

THE LAST WICKET

(By Tim Wise).

The promise of a keen contest was broken when the opposing team suddenly collapsed bringing the game to a spiritless conclusion: yet for all that a few players dallied around and later regretfully left the ground and with reluctant step strolled homewards.

The game in the adjoining enclosure was still in progress and as these enthusiasts walked round the path which encircled the field they came upon another group, members of the batting eleven, whose eager anxious attitude betrayed the unsatisfactory course which the game was taking, before a jerky sentence or so revealed the actual state of affairs to the newcomers.

"Our side eighty one for eight wickets. . . . ten minutes to go. . . . a hundred and sixty odd against us. . . . can't win and we'll be lucky to play out time."

Even as the enthusiasts ranged themselves along the fence to watch the outcome they heard a sharp, triumphant yell from the field—

"Ah!—well caught, Birrell!"

and a disappointed sigh from their gloomy neighbours as their fellow player walker from the wicket.

Nine for ninety-two. Spectators and players alike are at high tension now. There is an occasional manifestation of ill-feeling. It is fortunate that the chief control of the game is in the hands of an old-timer of the game, an acknowledged leader, whose fairmindedness neither team would question.

Now the last man goes out to bat. Whoever in any game has confidence in the last man? How then can he be expected to have faith in himself? And what could this man do? To win is a physical impossibility, and a draw is almost as unlikely, for according to agreement the game must go on until time is called: and twilight is here with the air thick with bush fire smoke. Even yet there is time for several overs; the bowling is good and the fielders as keen as mustard.

Yet none of these things trouble the last man as he goes to the pitch. He exchanges lively banter with a friendly rival before taking his guard. Just his luck, of course, that he must take an over from the bowler at the top end, a lefthander, who is in deadly form today. Here he comes now towards the wicket with that uneven jogtrot, and a tantalizing hesitant delivery as though he takes aim before delivering the ball.

"Watch your off-stump, Mr. Last Man! Ward's ball may pitch well to the off but remember it comes in a line from his arm which is wide of the wicket and may come across enough to just hit your stumps!"

The batsman plays forward and smothers the ball. Ball after ball he meets with the same easy confidence. Encouraging shouts arise from his fellow players who are all hoping that he can so manoeuvre the running as to get the bowling at both ends. Such is their faith in him from the first over.

His captain restlessly paces the cinder track which borders the field, nervously kicking bits of cinder about, his eyes fixed on the ground, and talking to himself loud enough for the last man to hear.

"Oh, I wouldn't call that blocking the ball, old man!" he calls, for the batsman, meeting a half-volley from Ward, smites it high and afar so that the ball hits the distant boundary fence with a sharp bang.

The fielding team changes over on the run, saving precious moments. There is an over from the bottom end in which a hard chance is given and lost. As the fielders cross again the senior umpire strides over from square leg to the wicket and the crowd hears him call to his colleague:

"Last Over, Mr. Umpire."

The last over and it is at such a moment as this that a small boy comes rushing up to one of the enthusiasts, as breathless with suspense, he hangs over the fence.

"Dad! Da-ad! mother is way off down near the car with the baby. We're waiting on you!"

There and then the infatuated soul voluntarily bankrupts himself of these precious possessions. His offspring shrinks beneath the glowering look which greets his ill-timed interruption.

The Last Over.

Even yet there is a chance of victory for the fielding team for it is Ward's turn with the ball. He has kept his length and is always dangerous. But it is the last man who faces him again and patiently, confidently, skillfully as ever, he guards his wicket. His captain, who has been anxiously counting each ball as it is delivered, suddenly looks up from his prolonged inspection of the track and stands at the edge of the turf.

"Last ball, old man," he calls. "Last ball. Hold it now!"

Leaning forward the spectators strain their eyes as the bowler comes down. All that the keenest sight can discern is the swing of the arm of the bowler and then the swaying figure of the batsman as he meets the ball.

"Oh, well played Fletcher!"

Now the players hurry from the field but the spectators wait long enough to applause generously the man whose gallant stand has furnished them with the thrill of a glorious moment of sport and saved his side from defeat.

At the fence that prodigal father—the enthusiast comes to himself and penitently taking his son by the hand he makes haste to seek forgiveness from one who sits afar off waiting—not very patiently—for his coming.

At Harvest Time.

(By Ellice Biggam, San Francisco, California.)

Murmurs the summer so wistfully
Over the restless wheat—
"Where are the reapers?" No more the earth
Sounds to their noisy feet.
Old days were full with the toil they spent
But many a lazy noon
Echoed a song from the maple's shade
A mouth-organ's sobbing tune.

"My bonnie lies over the ocean;

"My bonnie lies over the sea;

"My bonnie lies over the ocean;

"Oh bring back my bonnie to me."

Strong—from the camps of the timber belts
Young—from the homestead farms
In the time when Achievement lay asleep,
Locked in the earth's great arms.
Yearly they flocked where the golden plains
Tendered their hard-won pay.
They were the sons of the pioneers—
(Brothers of mine were they).

The sun to the southward was creeping;

The fair days no longer might be—

My bonnie came home from the reaping

My bonnie went over the sea—

Where are the reapers? The season calls.
Nations are wanting bread—
Faithfully under the noonday sun
The maple's shade is spread—
Over the harvest a wind of dawn
Sighs for their homing again;
While far in alien fields they sleep
Beside the whitening grain.

My bonnie lies over the ocean

My bonnie lies over the sea.

The care, and the yield of the harvest

My bonnie has left them to me.