

CHAPTER XV

MIKE CREATES A VACANCY

Burgess walked off the ground feeling that fate was not using him well.

Here was he, a well-meaning youth who wanted to be on good terms with all the world, being jockeyed into slaughtering a kid whose batting he admired and whom personally he liked. And the worst of it was that he sympathised with Mike. He knew what it felt like to be run out just when one had got set, and he knew exactly how maddening the Gazeka's manner would be on such an occasion. On the other hand, officially he was bound to support the head of Wain's. Prefects must stand together or chaos will come.

He thought he would talk it over with somebody. Bob occurred to him. It was only fair that Bob should be told, as the nearest of kin.

And here was another grievance against fate. Bob was a person he did not particularly wish to see just then. For that morning he had posted up the list of the team to play for the school against Geddington, one of the four schools which Wrykyn met at cricket; and Bob's name did not appear on that list. Several things had contributed to that melancholy omission. In the first place, Geddington, to judge from the

weekly reports in the Sportsman and Field, were strong this year at batting. In the second place, the results of the last few matches, and particularly the M.C.C. match, had given Burgess the idea that Wrykyn was weak at bowling. It became necessary, therefore, to drop a batsman out of the team in favour of a bowler. And either Mike or Bob must be the man.

Burgess was as rigidly conscientious as the captain of a school eleven should be. Bob was one of his best friends, and he would have given much to be able to put him in the team; but he thought the thing over, and put the temptation sturdily behind him. At batting there was not much to choose between the two, but in fielding there was a great deal. Mike was good. Bob was bad. So out Bob had gone, and Neville-Smith, a fair fast bowler at all times and on his day dangerous, took his place.

These clashings of public duty with private inclination are the drawbacks to the despotic position of captain of cricket at a public school. It is awkward having to meet your best friend after you have dropped him from the team, and it is difficult to talk to him as if nothing had happened.

Burgess felt very self-conscious as he entered Bob's study, and was rather glad that he had a topic of conversation ready to hand.

"Busy, Bob?" he asked.

"Hullo," said Bob, with a cheerfulness rather over-done in his anxiety to show Burgess, the man, that he did not hold him responsible in any way for the distressing acts of Burgess, the captain. "Take a pew. Don't these studies get beastly hot this weather. There's some ginger-beer in the cupboard. Have some?"

"No, thanks. I say, Bob, look here, I want to see you."

"Well, you can, can't you? This is me, sitting over here. The tall, dark, handsome chap."

"It's awfully awkward, you know," continued Burgess gloomily; "that ass of a young brother of yours--Sorry, but he is an ass, though he's your brother----"

"Thanks for the 'though,' Billy. You know how to put a thing nicely. What's Mike been up to?"

"It's that old fool the Gazeka. He came to me frothing with rage, and wanted me to call a prefects' meeting and touch young Mike up."

Bob displayed interest and excitement for the first time.

"Prefects' meeting! What the dickens is up? What's he been doing? Smith must be drunk. What's all the row about?"

Burgess repeated the main facts of the case as he had them from Firby-Smith.

"Personally, I sympathise with the kid," he added, "Still, the Gazeka is a prefect----"

Bob gnawed a pen-holder morosely.

"Silly young idiot," he said.

"Sickening thing being run out," suggested Burgess.

"Still----"

"I know. It's rather hard to see what to do. I suppose if the Gazeka insists, one's bound to support him."

"I suppose so."

"Awful rot. Prefects' lickings aren't meant for that sort of thing. They're supposed to be for kids who steal buns at the shop or muck about generally. Not for a chap who curses a fellow who runs him out. I tell you what, there's just a chance Firby-Smith won't press the thing. He hadn't had time to get over it when he saw me. By now he'll have simmered down a bit. Look here, you're a pal of his, aren't you? Well, go and ask him to drop the business. Say you'll curse your

brother and make him apologise, and that I'll kick him out of the team for the Geddington match."

It was a difficult moment for Bob. One cannot help one's thoughts, and for an instant the idea of going to Geddington with the team, as he would certainly do if Mike did not play, made him waver. But he recovered himself.

"Don't do that," he said. "I don't see there's a need for anything of that sort. You must play the best side you've got. I can easily talk the old Gazeka over. He gets all right in a second if he's treated the right way. I'll go and do it now."

Burgess looked miserable.

"I say, Bob," he said.

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing--I mean, you're not a bad sort." With which glowing eulogy he dashed out of the room, thanking his stars that he had won through a confoundedly awkward business.

Bob went across to Wain's to interview and soothe Firby-Smith.

He found that outraged hero sitting moodily in his study like Achilles

in his tent.

Seeing Bob, he became all animation.

"Look here," he said, "I wanted to see you. You know, that frightful young brother of yours----"

"I know, I know," said Bob. "Burgess was telling me. He wants kicking."

"He wants a frightful licking from the prefects," emended the aggrieved party.

"Well, I don't know, you know. Not much good lugging the prefects into it, is there? I mean, apart from everything else, not much of a catch for me, would it be, having to sit there and look on. I'm a prefect, too, you know."

Firby-Smith looked a little blank at this. He had a great admiration for Bob.

"I didn't think of you," he said.

"I thought you hadn't," said Bob. "You see it now, though, don't you?"

Firby-Smith returned to the original grievance.

"Well, you know, it was frightful cheek."

"Of course it was. Still, I think if I saw him and cursed him, and sent him up to you to apologise--How would that do?"

"All right. After all, I did run him out."

"Yes, there's that, of course. Mike's all right, really. It isn't as if he did that sort of thing as a habit."

"No. All right then."

"Thanks," said Bob, and went to find Mike.

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The lecture on deportment which he read that future All-England batsman in a secluded passage near the junior day-room left the latter rather limp and exceedingly meek. For the moment all the jauntiness and exuberance had been drained out of him. He was a punctured balloon. Reflection, and the distinctly discouraging replies of those experts in school law to whom he had put the question, "What d'you think he'll do?" had induced a very chastened frame of mind.

He perceived that he had walked very nearly into a hornets' nest, and

the realisation of his escape made him agree readily to all the conditions imposed. The apology to the Gazeka was made without reserve, and the offensively forgiving, say-no-more-about-it-but-take-care-in-future air of the head of the house roused no spark of resentment in him, so subdued was his fighting spirit. All he wanted was to get the thing done with. He was not inclined to be critical.

And, most of all, he felt grateful to Bob. Firby-Smith, in the course of his address, had not omitted to lay stress on the importance of Bob's intervention. But for Bob, he gave him to understand, he, Mike, would have been prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law. Mike came away with a confused picture in his mind of a horde of furious prefects bent on his slaughter, after the manner of a stage "excited crowd," and Bob waving them back. He realised that Bob had done him a good turn. He wished he could find some way of repaying him.

Curiously enough, it was an enemy of Bob's who suggested the way--Burton, of Donaldson's. Burton was a slippery young gentleman, fourteen years of age, who had frequently come into contact with Bob in the house, and owed him many grudges. With Mike he had always tried to form an alliance, though without success.

He happened to meet Mike going to school next morning, and unburdened his soul to him. It chanced that Bob and he had had another small encounter immediately after breakfast, and Burton felt revengeful.

"I say," said Burton, "I'm jolly glad you're playing for the first against Geddington."

"Thanks," said Mike.

"I'm specially glad for one reason."

"What's that?" inquired Mike, without interest.

"Because your beast of a brother has been chucked out. He'd have been playing but for you."

At any other time Mike would have heard Bob called a beast without active protest. He would have felt that it was no business of his to fight his brother's battles for him. But on this occasion he deviated from his rule.

He kicked Burton. Not once or twice, but several times, so that Burton, retiring hurriedly, came to the conclusion that it must be something in the Jackson blood, some taint, as it were. They were all beasts.

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Mike walked on, weighing this remark, and gradually made up his mind. It must be remembered that he was in a confused mental condition, and

that the only thing he realised clearly was that Bob had pulled him out of an uncommonly nasty hole. It seemed to him that it was necessary to repay Bob. He thought the thing over more fully during school, and his decision remained unaltered.

On the evening before the Geddington match, just before lock-up, Mike tapped at Burgess's study door. He tapped with his right hand, for his left was in a sling.

"Come in!" yelled the captain. "Hullo!"

"I'm awfully sorry, Burgess," said Mike. "I've crocked my wrist a bit."

"How did you do that? You were all right at the nets?"

"Slipped as I was changing," said Mike stolidly.

"Is it bad?"

"Nothing much. I'm afraid I shan't be able to play to-morrow."

"I say, that's bad luck. Beastly bad luck. We wanted your batting, too. Be all right, though, in a day or two, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, rather."

"Hope so, anyway."

"Thanks. Good-night."

"Good-night."

And Burgess, with the comfortable feeling that he had managed to combine duty and pleasure after all, wrote a note to Bob at Donaldson's, telling him to be ready to start with the team for Geddington by the 8.54 next morning.