

The Jersey (A Short Story)

By Toshio U.-P.

Sean Hill was a tall kid for his age with broad shoulders and sufficient torque in his swing to send a pitch in his wheelhouse over the right field's 'blue behemoth' as a line drive homerun. When he was drafted to play for the Sioux City Chieftains, he chose the number "11" to be on the back of his jersey, which harkened back to his days as a little leaguer. Hill's first game at the professional level came late into the season when he was added to the roster as a call-up and was put in to pinch hit when a pitching change was made in the eighth inning by the opposing Kent County Ghosts. Hill watched the first pitch strike cross the heart of the plate, laid off the second pitch, fouled the third, and on a one and two count lined a shot into left center field for a base hit. The next season, as a rookie, Hill hit .296 with 20 homeruns, 85 RBIs and with only two errors at first base. Pretty soon, fans would show up early at games just to get his autograph on their ball caps, baseball cards and leather-stitched baseballs. On his way on and off the field, he would reach into his jacket pocket to pull out a black marker to patiently sign his name along with the number "11" for as many kids as time would permit. The following season, Hill was given a full starting role and with more at bats, he finished with a .294 average, 34 homeruns and 102 RBIs. These improved power numbers helped propel the Chieftains to the fall playoffs. After winning each of the first three rounds, Hill's Chieftains had finally reached the Championship. They were to play a best of seven series against the Fred's Cove Titans.

Coming through the tunnel between the clubhouse and the dugout, Hill begins to feel his nerves reach a feverish high. He tries to tell himself that the Championship was like any of the other games the Chieftains had played thus far, but the heightened energy coming from the deafening crowd told him this round was different than any other. After charging onto the field for the warm-up, skipping over the baseline as was common for most superstitious big-leaguers, Sean Hill takes his position unaware that it was to be his very last 'memorable' game as a Chieftain. After the national anthems, where he and the Chieftains stood along the third baseline, Hill settles in at his position and feels the roar of the partisan home crowd. After a three up and three down inning, number "11" is up fifth and reaches first base on a liner up the middle, driving in the leadoff runner to give the Chieftains the early lead. The following at bat, Hill walks on a full count and later scores a run to give the Chieftains a 3-1 lead. After taking the field again in the top of the fifth inning, Sean Hill's promising career as a Chieftain was soon to be curtailed by secret activity in the owners' booth high above the Level B bleachers. A different type of trade was being hatched as a plan, at a time when player dealings were never customary with the Championships in full swing and the particular star player in question being a pivotal part of the run to winning the fall prize. After holding a runner on first, Hill gazes up into the bleacher lights, seeking some comfort from the baseball gods above. After the third out, Sean Hill races off the field toward the dugout and readies himself to hit again by grabbing his batting gloves and helmet on the steps

overlooking the on-deck circle. After adding some pine tar to his bat and taking a few practice swings to match the intensity of the Titans' left handed side-arm hurler, the announcer hollers: "And now batting for the Sioux City Chieftains...Number eleven...First baseman Sean Hill!" After stepping up to the plate, the left-handed hitting number "11" uses his cleats to dig in to the dirt, trying to gain a mental edge on the pitcher. After watching the first pitch strike and fouling off the next, Hill digs in on a 0-2 count trying his best to defend the plate. The next pitch hits the dirt with Hill laying off. Finally, gazing back up at the seats close to the third base side, Hill takes a deep breath and digs in again as the crowd roars. The left-handed pitcher, tall atop the mound goes into his windup and delivers with Hill picking up the spin of his curveball. In a split second, he plants his front foot and puts the barrel on the off speed pitch seeing the ball carry far into right-center field. Finally the right fielder decides to give up his chase as the white dot clears the fence, well into the second deck. Feeling the exhilaration of the crowd, Hill raises his arms in the air as he rounds the bases, slowing his pace after getting past second base. After stomping on home plate with his teammates close-by as a throng of rowdy victors tapping his batting helmet and full of high fives, Hill is later given a 'curtain call' before the inning's end from the roaring crowd.

After shutting down the Titans in the ninth, Sean Hill and the Chieftains come out on top, winning Game One 7-5. Hill's offense was stellar with the left-handed hitter going 4-5 with a tricky defensive play to end the inning with the bases loaded. Hill is eager to carry his hitting streak into Game Two. However, things were soon going to be quite different in Game Two, when the Chieftains were to take the field again as the home team. Late at night following the victory, Sean Hill struggles with sleeplessness. With intense fatigue and nerves on high alert, the infielder senses something threatening was outside his abode.

The next afternoon, the Chieftains take the field for b.p. but Hill is a no-show. This sends Coach Battlemore into a frenzy, with the bench lead spending the rest of the day on the phone with Hill's agent. After checking in at his suite with the team's security, they notice that some of his gear is neither in the locker room at the stadium nor at his home. While the Chieftains usually left their jerseys in their locker room to be cleaned and game-ready, Hill's number eleven is the only one not to be found by the laundromat.

The evening of Game Two, the Chieftains all gather in the clubhouse two hours prior to the game for a team meeting. Coach Battlemore updates the players about their star player still not checking in with him after missing practice the day before. After explaining that he is to be scratched from the lineup, a tall presence arrives in the main doorway to the locker room already dressed in a uniform.

"Where the hell have you been all this time? We've been looking all over for you! Did you forget we're in a championship here?" Coach Battlemore shouts aloud.

“Sorry coach. Something came up with family that I had to address. Are we here to play ball or what!” The first baseman says to his stunned teammates as he walks toward the vacant bench by his dressing room locker.

After reinserting number “11” into the starting lineup, Coach Battlemore tries to fire up the Chieftains with a quick few words on being in the game’s highest stage, before sending his squad down the tunnel and onto the field for the warm-up.

Upon reaching the field, the first baseman uncharacteristically drags his cleated foot along the baseline, messing up the clean white line connecting home plate to the left field wall. He then begins warming up the infielders with ground ball drills. Appearing to lack the quick jump and energy in his step, number “11” collects the baseball and tosses it to a ball-boy at the end of the home team warm-up and takes his position as the top of the first inning is about to begin.

With two outs in the top half of the inning, number “11” boots a ball driven between him and the second baseman, allowing the third batter to reach second base. Coach Battlemore removes his cap, angry about the E-3 on his usually stalwart first baseman. After the mishap at first base that would have retired the side, the runner steals second and later scores on a single up the middle to give the Titans the early lead. In the bottom half of the inning, the left-handed hitting first baseman steps to the plate with a runner on first. Appearing a bit more anxious, he swings and misses clumsily at a first pitch strike on the right corner of the strike zone. Stepping out of the batter’s box, he gazes over at the third base coach sending a signal. Appearing a little oblivious of the combination of touches to the coach’s cap brim, chin and parts of his right arm, he settles back into the batter’s box. As the second pitch is delivered by the hurler, the runner on first takes off and is within a few seconds the throw reaches second base. “You’re out!” The second base umpire hollers, clenching his fist in the air. The third base coach is livid, removing his ball cap voicing his anger and frustration at number “11” for missing the sign for a hit-and-run. After settling in to the batter’s box looking out of sorts, number “11” swings and misses at a high fastball, losing his balance at the plate. On his way back into the dugout, Coach Battlemore appears seething with anger, avoiding eye contact with the first baseman. Number “11” removes his batting gloves, helmet and grabs his glove containing a new stitched hardball before trotting off to his position.

After nine innings of play, the Titans beat the Chieftains by a score of 5-1. Number “11”, who merely filled the baseball jersey (and not the play) of the stellar first baseman from Game One of the Championship, goes 0-5 with four strikeouts and two errors at his position, not to mention several missed signs at the plate. Coach Battlemore, after a private meeting with his once reliable star player in his office, opts to bench him for Game Three and to re-assess the situation after a few team practices.

Up in the owners’ booth, a secret telephone agreement is underway about Hill’s status as a starting first baseman.

“What should I do with the body?” A man asks.

“Keep it in the wine cellar for now.” Rothberg the owner answers.

“We’re planning to tear down The Metropolitan today. What then?” The manager of the popular Bar-Resto-Pub enquires.

“Since my son Kenny got some live pitching, I’ll have no use for Hill when the Championship is over. Bury the body for me somewhere outside of town and I’ll give you the amount I promised plus ten percent.” Rothberg continues.

“How you gonna trade ‘im if he’s dead?” The other asks.

“I’ll cook up a story in the Globe pretty soon, saying he lost it and is retiring. That way he’ll just disappear. I make more money when my team loses anyways.” The owner says in a domineering tone.

After hanging up the phone, the manager of The Metropolitan calls a demolition contractor, who comes in to remove the lettering on the façade of his business starting with the large golden “M”. The next day, the body of Sean Hill is removed from the cellar in a body bag, placed on a gurney and covered by a tarp to look like construction material being off-loaded from the site. As the Chieftains travel to Fred’s Cove for Game Three, Hill’s cadaver is buried in a ditch off of a turnpike outside of Sioux City. With Rothberg betting against his team and the star first baseman permanently out of the lineup, the Chieftains go on to lose the Championship in Game 5.