

[15]

VERSUS CHARCHESTER (AT CHARCHESTER)

From the fact that he had left his team so basely in the lurch on the day of an important match, a casual observer might have imagined that Norris did not really care very much whether his House won the cup or not. But this was not the case. In reality the success of Jephson's was a very important matter to him. A sudden whim had induced him to accept his uncle's invitation, but now that that acceptance had had such disastrous results, he felt inclined to hire a sturdy menial by the hour to kick him till he felt better. To a person in such a frame of mind there are three methods of consolation. He can commit suicide, he can take to drink, or he can occupy his mind with other matters, and cure himself by fixing his attention steadily on some object, and devoting his whole energies to the acquisition of the same.

Norris chose the last method. On the Saturday week following his performance for Little Bindlebury, the Beckford Eleven was due to journey to Charchester, to play the return match against that school on their opponents' ground, and Norris resolved that that match should be won. For the next week the team practised assiduously, those members of it who were not playing in House matches spending every afternoon at the nets. The treatment was not without its effect. The team had been a good one before. Now every one of the eleven seemed to be at the very

summit of his powers. New and hitherto unsuspected strokes began to be developed, leg glances which recalled the Hove and Ranjitsinhji, late cuts of Palairetical brilliance. In short, all Nature may be said to have smiled, and by the end of the week Norris was beginning to be almost cheerful once more. And then, on the Monday before the match, Samuel Wilberforce Gosling came to school with his right arm in a sling. Norris met him at the School gates, rubbed his eyes to see whether it was not after all some horrid optical illusion, and finally, when the stern truth came home to him, almost swooned with anguish.

'What? How? Why?' he enquired lucidly.

The injured Samuel smiled feebly.

'I'm fearfully sorry, Norris,' he said.

'Don't say you can't play on Saturday,' moaned Norris.

'Frightfully sorry. I know it's a bit of a sickener. But I don't see how I can, really. The doctor says I shan't be able to play for a couple of weeks.'

Now that the blow had definitely fallen, Norris was sufficiently himself again to be able to enquire into the matter.

'How on earth did you do it? How did it happen?'

Gosling looked guiltier than ever.

'It was on Saturday evening,' he said. 'We were ragging about at home a bit, you know, and my young sister wanted me to send her down a few balls. Somebody had given her a composition bean and a bat, and she's been awfully keen on the game ever since she got them.'

'I think it's simply sickening the way girls want to do everything we do,' said Norris disgustedly.

Gosling spoke for the defence.

'Well, she's only thirteen. You can't blame the kid. Seemed to me a jolly healthy symptom. Laudable ambition and that sort of thing.'

'Well?'

'Well, I sent down one or two. She played 'em like a book. Bit inclined to pull. All girls are. So I put in a long hop on the off, and she let go at it like Jessop. She's got a rattling stroke in mid-on's direction. Well, the bean came whizzing back rather wide on the right. I doubled across to bring off a beefy c-and-b, and the bally thing took me right on the tips of the fingers. Those composition balls hurt like blazes, I can tell you. Smashed my second finger simply into hash, and I couldn't grip a ball now to save my life. Much less bowl. I'm awfully

sorry. It's a shocking nuisance.'

Norris agreed with him. It was more than a nuisance. It was a staggerer. Now that Gethryn no longer figured for the First Eleven, Gosling was the School's one hope. Baynes was good on his wicket, but the wickets he liked were the sea-of-mud variety, and this summer fine weather had set in early and continued. Lorimer was also useful, but not to be mentioned in the same breath as the great Samuel. The former was good, the latter would be good in a year or so. His proper sphere of action was the tail. If the first pair of bowlers could dismiss five good batsmen, Lorimer's fast, straight deliveries usually accounted for the rest. But there had to be somebody to pave the way for him. He was essentially a change bowler. It is hardly to be wondered at that Norris very soon began to think wistfully of the Bishop, who was just now doing such great things with the ball, wasting his sweetness on the desert air of the House matches. Would it be consistent with his dignity to invite him back into the team? It was a nice point. With some persons there might be a risk. But Gethryn, as he knew perfectly well, was not the sort of fellow to rub in the undeniable fact that the School team could not get along without him. He had half decided to ask him to play against Charchester, when Gosling suggested the very same thing.

'Why don't you have Gethryn in again?' he said. 'You've stood him out against the O.B.s and the Masters. Surely that's enough. Especially as he's miles the best bowler in the School.'

'Bar yourself.'

'Not a bit. He can give me points. You take my tip and put him in again.'

'Think he'd play if I put him down? Because, you know, I'm dashed if I'm going to do any grovelling and that sort of thing.'

'Certain to, I should think. Anyhow, it's worth trying.'

Pringle, on being consulted, gave the same opinion, and Norris was convinced. The list went up that afternoon, and for the first time since the M.C.C. match Gethryn's name appeared in its usual place.

'Norris is learning wisdom in his old age,' said Marriott to the Bishop, as they walked over to the House that evening.

Leicester's were in the middle of their semi-final, and looked like winning it.

'I was just wondering what to do about it,' said Gethryn. 'What would you do? Play, do you think?'

'Play! My dear man, what else did you propose to do? You weren't thinking of refusing?'

'I was.'

'But, man! That's rank treason. If you're put down to play for the School you must play. There's no question about it. If Norris knocked you down with one hand and put you up on the board with the other, you'd have to play all the same. You mustn't have any feelings where the School is concerned. Nobody's ever refused to play in a first match. It's one of the things you can't do. Norris hasn't given you much of a time lately, I admit. Still, you must lump that. Excuse sermon. I hope it's done you good.'

'Very well. I'll play. It's rather rot, though.'

'No, it's all right, really. It's only that you've got into a groove. You're so used to doing the heavy martyr, that the sudden change has knocked you out rather. Come and have an ice before the shop shuts.'

So Gethryn came once more into the team, and travelled down to Charchester with the others. And at this point a painful alternative faces me. I have to choose between truth and inclination. I should like to say that the Bishop eclipsed himself, and broke all previous records in the Charchester match. By the rules of the dramatic, nothing else is possible. But truth, though it crush me, and truth compels me to admit that his performance was in reality distinctly mediocre. One of his weak points as a bowler was that he was at sea when opposed to a

left-hander. Many bowlers have this failing. Some strange power seems to compel them to bowl solely on the leg side, and nothing but long hops and full pitches. It was so in the case of Gethryn. Charchester won the toss, and batted first on a perfect wicket. The first pair of batsmen were the captain, a great bat, who had scored seventy-three not out against Beckford in the previous match, and a left-handed fiend. Baynes's leg-breaks were useless on a wicket which, from the hardness of it, might have been constructed of asphalt, and the rubbish the Bishop rolled up to the left-handed artiste was painful to witness. At four o'clock--the match had started at half-past eleven--the Charchester captain reached his century, and was almost immediately stumped off Baynes. The Bishop bowled the next man first ball, the one bright spot in his afternoon's performance. Then came another long stand, against which the Beckford bowling raged in vain. At five o'clock, Charchester by that time having made two hundred and forty-one for two wickets, the left-hander ran into three figures, and the captain promptly declared the innings closed. Beckford's only chance was to play for a draw, and in this they succeeded. When stumps were drawn at a quarter to seven, the score was a hundred and three, and five wickets were down. The Bishop had the satisfaction of being not out with twenty-eight to his credit, but nothing less than a century would have been sufficient to soothe him after his shocking bowling performance. Pringle, who during the luncheon interval had encountered his young friends the Ashbys, and had been duly taunted by them on the subject of leather-hunting, was top scorer with forty-one. Norris, I regret to say, only made three, running himself out in his second over.

As the misfortune could not, by any stretch of imagination, be laid at anybody else's door but his own, he was decidedly savage. The team returned to Beckford rather footsore, very disgusted, and abnormally silent. Norris sulked by himself at one end of the saloon carriage, and the Bishop sulked by himself at the other end, and even Marriott forbore to treat the situation lightly. It was a mournful home-coming. No cheering wildly as the brake drove to the College from Horton, no shouting of the School song in various keys as they passed through the big gates. Simply silence. And except when putting him on to bowl, or taking him off, or moving him in the field, Norris had not spoken a word to the Bishop the whole afternoon.

It was shortly after this disaster that Mr Mortimer Wells came to stay with the Headmaster. Mr Mortimer Wells was a brilliant and superior young man, who was at some pains to be a cynic. He was an old pupil of the Head's in the days before he had succeeded to the rule of Beckford. He had the reputation of being a 'ripe' scholar, and to him had been deputed the task of judging the poetical outbursts of the bards of the Upper Fifth, with the object of awarding to the most deserving--or, perhaps, to the least undeserving--the handsome prize bequeathed by his open-handed highness, the Rajah of Seltzerpore.

This gentleman sat with his legs stretched beneath the Headmaster's generous table. Dinner had come to an end, and a cup of coffee, acting in co-operation with several glasses of port and an excellent cigar, had inspired him to hold forth on the subject of poetry prizes. He held

forth.

'The poetry prize system,' said he--it is astonishing what nonsense a man, ordinarily intelligent, will talk after dinner--'is on exactly the same principle as those penny-in-the-slot machines that you see at stations. You insert your penny. You set your prize subject. In the former case you hope for wax vestas, and you get butterscotch. In the latter, you hope for something at least readable, and you get the most complete, terrible, uninspired twaddle that was ever written on paper. The boy mind'--here the ash of his cigar fell off on to his waistcoat--'the merely boy mind is incapable of poetry.'

From which speech the shrewd reader will infer that Mr Mortimer Wells was something of a prig. And perhaps, altogether shrewd reader, you're right.

Mr Lawrie, the master of the Sixth, who had been asked to dinner to meet the great man, disagreed as a matter of principle. He was one of those men who will take up a cause from pure love of argument.

'I think you're wrong, sir. I'm perfectly convinced you're wrong.'

Mr Wells smiled in his superior way, as if to say that it was a pity that Mr Lawrie was so foolish, but that perhaps he could not help it.

'Ah,' he said, 'but you have not had to wade through over thirty of

these gems in a single week. I have. I can assure you your views would undergo a change if you could go through what I have. Let me read you a selection. If that does not convert you, nothing will. If you will excuse me for a moment, Beckett, I will leave the groaning board, and fetch the manuscripts.'

He left the room, and returned with a pile of paper, which he deposited in front of him on the table.

'Now,' he said, selecting the topmost manuscript, 'I will take no unfair advantage. I will read you the very pick of the bunch. None of the other--er--poems come within a long way of this. It is a case of Eclipse first and the rest nowhere. The author, the gifted author, is a boy of the name of Lorimer, whom I congratulate on taking the Rajah's prize. I drain this cup of coffee to him. Are you ready? Now, then.'

He cleared his throat.