

Ty Cobb's Wild Ten-Month Fight to Live

AL STUMP

In 1960, Ty Cobb designated Al Stump (1916–1995) to be the ghost of his memoirs. For the next year, Stump held on for dear life as the ornery, ailing Cobb regularly exploded. Stump finished the book—*My Life in Baseball: The True Record*—just before Cobb's death. It was a whitewash from cover to cover. Cobb had wrangled final approval over everything, and Cobb, being Cobb, invoked it spikes high.

Stump had the last word, though. Twice.

Not long after Cobb's death, *True* magazine published Stump's spell-binding saga of life with the Georgia Peach. Then, in 1994, he set the rest of the True Record straight with the publication of *Cobb*, one of the best sports biographies ever written. In that same year, Ron Shelton, who's featured elsewhere in these pages, adapted *Ty Cobb's Wild Ten-Month Fight to Live* into the movie *Cobb*, with Tommy Lee Jones in the title role, and Robert Wuhl as Al Stump. You can catch a glimpse of the real Stump in a cinema verite cameo sitting at the bar.

During his long career, Stump's byline appeared regularly in *Esquire*, *Colliers*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Sport* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and he wrote four books. In the 1970s, he covered the Charles Manson murder trial for my old paper, *The Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, where his wife, Jo Mosher, was the travel editor during my own adventures as a Hollywood columnist some years later.



Ever since sundown in the Sierra range, Nevada intermountain radio had been crackling warnings: "Route 50 now highly dangerous. Motorists stay off. Repeat: AVOID ROUTE 50."

By 1:00 A.M. the twenty-one-mile, steep-pitched passage from Lake Tahoe's sixty-eight-hundred-foot altitude into Carson City, a snaky grade most of the way, was snow-struck, ice-sheeted, thick with rock slides, and declared unfit for all transport vehicles by the State Highway Patrol.

It was right down Ty Cobb's alley. Anything that smacked of the apparently impossible brought an unholy gleam to his eye. The gleam had been there in 1959 when a series of lawyers advised Cobb that he stood no chance in court against the Sovereign State of California in a dispute over income taxes, whereupon he bellowed defiance and sued the state for sixty thousand dollars plus damages. It had been there more recently when doctors warned that liquor would kill him. From a pint of whiskey per day he upped his consumption to a quart and more.

Sticking out his grizzled chin, he had told me, "I think we'll take a little run into town tonight."

A blizzard rattled the windows of Cobb's luxurious hunting lodge on the eastern crest of Lake Tahoe, but to forbid him anything—even at the age of seventy-three—was to tell an ancient tiger not to snarl. Cobb was both the greatest of all ballplayers and a multimillionaire whose monthly income from stock dividends, rents, and interest ran to twelve thousand dollars. And he was a man contemptuous of any law other than his own.

"We'll drive in," he announced, "and shoot some craps, see a show, and say hello to Joe DiMaggio—he's in Reno at the Riverside Hotel."

I looked at him and felt a chill. Cobb, sitting there haggard and unshaven in his pajamas and a fuzzy old green bathrobe at one o'clock in the morning, wasn't fooling.

"Let's not," I said. "You shouldn't be anywhere but in bed."

"Don't argue with me!" he barked. "There are fee-simple sons of bitches all over the country who've tried it and wished they hadn't." He glared at me, flaring the whites of his eyes the way he'd done for twenty-four years at quaking pitchers, basemen, umpires, fans, and sportswriters.

"If you and I are going to get along," he went on ominously, "*don't increase my tension.*"

It was the winter of 1960. We were alone in his isolated, ten-room lakeside lodge—bearskin floor rugs, mounted game trophies on walls—with a lot of work to do. We'd arrived six days earlier, loaded with a large smoked ham, a twenty-pound turkey, a case of scotch, and another of champagne, for

the purpose of collaborating on Ty's autobiography, a book that he'd refused to write for more than thirty years but had suddenly decided to publish before he died. In almost a week's time we hadn't accomplished thirty minutes' worth of work.

The reason: Cobb didn't need a high-risk auto trip into Reno, but immediate hospitalization, and through the emergency-room entrance. He was desperately ill, and had been so even before we left California.

We had traveled 250 miles to Tahoe in Cobb's black Imperial limousine, carrying with us a virtual drugstore of medicines. These included digoxin (for his leaky heart), Darvon (for his aching back), Tace (for a recently operated-upon malignancy of the pelvic area), Fleet's Compound (for his impacted bowels), Librium (for his "tension"—that is, his violent rages), codeine (for his pain), and an insulin needle-and-syringe kit (for his diabetes), among a dozen other panaceas that he'd substituted for ongoing medical care. Cobb hated doctors. "When they meet an undertaker on the street," he said, "the boys wink at each other."

His sense of balance was precarious. He tottered about the lodge, moving from place to place by grasping the furniture. On a public street, he couldn't navigate twenty feet without clutching my shoulder, leaning most of his 208 pounds upon me and shuffling along with a spraddle-legged gait. His bowels wouldn't work, a near-total stoppage that brought groans of agony from Cobb when he sought relief. He was feverish. There was no one at the Tahoe hideaway but the two of us to treat his critical condition.

Everything that hurts had caught up with his six-foot, one-inch body at once, and he plied himself with pink, green, orange, yellow, and purple pills—often guessing at the amounts, since labels had peeled off some of the bottles. But he wouldn't hear of hospitalizing himself.

"The hacksaw artists have taken fifty thousand dollars from me," he said, "and they'll get no more." He spoke of a "quack" who'd treated him a few years earlier. "The joker got funny and said he found urine in my whiskey. I fired him."

His diabetes required a precise food-insulin balance. Cobb's needle wouldn't work. He misplaced the directions for his daily insulin dosage and his hands shook uncontrollably when he went to plunge the needle into his abdominal wall. He spilled more of the stuff than he injected.

He'd been warned by experts, from Johns Hopkins to California's Scripps Clinic, that liquor was deadly for him. Tyrus snorted and began each day with several gin and orange juices, then switched to "buzzers" of Old Rarity scotch, which held him until the night hours when sleep was impossible,

and he tossed down cognac, champagne, or "Cobb cocktails"—Southern Comfort stirred into hot water and honey.

A careful diet was essential. Cobb wouldn't eat. The lodge was without a cook or other help—in the previous six months, he had fired two cooks, a male nurse, and a handyman in fits of anger—and any food I prepared for him he nibbled at, then pushed away. As of the night of the blizzard, the failing, splenetic old monarch of baseball hadn't touched solid food in three days, existing almost solely on quarts of booze and mixers.

My reluctance to prepare the car for the Reno trip burned him up. He beat his fists on the arms of his easy chair. "I'll go alone!" he threatened.

I was certain he'd try. The storm had worsened, but once Cobb set his mind on an idea, nothing could alter it. Beyond that, I'd already found that to oppose or annoy him was to risk a fierce explosion. An event of a week earlier had proved that point. It was then that I discovered he carried a loaded Luger wherever he went, looking for opportunities to use it.

En route to Lake Tahoe, we'd stopped overnight at a motel near Hangtown, California. During the night a party of drunks made a loud commotion in the parking lot. In my room adjacent to Cobb's I heard him cursing and then his voice, booming out the window.

"Get out of here, you——heads!"

The drunks replied in kind. Groping his way to the door, Cobb fired three shots into the dark that resounded like cannon claps. Screams and yells followed. Reaching my door, I saw the drunks climbing one another's backs in their rush to flee. The frightened motel manager, and others, arrived. Before anyone could think of calling the police, the manager was cut down by the most caustic tongue ever heard in a baseball clubhouse.

"What kind of pesthouse is this!" roared Cobb. "Who gave you a license, you mugwump? Get the hell out of here and see that I'm not disturbed! I'm a sick man and I want it quiet!"

"B-b-beg your pardon, Mr. Cobb," the manager said feebly. He apparently felt so honored to have as a customer the national game's most exalted figure that no cops were called. When we drove away the next morning, a crowd gathered and stood gawking with expressions of disbelief.

Down the highway, with me driving, Cobb checked the Luger and reloaded its nine-shell clip. "Two of those shots were in the air," he remarked. "The third kicked up gravel. I've got permits for this gun from governors of three states. I'm honorary deputy sheriff of California and a Texas Ranger. So we won't be getting any complaints."

He saw nothing strange in his behavior. Ty Cobb's rest had been disturbed; therefore, he had every right to shoot up the neighborhood.

At about that moment I began to develop a nervous twitch, which grew worse in about the time it takes to say Grover Cleveland Alexander of the Philadelphia Phillies. I'd heard reports of Cobb's weird and violent ways without giving them much credence. Until early 1960 my own experience with the legendary Georgia Peach had been slight, amounting mainly to meetings in Scottsdale, Arizona, and New York to discuss book-writing arrangements and to sign the contract.

Locker-room stories of Ty's eccentricities, wild temper, wars with his own teammates, egotism, and miserliness sounded like the usual scandal-mongering you get in sports. I'd heard that Cobb had flattened a heckler in San Francisco's Domino Club with one punch; that he had been sued by Elbie Felts, an ex-Coast League player, after assaulting him; that he booby-trapped his main home, a Spanish-mission villa at Atherton, California, with high-voltage wires; that he'd walloped his ex-wives; that he'd been jailed in Placerville, California, at the age of sixty-eight for speeding, abusing a traffic cop, and then inviting the judge to return to law school at his, Cobb's, expense.

I passed these things off. The one and only Ty Cobb wished to write his memoirs, and I felt distinctly honored to be named his collaborator. As the poet Cowper reflected, "The innocents are gay." I was eager to start. Then a few weeks before the book work began, I was taken aside and tipped off by an in-law of Cobb's and by one of Cobb's former teammates on the Detroit Tigers that I hadn't heard the half of it. "Back out of this book deal," they urged. "You'll never finish it and you might get hurt."

They went on: "Nobody can live with Ty. Nobody ever has. That includes two wives who left him, butlers, housekeepers, chauffeurs, nurses, and a few mistresses. He drove off all his friends long ago. Max Fleischmann, the yeast-cake heir, was a pal of Ty's until the night a house guest of Fleischmann's made a remark about Cobb spiking other players when he ran bases. The man only asked if it was true. Cobb knocked the guy into a fishpond and never spoke to him again. Another time, a member of Cobb's family crossed him—a woman, mind you. He broke her nose with a ball bat.

"Do you know about the butcher? Ty didn't like some fish he bought. In the fight, he broke up the butcher shop. Had to settle fifteen hundred dollars on the butcher out of court after going to jail. He had a gun in his possession at the time."

"But I'm dealing with him strictly on business," I said.

"So was the butcher," replied my informants.

"In baseball," the ex-teammate said, "a few of us who really knew him well realized that he was wrong in the head—unbalanced. He played like a demon and had everybody hating him because he *was* a demon. That's how he set all those records that nobody has come close to since 1928. It's why he was always in a brawl, on the field, in the clubhouse, behind the stands, in the stands, on the street. The public's never known it, but Cobb's always been off the beam where other people are concerned. Sure, he made millions in the stock market—but that's only cold dollars. He carried a gun wherever he went in the big league and scared hell out of us. He's mean, tricky, and dangerous. Look out he doesn't blow up some night and clip you with a bottle. He specializes in throwing bottles.

"Now that he's sick he's worse than ever. And you've signed up to stay with him for months. The time will come when you'll want to write in his book about the scandals and wild brannigans he was in—and he'll chop you down. Don't be a sucker."

Taken aback, but still skeptical, I launched the job. My first task was to drive Cobb to his Lake Tahoe retreat, where, he declared, we could work uninterrupted.

Everything went wrong from the start. The Hangtown gunplay incident was an eye-opener. Next came a series of events, among them Cobb's determination to set forth in a blizzard to Reno, which were too strange to explain away. Everything had to suit his pleasure, or else he threw a tantrum. He prowled about the lodge at night with the Luger in hand, suspecting trespassers (there had once been a break-in at the place). I slept with one eye open, ready to move fast if necessary.

Well past midnight that evening, full of pain and ninety-proof, he took out the Luger, letting it casually rest between his knees. I had continued to object to a Reno excursion in such weather.

He looked at me with tight fury and said, biting out the words, "In 1912—and you can write this down—I killed a man in Detroit. He and two other hoodlums jumped me on the street early one morning with a knife. I was carrying something that came in handy in my early days—a Belgian-made pistol with a heavy raised sight at the barrel end.

"Well, the damned gun wouldn't fire and they cut me up the back."

Making notes as fast as he talked, I asked, "Where in the back?"

"WELL, DAMMIT ALL TO HELL, IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, COME AND LOOK!" Cobb flared, jerking up his shirt. When I protested that I believed him

implicitly but only wanted a story detail, he picked up a half-full whiskey glass and smashed it against the brick fireplace. So I gingerly took a look. A faint whitish scar ran about six inches up his lower left back.

"Satisfied?" jeered Cobb.

He described how, after a battle, the men fled before his fists.

"What with you wounded and the odds three to one," I said, "that must have been a relief."

"Relief? Do you think they could pull that on *me*? I WENT AFTER THEM!"

Anyone else would have felt lucky to be out of it, but Cobb had chased one of the mugs into a dead-end alley. "I used that gun sight to rip and slash and tear him for about ten minutes until he had no face left," related Ty with relish. "Left him there, not breathing, in his own rotten blood."

"What was the situation—where were you going when it happened?"

"To catch a train to a ball game."

"You saw a doctor instead?"

"I DID NOTHING OF THE SORT, DAMMIT. I PLAYED THE NEXT DAY AND GOT THREE BASE HITS."

Records I later inspected bore out every word of it: on August 3, 1912, in a blood-soaked, makeshift bandage, Ty Cobb hit 2 doubles and a triple for Detroit, and only then was treated for the painful knife slash. He was that kind of ballplayer, through a record 3,033 games. No other pro athlete burned with Cobb's flame. Boze Bulger, a great old-time baseball critic, said, "He was possessed by the Furies."

Finishing his tale, Cobb looked me straight in the eye.

"*You are driving me into Reno tonight,*" he said softly. The Luger in his hand was dangling floorward.

Even before I opened my mouth, Cobb knew he'd won. He had an extra sense about the emotions he produced in others—in this case, fear. As far as I could see (lacking expert diagnosis and as a layman understands the symptoms), he wasn't merely erratic and trigger tempered, but suffering from megalomania, or acute self-worship, delusions of persecution, and more than a touch of dipsomania.

Although I'm not proud of it, he scared hell out of me most of the time I was around him.

And now Cobb gave me the first smile of our association. "To get along with me," he repeated softly, "*don't increase my tension.*"

Before describing the Reno expedition, I would like to say, in this frank view of a mighty man, that the most spectacular, enigmatic, and troubled

of all American sport figures had his good side, which he tried his best to conceal. During the final ten months of his life I was his constant companion. Eventually I put him to bed, prepared his insulin, picked him up when he fell down, warded off irate taxi drivers, bill collectors, bartenders, waiters, clerks, and private citizens whom Cobb was inclined to punch, cooked what food he could digest, drew his bath, got drunk with him, and knelt with him in prayer on black nights when he knew death was near. I ducked a few bottles he threw, too.

I think, because he forced upon me a confession of his most private thoughts, along with details of his life, that I know the answer to the central, overriding secret of his life. Was Ty Cobb psychotic throughout his baseball career? The answer is yes.

Kids, dogs, and sick people flocked to him and he returned their instinctive liking. Money was his idol, but from his approximate \$12 million fortune he assigned large sums to create the Cobb Educational Fund, which financed hundreds of needy youngsters through college. He built and endowed a first-class hospital for the poor of his backwater hometown, Royston, Georgia. When Ty's spinster sister, Florence, was crippled, he tenderly cared for her until her last days. The widow of a one-time American League batting champion would have lived in want but for Ty's steady financial support. A Hall of Fame catcher, beamed by a pitched ball and enfeebled, came under Cobb's wing for years. Regularly he mailed dozens of anonymous checks to indigent old ballplayers (relayed by a third party)—a rare act among retired tycoons in other lines of business.

If you believe such acts didn't come hard for Cobb, table the thought. He was the world's champion pinchpenny.

Some 150 fan letters reached him monthly, requesting his autograph. Many letters enclosed return-mail stamps. Cobb used the stamps for his own outgoing mail. The fan letters he burned. "Saves on firewood," he muttered.

In December of 1960, Ty hired a one-armed "gentleman's gentleman" named E. Anthony Brown. Although steadily criticized, poor Brownie worked hard as cook and butler. But when he mixed up a grocery order one day, he was fired, given a check for the week's pay—forty-five dollars—and sent packing.

Came the middle of that night and Cobb awakened me.

"We're driving into town *right now*," he stated, "to stop payment on Brownie's check. The bastard talked back to me when I discharged him. He'll get no more of my money."

All remonstrations were futile. There was no phone, so we had to drive from Cobb's Tahoe lodge into Carson City, where he woke up the president of the First National Bank of Nevada and arranged for a stop-pay on a piddling check. The president tried to conceal his irritation; Cobb was a big depositor in his bank.

"Yes, sir, Ty," he said. "I'll take care of it first thing in the morning."

"You goddamn well better," snorted Cobb. And then we drove through the 3:00 A.M. darkness back to the lake.

But this jaunt was a light workout compared to the treacherous Reno trip he now directed we make.

Two cars were available at the lodge. Cobb's 1956 Imperial had no tire chains; the other buggy was equipped for snow driving.

"We'll need both cars for this operation," he ordered. "One car might break down. I'll drive mine, you take the one with chains. You go first. I'll follow your chain marks."

For Cobb to tackle precipitous Route 50 was unthinkable. The Tahoe road, with its two-hundred-foot drop-offs, had killed a record eighty motorists. Along with his illness, drunkenness, and no chains, he had weak eyes and was without a driver's license. California had turned him down at his last test; he hadn't bothered to apply in Nevada.

Urging him to ride with me was a waste of breath, however.

A howling wind hit my Buick a solid blow as we shoved off. Sleet stuck to the windshield faster than the wipers could clear it. For the first three miles, snowplows had been active, and at fifteen miles per hour, in second gear, I managed to hold the road. But then came Spooner's Summit, 6,900 feet high, and beyond it a steep descent of nine miles. Behind me, headlamps blinking, Cobb honked his horn, demanding more speed. Chainless, he wasn't getting traction. *The hell with him*, I thought. Slowing to low gear, fighting to hold a roadbed I couldn't see even with my head stuck out the window, I skidded along. No other traffic was on the road that night as we did our crazy tandem around icy curves, at times brushing the guardrails. Cobb was blaring his horn steadily now.

And then here came Cobb.

Tiring of my creeping pace, he gunned the Imperial around me in one big skid. I caught a glimpse of an angry face under a big Stetson hat and a waving fist. He was doing a good thirty miles per hour when he'd gained twenty-five yards on me, fishtailing right and left, but straightening as he slid out of sight in the thick sleet.

I let him go. Suicide wasn't in my contract.

The next six miles was a matter of feeling the way and praying. Near a curve I saw taillights to the left. Pulling up, I found Ty's car swung sideways and buried, nose down, in a snowbank, the hind wheels two feet in the air. Twenty yards away was a sheer drop-off into a canyon.

"You hurt?" I asked.

"Bumped my——head," he muttered. He lit a cigar and gave four-letter regards to the highway department for not illuminating the "danger" spot. His forehead was bruised and he'd broken his glasses.

In my car, we groped our way down-mountain, a nightmare ride, with Cobb alternately taking in scotch from a thermos jug and telling me to step on it. At 4:00 A.M. in Carson City, an all-night garageman used a broom to clean the car of snow and agreed to pick up the Imperial—"when the road's passable."

"It's passable," said Ty. "I just opened it."

With dawn breaking, we reached Reno. All I wanted was a bed, and all Cobb wanted was a craps table.

He was rolling now, pretending he wasn't ill; with the scotch bracing him, Ty was able to walk into the Riverside Hotel casino with a hand on my shoulder and without staggering as obviously as usual. Everybody present wanted to meet him. Starlets from a film unit on location in Reno flocked around, and comedian Joe E. Lewis had the band play "*Sweet Georgia Brown*"—Ty's favorite tune.

"Hope your dice are still honest," he told Riverside co-owner Bill Miller. "Last time I was here I won twelve thousand dollars in three hours."

"How I remember, Ty," said Miller. "How I remember."

A scientific craps player who'd won and lost his hefty sums in Nevada in the past, Cobb bet hundred-dollar chips, his eyes alert, not missing a play around the board. He soon decided that the table was cold and we moved to another casino, then a third. At the last stop, Cobb's legs grew shaky. Holding himself up by leaning on the table edge with his forearms, he dropped three hundred dollars, then had a hot streak in which he won eight hundred. His voice was a croak as he told the other players, "Watch 'em and weep."

But then suddenly his voice came back. When the stickman raked the dice his way, Cobb loudly said, "You touched the dice with your hand."

"No, sir," said the stickman. "I did not."

"I don't lie!" snarled Cobb.

"I don't lie, either," insisted the stickman.

"Nobody touches my dice!" Cobb, swaying on his feet, eyes blazing, worked his way around the table toward the croupier. It was a weird tableau. In his crumpled Stetson and expensive camel's-hair coat, stained and charred with

cigarette burns, a three-day beard grizzling his face, the fuming old giant of baseball towered over the dapper gambler.

"You fouled the dice, I saw you," growled Cobb, and then he swung.

The blow missed as the stickman dodged, but, cursing and almost falling, Cobb seized the wooden rake and smashed it across the table. I jumped in and caught him under the arms as he sagged.

And then, as quickly as possible, we were put out into the street by two large uniformed guards. "Sorry, Mr. Cobb," they said unhappily, "but we can't have this."

A crowd had gathered, and as we started down the street, Cobb swearing and stumbling, clinging to me, I couldn't have felt more conspicuous if I'd been strung naked from the neon arch across Virginia Street, Reno's main drag. At the corner, Ty was struck by an attack of breathlessness. "Get to stop," he gasped. Feeling him going limp on me, I turned his big body against a lamp-post, braced my legs, and with an underarm grip held him there until he caught his breath. He panted and gasped for air.

His face gray, he murmured, "Reach into my left-hand coat pocket." Thinking he wanted his bottle of heart pills, I did. But instead I pulled out a six-inch-thick wad of currency, secured by a rubber band. "Couple of thousand there," he said weakly. "Don't let it out of sight."

At the nearest motel, where I hired a single room with two twin beds, he collapsed on the bed in his coat and hat and slept. After finding myself some breakfast, I turned in.

Hours later I heard him stirring. "What's this place?" he muttered.

I told him the name of the motel—Travelodge.

"Where's the bankroll?"

"In your coat. You're wearing it."

Then he was quiet.

After a night's sleep, Cobb felt well enough to resume his gambling. In the next few days, he won more than three thousand dollars at the tables, and then we went sightseeing in historic Virginia City. There, as in all places, he stopped traffic. And had the usual altercation. This one was at the Bucket of Blood, where Cobb accused the bartender of serving watered scotch. The bartender denied it. Crash! Another drink went flying.

Back at the lodge a week later, looking like the wrath of John Barleycorn and having refused medical aid in Reno, he began to suffer new and excruciating pains in his hips and lower back. But between groans he forced himself to work an hour a day on his autobiography. He told inside baseball stories, never published:

“Frank Navin, who owned the Detroit club for years, faked his turnstile count to cheat the visiting team and Uncle Sam. So did Big Bill Devery and Frank Farrell, who owned the New York Highlanders—later called the Yankces.

“Walter Johnson, ‘the Big Train,’ tried to kill himself when his wife died.

“Grover Cleveland Alexander wasn’t drunk out there on the mound, the way people thought. He was an epileptic. Old Pete would fall down with a seizure between innings, then go back and pitch another shutout.

“John McGraw hated me because I tweaked his nose in broad daylight in the lobby of the Oriental Hotel, in Dallas, after earlier beating the hell out of his second baseman, Buck Herzog, upstairs in my room.”

But before we were well started, Cobb suddenly announced we’d go riding in his twenty-three-foot Chris-Craft speedboat, tied up in a boathouse below the lodge. When I went down to warm it up, I found the boat on the bottom of Lake Tahoe, sunk in fifteen feet of water.

My host broke all records for blowing his stack when he heard the news. He saw in this a sinister plot: “I told you I’ve got enemies all around here! It’s sabotage as sure as I’m alive!”

A sheriff’s investigation turned up no clues. Cobb sat up for three nights with his Luger. “I’ll salivate the first dirty skunk who steps foot around here after dark.”

(Parenthetically, Cobb had a vocabulary all his own. To “salivate” something meant to destroy it. Anything easy was “softy boiled,” to outsmart someone was to “slip him the oskafagus,” and all doctors were “truss-fixers.” People who displeased him—and this included a high percentage of those he met—were “fee-simple sons of bitches,” “mugwumps,” “lead-heads,” or, if female, “lousy slits.”)

Lake Tahoe friends of Cobb’s had stopped visiting him long before, but one morning an attractive blonde of about fifty came calling. She was an old chum—in a romantic way, I was given to understand, in bygone years—but Ty greeted her coldly. “Lost my sexual powers when I was sixty-nine,” he said when she was out of the room. “What the hell use to me is a woman?”

The lady had brought along a three-section electric vibrator bed, which she claimed would relieve Ty’s back pains. We helped him mount it. He took a twenty-minute treatment. Attempting to dismount, he lost his balance and fell backward. The contraption jackknifed and Cobb was pinned, yelling and swearing, under a pile of machinery.

After we freed him and helped him to a chair, he told the lady—in the choicest gutter language—where she could put the bed. She left, sobbing.

“That’s no way to talk to an old friend, Ty,” I said. “She was trying to do you a favor.”

“And you’re a hell of a poor guest around here, too!” he thundered. “You can leave any old time!” He quickly grabbed a bottle and heaved it in my direction.

“Thought you could throw straighter than that!” I yelled back. Fed up with him, I started to pack my bags.

Before I’d finished, Cobb broke out a bottle of vintage malt scotch, said I was “damned sensitive,” half-apologized, and the matter was forgotten—for now.

While working one morning on an outside observation deck, I heard a thud inside. On his bedroom floor, sprawled on his back, lay the Georgia Peach. He was unconscious, his eyes rolled back, breathing shallowly. I thought he was dying.

There was no telephone. “Eavesdroppers on the line,” Cobb had told me; “I had it cut off.” I ran down the road to a neighboring home and phoned a Carson City doctor, who promised to come immediately.

Back at the lodge, Ty remained stiff and stark on the floor, little bubbles escaping his lips. His face was bluish white. With much straining, I lifted him halfway to the bed, and by shifting holds finally rolled him onto it and covered him with a blanket. Twenty minutes passed. No doctor.

Ten minutes later, I was at the front door, watching for the doctor’s car, when I heard a sound. There stood Ty, swaying on his fee. “You want to do some work on the book?” he said.

His recovery didn’t seem possible. “But you were out cold a minute ago,” I said.

“Just a dizzy spell. Have ’em all the time. Must have hit my head on the bedpost when I fell.”

The doctor, arriving, found Cobb’s blood pressure standing at a grim 210/90 on the gauge. His temperature was 101 degrees and, from gross neglect of his diabetes, he was in a state of insulin shock, often fatal if not quickly treated. “I’ll have to hospitalize you, Mr. Cobb,” said the doctor.

Weaving his way to a chair, Cobb coldly waved him away. “Just send me your bill,” he grunted. “I’m going home.”

“Home” was the multimillionaire’s main residence at Atherton, California, on the San Francisco Peninsula, 250 miles away, and it was there he headed later that night.

With some hot soup and insulin in him, Cobb had recovered with the same unbelievable speed he's shown in baseball. In his heyday, trainers often sewed up deep spike cuts in his knees, shins, and thighs, on a clubhouse bench, without anesthetic, and he didn't lose an inning. Famed sportswriter Grantland Rice, one 1920 day in New York, sat beside a bedridden, feverish Cobb, whose thighs, from sliding, were a mass of raw flesh. Rice urged him not to play. Sixteen hours later, Cobb beat the Yankees with five hits in six times at bat, plus two steals.

On the ride to Atherton, he yelled insults at several motorists who moved too slowly to suit him. Reaching home, Ty said he felt ready for another drink.

My latest surprise was Cobb's eleven-room, two-story, richly landscaped Spanish-California villa at 48 Spencer Lane, an exclusive neighborhood. You could have held a ball game on the grounds. But the rich mansion had no lights, no heat, no hot water. It was in blackout.

"I'm suing the Pacific Gas and Electric Company," he explained, "for overcharging me on the service. Those rinky-dinks tacked an extra sixteen dollars on my bill. Bunch of crooks. When I wouldn't pay, they cut off my utilities. Okay—I'll see them in court."

For months previously, Ty Cobb had lived in an all but totally dark house. The only illumination was candlelight. The only cooking facility was a portable Coleman camper's stove. Bathing was impossible, unless you could take it cold. The electric stove, refrigerator, deep freeze, radio, and television, of course, didn't work. Cobb had vowed to "hold the fort" until his case against PG&E was settled. Simultaneously, he had filed a sixty-thousand-dollar suit in San Francisco Superior Court against the State of California to recover state income taxes already collected—on the argument that he wasn't a permanent resident of California, but of Nevada, Georgia, Arizona, and other waypoints. State's attorneys claimed he spent at least six months per year in Atherton, and thus had no case. "I'm gone so much from here," Cobb claimed, "that I'll win hands down." All legal opinion, I later learned, held just the opposite view, but Cobb ignored the lawyers' advice.

Next morning, I arranged with Ty's gardener, Hank, to turn on the lawn sprinklers. In the outdoor sunshine, a cold-water shower was easier to take. From then on, the backyard became my regular washroom.

The problem of lighting a desk, enabling us to work on the book, was solved by stringing two hundred feet of cord, plugged into an outlet of a neighboring house, through hedges and flower gardens and into the window of Cobb's study, where a single naked bulb hung over the chandelier provided

illumination. The flickering shadows cast by the single light made the vast old house seem haunted. No "ghost" writer ever had more ironical surroundings.

At various points around the premises, Ty showed me where he'd once installed high-voltage wires to stop trespassers. "Curiosity seekers?" I asked. "Hell, no," he said. "Detectives broke in here looking for evidence against me in a divorce suit. After a couple of them got burned, they stopped coming."

To reach our bedrooms, my host and I groped our way down long, black corridors. Twice he fell in the dark, and finally he collapsed completely. He was so ill that he was forced to check in to Stanford Hospital in nearby Palo Alto. Here another shock was in store.

One of the physicians treating Ty, a Dr. E. R. Brown, said, "Do you mean to say that this man has traveled seven hundred miles in the last month without medical care?"

"Doctor," I said, "I've hauled him in and out of saloons, motels, gambling joints, steambaths, and snowbanks. There's no holding him."

"It's a miracle he's alive. He has most of the major ailments I know about."

Dr. Brown didn't reveal Ty's main ailment to me. Cobb himself broke the news one night from his hospital bed. "It's cancer," he said bluntly. "About a year ago I had most of my prostate gland removed when they found it was malignant. Now it's spread up into the back bones. These pill-peddlers here won't admit it, but I haven't got a chance." Cobb made me swear I'd never divulge his secret before he died. "If it gets in the papers, the sob sisters will have a field day. I don't want sympathy from anybody."

At Stanford, where he absorbed seven massive doses of cobalt radiation, the ultimate cancer treatment, he didn't act like a man on his last legs. Even before his strength returned, he was in the usual form. "They won't let me have a drink" he said indignantly. "I want you to get me a bottle of sixteen-year-old. Smuggle it in your tape-recorder case."

I tried, telling myself that no man with terminal cancer deserves to be dried out, but sharp-eyed nurses and orderlies were watching. They searched Ty's closet, found the bottle, and over his hollers of protest appropriated it.

"We'll have to slip them the oskafagus," said Ty.

Thereafter, a drink of scotch and water sat in plain view in his room, on his bedside table, under the very noses of his physicians—and nobody suspected a thing. The whiskey was in an ordinary water glass, and in the liquid reposed Ty's false teeth. Nobody thought to frisk the dental fluid.

There were no dull moments while Cobb was at Stanford, one of the largest and highest-rated medical centers in the United States. He was critical

of everything. He told one specialist that he was not even qualified to be an intern, and advised the hospital dietitian—loudly—that she and the kitchen workers were in a conspiracy to poison him with their “foul” dishes. To a nurse he snapped, “If Florence Nightingale knew about you, she’d spin in her grave.”

Between blasts he did manage to buckle down to work on the book, dictating long into the night into a microphone suspended over his bed. Slowly the stormy details of his professional life came out. He spoke often of having “forgiven” his many baseball enemies, and then lashed out at them with such passionate phrases that it was clear he’d done no such thing. High on his hate list were John McGraw of the Giants; New York sportswriters; Hub Leonard, a pitcher who in 1926 accused Cobb and Tris Speaker of fixing a Detroit–Cleveland game, which led to Cobb’s retirement as Tiger manager; American League president Ban Johnson; one-time Detroit owner Frank Navin; former baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis; and all those who intimated that Cobb ever used his spikes on another player without having been attacked first.

After a night when he slipped out of the hospital, against all orders, and drove with me to a San Francisco Giants–Cincinnati Reds game at Candlestick Park, thirty miles away, Stanford Hospital decided it couldn’t keep Tyrus R. Cobb, and he was discharged. For his extensive treatment, his bill ran to more than twelve hundred dollars.

“That’s a nice racket you boys have here,” he told the discharging doctors. “You clip the customers, charge them for the use of everything from bedpans to the steam heat.”

“Good-bye, Mr. Cobb,” snapped the medical men.

Soon after this Ty caught a plane to Georgia and I went along. “I want to see some of the old places again before I die,” he declared.

It now was Christmas Eve of 1960 and I’d been with him for a lot of months and completed only four chapters. The project had begun to look hopeless. In Royston, his birthplace, a town of twenty-five hundred, Cobb wanted to head for the local cemetery. I drove him there and helped him climb a windswept hill through the growing dusk. Light snow fell. Faintly, Yule chimes could be heard.

Amongst the many headstones, Ty looked for the plot he’d reserved for himself while in California; he couldn’t find it. His temper began to boil: “Dammit, I ordered the biggest mausoleum in the graveyard! I know it’s around here somewhere.” On the next hill, we found it: a large marble walk-in-size structure with COBB engraved over the entrance.

“You want to pray with me?” he said gruffly. We knelt and tears came to his eyes.

Within the tomb, he pointed to crypts occupied by the bodies of his father, Professor William Herschel Cobb, his mother, Amanda Chitwood Cobb, and his sister, Florence, whom he'd had disinterred and placed there. "My father," he said reverently, "was the greatest man I ever knew. He was a scholar, state senator, editor, and philosopher—a saintly man. I worshiped him. So did all the people around here. He was the only man who ever made me do his bidding."

Rising painfully, Ty braced himself against the marble crypt that soon would hold his body. There was an eerie silence in the tomb. He said deliberately, "My father had his head blown off with a shotgun when I was eighteen years old—*by a member of my own family*. I didn't get over that. I've never gotten over it."

We went back down the hill to the car. I asked no questions that day. Later, from family sources and old Georgian friends of the diamond idol, I learned details of the killing. News of it reached Ty in Augusta, where he was playing minor-league ball, on August 9, 1905. A few days later he was told that he'd been purchased by the Detroit Tigers and was to report immediately. "In my grief," Cobb later said, "going up didn't matter much . . . it felt like the end of me."

Came March of 1961 and I remained stuck to the Georgia Peach like court plaster. He'd decided we were born pals, meant for each other, that we'd complete a baseball book that would beat everything ever published. He had astonished doctors by rallying from the spreading cancer, and between bouts of transmitting his life and times to a tape recorder, he was raising more whoopee than he had at Lake Tahoe and Reno.

Spring-training time for the big leagues had arrived, and we were ensconced in a deluxe suite at the Ramada Inn at Scottsdale, Arizona, close by the practice parks of the Red Sox, Indians, Giants, and Cubs. Here, each year, Cobb held court. He didn't go to see anybody. Ford Frick, Joe Cronin, Ted Williams, and other diamond notables came to him. While explaining to sportswriters why modern stars couldn't compare to the Wagners, Lajoies, Speakers, Jacksons, Johnsons, Mathewsons, and Planks of his day, Ty did other things.

For one, he commissioned a well-known Arizona artist to paint him in oils. He was emaciated, having dropped from 208 pounds to 176. The preliminary sketches showed up his sagging cheeks and thin neck. "I wouldn't let you kalsomine my toilet," ripped out Ty as he fired the artist.

But he was anything but eccentric when analyzing the Dow-Jones averages and playing the stock market. Twice a week he phoned experts around

the country, determined good buys, and bought in blocks of five hundred to fifteen hundred shares. He made money consistently, even when bedridden, with a mind that read behind the fluctuations of a dozen different issues. "The State of Georgia," Ty remarked, "will realize about one million dollars from inheritance taxes when I'm dead. But there isn't a man alive who knows what I'm worth." According to the *Sporting News*, there was evidence upon Cobb's death that his worth approximated \$12 million. Whatever the true figure, he did not confide the precise amount to me—or, most probably, to anyone except the attorneys who drafted his last will and testament. And Cobb fought off making his will until the last moment.

His fortune began accumulating in 1909, when he bought cotton futures and United (later General) Motors stock and did well in copper-mining investments. As of 1961 he was also "Mr. Coca-Cola," holding more than twenty thousand shares of that stock, valued at eighty-five dollars per share. Wherever he traveled, he carried with him, stuffed into an old brown leather bag, more than \$1 million in stock certificates and negotiable government bonds. The bag was never locked up. Cobb assumed nobody would dare rob him. He tossed the bag into any handy corner of a room, inviting theft. Finally, in Scottsdale, it turned up missing.

Playing Sherlock, he narrowed the suspects to a room maid and a man he'd hired to cook meals. When questioned, the maid broke into tears and the cook quit—fired, said Cobb. Hours later, I discovered the bag under a pile of dirty laundry.

Major-league owners and league officials hated to see Cobb coming, for he thought their product was putrid and said so, incessantly. "Today they hit for ridiculous averages, can't bunt, can't steal, can't hit-and-run, can't place-hit to the opposite field, and you can't call them ballplayers." He told sportswriters, "I blame Ford Frick, Joe Cronin, Bill Harridge, Horace Stoncham, Dan Topping, and others for trading in crazy style and wrecking baseball's traditional league lines. These days, any tax-dodging mugwump with a bankroll can buy a franchise, field some semipro, and get away with it. Where's our integrity? Where's *baseball*?"

No one could quiet Cobb. Who else had a record lifetime batting average of .367, made 4,191 hits, scored 2,244 runs, won 12 batting titles, stole 892 bases, repeatedly beat whole teams by his own efforts alone? Who was first into the Hall of Fame? Not Babe Ruth—but Cobb, by a landslide vote. And whose records still mostly stood, more than thirty years later? Say it again—*thirty years*.

By early April, he could barely make it up the ramp of the Scottsdale stadium, even with my help. He had to stop, gulping for breath, because of his

failing ticker. But he kept coming to games, loving the indelible sounds of a ballpark. His courage was tremendous. "Always be ready to catch me if I start to fall," he said. "I'd hate to go down in front of the fans."

People of all ages were overcome with emotion upon meeting him; no sports celebrity I've known produced such an effect upon the public. At a 1959 stop in Las Vegas, Clark Gable himself had stood in a line to shake the gnarly Cobb hand.

We went to buy a cane. At a surgical supply house, Cobb inspected a dozen twenty-five-dollar malacca sticks, then bought the cheapest white-ash cane they had—four dollars. "I'm a plain man," he informed the clerk, the ten-thousand-dollar diamond ring on his finger glittering.

But pride kept the old tiger from ever using the cane, any more than he'd wear the six-hundred-dollar hearing aid built into the bow of his glasses other than away from the crowd.

One day a Mexican taxi driver aggravated Cobb with his driving. Throwing the fare on the ground, Cobb waited until the cabbie had bent to retrieve it, then tried to punt him like a football.

"What's your sideline," he inquired, "selling opium?"

It was all I could do to keep the driver from swinging at him. Later, a lawyer called on Cobb, threatening a damage suit. "Get in line, there's five hundred ahead of you," said Tyrus, waving him away.

Every day was a new adventure. He was fighting back against the pain that engulfed him—cobalt treatments no longer helped—and anywhere we went I could count on trouble. He threw a salt shaker at a Phoenix waiter, narrowly missing. One of his most treasured friendships—with Ted Williams, peerless batsman of the 1930s to 1950s—came to an end.

From the early 1940s, Williams had sat at Ty Cobb's feet. They met often, and exchanged long letters on the science of batting. At Scottsdale one day, Williams dropped by Ty's rooms. He hugged Ty, fondly ruffled his hair, and accepted a drink. Presently the two men fell into an argument over which players should make up the all-time, all-star team. Williams declared, "I want DiMaggio and Hornsby over anybody you can mention."

Cobb's face grew dark. "Don't give me that! Hornsby couldn't go back for a pop fly and he lacked smartness. DiMaggio couldn't hit with Tris Speaker or Joe Jackson."

"The hell you say!" came back Williams jauntily. "Hornsby out-hit *you* a couple of years."

Almost leaping from his chair, Cobb shook a fist. He'd been given the insult supreme—for Cobb always resented, and finally hated, Rogers Hornsby.

Not until Cobb was in his sixteenth season did the ten-years-younger Hornsby top him in the batting averages. "Get—away from me!" choked Cobb. "Don't come back!"

Williams left with a quizzical expression, not sure how much Cobb meant it. The old man meant it all the way. He never invited Williams back, or talked to him, or spoke his name again. "I cross him off," he told me.

We left Arizona shortly thereafter for my home in Santa Barbara, California. Now failing fast, Ty had accepted an invitation to be my guest. Two doctors inspected him at the beach house by the Pacific and gave their opinions: he had a few months of life left, no more. The cancer had invaded the tissue and bones of his skull. His pain was unrelenting—requiring steady sedation—yet with teeth bared, sweat streaking his face, he fought off medical science. "They'll never get me on their f—hypnotics," he swore. "I'll never die an addict . . . an idiot . . ."

He shouted, "Where's anybody who cares about me? Where are they? The world's lousy . . . no good."

One night later, on May 1, the Georgian sat propped up in bed, overlooking a starlit ocean. He had a habit, each night, of rolling up his trousers and placing them under his pillow—an early-century ballplayer's trick, dating from the time when Ty slept in strange places and might be robbed. I knew that his ever-present Luger was tucked into that pants roll.

I'd never seen him so sunk in despair. At last the fire was going out. "Do we die a little at a time, or all at once?" he wondered aloud. "I think Max had the right idea."

The reference was to his one-time friend, multimillionaire Max Fleischmann, who'd cheated lingering death by cancer some years earlier by putting a bullet through his brain. Ty spoke of Babe Ruth and Rogers Hornsby, other carcinoma victims. "If Babe had been told what he had in time, he could've got it over with."

Cobb was well read in poetry. One night he quoted a passage he'd always liked by Don Marquis: "There I stood at the gate of God, drunk but unafraid."

Had I left Ty alone that night, I believe he would have pulled the trigger. His three living children—two sons were dead—had withdrawn from him. In the wide world that had sung his fame, he had not one intimate friend remaining.

But we talked, and prayed, until dawn, and slight sleep came. In the morning, aided by friends, we put him into a car and drove him home, to the big, gloomy house up north in Atherton. Ty spoke only twice during the six-hour drive.

"Have you got enough to finish the book?" he asked.

"More than enough."

"Give 'em the word then. I had to fight all my life to survive. They all were against me . . . tried every dirty trick to cut me down. But I beat the bastards and left them in the ditch. Make sure the book says that . . ."

I was leaving him now, permanently, and had to ask one question I'd never put to him before.

"Why did you fight so hard in baseball, Ty?"

He'd never looked fiercer than then, when he answered. "I did it for my father, who was an exalted man. They killed him when he was still young. They blew his head off the same week I became a major-leaguer. He never got to see me play. Not one game, not an inning. But I knew he was watching me . . . and I never let him down. *Never.*"

You can make what you want of that. Keep in mind that Casey Stengel said, later: "I never saw anyone like Cobb. No one even close to him as the greatest ballplayer. Ruth was sensational. Cobb went beyond that. When he wiggled those wild eyes at a pitcher, you knew you were looking at the one bird no one could beat. It was like he was superhuman."

To me it seems that the violent death of a dominating father whom a sensitive, highly talented boy loved and feared deeply, engendered, through some strangely supreme desire to vindicate that "saintly" father, the most violent, successful, thoroughly maladjusted personality ever to pass across American sports. The shock ticked the eighteen-year-old's mind, making him capable of incredible feats.

Off the field and on, he remained at war with the world. To reinforce the pattern, he was viciously hazed by Detroit Tiger veterans when he was a rookie. He was bullied, ostracized, and beaten up—in one instance, a 210-pound catcher named Charlie Schmidt broke the 165-pound Ty Cobb's nose and closed both of his eyes. It was persecution, immediately heaped upon one of the deepest desolations a young man can experience.

There can be no doubt about it: Ty Cobb was a badly disturbed personality. It is not hard to understand why he spent his entire adult life in deep conflict. Nor why a member of his family, in the winter of 1960, told me, "I've spent a lot of time terrified of him . . . and I think he was psychotic from the time he left Georgia to play in the big league."

I believe that he was far more than the fiercest of all competitors. He was a vindicator, a man who believed that "father was watching" and who could not put that father's terrible death out of his mind. The memory of it menaced his sanity.

The fact that he recognized and feared mental illness is revealed in a tape recording he made, in which he describes his own view of himself: "I was like a steel spring with a growing and dangerous flaw in it. If it is wound too tight or has the slightest weak point, the spring will fly apart and then it is done for . . ."

The last time I saw him, he was sitting in his armchair in the Atherton mansion. The place was still without lights or heat. I shook his hand in farewell—a degree of closeness had developed between us, if short of friendship—and he held it a moment longer.

"What about it? Do you think they'll remember me?" He tried to say it as if it weren't important.

"They'll always remember you," I replied.

On July 8, I received in the mail a photograph of Ty's mausoleum on the hillside in the Royston cemetery with the words scribbled on the back: "Any time now." Nine days later, at age seventy-four, he died in an Atlanta hospital. Before going, he opened the brown bag, piled \$1 million in negotiable securities beside his bed, and placed the Luger atop them.

From all of major-league baseball, three men, and three men only, attended his funeral.

So ended the battle. "He was the greatest and most amazing ballplayer I ever saw," attested Hall of Famer George Sisler, himself a candidate for best-ever honors. "There will never be another like him, he was a genius," said baseball sage Connie Mack in his old age. To Babe Ruth he was "the hardest to beat SOB of them all." So ended the struggle of the most feared, castigated, and acclaimed figure ever to plant his spikes in a batter's box. It was final innings on a personal tragedy. Ty Cobb had himself entombed in a chamber directly across from that of his father, Professor William Herschel Cobb, in dusty little Roystontown where it had all begun.