get up!*" The woman spoke with more energy than I expected. "What ails me? I have no money, I have no place to live, I haven't any shoes." She hardened her voice. "I'm going to create a scene and you'll have to run me in. At least your fuckin jail is warm and dry."

She got up suddenly without any help from either of us. I held out my hand, but she ignored it. Standing up, she was a short, stocky young woman. She was even quite pretty, although someone must have beaten her up, for her face was cut and battered. She was soaked and begrimed by her repose in the puddle. Her dark unkempt hair was wet and dripping. Her tattered jacket and slacks were splashed with mud. Her feet were bare, and blue with cold. (I theorized that perhaps her shoes had been stolen.) With a dark look at the cop, she walked away. He didn't try to stop her, probably glad that she was up off the sidewalk and out of his jurisdiction. I followed her, saying worriedly, "Are you OK?"

She obviously considered that a stupid remark and didn't bother to reply. Then she turned to me and asked for a ride to the Berkeley Support Services office. I explained that I had come to downtown Berkeley on BART today and didn't have my car. I said the office was only a few blocks away, and I would walk over with her. She glared at me, and trudged on. I could hardly bear the despondency of the rain and the poor creature of the street. Lauri never seems sorry for herself, although she has reason to be, but this woman seemed to be burdened with utter desolation and an indescribable prehistoric pathos. I could think of nothing I could do for her, however, except give her some money, so little that it would do her little good. She snatched the dollar out of my hand, in sort of a bizarre reverse replay of the last scene of Chaplin's "City Lights," in which I was the formerly blind girl and she was the little tramp, and darted across Shattuck avenue against the traffic, dangerous enough anytime but doubly so in the rain. As I watched with love, horror, and compassion she splashed across the street and reached the other curb. She must have had a guardian angel, as most women seem to have. Huddled in her wet jacket she stumbled on and entered the public library, where she would be warm and dry for a little while. At least it would be better than the city jail. I went on my way, with a sad premonition that I had seen someone in the dusk of life, someone under the sentence of death. I have often thought how terrible it must be to be on Death Row. But we are all on Death Row.

I returned home and shut the door against the mad world, with thoughts as grey as the day had become.

Little acorns from great oaks grow.
