

CHAPTER XVI

AN EXPERT EXAMINATION

Mike's Uncle John was a wanderer on the face of the earth. He had been an army surgeon in the days of his youth, and, after an adventurous career, mainly in Afghanistan, had inherited enough money to keep him in comfort for the rest of his life. He had thereupon left the service, and now spent most of his time flitting from one spot of Europe to another. He had been dashing up to Scotland on the day when Mike first became a Wrykynian, but a few weeks in an uncomfortable hotel in Skye and a few days in a comfortable one in Edinburgh had left him with the impression that he had now seen all that there was to be seen in North Britain and might reasonably shift his camp again.

Coming south, he had looked in on Mike's people for a brief space, and, at the request of Mike's mother, took the early express to Wrykyn in order to pay a visit of inspection.

His telegram arrived during morning school. Mike went down to the station to meet him after lunch.

Uncle John took command of the situation at once.

"School playing anybody to-day, Mike? I want to see a match."

"They're playing Geddington. Only it's away. There's a second match on."

"Why aren't you--Hullo, I didn't see. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Crooked my wrist a bit. It's nothing much."

"How did you do that?"

"Slipped while I was changing after cricket."

"Hurt?"

"Not much, thanks."

"Doctor seen it?"

"No. But it's really nothing. Be all right by Monday."

"H'm. Somebody ought to look at it. I'll have a look later on."

Mike did not appear to relish this prospect.

"It isn't anything, Uncle John, really. It doesn't matter a bit."

"Never mind. It won't do any harm having somebody examine it who knows a bit about these things. Now, what shall we do. Go on the river?"

"I shouldn't be able to steer."

"I could manage about that. Still, I think I should like to see the place first. Your mother's sure to ask me if you showed me round. It's like going over the stables when you're stopping at a country-house. Got to be done, and better do it as soon as possible."

It is never very interesting playing the part of showman at school. Both Mike and his uncle were inclined to scamp the business. Mike pointed out the various landmarks without much enthusiasm--it is only after one has left a few years that the school buildings take to themselves romance--and Uncle John said, "Ah yes, I see. Very nice," two or three times in an absent voice; and they passed on to the cricket field, where the second eleven were playing a neighbouring engineering school. It was a glorious day. The sun had never seemed to Mike so bright or the grass so green. It was one of those days when the ball looks like a large vermilion-coloured football as it leaves the bowler's hand. If ever there was a day when it seemed to Mike that a century would have been a certainty, it was this Saturday. A sudden, bitter realisation of all he had given up swept over him, but he choked the feeling down. The thing was done, and it was no good brooding over the might-have-beens now. Still--And the Geddington

ground was supposed to be one of the easiest scoring grounds of all the public schools!

"Well hit, by George!" remarked Uncle John, as Trevor, who had gone in first wicket for the second eleven, swept a half-volley to leg round to the bank where they were sitting.

"That's Trevor," said Mike. "Chap in Donaldson's. The fellow at the other end is Wilkins. He's in the School House. They look as if they were getting set. By Jove," he said enviously, "pretty good fun batting on a day like this."

Uncle John detected the envious note.

"I suppose you would have been playing here but for your wrist?"

"No, I was playing for the first."

"For the first? For the school! My word, Mike, I didn't know that. No wonder you're feeling badly treated. Of course, I remember your father saying you had played once for the school, and done well; but I thought that was only as a substitute. I didn't know you were a regular member of the team. What bad luck. Will you get another chance?"

"Depends on Bob."

"Has Bob got your place?"

Mike nodded.

"If he does well to-day, they'll probably keep him in."

"Isn't there room for both of you?"

"Such a lot of old colours. There are only three vacancies, and Henfrey got one of those a week ago. I expect they'll give one of the other two to a bowler, Neville-Smith, I should think, if he does well against Geddington. Then there'll be only the last place left."

"Rather awkward, that."

"Still, it's Bob's last year. I've got plenty of time. But I wish I could get in this year."

After they had watched the match for an hour, Uncle John's restless nature asserted itself.

"Suppose we go for a pull on the river now?" he suggested.

They got up.

"Let's just call at the shop," said Mike. "There ought to be a telegram from Geddington by this time. I wonder how Bob's got on."

Apparently Bob had not had a chance yet of distinguishing himself. The telegram read, "Geddington 151 for four. Lunch."

"Not bad that," said Mike. "But I believe they're weak in bowling."

They walked down the road towards the school landing-stage.

"The worst of a school," said Uncle John, as he pulled up-stream with strong, unskilful stroke, "is that one isn't allowed to smoke on the grounds. I badly want a pipe. The next piece of shade that you see, sing out, and we'll put in there."

"Pull your left," said Mike. "That willow's what you want."

Uncle John looked over his shoulder, caught a crab, recovered himself, and steered the boat in under the shade of the branches.

"Put the rope over that stump. Can you manage with one hand? Here, let me--Done it? Good. A-ah!"

He blew a great cloud of smoke into the air, and sighed contentedly.

"I hope you don't smoke, Mike?"

"No."

"Rotten trick for a boy. When you get to my age you need it. Boys ought to be thinking about keeping themselves fit and being good at games. Which reminds me. Let's have a look at the wrist."

A hunted expression came into Mike's eyes.

"It's really nothing," he began, but his uncle had already removed the sling, and was examining the arm with the neat rapidity of one who has been brought up to such things.

To Mike it seemed as if everything in the world was standing still and waiting. He could hear nothing but his own breathing.

His uncle pressed the wrist gingerly once or twice, then gave it a little twist.

"That hurt?" he asked.

"Ye--no," stammered Mike.

Uncle John looked up sharply. Mike was crimson.

"What's the game?" inquired Uncle John.

Mike said nothing.

There was a twinkle in his uncle's eyes.

"May as well tell me. I won't give you away. Why this wounded warrior business when you've no more the matter with you than I have?"

Mike hesitated.

"I only wanted to get out of having to write this morning. There was an exam, on."

The idea had occurred to him just before he spoke. It had struck him as neat and plausible.

To Uncle John it did not appear in the same light.

"Do you always write with your left hand? And if you had gone with the first eleven to Geddington, wouldn't that have got you out of your exam? Try again."

When in doubt, one may as well tell the truth. Mike told it.

"I know. It wasn't that, really. Only----"

"Well?"

"Oh, well, dash it all then. Old Bob got me out of an awful row the day before yesterday, and he seemed a bit sick at not playing for the first, so I thought I might as well let him. That's how it was. Look here, swear you won't tell him."

Uncle John was silent. Inwardly he was deciding that the five shillings which he had intended to bestow on Mike on his departure should become a sovereign. (This, it may be mentioned as an interesting biographical fact, was the only occasion in his life on which Mike earned money at the rate of fifteen shillings a half-minute.)

"Swear you won't tell him. He'd be most frightfully sick if he knew."

"I won't tell him."

Conversation dwindled to vanishing-point. Uncle John smoked on in weighty silence, while Mike, staring up at the blue sky through the branches of the willow, let his mind wander to Geddington, where his fate was even now being sealed. How had the school got on? What had Bob done? If he made about twenty, would they give him his cap? Supposing....

A faint snore from Uncle John broke in on his meditations. Then there

was a clatter as a briar pipe dropped on to the floor of the boat, and his uncle sat up, gaping.

"Jove, I was nearly asleep. What's the time? Just on six? Didn't know it was so late."

"I ought to be getting back soon, I think. Lock-up's at half-past."

"Up with the anchor, then. You can tackle that rope with two hands now, eh? We are not observed. Don't fall overboard. I'm going to shove her off."

"There'll be another telegram, I should think," said Mike, as they reached the school gates.

"Shall we go and look?"

They walked to the shop.

A second piece of grey paper had been pinned up under the first. Mike pushed his way through the crowd. It was a longer message this time.

It ran as follows:

"Geddington 247 (Burgess six wickets, Neville-Smith four).

Wrykyn 270 for nine (Berridge 86, Marsh 58, Jackson 48)."

Mike worked his way back through the throng, and rejoined his uncle.

"Well?" said Uncle John.

"We won."

He paused for a moment.

"Bob made forty-eight," he added carelessly.

Uncle John felt in his pocket, and silently slid a sovereign into Mike's hand.

It was the only possible reply.