

# The Wild Man

by Octavus Roy Cohen

I CAN'T say just where the grudge between Pat Nelligan and Bill Davis started. Sandy MacPherson claims to have known them both when they were in the Pacific Coast League, and he says that there's a girl mixed up in it somewhere, but I can't swear to that. All I know is that they were drafted into our circuit at the same time, and that both of them made names for themselves before the season was a month under way.

We got Nelligan when the draft maze was unraveled. He reported at our Texas training camp—short, stocky, silent, and confident; a little too short for a backstop, perhaps, but he assayed one hundred per cent when it came to ability.

He was one of the finds of the season.

Nothing got by him and he had a way of pegging down to second that was a revelation: a crouch and a snap, and presto! the ball was sizzling across the diamond like a bullet. And it always came just a little to the left of second, and low, where the man covering the base merely had to hold it and let the runner slide to his own destruction.

I wasn't surprised to see the bucko share catching honors with Thomson, our first string receiver, right from the start of the season. You see, Nelligan wasn't absolutely green: he'd had one season in the Kitty and one in the Pacific Coast, and he seemed to know the ins and outs of the game by instinct.

Out on the coast, Davis had accumulated something of a rep as a star base-runner. And, of course, he was drafted by Scrappy Connor, of the Reds. Scrappy was always on the lookout for men who would get into a game and fight for it with all

their might—and take chances, and all that—but I think he was a little taken aback with the way Davis buckled down to the job.

He put Davis in center the opening day of the season—they were stacked up against St. Louis—and what did the youngster do but spike two of the Cardinal basemen right off the reel. And before the series ended he had spiked two more.

I kept on thinking it was accidental until we met the Reds in the first series together.

Then I saw he was a deliberate base pirate—one of that class of runners which scares the basemen off the bags and then takes all kinds of chances. There was never an attempt on his part to slide around a baseman. Just a dash, a leap—and spikes straight for the baseman's shin.

I didn't suspect that anything was wrong between Nelligan and Davis during that first series, because our youngster was on the bench with a split finger.

Of course, when I saw Sandy Macpherson talking interestedly to Nelligan I asked him what was up, and he told me that he had been looking for fireworks between Nelligan and Davis. And when I cornered him he just shrugged and told me to wait until the first series together when Nelligan worked behind the bat.

Of all the men I've ever known I think I'd least rather have Nelligan as an enemy. Clean as a hound's tooth he is, and honest, but Lordy! That square jaw of his and the level, gray eyes are enough to strike terror to the heart of an ordinary mortal.

And after Sandy had tipped me off to the fact that there was something doing between them, I watched Nelligan more closely and I saw an ugly

look come into his eyes at sight of Davis. That night curiosity got the better of me and I cornered Nellie, as we called him, in the hotel billiard room. I gassed about everything from the European war to bush league averages, and finally shifted around to the topic I'd started out to discuss in the first place.

"You hear what they're calling Bill Davis now?" I asked casually.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw his eyes narrow into viciously glinting slits and his fists balled involuntarily—and then relaxed slowly.

"What?" He bit off the word like he didn't like the taste of it.

"The wild man!" I said, easily.

He turned angrily.

"Wild man!" he snorted. "Honest, Tom, I didn't think that these here big leaguers would fall for that melodrama. I played out on the coast with that stiff and there was a half dozen men out there that he didn't *dare* try to spike. If one of these guys would knock his block off—"

"But he's within his rights," I argued. "He has the right of way on the base-line, and if a player gets in his way—"

"Yeh! That sounds good, it does; but you forget that Ty Cobb and a lot of the other best base-runners in the world don't spike men all the time. Just because a runner has the right of way doesn't give him license to deliberately poke his spikes into a man's shins or ankles every chance. There's such a thing as abusing a privilege, an'—"

"An' you think some one ought to knock his block off, eh?"

"Yes. If he ever tries that stunt with *me!*"

"Didn't he ever on the coast?"

"Yeh—a bunch of times. But he never got by with it. Once his spikes slammed into my shin guards in San Francisco, but they didn't cut through. Good thing for him they didn't, too."

"Is he yellow?"

Nellie was as honest as the day is long.

"No, he ain't. But then again he ain't a fool, and he don't take chances with men who won't stand for it. If he ever tries his shenanigans with *me—*"

"Sandy tells me that you and he ain't any particular friends?"

"No!" he exploded the word. "We ain't. And one of these days I'm going to get him. You watch."

I did.

We jumped around our Eastern trip and then

received the Eastern teams at home. It was quite some time before we played the Reds again, and by then Davis was universally spoken of as the Wild Man. His list of victims was appallingly long. And every time news of a fresh spiking appeared in the papers I watched Nelligan, and I saw his jaw get grimmer and grimmer—

The very first day of our second series with the Reds they put me in the box and Nellie behind the bat. We were playing at home and the park was fairly jammed. For the first time in years the Panthers—that's us—were near the top of the heap and going like a house afire.

The Wild Man was first at bat. As he stood there at the plate, swinging his bats while the team was getting into position, I heard a little dialogue between Nelligan and Davis.

Said Nelligan: "You've been spiking these guys around the circuit, Davis, and getting away with it. Maybe you're within your rights according to the rules of the National Commission. But if you try any funny business with me there's going to be trouble, see?"

Davis laughed superciliously.

"Scared already, Nellie? I got the right of the base-line—see? And if you happen to be there, why—well, I ain't gonna make any difference between you and any one else. Get that?"

Davis flied out to Seay that time at bat, and the next time he singled and died on first. The third time up he sacrificed a runner, but the fourth time he poled out a double to left.

That was in the ninth inning.

We were three runs ahead and had the game sewed up, but still we weren't taking chances. A baseball game's never over until the last man's out, specially when you're playing Scrappy Connor's bunch. And every time Davis had come to bat there'd been nasty words between him and Nellie.

Sure enough, next man up slammed out a daisy cutter over second and Davis started like a streak around third for home. Run! Why, say, that man made Rector look like a selling plater when it came to the dash stuff. He just simply burned up the turf.

Sandy MacPherson, out in center, choked the ball and lined it home. He has a great wing, has Sandy. Mike Donnelley had run from first to back up Nelligan and Seay had come in from right to look out for the initial corner.

I watched.

Davis was digging down that third base-line like a streak of greased lightning, and I saw his

forehead furrowed as he kept one eye on Nelligan. As for Nellie, he had taken his proper position at the plate, legs apart, braced, and with all the room in the world for a runner to slide in between. The umpire was standing there watching like a hawk. And the look in Nelligan's eyes that minute wasn't the pleasantest thing I ever saw.

The ball spanked into Nellie's glove at the very instant Davis slid.

As I said, he had all the chance in the world to slide through Nellie's legs—but nothing doing! His left leg goes through all right—but he deliberately slams his right leg against Nellie's shin. I learned a few minutes later that the spikes cut right through the side of the guard and into the flesh.

He was safe, and as he arose from the ground and brushed the dust from his uniform Nelligan stepped close to him, his eyes shining redly.

"Y'r a dirty dog!" he sibilated. "An' if you ain't as yellow as you are rotten, you'll fight me after the game!"

Oh! Davis was there with the goods, all right, and after we put the next man out arrangements were made for the scrap. Nellie hadn't been spiked so very badly, thanks to the shin guards, and he was hopping mad—wild almost.

The fight was strictly private and less than a dozen of us saw it.

For those who didn't I have always felt sorry. Those two men, Nellie weighing a little more, but Davis having the advantage of height and reach and skill, fought stripped to the waist there in the clubroom and with bare fists. Freddy Lewis of the Panthers refereed.

That fight was the worst thing, and the cleanest I ever saw. Davis was simply wild, but I guess he's rather decent after all, for he fought one of the cleanest and gamest fights ever. But hate! Why, every blow struck by either man had hate as well as muscle and venom behind it. And it was the kind of hate you read about in books!

Nellie started right off by boring in, shoulders hunched and guard low.

Davis stood off and peppered him with left jabs until he got too close, and then he'd step in and shoot his right for the body or hook it to the jaw. And, of course, the minute he'd get close Nellie would uncork and they'd mix things like wildcats.

"There's a woman in this!" gasped Gerald Stanley, our crack twirler, as they paused pantingly for a second to stare at each other. "Nothin' else could make men fight like that!"

But this ain't a story of the fight those two men had there in the clubhouse, although if I live to be as old as Methusaleh I'll never see another one as vicious—or as clean.

Finally, when both men were so cut up and exhausted that all they could do was stand there and patter futile little blows that hurt the giver more than the receiver, we stepped in and put a stop to hostilities.

And was either man satisfied?

They were not. Most decidedly not. We rubbed them down and bandaged them up. They stood up near each other then, with us standing by ready to jump in if either started the fireworks again—and they stared into each other's eyes coldly.

"I'll get you one of these days, Nelligan!" muttered Davis.

"And I'll get you, Davis!" snapped Nellie, evenly. "This don't end things. One of these days I'm going to show you up for the four-flush you are!"

Then they separated, glaring furiously at each other.

When Seay—he was our manager—got wise to what had happened (and he couldn't very well miss it seeing that Nellie's face looked more like a pound of chopped beef than anything else I can think of just now), you can bet that he raised some Cain.

He docked every man jack of us who had anything to do with it—and then cornered me and asked for details of the scrap. And during the rest of that season—until nearly the end, he didn't let Nelligan so much as wander a foot away from the bench when we were stacked up against the Reds.

The race that year was one of the hottest in major league history.

Our bunch had been fighting with the Highlanders and the Buccaneers since mid-July for first place, and we shared it between us. I remember that on the second of August all three of us were tied for first place—a mighty unusual thing in any league.

The Reds?

Oh, they weren't in the pennant race at all, but they were scrapping with the Sailors for the leadership of the second division and were giving trouble to every one of the leading trio. Connor had gotten together one of those untrue-to-form teams which disrupt dope books and make baseball the fascinating game that it is.

They'd lose a couple of series to the tail-

enders and then knock the stuffing out of the leaders. And Bill Davis was leading the league in stolen bases and swelling the hospital expenses of all the clubs.

And the funny part of it was that he was clever and never spiked a man unless that man was in his way. Nine times out of ten he could have avoided, it, but it was his policy to scare 'em; and while mighty few of our basemen had any yellow in their make-ups, it takes more than the usual amount of nerve to stand up again a flying, glinting set of spikes when they've got a hundred and seventy pounds of body behind 'em.

Early in September we took four straight from the Sailors and clawed our way into first place. Then came the Reds. And in the very first game of the series Thomson, our star catcher, broke his leg sliding for second!

Every game counted—every run counted, and there wasn't a thing for Seay to do but to put Nellie behind the bat. Gardner, our third catcher, was a good enough man, but he was green and his whip wasn't what it should have been. And the Reds were playing pennant ball at that particular time.

We needed a real man behind the bat—and it was Nellie—or run a big risk of dropping a majority of the games in the Reds' series.

Gardner finished out the game in which Thomson broke his leg—and which he won, by the way—but four men stole on him; Davis twice—and that night Seay closeted himself with Nellie. I heard the details of the conversation later.

Seay started out paternal-fashion by lecturing Nellie. He instructed him in team-spirit and stressed the importance of burying private differences for the sake of the team. He told him that it was the duty every man owed to his club, and all that sort of stuff. Nellie was a sincere little guy and he took it all in serious as a judge.

"And so," Seay winds up, "I've got to put you in regularly from now to the end of the season. We have a chance for that pennant, but it's only a fighting chance, and unless we keep a maximum of efficiency and fighting strength we're going to be nosed out at the finish.

"It's up to you to forget that you and the Wild Man are enemies and play the best way you can for the team. I ain't asking you to swallow anything from him, or to let him run you away from the plate if he gets near home—but I am putting you on your honor not to get mixed up with him in a fight or anything—and so put yourself out of the game for days and days. We need you and—"

And, of course, Nellie agreed.

That was a pretty rotten position for Nellie and it couldn't help showing in his manner. But the next day's game passed all right, except that Davis taunted Nellie every time he came to the bat and made fun of the grim-jawed catcher, who refused to answer.

After the game Nellie exploded.

"Th' dam' hound!" he roared. "Here I am, tied and bound and pledged not to hit 'im and he goes out there an' gets my goat! I'll show him—I'll show him! I tell you, I'll prove that guy the biggest four-flush that ever lived!"

That was the second time he threatened to prove Davis a four-flush and I commenced to wonder just what he meant.

The game next day was one of those slugging, seesaw contests which rouse the fans to a frenzy. There wasn't standing room in the park and it was just our luck that ground rules were in effect. I'll bet the Panther management made enough to finance a war that year.

They knocked me out of the box in the third inning and we slammed their pitcher all over the lot in the fifth.

The eighth inning ended with the Reds one run behind—the score being six to five in our favor. One run would tie the game for them, and two would probably win, as they had Rudy Beiger in the box, and he was pitching air-tight ball at that time.

The first man up went out, and then the Wild Man came to the bat. While he was waiting he turned to Nellie.

"You been standin' a heap from me lately," he said evilly. "I reckon I must have hammered some respect into that ivory skull of yours that day we fought."

Nellie's jaw grew mighty firm and he turned away. Then Davis laughed derisively.

"Yellow!" he said.

Nellie faced him squarely.

"You four-flush!" he said.

And then he said something else—I couldn't catch just what it was, but Davis half way staggered back and then looked as though he was going to hit Nelligan. And Nelligan just smiled and repeated the thing, whatever it was.

Sandy thought it must be something about the girl we thought was mixed up in the affair, but I do know that I never saw a man show such terrible anger as Davis showed that minute. He was the wild man then, all right, all right.

And I knew, just as well as I knew my name, that if Davis got the chance he was going to spike Nellie—and spike him hard!

The crowd was wild by this time. Our two rivals had lost that day, as the left field scoreboard showed, and a victory meant a two-game lead for us over the next club.

We'd been ahead and then they'd wrested the lead from us, and then we'd gone ahead again. There was one out now—two more and we had the game without playing our half of the ninth.

The first one sizzled across the outside corner of the pan, but I reckon Davis was too shaky mad to see it, and he didn't wake up until the umpire called it a strike and the crowd yelled with glee.

The next one was tempting bait—a fast one just a little more than shoulder high, but Davis had a good eye and let it pass. One strike and one ball.

The next was a spitter, also wide of the platter, and a second ball was called. The next one drifted over—

Davis's bat cracked against it. There was something sinister in that crack of bat and ball.

The ball shot between center and left, and when it was returned Davis was on second!

The crowd was silent now, deathly silent. The spectators knew better than to rattle their own pitcher.

Scrappy Connor trotted down to the third base coaching box. Davis, perhaps the best base-runner on the league, on second. Things didn't look any too bright for us.

I wondered what would happen if Davis got a fair chance to come home. I saw him squinting at Nelligan, and I knew that he was more anxious to get his spikes into Nellie's shins than to score that run. As for Nellie, he was grim-visaged and cold—plain cold mad.

On the second ball pitched Davis streaked for third. Nellie slammed the ball to Masterson on a line—and Masterson fumbled it as Davis's shiny spikes zipped past him. The crowd groaned again.

Brodie was at bat. He waited until two strikes and one ball had been called and leaned up against the next one. At the crack of bat and ball Davis pelted for home.

The sphere sizzled nastily along the ground between third and short. Freddy Lewis leaped wildly for it, and the ball stuck in his bare hand. Without waiting to straighten up he did what only Freddy Lewis can do—lined the ball like a bullet straight into Nelligan's waiting mitt.

"Slide!"

It was a roar of command from the bench of the Reds. And you can bet your life that Davis needed no such instructions. His eye was focused viciously on Nelligan's calmly waiting, stocky body.

Fifteen feet from Nelligan he catapulted into the air and crashed, spikes first, straight toward the catcher. It was the most cold-blooded attempt at spiking I have ever witnessed.

It was up to Nelligan. In that fraction of a second I figured it out that Nellie could either be spiked and save the game for the Panthers, or that he could jump to safety. Then—

Nelligan leaped aside and Davis slipped past him in a cloud of dust!

But as he struck the ground he commenced to writhe. Like a panther, Nellie was on him, jamming the ball with terrific force into his ribs. I saw the arm of the umpire wave.

"*Out!*" he yelled. Bedlam broke loose.

I couldn't understand. But after the game Nelligan explained.

"I know he was more anxious to spike me than to score the run," the little catcher told us, "and I've always said I'd prove him a four-flush. So I stood three feet to the right of the plate to receive Lewis's throw. Just as I expected, he slid straight at me—never even looking to see if I was at the plate. I let him slide by. Then I touched him out."