

THE LOST BOWLERS: (A CRICKET STORY)

P. G. WODEHOUSE

Table of Contents

THE LOST BOWLERS: (A CRICKET STORY).....1
P. G. WODEHOUSE.....2

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We had arrived at Marvis Bay, and were to play the last match of our tour on the following morning. Marvis Bay is in Devonshire. We always take it last on our fixture-list, so as to end happily, as it were. Sidmouth may rout us, and Seaton may make us hunt leather till the soles of our boots wear through; but it is the boast of the Weary Willies that against Marvis Bay they never fail to get their own back. As a matter of fact, we hardly treat the thing as a match. We look on it as a picnic. We have a splendid time—the place is a paradise and the local curate a sportsman to his fingertips—and the actual game is a treat after the stern struggles of the earlier part of the tour. It is in the Marvis Bay match that I take my annual wicket, usually through a catch in the deep; while Geake, our leg-break artist, generally seizes the opportunity of playing his great double-figure innings, and pulling his average for the season out of the realms of the minuses. Except for the curate, Dacre, who played for Cambridge in the nineties and is a sound and pretty bat of the Jimmy Douglas type, the local team is composed of unskilled labourers. They hit hard and high and in a semicircle. Geake has six men in the country, and invariably reaps a plenteous harvest of wickets. When we go in it is an understood thing among us that every possible risk must be taken, and if a batsman shows symptoms of sitting on the splice and playing himself in, his partner feels it a duty to run him out at the earliest possible moment. I remember one year Sharples, our fast bowler, said he had never made a century, and wanted to see what it felt like, so he was going to play himself in against Marvis Bay, and take no risks. His statement was coldly received, and on the score-sheet of the match you will find these words are written:—

J. B. Sharples, run out 0
The wicked never prosper.

We were gathered together in the parlour of the only inn the village possesses on the night before the match, very sociable and comfortable and pleased with ourselves. We had come flushed with victory from Seaton, and everything pointed to a delightful game on the morrow. There were no signs of rain. It had been a beautiful evening, and the glass was going up. It was pretty to see the faith we had in that glass. On our last visit, a year back, the thing had prophesied much rain, and we had been unanimous in pointing out that of course no sane man ever thought of trusting a barometer.

Geake had just finished telling us, at considerable length, how he once made twenty-three not out in a house match at Malvern (which none of us believed) when Sharples strolled in.

He wore a cynical smile.

As a rule this smile of his is the forerunner of some bad news. He is apt to come up just before the Seaton match and tell me that he has strained his heart, or a lung, or something, and cannot possibly bowl a ball. But, as the match the next day was only against Marvis Bay, it seemed impossible that any bad news he might have could really matter. Even if he could not bowl for some reason it would not be particularly serious. Our changes were capable of getting Marvis Bay out.

However, I thought it was my duty, in my capacity of captain of the team, to hear all that was to be heard.

"What's the matter, Sharples?" I asked.

He shook his head pityingly.

"See," he said—"see how the little victims play, regardless of their fate."

One of the little victims, Gregory, our wicket-keeper, flung a bound volume of the *Farmer's Magazine* at him. He caught it high up with one hand.

"I'm in rare form," he said, complacently. "I can see anything. Good job too. We shall need good fielding."

"Sharples," I said, "you've got something up your sleeve. Out with it, or get out. You're frightening

THE LOST BOWLERS: (A CRICKET STORY)

Sanderson."

Sanderson, our nervous batsman, was already beginning to quake like a jelly caught in a storm.

"What's up, Sharples?" said several voices.

Our fast bowler condescended to explain.

"As I was coming up the street just now," he said, "I suddenly noticed a horse shy violently. And next minute I saw the reason. A little shrimp of a man with a face like a music-hall comedian was coming towards me. Do any of you know Wix? Apollo Wix?"

"Plays for Somerset," said Sanderson.

"He do," assented Sharples. "And likewise does he play—on occasion and by special request—for Marvis Bay."

"What?" I shouted.

Sharples's smile became a grin.

"James, my gallant skipper, I speak the truth. Wix, who, I may point out, is eighth in the first-class averages, has come down here all for love of us to play against the Weary Willies."

Our jaws fell. We had been looking forward to a gentle, go-as-you-please village game. With Wix against us we might have to go our hardest to win.

"Haven't Somerset a match?" asked Geake. "I thought they were playing Gloucestershire."

"Not till Monday, Gloucestershire. They are free till then. Hence," added Sharples, calmly, "we shall also have the pleasure of playing to-morrow against Jack Coggin and T. C. Smith."

A perfect howl of anguish rose from all corners of the room.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Jack Coggin!"

"What on earth——"

"Who——"

"T. C. Smith!"

"Wix, Smith, *and* Coggin! Good Lord!" There followed a lull, during which I heard Sanderson murmur, sadly, "And the last time I played against Jack Coggin he outed me in my first over!"

"Sharples," I said.

"Sir to you."

"Tell me you're lying and I'll forgive you."

"You pain me, James. I am a slave to truth. Haven't you ever heard the story of me when I was a boy? My father found me cutting down a cherry tree. 'Who is cutting down this tree?' he asked, sternly. 'Father,' I said, 'I cannot tell a lie. It is probably the cat.' You needn't believe what I say, of course. Wix is my authority. Oh, and, by the way——"

"Yes?"

"There is a party of public-school boys down here, reading with a coach. Winchester men. Mere lads, of course, mere lads—nothing more. Still, two of them were in the team this year, and one of the two—Shellick—knocked up seventy against Eton."

The concentrated gloom seemed to make the room quite dark; or it may have been the tobacco smoke.

"Let's scratch," suggested somebody, miserably.

"But look here, Sharples," I said, "I can't understand this. Dacre told me he hadn't got a very strong side."

"No, poor man, he's had disappointments. You see, the Australians have got a match, so he couldn't get Trumper and Noble."

"I believe there's something at the bottom of all this."

"There is," said Sharples, "if you want to know. I got it from Wix, who seemed to think it was so good that he couldn't keep it to himself."

"Well?"

"The man Dacre, who has got a sense of humour which strikes one as almost irreligious in a curate, is putting up a deep jest on the Weary Willies. He has collected all these celebrities, and—this is the point; you ought to laugh here—he is going to play them all under assumed names. You see the rollicking idea? The score of the match will be printed in all the sporting papers, and it will get about that an ordinary village team has beaten the

THE LOST BOWLERS: (A CRICKET STORY)

club hollow. We shall never live it down."

"We can explain," said Geake, hopefully.

"Who would believe us?"

"Now, look here," I said, firmly; "this is absurd. We mustn't chuck up the sponge in this rotten way. There's no earthly sense in going into the field a beaten side. Just because they've got a county man or two—"

"Three," corrected Sharples.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that they will win. As a matter of fact, in this sort of game a good club bat is far more likely to make runs than a county man, who's used to billiard table wickets. They may have a few cracks, but we're far stronger all through."

"I made twenty-three not out once," said Geake. "It was in a house match at Malvern."

"And, hang it all," I cried, warming to my work, "you and Geake, Sharples, are a good enough pair of bowlers to bother any batsman."

"My dear James," said Sharples, enthusiastically, "you make me blush. Your stately compliments embarrass me."

"It isn't only their batsmen," said Sanderson, despondently. "Look at their bowlers. Jack Coggin."

"And Smith," said Gregory.

"Who's Smith?" I said, scornfully. "A man who goes on second change—"

"First change," said Gregory. "And for a first-class county."

"Well, look at our batting," I urged. "There's Sanderson, for one—"

"And me," put in Geake. "I once made twenty three not out. It was in a house match at Malvern."

"You never know what will happen at cricket," I said. "Buck up, and let's make these Somerset men so sick that they'll stay in their own county another year or hang themselves with the laces of their cricket boots."

"And in passing," said Sharples, pouring out a measure of whisky and adding a dash of soda-water, "let's drink confusion to the man Dacre—the Rev. Dacre, curate and serpent. May his first ball hit him on the funny-bone, his second wind him, and his third get him l-b-w."

We drank the toast with considerable enthusiasm.

The inhabitants of Marvis Bay turned out in force to see us massacred. The curate's low plot had probably become public property, for there was an alert air about the crowd as of those who expect amusement in the near future.

"You've got some new men in your team, I see," I said to Dacre. I wondered whether Wix had told him that he had informed Sharples of the state of affairs.

Apparently he had not, for the serpentine curate made no confession. Instead, he waved his hand airily, as if to deprecate the attaching of any importance to the changes in his side.

"One or two," he said. "One or two; local celebrities, you know; very keen. You may teach them something of the game."

"Stranger things have happened."

I looked round me. To my left Jack Coggin was bowling his celebrated leg-theory balls to T. C. Smith.

"That's one of your new men, isn't it?" I said. "Looks a useful man."

"A very decent bowler on his day," said the curate.

I believed him. A week before Jack Coggin had taken five good Notts wickets for eighty-seven.

"And the man batting? He any good?"

"A tolerable fast bowler. When in form quite useful."

T. C. Smith had been in form ten days ago. On that occasion he had bowled Fry and had Vine caught off him in the slips in one over.

"Ah!" I said. "We ought to have a good game, then."

"Oh, we shall do our best," said he, modestly.

"So," I said, with determination, "shall we."

Of the opening stages of that match I have no very pleasant recollections. They won the toss, and batted first on a wicket which had evidently been prepared more carefully than was generally the case at Marvis Bay. Wix, looking positively hideous, opened the innings with Shellick, the Wykehamist expert, who had that peculiarly

THE LOST BOWLERS: (A CRICKET STORY)

competent look which characterizes the public-school man who is a certainty for his "blue" in the first year.

From the moment Wix took guard, and scraped the crease with one of the bails in his cool, unruffled way, our troubles began. Nothing could have been nobler than the struggles of Sharples and Geake. Over after over the former banged them down like a combination of Brearley and Prichard. Over after over the latter tried every trick in his repertory. But all in vain. Wix was superb. He took everything that came to him with the ease which belongs to a man who is morally certain of a place in the English team for the fifth Test Match. His driving was titanic, his cutting a dream. When he pulled, he did it with that certainty of touch which stamps the genius. It was only the fine bowling of Sharples and Geake which kept the score within anything like decent limits. After an hour's play eighty was on the board, and the pair were still together.

Then our luck turned. Geake, who had had a rest and was now bowling again, sent down a miserable long hop wide of the off stump. It was a ball that cried out to be hit. A novice could have dispatched it to the boundary. The vaulting ambition of the Wykehamist did not stop short at a mere four. He wanted six. He hit out much too wildly. There was a click, and Gregory had him behind the wickets.

Two minutes later, by that curious fatality which so often broods over the survivor of a long partnership, Wix, trying an almost identical stroke off Sharples, was caught at third man. Here, therefore, were their two best bats out, and the score under a hundred. We had still to deal with Smith, Coggin, the other Wykehamist, and the dastard parson, but, after all, these were but small fry in comparison. Smith and Coggin were first-class bowlers, but nobody had ever called them first-class bats.

However, they were far from being rabbits. They may have lacked style but they certainly had vigour. Smith rattled up thirty-three, mainly by means of boundaries, and Coggin took forty. The other Wykehamist compiled a stylish twenty-five. Dacre, to the joy of the Weary Willies, failed miserably. Sharples shattered him with his second ball, and then and there danced a cake-walk by the side of the pitch.

The rest of the team were our old friends the unskilled labourers. They did their best, and once or twice effected prodigious hits, but Geake got amongst them with slow yorkers, and the thing became a procession. The tenth Marvis Bay wicket fell five minutes before the luncheon interval. The scoring had been unusually rapid, even for that ground, which is small. The full total was two hundred and eleven.

Not a big score for a good wicket; but with Jack Coggin and T. C. Smith against us we were not riotously optimistic.

We had finished lunch, and I was trying to bring Sanderson to a frame of mind which would render him fit to come in first with me with any chance of surviving a couple of overs, when a motor-car puffed up to the entrance to the ground. It contained one man, who wore goggles and a cap with a peak that covered his nose.

There was a general move on the part of the two teams in his direction. A contemplative inspection of a motor-car is the very thing to round off a cricket lunch. I took Sanderson along with me to look at it, arguing as we went. Sanderson is a beautiful bat, but he has an impossible set of nerves. His flesh creeps when he goes to the wickets, but if he survives a few overs he is worth watching. I had almost succeeded in convincing him that Coggin and Smith were rather poor third-class bowlers when we joined the group round the car. Its owner had removed his goggles, but his face was strange to me.

Smith and Coggin, however, coming up arm-in-arm a moment later, recognised him and greeted him as a brother. He received their greetings calmly and replied to them precisely. He seemed a man who rarely permitted himself to become excited.

"Halloa, Charlie!" said Smith.

"How's things?" inquired Coggin.

"Middling," said the new-comer.

"Is that the motor?"

"That is the motor," replied he, with the precision of an Ollendorff.

Smith climbed into the vacated seat. Coggin was inspecting the rear of the machine. Its owner eyed them without emotion. The motor continued, as Sharples pathetically put it, to throb as though its little heart would break.

Coggin now proceeded to clamber carefully over the body of the car.

"Don't cut the leather with your spikes," said Charlie.

THE LOST BOWLERS: (A CRICKET STORY)

"Right ho," replied Coggin. "What's this thing for?" He touched a lever with his hand.

"That sets the thing going," said Charlie.

Instant attention of the part of T. C. Smith.

"What—this?" he said.

The owner nodded, and the next moment, without warning, the car bounded forward down the road. That same instinct which prompts a man to touch wet paint to see if it really *is* wet had induced T. C. Smith to pull the lever.

Our first impulse, on recovering from our surprise, was to laugh. The sight of Jack Coggin hanging on to the back of his seat was humorous.

Then the serious side of the thing struck us. One or two of the group made a half-hearted dash down the road, but stopped on realizing the futility of giving chase. Assistance was out of the question.

"They're all right," said the owner of the car, without emotion, "if they know how to steer; and it's simple enough. Yes, there they go round the corner. They're all right."

A buzz of conversation began. We all discussed the incident at one and the same time. The only person who made no contribution to the discussion was Charlie. He lit a cigar.

Dacre pulled a watch out of the pocket of his blazer.

"We ought to be starting again soon," he said. "It's nearly three. When do you think those two men will be coming back?"

Charlie blew the ash off his cigar.

"That," he said, "I can't say. I doubt if either of them knows how to stop the car."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Dacre. "Then you mean to say they will go on——"

"Till the thing runs down, I suppose."

"And when will that be?" I asked.

"Why, I couldn't say exactly. They've got enough petrol to take them— oh, say fifty miles."

"Fifty—miles!" gasped Dacre.

"Call it forty-five," said Charlie, making a concession.

"Shall we start?" I asked, suavely. "Are your men ready?"

Dacre passed a handkerchief over his forehead. "But—but—but——" he said.

"You had better play two substitutes."

"But——"

"After all," I said, gently, "their absence cannot be so very important. As you said, they are merely local talent."

He looked at me with eyes that were full of expression.

"Merely local talent," I repeated.

It was shortly after the tea interval, when our score was a hundred and sixty for three wickets, that a small boy entered the field, bearing in his hand a telegram for the bereaved Charlie. It was signed "Smith," and had been dispatched apparently from somewhere in the middle of Cornwall.

"Motor safe," it read. "Returning by train. Tell Dacre not wait dinner."

It was at that moment, I fancy, that the Rev. Joseph Dacre experienced a fleeting regret that he had ever taken holy orders.

Clergymen have to be so guarded in their speech.

And when, an hour later, the Weary Willies won the match with five wickets in hand, this regret may possibly have become keener.