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H. E. Bates

A RABBIT REMEMBERS

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I MAKE NO CLAIM EVER TO HAVE BEEN ANYTHING MORE THAN A RABBIT at cricket, and perhaps it was the unsuitable nature of the surroundings in which I first played the game that were primarily responsible for my subsequent lack of prowess. The first cricket I ever remember playing was with my grandfather, when we used to bowl at each other in the farmyard, up against the door of the old wooden copperhouse where we boiled chat potatoes for the pigs. A lusty forest of horse-radish grew behind the hut and a pale cream rose trailed along one wall: a *Gloire de Dijon*, I rather think it was.

My grandfather was an under-arm merchant who bowled nothing but daisy cutters. His principal virtue as a batsman was an unyielding determination never to lift the bat as much as a centimetre off the ground. For these reasons I was able neither to make runs against him nor get him out. These early frustrations clearly led to my failure to be either the Grace or the Spooner he hoped I would be, but years later he was present on a hot July afternoon to see me make the second highest score of my career, forty-six, and was clearly as pleased and proud about it as if I had made a maiden century at Lord's.

My father didn't play cricket at all but made up for this omission by being a most ardent lover of the game. Every summer Saturday afternoon of my boyhood – I am speaking now of the years round about 1910 – I used to be decked out in my little black and scarlet blazer, my cream short trousers and my cricket shirt, and go off with my father to the town cricket ground, which in memory seems to have been blessed with eternal golden sunlight.

The curious thing is that I remember little or nothing of the cricket there. Later in the afternoon my mother generally joined us with a basket of tea and this I remember vividly. I also remember how, as we walked home after the game, we always stopped to buy eggs for Sunday

breakfast from a gentleman named Mr Barney Smith. Mr Smith was a trombonist and after the fashion of the time sported one of those crisp under-lip moustaches, hardly a beard, that were supposed to strengthen the lip power of trombone players. You never see them nowadays.

The years between 1914 and 1918 are lost, as far as cricket is concerned, in a grey damp cloud. The game might never have been invented. And then, in the summer of 1919, came a revelation, a great flash of light in the cloud. I went again with my father to the town cricket ground and saw two of the most charming, elegant and nimble cricketers who ever graced a field come out from the big red pavilion to open the town innings: the celebrated Denton twins, J. S. and W. H., who in pre-war days had opened the innings for Northamptonshire. And off the very first ball of that afternoon I saw, as in a revelation, my first piece of cricket poetry. It was a leg-glide, played by one of the twins with hardly a perceptible movement and as with a feather, for four runs. And that too, I fear, is something you never see nowadays.

There was born in me, as a result of this stroke, a determination not to be a rabbit. I suddenly aspired to play the game with that same incomparable skill, grace and elegance. In pursuit of this aim I spent, during two summer holidays, long golden hours at the Saffrons ground at Eastbourne, watching club cricket of an excellent standard and trying to profit from the things I saw. They were the days when a club side had its solitary professional bowler to do most of the donkey work. He invariably batted last and crept out of the pavilion like a pariah, from his own separate wretched door. It is the one piece of cricket snobbery I have always hated, but it too, like the leg-glide and the trombonist's moustache, is no longer part of our scene.

My aspirations, over the next few years, never really flowered; I simply wasn't good enough. But my ardour for the game, like my father's, increased. It is true that I had, on a few occasions, opened the innings for the Town 2nd XI, but my highest score was still only forty-six and I never bettered it until some years later, when I hit my one and only fifty against an atrociously weak village side and was so ashamed of myself that I promptly threw my wicket away. I suppose I lack that killer instinct you hear them talking about so much these days.

I then found myself, in 1931, in that strangest and most pleasant of cricket worlds: that of village cricket. We played, in those days, on a piece of meadow roughage called the Sheep Walk. Five minutes before the game began two or three fellows trimmed some of the long grass off the middle and some others white-washed the creases. Thistles and sheep-dung cluttered the out-field. On one side a steep dip and on the other a sharp ridge made the stopping of boundaries a tiresome and hazardous affair. Barely half the team aspired to white flannels and there was much wearing of braces.

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It wasn't until I was ten that I enjoyed village cricket. I was on the village side. We were subsequently to make it beautiful parkland, its boundless and copper beeches, lime-fragrant summer game. Even the pi

Every village team has its Towser, who had a reputation for not wearing flannel, a grey army shirt, and his hair was a terrible mess. No gentleman ever looked at him with a wig by comparison, coloured streaks in his hair washed. Like the rest of the total and rebellious

Towser, like me, bowled at a reckless pace, a one-stroke man. I called on him to respond by clear

With the affectation to congratulate him 'Well, sir,' he said the first b-b-b-ball I aim at the b-b-b-b-b-bleeders down

But it was Towser who chanted me. He was and this one stroke on land or sea. You Macartneys, your will.

Towser's method

Brought up as I had been in the atmosphere of a club which boasted no fewer than five or six county players I ought to have thrived on this primitive rural air. Not so; I got, if anything, worse. My only excuses for this are the undeniable truths that in village cricket only one person takes more wickets than the pitch itself – the umpire. In my puny efforts to scrape an occasional twenty-five runs together I was sometimes able to beat one but never both of them.

It wasn't until after the war, in 1946, that I could honestly say I enjoyed village cricket. In an act of sheer madness I was elected captain of the village side. We had neither kit nor pavilion; ground nor money. We were subsequently given a ground and I determined from the first to make it beautiful. And there, eventually, in this sweet arena of parkland, its boundaries graced by great limes and oaks and chestnuts and copper beeches, it no longer mattered that I was a rabbit. On hot, lime-fragrant summer afternoons it was heaven merely to be playing a game. Even the pitch was level and all of us, except one, had flannels.

Every village team has its clowns and characters. We had Towser. Towser, who had just been demobbed, was the one among us who didn't wear flannels. He sported, instead, a pair of worn army denims, a grey army shirt, a khaki pullover and ginger coloured plimsolls. His hair was a terrible sight. It was once said of D. H. Lawrence that no gentleman ever had hair like his, but Towser's was a Marx brothers' wig by comparison. It was a strange shade of yellow with queer snuff-coloured streaks in it. It was uncut, uncombed and, I am certain, unwashed. Like the rest of Towser's gaunt and gangling frame it showed a total and rebellious disregard for rule and authority.

Towser, like me, was a rabbit; and like me he loved the game. He bowled at a reckless fast-medium pace but, as a batsman, was purely a one-stroke man. We had a number of pretty fair bowlers at that time, and it wasn't often necessary to call on Towser. But his day came when I called on him to get rid of three tail-enders, and quick too, and he responded by clean bowling all of them in four balls.

With the affection that only one rabbit can feel for another I rushed to congratulate him, at the same time asking how on earth he did it.

'Well, sir,' he said, speaking with his customary slight stutter, 'wiv the first b-b-b-ball I aim at the b-b-b-bleedin' leg-peg, wiv the second I aim at the b-b-b-bleedin' off-peg, and wiv the third I knock all the b-b-b-bleeders down.'

But it was Towser's unique method as a batsman that really enchanted me. He was, as I have indicated, purely a one-stroke man; and this one stroke was something that has never elsewhere been seen on land or sea. Your Bradmans, your Cowdreys, your Dexters, your Macartneys, your Woolleys have never played such a stroke and never will.

Towser's method was to hit the ball absolutely perpendicular into the

air, true and straight, to a height of about sixty-five feet. The first time I saw this astonishing stroke played the ball seemed to hang suspended for several minutes high above the centre of the pitch. Then suddenly there was an anxious and concerted rush of fielders from all parts and a horrible bony crunching as they met, eyes aloft, between the wickets. While this disaster was taking place the ball fell harmlessly to ground, uncaught, and Towser and his partner ran two runs. And then, since nobody ever dreamed that such an astounding stroke could possibly be played a second time, not a single fielder moved when Towser, who knew no other, immediately played it again. When Towser played it yet a third time the wicket-keeper was taking no chances. With bold and stentorian authority he rushed to the centre of the pitch, ordered the ball to be left to him and promptly dropped it. Alas, like the leg-glide, I fear that the Towser Perpendicular Special is now altogether lost to us.

And so, I fear, is Towser. One of a village cricket captain's constant tribulations arises from the fact that it is always difficult to get eleven men together. In half the matches you are making up with two school-boys or old Codger, who last played in 1912. For the most trivial of excuses men desert you.

But Towser, highly unorthodox though he was in dress, hair-style and stroke-making, had never shown disloyalty. And I was therefore both vexed and disconcerted when he failed, one brilliant afternoon in July, to show up.

Where the hell, I wanted to know, was Towser? We were short of bowlers anyway.

My team gathered to console me.

'Towser,' they said, 'is inside.'

'Good God,' I said, 'inside?'

This aspect of Towser's nature had been, by me at any rate, wholly unsuspected.

'We're afraid so,' they said, 'again.'



THE RABBIT

*His record, take it all in all,
Was not a very great one;
He seldom hit a crooked ball
And never stopped a straight one.*

ANON

HOLLOWOC



"I see — an
other woman
is UMP.