

way to offer you a salvo for all your wounds: to cover your head with an undying wreath, and make you the envy of all the clubs in the universe, both single and married, and the desired of all 'clever,' however celebrated.

"My terms are as low as possible for such a large grant, and I am prepared to qualify you in the twinkling of an eye, and make you second to none. I feel you will be slow in belief of my power to do so, but the bond shall be drawn up so that if you do not become what I promise you you shall be, the penalty of the bond becomes null and void.

"As you wish, as you will sign a bond that will not touch or endanger any of your worldly goods, but merely to consign yourself to me after death, I am ready to perform my part of the bargain without delay. To-morrow, I know, you are engaged with your eleven to play an eleven that has always thrashed yours most heartily, and indeed, feels a contempt for you as a club. Now, what would you not give to be the main instrument of their downfall to-morrow, and of achieving a grand triumph before the multitude which is expected on the ground. I have the power to make you do so if you come to my terms. If you do not do as I promise you, your part of the agreement becomes mere waste paper—think."

As he concluded, he threw himself back in the chair and smiled in my face.

There certainly was a curious, creeping feeling over my flesh when his hand touched my knee, and I felt alarmed when I found that his face never, with the exception of the smile, remained for one instant alike. What could he be? The devil? ridiculous! What could he be then?—a hoaxer, no doubt. My anger instantly rose, and I felt inclined to knock him down, but was much astonished and alarmed to find that I had not the power to do so. Yet I thought if such a thing were possible that he had the power to endow me with a conquering arm, how gladly would I consent to his terms, to triumph over those whose scorn had placed a burning brand in my bosom. As these thoughts rushed hurriedly through my brain, he fixed his eyes upon me with a most unmistakably sarcastic look.

"I perceive," said he, "that it is not my terms, but my ability you doubt; but I can assure you that, although I cannot give you any references as to character from individuals who have dealt with me, as my transactions always speak for themselves; it being always 'no cure no pay' with me; for my bond is nothing unless I fulfil my contract to the letter—you may place full confidence in me. On my own part I will take care of myself.

"If you will allow me to show you an article I have here, manufactured by myself, I think you may do business together." As he spoke, he unfolded a parcel which he drew from an unconspicuously long tail pocket. He unrolled the different wrappers in the most tradesmanlike manner, and at last discovered to my astonished eyes, a remarkable-looking cricket-bat.

"This article," continued he, "I can offer you, with the positive assurance of its being in every way all right; warranted never to miss, and make nothing under a three-run hit; so that you may remain in as long as you wish, or as your legs will allow you. This bat has belonged to all the celebrated cricketers of the day, who have all dealt with me more or less. The hotter the day the better will this bat play; as that kind of atmosphere suits the wood of which it is composed. This is the secret of the apparent madness, to the uninitiated, of men choosing to play a match when the heat has been almost intolerable; in fact, warm enough to drive a negro to the shade of a palm-tree. Look at the result. Not a knot disfigures its smooth surface—the handle lazed to a miracle; and the slight and graceful turn of the back vies with the beautiful line of the Venus de Medici, but its beauty is its least merit.

"Here's the bat. Here's the little agreement," continued he, pushing the bat into my unnerred hands, and placing a small slip of paper before

me. "Sign it, the bat is yours until I want it again. No qualmishness I beg, for I really have too much to do to wait for your wavering resolution."

An odd sort of vertigo seemed to be reeling my head round as I almost unconsciously took the pen in my hand. I signed the paper. I saw the signature was red, and supposed I had dipped by mistake in the red-ink bottle. As I finished my last down stroke the paper slipped from under the nib of my pen, and I was alone. I heard no door close—no creaking footstep; but my friend had gone. But there was the bat firmly grasped in my hand, and the moonlight shined on my writing table.

The next morning dawned. How sweet and refreshing was the morning air to my fevered head! I prepared for my jaunt to join my club, as I had promised ever and anon looking to see that the strange-looking bat had not vanished. But no—there it stood, in all its perfect beauty, and I had not been deceived. How extraordinary! Would it do all that had been promised? Should I have the glory of seeing my rivals' chagrin? It did not seem possible; it was some dream. Devils no longer came visibly upon earth to tempt mortals. Besides, I had never heard of a cricket-king devil!

But devil or no devil, there was a bat of unexampled beauty; so, *nil desperandum*, I must go—I must play—my fate was sealed. I packed up all my traps and prepared to depart, but found the door locked inside as usual. A shudder came over me at the discovery. I felt that my friend of the bat must have been more than mortal to have entered through the keyhole; and there was the chair placed exactly as he had taken it from its usual standing, and sat down in it. "What's done cannot be undone," I muttered to myself, with no pleasant feeling, as I shouldered my bat and emerged from my chamber.

I soon reached the place of rendezvous, and was greeted by the merry voices of my companions, who were already seated on the coach which was to convey us to our place of destination. They bantered me upon my dilatoriness, and the fear they were in that such a valuable member should be missing at the muster to meet our formidable opponents; at the same time hoping that I had saved up my runs for to-day, as I had not used up any the day before.

I bore all this like a martyr, and trembled in fear that my promised triumph might vanish at the very moment that I hoped to astonish the field.

We bowled merrily down the road through the pleasant little villages, all looking peaceful and happy as the invigorating morning sun shone brilliantly upon their flower-decked casements. The children garaballed after us as we passed, and the echo of their ringing laughter followed us long after the turning of the road shut them from our sight. How enviable did they appear to me—happy and innocent, whilst I, the spoil of pride and paltry ambition, had become the victim of the—. But I dared not think; I clutched my bat tighter as I recalled to my memory the insults of yesterday; notwithstanding which a heavy and oppressive feeling seemed to throw a shadow over my mirth.

My companions soon perceived my dullness, and laughed at my bewilderment, but I did not hope for better things, and said they would feel satisfied if I even got three runs.

We reached the ground, a lovely village green, surrounded by the little white-washed cottages that peeped at us from amidst most patriarchal-looking trees; the bells were ringing from the moss-grown tower of the venerable church in honour of our arrival. Everybody seemed to have put on their holiday faces to greet us.

Our opponents soon followed, coming in little groups over the fields and through the shady lanes. We were all soon shaking hands with the jollity of feeling that inspires such a meeting upon such a spot, determined upon a day of enjoyment. The flags, poles formed themselves into picturesque little groups around the field of action, and

many a bright look was sent to inspire our opponents who were playing upon their own ground. Such an audience, you may be sure, made me feel tenfold the desire to distinguish myself, and, if all turned out according to the promise of my last night's visitor, I felt that my desperation would not allow of any regrets.

After the usual preliminaries had been settled, and all had taken their places, our side going in first, and our best men at the wickets, the bowler, a powerful man, with the frame of a Hercules, approached to his task. My heart shrank within me as I heard the whistle of the ball, as he delivered it with the force of one fired from a cannon. It was blocked by the wary batter, but with a shock almost enough to shake his shoulders from their sockets.

Again he bowled, when, to my astonishment, I saw the stumps fly like chips, and our best man had not got one run. Cheers ran round the circle as our man threw down his bat with a burning blush upon his angry brow. Well did I understand his feeling for I had so often been placed in the like situation. The hopes of our club fell below zero especially when they saw unfortunate me take up my bat in my turn.

At that moment a sort of desperation seized me, as I saw the smiles of the other club-men, and the despairing looks of my own dear friends. I stood erect in my faultless dress by the side of the stumps, with my bat elegantly poised in my hand. The magnificent bowler looked with a sinister eye upon my attitude, and I thought a smile of contempt curled his lip, and I made no doubt that my fame had gone before me, and he held me as almost unworthy of his prowess. Wait a bit, thought I to myself, as I stooped to take my position; but as I did so guess my feelings, and the thrill that rushed to my very heart, when I felt a warm pair of hands grasp the handle of the bat in the spaces of the handle left by mine. I turned my eyes down, but saw nothing but my own round the handle. Strange! I dreaded but I must go on. The bowler's arm was in motion; I saw the dreaded ball rush on its rapid course through the air; my bat raised itself, and with itself my arms, and dealt such a blow upon the whistling missile, that it flew far away in the distance, far beyond the chance of being caught. I flew with almost winged feet along my course;—again—again—again—again! Five runs! Huzza! shouted the excited gazers. Huzza! shouted the astonished members of my own club.

The bowler looked puzzled. He seemed suddenly to feel that he had been hoaxed, and appeared to lose confidence accordingly. He, however, nerved himself for his next ball, and most beautifully and scientifically did he deliver it; but my magic bat hit it with such a tremendous blow, that its velocity made it almost indistinct. At last its course was distinguished by the astonished scouts, but it was handled only after six more runs were scored to me.

Our opponents began to look a little blank, whilst my own side looked at me as if they thought that they must have changed me by some accident on the road down; for it was impossible that I could be the poor and timid player that was looked upon as naught among players. They looked at each other with unbelieving eyes, and seemed to hug themselves, as they saw the downcast look of the vaunting club at my unexpected success and prowess.

But I had only just begun. The great bowler tried all his best manoeuvres, but in vain. My bat sent the ball flying hither and thither; the scouts got redder and redder in their faces; the bowler's arm became powerless.

"Forty runs!" cries the scorer. I saw nothing but the round orbs of my friends, which were gradually distending with astonishment, as they saw me polish off one bowler after another. As for my own part, I felt myself getting red-hot. I glowed with delight and exertion. The cheers of the populace maddened me. I felt no fatigue. Hour after hour flew by; I drank draught after