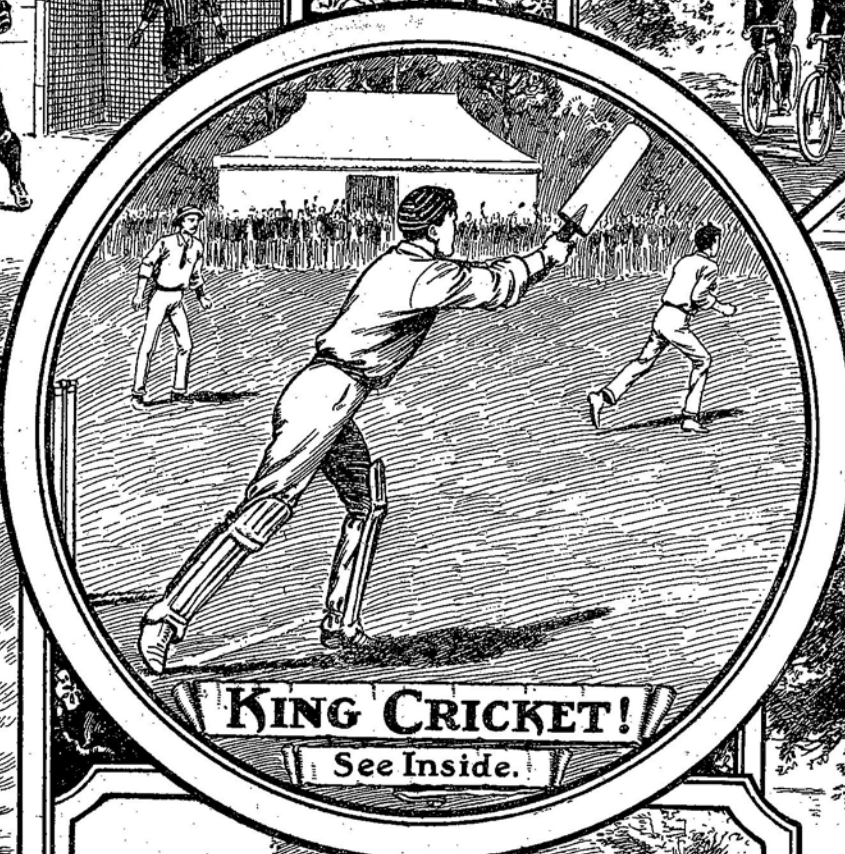
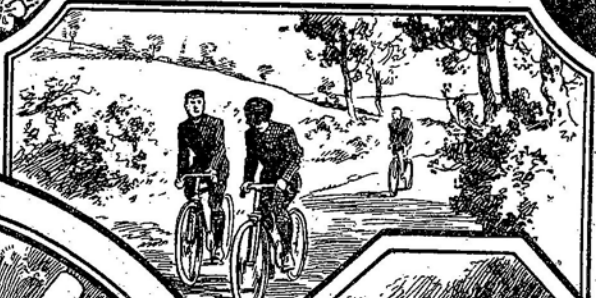


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KING CRICKET!

A Fascinating New Story of County Cricket, Dealing with the Experiences of Two Clever Young Professionals, who, by their Brilliant Feats with Bat and Ball, Materially Assist their Club to Become the Champion County Club of the Country. Written by CHARLES HAMILTON, and Illustrated by E. E. BRISCOE.

THE 1st CHAPTER. Colts v. County.

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.

The bowling does not seem to be able to touch Lovell," Sir Robert remarked. "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 nar-

row 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 groundsmen, 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?

The batsmen were crossing the pitch—once, twice, like streaks of white over the level emerald green. Again they crossed.

"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 up-turned 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!

Up goes the ball from the fieldman's hand, straight to the blue, to come down into his palm again with another sounding 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 groundsmen, 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 quietly.

"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 'bouncer,'" 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 groundsmen, 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 snicked 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 0 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 balls. A savage gleam leaped into his eyes as he looked down at his ruined wicket.

He had been clean bowled, the balls 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 background?"

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, and 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 your 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 off 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 bouncer, 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.



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"Yes, and Arthur Lovell is dependent upon his uncle, whose heir he is," he remarked,

"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!"

THE 2nd CHAPTER. 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 bouncer. But this innings proves that I was mistaken. He is giving Kit every chance now."

The colonel smiled, but made no reply.

Click!

"Hello! 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, illuminating 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 had made the runs 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 balls.

"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 second 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.

(This enthralling new tale of County Cricket will be continued on Saturday next, when the second long instalment will appear. Look out for some dramatic and exciting incidents in the coming chapters. — YOUR EDITOR.)

THE BOYS' REALM CRICKET LEAGUE.

"The Boys' Realm" League of Athletes.

Full particulars of our Magnificent Offer to every Young Athlete in the United Kingdom.

SECTION 1.

As announced in previous issues of THE BOYS' REALM, Your Editor hereby offers to present a large number of Solid Silver Challenge Cups as permanent trophies to bona-fide Cricket Leagues in the British Isles. Not only Silver Cups, but Solid Silver Medals will be presented to each of the members of the winning teams, and to each of the members of the running-up team of the leagues to which the silver cups are awarded. Secretaries of leagues desiring to possess one of these cups must make application on the following form, and must also submit to the following conditions:

- I. The Leagues must play the game according to the Official Rules of Cricket.
- II. Each League must be a properly constituted League in which the clubs engage in a genuine competition.
- III. Each form of entry must be accompanied by full particulars of the competition, which must be of one season's standing, or, if formed this season, must be accompanied by proof that it is a genuine competition. A League Handbook should also be enclosed.

LEAGUE RESULTS.

In connection with these great League Competitions for THE BOYS' REALM Challenge Cups, we intend to publish records of the positions of the clubs in the various Leagues as the season progresses, and Secretaries will be requested by the Editor to supply weekly results of the matches played. Cricket Club Secretaries are requested to draw the attention of their League Secretaries to this announcement of Your Editor's splendid offer.

THE BOYS' REALM CRICKET LEAGUE.

Name of League

Year of Formation

Number of Clubs in League

Secretary's Name and address

This form, together with full particulars of the League, to be addressed to The Secretary, THE BOYS' REALM League, 2, Carmelite House, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.

SECTION 2.

Two Solid Silver Cups for Senior and Junior Clubs.

SOLID SILVER MEDALS for Each Member of the Winning Club and Runners-up.

A HANDSOME CRICKET SET will also be awarded to the Third and Fourth Clubs on the List at the End of the Season.

This offer is made to clubs not belonging to any league, under the following conditions:

The First Division Cup will be presented to the Team (the average age of members of which must not exceed 18) which puts up the best performances in their Saturday matches only, commencing on the first Saturday in April, and finishing on the last Saturday in September.

The Second Division or Junior Cup will be presented to the Team (the average age of the members of which must not exceed 15) which puts up the best series of performances in their Saturday matches played between April and September.

In addition to the above a handsome cricket bat will be awarded each week in both divisions to the club which in the opinion of the Editor has put up the best show on the preceding Saturday. In all cases the Editor's decision is final.

Rules and Conditions.

- (a) Only clubs which have been established at least one season (exclusive of 1907) are eligible for entry, and the respectability and standing of the club must be vouched for by some responsible person.
- (b) Where clubs have two or more teams, only the premier team matches will count.
- (c) Clubs desirous of entering this contest may make application now. In doing so a list of their engagements between the dates mentioned above, with the average age of the opposing clubs, and a letter from the president of the club, should be sent to the Secretary, BOYS' REALM Cricket League (Section 2.), 2, Carmelite House, Carmelite Street, London, E.C., not later than May 1st.
- (d) The cup and medals will be presented at the end of the cricket season to the clubs in each section which Your Editor, the Secretary, and another umpire consider to hold the best records in the matches played between the dates stated above.
- (e) Strict investigation will be made by the controllers of the League into the bona-fides of the entering clubs and their fixtures.
- (f) All matches to be played under the official rules of cricket.
- (g) The cups to be won outright.
- (h) Opposing teams must, in every case, be of the same average age.

The League of Young Athletes.

All about the New Organisation founded by The Editor to encourage Manly Sport among the Boys and Young Men of Great Britain.

Every true British boy and young man indulges in athletics in some form or another, and nothing delights an athlete more than to win some trophy in connection with his pastime—something in the form of a prize or certificate which he can treasure, and which in after years, when he can no longer compete with other vigorous young men, he can show with pride as a proof of his skill in the particular form of athletics he indulged in.

By the scheme now announced for the first time, every boy and young man in the country can, when he has attained a certain proficiency, WIN FOR HIMSELF A PERMANENT TROPHY IN THE SHAPE OF A HANDSOME MEDAL OR CERTIFICATE. He will also be elected a member of the League of Young Athletes. The following particulars show the lines on which the League of Young Athletes will be run:

STANDARD TIMES will be fixed by Your Editor for certain athletic feats, and any youth or young man who can accomplish any of them, under the conditions mentioned, will be made a member of the League of Young Athletes, and will be awarded one of the League of Athletes Standard Medals, on which his feat will be recorded.

To every youth up to the age of 16, who can swim 100 yards, will be awarded a handsome embossed Certificate, stating this fact and making him a member of the League of Young Athletes. The feat must be accomplished in a swimming-bath, and the form of application for membership must be accompanied by a letter from an instructor or headmaster or some responsible adult, stating that the applicant has accomplished the feat in his presence. One of the following forms and a penny stamp must be sent with the application:

THE LEAGUE OF YOUNG ATHLETES (Swimming Section, 100 Yards).

I (Name)

(Address)

desire to become a member of this Institution. Enclosed I send particulars of my 100 yards swim.

We shall also award Bronze and Silver Medals to boys and youths who can swim set distances within certain times; Certificates and Medals for plunging, running, cycling, throwing the cricket ball, long and wide jumping, hurdling, and other athletic feats will also be awarded. If you are a member of an athletic club, and intend to go in for any of these sports, watch THE BOYS' REALM during the summer, and draw the attention of your club secretary to the paper. Particulars of the various schemes will be given week by week. In next week's issue will be found full particulars of how to win one of THE BOYS' REALM Standard Medals for Swimming and Running. THE BOYS' REALM will also, during the summer, award prizes to be competed for at Junior Athletic Meetings. Application should be made to the Secretary of the League of Young Athletes, 2, Carmelite House, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.

Your Editor Asks a Favour! Please Give This Copy to a Friend Who Does Not Read THE REALM.