

CHAPTER XVIII

BOB HAS NEWS TO IMPART

Wrykyn went down badly before the Incogs. It generally happens at least once in a school cricket season that the team collapses hopelessly, for no apparent reason. Some schools do it in nearly every match, but Wrykyn so far had been particularly fortunate this year. They had only been beaten once, and that by a mere twenty odd runs in a hard-fought game. But on this particular day, against a not overwhelmingly strong side, they failed miserably. The weather may have had something to do with it, for rain fell early in the morning, and the school, batting first on the drying wicket, found themselves considerably puzzled by a slow left-hander. Morris and Berridge left with the score still short of ten, and after that the rout began. Bob, going in fourth wicket, made a dozen, and Mike kept his end up, and was not out eleven; but nobody except Wyatt, who hit out at everything and knocked up thirty before he was stumped, did anything to distinguish himself. The total was a hundred and seven, and the Incogniti, batting when the wicket was easier, doubled this.

The general opinion of the school after this match was that either Mike or Bob would have to stand down from the team when it was definitely filled up, for Neville-Smith, by showing up well with the ball against the Incogniti when the others failed with the bat, made

it practically certain that he would get one of the two vacancies.

"If I do" he said to Wyatt, "there will be the biggest bust of modern times at my place. My pater is away for a holiday in Norway, and I'm alone, bar the servants. And I can square them. Will you come?"

"Tea?"

"Tea!" said Neville-Smith scornfully.

"Well, what then?"

"Don't you ever have feeds in the dorms. after lights-out in the houses?"

"Used to when I was a kid. Too old now. Have to look after my digestion. I remember, three years ago, when Wain's won the footer cup, we got up and fed at about two in the morning. All sorts of luxuries. Sardines on sugar-biscuits. I've got the taste in my mouth still. Do you remember Macpherson? Left a couple of years ago. His food ran out, so he spread brown-boot polish on bread, and ate that. Got through a slice, too. Wonderful chap! But what about this thing of yours? What time's it going to be?"

"Eleven suit you?"

"All right."

"How about getting out?"

"I'll do it as quickly as the team did to-day. I can't say more than that."

"You were all right."

"I'm an exceptional sort of chap."

"What about the Jacksons?"

"It's going to be a close thing. If Bob's fielding were to improve suddenly, he would just do it. But young Mike's all over him as a bat. In a year or two that kid'll be a marvel. He's bound to get in next year, of course, so perhaps it would be better if Bob got the place as it's his last season. Still, one wants the best man, of course."

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Mike avoided Bob as much as possible during this anxious period; and he privately thought it rather tactless of the latter when, meeting him one day outside Donaldson's, he insisted on his coming in and having some tea.

Mike shuffled uncomfortably as his brother filled the kettle and lit the Etna. It required more tact than he had at his disposal to carry off a situation like this.

Bob, being older, was more at his ease. He got tea ready, making desultory conversation the while, as if there were no particular reason why either of them should feel uncomfortable in the other's presence. When he had finished, he poured Mike out a cup, passed him the bread, and sat down.

"Not seen much of each other lately, Mike, what?"

Mike murmured unintelligibly through a mouthful of bread-and-jam.

"It's no good pretending it isn't an awkward situation," continued Bob, "because it is. Beastly awkward."

"Awful rot the pater sending us to the same school."

"Oh, I don't know. We've all been at Wrykyn. Pity to spoil the record. It's your fault for being such a young Infant Prodigy, and mine for not being able to field like an ordinary human being."

"You get on much better in the deep."

"Bit better, yes. Liable at any moment to miss a sitter, though. Not

that it matters much really whether I do now."

Mike stared.

"What! Why?"

"That's what I wanted to see you about. Has Burgess said anything to you yet?"

"No. Why? What about?"

"Well, I've a sort of idea our little race is over. I fancy you've won."

"I've not heard a word----"

"I have. I'll tell you what makes me think the thing's settled. I was in the pav. just now, in the First room, trying to find a batting-glove I'd mislaid. There was a copy of the Wrykynian lying on the mantelpiece, and I picked it up and started reading it. So there wasn't any noise to show anybody outside that there was some one in the room. And then I heard Burgess and Spence jawing on the steps. They thought the place was empty, of course. I couldn't help hearing what they said. The pav.'s like a sounding-board. I heard every word. Spence said, 'Well, it's about as difficult a problem as any captain of cricket at Wrykyn has ever had to tackle.' I had a sort of

idea that old Billy liked to boss things all on his own, but apparently he does consult Spence sometimes. After all, he's cricket-master, and that's what he's there for. Well, Billy said, 'I don't know what to do. What do you think, sir?' Spence said, 'Well, I'll give you my opinion, Burgess, but don't feel bound to act on it. I'm simply saying what I think.' 'Yes, sir,' said old Bill, doing a big Young Disciple with Wise Master act. 'I think M.,' said Spence. 'Decidedly M. He's a shade better than R. now, and in a year or two, of course, there'll be no comparison.'"

"Oh, rot," muttered Mike, wiping the sweat off his forehead. This was one of the most harrowing interviews he had ever been through.

"Not at all. Billy agreed with him. 'That's just what I think, sir,' he said. 'It's rough on Bob, but still----' And then they walked down the steps. I waited a bit to give them a good start, and then sheered off myself. And so home."

Mike looked at the floor, and said nothing.

There was nothing much to be said.

"Well, what I wanted to see you about was this," resumed Bob. "I don't propose to kiss you or anything; but, on the other hand, don't let's go to the other extreme. I'm not saying that it isn't a bit of a brick just missing my cap like this, but it would have been just as bad for

you if you'd been the one dropped. It's the fortune of war. I don't want you to go about feeling that you've blighted my life, and so on, and dashing up side-streets to avoid me because you think the sight of you will be painful. As it isn't me, I'm jolly glad it's you; and I shall cadge a seat in the pavilion from you when you're playing for England at the Oval. Congratulate you."

It was the custom at Wrykyn, when you congratulated a man on getting colours, to shake his hand. They shook hands.

"Thanks, awfully, Bob," said Mike. And after that there seemed to be nothing much to talk about. So Mike edged out of the room, and tore across to Wain's.

He was sorry for Bob, but he would not have been human (which he certainly was) if the triumph of having won through at last into the first eleven had not dwarfed commiseration. It had been his one ambition, and now he had achieved it.

The annoying part of the thing was that he had nobody to talk to about it. Until the news was official he could not mention it to the common herd. It wouldn't do. The only possible confidant was Wyatt. And Wyatt was at Bisley, shooting with the School Eight for the Ashburton. For bull's-eyes as well as cats came within Wyatt's range as a marksman. Cricket took up too much of his time for him to be captain of the Eight and the man chosen to shoot for the Spencer, as he would

otherwise almost certainly have been; but even though short of practice he was well up in the team.

Until he returned, Mike could tell nobody. And by the time he returned the notice would probably be up in the Senior Block with the other cricket notices.

In this fermenting state Mike went into the house.

The list of the team to play for Wain's v. Seymour's on the following Monday was on the board. As he passed it, a few words scrawled in pencil at the bottom caught his eye.

"All the above will turn out for house-fielding at 6.30 to-morrow morning.--W. F.-S."

"Oh, dash it," said Mike, "what rot! Why on earth can't he leave us alone!"

For getting up an hour before his customary time for rising was not among Mike's favourite pastimes. Still, orders were orders, he felt. It would have to be done.