THE FIFTEENTH MAN

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Neville−Smith's theory, arrived at after careful thought, was that the supreme governing powers of the universe had taken a sudden dislike to Bray Lench. He refused to listen to any other.

"Look at the evidence," he said, as we sat over our coffee. "Jimmy couldn't come. Got the flu. So far, nothing to grumble about. Anybody might get the flu, even our only decent three−quarter on the eve of our big match. Very well. Then young Thorn goes and falls off a ladder. Sprains his ankle. On top of that, Giles, our best forward, trips over his feet as he's going to church and crocks his wrist. And on top of that, Somers, who's pretty nearly as useful in the pack as Giles, gets a spill from his bicycle and has to go to bed for a week. It's spite, that's what it is. Petty spite."

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked.

He took the question literally, and instead of explaining how he was going to get back at Fate, told me how he proposed to reconstruct the team, which I had heard before.

I was staying with Smith on purpose for this match. I was not particularly keen on the match it seemed to me a very ordinary village game but he had apparently no other object in life than to steer Bray Lench to victory against the neighbouring village, Chalfont St. Peter's. We went for long spins in the daytime, or practiced with the Bray Lench team, who struck me as a distinctly ragged lot, and in the evenings he talked to me about the match till I began to wish that Rugby football had not been included in the curriculum of our mutual school. He even went to the length of suggesting that, as the day of the match was so close at hand, I had better knock off smoking, pastry, and potatoes, and drink only water at dinner. It was at this point that I asked him where he kept his *Bradshaw*, as I wished to look out a train; and he withdrew the suggestion. But in other respects he remained disgustingly keen. At the end of a couple of days I had the whole inner history of the annual game by heart, and had learned that what embittered Smith particularly was the fact that Chalfont St. Peter's were in the habit of enlisting outside talent in their ranks from Ealesbury, the local town. It struck me, though I did not say so, that his own habit of bringing down men from Cambridge to play for Bray Lench was just as bad. Jimmy, for instance, the three−quarter who had been stricken with influenza at the eleventh hour, had taken three tries off his own bat against Oxford at Queen's Club earlier in the season. It seemed to me that Smith's guilt was far blacker than that of Chalfont St. Peter's selection committee. Theirs appeared to me almost lemon−coloured in comparison. But I did not say so. I sat and smoked and reflected that, after all, Nemesis could usually do her own work, and that the series of accidents which had befallen his team were ample retribution.

For there was no doubt that the Bray Lench fifteen was in a bad way. Even with substitutes our numbers only reached fourteen, and it seemed likely that we should have to take the field one short. Possibly even galling thought be reduced to applying to Ealesbury for a last man.

"There's lots of them would like to play," said Smith, but what's the use of putting an absolute rotter into the team? He'd only spoil what little combination we've got. Much better to play fourteen men who know the game fairly decently. But, by Gad! it's been a bit hard to be let down like this after all the trouble I've taken to knock a little football into them."

And then for we had reached that well−defined after−dinner stage when man tells man his innermost sorrows he told me for the first time the full tragedy. And as I listened I became sympathetic also for the first time, and understood the true importance of the match we were to play in two days. It seemed that the county was keen on football, that Chalfont St. Peter's had had a club for some years, that they had presumed on that fact, gloating over it, given themselves airs on the strength of it, that the inhabitants of Bray Lench, after having courted some village beauty with fair success through the summer, would find themselves completely cut out in the winter by a blade from Chalfont St. Peter's, purely on the strength of the latter's football. In short, that, owing to being clubless, Bray Lench had for years groaned beneath the scorn of its neighbour. Then Neville−Smith, aided by the curate, had started the club, and challenged Chalfont St. Peters. And when, after two seasons of frightful disaster, they had at last got a team which had a chance of beating the rival fifteen, Fate had stepped in and removed their best men.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" I said, when he had finished. "I'd have knocked off smoking like a shot. We must win. We'll play like niggers."

"Oh, yes," he replied despondently, "we'll have a shot at it. But I'm afraid we're booked. And anyhow, now I come to think of it, it wouldn't have been much good your knocking off smoking, as you're to play full−back. Have another of these; they aren't bad."

I lit another cigar. As he had said, they were not bad.

"Don't you think you'll be able to get another man in time?" I said. "Why not wire to a 'Varsity man. How about Maurice, for instance?"

"I asked Maurice before we came down. He's gone abroad. No, it's no good; we'll have to get along with fourteen. Come in!"

Somebody was fumbling with the door−handle.

"Hello, Randall!" Come along in. Try one of these; they aren't bad."

Randall, the curate, an old Trinity man, came in and sat down.

"Well, Smith," he said, "I've got news for you."

"Don't tell me anybody else "

"No, no; good news. Jack Williams has come back."

The curate beamed. Smith and I looked politely interrogatory.

"Who's Jack Williams?" asked Smith.

"Brother of Tom Williams, the carpenter. Do you mean to tell me that you have really never heard of him?"

"Why should I? Any use at footer?"

The curate struck a match and relit his cigar. I suppose this must have been one of the most dramatic moments of his life.

"Any use?" he said between the puffs. "Oh yes. Centre three−quarter. He was reserve, if you remember, for England last season."

There was a dead silence, and then Neville−Smith sprang up and danced a few steps.

"Saved!" he shouted.

"*That* Williams?" I said. "I've seen him play. By Jove! we shall win that match, Smith."

"I met Tom Williams just outside," said the curate, "and he told me. I remember Jack dimly. He was rather a wild youth, I recollect poaching and so on; but everybody liked him, and old Rawlins got him a job of some sort in Devonshire somewhere. I suppose he learned his football there. He's now come home for a holiday, just in time."

"Have you told him about the match? Have you seen him?"

"I told Tom to tell him. So it will be all right."

"Yes; but I think I'd just like to see him. I must get him to keep himself in hand till the match is over. These men drink too much. All right if you've nothing to do, but no good just before a match. Can you reach that bell with your foot?"

I straightened my leg and pressed the electric bell.

"Croome," he said, when the butler appeared. "I want somebody sent to the village to ask Jack Williams to come up here for a minute. I want to speak to him."

"Yes, sir."

Croome retired.

"We ought to whack those fellows with Williams," said Smith. "Have you any idea what sort of a team they are?"

"Much the same as usual, I think," said the curate. "Strong and energetic, and equally clumsy. A good man like Jack Williams should run through them. We must get the ball out, though."

"Thank goodness," said Smith, "our fellows do know something about heeling. I've taught 'em that. We shall be all right, if we aren't shoved off our feet."

"How are you going to get to the ground?"

"I shall go in the motor. Care for a lift? I can seat four."

"No, thanks. I think I had better go in the brake. My presence exercises a certain restraint which is sometimes a good thing on these occasions. Ah! this must be Jack."

We all turned as the door opened, but it was only Croome.

"Well," said Smith, "has he come?"

"Sir," said Croome, "no."

"Why not? Couldn't they find him?"

"He was unable to come, sir."

We waited in silence for further information. "Having been locked up in the police−station by Constable Sibley," proceeded Croome, with a certain sad relish, "for intoxication and violent assaulting of the police."

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"Smith! Really!" protested Randall a minute later.

"Sorry, old man. I forgot you were there, for the moment. But really, this is the last straw."

"It's vile luck," I said.

"How did it happen, Croome?"

"I gather, sir, from James, who took your message, that Williams was in the 'Bunch of Grapes' standing treat to everybody who come in, and what with a glass with this one, and a glass with that one, and a glass with everyone else, pretty soon he was standing on the table trying how to do a conjuring−trick with three bottles and a jug. And then Sibley come in, and he said he was going to show them the new Japanese wrestling that he'd read about; and then Sibley went and locked him up. And he's going to take him to Ealesbury to−morrow, I 'ear, to be tried."

"What on earth does Sibley want to make such a fuss for about an ordinary affair like this?" I asked.

"Sibley's only too jolly glad to get a case at all," said Smith gloomily. "He wants advertisement to help him get on to his stripes, and it's only once in a blue moon he gets anything to do here. So you bet he isn't going to let a thing like this slip."

"So he'll really take him to Ealesbury?" I said, when Randall had gone off for the night, and we were left alone again.

"Unless we prevent it."

I opened my eyes.

"What?"

"Get him out before. Are you on?"

"How do you mean?"

"We must have him for the match. I don't care what happens afterwards. But if it comes to burning the station down, we must bring him up to scratch. Well, we can't do anything to−night. Let's go to bed and think it over. Good night."

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"I've got it," said somebody.

"All right," I murmured, "leave it on the mat."

"Wake up, you old ass!"

"I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Smith, clad in a dressing−gown, and carrying sponge and towel, was standing by my bed. A wintry sunbeam wandered in through the window.

"Wake up," said Smith, hitting me in the face with the sponge, "I've got it."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"About Jack Williams. Are you listening?"

"Go ahead."

"We must lure Sibley away from the station somehow."

"How?"

"Never mind that yet. While he's away I shall nip down, collar his keys, let Jack out of the jug, smuggle him up here, keep him dark until to−morrow, whang him over to Chalfont St. Peter's in the motor give him a pair of goggles and a coat, and nobody'll spot him and cart him off by train to Ealesbury directly after the game. How's that?"

My head swam. From what I could gather I was being invited to become an accomplice in a plot of a sort that made any of Machiavelli's seem like the tentative efforts of a raw beginner.

"Look here," I said.

But Smith had disappeared.

A bath cleared my head, and thereby enabled me to see with even greater minuteness the lurid depths of villainy into which I was invited to plunge.

"Look here Smith," I protested at breakfast, "it's all very well, and I want to win this match, and so forth; but hang it! Why we should get years for contempt of court, or burglary, or something of that sort, shouldn't we?"

"Why should we get anything? Why the deuce should we even be suspected. I've thought it all out. There's very seldom anybody near the police−station. It stands by itself outside the main street. So I shan't be seen letting Jack out."

I liked that little word, "I." Neville−Smith was quite capable of making me do the rescue work. I listened with an easier mind as he proceeded.

"All you've got to do is to stay here and talk to that solemn ass, Sibley."

"What's the idea? What am I to talk to him about?"

"Tell him you've lost something. Valuable for choice. Hint delicately that you think it might have been stolen. He'll lap it up. It'll be meat and drink to him. Then in a day or two, before he starts arresting people and searching the servant's boxes, you'll find the thing again. See?"

"All right," I said despondently. "I suppose there's a sort of sporting chance that we may pass the rest of our lives outside prison walls. And in any case, the judge will probably let us off lightly, as first offenders."

"I'll send James down to fetch Sibley," said Smith.

After my first quarter of an hour with Constable Sibley, I began to have a great respect for Smith's powers of description. If ever there was a solemn ass in this England of ours, Constable Sibley was that solemn ass. We discussed the case of my lost diamond tiepin in a series of circles, always getting back to where we started. He asked me questions, and took down the answers in full, very slowly, in a black notebook. At the conclusion of the first half−hour Neville−Smith interrupted the *seance*, and shortly after his arrival the policeman went away.

"It's all right," said Smith, "I've got him. Easiest job I ever struck. Door hadn't got a lock at all. Just a bar. Lifted bar, explained thing to Jack he understood in two minutes; he's a clever chap smuggled him up here, and he's shaving off his moustache upstairs, in case of accidents. So our team is now complete. Get on all right with Sibley?"

"Moderately. I believe he suspects Croome, but I suppose we can't help that. Let's hope he doesn't arrest him."

"Oh, Sibley's all right. He won't make any move in a hurry. He'll think it over for the next day or so."

"What'll he do when he finds his man gone?"

"Get a headache. I should think, trying to find out how he got off. I put the bar back in its place."

That afternoon, as I was passing the 'Bunch of Grapes,' I came upon the constable addressing a rather ribald knot of villagers.

"I name no names," he was saying, "but I says this: Whoever's been and took it upon himself to try and baffle Justice will find himself wishing he 'adn't. That's what I've got to say to you. I name no names, but I 'ave my suspicions, and I says: Whoever's been and took "

From which I deduced that the flight of the captive had been discovered.

After this, matters went with that perfect smoothness which renders Crime a luxury. The gaol−bird, swathed in a fur−coat and disguised by a mask, was conveyed to the Chalfont St. Peter's ground in the car, and presently took the field in football costume lent for the occasion by Smith, the knickerbockers much too tight for him.

It was obvious to me from the start of the game that my post at full−back was to be no sinecure. The forwards of Chalfont St. Peter's towered over our pack. Our substitutes were boys, and small at that, whereas our opponents were men, some of them even bearded. There was one colossal forward, who wore braces over his football shirt, whom I hoped I should not have to tackle. I was beginning to feel nervous when my eyes lit on our fifteenth man, and hope came back to me. Against that background of local talent he stood out in bold relief. In the very way he walked there was something that gave the spectator the impression of Form. I do not suppose the crowd on the touchline noticed him particularly before the game started, but to me he was so patently first−class that I wondered he attracted so little attention.

The giant in braces kicked off, and Smith, who had dropped back from the forward line, caught the ball and punted into touch a few yards beyond the half−way line. The first scrum was formed in what the sporting reporter loves to call neutral ground.

The next moment a great mass of forwards collapsed over our line, and the ball being discovered underneath, the referee ruled that a try had been scored. The man in braces took the kick, and converted.

So far our star had had no chance of showing us how International reserve men scored tries. He had tackled like a machine, but the superior weight of our opponents had prevented up to the present anything in the shape of attack. Smith had been exhorting his forwards all the time to heel, and it was plain that the poor men were doing their best; but so far they had not succeeded. At last, however, more owing to the enemy kicking through than to our heeling, the ball came out on our side of the scrum, and our half flicked it out to his colleague, who handed it on to the Expert. And the Expert ran.

Even in International football I have never seen a finer run. Quicksilver was stagnant compared with him, eels adhesive. Bearded men flew at his head. He ducked and ran on. Moustached men dived for his ankles. He jumped over them. Clean−shaven men tried to spring on to his back. He was yards away when they arrived. And after a dozen joyful seconds of ducking, jumping, and swerving he grounded the ball between the opposition posts.

Smith's kick put us level. One goal all was the score. The whistle blew for half−time, and almost at the same moment a roar of indignation from the touchline smote upon our ears.

I looked up. A stout figure in blue was pounding across the field in our direction. It was Constable Sibley.

Smith went to meet him, disturbed but intrepid.

"What's this, Sibley, what's this?" he said. "You mustn't come on the field during the game!"

Respect for the speaker struggled with duty. Duty won.

"Begging your pardon, sir, I must do my dooty. That's my man there."

"What are you talking about? Pull yourself together, Sibley. I've a jolly good mind to report this to headquarters."

"I can't help it, Mr. Neville−Smith, sir. That man in the breeches, sir, is my man what escaped from the station yesterday."

Here I entered the discussion.

"There must be some mistake," I said. "I understood him to say that he was an Ealesbury man."

"He's my feller."

"Now I come to look at him," I said, "there *is* a resemblance. Slight, but still a resemblance. Something about the left ear."

"Confound it, Sibley," said Smith, "your man had a moustache."

Now, thought I, you *have* done for yourself. How should Smith know whether he had a moustache or not?

But Sibley, honest fellow, overlooked the suspicious point. Instead of encouraging, it staggered him. "It's quite true," he said blankly. "So he had."

"I tell you what, Sibley," said Smith, "wait until the game's over and the man has changed back into his ordinary clothes, and talk to him then. Just now we want to go on with the match, and you're in the way."

The Law retired slowly, as one wrapped in thought.

The second half of the game was a repetition of the first. Their forwards broke through and rushed down the field, and very nearly scored again; but towards the end they tired, and we got the ball with tolerable regularity. And by virtue of playing solely to our great three−quarter we smote our opponents hip and thigh. Four more tries were obtained by our expert. Neville−Smith got another. I dropped a goal, and when the whistle blew for no side, the scutcheon of Bray Lench was wiped as clean as a new slate.

The end of it was rather tame. I had looked for a dramatic rescue, a once−on−board−the−lugger business which should be a fitting termination to our career of lawlessness. As a matter of fact, we got Jack Williams into his clothes, wrapped him as before in his fur coat, put on his goggles, and led him past the unsuspecting Sibley to the car.

"Your man, if he is your man, which I deny," said Smith, "will be coming out soon, Sibley. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

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We met Sibley in the village next day. "Well," I said, "what about that man?"

"You'll 'ardly believe it, sir," he replied "a mysterious thing, if ever I see one. I watched that door for a good 'arf−hour, and he didn't come out. And I went in, and he wasn't there. He's disappeared, sir, totally."

"Rummiest thing I ever heard," said Smith.