

The First Baseman

by Roland Foster

The old man leaned to his right and spat a stream of tobacco juice that just cleared the edge of the porch. He settled back in the rocker, which rocked gently to a halt again. "Yep," he went on, "Pa wanted me to be a farmer, and Ma had her heart set on me bein' a doctor, or at least a lawyer or banker or sump'n. But I outsmarted 'em both. Went and got me a baseball scholarship, all on my own. Went off to college in Louisville fer three years, then quit school and signed with Cincinnati. I was gonna make it big in the big leagues — I didn't need no dadburn college education.

"I started playin' minor league ball, of course. I went with Akron for two years, then a few teams down Carolina way — Kinston Eagles and Winston-Salem, then Myrtle Beach for a coupla years — I could give you chapter and verse, if you cared to listen. I remember every team and every town I ever played for, and the games I played and the ones I missed. Twenty-two years a minor league first baseman. Never made it to the majors, not even on a trial basis. I guess one of the teams would have just cut me loose, eventually, but I got to be a player-coach after while, then a player-manager, so I was sort of the boss, and I just kept playin' first base.

"After I finally quit playin', I managed for another eighteen years. How 'bout that, a forty-year baseball career. Ain't that sump'n?" He leaned over to spit again. Rock, rock, then still. "Nosir, I never missed bein' a doctor, and I shore'n hell didn't miss bein' no dirt farmer. Baseball suited me just fine."

He took the cud of tobacco from his mouth and tossed it into the bushes beside the porch. "It's been nice talkin' to you, but I gotta go in, take care of a few necessaries before supper." He got up creakily from the rocking chair. "Y'all come back sometime, we'll talk some more. Always glad to have a visitor."

The old man had a strange nobility as he limped slowly into the house, one shoulder three inches higher than the other, one leg two inches shorter than the other, just as they had been for the last thirty-eight years of his baseball career, since the auto accident that reshaped his body. A fact, apparently, that was not worth mentioning in the story of his life.