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PRINGLE MAKES A SPORTING OFFER

Estimating it roughly, it takes a new boy at a public school about a week to find his legs and shed his skin of newness. The period is, of course, longer in the case of some and shorter in the case of others. Both Farnie and Wilson had made themselves at home immediately. In the case of the latter, directly the Skinner episode had been noised abroad, and it was discovered in addition that he was a promising bat, public opinion recognized that here was a youth out of the common run of new boys, and the Lower Fourth--the form in which he had been placed on arrival--took him to its bosom as an equal. Farnie's case was exceptional. A career at Harrow, Clifton, and Wellington, however short and abruptly terminated, gives one some sort of grip on the way public school life is conducted. At an early date, moreover, he gave signs of what almost amounted to genius in the Indoor Game department. Now, success in the field is a good thing, and undoubtedly makes for popularity. But if you desire to command the respect and admiration of your fellow-beings to a degree stretched almost to the point of idolatry, make yourself proficient in the art of whiling away the hours of afternoon school. Before Farnie's arrival, his form, the Upper Fourth, with the best intentions in the world, had not been skilful 'raggers'. They had ragged in an intermittent, once-a-week sort of way.

When, however, he came on the scene, he introduced a welcome element of science into the sport. As witness the following. Mr Strudwick, the regular master of the form, happened on one occasion to be away for a couple of days, and a stop-gap was put in in his place. The name of the stop-gap was Mr Somerville Smith. He and Farnie exchanged an unspoken declaration of war almost immediately. The first round went in Mr Smith's favour. He contrived to catch Farnie in the act of performing some ingenious breach of the peace, and, it being a Wednesday and a half-holiday, sent him into extra lesson. On the following morning, more by design than accident, Farnie upset an inkpot. Mr Smith observed icily that unless the stain was wiped away before the beginning of afternoon school, there would be trouble. Farnie observed (to himself) that there would be trouble in any case, for he had hit upon the central idea for the most colossal 'rag' that, in his opinion, ever was. After morning school he gathered the form around him, and disclosed his idea. The floor of the form-room, he pointed out, was some dozen inches below the level of the door. Would it not be a pleasant and profitable notion, he asked, to flood the floor with water to the depth of those dozen inches? On the wall outside the form-room hung a row of buckets, placed there in case of fire, and the lavatory was not too far off for practical purposes. Mr Smith had bidden him wash the floor. It was obviously his duty to do so. The form thought so too. For a solid hour, thirty weary but enthusiastic reprobates laboured without ceasing, and by the time the bell rang all was prepared. The floor was one still, silent pool. Two caps and a few notebooks floated sluggishly on the surface, relieving the picture of

any tendency to monotony. The form crept silently to their places along the desks. As Mr Smith's footsteps were heard approaching, they began to beat vigorously upon the desks, with the result that Mr Smith, quickening his pace, dashed into the form-room at a hard gallop. The immediate results were absolutely satisfactory, and if matters subsequently (when Mr Smith, having changed his clothes, returned with the Headmaster) did get somewhat warm for the thirty criminals, they had the satisfying feeling that their duty had been done, and a hearty and unanimous vote of thanks was passed to Farnie. From which it will be seen that Master Reginald Farnie was managing to extract more or less enjoyment out of his life at Beckford.

Another person who was enjoying life was Pringle of the School House. The keynote of Pringle's character was superiority. At an early period of his life--he was still unable to speak at the time--his grandmother had died. This is probably the sole reason why he had never taught that relative to suck eggs. Had she lived, her education in that direction must have been taken in hand. Baffled in this, Pringle had turned his attention to the rest of the human race. He had a rooted conviction that he did everything a shade better than anybody else. This belief did not make him arrogant at all, and certainly not offensive, for he was exceedingly popular in the School. But still there were people who thought that he might occasionally draw the line somewhere. Watson, the ground-man, for example, thought so when Pringle primed him with advice on the subject of preparing a wicket. And Langdale, who had been captain of the team five years before, had thought so most decidedly,

and had not hesitated to say so when Pringle, then in his first term and aged twelve, had stood behind the First Eleven net and requested him peremptorily to 'keep 'em down, sir, keep 'em down'. Indeed, the great man had very nearly had a fit on that occasion, and was wont afterwards to attribute to the effects of the shock so received a sequence of three 'ducks' which befell him in the next three matches.

In short, in every department of life, Pringle's advice was always (and generally unsought) at everybody's disposal. To round the position off neatly, it would be necessary to picture him as a total failure in the practical side of all the subjects in which he was so brilliant a theorist. Strangely enough, however, this was not the case. There were few better bats in the School than Pringle. Norris on his day was more stylish, and Marriott not infrequently made more runs, but for consistency Pringle was unrivalled.

That was partly the reason why at this time he was feeling pleased with life. The School had played three matches up to date, and had won them all. In the first, an Oxford college team, containing several Old Beckfordians, had been met and routed, Pringle contributing thirty-one to a total of three hundred odd. But Norris had made a century, which had rather diverted the public eye from this performance. Then the School had played the Emeriti, and had won again quite comfortably. This time his score had been forty-one, useful, but still not phenomenal. Then in the third match, versus Charchester, one of the big school matches of the season, he had found himself. He ran up a

hundred and twenty-three without a chance, and felt that life had little more to offer. That had been only a week ago, and the glow of satisfaction was still pleasantly warm.

It was while he was gloating silently in his study over the bat with which a grateful Field Sports Committee had presented him as a reward for this feat, that he became aware that Lorimer, his study companion, appeared to be in an entirely different frame of mind to his own. Lorimer was in the Upper Fifth, Pringle in the Remove. Lorimer sat at the study table gnawing a pen in a feverish manner that told of an overwrought soul. Twice he uttered sounds that were obviously sounds of anguish, half groans and half grunts. Pringle laid down his bat and decided to investigate.

'What's up?' he asked.

'This bally poem thing,' said Lorimer.

'Poem? Oh, ah, I know.' Pringle had been in the Upper Fifth himself a year before, and he remembered that every summer term there descended upon that form a Bad Time in the shape of a poetry prize. A certain Indian potentate, the Rajah of Seltzerpore, had paid a visit to the school some years back, and had left behind him on his departure certain monies in the local bank, which were to be devoted to providing the Upper Fifth with an annual prize for the best poem on a subject to be selected by the Headmaster. Entrance was compulsory. The wily

authorities knew very well that if it had not been, the entries for the prize would have been somewhat small. Why the Upper Fifth were so favoured in preference to the Sixth or Remove is doubtful. Possibly it was felt that, what with the Jones History, the Smith Latin Verse, the Robinson Latin Prose, and the De Vere Crespigny Greek Verse, and other trophies open only to members of the Remove and Sixth, those two forms had enough to keep them occupied as it was. At any rate, to the Upper Fifth the prize was given, and every year, three weeks after the commencement of the summer term, the Bad Time arrived.

'Can't you get on?' asked Pringle.

'No.'

'What's the subject?'

'Death of Dido.'

'Something to be got out of that, surely.'

'Wish you'd tell me what.'

'Heap of things.'

'Such as what? Can't see anything myself. I call it perfectly indecent dragging the good lady out of her well-earned tomb at this time of day.

I've looked her up in the Dic. of Antiquities, and it appears that she committed suicide some years ago. Body-snatching, I call it. What do I want to know about her?'

'What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?' murmured Pringle.

'Hecuba?' said Lorimer, looking puzzled, 'What's Hecuba got to do with it?'

'I was only quoting,' said Pringle, with gentle superiority.

'Well, I wish instead of quoting rot you'd devote your energies to helping me with these beastly verses. How on earth shall I begin?'

'You might adapt my quotation. "What's Dido got to do with me, or I to do with Dido?" I rather like that. Jam it down. Then you go on in a sort of rag-time metre. In the "Coon Drum-Major" style. Besides, you see, the beauty of it is that you administer a wholesome snub to the examiner right away. Makes him sit up at once. Put it down.'

Lorimer bit off another quarter of an inch of his pen. 'You needn't be an ass,' he said shortly.

'My dear chap,' said Pringle, enjoying himself immensely, 'what on earth is the good of my offering you suggestions if you won't take them?'

Lorimer said nothing. He bit off another mouthful of penholder.

'Well, anyway,' resumed Pringle. 'I can't see why you're so keen on the business. Put down anything. The beaks never make a fuss about these special exams.'

'It isn't the beaks I care about,' said Lorimer in an injured tone of voice, as if someone had been insinuating that he had committed some crime, 'only my people are rather keen on my doing well in this exam.'

'Why this exam, particularly?'

'Oh, I don't know. My grandfather or someone was a bit of a pro at verse in his day, I believe, and they think it ought to run in the family.'

Pringle examined the situation in all its aspects. 'Can't you get along?' he enquired at length.

'Not an inch.'

'Pity. I wish we could swop places.'

'So do I for some things. To start with, I shouldn't mind having made that century of yours against Charchester.'

Pringle beamed. The least hint that his fellow-man was taking him at his own valuation always made him happy.

'Thanks,' he said. 'No, but what I meant was that I wished I was in for this poetry prize. I bet I could turn out a rattling good screed. Why, last year I almost got the prize. I sent in fearfully hot stuff.'

'Think so?' said Lorimer doubtfully, in answer to the 'rattling good screed' passage of Pringle's speech. 'Well, I wish you'd have a shot. You might as well.'

'What, really? How about the prize?'

'Oh, hang the prize. We'll have to chance that.'

'I thought you were keen on getting it.'

'Oh, no. Second or third will do me all right, and satisfy my people. They only want to know for certain that I've got the poetic afflatus all right. Will you take it on?'

'All right.'

'Thanks, awfully.'

'I say, Lorimer,' said Pringle after a pause.

'Yes?'

'Are your people coming down for the O.B.s' match?'

The Old Beckfordians' match was the great function of the Beckford cricket season. The Headmaster gave a garden-party. The School band played; the School choir sang; and sisters, cousins, aunts, and parents flocked to the School in platoons.

'Yes, I think so,' said Lorimer. 'Why?'

'Is your sister coming?'

'Oh, I don't know.' A brother's utter lack of interest in his sister's actions is a weird and wonderful thing for an outsider to behold.

'Well, look here, I wish you'd get her to come. We could give them tea in here, and have rather a good time, don't you think?'

'All right. I'll make her come. Look here, Pringle, I believe you're rather gone on Mabel.'

This was Lorimer's vulgar way.

'Don't be an ass,' said Pringle, with a laugh which should have been careless, but was in reality merely feeble. 'She's quite a kid.'

Miss Mabel Lorimer's exact age was fifteen. She had brown hair, blue eyes, and a smile which disclosed to view a dimple. There are worse things than a dimple. Distinctly so, indeed. When ladies of fifteen possess dimples, mere man becomes but as a piece of damp blotting-paper. Pringle was seventeen and a half, and consequently too old to take note of such frivolous attributes; but all the same he had a sort of vague, sketchy impression that it would be pleasanter to run up a lively century against the O.B.s with Miss Lorimer as a spectator than in her absence. He felt pleased that she was coming.

'I say, about this poem,' said Lorimer, dismissing a subject which manifestly bored him, and returning to one which was of vital interest, 'you're sure you can write fairly decent stuff? It's no good sending in stuff that'll turn the examiner's hair grey. Can you turn out something really decent?'

Pringle said nothing. He smiled gently as who should observe, 'I and Shakespeare.'