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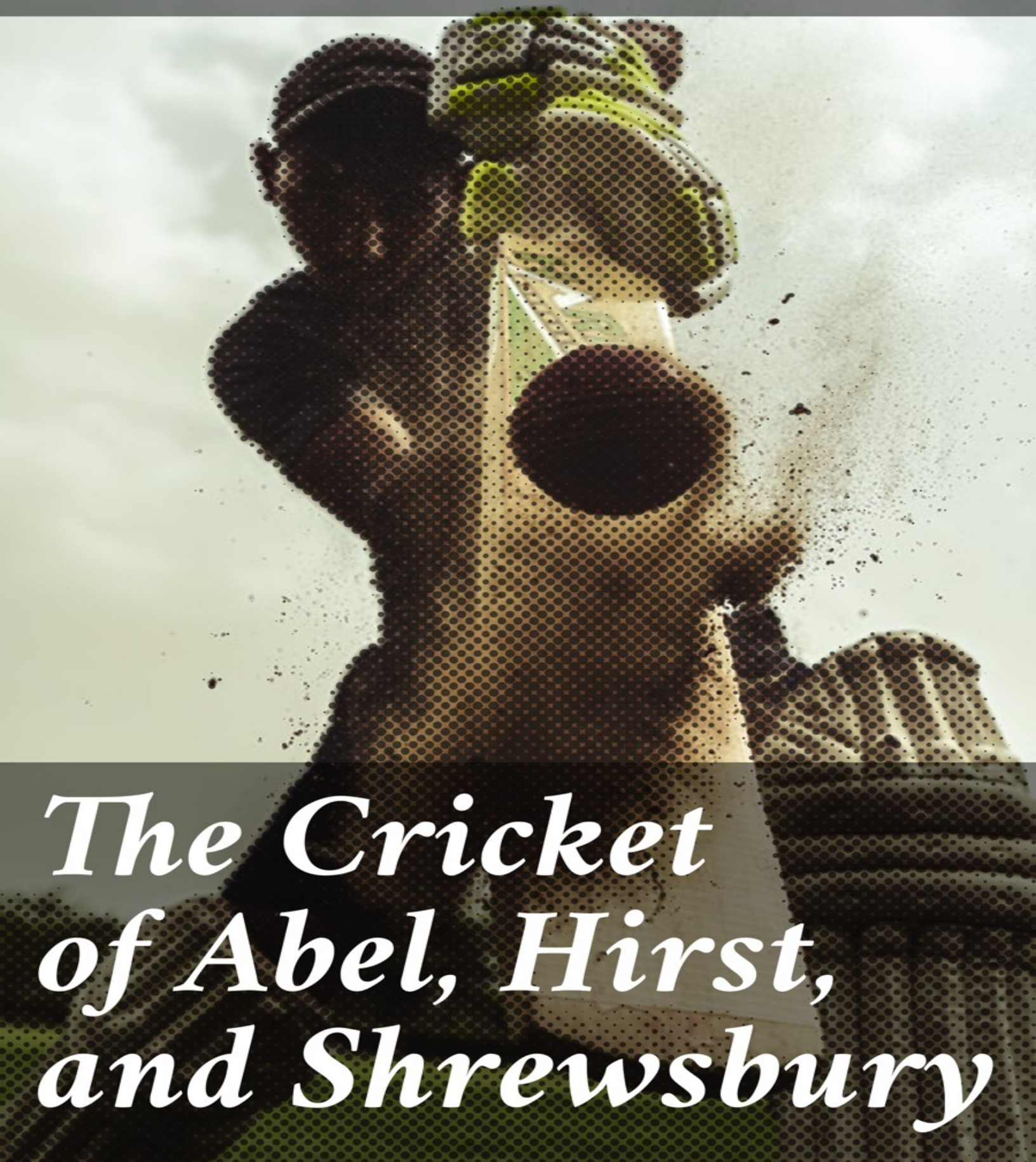

The Cricket of Abel, Hirst, and Shrewsbury

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066369729

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THE CRICKET OF ABEL, HIRST AND SHREWSBURY.

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CHAPTER I.

BATTING AND RUNNING.

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I.—INTRODUCTORY.

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It was once thought that the universe moved round our earth merely as its accompanying condition, existing simply and solely for the sake of our earth. And so the batsman has been, and generally still is, regarded as the centre of cricket, for whose enjoyment the rest of the players subsist. Batting seems best worth while, not so much because of the qualities, such as pluck, which it demands, as because of the pleasure it may give. The reason why most people like batting, even if they hate wicket-keeping and fielding and watching, and do not bowl, is the enjoyment of striking and of scoring runs. Perhaps in this there is some relic of the desire for hitting and killing—the desire for overcoming and controlling Nature, for using power. Moreover, batting includes defence as well as attack; indeed the safest defence may really be to attack boldly. Batting at its best and fullest involves a complexity of characteristics: it involves back-play, with gliding and late cutting, pulling, forward play, with the cut-drive and ordinary drive, the “half-cock” stroke, the snick; a decision between these varieties, followed by a hit, then recovery of balance, then a decision whether one shall run or not, then perhaps a run, then a turn at the crease—and much besides this. It may

involve a great change of habit. Thus in many other ball-games the ball is hit when it is further off from the striker's foot—as in Golf, Racquets, Tennis, Lawn Tennis, Fives. In Cricket, except in such strokes as the pull and the cut, the ball should be hit when it is near to the striker's foot.

He who is not born a batsman, he who wishes to be made—that is, make himself—an all-round batsman, must learn not only general rules like this, but also details with regard to the individual strokes. In studying these details he will meet divergent theories; here again is scope for individual trial and judgment, and for observation. He can notice what the best players actually *do*, for, as Murdoch says, this is of more importance than what they think they do.

The would-be batsman, therefore, is offered perhaps a few really universal laws, and certainly many general hints, yet he must judge of each hint by its results in his own case after fair experiment. He must be a free agent. He may find that the advisers have assumed that he has little reach, little activity, whereas he may be a Ford or Abel for reach, a Jessop or Abel for activity, without the safety of a Shrewsbury or the strength of a Hirst. Why should such a one be tied down by a law that in forward play he shall not let his bat pass beyond his left foot, if he has it in his power to send his bat with force many inches beyond that point, and so smother the ball? Who shall bind down such players? On the other hand, who shall spoil the slow player's pleasure and safety by bidding him run out?

Throughout this chapter all rules or hints are submitted to the test of utility for the individual. They must be studied;

questions must be asked of coaches and others, who should explain strokes by doing them; the mechanisms must be found out, and also the causes and reasons for them. These mechanisms—some will be described later on—must be mastered, if not in early life, then now; they must be mastered sensibly, not with huge bats and balls to begin with, but with lighter implements. The advice must all be judged by its effects.

If the reader will bear in mind that the mechanisms suggested, together with the other helps, are not necessarily the best (though they are based on a study of what the best players actually do in games), he will treat them in the right spirit, with a view to sensible trial and judgment by fruits. Anyhow, be these helps right or wrong, it is obvious that, by all except the genius player, *some* A B C should be acquired as a personal possession and habit before much regular play has confirmed bad habits. Mr. Edward Lyttelton insists on this in the following passage, after he has described what is needed for a correct stroke:—

> “Now from these principles, which some might call truisms, a very important practical maxim proceeds. All sound rules of batting should be practised by a young cricketer without the ball as well as with it. The grammar of the science can be partly learnt in the bedroom; the application of the rules must be made on the green sward. Many a finished batsman has tried this plan. Five minutes devoted every night by an aspiring cricketer to a leg hit, or cut, or forward play at a phantom ball, will gradually discipline his

sinews to the required posture, besides sending him to bed in a right frame of mind.

"I think it was Harry Jupp who used to ascribe his astonishingly good defence to a habit of this kind. He used to place a large-sized mirror on the floor—not for purposes of personal vanity—but to see if the bat moved in a straight line. To make the test better, a line was drawn along the floor from the centre of the mirror, along which line the bat was to move. The least deviation was then manifested, not only at the end of the stroke, but while it was being made."

2.—THE ALPHABET OF SAFE BATTING.

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It is not part of the alphabet of *safe* batting to meet and attack the ball always. Both W. G. and C. B. Fry began their careers with safety, with the stopping of balls; afterwards they proceeded to splendid execution. The A B C of safe batting is not quite identical with the A B C of effective batting, which will be considered in subsequent sections of this chapter.

One of the first rules of safety is said to be to "keep the eye on the ball." This rule needs alteration.[2] Before the delivery the eye should watch the bowler's arm, wrist, and fingers; Shrewsbury owed to this observation of something besides the ball a long innings against the Australians many years ago. To foretell a change in direction, length, pace, break, etc., is not easy by the sight of the ball alone. It is after the ball has left the bowler's hand that it must be sedulously watched. Nor can it always be watched right on

to the bat; exactly how far it can be watched is a much disputed point. Certainly few batsmen can carry out the golden rule of Golf. I believe that most of them—I speak from my own Tennis and Racquet experience—take their eyes off the cricket-ball too soon. Few err by looking at it too long. In my games, almost without exception, the longer I look at the ball the better my stroke is.

The second law is correct timing. There are several kinds of good sight; I doubt if any one of them by itself brings with it that desirable faculty, “the good eye.” Ranjitsinhji and others rightly include, under the timing, the judgment as to the flight (direction, pace, etc.), the decision as to what is or is not to be done, the command that the best things shall be done, the correct combination and co-operation of the requisite parts at just the very moment.[3] I believe that the good eye, where it is not already a natural or acquired habit, means a splendidly accurate and therefore healthy working of a vast number of more or less separate nerve centres and nerves; but that what is often called “a good eye” is nothing of the sort—it is a mastery of certain correct mechanisms, which, if a man possesses them for his own, can produce an even better effect than the most superb eyesight without such mechanism. I may have a far better sight and eye for games than a fairly well-taught golfer who knows what muscles to use, and has these as half-automatic habits; but put me against him, and ask any spectators which of us has the better eye, and they will very likely point to my opponent.

If this be so, then the third rule will be *to have already secured* the best possible mechanisms, and to have made

them easy and sub-conscious; at first perhaps they may be conquered one by one; in the end, however, they must be not independent units, but co-operating parts of a unit—members combining and working together in harmony, as in some businesses, adding power each to each, relieving one another. These mechanisms include, for many strokes, and especially the forward strokes, the “straight bat,” i.e., the bat held straight and not sideways as it meets the ball; with its handle nearer to the bowler than its blade is; with the end of its blade just to the side of the left foot; the bat moving as straight as may be towards the approaching ball from start to finish (the finish being a follow-through after the ball has been struck); quickness of foot and leg to start and to move, the right leg being the base and pivot; the power to get right to the pitch of the ball or else to wait for it as far back as possible; straight and fast and full extensions of various limbs in various directions; a control of many different strokes, and especially, in these days of fast plumb-wickets, a control of the forward stroke. The reader will best realise the number of these mechanisms if we mention (and if he meanwhile realises by trial) *some* of those which are parts of the ordinary forward stroke:—the right leg straight and unbent, the right foot firm, the left foot and leg sent out towards the ball (a little to the left of the line of flight), the left elbow and wrist shot well forward at full stretch (in order to keep the ball down), the right shoulder forward and down, the bat moved straight down and towards the approaching ball and beyond it (not necessarily straight along the line between the wickets), the weight brought forward with the head of the bat, the

recovery of balance and position, and the readiness to run directly after the ball has been struck or missed. If one has run out first, then the right foot will still have to serve as a firm pivot for the whole stroke, which must be a single movement. This will give some idea of what the correct mechanisms are, quite apart from individual peculiarities in the use of them. Such correct mechanisms may be acquired separately as I acquired my Tennis mechanisms, and as fencers acquire their fencing—mechanisms of lunge, wrist-play, etc.; but it is part of the A B C of correct play *to have already acquired them* as correct members of a correct whole before the game begins. Add to these the mechanisms and the combination of mechanisms for other strokes, such as back-play, cut, pull, etc., and the reader will agree that the A B C of batting is no light work for anyone, except the born player who apparently has not had to learn it letter by letter.

Out of the list of useful mechanisms a few will now be suggested. It is for the reader to judge how far they actually are used in the strokes of leading experts. Each example must be compared with the positions and movements of the best models, as shown in photographs like these, or in actual games or practice.

SOME SAMPLE EXERCISES.

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Before attempting these exercises, the reader should find out the principles of correct practice, some of which are suggested in Chapter VIII. One or two of the most vital may be selected here.

(1.) Decide whether it is worth while to play Cricket at all; if so, whether it is worth while to improve your standard of skill; if so, whether these and your own exercises are likely to be of appreciable help. (The exercises are not meant to take the place of net-practice and games, which are indispensable, but to make them more pleasant and useful.)

(2.) During the exercises, concentrate your whole attention either upon the muscles at work, or upon their reflection in a looking-glass.

(3.) Aim at correctness, and therefore begin slowly and carefully before you repeat any given movement. Freedom, pace, endurance, strength will then increase almost of their own accord. Freedom and pace may best be acquired by movements done at first without implements, afterwards with light implements. I found these two preliminary stages invaluable in the preparation for my games, perhaps especially for the sharp movements of Racquets. The worst possible beginning is any “exerciser” that requires a tense grip.

(4.) In case of a fault (discovered by yourself or pointed out by others), seek to exaggerate the opposite fault.

Among the most useful exercises for batting, as for bowling and fielding, are the fast and full and straight extensions of various muscles and muscle-combinations, with economy of the unused parts, and without loss of, or with immediate recovery of, the body’s balance, and readiness to be directed elsewhither. It is likely that these pages contain errors, but I think that if one were to ask a good player where he ached most of all after his first practice or game in the season, one would find that the

aches were mainly due to these extension movements (of the latissimus dorsi, below and behind the arm-pit, etc.).

For the feet and legs, (i.) Lunge far forward (but not so far as to strain yourself) with the left foot and leg in a direct line (not a curve) in various directions (perhaps along various chalk lines upon the floor) with full weight—the head should come almost over the left foot—but with rapid recovery of balance.

(ii.) Start to run in the forward direction afterwards.

(iii.) Practise the position and movement for backing up and a quick start to run.

(iv.) Practise the movement for turning at the crease, as shown in the photograph of Shrewsbury.

For the neck. Move the head round, at first slowly and carefully, from side to side, then up and down, and so on; but do not strain.

For the trunk: the body's force is great, as—to use an old illustration—one can see when one bumps against a wall in the dark. (i.) The body-swing from the hips is a most useful movement. Keeping the legs as stiff as possible, and the head as still as possible, twist round the shoulders, first to the right, then to the left. (ii.) Bend the trunk forwards, and then sideways, from the hips.

For the shoulders, arm, and forearm. (i.) To the lunge of the left foot add an equally full and direct and fast lunge of the left shoulder, elbow, and wrist. Your head should come forward also, above your left foot. Imagine yourself to be aiming at a ball, and see that your left wrist is in a line between your eyes and some object, say a chair's leg in the bedroom. (ii.) Jerk the forearm (and wrist) as if you were

whipping a peg-top or shaking out a clogged stylographic pen.

For the wrist and fingers. Flex and twist the wrist and each finger far and fast in various directions. After freedom and pace have been acquired, but not before, some strength can be added by resistance—as by holding a dumb-bell during the movements, or by using some grip machine.

Let us apply these—a few out of many mechanisms for all-round batting—to forward-play. The excellent words of Mr. Edward Lyttelton must be quoted first. He says:—

> “You will see from these directions that it is a very complex action, far from easy to do all at once, so that by careful practice if not by the light of nature you must first learn to do it properly without the ball, then with it. Establish the motion as a habit before the stress of the crisis begins.... It is thought that just as great players of yore reached eminence without being subject to coaching in early youth, or indeed in some cases after being completely self-taught, so boys of the present day would stand a better chance if they were less drilled than they sometimes are, and were left to find the use of their limbs by a vigorous, if unkempt style of hitting. The Englishman’s instinct, said a Frenchman, is to go out of doors and hit or kick something as hard as he can. This being so, why not let boys learn to hit as they please till they are sixteen or seventeen, and then perhaps a few rules might be taught them? But if taught beforehand, they only

> cramp the style, and take away the enjoyment of the game. Nature must be the best teacher; etc., etc.... But it is not at all easy to secure this habit, and therefore you should remember it carefully in your bedroom....”

Pretend that you are going to play forward, and hold a stick in your hands. Now, moving your fingers as you come forward (see below), lunge with your left foot along a straight line, and send your head over your left foot. (If you tend to deviate from the line, probably towards the left, then exaggerate towards the right.) Keep your eye on the foot till the foot can take care of itself. Regard it as a servant that you must first watch carefully till the correct work shall have become half-automatic; then only an occasional glance of supervision will be required. Add to this lunge the extended lunge of the left wrist, elbow, and shoulder straight along a line parallel to and slightly to the right of the left foot.

The stick should be lifted straight back and up before the stroke (though the blade of a bat, as in Racquets, will face outwards at the top of the lift), and should then come forward in a direct line close to the left foot, and afterwards follow through beyond the left foot. Do not forget to keep both that foot along *its* line and the left wrist along *its* line by aiming say at some spot on the wall. After the lunge with the whole weight, recover balance, look up, and prepare to run forward. Later on, do this and actually start forwards a few steps. That is part of the physical apparatus which a good average forward-stroke demands. There is no space to describe the requirements of the other strokes—the cut, etc. They can easily be seen from the photographs and from the

play of experts. And some additional exercises will be offered under the special headings below.

PRACTICE OUTSIDE THE NETS.

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In addition to these and other movements, which may be tried at first either before a large mirror or else with a teacher behind to correct and perform correctly by way of instruction, Mr. Edward Lyttelton mentions the practice of certain strokes with a ball in the pavilion. Any old room will do. And the narrower the implement of batting the more easily it will show the errors of batting; the lighter the implement, the better it will develop pace and freedom. A stump or stick or broomstick will do; a light indiarubber ball will do.

If you cannot get a bowler, then you can throw the ball—a Lawn Tennis ball will do—up against a wall, and play forward or back to it with a stick. I know a player who did this with very good results.

Games of “Snob-cricket,” and of Cricket with smaller ball and narrower bat, should be far more frequently tried for the sake of practice.

Imaginary strokes may be made during idle moments. Fancy yourself playing straight forward with full weight, or fancy yourself stepping across and back with the right foot and then cutting with a jerk of shoulder and forearm and some wrist-flick. I do a great deal of Racquet and Tennis practice in this way; needless to say, I play infinitely better in imagination than in reality! But I know that thus I help to make my ideal real. After such an imagination-practice I

often reproduce improved strokes with a light racket-handle in my bedroom.

NET-PRACTICE.

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If too many bowlers are bowling at one net, the variety is bad; in actual play one has no such variety in a single over. I would rather see three bowlers each bowl an over in turn, while the two others field. If you cannot reform this, then make the best of it by trying to remember the previous balls of each bowler, as if you were playing several games of chess at the same time.

Begin on good wickets, so as to habituate confidence and pluck. Don’t practise correct Cricket (you can, however, practise the bold running-out game for a caking wicket) if the ground be fiery. Loss of nerve is fatal.

Play safely and gently till you get set; defend against the difficult balls; then, when you are set, meet and hit every ball, except for the rare “half-cock” strokes to which you may have to resort.

The next stage is to place the ball. While on the one hand you must count every chance you give, and every ball an inch or two from the bails, as a wicket down, you may, on the other hand, venture on experiments; you may determine to hit a ball pitched too short or too far up to one of two or three places.

Notice the sort of ball which beats you most frequently, and find out why it does so, and how you can best play it—perhaps this may be by stepping back or forwards and turning it into some other ball.

Aim at developing your individual strong points, *but*—

(1.) Do not do this until you have mastered the fundamental elements of various strokes; and

(2.) Do not be content with this. Gradually bring up your weak points to the level of your strong points. Indeed, practise them far more than your strong points.

GAMES.

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While many hints must be reserved for the last section of this chapter, we may here say a few words about games as distinct from training, exercises, and net-practice; though it will be necessary to touch on the importance of training, for success in the games. What better help is there against the nervousness so fatal to success than the habit of full and deep breathing? Can you be nervous at all so long as you breathe fully and deeply? What better help, towards the steadiness and confidence so important to success, than the clear eye that comes from clean living, the feeling that the fingers “nip” the bat, the feeling that the correct mechanisms are under control, the self-reliance gained by net-practice on good pitches?

This steadiness is most necessary at the beginning of an innings. As we mentioned above, two of the great players tell us that at first they were content to defend, often merely to stop balls without attacking them. Historians and natural historians and other scientists show us that each individual human being in itself reproduces quickly the past evolutions of the human race, being, for example, a seed, fish-like, reptile-like, ape-like, then man-like. So each

individual innings may quickly reproduce the past stages of practice and progress, safety and defence coming before severity and attack, except where—as on some caking wickets—safety and defence consist in an apparently rash rushing out to smite. As a rule, however, no liberties should be taken until the bowling has been mastered and the eye is “in.” Time may be saved if one watches the previous batsmen and finds out how they get out. Moreover, just as Spofforth first tested the pitch and its pace and peculiarities on any given day, before he bowled his best, so a batsman may also test the pitch.

For different pitches demand different plays—different mechanisms, different tactics. Few, like Shrewsbury, have a style adapted alike to the billiard-table ground and the drying-ground. Ranjitsinhji’s book gives most useful remarks on these differences.

While you are batting, count a chance as a blessed indication of error; treat it as I treat a premonitory pain—do not wait for the illness itself, but find out and correct the mistake at once. You may have to exaggerate in the opposite direction—perhaps to play forward further out to the right than seems natural to you on that day.

WAITING FOR THE BALL.

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Guard is taken not only to give one a sense of the direction of any ball, but also to give one the correct place for the right foot: the toe of the right foot should be quite near to the block. Therefore one should not have a block

either to the off (in which case the right toes might be in front of the wicket), or short and too near the wicket.

Before and after taking guard one should look round to see how the field is placed.

As to the waiting-position, one may try several and choose that which is the best basis and starting-pose for *most* ordinary strokes. But first one should develop the various muscles, especially those needed for the quick movements; otherwise one might adopt an attitude suited for safe play when a more Jessop-like or at least a more Stoddart-like or Abel-like attitude might be better for one. A good attitude for many will be Shrewsbury’s as seen in the Photograph (I.). The body should be nearly sideways,

I.—Waiting for the ball, with the weight balanced almost evenly upon the two feet (which are near together), but rather on the right foot.

[*To face page 22.*

with the legs (or only the left leg) very slightly bent, and ready to move backwards or forwards. One should not be stiff, but should be inclined to looseness, until one knows which ball is coming; till then one should be ready to run or jump out if it should be desirable. The feet should probably be quite near to one another, the right being near the crease and parallel to the wicket, the left outside the crease

and pointing more towards the bowler. Probably both should be resting on their balls, and rather—so Mr. Fry advises—on the insides of their balls.

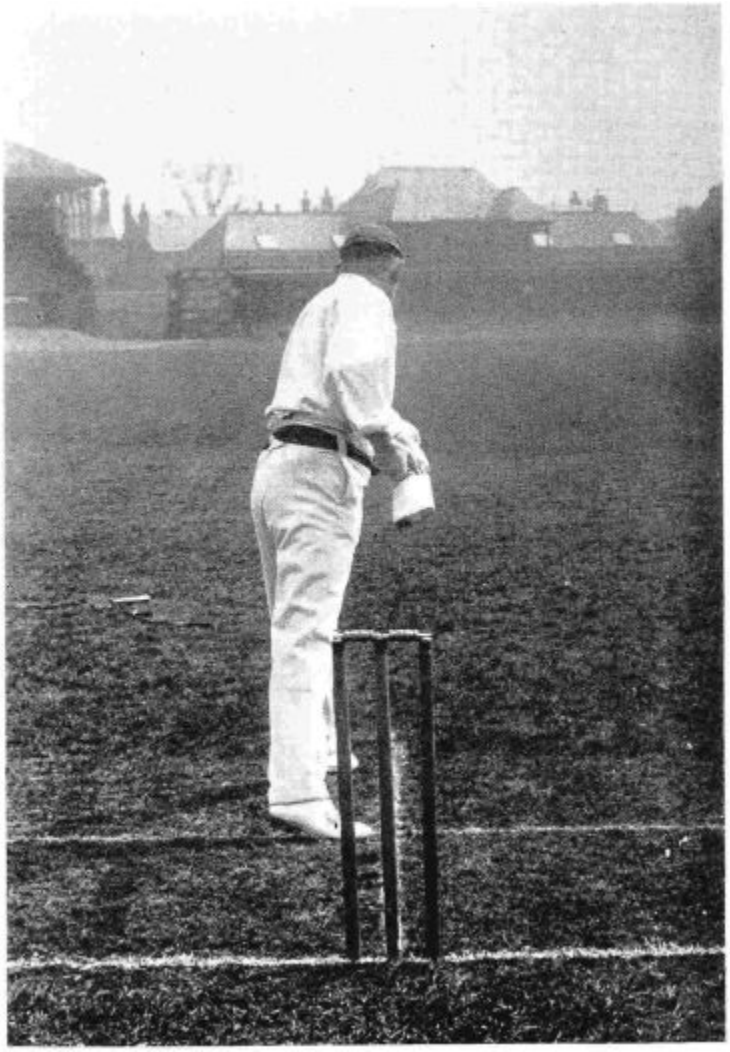
The weight of most batsmen should be upon the right foot, the batsman's basis. Abel stands on the ball of his right foot; that is good if one be quick-footed. Ranjitsinhji explains some of the reasons why the weight should rest on the right foot—he instances several forms of exercise, such as boxing; for Tennis and Racquets I have spent hours in practising quick movements in all directions with the stiff right leg as my pivot. The left foot may be slightly up and prepared to move out along some forward line. In case of a late cut one has time to shift the weight on to it and make *it* the pivot.

The bat is usually held with one hand near the top of the handle and the other hand near the middle of the handle; if one holds the right hand lower down one gets more control, but may lose some pace; one is more apt to stoop, and to lift the ball. But for some strokes, as for certain late cuts, the shifted grip is often preferable; one should be able to slip the right hand down the handle towards the blade, near to which so many of the stone-wallers love to keep it. As the right foot and leg hold the ground more firmly, so does the right hand and wrist hold the bat more firmly, though there should be no tight and tense grip till the stroke is being made. One can—as Abel and Shrewsbury put it—"feel the nip" of the bat without any unnecessary tension. Not a few players have the grip of the two hands almost equal.

The left elbow should be well up, so as to keep the handle of the bat nearer to the bowler and thus to prevent a

chance of catches. And the whole body and head should be well up as the bowler begins to bowl, so that the best possible view may be given.

One must watch the fingers and wrist and arm of the bowler; a change in his fingers



II.—Forward play: the bat has been drawn straight up and back (not in a curve) before the stroke.

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will mean a change of the ball he will bowl. Thus Hirst’s balls will differ according to the way in which his fingers are