



Liquid Cricket

THE ONLY REASON I was ever asked to play for the Freebooters was that they had to have one member of the club who knew the rules, at least well enough to wind up a match promptly and in a seemly manner if by any mischance it looked like lasting beyond six o'clock.

The Freebooters was our college drinking-cum-cricket club, very much in that order of precedence. I am told it no longer exists; I suspect this is not due to any general drop in the popularity of cricket, for none of the members (myself apart) actually liked the game, but rather because our present liberated young no longer feel they need to camouflage their excesses behind a pseudo-sporting screen of off-white flannel.

The college cricket captain was, by local legislation, *ex officio* Senior Pro of the Freebooters. They did not tell me this before

they elected me, and it could well have been the reason why nobody stood against me. My naïve assumption that it was due to my obvious superiority in wit, charm, cricketing ability and leadership potential did not survive the first match of the season, and I have viewed elective office with grave suspicion ever since.

My college was not in the first rank socially, which means it had very few members with more money than sense. It did, however, have the usual small quota who, unable to match the filthy rich in means, thought it enough to ape them in manners. I am enough of a snob to believe that you have to be born with a true talent for unpleasantness, and these lads weren't really very good at it, so on the whole the proceedings of the cricket club were wholesome and innocent fun, though they bore but a tenuous relation to the Great English Summer Game.

All matches began promptly at 11.30 a.m. in 'The Queen's Head', a hostelry commendable in two outstanding particulars: it was practically inside the college, and it held ample stocks of Messrs Youngers' excellent beverages. In those days, loyal Scot though I was, I tended to agree with my English friends that the best way to view Tartan was through glass, and I fear that any respects I paid to my Scotch origins were mere lip-service.

We moved to the cricket field promptly at 2.30 p.m. This moderate urgency (the adjective is poorly chosen, for by 2.30 p.m. in 'The Queen's Head' moderation was a word with very little application) was imposed more by the licensing laws than any deep-seated drive to put willow to leather, and I well remember a match in which no play took place at all, due to a visit of Royalty to the city, which was marked by an all-day extension. Again I must correct myself; I remember very little of the match for the same reason, and it has since been my firm opinion that the influence of High Personages on the youth of this country is in general towards drunkenness and loose living, the latter stemming from my vague recollection of the subsequent highly sportive evening with certain ladies who shall remain forever nameless, mainly because they were nameless at the time.

The office I held in the Freebooters was that of Senior Pro. It was no sinecure, for it devolved on me to run the match completely on the field of play. This resulted from the nature of the

office of captain, which was non-playing, for two very sound reasons. Only one captain in the history of the club had had any idea of how to play the game, and no captain had ever left 'The Queen's Head' in a fit state to play it, had he known how. To tell the truth, very few captains ever left 'The Queen's Head' at all.

The club motto was written on the fixture card, along with other vital information, like opening times, how to contact the nearest friendly pusher, and the going rate for bribing the club steward to keep the bar open after 1.00 a.m. The motto ran, 'Failure to score a run or hold a catch shall not be ascribed to moral obliquity,' and it was observed to the letter and in spirit, especially in spirit. Practice sessions were taken very seriously. They were held weekly in the college buttery, were run by a linguistics don and a University Gymnastics half-blue, and consisted of lessons in how to repeat 'She sells sea-shells on the sea-shore' while walking along a straight line after eight pints. (These were, of course, pre-breathalyser days.)

In later years I attained some fame (or notoriety) when as skipper of legitimate cricket sides I originated the all-round, multi-purpose, non-change field-placing system, which has saved many fielders unnecessary movement, and their captains unnecessary, and in many cases unwonted, thought. Until the introduction of my system it was considered essential to shift players about to compensate for the odd way in which the bowling switches from end to end about every six balls, and even to alter the field for each change of bowler. Nobody ever knew why this was done, for it never seemed to make any difference to the run of the game. However, while dismissing carefully planned, highly sensible and logical procedures which patently produce profitable results is commonplace in our society, it takes a bold man to disregard deeply ingrained totally pointless behaviour, and I would not have thought of doing so had I not been forced to perceive the beauty of the system during my time with the Freebooters. In their matches the field, once set, stayed set, for each player brought his pint onto the field with him, placed it at his feet, and would not thereafter move from that spot except for natural emergencies or refills.

Such rules as were observed were based loosely on the Laws of

Cricket, plus a few vital extras, the most invoked of which were as follows:

1. Any batsman scoring six or more runs in an over shall claim one pint, plus *pro rata* for surplus, from General Reserve.
2. Any bowler taking a wicket shall claim a pint from General Reserve.
3. Any player holding a catch or otherwise dismissing a batsman shall claim a pint from General Reserve.
4. Any player or spectator deemed by audible acclamation to have performed any meritorious act shall claim one pint from General Reserve.

I should at this point explain that the only officer of the club other than Captain and Senior Pro. was perhaps the most crucial, and certainly the most highly regarded. The holder's function was to make sure that adjacent to the field of play there was an adequate supply of essential equipment, such as beer and glasses, both of which tended to have a short life span. The title this officer held was 'General Reserve', which was appropriate, for he spent much of his time in consultation with our major supplier, the local brewery. The Senior Pro. looked after the minor stuff like bats, balls, pads and stumps. We never used bails, for by mid-afternoon few of the players could get them to stay on, and in any case some of the senior members did not like to be reminded of their current position *vis-à-vis* the local bench.

We played four matches during the term; the number was limited by rate of recovery more than anything, but an important factor was a shortage of clubs that played the Freebooter type of cricket. Two of our opponents were villages deep in the hinterland, seldom visited by outsiders, riddled with incestuous inbreeding, whose standard of play was so low they didn't notice what sort of odd game we played. In any case their local-brewed ale had a specific gravity that flattened any differences of style after three overs or two rounds, whichever was the earlier (a matter not easy to predict).

These two came early in the season, and were regarded as bracers or pipe-openers for the two big contests. The first of these was against a touring side of theological students from a Scottish

university. To those not in the know it may seem strange that candidates for the Ministry of the Kirk should be playing cricket at all, never mind our sort of cricket. Others familiar with the student bodies north of the Tweed will confirm that two groups vie for the title of most bawdy, brawling and beer-sodden – the medics and the divines. Both are doomed to pass, with their finals, into instant incarceration in a straight-laced profession, in which not the slightest departure from narrow order is tolerated, either by their peers or their clients. They have to pack a great deal of deviation into a short student span, and most of them do a lot of packing of one sort or another. Those who played us were on tour not so much as a drinking-cum-cricket as a drinking-cum-anything team, and some of the anythings I witnessed while in their company were matched in my experience only by the behaviour of a Jesuit graduate student resident in the college, the most dissolute man I have ever known, whose social habits were darker than his clerical ones. Ecumenicity has since always seemed entirely logical to me.

The last match of the season (and my last for the Freebooters) was played against the Corsairs, a wild bunch of Fleet Street journalists, whose name referred partly to their attitude to life, and partly to their superb repertory of vulgar songs, whose *après-match* performances almost outdid their reefers in turning the clubhouse atmosphere blue. Although apparently anarchic, they showed firm organization in two vital matters: they were all present knocking on the door of 'The Queen's Head' promptly at opening time on the day of the match, and they always brought fourteen men to compensate for the three who would inevitably drop out (sometimes literally) before the first ball was bowled.

The year I played, the Corsairs were, as usual, polyglot, polychrome and, judging by the glint of single earrings, probably polyandrous as well: but not entirely, for there were camp-followers among their party, glamorous female followers. It was before the advent of the mini-skirt, but there was enough contour-hugging leopard-skin trousering about to suggest that following was not their natural *forte*. It struck me that day, and I have heeded it as a precept ever since, that alcohol arouses enthusiasm while reducing performance in more activities than cricket, and I


fear that some of those London ladies ended that day's outing in semis in Surrey rather than flats *in flagrante*.

Looking back, I pride myself that my swan-song was a signal success. The details of the afternoon's play need not concern us here, and I must confess they hang a little hazy in my mind, but the opposition's penultimate wicket fell with the matching ball, and their eleventh man was forced to the crease. Actually, he was their fourteenth man, but numbers eleven, twelve and thirteen had stayed to keep our skipper company in 'The Queen's Head'. We had taken this as a piece of singularly good sportsmanship, though I suspect that the fact that none of them could stand upright at the time had something to do with it.

Forced is the exact word, for their last man was a huge coloured American of evil aspect. His amateur entomological interests had led him to believe that the outing was some sort of eccentric English grasshopper drive. He looked as if he had sprung from gang-leadership in the Bronx, but we discovered later that he wrote an agony column in a Dutch version of *The Tatler*, under the name of Aunt Julia. It was published in Haarlem, so he claimed he was only one letter removed from his natural environment. He was wearing a combination of pink slacks and canary T-shirt which would have scared off a swarm of locusts, but the Freebooters were not consciously severe on matters of dress; to be honest, by that stage in the game they were not particularly conscious of anything.

A cluster of his team-mates persuaded him to the wicket at stump point, then retired leaving him standing, bat on shoulder, facing the square leg umpire, and shouting, 'Pitch, brother, pitch!'

The bowler (who was our No. 14) threw the ball at his head. He struck it towards mid-wicket, hurled his bat down on his stumps, and took off towards cover point. The ball smashed mid-wicket's beer glass, and he, infuriated, hurled it towards the bowler's end. A mite high, it hit the umpire between the eyes; he staggered down the wicket and collided with Aunt Julia, who was heading cross-pitch for second base. They then became entangled with three converging fielders and the other batsman, all suffering from acute inebriated herd-instinct. They tumbled into



one glorious tangle of legs, arms and beer-bellies, with the ball irretrievably trapped underneath.

This was just the sort of complex cricketing *impasse* I was there to sort out. I summoned all my extensive knowledge, tact and sporting instinct, and gave both batsmen out for obstruction.

The two sides accepted my decision without rancour. Actually they didn't pay much attention to it, for the pavilion clock stood at 6.01 p.m., and they were all walking off the field, their minds no longer on the game. The American's Texan girlfriend summed it all up rather well – his actions, the match, youth, perhaps life itself – when she greeted him at the boundary with the raucous comment, 'Ah don't know what you done, Honey, but you sure-thing done it wrong!'