

THE PUDDLETON AND GROUND V. THE  
COTTON SPINNERS OF BOBBINSTOWN.

“ELL, this is what I call a fix,” said the Honorary Secretary of the Puddleton Cricket Club, to the captain of the first eleven, as he read a telegram which had just been handed to him at the bar of the “Clover Leaf.”

“What’s a fix?”

“Why, this is from the captain of the Cotton Spinners, at Crickley, to say that they have just left, but have had a wild night of it, and hopes there is a good barber’s shop at Puddleton, not a man having been able to shave himself for two days, and don’t want to appear before Lord Puddleton and swells unless cleaned up a little.”

“As if Lord Puddleton cared one sneeze of snuff whether a Cotton Spinner played with an inch of hair on his chin and his face unwashed so long as he could play cricket.”

“Well, but the honour of Puddleton is concerned,” said the enthusiastic native. “Why, they’ll be going away back home saying that Puddleton’s a miserable little one-horse place without a barber’s shop.”

“Let them say it, and be hanged; but there’s Lord Puddleton himself, in full flannel ready for the match, in his dog-cart, and by Jove—yes—the Honourable Matthew Mignette, the crack Cambridge bat. You show his lordship the telegram; maybe his valet will do the work for them in the marquee, if they are so deuced particular about their personal appearances.”

The Right Honourable Viscount Puddleton, Lord of the Manor, had succeeded to the family estates a few years previous to the period of our story, and was, as the Puddletonians described it, swimming “in silver and gold.” His lordship was a keen all-round sportsman, an enthusiastic cricketer, and if he had any faults at all it was a fondness for practical joking. He had played the very deuce in Puddleton on several occasions, and, had it not been for the fact that he was the man of

the place, would have, no doubt, been brought before the local magistrates. He it was who had covered the statue of Venus in the Market Square, which had been condemned as far too nude, in a night-dress and petticoat; and he it was and his college companions who had changed all the sign posts, and stuck "mangling and wringing done here," over the chief surgeon-dentist's doorway, and "repairs neatly executed" on the doctor's gateway. A spinster milliner's notice card—"A large amount of ladies' clothing always on view inside," was on Sunday morning found on a notorious bachelor's window-pane; whilst "A young man wanted," supplied its place. All these for a time were taken in good part, but there were not a few who said that young Lord Puddy was working to have his ears boxed.

"Eh, what did you say, Dunstan, about the Cotton Spinners? They're coming, are they not?"

"Yes, my lord, but they're anxious to get shaved and brushed up before taking the field. They've been playing, travelling, and sprecing, so far as I can make out, for a week, and I'm to conduct them to the nearest barber's on arrival. Now, there hasn't been a barber in Puddleton since old Naggles cut his throat with his own razor 'for want of a single chin to use it on,' as he said, so I thought your lordship's valet might——"

"My valet, Simpkins, shave strangers, Dunstan? Well, you're mighty ignorant of the world, or you might know that now-a-days a valet is a far greater man than his master. Why, if I suggested such a thing he'd go off in the night time, if he did not go off in a fit, and I don't want that. He's too valuable a man. Isn't he, Mat?"

"Yes, I should say if he'd only write a treatise on the 'Cause, Symptoms, and Cure of Jumps,' he'd be made family physician to the Bachelors' Club."

"Look here, I'll tell you what we'll do. Mat and I will shave them ourselves."

"You, my lord, you couldn't shave them," said the terrified secretary, starting back in alarm.

"Couldn't shave a man's beard off, why, man alive, I once clipped and singed a whole horse."

"Yes, and I shaved my sister's poodle from ears to tail, once," said the Honourable Mat, as fond of fun as his lordship.

“Yes, Dunstan, we’ll do it; you dust out old Naggles’ shop as quick as you can, and get someone to rig out the old pole which is lying inside. The landlord here will supply us with some soap, hot water, razors, and things, and no mirrors, mind, or looking-glasses of any kind, for I expect these might prove dangerous. Tell Didbin that Mat, here, and I will be the ‘ground’ as you call it, ‘professional and assistant and both in the hair cutting and shampooing trade,’ and that he’s to play Lord Puddleton, and keep his mouth shut, for I would not care to let the Cotton Spinners believe that I dropped my ‘h’s’ as if they burned my tongue.”

Dunstan did not know what to do, but as his position was but that of a clerk in the Puddleton estate offices, he saw no other alternative than obeying, though he trembled for the results. Only fancy Lord Puddleton handling a razor, a man who is unable to shave himself; and the Honourable Matthew Mignette lathering men’s faces as if he had been a barber’s assistant all his days. The other members of the club, possibly because they dearly “lo’ed a lord,” roared at the idea and seemed only too glad to give their assistance in carrying it out. Dick Didbin did not seem to relish the idea of acting the part of a lord as being from “his /experience a mighty uncomfortable position at the best of times.” As he was only to be “a Life Peer of a single afternoon,” he, however, consented to act as Lord Puddleton, and to do the duties of chairman at the luncheon if Mr. Dunstan would do the palavering, which he “weren’t nohow up to.”

In less than half an hour the whole barber’s shop was swept out, the pole with the brass basin at the end of it rigged out, while a fire was lit and the old man’s soap “set a-boiling.” For the sake of appearances a canary and a tame blackbird were borrowed to stick in the window, and the landlord of the “Clover Leaf” having given his razors a finishing polish and lent the two worthies a couple of waiter’s aprons and a pair of light cotton jackets, they took up their stations inside and awaited the coming of their customers from the railway station, whither Dunstan had gone for the purpose of escorting them to the nearest hairdresser’s, as he said.

In a body they rushed into Naggles’ old shop, which was not large enough to contain one half of them, and there was quite a struggle as to who was to be attended to first. The secretary

was, however, quite equal to the difficulty and suggested an adjournment to the "Clover Leaf," over the way, where they might wait for their turn one by one.

"Shaving, sir?" said the Honourable Mat, as he dipped the soapbrush into the pot of boiling soap, and applied it to the chin of the best bowler of the Cotton Spinners. There was a yell as the man jumped up with the exclamation, "You infernal idiot, do you want to scald a man to death?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the honourable gentleman with all the urbanity of an ordinary barber, "it is a little hot, but I will soon put it all right," and so saying he filled the pot up with cold water.

Having done so, he commenced to lather the man all over from ears to eyelids, and handed him wet to the Lord of Puddleton, who, with a razor held like a pencil, did not seem to know where or how to begin. Seizing the unfortunate Cotton Picker by the nose, he made a nice salve-like sweep across the right cheek bringing away a portion of whiskers and skin, but not seemingly taking off much of the hard bristles of the four-days-old beard. Still his victim was patient, and bore the scrapes manfully, though drops of blood here and there spoke of gashes which had been made in the operation.

"You don't seem to have got hold of good razors," was his remark.

"Oh, yes, sir," said the amateur barber, "very best of Sheffield cutlery, but your beard is a little old and stiff, sir; but I think you'll do now, sir, there's clean water in a basin and a towel there alongside."

Having washed his face, the poor victim, unconscious of the fact that nearly the whole of one of his much-valued whiskers, the whiskers which his wife so much admired, the whiskers which she fell in love with, was nearly all swept away, asked for a looking-glass.

"No such thing, I'm sorry, sir, our old one was broken in pieces by an accident the day afore yesterday, but if you take my opinion, sir, you're looking uncommonly well."

"Humph," was the remark as he looked at the red stains on the towel, "all I can say is, that you're the worst scraper I ever sat under, sir. Shave! by heaven, you can, and so can an Archimedean lawn mower and a reaping machine."

All this was not very assuring to young Noogles, who was soaped chin, brow, and cheek, and whom the Honourable Mat so plastered with nipping yellow soap about the eyes, that he dare not open them to look at his friend's face. Had he done so he no doubt would have bolted into the street.

With some little experience, Lord Puddleton approached him with more confidence, but Mat had so lathered him that he really did not know where to make a beginning. The result of this was, that the right half of young Noogle's moustache came off in the first two scrapes ere he could remonstrate. Some rough sweeps across the beard and the side of the cheeks brought him off with a few cuts, and he washed his face, and went off to join his friends at the "Clover Leaf," with one side of his moustache completely scraped off, and the other left standing. The fourth man in, was not a very difficult subject to deal with, being exceedingly plain-faced, but his request to have a little off his hair seemed rather to puzzle the operators. Lord Puddleton had once, however, clipped a horse, so there could not surely be very much difficulty about docking a man. Seizing the comb and the scissors, he gathered up as much as he could, with the former, and then, with several dexterous twitches, cut the whole close to the skull, leaving a perceptibly bald piece on the scalp. A general scoop all round, a hurried scurry with the brush, and a "There you are, sir," and it was all done. But while they were at this job, a rather wary-looking gentleman had come in to get shaved, and had just undergone a thorough lathering. The cuts on the faces of his friends, the red marks on the towel, and, more than all, the novel style in which the shaver held the razor between his finger and thumb like a pen seemed to quite scare him.

"This chair, sir," said the noble barber, in the most bland and inviting tones.

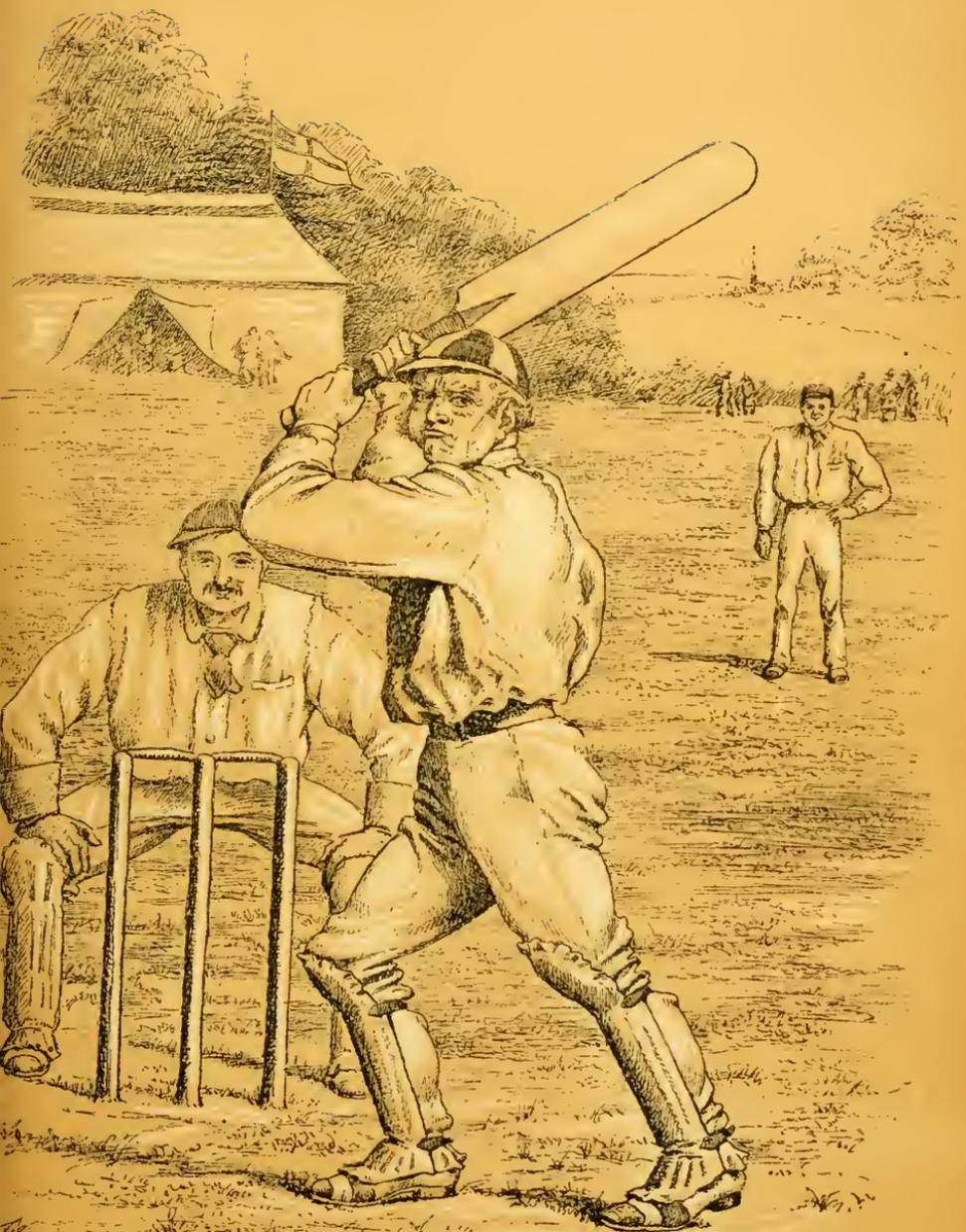
"Ah, well, no, sir," said the cautious individual, with a drawling accent, who was none other than a Yankee cotton-agent, "I guess not. I rather think the ringworm's in our family; and as it would be mighty dangerous for the fellows who come after me, I'll just wash and hang on till I'm better."

His example, if not his ringworm, seemed to be infectious, for not a single customer came forward, and the local cricketers being all anxious for play to commence, the razors and shaving pots were laid aside, and all made for the field.

The Puddleton men won the toss, and elected to bat, the Lord Puddleton Life Peer of an afternoon going in with the real Lord as professional against the bowling of the "Ring-worm" individual, who had escaped, and the first man shaved. Whether it was out of sheer downright spite or not, would have been difficult to determine, but that infernal barbarous barber's wicket was not long of being shattered, and he was relieved by 'Soapbrush,' as the strangers christened him. Mat was not to lose his wicket, however, so easily, and thrashed the bowling to a fearfully hard-scoring tune. Every ten minutes the numbers were being shifted on the telegraph board, and Soapbrush had run within short distance of a treble figure, while Dick Didbin, whose mouth would not keep shut, though continually addressed as "My lord," played a careful game. In time, both men went down and after that, as the cricket reporters say, the tail fell easily.

The Cotton Spinners had to take the field and knock off 140 runs; Mat Mignette, who played as Mat Mintey, having put together 85. The No. 1 Shaved man was the first to raise his bat, the bowler being the real Lord Puddleton. The Shaver's first over was smashed in a most savage manner, and what seemed to make the batsman hit wilder than ever, was the cry every time from the crowd of, "Well hit, old Single Whisker! Go it, old Single Whisker!" Nor did it end there, for, "Go it old Scraped Face!" and "The man with the Upper Lip!" were amongst other of the salutations. Worst of all, it was most annoying to be asked if there was a barber in Bobbinstown, or if they had only a peculiar style of cutting their hair and shaving themselves.

At the end of the single innings match, the Cotton Spinners were defeated by 50 runs, and without much loss of time made their way to the station, not carrying, as may be imagined, a very fair countenance. Dick Didbin, with a tongue no longer under a ban, accompanied them to the station, shaking hands and conversing with them all. "He had no more pride," said one, "than if he had only been one of ourselves." How the match ended is best explained by a letter from the Bobbinville secretary to Mr. Dunstan as read aloud at the "Clover Leaf," three days afterwards, by the Honourable Mat Mignette:—



"Go it old Single Whisker!"

see page 46.

“BOBBINSVILLE,

“Thursday.

“My dear Sir,

“We got home all right, and were well pleased with our day at Puddleton, all save Bill Snookins, and Sam Sellers, and Joe Wilson, in fact nearly all of them save Yankee Dansken (the Doodle, we call him here), who stood at slip. No fault of yours, my dear boy, but of those infernal professionals of yours, who do know something about cricket, but nothing about their real business, shaving. Bill Snookins, our best bowler, was so disgusted at the appearance of one of his whiskers when he first saw himself in a glass, that he had both shaved clean off. This was easy enough, but when he went home to his wife, who is a little short-sighted, she refused to let him in, and, when he did get in again, had to lie all night on the sofa. Next day three of us attended to swear that it was Bill, but she seems to be of opinion that the real Bill has still to turn up. As to Sam Sellers, the young woman he was engaged to has chucked him over on account of his having lost one of his moustaches. If ever he catches that infernal shaver again, he swears he will make him swallow his razors; while as to Soapsuds, he'll make it as hot for him about the eyes as he did with his brush.

“Lord Puddleton every man swears by, though at the station refreshment-room he was going to fight some of us for calling him “My lord,” and said he was just a plain son of a slut like the rest of us.

“Hoping you are well,

“I am, yours—”

“Hilloah, here is Didbin,” said Lord Puddleton, waking up. “So you didn't like ‘playin’ Lord,’ did you, eh?”

“No more I didn't, my lord, and if ever you get me at that game again, may I be where the parson says ‘the wickets cease from troubling, and the weary is at rest.’ Yes, blow me, rather than be a-bowed to and a-scraped to, I'd rather, my lord, yes, I would, I'd rather have my beard grow six times a day and have you and the 'Onerable Mister Soapsuds as my barber-'Enceforth, Richard Didbin, if he plays for Puddleton, plays as ‘The Ground.’”