

CHAPTER XIV

A SLIGHT IMBROGLIO

Mike got his third eleven colours after the M.C.C. match. As he had made twenty-three not out in a crisis in a first eleven match, this may not seem an excessive reward. But it was all that he expected. One had to take the rungs of the ladder singly at Wrykyn. First one was given one's third eleven cap. That meant, "You are a promising man, and we have our eye on you." Then came the second colours. They might mean anything from "Well, here you are. You won't get any higher, so you may as well have the thing now," to "This is just to show that we still have our eye on you."

Mike was a certainty now for the second. But it needed more than one performance to secure the first cap.

"I told you so," said Wyatt, naturally, to Burgess after the match.

"He's not bad," said Burgess. "I'll give him another shot."

But Burgess, as has been pointed out, was not a person who ever became gushing with enthusiasm.

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So Wilkins, of the School House, who had played twice for the first eleven, dropped down into the second, as many a good man had done before him, and Mike got his place in the next match, against the Gentlemen of the County. Unfortunately for him, the visiting team, however gentlemanly, were not brilliant cricketers, at any rate as far as bowling was concerned. The school won the toss, went in first, and made three hundred and sixteen for five wickets, Morris making another placid century. The innings was declared closed before Mike had a chance of distinguishing himself. In an innings which lasted for one over he made two runs, not out; and had to console himself for the cutting short of his performance by the fact that his average for the school was still infinity. Bob, who was one of those lucky enough to have an unabridged innings, did better in this match, making twenty-five. But with Morris making a hundred and seventeen, and Berridge, Ellerby, and Marsh all passing the half-century, this score did not show up excessively.

We now come to what was practically a turning-point in Mike's career at Wrykyn. There is no doubt that his meteor-like flights at cricket had an unsettling effect on him. He was enjoying life amazingly, and, as is not uncommon with the prosperous, he waxed fat and kicked. Fortunately for him--though he did not look upon it in that light at the time--he kicked the one person it was most imprudent to kick. The person he selected was Firby-Smith. With anybody else the thing might have blown over, to the detriment of Mike's character; but Firby-Smith,

having the most tender affection for his dignity, made a fuss.

It happened in this way. The immediate cause of the disturbance was a remark of Mike's, but the indirect cause was the unbearably patronising manner which the head of Wain's chose to adopt towards him. The fact that he was playing for the school seemed to make no difference at all. Firby-Smith continued to address Mike merely as the small boy.

The following, verbatim, was the tactful speech which he addressed to him on the evening of the M.C.C. match, having summoned him to his study for the purpose.

"Well," he said, "you played a very decent innings this afternoon, and I suppose you're frightfully pleased with yourself, eh? Well, mind you don't go getting swelled head. See? That's all. Run along."

Mike departed, bursting with fury.

The next link in the chain was forged a week after the Gentlemen of the County match. House matches had begun, and Wain's were playing Appleby's. Appleby's made a hundred and fifty odd, shaping badly for the most part against Wyatt's slows. Then Wain's opened their innings. The Gazeka, as head of the house, was captain of the side, and he and Wyatt went in first. Wyatt made a few mighty hits, and was then caught at cover. Mike went in first wicket.

For some ten minutes all was peace. Firby-Smith scratched away at his end, getting here and there a single and now and then a two, and Mike settled down at once to play what he felt was going to be the innings of a lifetime. Appleby's bowling was on the feeble side, with Raikes, of the third eleven, as the star, supported by some small change. Mike pounded it vigorously. To one who had been brought up on Saunders, Raikes possessed few subtleties. He had made seventeen, and was thoroughly set, when the Gazeka, who had the bowling, hit one in the direction of cover-point. With a certain type of batsman a single is a thing to take big risks for. And the Gazeka badly wanted that single.

"Come on," he shouted, prancing down the pitch.

Mike, who had remained in his crease with the idea that nobody even moderately sane would attempt a run for a hit like that, moved forward in a startled and irresolute manner. Firby-Smith arrived, shouting "Run!" and, cover having thrown the ball in, the wicket-keeper removed the bails.

These are solemn moments.

The only possible way of smoothing over an episode of this kind is for the guilty man to grovel.

Firby-Smith did not grovel.

"Easy run there, you know," he said reprovingly.

The world swam before Mike's eyes. Through the red mist he could see Firby-Smith's face. The sun glinted on his rather prominent teeth. To Mike's distorted vision it seemed that the criminal was amused.

"Don't laugh, you grinning ape!" he cried. "It isn't funny."

[Illustration: "DON'T LAUGH, YOU GRINNING APE"]

He then made for the trees where the rest of the team were sitting.

Now Firby-Smith not only possessed rather prominent teeth; he was also sensitive on the subject. Mike's shaft sank in deeply. The fact that emotion caused him to swipe at a straight half-volley, miss it, and be bowled next ball made the wound rankle.

He avoided Mike on his return to the trees. And Mike, feeling now a little apprehensive, avoided him.

The Gazeka brooded apart for the rest of the afternoon, chewing the insult. At close of play he sought Burgess.

Burgess, besides being captain of the eleven, was also head of the school. He was the man who arranged prefects' meetings. And only a

prefects' meeting, thought Firby-Smith, could adequately avenge his lacerated dignity.

"I want to speak to you, Burgess," he said.

"What's up?" said Burgess.

"You know young Jackson in our house."

"What about him?"

"He's been frightfully insolent."

"Cheeked you?" said Burgess, a man of simple speech.

"I want you to call a prefects' meeting, and lick him."

Burgess looked incredulous.

"Rather a large order, a prefects' meeting," he said. "It has to be a pretty serious sort of thing for that."

"Frightful cheek to a school prefect is a serious thing," said Firby-Smith, with the air of one uttering an epigram.

"Well, I suppose--What did he say to you?"

Firby-Smith related the painful details.

Burgess started to laugh, but turned the laugh into a cough.

"Yes," he said meditatively. "Rather thick. Still, I mean--A prefects' meeting. Rather like crushing a thingummy with a what-d'you-call-it. Besides, he's a decent kid."

"He's frightfully conceited."

"Oh, well--Well, anyhow, look here, I'll think it over, and let you know to-morrow. It's not the sort of thing to rush through without thinking about it."

And the matter was left temporarily at that.