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POETRY AND STUMP-CRICKET

The Old Beckfordians' match came off in due season, and Pringle enjoyed it thoroughly. Though he only contributed a dozen in the first innings, he made up for this afterwards in the second, when the School had a hundred and twenty to get in just two hours. He went in first with Marriott, and they pulled the thing off and gave the School a ten wickets victory with eight minutes to spare. Pringle was in rare form. He made fifty-three, mainly off the bowling of a certain J.R. Smith, whose fag he had been in the old days. When at School, Smith had always been singularly aggressive towards Pringle, and the latter found that much pleasure was to be derived from hitting fours off his bowling. Subsequently he ate more strawberries and cream than were, strictly speaking, good for him, and did the honours at the study tea-party with the grace of a born host. And, as he had hoped, Miss Mabel Lorimer did ask what that silver-plate was stuck on to that bat for.

It is not to be wondered at that in the midst of these festivities such trivialities as Lorimer's poem found no place in his thoughts. It was not until the following day that he was reminded of it.

That Sunday was a visiting Sunday. Visiting Sundays occurred three times a term, when everybody who had friends and relations in the

neighbourhood was allowed to spend the day with them. Pringle on such occasions used to ride over to Biddlehampton, the scene of Farnie's adventures, on somebody else's bicycle, his destination being the residence of a certain Colonel Ashby, no relation, but a great friend of his father's.

The gallant Colonel had, besides his other merits--which were numerous--the pleasant characteristic of leaving his guests to themselves. To be left to oneself under some circumstances is apt to be a drawback, but in this case there was never any lack of amusements. The only objection that Pringle ever found was that there was too much to do in the time. There was shooting, riding, fishing, and also stump-cricket. Given proper conditions, no game in existence yields to stump-cricket in the matter of excitement. A stable-yard makes the best pitch, for the walls stop all hits and you score solely by boundaries, one for every hit, two if it goes past the coach-room door, four to the end wall, and out if you send it over. It is perfect.

There were two junior Ashbys, twins, aged sixteen. They went to school at Charchester, returning to the ancestral home for the weekend. Sometimes when Pringle came they would bring a school friend, in which case Pringle and he would play the twins. But as a rule the programme consisted of a series of five test matches, Charchester versus Beckford; and as Pringle was almost exactly twice as good as each of the twins taken individually, when they combined it made the sides very even, and the test matches were fought out with the most deadly

keenness.

After lunch the Colonel was in the habit of taking Pringle for a stroll in the grounds, to watch him smoke a cigar or two. On this Sunday the conversation during the walk, after beginning, as was right and proper, with cricket, turned to work.

'Let me see,' said the Colonel, as Pringle finished the description of how point had almost got to the square cut which had given him his century against Charchester, 'you're out of the Upper Fifth now, aren't you? I always used to think you were going to be a fixture there. You are like your father in that way. I remember him at Rugby spending years on end in the same form. Couldn't get out of it. But you did get your remove, if I remember?'

'Rather,' said Pringle, 'years ago. That's to say, last term. And I'm jolly glad I did, too.'

His errant memory had returned to the poetry prize once more.

'Oh,' said the Colonel, 'why is that?'

Pringle explained the peculiar disadvantages that attended membership of the Upper Fifth during the summer term.

'I don't think a man ought to be allowed to spend his money in these

special prizes,' he concluded; 'at any rate they ought to be Sixth Form affairs. It's hard enough having to do the ordinary work and keep up your cricket at the same time.'

'They are compulsory then?'

'Yes. Swindle, I call it. The chap who shares my study at Beckford is in the Upper Fifth, and his hair's turning white under the strain. The worst of it is, too, that I've promised to help him, and I never seem to have any time to give to the thing. I could turn out a great poem if I had an hour or two to spare now and then.'

'What's the subject?'

'Death of Dido this year. They are always jolly keen on deaths. Last year it was Cato, and the year before Julius Caesar. They seem to have very morbid minds. I think they might try something cheerful for a change.'

'Dido,' said the Colonel dreamily. 'Death of Dido. Where have I heard either a story or a poem or a riddle or something in some way connected with the death of Dido? It was years ago, but I distinctly remember having heard somebody mention the occurrence. Oh, well, it will come back presently, I dare say.'

It did come back presently. The story was this. A friend of Colonel

Ashby's--the one-time colonel of his regiment, to be exact--was an earnest student of everything in the literature of the country that dealt with Sport. This gentleman happened to read in a publisher's list one day that a limited edition of The Dark Horse, by a Mr Arthur James, was on sale, and might be purchased from the publisher by all who were willing to spend half a guinea to that end.

'Well, old Matthews,' said the Colonel, 'sent off for this book. Thought it must be a sporting novel, don't you know. I shall never forget his disappointment when he opened the parcel. It turned out to be a collection of poems. The Dark Horse, and Other Studies in the Tragic, was its full title.'

'Matthews never had a soul for poetry, good or bad. The Dark Horse itself was about a knight in the Middle Ages, you know. Great nonsense it was, too. Matthews used to read me passages from time to time. When he gave up the regiment he left me the book as a farewell gift. He said I was the only man he knew who really sympathized with him in the affair. I've got it still. It's in the library somewhere, if you care to look at it. What recalled it to my mind was your mention of Dido. The second poem was about the death of Dido, as far as I can remember. I'm no judge of poetry, but it didn't strike me as being very good. At the same time, you might pick up a hint or two from it. It ought to be in one of the two lower shelves on the right of the door as you go in. Unless it has been taken away. That is not likely, though. We are not very enthusiastic poetry readers here.'

Pringle thanked him for his information, and went back to the stable-yard, where he lost the fourth test match by sixteen runs, owing to preoccupation. You can't play a yorker on the leg-stump with a thin walking-stick if your mind is occupied elsewhere. And the leg-stump yorkers of James, the elder (by a minute) of the two Ashbys, were achieving a growing reputation in Charchester cricket circles.

One ought never, thought Pringle, to despise the gifts which Fortune bestows on us. And this mention of an actual completed poem on the very subject which was in his mind was clearly a gift of Fortune. How much better it would be to read thoughtfully through this poem, and quarry out a set of verses from it suitable to Lorimer's needs, than to waste his brain-tissues in trying to evolve something original from his own inner consciousness. Pringle objected strongly to any unnecessary waste of his brain-tissues. Besides, the best poets borrowed. Virgil did it. Tennyson did it. Even Homer--we have it on the authority of Mr Kipling--when he smote his blooming lyre went and stole what he thought he might require. Why should Pringle of the School House refuse to follow in such illustrious footsteps?

It was at this point that the guileful James delivered his insidious yorker, and the dull thud of the tennis ball on the board which served as the wicket told a listening world that Charchester had won the fourth test match, and that the scores were now two all.

But Beckford's star was to ascend again. Pringle's mind was made up. He would read the printed poem that very night, and before retiring to rest he would have Lorimer's verses complete and ready to be sent in for judgement to the examiner. But for the present he would dismiss the matter from his mind, and devote himself to polishing off the Charchester champions in the fifth and final test match. And in this he was successful, for just as the bell rang, summoning the players in to a well-earned tea, a sweet forward drive from his walking-stick crashed against the end wall, and Beckford had won the rubber.

'As the young batsman, undefeated to the last, reached the pavilion,' said Pringle, getting into his coat, 'a prolonged and deafening salvo of cheers greeted him. His twenty-three not out, compiled as it was against the finest bowling Charchester could produce, and on a wicket that was always treacherous (there's a brick loose at the top end), was an effort unique in its heroism.'

'Oh, come on,' said the defeated team.

'If you have fluked a win,' said James, 'it's nothing much. Wait till next visiting Sunday.'

And the teams went in to tea.

In the programme which Pringle had mapped out for himself, he was to go to bed with his book at the highly respectable hour of ten, work till

eleven, and then go to sleep. But programmes are notoriously subject to alterations. Pringle's was altered owing to a remark made immediately after dinner by John Ashby, who, desirous of retrieving the fallen fortunes of Charchester, offered to play Pringle a hundred up at billiards, giving him thirty. Now Pringle's ability in the realm of sport did not extend to billiards. But the human being who can hear unmoved a fellow human being offering him thirty start in a game of a hundred has yet to be born. He accepted the challenge, and permission to play having been granted by the powers that were, on the understanding that the cloth was not to be cut and as few cues broken as possible, the game began, James acting as marker.

There are doubtless ways by which a game of a hundred up can be got through in less than two hours, but with Pringle and his opponent desire outran performance. When the highest break on either side is six, and the average break two, matters progress with more stateliness than speed. At last, when the hands of the clock both pointed to the figure eleven, Pringle, whose score had been at ninety-eight since half-past ten, found himself within two inches of his opponent's ball, which was tottering on the very edge of the pocket. He administered the coup de grace with the air of a John Roberts, and retired triumphant; while the Charchester representatives pointed out that as their score was at seventy-four, they had really won a moral victory by four points. To which specious and unsportsmanlike piece of sophistry Pringle turned a deaf ear.

It was now too late for any serious literary efforts. No bard can do without his sleep. Even Homer used to nod at times. So Pringle contented himself with reading through the poem, which consisted of some thirty lines, and copying the same down on a sheet of notepaper for future reference. After which he went to bed.

In order to arrive at Beckford in time for morning school, he had to start from the house at eight o'clock punctually. This left little time for poetical lights. The consequence was that when Lorimer, on the following afternoon, demanded the poem as per contract, all that Pringle had to show was the copy which he had made of the poem in the book. There was a moment's suspense while Conscience and Sheer Wickedness fought the matter out inside him, and then Conscience, which had started on the encounter without enthusiasm, being obviously flabby and out of condition, threw up the sponge.

'Here you are,' said Pringle, 'it's only a rough copy, but here it is.'

Lorimer perused it hastily.

'But, I say,' he observed in surprised and awestruck tones, 'this is rather good.'

It seemed to strike him as quite a novel idea. 'Yes, not bad, is it?'

'But it'll get the prize.'

'Oh, we shall have to prevent that somehow.'

He did not mention how, and Lorimer did not ask.

'Well, anyhow,' said Lorimer, 'thanks awfully. I hope you've not fagged about it too much.'

'Oh no,' said Pringle airily, 'rather not. It's been no trouble at all.'

He thus, it will be noticed, concluded a painful and immoral scene by speaking perfect truth. A most gratifying reflection.