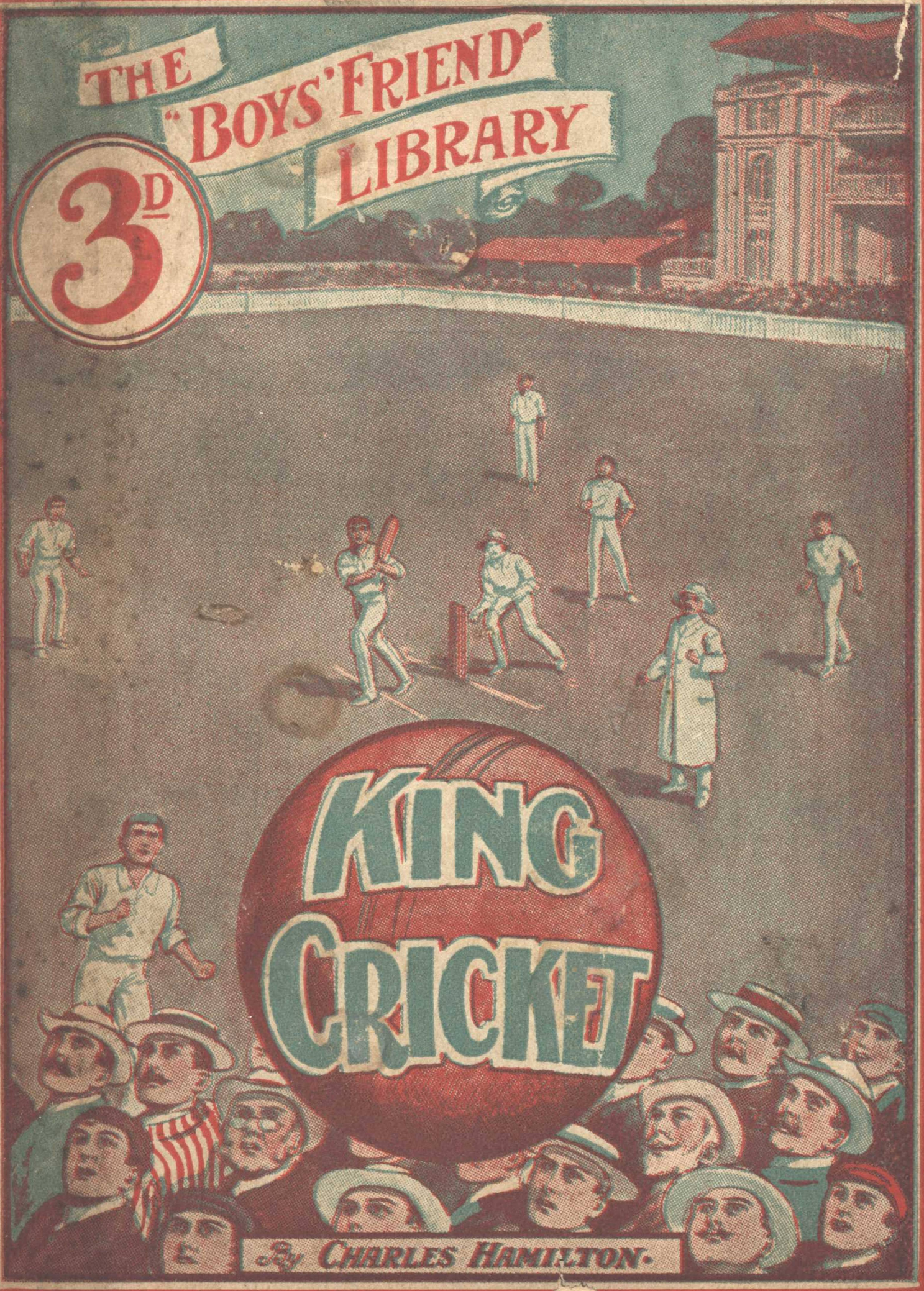


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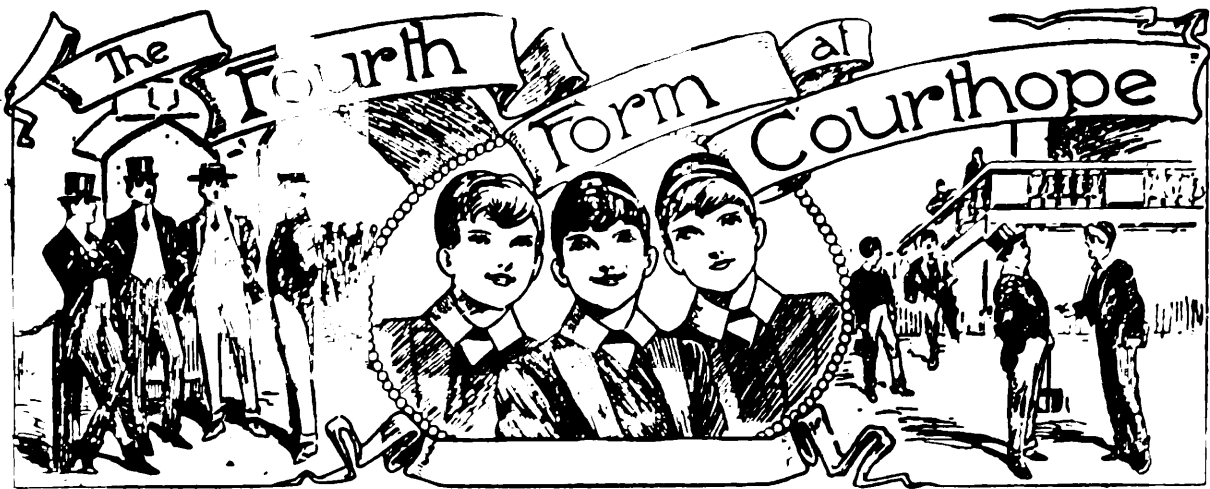
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KING  
CRICKET

By CHARLES HAMILTON.







By **DAVID GOODWIN**

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# KING CRICKET!

*A Grand Tale of the Great Summer Game.*

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

## CHAPTER 1.

### Colts v. County.

**C**LACK!

The quick, staccato sound of wood meeting leather, and a deep-throated shout:

“Well hit, sir!”

Away, and away, beyond the reach of point and cover-point, whizzes the round red ball.

A splendid hit, but Arthur Lovell does not run, for he knows it is a boundary, and he does not need to stir.

A fine figure the young batsman makes as he stands there, a cheery smile upon his slightly sunburnt, handsome face.

The best amateur bat in the Loamshire County Eleven is Arthur Lovell—medium-sized, upstanding, straight as a pine, a splendid specimen of young British manhood.

Blane, the Loamshire captain, looks at him from the pavilion and thinks, with a satisfied smile, of what Arthur Lovell will do for the county in the coming season, and that in the present match the Colts will have a difficult task to get rid of him.

For it is the annual match—Colts v. County.

It is a fine, sunny day—ideal cricketer’s weather—and a goodly concourse of Loamshire folk have gathered to witness the match. Two or three thousand people are on the ground, and there is a blaze of bright colour from the hats and dresses of the feminine contingent. Loamshire is a cricket-loving county, and many of the spectators have brought their sisters and their cousins and their aunts to see how the Colts shape against the first eleven.

In the pavilion, Sir Robert Reede, president of the county club, sits with Colonel Hilton, and the latter’s daughter Molly.

The colonel is an old county cricketer, and the mainstay of the Loamshire Club, but he is not a more enthusiastic advocate of the great game than his daughter Molly.

Sir Robert occasionally addresses a remark to Molly Hilton, but she hardly listens to him, for all her attention is given to the batsman at the wicket, who has just made a boundary hit. A close observer might guess that Molly’s interest in handsome Arthur Lovell is more than an ordinary one.

“Well hit, sir!”

Colonel Hilton joins cordially in the shout, and Molly claps her little hands. The colonel, like nearly everyone else in the Loamshire Club, likes Arthur Lovell, and is proud of the splendid batsman, and hopes great things of him during the coming season.

A

“The bowling does not seem to be able to touch Lovell,” Sir Robert re-

marked. "The Colts will have all their work cut out to get him away from the wicket."

The colonel nodded.

"You are right, Sir Robert. The bowling has been very average up to now, but there is a splendid bowler among the Colts. I am surprised that Lagden has not put him on yet!"

"I should say it is about time he was produced, then," said Sir Robert, with a laugh. "What is Lagden thinking of? Why, Lovell is at fifty now, and unless there is a change, he looks like going over the hundred!"

"Very likely. Lagden certainly does not seem able to move him himself! I suppose he has some reason for not sending Valance on to bowl."

"And which is Valance?" asked Sir Robert.

"That slim lad in the long field, and in my opinion the most promising of the Colts," said the colonel. "He is a good, reliable bat, but bowling is what he was born for. I have had my eye on him for some time."

"He seems to be quite a lad?"

"He is only eighteen. He has been employed on the club ground for some time," the colonel explained. "He is the son of a local farmer, and he seems to have taken to cricket like a duck to water. He has no means, and wishes to earn his livelihood at the game."

"A very creditable ambition."

"Quite so; and goodness knows Loamshire is in need of new blood!" the colonel said with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "I was glad to be able to give him a chance, but the county needs him more than he needs the county, you understand. As a professional, I believe he will make a really first-class player, and we are weakest in bowlers. Arthur Lovell is the best bat Loamshire has ever turned out!"

Sir Robert nodded.

Lagden was bowling again now, and the grim, determined look upon his somewhat narrow face, showed how set he was upon getting the batsman out.

Geoffrey Lagden, the son of one of the wealthiest members of the Loamshire County Club, was a fairly good cricketer, but there was little of the sportsman in his nature. Had the colonel been of a more suspicious disposition, he might have guessed why the Colts' captain did not put Valance on to bowl. His motive was jealousy, pure and simple, added to a snobbish disdain, which he, a wealthy amateur, felt for the groundsman whose ambition was to become a professional cricketer. There was a good deal of snobbishness rife in the Loamshire County Club, which probably accounted for the low position the county had for some time held in the cricketing world.

Lagden, too, had a good conceit of himself, and believed in his own powers, both as batsman and bowler. He wanted to show Loamshire what he could do, by taking the wicket of the best bat in the county eleven, especially as he disliked Arthur Lovell as much as he did Kit Valance.

He took a longer run than usual, and his right arm went up. Down went the ball, and the batsman stepped out to meet it.

Clack! Where was the ball?

"By Jove!" murmured the colonel. "How Lovell flies! Bravo!"

And Molly clapped her hands.

Again they crossed. And now the ball comes whizzing in—a few seconds too late. The batsmen have made good their ground, with four added to the score, and Arthur Lovell's partner is breathing deeply. But Arthur is as fresh as paint, and he stands with a cheery look, waiting for the last ball of the over.

Lagden gripped the round ball hard, as if he would crush it with the



savage anger that possessed him, and which he could not wholly keep his face from showing. He had tried Arthur Lovell with every kind of ball, but they all seemed the same to the champion bat of the first eleven. He had little hope that the last of the over would shift Lovell from the wicket.

Again the leather flew. Clack! It was gone—whither?

A murmur, swelling to a shout, told whither! For Kit Valance is running—running with upturned eye. He, at least, had seen the chance, and was ready to take it. Now he stops. Now he is backing—backing, his hand in the air, and every eye on the match-ground is fixed upon him, and the shout dies half-uttered into breathless silence.

Will he do it?

Back, and further back, then a nimble spring, and smack!

And from all sides rises and swells a shout:

“Caught!”

“Oh, well caught!”

“Caught, indeed!”

And Arthur Lovell, without waiting for the umpire to speak, walks away towards the pavilion. He stops for a minute to speak to the colonel, and to glance at Molly Hilton.

“Hard luck, Lovell!” said the colonel with a smile. “But what a splendid catch!”

“Rather!” said Arthur, with a nod. “Kit Valance is as good in the field as he is at bowling, which is saying a great deal, sir! In my opinion, I shouldn’t have kept up my wicket so long if Valance had had the bowling!”

“You think so?”

“I am pretty sure of it,” said Arthur confidently. “Valance, as a groundsman, has bowled a lot to me in practice at the nets, and I know his quality.”

“True enough. It was you who first drew my attention to him,” nodded the colonel. “You were the first to recognise in him a coming cricketer. He really owes his chance of figuring in a Colts’ match to you, Lovell!”

“I’m glad of it, then,” said Arthur quickly; “for a finer, better chap never lived than Kit Valance, although some superior persons affect to look down on him for social reasons. Loamshire has simply made a discovery in Valance, sir!”

“I believe you, Lovell,” said Colonel Hilton. While Molly’s bright glance at the young cricketer showed how keenly she appreciated his frank manliness in speaking up for the young fellow he liked and admired, without caring to consider the difference in social station. “I can’t understand why Lagden doesn’t give him the bowling!”

“I think I can, sir,” said Arthur impulsively. And then he stopped and coloured. The colonel looked at him curiously.

“And what do you think is his reason, Lovell?”

Arthur hesitated.

“Pardon me, sir, I shouldn’t have said that,” he said slowly. “I can only form opinions from what I see; but it wouldn’t be the thing—it wouldn’t be cricket—to run a fellow down behind his back.”

And Arthur Lovell passed into the pavilion, leaving Colonel Hilton looking considerably puzzled. The next man in was going to the wicket, but the colonel’s glance did not follow him.

“I don’t quite see what Lovell was getting at,” the colonel remarked to Molly. “His words would imply that Lagden had some not exactly creditable motive in keeping Valance in the background, otherwise there is no reason why Lovell should not speak right out.”

“I think I could make a guess, dad,” said Molly quickly.

"Oh, you could?" said the colonel, with a look of surprise. "And what do you know about it, Molly?"

"If I am not mistaken, Mr. Lagden has a prejudice against Kit Valance, for being what he is pleased to call a 'bounder,'" said Molly, with a flash in her eyes. "I believe he did not like Valance playing in the Colts' match at all, and would have excluded him if he had had the power."

The colonel's brow darkened.

"I shouldn't like to believe Lagden guilty of such snobbishness and folly," he said. "But—well, we shall see."

And Colonel Hilton turned his attention to the game again.

But he did not watch the play with the same keenness as before. His daughter's words had put him in a thoughtful mood. For the colonel knew well that what Molly did not know about cricket in general, and Loamshire cricket in particular, wasn't worth knowing. He knew that the girl's judgment was as keen as his own.

The rot which seemed to have set in during the past few seasons in Loamshire county cricket was due, more than to any other cause, to the club's exclusiveness, not to use a harsher word. The time had come for a change, if Loamshire was not to disappear altogether from first-class cricket.

That change Colonel Hilton was determined to effect, in spite of opposition from the members, and even passive resistance on the part of the committee itself. He hoped great things from the Colts' match this year. It was certain that Geoffrey Lagden would get his cap for the county. His quality as a cricketer was good and his father's influence in the club was great. But Kit Valance, the boyish groundsman, was worth a dozen of him, the colonel knew well. Kit was the most promising Colt of the year, if the colonel's opinion was worth anything. That such a player should be kept in the background from a feeling of class prejudice would have been absurd, if it had not been so serious. The colonel thought it was time for somebody's foot to be put down hard.

Arthur Lovell's place at the wicket had been taken by Ponsonby, a fair bat, and a scion of one of the first county families. He was a tall, fair-haired fellow, with sleepy, light-blue eyes. His manner showed that he did not think much of the Colts' chance of taking his wicket.

But this time Lagden, for the sake of appearance, let Valance have the ball, and as soon as Ponsonby had the bowling, he found that he had all his work cut out to defend his wicket.

Kit Valance's bowling was a revelation. He seemed to be a past-master of every kind of bowling, and his varieties were more than bewildering to Ponsonby.

The batsman succeeded in stopping the first ball dead on the crease, and the second he nicked into the slips, without getting a run, however. Then came a slow ball, which he stopped dead. It was followed by a lightning one which took Ponsonby completely by surprise. His bat swept the empty air, and he wondered whether it was a wide; but the click of a falling wicket enlightened him. He glanced down, and saw his middle stump on the grass, leaving the wicket with a kind of toothless look. And he clicked his teeth.

The umpire's laconic "Out" was hardly needed.

"Well bowled!"

A hearty shout greeted the neat performance of the bowler. Ponsonby flushed with chagrin as he carried out his bat. A grin greeted him in the pavilion as the figures were altered to 150 for 6, last man 0.

Some irreverent spectator chirped out: "What price ducks' eggs?" And the question was perfectly audible in the pavilion, and Ponsonby, catching a smile on Molly Hilton's face as he passed her, gritted his teeth.



Colonel Hilton's face had brightened.

Ponsonby was certainly far from the best of the county batsmen, but the ease with which the Colts' bowler had taken his wicket could not fail to impress the old cricketer. It confirmed him in his already-formed opinion of Kit Valance. He would have been glad to see more of Kit's bowling, but apparently Lagden thought he had done enough for appearances, and Valance had no further chance of showing what he could do with the leather.

The county innings tailed off, and at three o'clock the first eleven were all out for 180. And when Blane, the county captain, and his men took the field, there was a general movement of interest. How the sixteen would stand the test of the county bowling was now the question, and an interesting one.

Lagden opened the innings himself, with a young, broad-shouldered Colt named Aitken. There was a good deal of self-confidence in Geoffrey Lagden's manner as he walked to the wicket and took middle. It was easily to be seen that the batsman had a good opinion of himself, and intended to show the assembled Loamshire folk what batting was really like.

Lagden had a rather flashy manner, but he wielded the willow with good effect. The first over was a maiden, but when he had the bowling again, he began to score. A two and a three were the result of that over, and the Colts' captain won a cheer.

His eyes sparkled. So much was not, of course, expected of a Colt as of a county player, but Lagden was inwardly determined that his innings should equal that of Arthur Lovell for the county. To lower Arthur's colours, especially in the eyes of Molly Hilton, was the dearest wish of his life.

Aitken went out with a big round O to his credit, caught by Arthur Lovell, who was fielding for the county at point. Another Colt came in to join Lagden, who seemed to be getting well set.

"He bats well, colonel," Sir Robert Reede remarked, when the board showed thirty for Lagden. "He is certainly better as a batsman than as a bowler. I suppose Lagden is certain to play for the county?"

"Yes, he is undoubtedly a recruit worth our while," the colonel assented. "But, as I said, we are weakest in bowlers. Kit Valance is the pick of the bunch, from my point of view."

"I hope we shall have an opportunity of seeing more of what he can do in the county's second innings."

"You may be sure of that," said the colonel, with emphasis. "Lagden will be spoken to on the subject."

And the colonel, who was general manager for the Loamshire Club, and whose word was therefore very weighty, meant what he said.

Meanwhile, the Colts' innings was progressing favourably. Lagden was certainly putting his best foot foremost. Three batsmen had joined him, and left him, but he was still batting strongly. Another man came in, and as the field crossed after an over, Blane tossed the ball to Arthur Lovell.

"You want me to bowl against Lagden, Blane?"

"Yes. I think you can deal with him."

"I don't know. I'm only a change bowler, and——"

"Never mind, do your best."

So Arthur went on to bowl.

Lagden's eyes glittered as he saw his rival, for so he considered Arthur, prepare to deliver the ball.

He had not a very high opinion of Arthur's powers as a bowler, but he played that ball very carefully. He had not been able to touch Arthur's

wicket in the county innings, and to be bowled by him now would be too bitter.

He was successful with the first and second balls of the over. Then, playing a fraction too forward to a slow ball, he heard the clack of falling bails. A savage gleam leaped into his eyes as he looked down at his ruined wicket.

He had been clean bowled, the bails were on the ground, and his off-stump was reclining at an angle of forty-five.

He gritted his teeth hard. Then he tucked his bat under his arm, and walked away towards the pavilion, striving to conceal his rage, but not quite successfully.

"Oh, how I hate him!" he murmured, as he saw Molly Hilton clapping her hands, and overheard her innocent remark to her father:

"What a good ball, dad! And bowling is not Mr. Lovell's strong point, either."

"It was a fluke, Miss Hilton," said Lagden, stopping as he passed them. "Perhaps I shouldn't be the one to say it, but it's a fact. Lovell can bat, but——"

"Oh, I don't know," said Colonel Hilton. "Lovell is a reliable change bowler though we all know he cuts the best figure with the willow. That was a good ball, Lagden, and I am not surprised that it beat you. You have done very well, my boy. Thirty-nine against the County bowlers cannot be said to be bad for a Colt."

Lagden nodded, and passed on. He had had great hopes of his innings, but Arthur Lovell had nipped them in the bud. Never had he hated the Loamshire bat so bitterly as at that moment. He persisted in his belief that Arthur was no bowler in spite of the wrecked wicket to prove the contrary.

The Colts' wickets fell at a fair average of runs. Kit Valance was last man in, and at the third over his partner was bowled by Blane, so that the lad was "not out" for nine, not a bad score for the time he had been at the wicket.

Colonel Hilton's brow puckered a little as he did not fail to observe this last instance of Lagden's evident desire to avoid giving the young groundsman a chance.

"A pity that young fellow did not bat earlier," said Sir Robert. "It would have given us a better idea of his form."

"He will bat earlier in the second innings," said the colonel significantly.

And cricket for the day being over, the colonel found an early opportunity of speaking to the captain of the Colts' team. Lagden's manner to the colonel was very agreeable, for he had every desire to keep in the old cricketer's good graces. But his face clouded over as Hilton explained what he wanted to speak about.

"You gave young Valance simply no chance, Lagden," said the colonel. "In this match I particularly want to see how his bowling shapes under a really severe test. What was your motive in keeping him in the back-ground?"

Lagden flushed uncomfortably.

"He is a flashy bowler," he replied. "He has made a few lucky flukes, which have led people to think he is good-class, but it is a false idea."

"I suppose you are speaking your honest opinion, Lagden," said the colonel somewhat tartly. "I can only say that it shows lack of judgment on your part."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed! I suppose you will admit that I know something about the game I have played since I was a junior at school."



"Everybody will admit that, Colonel Hilton, I think," said Lagden, with a conciliatory smile. "We all know that you are the backbone of Loamshire cricket."

"Well, my opinion is that Kit Valance is a bowler any county team might be proud of, and that he will be a decided acquisition to Loamshire."

"There are a good many things against him, sir," said Geoffrey Lagden diffidently, but with a wicked gleam in his eye.

The colonel's brows contracted.

"I hope you don't mean that his social position makes any difference, Lagden. In the first place, he will join the first eleven, if he joins it at all, as a professional, and professionals are drawn from every class of society. In the second place, no decent man would care a rap what his social position was, whether he played as professional or amateur, so long as he played a good game, and kept his end up."

Geoffrey Lagden bit his lip.

"You are rather hard, Colonel Hilton."

"Not a whit," was the quick reply. "I speak as I think, and I believe I hold my opinions in common with every good cricketer and sportsman. There's been too much uppishness of that kind in Loamshire county cricket of late seasons. And where is the club now? People are beginning to ask what Loamshire knows about first-class cricket."

"We shall have a better position this season, I hope, sir."

"I hope so, too, but if we win a better position, Lagden, it will not be by a policy of snobbish exclusiveness, but by playing the best Loamshire men we can find, whether they are the sons of peers or peasants. That's what we are going to do, or I sever my connection with the club. We are going to wind up the season in the position of champion county, if hard work and good play can get us there."

"Of course every Loamshire man will do his best."

"Yes, off the field as well as on it," said Colonel Hilton significantly. "So mind, the committee want to see something more of Valance's quality, both as batsman and bowler."

Lagden breathed hard.

"I believe I am captaining the Colts for this match," he said half-defiantly.

"You will never do anything better than that, Lagden, unless you mind you P's and Q's," said Colonel Hilton bluntly. "To speak in plain English, I have heard your treatment of Valance attributed to jealousy."

"I hope you do not believe that," said Geoffrey Lagden, flushing scarlet.

"I look to you to prove to me that it is not correct."

And the colonel walked away without waiting for a reply. Lagden looked after him with a bitter expression on his face.

"I suppose it is Arthur Lovell who has spoken against me," he muttered. "he dislikes me, I imagine, as much as I hate him, and he would be glad to keep me out of the county eleven. He always takes it upon himself to champion the cause of that rank outsider, Valance, and I am certain he only does it because I take the opposite tack."

In this Geoffrey Lagden was certainly unjust to Arthur, but he was not in a mood to be just to anybody. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and walked away, his eyes on the ground. His face was very black, his eyes gleaming under his bent brows.

"I hate him," he muttered. "If I get into the County team—and I will get into it by hook or by crook—I will make him smart for his enmity to me. I——"

"Geoffrey!"

He looked up quickly as his name was spoken.

An elderly man with a thin, narrow face, strangely like his own in feature, though much more deeply marked by the hand of Time, was coming towards him.

"Father!" exclaimed the young cricketer.

Mr. Lagden shook hands with his son.

"What is the matter with you, Geoff? You were looking as black as a thundercloud when I caught sight of you."

"Nothing," said Geoffrey shortly.

Mr. Lagden looked at him anxiously.

"Has anything gone wrong in the match to-day? I was unable to come down in time for it; an important matter detained me in London. I thought you expected to distinguish yourself in the Colts' match, Geoff."

"I haven't done badly," said the young man, biting his lip. "I knocked up thirty-nine off my own bat, and that's a round dozen better than the score of any other of the Colts."

Then his brow contracted darkly.

"Then I was bowled, by a mere fluke, by Arthur Lovell. Confound him! How I hate that fellow!"

"That was hard luck, my boy."

"It isn't only that," said Geoffrey between his teeth. "Lovell sets himself against me in every way. He has been speaking against me to Colonel Hilton, and you know how much that means to a candidate for the first team. He means to keep me out of playing for the County if he possibly can."

A hard expression came over Mr. James Lagden's face.

"Are you sure of that, Geoff? Why should he dislike you?"

"Oh, there never was any love lost between us!" said the young man. "Natural antipathy, I suppose. We were always rowing at school. Then he champions a bounder, a rank outsider, who is trying to shove himself into the club, and, of course, I'm down on him. I don't see why the county club should take in all the riff-raff of Loamshire because they can play cricket after a fashion. The worst of it is, that Colonel Hilton and most of the committee are wrapped up in Arthur Lovell, and his word may do me a lot of harm."

"He will not possess the power to do anybody harm in Loamshire county cricket longer than I choose," said Mr. Lagden, setting his lips together. "I have only to raise my finger to get his name removed from the list of the club."

Geoffrey looked at him incredulously.

"I don't see how that can be," he said slowly. "Lovell is a general favourite, and his uncle is one of the chief supporters of the club."

Mr. Lagden smiled disagreeably.

"Yes, and Arthur Lovell is dependent upon his uncle, whose heir he is," he remarked, "and his uncle, Montague Lovell, is supposed to be one of the richest men in the county."

Geoffrey Lagden stared.

"And isn't he?"

"Nothing of the kind. That is really what kept me in town to-day, a matter connected with Montague Lovell's business. He still keeps up appearances to the world, but as a matter of fact, for a year or more he has been tottering on the verge of ruin."

"Ruin!" Geoffrey drew a deep breath. "Can that be true?"

"Quite true," said Mr. Lagden composedly. "I have been helping him, to tell you the truth, entirely for my own purpose, of course. It rests with me now to let him sink or swim. I have but to withhold my support, and



Montague Lovell goes to the bad with a crash, and his nephew is a beggar!"

"A beggar!" Lagden seemed to turn the word over in his mouth as if it had a relish for him. "Arthur Lovell a beggar!"

"Yes, if I say the word. That is what I meant by saying that I could turn him out of county cricket if I liked. There is no room for a pauper in the Loamshire Club, I imagine. With his uncle's fall he will be cast upon the world to support himself and get a livelihood in any way he can."

"By Jove, dad"—Lagden's eyes were gleaming; his breath came thick and hard—"if you would rid me of him—if you'd get him kicked out of the club! I know you detest his uncle as much as I detest him, and I've wondered to see you on close terms with him. I think I can guess your aim now. You don't intend to spare him?"

"Not unless it suited my purpose. I wanted to consult with you about it."

"Ruin him," said Lagden, between his teeth. "Have no mercy upon him. What is he to us, anyway? And Arthur Lovell is my enemy. I've already told you he's trying to injure me with the club. By Jove, this is a more complete revenge than I ever dreamed of."

There was a moment's silence.

"Arthur Lovell knows nothing of all this?" asked Geoffrey.

"Nothing. His uncle has concealed the facts from him as carefully as from the world. He hopes still to weather the storm." Mr. Lagden smiled a feline smile. "He is looking forward to a successful career for Arthur as a Loamshire cricketer."

"When will the truth be known?"

"As soon as I choose."

"Let it be soon," said Lagden savagely; "as soon as it comes out, Lovell will retire from cricket as a matter of course, and there will be all the more room for a Colt. They say that one good turn deserves another, and I suppose the same applies to an ill-turn. Are you staying here to-night for the cricket to-morrow?"

"No; I shall have to return to town. I only wished to consult you before acting in this matter," said his father. "Come with me to my hotel, and we will talk over it. I may say that your feeling in the matter is exactly the same as mine. The only question, then, is how soon the blow shall fall upon the Lovells."

Lagden gritted his teeth.

"The sooner the better!"

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## CHAPTER 2.

### Black News—How the Match Ended.

"PLAY!"

A bright, sunny morning. Again we look down upon the Loamshire County Cricket Club match-ground, crowded with spectators as thickly as upon the opening day of the match.

The County's second innings is in full swing. Arthur Lovell, waiting for his call, is chatting in the pavilion with Colonel Hilton and Molly. His call will not be long in coming, for the County wickets are falling at a merry rate.

The score, so far, is 30 for 4 wickets, a figure which makes some of the County batsmen look glum, but which is easily explained.

The colonel's words to Lagden have not been without effect, and Kit Valance is being given his chance as a bowler. Two wickets have fallen to his bowling—one of them for 2 runs, the other for a duck. Now he has

the ball again, and is facing Ponsonby, who is in with Blane, the Loamshire captain.

The colonel's face expresses his satisfaction.

"By Jove," exclaimed the veteran, "I was right about Valance, and you were right, Lovell. I shouldn't be surprised to see him perform the hat trick, now that he has his proper chance."

"Neither should I, sir," said the young batsman, with a nod. "He's a demon bowler, and no mistake. I am glad Lagden has decided to give him a chance."

"Yes; he is making the most of it."

"I am afraid I did Lagden something like an injustice," said Arthur frankly. "I fancied he was keeping Valance back because he didn't choose to be outclassed by a fellow he is pleased to consider a bounder. But this innings proves that I was mistaken. He is giving Kit every chance now."

The colonel smiled, but made no reply.

Click!

"Hallo! There's Pon out!"

Ponsonby cast a rueful glance at his wrecked wicket, and put his bat under his arm. He had been clean bowled at the second ball of the over.

There was a delighted shout from the spectators.

"Well bowled!"

"The hat trick!"

"Oh, well bowled!"

The colonel's eyes glistened.

"My prediction is realised sooner than I thought for," he observed, with a laugh. "I shall be glad to see what Valance can do against your wicket, Lovell. If he can take it, I shall know what to think of him."

"Thank you!" said Arthur, laughing.

Another man went in to join Blane, and Arthur stepped into the pavilion to strap on his pads. He was to be next man in, and he did not think he would have long to wait. He was right.

A loud, ringing shout from an enthusiastic crowd reached him in the pavilion.

"Oh, well bowled!"

It was the last ball of the over, and it had taken the batsman's off-stump clean out of the ground.

"My hat!" murmured Arthur. "Kit is making the fur fly with a vengeance! I shall have all my work cut out to stand up to his bowling."

The last man came into the pavilion with a rueful countenance.

"Look out for a ball that does the very last thing you expect of it, if Valance bowls against you," he said to Arthur.

Lovell laughed, and promised to bear this very lucid direction in mind, and went out of the pavilion buttoning up his glove.

There was a movement of interest in the crowd. Never had Loamshire's champion bat looked so fresh and fit.

Geoffrey Lagden had the ball in his hand. He was to take the next over. He gave the batsman a nod as he passed. There was a peculiar expression upon his face that could not fail to be noticed by the batsman.

"Hallo, Lovell!" he said. "So you're playing the match out?"

Arthur looked at him in astonishment.

"Playing the match out, Lagden?" he repeated. "Of course. What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing; but, under the circumstances, I thought you would perhaps have asked Blane to excuse you," said Lagden carelessly.



Arthur Lovell stopped and looked at him.

"I don't understand in the least what you are driving at, Lagden," he said. "Why should I ask Blane to excuse me? Why shouldn't I play the match out? You are talking in riddles."

"You don't mean to say you haven't heard?" exclaimed Lagden, with an air of surprise.

"Heard what?"

"Why, the news about your uncle!"

Arthur Lovell stared at him.

"News about my uncle! No; I have heard nothing. I don't know what you mean."

"Then I'm sorry I spoke," said Lagden, with a great air of sincerity. "Of course, I thought you knew. I suppose they're keeping it from you till after the match. Excuse me!"

Arthur came a step nearer to him.

"I don't know what you're driving at," he said quietly, and with a flash in his eyes; "but you've said too much to let the matter drop there. You speak as if something had happened to my uncle. Is that the case?"

"I'd rather say nothing further."

"But I insist upon your saying something further!" cried Arthur. "We're wasting time. What have you heard? I expected my uncle here for the match, but he wrote to say he couldn't come. Do you mean to say that anything has happened to him since then?"

"If you insist upon my speaking, Lovell," said Lagden, with a show of reluctance. "I will do so. But I never dreamed that you hadn't heard. I naturally thought that you, as Mr. Lovell's nephew, would know about it before an outsider—myself, for instance."

"Will you come to the point?" cried Arthur, who was certain that Lagden, for all his show of reluctance, was purposely tantalising him. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, only—only Mr. Lovell is ruined—a bankrupt. I am sorry to be the person to break the news to you, Lovell, as I know your prospects are quite dependent upon your uncle. But I thought you knew, and——"

"Is this true?"

"Half Loamshire knows it, I imagine," said Lagden carelessly. "I wonder you haven't heard. That's why I was surprised to see you still here. I should have thought that Mr. Lovell would write to you to come to him."

"He wouldn't do that," said Arthur. His brain was in a whirl. He could hardly grasp the full significance of the news at once. "He wouldn't spoil my cricket. But—but is this certain?"

"Ask anybody. I know it for a fact; it will be in all the papers to-night."

Arthur Lovell did not doubt.

It was not only that he could not suspect Lagden of telling a lie that would so soon be put to the proof.

The revelation came like a flash of light, illumining many things that had previously been dark to him.

Words of Montague Lovell, which had puzzled him, and which he had half-forgotten, came back to his mind, as well as his uncle's altered looks and worried manner of late.

The news was true!

Montague Lovell was ruined, and he—Arthur—was a beggar!

Yet it was not of himself that the young cricketer thought then, but of the kind old man who had been a father, more than a father, to him

To go to him, to give what comfort he could under this terrible blow—that was naturally Arthur Lovell's first thought. But his name was being called impatiently, and he recollected where he was. He went slowly and blindly to his wicket.

Those who had noticed the incident only observed that the batsman had exchanged a few words with the Colts' captain as he went to the crease. They little dreamed of what import those few words were. But the result of them was soon seen.

Blane had the bowling, and so Arthur had a few minutes to pull himself together. But the second ball of the over gave the County captain three, and brought Arthur Lovell to face the bowling of Geoffrey Lagden.

And Lagden's eyes gleamed.

Arthur was holding his bat mechanically, and Lagden could see how utterly upset and distraught the young batsman was.

That had been his object, of course, in speaking to Arthur. He had foreseen the effect of his words, though even he had not expected it to be so complete.

Now the hour of his triumph was at hand.

If he could bowl the champion Loamshire bat, his ambition would be realised. And he felt that the wicket was a certainty. With Arthur Lovell in his present state, before he had had time to recover from the shock he had received, one, at least, of the four remaining balls of the over was certain to find his wicket.

The bowler took a short run, and his arm went up. The ball went down with a whiz, and broke in true for the batsman's middle stump.

Clack!

Away it went to mid-off, and the wicket was saved, but it was not the hit that had been expected of Arthur Lovell.

Again it came down, and this time Lovell stopped it dead.

He realised that he was doing badly, and tried to pull himself together. He knew that Lagden was putting everything he knew into the bowling to take his wicket. But it was in vain that he tried to play like his old self.

The vision of a kind old face, with a haunting expression of trouble upon it, was floating before his eyes, and his eyes were not so clear as usual.

Whiz! came the ball again, with a break on it that would have baffled many good batsmen, but which Arthur Lovell would have played with ease had he been in his usual form.

But now, to the amazement of the onlookers, the gleaming bat swept the empty air, and the clack of a falling wicket followed.

"Bowled!"

The umpire picked up the bails.

"Out!"

Yes, he was out; there was no doubt about it. Arthur looked at the umpire for a moment dazedly, and then put his bat under his arm and walked to the pavilion.

There was a deep-drawn breath round the field as the figures were altered. 40 for 6, last man 0.

Last man 0, and the last man was Loamshire's champion bat!

No wonder the crowd, not knowing the true facts of the case, cheered Geoffrey Lagden.

"Well bowled, sir!"

"Bravo! Well bowled, indeed!"

Lagden's face flushed with triumph.

That he had won his success by mean cunning, and not by playing the game, mattered not a whit to him.

He had won it! His bowling had dismissed Arthur Lovell, Loamshire's best bat, for a duck's egg, and he was satisfied.

But Colonel Hilton's face was serious.

"What the dickens is the matter with Lovell?" he muttered testily. "Can he be ill? He looked the picture of fitness when he left the pavilion!"

"He looks ill," said Molly anxiously. "Look! How dreadfully pale he is!"

The colonel looked at Arthur attentively as he came up.

The dismissed batsman was indeed pale, and there was a strange look in his eyes. Next man in passed Arthur, and went to join Blane, while the colonel stopped the young man to speak to him.

"Is anything the matter, Lovell? Are you ill?"

Arthur passed his hand across his brow.

"No—yes," he muttered. "I've—I've had a shock!"

"What do you mean? I don't understand!"

But Arthur, without replying, passed on, and went into the players' dressing-room. He wanted to be quiet, to think what he should do.

"I don't understand this," muttered Colonel Hilton. "I have never seen Lovell in that mood before. I wonder what can be the matter with him? I shouldn't be surprised now if the Colts pull off the match!"

And the old cricketer turned a somewhat troubled face towards the field of play.

Between Arthur Lovell's unexpected breakdown and the wonderful bowling of Kit Valance, the county innings certainly seemed to have fallen into a parlous state.

Blane was doing well for his side, but soon after Arthur Lovell's retirement from the wicket, the Loamshire captain was caught in the slips, and he carried out his bat for 40, the County total then being only 59.

The County innings tailed off miserably, and was finished before the luncheon interval for a total of 70 runs.

"I say, old man," exclaimed Blane, as he joined Arthur Lovell. "I can't understand your letting Lagden bowl you out. If it had been Valance, I should not have been surprised. You are looking awfully out of sorts!"

"I've had some bad news!"

"How do you mean? During the game? I don't see——"

"Lagden told me."

"Ah! Was that it? And what did he tell you?"

Arthur explained. Blane's look was very sympathetic as he listened.

"This is bad, old fellow!" he said. "But it may not be as bad as Lagden makes out. He would exaggerate, of course, for it's pretty clear why he told you. As for half Loamshire knowing it, that's all rot! I believe Lagden has the news all to himself, or I should have heard something. It may not be true at all!"

Arthur Lovell shook his head.

"I feel that it is true. There are reasons. It may not, of course, be as bad as Lagden makes out. I believe that may be the case, now that I have been able to think it out calmly. As you said, his motive in telling me when he did is pretty clear. He has effected part of his purpose, but he will fail in the rest. I shall play it out."

"If you would like to——"

"Not at all," said Lovell, quietly and firmly. "I shall play it out, and, if I can help it, the Colts will not win."

Blane nodded, and the subject dropped.



The luncheon interval over, the Colts' second innings commenced. They had made 110 in their first, so that they now required 141 to win. Had the County's innings produced a score like that of the first, Lagden's side would have had no chance. But now Geoffrey believed that his chance was good.

The County was undoubtedly weak in bowling. The Colts made a good stand at the wickets, and the runs added up at a fair rate. Kit Valance was at the wicket, and had knocked up thirty for himself, when Geoffrey Lagden came in to join him.

Arthur Lovell looked at Blane, who tossed him the ball. Lagden bit his lip as Lovell went on to bowl.

He knew that he had "tit for tat" to look for, and he set himself to play the bowling with all the skill he was capable of. Arthur Lovell's face was grim and determined. He took a longer run than usual, and the ball left his hand like a bullet.

Lagden was ready for it, but he played it a shade too late. Before he knew what was happening, his middle stump was lying on the ground.

Bowled first ball!

He gripped the cane handle of the bat till his finger-tips were white.

"Out!"

Lagden walked away from the wicket with his eyes gleaming with fury. There was no mercy in his heart now for either of the Lovells, uncle or nephew.

And Arthur smiled grimly. He had at least given a Roland for an Oliver. With a dark brow, Lagden watched the innings tail off from the pavilion. The Colts were all down at last for 90, and the County had won the match by 50 runs.

While the cheering was still ringing round the field, Arthur Lovell hastily changed in the dressing-room in the pavilion. He had stayed to finish the match from a sense of duty as a cricketer. But his heart was with the kind old man in the distant city, who in these hours was facing black ruin. Now that he was free, his only thought was to get to his uncle. Blane looked out a train in a time-table while Arthur changed.

"From the town station, 8.30," he said. "I hope you will find that things are not so bad, after all, old fellow. I will say nothing here till I hear from you, anyway!"

Arthur pressed his hand and was gone.

Ten minutes later, while most of the spectators of the Colts' match were still wending their homeward way, discussing the cricket, Arthur Lovell was speeding towards London as fast as an express train could carry him, to learn the worst, and to face this terrible blow which had fallen upon him in the midst of his high hopes.

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### CHAPTER 3.

#### **Straight from the Shoulder.**

"ARTHUR! You here?"

**A** Mr. Lovell rose abruptly to his feet as the young Loamshire cricketer entered the room. Arthur came quickly towards his uncle, his eyes scanning anxiously the kindly old face he knew so well. He noted, with a pang, how pale and troubled it was.

"Yes, I am here," said Arthur quietly, as he gripped his uncle's hand. "You did not expect to see me?"

"No; I thought you were playing in the Colts' match."

"I came away the moment the match ended."

"But why?"

"Because," said Arthur, regarding him steadily—"because I had heard some news, uncle; news that came to me as a terrible blow. Is it true?"

"How can I tell you, until I know what it was?" asked Mr. Lovell, with a faint smile, but his lips were trembling.

"I heard it from Geoffrey Lagden. He told me you were ruined."

Mr. Lovell sank into his chair.

"Then it is true?" cried Arthur. "Uncle, don't attempt to conceal it from me. It is my place to help you if you are in trouble. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I hoped and hoped," groaned Mr. Lovell; "I wished to spare you. Even now all hope may not be lost—if James Lagden is merciful."

Arthur Lovell stared.

"Geoffrey Lagden's father? What has he to do with it?"

"He is the man who can ruin me or spare me as he chooses," said Mr. Lovell, in a low voice. "Circumstances have compelled me to fall deeper and deeper into his debt. He has made a huge fortune from the concern in which all my money has gone. That might make him consider me a little. But——"

"Geoffrey's father!" repeated Arthur. "Then that is how he knew!"

"Yes: his father has evidently told him all about my position," said Mr. Lovell, with a bitter smile. "He does not intend to spare me. I cannot make it worth his while, and James Lagden is not the man to do a kind action for nothing. My poor boy, I fear that we must look for the worst; but I would not have told you until I was sure."

"I am glad I know," said Arthur. "I can help you to bear it. But—but why should Mr. Lagden do this? Why——"

"I have been reckless—a fool, foolish enough to accept help from him, believing that he was actuated by feelings of friendship. After that, I was helpless. Now I am at his mercy, and it is to his interest to crush me. Yet—perhaps there is a chance." Mr. Lovell paused, and looked hesitatingly at his nephew. "You are on friendly terms with his son, Arthur?"

The young cricketer smiled bitterly.

"We are at daggers drawn, almost. Lagden has never lost an opportunity of showing his spite towards me; and if he gets into the club—as I have no doubt he will now—matters will be worse."

Mr. Lovell sighed.

"Then I am afraid all hope is gone, Arthur. If James Lagden has one human feeling left in his breast, it is his affection for his son. He is devoted to Geoffrey. My dear boy, if it were only for myself, I would care little. My race is nearly run; but you, at the very beginning of your career, to have all your prospects blighted!" Mr. Lovell covered his face with his hands.

Arthur stood silent, with contracted brows. It had rushed upon his mind, all that this must mean to him—broken prospects in life, and the wreck of his career as a cricketer for his county—a career that had opened with such brilliant promise!

The blow was a staggering one, and it required all his pluck to face it without flinching. Yet, as he looked at his uncle's bowed head, all thought of himself was lost in compassion for the kind old man who had been more than a father to him. His heart ached as he saw a tear trickle through the old man's fingers. He laid his hand gently upon Mr. Lovell's shoulder.

"Don't think of me," he said quietly. "I am young and strong, and can face the world. I owe it all to you that I am fitted to face it. We can bear this together."

Mr. Lovell nodded without looking up.

"Leave me now, Arthur," he said brokenly. "I am not quite myself. I am glad you came—I am glad to see you bear it so well. But leave me now for a time."

The young man went quietly from the room. He had been the prey of alternate hopes and fears during the rapid journey from Loamchester. Now he had heard the worst. It was ruin! Yet was it so certain?

His uncle seemed to be crushed by the misfortune that had fallen upon him—crushed and confused. It was possible that he took too grave a view of the situation; more than possible that James Lagden did not intend to be pitiless to a man who had never harmed him. There was one man from whom the young cricketer could learn the worst—one man who could tell him what he had to expect—and that man was James Lagden!

Arthur stood for some minutes in the hall in anxious reflection. Then he took his hat and left the house.

The lamps were lighted in the London streets. Arthur Lovell strode through the dusky, spring evening at a rapid pace. His mind was made up; James Lagden could tell him the worst, and he should! It was to Mr. Lagden's house that the young cricketer was hurrying. He reached it in a quarter of an hour.

The servant who admitted him took his name in, and left him standing in the hall. A travelling-bag was standing there, as if hastily set down by someone who had just arrived. Arthur's eye caught the initials on it—"G. L."

His heart sank. He knew that meant that Geoffrey Lagden had arrived in his father's house. Lagden had followed him to London, then! Why? There was but one answer to that question. Lagden intended to be upon the spot to see that no concession was made to the Lovells—to see that his father used to the utmost the power that was in his hands.

Some vague thought of appealing to Mr. Lagden—of asking his compassion for a kind old man, brought low through no fault of his own—had flitted through Arthur's mind. He felt that he might dismiss it now. In this matter, as in most others, Mr. Lagden was pretty certain to be governed by his son—the son of whom he was proud, and to whom all the love of his cold heart was given.

The servant returned, and Arthur followed him to the library. He entered and gave a start of annoyance—for it was not Mr. Lagden in the room. Standing on the hearthrug, regarding him with a peculiar smile, was Geoffrey Lagden!

Arthur Lovell paused.

"How do you do?" drawled Geoffrey. "I hardly expected to have the pleasure of seeing you so soon after the Colts' match in Loamshire."

Arthur bit his lip. The mocking light in Geoffrey's eyes was as good as a declaration of war.

"I expected to see Mr. Lagden here," he replied coldly. "It is your father I called to see."

Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders.

"My father is occupied. I thought that perhaps I should be able to serve you as well."

Arthur made a movement towards the door.

"Thank you; but that is not the case. I will call again when Mr. Lagden is at leisure."

"Stop!"

Arthur looked at him. An unpleasant sneer was upon the face of the Colts' captain.



"You may as well say out what you have come here for, Lovell. Do you think I don't know—and do you think it will be any good?"

"I don't understand you."

"Oh, yes you do," said Geoffrey coolly. "You have come to make an appeal to my father—to ask him for mercy."

Arthur was silent.

"It was what I told you on the Loamshire ground to-day that brought you posthaste to London," went on Geoffrey. "I knew that would be the case, and I followed."

"I really don't see why you should have taken the trouble," said Arthur coldly.

"Don't you! I will explain, then. I have a good deal of influence with my father, and I am going to use it—to suit myself. Mr. Lovell is ruined. My father can save him, or leave him to sink, as he chooses. I shall see that it is the latter that he does."

"Why should you wish to injure a man who has never harmed you, or anyone else?" said Arthur, controlling his temper with difficulty.

"You are mistaken. I do not care a snap of the fingers for Mr. Lovell. His fate is less than nothing to me. I am dealing with my enemy—the man who has tried to supplant me with the girl I love; the man who has tried to keep me out of the Loamshire Club; the man who has backed up the bounders I have always been down upon—in short, yourself!"

"You are mistaken," said Arthur, still keeping calm. "I have never tried to keep you out of the club, and never had any thought of doing so!"

"Dare you deny that you have run me down to Colonel Hilton, who values your opinion as much as the club committee value his?"

"I have never run you down to anybody," said Arthur contemptuously. "I am not in the habit of running people down behind their backs. I was strongly tempted to let the colonel know the reason why you tried to keep Kit Valance in the background in the Colts' match—but I did not."

"You do not expect me to believe that?"

Arthur Lovell's eyes flamed. But he would not lose his temper—more especially as he suspected that it was Geoffrey's object to make him do so. He turned to the door.

"It's useless to discuss the matter, anyhow," he said quietly. "We have never pulled together, and we never shall, I suppose!"

"There won't be any need," said the other coolly. "Our ways in life lie far apart, Lovell, from this day. I have been assured that I shall be asked to play for the Loamshire Club"—he paused for a moment, hoping to see chagrin in Arthur's face, but the young man's look expressed nothing of the kind—"and you will never play for Loamshire again."

"How do you know that?"

"Because a beggar is not wanted in a county club," replied Geoffrey, "and in Loamshire less than in any other club. I think I shall give you a Roland for your Oliver, Lovell. You tried to keep me out of the club, and you have failed. But I shall succeed in ridding Loamshire of you!"

"That will not rest with you," said Arthur scornfully. "And even if I give up regular cricket, I shall probably play for the county occasionally, whenever I find the time, in fact. So you will be disappointed in that!"

"I think not. County cricketers are rather particular about their associates, and the nephew of a beggared swindler is not likely to find a warm welcome," said Geoffrey, with an insulting laugh.

Arthur Lovell quivered from head to foot with rage.

An insult to himself he could have borne, but a brutal insult to his uncle, and from the son of the man who had ruined him, was too much.

Geoffrey Lagden felt an inward qualm as he saw the look upon the young cricketer's face. Arthur strode toward him.

"You coward!" he said thickly. "You cad! Apologise for that lie—that mean lie—instantly, or——"

Geoffrey recovered himself in a moment.

"Or what?" Lagden cried mockingly. "What will you do? Apologise?—hardly. Your uncle is a beggar, and a swindler, too, and you are——"

He got no further.

Arthur's last vestige of self-control vanished, and he sprang upon Geoffrey like a tiger. He forgot where he was—he forgot why he had come there. He only saw his enemy's sneering face—heard only his insulting words.

"You cad! You coward!"

In a moment, Arthur Lovell was upon his foe. Geoffrey struck him in the face, but the blow passed unheeded. The young cricketer's clenched fist crashed upon Geoffrey's mouth, and he went to the floor with a crash.

And as Arthur stood over him, with blazing eyes and heaving chest, the door opened, and James Lagden looked into the room.

The banker stood petrified.

"What—how——" He stammered with rage. "Lovell! So this how you——"

Arthur turned crimson.

"I—I am sorry, Mr. Lagden," he said. "I forgot myself. But if you had heard his words——"

"Sorry!" cried Mr. Lagden. "Yes, I imagine so! I will make you sorrier! Henry, show this man out of the house!"

Geoffrey Lagden staggered to his feet. His face was white with hatred, and there was a red trickle of blood from his bruised mouth.

"Yes, go!" he hissed. "Go, you beggar! You know what to expect now!"

Arthur Lovell, his heart beating tumultuously, quitted the room, the glances of father and son following him with bitter hate.

In the street, he drew a deep breath. Misfortune seemed fated to dog his steps. He had only made matters worse by his visit to the banker's house, yet he could not have foreseen it. He knew that Geoffrey had deliberately provoked him in order to make the breach between his father and Mr. Lovell complete, and he had fallen into the trap. The young cricketer's heart was very heavy as he returned with slow steps towards his uncle's house.

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#### CHAPTER 4.

##### On the Cricket Ground Again—Struck Down.

**C**LICK!

The ball broke in from the off, curled under Lagden's bat, and whipped a stump out of the ground in the neatest possible way.

Geoffrey Lagden muttered something under his breath, and Kit Valance, who had bowled that ball, smiled.

Both the "Colts" were now in the County Eleven, and the committee were of one mind as to which was the more valuable recruit of the two. Lagden was a good bat, but he was no better in that respect than Valance, while as a bowler the latter had no equal in Loamshire.

To Loamshire, weak in bowlers, Kit Valance was a prize. But the former groundsman was in the team as a "professional," and he had little courtesy to look for from Geoffrey Lagden and the others of the same kidney.

Lagden's scarcely veiled contempt and dislike, however, appeared to have

absolutely no effect upon the young professional. He never seemed to be even aware of it.

They were at practice now in the Loamshire ground, and Lagden was trying in vain to keep his wicket up against Kit's bowling.

"Bravo!" came from the field, as Lagden's wicket went down for the fourth time. "A good ball that, Kit!"

The young bowler looked round quickly as he recognised Arthur Lovell's voice.

Arthur had come on the ground unnoticed; but as soon as he saw him, Kit Valance walked quickly towards him, tossing the ball to Ponsonby.

"Hallo, sir!" Kit exclaimed. "So you are back in Loamchester? Where have you been all this time?"

He scanned Arthur's face keenly as he asked the question.

He noted at once the change that had come over the young cricketer. The old careless look was gone from Lovell's face. He looked like a man upon whom trouble had fallen, and fallen heavily. Yet in his firm face and steady eyes could be read undiminished pluck and self-reliance.

And quick sympathy came into Kit's look. He had always been on the best of terms with Arthur Lovell; even when he was only a groundsman and Lovell a wealthy amateur member of the county team, a friendship had grown up between them. There had never been a hint of patronage about Arthur's manner, and Kit had been very careful not to transgress the unwritten, but nevertheless strict, rules of county cricket etiquette.

"I've been with my uncle," said Lovell. "You have heard, of course?"

Kit nodded. He knew that Arthur referred to the bankruptcy of Mr. Lovell and the ruin which had overwhelmed his own prospects.

"Yes," he said, "I heard, and I was very sorry. I was afraid we might never see you again down here, sir. You are not going to give up county cricket, then?"

"I'm afraid so, Kit," replied Lovell. "I am absolutely thrown upon my own resources now. My uncle has saved a small annuity from the wreck of his fortune, but I cannot be a burden upon him now, even if it were possible. I have got to earn my own living!"

Kit's face was very grave. They had walked out of hearing of the cricketers at practice on the ground.

"This is a terrible position for you, sir!"

Arthur smiled faintly.

"I don't know. A man who is worth his salt ought to be able to earn his own living, I suppose."

"It would be different if you had been brought up to it," said Kit. "When I was a groundsman for Loamshire Club, I often thought how jolly it would be to be born to a position like yours. I loved cricket, but I had to work my way up through heaps of difficulties, and now I am a county player, I am only a professional!" He made a grimace. "It was your kindness, sir, that made my lot a great deal easier than it would otherwise have been. Now I think that perhaps I was better off, after all. It's easier to fight the world when you have had to do it from your early boyhood."

"I suppose so. But I shall make my way somehow, I hope, Kit. I shall be sorry to say good-bye to the old club, especially at the beginning of the season." A shade crossed his face. "I've been looking forward to it so much. We've got such a lot of splendid matches on the list. I wanted to play Surrey at the Oval, the M.C.C. at Lord's, and the South Africans here in Loamchester, and the rest. I wanted to see Loamshire top county. I wanted—— But it's no use grumbling. I wanted a lot that I'm not likely



## KING CRICKET!

to get now!" He laughed. "I'm down in Loamchester to say good-bye to the old ground, and to you, Kit, and—and to someone else."

Kit knew whom he was thinking of. A bright face, framed in sunny hair was floating before the mental vision of Arthur Lovell.

"I understand, sir," said Kit quietly. "But is it absolutely necessary to say good-bye to Loamshire cricket?"

"I have told you how I stand, Kit."

"You say you have to earn your living now, sir. Hasn't it occurred to you that there is a living to be made at the good old game—as I am making mine?"

Arthur Lovell started. He had turned over in his mind many schemes for the future since his uncle's bankruptcy, but he had not thought of that. As an amateur he had played for Loamshire, and good judges had considered him the county's best bat. But as a professional!

That had not crossed his mind. Yet, why not? There was, as Kit said, a living to be got at the game—nothing like a big income, perhaps, but enough to live upon decently; and surely a man could not earn his bread in a more honourable manner than by playing the national game. He was a born cricketer; it was one thing, at least, that he could do thoroughly well.

A thoughtful shade came over his brow. Loamshire would probably be glad to have him. There was nothing at all of the snob about Arthur, but he realised that it would not be quite pleasant to play as a paid professional for the team in which he had been an amateur and looked up to. But a man thrown suddenly upon his own resources, without a profession, could not expect to find things pleasant. He had thought in a hazy way of emigration, of a ranch in Canada! How much better to stay in Loamshire—to remain near Molly Hilton, though, of course, he must give up all thoughts of her now, and to play the game he loved, and to help Loamshire up the hill to the county championship.

"I never thought of that, Kit," said Lovell, after some minutes' thought. "But I think I like the idea. I expect Colonel Hilton would find room for me."

"Of course he would, sir. Your retirement from county cricket has upset all his calculations. I know he feels it keenly. He would welcome you back on any terms. Of course, it's a big come-down for you. If you had better prospects——"

"I have no prospects, Kit, and really I don't see that it's a come-down," said Arthur slowly. "There's plenty of the finest fellows in England playing the game for a living. What is good enough for men like Hayward and Hirst is good enough for me, Kit." He smiled slightly. "As for the loss of the 'Esquire' after my name, that will not trouble me very greatly."

Kit laughed.

"I suppose not, sir. Then why not speak to the colonel on the matter while you are down here? You are staying in Loamchester?"

"Yes; I intended to see to-morrow's match as a last look at Loamshire cricket before I said good-bye to the county. You are playing, I suppose?"

"Yes; it isn't much of a match—a one-day fixture, you know, which will help us get our hand in for the season," said Valance. "I don't think Drayholme will bother us much to-morrow. Next week we meet a first-class county, and that is when we shall miss you if you are not with us, sir."

"Well, I shall be on the ground to-morrow for the Drayholme match," said Arthur. "I will speak to the colonel at the first opportunity about this matter. I shall be glad to get back into the club if it turns out all right."

The two cricketers had a long talk, and when Arthur parted with Kit, he

walked to his hotel in Loamchester in a much more cheerful frame of mind. He did not disguise from himself that the path of a professional player in a county club like Loamshire might be set with thorns; but he would have at least one true and steady comrade—Kit Valance. And so long as he “played the game,” and deserved men’s respect, what did it matter to him if he lost the esteem of unthinking snobs?

Bright and early the following morning Arthur Lovell was on the Loamshire County Cricket Ground. The stumps were pitched early, as it was a one-day contest. It was a friendly match between Drayholme and the county.

Yorke, the Drayholme skipper, won the toss, and elected to bat. One of the visiting team had not yet arrived upon the ground, owing to some accident, and the Drayholme captain hoped that he would turn up before the innings reached its conclusion. Colonel Hilton was seated in the pavilion enclosure, with Molly by his side, when the girl uttered an exclamation:

“Mr. Lovell!”

She gave her hand impulsively to the young cricketer. The colonel looked at him quickly, and shook hands with him also. There was a vacant seat beside the old county player, and Arthur dropped into it.

“I’m glad to see you Lovell,” exclaimed Colonel Hilton. “I haven’t had an opportunity of telling you how sorry I am for what has happened. So you have come down to have another look at Loamshire cricket?”

“Yes; and also to speak to you, sir, after the match is over,” said Arthur. “It makes me feel ten years off my age to see the good old game and hear the ball on the bat again. How well Kit Valance handles the ball. He is in good form to-day.”

“Yes; there is not a Drayholme bat fit to face him, I think. Of course, they are nothing like a match for us. They are a man short, too, owing to some accident.”

Arthur watched the cricket with keen interest. It was a fine, sunny morning, and the sight of the level green, the white-flannelled figures of the players, and the cheery sound of bat meeting ball, were like wine to the young cricketer. The clouds which had settled darkly over his life seemed to melt away as he gazed at the familiar scene.

The Drayholme men found Kit Valance an exceedingly tough customer. His bowling was a bit above their weight, so to speak. The visitor’s wickets fell merrily when Kit had the ball, which was as often as possible, for the young bowler seemed untiring. And the face of the Drayholme skipper grew longer. His absent batsman had not yet arrived; and the missing man happened to be one of the best of the Drayholme bats. If he did not come in time for “last man in,” the captain would be compelled to ask for a substitute.

“Eight down for forty,” said Arthur, with a smile, as another Drayholme wicket fell. “Our friends are having a lively time of it. Hallo, the Drayholme skipper is consulting Blane! What is the matter, I wonder?”

“I suppose his man hasn’t arrived,” the colonel remarked. “He will have to play a substitute. I suppose that’s what he’s speaking to Blane about.”

The colonel’s words were soon proved to be correct. Blane, the Loamshire skipper, came towards the colonel, with the visiting captain along with him. He gave Arthur a welcoming nod.

“I saw you on the ground, Lovell,” he said. “One of the Drayholme men has not turned up. Mr. Yorke is looking for a substitute, and I wondered whether you would volunteer.”

“You see, it’s no good our expecting our man now,” said Yorke. “If he hasn’t got here by this time, there’s something up, and he won’t be here at all, probably. Anyway, he’ll be too late for our innings, which has not lasted

so long as I expected." He made a slight grimace. "Mr. Blane mentioned you to me, Mr. Lovell, and I wondered if you would play for us as a substitute."

Arthur Lovell rose to his feet at once. As a true sportsman, he was quite willing to render any assistance in his power to a cricket captain in a difficulty.

"I am quite willing," he replied, "if Blane doesn't object to an old Loamshire player playing against him."

The Loamshire skipper laughed.

"Not at all," he replied cheerily.

"Then come along," said the Drayholme captain. "We have the things for you, and it won't take you long to change."

"I have heard a great deal of your batting, Mr. Lovell," the Drayholme skipper remarked, as he showed Arthur into the visitors' dressing-room in the pavilion. "We haven't made much of a show against the county, and perhaps you can give us a leg up."

"I will try," said Arthur, laughing.

"As an old member of the Loamshire Club, of course, you know Valance's bowling?"

"Yes; he's a great chum of mine, and the only Loamshire bowler I am afraid of," said Arthur.

"Well, keep up your wicket against him if you can. I'll put you in with Simpson. Simpson is a stonewaller. He gets a run about once in a dog's age, but he can stand the bowling like a brick wall," said Yorke. "Here's your things. I think you'll find them a decent fit. It's jolly good of you to come to the rescue like this!"

"Oh, I'm glad to, as a matter of fact!" said Arthur. "It's splendid to handle a bat again, and I'm glad of the chance; and glad to help you, too, of course."

The Drayholme captain left him to change, and returned to the field. Arthur Lovell was not long in changing, and he selected a bat. In a few minutes more a shout announced that another Drayholme wicket was down.

"Ready, Lovell?"

"Quite," said Arthur cheerily.

With his bat under his arm, and buttoning his glove, the young cricketer walked out of the pavilion.

Some of the Loamshire fieldsmen started to see their old comrade on the opposite side. The crowd round the palisade, numbering some five hundred, soon recognised Arthur Lovell, and gave him a cheer as he took his place at the wicket.

Geoffrey Lagden looked at Arthur with a spiteful gleam in his eyes. He was considered a good change bowler, and he happened to be put on to bowl the first over against the Drayholme new recruit.

Arthur smiled as he saw him take the ball in hand. He was not afraid of Lagden's bowling, and he waited with easy confidence for the ball. Down it came, and the gleaming bat met it with a dull clack! It dropped dead on the crease.

The same was the fate of the second ball. But at the third Arthur Lovell saw his chance. His eyes gleamed, and the bat swept the air, meeting the ball as it rose from the pitch with an impact that sent it whizzing far, far from the fieldsmen's reach. Away went the leather-hunters, and the batsmen ran—and ran again—and again!

Once more? No—Arthur settled his bat on the crease—the ball was whizzing in from the country, but the batsmen were secure. The three runs.

had come easily to Arthur, but now he had lost the bowling. Lagden finished the over against Simpson.

Simpson was, as the Drayholme skipper had said, a stonewaller and nothing else. He could stop a ball when he wanted to, if he could do nothing further. Lagden might as well have bowled at a wall. Not a single run did the Drayholme man score, but his wicket was still intact when the field crossed over.

And now Arthur had the bowling again, and a buzz of deep-drawn breath went through the crowd as Kit Valance went on to bowl. The best bat in Loamshire, and the best bowler, were pitted against each other. What would be the result?

Kit gave Arthur a smile as their eyes met across the pitch. There was a real friendship between them, but that had nothing to do with cricket. It was Kit's business to take his comrade's wicket if he could, and he meant to do it.

The eyes of all the spectators were upon the bowler. He took a little run, and his right arm went up. Down went the ball, pitching at a good length, and breaking in from the off in a tricky way that had proved fatal to many of the Drayholme batsmen. But Arthur Lovell was ready for it. Clack!

Point made a desperato clutch at the round red ball, but it was inches past his reach. As the leather shot away, Arthur was running. Once, twice, the batsmen crossed, and the ball came in too late. A couple of runs, and Arthur still had the bowling.

Kit's second ball was stopped dead; his third snicked away through the slips for two. Then a drive to the boundary gave the batsmen four without the trouble of stirring from the crease. Then a single brought Kit opposite Simpson for the last ball of the over.

And then Yorke's face became a little anxious. Simpson was as good as a wall in front of a wicket against most bowlers—slow, fast, or medium, straightforward or tricky—but there was no telling what to expect of a bowler like Kit Valance.

Like many another skipper who had been opposed to Valance, Yorke knew that nothing was to be expected of him but the unexpected, to use a paradox, and so, in spite of his faith in Simpson, he felt extremely uneasy. But the stonewaller did well.

Kit Valance took a little run, and seemed to turn himself into a catherine wheel for a moment, and the ball came down like lightning. But with a clack it was dropped to the ground, and Drayholme had lived through one more over.

Then the bowling was Arthur Lovell's again. Lovell was feeling all his old self now. The mere feel of the cane handle of the bat was exhilarating to the born cricketer. The troubles that had so darkly clouded his life were forgotten now. On the field he thought only of the game. His eyes were bright with a light that had not been in them for some time, and there was a happy, healthy flush in his cheeks as he stood at the wicket.

And Blane, his former captain, now his opponent, muttered to himself as he looked at him:

"If the other man can keep his end up, Arthur Lovell's set for the day, and the innings won't wind up before lunch, after all."

The same thought had come to Yorke, and he was smiling jubilantly. His new recruit, the substitute picked up by chance on the Loamshire ground, might even pull the game out of the fire, he thought, and bring upon Drayholme the dazzling glory of defeating the county.

And, indeed, it looked as if that might come to pass. Lovell was getting well set, and he handled the bowling in a masterly style. He had an easy,



careless air at the wicket, but no wielder of the willow could have been more alert, more keenly watchful.

That over gave Arthur Lovell fifteen, and the bowling for the next over. Then again Kit Valance was put on, and again Arthur, who knew his chum's bowling as no other batsman knew it, played it with success.

The crowd cheered him loudly at the end of the over. The score-board showed thirty-two for Arthur Lovell, and he was only getting his hand in. Then over followed over, and always Arthur kept his end up, and managed to keep most of the bowling, well backed up by Simpson, who knew what was expected of him, and tried only to prolong Arthur's innings without gaining any laurels for himself.

And from the pavilion Colonel Hilton watched eagerly, yet at moments with a cloud upon his brow. The old cricketer was thinking of what Loamshire had lost in losing Arthur Lovell.

"By Jove, he is in good form to-day!" the colonel remarked, when the Drayholme score reached 130, of which 87 were Lovell's. "He is certain to go over the century, and the innings will decidedly not close before lunch unless his partner fails him. Ah, there is Lagden going on to bowl again! I am afraid he will never be able to touch Lovell's wicket."

Molly Hilton laughed, with a shake of her golden curls.

"Hardly, dad. He is looking very determined, though. Perhaps there is a surprise in store for us."

"Perhaps, but I do not think so."

Geoffrey Lagden was indeed looking very determined. His bowling was at its best upon a hard wicket, but so far he had not been able to make any impression upon Arthur Lovell. He caught a smile upon Lovell's face as he went on to bowl, and his eyes glittered with a peculiar light. For some time a thought had been working in his mind, and at that moment it took definite shape, and he came to a sudden determination.

The first ball of the over Arthur played for two, and the second gave him a boundary. That peculiar light had intensified in Geoffrey Lagden's eyes as he prepared to send down the third ball of the over. Up went his arm, and the ball flew with a kind of sudden jerk. And Molly, who knew as much about cricket as any umpire, involuntarily ejaculated:

"That was a throw, dad!"

But before the words were well out of her mouth the catastrophe came, for the ball went down like a bullet, struck the pitch like a hailstone upon glass, and rose like lightning from the hard turf and crashed full upon the forehead of Arthur Lovell. There was a general cry of consternation as the young batsman staggered forward, dropped his bat, and fell senseless to the earth.

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## CHAPTER 5.

### After the Accident.

**S**TRUCK down by the treacherous ball, Arthur Lovell lay senseless before his wicket. Kit Valance, who was fielding at short slip, ran quickly towards him, and reached his side almost as soon as the wicket-keeper.

Quickly kneeling by the fallen batsman, Kit lifted his head, resting it upon his knee. Arthur was quite unconscious, and the black bruise forming upon his forehead showed how terrible the blow had been.

Kit gritted his teeth. To all others on the field it had seemed an accident, but Kit Valance thought that he knew better. He believed that Geoffrey

Lagden had deliberately intended to injure the batsman he hated. But it was no time to say so.

"Water—quick!" exclaimed Kit; and with nimble fingers he unfastened the collar of Arthur Lovell's shirt.

Yorke, the Drayholme skipper, ran quickly from the pavilion with water and a sponge. He handed them to Kit, who bathed the face of the unconscious batsman.

Anxious eyes watched Arthur's face for a sign of returning consciousness, and not the least anxious there was Lagden. He had run swiftly from the bowler's end, and his face was as pale now as Arthur's, for for a few moments he feared that he had done his dastardly work only too well. But his fear, and the anxiety of the others, were relieved at last.

Arthur Lovell's eyes slowly opened. He stared wildly about him, and groaned faintly.

"What is it? What has happened?"

Kit pressed his hand. The young cricketer's relief was almost too deep for words.

"The ball caught you on the forehead," he explained, in a low voice.

"Thank goodness it's no worse, old fellow! I—I was afraid——"

He did not finish the sentence. Arthur Lovell pressed his hand to his forehead. A great lump had formed there, and his head was racked by a terrible aching. He tried to rise. Kit and Yorke assisted him to his feet. He was dazed still, and unable to stand alone. The pain in his head was blinding, yet even at that moment he could think of others, and of the game. He looked at the Drayholme captain.

"I'm sorry for this, Yorke. I hoped to be able to do better for you."

"Oh, don't you worry about that!" said Yorke heartily. "You've done better for us than we could have expected, and we owe you a lot. That's nothing! I only hope that this won't turn out a serious injury. Come—we must get you into the pavilion, and send for a doctor!"

Lagden made a step forward. There was a mean triumph and exultation in his heart, for he knew now that he had effected his purpose. Arthur Lovell would not play again that day. And he had effected it without exciting suspicion. No one on the field, so far as he knew, even suspected the cowardly and unsportsmanlike conduct he had been guilty of.

"I'm sorry this has happened, Lovell," he said, with a well-simulated air of regret. "Of course, accidents will happen, but this one comes very hard on you. I can't say how sorry I am."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Arthur unsuspectingly. "Fast bowling on a hard wicket has been responsible for a good many hard knocks before now."

He moved off to the pavilion, assisted by Yorke on one side and Kit Valance on the other. His head was aching horribly, and he felt a keen desire to get out of the blazing sun and the noise. The sympathetic looks of the crowd followed him to the pavilion, where he disappeared from their gaze.

Arthur lay down in a quiet room in the pavilion. The terrible aching and throbbing in his head did not cease for a moment, but not a word of complaint passed the young cricketer's lips.

The doctor, hurriedly sent for, was not long in arriving. It was now the lunch interval, and Colonel Hilton came into the room with the doctor. Molly Hilton remained in her seat in the pavilion enclosure, her sunny face clouded now with anxiety for Arthur. The doctor's face was serious as he examined Lovell's injury.

"You have been very fortunate in escaping concussion," he said, at last.

"It was a nasty blow—a very nasty blow indeed. Complete rest for a few days will, I hope, make you all right again."

"Then I shall not be able to play in the Drayholme second innings."

The doctor smiled grimly.

"I will not answer for the consequences if you do."

"I am sorry to have to fail Yorke like this; but, of course, I shall obey your orders, doctor."

"You will be wise."

"Thank goodness it's no worse!" said the colonel, with a sigh of relief.

"You cannot go back to your hotel, Lovell. You had better lie here for a bit, and come home with me, and be my guest until you are fit again."

Arthur's eyes sparkled for a moment. It was happiness to think of being under the same roof as Molly Hilton, even though, in his altered circumstances, he could never more think of winning her love.

"But you don't want to be bothered with a semi-invalid!" he exclaimed.

"You are very kind, sir, but——"

"No buts, my boy. Even if you were no friend of mine, I should owe you what care I can bestow, as it was a Loamshire bowler who knocked you over. It was clumsy——"

"Oh, that's all right! Accidents will happen."

"Yes; but Lagden was really to blame. It was a throw—a sheer throw—and he should have been no-balled. He was greatly to blame. It is settled, then. You will come to Lincroft?"

"I shall be glad to, sir, since you are so kind."

The colonel nodded, and left the room. He joined Molly, and found Lagden talking to her. Molly Hilton's manner to Lagden was cold and formal. She had never liked the swaggering amateur of the Loamshire team very much, and now she could not forgive him for the injury to Arthur. True, she believed that the injury was unintentional, but in the back of her mind was a lurking doubt. She looked up eagerly as her father rejoined her.

"How is Mr. Lovell now, papa?"

"Much better than we might have expected, Molly, I am glad to say. The doctor says he will be all right again in a few days."

"Oh, I am so glad!"

"And I," said Lagden. "I have been very anxious. I should never have forgiven myself if Lovell had been seriously hurt."

"I should think not," said Molly.

The colonel darted a quick glance at his daughter as he saw Lagden bite his lip.

"I have asked Mr. Lovell to stay with us at Lincroft, Molly, until he is quite fit again," he said hastily. "We owe him some care."

Geoffrey Lagden turned aside to hide the black scowl that came over his face. He had not foreseen this. To install Arthur Lovell in Molly Hilton's home, with all the eclat of an injured hero, had certainly been no part of his plan. He realised that, with all his cunning, he had succeeded in overreaching himself.

His teeth were set hard as he joined the county cricketers at lunch. And when, at the end of that day's play, he saw Arthur Lovell helped into Colonel Hilton's motor-car, his eyes blazed with rage. The County team had won by an innings and a crowd of runs, for the Drayholme contingent had gone all to pieces without Arthur Lovell. In the summer dusk the big Mercedes buzzed off with Arthur, Molly, and the colonel, on the road to Lincroft, the colonel's home, and Lagden looked after it with the blaze of rage and hatred still in his eyes.

"She cares for him," he muttered to himself. "I saw it in her eyes. I am sure of it now. Hang him! What is he doing in Loamchester again? He is ruined. He hasn't a feather to fly with. I thought they would never meet again. What is he doing down here?"

He gave a sudden start.

Two voices in talk reached his ears where he stood—Kit Valance's voice and that of Blane, the Loamshire skipper. They were chatting together, and Lagden listened as he caught the name of Arthur Lovell.

"A jolly good idea!" Blane exclaimed heartily. "You think that he means that seriously, then, Valance?"

"Yes, I know he does."

"Has he spoken to the colonel yet?"

"He was going to speak to him after the match to-day."

"Well, I think I can answer for Colonel Hilton's reply. He will jump at the chance of getting Lovell into the team again."

Geoffrey Lagden ground his teeth.

"It will be easy work with the committee, too," said Blane. "For one thing, they take the colonel's advice in everything, and for another, they all know Lovell's quality, and will be glad to have him."

Lagden strolled towards the speakers.

"Hallo! What's that, Blane?" he said, with assumed carelessness. "Is there any talk of Lovell coming back into the Loamshire Club?"

Blane nodded.

"Yes; he is thinking of coming into the club as a professional."

Lagden stared. That had never crossed his mind at all, as until the previous day, on Kit Valance's suggestion, it had never crossed Arthur's.

"Arthur Lovell a professional!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Of course, it's out of the question his playing as an amateur again, but I fancy the club will be glad to have him on any terms."

Lagden nodded and walked away, his brow dark and his eyes gleaming. He knew that the Loamshire Committee, as Blane said, would jump at the chance of having Arthur Lovell once more in the ranks of the county cricketers.

So he was not to be rid of his rival, after all! All his machinations, so far, had gone for nothing. Arthur Lovell was still to be a member of the Loamshire Club, still to be thrown into constant contact with Molly Hilton, still to be free to win fame on the cricket field!

"But"—and Lagden's eyes flashed at the thought—"but he comes into the club as a professional—as a paid player. It will be in my power to make his life a burden to him. I can do it, and I will!"

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## CHAPTER 6.

### To Play for Loamshire.

"HOW do you feel now, Lovell, my boy?"

It was the colonel who spoke in his hearty tones. Arthur Lovell was seated in a deep garden-chair, looking out dreamily over the sunny stream that rippled by at the end of the great, old-fashioned garden at Lincroft. It was the day after the match on the county ground, when Arthur had played as a substitute in the Drayholme ranks, and the young cricketer was Colonel Hilton's guest. Save for the great lump on his forehead, and a slight pallor in his face, Arthur was looking his old self.

He nodded, with a smile to the colonel.



"Pretty fit," he replied. "I've been thinking. If you can spare me a few minutes, sir, there's a subject I want to speak to you about."

"Certainly!" The colonel dropped into a seat beside Arthur's, and opened his cigar-case. "I should be glad to know something, Lovell, about your position now and your future prospects. I know you have had a heavy blow financially, and cannot keep up your cricket for the county. That is a blow for Loamshire, too. If I could help you in any way, my boy, you have only to say so. Your uncle was always a friend of mine, and I was deeply sorry to hear of his bad luck."

"Thank you, sir!" said Arthur gratefully. "It is really about my prospects that I want to speak, but it is not exactly help I want. You have been good enough to say that I was of some value to Loamshire."

"You were our champion bat," said Colonel Hilton tersely. "In losing you we have lost most of our chances of getting ahead this season."

Arthur smiled faintly.

"Then, would you like to have me back?"

"That goes without saying; but I thought——"

"My uncle is ruined, sir," said Arthur quietly. "I have to earn my bread, and Kit Valance has suggested a way to me which I had not previously thought of. He suggested that I should enter the Loamshire team as a professional."

The colonel started.

Arthur Lovell looked at him anxiously. Hilton was pulling his grey moustache in a very thoughtful way.

"I need not say that we should be glad to have you, Lovell," said the old cricketer, at last. "You were invaluable to us. That's understood. But have you thought about yourself? You were in the club as an amateur—the nephew of one of the club's most influential backers. You took your proper position. As a professional, everything would be changed."

Arthur nodded.

"Of course, sir, I know that I shouldn't be in the club on the same footing as before," he said, colouring slightly. "That's not to be expected. I should be a paid professional, and I hope I should have sense and proper feeling enough to know how to keep my place."

"Mind, I am not speaking of myself," said the colonel. "To me you would still be the same as ever—my friend, and the nephew of my old friend Lovell. But to the others the difference would be very great. Loamshire is an exclusive club—too exclusive, in my opinion. As a matter of fact, I believe the club's extreme exclusiveness to be at the bottom of the dry rot that has set in in Loamshire county cricket. The members do not treat the paid players so well as they are treated in some clubs."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, sir," said Lovell, smiling. "While I played as an amateur I always tried to follow a more sportsmanlike tack."

"I know you did, my boy, and I liked you for it. But I am afraid you will not find any other amateur in the club so generous and sportsmanlike as yourself in that respect."

Arthur was silent.

"Of course, I am not alluding to such absurd trifles as the loss of the 'esquire' after your name," said the colonel. "You are not the man to care for childish distinctions of that kind; and you know as well as I do that in a Gentlemen v. Players match there are as many gentlemen, in the true sense of the word, on the one side as on the other. There are more serious obstacles in your way. In pointing them out to you, I am speaking against my own inclinations, for I would give a great deal to get you into the team again."

Arthur laughed.

"I have thought it all over, sir, and I think I have foreseen all the difficulties that may arise. It would, from a certain standpoint, be better for me to start in some club where I had never played as an amateur. But to set against that is the fact that I am a Loamshire man, and that I am already qualified for Loamshire."

"If you are sure you have thought it out well, I will say no more, Lovell, only to assure you that the committee will welcome you with open arms."

"That is the important point."

"I can answer for it. However, I will see them, and get you a definite reply. But you need have no uneasiness on that score. Mind, what I have said must not discourage you, if you have made up your mind to go ahead and win. There will be plenty of difficulties in your way, but there is no reason why you should not surmount them by pluck and resolution. And, as a patriot for your county, you will reap a certain reward in helping Loamshire up the county ladder."

"I shall do my best, sir."

The colonel rubbed his hands. He had spoken out to Arthur from a sense of duty, but he was delighted to have the splendid young batsman back in the ranks of Loamshire.

He left Arthur in a cheerful mood. The young man was well aware that he had set himself to tread a thorny path. But he would have a friend in Colonel Hilton and a staunch chum in Kit Valance. As for the rest, he could afford to ignore them. He could go his own way quietly, doing his duty, heedless of sneers or snobbishness.

"So you are coming back to us, Mr. Lovell."

He started out of a reverie.

Molly Hilton, with a smile on her sunny face, had come through the trees, and was standing by him. She nodded brightly.

"Father has told me," she said. "I am so glad."

"It is not quite decided yet," smiled Arthur. "The committee have to accept me yet."

"Oh, that is a certainty! And you are going into the club as a professional player?"

He nodded.

"You will have a battle to fight," the girl said seriously. "But you will fight it and win. I am sure of that. And—and I admire you, Mr. Lovell!"

Arthur looked at her inquiringly.

"Yes," said Molly, nodding, "because you have chosen the honourable and manly way. There are plenty of amateurs in the county clubs—and one at least I know of in the Loamshire Club—who make more money out of cricket as 'amateurs' than the professionals do. And, whatever may be said of the paid player, to my mind he is a better man and a truer sportsman in every way than the amateur who draws a larger income from the club, and yet insists upon his status as a gentleman player."

"I agree with you there, Miss Hilton. Modern county cricket is honey-combed with humbug, and a comparison of the earnings of some professionals and the 'expenses' of some amateurs would make the public open their eyes."

"All the more honour to you, Mr. Lovell, for playing openly as a professional, instead of veiling the facts under a thin disguise of amateurism!" exclaimed the girl impulsively.

And Arthur's eyes sparkled.

At all events, he had not lost Molly Hilton's respect; rather, it had

increased. He felt more sure than ever that he had done well in returning to Loamshire.

"And you will play in the next county match," said Molly, changing the subject. "You know we play Leicestershire next week on our home ground."

And so the talk ran on, upon cricket in general and Loamshire's prospects in particular; a pleasant hour, which Arthur Lovell long remembered in less happy days that were to follow.

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## CHAPTER 7.

### The Leicestershire Match.

**L**EICESTERSHIRE was the first of the first-class fixtures on the Loamshire card. The meeting was looked forward to with some anxiety by the Loamshire Club.

Not that the Loamshire men were afraid of the club which last season finished last but one in the county championship; but straws show which way the wind blows, and by the form displayed by the home eleven against the visitors the committee hoped to judge of Loamshire's prospects for the season.

The previous season Loamshire's performance had been poor. That was not due to any dearth of cricket talent in the county, Colonel Hilton believed, and he meant that the present season should see Loamshire high up the able, if not actually at the top.

Arthur Lovell had been snapped up by the club, as the colonel foretold. Whether as an amateur or a professional, there was no doubt he was the finest bat Loamshire had ever produced, and fully the equal of players like Jessop or Hayward. What his standing in the club might be mattered little, so long as he knocked up centuries for Loamshire.

His standing, of course, was changed. He had expected it, and was prepared to take it patiently. But sometimes a feeling of bitterness crept in in spite of himself.

It had always been his way to value a cricketer simply and solely for the cricket he played, without any reference to whom his father was, or what his grandfather might be. That had always seemed to him the sportsman-like way, though perhaps rare in county cricket.

He had always had a firm friendship for Kit Valance, though he himself was a wealthy member of the club, and the other only a ground bowler, paid to bowl to the members. Now his own position was exactly the same as Kit's.

To some extent, he had the advantage of having once been an amateur, and having mixed with the best in the club on equal terms; but, in many respects, that was a disadvantage, for by many it was anticipated that he would fail to know his place, and some haughty pooh-bahs went out of their way to show him that he was no longer to consider himself on an equal footing. This was especially true of those who had, in the old days, found themselves outshone by him, and it was also partly due to the secret, but none the less active, enmity of Geoffrey Lagden.

For Lagden, as the son of the wealthiest member and most influential backer of the club, had a great deal of influence, especially over men of his own stamp, who thought more of putting on "side" than of playing a good game. And it was to be remarked that the so-called "amateurs," whose "expenses" amounted to more than Arthur Lovell's earnings, were extremely inclined to look down upon the paid player.

"How do you like it, sir?" asked Kit Valance, as he met Lovell on the morn-

ing of the first day of the Leicestershire match. "Feels good to be in the ranks again—eh?"

"Yes, rather; though it's a change. But I can stand all that. If only some of them would not go out of their way to make themselves unpleasant, it would be better."

Kit shrugged his shoulders.

"That's only to be expected. It's a rotten system, as a matter of fact, and, in my opinion, it will have to be altered sooner or later. Still, a man can put up with a good deal for the sake of the game. It is a bit of luck to have Blane for captain. Do you know, there was talk of Ponsonby filling that position?"

Arthur Lovell nodded.

"Yes. I am glad it came to nothing. I never liked Ponsonby when I was in the club before, and now——" He checked himself.

"Now you find him a greater snob than ever," said Kit quietly. "All the more curious, because he makes as much out of Loamshire cricket as the two of us put together."

Arthur laughed.

"Yes; but he would be greatly insulted if you called him a professional. It's a queer world! What do you think of the prospects to-day?"

"I think we shall beat Leicestershire. I am curious to see how you shape at the wicket against King's left-handed bowling, sir."

"So am I. But while we're on the subject, Kit, I want you to drop that 'sir.' Remember, I am a professional now, the same as yourself."

"Not at all," said Kit, laughing. "The 'sir' was never empty lip-service from me, as far as you were concerned, and I shall keep it up."

The chums went into their quarters to get ready for the match. On the Loamshire ground, as with most of the more exclusive county clubs, a sharp dividing-line was drawn between amateur and professional, and they did not mix off the field. This, however, Arthur Lovell was glad of, for it saved a good many possibilities of friction.

The weather was good, the wickets dry and hard. A goodly crowd were assembling in the ground for the opening day of the match, and the pavilion enclosure was filling.

Leicestershire were already in their quarters, the stumps were pitched, and all was ready. Blane tossed for choice of innings with the Leicestershire captain, and correctly named the coin. Loamshire chose to bat first.

The Loamshire crowd gave an encouraging cheer as Ponsonby and Geoffrey Lagden were seen to issue from the pavilion.

Lagden was a "flashy" bat, and there was a great deal of "playing to the gallery" about his cricket, which often evoked cheers, while good judges shrugged their shoulders. He made a very good figure as he took his place at the wicket, his bat on the crease, to face the bowling from the pavilion end.

The Leicestershire skipper, Sir Arthur Hazelrigg, had placed his men to field, and very fit they looked in their spotless white and the green-and-red caps of their county.

J. H. King bowled the first over for Leicestershire, with disastrous results to Geoffrey Lagden.

Lagden explained afterwards in the pavilion that left-handed bowling was not so easy to him as the other variety, and certainly he did not find it anything like easy to play the bowling of J. H. King.

He succeeded in stopping the first ball, and sent the second to the slips, but did not venture to run. The third nearly baffled him, and gave him a thrill as he just saved his wicket.

The fourth was a deceiving ball, and Lagden played a shade too forward at it, and felt his bat sweep the empty air. For a fraction of a second he wondered where the ball was. Then he knew!

The clatter of falling bails gave him all the information he required upon the point, and the umpire's laconic "out" was a little superfluous.

Lagden stared at his wrecked wicket, and then slowly and reluctantly put his bat under his arm and walked away towards the pavilion.

From the palisades, lined with interested faces, came a very audible snigger. Lagden's face turned red as he heard it. He cast a scowl about him, and it was probably that involuntary exhibition of ill-temper that brought a further mocking question from the spectators:

"What price duck's eggs?"

Lagden snapped his teeth and stamped into the pavilion. He had gone forth prepared to do great things for Loamshire in the first county fixture of the season, and he had hardly had time to swing his bat.

It was painful, and it was humiliating, and the expression upon Blane's face was far from agreeable to him when he entered the pavilion.

However, the Loamshire skipper said nothing. He was not the kind of man to "nag" a player, and he knew that the best way to put a man off his form is to get into a fault-finding habit.

Lagden had had bad luck, and it was no use complaining about it, and he could only hope that the next man in would do better.

Arthur Lovell was next man in.

Geoffrey Lagden saw the expression of Blane's face as he watched Lovell don his pads, and knew how much the Loamshire skipper expected of Arthur. And it added to the rancour in his heart. He knew instinctively that even King could not bowl Arthur Lovell out in the first over, and that the Loamshire champion bat would probably live through a good many.

"You next, Lovell!" said Blane cheerily. "Look out for King; he's a regular cough-drop, I know; I've batted against him before. We drew with Leicestershire last season; I want to beat them this time."

Arthur smiled.

"I'll keep the sticks up if I can, Blane. One thing, if I can stand King's bowling, I can stand any of the other's."

"Yes, that's a fact."

And Arthur Lovell, having donned pads and gloves, made his way to the wicket. The moment he made his appearance in the open there was a ringing cheer from the crowd of spectators. Arthur smiled, not without gratification. It was pleasant to feel that, to the Loamshire cricket world in general he was the same as ever, that the fall in his fortunes had made no difference in their estimation of him.

Whatever county cricketers might say or do, the sporting public were to be relied upon to stand by their old favourites, and back up a good and true player with their honest approval. Indeed, it was probably the general knowledge of the young cricketer's changed fortunes that added to the heartiness of the greeting that was given him.

Lagden watched him go from the pavilion with a sneer upon his face.

"What a silly fuss they make of that fellow!" he muttered to Tunstall, one of his own set. "It makes me sick to hear them!"

"Awful rot, I call it!" agreed Tunstall. "What is he, anyway? All that silly shouting is wasted on a chap like that."

"Hallo, what's that?" said Blane. "If he keeps his end up for Loamshire, that's all we want, isn't it? He deserves every cheer they've given him."



Lagden sneered again, and relapsed into silence. His duck's egg was still rankling in his mind, and he was ready to quarrel with anybody, but he did not dare to do so with the Loamshire skipper.

Blane took no more notice of him. His eyes were on the pitch, following the movements of Arthur Lovell, and he cared nothing for the jealous carping of Lagden and Tunstall.

Arthur had taken middle, and King was preparing to bowl. He had bowled four balls to Lagden's wicket, and he wanted to take another with the remaining two of the over.

He had never bowled against Arthur Lovell before, or he would certainly never have entertained that ambition for a moment.

There was a great deal less swagger about Lovell, but there was in his manner a quiet confidence, which was a great deal better, and which to an experienced cricketer showed that he was a much more dangerous customer to tackle.

The first ball came down with a cunning break on it, like the ball which had sent Geoffrey Lagden bootless home.

Clack! The ball dropped dead on the crease, somewhat to the bowler's surprise. There was a very determined look upon his face as he prepared to deliver the last ball of the over.

It came with a vim, and it pitched just where, as it happened, Arthur Lovell liked it. The gleaming bat met it with a sounding click, and the leather sailed away—away—away!

The batsmen were running. The fieldsmen were hunting the elusive ball, and the batsmen were crossing the pitch, sprinting for all they were worth.

Once, twice, thrice—yes, four times! And Ponsonby was for running again.

"No!" shouted Arthur. And he was right, for the ball had been sent in by Odell, and Ponsonby's bat clumped on the crease again just in time.

Arthur had saved that wicket by refusing to run, but Ponsonby was far from grateful. He cast a look towards Arthur, which the other batsman saw and understood.

Ponsonby could not deny that Arthur had been right, but his look conveyed all the arrogant annoyance of an amateur who felt himself ordered by a professional.

Little did Arthur care what he thought or felt. He was there to play the game, and not to attend to the feelings and fancies of an unthinking popinjay.

The crowd, who from the moment of Arthur's appearance had looked upon him with a favourable eye, gave him a hearty cheer.

To score four in the first over against a bowler like King was a feat which showed what they might expect of the Loamshire batsman when he became set at the wicket.

The field crossed, and Odell took the ball against Ponsonby's wicket. Ponsonby, though he was undoubtedly in many respects a puppy, was a good batsman in his way, and though he would probably never be really brilliant, he could be relied upon to keep his wicket up and bag a fair average of runs.

Odell gave him some twisters, but he managed to stop them, and the fifth ball gave him a single, which brought Arthur Lovell opposite Odell for the last ball of the over.

Odell put all he knew into that ball, with the result, which he was far from anticipating, of giving Arthur a hit into the long-field for two.

In the next over Ponsonby knocked up six runs, and was then caught by

King. He went into the pavilion looking far from amiable, and Kit Valance took his place at the wicket.

Kit exchanged a cheerful glance with Arthur Lovell. He was glad to be in with his chum, and he meant to back him up for all he was worth.

Kit's excellence was as a bowler, certainly, but he was a very good and reliable bat, and the two professionals understood each other perfectly, which was a great point.

Kit was quite content to back up Arthur, and leave him to decide the runs and make the scoring, putting in a few himself whenever he had a good chance.

And Kit Valance showed now that he could defend wickets as well as capture them, and King, Jayes, and Odell varied their bowling against him without making any impression upon the "sticks."

And when Arthur Lovell had the bowling he showed his finest form. He was getting set now, as Blane had hoped, and as Sir Arthur Hazelrigg, the Leicestershire captain, had dreaded.

Whatever balls were sent down, he seemed equally able to deal with them, and when Hazelrigg changed his bowling, and put on Coe and Whitehead for the sake of variety, Lovell proved himself equally able to deal with them.

And all the time the score was mounting up. Fifty-five runs had fallen to Arthur Lovell's credit now, and he was still batting with an almost machine-like steadiness and cleanness of style.

The interest of the crowd was fast changing to enthusiasm. There was no slow cricket here; no batting with one eye on the game and the other on the averages.

Arthur Lovell played up for all he was worth, and he had his reward. Odell went on again, and bowled his cunningest, with the result—greeted with loud cheers by the spectators—that Lovell's individual score leaped to sixty-eight. Colonel Hilton watched from the pavilion with sparkling eyes.

"What did I tell you, Blane?" he exclaimed. "Arthur Lovell is the backbone of the Loamshire team, and I say it again."

And the Loamshire skipper nodded, with a laugh.

"Yes, the Leicestershire bowlers are finding him hot stuff. There's Odell going on to tackle him again. Odell bowled Maclaren last season, in their match with Lancashire, and Lord Dalmeny, if I remember rightly, in their Surrey match; but he doesn't seem able to touch Lovell."

The colonel rubbed his hands.

"No, he certainly does not. Hurrah! Well hit—well hit!"

It was a hit into the long-field for three. Kit Valance then had to face Odell, and met with bad luck, being caught by King in the slips. Kit carried out his bat with twenty-four to his credit—a very respectable score.

And the score still mounted. Tunstall came in to join Lovell, and lived through a couple of overs, and was then stumped by Burgess, the wicket-keeper. His wicket went down for six.

It was now Blane's turn on the list, and the Loamshire captain came out and joined the invincible bat, giving him a cheery nod as he passed.

Blane was a fine cricketer, but he had not his usual luck in this innings. Odell caught him at point, from a ball bowled by Jayes, when his score had reached twenty, but he was looking far from glum as he went back to the pavilion.

For Arthur Lovell's score was at ninety-six now, and it was pretty certain that he would go over the hundred; and as long as the runs were scored for Loamshire, Blane, like a true sportsman, cared little by which individual batsman they were scored.

Odell was bowling again, and the crowd were watching with breathless interest. Would Lovell top the century in Loamshire's first innings in the first of the county's first-class matches of the season?

It looked like it. Down came the ball, and it rose just to the batsman's fancy, and he let himself go at it. Swipe—clack!

The ball flew far, and the batsmen ran, and ran again, and yet again. The crowd roared.

"One more, Lovell! Well run! One more!"

Yes, they were running again—crossing the pitch like lightning—and the ball came whizzing in to the wicket-keeper too late.

Too late! The batsman was safe, and the ground was ringing with the cheers of the crowd.

"Well run—well run!"

Arthur Lovell had topped the century. In the very next over, by a strange freak of Fate, he was caught out by Odell, by a ball from Whitehead, and he carried out his bat for 105, amid enthusiastic cheers, and as he strode into the pavilion, with his face flushed and happy, Colonel Hilton met him with a grip of the hand.

And even Ponsonby and Tunstall, and, in fact, all but Geoffrey Lagden, joined in the general, "Bravo, Lovell!"

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## CHAPTER 8.

### A Friend in Need.

"KIT, what's the matter?"

Arthur Lovell asked the question in a quick, anxious tone. It was the lunch interval. Loamshire were eight down for 165 when the cricketers knocked off for a well-earned rest. After lunch Arthur had missed Kit, and now he had suddenly come upon him sitting alone, with a look of the deepest dejection upon his face.

The young cricketer held a letter in his hand, but he was not reading it. He looked up quickly as he saw Arthur, and coloured.

Lovell looked at him anxiously. More than once he had observed about Kit Valance a gravity unusual in one of his boyish years, and he had attributed it to the sometimes slighting treatment he experienced in the Loamshire Club. Now it struck him for the first time that there might be a deeper cause for it.

"Is anything wrong, Kit?" Arthur said, with a glance at the letter in his chum's hand. "Of course, I don't want to inquire into your affairs, as you know; but if there's anything wrong, perhaps I could help you."

Kit shook his head.

"I'm afraid nobody can help me, sir. It's my brother in trouble again."

Lovell looked surprised.

"I didn't know you had a brother, Kit."

The young bowler smiled bitterly.

"I'm not proud of him, sir, and I don't speak about him if I can help it. If the facts were known in Loamchester, I expect it would make my position in the club more difficult than it is now. Of course, with you it's different. If you cared to hear about it, I think it would be a relief to tell you. I've been on the point of doing so a good many times."

Lovell dropped into a seat on the bench by his side.

"Of course I should care to hear, Kit, if you're in trouble, though I may not be able to help you out of it. Why haven't you spoken about it before, old fellow?"

"Because you were rich, and the difficulty is chiefly a money one," replied Kit, with a faint smile. "I might have been misunderstood."

"I should never have misunderstood you, Kit," said Lovell quietly; "but I understand why you did not speak. Go on."

Kit was silent for a few moments, as if even to his chum he felt some difficulty in speaking about the matter which had always been a secret buried in his own heart.

"I suppose you'll think me a fool for troubling my head about Len at all," he said, colouring a little. "He has always been what people call 'a bad lot,' though I can't help believing that he has his good points. Len and I are twins, and I dare say that accounts for my sticking to him. He went to the bad years ago, and though he has never fallen into the grip of the law, I am afraid he owes that to his good luck. I thought he had turned over a new leaf when he got into the office of Mr. Lagden, but that doesn't seem to have lasted long, to judge by this letter."

Arthur Lovell started.

"Mr. Lagden? Do you mean James Lagden, Geoffrey Lagden's father?"

Kit nodded.

"Yes; of course you know him. He's a rich banker."

"The man who ruined my uncle," said Arthur, between his teeth. "The man who tricked and, I firmly believe, swindled him, though it is impossible to prove it."

"I shouldn't wonder. I know from Len that he's a hard man—hard as nails—and merciless in his business methods. But read that letter."

Arthur Lovell took the letter and glanced over it. His brow darkened as he read the carelessly-written, flippant epistle.

"Dear Kit," it ran—"I am in trouble again, and, of course, I come to you. Can you let me have a twenty-pound note? I haven't bothered you for some time, you know, so you ought to be able to manage it. I am sure you will.

"It's a serious matter. I am in debt to just that extent to my excellent employer, Mr. James Lagden. He is not aware of it yet; but unless I have the money by Monday morning, he cannot fail to learn that I have been borrowing his cash without asking his permission first, and he is sure to be unreasonable, and to call it by a harsher name than mere borrowing. So, you see, I simply must have it.

"I know you'll stump up, like a good fellow. I follow your career with the keenest interest from this smoky old city, and often envy you playing the great game on the green, under the sunny sky. If I had had my fair allowance of sense I should have taken up cricket as seriously as you did, though I suppose I should never have become Loamshire's champion bowler. I am confident that you will head the bowling average this year, and as you are certain to play in all the county's first-class matches, you will scoop in quite a crop of fivers. Will you be able to spare one now and then for your affectionate brother? Anyway, do try to let me have the twenty by Monday, or before, or I shall be walked off that same day like Eugene Aram. You remember—the two stern-faced peelers, and

"Eugene Aram walked between,  
With gyves upon his wrists."

"I know you don't want that unhappy fate to overtake your twin and counterpart; and besides, as your classic features are well known, I might be mistaken in the dock for Loamshire's famous bowler, which would make

things awkward for you in that extremely high and mighty club of little tin gods you have the honour to belong to.

“So stump up like a sportsman, and earn the undying gratitude of your affectionate twin,

LEN VALANCE.”

Arthur Lovell handed back the letter.

“If that were written to me,” he said, “I should leave the writer of it to take the consequences of his action; but, of course, if he were my brother I should feel differently, I suppose. Is it true that he so strongly resembles you?”

“Yes; we have often been mistaken for one another.”

“Then it is quite possible that awkwardness might arise from his arrest. It’s an unfortunate position for you, Kit, old fellow. I know the limitations of a professional cricketer’s income better than ever since I have become one. This must be a hard pull for you.”

“It is, and one I cannot meet,” said the young bowler miserably. “I actually haven’t twenty pounds in the world, and so I cannot possibly send the money. That’s what’s worrying me.”

“And you were not going to speak about it!” exclaimed Arthur reproachfully. “I think you might have remembered that I am your friend, Kit. It isn’t as if I were rich now. I am as poor as yourself, and so there is no reason at all why you shouldn’t have told me. I have twenty-five pounds in the bank. My riches have shrunk to exactly that sum,” he went on, laughing. “You cannot refuse a loan.”

“It’s awfully good of you, Lovell,” said Kit, in a low voice. “You’re the only man in the world I would ask. I want ten pounds to make up the sum. I can manage the rest. I shall get five pounds for this match, and six if we beat Leicestershire. I shall hand it directly to you, and next week I shall be able to settle for the rest.”

Lovell nodded.

“Then you shall send it off this evening, Kit, and get it off your mind. But after you have got Len Valance out of this hole, how do you know he will run straight in the future?”

Kit sighed.

“I don’t know it, Lovell; in fact, I don’t suppose he will. But he’ll leave me alone for a time, and I shall be able, I hope, to meet his next difficulty. You must think me a fool,” he went on, colouring, “but the last words I spoke to my mother on her deathbed were a promise to look after Len. He seems a bad lot to you; ; but he’s rather weak than bad, and easily led astray by others. He’s the kind of man who runs straight so long as he’s not tempted, and yields at once to bad influence. This money that he has—has borrowed from his employer, has gone into the hands of sharpers, I am convinced. I hoped at one time he would take up cricket—he was a good cricketer, and still plays sometimes—but he hadn’t the patience to make slow beginnings—” He broke off abruptly. “Hallo, time’s up!”

He rose, and Arthur rose also. Lovell’s face was grave, and his heart was heavy for his chum. They walked back in silence, each busy with his thoughts. The Leamshire innings had recommenced, and the crowd was thickening round the palisade, watching the resumption of play.



## CHAPTER 9.

**The Leicestershire Innings and a Quarrel.**

**L**OAMSHIRE'S few remaining wickets soon went down to the bowling of Jayes, King, and Odell, and the first innings of Leicestershire commenced.

Loamshire were all down for exactly 199, of which as we all know, 105 belonged to Arthur Lovell.

No other Loamshire score had come anywhere near his, and he was the acknowledged champion of the day; acknowledged, that is, by all whose hearts were not touched by the demon of jealousy.

His name was on the lips of all the crowd, and if it was mentioned with a sneer or a shrug, it was only within the Loamshire pavilion.

For Geoffrey Lagden's hatred was fed by the success of the man he persisted in regarding as his rival, though there was no thoughts of rivalry in Arthur's mind. And the figure Lagden had cut in the Loamshire first innings was certainly a humiliating one, and bitterly disappointing to an ambitious cricketer. Arthur Lovell had topped the century, and Lagden had retired with a duck's egg to his credit, and his heart was seething with bitterness in consequence.

Leicestershire opened their innings with Sir Arthur Hazelrigg, the skipper, and Knight.

Blane placed his men deep to field, and sent Kit Valance to bowl the first over. Kit was looking all himself again. The difficulty which had disquieted and depressed him was removed now, thanks to the friendship of Arthur Lovell. That it would undoubtedly crop up again later did not trouble him now. He was given to taking things quietly, and never meeting trouble half-way. The weight once gone from his mind, he dismissed the matter, and gave his whole thoughts to the game he was playing.

Lovell glanced at him, and was glad to see him in such good form. Lovell was fielding at point, watchful for chances. The Loamshire crowd, who knew Kit Valance well, became interested the moment he was seen to take the ball in hand.

The Leicestershire captain also knew Valance's bowling, and was keenly on his guard against it. He was a good and steady bat, as he soon showed. As he came to the wicket Kit ceased bowling trial balls to the wicket-keeper, and prepared for business.

He took a short run, and his arm went up and over with the lightning movement the Loamshire crowd had learned to know.

Clack! And the ball flew from Sir Arthur Hazelrigg's bat, and skimmed away just beyond the clutch of point, and the batsmen ran and ran again.

The next ball gave Hazelrigg a single, and Knight faced the bowling.

Kit sent down a fast ball, full of spin, which glanced off the Leicestershire man's bat, fairly into the outspread hands of point.

Up went the ball from Arthur Lovell's hand skyward, to fall straight as a die into his palm again.

And the batsman looked glum as a cheer rang out.

"Well caught!"

"Oh, well caught!"

He glanced at the umpire rather unnecessarily.

"Out!" was the laconic decision. And the Leicestershire man walked away.

Odell came to take his place at the stumps. He lived through the rest of the over, stopping the balls without a single run, and then the field crossed, and Tweedie took the ball.

Tweedie was a medium-sized, active Scotsman, a professional in the Loamshire team, and a good, sometimes brilliant, bowler. He was nowhere the equal of Kit Valance, but at the same time it was certain that he was streets ahead of any other bowler in the Loamshire team, and after Kit, it was upon Tweedie that Blane placed his chief reliance.

Both Lovell and Lagden were good change bowlers, but the business of taking wickets fell to Kit Valance and Alex Tweedie.

The Scotsman was a slow bowler, but he could at times send down a ball that would puzzle the most experienced batsman. He did not cut so handsome a figure on the bowling crease as Kit, but he could be dangerous to the enemy, and after all that was the chief thing to be desired.

Tweedie's slow balls, however, did not seem dangerous to the Leicestershire captain, who played the first for six and the second for two, and the third for another two. The fourth ball came off his bat and whizzed past point and straight for cover-point, as if he had designed to give Ponsonby, who was fielding there, a catch!

Blane, who was keeping wicket, grinned with glee. The catch was an easy one, and he had not the slightest doubt that Ponsonby would gather it in without difficulty, and dismiss one of the most dangerous of the Leicestershire batsmen for a small figure.

It was all a matter of a few seconds.

Arthur Lovell, at point, had no chance to touch the ball, but he followed its flight with his eye, and he saw that Ponsonby was not alert. There was no time to waste—no time to think of anything but that an easy catch was about to be “muffed.”

“Look out, Ponsonby!” called out Arthur.

Ponsonby started. He was by no means so alert as a fieldsman should be. He was not looking for that catch; though, of course, he ought to have been looking for that or anything else. And he would certainly never have even caught at the ball, until too late, but for Lovell's warning exclamation.

As it was he caught at it too late or too clumsily. The ball escaped his grasp, and rolled on the ground at his feet. From the palisades, whence the blunder had been watched and noted, came a loud hoot.

“Butter-fingers!”

Ponsonby stooped and picked up the ball, his face red with rage. He darted a savage glance towards Arthur.

“What the dickens do you mean by shouting at me?” he exclaimed. “Mind your own business, confound you!”

A hot retort rose to Lovell's lips. But he did not utter it. He remembered himself in time, and biting his lips to keep back the angry words, he turned his back on Ponsonby.

The latter returned the ball, and stood with a dark frown upon his brow. He had muffed an easy catch, and he knew it, and given the Leicestershire skipper's innings a new lease of life. But he wasn't thinking of that. He was thinking of the unheard-of insolence of a paid professional in daring to shout at him in the open field.

The Leicestershire batsman breathed more freely as he realised his narrow escape, and he probably felt grateful to Ponsonby. His innings had been threatened with an abrupt termination, and now he showed that he was not slow to profit by the lesson.

He batted steadily and cautiously, and there were no more easy catches offered to the Loamshire fieldsmen. The chance had come, and gone, and it was not repeated.

Sir Arthur Hazekrigg's score had mounted to forty before Kit Valance succeeded in clean bowling him.

Then came in King, the left-handed batsman, and he did well for his side, piling up thirty runs before he was dismissed, l.b.w.

After that the Leicestershire men had very little of a look-in. Kit and Tweedie between them accounted for the wickets at a good rate, amid cheers from the Loamshire crowd watching their achievements.

Lovell, put on as a change bowler, captured one wicket, clean-bowled, but the rest of the work was done by Kit Valance and the Scotsman.

The Leicestershire innings closed just before the time appointed for the stumps to be drawn, with a total of 101 runs.

Loamshire was ninety-eight ahead, and full of confident anticipations for the morrow's play.

Indeed, Colonel Hilton was inclined to believe that the match would probably finish in two days instead of the three allotted to it as a first-class county fixture. And the colonel was far from dissatisfied with the prospect. He was a cricketer and a sportsman to the finger-tips, and whatever might be the views of committee and secretary, the colonel thought more of the game than the "gate."

It was scarcely possible to doubt now that Loamshire would beat their visitors, and that would be an auspicious opening for the season, and a promise of what was to come in the contest for the County Championship.

Already in his dreams the colonel saw Loamshire as champion county, encountering the Rest of England at the Oval, and winning a glorious victory.

But there were other Loamshire men on the ground who were far from being in the same satisfied mood as Colonel Hilton.

Ponsonby had come off the field in a towering passion. He had been nursing his injury, as he considered it, all through the Leicestershire innings, and now he was bursting with it.

The crowd was dispersing after the play had ceased, and Arthur Lovell was chatting with Kit, when the incensed amateur strode up to him.

"Hallo, here's Ponsonby on the warpath, Lovell!" muttered Kit, as he saw the amateur approaching with rapid steps and a black brow. "Looks like a row."

Arthur compressed his lips.

A glance at Ponsonby showed that Kit's prediction was probably a correct one. The cricketer was in a passion, and there was no consideration in his heart towards one who was, in a way, at his mercy.

"Yes, it looks like it, Kit," said Arthur Lovell, in a low voice. "I thought from his expression several times during the Leicestershire innings that he was looking for trouble."

"He has no reason to get his rag out. Anybody might have called out to him as you did. I should certainly have done so if I had been in your place; so would anybody else in the team," said Kit.

Lovell nodded. A bitter smile was on his handsome face for a moment.

"Yes, Kit, any other member of the club might have done so unremarked. But I forgot for the moment my position in the club."

"I see. That's what's got his back up?"

"I imagine so."

Ponsonby had now reached him.

Arthur Lovell looked calmly at him, and nodded.

"What the dickens did you mean by speaking to me on the ground in the way you did, Lovell?" exclaimed Ponsonby.

"I think that's pretty evident," said Arthur quietly. "I spoke to you in the way I did because you couldn't see that catch coming, and I wanted to save it."

"What business was it of yours, confound you?" broke out Ponsonby violently. "Are you employed here to teach gentlemen how to play the game?"

Arthur winced. But his manner was perfectly quiet and calm as he replied to the insulting speech.

"Some of them need teaching, Mr. Ponsonby, to judge by the way they played the game this afternoon," he said.

Ponsonby gritted his teeth. Arthur Lovell's quietness added to his rage. He had come there to bully, and he was a little puzzled and nonplussed by the man whom, somehow, he did not seem to be able to bully. He was silent for a moment, and Lovell turned away.

Ponsonby started forward and caught him by the arm.

"Stop a bit, Lovell," he exclaimed; "I haven't finished!"

Arthur looked him steadily in the face.

"Let go my arm!" he said.

"Do you think you are going to give orders to me?"

"Let go my arm!"

The veins were standing out on Lovell's forehead; his right fist was clenched hard. If Ponsonby had not obeyed him, he would have been lying on the grass the next moment, whatever the consequences might be.

But he realised it, and it was no part of his desire to come to blows with a man who could have thrashed him easily. He released his hold. But that tacit defeat only added to his rage.

"I haven't finished yet!" he exclaimed thickly. "You spoke to me on the ground in a way I have no intention of submitting to. You forget that you are a paid professional, and that it is part of your business to be respectful to a gentleman."

"I have never, to my knowledge, failed in respect to a gentleman," said Arthur, with a quiet look of scorn that stung the other to the quick.

Ponsonby drew a deep, hissing breath.

"You will either apologise to me for what you said on the field this afternoon, Lovell, or I shall report you to the committee for insolence!" he exclaimed.

Arthur Lovell stood quite still.

Kit's eyes were blazing with rage. For two pins he would have flung himself upon Ponsonby and sent him flying. But he realised that it was Arthur's affair, and that he had no right to interfere. He stood by, quivering with anger, his nails digging into the palms of his hands.

Ponsonby took no notice of him; his eyes were fixed upon Arthur Lovell. His look expressed a mean triumph, for his threat was one that the young professional could not combat. To be reported to the county committee for insolence to a gentleman amateur was no light thing. That the colonel would stand by him Arthur was pretty certain. But to most of the committee he was simply a paid player. It might lead to friction between the old soldier and his colleagues if he stood up for Lovell.

"Well, what are you going to do?" asked Ponsonby, with a ring of triumph in his voice.

Arthur's lips were white, but his voice was quite steady as he replied:

"I had no intention of offending you when I spoke on the field. I might have expected you to know that. But, since you have taken offence, I am sorry I spoke."

Ponsonby smiled grimly.

"Then you had better take more care in the future, that's all," he said; and he turned on his heel and walked away.

Kit made no remark. Lovell, with a short nod to his friend, walked

away, his brow dark and moody. Never had the change in his position been brought home to him so keenly, so bitterly as at that moment. And, for the first time, he doubted whether he had done wisely, after all, in returning to Loamshire.

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## CHAPTER 10.

### Bitter Blood.

**T**HE Loamshire men opened their innings on the second day of the match in high spirits. Their success of the previous day was inspiring, and they had no doubt whatever of their ability to handle their visitors, and they looked forward to an innings lasting from the time the stumps were pitched to the time they were drawn.

There is no need to describe that innings in detail. It was a good deal like that of the previous day, excepting that Lagden succeeded in scoring forty before he was bowled by Odell, and Arthur Lovell's score reached only seventy before he was caught out by King.

The innings lasted well into the afternoon, and at length Loamshire were all down for a hundred and sixty. It was late in the day when Blane led out his men to field.

Leicestershire opened their second innings in a grim, determined manner. They had an enormous leeway to make up, if they were to win; and, as a matter of fact, their best prospect was of making the match an unfinished one. But this was not likely to be easy with a bowler like Kit Valance in the ranks of the home eleven.

Kit seemed to be in his best form. By the time play closed for the day four Leicestershire wickets had fallen for thirty runs, and of these two had been accounted for by Kit Valance. The visitors had been left an impossible task for the third day of the match, and in the Loamshire team there was rejoicing for a certain victory.

Arthur Lovell was changing his clothes in the dressing-room when there was a tap at the door, and a note was brought in for Kit Valance.

Kit took it from the boy who brought it, and a look of vexation came over his face as he glanced at the writing.

Arthur looked at him.

"It's from my brother," said the young bowler quietly, as he tore open the letter.

He read it through, the expression of vexation upon his handsome face becoming more pronounced.

"Is the fellow who gave you this waiting for an answer, my lad?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Tell him I will be with him in ten minutes from now."

The boy took his departure, and Kit turned to his chum with a worried look.

"It's from Len," he said. "He has come down here, and wants to see me at once. I don't know why. But I feel that there is something wrong. I sent him the money last night, as you know. This looks as if there is something else. I suppose he did not tell me all."

"If I can do anything, Kit, don't fail to let me know."

"Thank you! I don't know what he wants, but he hasn't come all the way down to Loamshire for nothing, I am convinced of that."

And, with a dark expression upon his face, the young bowler quitted the room a few minutes later.



Arthur finished his dressing, and left the pavilion in a very thoughtful and serious mood. The unpleasant encounter with Ponsonby of the previous evening was still in his mind; and he was thinking, too, of the trouble which Kit bore so quietly and bravely. Each of them had a battle to fight, each in his own way, and each needed all his pluck not to give in and go to the wall.

"Mr. Lovell!"

He looked up quickly, and raised his cap.

Molly Hilton was standing before him. Buried in thought, he had not seen her till she spoke. She was looking at him with a mischievous smile in her dark-blue eyes.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Lovell," she said brightly. "Although I think I can guess them. You are planning some mighty strokes to astonish the natives at Lord's and the Oval when the Loamshire team goes up to town."

Arthur laughed.

"Not at all," he said. "Forgive me if I say that I was thinking of anything but cricket at that moment. What did you think of the day's play, Miss Hilton?"

"Very creditable to Loamshire," she said. "Leicestershire haven't a chance left for to-morrow. It is a good augury for the season, though we shall find the fight harder when we have to face teams like the M.C.C., Surrey, and Kent. Do you think we have any chance of robbing Kent of the championship, Mr. Lovell?"

"I hope so, if the Loamshire men pull well together," said Arthur. "We have made a good beginning, at all events."

"And you are glad to be in the ranks again?"

"Ye-es," said Lovell slowly.

The girl caught something in his tone, and changed the subject tactfully.

"My father is busy in the secretary's room, and it is such a lovely evening that I thought of walking home," she said. "If you are not too fatigued, you may walk as far as Lincroft with me, Mr. Lovell."

"Fatigued!" said Lovell, delighted. "Scarcely. I shall be very happy and honoured, Miss Hilton."

At that moment Geoffrey Lagden came up. He bowed to Molly Hilton, without taking the slightest notice of Arthur.

"Ah, I have been looking for you, Miss Hilton," he said, with his most agreeable smile.

"Indeed!" said Molly coldly.

"Yes; as the colonel is not returning just yet, I thought you might accept a lift in my dogcart as far as Lincroft. I have the colonel's permission to ask you."

"Thank you, Mr. Lagden, but Mr. Lovell is going to walk home with me."

Lagden bit his lip.

Arthur could hardly help smiling. Lagden had deliberately tried to ignore him, as if unaware that he was standing there, and Molly's refusal was a "facer" for him.

"But——" began Lagden, rather confusedly.

Molly looked at him calmly.

"Well?"

Lagden paused. Hot and angry words were on his lips, but Molly's presence was a restraint. He felt keenly his humiliation in the eyes of the man he had wished to ignore and insult. But the sight of Lovell stepping to Molly's side was too much for his prudence.

"Miss Hilton, as I said, I had your father's permission to drive you home!" he exclaimed quickly. "And—and——"

"I have already told you, Mr. Lagden, that Mr. Lovell is going to walk with me to Lincroft, and I thank you all the same," said Molly calmly.

Lagden's eyes burned. He was reckless now.

"But, really, Miss Hilton, I am afraid the colonel will not be pleased."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed. You are too good and generous, Miss Hilton, to remember Lovell's social position, but——"

Molly's eyes flashed.

"You have said quite enough. Come, Mr. Lovell."

"Not quite enough," said Lagden, with a bitter sneer. "Even the fear of your anger, Miss Hilton, cannot prevent me from saying that the colonel may be angry at the presumption of a paid player in offering——"

Arthur was nearly choking with rage.

"Be silent, sir!" exclaimed Molly. "How dare you insult Mr. Lovell—my friend? If I were not here, I do not think you would venture to do so. If you were a gentleman, you would apologise to him upon the spot. But I suppose it is useless to expect that of you." Her scorn made Lagden wince as if a whip had struck him. "Mr. Lovell, I am waiting for you."

"Mr. Lagden is right, Miss Hilton," said Arthur, in a low voice. "He has spoken like a cad, but he is right. You are kind enough to forget that I am no longer your equal, but I cannot forget it, and others will not."

Molly made an imperious gesture.

"Nonsense, Mr. Lovell. Come, I am waiting."

Arthur could say nothing further. They walked away from the Loamshire County Ground together, down the leafy, shady lane that led to the colonel's house.

Lagden stood looking after them, grinding his teeth, his eyes on fire with rage. Never had he realised so keenly how much he loved Molly Hilton, as at this moment when he saw her leave with Lovell, her last glance towards him being full of stinging scorn and contempt. At that moment Geoffrey Lagden could have stricken his rival to the earth with a savage pleasure.

Arthur Lovell's brow was gloomy as he walked by Molly's side. The girl was the first to break the silence.

"I am sorry you should have been exposed to such a scene, Mr. Lovell. I hope you will not attach any importance to Mr. Lagden's remarks. His words were dictated by his own mean heart. My father has never dreamed of regarding you as anything else but a friend because of the change in your fortunes."

"I am sure of that," said Arthur. "Yet he was, in a sense, right. I have no right to claim your friendship now that—now that——"

"You are wrong," said the girl quietly. "You have every right to claim it, and unless you tell me you do not want it——"

"Ah, that will never be! It is almost the only thing I have left, and I shall not part with it lightly. Yet——"

"Then say no more on that topic. I think even Mr. Lagden will be ashamed of his ungenerous words when he is cool."

"I am beginning to think I made a mistake in coming back to Loamshire," said Arthur gloomily.

"You made no mistake," said Molly. "You did rightly. You are following the path of duty, and what matters the carping of small minds and mean hearts?"

Arthur nodded, and his face brightened. After all, Molly was right.

He could afford to despise Geoffrey Lagden, and what mattered the contempt of one who was himself contemptible?

A short walk brought them to Lincroft. They entered the old garden by the path along the river, and at the gate Molly left Arthur, with a bright smile of encouragement. The girl's graceful form disappeared among the trees, but Arthur was in no hurry to leave the spot.

The sun was setting over the woods of Loamchester, and the hour was very quiet and calm. Arthur stood, leaning back on the gate, watching absently the stream as it rippled by, red in the sunset, save where fell the shadows of the trees almost at his feet.

A sudden footstep startled him from his reverie.

He looked up quickly. Geoffrey Lagden stood before him. With a quick glance, Lagden noted that Arthur was alone.

"So I have found you!"

Arthur's lip curled with scorn.

"You followed me?"

"Why not?" said Lagden, shrugging his shoulders. "Are you to direct my actions—you, a hireling—a man paid to——"

"Enough," said Arthur, restraining his temper with difficulty. "You have sought me out to insult me, I can see. It is brave of you to heap taunts upon a man whose position ties his hands. I warn you, that you may presume too far upon my forbearance."

"Your forbearance!" Lagden laughed mockingly. "I have sought you out to speak to you—to warn you. To warn you," he went on savagely, "not to presume upon Miss Hilton's foolish and mistaken kindness. If you do not know how to keep your place, you must be taught!"

Arthur's hands twitched to be at the throat of his insulter, but he still restrained himself, though with a terrible effort.

"I wish to have nothing to say to you, Geoffrey Lagden!" he said thickly.

"Let me pass, please!"

Lagden did not stir.

"I shall let you pass when I have said my say, which is not yet. I——"

"Let me pass! I tell you I will not listen to you! I will not answer for myself if you say more!"

"Bah! What do I care for——"

Arthur Lovell brushed past him roughly. Lagden staggered aside, and then, red with rage, raised his hand, and struck the young cricketer full in the face with the open palm.

It was the last straw! Arthur's clenched fist shot out like lightning, and Lagden reeled away—reeled on the verge of the deep river, and lost his footing in the rushes. There was a sharp cry, a sullen splash.

For a moment a white face looked from the waters as the swift current swept its victim away, and then it disappeared. Arthur Lovell stood on the bank, gazing out over the dusky river with wild, horrified eyes.

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## CHAPTER 11.

### From the Jaws of Death.

**A**RTHUR LOVELL stood spellbound, petrified for the moment by the horror of what he had done. The river rippled on at his feet; the white, despairing face of Geoffrey Lagden had vanished in the dusky waters.

It had all passed in a flash; but it was only for a moment that Arthur

stood thus. He was quick to realise what had happened; quick to act. He tore off his coat, and plunged into the swift waters to the rescue of his enemy.

The current ran hard in this spot, and the water was deep. Arthur Lovell was whirled away, as his enemy had been; but he was a splendid swimmer, and master of his movements.

Lagden, he knew, was a poor swimmer, and doubtless the blow had dazed him. An icy fear was gripping at the young cricketer's heart—the terrible fear that Lagden had gone to his death in the deep waters.

He had not foreseen anything of this kind. He had not realised the dangerous position in which Lagden was standing. He had realised nothing but the sting of his enemy's palm upon his cheek, and even now he could hardly blame himself for the blow he had dealt in return.

But he would have given worlds to recall it. Lagden had provoked him beyond endurance; and if Lagden found his death in the deep river, Arthur Lovell was none the less his murderer!

That terrible word was already ringing in Lovell's ears. He must save Lagden—he must save him! But where was he?

The dusk of evening was thickening, and here the shadows of the trees fell darkly over the river. Where was Geoffrey Lagden?

“ Help! ”

Arthur's heart bounded. It was Lagden's voice.

“ Help! ”

Some distance away a drooping branch trailed almost on the surface of the water, and Lagden had clutched at it desperately, and by sheer luck caught it. Twice he had been under, and his face was waxy-white, his brain reeling.

He had clutched the drooping branch, and now hung to it desperately, while the current, like some hungry monster beneath, whirled round him and strove to tear him away from his hold.

He could not have held on many minutes. The branch drooped lower under his grip, and an ominous crack came from above. The waters thundered over Lagden's head; but he held on, and came up again, still clinging to the failing branch.

“ Help! ”

It was his last cry, uttered instinctively, without thought, for what help could be nigh? The last he would have looked for, as it happened. Arthur Lovell, borne by the current and his own powerful strokes, was speeding to the rescue.

Lagden's senses were swimming. He felt himself slipping from his hold, without the power to retain it. Suddenly he felt a firm grip upon his collar, and his head came out well above the surface. He gazed round wildly.

“ Lovell! Curse you! I——”

Perhaps he thought in that confused moment that Arthur's intention was hostile. Perhaps the terror of death frenzied him, as is often the case with a drowning man. He began to struggle wildly, furiously.

“ Keep still! ” panted Lovell. “ I am here to save you. You will drown us both? Keep still, man! ”

Lagden did not seem to hear him.

He struggled like a maniac, gripping Lovell round the neck, and both of them went under the surface.

Well for Lovell was it that in that fearful moment he did not lose his presence of mind. With a great effort he tore himself loose from Lagden's grip; but even then, exhausted as he was, and in the grim shadow of death,

he did not abandon his enemy. He came to the surface again, still gripping Lagden.

But the latter was now, fortunately, almost unconscious. Arthur shifted his grip to the back of the collar, so as to be safe if he should renew his struggles, and with his free arm struck out for the shore.

During the struggle they had been swept down the centre of the stream, a mile or more from the spot where Lagden had fallen in. The river ran between banks steeply sloping, overgrown with rushes, with fields and woods on either side. Help there was none.

Lovell realised that, and he set himself bravely to the task of fighting his way ashore with his burden. He was fatigued and dizzy, but he would not give in. It did not even cross his mind to leave Lagden. It was to be both, or neither.

Ever afterwards that grim fight with death was a remembrance of horror to Arthur Lovell. Lagden was a dead-weight upon him.

Twice, thrice he clutched up at the rushes on the bank, and the soft earth came away in lumps under his clutch, and the current swept him away again.

But at last he gained a hold upon a willow growing low over the river, and held on there till his strength returned sufficiently for the struggle to the shore.

Exhausted, almost fainting, he dragged himself through deep mud and clinging reeds at last to the bank, and sank down there, utterly worn out, with Lagden by his side.

It was a quarter of an hour before he attempted to move. It was now quite dark, with a glimmer of the rising moon far away over the fields. Lovell's first thought was of Lagden as he rose. He turned to his foe, and found him conscious. He was lying on his elbow, his eyes open, and watching Lovell.

Their glances met.

"How did we get here?" said Lagden thickly. "Did you fetch me out?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lovell was silent. A bitter sneer crossed Geoffrey's face.

"You altered your mind, then?"

Lovell stared at him.

"What do you mean, Lagden? I don't understand you."

"Don't you? How obtuse you are, you murderer!"

Arthur quivered.

"You murderer!" repeated Lagden, his eyes watching Arthur's face like a rat's as he lay there in the gloom. "You meant to murder me. You knew I should go into the river, and it was the thought of the hangman's noose that——"

Arthur's face hardened. For a few moments he had thought that even Lagden, at a moment like this, would forget his hatred, but he had evidently judged his enemy too generously.

"You lie!" he said, in a low voice. "You know that you lie! I did not notice that you were standing so close to the water, and you know it. It was an accident."

"It is you who lie! You meant to kill me, but your courage failed you."

Lovell shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall not argue with you. You hate me, though I never gave you real cause, and I suppose nothing will alter that. What has happened to-night has been by your own fault. I have saved your life, but I do not expect that to make any difference to you."



"Considering that you placed it in danger, I hardly think that any deep gratitude is called for," said Lagden, with a sneer.

"I do not ask for that. We have both narrowly escaped death, and I thought you might be inclined to act decently for once. I was mistaken. There is no need for words between us. Let me help you away from here, and——"

Lagden did not move.

"I want none of your help!" he said between his teeth. "You can go. I shall manage to get home without your assistance, Arthur Lovell, and then——"

"Don't be a fool!" said Lovell impatiently. "You are done up, and I am ready to help you. Come, be sensible!"

"I tell you I don't want your help, and will not have it. Get out of my sight!" snarled Lagden. "I hate you, Arthur Lovell, and what has happened this night only makes my hatred more intense. I shall not forget that I nearly came to my death at your hands."

"Your hatred will not hurt me much, I suppose!" said Lovell contemptuously.

"You shall see. I will bring you down to the very dust, so that even Molly Hilton shall despise you. Ah, that makes you wince, does it? I will——"

Lagden broke off. Lovell, without a word, had turned away, and now he strode up the bank and disappeared into the gloom. He felt that he could not answer for himself if he remained longer with Geoffrey Lagden.

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## CHAPTER 12.

### A Rascally Proposition.

**K**IT VALANCE'S face was dark with vexation as he walked slowly away from the Loamshire County Cricket Ground in the dusk of that eventful evening. He knew his twin-brother too well to suppose for a moment that Len Valance had come down to Loamchester simply for the purpose of paying him a visit. Len had an axe to grind, and Kit took it for granted that he was in a scrape, and wanted helping out of it.

Half hidden by ancient elms, a little, old-fashioned alehouse stood at the side of the lane, ten minutes walk from the county cricket-ground. It was towards this that Kit Valance was making his way. Len, in his note, had asked him to come there; and as he came in sight of the White Hart, Kit saw his brother seated upon a bench outside the inn.

Len Valance rose as he caught sight of Kit.

The most casual observer could not have failed to note the remarkable resemblance between the two young men as they met. Len Valance's face was the exact counterpart of his brother's, the only difference being that it was weaker and more irresolute, and that there was a cynical curl to the lip that was absent from Kit's. There were signs, too, that the life he led was not so steady and healthy as that of the young Loamshire cricketer.

"I'm glad to see you, Kit," said Len, whose manner was a strange mingling of nervousness and assurance. "I take it for granted that the pleasure is mutual, so you need not trouble to assure me on that point. The ale here is good—I've been sampling it. I'll order you a——"

"Don't," said Kit; "I don't want it. What are you here for, Len!"

"Always businesslike," smiled Len Valance. "How quickly you come to the point! No beating about the bush with you. By the way, I've been

following your performances in the match with Leicestershire. Fine, my boy—fine! I'm proud of you!"

"Thank you!" said Kit drily. "But I suppose you didn't come down to Loamchester to pay me compliments on my bowling, did you?"

"Hang it, Kit!" said Len Valance, with a look of vexation. "You're not in an amiable mood this evening!"

"I want you to come to the point," said Kit impatiently. "What scrape are you in now, and what do you want me to do? Let me know the worst, and have done with it."

Len laughed uneasily.

"Surprising as it may seem to you," he said, "I am not in a scrape. The twenty pounds you sent me yesterday got me out of that hole nicely, and Mr. James Lagden will never have any suspicion that I borrowed any of his cash without asking his permission. I'm awfully obliged to you for sending it, Kit. But I knew I could rely on you."

"You came near relying on me once too often," said Kit grimly. "But for the kindness of Arthur Lovell, who lent me half the money, I could not have sent it."

"Oh, I knew you'd manage it somehow, old fellow!" said the scapegrace easily. "It's awfully good of you to stick to a ne'er-do-well like myself. I don't deserve it. But, really, I'm not ungrateful. I'm down here now to do you a good turn."

Kit Valance looked decidedly sceptical.

"It's a fact!" exclaimed his brother. "I've had a lot of money from you for the past few years, but I've thought of a way of paying it all back, and something over. How would you like to make a hundred pounds?"

"I think you are taking leave of your senses," said Kit impatiently. "How can I possibly make a hundred pounds? Don't be an ass!"

"Answer my question—would you like to make it?"

"Of course I should; but——"

"Well, I've hit on a way. To tell the exact truth, it was a friend of mine hit on it, and he's going to finance the thing," explained Len. "It's as easy as rolling off a stile, Kit; and I'll answer for the hundred pounds if you go into the thing with us."

Kit looked at him suspiciously.

"What do you want me to do? Out with it?"

"Look here, Kit, it's a fact, isn't it, that your bowling has won this match for Loamshire—for it's practically won?" said Len. "Leicestershire won't last till lunch to-morrow."

"No, it isn't," said Kit. "Lovell's batting had quite as much to do with it, or more."

"Yes, yes; I know. But Lovell's innings, good as they were, would never have beaten Leicester if your bowling had failed."

"Possibly. I don't know, and I don't care much. What are you driving at, anyway? Why can't you come to the point?"

"I'm coming to it as fast as I can. Next week Loamshire are playing an out-match with Somersetshire at Taunton—a first-class fixture."

"Yes. What about it?"

"People who know anything about cricket are willing to back up Loamshire for all they're worth. Somerset are not strong this season. They're feeling the draught of last year's bad finances, and one of their best men is not going to play for them. If there were as much betting done on cricket as on football, there would be thousands of pounds laid against Somersetshire for that match at Taunton."

"Yes, very likely," said Kit contemptuously. "But, thank goodness,

cricket has kept free, or almost so, from the taint of gambling. The book-makers have ruined racing, and they're doing their worst for football. I hope cricket will always keep free of them."

Len Valance grinned.

"My dear brother, those sentiments do you honour; but business is business. And cricket is not quite so free from the taint of betting as you appear to imagine. As a matter of fact, that's what I want to speak about. The friend I was speaking of knows people who are willing to lay the odds on Loamshire for the Taunton match."

"Then the less you have to do with such a friend the better!"

"Oh, don't be a prig, Kit! I was going to say, that if Somerset were to win, instead of losing, and my friend were assured beforehand that they would win, he could make a haul of some hundreds of pounds, without risk or difficulty."

"But how can he possibly be assured of anything of the kind, when, as a matter of fact, Somerset are pretty certain to lose?" demanded Kit impatiently.

"Cricket may be a grand game, but it does not appear to sharpen the mental faculties, Kit. Let me explain. It would be just as efficacious if my friend were assured, not that Somerset would win, but that Loamshire would lose."

"It comes to the same thing."

"Not exactly, for you could give him an assurance on the latter point, if you liked."

Kit stared at his brother. Len was smiling, but there was a look of keen anxiety in his eyes which he could not hide. It was a full minute before his meaning fairly dawned upon the young cricketer. Then a blaze came into his eyes that made his brother start back.

"You—you hound!"

"Don't be a fool, Kit!" said Len uneasily. "I'm not asking you much. The Loamshire Club don't treat you well. Most of the amateurs treat you as dirt. You're nothing to them; I don't see why they should be anything to you. If they can win the match, let the fine gentlemen win it. I'm not afraid of that."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Be reasonable. Nothing will come out," urged Len. "You've only got to be a bit off your bowling form, and give each Somerset innings as long a life as you can. You're certain to be put on as much as possible against Palaret. Well, let him knock up as many runs as he can, and that alone may decide the match."

"Will you be silent?"

"No, I won't. I'm talking to you for your own good. What's that collection of little tin gods and haughty snobs, the Loamshire Club, to you, anyway? If you're thinking of the danger of discovery——"

"I'm not thinking of anything of the kind."

"Then where's your objection. Of course, I know your averages will suffer, but a hundred pounds will more than make up for that, I should think."

Kit Valance drew a deep breath.

It was useless to argue or to be angry with this blackguard, who appeared to be unable to understand, much less to appreciate, a county cricketer's sense of honour.

"I won't talk to you, Len," he said quietly. "I've only got this to say: If any man but my own brother had said as much to me, I'd have thrashed him within an inch of his life. And—and it won't be safe for you

to make such a proposition again. I warn you. So keep off that subject in future."

Len's eyes gleamed with anger and disappointment.

"You're a fool," he growled—"a fool to your own interests! I wanted to do you a good turn, and myself one at the same time. And—and I've practically answered for you to my friend. He has already laid some of his bets against Loamshire, and he'll hold me——"

"How dared you do anything of the kind?" cried Kit, flaming into sudden anger. "How dared you? By Jove, I wish I could have five minutes with your friend! I'd teach him a lesson that would keep him from this sort of business for some time!"

"That's enough," said Len sulkily. "You refuse. I think you're a fool. I suppose I may as well be gone. You're a confounded fool!"

"Possibly; but I'd rather be that than a rascal. But, Len"—Kit's manner changed—"Len, old man, why don't you drop this sort of rotten business? You could run straight if you'd only try, and——"

"I didn't come down here for advice," said Len sullenly. "You refuse what I want, and that's enough. You've got me into a hole with your confounded scruples. Good-bye!"

And without offering to shake hands, Len Valance swung away, leaving Kit alone. In a mood of anxious despondency, the young cricketer walked slowly homeward. He could see plainly enough that his brother was in bad hands, but he could not see what could possibly be done to rescue him from his rascally associates. Kit's brow was very dark as he entered Loamchester and reached the lodgings which he shared with Arthur Lovell.



### CHAPTER 13.

#### Loamshire v. Somerset—Kit Performs the "Hat Trick."

**A**RTHUR LOVELL was not at home when Kit came in, but he entered shortly afterwards. Kit looked at him in amazement as he saw the state his friend was in. Lovell's clothes were soaked with water, and his face was smudged with mud. He met his chum's amazed look with a faint smile.

"What on earth, has happened, Lovell?"

"I've had an adventure. I'll tell you about it when I've got into some dry things."

And Arthur went upstairs to his bed-room. A hard rub down with a rough towel and a change of clothes wrought wonders, and when he came down, a quarter of an hour later, he was looking much more like himself. Kit was sitting with a book in his hand, but he was not reading. He tossed it aside as Lovell came into the room.

"You've been in the river?" he asked.

"Yes; it was a row with Lagden, and a narrow shave for both of us."

Kit listened with astonishment as Lovell concisely related what had happened. His face became very grave and concerned.

"Do you think Lagden will do anything about this?" he asked. "It might make things very awkward for you."

Lovell shook his head.

"He is not likely to say anything. He does not cut a very fine figure in the matter. If he makes the affair public, I shall simply tell the truth—of course, keeping Miss Hilton's name out of it. But now about yourself, Kit—

that is, if you have anything to tell me? I hope your brother's visit does not mean trouble for you."

"Not exactly," said Kit grimly. "He came down to Loamchester to make a proposition to me—or rather to bring me one—from a friend of his in town—a friend in the bookmaking line."

"A bookmaker! What did he want?"

"Only that I should sell the Somersetshire match next week!"

Lovell gave a jump.

"The infernal scoundrel!"

"You are right; he is a scoundrel, and my brother is a fool! But there is one point about the matter that rather amuses me." Kit smiled in a grim way. "This rascal, whoever he is, has judged me by Len, and has accepted Len's assurance that I should do what he wanted. As a result, he has commenced to lay bets against Loamshire—and I guessed from Len's manner that a considerable sum is at stake."

"And so you——"

"So I shall play the game of my life at Taunton," said Kit. "That is the only way I can reach the scoundrel who is making a rascal of Len. Loamshire shall win, and I hope he will be hard hit!"

"Good!" said Arthur. "I'm with you there, with all my heart. But, by Jove, I should like to have the villain within arm's length for five minutes!"

No more was said on the subject. Len Valance's visit to Loamchester had had an effect the opposite to what he had intended and desired. Loamshire would win the Somersetshire match if her two best players could manage it.

The next morning the Leicestershire match finished before lunch, leaving Loamshire victors by enough runs to take one's breath away. Leicestershire never had a look-in that day, and the county looked forward with confidence to the Somersetshire match the following week.

Both Arthur Lovell and Geoffrey Lagden, looking little the worse for their narrow escape of the previous evening, appeared on the field for the finish of the Leicestershire match. Lagden had apparently made his mind up to say nothing of the happening on the river. As Lovell had remarked, he would not cut a very good figure if the facts came to light, and he had decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

He did not speak a word to Lovell, and seemed to avoid him; but once or twice Arthur caught his eyes fixed upon him, with an expression in them that showed that Geoffrey Lagden had not forgotten, and that he was biding his time.

Little thought did Arthur Lovell give to his enemy. Lagden could make his position uncomfortable in the Loamshire Club, and was doing so to the utmost of his power, but he could do nothing more—so far as Arthur yet knew. The young cricketer felt he could despise his enmity. He did not yet know all that was in Lagden's jealous, revengeful heart.

And in other ways Arthur Lovell's life was brightened just now; for Molly Hilton, as if to show Lagden how little effect his snobbish words had had upon her, was kinder than ever before to Lovell. She made the colonel, who suspected nothing, ask him several times to Lincroft; but Geoffrey Lagden seldom had an opportunity of crossing that threshold, and whenever he did, he saw little of Molly.

"I don't know how you'll receive what I am going to say, sir," Lagden said to the colonel one evening, in a diffident way, "but I think I ought to speak. Have you noticed how very much Arthur Lovell seeks Miss Hilton's society?"

The colonel stared at him.

"I can't say that I have," he replied stiffly; "but, if that were the case, what of it?"

Lagden felt rather uncomfortable.

"I don't know if you have considered Lovell's position," he said. "At one time, of course, no fault was to be found with him. Now he is—well, not to put too fine a point upon it—he is an adventurer. Yes; I know he is a fine cricketer, but that does not alter the fact that he hasn't a feather to fly with, and that he has no right to entertain hopes which were permissible in his former circumstances."

"I believe you wrong Lovell in attributing anything of the kind to him," said Colonel Hilton stiffly; "and, thanking you all the same, Mr. Lagden, I am not at present in want of advice about purely private affairs!"

This was a rebuff with a vengeance. Lagden changed colour for a moment, but, with a black fury in his heart, he forced a smile to his lips.

"Oh, certainly," he said. "I dare say I should not have spoken, but my regard for you and Miss Hilton——"

"Exactly; but I am quite convinced that there is no ground for uneasiness."

Lagden bit his lip as he walked away. But he was not, upon the whole, dissatisfied.

"He scouts the idea that his pet, Lovell, could be a fortune-hunter," he murmured; "but, all the same, he will take the hint. I think I have put a pretty effective spoke in Arthur Lovell's wheel."

And, indeed, that was the case. The colonel believed that Lovell could be trusted, but he reflected that it might not be for Arthur's happiness, nor for Molly's, that they should meet too often. And so the invitations to Lincroft dropped off.

The match with Somersetshire was now close at hand. On the day the Loamshire team left Loamchester, Kit Valance received a letter from his brother. It was a last appeal to him to fail his side in the match, and Kit did not answer it.

Fine weather and fine wickets awaited Loamshire at Taunton. On the splendid county ground, Loamshire were to meet the blue-capped brigade, captained by Lionel Palairat, the mighty hitter of the West.

Half Somerset seemed to have turned up for the opening day of the match. Loamshire's easy victory over Leicestershire had caused their fame to precede them, and the eyes of half the cricketing world were upon them now, anxious to see how they would fare in their second first-class fixture.

Loamshire were in very good form. The county played the same team that had met Leicestershire on the home ground, and it remained to be seen whether they would be equally successful in the enemy's country. An out match, of course, is a greater tax upon a team than one on the home ground. If Loamshire pulled this off, they could certainly be said to have started the season with a swing.

And there were at least two of the Loamshire men who were grimly determined that the match should be a win, and those two were the Loamshire champions, Kit Valance and Lovell. The man who had laid his money against Loamshire was likely to have a bad day of reckoning if the cricket chums had their way.

And have their way they did. Lovell absolutely played with the Somerset bowlers, and put up an innings to be proud of.

Up and up went the score. He seemed set for the day. And in truth he was.

Arthur Lovell carried out his bat for a hundred and forty, and as he



approached the pavilion, he raised his cap slightly to the storm of cheers he received.

With the Loamshire score 259 for six wickets, play for the day closed.

And Loamshire's anticipations of the morrow were bright indeed. In their quarters that evening the Loamshire cricketers discussed the match as a certain win. But a plot was already working which was to cast a gloom over their confident hopes.

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#### CHAPTER 14.

##### A Dastardly Plot.

"KIT VALANCE!"

Geoffrey Lagden muttered the name under his breath.

After the finish of the day's play, Lagden had gone for a stroll in the dusk of the summer's evening with Tunstall, and they were returning towards Taunton when Geoffrey Lagden suddenly stopped and uttered the name of the young Loamshire bowler.

Tunstall glanced at him.

"What's that about Valance?"

Lagden drew him quickly into the shadow of a tree beside the leafy lane. His face showed a keen excitement.

"Look," he whispered, "it's Kit Valance—and do you see whom he's with?"

Tunstall followed the direction of his companion's pointing finger.

Two men were coming up the lane from the direction of the town, and in the last rays of the setting sun their faces were distinctly visible. One was a portly, red-faced man in a gaudy waistcoat and a white hat, and the other was a younger man, who wore a cheap panama much the worse for weather stains. It was upon the latter that Lagden's eyes were fixed.

"Kit Valance!" he muttered. "You know him, Tunstall."

"Yes, it's Valance right enough, but I don't see anything to get excited about. Who's the other man? I've never seen him before. Some native here, I suppose?"

"Nothing of the kind."

"Do you know him?"

"I know him well."

"Well, what's the giddy mystery?" demanded Tunstall rather impatiently. "I don't see what you're driving at."

"Hush! I don't want them to see us. Wait till they've passed."

He drew Tunstall back further into the shadows. The two men in the lane passed without seeing them there, and disappeared beyond the trees.

"But, I say——" began Tunstall.

"Shut up, can't you!" said Lagden, in a fierce whisper.

Tunstall was silent from sheer amazement. Not till the footsteps of the unconscious pair had died away did Lagden break the silence.

"Now explain what the dickens it all means, Lagden," said Tunstall, considerably ruffled.

"It means that I know who that chap in the white hat is. He's not a native of here. He's come down from London for this match with Somerset. He's Abel Sharp, the bookmaker."

Tunstall whistled.

"Phew! What is Valance doing with him, then?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," said Lagden determinedly. "They were talking cricket as they went by. I caught a few words. There's something on the cards—some underhand business, unless I'm much mistaken."

"What are you going to do?" asked Tunstall uneasily.

"I'm going to follow them. Come on."

Tunstall held back. He was a good deal of a snob by nature, but he was not an out-and-out cad. Lagden gave him a savage look.

"Aren't you coming?"

"No. I'm not going to follow anybody and spy on him. If you think there's something fishy afoot, let's report this to the committee, and they——"

"Rot! A lot they would do! It would mean a caution to Valance at the most, and he would be left to play his little game, whatever it is, unchecked, and on his guard."

"Well, I'm not going to follow him. You can if you like."

"Do as you like. I certainly shall," said Lagden. "Don't say anything about this till I've seen you again."

Tunstall nodded, and strode on towards Taunton, while Geoffrey Lagden hurried on the track of Sharp and Valance. He was certain that he was upon the track of something shady—something which might place the power in his hands to disgrace the young professional with the club, and get him kicked out of Loamshire county cricket.

He was soon close behind the unsuspecting pair. They evidently had not the faintest idea that they were being followed. They were talking, but their tones were low and cautious from habit, and so Lagden only caught a word now and then.

But the few words he heard showed him that they were talking cricket, discussing the Somerset and Loamshire match, and in no good humour.

It was now quite dark, and Lagden, walking on the strip of soft grass that bordered the lane, shaded by trees, was able to keep close on the track of his quarry without danger of discovery. And a little later he caught a sentence, spoken by Sharp in less cautious tones than usual.

"I tell you Loamshire must lose; they shall lose!"

Valance's reply was not audible. Lagden's heart beat hard. It was not only his spite against the young cricketer, but a real regard for the interests of his side that spurred him on now.

The two men abruptly stopped at a gate in the side of the lane, and entered a garden attached to a small cottage. The little building was dark; but a few minutes later a light glimmered from one of the windows.

Lagden had hesitated a few minutes at the gate. He had discovered something; yet, if he reported what he had heard to Colonel Hilton, he had, after all, very little that was definite to relate, and that would be discounted by his well-known dislike for Kit. After a little reflection, he determined to learn more if he could, at the risk of revealing himself.

He entered the garden, and crept towards the cottage. There was no blind to the window of the room in which the light glimmered, and the window itself was half open. The day had been warm, and the evening was decidedly sultry. Lagden saw the open window, which it was plainly not Valance's or Sharp's intention to close, and blessed his stars. He dropped on his hands and knees in the gloomy garden, and crept towards the lighted window, and in a few minutes was standing close beside it.

He dared not look in now, for to do so would have been to betray his presence. He heard the clatter of knives and forks, which showed that the two men within were at a meal. He had tracked them to their lair!

Now they were talking again. Lagden, his heart beating hard, listened with all his ears.

"Have you thought of anything, Sharp?"

It was Valance's voice, and it followed a pause in the eating. There was

a scratch of a match, and the scent of tobacco came through the open window.

"I have an idea," was Sharp's reply.

"You are thinking of getting at Kit?"

Lagden nearly betrayed himself by the start of astonishment he gave. What on earth did Kit Valance mean by speaking of himself as of a third person?

"Yes," said Sharp slowly; "I've got some friends in Taunton, some fellows I know in racing matters. I can always depend upon them if I make it worth their while."

"Look here, Sharp, we'll have one thing understood right here. Kit's not going to be hurt."

"Who wants to hurt him?"

"Well, what's the game, then?"

"And if he was hurt," said Sharp, without answering the question—"if he was hurt, I don't see that you need grumble. How has he treated you?"

"A great deal better than I had any right to expect, take it all in all," said Valance. "I don't say I don't feel sore about his refusing to go into this with us, and leaving us in such a fearful hole. I'd like to get even with him; but I'm going to have no violence. Hang it, man, he's my brother!"

"Oh, that's all right; nobody wants to hurt him!"

Geoffrey Lagden drew a long, long breath. So that was the explanation! He had never known that Kit Valance had a brother; it was clear that the young Loamshire bowler had his secrets, and knew how to keep them.

So this blackguard was his brother—a twin brother undoubtedly, to account for the strange, striking resemblance between them, a resemblance which had deceived Lagden, though he met Kit Valance nearly every day of his life!

Lagden's feeling at first was one of the keenest disappointment. He was certainly on the track of a plot against the success of the Loamshire cricketers, but his hope of finding Kit Valance out in some rascality had vanished. Indeed, it was pretty clear from what he had heard that Kit had been tempted, and had stood firm, in spite of temptation.

Lagden, eager to learn more, listened intently. A short silence followed Sharp's reply, broken at last by Len Valance.

"Well, what's the idea, then, Sharp? Out with it, can't you?"

"Look here, if the Somerset men had any chance in their second innings, they might pull up yet, and I believe Palairret alone would do a lot towards equalising if that confounded brother of yours were off the ground."

"You've said all that before," growled Len. "I've asked him, and he's refused. I've written to him, and he hasn't even answered my letter."

"I'm not thinking of asking him again. I know when a man's made up his mind, and Kit Valance has made up his. He's got to be kept off the field. You're mighty particular about hurting him, but I suppose it won't hurt him to be kept for a few days in some quiet place—say, this cottage?"

"You mean that he could be tricked here, and——"

"Yes; don't you like the idea?"

"If it will work—yes. But how are you going to get him here?"

"He'd come easily enough if you wrote to him and asked him."

Len Valance laughed.

"Yes; and send me to prison afterwards."

"He wouldn't do that. You're his brother, and he thinks more about

that than I should in his place, Mr. Len Valance. He'd just keep mum, you know that."

"Well, perhaps he would; but—but it's a dirty trick to play."

"Don't start preaching to me. I've got three hundred pounds on this. Mind, you're as deep in the mud as I am in the mire."

"I don't see that. It's your money that's at stake."

"And your position. For, mark you, if you don't help me in this business, Mr. James Lagden shall know you in your true colours."

Again Lagden, in the darkness outside, started.

"You mean that you will give me away to my employer?" said Len, in a low voice.

"Yes; I'll do all that, and worse! I'll let him know the life you lead, and that you gambled and lost twenty pounds of his money, and were only able to make it up by screwing it out of your brother in time; and if he didn't have you arrested, as well as kicked out of his office, I don't know the hard-fisted old hound!"

"You've got me in a cleft-stick, Sharp," said Len Valance, in the tone of one who is glad to find himself forced to do what he wanted, and had almost resolved to do.

"Well, are you game, then?" grunted Sharp.

"Yes."

"Then it's agreed—I—— By thunder!"

The rascal broke off with that startled exclamation as Geoffrey Lagden's face appeared at the open window, looking coolly into the room. Both men started to their feet, staring at Lagden in dismay. Len Valance was the first to recognise him.

"Geoffrey Lagden! The game's up, Sharp!"

And he flung himself recklessly into his chair again.

"Young Master Geoffrey; so it is!" exclaimed Sharp, distorting his face into an attempt at an agreeable smile. "Fancy meeting you here, sir!"

Lagden smiled grimly.

"Yes; it is an unexpected pleasure all round," he remarked. "It may interest you to know that I have overheard all your conversation since you have been in this room."

"You—you've been listening!"

"Exactly, my good friends. I know the whole plot from A to Z. I'll come in, if you don't mind." Lagden stepped in at the window, as cool as ever. He was so evidently master of the situation that he could afford to be cool. "You seem rather flabbergasted."

Sharp recovered himself, and showed it by giving a scoffing laugh.

"Well, we was only talking," he said. "You can't do anything to a man for talking, I suppose?"

Lagden laughed.

"No; not so far as you are concerned, Sharp. But this admirable young gentleman, who appears to be in my father's employ, is in a worse box than you are."

"Oh, I know you'll give me away!" said Len, with bitter recklessness. "Go and do it, and be hanged to you!"

But Sharp was watching Geoffrey's face intently. He was a keen observer, and he guessed that Lagden was holding something back. He had known Lagden on the racecourse, and knew that his sense of honour was not particularly fine. It occurred to him at once that, if Lagden had meant to betray them, he would not have revealed his presence. He had done so of his own choice.

"What's the game?" Sharp demanded abruptly. "You've got something up your sleeve, Mr. Lagden. What is it that you want?"

"How keen you are," Lagden laughed. "I can see that you have guessed already why I showed myself. On certain conditions I shall keep your secret, and even allow the game to be played out, as if I knew nothing about it."

"And you're a member of the Loamshire Club!" ejaculated Len.

"Hold your tongue!" said Lagden sharply, for the taunt struck home.

"Hold your tongue, confound you! I'm talking to Sharp."

"Yes; shut up, Len!" said Sharp. "Let's hear what Mr. Lagden wants. If it's a share in the spoil, I'm willing to stand——"

Lagden's lip curled.

"Do you think I want to touch your dirty money? It's not that. I want to make your plot a success instead of a failure, and in doing so I shall serve the purpose I have in view, about which I needn't go into details."

"I don't quite understand," said Sharp, puzzled.

"I'll explain. You think that you can give Somerset the victory simply by removing Kit Valance from the field. If that had been done before the first innings, it might have worked; but it's too late now. If a substitute bowled for him, Loamshire would still win, with their enormous lead from to-day, and their strength in batting. It's not sufficient to take the best bowler away. I suggest an improvement."

Len and Sharp looked at him inquiringly, without speaking.

"You've got one chance of gaining your point," said Lagden slowly.

"If a very bad bowler were put on in Kit Valance's place—very bad, and yet completely trusted by his side, he could so play into the hands of the Somerset batsmen that Palairt and his men would be able to pile up a score sufficient to beat Loamshire."

"Yes; but how——"

"When I saw you in the lane with this fellow, I took him for Kit Valance."

"That mistake's often been made," said Len; "but I don't see what it's got to do with the matter in hand."

"Don't you? Can't you see that if I, who know Kit Valance so well, mistook you for him, others would do the same—and that, if Kit were kept away, and you appeared on the ground in his place, there would be no suspicion raised, if you played your part with common caution?"

Len gave a violent start. Sharp's eyes blazed, and he brought his right hand into the palm of his left with a sounding crack.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "And I never thought of it. Why, it would be as easy as rolling off a log! But—but where do you come in, Mr. Lagden?" he went on, half suspiciously. "You must want your side to win, and you say you don't want a share of the money. This will mean a bad time for Loamshire, and I want to know—where do you come in?"

Lagden looked at him coolly.

"That's my business, and not yours," he said. "I have my motives, but there's no need for me to explain them to you. Are you game to carry out the idea?" Sharp and Len exchanged a glance.

"Yes," said both of them together.

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## CHAPTER 15.

### Trapped!

**K**IT VALANCE was looking very cheerful. He was sitting by the open window, in the quarters he was sharing with Arthur, in the quaint old town of Taunton, and the soft air of the early summer night came into the room. The cricket chums had been for a stroll after the

day's play, for as it happened it was their first visit to the old Somerset city, and there were many points of interest to them in the scene of the "Bloody Assizes" of Judge Jeffreys' cruelties two hundred years ago. Now they were chatting before turning in, for they kept early and regular hours, very necessary to cricketers who wished to keep themselves in form for the great game.

Cricket, naturally, was a topic of never-ending interest to them. The day's play, and the prospects of the morrow, they had run over in their chat. Kit was feeling decidedly cheerful. His success, and the success of his chum, were equally gratifying. And the thought that the scoundrel who was leading Len Valance astray would suffer by Loamshire's victory, was a satisfactory one.

There came a tap at the door of the little sitting-room.

"Come in!" called out Arthur.

A little stout old lady entered with a letter.

"For Mr. Valance," she said. "No answer. It came just now by a lad."

"Thank you," said Kit, taking the letter.

His face had become shadowed. He recognised his brother's writing on the envelope at once. Arthur glanced at him, and guessed.

"I hope it's no trouble for you, old fellow," he said, when Mrs. Short had retired. "Read it, anyway."

And he stood looking out of the window while Kit opened the letter and read it.

A smothered exclamation came from the young bowler. Arthur turned round quickly.

Kit was staring at the letter with wide eyes, and a deadly pale face.

"Kit! Bad news?"

"Yes," said Kit thickly, "I—I'm afraid so. I—I can't tell you more, old chap. It's from Len, and he wants to keep it dark." He rose to his feet. "I'm going out. Don't wait up for me, Lovell. I may be very late."

Lovell nodded. He could see that there was some black trouble in the letter, and a feeling of fierce anger rose up in his heart against the black-guard whose selfishness caused so much bitter worry to Kit. But that feeling he could not express in words.

And so, without a word of inquiry, he helped Kit on with his coat, and saw him out. Kit Valance strode away, the note crumpled in his hand. And Arthur Lovell went to bed with a heart unusually heavy.

Kit's face was dark as he strode through the shadowy Taunton streets. Once or twice, as he passed the outskirts of the town, he had to ask his way. The crumpled letter was still gripped in his hand.

It was a brief letter. From the absence of Len's usual tone of flippant carelessness, Kit was more disturbed by it than he might otherwise have been.

"Dear Kit," it ran—"I am in bitter trouble through the affair I spoke to you about. It is not money this time; but you must help me, or I am lost. If you are willing to do so, come to the Red Cottage in Gallows Lane to-night, as soon as you receive this. I dare not come to you. Keep this secret, even from your chum Lovell. I cannot tell you in writing how much depends upon this. Come.  
LEN."

Such was the letter which had brought Kit Valance out in the summer night. What was this fresh trouble Len was in? Had he, at last, fallen within the clutches of the law? Kit had always feared it. Yet, even then,



he must stand by his own flesh and blood. Weak or criminal, or both, Len Valance was his brother.

A light gleamed through the trees on Kit's right. He halted, and looked over a gate. He had followed implicitly the directions he had obtained from a passer-by, before entering Gallows Lane. He had no doubt that this was the Red Cottage.

He opened the gate, and passed up the dark, weedy path. He stopped at the cottage door and knocked. The knock rang and echoed eerily through the cottage as through an empty, deserted building. The sound sent a chill to the young cricketer's heart.

He knocked again. There was no sound from within. He stepped back and looked at the cottage. A light was burning in an upper window. Certainly the building was inhabited. He advanced to the door, and knocked again.

Still grim silence when the echo of the knock had died away. A grim foreboding seized upon the young cricketer. Where was Len? What had happened?

He tried the door. It opened to his touch. All beyond was black darkness. He thought he heard a movement within—a quick, hurried breath. He called out:

“Len! Len!”

No answer came from the gloom. With beating heart the young cricketer strode into the dark cottage. Then he gave a sudden start. The door had slammed shut behind him, and he heard a key turn.

He stood for a second still, quivering in every limb, amazed and angry. What did it mean? He turned to the door again. As he did so, hands reached out of the darkness and gripped him, and he was dragged heavily to the floor.

He struggled fiercely, desperately; but his foes were too many. Dragged to the floor beneath the weight of numbers he was pinned down, and his fierce resistance was of no avail. He felt ropes placed upon his limbs, and in spite of his struggles they were drawn tight and knotted fast. Then a gag was thrust into his mouth, and then yet more bonds placed upon his limbs. All the time no word was uttered—from the grim darkness came no sound but the trampling of feet and the quick, hurried breathing of his captors.

And now those sounds died away. All was silent. He was alone—alone, but a helpless prisoner, unable to stir hand or foot, or to utter a sound. So he lay, with aching limbs and reeling brain, in silence and darkness.

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## CHAPTER 16.

### Somersetshire Goes Ahead.

“**A**LL down for 290!” said Arthur Lovell cheerfully. “Not bad, Kit!” Valance nodded without speaking. He had been strangely silent that morning, and Arthur wondered rather anxiously what was troubling his mind.

There was a buzz of cheery talk on the County Cricket Ground at Taunton. The interest in the first day's play had been very keen, and a good-sized crowd had turned up for the second day. Loamshire had finished their innings in about an hour, and the score for the visiting county stood at 290.

As Somerset had scored only 93 for their first innings, the result of the match seemed to be a foregone conclusion. At all events, it seemed so to,

the Loamshire men, who were confidently anticipating a victory with an innings to spare. It did not seem probable that play would last into the third day at all.

But Somerset had not given up hope yet. With such batsmen as Lionel Palairet and Braund to rely upon, the home team were certain to make a desperate fight for it in their second innings, and some of them still nourished a faint hope that Loamshire might return defeated home.

The Loamshire innings over, the cricketers were chatting while the roller was busy on the pitch; but Arthur Lovell found his chum in an uncommunicative mood. To any remark made to him that morning, Valance had replied only in monosyllables; and Arthur could not help being anxious.

Kit had left him the previous night, on receiving the letter from Len, and, on coming down in the morning, Arthur had discovered that the young bowler had not been home all night.

He was alarmed and uneasy, but his fears were relieved when he met Valance on the match ground. Valance had not explained his absence, and Arthur had not liked to ask his chum questions.

"I say, Kit," the young batsman remarked abruptly, "is anything wrong, old chap? Can I do anything to help you?"

Valance shook his head.

"Nothing is wrong, Lovell," he replied. "I'm feeling a bit—a bit depressed this morning—that's all."

"You saw Len last night?"

Valance started a little.

"Yes; I saw him," he replied briefly.

"I was rather worried when I found you hadn't been home all night."

"I'm sorry; it couldn't be helped."

Still he volunteered no word of information, and Arthur, who was anxious, but did not wish to appear curious, said no more upon the subject.

Some subtle change had taken place in his friend since they parted the previous night; he felt that keenly, but could hardly define what it was. Valance's manner was cold and uncommunicative, but this Lovell attributed to the worry on his mind concerning his scapegrace twin-brother.

There was something else, Arthur did not exactly know what, but it seemed as if a cloud had come between him and his friend.

The crowd were collecting again to watch the resumption of play. Arthur went into the pavilion, and Valance slowly followed. Blane, the Loamshire skipper, met them with a cheerful grin.

"Feeling fit, Valance?" he exclaimed. "I want you to repeat yesterday's performance to-day. Feel like doing it?"

Valance laughed slightly.

"I hope so, Blane. I shall do my best, at all events."

"That's right," laughed the Loamshire skipper. "We all know what your best is like, Valance."

Geoffrey Lagden, who was standing near, smiled sardonically as he overheard the remark. Then, catching Arthur Lovell's eye, he coloured and turned away.

Arthur glanced at him in surprise for a moment. But it was now time to think of the game, and the incident made no impression upon his mind.

The wickets were in perfect condition, the day clear and sunny, the ground crowded with a good-humoured and interested throng. The conditions were favourable for ideal cricket, and the spectators were destined to see some startling developments of that eventful match.

Blane placed his men to field, and assigned the first over to Valance. The bowler sent down a few trials to the wicket-keeper. Arthur Lovell

was looking at him, and again a vague sense of a change in his friend came to him. Valance's style was not the free, assured style of old. What was the matter with him?

The Somersetshire batsmen came out of the pavilion, and the trials balls ceased, and the bowler prepared for business.

Lionel Palairet and Lewis opened the innings for Somersetshire. The Somerset captain had resolved that a stand should be made against the Loamshire bowling early in the innings, if only to encourage his side, but even Palairet felt a slight uneasiness at the sight of Valance ready for business at the pavilion end. But he did not show it.

With the grace of manner never lacking in him, the Somerset captain took up his position at the wicket, and prepared for the first over. Blane, who was keeping wicket, smiled a confident smile to himself. He had every confidence in Kit Valance.

Valance took a little run, shorter than usual, and his arm went up and over, and the round, red ball came down.

Clack!

Away it went with a whizz, and the batsmen ran and ran again. They were safe, with two to their credit, when the ball came in, and was tossed back to the bowler.

A slight smile came over Lionel Palairet's face. That ball was one of the easiest he had ever played, and either Valance was off his form this morning, or else he was playing with him and hoping to throw him off his guard. The latter was not likely to happen. Palairet watched keenly for the next ball. Down it came, as simple a ball as ever a schoolboy bowled on a college ground, and with a powerful drive Palairet sent it over the pavilion.

The crowd cheered loudly, not only at the splendid hit, but at the dawning possibility that Somersetshire would yet pull up in their second innings. The over finished in the same style. It gave Palairet sixteen in all, and the crowd were delighted.

Either Valance was off his form, or else his magnificent bowling of the previous day had been a kind of fluke, a mere flash in the pan. Lionel Palairet had never been in better form. The hopes of Somersetshire rose. Blane's expression was puzzled. He did not quite know what to make of it.

Tweedie bowled the second over against Lewis's wicket. Lewis took five runs for the over, and at the end of it faced Valance's bowling.

Now was the time for Valance to break the ice, as it were. He did not seem able to touch Palairet's wicket, but Lewis's was well within his powers, if he was in anything like his usual form.

Blane's face became a perfect study as that over progressed. There were two wides to begin with, and then Lewis cut the bowling all over the ground. What was the matter with Valance?

The crowd were cheering lustily. The Somerset score was already at twenty-nine for two overs, and Loamshire realised that the victory they had counted upon as a certainty was not so very certain after all. If this sort of thing continued, the home team would soon pull up. And it did continue.

Valance bowled his usual big proportion of overs, but all the "devil" was gone out of his bowling. Not a wicket fell, and his bowling was played as easily as possible. The Somerset score mounted up.

The first wicket—Lewis's—fell to Tweedie. Poyntz replaced him at the wicket, and, luckily for Loamshire, was soon caught out by Arthur Lovell. But Valance seemed unable to effect anything against the batsmen. His

bowling was cut all over the field, and every over he delivered added considerably to the home score.

Blane's face gradually grew longer and longer. He knew that the worst thing a skipper could do in a tough game was to get flurried, and change the bowling contrary to his original intentions.

But if Valance's form did not improve, it was useless to allow him to go on adding to the Somerset score in this manner. The Loamshire skipper wore a worried look. The cheers from the interested and excited crowd, greeting every drive by Palairet, did not sound pleasantly in his ears.

The Somerset captain was certainly batting in magnificent style, and would undoubtedly have piled up a good total of runs for his side in any case, but Blane knew that his splendid innings now was due to Valance's inexplicable falling off in form.

A splendid five brought Palairet's individual score up to eighty, and then, as the field crossed for the next over, Blane spoke to Valance.

The latter was looking somewhat nervous and uneasy, as if he felt that he had not done what was expected of him, and did not like to face his captain. Blane went straight to the point in his direct way.

"What the dickens is the matter with you, Valance?"

"Nothing," said the bowler half-sullenly.

"You're not in form to-day."

"Well, we can't be in first-class form always, can we? I'm doing my best."

Blane looked at him in surprise. He did not speak in the manner the Loamshire skipper was accustomed to from Kit Valance, and Blane felt the difference. A look of concern came into Blane's face as a new thought struck him.

"Aren't you well, Valance? If you're not, say so. It's a bad look-out for us, but I don't want to play any man who's not up to it."

"I'm all right," said Valance; "I've been feeling a bit off-colour. I fancy I overdid it a bit yesterday."

"Well, I'll give you a rest, anyway," said Blane. "For goodness' sake try to get some of your form back. I've depended upon you, Valance, and it's hard to be left in the lurch like this. Buck up!"

"I'm sorry, Blane. It's as bad for me as for you."

"I'm thinking of the county," growled Blane. "We can't afford to throw a match away. But I don't want to rag you. I'm not grumbling. I know you too well to think that you wouldn't do your best, Valance. But for goodness' sake pull yourself together."

He tossed the ball to Geoffrey Lagden.

Valance took Lagden's place in the field with a flush in his cheeks, which showed that he had felt the captain's words. Geoffrey Lagden bowled against Lionel Palairet, and though he could not touch his wicket, he secured a maiden over, the first in the innings.

Palairet's success at the wicket made Blane grateful for trifles now, and he gave Lagden a glance of cordial approval as the over ended.

He had never expected to see the amateur bowl better than Valance, but on this occasion Geoffrey Lagden had certainly done so. And it was Lagden's day out, too, as it seemed, for a little later a Somersetshire wicket fell to his bowling, though it was not that of a dreaded Palairet.

Somersetshire were now three down for a hundred and twenty runs, a score that nobody on the ground had expected for the whole innings when it commenced. Loamshire's luck was evidently out. For, as is not at all uncommon in a match, the unexpected "rot" of a player relied on by all seemed to detract from the form of the rest,

The Loamshire bowling all round was weaker than it had been on the first day of the match, with the solitary exception of Geoffrey Lagden.

The fourth wicket fell to Arthur Lovell, put on as a change bowler, but by this time Lionel Palairet's score was ninety-eight. That he would go over the century was the hope of nearly every spectator on the ground, and it began to look like a certainty. A red-faced man in a white hat, standing well to the front watching the game, rubbed his fat hands with glee. The growing success of the home team seemed to afford him more enjoyment than it did to the native folk who thronged around him, and cheered every clack of the bat on the ball.

Mr. Sharp was in high spirits. But a nervous depression was settling over the Loamshire men. In the pavilion enclosure Colonel Hilton was puzzled and worried. Blane did not allow his face to show what he felt, but he was feeling extremely sore.

After a rest, Valance was put on again to bowl against Palairet. The Somersetshire captain faced his bowling with easy confidence now, but at the same time he was thoroughly alert and ready for a surprise. But his alertness was not needed. He played every ball as easily as he could have desired, and they pitched one after another just where he wanted them, and every ball he swiped away with a vim that made the crowd yell with delight.

Blane's brow contracted. Arthur Lovell was feeling, and looking, miserable. He could not understand this falling-off in Valance's bowling any more than the Loamshire skipper could. There was certainly something wrong with Kit somehow, and yet so far as physical health went he looked perfectly fit.

The cheers were deafening when Lionel Palairet passed the hundred, and the finish of the over brought his score up to 116.

Then the luncheon interval gave the Loamshire fieldsmen a much-needed rest. The scoring had been extremely rapid, and boundaries had been, if not as thick as leaves in Vallambrosa, at all events, pretty frequent.

Lionel Palairet was still looking as fresh as paint, and loud cheers followed him as he walked off the field.

"I say, I'm sorry, Blane," said Valance, in the pavilion. "I know I've not done what you expected of me."

Blane looked at him grimly.

"No, you haven't," he said.

"I've been feeling a bit off-colour somehow."

"You look fit enough."

"I'll do better in the afternoon, I promise you that," said Valance; and Blane nodded, and turned away without speaking again.

He knew it was useless, or worse than useless, to "nag" a player who did not come up to expectations, and that such "nagging" was only likely to make him nervous and detract from his form. But he was bitterly disappointed, and he could not help an unpleasant suspicion rising in his mind that Valance could have done better if he had tried.

It seemed impossible that the young bowler, whom he had always known to be thoroughly honourable and reliable, could have deliberately intended to let his side down in the match, especially after opening so brilliantly on the previous day.

Yet it was hard to reconcile his previous day's splendid performance with to-day's miserable display, without a suspicion that all was not as it should be. And if that chilling doubt crept into Blane's mind, it may be imagined what was in the more carping and suspicious minds of the rest.

Geoffrey Lagden, indeed, made no secret of his opinion. He talked to the colonel over lunch, and the veteran cricketer naturally alluded to the

matter that was weighing on his mind, the inexplicable falling off of Valance's form.

"Do you think he is doing his best, sir?" asked Lagden.

The old cricketer stared.

"I don't quite understand you, Lagden. Of course he's doing his best."

"Oh, if you are sure of that, all right!"

"Do you mean to say that you think he's not doing as well as he might for his side?" Colonel Hilton asked, knitting his brows.

Lagden shrugged his shoulders.

"If he is, sir, it's a very poor best, after what he did yesterday."

"I admit it is inexplicable, but I have known such cases in cricket before," said the colonel. "Such things will happen."

"I don't know, sir, whether I ought to speak about a matter that came under my notice which might throw some light upon the matter," said Lagden hesitatingly.

Colonel Hilton looked straight at him.

"If you have the slightest reason to suppose that Valance was playing his side false, Lagden, you certainly ought to acquaint me with it," he said. "At the same time, I cannot help knowing that you dislike that young man, and I say plainly, that I don't want to listen to any insinuations against him."

Lagden bit his lip and coloured. The colonel had a direct and soldierly way of coming straight to the point, which often made Geoffrey Lagden feel uncomfortable. But a little discomfort of that kind was not likely to prevent him from taking advantage of any opportunity of injuring one he hated.

"If I tell you exactly what occurred, sir, you can use your own judgment as to whether it is of any consequence," he said, concealing his annoyance. "I may mention that Tunstall was with me at the time, and can bear me out."

"That sounds very serious to begin with. What is it?"

"Last evening, when walking near Taunton, we saw Valance in deep and earnest conversation with a man a professional cricketer ought to have no acquaintance even with."

"Who was the man?" asked the colonel tersely.

"A disreputable fellow named Sharp, whom I have seen many times on the racecourse. He is a bookmaker, and to my knowledge bets on county cricket matches."

The colonel gnawed his grey moustache.

"And you say Valance was in earnest conversation with this black-guard?"

"Yes. And they were undoubtedly on very friendly terms. They passed us in a lane, and I happened to catch a word or two as they passed—of course, quite by accident. They were talking cricket."

Colonel Hilton knitted his brows darkly.

He knew that Lagden disliked Kit Valance, and he had a vague feeling that Lagden's word was not absolutely to be relied upon when he was speaking about a person he disliked. But he knew Lagden could have hardly invented a story like this; and, beside, there was Tunstall's word for it, too. Tunstall had his faults, but he was not a man to lie.

"I don't understand this at all," said Colonel Hilton slowly. "Valance certainly never ought to hold any communication with such a man. A professional cricketer ought to be like Cæsar's wife, above suspicion. But, taken in conjunction with his extraordinary failure to-day, the circumstance looks suspicious."

"I am glad you think I ought to have mentioned it," said Lagden



diffidently. "I should be sorry to be understood as speaking against Valance without cause." And he walked away, leaving the old soldier to digest his information.

Colonel Hilton was looking very worried when Blane came to speak to him a little later.

The Loamshire skipper noted it at once, and spoke on the subject that was exercising the colonel's mind and his own.

"Not quite what we expected to-day, sir," he remarked. "I can't understand Valance."

"I have just heard something about him," said Colonel Hilton abruptly. "I don't want it to go any further at present, but I want your opinion on it, Blane."

"Yes!" said the Loamshire captain wonderingly. "What is it?"

"Lagden and Tunstall saw him last night in close conversation with a betting man named Sharp. They appeared to be on friendly terms, and were talking cricket. What do you think of that?"

Blane started.

"I hardly know what to say, sir," he replied slowly. "I can't help feeling that Valance has not done so well to-day as he might have done."

"Ah, you have thought that, Blane?"

"Yes, I couldn't help thinking it; but I should hate to do him an injustice. It seems impossible that he could have sold the match."

"Yet it is strange, very strange."

"Yes, it is strange," assented the Loamshire captain. "But—but we don't want to judge hastily, at all events, sir. Let us give Valance another chance this afternoon."

"If he is playing us false, that may be throwing away the game."

"True, but unless he picks up form a bit, I will not let him bowl more than an over or two. That won't make much difference either way."

"Very good. This is a horribly unpleasant happening. I hope for his own sake that Valance will do better this afternoon. Otherwise I cannot very well keep the matter from the official notice of the committee."

And there was a shade upon the colonel's face when, the luncheon interval over, the Somersetshire innings was resumed, and the Loamshire men went out to field.

## CHAPTER 17.

### Somerset's Success—An Amazing Discovery.

**L**IONEL PALAIRET looked as fresh as a daisy as he took his place at the wicket. The crowd cheered his reappearance. The keen Somerset folk wanted to see him knock up his second century, and with the "rot" that seemed to have set in in the Loamshire bowling, that was now quite within the bounds of possibility.

The ball was given to Geoffrey Lagden for the first over. He bowled a maiden against Palaret, a sufficiently creditable feat, considering the form the Somerset captain was in, for the second time that day. Then Valance was put on against Phillips at the other end.

Blane, keeping wicket, waited anxiously. Arthur Lovell cast a still more anxious glance at his chum. He fervently hoped that the rest had restored to Kit something of his old form. He knew the harm this egregious failure might do to Kit's prospects, to say nothing of the now probable result of a county defeat.

He looked eagerly for something of the old bowling, but he was disappointed. The very first ball showed that Valance had not improved in the

least. Phillips, stepping out to it, sent it on its journey with a powerful drive, and the crowd cheered the first boundary.

Valance sent down ball after ball, and the Somerset batsman, with an easy, confident smile on his face, simply made hay of them.

The fifth ball gave him three, so that Lionel Palairet received the last ball of the over, and with easy grace he cut it away over the heads of the spectators.

Blane's teeth came together with a click.

When the field crossed over, the ball was tossed to Arthur Lovell.

"Go on and see what you can do, Lovell, for mercy's sake," said Blane, in a low voice. "That rotter won't bowl another over to-day!"

Lovell started and coloured.

"Are you speaking of Valance?"

"Yes," said Blane savagely, "confound him!"

"He's done his best," said Arthur warmly, ever ready to speak up for his friend, though even he had no word of explanation to give as to the cause of Valance's failure.

"Perhaps," said Blane, shrugging his shoulders. "Never mind that now. He won't bowl again this afternoon, and maybe never again for Loamshire."

A look of pain came into Lovell's face.

He had feared something of this kind. But there was no time for talk. He went on to bowl, determined to do what he could to make up for Valance's deficiency.

Fortune smiled upon him, too, for at the second ball of the over Phillips was clean bowled, and now Somerset had five down.

The score stood at 220. Lionel Palairet was still batting strongly, and seemed set at the wicket for the day. In the next few overs he passed Lovell's score in the Loamshire innings of 140. The Loamshires' dream of winning by an innings had long crumbled away. They would have to bat again, and it began to look as if they would have a fight to win at all.

The enthusiasm round the field was growing to fever heat. Men shouted and tossed their hats in the air, caring little whether they ever saw them again, when the Somerset score passed that of the Loamshire's innings.

The recovery of Somerset, after the dismal prospects of the county at the commencement of the match, was astounding. 280! That was the figure when Lionel Palairet, within a dozen of his second century, succumbed to the Loamshire attack at last.

Tweedie, canny Scot that he was, had sent him down a ball that tempted him to hit out, and Arthur Lovell in the field saw his chance. And his eyes flashed. Up went his hands, and he backed away with his eyes fixed on the round object that seemed to be floating down into them.

Click! And the round red ball was safe in his palms.

"Caught!"

It was a loud shout; and disappointed as most of the spectators were, they gave Lovell's fine feat a ringing cheer.

"Well caught!"

"How's that?" cried Loamshire, with a deep breath of relief.

"Out!"

Palairet already had his bat under his arm. He walked away towards the pavilion, while the crowd cheered him lustily, with cheers, too, for the fieldsman who had caught him out.

The score now read 280 for 6, last man 188.

There were still four wickets to fall, and one of these was Braund's, so that Somerset's chance was decidedly a rosy one.

Braund came in to take the place of the Somerset captain. He was in fine form, as he soon showed.

The Loamshire bowling now came from Tweedie, Lagden and Lovell. Since lunch Valance had bowled only one over, and Blane had clearly no intention of putting him on again.

Braund made hay of an over from Lagden, but presently the Loamshire amateur succeeded in bowling his partner.

Seven down for 300!

The afternoon was wearing away in a blaze of golden sunlight. Another Somersetshire wicket had fallen by the time the figures stood at 320. But Braund was still batting, and hitting the Loamshire bowling all over the field.

Then suddenly a blaze came into Blane's eyes.

From a late cut by Braund the ball sailed as if with deliberate intention towards the exact spot where Valance was standing at field.

The fieldsman's hands went up swiftly. He had seen his chance, and apparently meant to take it, and had he done so, the most dangerous Somerset batsman would have been dismissed.

But Valance's fielding seemed to be on a par with his bowling that day. His hands came clumsily together, and the ball escaped them, and rolled at his feet.

The chance was lost.

Braund drew a deep breath of relief as he saw what a narrow escape he had had, and Blane ground his teeth.

Valance had muffed an easy catch, and the Loamshire skipper, with Lagden's insinuation in his mind, believed that he had done it intentionally.

Arthur Lovell looked dismayed. He had made sure in his mind of that catch, and he was amazed and distressed to see Valance so inexplicably throw the chance away. What was the matter with him?

Braund continued to pile up runs. His individual score was getting high now, and the Somersetshire total was piling up. Another wicket down, caught out by Blane, who had an eagle eye open for chances.

And now Braund's time had come. He had sent the leather whizzing with a mighty cut, and Arthur Lovell was after it like a shot. The batsmen were running, and running again, and again for a third time they tempted fortune.

It was once too often. From the country the leather came whizzing in from Lovell, straight to the Loamshire skipper, and down went the bails. Braund's bat clumped on the crease a second too late.

"How's that?"

"Out!" said the umpire sententiously.

And the Somersetshire hero carried out his bat, stumped.

The last Somersetshire wicket fell a few minutes before the time fixed for drawing the stumps, and the home county were all down for a total of 360 for the second innings.

Considering the score for the Somerset first innings, the figure was astounding, and the Somerset men were in high spirits over it. The Somerset total for both innings was 453. Had the first innings panned out anything like the second the total would probably have passed Somersetshire's record, the famous 630 in the Yorkshire match in 1901.

But as it was it was bad enough for the visiting county. Instead of winning the match with an innings to spare, as they had confidently hoped, they were left with 164 to get to win on the third day of the match, and it was certain now to be a fight to a finish.

Loamshire's bowling had "petered out" in a lamentable way, and it

remained to be seen on the last day of the match whether the visiting county's batting could save the situation. After the happenings of the second day, Loamshire did not feel inclined to make sure about anything.

The red-faced man in the white hat walked off the field with a dubious expression. The Somerset total had passed most expectations, but it had hardly fulfilled his hopes, for it left Loamshire 164 to get; but they had taken as many as 290 in their first innings. If Arthur Lovell knocked up another century for his side the situation would probably be saved for the visitors. And was there any reason why he should not?

If the fourth innings pulled Loamshire round, all the trouble and risk of the bookmaker's plot had gone for nothing. And if Arthur Lovell batted, Mr. Sharp had very serious doubts about Somerset's ultimate victory. An idea was working in Mr. Sharp's subtle brain, the result of which we shall soon see.

Arthur Lovell intended to walk home with his chum after the match, but he missed Valance, after changing his clothes. He learned from a groundsman that Valance had left the ground; and rather surprised at the young bowler having given him the slip, as it were, Lovell set out to walk home alone.

At a short distance from the ground, however, he came upon Valance. He was standing in the shadow of a tree by the roadside talking to a man in a white hat. At sight of Lovell they immediately parted, and Valance came towards the Loamshire bat.

"Hallo!" said Arthur cheerily. "I missed you, Kit."

"I wanted to speak to that chap, so I came out quickly," said Valance. "I thought I should meet you here. I made a rotten show to-day."

"I'm afraid you did, Kit," said Lovell frankly. "I can't understand it. Your form seemed to be completely gone."

"We have a good number to get to win to-morrow," said Valance abruptly. "What do you think of our chances, Lovell?"

"Oh, so far as that goes, good!"

"You think we shall win?"

"Decidedly," said Arthur, with a nod. "We knocked up 290 in our first innings. There's no reason on earth why we shouldn't get 164 in our second."

"I suppose not."

"Somerset's recovery has simply given us another day's work to-morrow," said Arthur, with a laugh. "But we shall handle it all right, Kit. I haven't the slightest doubt that our batting will save the game."

"Your batting you mean, Lovell. Loamshire would cut a poor figure to-morrow if you were not in the ranks."

"Well, I shall bat for all I'm worth, you may be sure," said Arthur. "But don't worry about that, Kit. It's been rather a could douche to-day; but I don't believe the winning of the match is seriously endangered. We shall pull the game out of the fire to-morrow."

Valance smiled curiously.

"That's what I was anxious about, Lovell. You said some time ago that you'd help me if I were in need of help."

"You can rely upon me, Kit."

"Will you come with me now?"

"Certainly. What can I do?"

"I can explain that better when we get there. You can help me materially—if you don't mind," said Valance hesitatingly.

"With all my heart, Kit. You know I'm quite at your service," said Lovell. "Lead away!"

Valance nodded, and walked on, and the young Loamshire bat strode along by his side. The bowler was strangely silent, as if immersed in disagreeable reflection, and Arthur Lovell did not speak.

Little did Arthur Lovell dream of what was passing in his companion's mind.

They turned from the road into a dusky lane, and after a walk of some distance Valance opened a door and stepped inside. It was all dark, no light showing anywhere within.

"Come in, Lovell." Kit's voice was shaking, and Lovell noted it and wondered again. "Come in, old fellow. I'll have a light in a jiffy!"

"All right, Kit."

Lovell stepped into the cottage. The next instant he uttered an exclamation of astonishment. His companion had suddenly slammed the door, and at the same moment hidden hands from the darkness grasped Arthur Lovell and dragged him down.

Too utterly amazed to struggle, the young cricketer was secured, and bound hand and foot almost in a twinkling. He was a helpless prisoner before he even recovered his voice. Then, amazed, bewildered, he called out to Valance:

"Kit, what does this mean? Is it a joke, or what, Kit?"

There was no reply.

"Kit—Kit!"

He heard a faint chuckle in the darkness. Then he was lifted up and carried bodily away. He tried to struggle, but he was powerless; he could only writhe helplessly in his bonds.

"Kit!"

Down a rickety, creaking flight of stairs he was carried, and dumped heavily on a hard board floor. The darkness was intense. The grip on him was gone; he was left lying there, and he heard the stairs creak under the footsteps of his captors, who were evidently leaving the room.

Anger and indignation was blended now with the young cricketer's amazement. He had been led into a trap by the man he trusted. But why? For what—for what?

He struggled with the cord that bound his limbs. In vain. He heard a door at the top of the steps close, and a key turn in a lock.

"Kit—Kit!"

There was a faint groan from the darkness. Lovell started. - The black den had another tenant, then! Who was it? What was the meaning of it all?

"Who is there?" called out Arthur, in a firm voice.

"Lovell!"

It was a cry of surprise. Lovell felt as if his head was turning round, for he knew the voice. It was the voice of Kit Valance!

"Kit, is it you? How came you here? For Heaven's sake speak, before I think I have taken leave of my senses!"

"I am Kit Valance. And you are here?"

"Then who, in the name of wonder, has played in the Somerset match to-day? Who has trapped me here and kidnapped me?"

"My twin-brother Len! He has trapped you as he trapped me," groaned Kit. "It is a plot against Loamshire. We are helpless prisoners here, and the county match is lost!"

## CHAPTER 18.

## To Win or Lose?

"HAVE you seen Lovell?"

Blane, the Loamshire skipper, had asked that question more than once during the morning. Now he asked it again, with a shade of anxiety upon his brow.

It was the third day of the great match—Somerset v. Loamshire.

Interest in the match had been growing keener, and a great crowd, larger than on either of the previous days, was gathering to witness the final tussle between Lionel Palairet's team and the visiting county.

The Taunton ground, capable at a pinch of accommodating seven thousand spectators, seemed to be likely to fill to overflowing.

For the match had been full of surprises.

The low total of Somerset's first innings, due chiefly to Kit Valance's splendid bowling, had come as the first surprise to the home crowd. Then Loamshire's fine innings, totalling 290, had seemed to indicate that victory would be an easy affair for the visitors. But neither had been so sensational as Somerset's recovery in their second innings.

Lionel Palairet and Braund had batted like Trojans for the home county, but Somerset's success had been mainly due to the inexplicable failure of Kit Valance's bowling. Contrary to all expectations, the visitors had been left with 164 to get on the third day of the eventful match.

Would they do it?

After Loamshire's splendid first innings, there seemed no reason why they should not, unless their batting fell off as their bowling had done.

But the glorious uncertainty of cricket was more conspicuous than ever in this contest, and the spectators, and the players themselves, were prepared for anything.

The hopes of Somerset's partisans had risen high, and the chance of the home county pulling out ahead, after all, keenly excited them. However the match turned out, it was certain to be a well-fought game, and the good Somerset folk were coming in their hundreds to see it.

"Have you seen Lovell?"

Blane, as we have said, was looking anxious. Arthur Lovell was not yet on the ground, though the time was drawing near for the day's play to begin. Blane had sent a groundsman to his quarters with a note, and the answer had come that Lovell was not there, and had been absent all night.

Kit Valance was the likeliest of the Loamshire men to know something about Lovell's movements, and the Loamshire skipper sought out the young professional to question him.

"I believe you left the ground with him last night, Valance," said Blane.

"Do you know where he is now?"

Valance shook his head.

"Isn't he on the ground?"

"I shouldn't be inquiring after him if he were!" replied Blane, rather tartly.

"Well, I haven't seen him this morning."

"It's very strange. Lovell is usually the most punctual and reliable of fellows. Is it possible that any accident can have happened to him?" said Blane, looking decidedly worried.

"I don't see what can have happened."

"Where did you leave him last night?"

"We strolled into the country a bit, and parted. I believe he went straight home."

"No; he couldn't have, for I hear that he hasn't been home all night."



Valance began to look serious.

"I say, Blane, that's bad. Surely nothing can have happened to him? We should have heard something of it by this time, I should think."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Blane walked away with a troubled brow.

Where was Arthur Lovell? What did his strange absence from the match-ground imply? If it meant that Loamshire's best bat was to fail his side, as their best bowler had done, the match was as good as thrown away.

What could it mean? Lovell was the last man in the world to fail his side in an important match if he could help it. Had there been foul play?

Had Blane seen the peculiar look in Valance's eyes at that moment he would have had little doubt upon the latter point.

The traitor smiled sardonically as he looked after the worried Loamshire skipper.

Not the faintest suspicion was there in Blane's mind that he had been speaking, not to Kit Valance, but to his twin-brother, Len, who had so successfully personated the young bowler and brought Loamshire to the verge of defeat.

"Have you seen Lovell, Blane?" asked Colonel Hilton, as the Loamshire captain entered the pavilion. "I hear that he is not on the ground."

Blane shook his head, with a very disturbed expression.

"No, sir. He is certainly not on the ground, and I hear that he has been away from his quarters all night."

"That is very strange. Where is Valance? He should know——"

"I have just spoken to him, and he knows nothing of Lovell's movements since he parted with him last night."

Colonel Hilton knitted his brows.

"It's a beastly bother!" said Blane. "I intended to open the innings with Lovell. I wanted some good batting at the start to put heart into the side. Our failure yesterday had a very bad effect on the team. We want 164 to win, and we shall have to fight for it."

"But what can be the cause of Lovell's delay? If an accident had happened we should certainly have heard something of it."

"It is inexplicable, unless there has been foul play."

The colonel started.

"Do you suspect foul play, Blane?"

"I don't know what to suspect. But you know what Lagden said—that bookmaker fellow is down here, and has been getting at Valance. I am convinced that Valance's bad form yesterday was not by chance. Without proof it would not be fair to find him guilty, and I know a man cannot always be at the top of his form. But yesterday's display put my faith in him to a very severe test. If there was foul play there, there may be in other directions. Look!"

The Loamshire skipper jerked his thumb towards a man in the front line of the spectators, some distance from the pavilion—a red-faced man, in a white hat.

"Who is that?" asked the colonel.

"Sharp, the bookmaker. Lagden pointed him out to me. Is he here to watch Loamshire's defeat—does he know anything about it?"

And the Loamshire captain gritted his teeth.

"Perhaps we are taking too serious a view of the matter," the colonel remarked. "Lovell may turn up all right; there is yet time. Does he know that he is down first on the list?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Then I cannot understand it, unless, as you say, there has been foul

play. If he has been giving us this anxiety for nothing, I shall speak very sharply to him about it!" the colonel said, compressing his lips. "But—but I can hardly think he is in fault. It would not be like him."

"Very unlike him." Blane looked at the clock. "I shall have to make a change in my plan. Lovell cannot go in first. If he arrives I shall send him in later. I will open with Ponsonby and myself."

"If the worst should happen, Blane—if Lovell should not turn up at all for the match—what do you think of Loamshire's chances?"

"Nothing," said the captain tersely; "we haven't any!"

"It's a bad look-out."

"We made 290 in our first innings," said Blane. "Lovell knocked up 140 of them. The other fellows had 150 between them. We want 164 to win to-day. You can work that out for yourself, sir."

"Well, we can only hope for the best, and that he will turn up. If he went in as last man, it would be better than nothing, and there's heaps of time for that."

"I intended to send in Valance last, because I have a feeling that he means to throw a wicket away!" said the captain. "If he played us false yesterday, he will do the same to-day. I shall partner him with our weakest bat, so that he can't do much harm. I hope Lovell will come. Hang it all!"

And the cricket captain turned away, worried and wrathful.

"Hallo, Blane!" said Lagden cheerfully. "Lovell doesn't seem to be here. Is he on the sick-list, or what?"

"I don't know. Ponsonby, get your pads on!"

"I thought Lovell was going in first with you, skipper?" said Ponsonby, looking up from a conversation with Tunstall.

"So did I," growled Blane. "But as he's not here he can't go in, can he?"

There was a general exclamation from the amateurs of the Loamshire team.

"Do you mean to say that he's failed us?" exclaimed Lagden. "Well, of all the cheek! A chap who is paid to play not turning up for a match! By Jove!"

"There's been too much fuss made of the bouncer!" said Ponsonby. "That's what's at the bottom of it. It's got into his head."

"Oh, rot!" growled Blane. "Something has kept him away, and I'm certain that it's not his own fault. Anyway, there's no time for talk, and we can't wait. He can go in later. I want you to open the innings with me, Ponsonby."

"Right-ho!" said Ponsonby. "I'm your man!"

"But, I say, the committee ought to take note of this," said Lagden. "You'll report it to them, of course, Blane?"

"I shall do as I think fit, and I'm not asking for any suggestions just at present!" said the Loamshire captain grimly.

And Geoffrey Lagden bit his lip, and let the subject drop.

It was high time for the innings to open. The crowd were showing signs of impatience. The Somerset bowler was sending down trials to the wicket-keeper to fill up time. There was no time to wait for Arthur Lovell.

Where was he? Would he come in time to take part in the match at all?

These questions weighed upon the Loamshire skipper's mind as he took his place at the wicket, and prepared to face the bowling of Lewis.

But he was too good a cricketer to allow mental worries to interfere with his play. Blane could always be relied upon to keep his end up and put on a good number of runs for his side.

Ponsonby, when he chose to exert himself, was a fine batsman, too; and so the Loamshire innings opened in very good style.

It was a sunny, cheery morning. The fine weather was lasting through the match; much to the satisfaction of the spectators. The cheery sound of wood meeting leather rang over the level green, and away went the batsmen running.

Colonel Hilton watched from the pavilion with a shadow on his face. Loamshire was opening well—but where was Arthur Lovell? Without their champion bat, the visiting county would never pile up the required number of runs to win. That hard-fought match would count as a defeat for Loamshire, after all.

Where was Arthur Lovell?

The Loamshire skipper was doing very well. But his time was coming. Braund was bowling when the Loamshire score stood at 20. Blane hit out at the ball, and the next moment there was a shout of excitement round the field:

“Palairret—Palairret!”

“Well caught!”

Blane made a grimace. The leather was in the hand of the handsome captain of Somerset, who tossed it up and caught it again with a smile.

“How’s that?”

There was only one possible answer to that question, and Blane put his bat under his arm and walked away to the pavilion.

Geoffrey Lagden already had his pads and batting-gloves on. Blane gave him a nod, and he picked up his bat and walked out of the pavilion, fastening a last button on his glove as he appeared in the open, with an appearance of careless confidence.

As a matter of fact, Lagden was burning with excitement within. His chance had come!

He had every confidence in himself. The failure of Valance’s bowling on the previous day had shattered Loamshire’s rosy prospects, and brought the county within sight of defeat. A fine display of batting would save them. Lovell would have saved them had he been there, but the plotters had taken care that he should not be there. Could Lagden do it?

He meant to try. The red-faced man in the white hat saw him come on, and grinned. He believed, from Lagden’s joining in the plot, that the Loamshire man wanted his own side to lose, for some underhand reason, and it had not occurred to him that Lagden’s desire was to distinguish himself by winning after getting rid of his rival.

Mr. Sharp had a disappointment and a heavy loss in store for him that day if Geoffrey Lagden could bring it to pass.

But could he?

That remained to be seen. Lagden began well. The first over against his wicket was a maiden, but after that he began to score. Braund, Lewis, and Martyn tried their skill upon him, but he was on his mettle as he had seldom been before, and he stopped everything that was sent down to him.

Twenty runs came to him in a very brief time, and he began to feel himself getting set at the wicket. His hopes were high. Was he to rival to-day Arthur Lovell’s performance in the first Loamshire innings, and make the champion bat’s absence a matter of little consequence?

He resolved that it should be so.

Loamshire stood at 50 when Ponsonby was clean bowled by Braund. Tunstall came in to join Lagden, but he knocked up only five runs before he was caught out. Then Tweedie came in to take his place. Tweedie was a

fine bowler, as we know, but a very ordinary bat. He was stumped by the wicket-keeper, Newton, in attempting his sixth run.

Blane was looking blue.

The Loamshire wickets were going down at a rate that was quite alarming to the captain, who was waiting in vain for the arrival of his best bat.

The only hopeful feature of the innings, so far, was Lagden's batting. The Loamshire amateur was showing unusual form, though Blane had not the slightest hope that Lagden would succeed in pulling the game out of the fire.

As he seemed to be in extra special form, he might knock up sixty or seventy, but that he would go beyond the latter figure Blane did not believe.

Fortescue joined Lagden at the wickets. Fortescue excelled chiefly as a stone-waller, and he was a good man at wearing down the enemy's bowling.

Lunch was close at hand now, and the interval. Blane had been looking anxiously for Arthur Lovell, but the young professional had not put in an appearance. It was certain now that something untoward had happened, and Colonel Hilton had sent a note to the Taunton police to ask them to look into the matter.

But the colonel and the Loamshire captain felt that it was impossible that Lovell would leave them in the lurch in this way if he could possibly help it.

Something had happened, and both suspected foul play. Yet neither lost the faint, lingering hope that the Loamshire champion might yet turn up in time to bat for his side.

When the cricketers knocked off for lunch the Loamshire score stood at 70.

The batting had been very poor, and the bowling had been better than on either of the previous days. The unexpected prospect of victory made the Somersetshire bowlers buck up, and the fielding was particularly good. With the exception of Lagden, not out at lunch, Loamshire had done little.

Ninety-four runs were still wanted to win, and the best Loamshire men were out. The hopes of Somersetshire were high. At lunch there was only one topic over the Loamshire table, and that was the absence of Arthur Lovell.

Where was he?

Still no sign of Lovell when the cricketers took the field again. Lionel Palairet led out his men to field, and the Loamshire batsmen went to the wickets.

Play was slow and eventless for some time. Lagden batted cautiously, determined not to spoil his chance by snatching at shadows. There was none of that dare and dash about him that had often helped Arthur Lovell to win for his side. He was of too cold and cautious a nature to take risks, and a batsman who wanted to be quite safe every time was not likely to pile up runs very rapidly against the Somerset bowling.

The crowd were beginning to look bored and to crack jokes, after the manner of a cricket crowd, concerning the play. There were remarks about *dolce far niente* and the rest cure in the pavilion enclosure, and inquiries from the "sixpennies" as to whether the batsmen had that "tired feeling," and whether they wanted to go to sleep.

The score went up slowly.

The afternoon was wearing away, and Loamshire were six down when the figures stood at the even 100, of which fifty belonged to Geoffrey Lagden.

The spectators were getting impatient now at the prospect of an unfinished match, after the brilliant play of the first two days.

As the sun sank towards the west, the Somersetshire men seemed to "buck up" with ever-increasing energy, while the Loamshire play was decidedly slack.

Blane looked at his watch, and then at Colonel Hilton, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Sixty-four to get to win," he said. "Arthur Lovell could do it yet; and I hate playing for a draw. But——"

"He will not come."

"No; I suppose we may as well give up all hope now," said Blane gloomily. There was a shout from the field.

"How's that?"

"Out!"

Another Loamshire wicket went down. Seven wickets down for 100. Chichester came in, and Lagden had the bowling again. Clack!

What was that?

It was a cunning ball from Braund. Lagden had played cautiously—perhaps a shade too cautiously, which is quite possible. At all events, there was his wicket in pieces, and the exultant "How's that?" ringing in his ears.

"Out!"

Lagden turned perfectly pale.

A sickening feeling came over him. He was out; the fall of the bails had knelled his doom as a batsman. Out, with the consciousness that he had plotted for nothing, for worse than nothing, for he had not succeeded in saving his side. He had lost for his county!

Yes, lost for Loamshire, for Arthur Lovell, the only man who could have saved the side, was far away, a helpless prisoner, by his instrumentality.

But there was no help for it now. Gnawing his underlip so bitterly that the blood came, he slowly turned towards the pavilion, rage and chagrin seething in his breast. He had failed. The blindest conceit could not comfort him now. He knew that he had failed, where Arthur Lovell would have succeeded if he had been allowed to try.

Eight Loamshire wickets down for 100 runs. And one of the remaining batsmen was the man Blane suspected of treachery, of intending to play his side false. And there was still over half an hour to play.

Lagden reached the pavilion, and Blane, with a heavy heart, was about to sign to Valance to go on, when there was a sudden sound of commotion.

The Loamshire captain gave a quick start. Lagden turned round, pale as death, a savage blaze in his eyes.

Whose voice was that—those well-known tones, bringing suddenly, unexpectedly, a gleam of hope to Loamshire in that dark hour of impending defeat?

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## CHAPTER 19.

### To Save His Side.

**T**HE long day, which passed with so much ill-luck for Loamshire on the Taunton match-ground, dragged by wearily to the two prisoners in the lonely cottage. In black darkness, unconscious of the flight of time, the two cricketers remained while the heavy hours of that day rolled by. Only once since Arthur Lovell had been brought there had the dark cellar been visited by the kidnappers.

They had come to loosen the hands of the prisoners, and to bring them food and drink, only bread and water, but very welcome to the captives when they arrived.

Two men came in, but as they carried no light, and the cellar was beyond the reach of daylight, it was impossible to see whom they were.

Whether the ruffians were still capable of some feeling of pity, or whether

Len Valance, rascal as he was, had insisted that his brother should not be treated too badly, the comrades did not know; but the cords round their wrists were loosened for them to be free to eat, and left so.

Their captors did not speak a single word. Whether night had passed and it was day, whether day had gone and it was night again, they could not even guess. The closing door left them to solitude and silence again.

It did not take them long to wholly release their hands, and then they ate and drank, and felt the stronger for the meal.

"We have a chance now, Lovell," said Kit. He sat up in the darkness, and began to pick at the rope round his ankles. "At least we can free ourselves."

"True. But if there were any chance of our getting out of the cellar they would not have left our hands free," replied Arthur.

It seemed only too true.

"But there may be a chance that they've overlooked," said Kit quietly. "At all events, we will do what we can."

"You are right."

The ropes were knotted tightly round their legs, and the unfastening of them was a long and weary task. But it was accomplished at last, and the two cricketers stood up, free to move, free to exercise and restore the circulation to their cramped limbs. Cramped they indeed were, and for a time the pain of it kept them helpless to make any further move, but gradually it passed away, and then they began to make an examination of their prison.

Lovell struck a match, and the light flickered on dirty, damp brick walls and a muddy earthen floor. Over their heads was the floor of the room above, thick planks on rafters. A flight of shaky steps led up to the trap-door which gave access to the cellar.

Lovell ascended the steps and tried the trap. It was as firm as the floor around it. It was made to open upwards, and was now evidently secured by a bolt on the upper side, and probably by some heavy article of furniture placed upon it also.

Lovell, bracing himself under it, put his shoulder to the trap, and exerted all his strength in a terrible effort to force it up. The strain was terrible, and the veins stood out on the young athlete's face like whipcord, but the trap did not budge. Hardly a creak came from the wood, and Lovell's effort gradually relaxed. Exhausted, panting, he reeled down the wooden steps, and leaned against the wall of the cellar, breathing hard.

"It is useless," he said huskily. "It is as firm as a rock."

During the long hours they had lain bound the comrades had compared notes. Arthur knew how Kit had been entrapped by his scapegrace brother's letter; and he had told his comrade of the day's play, and the supposed failure of Valance's bowling.

Arthur had known of Kit's twin-brother and double, but had it not been for the presence of the young Loamshire bowler now he could hardly have credited that he had been so deceived by a resemblance. But, of course, with the real Kit a prisoner in the dark cellar along with him, he could have no doubt upon the subject.

And now that he knew the truth, he understood what had so deeply puzzled him before—the inexplicable failure of Valance's bowling in the second Somersetshire innings. He had stoutly refused to believe that his chum could be guilty of betraying his side; but now that he knew that the bowler was a traitor impersonating Kit, he knew that the bowling had been purposely bad.

And there was a deep, angry indignation in Lovell's breast, Kit's brother



as he was, Len Valance was likely to have a rough time of it if ever the young Loamshire bat got within hitting distance of him.

Kit began to pace the cellar impatiently. Thinking of the match going on on the Taunton ground, of his rascally brother imposing upon the Loamshire team and throwing away the game, and of the obloquy that would fall upon himself in consequence, made the young bowler too restless and furious to keep still.

Arthur Lovell stood thinking, trying to think out some plan of escape. He could think of nothing. He struck some more matches, and made a fresh examination of the cellar. There was no opening save at the trapdoor, and the ceiling of planks laid over rafters, and about a couple of feet over his head. Chance of escape there was absolutely none.

"Fury!" cried Arthur, at last. "Oh, that I had those scoundrels within reach! I say, Kit, let us have another try at the trap. I can't keep still. Perhaps we may be able to get at it together, and make some impression on it."

"No harm in trying," replied Kit, but without the least hope of success.

They ascended the flight of wooden steps. The steps were hardly wide enough for two to stand abreast. With a great deal of difficulty the two comrades found room to brace themselves together under the trap.

"Now!" muttered Arthur.

And at the word they threw their whole strength into a tremendous effort.

The trap cracked and creaked, but did not budge. Harder and harder they strained; another creak, but nothing more. A footstep sounded above, and there was a knock on the trap.

Sick with the futile effort, the comrades ceased it. The knock was repeated, and then came a voice, evidently from a man with his mouth placed close to the floor.

"You may as well chuck that, you fools! You can't get out. You'll be set free when the match at Taunton is over; it won't be long now."

Then a receding footstep.

"You heard that!" gasped Arthur. "The match is not over; if we could get out, there's a chance yet. Kit, I believe I felt something give slightly just now; one more effort, old man, if it kills us."

"I'm ready."

And again they put forth their strength in a terrible effort. Was something giving? Alas! it was not the trap. There was a crack, a crash, and the two comrades found themselves flying downward, to fall bruised and shaken on the floor of the cellar, hurting their limbs considerably on the debris there.

They hardly knew what had happened for a moment. Then Arthur limped painfully to his feet.

"Are you hurt, Kit?"

"Only a knock or two. The steps have given way."

"Yes, and the last chance has gone."

Arthur Lovell struck one of his last matches. Overhead the trap was as firm as ever. On the ground lay the steps. The tremendous strain had not forced the trap, but it had displaced the flight of steps, which was merely a kind of broad wooden ladder fastened in a sloping position under the trapdoor. The latter it was now impossible to touch.

The crash had doubtless been heard from above, for the comrades could hear a sound of chuckling in the room overhead. Kit gave a groan.

"It's all up now."

But a sudden flash darted into Arthur's eyes—the flash of a new idea—of hope!

“Kit! It’s a chance—it’s Providence! Kit, look here!”

He stooped and picked up one of the two long, broad side-pieces between which the wooden steps had been clamped. Two of the steps were yet fastened to it.

“Do you understand?” cried Arthur, his eyes blazing with excitement. “Kit, there’s only a plank floor above our heads, and with weapons like this——”

No more words were needed; Kit sprang to seize a similar fragment. The next moment terrific blows were crashing, between the rafters, on the planks over their heads.

The floor of the room above was within two feet, easy reach for an assault. The boards were stout and strong, but they were not made to stand an attack like this. The heavy beams of wood, wielded with all the strength of powerful arms, crashed up against the planks with terrific force.

There was a cry of alarm in the room above. Little heed did the cricketers pay to that, little thought to their captors. They were only too anxious to get to close quarters with the scoundrels.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

A long, rending groan, and one of the planks went through. A glimmer of daylight came down into the cellar through broken wood and torn oilcloth. A quavering voice was heard above:

“Stop it! Stop it, do you hear, or I’ll shoot!”

It was an empty threat, but even otherwise it would have had no effect upon the young cricketers, fierce and determined now with the hope of freedom.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

The boards were breaking through on all sides. Lovell dropped his beam, and caught at one of the cross-pieces with his hands, and swung himself up. There was an aperture amply large enough for him. A rough-looking fellow dashed at him with a chair caught up by the back to strike him down.

Lovell, with a tremendous spring, gained the upper floor, and, dodging the descending chair, he closed with his foe.

“Kit! Kit!”

“I’m coming!”

Lovell was struggling with a powerful ruffian, and another was rushing upon him. Kit was out of the cellar, coming to his comrade’s aid in a twinkling. He tackled the second rough with a strength and determination there was no gainsaying. Right round he whirled him, and sent him crashing through the opening in the smashed floor-boards.

The scoundrel went through into the cellar and lay there groaning.

Quickly Kit sprang to Lovell’s aid. The ruffian was holding his own, but with two against him he was soon dragged down, and sent headlong on top of his confederate in the cellar below. Lovell gripped Kit’s hand. From underneath came a chorus of groans and curses.

“Free, Kit! There may yet be time! Come!”

They dashed down to the road. The long imprisonment had told upon them, yet at that moment they felt fresh, keen, fit for anything. If only they could get on the ground in time to play, in time to baffle the dastardly plot, and save Loamshire from defeat!

If! It was a big—a very big if. They were far, far from Taunton, with no method of reaching the town but by walking, no conveyance, not even a human being in sight.

The new-born hope sank down again. It was too late!

Zip, zip!

Toot, toot!

Arthur Lovell made a movement to one side of the road as he heard the horn of an approaching motor-car. But then a new thought flashed into his mind. He sprang into the centre of the road and held up his hand. A powerful Mercedes car was sweeping down towards him, and the chauffeur had no choice but to stop, or to run over the young cricketer.

"What the——"

Arthur did not heed him. He had thought of a last chance; a desperate one, but all there was left for him. He sprang to the side of the car. A gentleman was looking out to see why the chauffeur had stopped, and he fixed an astonished gaze upon Lovell.

"What—what the——"

"I do not know you, sir," said Lovell, speaking quickly but respectfully. "But I want to ask a favour of you. My friend and myself belong to the Loamshire team, playing Somerset to-day at Taunton; and we have been kidnapped by a gang of scoundrels, and have just escaped, too late to get to the ground. Would you—could you take us there, for the sake of fair play and the good old game?"

He waited in tense suspense for the reply. The man was a stranger to him; but such an appeal would not be made in vain to a sportsman. The motorist's face expressed blank amazement for a moment, then it broke into a smile.

"Jump in!"

Away went the car, the two cricketers in it.

"Bravo!"

The cricket ground at last, and a shout ringing from it. The game was not yet over at all events. The car jerked to a stop.

"There you are," said the motorist.

"Heaven bless you, sir!" said Arthur Lovell, as he jumped out, and Kit echoed his words. The motorist smiled, and the car moved off at a speed more moderate than that at which it had arrived.

"Lovell!"

Lovell's name was called out by a dozen voices. He ran swiftly into the pavilion.

"Am I in time?"

Kit was at his heels. Blane turned towards them in amazement. Lagden was just throwing down his bat.

"Am I in time?" cried Lovell again.

"Yes," shouted the Loamshire skipper, "in time to save the side. No time for words. You've got to change like lightning. You're next man in!" To save his side? With sixty-four to get in half an hour. Could he do it?

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## CHAPTER 20.

### How Arthur Lovell Saved His Side.

**A**RTHUR LOVELL came out of the pavilion with his bat under his arm. But a very few minutes had elapsed since his arrival, dusty and breathless. Blane, overjoyed by the reappearance of the best Loamshire bat in the nick of time, had helped him to change, and the change had been really a lightning one. Now, in spotless white, with pads and batting-gloves, Arthur came out to take his place at the wicket.

A cheer greeted his appearance. Few of the spectators had seen him arrive; none knew the strange adventure he had gone through, or how he

had escaped from rascally hands just in time to bat for Loamshire. Or, rather, one there knew; a man in a white hat, who stared in amazement and dismay at the young batsman as he walked to the wicket, scarcely believing his eyes.

"Lovell! He is going to bat!"

Mr. Sharp muttered the words in a savage undertone, as he realised that his carefully-laid scheme was crumbling to pieces after all.

But the rest of the crowded spectators on the Taunton ground only remembered Arthur as the fine Loamshire batsman who had done so well for his side in the first Loamshire innings, and they cheered him cordially.

"Where is Valance?" Blane asked.

"Which one do you mean?" said Ponsonby. "There seem to be two of them. What sort of a game has that bouncer been playing, I wonder—the chap who came in with Lovell, I mean?"

"He's gone to change. The other slipped out just now, and goodness only knows where he is by this time. I wonder——"

Blane did not wait to hear what Ponsonby wondered. He walked away quickly to the professional's room. Kit Valance had almost finished changing, ready to take his turn at the wicket.

Blane stared at him hard.

"I suppose you are Kit Valance?" he said abruptly.

"Yes, I should think you know me, sir."

"Then who is the fellow who has been playing in your name to-day?"

"A scoundrel—though he is my brother."

"Your brother?" ejaculated Blane, in amazement.

"Yes, my twin brother Len. Where is he now?"

"He has cleared out before we could think of stopping him. What does this mean, Valance? Where have you been?"

"Lovell and I have been prisoners; we escaped by a stroke of good fortune, and a motorist was generous enough to bring us to the ground in time."

"I suppose it's as you say," said the Loamshire skipper, passing his hand over his brow. "It's a puzzling business. Do you know that this precious brother of yours has nearly lost us the game? He has bowled to lose, and if we lose, or make it a draw, it will be his doing."

Kit nodded.

"I know it, sir, and I am sorry. But there is a chance yet. Lovell can do wonders at the wicket, as you know, and when I go in to join him I shall strain every nerve to keep my end up. We may pull the game out of the fire yet."

"I hope so," said Blane, knitting his brows. "I shall have to speak to Palairet, and explain to him. Not that the Somerset men would know the difference between you and your brother, if you went on now, for that matter; I don't think I should myself. Now I come to think of it your voice is a little different. The hound! He has escaped now, but the police will lay him by the heels before long, I hope!"

"I suppose I have no right to ask you to show him mercy, sir?" Kit said, in a halting voice. "He deserves the worst you can do, I know that."

Blane looked at him sharply.

"You don't mean to say that you want him to escape punishment for this scoundrelly action, Valance?" he cried.

Kit was silent.

"I don't know what you feel about the matter, Valance," went on the Loamshire skipper, "but I will tell you this, that if you show a desire to spare this fellow his proper punishment you may be suspected of abetting

his rascality. I don't mean that I should think so," he added, as a painful flush overspread the lad's face, "but many would, and you cannot afford to give ground for such a suspicion. This occurrence will sufficiently shake your position in the Loamshire Club already, I assure you."

A loud shout penetrated into the room.

"Well bowled, Braund!"

Blane snapped his teeth.

"That must be Chichester's wicket. Are you ready, Valance?"

"Quite," said Kit.

Blane hurried away. He was right; it was Chichester's wicket that had fallen, and now the Loamshire score stood at 110. Chichester carried out his bat. The crowd looked on excitedly for the last Loamshire batsman to come in. There was a buzz of interest as the Loamshire captain was seen to cross over to Lionel Palairet and enter into a quick talk with him.

What could Blane have to say to the Somersetshire captain just then? There was a good deal of surmise on the subject, as to whether the two captains were discussing the state of the wickets, or the fitness of light for play. What Blane was actually saying would have astounded the spectators on the Taunton ground if they could have heard it.

It amazed Lionel Palairet. The Somerset captain, of course, had no objection to raise to Kit Valance resuming his place in the team. Had Loamshire benefited by the play of the unpermitted substitute, the case would have been different. But the reverse, of course, was the case.

With the exception of Lionel Palairet and the Loamshire men, nobody on the ground knew that the batsman who now came on was not the same man as the bowler who had done so ill for his side the previous day. Even the red-faced man in the white hat was doubtful.

That Lovell had escaped from the Red Cottage he knew, because he saw him at the wicket, but so exactly alike was Kit Valance's appearance to Len's, that it seemed impossible that this was the champion Loamshire bowler on the ground again.

Mr. Sharp, his mind tossed with doubt and foreboding, settled down to watch. He knew that the next over, which Poyntz was preparing to deliver for Somerset, would settle the matter beyond the shadow of a doubt. For if it was the traitor at the wicket, he would be clean bowled, and then the Loamshire innings would end, Lovell not out. As last man in, it was in Valance's power to throw away the game if he liked, and probably in his power to win it if he backed up Lovell well.

And so Mr. Sharp watched with puckered brow and anxious eyes. Poyntz sent down a tricky ball to Valance, and it was stopped dead on the crease. So with the second and the third. At the Fourth Kit snicked away the ball, and the batsmen ran a single, which gave Arthur Lovell the bowling.

The man in the white hat ground his teeth hard together. He knew the truth now. The traitor was gone. It was the real Kit Valance at the wicket, and he was backing up Arthur Lovell for all he was worth.

There could be no doubt upon that point now. For Valance was running no risks. He knew that he was wanted, not to score, but to keep the innings open so that Arthur Lovell could score. That was what he meant to do. The single run gave Arthur the bowling, and he made good use of it.

Poyntz sent down his fifth ball, and it broke from the pitch just where Arthur Lovell liked it. The batsman stepped out to it, and a mighty swipe of the bat sent it on its journey, far too swift for the fieldsmen's eyes to follow it.

Kit Valance made a motion to run, but Arthur, with a smile, waved his

hand, and the young batsman dropped his bat on the pitch again. For it was a boundary.

The ball was tossed in by a grinning spectator, and came back to Poyntz. He sent down his last ball like a four-point-seven shell, and the clack of the bat was followed by the swift flight of the leather.

And now the batsmen were running—once, twice, thrice! Three! And the willow safe on the crease again before the leather came whizzing in from the country.

The field crossed over, and Lovell still had the bowling. Now Lewis delivered an over, putting all he knew into it. But Lovell played every ball in masterly style, and gained thirteen for the over. The Loamshire score stood at 130.

Thirty-four wanted to win, in fifteen minutes!

Braund was bowling now, steadily and cautiously. A boundary for Lovell, then a three, and, with the score at 137, Kit had the bowling. Now was Braund's chance, and he did his level best against Kit's wicket.

But Valance was caution itself. The most tempting balls had no effect upon him; he was absolutely content to stop them, and stop them only, apparently oblivious of the fact that time was creeping on, and the moment for drawing the stumps getting nigher and nigher.

Blane, in the pavilion enclosure, gnawed his lip. He knew that Kit was doing well, doing what was best to be done, yet the slow play was nerve-irritating when seconds were so precious.

Was it to be an unfinished match, after all?

Colonel Hilton looked on with knitted brows. After all Loamshire's ill-luck her chance had come—had it come too late?

The over finished without Kit moving from his wicket. He had kept it up, and that was all. Now Robson bowled to Lovell.

Clack! went the bat. Lovell was hitting out in good style. A two, a four, a two again, then a three. Loamshire stood at 148. Sixteen more wanted!

The colonel looked at his watch. Sixteen runs wanted in exactly eight minutes, and now Kit was stopping the last balls of the over without attempting to run. He was stonewalling, the best thing possible to be done, under the circumstances, but the moments were flying.

Now they were bowling from the other end again. Again the colonel's eyes sought his watch. Six minutes more!

Sixteen runs in six minutes! It was evidently to be the last over, and all depended upon Arthur Lovell. Could he save his side?

Down comes the ball, and Arthur Lovell stops it dead. The colonel clicks his teeth. It was a ball that only a good batsman could even have stopped. But runs are wanted now—runs, runs, runs!

Ah, now he is hitting out! Away goes the ball, and the batsmen run. Heavens, how they scud—like streaks of white on the level green!

Again, again, again—yes, and a fourth time! Loamshire is 152. Now Braund bowls again, and again Arthur Lovell comes out strong. No need to run; it is a boundary. The game shall be saved yet!

Eight wanted to win! Will they do it? Wood meets leather again with a staccato clack, and the leather-hunters are busy again.

And the batsmen are running—running as if for their lives, while the panting Somerset fieldsmen toil after the elusive ball. Thrice across the pitch, amid cheers growing ever louder, from a sportsmanlike crowd, who forget that the home side is losing its grip on what seemed a certain victory, in their keen appreciation of splendid cricket.

A fourth run—can they do it? The nearness of time urges them to the attempt, and they are scudding like lightning.

And now the ball is coming in, whizzing to the ready hands of the wicket-keeper. Lovell feels rather than sees the peril. He puts on a desperate spurt. His feet seem scarcely to touch the ground. His bat clumps on the crease. At the same moment there is a crash of falling bails. But the umpire shakes his head.

Lovell had got home first; by the skin of his teeth, as it were. But a miss is as good as a mile!

"Not out!"

No, not out. And Loamshire breathes again.

Four wanted to win. But the time has flown. The minutes seem to race by. Four more wanted to win, and two more balls to the over—but only one minute left! For no earthly king—not even for King Cricket—will Father Time call a halt.

To the Loamshire men Braund seems aggravatingly slow as he prepares to deliver the next ball. He is not really slower than usual. But Blanc bites his lip. Colonel Hilton is tugging at his moustache. The crowd hold their breath.

Will the man never bowl?

Yes; he is bowling. Down goes the ball. The colonel's eyes are on his watch—on the second hand of it—yes, the time is counted by seconds now.

Clack! For good or ill, for victory or defeat, it is the last hit of the game—Arthur Lovell has struck the last blow for Loamshire!

Where is the ball? Eyes seek in vain to follow its flight. Right over the pavilion it goes. Where, after that, no one knows or cares. For it is a boundary hit, and the game is won—won on the stroke of time!

Arthur Lovell has saved his side!

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## CHAPTER 21.

### A Blow in the Dark.

**H**OME again in Loamshire, after the splendid victory over Somersetshire at Taunton—a splendid victory, though won on the stroke of time by a single run. For the Loamshires had not only had to fight against the Somerset cricketers, but against black treachery from outsiders as well; and still they had triumphed.

It was Arthur Lovell's fine innings, not out, that had saved the game and brought Loamshire home with a victory instead of a defeat to their name.

And wherever the great game was loved and played the name of the young batsman was known, and to Loamshire folk generally he was a hero.

But, mingled with the triumph and satisfaction of the Loamshire cricketers were many bitter feelings.

While almost the whole team, forgetting everything else in the keen enthusiasm of victory—made a fuss of Arthur Lovell, Geoffrey Lagden could hardly hide his chagrin. The plot he had so carefully laid for his own advantage, which was to have cast Arthur Lovell into the shade, had resulted in the very opposite effect.

Neither had Kit Valance suffered as Lagden had hoped.

After the Taunton victory, and the return of the cricketers to Loamshire, Kit had been called before the committee to give an explanation of what had occurred. He told his story plainly and straightforwardly. That the tale was true, that the young bowler's double really existed and was not a figment of his imagination, was proved by the fact that half a dozen of the eleven had seen them at the same time, Blanc among the rest.

The plot had been baffled, and it was pretty certain that Abel Sharp,



the principal in it, had suffered heavily in a financial sense. To avoid a cricket scandal, it was deemed best in the end to allow the matter to rest where it was.

Colonel Hilton, whose influence was great in the committee, thought so, and he received an unexpected support from Mr. James Lagden. Geoffrey Lagden's father was on the committee, and his extensive financial support to the club made him a man of influence there. Mr. Lagden was usually the last man in the world to err on the side of mercy; but in this case he concurred in the colonel's desire to avoid a scandal.

The fact was that Geoffrey Lagden was afraid to let the matter go further, and Mr. Lagden, who was under his son's influence in everything, simply carried out Geoffrey's wishes. It was not, of course, for Kit's sake that Geoffrey Lagden acted as he did.

He was afraid that if Len were arrested, he would speak too freely of his—Lagden's—share in the kidnapping plot, and though he might not be able to prove his statement, a good many people would be found to believe it. It was safer to let sleeping dogs lie.

And Geoffrey Lagden drew a deep breath of relief when he learned from his father that the county committee had decided to let the matter drop. Mr. Lagden was puzzled as to his son's motive, but Geoffrey volunteered no explanation, and his father asked for none.

Kit's troubled face brightened when he was informed that no steps would be taken in the matter, and that Len Valance had nothing to fear if he kept clear of Loamshire in the future.

"I'm glad for your sake, Kit," said Arthur, when Valance told him the news. "Knowing how you feel about the matter, I am glad Len Valance is let off. But—well, I am sorry that hound of a bookmaker cannot be sent to prison; though, as a matter of fact, I think it would have been difficult to prove his complicity in the plot, and he would probably have escaped scot-free, even if he had been prosecuted. If this is a lesson to Len——"

"I don't hope for that," said Kit sadly. "He will be scared for a time, that is all; and his position will be worse now. I don't know what he will do."

"If the affair is hushed up——"

"It is not hushed up from Mr. Lagden, and he is Len's employer. Is he likely to keep my brother in his service after this proof of his rascality?"

"I had not thought of that. I suppose not."

"I am sure not. Mr. Lagden is not the kind of man to give a fellow a second chance, and I admit that Len does not deserve one. Mr. Lagden will kick him out, and he will be without work and without a character."

"Then you have not seen the last of him, Kit!"

"I'm afraid not."

And that, as a fact, was what happened a couple of days later. Loamshire had no other match on that week, but most of the team turned up pretty frequently for practice at the county ground in Loamchester. Arthur and Kit were required on the ground, of course. It was on Saturday, as Arthur was leaving the ground, that he caught sight of a figure leaning against a tree at a short distance from the gate.

For a moment he started in amazement. He had left Kit bowling to Ponsonby and Lagden, in practice at the nets. Yet here was Kit—or his double. In a moment the young batsman realised that it was Len Valance he saw.

Lovell stopped, his brows contracted, his eyes gleaming. The ne'er-do-well was smoking a cigarette, and reading a pink-coloured paper, evidently

of the sporting variety. He did not notice Lovell, though once or twice he raised his eyes from the paper to glance across the road.

He was waiting there for someone, that was certain; and whom could he be waiting for, if not Kit Valance. Lovell with his lips set hard, crossed the road. Len Valance looked up and saw him, and evidently recognised him at a glance, for he turned pale and stepped quickly back.

"What do you want here?" said Lovell.

Len made an attempt to recover his usual cynical coolness. He pushed back the cheap Panama hat and stared Lovell in the face.

"I really don't see how that concerns you, my friend," he drawled.

Arthur's eyes flashed.

"It does concern me, Mr. Len Valance. I have only to call a policeman to have you taken into custody, if I choose."

"Excuse my dropping into slang, but really that chicken won't fight," said Len Valance, with a laugh. "I happen to know that the Loamshire committee have decided to ignore altogether that little affair at Taunton."

"You seem to forget that I was one of the parties kidnapped, and that, if I choose to act upon my own responsibility, I am quite at liberty to do so."

Len started.

"But you won't," he said quickly. "You are Kit's friend, Mr. Lovell, and you won't. Besides, a man in your position can't afford to go against the opinion of the committee. I don't see what you want to meddle with me for."

"I was wondering whether you had any sense of shame or of decency," said Lovell, in a low voice. "Can't you be satisfied with the harm you have already done Kit? The committee have overlooked this affair, but it has given Kit's enemies a handle to use against him, and they will use it. If he is found to be in communication with you, they will not be slow to say—as some of them hint now—that he was your confederate, not your victim, and that you still have dealings together."

Len Valance blew out a little cloud of smoke. There was a smile about his lips that irritated Lovell almost past patience.

"I dare say you are right, Mr. Lovell," said the scapegrace, calmly watching the curling smoke. "I don't want to do Kit any harm. You have a far worse opinion of me than I deserve. I like Kit, and would do anything for him."

"Then let him alone."

"My dear fellow, that is exactly what I intend to do for the present. Later, a scarcity in the money market may lead to a renewal of relations. For the present, I am going to let him alone."

"Then why are you here?"

Len Valance laughed lightly.

"That, my excellent friend, is my own business."

"Do you deny that you are here to see Kit?"

"I shall not take the trouble of denying anything that you choose to state. The weather is far too warm for argument."

"You coward! You hound! But there, you are not fit for a decent fellow to lay his hands upon!" cried Lovell scornfully. "You kidnapping thief; it is for Kit's sake that I hold my hand, but you had better take care!"

And, unable to trust himself any longer in the rascal's presence, lest he should forget what he owed Kit, and give Len Valance the hiding he deserved, Lovell turned upon his heel and strode away.

"The—the bully!" muttered Len Valance. It was the last word that Arthur Lovell would ever have deserved to have applied to him, but Len

Valance was seldom just. "How I hate him! Perhaps I'll give him something back for his threats one of these days—perhaps I'll make him sorry he made an enemy of me!" He snapped his teeth viciously. "Perhaps my time will come! Ah, here's my man!"

At that moment, as it happened, Arthur Lovell glanced back. He saw Len Valance quickly cross the road to speak to someone who had just come out of the cricket ground. But it was not Kit.

To Lovell's amazement, he saw that the man Len Valance stopped, and spoke to familiarly, was not his brother, the young Loamshire bowler, but Geoffrey Lagden!

Lovell had no desire to play the spy; his glance rested upon the two only for a few moments, and then he strode on his way. But the incident lingered in his mind, and did not fade from his remembrance. He had noticed that Lagden looked annoyed when Len Valance spoke to him. Lagden was extremely annoyed, as a matter of fact.

He had never wanted to see Len again, and the sight of the scapegrace, with his half-insolent, half-insinuating smile, was very disagreeable to the Loamshire amateur.

"I see you haven't forgotten me, Mr. Lagden," Len remarked.

Lagden stared at him frowningly.

"The sooner I do so, the better I shall be pleased," he replied. "I don't want you to speak to me. That's plain, isn't it?"

"Quite plain. But I want to speak to you, and I intend to speak to you," smiled Len Valance. "That's plain, isn't it?"

"You have no business with me."

"On the contrary, I have; and you will do wisely to listen to it. I don't want to make a row."

Lagden reflected for a moment or two. He felt that it would be wiser to listen to what Len had to say, at all events.

"Come with me," he said briefly. "You ought to know better than to be seen lounging about the Loamshire ground, after what has happened."

"It was my only chance of seeing you, as I don't know where you live."

"Well, come! I don't want to be seen with you."

Lagden crossed a stile on the other side of the road, and Len followed him. The Loamshire amateur halted in the shadow of a clump of trees that hid them from the road.

"Now, what is it?" he said sharply. "If you think you are going to get money out of me, my fine fellow, I warn you at the start that you will be disappointed."

"It isn't exactly money, though some of that would come in useful. Mr. Lagden has given me notice to leave his employment."

"You couldn't expect anything else after what has happened," said Lagden coldly. "I quite approve of my father's action. You are lucky to be out of prison."

"And what of yourself?"

"Leave me out of it. Whatever you might say, you could prove nothing."

"I am not so sure of that. But I don't want to use threats. If Mr. Lagden turns me away without a character, as he declares he will do, and uses his influence against me as I expect, I am done in. I sha'n't have a chance of making an honest living again."

"Make a dishonest one, then. I expect it will come easier to a fellow of your kind."

"Easier to say than to do. Will you speak to your father for me? I

only want to be given another chance. It isn't much to ask you, Mr. Lagden, considering everything."

Lagden looked thoughtful.

"I really don't see why I should do anything of the kind!" he exclaimed. "It's like your cheek to ask me."

"But I do," said Len Valance, with a glint in his eyes. "Just before you came out, I was speaking to a fellow in your club——"

"Do you mean Lovell?"

"Yes. The man you hate," Len sneered. "The man you are envious of. Well, I don't say I like him any more than you do, but I dare say he'd give something to know who was at the bottom of that kidnapping business at Taunton."

Lagden gritted his teeth.

"Well, what do you say?" demanded Len, when Lagden had been silent for a full minute, his eyes on the ground, his brow wrinkled in thought.

Lagden's eyes were gleaming, as though some new and exciting idea had flashed into his brain.

Len looked at him curiously. Lagden raised his eyes, and fixed them on the rascal's face. His look was so keen that Len shrank from it.

"You say you dislike Lovell?" said Lagden, in a low voice. "You hate him?"

"Well, yes, I hate him; but that will make no difference if you——"

"Listen to me. You have blundered once. The wretched affair at Taunton ended more to Lovell's advantage than otherwise. Are you willing to try again—not anything of that kidnapping business—that is no good—but——" Lagden hesitated. "Are you willing to do as I tell you, Len Valance, if I make it worth your while? Do so, and I will speak to my father, as you wish, and give you a twenty-pound-note over into the bargain."

Len's eyes glistened.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Colonel Hilton has asked Arthur Lovell to call upon him this evening at Lincroft, his house near Loamchester." Lagden's face turned pale as he spoke, and his eyes flamed. "When Lovell goes there he always goes the same way, walking through Lincroft Lane. If you know anything of this part of the country, you know that the lane is deserted after dark, and that at a certain spot it is so thickly shadowed by big trees, that it is impossible to see one's hand before one's face at night."

"I know the spot."

"We are playing Yorkshire next week," went on Lagden, in a low voice. "If—if Lovell were prevented from going with us when we went to meet Lord Hawke's team, I would do what I have just told you. What do you say?"

Len Valance had turned deathly pale.

"You—you don't mean that——" he stammered.

Lagden gave a short, contemptuous laugh.

"Of course not, you fool! I want him kept off the cricket field for a few weeks, that's all. What are you afraid of? A blow in the dark will be sufficient—you will know where to place it. He will not even see you; he will never know what struck him. What do you say?"

"I will do it."

"Good! Mind, I will keep my word! Only spoil Arthur Lovell's cricket for the season, and you may ask anything you like of me."

Len Valance nodded.

Lagden gave him a last look, and then, turning, strode away, and soon disappeared in the dusk. Len Valance left the spot more slowly.

Darkness descended upon the woods and fields of Loamshire. The black shadows of over-arching trees hid a desperate man who lurked in cover in Lincroft Lane, waiting for his destined victim to pass.

Len Valance was determined!

He waited, with white face, and burning eyes, and his heart beating like a hammer. His hand fastened in a convulsive grasp upon the loaded stick he carried.

Suddenly he started.

A sound came ringing along the lane—the sound of a man's swift, springy stride.

Footsteps!

Len Valance set his teeth, and gripped his stick tighter. His enemy was coming—the man he hated. He caught a dim glimpse of a sturdy form in the last patch of starlight on the road, and then the new-comer came on into the blackness under the arching trees, which met above the lane, and shut out every gleam of the stars.

Nearer and nearer!

And Len Valance, drawing a sharp, quick breath, ran forward. The loaded stick circled in the air, and descended. There was a sharp exclamation, broken short by the crash of the blow upon a defenceless head. A groan, a heavy fall. Len Valance stood still for a moment, trembling in every limb. His victim did not stir.

There was a sound of footsteps in the lane—fresh footsteps! Someone was coming. With a gasp of terror, Len Valance took to his heels, and dashed away at a frantic speed into the night.

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## CHAPTER 22.

### Struck Down!

**B**UT it was not Arthur Lovell who had fallen under that cowardly blow!

Len Valance had taken it for granted that the shadowy figure, dimly seen under the trees overhanging the lane, was that of the young Loamshire cricketer. He had been wrought up to a pitch of mingled excitement and terror as he waited there in the darkness for Arthur Lovell to pass, and he had acted swiftly, without stopping to think.

As he fled into the night at the sound of approaching footsteps, he did not doubt that it was Arthur Lovell who lay there senseless under the trees. But he was mistaken.

The footsteps came rapidly nearer. A figure, running swiftly, came upon the scene only a few seconds after Len Valance had disappeared.

The new-comer stumbled over the prostrate form on the ground, and almost fell. He recovered himself quickly, and stopped, bending over the fallen man.

“What has happened? Are you hurt?”

Had Len Valance been still within hearing the sound of that voice would have stricken him with amazement and dismay. For it was the voice of Arthur Lovell!

Arthur had been striding along the lane towards the colonel's house, thinking of anything but danger, when he heard the groan of the stricken man, followed by a heavy fall, from the darkness ahead of him.

Without a moment's hesitation the young cricketer had dashed forward to see what was the matter.

Len Valance had fled, little dreaming of the true state of affairs. Arthur knelt beside the prostrate form.

"Are you hurt?"

A low, faint moan was the only response.

Arthur gave a quick glance round. It was easy to guess that the man had been struck down by some scoundrel lurking in the shadows of the trees, and it was possible that the latter was still at hand. But the young cricketer soon saw that his arrival on the scene had scared away the ruffian.

He lifted the dim form in his strong arms, and carried it out of the shadow of the trees into the open lane, where the starlight glimmered down. His intention was to render what assistance he could, and he did not suspect yet that the injured man was known to him.

But as he set him down upon the grassy bank beside the lane, in the light of the stars, and glanced at the pale, set face, an exclamation of astonishment left the young cricketer's lips:

"Blane!"

The injured man was Blane, the Loamshire county captain.

It did not take Arthur many seconds to decide what to do. He raised the insensible man from the grassy bank, and hoisted him upon his shoulder. Blane was a bulky man, of more than average weight; but Lovell shouldered the burden steadily, and set off through the dark lane towards the colonel's house.

He kept a wary eye about him as he strode on. But it was needless, for the man who had struck the blow was far away. Lovell breathed hard under the heavy strain, but he bore it pluckily.

He came in sight of the gate of Lincroft, and caught a tiny red glow in the gloom. It came from the end of a cigar which Colonel Hilton was smoking. He was waiting there for his nephew.

"Hallo, what is that, Lovell?" ejaculated the colonel, in astonishment.

"What has happened?"

"It is Blane, sir!"

"Blane? My nephew? Is he injured?"

"I found him in the lane, sir. Some scoundrel had struck him down. The wretch intended robbery, I suppose, but my coming frightened him away. I'm afraid he is badly hurt."

The colonel threw away his cigar. The old soldier was a man of action, and, without wasting time in words, he helped Lovell carry poor Blane into the house.

In a very few minutes the Loamshire captain, still insensible, was in bed, and the colonel had telephoned for a doctor.

They waited anxiously for the arrival of the doctor. It was not long before wheels were heard on the drive, and the physician was shown up to the room where Blane lay white and unconscious. He shook his head seriously as he looked at the injured man. The colonel tugged at his moustache.

"Dr. Lathom, is it serious?"

"Very serious," said the doctor briefly. "The poor fellow has received a terrible blow from a loaded stick, I should imagine. He may not recover consciousness for days, and when he does——" The doctor paused.

"And when he does?" repeated the colonel anxiously. "Come, you may speak out to me!"

"I cannot speak with certainty at present, but I fear concussion," said Dr. Lathom simply. "We can only hope for the best."

The colonel breathed hard. This was a heavy blow to him, for he was greatly attached to the sturdy, true-hearted captain of the Loamshire team. He did not as yet think of other things—of Loamshire's prospects now that her captain was disabled by this cruel attack. Yet on Monday the county

was to face one of the hardest struggles of the cricket season—the match with Yorkshire.

Arthur Lovell left Lincroft as soon as he had heard the doctor's verdict. He went away with a heavy heart. Like the colonel, he was as yet thinking only of poor Blane, and not of the consequences that would follow his disablement.

Kit Valance had heard the news when Arthur Lovell rejoined him late in the evening. The young bowler was as concerned as Arthur. But the former groundsman of the Loamshire County Club had never been on terms of personal friendship with Blane, as Arthur had been in the old palmy days before his fall in fortune, and so his concern was not wholly for Blane. He looked ahead, too.

"This will be bad for Loamshire, sir," the young bowler remarked thoughtfully. "We can't spare Blane just now. It seems to be pretty certain that he will not play again for a long time."

"Perhaps not for the rest of the season, poor chap!" said Arthur sadly. "Anyway, certainly not for some weeks to come."

"Then Loamshire will want a new captain."

Arthur Lovell started.

"I hadn't thought of that, Kit."

"We shall have to think of that, sir. You know who is likely to become captain in the place of poor Blane!"

And again Arthur Lovell started.

"Ponsonby!"

"Yes. Ponsonby—the man whom, next to Geoffrey Lagden, you and I pull the worst with, sir, in all the Loamshire Club."

If Ponsonby became captain of the team the prospect was not a bright one for either Arthur Lovell or Kit Valance.

"He may not become skipper, Kit," Arthur said, after a long pause.

Kit shook his head.

"He very nearly got the position before, sir, but the colonel's influence with the committee decided it in favour of Blane. Now Blane is laid up, it's a thousand to one that Ponsonby takes his place. He has powerful backing, and it isn't as if he wasn't fit for the post, in one way. He's a good cricketer, and ought to make a fairly good captain—if he doesn't let private feelings interfere with the game."

"Which is just what he is certain to do, Kit."

"I believe so. There's no disguising the fact that he sticks to Geoffrey Lagden through thick and thin, and Lagden hardly makes a secret of his intention to make things too hot for us in the Loamshire Club."

A hard look came over Arthur Lovell's handsome face.

"I believe you are right, Kit. We have got to look out for squalls."

Kit nodded.

"We can only do our duty, sir, and play a straight game, and trust to fortune. But this bad luck of poor Blane's is the worst thing that could have happened for us, as well as for him."

Kit Valance was right. When the Loamshire men went northward to meet the White Roses, Blane was lying in a darkened room at Lincroft, helpless to leave his bed; and the colonel, who was too anxious about his nephew to accompany the team to Yorkshire, also remained in Loamchester. A new captain led the cricketers of Loamshire, and the new captain was Ponsonby.

Geoffrey Lagden had felt a pang of remorse when he learned that his



treacherous plan had miscarried, and that the Loamshire captain had fallen under the attack intended for Arthur Lovell; but that had soon passed.

He had never liked Blane. He had always had an uneasy feeling that the big, hearty Loamshire skipper saw right through him, and knew the smallness and meanness of his nature. And Blane had always stood by Arthur Lovell, and refused to hear a word said against him.

Many a sneering or cavilling remark had been silenced by a single glance from Blane's honest, scornful eyes, and the skipper had a way of speaking his mind which had often made Lagden and his cronies uncomfortable.

But Lagden was not thinking of that now, on the sunny Monday morning when the teams turned out on the Bradford ground. This fixture with Loamshire was to be played at Bradford, where a good many of the Yorkshire county matches take place.

The morning was fine, but there was a hint of rain in the west. For the present, however, the ground was in excellent condition, and the stumps were pitched at the usual hour.

Of the wonderful game which followed there is, unfortunately, no space in which to describe it. In spite of the new captain's efforts to play Kit and Lovell last, in order to show that the amateurs were capable of pulling off the match themselves, they had their opportunity given them. For on the second day the colonel arrived and insisted that they should be given a chance. Needless to say, they saved the game.

As a consequence to his action, Ponsonby is warned that the committee will require an explanation.

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## CHAPTER 23.

### Startling News!

**"KIT!"**

Kit Valance gave a start, and looked up out of a brown study. It was the day after the Yorkshire match, and the Loamshire men were at home in their own quarters. Kit Valance had finished his practice for the day at the county ground. Loamshire's next first-class fixture was the match with the South Africans on the home ground, which was due to commence on Monday. The interval was to be a rest, save for practice, and some of the Loamshire men needed it.

Kit Valance was strolling along the shady green lanes from the county ground, when a man stepped from an opening in the hedge into the sunlight.

"Kit!"

It was Len Valance.

Kit looked at his twin brother with cold, hard eyes.

He had borne with Len Valance long and patiently, for the sake of their dead mother, but the villainous trick Len had played him at Taunton had hardened his heart against the reckless blackguard who had caused him so much trouble.

"What do you want?" he asked. "How dare you show your face here?"

Len shrugged his shoulders.

"Why shouldn't I? Don't rake up ancient history, Kit."

"You narrowly escaped imprisonment over that affair in Somersetshire. You ought to have gone to penal servitude. I don't know why I wanted to save you."

"I do, Kit," said the scapegrace coolly. "It's because you are a decent fellow, and I'm not. I'm a blackguard, and I know it. You won't throw me over."

Kit's face relaxed a little.

"Still, you ought not to have been seen about here," he said. "It may do me harm to be seen talking to you, and you know it. What do you want?"

"The old want," said Len, with a laugh.

"Money, I suppose?"

"Well, as you have just pocketed six quid over the match at Bradford, Xit, you might let me have a couple," said Len persuasively.

Kit silently handed him two sovereigns, a third part of his reward for the hard-fought match at Bradford, the earnings of three hard days.

The scapegrace slipped them carelessly into his pocket; it was "easy come, easy go" with him, and the money would probably be wasted the next day on some extravagance.

"You're a jolly good sort, Kit," said Len, "and I'm sorry for that business at Taunton. I was led into it by that brute Sharp. I've cut him now."

"I'm glad to hear that, at all events."

"I thought you would be," said Len confidentially. "But really, I haven't told you what I wanted to see you about to-day."

Kit did not speak, but looked at him inquiringly.

"You know I'm still with Mr. James Lagden in the City."

"Yes; I thought you would be sacked after that affair. I can't understand Mr. Lagden keeping you on," said Kit, with a puzzled look.

Len grinned.

"Influence, my boy—influence!"

"What do you mean? Whose influence?" asked Kit abruptly.

"Never mind that, Kit. Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," said Len Valance, with a wink. "I'm still with Mr. Lagden, and likely to remain there. He has done me the honour to make use of me in some delicate transactions—transactions which would hardly redound to his credit if they were exposed to the light of day. The excellent and respectable Mr. Lagden is a great deal like a whited sepulchre, Kit—nice to look at from a distance, but he won't bear a close inspection."

"I think that's very likely. He ruined Arthur Lovell's uncle, and reduced Lovell to poverty, and I believe there was foul play somewhere."

"That's just what I was going to speak about. Mr. Lagden thinks he has me under his thumb over that Taunton business, and—and one or two other things about which I need not go into details. For this reason he uses my wits when it suits him, under the impression that I shall never venture to betray him."

"What new rascality are you getting mixed up in, Len?"

"Bide a wee! Now, you know I'm a keen fellow, Kit, and there are few tricks I am not up to when I set my wits to work."

"Yes, you can do everything except run straight," said Kit bitterly.

"Exactly," said the scapegrace, with perfect coolness. "You have my character to a T. I've served Mr. Lagden, and at the same time kept my eyes open. And I have learned a little more about his affairs than he imagines. Among other matters, that affair of Arthur Lovell's uncle."

"What do you know about that?"

"I know that James Lagden swindled the man in the most barefaced way, and that it may still be possible to compel him to disgorge," said Len Valance.

Kit's eyes sparkled.

"Are you sure of that, Len?"

"Yes, quite sure, and that is why I am down here now, Kit. I want to

see Lovell about it." He grinned. "Lovell and I are not on good terms. When we met the other day we had some words—and that affair at Taunton rankles in his mind, I've no doubt."

"You are right," said Kit drily. "If it were not for my sake, Len, it would not be safe for you to get within arm's length of Lovell."

"Exactly. So I want you to act as peace-maker," said Len coolly. "I can help Lovell to see his uncle righted—if it is made worth my while!"

"But surely Lovell's uncle—the man who was swindled—is the right person to go to," exclaimed Kit.

The scapegrace shook his head.

"No, you are wrong there. I've made an inquiry or two. The old gentleman has been completely prostrated by the ruin of his fortunes, and he is in a very weak state of health. He is living at the seaside, and has to be taken great care of. He wouldn't be allowed to enter into any business, even if he wanted to. He's only a cipher now. It's with Lovell I must deal, if anybody."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Tell Lovell what I have told you—that I can help him to make James Lagden disgorge, and may be able to get his fortune back—and that I am willing to do it on conditions."

Kit's brow wrinkled in thought.

"Do you mean that you will have to act a spy upon Mr. Lagden—to watch him while pretending to serve his interests—and to betray him when the right time comes, Len?"

"What a beastly way of putting it," said Len, shrugging his shoulders; "but I suppose it comes to something like that."

"Then I'm pretty certain that Lovell will refuse."

"With a fortune at stake?"

"He would not act in an underhand manner with a dozen fortunes at stake."

"But surely one is justified in playing it a little low down on a trickster—fighting him with his own weapons?"

"Perhaps; but I don't know that Lovell will see it in that light. But I will tell him exactly what you say, Len, and leave it to him."

"That's right. If he will meet me and talk it over I've no doubt I shall be able to make him see reason," exclaimed Len. "And the sooner the better. Where is Lovell now?"

"On the cricket ground."

"Then why don't you see him at once, and ask him? Let me see him this evening, and have a chat over it, at all events," said Len eagerly.

Kit nodded.

"Very well. You know my lodgings; come there at nine o'clock. I'll speak to Lovell at once."

"Good!" said the scapegrace, with a smile of satisfaction.

And Kit Valance left him and walked back slowly to the county ground.

The young bowler's brow was very thoughtful. Len Valance's news was strange, and yet it was not surprising. Whether Lovell would consent to make use of the scapegrace was a question Kit could not answer.

If he did—and if the stolen fortune came back to its rightful owners—it would make a great difference to Arthur Lovell. Would it make any difference to their friendship?

Kit, of course, wished for the best for Arthur. Yet it would not be pleasant to have the bar of wealth thrust between him and his chum, the best friend he had on earth.

Things had gone smoothly for neither of them in the Loamshire County Cricket Club; but their friendship had compensated for all.

It would be a blow to the young bowler if it ended—if the difference in their positions made it impossible for it to continue.

But he drove the thought resolutely from his mind.

After all, circumstances might change, but Arthur Lovell's true heart would never change—his friendship was a friendship till death.

Kit entered the cricket ground. Some of the members were still at practice, others were standing about chatting. Among these latter there seemed to be a topic of unusual interest under discussion.

Kit thought he guessed what it was. Ponsonby had had a scene with the county committee, and though no one outside that sacred circle knew exactly what had transpired, it was known that he had resigned the captaincy of the Loamshire team, and it was an open secret that he had resigned under pressure.

Kit guessed that the new captain had now been decided upon, and that this was the extremely interesting topic now under discussion.

He wondered who it was, and as he came up towards the pavilion he caught a few words from a couple of talkers that increased his interest in the question.

"It can't be!"

"Well, I heard it from Lagden."

"I won't believe it."

Kit passed on, puzzled and wondering. Geoffrey Lagden was standing in the enclosure, talking to Tunstall and Chichester.

There was a bitter, savage sneer on Lagden's face. He did not observe Kit Valance.

"Yes," he said; "and what do you think of it?"

"Think of it!" said Tunstall hotly. "Oh, it's too rotten for words! A professional captain the Loamshires! My word!"

"Yes," said Lagden bitterly; "we're going to face the South Africans under the captaincy of a paid player—for the first time, I imagine, in county cricket history. Arthur Lovell is to be the new captain of Loamshire!"

Kit caught the words and started.

Could it be true?

Arthur Lovell the new captain of Loamshire! Could it be true?

Yes! It was true enough. Lovell had been given the captaincy of Loamshire. And to say that the news caused a sensation would be to put it mildly. Loamshire was to be captained by a professional for the first time in its history.

But Lovell was not to enjoy captaincy for long. At first he refused the position, but the colonel overruled his objection. But Lagden had his own ideas on the matter.

Lovell should not play, that he should see to. It did not take him long to ferret out Len Valance, and then the two got their heads together in the hatching of as nice a little plot as they were capable of.

And it succeeded. Lovell was found early the next morning at the foot of a deep pit, with a badly twisted foot. His explanation was that he had been walking along the edge the night previous, and had suddenly received a push from behind. Over he had gone, and it was only by a miracle that he had not been killed.

That put Lovell out of the running for over a month.

## CHAPTER 24.

## An Angry Blow!

**I**N many respects, however, the illness of Lovell had not "panned out" for Lagden in the way he had hoped and expected.

Ponsonby retained for the present the captaincy of Loamshire, having apparently turned over a new leaf, and acquitted himself to Colonel Hilton's satisfaction in his treatment of the professionals.

The fact, in truth, was, that although he was a very good and sometimes even brilliant bat, he would never be a great master, and he had not in his composition the makings of a Jessop, a Fry, or a Hayward.

This fact he was very slow to realise.

He hated and affected to despise the young professional batsman who had done so much for Loamshire, and was obstinately convinced that, given a fair chance, he could outshine Lovell in his own line.

He had been given a chance, for a better chance than Lovell's absence gave him he could not have desired.

And he had not succeeded.

He had done well, very well, but there was nothing that could be called uniformly brilliant in his batting, and he knew that no one considered that he filled Lovell's empty place.

It was very bitter to Geoffrey Lagden to realise that, given every possible chance, he could not come up to the form of his rival, and his hatred of Arthur Lovell deepened and intensified in these days in consequence.

When Lovell began to be seen about the Loamshire pavilion again, he carefully avoided Geoffrey Lagden.

He had made up his mind to say nothing of the true story of the "accident" in the chalk pit, but he felt that it would be difficult for him to meet the cowardly schemer without giving some expression, either in word or look, to the scorn and contempt he felt.

A quarrel with Lagden would serve no useful purpose, yet it was not easy to keep on civil terms with a man who had planned a cowardly injury to him, and caused his disappearance from first-class cricket for a considerable portion of the season.

The next match on the Loamshire ground was with the Marylebone Cricket Club—the famous M.C.C.—monarchs of the cricket world.

The M.C.C. eleven was a very strong one, with some of the finest county players of England in it, and from the first it was seen that Loamshire had little chance.

Loamshire batted first, and were all down for 60 runs, Geoffrey Lagden's share being a big round 0.

The M.C.C., in their first innings, knocked up 250.

When Loamshire batted again, the wickets went down at a rapid rate before the bowlers from Lord's.

Before the innings was half through it was certain that the M.C.C. would not have to bat again.

Loamshire were seven down for 40 when Geoffrey Lagden was clean bowled for 0, and thus achieved the distinction of the dread "pair of spectacles"—a 0 in each innings.

Lagden strode from the wicket in a savage temper, and flung his bat down in the pavilion.

"Thank goodness Lovell will be batting in our next match, with Sussex," Colonel Hilton remarked to Molly, who was with him watching the match. "Loamshire has very seldom made a poorer show than this. I am half sorry that I did not risk playing Lovell after all. Our batting seems to have gone all to pieces before the M.C.C. bowling."

Lagden heard the remark, and he ground his teeth.

Arthur Lovell—always Arthur Lovell!

He strode from the pavilion with a savage anger in his breast, and a savage gleam in his eyes.

In the next Loamshire match Arthur Lovell was to bat, and Lagden's last chance of earning distinction in the absence of his rival had failed him, resulting in the worst score he had yet made in first-class cricket—the pair of spectacles.

Next week Lovell was playing, and his name would be on every tongue, and success would once more follow the colours of Loamshire.

Lagden ground his teeth at the thought.

As ill-luck would have it, he came upon Lovell as he left the pavilion. Lovell averted his look, and would have passed him without a word. But Lagden was in too bitter a mood to let him pass thus.

"So you are coming back into the team next week?" he said, in a sneering tone.

"Yes," said Arthur quietly.

"How much has Sharp, the bookmaker, paid you for malingering all this while, and standing out of the matches?" asked Lagden pointedly.

Arthur's face went scarlet.

This deliberate insult, from the man who had caused his injury, was too much for the most patient temper to endure.

"You—you cad!" broke out Arthur. "You dare to say that—you, who plotted with a cowardly ruffian to injure me by treachery? You coward!"

Lagden started, and turned deadly pale. He had known that someone had overheard his talk with Len Valance and the plot against Arthur, but as nothing had been said for so long, he had not dreamed that the knowledge had come to Arthur Lovell's ears.

"What do you say?" he cried.

"I say that you plotted with Len Valance to injure me and keep me out of the team, you coward!" cried Arthur, with flashing eyes.

"You lie!"

Lagden hurled the words at Lovell; but he had gone too far. Arthur's clenched fist shot out like lightning, and Geoffrey Lagden went flying. He went to the ground with a crash, and at the same moment Colonel Hilton came out of the pavilion.

"Lovell!" he said sternly.

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## CHAPTER 25.

### To Leave Loamshire.

"LOVELL!"

Colonel Hilton rapped out the word in angry amazement.

He could scarcely believe his eyes.

Geoffrey Lagden was sprawling on the turf, and Arthur Lovell stood over him with flashing eyes and clenched fists.

"Lovell!?"

Arthur Lovell did not answer; he did not look at the colonel; did not even hear him at that moment. His eyes were fixed upon his traducer, whom his angry blow had stretched on the ground at his feet.

"Get up!" Lovell's voice was sharp and savage. "Get up, Geoffrey Lagden! You have been trying to drive me to this for a long time, and now that you have succeeded, you had better stick it out. Get up, unless you are a coward as well as a liar and a slanderer!"

Lagden staggered to his feet.

His face was white with rage, and although at a cooler moment he would

not have cared to come to blows with Arthur Lovell, he had forgotten all prudence now.

He sprang savagely towards the young cricketer.

"Stop!"

Colonel Hilton fairly shouted out the words as he sprang between them, and forced them apart. Bitter as the anger was on both sides, they obeyed him.

Lagden's eyes were burning.

"You saw what he did," he said thickly. "That paid player—that rank outsider has struck me!"

"I saw it. Stand back!"

"I am not——"

"Stand back!"

Geoffrey Lagden clicked his teeth, but he obeyed.

Colonel Hilton faced Arthur, with frowning brows.

"What have you to say, Lovell?"

Arthur's eyes met his.

The young cricketer was somewhat pale now, as the flush of anger died out of his face. He realised his position, but he was calm and cool.

"Nothing, sir."

His voice did not falter.

The colonel's frown grew darker.

"You have nothing to say in defence of your outrageous action, Lovell?"

"Geoffrey Lagden could tell you what called forth that blow," said Arthur Lovell. "If he does not choose to do so, I shall not."

Colonel Hilton looked at Lagden.

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"I have nothing to say."

"Very well," said Colonel Hilton, gritting his teeth. "You refuse to explain, Lovell?"

"What is the use?" said Lovell wearily. "It's only the same tale over again. Geoffrey Lagden will probably deny using the words he used. What is the use of talking? He has tried to drive me to this ever since I have played for the Loamshire Club as a professional. He and his friends have hardly made any secret of their intention to make the club too hot to hold me."

"Is there any truth in that, Lagden?"

"None," said Lagden, with cool effrontery. "We have made no secret of our dislike, some of us, of a paid player who swaggers about as if he were monarch of all he surveys. Some of us don't like him in the club. That's all."

"That's a lie!" said Arthur Lovell, with quiet scorn. "But a lie comes very cheaply to Geoffrey Lagden. Ever since I have played as a professional in the Loamshire ranks, he has been against me, and has stirred up strife. My captaincy of the team might have been a success but for him. He has sought time and again to drive me into some action which would make it impossible for me to continue to play for Loamshire. He has succeeded. I am ready to leave the club."

The colonel made an effort to be pacific.

"I cannot believe that you seriously mean what you say, Lovell. Let this matter end here; it has gone far enough. You have struck Lagden. If you care to apologise to him for the blow, he will say no more about it, I am sure."

Lagden smiled vindictively.

"Certainly, sir."



To humble Arthur Lovell in such a way would have been a greater gratification to Lagden than to drive him from the club.

"You hear, Lovell?" said the colonel. "Lagden is willing to look over the matter. What do you say?"

"That I do not owe Lagden an apology, and certainly will not make him one," said Arthur quietly.

The colonel's eyes gleamed.

"You understand what you are saying?"

"I understand that I must either apologise to Lagden or leave the club."

"That is the case."

"Well, I refuse to apologise."

"You are your own master," said the colonel. And he turned upon his heel.

Arthur Lovell slowly turned and left the spot.

He had no regrets for his decision. He had endured too many humiliations already; this last one he had been right to refuse.

But to leave the Loamshire Club!

That was bitter.

He had stood so much for the sake of the county; and now, if he remained a cricketer, he had no prospect but to play for some rival club.

It was a blow to him in other ways.

For a residence of two years was required to qualify for another county, and during that time he would have to seek employment as a groundsman for his future club, as he had no other prospect of support.

The name of Arthur Lovell, for a time at least, would disappear from first-class cricket!

For a long time Arthur Lovell had "faced the music" pluckily, determined that he would keep his end up in despite of the repeated blows fickle Fortune had dealt him. But now it seemed at last as if he had reached the end of his tether.

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## CHAPTER 26.

### Molly Hilton Steps In.

**C**OLONEL HILTON was silent and gloomy as he drove home from the cricket ground to Lincroft. His interview with Arthur Lovell, and the young cricketer's decision, worried him, for he knew that without Arthur Lovell Loamshire's chance was gone.

But he was not in the least inclined to recede from the position he had taken up.

The cause of the dispute between Lovell and Geoffrey Lagden he did not know, but he set it down to an ebullition of bitterness, the outcome of the friction that had long existed between amateur and professional.

Arthur Lovell must either apologise or leave the club!

Upon that point the colonel was determined, but he still had a faint hope that Lovell would see what was best for himself, and tender the required apology.

It was a faint hope; but the colonel nourished it, not caring to consider the county's prospects with her best bat gone for ever.

The result of the M.C.C. match had not cheered the old cricketer, either.

Loamshire had been hopelessly and thoroughly beaten by the M.C.C., who had an innings and a heap of runs to spare at the finish.

The "pair of spectacles" achieved by Lagden had contributed very materially to that undesired result.

The M.C.C. team had been a pretty strong one, but not so strong as

some that the Loamshire men had to meet before the season was over, and that crushing defeat seemed like a foretaste of the wrath to come.

Molly glanced at her father several times during the drive to Lincroft, without speaking, wondering whether it was only the defeat at the hands of the men from Marylebone that brought the dark shade to his brow.

He caught her glance presently.

"It is bad luck for Loamshire, Molly," he said, guessing her thoughts. "Lovell is going to leave us, I'm afraid."

The girl started.

"Mr. Lovell leave us?"

"Yes; I fear so."

"But why, dad? You mustn't let him go!" exclaimed Molly. "I remember what you said at the beginning of the season, when Mr. Lovell's uncle was ruined, and he left the club. You said we should finish up almost as badly this season as last if Mr. Lovell did not return."

"I know I did, Molly."

"And when he came back, to play as a professional instead of an amateur——"

"I thought we were in luck, my dear," said the colonel, with a faint smile. "But there has been friction ever since—more of it than I suspected at the time. Some of them say that Lovell cannot forget that he was once an amateur in the team, and that he puts on airs unsuitable to a paid professional——"

"That is not true, dad."

"They are saying so, and it has come to my ears. Personally, I never saw anything in Lovell's conduct to complain of in the least," confessed the colonel. "His idea is that the amateurs have made a dead-set against him—and it's no good denying that there's a strong snobbish element in the club, Molly. That's why we finished nearly at the bottom of the table last season."

"But why is Mr. Lovell going? I heard a rumour before we left the ground about a quarrel outside the pavilion——"

"It was a quarrel between Lovell and Lagden, and Lovell struck him."

"He must have been very much provoked."

The colonel smiled.

Like a true woman, Molly Hilton could see no wrong in the man who was a hero in her eyes.

"Unfortunately, it is difficult to get at the exact rights of the matter, Molly," he replied. "But Lovell has the choice of apologising to Lagden or leaving the club. I hope that he will elect to apologise, but I have my doubts."

"But if he leaves——"

"It will be bad for Loamshire. But discipline must be maintained," said the old soldier. "I cannot alter my decision. Lovell must give in or go!"

The arrival of the carriage at Lincroft put an end to the conversation, but the matter did not leave Molly Hilton's mind.

The girl was deeply concerned by what her father had told her.

In the old days, before misfortune and poverty fell upon Arthur Lovell—through no fault of his own—Molly had learned to care for the handsome young cricketer, and his fall from his previous station had made no difference to her.

She seldom saw him now, save on the cricket-ground, for there could be little in common between the professional cricketer and the daughter of a county magnate. But the old regard remained in her heart unchanged.

But it was not merely her regard for Arthur Lovell that prompted her now. The girl took as deep an interest in Loamshire's cricket success as the colonel himself, and the thought of Lovell being lost to the county dismayed her.

To seek Lovell out was impossible, though she longed to speak to him and urge him to stand by his county in the time of need. The secret of her heart—which had been hardly a secret in the days when it had seemed possible for her to give her hand to Arthur Lovell—stood between them now. She cared for Lovell, and she believed that, although no word had passed his lips since his fall from fortune, he cared for her. And so she shrank from asking him to see her.

But there was Kit Valance.

Molly had always liked and respected the young bowler, and she had a regard for him as Arthur's chum. With him, at least, she could speak freely, and discover if there was any way of changing Arthur's decision, or of making the colonel aware that the required apology was not called for. For Molly was convinced that Lagden had been flagrantly in the wrong, though Lovell had been too proud to explain.

The result of the girl's reflections was a little note that Kit Valance received. The young bowler read it, and wondered; but he lost no time in doing what he was asked to do. In the summer morning, before the time for appearing on the Loamchester ground, the young cricketer entered Lincroft Park, and stopped on the bridge that spanned the little stream meandering among the old trees.

Kit raised his cap as the graceful form of Molly Hilton came from the trees, and joined him. The girl nodded cordially.

"You had my note, Mr. Valance? Or, rather, I need not ask, since you are here."

Kit bowed.

"Yes, Miss Hilton. How can I serve you?"

"You know what happened yesterday on the cricket ground," said Molly Hilton, plunging into the subject at once. "Mr. Lovell has no doubt told you?"

"Yes; he told me all about it," said Kit wonderingly. "Is that what you wish to speak to me about, Miss Hilton?"

"Yes. My father has decided that Arthur Lovell must either apologise to Mr. Lagden or leave the club, and he has resolved to leave."

"That is correct."

Molly coloured a little.

"Loamshire cannot spare him, Mr. Valance," she said. "He must not leave us like this! I am certain that, if the facts were known, Mr. Lovell would be proved to be in the right, and Colonel Hilton would change his decision. Will you help me to bring the truth to light?"

Kit understood.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Lovell's decision is a blow to me, and I have urged him to tell the colonel the whole truth, but his pride has been bitterly wounded, and he will not say a word. I was already thinking of approaching the colonel on the matter."

"And the truth—what is that?"

"Geoffrey Lagden and—and another caused the accident to Lovell at Tonbridge, which laid him up for so long. It was done deliberately to keep him out of Loamshire cricket."

Molly drew a deep, quivering breath.

"Can that be true?"

"I could prove it! I knew it all along; and Lovell, for my sake, was silent, too.

"You will understand when I tell you that Geoffrey Lagden's confederate was my brother, Len Valance."

Kit spoke quietly, but his face was very pale. A look of quick sympathy flashed into the girl's face. She knew that it must have cost him much to tell her this.

"I—I am sorry, Mr. Valance."

"It is not the first time he has brought shame upon me," said Kit quietly. "It is nothing! But that was not all. Yesterday Lagden, not knowing that Lovell was aware of his villainy, taunted him with malingering—with pretending to be ill for the sake of not playing for the county, and with being bribed by a bookmaker to do it."

The girl flushed hotly.

"No wonder Mr. Lovell struck him down!" she exclaimed. "He would have been less, or more, than a man had he not done so."

There was a short silence.

"Can this be proved?" asked the girl at last.

"Lagden would deny everything, of course," replied Kit. "I suppose it could be proved if my brother were arrested and charged."

"That must not be."

"I would rather Len came to his deserts at last, than that Arthur Lovell left Loamshire," said Kit quickly. "I have told him so."

"But there may be another way."

"I cannot think of one."

"I will see Mr. Lagden," said the girl firmly. "I will tell him how much is known, and tell him that it shall be made public if Arthur Lovell leaves Loamshire."

Kit smiled.

"I did not think of that. It is quite possible that you will succeed, Miss Hilton."

"I think I shall."

She gave Kit her hand, and left him. The young bowler turned and walked away in the direction of the Loamshire ground, with many thoughts in his mind.

Little as Molly dreamed it, Kit guessed her secret—that she was as much concerned for Lovell the man as for Lovell the cricketer. He knew that she loved his chum, and that Fortune had made it impossible for them to meet, except as mere acquaintances.

And a new idea came into Kit's mind.

He remembered the declaration of his brother, who was in Mr. James Lagden's employment in the City, that he could find proof that James Lagden had swindled Arthur's uncle—that he could prove that James Lagden was a rogue, and force him to restore fifty thousand pounds to the man he had robbed.

Lovell had refused to have a hand in the matter; the methods Len had proposed had revolted him, and it was his refusal as much as anything else that had exasperated Len, and made him the willing tool of Geoffrey Lagden.

Yet, if the truth were made known, and restitution compelled, then the bar between Arthur Lovell and the girl he loved would disappear, and two lives would be made happy.

Kit would lose his chum to some extent, but he knew that, rich or poor, Arthur Lovell would never change in his true friendship. And if he played again for Loamshire as an amateur, and probably as county

captain, Kit would still be his chum. But even if Kit lost him to some extent, surely he could not allow selfish considerations to stand in the way of helping his friend.

The young bowler turned the matter over in his mind very carefully. The result was a letter to Len Valance, which the scapegrace received with great satisfaction.

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CHAPTER 27.

Molly Hilton Threatens Lagden.

GEOFFREY LAGDEN entered the drawing-room at Lincroft with a beating heart.

Molly Hilton, in a brief note, had asked him to call. Why, he could not guess; but he allowed his imagination to run riot.

Did this mean that the girl's long and unrelaxing coldness towards him was to end at last, that she had at last forgotten Arthur Lovell, and was willing to smile upon his rival? It was hardly likely, but Lagden allowed himself to picture it. He cared as much for Molly Hilton as his hard, cold nature was capable of caring for anyone, and he would have dearly liked to cut Arthur out in this direction, even if he could not oust him from his position as champion cricketer of Loamshire.

He waited, after he was shown in, impatiently for Molly to appear. She did not keep him waiting many minutes.

Lagden started forward eagerly as the girl swept into the room.

But a single glance at her face was sufficient to show him that his hopes were groundless, and that he had nothing in the shape of kind words to expect from Molly Hilton.

Her face was hard and cold, and there was a metallic light in her eyes. Never had Lagden seen her look so cold and scornful.

"You asked me to call, Miss Hilton?" he said awkwardly.

"Yes," said Molly, looking him straight in the eyes; "I asked you to call, Mr. Lagden, because my father is not here this morning, and I wished to speak to you upon an important matter."

He wondered what was coming.

"I am listening, Miss Hilton."

"Owing to a dispute between you, Mr. Lovell is leaving the Loamshire County Club?"

He nodded.

"He must not go, Mr. Lagden."

"Indeed! I should hardly have thought that you would be so keenly interested in the affairs of a paid player," said Lagden, with a sneer he could not conceal.

Molly coloured.

"I am Mr. Lovell's friend, but I am not speaking because of that," she said. "I speak because Loamshire cannot afford to lose Mr. Lovell, especially at this time."

He gave an incredulous smile.

"But I shall not discuss this with you," said Molly haughtily. "My motives are nothing to you. Mr. Lovell is not to leave Loamshire through your act."

"He will leave through his own act."

"Nothing of the kind! I have learned all, Mr. Lagden, and I know that you deliberately provoked him."

Lagden shrugged his shoulders.

"I have learned all," repeated the girl, with marked emphasis—"all that happened at Tonbridge. Kit Valance has told me all—of your plot with his brother, whom he is willing to send to his deserts rather than permit Arthur Lovell to be turned out of the Loamshire Club."

Lagden started violently.

"I—I do not understand."

"You know that you plotted against Mr. Lovell!" the girl said scornfully. "You know that if the truth were made known you would be compelled to resign from the Loamshire Club."

"But I—I——"

"You can take your choice. It is to tell you so that I have sent for you. Make it possible for Arthur Lovell to remain in the club, without the humiliation you have exacted of him, and I will say nothing. But if Arthur Lovell goes, you go, too, Mr. Lagden!"

"I hardly thought Lovell would tell you——"

She cut him short without ceremony.

"Mr. Lovell has told me nothing. What I know I have learned from his friend, Kit Valance. I do not desire to talk further with you, Mr. Lagden. I never desire to see you again! If you do not promise to make amends to Arthur Lovell, I shall tell Colonel Hilton the whole story as soon as he returns."

"Lovell is fortunate in his champion," sneered Lagden. "Perhaps the colonel would not be exactly pleased by the deep interest you take in this outsider."

"That is no business of yours! Have you decided?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Mind, there must be no double-dealing!" said Molly icily. "Mr. Lovell remains in the club, or else you are exposed as you really are to all Loamshire."

He passed from the room.

A scornful smile was upon Molly's face as she watched him go. Never had Geoffrey Lagden looked smaller or meaner in a woman's eyes than he did at that moment.

As chance would have it, he met Colonel Hilton walking up the drive. The colonel stopped. Lagden endeavoured to conceal his chagrin from the old cricketer's eyes.

"I wanted to see you, sir, to speak to you about that matter with Lovell," he said, with an affectation of great frankness. "I don't want you to be too hard upon Lovell."

Colonel Hilton stared.

This was an entirely new line for Geoffrey Lagden to take.

"I don't quite understand you, Lagden."

"What I mean is, that there are faults on both sides, sir, and that I spoke hastily, and so there is some excuse for Lovell," said Lagden. "I don't want to exact an apology. Better let the matter rest where it is, I think."

"But——"

"We are playing Sussex immediately, sir, and we want Lovell," said Lagden. "We don't want him to go for a hasty word! He thinks that all the amateurs in the team are against him. Perhaps my forbearance in this instance will have a good effect upon him. Anyway, I'd much rather the affair didn't go any further."

"This is very decent and generous of you, Lagden," said the colonel, shaking the young man warmly by the hand, his whole manner showing how relieved he was. "I didn't want to part with Lovell, of course, but

I could not give in. This alters the case entirely. I am very glad you have spoken out in this way—very glad, indeed!”

And the colonel walked on, his face considerably brighter than it had been before he met Lagden in the drive. Colonel Hilton lost no time in letting Lovell know how matters stood. Lovell opened his letter in the presence of Kit Valance, and gave a whistle of surprise as he read it. Kit looked at him inquiringly.

“It’s from the colonel,” said Lovell. “Lagden forgoes the apology, and I am to stay in the team, and nothing more is to be said. I don’t understand it. That’s not like Lagden.”

Kit laughed.

“Perhaps I could explain,” he remarked.

“You!” ejaculated Arthur, in astonishment.

“Yes—I.”

And Kit explained about his meeting with Molly Hilton, and the step the girl had taken. Lovell listened with surprise at first, and then his face grew very tender.

“She is a noble girl,” he said. “The best, the truest a man could ever love, Kit. I had a chance once. I have lost it——”

“It may return,” said Kit quietly. “If justice is done, and James Lagden is compelled to disgorge his plunder, there will be another chance for you, Arthur.”

Lovell’s eyes sparkled for a moment; but then he shook his head sadly.

“I have very little hope of that, Kit; but I owe a lot to you, old fellow. I am glad—more glad than I can say—to remain with the Loamshire team. I shall be wanted in the Sussex match.”

“You will be wanted badly,” said Kit. “I am very glad he turned out so well.”

Arthur Lovell was quite in his old form when the Loamshire men set out for Brighton to meet C.B.’s gallant team. And it might have been noticed that there was something of a change in the manner of the Loamshire men towards Arthur. The change had come during his long illness.

While he was absent, his comrades had learned his value as they had never realised it before, and they knew how much his presence meant to the team. During the strife and stress of a hard cricket season, they had learned to rely upon Arthur Lovell, and there were few, amateur or professional, who were not glad that the dispute with Lagden had not ended in the dismissal of Loamshire’s best bat!

There is no space in which to describe that match at Brighton, but the result was a win for Loamshire, mainly due to Lovell.

It was indeed a splendid victory, and an earnest of more success to come. Loamshire, at last, were fairly embarked on the tide of victory—the tide that swept them towards the coveted goal—the County Championship!

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## CHAPTER 28.

### Black News!

**T**HERE was but one of the Loamshire cricketers who left the field in a black humour; it was Geoffrey Lagden. Favoured or unfavoured by the powers that were, his efforts to outshine Loamshire’s champion had always ended in the same way, and of late his luck had been worse than ever.

His attempts to discredit Arthur Lovell in the Loamshire Club, to drive



him from it, had seemed at one time likely to be crowned with success; but that time was now past.

Arthur Lovell was still a professional; he was still the "paid player" upon whom Lagden and his set had affected to look down. But his standing in the club was undergoing a change. His absence for a time from the side had shown his comrades, professional and amateur alike, how much he was worth to them.

His splendid success since rejoining Loamshire had done more. From the moment when he had been carried off the field by his comrades after a magnificent innings, he knew that there was a change, and Geoffrey knew it, too.

Fortescue, among the amateurs, had always stood up for Lovell. Others now seemed to have come round to Fortescue's way of thinking.

All this was gall and wormwood to Geoffrey Lagden. The influence was departing from his hands. The season was wearing on, and he had not made the name he had hoped to make in county cricket. He had not "played the game," and he had to pay the penalty of being unsportsmanlike; but the knowledge of that was no comfort to him.

"Geoffrey!"

He looked up, none too amiably, at the sound of his father's voice. He had just walked out of the pavilion on the Hove ground, his hands in his pockets and his brow moody. But as his eyes fell upon James Lagden's face his expression changed. Never had he seen the cold, self-contained banker look like that before.

James Lagden was pale as death; his lips seemed afflicted with a nervous twitching, and his eyes looked hollow and sleepless. More than one curious glance had been cast at the well-dressed banker on the cricket ground as his pale, trouble-stricken face was seen.

"Father, what is the matter?"

"Come with me, Geoffrey. I have something important to say to you. I want your help."

Wonderingly, the young man followed the banker. They left the county ground, and not till they were out of all possible danger of curious eyes did the banker stop.

"Father, what has happened?"

"Have you seen Len Valance?" asked Mr. Lagden, without replying to the question.

Lagden looked at him in amazement.

"No, dad, I don't know where he is, or where to find him," he replied. "I have communicated with him once or twice, but I wrote to your office in London. Has he left you?"

The banker nodded.

"He has left your employ?" asked Lagden, in astonishment. "But it is not very long since he asked my influence with you to save him from dismissal."

James Lagden gave a bitter laugh.

"He had his purposes to serve by staying with me, I suppose."

"What purposes?"

"He has left me, and he has taken with him a bundle of important documents."

"Ah, I see! He has robbed you?"

"The documents he has stolen are not securities; they have no intrinsic value. They are private papers—letters and records—dealing with the affairs of the company in which Arthur Lovell's uncle lost his fortune."

Geoffrey Lagden started.

"But—but what are these papers? What had you to do with old Mr. Lovell losing his fortune? Once or twice I have thought that—that——"

The banker gave a hard, mirthless laugh.

"That I helped him realise the loss? Well, you were right. I will be frank with you, Geoff, for in the pass things have come to only a desperate effort can save us, and we must work together. If justice were done"—the banker's voice sank low—"if justice were done, I should have to restore to Mr. Lovell fifty thousand pounds!"

Geoffrey turned pale.

"And that would mean——"

"Ruin!"

"Ruin?" Geoffrey was white to the lips. "Father—ruin?"

"Yes, ruin. And that is not the worst. If those documents are made public it means worse than ruin; it means disgrace—it means—prison!"

"Good heavens!"

"We must find Len Valance; we must induce him to give up the documents—buy them at any price, or take them by force—or we are ruined! That is what I have come to tell you, Geoffrey!"

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## CHAPTER 29.

### The Proofs!

"LEN!"

Kit Valance uttered the name sharply. The cricket comrades were staying at the house of a friend near Hove, and Kit Valance was coming up the lane, after leaving the county cricket ground, when he caught sight of his brother leaning on the gate and smoking a cigarette.

Len Valance nodded coolly to Kit. He was relieved to see that Arthur Lovell was not with the young bowler.

"You wrote to me asking me exactly what I could do in this affair of James Lagden and Lovell's uncle. I had already told you that I could lay my finger on proofs that James Lagden swindled old Mr. Lovell in the most barefaced manner. Lovell refused to have any dealings with me. Does your letter mean that he has changed his mind?"

Kit shook his head.

"I have not spoken to him about the matter. I wanted to see you first. He is staying to talk with Colonel Hilton, and I came on, as I thought you might be here."

Len Valance nodded with satisfaction.

"Good! I would rather not meet him just now. We can settle this between us. Shall we talk here, or shall I come into the house?"

"We can talk here very well."

Len laughed again.

"Very well. Since I saw you last I have kept my eyes open, though Lovell refused to employ my services. I had an idea of going to his uncle, who, after all, ought to be interested in the matter, even if he is in bad health. However, here we are. Now, you know, of course, that Mr. Lovell's money was invested in a concern in which James Lagden was also interested?"

"Yes, and he lost fifty thousand pounds in it."

"Exactly; every shilling of which went into James Lagden's pocket."

"Can you prove that?"

"Easily. There was a rascal named Isaacson who appeared to be prime mover in the affair, and who fled when the crash came, and was supposed to have made away with most of the money. As a matter of fact, this Isaacson

was only a tool of another—a sort of dummy, you know, behind whom the real scoundrel worked and carried out his schemes. Isaacson was never more than that. You can guess who the real rascal was.”

“James Lagden?”

“Just so.”

“But the proof?”

“The proof exists in black and white. Letters which passed between Isaacson and Lagden, and documents relating to the concern, containing particulars of its doings, and showing it to have been a rank swindle from end to end, and the work of James Lagden from start to finish—I can lay my finger on them when I choose.”

“What have you done?”

“The documents were kept in James Lagden’s private safe, to which no one but himself had the key.” The rascal grinned. “That baffled me for a time. He kept them. He never dreamed that they could ever see daylight, and they contained proofs of Isaacson’s guilt, in case that fellow should ever cut up rusty; but I fancy that when James Lagden discovers that they are gone he will wish that he had destroyed them.”

“Do you mean that you have taken them?”

“Yes.”

Kit drew a deep breath.

“And you have been through them. You are certain that they will prove what you say?”

“I know it. Once these papers are published to the world, James Lagden is a ruined and disgraced man.”

Len rolled the words over, as it were, on his tongue as if they had a relish for him. James Lagden was not a master to be loved, and he had been very hard with the scapegrace. It was Len’s turn now.

“He will have to disgorge the Lovell fortune,” he went on, “and if he can save himself from prison it will be by only one means—a bullet through his head.”

Kit shuddered.

“Are you speaking seriously, Len?”

“Quite. He would count my life no more than I count a gnat’s to secure his safety and the fortune he has stolen.”

“Then you had better take care, for he is down in Hove. I saw him on the county ground before I left, and I noticed he was looking very disturbed.”

“No wonder! Thanks for the warning. I shall take care. When shall I see you again, Kit?”

“I will write to you as soon as I have consulted with Lovell.”

“Very well. You know my address in Brighton. Ta-ta!”

The scapegrace lounged away up the lane, his cigarette glowing in the thickening dusk, and Kit Valance entered the garden gate and walked up the path, his brow very thoughtful.

Fortune and a restoration to his old position were in the hands of Arthur Lovell, if he chose to take them.

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## CHAPTER 30.

### Arthur Lovell to the Rescue.

**L**EN VALANCE strolled away through the thickening dusk. There was a keen satisfaction in the face of the scapegrace as he walked along with his hands in his pockets, puffing out little streams of blue smoke. That Kit would succeed with Lovell, he had now little doubt. The deed of

abstracting the documents being done, the only question was whether to make use of them; and surely Lovell would see reason upon that point.

A thousand pounds for himself, and the loss of fifty thousand for the man who had earned his hatred; that was an attractive prospect. A thousand pounds, probably, would not last the spendthrift long, but he did not think of that. The prospect of possessing such a sum, of the pleasure he could derive from it, made the future rosy to him.

From his rosy dreams he was suddenly recalled to real life in a startling manner. A dark figure leaped from the hedge and rushed upon him.

Len Valance started back, his cigarette dropping from his lips. But he could not escape. In a twinkling the dim form was upon him, and two sinewy, savage hands were clutching at his throat.

"Help!"

The word was choked back by that savage grip. He went down heavily into the road, his assailant upon him.

"Quick, pater!"

The voice was sharp and quick. Len Valance knew it at once.

"Geoffrey Lagden!"

He gasped out the name, struggling furiously. But a second figure—a more portly one—joined the first, and a second pair of hands grasped him. He was dragged from the road through the gap in the hedge.

"Across the field, pater! I'll see that he makes no noise."

Geoffrey Lagden's voice was hard and determined. He picked Len Valance up by the shoulders and took a grip on his collar, grinding his knuckles into the neck and half choking the unfortunate scapegrace.

James Lagden gripped his ankles, and between them they carried the prisoner away; where, and for what purpose, Len could only wildly guess.

He struggled desperately, but without avail.

Twenty yards from the lane they carried him, over rough ground, and then flung him down again—with Lagden's knee on his chest, Lagden's grip on his throat.

"Now, you hound, where are the papers?"

Len Valance could only gasp.

"Do you hear me, you cur? I was right in suspecting that you would go and see Kit Valance, and we have lain in wait for you a long time. Now we have laid you by the heels, you had better come to terms—sharp! We are not to be trifled with. Where are the papers?"

"Where you will never find them!" gasped Len.

"Have you given them to Kit Valance?"

"Find out!"

"Are they upon you?"

"No."

"We'll see! Search him, father, while I hold him! Attempt to cry out, Len Valance, and you are a dead man!"

"You—you dare not——"

"You shall see. Give me that cane, father! Do you see this, Len Valance? It is loaded with lead at the end, and a blow would brain an ox."

"You dare not——"

"You shall see. I offer you your life for those papers. Without them you are as helpless as an adder with his fang drawn. Retain them, my fine fellow, and you will not live to make use of them."

The loaded cane swung aloft.

"Geoffrey, stop——"

"Bah!"

Len Valance, frantic with terror, made a terrible effort. Geoffrey reeled

aside, and the descending blow struck only the earth. A ringing scream left the white lips of the scapegrace.

"Help! Help!"

He scrambled to his feet. The moon came out from behind a bank of clouds and glimmered on the field, on shadowy trees, and three dim figures. Geoffrey Lagden, with a curse, recovered himself, and sprang at the scapegrace.

"Help! Help!"

Wide rang the piercing cry. The loaded cane whizzed through the air. Len attempted to elude the blow, and he saved his head, but it took effect upon his shoulder, and he sank on his knees.

Again that frenzied cry:

"Help!"

With an imprecation, Lagden swung up the loaded cane. The banker stood trembling and terror-stricken.

"Help!"

A rapid footstep—a dim, running figure in the moonlight! The loaded cane was descending, but a fierce blow under the ear sent Geoffrey Lagden reeling, and the blow missed its mark. The cane crashed to the ground, and Lagden followed it there.

"You hound!"

It was Arthur Lovell. Len's cry for help had reached his ears as he strode along the lane to his quarters with Kit. Little dreaming who was in peril, and from whom, the cry had been enough for him, and he had rushed to the rescue.

Lagden, gritting his teeth, scrambled to his feet. He was mad with rage, and desperate now. But Arthur Lovell had quickly gripped the loaded cane.

"Stand back, you scoundrel!"

"Help!" shrieked Len. "Save me! They meant to murder me!"

"Len Valance!" Arthur Lovell uttered the name in amazement. "And—and Geoffrey Lagden! In the name of wonder, what does this mean?"

"They were going to murder me." Len was on his feet now, keeping close to the stalwart young cricketer. His shoulder was aching horribly, but his coolness was returning as he saw that the danger was past. "It's Geoffrey Lagden and his father—they were going to murder me."

Lagden gave a bitter laugh. The game was up now with a vengeance. His father was useless in a struggle, and he was no match for two—no match for Lovell singly, for that matter.

Without a word, with no sound but that bitter laugh, in which despair was blended with cynical mockery, he turned and strode away, and his father followed him. Arthur Lovell did not seek to prevent their going. He fixed his eyes upon Len Valance.

"Tell me what this means?"

Len panted.

"It means that I hold the documents to prove that James Lagden robbed your uncle. It means that, whether you like it or not, the truth will come out now, and justice will be done, and Geoffrey Lagden and his father are ruined." He laughed hoarsely. "That is what it means."

And then, as pain and exhaustion overcame him, he reeled, and would have fallen, but the strong arm of Arthur Lovell caught him, and held him firmly.

"Come with me!" said Lovell quietly.

## CHAPTER 31.

## Justice at Last!

**A**RTHUR LOVELL'S brow grew darker and darker. There was silence in the room, broken only by the faint rustle of the papers as the young cricketer turned them over.

It was the day after Loamshire's splendid victory over Sussex on the county ground at Hove. Len Valance, saved from his assailants by the young cricketer whom he had so often injured, had been brought to Lovell's quarters. The papers which the Lagdens—father and son—had in vain sought to recover were in Arthur Lovell's hands now.

Arthur had at first hesitated to receive the papers from him. He could not approve of the way they had been obtained, but Len's assertion that they contained clear proof of James Lagden's villainy weighed with him.

He thought of his uncle, spending his old days in obscure poverty by the act of Lagden. If it was possible to compel the rascally banker to disgorge, surely it was his duty to use every means in his power to that end.

He had decided, at all events, to read the papers. He sat on the table, examining them carefully one by one. Len lay back in a chair, his head bandaged, his face white, his eyes scintillating. Kit Valance sat waiting in silence till Arthur should be finished.

Arthur looked up at last with a sigh. It had not been a pleasant task. There was something strangely repellent in this record of trickery and dishonesty to the healthy, wholesome mind of the young cricketer.

Len Valance was watching him.

"What do you think, Lovell? Will you spare James Lagden?"

Lovell did not immediately reply.

"He ruined your uncle! He can be forced to restore fifty thousand pounds that he robbed him of. The man Isaacson would turn against him, and give evidence to save his own skin, if he had a chance. There is no difficulty now that you have the papers. James Lagden can be shown up to all the kingdom, and you can be rich again. You would be mad to hesitate."

Arthur Lovell nodded, still without speaking.

"If you do not act," said the scapegrace passionately, "I shall act without you! James Lagden and his son attempted my life! I am laid up now. Do you think I am going to bear that patiently? I have said nothing yet, but I tell you that before another hour has passed the police will be tracking them on my information. There is penal servitude waiting for both of them—and serve them right!"

And the eyes of the scapegrace gleamed vindictively. There was a knock at the door, and a card was brought in. Arthur Lovell started as he read the name of James Lagden. He had not imagined that the banker would have the audacity to come there, after the happenings of the previous night.

The banker was at the heels of the servant. He had not waited for permission to enter. His face, usually somewhat florid, was pale now, and almost haggard in expression. His eyes were sunken and restless, and showed plainly that he had not slept the previous night. He looked nervously at Arthur.

"Can I speak to you, Lovell? I—I——"

The banker's eyes wandered to the papers on the table, and he started. His hand involuntarily stretched out towards them, but he met Arthur's stern glance, and it dropped again.

Len Valance gave a mocking laugh.

"It is too late, Mr. Lagden! You played your last card, and lost, when you tried to murder me. The game is up."

The banker did not look at him.

"Silence, Len!" said Kit Valance.

The scapegrace shrugged his shoulders.

"I have come here to see you, Lovell," said the banker, fixing his eyes upon Arthur. "It is in your power to ruin me if you choose."

Lovell nodded.

"You have read the papers?"

"I have read them from beginning to end."

"I—I do not defend my conduct. Many things are done in the City that would not bear the light of day," he said haltingly. "I am no worse than others—only more unfortunate in having a spying scoundrel in my employ."

Len Valance laughed.

"Whom you tried to make a tool of to do your dirty work, and who was more than a match for you," he sneered, "and who is about to give information to the police for the issue of a warrant for your arrest on a charge of attempted murder."

The banker shuddered. At the same time a light of hope gleamed in his eyes.

"Then nothing has been made public so far?"

"Nothing, so far," said Lovell; "but you surely cannot expect us to keep silent? You have robbed my uncle of fifty thousand pounds, and you have attempted Len Valance's life. If you are given a chance to fly before arrest, you must consider yourself fortunate."

"Listen to me, for mercy's sake!" said the banker, in a low voice. "I admit everything. You do not wish to drive me to despair? I can and will restore to Mr. Lovell every shilling that is due to him, with full interest for the time that has elapsed since—since he lost his money. Can I say more than that?"

"That will be satisfactory so far as I am concerned," said Arthur slowly, "and I can answer for my uncle. But the attack on Len Valance is a different matter!"

"I will compensate him. I will do anything in reason. You must know, Lovell, that that was not my idea! My son was headstrong. He was furious at the trick Valance had played upon us. He acted hastily, and dragged me with him."

The perspiration was clotting the brow of the banker. He was in earnest. It was evident that he spoke the truth. That wild deed of the previous night had been the work of Geoffrey Lagden—not of his father.

"I know that you hate my son," went on Mr. Lagden. "I know——"

"I do not hate him," said Arthur Lovell coldly. "We have always been enemies in the Loamshire County Club, but by no fault of mine. I was willing to stand well with him, as with everybody else in the club. He has deliberately gone out of his way to injure me, and to try to drive me from the team."

"Well, you were enemies, and now that it is possible for you to crush him, to disgrace him, I know I cannot expect you to hold your hand. Yet——"

"You are mistaken. I have not the slightest idea of seeking revenge, either upon you or upon Geoffrey Lagden. So long as mere justice is done, I am satisfied, for my part."

"As for Len Valance, I will make him every compensation in my power."

The scapegrace grinned.

"I am quite willing to come to an agreement on those terms, sir. I am not afraid of your trying any more tricks."

"That is no business of mine!" said Arthur. "You may settle your own affair as you please, without my assistance. I have no desire for a scandal, certainly, and I should not like the name of the Loamshire Club to be mixed



up with an unpleasant sensation in the papers; but one point I cannot concede. An attempted murderer is not the kind of member the Loamshire Club wants! Geoffrey Lagden will have to go! Whether he goes to prison or not, I do not care; but he cannot remain in the Loamshire Club."

The banker nodded.

"That is already decided upon, Mr. Lovell. We shall not be able to keep up our old position after this—this repayment, as I have had other losses. As a matter of fact, Geoffrey did not believe that I should be able to make terms with you, and—and he feared arrest. He has already fled."

The banker covered his face with his hands for a moment. The once pompous and important banker, the wealthy backer of the Loamshire Club, had been brought very low indeed. He rose to his feet, pale and worn.

"Thank Heaven I have been able to come to a settlement!" he said. "At least, we are saved from the worst! I thank you, Mr. Lovell. You have been more generous to me than I deserve. I—I am grateful. What I have said I will do—I will do at once. I am in your hands, and I cannot resist. You can rely upon me."

He moved falteringly to the door, and passed from the room.

Silence reigned for some minutes after he had gone. Arthur Lovell folded up the papers, and rose to his feet.

"This will make a difference to you, Arthur," said Kit Valance, with a slight catch in his voice.

Lovell turned to him quickly.

"A difference to my fortunes, Kit," he said, holding out his hand. "Next season I shall play for Loamshire as an amateur, certainly. But no difference to our friendship."

Kit grasped his hand.

"I know it, Lovell. I was sure of that."

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## CHAPTER 32.

### Sunshine After Shadow.

COLONEL HILTON was looking amazed.

The Loamshire cricketers were home again in Loamchester, and Arthur Lovell had called on the colonel at Lincroft. He had caught a glimpse of Molly in the garden as he went up to the house, and his heart beat at the sight of the girl's winsome face.

Between Arthur and Molly a great gulf had been fixed for long months; but now, with the young cricketer's return to fortune, his hopes had risen again.

Colonel Hilton listened to what Arthur had to relate to him in extreme astonishment.

Arthur concealed some of the story, for the sake of those who had injured him, and who had been made to pay so dearly for it; but the colonel had a pretty clear idea of what had passed.

The restoration of the Lovell fortune by James Lagden showed what the true character of the banker must be, and Geoffrey Lagden's resignation from the Loamshire Club showed that he, too, had nothing to say for himself.

"We shall not miss Lagden very much, as a matter of fact," the colonel remarked. "He made more trouble in the club than he was worth. There will be a great deal less friction now that he is gone, and I hope the team will pull together better. We shall certainly miss James Lagden's backing

of the club, but we don't want money gained as he seems to have gained his. I'd rather see the Loamshires go under."

"As for that, sir, the club will not lose," said Arthur. "Lagden has repaid my uncle all that he deprived him of. My uncle was always a steady backer of the club while he was wealthy, and now he will be all that he ever was, or more. The club will be no loser."

"I am glad to hear that, Lovell. A club manager is compelled to think of the financial considerations," the colonel remarked, with a smile. "I am very glad you have been able to arrange this matter without a scandal. We don't want the name of the Loamshire County Cricket Club disgraced in the eyes of the public, especially as it now seems pretty certain that we shall win the championship."

Arthur's eyes sparkled.

"You think so, sir?"

The colonel nodded emphatically.

"Yes, I think so, Lovell; and if we finish at the top of the list, it will be due more to your batting and Kit Valance's bowling than to anything else."

"It's very good of you to say so, sir."

"It's the mere truth. I have noticed for some time, Lovell, that there has been a better feeling in the club towards you. You must have observed it yourself."

"I think I have, sir."

"It crossed my mind to ask you to take the captaincy again. I believe that even as a professional player you would have been welcomed, so much have the lads come to think of you lately. But this alteration in your circumstances makes everything easy. You will resume your old footing in the club—or, rather, more than your old footing."

Arthur Lovell, as a professional, as a "paid player," had won respect and esteem, even from the most reluctant, and by courage and by steadily playing the game, he had succeeded in silencing the whispers of envy and malice.

Few now in the Loamshire County Cricket Club who did not like and admire the gallant young batsman who had done so much to bring his county to the front.

As captain once more, he would find the team ready to back him up to any extent. His change in fortune was the finishing touch. The most carping critic could not find any objection to make now.

Captain of Loamshire! It was a glorious prospect—a prospect to make the young cricketer's heart beat faster, and to bring a flush of pride to his handsome face!

The colonel watched his face, easily reading the thoughts within.

"You would accept the offer if it were made, Lovell?"

"I could not do otherwise, sir. But what of Ponsonby?"

Colonel Hilton smiled grimly.

"Ponsonby has sent in his resignation from the club."

Arthur looked surprised.

"It was a question of expenses, in which he could not agree with the committee," the colonel remarked. "There is no secret about it."

A slight smile hovered over Arthur Lovell's lips.

Ponsonby, one of his enemies in the club, had been an "amateur" of the kind well known in modern county cricket.

His "expenses" had frequently amounted to more than twice as much as Arthur Lovell's earnings as a "professional" player.

Arthur had often thought that the Loamshire committee must find Ponsonby rather an expensive luxury, and he was not surprised to learn that the amateur's "expenses" had found objection raised to them at last.

Ponsonby had evidently resigned in a huff, and would probably be astonished at not being asked to reconsider the matter. That was his own business, however.

"The captaincy is vacant," said Colonel Hilton. "Of course, in the interests of the county, I should have asked Ponsonby to stand aside if necessary. As it happens, though, the place is empty and ready for you to take, if you choose to take it."

"I should not refuse it, sir."

"Then it is as good as settled."

Colonel Hilton shook hands heartily with the young cricketer.

"I am glad we shall have you with us as an amateur, Lovell. You have forced the club to respect you as a professional player, and it is owing to you mainly that there is a better feeling all round between professional and amateurs in the Loamshire Club. And I am glad, more than anything else, that you will captain the team in the match against the Rest of England at the Oval, for there is no doubt in my mind now about Loamshire winning the championship."

Arthur's face was happy, his heart beating joyously, as he left the house. He had known trouble—black and bitter trouble—but the clouds had rolled by at last. He had faced his troubles manfully; he had always played the game, and now he was reaping his reward.

"Molly!"

He uttered the name involuntarily as he caught sight of the girl's white dress under the trees. She turned at the sound of his voice, and her face was blushing. Lovell joined her in the shade of the old beeches.

"You are looking happy," she said.

"I am feeling happy. May I tell you why?"

"Please tell me."

He told her as much as was necessary to inform her of his change in fortune, of the sunshine that had followed the clouds in his life.

She listened attentively, her eyes glowing.

"Oh, I am so glad," she cried—"so glad!"

She held out her hands. He clasped them, and did not let them go again. His eyes were on her face; hers sunk under his glance.

"Molly! May I call you so? You know—you cannot fail to know—how I have always loved you! Now I can dare to speak."

Her face was crimson. She did not raise her eyes.

"Molly, I can speak at last! I love you! Could you ever care for me?"

Then she raised her eyes. They were wet with tears.

"I—I have always cared," she whispered.

And then, as he drew her to his heart, it seemed to Arthur Lovell that the sun had never shone so brightly—never had the birds sung so merrily to his ears.

## CHAPTER 33.

### The Champion County.

**C**HAMPION county of England! It had come at last! The proud title, coveted by every cricketing county in England, had been won by the men of Loamshire.

Loamshire was champion county! The fight had been long and hard, and the result often doubtful. At one time, indeed, it had seemed as if Loamshire's hopes were chimerical, as if the county championship might pass into any hands but theirs.

But things had come round. Later in the season the team had pulled

together as they had never done before. With Arthur Lovell for captain they went ahead splendidly.

Captained by the best batsman of the season, well backed up by the finest bowler that ever bowled a ball in county cricket, the Loamshires had a good chance, and they made the most of it.

Ill-luck had dogged their footsteps during Arthur Lovell's enforced absence from the team, caused by the treachery of his rival in the Loamshire club.

But his return had changed all that. He had returned under new circumstances. Now he was once again smiled upon by fortune, rich, and free to do as he liked. His days of dependence upon the game for a mere living were over.

Justice had been done. The Lagdens had escaped the full penalty of their rascality, for Arthur was generous in the hour of triumph. But James Lagden had made full restitution, and poverty was ended for Arthur.

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#### CHAPTER 34.

##### Champion County v. Rest of England.

**A** SUNNY September day—a day of note in the annals of the year's cricket, for it was the day of the match between the Champion County and the Rest of England at the Oval. On the historic ground at Kennington two splendid teams were to meet, and the weather had turned out propitious, much to the relief of cricket lovers, who had looked forward to the match.

The captain of the Rest won the toss, and elected to bat, and Arthur Lovell led his merry men out to field. Eleven fine figures in spotless white issued from the pavilion, to be greeted with a rousing cheer from a large and enthusiastic crowd.

Arthur Lovell glanced round at the ocean of faces, and turned to Kit Valance with a smile.

"We have a splendid audience to-day, Kit," he said. "We must give them some good cricket. How are you feeling now?"

Kit's eyes sparkled.

"Fit as a fiddle!" he said. "Right as rain! I shall do my best to-day, Arthur. I feel in a mood for conquering worlds!"

Arthur Lovell laughed.

"Stick to that, Kit, and we shall win. I depend upon your bowling, and when you are at your best, there are few batsmen who can stand up to you. Stick to it. You will take the first over."

There was another cheer as the batsmen were seen coming out. The innings were opened for England by C. B. Fry and Hayward.

They were a splendid pair, and even Kit Valance was likely to have all his work cut out to deal with them. Every eye on the vast ground was fastened upon the young professional bowler of Loamshire as he prepared to deliver the first ball against Fry's wicket.

The Sussex man stood ready. Down came the ball, and clack went the bat, and it dropped dead on the crease. So with the next, and the next. Then came a swing of the Sussex man's mighty bat, and the leather went away, and away to the boundary, and beyond.

Kit's eyes gleamed as he took the ball in hand again. All he knew he threw into the next ball, and it came down, a puzzling and baffling googly, that proved too much even for the splendid batsman from Sussex. For once the great C.B. was caught napping.

Clack! The bails were on the ground, and one of the stumps reclining at an intoxicated-looking angle. There was a roar from the crowd.

"How's that?"

There was only one reply for the umpire to make:

"Out!"

First man out for 4. C. B. Fry took the fall of his wicket good-humouredly, as was his wont. So great a batsman could afford a reverse now and then. He walked away to the pavilion.

"Bravo, Valance! Well bowled! Hurrah!"

Loud rang the cheers greeting the young bowler's feat. But more gratifying to him than the plaudits of the crowd was the quiet but hearty:

"Well done, Kit!" from his chum, Arthur Lovell, the captain of Loamshire.

Tyldesley came in to take the Sussex man's place. The great Lancashire bat was well on his guard, and Kit was not able to touch his wicket. But his time was coming. In the fourth over of the match he was caught out by Arthur Lovell, with the moderate number of 20 runs to his credit.

Foster, the England captain, was next man in. He proved to be in great form. With Hayward backing him up splendidly the Worcestershire man proceeded to make the fur fly in fine style.

The runs piled up rapidly, to the accompaniment of cheers and hand-clapping from the vast crowds thronging the Oval.

One hundred! The hundredth run was the last of that partnership. A tricky ball from Kit Valance beat Hayward at last, and the Surrey giant carried out his bat. His place was taken by Braund.

In Loamshire's matches with Somersetshire, Kit Valance had bowled against Braund, and he knew the quality of the splendid West Country cricketer. He put all he knew into the bowling, but he was not fated to take the wicket of the finest batsman in the West.

That honour fell to Tweedie, the Scottish professional bowler in the Loamshire team. Braund was at 40 when the Scotsman whipped out his middle-stump with a clever ball, and the Somersetshire man retired from the wicket.

The England total was now 160 for four wickets. The luncheon interval followed, and then the innings were resumed with Foster and Hirst at the wickets. Hirst was in splendid form.

As batsman and bowler he has few equals, and on this occasion he batted in wonderful style. Through the golden afternoon he stood steady at the wicket, piling up runs, while partners came and went.

Foster fell to a fast ball from Kit Valance, and Jessop was caught out by Fortescue, while Crawford was stumped by Tunstall, the Loamshire wicket-keeper.

But Hirst was still batting, and a roar from the crowd greeted his turning of the century. With his individual score at 106, he was out at last to a ball from Kit Valance.

The score was now 400 for eight wickets. It began to look doubtful whether the England innings would be over at the time appointed for the close of the day's play. But the Loamshire men were determined to end it, and they "bucked up" in fine style, and the remaining wickets went down.

Five minutes only remained to play when the last wicket fell, from a throw-in from Arthur Lovell from the deep-field.

England were all down for 460. It was a fine score even in these days of big scoring, and the "Rest" had reason to be satisfied with themselves. Among the Loamshire men there were serious faces.

The score was a huge one, yet no more than might have been expected

of such a magnificent side as the Rest of England had put in the field against Loamshire.

But whether the county could do anything like it on the morrow was a question few felt competent to answer.

Colonel Hilton tapped Lovell on the shoulder when he came off the field.

"We look to you to pull up to-morrow," he said. "It is your batting that will save us, if anything can. We rely upon you."

Lovell nodded. He meant to do his best, and no man could do more.

. . . . .

The next day's play was as exciting as it well could be. Lovell made hay of the bowling, and at the close of play for that day, the Loamshire total was 350, of which exactly 200 belonged to Lovell.

The following day's play resulted in England being dismissed for 310, making a total of 770 for the two innings. Loamshire wanted 421 to win. Would they do it?



## CHAPTER 35.

### A Fight to a Finish.

**T**HE fourth day of the great struggle had dawned. Again bright weather favoured the cricketers, a gay sun shining down upon the Oval, and again a vast crowd had gathered to see the final struggle between the Champion County and the National Team.

It was the last day, and it was to see Loamshire's last innings, and the final attempt of the sturdy cricketers to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

In the crammed pavilion Molly Hilton could be seen, with Blane and the colonel and Harding, who had once captained Loamshire. Arthur Lovell's uncle, too, was there, to see his nephew play in the finish of the great match. Old Mr. Lovell, greatly improved in health now, was chatting with Molly, and looking on eagerly. His face glowed with pride as he saw the tall, athletic figure of his nephew go down to the wicket.

The England fieldsmen were in their places, and Blythe ceased bowling trial balls to the wicket-keeper as the Loamshire batsmen appeared. He gripped the round red ball in his hand and prepared for business.

Arthur Lovell dropped the end of his bat on the crease, and stood ready. He was looking very fit and handsome, and keenly on the alert.

The first ball came down amid a buzz of close-drawn breath.

Clack! sounded the bat on the leather. The ball flew away, and the batsmen were running, and running again. The innings opened with a 2 for Arthur Lovell, an earnest of what was to come.

He faced that over, and many more, with coolness and a certain confidence in his manner—a confidence that was fully justified. For the bowlers were quite unable to touch him.

Blythe, Knox, and Hirst tried their hardest, but the harder they tried, the more certain were Lovell's steady swipes, and each drive off the bat brought him 1, or 2, or 3, or 4.

Never had Arthur Lovell batted so splendidly before.

Once, indeed, he had lived through an entire innings, from start to finish, but that was not against an England team. Now he was excelling himself. In forty-five minutes he had topped the century, and the crowd yelled approval.

The other bats did well, better than in the first innings. Each put on

an average number of runs ere he fell to the deadly bowling of the enemy. Deadly, indeed, the bowling was, and hard to face, and, all things considered, the Loamshire batsmen did very well against it. But the most brilliant of all was the batting of Arthur Lovell.

Loamshire were five down for 260 at lunch, and of that 260, 180 belonged to the captain of the county side.

After the luncheon interval, when the game was resumed, two Loamshire wickets fell in quick succession to Knox, who was more dangerous than ever. But a few minutes later Arthur Lovell completed his second century.

Three hundred for seven wickets.

Three more wickets to fall, and 121 wanted to win. Loamshire's hopes were rising. Arthur Lovell, showing scarcely a sign of fatigue, was still batting, and apparently meant to make a whole innings of it, as he had done once before. Could he do it against an England team? If so, there could be no doubt as to whom the title of the greatest batsman of the year was due.

He was still battling, and the score was creeping up. His figures were getting on towards the third century, and the crowd was almost breathless with interest. There was nothing slow about the Loamshire cricket. Arthur Lovell meant to either win or lose the game. The idea of a dragged-out draw had no attractions for him.

The eighth wicket went down with the score at 330, and the ninth when the Loamshire total stood at 350, with 71 runs required to win.

Seventy-one required to win, and exactly half an hour remaining to play!

The long, hard struggle was drawing to its close, and the finish was likely to be more keen and exciting than any previous phase of the great game.

"Last man in!"

Kit Valance came out of the pavilion with his bat under his arm. Arthur Lovell had foreseen all, and he had wanted to have his chum to back him up at the finish, and so Kit had been left for last man.

He exchanged a look with Lovell as he came to the wicket, and then he took up his position.

It was the last throw of the dice for Loamshire, and interest was breathless in the immense crowd as Blythe went on to bowl again.

He bowled to Kit Valance, and each ball was stopped with methodical regularity. The over was a maiden one, Kit risking nothing. It was the best he could do to back up Arthur Lovell; but time was precious now, and only twenty-four minutes remained in which to get the required 71.

Now Arthur Lovell was batting again. 2, and 2, and 4, and 4 again, and 2, and another 4! Eighteen for the over, and now only 53 required to win.

Blythe bowled to Kit Valance's wicket, and Kit, seeing the danger, ran a single, which brought Arthur Lovell to the batting end, and gave him the rest of the bowling.

It was a chance that Arthur made the most of. He proceeded to punish the Kentishman's bowling in the finest style. Boundary followed boundary, and in the over concluded, Loamshire wanted only 32 to win! And Arthur Lovell had topped his third century!

Fifteen minutes more of play, and 32 runs wanted. Were Loamshire, after maintaining the struggle so gallantly right up to the finish, to lose the fruits of the brave struggle at the behest of Father Time?

Not if Arthur Lovell could help it.

Kit Valance was batting again, and again a single gave Lovell the bowling. Ten for the over for Arthur Lovell.

Six more minutes of play. The excitement was breathless now. Would Loamshire do it—could they do it?



Three to Kit Valance from the bowling of Hirst. Eighteen more wanted, and four minutes to get them in!

Hirst was bowling to Lovell now, and Lovell's face was set, his eyes gleaming. He knew that this must be the last over—that if he did not win now, there would be no time to win.

Clack!

Away soared the ball, and away, and the batsmen ran 4 before it came in. A boundary followed, and then another. The fieldsmen played up well; there was no hint of a desire to drawl out the game. If Loamshire could win, they should win! Two more balls to the over, and 6 runs wanted. Clack! goes the bat again, and the batsmen are running—once, twice! Whiz comes the ball, not to the wicket-keeper but to Lovell's wicket, and there is a crash of falling stumps. But the bat has clumped on the crease in time, and the umpire shakes his head. Not out!

The crowd breathe again.

Hirst is preparing to send down the last ball for England. He is not slow, but to the eager, impatient crowd he seems so.

But the ball has gone down, and the flashing bat has swept to meet it. Away it goes—and away—and away. Kit Valance starts from the crease, but Arthur waves him back with a smile.

“No need to run, Kit!”

No need, certainly, for that last hit was a boundary. And the game was saved—saved on the stroke of time!

The next minute the level green is black with a swaying, roaring crowd. Arthur Lovell is swept to the pavilion. His comrades are round him, cheering, hand-shaking, breathless with excitement and delight. It is the hour of Loamshire's triumph, and Arthur Lovell's. But sweetest of all to him is the joyous smile of Molly Hilton, the tender pressure of her hand.

And in this, the brightest hour of Arthur Lovell's life, we end our tale of the grand old game, and say farewell to King Cricket.

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