

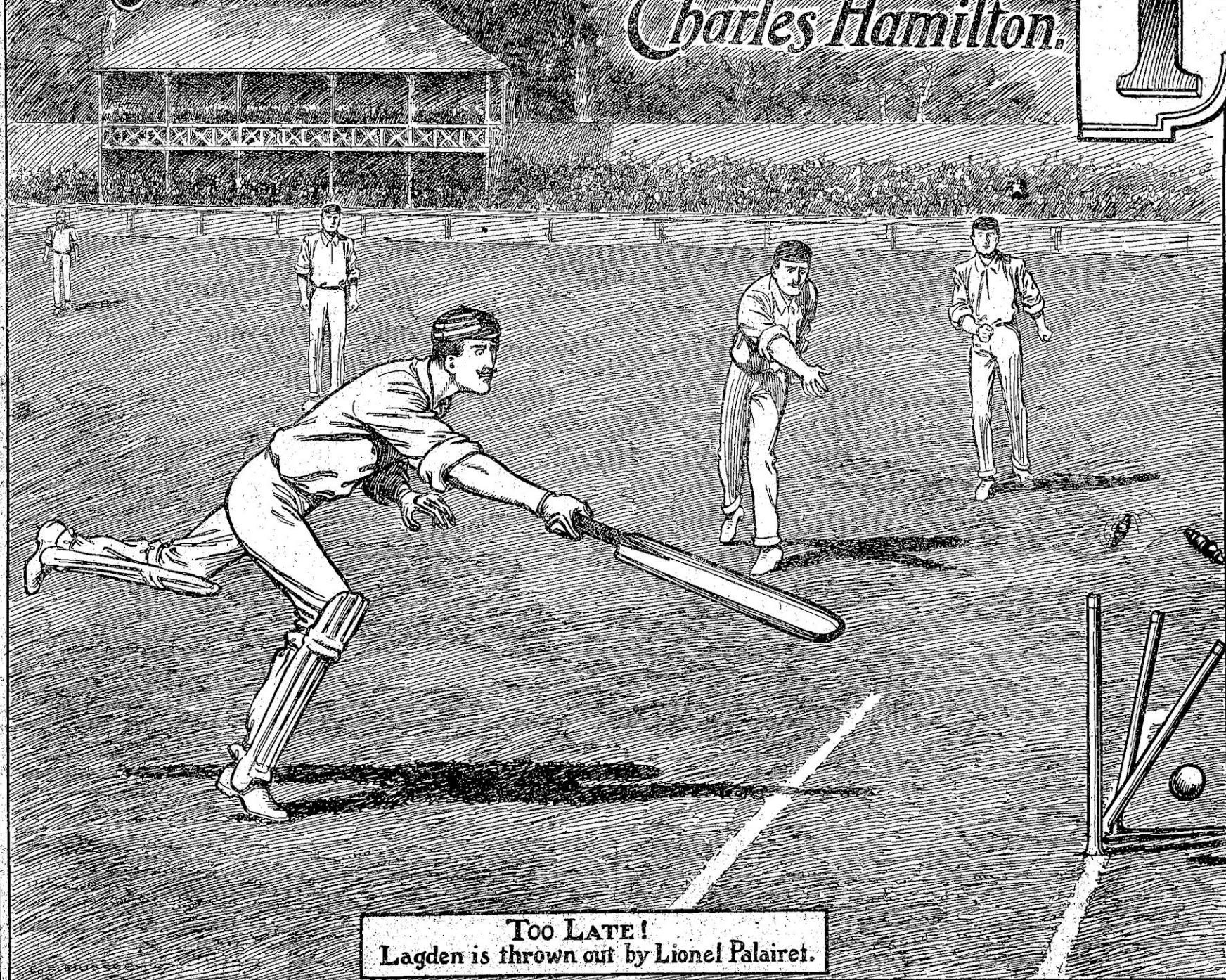
 CAN YOU SWIM 100 YARDS? (See Inside.)

THE BOYS' REALM

of
SPORT & ADVENTURE.

*King Cricket! By
Charles Hamilton.*

1^D



TOO LATE!
Lagden is thrown out by Lionel Palairat.

Healthy, Interesting, & Instructive.



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.

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

PONSONBY. 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 realises 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.

Kit Valance has a twin brother who is not a credit to his family. He is constantly asking for money, and because of the disgrace which publicity would bring, Kit lets him have it. But being in a rather tighter corner than usual Len Valance backs Somerset to beat Loamshire, and asks his brother to let down his side. Kit refuses indignantly, and in the first innings takes no less than three wickets.

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

Arthur Lovell's Splendid Innings.

SOMERSETSHIRE were all down for ninety-three, and after the luncheon interval Loamshire commenced their first innings in high spirits. Somerset had been dismissed for a total unexpectedly small, considering the fine batting of Lionel Palairet—a result that was chiefly due to the splendid bowling of Kit Valance. It had been Kit's "day out" with a vengeance, and he had finished up a fine display with the "hat-trick" which had sent out the last three Somersetshire batsmen with a big round "0" to their credit.

It remained to be seen whether the Loamshire batting would be anything like the form of their bowling. If it proved to be so, Somerset were booked for a severe defeat. And that was what the Loamshire men confidently looked forward to.

Blane had decided to open the innings with Arthur Lovell and himself, a combination that was certain to give the home bowling some hard work to do before a wicket fell.

Lionel Palairet placed his men to field, and put on Robson to bowl the first over. Arthur Lovell had the bowling, and the way he played the first over was a promise of good things to come.

The first ball he cut over the pavilion—a rather startling commencement to an innings that was to prove more startling yet. The second went whizzing between point and cover-point for four, which were all run out, the batsmen crossing the pitch like lightning. The third ball he stopped dead, and the fourth. The fifth went over the pavilion from a mighty stroke, and the crowd cheered lustily. It recalled to many of them Blaker's feat in the Kent match on the same ground the year before, when the Kentish cricketer, making 35 not out in twelve minutes, sent the ball over the pavilion twice.

Lovell was evidently in form! The last ball of the over gave him another boundary, and so it ended with sixteen runs to his credit, a result that brought him a ringing cheer from the crowded enclosures.

Lewis bowled next against Blane. Blane was a cautious player, though he could be very dangerous at times, and his batting, though nothing like so brilliant as Lovell's, showed that he could be relied upon to keep his end up.

The over gave him seven, so that when it ended he was called upon to face Robson's bowling. He faced it well, running no risks, and the over proved to be a maiden. Then Lovell had the bowling again, and he proceeded to make the fur fly.

The Somersetshire bowling was decidedly good, but the difficulty for them was that the Loamshire batting was better. Blane played well and steadily, stealing a few runs when he

could, while Lovell hit the bowling all over the ground, and gave the home fieldmen enough leather-hunting to last them for a long time.

Kit, from the pavilion, watched his chum's innings with sparkling eyes. Once or twice his glance turned to the railings, where a white hat was very prominent among the crowd.

Len and his "friend" were there again, and Kit wondered how they liked the opening of the Loamshire innings. If the rout of the home batsmen had not convinced them that their game was up, it was certain that the sight of Lovell's magnificent batting would do so. And magnificent Lovell's batting truly was! Never had he seemed in finer form.

Palairet changed the bowling again and again, but he changed it without avail. Fast and slow, lob and yorker, anything and everything, Lovell played with the same cool confidence and dash.

The best Somerset bowlers exerted and exhausted themselves against him in vain. They might as well have been bowling at the wall of the pavilion for all the impression they could make upon his wicket. And the runs were mounting up.

Forty-fifty—sixty—and the Loamshire batsmen seemed as fit as ever, and as fresh as paint. Blane had put on thirty-five for himself, when he was caught out by Lewis from a ball bowled by Robson.

Lagden came in to join Lovell. Lagden, too, seemed in good form. He played up well to the home bowling, and the first over gave him eight. Even he could forget his hatred for the man at the other end in the excitement and exhilaration of scoring; and Lovell, thinking only of the game, was ready to back up Lagden to the utmost of his power.

But Geoffrey Lagden's luck was soon out, as it proved. He had knocked up twenty-eight, and he felt fully equal to the bowling, but, as his head was not quite so level as Arthur's, he became less careful. And the men of Somerset were not slow to take advantage of it.

Lagden had hit the ball into the long field, and the batsmen ran three, and then Arthur would have been content. With the keen, unflinching judgment of an experienced cricketer, he saw what Lagden could not see, that it was not safe to attempt any more. But Lagden was determined that it should be a four, and he started running again.

"No!" shouted Arthur.

But Lagden took no notice. He had made the hit, and he felt inclined to call the tune, even if his partner at the wickets had to pay the piper.

Arthur's eyes gleamed angrily for a moment. But he was a sportsman to the backbone, and since Lagden was committed to the run, he backed him up for all he was worth. He ran with a pace that made some of the onlookers open their eyes. He passed Lagden in the middle of the pitch, though the latter had had the start of him, and he raced on to the wicket with the pace of a C. B. Fry.

But now the leather was coming in. From far out in the "country" it came whizzing to cover-point, who caught it with one hand, and with the same movement of the arm sent it crashing in.

It happened to be Palairet at cover-point, and the Somerset captain showed that he knew as much about fielding as any other part of the great game.

Arthur Lovell, putting on a terrific spurt, feeling rather than seeing that the ball had come in from the country, reached home and clumped his bat on the crease, but Lagden was not so lucky.

He had not Arthur's pace, and although he had started to run first, he was still feet from the wicket when Palairet, seeing where his chance lay, sent the leather in. It all passed in the twinkling of an eye—the return from the country, the catch by Lionel Palairet, and the crash of the falling wicket.

The next moment Lagden's bat bumped on the crease. Too late! He knew that it was too late, but he still turned his eyes inquiringly on the umpire. It had been a close thing.

"How's that?" cried Lionel Palairet. And the umpire's decision was prompt: "Out!"

And out it was; so Geoffrey Lagden carried his bat off for twenty-eight—not a bad score for a batsman of his quality against such fieldsmen as the Somerset, but about a third of what he had hoped to knock up.

But the unkindest cut of all was that he left Arthur Lovell in. He had found Lovell in, and he left him in; his innings had been only an episode in Lovell's long life at the wicket, and that was the bitterest thought to him. And it did not add to his good-humour when Blane gave him a satisfied nod on his entering the pavilion.

"Good business!" said the Loamshire skipper. "Good, indeed, Lagden!"

Lagden grunted. He had evidently done quite as much as was expected of him, but that was not gratifying in the least, for it showed that his captain did not expect very much.

"A pity you ran yourself out, though," went on Blane. "I noticed that Lovell warned you off, and the wonder is that it was not his wicket fell instead of yours. That would have been a serious thing. However, all's well that ends well."

Kit, who was standing by, waiting his turn, could not help smiling as he caught the expression upon Lagden's face. Blane's undisguised relief that it had been Lagden, and not Lovell, who was run out, was scarcely complimentary to the defeated batsman.

Lagden caught Kit's smile, and turned away with a savage scowl.

"Come, Valance," said Blane. "You're next."

Kit already had his pads on. He picked up his bat and went out to join Arthur Lovell at the wicket.

The spectators remembered the "hat-trick" of the morning, and watched with great interest to see how the famous Loamshire bowler would shape at the sticks.

Kit did very well, considering that his genius lay in bowling. He knocked up twenty for his side, and was then caught out by Palairet.

Tunstall was next man in, and he retired with a duck's egg to his credit, being clean bowled first ball by Lewis.

Arthur Lovell's score was ninety-eight when Tunstall left the wicket, and Tweedie came in. Tweedie was stumped for ten, and then the cricketers knocked off for tea and a rest.

Loamshire were now five down for 191, Lovell still not out. No wonder the faces of the visitors were bright and gay as they discussed tea in the pavilion. They were nearly a hundred runs ahead of their adversaries, and their best batsman was still at the wicket.

It was looking as if Loamshire would win, not only by runs, but by an innings as well, if things kept on as they had started.

And among the crowd on the ground two faces were dark and gloomy.

"The game's up," said the man in the white hat. "Did you ever see such batting for a county like Loamshire? That brute is a Jessop and a Grace rolled into one. Mark me, he'll make the century, and perhaps another, and I shouldn't be surprised if he lives right through the innings, not out. I never dreamed that Loamshire had a batsman like that, or I'd have put the bets the other way round, even at odds against."

Len nodded gloomily. "Yes, unless Somerset make a wonderful recovery in their second innings, we are done in, and no mistake."

"And they could, and would, if it wasn't for that confounded brother of yours," snarled Sharp. "Let Lionel Palairet get a chance, and he'll make his century as easy as winking. I've seen him knock up close on three hundred in a match before now, against bowlers quite as good as the Loamshires, with one exception—Kit Valance. That confounded fellow seems able to make the ball do whatever he likes."

"It's no go," said Len sulkily. "Kit will bowl him for a dozen or so in the next innings, and the rest won't do much. The game's over, bar shouting."

Sharp snapped his teeth. "If I could think of a way of spoiling his form, by fair means or foul—"

"Well, you can't, so it's no good talking about it. And Sharp scowled, and relapsed into sullen silence.

When the play was resumed, it was soon apparent that the rest had restored to the Loamshire champion bat whatever of freshness he had lost during his long innings. His very first hit gave him a couple, and completed his century, and the spectators cheered with a deafening roar.

One hundred not out! And he was still scoring!

Kit's eyes danced with delight as he watched his chum. Ponsonby was in with him now, and Ponsonby seemed to be imbued by the prevailing determination to make a big victory of it. The air of languid indifference he usually assumed was gone now, and he was batting with a keenness that showed that he could be a fine cricketer when he chose.

Ponsonby added run to run, and soon had thirty for himself, and all the time Lovell was scoring.

It really seemed as if he was to last through the innings, and to prove "not out," as well as first man in.

But if he hoped so, he was doomed to disappointment.

He had hit a loose ball away, and started to

run, when there was a loud shout from the excited ring.

Lionel Palairet had seen his chance. Now he was backing away—backing, backing, his eyes on the sky, and on the round dark object that was rushing down towards him! Backing, swerving, twisting, his gaze fixed, his breathing quick and hard, till with a final spring, his hand went up, and his palm closed on the ball.

And the Somerset crowd yelled with delight. "Caught!"

"Bravo, Palairet!"

"Well caught!"

Well caught, indeed, for that catch had displaced the Loamshire batsman whom the Somerset bowlers had been able to make no impression upon.

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.

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 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 under-hand 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 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 Palaret 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 race-course, 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 your 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 Palaret 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

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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.

Trapped!

Kit 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 blackguard 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. The 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.

(This fine story of County Cricket will be continued next week.)