Charlie Faust: Grace's Version

by James Como (July 2017)

NOTE. This dramatic monologue is about what Grace claims: the dangerous intersection of passions, in this case passions for baseball, religion, and story-telling. If one is at that crossroad, as Grace seems to be, can lunacy be far behind? Of course much religious passion is displaced, dragging zealots down into deep water where dwell all sorts of monsters. Now, none of this is intended to suggest that baseball is anything but the healthiest passion in the land, or that Charlie's story or Grace's telling are false . . .

Thank you for visiting, young lady, and what a lovely dress. Yellow, to go with the noonday sun breaking off the palisades across the Hudson.

Yes. Please do pour. One sugar for me. No, no milk. I’m not a Brit, dear.

Lovely. Now, so we understand each other. I know you are here to do me good, as some sort of . . . therapist?

Ah. Social worker. I see.

And by no means would I demean your intention. Good conversation always helps.

This will not be that. If you really want to do me good you’ll have to listen. I have a story, you see. A true story that you can check in books. You give me your attention, I’ll give back something interesting, instructive, *dulce* et *utile*, as those old-timers used to say. And you will have done considerable good: more than you can know right now.

You know, a story worth telling is worth telling four times, just like the Gospels.

Oh no. No. I have arranged the accounts into a whole. Of course, someone else might have arranged them differently. But I do not contradict the truth.

Any life, to paraphrase Keats, is an allegory the keys to which we cannot know any more than most of us can make out the

Hebrew Bible.

I have done evil, but this isn’t a confession, so don’t you worry. That would require a priest. I no longer have any truck with priests.

Now don’t you touch those! I’ve been saving them up for a rainy day, or a sunny one. Fourteen days of medication. I like the colors.

Now, this is a baseball story, young lady. Do you hear? Baseball. Nothing else. So if you want to stop listening, now’s the time. Others have tried to tell this story, and I have tried to tell other stories but they’ve never been much good. Now I’m very old and really and truly at my wit’s end. My wit’s very end. This is my last try.

Moreover, it’s about time I arrive at some view of this man, my hero, Charlie Faust.

Make much of that portentous name. Faust is real. And know this: there are no accidents. So what follows is the one true story. With a stroke or two for color.

All stories are bargains. Do we have one?

No, no meds right now. I’ll let you know, dearie. Let’s not

dull the voice, so to speak.

Very well. Deal. Sometimes I enjoy playing to type, but I’m not really an old grouch.

Now, I suggest you listen very closely—Penelope, is it? Perfect! The perfect name for our business—listen very patiently, Penelope, because I do believe this is my last story. No one ever understands it, so why keep bothering, right? I do so hope you are the exception.

That’s right. Get comfy.

Charles Victor—later called “Victory”—Faust was born in Marion, Kansas, on October 9, 1880, the eldest of six children.

That part of our country is part of the Great Plains, where cowboys, the Bible, and baseball met. Don’t forget that. A sort of dynamic, oh, insanity was inbred. A freshness.

Now, the first—that Old West nonsense—would be overtaken (and sooner than anybody could know) by railroads, telephones, automobiles and a growing population that would turn the “frontier” into “pastoral America,” for those of you who need your labels.

The Bible has not been overtaken, of course, though here and there it wanes, only to wax again, a vexation to some.

And baseball—it was already forty-some years old; most folks don't know that—well, anybody with half a mind could have guessed that it would continue to grow like a prairie fire, across the country and through men's souls.

Now, here's my point. Where Charlie grew up the combination of Bible and baseball was keen.

You could call this a religious story, but you don't have to. Or a "psychological drama," if you like. Or history. Me? I call it a cautionary tale.

You see, back then and there a boy went from plowing to the revival tent, where he would see demons exorcised! And Charlie, he testified too. Boy, could he testify. He was articulate, he was theatrical, he was a born performer and he knew it!

Why, when Charlie had set the scene of the Crucifixion, and taken the part of the Good Thief on the Cross, crying for his Lord and dying happy with the words of his Savior resounding in his ears—"today you shall be with me in Paradise"—when Charlie finally died happy, the crowd would roar and moan and cry. And Charlie meant it. And Charlie loved it. Why, he was a vessel, yes, a vessel for a Cause.

Now, here—just here—comes the first touch of madness. For Charlie a ball field and the tent were big-time. Eternal souls were at stake, though differently, of course, in both.

After testifying he would race to the town pasture, where what he did brought good cheer instead of damnation: backslapping acceptance amidst the thrill and the settled satisfaction of physical achievement.

You see? Two sides of the same single coin.

Nobody took meds back then. Nobody needed them. Baseball. Tent. Body. Soul.

Because Charlie was deeply marked by the tent, always accepting and usually frightened, he naturally fell in love with the open field, which offered innocence and escape, peace and self-esteem; in short, surcease from dread and doubt.

The other side of that coin.

He was tall and lanky, attentive and serious, usually happy, but somewhat . . . dim. He never fully lost his father’s German accent and from his early teens he commonly flashed his trademark semi-toothless grin. He stood out all right.

Oh, he was capable of strong concentration (especially in the

clutch) and, ironically you would think, when on the despised showboating of any kind. He thrilled to the release afforded by the frequent, though irregular, irruptions of excitement, and of the challenges, that are common—one might say peculiar—to baseball and to the tent.

It was because he was fundamentally good—really innocent—and bigger and stronger than the other boys (until his early twenties he would often be compared to President Lincoln!)—it was because of these traits that he was the one who organized games and made sides. In this he was scrupulously fair, often pitching for both teams so as to even things out.

He had a pretty fair country curveball.

Though he was certainly not a ladies' man, away from the revival tent and the ball field he was dandyish. He saw dressing well as a responsibility, given his celebrity and all.

So you see, he *was* a character.

At one time was very fond of one girl, an orphan who had been sent by a home from Wichita. But she was so shy that no one could ever remember even who she was.

Charlie's idol was he great Iron Man McGinnity. When the man went from Baltimore to pitch for the Giants he began to follow the New York Nine in earnest, and their manager, the great and

notorious John McGraw, and then a new star pitcher, a man his very own age named Christy Mathewson. Rooting could not get better than this.

It was a match for the Gospel itself!

At first the Giants seemed simply like a better version of other big league teams. Finally, in 1905, they didn’t seem like other big league teams at all but figures from the Bible, like conquering Israelites who triumphed in the Holy Cause.

This was especially so to Charlie when Christy dominated Philadelphia in the World Series and permanently eclipsed the Iron Man himself.

To celebrate Charlie took Helena, his girl, at her suggestion, to Wichita, which at fifty miles is no small distance from Marion, to see, of all things, a traveling carnival—something he would not ordinarily have done, since carnivals seemed to mock the tent, and religion was the other thing—besides baseball, of course—that he would not mock.

Here we have what is called a foreshadowing, Penelope, so forget those meds, will you? and pay attention.

Charlie did have himself some fun, especially when he won a Kewpie doll by knocking over a few milk cans with a baseball, in one instance even using his real slow curveball.

Then, at the urging of Helena, Charlie did something else that should have been unthinkable. Here is the first real complication, where the plot thickens, so to speak. These will proliferate. You just have to believe it, you have to, especially since its true.

This is most upsetting to tell. Most upsetting. I said no pills! Soon maybe. We'll see.

He visited Madame Fantasia, a fortune-teller who, when not selling fortunes, was reputed to sell the flesh of very young girls to itinerant salesmen.

Of course Fantasia, whose real name was Borecka Faustina Kowalska, was no procurer and no fortune-teller. She was earning her way by doing an act she had seen as a very small child back in Minsk. She and Helena, actually Helena Kowalska, were cousins. The two of them, both orphans, had come to America together from White Russia when it was still mainly Polish.

That Faustina (as friends and acquaintances called her) would have a glorious destiny all her own, but this is not her story.

Anyway, when she heard Charlie's name she spun out the old Faust-selling-his-soul-to-the-devil legend. All Europe knew the tale. You've heard it a hundred different ways, but not

Charlie!

Stories are dangerous things. Just look at those so-called Gospels.

Dr. Faustus wants all knowledge and beauty, so when the demon Mephistopheles appears to him at the Doctor’s beckoning, they strike a bargain. Faustus gets knowledge and Helen of Troy. The devil gets Faustus’s soul. In one form or another it’s been told for millennia, all over the world.

That’s right. Here we go again. Still, you have to wonder, Is there any truth to it?

Helena had already told Faustina of Charlie’s ball playing and rooting interest and any man’s plans for a family, so all she did was what any capable fortune-teller does; she tied them all together.

This was not her better self. No it wasn’t. She did know better.

In return for his immortal soul, Fantasia promised that his Giants would win the pennant, and more than one. Okay.

You would expect that. But *how*?

Because Charlie would pitch for them, that's how, *and* lead them, finally even to "ultimate triumphs"! Of course that would mean World Series victories.

"Hokey?" Oh, it's much more than that. And it gets worse.

I'm in the middle of a story here, and medicine can throw a story off. By the way, call medicine *medicine*, will you pease? Not *meds*. No. Leave them. Just leave them! I will need them. I've been saving them up.

None of your business.

So don't you touch, dear. You are here to work *socially*, as your profession instructs, not to dictate, as many of your ilk are wont to do. Goodness, you Catholics are all the same.

Of course I can tell. It's written all over you.

Fantasia really layed it on thick that night. Charlie would have progeny that would continue his work, continuing his "labor in the vineyard of righteousness."

"All this in exchange for your soul. Do you accept these terms, Mr. Faust? And do we have a bargain?" Charlie couldn't say a word. With candlelight shining into his face from below and sweat running from his brow, he looked like melting wax.

All he could do was nod. “Very well, then, Mr. Faust. Consider it done.”

But Faustina decided to add a little something, her own unfortunate stroke of color, but a little something would be the one really inexplicable element. She predicted Lulu. Lulu.

All in good time. You see? That’s a hook, a complication. Keeps you guessing.

As far as Charlie was concerned, he had not only heard a Prophecy right there in that tent. He had a hand in it, too.

He was not thinking of the bargain as a curse.

Helena believed that Charlie would view this all as mere good fun. The poor child even thought that the play on the names of her two friends—Faustina and Faust—would be *amusing* to both. She really did think that. How, she reasoned, could a practiced tent performer like Charlie not appreciate someone else’s fine work?

You see, Helena was just as ingenuous as Charlie, and younger. Even when she tried to set the record straight with Charlie about her cousin it did no good, such was the intensity of Charlie’s eager credulity. Mark that phrase. It’s a good one. Much better than that “willing suspension of

disbelief," don't you think?

As far as Charlie was concerned he had lost his soul, then and there, to baseball and to the Giants, and it would be worth it.

Here you have a ramification *of* the complication, which seems like a sudden—a too sudden—reversal of character, until you remember that it's still the same, one coin.

Why thank you. Yes, I do take some trouble with my hair—lots of brushing, and I never let it get too long. Truth be told, I'm a bit vain about its whiteness, too. Somehow it highlights my cheekbones, don't you agree? And I'm vain about my figure. I do struggle to keep my weight down. A woman's line is so important. And it's not only vanity. It's a social responsibility, to be elegant, that is, in a muted way. Taking trouble is a sign of respect, after all, of self-respect and of respect for others. I can see you understand.

Oh, dearie. I promise we'll see about those pills after a while. Better to stop going on about them.

Charlie became much more regular in his ball playing, establishing a set team with his brothers called the Faust Nine, uncharacteristically challenging all comers, and even setting up a schedule.

He went to revival meetings less but spoke up much more when

he did.

Recall that his favorite text had always been Luke 23.39-43, the story of the Good Thief crucified next to Jesus “Today you shall be with me in Paradise,” Jesus had told him. But that changed to Matthew 4.6-11.

Yes. That’s the one. Good for you, Penelope! Satan tempting the newly-baptized Christ in the wilderness. You know he’s everywhere, don’t you? Why, he right here!

The personal terms in which Charlie spoke—his cascade of tears, the veins swelling on his forehead, the tendons bursting from his neck, his use of the first person!—all of this brought forth much justifyin’ and yeas and amens.

He attained celebrity in that region, a good deal beyond just a neighborhood. People began to watch for his appearances, in the tent as well as on the field, often going from the first directly to the second, where he dominated more often than not.

But all along he had the mien of a man who, while waiting patiently, was preparing himself. Sometimes he preached right from the ball field, and the townsfolk became cranky with him. This was a ball field, after all, not the tent.

That’s how much *they* knew.

Of course, Charlie had always been looked upon as a bit strange; if not downright dim, then certainly lacking in some common sense. Now folks started thinking he was more loony than dim.

And they thought that without knowing how frequently *he* wrote to the great McGraw, and with baseball advice and personal counsel about righteous living! Can you imagine? Charlie writing to the greatest baseball manager who ever lived with baseball advice? *And* righteous living—John McGraw?

But the point is moot, because something, some damned thing, stepped in. And here comes the next complication. Like some anti-medicine, Penelope!

It was the next year, in the mid-summer of 1911, nearly six years after Charlie's visit to Madame Fantasia, when he was thirty years old, on a day rippling with heat on that shimmering Sunday when the telegram from McGraw arrived.

That's right! *From* John McGraw!

The message-boy ran up to him in the street, nearly collapsing with breathlessness, and gave the paper to Charlie.

Of course Charlie was dressed in his black Sunday best, and after reading the telegram he ran right then full speed to the

train station and went to meet the Giants in St. Louis!

I kid you not. Right then and right there. An immediate ramification, this one somehow—some-damned-how—connected to the first.

Oh, Penelope. Oh my good Penelope. Is that what Rome has come to? Coincidence?

McGraw had beckoned. The telegraph man and the boy both vouch for that. And Charlie simply never paused, never looked back, and certainly never thought.

An ecstatic moment, don't you think? I'm always elated at this part!

…

Helena disappeared soon after Charlie ran off, within days, as suddenly as she had appeared in the first place, never to be seen or heard from again by anybody in Marion. Another ramification perhaps, connected to the first two?

Who needs *meds* now, eh?

…

Charlie himself always said that he believed *in* the telegram. In his mind, you see, he had no choice. No choice whatsoever. None of that so-called existential freedom for him! It's one of the reasons I fell in love with him.

Once arrived in St. Louis on July 28, a hellishly hot day, he introduced himself to McGraw at the Planters Hotel. Apparently for a lark—a lark!—that runt invited Charlie to the ballpark for a so-called tryout.

Now Charlie, like most fans back then and for a long while thereafter, had never actually seen major league players in action. So when he made his way to the ballpark, still in his own black Sunday best, he was stunned by what he witnessed.

His first great surprise was the Giants uniform. They were black. McGraw's idea. It was a different era. So, you see, Charlie thought he fit right in. He thought the uniforms were a sign, a portent, but don't ask me why, because I don't know why.

The second was the players. Just as they saw, so did these men dart—without thought intervening. What they darted to so did they reach. And what they reached so did they—nearly always—catch.

And when they threw their arms moved quicker, almost, than Charlie's eyes could follow. And, oh Nelly, did they hit, not merely with bats but with every part of their whole bodies! They rocketed the ball.

There was neither groan nor wheeze. Their very limbs seemed to laugh with the joy of mastery. The sheer skill—the precision, the quickness and power, the unthinking, ordained, abundant ease, like a cascading waterfall—these were beyond what he ever envisioned. He knew absolutely that not one in a hundred thousand men, and surely not he, could perform at that level, let alone perform consistently so, for these men were marvels.

Like most ballparks back then, Robison Field was all wood. Steel and concrete were coming in—the Giants' Polo Grounds had opened that year just a month earlier. But there was nothing like those small, wooden parks. No upper decks. Not even dugouts. The players sat on benches right on the field. It seated only 20,000 fans, and every one of them could hear the chatter and smell the leather and taste the dust and—

Can you see it? When Charlie made his entrance the space was small and everyone had a real good look and got involved. What a stage that was. What a stage, Penelope.

Once on the mound Charlie pitched so weakly that McGraw actually discarded his catcher's mitt. Next the dust flew as Charlie flailed at bat, and the crowd roared and stomped the louder as, after finally batting the ball, he slid into every base, still in his black Sunday suit and tearing it to shreds, grinning that semi-toothless smile with every stride.

That's right. He slid into each base.

McGraw did note the riotous approval of the crowd to Charlie’s performance. The runt had gotten the show he had bargained for. Just another sideshow.

Contract? This is 1911! Young people think everything is so much freer now, but you’re wrong. Life was looser then! And baseball was life.

Now, listen. Every day Charlie sat on the bench in his suit, and The Giants lost. Then McGraw gave him a uniform and they won.

And the Giants won again, and all the time Charlie’s pre-game act—for such had it become—was winning the approval of the fans and the friendship and superstitious credulity of the Giants themselves. The vaudeville he did later came easily, and it would be small potatoes.

And now comes the next complication. You’re the one who may need meds for this one, my dear. *Charlie met Lulu*.

Who knows? Who knows! But I’ll tell you this, you dabble with the dark side and you will pay. One way or another. Then no meds in the world would—or could—help.

And of course McGraw did ditch Charlie there in St. Louis. How could he not have done so? The guy couldn’t play.

But Charlie rode the rails to New York under the impression that McGraw had made a *mistake* in not leaving behind a train ticket and a contract. He was getting to like Lulu. Left her cold.

Nobody knows what happened on that train ride. Maybe nothing of particular interest, though some say he killed a man, a very big and violent tramp who was attempting a sexual assault. They say Charlie drove the bridge of the man's nose into his brain with one blow. But it was during that journey to New York that Charlie changed on the inside, becoming even more determined, you might say more intense.

I do believe Charlie could have killed a man. Not deliberately, mind you. But he had great strength. Great strength.

And yes, there's the curse—let's not call it a prophecy anymore, Penelope, because we both know that's a crock—the curse was taking hold.

Lulu? Young lady, may I tell the story my way, please? The right way? We'll get to her, I promise. I well understand the vexations of threads just dangling in a narrative. Meanwhile, you must seize the essence here. You simply must get it now. You must.

There will not be another telling.

You can imagine McGraw’s surprise when he got to the Polo Grounds on August 11 only to find Charlie waiting! This Charlie, however, was not the merry prankster but a driven monomaniac. When McGraw refused to give him a uniform the players found Charlie crying like a baby. They went to McGraw, the Little Napoleon relented, and the Giants won their next six games.

That’s not a ramification but a consequence. Quite different in spite of appearances. The former is purely a matter of narrative form, the second of morality.

The rest is baseball history and most of what happened thereafter we know from newspapers.

For example, we know that Charlie got more haircuts than the entire team put together. When in the hair parlor he would sit with a teammate, chatting, encouraging, puffing up strengths and deflating doubts.

Charlie himself said, “since a man ain’t thinking much about anything when he’s getting shaved, I’d tackle him there and tell him that if this or that happened he would get a hit that day. Lots of times I had to get in a barber chair three or four times in a morning so I could talk to the boys.”

And it always seemed to work. Even Larry Doyle, the second baseman, slugged .527, but he was no slouch to begin with.

…

Talking cure? Do you mean the team or do you mean me, dear, here and now?

Don’t you be coy, Penelope. That’s my play.

Surely you know there was such a so-called cure B.F., Before Freud? Freud was nothing but an intellectual parasite! He invented nothing. But Freud’s narcissism, as well as his superb German style, proved irresistible. Do you have any German, dearie?

Oh, you must pick it up. For Freud. Even though he is far worse than meds. Never forget that!

…

But always the players had taken Charlie very seriously as a mascot, ballplayers being the most superstitious lot of men this side of mackerel-snappers, as you Papists were then rudely called. Once, when the Giants were about to lose a sizable lead, Mathewson—who had a peculiar understanding of Charlie and would speak *and* write well of him in his autobiography—Christie had McGraw summon Charlie from the bullpen to the bench. The Giants rallied at once and held on to win, Mathewson calling it, and this is a quote, “the greatest example of pinch-mascotting” that he had ever seen!

Pinch mascotting. And that from Christie himself. From then on they called Charlie the Kansas Jinx Killer. In any event, the Giants won when Charlie was around and lost when he wasn't, so they kept him around.

And boy did those Giants win! Not just their wins but their winning *streaks*—six, nine, eleven, eight games at a clip! From the time Charlie joined the team until the end of the season the Giants won almost seventy-five per cent of their games, a run that remains one of the most remarkable in history.

And of course they came from behind to win the pennant—their first since 1905. And all the while Charlie-the-sideshow never went away. He was "kidnapped," presumably by the opposition, was made the butt of several practical jokes, entertained crowds before games.

What he did play was the Fool, poor man, and eagerly. That's how he would stick. *That's* what Faust's bargain had done to Charlie. *That's* how far he had fallen. That's how he was losing his soul. He was on his was to a personal Hell, but that doesn't matter to the Prince of Lies. One Hell is as good as any other.

I can tell you Lulu still loved him.

Oh, he tried to wrest a contract from Mr. Brush, the Giants owner, but he failed. And he always prepared as though he would be called in to pitch—what was he thinking?—but he never was.

At least not until the Giants had clinched the pennant.

Then, finally, on October 7, he pitched the last inning against the Braves in Boston. He gave up one run, all the while using that ridiculous windmill windup. He even went to bat after the last out, in the rain, and of course put on a show, sliding around in the mud.

The *New York Herald* made it a headline story. Remember, all the way through, all the way, Charlie remained excellent copy, and he read it all. Those actual big league appearances, along with winning the pennant, must have been the high points of his life.

In 1912 he traveled with the team and, despite McGraw's refusal to let him wear a team uniform—at least until the team photo was taken at the end of the season—in spite of that and the usual absence of a contract, his presence brought another pennant.

That's what he believed. That's what the team believed. That's what I believe. I'll be eager to know what you believe, my dear. You simply must.

Your mind is wandering. Stop looking at those pills! How can you believe if you're distracted?

Now, though, Charlie was scared stiff! Call it a reversal, what the old Greeks called peripeteia. Bam. Just like that. It happens.

So he decided to re-write the deal. He sees it all coming true! And the consequences—what is a bargain but another word for consequences—are coming home to him.

First he dumped Lulu. Didn't I tell you she'd be back? Not only had they never married, they had never even lain together! Charlie couldn't risk having children. Remember? The curse dealt with his progeny, too. Then—

He disappeared during the World Series—no deal, no pitching, no mascotting.

For Giants fans the question vexed, not merely like St. Paul's thorn, but like a dagger in the side. How could the Giants lose and lose and lose, especially given all the winning—

How could the Giants lose? Smokey Joe Wood won thirty-seven games for the Beantowners in 1912, including three in the world series against the Giants! That's how.

No, that's not how. Of course they lost. No Charlie.

During the next season, the summer of 1913, back in Marion, he

once again organized teams, as he had done in his youth, this time the Methodists against the Presbyterians. (There were hardly any Jews and they wouldn't mix with Papists.)

People sort of looked up to him again. After all he really had pitched for the New York Giants.

He became more or less settled and seemed to remain so until the conclusion of the 1913 series. That year Mathewson had the lowest earned run average in the league and had thus lifted the Giants to their third consecutive pennant. In that Series the great Christy gave up only three runs in nineteen innings!

But in the Series the Giants, they lost. Again. AGAIN. Inexplicably. So damned inexplicable!

Did you just tell me to settle down? Settle down or what, young lady? A stroke? I've already told you I'm done, haven't I? Anyway, it's you who must settle *up*. Get with it. There's a story being told here, about good and evil and the intrusion upon us of dark powers and the attractions and dangers of passion and the possibly of redemption too!

I preserve the appearance, because it's in the nature of evil to deceive. Do not be deceived. So I will say again, calmly you will note, and politely—

—do not touch those fucking pills!

Is that why Charlie tried for a “comeback,” as he called it, at the winter meetings of the owners in 1913-14? Why he put himself through that ringer of frustration, ridicule, and despair? Threw spiritual caution to the wind? Because the Giants couldn’t win the World Series?

No. It must have been because, even at thirty-three, he now thought that he was not quite done with his work, as he called it, that he should pay the folks another visit, witnessing for them what he had accomplished—because he had become, not just a Major League pitcher, but, as he said, a vessel of Providence.

You see, Providence is power, he thought, so its source ceased to matter to him.

Or was it stupidity? I know a very great teacher who would always say, “never underestimate the power of sheer stupidity, Lulu.”

Did I? I said Lulu? Hah! I’m Grace, dear, as you know. A slip of the tongue.

No, not a Freudian slip! My, you are sharp, aren’t you. Watch out you don’t cut yourself.

What did Charlie imagine he could do? Did he suppose that,

because the Giants had won the pennant without him, the deal was off?

Do you see? You do? Really? You see how we come to do the Devil's work, how he gives us a taste, and then how we like that taste, and then how we turn it into God's work in our minds?

I'm not so sure you're being completely honest with me, dear. I smell a whiff of the therapeutic in your assent.

Anyway. He makes us insane, changing evil into good. Insane. And it's an insanity with no physical cure. There are none of your meds for insanity of the soul.

It was that final rejection by those moneybag owners that made him so ill.

He wound up in Los Angeles, working at the Vista Del Rio Hotel as a carpenter. Once again he took to witnessing. That's probably where he caught the consumption. By late 1914 he had moved to Seattle. By December he was in a lunatic asylum. Charlie died from pulmonary tuberculosis on June 15, 1915, according to the Official Baseball Encyclopedia.

Really what he died from was Bargain Abortion.

Yes, I made that one up. Not bad, don't you think?

Listen. You make a deal. With the devil. Somehow you change the terms, you cut your losses. Okay. But do you think there is no price?

Consequence.

Well, for Charlie it was his sanity and his dignity—and a small price, too, compared to his immortal soul, which I personally believe was saved. Is saved.

In 1914, at age thirty-three, Christy Mathewson did have a good year (his last good one), but the Giants lost anyway. Didn't even make the series.

Yes, more or less, the end of the baseball story, but it's not quite the end of my story.

Ah, you know there's always more to any story. Like four gospels instead of just one. And even thereafter we have The Book of Acts.

What follows is the last version—but not really a version. More of a coda. You know, an epilogue. After a bunch of ramifications and consequences another—complication! All good stories have them you know. It's how we know we're

sane. It’s just like life and so is a reminder. That’s how a good story reassures us.

As for authenticity, which I know is on your mind. The time has come for you to know this: I heard it from an eyewitness. A woman. You might say, *The Woman*. It was Helena. The woman who disappeared, or so everyone thought.

Oh, you seem skeptical. Don’t you believe me? Well, you believe whatever you want!

Absolutely incredible, like most non-quotidian truth, and it gets even more so.

Why aren’t you pouring, Penelope? I’ll need more tea for this. You too. Trust me.

Helena was beautiful. Very black hair, sculpted cheekbones, and the slightest slant to her large, hazel eyes. She was not temperamental, nor tempestuous. She always, always, put herself last. Always. Helena watched over Charlie. She loved him! She loved him so. Now, you decide what to make of this, a little-noted episode.

On September 17, The Pirates, for a laugh, let Charlie pitch batting practice to them.

When Wagner—that's Honus Wagner, one of the greatest hitters in history and absolutely the greatest shortstop who has ever lived; you study him, girl, and you will know how shortstopping and everything else ought to be done on a ball field—when that Flying Dutchman, as he was called, got into the batting cage, Christy, who everyone knew always had trouble pitching to Wagner, shouted to Charlie.

"Give him your best stuff, yours Victory! Go get him. He's yours if you want him."

Christy was already Charlie's best friend; indeed, the best friend he would ever have, if you exclude Helena. So Charlie stopped, stopped cold, and gazed into the dugout where Christy stood, one foot up on the top step and leaning forward. And Charlie nodded, adjusted himself, and did what he was told.

The windup was much tighter and quicker than usual, not at all funny, the stride very powerful. The right arm, at first held back, cracked forward with the speed of a whip. That was the arm that might have killed a man.

But the ball merely floated. Of course Charlie had gone to his curveball, so Wagner, who was not quite ready, swung early and just missed.

For the second pitch, however, the Dutchman *was* ready.

He fixed his gaze on that spot sixty feet away where the ball

had left Charlie’s hand. But this time Charlie came from a different place, sidearm, with an even slower curve, and Wagner missed by plenty. Then he stepped away from the plate, took up some dirt to rub on his hands, and he stared at Charlie, who stared right back. When Wagner stepped back in he was waiting for the curveball again, and he got it.

This time, though, it came from right over the top, so slow you could’ve counted the stitches, and that ball dropped from his eyes to his shins. And the Dutchman missed again. Three in a row: slow, slower, slowest. And the great Wagner whiffed, swinging early, earlier, and earliest on those three pitches.

Ten men on the field, excluding Wagner, Mathewson, and Charlie, saw it happen. Wagner was stone still and staring, first at Charlie, then at his bat, then at the catcher, then back at Charlie, who did nothing but stare right back at Hans, perfectly relaxed.

They saw Wagner’s slow removal from the cage, saw Christy beckon Charlie silently to leave the mound, and saw those two descend, without a word being uttered until they reached the dugout, where Charlie muttered, as if to himself, “I’m not so loony now.”

It was then the meager crowd of a thousand souls burst into a thunderous ovation.

Now, there’s your climax.

From his first appearance on the field in St. Louis, when Charlie had still been wearing his Sunday best and witnessed the monumental skills of his heroes and tried out for McGraw, even sliding into the bases without having taken off his suit coat—from that day, when he realized he didn't have "the makin's," to his last attempt at the meeting of owners in February of 1914 to get a contract—for all that time Charlie had looked ridiculous.

He was ridiculous.

But on September 17, during that at-bat by Honus Wagner, he was *not* ridiculous, not to The Dutchman. Not to anyone else. That's why I've remained in love.

…

Now, what do you make of that, dear? Eh? What do you make of it?

It could be Satanic. I've thought of that. That ever-lying son of a bitch could have been behind it—another taste, another temptation, something for Charlie to remember when he got the call again, that itch, as we know he did in 1913.

We could see it as a story about false faith, with its mighty, woeful and destructive influences and twisted origins. Or we might ascribe it all to trivial superstition.

Or overripe images of false freshness, like a bunch of rotting grapes, or misplaced metaphors for life. Some folks do still get so very carried away about the poetry of baseball and the like. How it imitates life or vice versa.

Or that Charlie was some kind of egomaniac.

But he was not egotistical! A bit vain, yes. But he simply was not egotistical.

What mattered was the show and its effect, not what he looked like. Once when he was warming up Rube Marquard a pitch got away from Rube and hit Charlie flush in the eye. Charlie went down hard and lay still. But he rose up again.

And then what? Why, then he did his whole act, that’s what!

Was he the classic fool or the classic dealmaker?

But if you think of a that diabolical curse, or prophecy, or bargain, as genuine, as Charlie always did, then . . .

Then by his foolishness had he atoned, been saved?

I do get winded sometimes, Penelope. I apologize for alarming you. There, two sips and I’m myself again. See? And no pills. So far.

It’s all or none.

That telegram came: the real thing from the real John McGraw, who really was answering the letters that Charlie really had written, with Helena’s help.

He actually had pitched in the Majors for the Giants, had helped them win, and had not satisfied any demonic conditions!

Hadn’t Jesus allowed himself to be treated like a fool?

The question of why or how his redemption would or could have anything to do with the fortunes—the ill fortunes—of a baseball team simply didn’t matter to him.

Charlie’s thinking, not mine, is that the connection was part of the prophecy and therefore part of the deal. This last is what Charlie said he knew to be true, right before he died.

I do adhere to a . . . a connection theory . . . it’s the only one that makes sense to me—but for reasons that differ from Charlie’s.

You know, he told Christy everything. Helena said he confessed to Christy and that the great man himself had comforted Charlie.

Christy told Charlie that fifty World Series victories were not worth one human soul; that two pennants were not worth Charlie's happiness here on earth; that baseball was fun, not life—let alone war. And he said that he was very sorry that Charlie had not had those sons.

And there's your denouement. And now here is some *explication de texte*, as they say.

Had not St. Peter betrayed the Lord three times even before the cock had crowed?

Maybe that is why in the end Charlie had become fearless, which looks very much like lunacy, don't you think?

Helena loved him but couldn't forgive him. She prospered without him, and so would have the Giants. She knew he was no Dr. Faustus, and certainly no Christy. Maybe a thief, and a good one, who had robbed her.

That's what Helena believed to the end. Helena thought him the great Fool. But in this—as in nothing else I know of—Helena was wrong. Foolish, and a child perhaps, was Charlie. And if a thief, then indeed the Good Thief, so deep was his faith.

What do I believe?

I used to think this story is about gullibility; about what didn’t and could never happen; about not growing up but growing old before your time.

About the impossibility of staying hopeful. It certainly is about a mad confusion of the Bible with baseball; about mixing up life with religion, really. People do a lot of that, even these days.

The tent is the tent and the field is the field, that’s what I always say. The separation of tent and field!

But I ask, How could we not mix up the two? To get through life and put up with religion a person needs a healthy imagination! The best medicine.

Maybe that’s why there’s so much confusion in the first place. Don’t you believe that imagination mimics lunacy, as does so much else? Doesn’t any passion?

But that’s only my thinking. I’m no theologian. And I certainly would never be a psychologist!

In the end I am unsurprised. I’m no longer sure—who can be

sure?—that that business—faith, metaphors—are ever either false, or over-ripe, or misplaced.

Baseball as a map of the soul. Baseball as a sacrament, for Heaven’s sake! Even fortune-telling and deals with the devil. I used know where life ended and religion began. Now I get confused.

Anyway, meds or no meds, that’s my gospel and I’m sticking to it. Free will is real.

But now tell me what you think, won’t you?

Do you want to know something, Penelope? I almost believe you. No. I do believe you. I do believe that you believe me.

How wonderful! And, you know, I feel so well now I think I’ll pass on my medicine and take a short walk instead.

Yes, certainly, now you can take them away. I won’t be needing them after all. You’ve done your social working job!

Yes, of course, you must come for another visit, maybe within the fortnight, and we’ll see. I’ll have saved up more medicine by then.

Another story-telling? Certainly. It seems to do the trick. But next time you must tell it.

Charlie Faust

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