

**Mike**

**By**

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Dedication

TO

ALAN DURAND

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## CHAPTER I

### MIKE

It was a morning in the middle of April, and the Jackson family were consequently breakfasting in comparative silence. The cricket season had not begun, and except during the cricket season they were in the habit of devoting their powerful minds at breakfast almost exclusively to the task of victualling against the labours of the day. In May, June, July, and August the silence was broken. The three grown-up Jacksons played regularly in first-class cricket, and there was always keen competition among their brothers and sisters for the copy of the Sportsman which was to be found on the hall table with the letters. Whoever got it usually gloated over it in silence till urged wrathfully by the multitude to let them know what had happened; when it would appear that Joe had notched his seventh century, or that Reggie had been run out when he was just getting set, or, as sometimes occurred, that that ass Frank had dropped Fry or Hayward in the slips before he had scored, with the result that the spared expert had made a couple of hundred and was still going strong.

In such a case the criticisms of the family circle, particularly of the smaller Jackson sisters, were so breezy and unrestrained that Mrs. Jackson generally felt it necessary to apply the closure. Indeed, Marjory Jackson, aged fourteen, had on three several occasions been

fined pudding at lunch for her caustic comments on the batting of her brother Reggie in important fixtures. Cricket was a tradition in the family, and the ladies, unable to their sorrow to play the game themselves, were resolved that it should not be their fault if the standard was not kept up.

On this particular morning silence reigned. A deep gasp from some small Jackson, wrestling with bread-and-milk, and an occasional remark from Mr. Jackson on the letters he was reading, alone broke it.

"Mike's late again," said Mrs. Jackson plaintively, at last.

"He's getting up," said Marjory. "I went in to see what he was doing, and he was asleep. So," she added with a satanic chuckle, "I squeezed a sponge over him. He swallowed an awful lot, and then he woke up, and tried to catch me, so he's certain to be down soon."

"Marjory!"

"Well, he was on his back with his mouth wide open. I had to. He was snoring like anything."

"You might have choked him."

"I did," said Marjory with satisfaction. "Jam, please, Phyllis, you pig."

Mr. Jackson looked up.

"Mike will have to be more punctual when he goes to Wrykyn," he said.

"Oh, father, is Mike going to Wrykyn?" asked Marjory. "When?"

"Next term," said Mr. Jackson. "I've just heard from Mr. Wain," he added across the table to Mrs. Jackson. "The house is full, but he is turning a small room into an extra dormitory, so he can take Mike after all."

The first comment on this momentous piece of news came from Bob Jackson. Bob was eighteen. The following term would be his last at Wrykyn, and, having won through so far without the infliction of a small brother, he disliked the prospect of not being allowed to finish as he had begun.

"I say!" he said. "What?"

"He ought to have gone before," said Mr. Jackson. "He's fifteen. Much too old for that private school. He has had it all his own way there, and it isn't good for him."

"He's got cheek enough for ten," agreed Bob.

"Wrykyn will do him a world of good."

"We aren't in the same house. That's one comfort."

Bob was in Donaldson's. It softened the blow to a certain extent that Mike should be going to Wain's. He had the same feeling for Mike that most boys of eighteen have for their fifteen-year-old brothers. He was fond of him in the abstract, but preferred him at a distance.

Marjory gave tongue again. She had rescued the jam from Phyllis, who had shown signs of finishing it, and was now at liberty to turn her mind to less pressing matters. Mike was her special ally, and anything that affected his fortunes affected her.

"Hooray! Mike's going to Wrykyn. I bet he gets into the first eleven his first term."

"Considering there are eight old colours left," said Bob loftily, "besides heaps of last year's seconds, it's hardly likely that a kid like Mike'll get a look in. He might get his third, if he sweats."

The aspersion stung Marjory.

"I bet he gets in before you, anyway," she said.

Bob disdained to reply. He was among those heaps of last year's



seconds to whom he had referred. He was a sound bat, though lacking the brilliance of his elder brothers, and he fancied that his cap was a certainty this season. Last year he had been tried once or twice. This year it should be all right.

Mrs. Jackson intervened.

"Go on with your breakfast, Marjory," she said. "You mustn't say 'I bet' so much."

Marjory bit off a section of her slice of bread-and-jam.

"Anyhow, I bet he does," she muttered truculently through it.

There was a sound of footsteps in the passage outside. The door opened, and the missing member of the family appeared. Mike Jackson was tall for his age. His figure was thin and wiry. His arms and legs looked a shade too long for his body. He was evidently going to be very tall some day. In face, he was curiously like his brother Joe, whose appearance is familiar to every one who takes an interest in first-class cricket. The resemblance was even more marked on the cricket field. Mike had Joe's batting style to the last detail. He was a pocket edition of his century-making brother. "Hullo," he said, "sorry I'm late."

This was mere stereo. He had made the same remark nearly every morning

since the beginning of the holidays.

"All right, Marjory, you little beast," was his reference to the sponge incident.

His third remark was of a practical nature.

"I say, what's under that dish?"

"Mike," began Mr. Jackson--this again was stereo--"you really must learn to be more punctual----"

He was interrupted by a chorus.

"Mike, you're going to Wrykyn next term," shouted Marjory.

"Mike, father's just had a letter to say you're going to Wrykyn next term." From Phyllis.

"Mike, you're going to Wrykyn." From Ella.

Gladys Maud Evangeline, aged three, obliged with a solo of her own composition, in six-eight time, as follows: "Mike Wryky. Mike Wryky. Mike Wryke Wryke Wryke Mike Wryke Wryke Mike Wryke Mike Wryke."

"Oh, put a green baize cloth over that kid, somebody," groaned Bob.

Whereat Gladys Maud, having fixed him with a chilly stare for some seconds, suddenly drew a long breath, and squealed deafeningly for more milk.

Mike looked round the table. It was a great moment. He rose to it with the utmost dignity.

"Good," he said. "I say, what's under that dish?"

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After breakfast, Mike and Marjory went off together to the meadow at the end of the garden. Saunders, the professional, assisted by the gardener's boy, was engaged in putting up the net. Mr. Jackson believed in private coaching; and every spring since Joe, the eldest of the family, had been able to use a bat a man had come down from the Oval to teach him the best way to do so. Each of the boys in turn had passed from spectators to active participants in the net practice in the meadow. For several years now Saunders had been the chosen man, and his attitude towards the Jacksons was that of the Faithful Old Retainer in melodrama. Mike was his special favourite. He felt that in him he had material of the finest order to work upon. There was nothing the matter with Bob. In Bob he would turn out a good, sound article. Bob would be a Blue in his third or fourth year, and probably a creditable performer among the rank and file of a county team later

on. But he was not a cricket genius, like Mike. Saunders would lie awake at night sometimes thinking of the possibilities that were in Mike. The strength could only come with years, but the style was there already. Joe's style, with improvements.

Mike put on his pads; and Marjory walked with the professional to the bowling crease.

"Mike's going to Wrykyn next term, Saunders," she said. "All the boys were there, you know. So was father, ages ago."

"Is he, miss? I was thinking he would be soon."

"Do you think he'll get into the school team?"

"School team, miss! Master Mike get into a school team! He'll be playing for England in another eight years. That's what he'll be playing for."

"Yes, but I meant next term. It would be a record if he did. Even Joe only got in after he'd been at school two years. Don't you think he might, Saunders? He's awfully good, isn't he? He's better than Bob, isn't he? And Bob's almost certain to get in this term."

Saunders looked a little doubtful.

"Next term!" he said. "Well, you see, miss, it's this way. It's all there, in a manner of speaking, with Master Mike. He's got as much style as Mr. Joe's got, every bit. The whole thing is, you see, miss, you get these young gentlemen of eighteen, and nineteen perhaps, and it stands to reason they're stronger. There's a young gentleman, perhaps, doesn't know as much about what I call real playing as Master Mike's forgotten; but then he can hit 'em harder when he does hit 'em, and that's where the runs come in. They aren't going to play Master Mike because he'll be in the England team when he leaves school. They'll give the cap to somebody that can make a few then and there."

"But Mike's jolly strong."

"Ah, I'm not saying it mightn't be, miss. I was only saying don't count on it, so you won't be disappointed if it doesn't happen. It's quite likely that it will, only all I say is don't count on it. I only hope that they won't knock all the style out of him before they're done with him. You know these school professionals, miss."

"No, I don't, Saunders. What are they like?"

"Well, there's too much of the come-right-out-at-everything about 'em for my taste. Seem to think playing forward the alpha and omugger of batting. They'll make him pat balls back to the bowler which he'd cut for twos and threes if he was left to himself. Still, we'll hope for the best, miss. Ready, Master Mike? Play."

As Saunders had said, it was all there. Of Mike's style there could be no doubt. To-day, too, he was playing more strongly than usual. Marjory had to run to the end of the meadow to fetch one straight drive. "He hit that hard enough, didn't he, Saunders?" she asked, as she returned the ball.

"If he could keep on doing ones like that, miss," said the professional, "they'd have him in the team before you could say knife."

Marjory sat down again beside the net, and watched more hopefully.