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THE M.C.C. MATCH

But out in the field things were going badly with Beckford. The aspect of a game often changes considerably after lunch. For a while it looked as if Marriott and Pringle were in for their respective centuries. But Marriott was never a safe batsman.

A hundred and fifty went up on the board off a square leg hit for two, which completed Pringle's half-century, and then Marriott faced the slow bowler, who had been put on again after lunch. The first ball was a miss-hit. It went behind point for a couple. The next he got fairly hold of and drove to the boundary. The third was a very simple-looking ball. Its sole merit appeared to be the fact that it was straight. Also it was a trifle shorter than it looked. Marriott jumped out, and got too much under it. Up it soared, straight over the bowler's head. A trifle more weight behind the hit, and it would have cleared the ropes. As it was, the man in the deep-field never looked like missing it. The batsmen had time to cross over before the ball arrived, but they did it without enthusiasm. The run was not likely to count. Nor did it. Deep-field caught it like a bird. Marriott had made twenty-two.

And now occurred one of those rots which so often happen without any ostensible cause in the best regulated school elevens. Pringle played

the three remaining balls of the over without mishap, but when it was the fast man's turn to bowl to Bruce, Marriott's successor, things began to happen. Bruce, temporarily insane, perhaps through nervousness, played back at a half-volley, and was clean bowled. Hill came in, and was caught two balls later at the wicket. And the last ball of the over sent Jennings's off-stump out of the ground, after that batsman had scored two.

'I can always bowl like blazes after lunch,' said the fast man to Pringle. 'It's the lobster salad that does it, I think.' Four for a hundred and fifty-seven had changed to seven for a hundred and fifty-nine in the course of a single over. Gethryn's calculations, if he had only known, could have done now with a little revision.

Gosling was the next man. He was followed, after a brief innings of three balls, which realized eight runs, by Baynes. Baynes, though abstaining from runs himself, helped Pringle to add three to the score, all in singles, and was then yorked by the slow man, who meanly and treacherously sent down, without the slightest warning, a very fast one on the leg stump. Then Reece came in for the last wicket, and the rot stopped. Reece always went in last for the School, and the School in consequence always felt that there were possibilities to the very end of the innings.

The lot of a last-wicket man is somewhat trying. As at any moment his best innings may be nipped in the bud by the other man getting out, he

generally feels that it is hardly worth while to play himself in before endeavouring to make runs. He therefore tries to score off every ball, and thinks himself lucky if he gets half a dozen. Reece, however, took life more seriously. He had made quite an art of last-wicket batting. Once, against the Butterflies, he had run up sixty not out, and there was always the chance that he would do the same again. Today, with Pringle at the other end, he looked forward to a pleasant hour or two at the wicket.

No bowler ever looks on the last man quite in the same light as he does the other ten. He underrates him instinctively. The M.C.C. fast bowler was a man with an idea. His idea was that he could bowl a slow ball of diabolical ingenuity. As a rule, public feeling was against his trying the experiment. His captains were in the habit of enquiring rudely if he thought he was playing marbles. This was exactly what the M.C.C. captain asked on the present occasion, when the head ball sailed ponderously through the air, and was promptly hit by Reece into the Pavilion. The bowler grinned, and resumed his ordinary pace.

But everything came alike to Reece. Pringle, too, continued his career of triumph. Gradually the score rose from a hundred and seventy to two hundred. Pringle cut and drove in all directions, with the air of a prince of the blood royal distributing largesse. The second century went up to the accompaniment of cheers.

Then the slow bowler reaped his reward, for Pringle, after putting his

first two balls over the screen, was caught on the boundary off the third. He had contributed eighty-one to a total of two hundred and thirteen.

So far Gethryn's absence had not been noticed. But when the umpires had gone out, and the School were getting ready to take the field, inquiries were made.

'You might begin at the top end, Gosling,' said Norris.

'Right,' said Samuel. 'Who's going on at the other?'

'Baynes. Hullo, where's Gethryn?'

'Isn't he here? Perhaps he's in the Pavi--'

'Any of you chaps seen Gethryn?'

'He isn't in the Pav.,' said Baker. 'I've just come out of the First room myself, and he wasn't there. Shouldn't wonder if he's over at Leicester's.'

'Dash the man,' said Norris, 'he might have known we'd be going out to field soon. Anyhow, we can't wait for him. We shall have to field a sub. till he turns up.'

'Lorimer's in the Pav., changed,' said Pringle.

'All right. He'll do.'

And, reinforced by the gratified Lorimer, the team went on its way.

In the beginning the fortunes of the School prospered. Gosling opened, as was his custom, at a tremendous pace, and seemed to trouble the first few batsmen considerably. A worried-looking little person who had fielded with immense zeal during the School innings at cover-point took the first ball. It was very fast, and hit him just under the knee-cap. The pain, in spite of the pad, appeared to be acute. The little man danced vigorously for some time, and then, with much diffidence, prepared himself for the second instalment.

Now, when on the cricket field, the truculent Samuel was totally deficient in all the finer feelings, such as pity and charity. He could see that the batsman was in pain, and yet his second ball was faster than the first. It came in quickly from the off. The little batsman went forward in a hesitating, half-hearted manner, and played a clear two inches inside the ball. The off-stump shot out of the ground.

'Bowled, Sammy,' said Norris from his place in the slips.

The next man was a clergyman, a large man who suggested possibilities in the way of hitting. But Gosling was irresistible. For three balls

the priest survived. But the last of the over, a fast yorker on the leg stump, was too much for him, and he retired.

Two for none. The critic in the deck chair felt that the match was as good as over.

But this idyllic state of things was not to last. The newcomer, a tall man with a light moustache, which he felt carefully after every ball, soon settled down. He proved to be a conversationalist. Until he had opened his account, which he did with a strong drive to the ropes, he was silent. When, however, he had seen the ball safely to the boundary, he turned to Reece and began.

'Rather a nice one, that. Eh, what? Yes. Got it just on the right place, you know. Not a bad bat this, is it? What? Yes. One of Slogbury and Whangham's Sussex Spankers, don't you know. Chose it myself. Had it in pickle all the winter. Yes.'

'Play, sir,' from the umpire.

'Eh, what? Oh, right. Yes, good make these Sussex--Spankers. Oh, well fielded.'

At the word spankers he had effected another drive, but Marriott at mid-off had stopped it prettily.

Soon it began to occur to Norris that it would be advisable to have a change of bowling. Gosling was getting tired, and Baynes apparently offered no difficulties to the batsman on the perfect wicket, the conversational man in particular being very severe upon him. It was at such a crisis that the Bishop should have come in. He was Gosling's understudy. But where was he? The innings had been in progress over half an hour now, and still there were no signs of him. A man, thought Norris, who could cut off during the M.C.C. match (of all matches!), probably on some rotten business of his own, was beyond the pale, and must, on reappearance, be fallen upon and rent. He--here something small and red whizzed at his face. He put up his hands to protect himself. The ball struck them and bounded out again. When a fast bowler is bowling a slip he should not indulge in absent-mindedness. The conversational man had received his first life, and, as he was careful to explain to Reece, it was a curious thing, but whenever he was let off early in his innings he always made fifty, and as a rule a century. Gosling's analysis was spoilt, and the match in all probability lost. And Norris put it all down to Gethryn. If he had been there, this would not have happened.

'Sorry, Gosling,' he said.

'All right,' said Gosling, though thinking quite the reverse. And he walked back to bowl his next ball, conjuring up a beautiful vision in his mind. J. Douglas and Braund were fielding slip to him in the vision, while in the background Norris appeared, in a cauldron of

boiling oil.

'Tut, tut,' said Baker facetiously to the raging captain.

Baker's was essentially a flippant mind. Not even a moment of solemn agony, such as this, was sacred to him.

Norris was icy and severe.

'If you want to rot about, Baker,' he said, 'perhaps you'd better go and play stump-cricket with the juniors.'

'Well,' retorted Baker, with great politeness, 'I suppose seeing you miss a gaper like that right into your hands made me think I was playing stump-cricket with the juniors.'

At this point the conversation ceased, Baker suddenly remembering that he had not yet received his First Eleven colours, and that it would therefore be rash to goad the captain too freely, while Norris, for his part, recalled the fact that Baker had promised to do some Latin verse for him that evening, and might, if crushed with some scathing repartee, refuse to go through with that contract. So there was silence in the slips.

The partnership was broken at last by a lucky accident. The conversationalist called his partner for a short run, and when that

unfortunate gentleman had sprinted some twenty yards, reconsidered the matter and sent him back. Reece had the bails off before the victim had completed a third of the return journey.

For some time after this matters began to favour the School again. With the score at a hundred and five, three men left in two overs, one bowled by Gosling, the others caught at point and in the deep off Jennings, who had deposed Baynes. Six wickets were now down, and the enemy still over a hundred behind.

But the M.C.C. in its school matches has this peculiarity. However badly it may seem to stand, there is always something up its sleeve. In this case it was a professional, a man indecently devoid of anything in the shape of nerves. He played the bowling with a stolid confidence, amounting almost to contempt, which struck a chill to the hearts of the School bowlers. It did worse. It induced them to bowl with the sole object of getting the conversationalist at the batting end, thus enabling the professional to pile up an unassuming but rapidly increasing score by means of threes and singles.

As for the conversationalist, he had made thirty or more, and wanted all the bowling he could get.

'It's a very curious thing,' he said to Reece, as he faced Gosling, after his partner had scored a three off the first ball of the over, 'but some fellows simply detest fast bowling. Now I--' He never finished

the sentence. When he spoke again it was to begin a new one.

'How on earth did that happen?' he asked.

'I think it bowled you,' said Reece stolidly, picking up the two stumps which had been uprooted by Gosling's express.

'Yes. But how? Dash it! What? I can't underst--. Most curious thing I ever--dash it all, you know.'

He drifted off in the direction of the Pavilion, stopping on the way to ask short leg his opinion of the matter.

'Bowled, Sammy,' said Reece, putting on the bails.

'Well bowled, Gosling,' growled Norris from the slips.

'Sammy the marvel, by Jove,' said Marriott. 'Switch it on, Samuel, more and more.'

'I wish Norris would give me a rest. Where on earth is that man Gethryn?'

'Rum, isn't it? There's going to be something of a row about it. Norris seems to be getting rather shirty. Hullo! here comes the Deathless Author.'

The author referred to was the new batsman, a distinguished novelist, who played a good deal for the M.C.C. He broke his journey to the wicket to speak to the conversationalist, who was still engaged with short leg.

'Bates, old man,' he said, 'if you're going to the Pavilion you might wait for me. I shall be out in an hour or two.'

Upon which Bates, awaking suddenly to the position of affairs, went on his way.

With the arrival of the Deathless Author an unwelcome change came over the game. His cricket style resembled his literary style. Both were straightforward and vigorous. The first two balls he received from Gosling he drove hard past cover point to the ropes. Gosling, who had been bowling unchanged since the innings began, was naturally feeling a little tired. He was losing his length, and bowling more slowly than was his wont. Norris now gave him a rest for a few overs, Bruce going on with rather innocuous medium left-hand bowling. The professional continued to jog along slowly. The novelist hit. Everything seemed to come alike to him. Gosling resumed, but without effect, while at the other end bowler after bowler was tried. From a hundred and ten the score rose and rose, and still the two remained together. A hundred and ninety went up, and Norris in despair threw the ball to Marriott.

'Here you are, Marriott,' he said, 'I'm afraid we shall have to try you.'

'That's what I call really nicely expressed,' said Marriott to the umpire. 'Yes, over the wicket.'

Marriott was a slow, 'House-match' sort of bowler. That is to say, in a House match he was quite likely to get wickets, but in a First Eleven match such an event was highly improbable. His bowling looked very subtle, and if the ball was allowed to touch the ground it occasionally broke quite a remarkable distance.

The forlorn hope succeeded. The professional for the first time in his innings took a risk. He slashed at a very mild ball almost a wide on the off side. The ball touched the corner of the bat, and soared up in the direction of cover-point, where Pringle held it comfortably.

'There you are,' said Marriott, 'when you put a really scientific bowler on you're bound to get a wicket. Why on earth didn't I go on before, Norris?'

'You wait,' said Norris, 'there are five more balls of the over to come.'

'Bad job for the batsman,' said Marriott.

There had been time for a run before the ball reached Pringle, so that the novelist was now at the batting end. Marriott's next ball was not unlike his first, but it was straighter, and consequently easier to get at. The novelist hit it into the road. When it had been brought back he hit it into the road again. Marriott suggested that he had better have a man there.

The fourth ball of the over was too wide to hit with any comfort, and the batsman let it alone. The fifth went for four to square leg, almost killing the umpire on its way, and the sixth soared in the old familiar manner into the road again. Marriott's over had yielded exactly twenty-two runs. Four to win and two wickets to fall.

'I'll never read another of that man's books as long as I live,' said Marriott to Gosling, giving him the ball. 'You're our only hope, Sammy. Do go in and win.'

The new batsman had the bowling. He snicked his first ball for a single, bringing the novelist to the fore again, and Samuel Wilberforce Gosling vowed a vow that he would dismiss that distinguished novelist.

But the best intentions go for nothing when one's arm is feeling like lead. Of all the miserable balls sent down that afternoon that one of Gosling's was the worst. It was worse than anything of Marriott's. It flew sluggishly down the pitch well outside the leg stump. The novelist watched it come, and his eye gleamed. It was about to bounce for the

second time when, with a pleased smile, the batsman stepped out. There was a loud, musical report, the note of a bat when it strikes the ball fairly on the driving spot.

The man of letters shaded his eyes with his hand, and watched the ball diminish in the distance.

'I rather think,' said he cheerfully, as a crash of glass told of its arrival at the Pavilion, 'that that does it.'

He was perfectly right. It did.