

The girl who shot the ballplayer

From psychiatrists' files comes a case unrivaled by the most imaginative fiction:

By CURTIS MITCHELL

EDDIE WAITKUS had no business going to the girl's room alone that midnight in June, 1949, but there was the urgent and mysterious note he had found on his dresser: "It's important that I see you as soon as possible... I think it would be to your advantage to let me explain it to you."

He took an elevator to the 12th floor and walked hesitantly to Room 1297A. He knocked and heard footsteps. When the door opened, he saw that she was tall, slim, and very pale. Her eyes, as he stepped past her into the room, flashed with annoyance.

"I've got a surprise for you," she said, striding toward the closet. Then she turned swiftly, pointing a .22 rifle at him, and said, "For two years, you've been bothering me, and now you're going to die."

It's a joke, he thought. Maybe the fellows are pulling a rib. He said, "What goes on here?"

The bullet hit his chest, tore through the right lung, and lodged near the spine. He fell, crying, "Baby, what did you do that for?"

Hours later, the American baseball public was

asking the same question, and so were two psychiatrists in the Behavior Clinic of the Criminal Court of Cook County, Ill., Dr. William H. Haines, director, and Dr. Robert A. Esser, his assistant.

To them, Ruth Steinhagen, 19-year-old typist for a Chicago firm, tried to explain her attack:

"I'm sorry Eddie has to suffer so, but I had to shoot somebody. He reminded me of my father. Since I shot Eddie, I feel more consoled and relieved than ever before in my life."

Her answer led to another query: was Ruth sane or insane? Could she be tried under Illinois law?

Psychiatrists Haines and Esser, public servants as well as physicians, had to find out. They began to question her in the gloomy Cook County jail. Conditions were hardly the best. Chicago newspapers made a field day of the event, filling their pages with her pictures. "I've never been so happy in my life," she announced.

Meanwhile, Eddie Waitkus had to endure two operations to remove the bullet from his lung. He

the true story of the twisted teen-ager who tried to kill her baseball "idol"

snapped, "She seems to think this is a joke. She should be taken off the streets, same as a mad dog."

Ignoring the uproar, doctors gave her standard psychological tests. Her IQ was normal. But her attention span was so brief that it was necessary to call her back over and over to the tests. A device called the Rorschach test indicated that her personality was in danger of splitting off from reality to such a degree that she would become, in effect, two persons in one body. To the doctors, there was strong evidence of schizophrenia—a common form of mental illness.

That did not necessarily mean, however, that she was legally insane when she tried to kill Eddie. No test could answer that; only the insight of a psychiatrist could.

Investigators sought out friends and members of her family, seeking any clue to the jigsaw puzzle of Ruth's mind. Her parents had come from Berlin to New York, where they married when both were 22. They moved to Chicago, and Ruth was born a year later.

Of her father, Ruth said: "He was nice and stubborn. I am stubborn, too, and that is why we don't get along. He said things about Eddie I didn't like. I used to get real mad and go to my room and beat my hands on the bed. He said girls nowadays must be crazy using lipstick, nail polish, going after ballplayers, and dancing to jive."

AS AN ADOLESCENT, she refused to allow a male physician to examine her. After much persuasion, she accepted a woman doctor who noted that, even at 16, she was underdeveloped physically.

Ruth was bright in school and once was given a double promotion. Because she preferred to remain with her own class, she resented this. She was graduated at 13, went on through two years of high school, then two years of commercial college. On graduation, the college offered to place her, but she insisted on getting her first job herself. About this time she became fearful of meeting people.

Yet employers and her associates at work liked her. Her few close friends thought highly of her, too. How did her infatuation for Waitkus start? A

friend said she had gone to a ball game and noticed Eddie for the first time when some kid called to him, "Hello, funny-face." From then on, he was her dream boat.

She began to collect pictures and clippings of Waitkus. Soon, he filled all her thoughts. At home, all table talk had to be about Eddie.

Her feverish interest mounted day after day. Eddie's baseball uniform bore the number 36. That number haunted her. "I used to see 36s everywhere," she said. She even bought phonograph records issued only in 1936.

Waitkus became an obsession, a dangerous one. "I used to go to all the ball games I could and just watch him," she told Dr. Haines. "I used to wait for him to come out of the clubhouse after the games, and all the time I was forming the idea of killing him. I knew I couldn't get him in the normal way, so I kept thinking, 'If I can't have him, nobody will.' Then I decided to kill him. I didn't know how or when."

To Dr. Haines, the broad, cheerless strokes of incipient schizophrenia were obvious. He knew that many teen-agers had loved in vain, been rejected, and yet managed to survive.

Ruth even left home and went to live in a furnished room. But she continued to eat her evening meal with her parents. Her visits home were disturbing to her. The sight of men, even her father, continued to remind her of Eddie.

Often she talked with Eddie—much too often. His picture was in her billfold by day and under her pillow by night. They went for long walks together, or so she pretended.

And she dreamed. Ruth said: "I never dreamed of killing anyone except Eddie. I had the idea of shooting him. I was sitting with him in my arms." Was that the birth of her crime?

Unsuspected by anyone, a plan was forming. One day she picked up a paper in search of news about Eddie and there he was, speaking to her.

"He was holding a gun," she told the doctor. "Well, I thought the whole thing was pretty significant of what I was going to do. Then I decided to kill him with a gun. It would be the easiest way."

He as much as told me to... in that picture."

Ruth told Dr. Haines: "I actually got the gun in May. I went to a pawnshop and I got this second-hand rifle. A girl friend was with me and we went over to my house and hid it."

Her next steps were as coolly calculated as a bank robbery. "I looked up the schedule to see when the Phillies would be here. I put in my reservation (at the Edgewater Beach Hotel where the Philadelphia team stayed) for that time. While waiting, I learned how to put the rifle together and take it apart."

At the last minute, she hinted broadly of her plan. "Tomorrow night, you'll have all kinds of exciting things to talk about," she promised a friend. Then she drew all her money out of the bank. That afternoon, Eddie got a hit as Philadelphia won, 9 to 2. Ruth watched him from the stands and was happy. At the end of the game, she took a taxi to the hotel. She had registered earlier. Her rifle was in the closet.

She showed no reticence in reciting the damning facts. "I ordered a radio from room service and some drinks. Then I sent for the bellboy and gave him \$5 and told him it was important to give him (Eddie) the note. The boy called up that Waitkus wasn't there, but he left the note on the dresser. I sat down and listened to the radio. That was about 6:30. At about 10:30, I finished the drinks."

Weary of waiting, Ruth went to sleep easily. Meanwhile, Waitkus had returned to his room, found her note, and was thinking it over. A silly doll note; what could she want?

"The telephone was ringing," Ruth recalled later. "He wanted to know what the note was about. He said, 'What's so darned important?' and that shocked me. I said, 'Can you come up for a few minutes?' He said yes, so I got dressed and waited."

Ruth's words were a torrent now. "When he opened the door, he came rushing in right past me. I expected him to stand there and wait until I asked him to come in, and during that time I was going to stab him with a knife. I was kind of mad that he came in and sat down and didn't give me a chance to stab him."

THERE IT WAS, the twisted logic of the mentally ill. But was it legal insanity? She said: "I went to the closet and got out the gun. I pointed it at him, and he had such a silly look. I was pretty mad at him, so I told him to move over by the window. He got up right away and said, 'Baby, What's this all about?' That made me mad. I said, 'For two years you've been bothering me, and now you're going to die.' And then I shot him."

"For a minute, I didn't think I shot him because he just stood there. Then he crashed against the wall. He kept saying, 'Baby, why did you do that?' He was still smiling."

"I knelt down next to him. He had his hand stretched out and I put my hand over his... I asked, 'Where have you been shot?' I couldn't see a bullet hole or blood or anything. He said I shot him

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The girl was a stranger to him and much too young to handle a rifle: as the pain ripped Eddie's body, his mind kept on asking, "Why?"

ILLUSTRATION BY ISA BARNETT