

The Prospect

The batter jumped back as the pitch flew at his head and then stared open-mouth as the ball broke in an arc, smacked into the catcher's mitt and the umpire called strike three.

On the bench Bill Poole, the manager of the Wheatland Township High School Threshers, spit in a bucket and said, "holy shit."

At the other end of the bench Max Fell let out a low whistle, looked over his shoulders, leaned into Elmer French, lowered his voice and said, "Did you see that?"

"Yep," French said, "Struck 'em out."

"No, no, no..."

"Yep, he did. Struck 'em out."

"Yeah, Yeah, I know he struck him out, but did you see that goddamn pitch."

"Yep, looked like a curve."

"A curve? It floated like a goddamn paper airplane. I thought it was gonna hit the batter in the head and so did the batter."

"That's Bo Webster, the Sheriff's boy." Now French looked around and lowered his voice. "I coulda struck him out."

Fell rolled his eyes. "It's not about the batter. It's about he pitcher. He could write a Goddamn textbook."

"Doubt that, since he ain't even ever read one. He carries 'em home, though, for Mary Lou Radle." French slapped his knee and laughed.

“It’s just a saying. Textbook,” Fell said. “It means his mechanics are about perfect.”

“You can say that again. He can tune a tractor till it purrs like a kitten.”

Fell raised his eyebrows turned toward French and waited for the laugh, but French just stared out at the field. Just then a crack like a pistol shot startled Fell.

“What the...” he looked at the field and saw the Threshers’ catcher throw down his mitt and wave his hand like it was on fire.

“Fastball,” French said.

Manager Poole spit in a bucket and said, “holy shit.”

Fell said, “Yeah. Holy Goddamn shit.”

“So, you’re some kind of scout?” French asked.

“Yeah, some kind. The kind that hasn’t signed a decent prospect in four years and got sent to Siberia.”

“Siberia? This ain’t...”

“Yeah, I know,” Fell interrupted. “It’s a saying. Siberia. Look, they say you’re his lawyer, why don’t I make an offer right now.”

“I ain’t a lawyer, but I do clerk for Judge Thompson and I give folks legal advice from time to time.”

Fell sighed. “I have a contract right here in my pocket. I’ll give him \$500 for his name and send him over to Wichita for starters for \$150 a month.”

“Don’t know about that?”

“Okay, okay. A grand and \$200 a month.”

“Don’t know about that either? He’s only 17. You’d have to ask his old man.”

“Seventeen?” Fell had taken him for 19. “So, where’s the old man?” Fell asked looking around at the sparse crowd.

“Ain’t here. He’s back a farm birthing a cow and if Terry knows what’s good for him, he’ll get back there and help as soon as this game is over.”

Man, Fell thought to himself. This joint is right out of the Grit.

“Look, let me take you out to dinner tonight. You, the kid, his parents. Best place in town.”

French stared out at the field and watched Terry strikeout another batter. “Make it tomorrow. Meet us at the Bales at 7:30. It’s easy to find on Main Street. Best place in town and the only one.”

It was easy to find, all right. Bales was right across the street from the hotel, which, Fell judged, wasn’t half bad for crossroads cowtown. He got to Bales early and took a table against the wall opposite the bar. They came in on time, the father, Wilson, leading the way with Terry close behind him. The old man pulled a chair out for his wife, Denise. Terry did the same for his girlfriend, Mary Lou. Fell sized Terry up. He wasn’t a big kid, looked to be about 5-10, maybe 160. Built, though, with those long, lean farmer muscles showing below the rolled up sleeves of his flannel shirt. And he had a posture, the kid did. Like they used to say about Big Ed Walsh. He could strut standing still.

Terry, his parents and Mary Lou sat across the table from Fell. French came around and sat with Fell. Watching Terry and his father cut their steaks, with their forks and knives dwarfed by their huge paws, Fell had a hard time getting the image out of his mind of those hands inside a cow’s uterus. When Terry’s father finished his steak, put

down his fork and knife and wiped his face, Fell opened his mouth to make his pitch, but Terry's father beat him to it. "Elmer here tells me you want to send my boy away to play ball clear to Wichita."

"He won't be there long, Mr. Kranson," Fell said.

"Well that's good, gonna need him in August."

"No," said Fell, "that's not what"

Just then the restaurant front door opened. Fell glanced at the man who walked in, recognized him and lowered his head. Terry was about turn and look, but Fell distracted him. "Terry, do you know how much Bob Feller made last year?"

"No sir."

"Twenty thousand."

Terry's mother's mouth fell open. "Dollars?" She said with a gasp.

"Yes, mam, dollars."

"Are you saying Terry could make \$20,000 pitching baseball?" French asked.

"Well, yeah, and more than that one day."

Mary Lou muttered "whoa" and elbowed Terry in the ribs.

Fell dared a glance at the front. Yankee scout Dan Kellow stood at the bar talking to the bartender and then turned and went down a hallway toward the men's room.

Fell excused himself and hurried to the bar.

He put a fiver in the bartender's hand. "If that stranger asks about Terry, you don't know him."

"But he's sitting right there."

Fell put another fiver in his hand, said "You don't know him" and hurried back to the table.

Kellow came out and went back to the bar. He looked at Fell's table, but Fell looked down at his plate. Kellow didn't recognize him. Kellow talked to the bartender, who pointed toward the street and said something back. Kellow went out. Fell went to the bar.

"He didn't ask about Terry," the bartender said. "He went across the street to get a room. He's coming back for dinner, 20 minutes."

Fell was relieved. He was a step ahead. Kellow had just arrived. He wasn't at the game. But what else could he be here for? Fell went back to the table and waved for the check. As he counted out the money, he said, "Here's my offer. \$1500 for his name. It's unheard of. And \$350 a month. Please think about it."

"We will," French said.

Fell got French and Terry and his family out of the restaurant just in time. Their pickup pulled away just as Kellow walked across the street from the hotel to the restaurant. Walking in the opposite direction to the hotel Fell turned his head as he passed Kellow in the street. It was dark. Kellow didn't recognize him.

Fell went to the desk and chatted up the night clerk about dinner. "Cut that steak with a butter knife," Fell said glancing down at the registration book. Reading upside down he saw that Kellow was in 10, just two doors down from his own room.

Picking hotel room locks might not like seem like a scouting skill, but it happened before. In Kellow's room Fell found Kellow's personal appointment book on the dresser.

He looked at the next day, Tuesday. Nothing there. He looked at Wednesday. It read, "Game at Wheatland high school. Good prospect. 4 p.m."

"Damn Yankees," Fell said under his breath. Wednesday was Wheatland's next game and as far as Coach Poole cared two days rest was plenty for Terry. Back in his room Fell poured a stiff bourbon and played mental pepper with his options. One. Run over to the bar, confront Kellow and demand he lay off his discovery. Two. Go out to the farm and make the family an offer that would curl the old man's mustache. But the Browns were cheap. Fell didn't have the power to offer the money he was thinking about. Hell, he didn't even think they'd go for the \$1500.

Back his room Fell tried the telephone, but the operator couldn't make a connection to St. Louis. He went to the desk and sent a telegram, but wasn't optimistic. President Miller wasn't gonna buy "the next Feller" description. How could there be more than one?

So Fell chose option one. He stormed into the Bales and walked right up to Kellow. "Fell," Kellow said, "What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere? The Browns find some money in the couch cushions?"

"Like you don't know. The kid's mine Kellow. Mine alone. I discovered him."

Kellow drained his glass, threw \$2 on the bar, said, "It's a business," and walked out.

Fell went to the window and watched Kellow enter the hotel. He waited a couple minutes and then went to the hotel. He gave the night clerk a fiver, they were getting scarce. "If room 10 goes out ring me." He gave him another five and said, "Pass it on to the day clerk."

Fell couldn't sleep. He stayed up half the night worrying. He didn't hear anyone in the hall. The desk didn't ring. Kellow stayed in. The next day there were enough cowboys around for Fell to keep an eye on Kellow without making it obvious. The Yankee scout took breakfast, lunch and dinner at the Bales. After dinner he went to the bar. The waiter brought him a telegram. Kellow read it and went back to his room.

Fell made the same deal with the clerk. Exhausted he downed a couple of drinks and slept soundly. In the lobby in the morning, the day clerk nodded at him. Kellow hadn't gone out. Fell followed Kellow to Bales, took a table across the dining room. As Fell ate his breakfast, Kellow walked over to his table and stood over him. "Look, Fell, you're right. You discovered him, the kid is yours."

Fell nearly spit out his coffee. He slapped a hand on the table and laughed. "Since when did the Yankees get a conscience?"

"Do you want him or don't you. Final offer, the Smith kid is yours."

"Smith? Who the hell is Smith?"

"Don't play stupid with me Fell. He's the outfielder from West County high and they're playing here tomorrow."

"But, I'm not here for..."

Kellow interrupted, raising his voice. "I'm not buying your act, Fell, I know that's why you're here. You're getting what you want. Besides I found a better kid. Kranson kid. Terry. A pitcher."

Fell dropped his fork. It clattered off the plate onto the floor. He put his hands over his eyes and moaned. "What? How? You didn't go out."

“I got lucky. I overheard talk of the kid in the bar. He’s a hayseed, but I figured if the truth of the stories were half of what I was hearing, he be a find. For 15 bucks and a bottle of bourbon, the bartender said he get word to the kid and the old man. They came to my room last night. Ruppert wired him personally from New York. The old man was impressed as all hell. Signed him right there in my room. They’re all on the way to Springfield as we speak. The old man, the mother, the girlfriend. Gonna get him settled in.”

Fell’s mouth dropped open, but he couldn’t speak.

“Come on, Fell aren’t you going to thank me for Smith? Say something.”

Fell looked down at his eggs and said, “Who’s gonna birth the calves?”

Kellow shook his head. “What? What’re you cracking up?”

“Yeah. I’m cracking up.”

“Well, I gotta catch my train. Good luck with Smith.”

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Elmer French pointed at the boy in the batter’s box, turned to Fell and said, “Did you see him throw that kid out at third? Some arm that Smith kid, hey.”

“That runner was so slow, I you could have thrown him out,” Fell said.

Just then Smith swung and hit a mighty drive over the right field fence.

“Look at that Fell. Musta went 350.”

“My grandma could throw harder than that pitcher and in that wind I could hit one 400,” Fell said.

Coach Poole spit in the bucket and said, “holy Shit.”