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A DISPUTED AUTHORSHIP

'One moment,' said Mr Lawrie, 'might I ask what is the subject of the poem?'

'Death of Dido,' said the Headmaster. 'Good, hackneyed, evergreen subject, mellow with years. Go on, Wells.'

Mr Wells began.

Queen of Tyre, ancient Tyre,
Whilom mistress of the wave.

Mr Lawrie, who had sunk back into the recesses of his chair in an attitude of attentive repose, sat up suddenly with a start.

'What!' he cried.

'Hullo,' said Mr Wells, 'has the beauty of the work come home to you already?'

'You notice,' he said, as he repeated the couplet, 'that flaws begin to appear in the gem right from the start. It was rash of Master Lorimer

to attempt such a difficult metre. Plucky, but rash. He should have stuck to blank verse. Tyre, you notice, two syllables to rhyme with "deny her" in line three. "What did fortune e'er deny her? Were not all her warriors brave?" That last line seems to me distinctly weak. I don't know how it strikes you.'

'You're hypercritical, Wells,' said the Head. 'Now, for a boy I consider that a very good beginning. What do you say, Lawrie?'

'I--er. Oh, I think I am hardly a judge.'

'To resume,' said Mr Mortimer Wells. He resumed, and ran through the remaining verses of the poem with comments. When he had finished, he remarked that, in his opinion a whiff of fresh air would not hurt him. If the Headmaster would excuse him, he would select another of those excellent cigars, and smoke it out of doors.

'By all means,' said the Head; 'I think I won't join you myself, but perhaps Lawrie will.'

'No, thank you. I think I will remain. Yes, I think I will remain.'

Mr Wells walked jauntily out of the room. When the door had shut, Mr Lawrie coughed nervously.

'Another cigar, Lawrie?'

'I--er--no, thank you. I want to ask you a question. What is your candid opinion of those verses Mr Wells was reading just now?'

The Headmaster laughed.

'I don't think Wells treated them quite fairly. In my opinion they were distinctly promising. For a boy in the Upper Fifth, you understand. Yes, on the whole they showed distinct promise.'

'They were mine,' said Mr Lawrie.

'Yours! I don't understand. How were they yours?'

'I wrote them. Every word of them.'

'You wrote them! But, my dear Lawrie--'

'I don't wonder that you are surprised. For my own part I am amazed, simply amazed. How the boy--I don't even remember his name--contrived to get hold of them, I have not the slightest conception. But that he did so contrive is certain. The poem is word for word, literally word for word, the same as one which I wrote when I was at Cambridge.'

'You
don't say so!'

'Yes. It can hardly be a coincidence.'

'Hardly,' said the Head. 'Are you certain of this?'

'Perfectly certain. I am not eager to claim the authorship, I can assure you, especially after Mr Wells's very outspoken criticisms, but there is nothing else to be done. The poem appeared more than a dozen years ago, in a small book called *The Dark Horse*.'

'Ah! Something in the Whyte Melville style, I suppose?'

'No,' said Mr Lawrie sharply. 'No. Certainly not. They were serious poems, tragical most of them. I had them collected, and published them at my own expense. Very much at my own expense. I used a pseudonym, I am thankful to say. As far as I could ascertain, the total sale amounted to eight copies. I have never felt the very slightest inclination to repeat the performance. But how this boy managed to see the book is more than I can explain. He can hardly have bought it. The price was half-a-guinea. And there is certainly no copy in the School library. The thing is a mystery.'

'A mystery that must be solved,' said the Headmaster. 'The fact remains that he did see the book, and it is very serious. Wholesale plagiarism of this description should be kept for the School magazine. It should not be allowed to spread to poetry prizes. I must see Lorimer about

this tomorrow. Perhaps he can throw some light upon the matter.'

When, in the course of morning school next day, the School porter entered the Upper Fifth form-room and informed Mr Sims, who was engaged in trying to drive the beauties of Plautus' colloquial style into the Upper Fifth brain, that the Headmaster wished to see Lorimer, Lorimer's conscience was so abnormally good that for the life of him he could not think why he had been sent for. As far as he could remember, there was no possible way in which the authorities could get at him. If he had been in the habit of smoking out of bounds in lonely fields and deserted barns, he might have felt uneasy. But whatever his failings, that was not one of them. It could not be anything about bounds, because he had been so busy with cricket that he had had no time to break them this term. He walked into the presence, glowing with conscious rectitude. And no sooner was he inside than the Headmaster, with three simple words, took every particle of starch out of his anatomy.

'Sit down, Lorimer,' he said.

There are many ways of inviting a person to seat himself. The genial 'take a pew' of one's equal inspires confidence. The raucous 'sit down in front' of the frenzied pit, when you stand up to get a better view of the stage, is not so pleasant. But worst of all is the icy 'sit down' of the annoyed headmaster. In his mouth the words take to themselves new and sinister meanings. They seem to accuse you of

nameless crimes, and to warn you that anything you may say will be used against you as evidence.

'Why have I sent for you, Lorimer?'

A nasty question that, and a very favourite one of the Rev. Mr Beckett, Headmaster of Beckford. In nine cases out of ten, the person addressed, paralysed with nervousness, would give himself away upon the instant, and confess everything. Lorimer, however, was saved by the fact that he had nothing to confess. He stifled an inclination to reply 'because the woodpecker would peck her', or words to that effect, and maintained a pallid silence.

'Have you ever heard of a book called The Dark Horse, Lorimer?'

Lorimer began to feel that the conversation was too deep for him. After opening in the conventional 'judge-then-placed-the-black-cap-on-his-head' manner, his assailant had suddenly begun to babble lightly of sporting literature. He began to entertain doubts of the Headmaster's sanity. It would not have added greatly to his mystification if the Head had gone on to insist that he was the Emperor of Peru, and worked solely by electricity.

The Headmaster, for his part, was also surprised. He had worked for dismay, conscious guilt, confessions, and the like, instead of blank amazement. He, too, began to have his doubts. Had Mr Lawrie been

mistaken? It was not likely, but it was barely possible. In which case the interview had better be brought to an abrupt stop until he had made inquiries. The situation was at a deadlock.

Fortunately at this point half-past twelve struck, and the bell rang for the end of morning school. The situation was saved, and the tension relaxed.

'You may go, Lorimer,' said the Head, 'I will send for you later.'

He swept out of the room, and Lorimer raced over to the House to inform Pringle that the Headmaster had run suddenly mad, and should by rights be equipped with a strait-waistcoat.

'You never saw such a man,' he said, 'hauled me out of school in the middle of a Plautus lesson, dumps me down in a chair, and then asks me if I've read some weird sporting novel or other.'

'Sporting novel! My dear man!'

'Well, it sounded like it from the title.'

'The title. Oh!'

'What's up?'

Pringle had leaped to his feet as if he had suddenly discovered that he was sitting on something red-hot. His normal air of superior calm had vanished. He was breathless with excitement. A sudden idea had struck him with the force of a bullet.

'What was the title he asked you if you'd read the book of?' he demanded incoherently.

'The Derby Winner.'

Pringle sat down again, relieved.

'Oh. Are you certain?'

'No, of course it wasn't that. I was only ragging. The real title was The Dark Horse. Hullo, what's up now? Have you got 'em too?'

'What's up? I'll tell you. We're done for. Absolutely pipped. That's what's the matter.'

'Hang it, man, do give us a chance. Why can't you explain, instead of sitting there talking like that? Why are we done? What have we done, anyway?'

'The poem, of course, the prize poem. I forgot, I never told you. I hadn't time to write anything of my own, so I cribbed it straight out

of a book called The Dark Horse. Now do you see?'

Lorimer saw. He grasped the whole unpainted beauty of the situation in a flash, and for some moments it rendered him totally unfit for intellectual conversation. When he did speak his observation was brief, but it teemed with condensed meaning. It was the conversational parallel to the ox in the tea-cup.

'My aunt!' he said.

'There'll be a row about this,' said Pringle.

'What am I to say when he has me in this afternoon? He said he would.'

'Let the whole thing out. No good trying to hush it up. He may let us down easy if you're honest about it.'

It relieved Lorimer to hear Pringle talk about 'us'. It meant that he was not to be left to bear the assault alone. Which, considering that the whole trouble was, strictly speaking, Pringle's fault, was only just.

'But how am I to explain? I can't reel off a long yarn all about how you did it all, and so on. It would be too low.'

'I know,' said Pringle, 'I've got it. Look here, on your way to the Old

Man's room you pass the Remove door. Well, when you pass, drop some money. I'll be certain to hear it, as I sit next the door. And then I'll ask to leave the room, and we'll go up together.'

'Good man, Pringle, you're a genius. Thanks, awfully.'

But as it happened, this crafty scheme was not found necessary. The blow did not fall till after lock-up.

Lorimer being in the Headmaster's House, it was possible to interview him without the fuss and advertisement inseparable from a 'sending for during school'. Just as he was beginning his night-work, the butler came with a message that he was wanted in the Headmaster's part of the House.

'It was only Mr Lorimer as the master wished to see,' said the butler, as Pringle rose to accompany his companion in crime.

'That's all right,' said Pringle, 'the Headmaster's always glad to see me. I've got a standing invitation. He'll understand.'

At first, when he saw two where he had only sent for one, the Headmaster did not understand at all, and said so. He had prepared to annihilate Lorimer hip and thigh, for he was now convinced that his blank astonishment at the mention of The Dark Horse during their previous interview had been, in the words of the bard, a mere veneer, a

wife of guile. Since the morning he had seen Mr Lawrie again, and had with his own eyes compared the two poems, the printed and the written, the author by special request having hunted up a copy of that valuable work, *The Dark Horse*, from the depths of a cupboard in his rooms.

His astonishment melted before Pringle's explanation, which was brief and clear, and gave way to righteous wrath. In well-chosen terms he harangued the two criminals. Finally he perorated.

'There is only one point which tells in your favour. You have not attempted concealment.' (Pringle nudged Lorimer surreptitiously at this.) 'And I may add that I believe that, as you say, you did not desire actually to win the prize by underhand means. But I cannot overlook such an offence. It is serious. Most serious. You will, both of you, go into extra lesson for the remaining Saturdays of the term.'

Extra lesson meant that instead of taking a half-holiday on Saturday like an ordinary law-abiding individual, you treated the day as if it were a full-school day, and worked from two till four under the eye of the Headmaster. Taking into consideration everything, the punishment was not an extraordinarily severe one, for there were only two more Saturdays to the end of term, and the sentence made no mention of the Wednesday half-holidays.

But in effect it was serious indeed. It meant that neither Pringle nor

Lorimer would be able to play in the final House match against Leicester's, which was fixed to begin on the next Saturday at two o'clock. Among the rules governing the House matches was one to the effect that no House might start a match with less than eleven men, nor might the Eleven be changed during the progress of the match--a rule framed by the Headmaster, not wholly without an eye to emergencies like the present.

'Thank goodness,' said Pringle, 'that there aren't any more First matches. It's bad enough, though, by Jove, as it is. I suppose it's occurred to you that this cuts us out of playing in the final?'

Lorimer said the point had not escaped his notice.

'I wish,' he observed, with simple pathos, 'that I'd got the Rajah of Seltzerpore here now. I'd strangle him. I wonder if the Old Man realizes that he's done his own House out of the cup?'

'Wouldn't care if he did. Still, it's a sickening nuisance. Leicester's are a cert now.'

'Absolute cert,' said Lorimer; 'Baynes can't do all the bowling, especially on a hard wicket, and there's nobody else. As for our batting and fielding--'

'Don't,' said Pringle gloomily, 'it's too awful.'

On the following Saturday, Leicester's ran up a total in their first innings which put the issue out of doubt, and finished off the game on the Monday by beating the School House by six wickets.