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IN WHICH A CASE IS FULLY DISCUSSED

Gethryn was right in thinking that the interviews would be unpleasant. They increased in unpleasantness in arithmetical progression, until they culminated finally in a terrific encounter with the justly outraged Norris.

Reece was the first person to institute inquiries, and if everybody had resembled him, matters would not have been so bad for Gethryn. Reece possessed a perfect genius for minding his own business. The dialogue when they met was brief.

'Hullo,' said Reece.

'Hullo,' said the Bishop.

'Where did you get to yesterday?' said Reece.

'Oh, I had to go somewhere,' said the Bishop vaguely.

'Oh? Pity. Wasn't a bad match.' And that was all the comment Reece made on the situation.

Gethryn went over to the chapel that morning with an empty sinking feeling inside him. He was quite determined to offer no single word of explanation, and he felt that that made the prospect all the worse. There was a vast uncertainty in his mind as to what was going to happen. Nobody could actually do anything to him, of course. It would have been a decided relief to him if anybody had tried that line of action, for moments occur when the only thing that can adequately soothe the wounded spirit, is to hit straight from the shoulder at someone. The punching-ball is often found useful under these circumstances. As he was passing Jephson's House he nearly ran into somebody who was coming out.

'Be firm, my moral pecker,' thought Gethryn, and braced himself up for conflict.

'Well, Gethryn?' said Mr Jephson.

The question 'Well?' especially when addressed by a master to a boy, is one of the few questions to which there is literally no answer. You can look sheepish, you can look defiant, or you can look surprised according to the state of your conscience. But anything in the way of verbal response is impossible.

Gethryn attempted no verbal response.

'Well, Gethryn,' went on Mr Jephson, 'was it pleasant up the river yesterday?'

Mr Jephson always preferred the rapier of sarcasm to the bludgeon of abuse.

'Yes, sir,' said Gethryn, 'very pleasant.' He did not mean to be massacred without a struggle.

'What!' cried Mr Jephson. 'You actually mean to say that you did go up the river?'

'No, sir.'

'Then what do you mean?'

'It is always pleasant up the river on a fine day,' said Gethryn.

His opponent, to use a metaphor suitable to a cricket master, changed his action. He abandoned sarcasm and condescended to direct inquiry.

'Where were you yesterday afternoon?' he said.

The Bishop, like Mr Hurry Bungsho Jabberjee, B.A., became at once the silent tomb.

'Did you hear what I said, Gethryn?' (icily). 'Where were you yesterday afternoon?'

'I can't say, sir.'

These words may convey two meanings. They may imply ignorance, in which case the speaker should be led gently off to the nearest asylum. Or they may imply obstinacy. Mr Jephson decided that in the present case obstinacy lay at the root of the matter. He became icier than ever.

'Very well, Gethryn,' he said, 'I shall report this to the Headmaster.'

And Gethryn, feeling that the conference was at an end, proceeded on his way.

After chapel there was Norris to be handled. Norris had been rather late for chapel that morning, and had no opportunity of speaking to the Bishop. But after the service was over, and the School streamed out of the building towards their respective houses, he waylaid him at the door, and demanded an explanation. The Bishop refused to give one. Norris, whose temper never had a chance of reaching its accustomed tranquillity until he had consumed some breakfast--he hated early morning chapel--raved. The Bishop was worried, but firm.

'Then you mean to say--you don't mean to say--I mean, you don't intend to explain?' said Norris finally, working round for the twentieth time

to his original text.

'I can't explain.'

'You won't, you mean.'

'Yes. I'll apologize if you like, but I won't explain.'

Norris felt the strain was becoming too much for him.

'Apologize!' he moaned, addressing circumambient space. 'Apologize! A man cuts off in the middle of the M.C.C. match, loses us the game, and then comes back and offers to apologize.'

'The offer's withdrawn,' put in Gethryn. 'Apologies and explanations are both off.' It was hopeless to try and be conciliatory under the circumstances. They did not admit of it.

Norris glared.

'I suppose,' he said, 'you don't expect to go on playing for the First after this? We can't keep a place open for you in the team on the off chance of your not having a previous engagement, you know.'

'That's your affair,' said the Bishop, 'you're captain. Have you finished your address? Is there anything else you'd like to say?'

Norris considered, and, as he went in at Jephson's gate, wound up with this Parthian shaft--

'All I can say is that you're not fit to be at a public school. They ought to sack a chap for doing that sort of thing. If you'll take my advice, you'll leave.'

About two hours afterwards Gethryn discovered a suitable retort, but, coming to the conclusion that better late than never does not apply to repartees, refrained from speaking it.

It was Mr Jephson's usual custom to sally out after supper on Sunday evenings to smoke a pipe (or several pipes) with one of the other House-masters. On this particular evening he made for Robertson's, which was one of the four Houses on the opposite side of the School grounds. He could hardly have selected a better man to take his grievance to. Mr Robertson was a long, silent man with grizzled hair, and an eye that pierced like a gimlet. He had the enviable reputation of keeping the best order of any master in the School. He was also one of the most popular of the staff. This was all the more remarkable from the fact that he played no games.

To him came Mr Jephson, primed to bursting point with his grievance.

'Anything wrong, Jephson?' said Mr Robertson.

'Wrong? I should just think there was. Did you happen to be looking at the match yesterday, Robertson?'

Mr Robertson nodded.

'I always watch School matches. Good match. Norris missed a bad catch in the slips. He was asleep.'

Mr Jephson conceded the point. It was trivial.

'Yes,' he said, 'he should certainly have held it. But that's a mere detail. I want to talk about Gethryn. Do you know what he did yesterday? I never heard of such a thing in my life, never. Went off during the luncheon interval without a word, and never appeared again till lock-up. And now he refuses to offer any explanation whatever. I shall report the whole thing to Beckett. I told Gethryn so this morning.'

'I shouldn't,' said Mr Robertson; 'I really think I shouldn't. Beckett finds the ordinary duties of a Headmaster quite sufficient for his needs. This business is not in his province at all.'

'Not in his province? My dear sir, what is a headmaster for, if not to manage affairs of this sort?'

Mr Robertson smiled in a sphinx-like manner, and answered, after the fashion of Socrates, with a question.

'Let me ask you two things, Jephson. You must proceed gingerly. Now, firstly, it is a headmaster's business to punish any breach of school rules, is it not?'

'Well?'

'And school prefects do not attend roll-call, and have no restrictions placed upon them in the matter of bounds?'

'No. Well?'

'Then perhaps you'll tell me what School rule Gethryn has broken?' said Mr Robertson.

'You see you can't,' he went on. 'Of course you can't. He has not broken any School rule. He is a prefect, and may do anything he likes with his spare time. He chooses to play cricket. Then he changes his mind and goes off to some unknown locality for some reason at present unexplained. It is all perfectly legal. Extremely quaint behaviour on his part, I admit, but thoroughly legal.'

'Then nothing can be done,' exclaimed Mr Jephson blankly. 'But it's absurd. Something must be done. The thing can't be left as it is. It's

preposterous!'

'I should imagine,' said Mr Robertson, 'from what small knowledge I possess of the Human Boy, that matters will be made decidedly unpleasant for the criminal.'

'Well, I know one thing; he won't play for the team again.'

'There is something very refreshing about your logic, Jephson. Because a boy does not play in one match, you will not let him play in any of the others, though you admit his absence weakens the team. However, I suppose that is unavoidable. Mind you, I think it is a pity. Of course Gethryn has some explanation, if he would only favour us with it. Personally I think rather highly of Gethryn. So does poor old Leicester. He is the only Head-prefect Leicester has had for the last half-dozen years who knows even the rudiments of his business. But it's no use my preaching his virtues to you. You wouldn't listen. Take another cigar, and let's talk about the weather.'

Mr Jephson took the proffered weed, and the conversation, though it did not turn upon the suggested topic, ceased to have anything to do with Gethryn.

The general opinion of the School was dead against the Bishop. One or two of his friends still clung to a hope that explanations might come out, while there were also a few who always made a point of thinking

differently from everybody else. Of this class was Pringle. On the Monday after the match he spent the best part of an hour of his valuable time reasoning on the subject with Lorimer. Lorimer's vote went with the majority. Although he had fielded for the Bishop, he was not, of course, being merely a substitute, allowed to bowl, as the Bishop had had his innings, and it had been particularly galling to him to feel that he might have saved the match, if it had only been possible for him to have played a larger part.

'It's no good jawing about it,' he said, 'there isn't a word to say for the man. He hasn't a leg to stand on. Why, it would be bad enough in a House or form match even, but when it comes to first matches--!' Here words failed Lorimer.

'Not at all,' said Pringle, unmoved. 'There are heaps of reasons, jolly good reasons, why he might have gone away.'

'Such as?' said Lorimer.

'Well, he might have been called away by a telegram, for instance.'

'What rot! Why should he make such a mystery of it if that was all?'

'He'd have explained all right if somebody had asked him properly. You get a chap like Norris, who, when he loses his hair, has got just about as much tact as a rhinoceros, going and ballyragging the man, and no

wonder he won't say anything. I shouldn't myself.'

'Well, go and talk to him decently, then. Let's see you do it, and I'll bet it won't make a bit of difference. What the chap has done is to go and get himself mixed up in some shady business somewhere. That's the only thing it can be.'

'Rot,' said Pringle, 'the Bishop isn't that sort of chap.'

'You can't tell. I say,' he broke off suddenly, 'have you done that poem yet?'

Pringle started. He had not so much as begun that promised epic.

'I--er--haven't quite finished it yet. I'm thinking it out, you know. Getting a sort of general grip of the thing.'

'Oh. Well, I wish you'd buck up with it. It's got to go in tomorrow week.'

'Tomorrow week. Tuesday the what? Twenty-second, isn't it? Right. I'll remember. Two days after the O.B.s' match. That'll fix it in my mind. By the way, your people are going to come down all right, aren't they? I mean, we shall have to be getting in supplies and so on.'

'Yes. They'll be coming. There's plenty of time, though, to think of

that. What you've got to do for the present is to keep your mind glued on the death of Dido.'

'Rather,' said Pringle, 'I won't forget.'

This was at six twenty-two p.m. By the time six-thirty boomed from the College clock-tower, Pringle was absorbing a thrilling work of fiction, and Dido, her death, and everything connected with her, had faded from his mind like a beautiful dream.