

The Boys' Realm

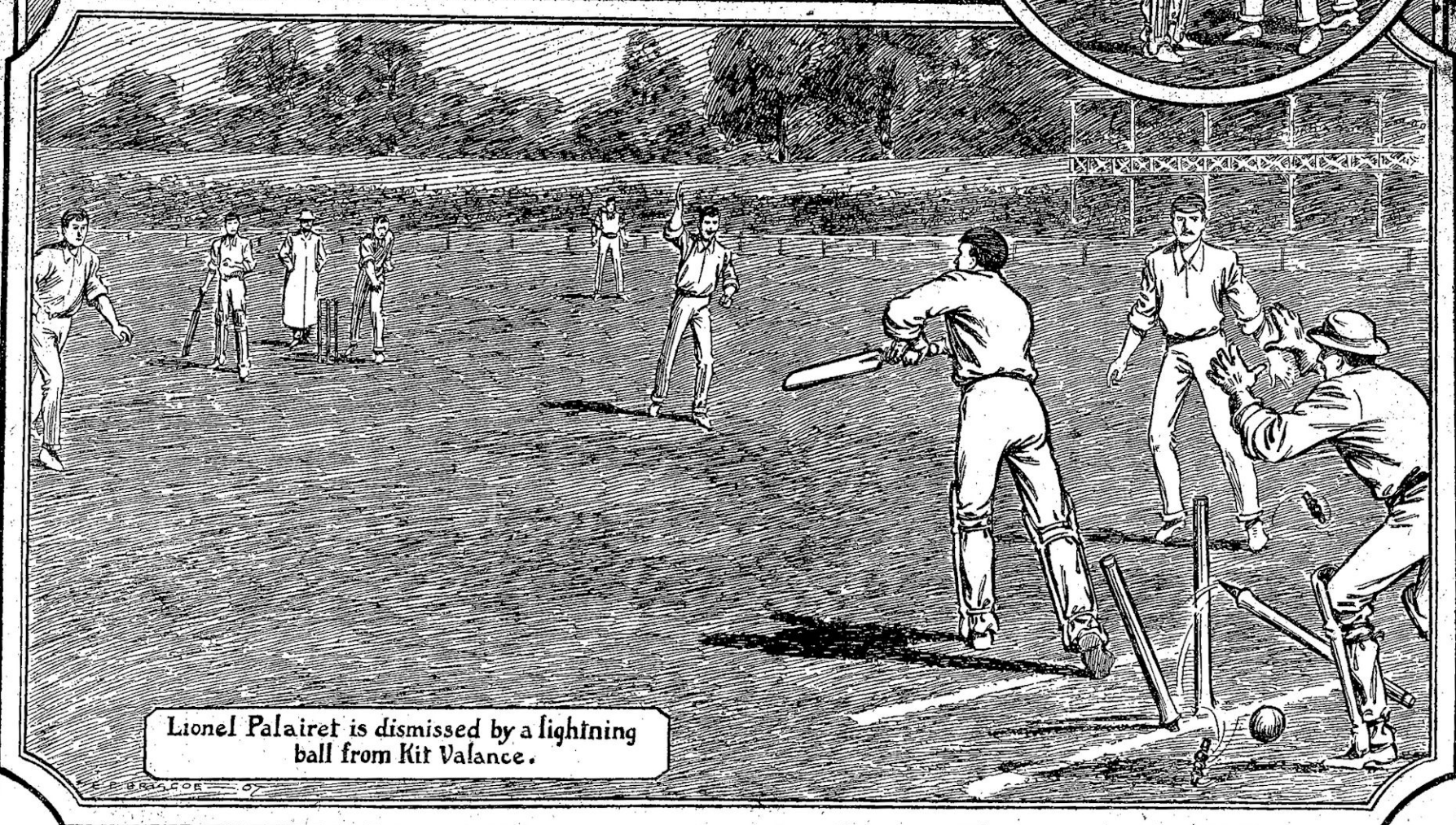
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KING CRICKET! By Charles Hamilton.

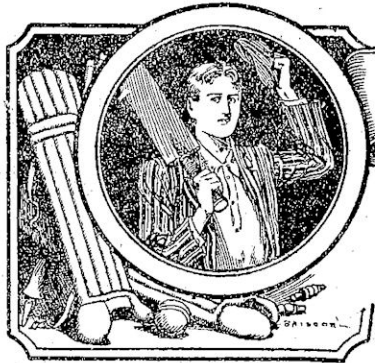


ARTHUR LOVELL RESCUES LAGDEN.



Lionel Palaret is dismissed by a lightning ball from Kit Valance.

You Must Read This Grand Athletic Tale!



KING CRICKET!

A Fascinating New Story of County Cricket.

Written by CHARLES HAMILTON, and Illustrated by E. E. BRISCOE.

The Chief Characters in this Fine Story.

ARTHUR LOVELL, Loamshire's champion bat. He becomes a professional. His uncle is ruined by James Lagden.

KIT VALANCE, Loamshire's best bowler. He first comes to notice in the Colts' match, where he takes Arthur Lovell's wicket. Later he becomes Arthur's firm chum.

GEOFFREY LAGDEN, an amateur and a good bat. He is bitterly jealous of Arthur Lovell, whom he hates and endeavours to injure. He is Arthur's rival for the hand of Molly Hilton. A snobbish character.

JAMES LAGDEN, who has ruined Arthur's uncle.

BLAHE, Captain of Loamshire, and the steady friend of Arthur and Kit. He is Molly Hilton's cousin.

PONSONEY, Geoffrey Lagden's friend, and a man of similar character—snobbish to a degree.

The first instalment tells how Arthur Lovell distinguishes himself in the Colts' match, in spite of the efforts which Geoffrey Lagden puts forth to keep him in the shade. In the second innings, just as Arthur is about to take his place at the wicket, Lagden tells him that his uncle is a ruined man, thus putting him off his form. At the earliest possible moment he leaves the field, and speeds towards London to learn exactly what is amiss. His uncle tells him that James Lagden is the cause of his ruin.

Arthur realizes that he can no longer retain his position as amateur cricketer for Loamshire, and sends in his resignation; but his friend Kit Valance suggests his turning professional. Arthur thinks it a good idea, and decides to do so. He rejoins his club, and in the first innings of the match against Leicestershire he tops the century.

It is now that Arthur begins to feel the change in his position. One or two of the snobbish amateurs cut him dead. Especially is this the case with Geoffrey Lagden. One night, after Arthur has escorted Molly Hilton home at her own request, Lagden calls him to account for doing so, and insults him. In a fit of anger Arthur's fist shoots out, and Lagden reels backwards into the swirling waters of the river on the verge of which he has been standing.

(Now follow his fortunes as detailed in the instalment below.)

From the Jaws of Death!

ARTHUR 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; but 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. Will you 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 his 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 nar-

rowly 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.

A Rascally Proposition.

KIT 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 Loamshire 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 n'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 bookmakers 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 with an inch of his life. 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 than 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 sulkily. "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.

Loamshire v. Somerset—Kit Performs the "Hat Trick."

ARTHUR 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 in 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 bidding 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 that he could despise his enemy. 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'm 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 lately seeks Miss Hilton's society?"

"The colonel said to him. "I can't say 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

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 crick chums had their way.

Lionel Palaret, the handsome captain of Somersetshire, won the toss, and elected to bat first. Blane led his merry men out to field—eleven athletic figures in white.

The Somersetshire innings opened with Lionel Palaret and Poyntz. A splendid figure the Somerset captain looked at the wicket. Palaret had once knocked up 292 off his own bat, in a match with Hampshire, and he looked as if he were quite fit and ready to repeat the performance to-day against Loamshire.

Kit Valance bowled the first over against Lionel Palaret. That over gave the Somerset captain six, and then Tweedie bowled from the other end to Poyntz.

Arthur Lovell was at watch, his favourite place in the field, and as watchful as a cat. Poyntz took a couple, then a four, and then he hit out to a tempting slow ball, and started to run. But he stopped short, with a gasp of dismay.

Palaret, whose eyes nothing escaped, had not quitted his wicket; for the ball had sailed into point's hands as if the batsman had designed to land it there, though, of course, nothing had really been farther from his thoughts. And Arthur Lovell's right hand had closed upon it like a vice. From the crowd came an admiring shout:

"Caught!" "Oh, well caught!" And the umpire grinned.

CLUBS IN THE BOYS' REALM FOOTBALL LEAGUE.



Wellfield Juniors F.C. (Warrington). Secretary, P. Kendrick, 58, Lovely Lane, Warrington.

changed colour for a moment, but, with 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, accommodating 7,000 spectators, Loamshire were to meet the blue-capped brigade, captained by Lionel Palaret, 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

"Out!" So Poyntz carried out his bat for six. Lovell tossed the ball back to the bowler.

He exchanged a glance of satisfaction with Kit Valance.

The match had begun well. Lovell thought it quite probable that Len Valance and his precious "friend" were on the ground watching the match, and he was glad to give them a sample of what was to come.

Newton came on in the place of Poyntz, and knocked up twenty before he succumbed to a lightning ball from Kit Valance.

Palaret, however, seemed immovable at the wicket, and was adding up runs, and but for the smartness of the Loamshire fieldsmen, his score would have gone up by leaps and bounds. The Loamshire fielding, however, was distinctly good, and Blane, the wicket-keeper captain, was always on the alert for chances.

Kit Valance had bowled as many as six overs against Palaret, but he might as well, so it seemed, have been bowling at a brick-wall. For the Somerset skipper seemed able to play any kind of a ball that he sent down; fast and slow bowling were the same to him, and the trickiest ball only slid from his bat as easily as the simplest one.

Braund came in to join him at the wickets, and then Somerset began to make the fur fly. The two splendid batsmen played the Loamshire bowling for all they were worth, cutting it all over the ground, amid enthusiastic cheers from the crowd.

Loud cheering greeted every big hit, and the hopes of Somerset rose high.

And a man in a white hat, standing close to the railings with a companion, grinned with glee and evident relief.

"My word!" he muttered. "Palaret is in splendid form to-day! I think it's very likely that Loamshire will go home licked, after all."

His companion, a young man, whose face was half-hidden by a shady Panama hat, shook his head incredulously.

"Kit hasn't quite got on to his style yet," he replied. "Just you wait a bit, Sharp. What will you bet me that the Somerset innings lasts over lunch-time?"

"Rot! It won't be half over by then."

"What will you bet on that?" said the younger man, with irritating persistence.

"Nothing, confound you!" growled Sharp unasily.

His companion's gloomy forebodings had evidently damped his hopes. And Len's prediction, as it happened, was soon to be fulfilled. Kit Valance took the next over against the Somersetshire skipper's wicket, and his look showed that he meant business.

Down came the ball like a hailstone, and as it rose from the pitch, Palaret played a shade too forward, for the ball, as if possessed by an elusive spirit, seemed to curl itself somehow under his bat, and there was a clack of falling stumps.

Palaret looked at his wicket. It was a wreck! The middle stump was right out of the ground, the leg stump was reclining at an intoxicated-looking angle, and the bails were off, of course. And Blane was grinning.

"Out!" There was no doubt about that. Palaret nodded, and put his bat under his arm. A ringing cheer followed him to the pavilion, for he had done well for his side, having knocked off forty-six in a comparatively short innings.

Len Valance turned to his companion with a grin. "What did I tell you, Sharp?"

Sharp made no reply, except by a muttered oath.

The finest batsman of the Somerset side having been bowled, the game went on more and more in favour of Loamshire. Geoffrey Lagden, put on to give the bowlers a rest, had the good fortune to take Phillips' wicket for ten, and Tunstall accounted for another. Another fell to Arthur Lovell for a duck's egg.

Somerset were now six down for ninety, but good old Braund was still batting strongly.

Play had been rapid and good, but in spite of Palaret's fine display and Braund's steady defence, there was no doubt that the home batting had been outclassed by the bowling of the visitors.

Kit Valance seemed to be in his finest form now. While fielding close to the boundary he had caught sight of his brother and the dark-faced man in the white hat by his side.

The identity of the latter it was easy to guess. He was the rascal who was leading Len Valance into his own evil ways, and Kit realised that his stake upon the game must be a heavy one, to cause him to come all the way to Taunton to see the match played there.

And that thought—the thought of punishing the scoundrel in the only possible way, made the young bowler "buck up" as nothing else would have done.

Five minutes later a Somerset batsman was run out, and three wickets only remained to fall.

Then Kit Valance was given the ball again to tackle Braund.

Braund cut the leather away into the long-field for three, and so the batsmen had changed places, when the ball came whizzing in from the "country."

Kit gripped the round, red ball again, with a gleam in his eyes. A short run, a lightning swing of the arm, and the leather ball went down like a 4.7 shell.

Crash! It was the fall of a ruined wicket! The dismayed batsman walked away to the pavilion.

The score for Somerset now read 93 for 7; last man 0.

And as the unfortunate wielder of the willow reached the pavilion, he muttered to the next man coming in:

"Keep your eyes open for a ball with a dinkens of a leg-break on it!"

And the batsman said that he would. And he did—to his sorrow, for the next ball came down with an off-break that took him entirely by surprise, and the next moment he was staring glumly at a wrecked wicket.

"Last man in!" chuckled Blane to himself, as the last Somersetshire bat came out of the pavilion. "Oh, my only aunt, Matilda! It's going to be the hat trick, or I'm a Dutchman!"

The Loamshire skipper, proved to be a prophet.

Kit Valance delivered his next ball with a seeming carelessness that deceived many of the spectators; but there was a twist on it that puzzled the batsman, and he never really knew where that ball was going till the click of falling bails told him.

"Out!"

The crowd, though most of them were Somerset folk, cheered the bowler lustily. The home innings was at an end; Kit, by performing the "hat trick," had finished it up with startling suddenness. Braund carried out his bat, "not out." Blane slapped Kit Valance heartily on the back.

"Bravo, Valance! Splendid, my boy!"

Kit's face was flushed with pleasure as he heard the cheers from the crowd.

"Hurrah, hurrah! The hat trick! Hurrah!"

There was one man close to the railings who was grinding his teeth—a man in a white hat. But nobody noticed him in the general enthusiasm. And his muttered curse was lost in the ringing cheers for Kit Valance.

"Hurrah, hurrah!"

(To be continued on Saturday next.)