

[7]

THE BISHOP GOES FOR A RIDE

The M.C.C. match opened auspiciously. Norris, for the first time that season, won the toss. Tom Brown, we read, in a similar position, 'with the usual liberality of young hands', put his opponents in first.

Norris was not so liberal. He may have been young, but he was not so young as that. The sun was shining on as true a wicket as was ever prepared when he cried 'Heads', and the coin, after rolling for some time in diminishing circles, came to a standstill with the dragon undermost. And Norris returned to the Pavilion and informed his gratified team that, all things considered, he rather thought that they would bat, and he would be obliged if Baker would get on his pads and come in first with him.

The M.C.C. men took the field--O. T. Blackwell, by the way, had shrunk into a mere brother of the century-making A. T.--and the two School House representatives followed them. An amateur of lengthy frame took the ball, a man of pace, to judge from the number of slips. Norris asked for 'two leg'. An obliging umpire informed him that he had got two leg. The long bowler requested short slip to stand finer, swung his arm as if to see that the machinery still worked, and dashed wildly towards the crease. The match had begun.

There are few pleasanter or more thrilling moments in one's school career than the first over of a big match. Pleasant, that is to say, if you are actually looking on. To have to listen to a match being started from the interior of a form-room is, of course, maddening. You hear the sound of bat meeting ball, followed by distant clapping. Somebody has scored. But who and what? It may be a four, or it may be a mere single. More important still, it may be the other side batting after all. Some miscreant has possibly lifted your best bowler into the road. The suspense is awful. It ought to be a School rule that the captain of the team should send a message round the form-rooms stating briefly and lucidly the result of the toss. Then one would know where one was. As it is, the entire form is dependent on the man sitting under the window. The form-master turns to write on the blackboard. The only hope of the form shoots up like a rocket, gazes earnestly in the direction of the Pavilion, and falls back with a thud into his seat. 'They haven't started yet,' he informs the rest in a stage whisper. 'Si-lence,' says the form-master, and the whole business must be gone through again, with the added disadvantage that the master now has his eye fixed coldly on the individual nearest the window, your only link with the outer world.

Various masters have various methods under such circumstances. One more than excellent man used to close his book and remark, 'I think we'll make up a little party to watch this match.' And the form, gasping its thanks, crowded to the windows. Another, the exact antithesis of this great and good gentleman, on seeing a boy taking fitful glances through

the window, would observe acidly, 'You are at perfect liberty, Jones, to watch the match if you care to, but if you do you will come in in the afternoon and make up the time you waste.' And as all that could be seen from that particular window was one of the umpires and a couple of fieldsmen, Jones would reluctantly elect to reserve himself, and for the present to turn his attention to Euripides again.

If you are one of the team, and watch the match from the Pavilion, you escape these trials, but there are others. In the first few overs of a School match, every ball looks to the spectators like taking a wicket. The fiendish ingenuity of the slow bowler, and the lightning speed of the fast man at the other end, make one feel positively ill. When the first ten has gone up on the scoring-board matters begin to right themselves. Today ten went up quickly. The fast man's first ball was outside the off-stump and a half-volley, and Norris, whatever the state of his nerves at the time, never forgot his forward drive. Before the bowler had recovered his balance the ball was half-way to the ropes. The umpire waved a large hand towards the Pavilion. The bowler looked annoyed. And the School inside the form-rooms asked itself feverishly what had happened, and which side it was that was applauding.

Having bowled his first ball too far up, the M.C.C. man, on the principle of anything for a change, now put in a very short one. Norris, a new man after that drive, steered it through the slips, and again the umpire waved his hand.

The rest of the over was more quiet. The last ball went for four byes, and then it was Baker's turn to face the slow man. Baker was a steady, plodding bat. He played five balls gently to mid-on, and glanced the sixth for a single to leg. With the fast bowler, who had not yet got his length, he was more vigorous, and succeeded in cutting him twice for two.

With thirty up for no wickets the School began to feel more comfortable. But at forty-three Baker was shattered by the man of pace, and retired with twenty to his credit. Gethryn came in next, but it was not to be his day out with the bat.

The fast bowler, who was now bowling excellently, sent down one rather wide of the off-stump. The Bishop made most of his runs from off balls, and he had a go at this one. It was rising when he hit it, and it went off his bat like a flash. In a School match it would have been a boundary. But today there was unusual talent in the slips. The man from Middlesex darted forward and sideways. He took the ball one-handed two inches from the ground, and received the applause which followed the effort with a rather bored look, as if he were saying, 'My good sirs, why make a fuss over these trifles!' The Bishop walked slowly back to the Pavilion, feeling that his luck was out, and Pringle came in.

A boy of Pringle's character is exactly the right person to go in in an emergency like the present one. Two wickets had fallen in two balls,

and the fast bowler was swelling visibly with determination to do the hat-trick. But Pringle never went in oppressed by the fear of getting out. He had a serene and boundless confidence in himself.

The fast man tried a yorker. Pringle came down hard on it, and forced the ball past the bowler for a single. Then he and Norris settled down to a lengthy stand.

'I do like seeing Pringle bat,' said Gosling. 'He always gives you the idea that he's doing you a personal favour by knocking your bowling about. Oh, well hit!'

Pringle had cut a full-pitch from the slow bowler to the ropes. Marriott, who had been silent and apparently in pain for some minutes, now gave out the following homemade effort:

A dashing young sportsman named Pringle,
On breaking his duck (with a single),
Observed with a smile,
'Just notice my style,
How science with vigour I mingle.'

'Little thing of my own,' he added, quoting England's greatest librettist. 'I call it "Heart Foam". I shall not publish it. Oh, run it out!'

Both Pringle and Norris were evidently in form. Norris was now not far from his fifty, and Pringle looked as if he might make anything. The century went up, and a run later Norris off-drove the slow bowler's successor for three, reaching his fifty by the stroke.

'Must be fairly warm work fielding today,' said Reece.

'By Jove!' said Gethryn, 'I forgot. I left my white hat in the House. Any of you chaps like to fetch it?'

There were no offers. Gethryn got up.

'Marriott, you slacker, come over to the House.'

'My good sir, I'm in next. Why don't you wait till the fellows come out of school and send a kid for it?'

'He probably wouldn't know where to find it. I don't know where it is myself. No, I shall go, but there's no need to fag about it yet. Hullo! Norris is out.'

Norris had stopped a straight one with his leg. He had made fifty-one in his best manner, and the School, leaving the form-rooms at the exact moment when the fatal ball was being bowled, were just in time to applaud him and realize what they had missed.

Gethryn's desire for his hat was not so pressing as to make him deprive himself of the pleasure of seeing Marriott at the wickets. Marriott ought to do something special today. Unfortunately, after he had played out one over and hit two fours off it, the luncheon interval began.

It was, therefore, not for half an hour that the Bishop went at last in search of the missing headgear. As luck would have it, the hat was on the table, so that whatever chance he might have had of overlooking the note which his uncle had left for him on the empty cash-box disappeared. The two things caught his eye simultaneously. He opened the note and read it. It is not necessary to transcribe the note in detail. It was no masterpiece of literary skill. But it had this merit, that it was not vague. Reading it, one grasped its meaning immediately.

The Bishop's first feeling was that the bottom had dropped out of everything suddenly. Surprise was not the word. It was the arrival of the absolutely unexpected.

Then he began to consider the position.

Farnie must be brought back. That was plain. And he must be brought back at once, before anyone could get to hear of what had happened.

Gethryn had the very strongest objections to his uncle, considered purely as a human being; but the fact remained that he was his uncle, and the Bishop had equally strong objections to any member of his

family being mixed up in a business of this description.

Having settled that point, he went on to the next. How was he to be brought back? He could not have gone far, for he could not have been gone much more than half an hour. Again, from his knowledge of his uncle's character, he deduced that he had in all probability not gone to the nearest station, Horton. At Horton one had to wait hours at a time for a train. Farnie must have made his way--on his bicycle--straight for the junction, Anfield, fifteen miles off by a good road. A train left Anfield for London at three-thirty. It was now a little past two. On a bicycle he could do it easily, and get back with his prize by about five, if he rode hard. In that case all would be well. Only three of the School wickets had fallen, and the pitch was playing as true as concrete. Besides, there was Pringle still in at one end, well set, and surely Marriott and Jennings and the rest of them would manage to stay in till five. They couldn't help it. All they had to do was to play forward to everything, and they must stop in. He himself had got out, it was true, but that was simply a regrettable accident. Not one man in a hundred would have caught that catch. No, with luck he ought easily to be able to do the distance and get back in time to go out with the rest of the team to field.

He ran downstairs and out of the House. On his way to the bicycle-shed he stopped, and looked towards the field, part of which could be seen from where he stood. The match had begun again. The fast bowler was just commencing his run. He saw him tear up to the crease and deliver

the ball. What happened then he could not see, owing to the trees which stood between him and the School grounds. But he heard the crack of ball meeting bat, and a great howl of applause went up from the invisible audience. A boundary, apparently. Yes, there was the umpire signalling it. Evidently a long stand was going to be made. He would have oceans of time for his ride. Norris wouldn't dream of declaring the innings closed before five o'clock at the earliest, and no bowler could take seven wickets in the time on such a pitch. He hauled his bicycle from the shed, and rode off at racing speed in the direction of Anfield.