

XXV

THE CRICKET MATCH

I THINK there has not been so much on a cricket match since the day when Sir Horace Mann walked about Broad Ha'penny agitatedly cutting down the daisies with his stick. And, be it remembered, the heroes of Hambleton played for money and renown only, while David was champion of a lady. A lady! May we not prettily say of two ladies? There were no spectators of our contest except now and again some loiterer in the Gardens who little thought what was the stake for which we played, but cannot we conceive Barbara standing at the ropes and agitatedly cutting down the daisies every time David missed the ball? I tell you, this was the historic match of the Gardens.

David wanted to play on a pitch near the Round Pond with which he is familiar, but this would have placed me at a disadvantage, so I insisted on unaccustomed ground, and we finally pitched

stumps in the Figs. We could not exactly pitch stumps, for they are forbidden in the Gardens, but there are trees here and there which have chalk-marks on them throughout the summer, and when you take up your position with a bat near one of these you have really pitched stumps. The tree we selected is a ragged yew which consists of a broken trunk and one branch, and I viewed the ground with secret satisfaction, for it falls slightly at about four yards' distance from the tree, and this exactly suits my style of bowling.

I won the toss, and after examining the wicket decided to take first knock. As a rule when we play the wit at first flows free, but on this occasion I strode to the crease in an almost eerie silence. David had taken off his blouse and rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and his teeth were set, so I knew he would begin by sending me down some fast ones.

His delivery is under-arm and not inelegant, but he sometimes tries a round-arm ball, which I have seen double up the fielder at square leg. He has not a good length, but he varies his action bewilderingly, and has one especially teasing ball which falls from the branches just as you have stepped out of your ground to look for it. It was not, how-

ever with his teaser that he bowled me that day. I had notched a three and two singles, when he sent me down a medium to fast, which got me in two minds, and I played back to it too late. Now, I am seldom out on a really grassy wicket for such a meagre score, and as David and I changed places without a word, there was a cheery look on his face that I found very galling. He ran in to my second ball and cut it neatly to the on for a single, and off my fifth and sixth he had two pretty drives for three, both behind the wicket. This, however, as I hoped, proved the undoing of him, for he now hit out confidently at everything, and with his score at nine I beat him with my shooter.

The look was now on my face.

I opened my second innings by treating him with uncommon respect, for I knew that his little arm soon tired if he was unsuccessful, and then when he sent me loose ones I banged him to the railings. What cared I though David's lips were twitching.

When he ultimately got past my defence, with a jumpy one which broke awkwardly from the off, I had fetched twenty-three, so that he needed twenty to win, a longer hand than he had ever yet made. As I gave him the bat he looked brave, but some-

thing wet fell on my hand, and then a sudden fear seized me lest David should not win.

At the very outset, however, he seemed to master the bowling, and soon fetched about ten runs in a classic manner. Then I tossed him a Yorker which he missed and it went off at a tangent as soon as it had reached the tree. 'Not out,' I cried hastily, for the face he turned to me was terrible.

Soon thereafter another incident happened, which I shall always recall with pleasure. He had caught the ball too high on the bat, and I just missed the catch. 'Dash it all!' said I irritably, and was about to resume bowling, when I noticed that he was unhappy. He hesitated, took up his position at the wicket, and then came to me manfully. 'I am a cad,' he said in distress, 'for when the ball was in the air I prayed.' He had prayed that I should miss the catch, and as I think I have already told you, it is considered unfair in the Gardens to pray for victory.

My splendid David! He has the faults of other little boys, but he has a noble sense of fairness. 'We shall call it a no-ball, David,' I said gravely.

I suppose the suspense of the reader is now painful, and therefore I shall say at once that

David won the match with two lovely fours, the one over my head and the other to leg all along the ground. When I came back from fielding this last ball I found him embracing his bat, and to my sour congratulations he could at first reply only with hysterical sounds. But soon he was pelting home to his mother with the glorious news.

And that is how we let Barbara in.