

THE VETERAN CRICKETER

My old cricketer was seized, he says, some score of years ago now, by sciatica, clutched indeed about the loins thereby, and forcibly withdrawn from the practice of the art; since when a certain predisposition to a corpulent habit has lacked its natural check of exercise, and a broadness almost Dutch has won upon him. Were it not for this, which renders his contours and his receding aspect unseemly, he would be indeed a venerable-looking person, having a profile worthy of a patriarch, tinged though it may be with an unpatriarchal jollity, and a close curly beard like that of King David. He lives by himself in a small cottage outside the village--hating women with an unaccountable detestation--and apparently earns a precarious livelihood, and certainly the sincere aversion of the country side, by umpiring in matches, and playing whist and "Nap" with such as will not be so discreet and economical as to bow before his superior merit.

His neighbours do not like him, because he will not take their cricket or their whist seriously, because he will persist in offering counsel and the stimulus of his gift of satire. All whist than his he avers is "Bumble-puppy." His umpiring is pedagogic in tone; he fails to see the contest in the game. To him, who has heard his thousands roar as the bails of the best of All England went spinning, these village matches are mere puerile exercises to be corrected. His corrections, too, are Olympian, done, as it were, in red ink, vivid, and without respect of

persons. Particularly he gibes. He never uses vulgar bad language himself, but has a singular power of engendering it in others. He has a word "gaby," which he will sometimes enlarge to "stupid gaby," the which, flung neatly into a man who has just missed a catch, will fill the same with a whirl of furious curses difficult to restrain. And if perchance one should escape, my ancient cricketer will be as startled as Cadmus at the crop he has sown. And not only startled but pained at human wickedness and the follies of a new generation. "Why can't you play without swearing, Muster Gibbs?" he will say, catching the whispered hope twenty yards away, and proclaiming it to a censorious world. And so Gibbs, our grocer and draper, and one made much of by the vicar, is shamed before the whole parish, and damned even as he desired.

To our vicar, a well-meaning, earnest, and extremely nervous man, he displays a methodical antagonism. Our vicar is the worst of all possible rural vicars--unripe, a glaring modern, no classical scholar, no lover of nature, offensively young and yet not youthful, an indecent politician. He was meant to labour amid Urban Myriads, to deal with Social Evils, Home Rule, the Woman Question, and the Reunion of Christendom, attend Conferences and go with the Weltgeist--damn him!--wherever the Weltgeist is going. He presents you jerkily--a tall lean man of ascetic visage and ample garments, a soul clothed not so much in a fleshy body as in black flaps that ever trail behind its energy. Where they made him Heaven knows. No university owns him. It may be he is a renegade Dissenting minister, neither good Church nor wholesome Nonconformity. Him my cricketer regards with malignant

respect. Respect he shows by a punctilious touching of his hat brim, directed to the sacred office; all the rest is malignity, and aimed at the man that fills it. They come into contact on the cricket-field, and on the committee of our reading-room. For our vicar, in spite of a tendency to myopia, conceives it his duty to encourage cricket by his participation. Duty--to encourage cricket! So figure the scene to yourself. The sunlit green, and a match in progress,--the ball has just snipped a stump askew,--my ancient, leaning on a stout cabbage stick, and with the light overcoat that is sacred to umpires upon his arm.

"Out, Billy Durgan," says he, and adds, *ex cathedrâ*, "and one you ought to ha' hit for four."

Then appears our vicar in semi-canonicals, worn "to keep up his position," or some such folly, nervous about the adjustment of his hat and his eyeglasses. He approaches the pitch, smiling the while to show his purely genial import and to anticipate and explain any amateurish touches. He reaches the wicket and poses himself, as the convenient book he has studied directs. "You'll be caught, Muster Shackleforth, if you keep your shoulder up like that," says the umpire. "Ya-a-ps! that's worse!"--forgetting himself in his zeal for attitude. And then a voice cries "Play!"

The vicar swipes wildly, cuts the ball for two, and returns to his wicket breathless but triumphant. Next comes a bye, and then over. The misguided cleric, ever pursuing a theory of foolish condescension to his

betters at the game, and to show there is no offence at the "Yaaps," takes the opportunity, although panting, of asking my ancient if his chicks--late threatened with staggers--are doing well. What would he think if my cricketer retaliated by asking, in the pause before the sermon, how the vicarage pony took his last bolus? The two men do not understand one another. My cricketer waves the hens aside, and revenges himself, touching his hat at intervals, by some offensively obvious remarks--as to a mere beginner--about playing with a straight bat. And the field sniggers none too furtively. I sympathise with his malice. Cricket is an altogether too sacred thing to him to be tampered with on merely religious grounds. However, our vicar gets himself caught at the first opportunity, and so being removed from my veteran's immediate environment, to their common satisfaction, the due ritual of the great game is resumed.

My ancient cricketer abounds in reminiscence of the glorious days that have gone for ever. He can still recall the last echoes of the "throwing" controversy that agitated Nyren, when over-arm bowling began, and though he never played himself in a beaver hat, he can, he says, recollect seeing matches so played. In those days everyone wore tall hats--the policeman, the milkman, workmen of all sorts. Some people I fancy must have bathed in them and gone to bed wearing them. He recalls the Titans of that and the previous age, and particularly delights in the legend of Noah Mann, who held it a light thing to walk twenty miles from Northchapel to Hambledon to practise every Tuesday afternoon, and wander back after dark. He himself as a stripling would run a matter of

four miles, after a day's work in the garden where he was employed, to attend an hour's practice over the downs before the twilight made the balls invisible. And afterwards came Teutonic revelry or wanderings under the summer starlight, as the mood might take him. For there was a vein of silent poetry in the youth of this man.

He hates your modern billiard-table pitch, and a batting of dexterous snickery. He likes "character" in a game, gigantic hitting forward, bowler-planned leg catches, a cunning obliquity in a wicket that would send the balls mysteriously askew. But dramatic breaks are now a thing unknown in trade cricket. One legend of his I doubt; he avers that once at Brighton, in a match between Surrey and Sussex, he saw seven wickets bowled by some such aid in two successive overs. I have never been able to verify this. I believe that, as a matter of fact, the thing has never occurred, but he tells it often in a fine crescendo of surprise, and the refrain, "Out HE came." His first beginning is a cheerful anecdote of a crew of "young gentlemen" from Cambridge staying at the big house, and a challenge to the rustic talent of "me and Billy Hall," who "played a bit at that time," "of me and Billy Hall" winning the pitch and going in first, of a memorable if uncivil stand at the wickets through a long hot afternoon, and a number of young gentlemen from Cambridge painfully discovering local talent by exhaustive fielding in the park, a duty they honourably discharged.

I am fond of my old cricketer, in spite of a certain mendacious and malign element in him. His yarns of gallant stands and unexpected turns

of fortune, of memorable hits and eccentric umpiring, albeit tending sometimes incredibly to his glory, are full of the flavour of days well spent, of bright mornings of play, sunlit sprawlings beside the score tent, warmth, the flavour of bitten grass stems, and the odour of crushed turf. One seems to hear the clapping hands of village ancients, and their ululations of delight. One thinks of stone jars with cool drink swishing therein, of shouting victories and memorable defeats, of eleven men in a drag, and tuneful and altogether glorious home-comings by the light of the moon. His were the Olympian days of the sport, when noble squires were its patrons, and every village a home and nursery of stalwart cricketers, before the epoch of special trains, gate-money, star elevens, and the tumultuous gathering of idle cads to jabber at a game they cannot play.