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NORRIS TAKES A SHORT HOLIDAY

'It's all rot,' observed Pringle, 'to say that they haven't a chance, because they have.'

He and Lorimer were passing through the cricket-field on their way back from an early morning visit to the baths, and had stopped to look at Leicester's House team (revised version) taking its daily hour of fielding practice. They watched the performance keenly and critically, as spies in an enemy's camp.

'Who said they hadn't a chance?' said Lorimer. 'I didn't.'

'Oh, everybody. The chaps call them the Kindergarten and the Kids' Happy League, and things of that sort. Rot, I call it. They seem to forget that you only want two or three really good men in a team if the rest can field. Look at our crowd. They've all either got their colours, or else are just outside the teams, and I swear you can't rely on one of them to hold the merest sitter right into his hands.'

On the subject of fielding in general, and catching in particular, Pringle was feeling rather sore. In the match which his House had just won against Browning's, he had put himself on to bowl in the second

innings. He was one of those bowlers who manage to capture from six to ten wickets in the course of a season, and the occasions on which he bowled really well were few. On this occasion he had bowled excellently, and it had annoyed him when five catches, five soft, gentle catches, were missed off him in the course of four overs. As he watched the crisp, clean fielding which was shown by the very smallest of Leicester's small 'tail', he felt that he would rather have any of that despised eight on his side than any of the School House lights except Baynes and Lorimer.

'Our lot's all right, really,' said Lorimer, in answer to Pringle's sweeping condemnation. 'Everybody has his off days. They'll be all right next match.'

'Doubt it,' replied Pringle. 'It's all very well for you. You bowl to hit the sticks. I don't. Now just watch these kids for a moment. Now! Look! No, he couldn't have got to that. Wait a second. Now!'

Gethryn had skied one into the deep. Wilson, Burgess, and Carstairs all started for it.

'Burgess,' called the Bishop.

The other two stopped dead. Burgess ran on and made the catch.

'Now, there you are,' said Pringle, pointing his moral, 'see how those

two kids stopped when Gethryn called. If that had happened in one of our matches, you'd have had half a dozen men rotting about underneath the ball, and getting in one another's way, and then probably winding up by everybody leaving the catch to everybody else.'

'Oh, come on,' said Lorimer, 'you're getting morbid. Why the dickens didn't you think of having our fellows out for fielding practice, if you're so keen on it?'

'They wouldn't have come. When a chap gets colours, he seems to think he's bought the place. You can't drag a Second Eleven man out of his bed before breakfast to improve his fielding. He thinks it can't be improved. They're a heart-breaking crew.'

'Good,' said Lorimer, 'I suppose that includes me?'

'No. You're a model man. I have seen you hold a catch now and then.'

'Thanks. Oh, I say, I gave in the poem yesterday. I hope the deuce it won't get the prize. I hope they won't spot, either, that I didn't write the thing.'

'Not a chance,' said Pringle complacently, 'you're all right. Don't you worry yourself.'

Webster's, against whom Leicester's had been drawn in the opening round

of the House matches, had three men in their team, and only three, who knew how to hold a bat. It was the slackest House in the School, and always had been. It did not cause any overwhelming surprise, accordingly, when Leicester's beat them without fatigue by an innings and a hundred and twenty-one runs. Webster's won the toss, and made thirty-five. For Leicester's, Reece and Gethryn scored fifty and sixty-two respectively, and Marriott fifty-three not out. They then, with two wickets down, declared, and rattled Webster's out for seventy. The public, which had had its eye on the team, in order to see how its tail was likely to shape, was disappointed. The only definite fact that could be gleaned from the match was that the junior members of the team were not to be despised in the field. The early morning field-outs had had their effect. Adams especially shone, while Wilson at cover and Burgess in the deep recalled Jessop and Tyldesley.

The School made a note of the fact. So did the Bishop. He summoned the eight juniors seriatim to his study, and administered much praise, coupled with the news that fielding before breakfast would go on as usual.

Leicester's had drawn against Jephson's in the second round. Norris's lot had beaten Cooke's by, curiously enough, almost exactly the same margin as that by which Leicester's had defeated Webster's. It was generally considered that this match would decide Leicester's chances for the cup. If they could beat a really hot team like Jephson's, it was reasonable to suppose that they would do the same to the rest of

the Houses, though the School House would have to be reckoned with. But the School House, as Pringle had observed, was weak in the field. It was not a coherent team. Individually its members were good, but they did not play together as Leicester's did.

But the majority of the School did not think seriously of their chances. Except for Pringle, who, as has been mentioned before, always made a point of thinking differently from everyone else, no one really believed that they would win the cup, or even appear in the final. How could a team whose tail began at the fall of the second wicket defeat teams which, like the School House, had no real tail at all?

Norris supported this view. It was for this reason that when, at breakfast on the day on which Jephson's were due to play Leicester's, he received an invitation from one of his many uncles to spend a weekend at his house, he decided to accept it.

This uncle was a man of wealth. After winning two fortunes on the Stock Exchange and losing them both, he had at length amassed a third, with which he retired in triumph to the country, leaving Throgmorton Street to exist as best it could without him. He had bought a 'show-place' at a village which lay twenty miles by rail to the east of Beckford, and it had always been Norris's wish to see this show-place, a house which was said to combine the hoariest of antiquity with a variety of modern comforts.

Merely to pay a flying visit there would be good. But his uncle held out an additional attraction. If Norris could catch the one-forty from Horton, he would arrive just in time to take part in a cricket match, that day being the day of the annual encounter with the neighbouring village of Pudford. The rector of Pudford, the opposition captain, so wrote Norris's uncle, had by underhand means lured down three really decent players from Oxford--not Blues, but almost--who had come to the village ostensibly to read classics with him as their coach, but in reality for the sole purpose of snatching from Little Bindlebury (his own village) the laurels they had so nobly earned the year before. He had heard that Norris was captaining the Beckford team this year, and had an average of thirty-eight point nought three two, so would he come and make thirty-eight point nought three two for Little Bindlebury?

'This,' thought Norris, 'is Fame. This is where I spread myself. I must be in this at any price.'

He showed the letter to Baker.

'What a pity,' said Baker.

'What's a pity?'

'That you won't be able to go. It seems rather a catch.'

'Can't go?' said Norris; 'my dear sir, you're talking through your hat.'

Think I'm going to refuse an invitation like this? Not if I know it. I'm going to toddle off to Jephson, get an exeat, and catch that one-forty. And if I don't paralyse the Pudford bowling, I'll shoot myself.'

'But the House match! Leicester's! This afternoon!' gurgled the amazed Baker.

'Oh, hang Leicester's. Surely the rest of you can lick the Kids' Happy League without my help. If you can't, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. I've chosen you a wicket with my own hands, fit to play a test match on.'

'Of course we ought to lick them. But you can never tell at cricket what's going to happen. We oughtn't to run any risks when we've got such a good chance of winning the pot. Why, it's centuries since we won the pot. Don't you go.'

'I must, man. It's the chance of a lifetime.'

Baker tried another method of attack.

'Besides,' he said, 'you don't suppose Jephson'll let you off to play in a beastly little village game when there's a House match on?'

'He must never know!' hissed Norris, after the manner of the

Surrey-side villain.

'He's certain to ask why you want to get off so early.'

'I shall tell him my uncle particularly wishes me to come early.'

'Suppose he asks why?'

'I shall say I can't possibly imagine.'

'Oh, well, if you're going to tell lies--'

'Not at all. Merely a diplomatic evasion. I'm not bound to go and sob out my secrets on Jephson's waistcoat.'

Baker gave up the struggle with a sniff. Norris went to Mr Jephson and got leave to spend the week-end at his uncle's. The interview went without a hitch, as Norris had prophesied.

'You will miss the House match, Norris, then?' said Mr Jephson.

'I'm afraid so, sir. But Mr Leicester's are very weak.'

'H'm. Reece, Marriott, and Gethryn are a good beginning.'

'Yes, sir. But they've got nobody else. Their tail starts after those

three.'

'Very well. But it seems a pity.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Norris, wisely refraining from discussing the matter. He had got his exeat, which was what he had come for.

In all the annals of Pudford and Little Bindlebury cricket there had never been such a match as that year's. The rector of Pudford and his three Oxford experts performed prodigies with the bat, prodigies, that is to say, judged from the standpoint of ordinary Pudford scoring, where double figures were the exception rather than the rule.

The rector, an elderly, benevolent-looking gentleman, played with astounding caution and still more remarkable luck for seventeen. Finally, after he had been in an hour and ten minutes, mid-on accepted the eighth easy chance offered to him, and the ecclesiastic had to retire. The three 'Varsity men knocked up a hundred between them, and the complete total was no less than a hundred and thirty-four.

Then came the sensation of the day. After three wickets had fallen for ten runs, Norris and the Little Bindlebury curate, an old Cantab, stayed together and knocked off the deficit.

Norris's contribution of seventy-eight not out was for many a day the sole topic of conversation over the evening pewter at the 'Little

Bindlebury Arms'. A non-enthusiast, who tried on one occasion to introduce the topic of Farmer Giles's grey pig, found himself the most unpopular man in the village.

On the Monday morning Norris returned to Jephson's, with pride in his heart and a sovereign in his pocket, the latter the gift of his excellent uncle.

He had had, he freely admitted to himself, a good time. His uncle had done him well, exceedingly well, and he looked forward to going to the show-place again in the near future. In the meantime he felt a languid desire to know how the House match was going on. They must almost have finished the first innings, he thought--unless Jephson's had run up a very big score, and kept their opponents in the field all the afternoon.

'Hullo, Baker,' he said, tramping breezily into the study, 'I've had the time of a lifetime. Great, simply! No other word for it. How's the match getting on?'

Baker looked up from the book he was reading.

'What match?' he enquired coldly.

'House match, of course, you lunatic. What match did you think I meant? How's it going on?'

'It's not going on,' said Baker, 'it's stopped.'

'You needn't be a funny goat,' said Norris complainingly. 'You know what I mean. What happened on Saturday?'

'They won the toss,' began Baker slowly.

'Yes?'

'And went in and made a hundred and twenty.'

'Good. I told you they were no use. A hundred and twenty's rotten.'

'Then we went in, and made twenty-one.'

'Hundred and twenty-one.'

'No. Just a simple twenty-one without any trimmings of any sort.'

'But, man! How? Why? How on earth did it happen?'

'Gethryn took eight for nine. Does that seem to make it any clearer?'

'Eight for nine? Rot.'

'Show you the score-sheet if you care to see it. In the second innings--'

'Oh, you began a second innings?'

'Yes. We also finished it. We scored rather freely in the second innings. Ten was on the board before the fifth wicket fell. In the end we fairly collared the bowling, and ran up a total of forty-eight.'

Norris took a seat, and tried to grapple with the situation.

'Forty-eight! Look here, Baker, swear you're not ragging.'

Baker took a green scoring-book from the shelf and passed it to him.

'Look for yourself,' he said.

Norris looked. He looked long and earnestly. Then he handed the book back.

'Then they've won!' he said blankly.

'How do you guess these things?' observed Baker with some bitterness.

'Well, you are a crew,' said Norris. 'Getting out for twenty-one and forty-eight! I see Gethryn got nine for thirty in the second innings.'

He seems to have been on the spot. I suppose the wicket suited him.'

'If you can call it a wicket. Next time you specially select a pitch for the House to play on, I wish you'd hunt up something with some slight pretensions to decency.'

'Why, what was wrong with the pitch? It was a bit worn, that was all.'

'If,' said Baker, 'you call having holes three inches deep just where every ball pitches being a bit worn, I suppose it was. Anyhow, it would have been almost as well, don't you think, if you'd stopped and played for the House, instead of going off to your rotten village match? You were sick enough when Gethryn went off in the M.C.C. match.'

'Oh, curse,' said Norris.

For he had been hoping against hope that the parallel nature of the two incidents would be less apparent to other people than it was to himself.

And so it came about that Leicester's passed successfully through the first two rounds and soared into the dizzy heights of the semi-final.