CHAPTER XVII

ANOTHER VACANCY

Wyatt got back late that night, arriving at the dormitory as Mike was going to bed.

"By Jove, I'm done," he said. "It was simply baking at Geddington. And I came back in a carriage with Neville-Smith and Ellerby, and they ragged the whole time. I wanted to go to sleep, only they wouldn't let me. Old Smith was awfully bucked because he'd taken four wickets. I should think he'd go off his nut if he took eight ever. He was singing comic songs when he wasn't trying to put Ellerby under the seat. How's your wrist?"

"Oh, better, thanks."

Wyatt began to undress.

"Any colours?" asked Mike after a pause. First eleven colours were generally given in the pavilion after a match or on the journey home.

"No. Only one or two thirds. Jenkins and Clephane, and another chap, can't remember who. No first, though."

"What was Bob's innings like?"

"Not bad. A bit lucky. He ought to have been out before he'd scored, and he was out when he'd made about sixteen, only the umpire didn't seem to know that it's l-b-w when you get your leg right in front of the wicket and the ball hits it. Never saw a clearer case in my life. I was in at the other end. Bit rotten for the Geddington chaps. Just lost them the match. Their umpire, too. Bit of luck for Bob. He didn't give the ghost of a chance after that."

"I should have thought they'd have given him his colours."

"Most captains would have done, only Burgess is so keen on fielding that he rather keeps off it."

"Why, did he field badly?"

"Rottenly. And the man always will choose Billy's bowling to drop catches off. And Billy would cut his rich uncle from Australia if he kept on dropping them off him. Bob's fielding's perfectly sinful. He was pretty bad at the beginning of the season, but now he's got so nervous that he's a dozen times worse. He turns a delicate green when he sees a catch coming. He let their best man off twice in one over, off Billy, to-day; and the chap went on and made a hundred odd. Ripping innings bar those two chances. I hear he's got an average of eighty in school matches this season. Beastly man to bowl to. Knocked

me off in half a dozen overs. And, when he does give a couple of easy chances, Bob puts them both on the floor. Billy wouldn't have given him his cap after the match if he'd made a hundred. Bob's the sort of man who wouldn't catch a ball if you handed it to him on a plate, with watercress round it."

Burgess, reviewing the match that night, as he lay awake in his cubicle, had come to much the same conclusion. He was very fond of Bob, but two missed catches in one over was straining the bonds of human affection too far. There would have been serious trouble between David and Jonathan if either had persisted in dropping catches off the other's bowling. He writhed in bed as he remembered the second of the two chances which the wretched Bob had refused. The scene was indelibly printed on his mind. Chap had got a late cut which he fancied rather. With great guile he had fed this late cut. Sent down a couple which he put to the boundary. Then fired a third much faster and a bit shorter. Chap had a go at it, just as he had expected: and he felt that life was a good thing after all when the ball just touched the corner of the bat and flew into Bob's hands. And Bob dropped it!

The memory was too bitter. If he dwelt on it, he felt, he would get insomnia. So he turned to pleasanter reflections: the yorker which had shattered the second-wicket man, and the slow head-ball which had led to a big hitter being caught on the boundary. Soothed by these memories, he fell asleep.

Next morning he found himself in a softened frame of mind. He thought of Bob's iniquities with sorrow rather than wrath. He felt towards him much as a father feels towards a prodigal son whom there is still a chance of reforming. He overtook Bob on his way to chapel.

Directness was always one of Burgess's leading qualities.

"Look here, Bob. About your fielding. It's simply awful."

Bob was all remorse.

"It's those beastly slip catches. I can't time them."

"That one yesterday was right into your hands. Both of them were."

"I know. I'm frightfully sorry."

"Well, but I mean, why can't you hold them? It's no good being a good bat--you're that all right--if you're going to give away runs in the field."

"Do you know, I believe I should do better in the deep. I could get time to watch them there. I wish you'd give me a shot in the deep--for the second."

"Second be blowed! I want your batting in the first. Do you think you'd really do better in the deep?"

"I'm almost certain I should. I'll practise like mad. Trevor'll hit me up catches. I hate the slips. I get in the dickens of a funk directly the bowler starts his run now. I know that if a catch does come, I shall miss it. I'm certain the deep would be much better."

"All right then. Try it."

The conversation turned to less pressing topics.

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In the next two matches, accordingly, Bob figured on the boundary, where he had not much to do except throw the ball back to the bowler, and stop an occasional drive along the carpet. The beauty of fielding in the deep is that no unpleasant surprises can be sprung upon one. There is just that moment or two for collecting one's thoughts which makes the whole difference. Bob, as he stood regarding the game from afar, found his self-confidence returning slowly, drop by drop.

As for Mike, he played for the second, and hoped for the day.

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His opportunity came at last. It will be remembered that on the morning after the Great Picnic the headmaster made an announcement in Hall to the effect that, owing to an outbreak of chicken-pox in the town, all streets except the High Street would be out of bounds. This did not affect the bulk of the school, for most of the shops to which any one ever thought of going were in the High Street. But there were certain inquiring minds who liked to ferret about in odd corners.

Among these was one Leather-Twigg, of Seymour's, better known in criminal circles as Shoeblossom.

Shoeblossom was a curious mixture of the Energetic Ragger and the Quiet Student. On a Monday evening you would hear a hideous uproar proceeding from Seymour's junior day-room; and, going down with a swagger-stick to investigate, you would find a tangled heap of squealing humanity on the floor, and at the bottom of the heap, squealing louder than any two others, would be Shoeblossom, his collar burst and blackened and his face apoplectically crimson. On the Tuesday afternoon, strolling in some shady corner of the grounds you would come upon him lying on his chest, deep in some work of fiction and resentful of interruption. On the Wednesday morning he would be in receipt of four hundred lines from his housemaster for breaking three windows and a gas-globe. Essentially a man of moods, Shoeblossom.

It happened about the date of the Geddington match that he took out from the school library a copy of "The Iron Pirate," and for the next

day or two he wandered about like a lost spirit trying to find a sequestered spot in which to read it. His inability to hit on such a spot was rendered more irritating by the fact that, to judge from the first few chapters (which he had managed to get through during prep. one night under the eye of a short-sighted master), the book was obviously the last word in hot stuff. He tried the junior day-room, but people threw cushions at him. He tried out of doors, and a ball hit from a neighbouring net nearly scalped him. Anything in the nature of concentration became impossible in these circumstances.

Then he recollected that in a quiet backwater off the High Street there was a little confectioner's shop, where tea might be had at a reasonable sum, and also, what was more important, peace.

He made his way there, and in the dingy back shop, all amongst the dust and bluebottles, settled down to a thoughtful perusal of chapter six.

Upstairs, at the same moment, the doctor was recommending that Master John George, the son of the house, be kept warm and out of draughts and not permitted to scratch himself, however necessary such an action might seem to him. In brief, he was attending J. G. for chicken-pox.

Shoeblossom came away, entering the High Street furtively, lest Authority should see him out of bounds, and returned to the school, where he went about his lawful occasions as if there were no such

thing as chicken-pox in the world.

But all the while the microbe was getting in some unostentatious but clever work. A week later Shoeblossom began to feel queer. He had occasional headaches, and found himself oppressed by a queer distaste for food. The professional advice of Dr. Oakes, the school doctor, was called for, and Shoeblossom took up his abode in the Infirmary, where he read Punch, sucked oranges, and thought of Life.

Two days later Barry felt queer. He, too, disappeared from Society.

Chicken-pox is no respecter of persons. The next victim was Marsh, of the first eleven. Marsh, who was top of the school averages. Where were his drives now, his late cuts that were wont to set the pavilion in a roar. Wrapped in a blanket, and looking like the spotted marvel of a travelling circus, he was driven across to the Infirmary in a four-wheeler, and it became incumbent upon Burgess to select a substitute for him.

And so it came about that Mike soared once again into the ranks of the elect, and found his name down in the team to play against the Incogniti.