

CHAPTER XX

THE TEAM IS FILLED UP

When Burgess, at the end of the conversation in the pavilion with Mr. Spence which Bob Jackson had overheard, accompanied the cricket-master across the field to the boarding-houses, he had distinctly made up his mind to give Mike his first eleven colours next day. There was only one more match to be played before the school fixture-list was finished. That was the match with Ripton. Both at cricket and football Ripton was the school that mattered most. Wrykyn did not always win its other school matches; but it generally did. The public schools of England divide themselves naturally into little groups, as far as games are concerned. Harrow, Eton, and Winchester are one group: Westminster and Charterhouse another: Bedford, Tonbridge, Dulwich, Haileybury, and St. Paul's are a third. In this way, Wrykyn, Ripton, Geddington, and Wilborough formed a group. There was no actual championship competition, but each played each, and by the end of the season it was easy to see which was entitled to first place. This nearly always lay between Ripton and Wrykyn. Sometimes an exceptional Geddington team would sweep the board, or Wrykyn, having beaten Ripton, would go down before Wilborough. But this did not happen often. Usually Wilborough and Geddington were left to scramble for the wooden spoon.

Secretaries of cricket at Ripton and Wrykyn always liked to arrange the date of the match towards the end of the term, so that they might take the field with representative and not experimental teams. By July the weeding-out process had generally finished. Besides which the members of the teams had had time to get into form.

At Wrykyn it was the custom to fill up the team, if possible, before the Ripton match. A player is likely to show better form if he has got his colours than if his fate depends on what he does in that particular match.

Burgess, accordingly, had resolved to fill up the first eleven just a week before Ripton visited Wrykyn. There were two vacancies. One gave him no trouble. Neville-Smith was not a great bowler, but he was steady, and he had done well in the earlier matches. He had fairly earned his place. But the choice between Bob and Mike had kept him awake into the small hours two nights in succession. Finally he had consulted Mr. Spence, and Mr. Spence had voted for Mike.

Burgess was glad the thing was settled. The temptation to allow sentiment to interfere with business might have become too strong if he had waited much longer. He knew that it would be a wrench definitely excluding Bob from the team, and he hated to have to do it. The more he thought of it, the sorrier he was for him. If he could have pleased himself, he would have kept Bob in. But, as the poet has

it, "Pleasure is pleasure, and biz is biz, and kep' in a sepyrit jug."

The first duty of a captain is to have no friends.

From small causes great events do spring. If Burgess had not picked up a particularly interesting novel after breakfast on the morning of Mike's interview with Firby-Smith in the study, the list would have gone up on the notice-board after prayers. As it was, engrossed in his book, he let the moments go by till the sound on the bell startled him into movement. And then there was only time to gather up his cap, and sprint. The paper on which he had intended to write the list and the pen he had laid out to write it with lay untouched on the table.

And, as it was not his habit to put up notices except during the morning, he postponed the thing. He could write it after tea. After all, there was a week before the match.

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When school was over, he went across to the Infirmary to Inquire about Marsh. The report was more than favourable. Marsh had better not see any one just yet, In case of accident, but he was certain to be out in time to play against Ripton.

"Doctor Oakes thinks he will be back in school on Tuesday."

"Banzai!" said Burgess, feeling that life was good. To take the field

against Ripton without Marsh would have been to court disaster. Marsh's fielding alone was worth the money. With him at short slip, Burgess felt safe when he bowled.

The uncomfortable burden of the knowledge that he was about temporarily to sour Bob Jackson's life ceased for the moment to trouble him. He crooned extracts from musical comedy as he walked towards the nets.

Recollection of Bob's hard case was brought to him by the sight of that about-to-be-soured sportsman tearing across the ground in the middle distance in an effort to get to a high catch which Trevor had hit up to him. It was a difficult catch, and Burgess waited to see if he would bring it off.

Bob got to it with one hand, and held it. His impetus carried him on almost to where Burgess was standing.

"Well held," said Burgess.

"Hullo," said Bob awkwardly. A gruesome thought had flashed across his mind that the captain might think that this gallery-work was an organised advertisement.

"I couldn't get both hands to it," he explained.

"You're hot stuff in the deep."

"Easy when you're only practising."

"I've just been to the Infirmary."

"Oh. How's Marsh?"

"They wouldn't let me see him, but it's all right. He'll be able to play on Saturday."

"Good," said Bob, hoping he had said it as if he meant it. It was decidedly a blow. He was glad for the sake of the school, of course, but one has one's personal ambitions. To the fact that Mike and not himself was the eleventh cap he had become partially resigned: but he had wanted rather badly to play against Ripton.

Burgess passed on, his mind full of Bob once more. What hard luck it was! There was he, dashing about in the sun to improve his fielding, and all the time the team was filled up. He felt as if he were playing some low trick on a pal.

Then the Jekyll and Hyde business completed itself. He suppressed his personal feelings, and became the cricket captain again.

It was the cricket captain who, towards the end of the evening, came

upon Firby-Smith and Mike parting at the conclusion of a conversation. That it had not been a friendly conversation would have been evident to the most casual observer from the manner in which Mike stumped off, swinging his cricket-bag as if it were a weapon of offence. There are many kinds of walk. Mike's was the walk of the Overwrought Soul.

"What's up?" inquired Burgess.

"Young Jackson, do you mean? Oh, nothing. I was only telling him that there was going to be house-fielding to-morrow before breakfast."

"Didn't he like the idea?"

"He's jolly well got to like it," said the Gazeka, as who should say, "This way for Iron Wills." "The frightful kid cut it this morning. There'll be worse trouble if he does it again."

There was, it may be mentioned, not an ounce of malice in the head of Wain's house. That by telling the captain of cricket that Mike had shirked fielding-practice he might injure the latter's prospects of a first eleven cap simply did not occur to him. That Burgess would feel, on being told of Mike's slackness, much as a bishop might feel if he heard that a favourite curate had become a Mahometan or a Mumbo-Jumboist, did not enter his mind. All he considered was that the story of his dealings with Mike showed him, Firby-Smith, in the favourable and dashing character of the fellow-who-will-stand-no-nonsense, a sort

of Captain Kettle on dry land, in fact; and so he proceeded to tell it in detail.

Burgess parted with him with the firm conviction that Mike was a young slacker. Keeness in fielding was a fetish with him; and to cut practice struck him as a crime.

He felt that he had been deceived in Mike.

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When, therefore, one takes into consideration his private bias in favour of Bob, and adds to it the reaction caused by this sudden unmasking of Mike, it is not surprising that the list Burgess made out that night before he went to bed differed in an important respect from the one he had intended to write before school.

Mike happened to be near the notice-board when he pinned it up. It was only the pleasure of seeing his name down in black-and-white that made him trouble to look at the list. Bob's news of the day before yesterday had made it clear how that list would run.

The crowd that collected the moment Burgess had walked off carried him right up to the board.

He looked at the paper.

"Hard luck!" said somebody.

Mike scarcely heard him.

He felt physically sick with the shock of the disappointment. For the initial before the name Jackson was R.

There was no possibility of mistake. Since writing was invented, there had never been an R. that looked less like an M. than the one on that list.

Bob had beaten him on the tape.