

A Village Cricket Match

-A. G. Macdonell

The story 'A Village Cricket Match' is an excerpt from the author's novel *England, their England* and presents a light-hearted look at the hypocrisy of the English society and the concept of Englishness through the eyes of the Scottish author. This episode is a mild satire directed at the manipulation of the rules which were rearranged as per convenience and tries to shed light on the follies of the English society.

'A Village Cricket Match' is in the form of a commentary of a cricket match being played between a local village team and a team from London. Never being short of excuses and explanations, they flout rules and manipulate the basic conventions of the game to ensure that the result is in their favour. The story begins with a brief description of the countryside surroundings where the much anticipated match was about to begin.

Blue –and-green dragonflies played hide and seek among the thistledown and a pair of swans flew overhead. An ancient man leaned upon the scythe, his sharpening-stone ticking out of his pocket in his velveteen waistcoat. A magpie flapped lazily across the meadows. The parson shook hands with the squire. Doves cooed. The haze flickered. The world stood still.

The local team consists of villagers who work as blacksmith, rate-collector, baker etc. The audience too, consists of urchins and villagers who wait patiently for the match to begin. Such games, against a team of city-dwellers, were rare for them, and yet they are calm; they face the irregularities of rural life every day and are not bothered by either the delay in the match or by the manipulation of rules.

Since two players of the visiting team had failed to show up, Mr. Hodge, the captain of the team, after a rather tricky conversation with the Fordenden captain, had arranged

That two substitutes be lent by Fordenden in order that the visitors should field eleven men, and that nine men on each side should bat.

However, just as the match is about to begin, the defaulters arrive with an extra man. Discussions ensue and there are adjustments in rules to accommodate the demand of the last person. Finally, it is decided that the match will have twelve men on each side. The match begins as Mr. Hodge sends in the opening pair to bat. One was James Livingstone, a very sound club cricketer, and the other one was called, simply, Boone.

Boone was a huge, colossus of a man, weighing at least eighteen stone and wearing all the majestic trappings of Cambridge Blue.

The local team took their positions on the field at the command of their captain, the village baker, amidst 'daisies, buttercups, dandelions, vetches, thistledown, and clumps of dark-red sorrel'.

The unkept village ground behind the wicket was level for a few yards and then sloped away rather abruptly. As a result, the bowler could not be seen by any player on the field during his run up. The sound club batsmen having taken guard after twiddling their bat round in a nonchalant manner and

having stared arrogantly at each fieldsmen, found the blacksmith prepared to open the attack with his fast bowling as he took another reef knot in his snake-buckle belt and charged like 'Vulcan and Venus Anadyomene'. The first ball, a full pitch to leg, went for a 'rare' four-bye, while the second hit the wicket-keeper's stomach, causing a small delay. The third went for a 'dexterously struck' six by James Livingstone, and the fourth took his leg-bail. The city team's luck looked badly out as the fifth ball retired hurt the professor before Mr. Harcourt had the 'singular misfortune to hit his own wicket, even before the sixth ball could be delivered.

The local rate-collector, a left-hand bowler, whose life seemed to be one of infinite patience and guile, was the next bowler in and his first bowl dismisses Boone, the massive one in Cambridge blue. Seeing this the author felt-

Boone had gained his Blue at Cambridge for rowing and not for cricket.

Next in, Robert Southcott, a novelist takes charge.

He was small and quiet, and he wore perfectly creased white flannels, white silk socks, a pale pink shirt, and a white cap.

Mr. Hodge instructs him to hold his wicket as runs were not important at this point and Donald Cameron felt the team spirit at work. He hits the first ball into the hay-field for a six, the second ball; a Yorker hits the saloon bar, again for a six. The next, a slow swinging one, meets the same fate. It is fished out of the pond by the delighted local children.

The rate-collector is baffled by the unseemly results of his deliveries and fears that his reputation is at stake. The village umpire, sensing this and by his own knowledge too, favours the local team and declares the over before the sixth ball.

The rate-collector was glad to give way to a Free Forester, who had been specially imported for this match.

Mr. Southcott had been treating with apologetic contempt those of his deliveries which came within reach while the Blacksmith's temper had been rising for some time. The last ball of the over is seen by the blacksmith as a do or die situation. On his way back to take his run, he glared at the umpire Mr. Harcourt of the English team-who had been driven out to umpire by his colleagues.

He took another reef in his belt, shook out another inch in his braces, spat on his hand, swung his arm three or four times in a meditative sort of way, grasped the ball tightly in his colossal palm.

As the Blacksmith approaches, 'after a long stillness, the ground shook, the grasses waved violently, small birds arose with shrill clamours, aloud puffing sound alarmed the butterflies' and the audience hold their breath for the climax to unfold. The author describes the blacksmith as 'Venus Anadyomene' and likens his aggressive and desperate charge as the 'charge of von Bredow's Dragoons at Gravelotte', referring to the Franco-Prussian war of August 1870, in which although greatly outnumbered by the French, the Prussian Major General Friedrich von Bredow led the cavalry charge against the French

artillery and had won the battle of Mars-La-Tour. His daring cavalry charge known as von Bredow's 'Death Ride' is used to describe a brave attempt against all overwhelming odds.

However, the umpire Mr Harcourt 'swinging slightly from leg to leg' had other plans. He is a person of agreeable sense of humour but, being tipsy, he does something eccentric. He had recognized the 'titanic effort' of the bowler and just as he rushes past him, he shouts 'No ball!' The ball slipped out of the bowler's hand, hit the person standing in the third slip and the poor player fell flat on his face, screaming loudly. The bowler on the other side is thrown off balance, and falls in the centre of the wicket twisting his ankle-all making Mr. Harcourt laugh inwardly at the admirable result of his antic.

At this moment, Mr. Hodge after surveying the scoreboard, asked Southcott 'to play his own game'. Doing just the reverse, the novelist starts playing defensive, scoring only a run in the next quarter of an hour. The ball then touches the batsman at his leg and he is declared out by the esteemed umpire even before an appeal is made. The score now is sixty-nine for six.

The game proceeds without further incidents, until Shakespeare Pollock comes to bat. He is new to the game and not well aware of its fundamental principles. He suddenly throws off his bat and runs towards the cover point. A dead silence ensues as the batsman realises his mistake.

'Well, well! I thought I was playing baseball.' He smiled disarmingly round.

The author seems to be at his best as he ineptly combines the three elements of humour-verbal humour, situational humour and humour in characterization. He uses verbal humour in describing the blacksmith, calling him 'local Achilles' or comparing him to 'Vulcan and Venus Anadyomene' and his titanic effort and his desperate charge to that of 'von Bredow's Dragoons'.

Situational humour is employed to describe the sloping field, the local audience and the antics and the laughable performance of the much experienced and decorated city team members. The author has created instances that amuse the reader like the blacksmith tripping over, his gigantic feet getting mixed up and the ball hitting the slip player, create a entertaining visual. Besides Shakespeare Pollock throwing his bat and presenting the excuse of thinking to play baseball gives the humorous story a perfect end.

Humour in characterisation is implemented through Mr. Harcourt who hits his own wicket while batting and even comes out to umpire under the influence of wine along with his sense of mischievous humour. He plays an amusing prank on the blacksmith, declaring the ball delivered with all his power and strength as No ball, and in turn producing hilarious results to which he has a good laugh internally. Robert Southcott, the novelist is the youngest member of the city team who hardly seems to be strong enough to bat powerfully, scores the maximum runs and plays just the opposite of what Mr. Hodge, his captain tells him to play.