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THE WINTER TERM

It was the first day of the winter term.

The Bishop, as he came back by express, could not help feeling that, after all, life considered as an institution had its points. Things had mended steadily during the last weeks of the term. He had kept up his end as head of the House perfectly. The internal affairs of Leicester's were going as smoothly as oil. And there was the cricket cup to live up to. Nothing pulls a House together more than beating all comers in the field, especially against odds, as Leicester's had done. And then Monk and Danvers had left. That had set the finishing touch to a good term's work. The Mob were no longer a power in the land. Waterford remained, but a subdued, benevolent Waterford, with a wonderful respect for law and order. Yes, as far as the House was concerned, Gethryn felt no apprehensions. As regarded the School at large, things were bound to come right in time. A school has very little memory. And in the present case the Bishop, being second man in the Fifteen, had unusual opportunities of righting himself in the eyes of the multitude. In the winter term cricket is forgotten. Football is the only game that counts.

And to round off the whole thing, when he entered his study he found a

letter on the table. It was from Farnie, and revealed two curious and interesting facts. Firstly he had left, and Beckford was to know him no more. Secondly--this was even more remarkable--he possessed a conscience.

'Dear Gethryn,' ran the letter, 'I am writing to tell you my father is sending me to a school in France, so I shall not come back to Beckford. I am sorry about the M.C.C. match, and I enclose the four pounds you lent me. I utterly bar the idea of going to France. It's beastly, yours truly, R. Farnie.'

The money mentioned was in the shape of a cheque, signed by Farnie senior.

Gethryn was distinctly surprised. That all this time remorse like a worm i' the bud should have been feeding upon his uncle's damask cheek, as it were, he had never suspected. His relative's demeanour since the M.C.C. match had, it is true, been considerably toned down, but this he had attributed to natural causes, not unnatural ones like conscience. As for the four pounds, he had set it down as a bad debt. To get it back was like coming suddenly into an unexpected fortune. He began to think that there must have been some good in Farnie after all, though he was fain to admit that without the aid of a microscope the human eye might well have been excused for failing to detect it.

His next thought was that there was nothing now to prevent him telling

the whole story to Reece and Marriott. Reece, if anybody, deserved to have his curiosity satisfied. The way in which he had abstained from questions at the time of the episode had been nothing short of magnificent. Reece must certainly be told.

Neither Reece nor Marriott had arrived at the moment. Both were in the habit of returning at the latest possible hour, except at the beginning of the summer term. The Bishop determined to reserve his story until the following evening.

Accordingly, when the study kettle was hissing on the Etna, and Wilson was crouching in front of the fire, making toast in his own inimitable style, he embarked upon his narrative.

'I say, Marriott.'

'Hullo.'

'Do you notice a subtle change in me this term? Does my expressive purple eye gleam more brightly than of yore? It does. Exactly so. I feel awfully bucked up. You know that kid Farnie has left?'

'I thought I missed his merry prattle. What's happened to him?'

'Gone to a school in France somewhere.'

'Jolly for France.'

'Awfully. But the point is that now he's gone I can tell you about that M.C.C. match affair. I know you want to hear what really did happen that afternoon.'

Marriott pointed significantly at Wilson, whose back was turned.

'Oh, that's all right,' said Gethryn. 'Wilson.'

'Yes?'

'You mustn't listen. Try and think you're a piece of furniture. See? And if you do happen to overhear anything, you needn't go gassing about it. Follow?'

'All right,' said Wilson, and Gethryn told his tale.

'Jove,' he said, as he finished, 'that's a relief. It's something to have got that off my chest. I do bar keeping a secret.'

'But, I say,' said Marriott.

'Well?'

'Well, it was beastly good of you to do it, and that sort of thing, I

suppose. I see that all right. But, my dear man, what a rotten thing to do. A kid like that. A little beast who simply cried out for sacking.'

'Well, at any rate, it's over now. You needn't jump on me. I acted from the best motives. That's what my grandfather, Farnie's pater, you know, always used to say when he got at me for anything in the happy days of my childhood. Don't sit there looking like a beastly churchwarden, you ass. Buck up, and take an intelligent interest in things.'

'No, but really, Bishop,' said Marriott, 'you must treat this seriously. You'll have to let the other chaps know about it.'

'How? Put it up on the notice-board? This is to certify that Mr Allan Gethryn, of Leicester's House, Beckford, is dismissed without a stain on his character. You ass, how can I let them know? I seem to see myself doing the boy-hero style of things. My friends, you wronged me, you wronged me very grievously. But I forgive you. I put up with your cruel scorn. I endured it. I steeled myself against it. And now I forgive you profusely, every one of you. Let us embrace. It wouldn't do. You must see that much. Don't be a goat. Is that toast done yet, Wilson?'

Wilson exhibited several pounds of the article in question.

'Good,' said the Bishop. 'You're a great man, Wilson. You can make a

small selection of those biscuits, and if you bag all the sugar ones I'll slay you, and then you can go quietly downstairs, and rejoin your sorrowing friends. And don't you go telling them what I've been saying.'

'Rather not,' said Wilson.

He made his small selection, and retired. The Bishop turned to Marriott again.

'I shall tell Reece, because he deserves it, and I rather think I shall tell Gosling and Pringle. Nobody else, though. What's the good of it? Everybody'll forget the whole thing by next season.'

'How about Norris?' asked Marriott.

'Now there you have touched the spot. I can't possibly tell Norris myself. My natural pride is too enormous. Descended from a primordial atomic globule, you know, like Pooh Bah. And I shook hands with a duke once. The man Norris and I, I regret to say, had something of a row on the subject last term. We parted with mutual expressions of hate, and haven't spoken since. What I should like would be for somebody else to tell him all about it. Not you. It would look too much like a put-up job. So don't you go saying anything. Swear.'

'Why not?'

'Because you mustn't. Swear. Let me hear you swear by the bones of your ancestors.'

'All right. I call it awful rot, though.'

'Can't be helped. Painful but necessary. Now I'm going to tell Reece, though I don't expect he'll remember anything about it. Reece never remembers anything beyond his last meal.'

'Idiot,' said Marriott after him as the door closed. 'I don't know, though,' he added to himself.

And, pouring himself out another cup of tea, he pondered deeply over the matter.

Reece heard the news without emotion.

'You're a good sort, Bishop,' he said, 'I knew something of the kind must have happened. It reminds me of a thing that happened to--'

'Yes, it is rather like it, isn't it?' said the Bishop. 'By the way, talking about stories, a chap I met in the holidays told me a ripper. You see, this chap and his brother--'

He discoursed fluently for some twenty minutes. Reece sighed softly,

but made no attempt to resume his broken narrative. He was used to this sort of thing.

It was a fortnight later, and Marriott and the Bishop were once more seated in their study waiting for Wilson to get tea ready. Wilson made toast in the foreground. Marriott was in football clothes, rubbing his shin gently where somebody had kicked it in the scratch game that afternoon. After rubbing for a few moments in silence, he spoke suddenly.

'You must tell Norris,' he said. 'It's all rot.'

'I can't.'

'Then I shall.'

'No, don't. You swore you wouldn't.'

'Well, but look here. I just want to ask you one question. What sort of a time did you have in that scratch game tonight?'

'Beastly. I touched the ball exactly four times. If I wasn't so awfully ornamental, I don't see what would be the use of my turning out at all. I'm no practical good to the team.'

'Exactly. That's just what I wanted to get at. I don't mean your remark

about your being ornamental, but about your never touching the ball. Until you explain matters to Norris, you never will get a decent pass. Norris and you are a rattling good pair of centre threes, but if he never gives you a pass, I don't see how we can expect to have any combination in the First. It's no good my slinging out the ball if the centres stick to it like glue directly they get it, and refuse to give it up. It's simply sickening.'

Marriott played half for the First Fifteen, and his soul was in the business.

'But, my dear chap,' said Gethryn, 'you don't mean to tell me that a man like Norris would purposely rot up the First's combination because he happened to have had a row with the other centre. He's much too decent a fellow.'

'No. I don't mean that exactly. What he does is this. I've watched him. He gets the ball. He runs with it till his man is on him, and then he thinks of passing. You're backing him up. He sees you, and says to himself, "I can't pass to that cad"--'

'Meaning me?'

'Meaning you.'

'Thanks awfully.'

'Don't mention it. I'm merely quoting his thoughts, as deduced by me. He says, "I can't pass to that--well, individual, if you prefer it. Where's somebody else?" So he hesitates, and gets tackled, or else slings the ball wildly out to somebody who can't possibly get to it. It's simply infernal. And we play the Nomads tomorrow, too. Something must be done.'

'Somebody ought to tell him. Why doesn't our genial skipper assert his authority?'

'Hill's a forward, you see, and doesn't get an opportunity of noticing it. I can't tell him, of course. I've not got my colours--'

'You're a cert. for them.'

'Hope so. Anyway, I've not got them yet, and Norris has, so I can't very well go slanging him to Hill. Sort of thing rude people would call side.'

'Well, I'll look out tomorrow, and if it's as bad as you think, I'll speak to Hill. It's a beastly thing to have to do.'

'Beastly,' agreed Marriott. 'It's got to be done, though. We can't go through the season without any combination in the three-quarter line, just to spare Norris's feelings.'

'It's a pity, though,' said the Bishop, 'because Norris is a ripping good sort of chap, really. I wish we hadn't had that bust-up last term.'