LADIES AND GENTLEMEN V. PLAYERS

P. G. WODEHOUSE

Table of Contents

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN V. PLAYERS

P. G. WODEHOUSE

Etext by Dagny
and the Blandings Group

Quite without meaning it, I really won the Gentlemen *v.* Players match the summer I was eighteen. They don't say anything about me in the reports, but all the time I was really the thingummy the iron hand behind the velvet glove, or something. That's not it, but it's something of the sort. What I mean is, if it hadn't been for me, the Gentlemen would never have won. My cousin Bill admits this.

I cut the report of the match out of the *Telegraph*. The part where I come into it begins like this: '. . . After lunch, however, a complete change comes over the game. A change frequently comes over a game of cricket after lunch, but it is usually to the disadvantage of the batting side. In this case, however, the reverse happened. Up to the interval the Gentlemen, who had gone in to make three hundred and fourteen in the fourth innings of the match, had succeeded in compiling one hundred and ten, losing in the process the valuable wickets of Fry, Jackson, Spooner, and MacLaren. As N. A. Knox, who had been sent in first on the previous evening to play out the twenty minutes that remained before the drawing of stumps, had succumbed to a combination of fading light and one of Hirst's swervers in the last over on Friday, the Gentlemen, with five wickets in hand, were faced with the task of notching two hundred and four runs in order to secure the victory. At lunchtime the position seemed hopeless. Two hundred and four is not a large score as scores go nowadays; but against this had to be placed the fact that Batkins, the Sussex professional, who had been drafted into the team at the eleventh hour, was scoring the proverbial success which attends eleventh−hour choices. From the press box, indeed, his bowling during the half−dozen overs before lunch appeared literally unplayable. The ball with which he dismissed MacLaren must have come back three inches. The wicket, too, was giving him just that assistance which a fast bowler needs, and he would have been a courageous man who would have asserted that the Gentlemen might even yet make a game of it. Immediately upon the re−start, however, the fortunes of the game veered completely round, Batkins' deliveries were wild and inaccurate, and the two batsmen, Riddell and James Douglas, speedily took advantage of this slice of luck. So much at home did they become that, scoring at a rapid rate, they remained together till the match was won, the Oxonian making the winning hit shortly before a quarter to six. The crowd, which was one of the largest we have ever seen at a Gentlemen *v.* Players match, cheered this wonderful performance to the echo. Douglas, the alteration in whose scholastic duties enabled him for the first time to turn out for the Gentlemen, made a number of lovely strokes in the course of his eighty−one. But even his performance was eclipsed by Riddell's great century. Without giving the semblance of a chance, he hit freely all round the wicket, two huge straight drives off successive balls from Batkins landing among the members' seats. When next our cousins from "down under" pay us a visit, we shall be surprised if Riddell does not show them . . .'

The rest is all about what Bill will do when he plays against Australia. Riddell is Bill. He is Aunt Edith's son, He is at New College, Oxford. Father says he is the best bat Oxford have had since he was up. But if you had seen him at lunch that day, you would never have dreamed of his making a century, or even double figures.

If you read what I wrote once about a thing that happened at our cricket week, you will remember who Batkins is. He came down to play for Sir Edward Cave's place against Much Middleford last year, and got everybody out

except father, who made forty−nine not out. And he didn't get father out because I got my maid Saunders, whom he was in love with, to get him to bowl easy to father so that he could make fifty. He didn't make fifty, because the last man got out before he could; but it was all right. Anyhow, that's who Batkins was.

Perhaps you think that I tried the same thing again, and got Saunders to ask him to bowl easy to my cousin Bill in the Gentlemen *v.* Players match. But I didn't. I don't suppose he would have bowled badly in a big match like that for anyone, even Saunders. Besides, he and Saunders weren't on speaking terms at the time.

And that's really how the whole thing happened.

I really came into the story one night just before I was going to bed. Saunders was doing my hair. I was rather sleepy, and I was half dozing, when suddenly I heard a sort of curious sound behind me a kind of mixture of a sniff and a gulp. I looked in the glass, and there was the reflection of Saunders with a sort of stuffed look about the face. Just then she looked up, and our eyes met in the glass. Hers were all reddy.

I said: 'Saunders!'

'Yes, miss.'

'What's the matter?'

'Matter, miss? Nothing, miss.'

'Why are you crying?'

She stiffened up and tried to look dignified. I wish she hadn't because she was holding a good deal of my hair at the time, and she pulled it hard.

'Crying, miss! I wouldn't demean myself no, I wouldn't.'

So I didn't say anything more for a bit, and she went on brushing my hair.

After about half a minute there was another gulp, I turned round.

'Look here, Saunders,' I said, 'you might as well tell me. You'll hurt yourself if you don't. What is up?'

(Because Saunders had always looked after me, long before I had my hair up when I had it right down, not even tied half−way with a black ribbon. So we were rather friends.)

'You might say. I won't tell a soul.'

Then there was rather a ghark. A ghark is anything that makes you feel horrid and uncomfortable. It was a word invented by some girls I know, the Moncktons, and it supplied a long−felt want. It is a ghark if you ask somebody how somebody else is, and it turns out that they hate them or that they're dead. If you hurt anybody's feelings by accident, it is a ghark. This was one, because Saunders suddenly gave up all attempt at keeping it in, and absolutely howled. I sat there, not knowing what to do, and feeling wretched.

After a bit she got better, and then she told me what was the matter. She had had a quarrel with Mr Batkins, and all was over, and he had gone off, and she had not seen him since.

'I didn't know, miss, he'd take on so about me talking to Mr Harry Biggs when we met in the village. But he says: "Ellen," he says, "I must ask you to choose between that" then he called him names, miss "and me." "William," I says to him, "I won't 'ave such language from no man, I won't," I says, "not even if he is my *fiance*," I says. So he says: "Promise me you won't speak to him again." So I says: "I won't, and don't you expect it." "Won't what?" he says, "won't speak?" "No," I says, "won't promise." "Ho!" he says, "so this is the end, is it? All's over, is it?" So I says: "Yes, William Batkins," I says, "all is over; and here's your ring what you gave me, and the photograph of yourself in a locket. And very ugly it is," I says; "and don't you come 'anging round me again," I says. And so he rushed out and never came back.'

She broke down once more at the thought of it.

This was the worst ghark I had ever had; because I couldn't think how I could make the thing better.

'Why don't you write to him?' I asked.

'I wouldn't demean myself, miss, And I don't know his address.'

'He plays for a county, so I suppose a letter addressed care of the county ground would reach him. I remember being told which county, but I've forgotten it. Do you know?'

'No, miss. He told me it was a first−class one, but I don't remember which it was.'

'Well, I'll look at the paper tomorrow, and see. He is sure to be playing.'

But though I looked all through the cricket page, I could not find him.

That was Wednesday. On Thursday, my brother Bob arrived from London, bringing with him a friend of his, a Mr Townend, who said he was an artist, but I had never seen any of his pictures. He explained this at dinner. He said that he spent the winter thinking out schemes for big canvases, and in the summer he was too busy playing cricket to be able to get to work on them.

'I say, we've been up at Lord's today,' he said. He was a long, pleasant−looking young man, with a large smile and unbrushed hair. 'Good game, rather. Er um Gentlemen'll have all their work cut out to win, I think.'

'Ah!' said father. 'Gentlemen *v.* Players, eh? My young nephew Willie is playing. Been doing well for Oxford this season W. B. Riddell.'

'Oh, I say, really? Good field. Players batted first. Fiery wicket, but it'll wear well, I think. Er um Johnny Knox was making them get up at the nursery end rather, but Tyldesley seems to be managing 'em all right. Made fifty when we left. Looked like stopping. By the way, friend of yours was playing for the pros Billy Batkins, the Sussex man. Bob was telling me that you knocked the cover off him down here last summer.

Father beamed.

'Oh!' he said. 'Good deal of luck in it, of course. I managed to make a few.'

'Forty−nine not out,' I said, 'and a splendid innings, too.'

'Oh, I say, really?' said Mr Townend, stretching out a long, thin hand in the direction of the strawberries. 'Takes some doing, that. You know, they only put him into the team at the last moment. But if anyone's going to win the match for them, it'll be he. Just suit him, the wicket ought to, on the last day.'

'Regular Day of Judgment for the Gentlemen,' said Bob. 'Somebody ought to run up to town and hold Bill's hand while he bats, to encourage him.'

I said: 'Father, mayn't I go up to London tomorrow? You know Aunt Edith said only the other day that she wished you would let me. And I *should* like to see Bill bat.'

Father looked disturbed. Any sudden proposal confuses him. And I could see that he was afraid that if I went, he might have to go too. And he hates London.

I didn't say anything more just then; but after dinner, when Bob and Mr Townend were playing billiards, I went to his study and asked him again.

'I should love to go,' I said, sitting on the arm of his chair. 'There's really no need for you to come, if you don't want to. Saunders could go with me.'

'It's uncommonly short notice for your aunt, my dear,' said father doubtfully.

'*She* won't mind. She's always got tons of room. And she said come whenever I liked. And Bill would be awfully pleased, wouldn't he?'

'Only make him nervous.'

I said: 'Oh, no. He'd like it. Well, may I?'

I kissed father on the top of the head, and he said I might.

So next day up I went with Saunders, feeling like a successful general.

I got there just before dinner. I found my cousin Bill rather depressed. He had come back from Lord's, where the Gentlemen had been getting the worst of it. The Players had made three hundred and thirty something, and the Gentlemen had made two hundred and twenty−three. Then the Players had gone in again and made two hundred and six, which wasn't good, Bill said, but left the Gentlemen more than three hundred behind.

'And we lost one wicket tonight,' he said, 'for nine; and the pitch is getting beastly. We shall never make the runs.'

'How many did you make, Bill?'

'Ten. Run out. And I particularly wanted to get a few. Just like my luck.'

I asked Aunt Edith afterwards why Bill had been so keen on making runs in this match more than any other, and she said it was because it was the biggest match he had ever played in. But Bill told me the real reason before breakfast the next morning. He was engaged, and she had come to watch him play.

'And I made a measly ten!' said Bill, 'If I don't do something this innings, I shall never be able to look her in the face again. And I know she thinks a lot of my batting. She told me so. It's probably been an eye−opener for her.'

'Poor old Bill!' I said. 'Perhaps you'll do better today.'

'I feel as if I should never make a run again,' he said.

But he did.

I thought it all over that night. Of course, the difficult part was how to let Mr Batkins know that Saunders wanted everything to be forgiven and forgotten. Because he would be out in the field all the time.

I said to Bill: 'You'll be seeing Mr Batkins, the bowler, tomorrow, won't you?'

He said: 'Yes, worse luck, I shall.'

'Then look here, Bill,' I said, 'will you do me a favour? I want to speak to him particularly. Can I, do you think? Can you make him come and talk to me?'

'You can take a man from the pavilion,' said Bill, 'but you can't make him talk. What do you want him for?'

'It's private.'

'You're not after his autograph, are you?'

'Of course I'm not. Why should I want his autograph?'

'Some kids would give their eyes for it. They shoot in picture−postcards to all the leading pros, and make them sign 'em.'

I said nothing, but I did not like Bill hinting that I was a kid; because I'm not. I've had my hair up more than a year now.

I said: 'Well, I don't, anyhow. I simply want to speak to him.'

'Shy bird, Batkins. Probably if he hears that there's a lady waiting to see him, he'll lock himself in the changing−room and refuse to come out. Still, I'll have a try. During the lunch interval would be best just before they go onto the field.'

Then I arranged it with Saunders.

I said: 'I shall be seeing Mr Batkins tomorrow, Saunders. If you like, I'll give him a note from you, and wait for an answer.'

'Oh, miss!' said Saunders.

'Then you can say what you like about wanting to make it up, without the ghark of doing it to his face. And if it's all right, which it's certain to be, I'll tell him to come round to Sloane Street after the match, and have some supper, and it'll all be ripping. I'm sure Aunt Edith won't mind.'

Then there was another ghark. Saunders broke down again and got quite hysterical, and said I was too good to her, and she wouldn't demean herself, and she didn't know what to write, and she was sure she would never speak to him again, were it ever so, and she'd go and get the note ready now, and heaps of other things. And when she was better, she went downstairs to write to Mr Batkins.

I believe she found it very difficult to make up the letter, because I didn't see her again that night, and she only gave it to me when we came home for lunch next day. We had decided to take Bill home in the motor to lunch, unless he had gone in in the morning and was not out, when he wouldn't have time. We sat in the seats to the right of the pavilion. The girl Bill was engaged to was there, with her mother, and I was introduced to her. She was very anxious that Bill should make lots of runs. She was a very nice girl. I only wished I could use my influence

with Mr Batkins, as I had done before, to make him bowl badly. But he did just the opposite. They put him on after about half an hour, and everybody said he was bowling splendidly. It got rather dull, because the batsmen didn't seem able to make any runs, and they wouldn't hit out. I thought our matches at home were much more interesting. Everybody tries to hit there.

Bill was in the pavilion all the morning; but when the umpires took the bails off, he came out to us, and we all went back in the motor. Bill was more gloomy than I had ever seen him.

'It's a little hard,' he said. 'Just when Hirst happens to have an off−day he was bowling tosh this morning and the wicket doesn't suit Rhodes, and one thinks one really has got a chance of taking a few, this man Batkins starts and bowls about fifty per cent above his proper form. Did you see that ball that got MacLaren? It was the sort of beastly thing you get in nightmares. Fast as an express and coming in half a foot. If Batkins doesn't get off his length after lunch, we're cooked. And he's a teetotaller, too!'

I tried to cheer him up by talking about the girl he was engaged to, but it only made him worse.

'And it's in front of a girl like that,' he said, 'who believes in a chap, too, mind you, that I'm probably going to make a beastly exhibition of myself. That ball of Billy Batkins'll get me five times out of six. And the sixth time, too.'

Saunders gave me the letter as I was going out. I reminded Bill that he had promised to get hold of Mr Batkins for me.

'I'd forgotten,' he said. 'All right. When we get to the ground, come along with me.'

So we left Aunt Edith in the covered seats and walked round to behind the pavilion.

'Wait here a second,' said Bill. 'I'll send him out. You'll have to hurry up with whatever you're going to say to him, because the Players will be taking the field in about three minutes.'

I waited there, prodding the asphalt with my parasol, and presently Mr Batkins appeared, blushing violently and looking very embarrassed.

'Did you want to see me, miss?' he said. I said 'Yes,' feeling rather gharked and not knowing how to begin.

'You're Mr Batkins, aren't you?' I said at last. It was rather silly, because he couldn't very well be anybody else.

'You played against us last summer,' I said, 'for Sir Edward Cave, at Much Middlefold.'

He started. I suppose the name made him think of Saunders.

The bell began ringing in the pavilion. He shuffled his feet. The spikes made a horrid noise on the asphalt, like a squeaking slate−pencil.

'Was there anything?' he said. 'I shall have to be going out in a minute to bowl.' He pronounced it as if it rhymed with 'fowl'.

So I saw there was no time to waste, and I plunged straight into the thing.

I said: 'You know Saunders doesn't really care a bit for Mr Harry Biggs. She told me so.'

He turned crimson, He had been rather red before, but nothing to this.

'Me and Ellen, miss ' he began.

'Oh, I know,' I said. 'She has told me all about it. She's awfully miserable, Mr Batkins. And she would have written long before, to make it up, only she didn't know your address. I've got a letter from her here, which '

He simply grabbed the letter and tore it open. I wish I knew what was in it. He read it again and again, breathing very hard, and really looking almost as if he were going to cry.

'Can I tell Saunders it's all right?' I said.

He wouldn't answer for an age. He kept on reading the letter. Then he said: 'Oh, yes, miss,' very fervently. He was what Bob calls 'absolutely rattled.' I suppose he must have been fretting awfully all the time, really, only he wouldn't write and tell Saunders so, but let concealment, like a worm i' the bud, feed on his damask cheek.

(I used to know the whole bit once, to say by heart, I learned it when I did lessons, before I put my hair up. But I've forgotten all but that one piece now.)

'And you'll come to supper tonight? You've got the address on the letter. It's on the right−hand side of Sloane Street, as you go down.'

'Oh, yes, miss. Thank you, miss.'

And off he dashed in a great hurry, because the Players were just going out into the field.

So that's why Batkins' deliveries were 'wild and inaccurate' after lunch. Poor man, he was so flurried by the whole thing that he could hardly bowl at all. The bowler at the other end got a man caught in his first over, and then Bill went in. And Bill hit him in all directions. It was a lovely innings. I don't think I ever enjoyed one more not even father's forty−nine not out against the Cave men. They took poor Mr Batkins off after a time, but Bill was set by then, and they couldn't get him out. He went on and on, till at last he got his century and won the match. And everybody rushed across the ground from the cheap seats, and stood by the pavilion railings, yelling. And Bill had to lean out of a window and bow.

'I withdraw what I said about friend Batkins being a teetotaller,' said Bill after dinner that night to me. 'No man could have bowled as rottenly as he did after lunch, on lemonade. It was the sort of stuff you get in a village game very fast and beautifully inaccurate,'

Then I told him how it had happened, and he owned that his suspicions were unjust. We were in the drawing−room at the fire. The drawing−room is just over the kitchen. Bill stretched out his hands, palms downwards, and looked at the floor.

'Bless you, my children!' he said.

Bill is really an awfully good sort. When I was leaving Aunt Edith's, he came up and gave me a mysterious little paper parcel. I opened it, and inside it was a jeweller's cardboard box. And inside that, in cotton wool, was the duckiest little golden bat.

'A presentation bat,' he explained, 'because you made a century for Gentlemen *v.* Players.'