

## CHAPTER XII

### MIKE GETS HIS CHANCE

The headmaster was quite bland and business-like about it all. There were no impassioned addresses from the dais. He did not tell the school that it ought to be ashamed of itself. Nor did he say that he should never have thought it of them. Prayers on the Saturday morning were marked by no unusual features. There was, indeed, a stir of excitement when he came to the edge of the dais, and cleared his throat as a preliminary to making an announcement. Now for it, thought the school.

This was the announcement.

"There has been an outbreak of chicken-pox in the town. All streets except the High Street will in consequence be out of bounds till further notice."

He then gave the nod of dismissal.

The school streamed downstairs, marvelling.

The less astute of the picnickers, unmindful of the homely proverb about hallooing before leaving the wood, were openly exulting. It

seemed plain to them that the headmaster, baffled by the magnitude of the thing, had resolved to pursue the safe course of ignoring it altogether. To lie low is always a shrewd piece of tactics, and there seemed no reason why the Head should not have decided on it in the present instance.

Neville-Smith was among these premature rejoicers.

"I say," he chuckled, overtaking Wyatt in the cloisters, "this is all right, isn't it! He's funk'd it. I thought he would. Finds the job too big to tackle."

Wyatt was damping.

"My dear chap," he said, "it's not over yet by a long chalk. It hasn't started yet."

"What do you mean? Why didn't he say anything about it in Hall, then?"

"Why should he? Have you ever had tick at a shop?"

"Of course I have. What do you mean? Why?"

"Well, they didn't send in the bill right away. But it came all right."

"Do you think he's going to do something, then?"

"Rather. You wait."

Wyatt was right.

Between ten and eleven on Wednesdays and Saturdays old Bates, the school sergeant, used to copy out the names of those who were in extra lesson, and post them outside the school shop. The school inspected the list during the quarter to eleven interval.

To-day, rushing to the shop for its midday bun, the school was aware of a vast sheet of paper where usually there was but a small one. They surged round it. Buns were forgotten. What was it?

Then the meaning of the notice flashed upon them. The headmaster had acted. This bloated document was the extra lesson list, swollen with names as a stream swells with rain. It was a comprehensive document. It left out little.

"The following boys will go in to extra lesson this afternoon and next Wednesday," it began. And "the following boys" numbered four hundred.

"Bates must have got writer's cramp," said Clowes, as he read the huge scroll.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wyatt met Mike after school, as they went back to the house.

"Seen the 'extra' list?" he remarked. "None of the kids are in it, I notice. Only the bigger fellows. Rather a good thing. I'm glad you got off."

"Thanks," said Mike, who was walking a little stiffly. "I don't know what you call getting off. It seems to me you're the chaps who got off."

"How do you mean?"

"We got tanned," said Mike ruefully.

"What!"

"Yes. Everybody below the Upper Fourth."

Wyatt roared with laughter.

"By Gad," he said, "he is an old sportsman. I never saw such a man. He lowers all records."

"Glad you think it funny. You wouldn't have if you'd been me. I was

one of the first to get it. He was quite fresh."

"Sting?"

"Should think it did."

"Well, buck up. Don't break down."

"I'm not breaking down," said Mike indignantly.

"All right, I thought you weren't. Anyhow, you're better off than I am."

"An extra's nothing much," said Mike.

"It is when it happens to come on the same day as the M.C.C. match."

"Oh, by Jove! I forgot. That's next Wednesday, isn't it? You won't be able to play!"

"No."

"I say, what rot!"

"It is, rather. Still, nobody can say I didn't ask for it. If one goes out of one's way to beg and beseech the Old Man to put one in extra,

it would be a little rough on him to curse him when he does it."

"I should be awfully sick, if it were me."

"Well, it isn't you, so you're all right. You'll probably get my place in the team."

Mike smiled dutifully at what he supposed to be a humorous sally.

"Or, rather, one of the places," continued Wyatt, who seemed to be sufficiently in earnest. "They'll put a bowler in instead of me.

Probably Druce. But there'll be several vacancies. Let's see. Me.

Adams. Ashe. Any more? No, that's the lot. I should think they'd give you a chance."

"You needn't rot," said Mike uncomfortably. He had his day-dreams, like everybody else, and they always took the form of playing for the first eleven (and, incidentally, making a century in record time). To have to listen while the subject was talked about lightly made him hot and prickly all over.

"I'm not rotting," said Wyatt seriously, "I'll suggest it to Burgess to-night."

"You don't think there's any chance of it, really, do you?" said Mike awkwardly.

"I don't see why not? Buck up in the scratch game this afternoon. Fielding especially. Burgess is simply mad on fielding. I don't blame him either, especially as he's a bowler himself. He'd shove a man into the team like a shot, whatever his batting was like, if his fielding was something extra special. So you field like a demon this afternoon, and I'll carry on the good work in the evening."

"I say," said Mike, overcome, "it's awfully decent of you, Wyatt."

\* \* \* \* \*

Billy Burgess, captain of Wrykyn cricket, was a genial giant, who seldom allowed himself to be ruffled. The present was one of the rare occasions on which he permitted himself that luxury. Wyatt found him in his study, shortly before lock-up, full of strange oaths, like the soldier in Shakespeare.

"You rotter! You rotter! You worm!" he observed crisply, as Wyatt appeared.

"Dear old Billy!" said Wyatt. "Come on, give me a kiss, and let's be friends."

"You----!"

"William! William!"

"If it wasn't illegal, I'd like to tie you and Ashe and that blackguard Adams up in a big sack, and drop you into the river. And I'd jump on the sack first. What do you mean by letting the team down like this? I know you were at the bottom of it all."

He struggled into his shirt--he was changing after a bath--and his face popped wrathfully out at the other end.

"I'm awfully sorry, Bill," said Wyatt. "The fact is, in the excitement of the moment the M.C.C. match went clean out of my mind."

"You haven't got a mind," grumbled Burgess. "You've got a cheap brown paper substitute. That's your trouble."

Wyatt turned the conversation tactfully.

"How many wickets did you get to-day?" he asked.

"Eight. For a hundred and three. I was on the spot. Young Jackson caught a hot one off me at third man. That kid's good."

"Why don't you play him against the M.C.C. on Wednesday?" said Wyatt, jumping at his opportunity.



"What? Are you sitting on my left shoe?"

"No. There it is in the corner."

"Right ho!... What were you saying?"

"Why not play young Jackson for the first?"

"Too small."

"Rot. What does size matter? Cricket isn't footer. Besides, he isn't small. He's as tall as I am."

"I suppose he is. Dash, I've dropped my stud."

Wyatt waited patiently till he had retrieved it. Then he returned to the attack.

"He's as good a bat as his brother, and a better field."

"Old Bob can't field for toffee. I will say that for him. Dropped a sitter off me to-day. Why the deuce fellows can't hold catches when they drop slowly into their mouths I'm hanged if I can see."

"You play him," said Wyatt. "Just give him a trial. That kid's a genius at cricket. He's going to be better than any of his brothers,

even Joe. Give him a shot."

Burgess hesitated.

"You know, it's a bit risky," he said. "With you three lunatics out of the team we can't afford to try many experiments. Better stick to the men at the top of the second."

Wyatt got up, and kicked the wall as a vent for his feelings.

"You rotter," he said. "Can't you see when you've got a good man? Here's this kid waiting for you ready made with a style like Trumper's, and you rave about top men in the second, chaps who play forward at everything, and pat half-volleys back to the bowler! Do you realise that your only chance of being known to Posterity is as the man who gave M. Jackson his colours at Wrykyn? In a few years he'll be playing for England, and you'll think it a favour if he nods to you in the pav. at Lord's. When you're a white-haired old man you'll go doddering about, gassing to your grandchildren, poor kids, how you 'discovered' M. Jackson. It'll be the only thing they'll respect you for."

Wyatt stopped for breath.

"All right," said Burgess, "I'll think it over. Frightful gift of the gab you've got, Wyatt."

"Good," said Wyatt. "Think it over. And don't forget what I said about the grandchildren. You would like little Wyatt Burgess and the other little Burgesses to respect you in your old age, wouldn't you? Very well, then. So long. The bell went ages ago. I shall be locked out."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the Monday morning Mike passed the notice-board just as Burgess turned away from pinning up the list of the team to play the M.C.C. He read it, and his heart missed a beat. For, bottom but one, just above the W. B. Burgess, was a name that leaped from the paper at him. His own name.