

BETWEEN THE INNINGS

P. G. WODEHOUSE

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Etext by Dagny
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It seemed to be the general opinion that the country wanted rain. Meaning by the country the half-dozen of us who were gathered together in the billiard-room at Heath Hall smoking, playing pool, and talking cricket 'shop', with particular reference to the match which would come to an end on the following day.

It was, indeed, a most solemn and important occasion. This was the last night but one of the Hall cricket-week, and, so far, success had crowned the efforts of the Hall team as never before.

The Zingari had come and gone, routed a five-wickets affair. The Band of Brothers had headed us on the first innings, but failed in the next, and we had come through for the second time with half our wickets in hand. We were now in the middle of the Incogniti match, and our one aim in life was to win this and set up a Hall week record. Never before had the Hall been able to score more than a couple of victories in the three matches.

The best week up to the present had occurred six years before, when Ronald Heath was captain of the Oxford team, and Jack Heath half-way up the list of the same. Then we had won two and drawn the third favourably.

What made this season's week such a triumph was the fact that, on paper, we were not so strong as usual. Jack was in India playing polo instead of cricket, and Ronald was obliged to confine his efforts to umpiring, having strained a muscle in a county match of the previous week. We should have missed them more had it not been for the unusually fine form in which young Tommy Heath, the third of the brothers, happened to find himself at this crisis.

Tommy had captained Winchester that season and scored a century against Eton; but even that had not prepared us for his feats during this week. He had followed up two brilliant innings in the earlier games with a masterly eighty-four in the match now in progress, which match was now in such a position that it might be said to be anybody's game. We had batted first. Wicket hard and true.

The Hall ground is small, and scoring is generally fast there. Starting at a quarter to eleven, we had made two hundred and ten by lunch-time for six wickets. By three o'clock we were all out for two hundred and fifty.

It was not a large score for the ground. Having lived all my life at my father's rectory across the Park, I could remember many Hall weeks including at least three when the side that had won the toss had nearly succeeded in putting four hundred on the board before going the way of all batting sides. But two hundred and fifty proved good enough in the present case. The Incogs had replied with two hundred and twenty-three. In an hour and a half of the second innings we had put up a hundred and thirty for seven wickets by the time stumps were drawn for the day.

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Wherefore we prayed for rain. A steady downpour in the night, and the wicket would play easy for the first hour on the morrow, during which period our last three men might be expected to put on at least another fifty. Which, if the sun came out, as it probably would, ought to be enough, we thought, to give us a winning lead.

Dalgliesh flung up the window and peered earnestly out into the night.

'It looks like rain,' he said. 'There's thunder hanging about somewhere.'

'Yellow to play,' said Felstone, moving round the table after chalking his cue 'dot vos me. No good. I don't think pool's my *forte*. Hullo! Lightning.'

He joined Dalgliesh at the window. Summer lightning flickered across the dark opening. It was oppressively hot. Too hot to last. The rain was bound to come soon. But it might delay its advent for another twenty-four hours, by which time, like most late-comers in this world, it would find its services not required and even unpopular.

'Give us three hours' good, steady, soaking downpour,' said Dalgliesh meditatively, 'and we shall have those Incogs by the short hairs. We shall then call upon our Mr Peter Baynes to give his celebrated imitation of Braund.'

'On a nice, sticky pitch,' I replied, being the Peter Baynes alluded to and the slow bowler of the Hall team, 'with a hot sun drying it up while you look at it, I'll see what I can do for you. But if the wicket's going to be the mixture of concrete and granite it was this afternoon, gallery performances are off and I shall take to golf.'

For the Hall ground on a day such as we had just had was enough to break the heart of any slow bowler, who likes assistance from the pitch when he embarks upon his duties. The combination of good wicket and short boundaries had done neither myself nor my analysis any good that afternoon.

'Did your father read the prayer for rain last Sunday?' asked Melhuish in his solemn way.

'Yes,' I said, 'he did.'

'Good!' said Melhuish. 'We shall need it.'

The door opened as he spoke, and Wentworth Flood came in. Flood was a man I cordially disliked, and I have reason to believe that my feelings were shared by at least a good working majority of those present. How he came to be tame cat in a house the very atmosphere of which breathed sport, I had never been able to understand. I take it, however, that women, however many sons they may have playing in first-class cricket, and however interested they may be in the game, cherish a secret liking for a man who can always be relied on to make himself useful in the drawing-room instead of seeking his pleasure out-of-doors.

Wentworth Flood dressed well, looked neat, never broke things, handled tea-cups admirably, played a number of card-games with more than average skill, acted if there were theatricals, and was always ready to play an accompaniment on the mandolin; so, I suppose, Lady Heath saw reasons for having him about the house which we did not.

He was a small man, with an almost irritating lack of anything wrong in his personal appearance. His hair was parted exactly in the middle. His tie was tied with a nicety which almost suggested the made-up article. His voice was 'ever soft, gentle, and low,' which, though it may be an 'excellent thing in a woman,' is not such an endearing quality in man.

'Been playing bridge, Flood?' asked Dalgliesh, breaking one of those awkward pauses which occur when the uncongenial spirit breaks in upon the social gathering.

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'No,' said Flood precisely. 'I have not been playing bridge. I have been playing the mandolin.'

There did not seem much that could be said by way of comment on this. Somehow the mention of mandolins in the middle of the profound and serious discussion of a cricket match struck us as almost blasphemous. Dalglish snorted, and Manners, whose turn it was to play, nearly cut the cloth. Otherwise there was no attempt at criticism.

'Tommy Heath tells me we shall win the cricket match tomorrow,' said Flood, after a silence lasting for the space of two strokes of the cue.

'So we shall,' said Dalglish, 'if it rains.'

'But I thought you could not play cricket in the rain?'

'No, but rain occasionally stops, and then the wicket gets soft,' said Manners.

'And then Baynes leaves off those half-volleys which worry Sir John's nesting pheasants,' said Dalglish, 'and gets some work on the ball.'

'But why should it matter if the ground is soft?' inquired Flood.

'Because,' I said, 'a merciful Providence, watching over slow bowlers, has ordained that batsmen make fewer runs on a soft pitch, and get out quicker. That's why.'

Flood looked thoughtful, and I noticed that he went to the window, and stood for some time gazing at the sky. At the moment I wondered why, and what possible interest he could take in the weather. A drawing-room is just as pleasant on a wet as on a dry day.

It was at eleven o'clock, when I left the billiard-room to begin my homeward journey, that I found out his reason. In the hall I met Tommy Heath. He looked worried and rather pale.

'Going already?' he said, 'It's quite early. Come for a bit of a stroll with me first. I've got something I want to tell you.'

We walked slowly round to the back of the house, and came to an anchor on a garden-seat that stood against the wall, facing the Park.

'Well?' I said.

Tommy and I had been to different schools, and I was some years his senior, but we had known one another since his sailor-suit days; and we generally told each other things.

Tommy lit a cigarette, an act which would possibly have disturbed his headmaster if he had seen it.

'I'm in rather a hole,' he said.

'What's up now?' I asked.

'It's that man Flood. Hope he's not a friend of yours, by the way?'

'Not in the very least,' I said. 'Don't let that worry you. What has Flood been doing to you?'

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'Well, it was like this. He'd been trying to be funny the whole evening, and then he started shooting off his confounded epigrams about cricket. I'm hanged if I can remember how it all came about, but we met [Image] on the stairs going to the drawing-room, and he began chipping the Hall team. Beastly bad form, considering I was captain. I couldn't think of anything much to say, don't you know, but I had to say something, so I said: "Well, I bet you ten to one the Hall wins tomorrow, whatever you think of the team."' "

'What happened then? That wouldn't squash him.' [Image] 'It didn't,' said Tommy briefly. 'The man took me up like a shot, "Ten to one?" he said. I believe he's a Jew. He looked just like one. "Ten to one? In what? Shall we say fivers?'"

I sat up.

'You don't mean to say you were idiot enough to make it fivers?' I said.

'Not so loud, man,' said Tommy, 'I don't want everyone to hear. Yes, I was. I don't know why I did it. I must have been cracked. But, somehow, looking at him standing there, and knowing that I should feel scored off if I backed out, I said, yes, fivers if he liked. Do you know, the man actually planked it down in a beastly little pocket-book, and asked me to initial it. So, there you are. That's the situation. And if we don't win tomorrow I'm in for rather a pleasant thing.'

'But, Tommy,' I gasped, 'this is absurd! You haven't got fifty pounds in the world. Suppose we lose tomorrow? And we probably shall if it don't rain tonight. What will you do?'

'Oh, it's simple enough. I shall go to the governor. I've got a couple of hundred quid in the bank, but I can't draw without his leave. He'll want to know why I'm asking for a big sum like that. I shall tell him it's for a bet.'

'And then what?' I said.

'And then he'll give me the fifty pounds, and not let me go to the 'Varsity. Ever since he had to pay up for Ronald's Oxford debts he ran them up a bit, as you probably remember he's told us plainly that the first sign we show of not being able to take care of money scratches us as far as the 'Varsity's concerned. Jack had to be awfully careful when he went up. That's what'll happen.'

I was silent, I knew that he had set his heart on going up to Oxford and adding a third to the family list of cricket Blues. And I knew that Sir John, rigid as steel in matters of this sort, would keep his word.

'You can't back out?' I said at length. 'Flood surely must know that ten to one was simply a way of speaking. He can't imagine that you were really offering him odds.'

'Of course he didn't,' said Tommy bitterly. 'Flood's not a fool. He's the other thing. But, all the same, I can't get out of it now. I'm not going to give a man like Flood the whip-hand of me, even if I lose my chance of a Blue through it. There's only one way out. We must win tomorrow.'

'I wish we could water that wicket,' I said. 'If only that infernal concrete turf would get a soaking I could make the ball do a bit. As it is, I'm helpless.'

I made my way across the Park in a very gloomy frame of mind. It was warmer than ever. The sky was inky black, except when a flash of summer lightning lit it up. I knew every inch of the Park, or I might not have been able to find my way.

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My nearest path lay across the cricket-field. When I got to the pitch where we had been playing that afternoon I stopped. But for the white creases, which showed faintly through the darkness, I should have passed by without seeing it. I stooped, and pressed a finger into the turf. It was dry as tinder. On such a wicket, with a whole day in which to make the runs, the Incogniti could hardly help winning, even if our tail were to wag more energetically than the most sanguine among us hoped.

Poor Tommy's chances of a Blue seemed small. Somehow, perhaps on account of the excitement of the day or the electricity with which the thunder-clouds filled the air, I felt disinclined for bed. The church clock struck half-past eleven. I sat down by the side of the pitch and lit my pipe. It was pleasant, if a little eerie, out there in the middle of the Park. I sat on where I was long after my pipe had gone out, listening dreamily to the thousand and one faint noises of a summer night.

I think I must have been falling asleep, when suddenly a new sound came to my ears, and I was broad awake in a moment. It was none of those thousand and one noises which are all unaccountable yet not startling. It was the soft tread of a human foot on the turf, and a heavy breathing, as of one working hard. I could just see a dim figure coming slowly towards me. A few yards away it halted, and I heard a thud, as it set down its burden on the ground.

It was the noise that followed the thud that made me dart forward so rapidly. It was the unmistakable sloppy splash of water forced out of the spout of a can. I realised the situation at once. Somebody had come to water the wicket.

I am glad to say that I abandoned the notion that it was Tommy a clear three seconds before I became aware of the criminal's real identity. I felt instinctively that it would take a deal more than the thought of his bet to make him sink to such depths.

'Oh!' gasped a frightened voice. 'Who's that?'

I recognised the voice. The intruder was the youngest of the four Heaths; Tommy's sister Ella.

'Ella!' I cried. 'What on earth?'

I heard her draw a long breath of relief. 'Oh, is that you, Peter? How you frightened me!'

'What are you doing out here at this time of night?'

'It was so hot, I couldn't sleep. I '

'And what is that can for?' I inquired coolly.

'I don't care!' she said defiantly. 'I meant to do it, and I would have done it if you hadn't caught me. Don't glare at me like that, Peter. I don't care a bit. I heard every word you and poor old Tommy were saying. You didn't know my bedroom window was over that seat. I heard you say that you wished you could water the pitch. It's no use looking shocked, Peter, because I'm not sorry. Not a bit.'

The main points of the affair had found their way to my understanding by now. I was conscious of a curious, dazed feeling. It was like a vivid dream.

'But, Ella,' I said at last, 'it's impossible. You can't have understood. Don't you see what a frightful thing It isn't as if you knew nothing about cricket. You know as well as I do what it means to doctor the pitch between the innings.'

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'I don't care!' she repeated. 'I would do anything to save Tommy from that *beast*, Mr Flood.

'As if Tommy wouldn't rather lose his Blue a hundred times sooner than be saved like that.'

There was a pause.

'Peter.'

'Well?'

'You know you know you said you'd do anything for me?'

I may state here briefly that, like the great majority of the youth of the neighbourhood, I was head over ears in love with Tommy's sister Ella. The occasion to which she referred had been a painful one for me. We had been sitting out the eighth waltz in the conservatory on the night of the Hunt Ball. To put the thing in a nutshell, I had proposed with all the clumsy energy of an enthusiastic novice, and had been rejected.

'You know you did.'

I said nothing.

There was a very long pause.

'Peter!' said a still small voice.

'Yes?' I said,

'Don't you think just *one* canful?'

I am ashamed to say that for a single moment I wavered. I verily believe that Mr Apted of the Oval would have thought seriously about ruining one of his masterpieces if the request had come to him in such a form. But I rallied myself.

'Let me just sketch for you,' I said, in the calm, dispassionate voice of a professor lecturing on astrology or some kindred subject, 'what would be the result of that canful. We should probably win the match. Tommy would win his bet, and go to Oxford. Every single man in the Incogniti team would see that the wicket had been tampered with, and every single man would be too polite to say a word about it. But, little by little the story would get about, and after that I should imagine that the teams which come here during the Hall week would have previous engagements for a few years. When Tommy went away to play in matches, people would ask one another if he was one of the Heaths of that place where they water the wicket when it suits their fancy. And then '

'Peter, stop!'

I stopped.

'Would you mind carrying that can to the stable-yard, please?'

I took up the can.

'Good-night!' I said.

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'Come back. Listen! I I'm very grateful to you, Peter. You've saved me from disgracing the family. I'm very, very grateful to you!'

I murmured inarticulately. Then I started, for something wet had fallen upon my hand. From every side came a faint patter, growing in volume with each succeeding second. A warm rivulet trickled between my collar and my neck.

'By George!' I cried, 'here's the rain!'

And, indeed, the downpour had begun in earnest. We were standing in a vast shower-bath.

'You must go in at once!' I said. 'You'll be catching cold.'

'Peter!'

I stopped.

'You *will* bowl your best tomorrow, won't you?'

'That is my present intention,' I said.

There was a pause, broken by the swishing of the rain on to the turf.

'Peter, I you know sometimes I don't always say what what I mean.'

Another pause.

'If you save Tommy tomorrow, I'll '

'Will you?' I said eagerly.

'I'll see,' said Ella, and vanished into the darkness in the direction of the Hall.

At three-fifty on the following afternoon Mr Wentworth Flood lost five pounds, which annoyed him. At precisely the same moment I won something of a greater value, which pleased me very much.