

[9]

THE BISHOP FINISHES HIS RIDE

Gethryn had started on his ride handicapped by two things. He did not know his way after the first two miles, and the hedges at the roadside had just been clipped, leaving the roads covered with small thorns.

It was the former of these circumstances that first made itself apparent. For two miles the road ran straight, but after that it was unexplored country. The Bishop, being in both cricket and football teams, had few opportunities for cycling. He always brought his machine to School, but he very seldom used it.

At the beginning of the unexplored country, an irresponsible person recommended him to go straight on. He couldn't miss the road, said he. It was straight all the way. Gethryn thanked him, rode on, and having gone a mile came upon three roads, each of which might quite well have been considered a continuation of the road on which he was already. One curved gently off to the right, the other two equally gently to the left. He dismounted and the feelings of gratitude which he had borne towards his informant for his lucid directions vanished suddenly. He gazed searchingly at the three roads, but to single out one of them as straighter than the other two was a task that baffled him completely. A sign-post informed him of three things. By following road one he might

get to Brindleham, and ultimately, if he persevered, to Corden. Road number two would lead him to Old Inns, whatever they might be, with the further inducement of Little Benbury, while if he cast in his lot with road three he might hope sooner or later to arrive at Much Middlefold-on-the-Hill, and Lesser Middlefold-in-the-Vale. But on the subject of Anfield and Anfield Junction the board was silent.

Two courses lay open to him. Should he select a route at random, or wait for somebody to come and direct him? He waited. He went on waiting. He waited a considerable time, and at last, just as he was about to trust to luck, and make for Much Middlefold-on-the-Hill, a figure loomed in sight, a slow-moving man, who strolled down the Old Inns road at a pace which seemed to argue that he had plenty of time on his hands.

'I say, can you tell me the way to Anfield, please?' said the Bishop as he came up.

The man stopped, apparently rooted to the spot. He surveyed the Bishop with a glassy but determined stare from head to foot. Then he looked earnestly at the bicycle, and finally, in perfect silence, began to inspect the Bishop again.

'Eh?' he said at length.

'Can you tell me the way to Anfield?'

'Anfield?'

'Yes. How do I get there?'

The man perpended, and when he replied did so after the style of the late and great Ollendorf.

'Old Inns,' he said dreamily, waving a hand down the road by which he had come, 'be over there.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said Gethryn.

'Was born at Old Inns, I was,' continued the man, warming to his subject. 'Lived there fifty-five years, I have. Yeou go straight down the road an' yeou cam t' Old Inns. Yes, that be the way t' Old Inns.'

Gethryn nobly refrained from rending the speaker limb from limb.

'I don't want to know the way to Old Inns,' he said desperately. 'Where I want to get is Anfield. Anfield, you know. Which way do I go?'

'Anfield?' said the man. Then a brilliant flash of intelligence illumined his countenance. 'Whoy, Anfield be same road as Old Inns. Yeou go straight down the road, an'--'

'Thanks very much,' said Gethryn, and without waiting for further revelations shot off in the direction indicated. A quarter of a mile farther he looked over his shoulder. The man was still there, gazing after him in a kind of trance.

The Bishop passed through Old Inns with some way on his machine. He had much lost time to make up. A signpost bearing the legend 'Anfield four miles' told him that he was nearing his destination. The notice had changed to three miles and again to two, when suddenly he felt that jarring sensation which every cyclist knows. His back tyre was punctured. It was impossible to ride on. He got off and walked. He was still in his cricket clothes, and the fact that he had on spiked boots did not make walking any the easier. His progress was not rapid.

Half an hour before his one wish had been to catch sight of a fellow-being. Now, when he would have preferred to have avoided his species, men seemed to spring up from nowhere, and every man of them had a remark to make or a question to ask about the punctured tyre. Reserve is not the leading characteristic of the average yokel.

Gethryn, however, refused to be drawn into conversation on the subject. At last one, more determined than the rest, brought him to bay.

'Hoy, mister, stop,' called a voice. Gethryn turned. A man was running up the road towards him.

He arrived panting.

'What's up?' said the Bishop.

'You've got a puncture,' said the man, pointing an accusing finger at the flattened tyre.

It was not worth while killing the brute. Probably he was acting from the best motives.

'No,' said Gethryn wearily, 'it isn't a puncture. I always let the air out when I'm riding. It looks so much better, don't you think so? Why did they let you out? Good-bye.'

And feeling a little more comfortable after this outburst, he wheeled his bicycle on into Anfield High Street.

Minds in the village of Anfield worked with extraordinary rapidity. The first person of whom he asked the way to the Junction answered the riddle almost without thinking. He left his machine out in the road and went on to the platform. The first thing that caught his eye was the station clock with its hands pointing to five past four. And when he realized that, his uncle's train having left a clear half hour before, his labours had all been for nothing, the full bitterness of life came home to him.

He was turning away from the station when he stopped. Something else had caught his eye. On a bench at the extreme end of the platform sat a youth. And a further scrutiny convinced the Bishop of the fact that the youth was none other than Master Reginald Farnie, late of Beckford, and shortly, or he would know the reason why, to be once more of Beckford. Other people besides himself, it appeared, could miss trains.

Farnie was reading one of those halfpenny weeklies which--with a nerve which is the only creditable thing about them--call themselves comic. He did not see the Bishop until a shadow falling across his paper caused him to look up.

It was not often that he found himself unequal to a situation. Monk in a recent conversation had taken him aback somewhat, but his feelings on that occasion were not to be compared with what he felt on seeing the one person whom he least desired to meet standing at his side. His jaw dropped limply, Comic Blitherings fluttered to the ground.

The Bishop was the first to speak. Indeed, if he had waited for Farnie to break the silence, he would have waited long.

'Get up,' he said. Farnie got up.

'Come on.' Farnie came.

'Go and get your machine,' said Gethryn. 'Hurry up. And now you will

jolly well come back to Beckford, you little beast.'

But before that could be done there was Gethryn's back wheel to be mended. This took time. It was nearly half past four before they started.

'Oh,' said Gethryn, as they were about to mount, 'there's that money. I was forgetting. Out with it.'

Ten pounds had been the sum Farnie had taken from the study. Six was all he was able to restore. Gethryn enquired after the deficit.

'I gave it to Monk,' said Farnie.

To Gethryn, in his present frame of mind, the mere mention of Monk was sufficient to uncork the vials of his wrath.

'What the blazes did you do that for? What's Monk got to do with it?'

'He said he'd get me sacked if I didn't pay him,' whined Farnie.

This was not strictly true. Monk had not said. He had hinted. And he had hinted at flogging, not expulsion.

'Why?' pursued the Bishop. 'What had you and Monk been up to?'

Farnie, using his out-of-bounds adventures as a foundation, worked up a highly artistic narrative of doings, which, if they had actually been performed, would certainly have entailed expulsion. He had judged Gethryn's character correctly. If the matter had been simply a case for a flogging, the Bishop would have stood aside and let the thing go on. Against the extreme penalty of School law he felt bound as a matter of family duty to shield his relative. And he saw a bad time coming for himself in the very near future. Either he must expose Farnie, which he had resolved not to do, or he must refuse to explain his absence from the M.C.C. match, for by now there was not the smallest chance of his being able to get back in time for the visitors' innings. As he rode on he tried to imagine what would happen in consequence of that desertion, and he could not do it. His crime was, so far as he knew, absolutely without precedent in the School history.

As they passed the cricket field he saw that it was empty. Stumps were usually drawn early in the M.C.C. match if the issue of the game was out of doubt, as the Marylebone men had trains to catch. Evidently this had happened today. It might mean that the School had won easily--they had looked like making a big score when he had left the ground--in which case public opinion would be more lenient towards him. After a victory a school feels that all's well that ends well. But it might, on the other hand, mean quite the reverse.

He put his machine up, and hurried to the study. Several boys, as he passed them, looked curiously at him, but none spoke to him.

Marriott was in the study, reading a book. He was still in flannels, and looked as if he had begun to change but had thought better of it. As was actually the case.

'Hullo,' he cried, as Gethryn appeared. 'Where the dickens have you been all the afternoon? What on earth did you go off like that for?'

'I'm sorry, old chap,' said the Bishop, 'I can't tell you. I shan't be able to tell anyone.'

'But, man! Try and realize what you've done. Do you grasp the fact that you've gone and got the School licked in the M.C.C. match, and that we haven't beaten the M.C.C. for about a dozen years, and that if you'd been there to bowl we should have walked over this time? Do try and grasp the thing.'

'Did they win?'

'Rather. By a wicket. Two wickets, I mean. We made 213. Your bowling would just have done it.'

Gethryn sat down.

'Oh Lord,' he said blankly, 'this is awful!'

'But, look here, Bishop,' continued Marriott, 'this is all rot. You can't do a thing like this, and then refuse to offer any explanation, and expect things to go on just as usual.'

'I don't,' said Gethryn. 'I know there's going to be a row, but I can't explain. You'll have to take me on trust.'

'Oh, as far as I am concerned, it's all right,' said Marriott. 'I know you wouldn't be ass enough to do a thing like that without a jolly good reason. It's the other chaps I'm thinking about. You'll find it jolly hard to put Norris off, I'm afraid. He's most awfully sick about the match. He fielded badly, which always makes him shirty. Jephson, too. You'll have a bad time with Jephson. His one wish after the match was to have your gore and plenty of it. Nothing else would have pleased him a bit. And think of the chaps in the House, too. Just consider what a pull this gives Monk and his mob over you. The House'll want some looking after now, I fancy.'

'And they'll get it,' said Gethryn. 'If Monk gives me any of his beastly cheek, I'll knock his head off.'

But in spite of the consolation which such a prospect afforded him, he did not look forward with pleasure to the next day, when he would have to meet Norris and the rest. It would have been bad in any case. He did not care to think what would happen when he refused to offer the slightest explanation.