

A Prefect's Uncle



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1 — TERM BEGINS

Marriott walked into the senior day-room, and, finding no one there, hurled his portmanteau down on the table with a bang. The noise brought William into the room. William was attached to Leicester's House, Beckford College, as a mixture of butler and bootboy. He carried a pail of water in his hand. He had been engaged in cleaning up the House against the conclusion of the summer holidays, of which this was the last evening, by the simple process of transferring all dust, dirt, and other foreign substances from the floor to his own person.

'Ullo, Mr Marriott,' he said.

'Hullo, William,' said Marriott. 'How are you? Still jogging along? That's a mercy. I say, look here, I want a quiet word in season with the authorities. They must have known I was coming back this evening. Of course they did. Why, they specially wrote and asked me. Well, where's the red carpet? Where's the awning? Where's the brass band that ought to have met me at the station? Where's anything? I tell you what it is, William, my old companion, there's a bad time coming for the Headmaster if he doesn't mind what he's doing. He must learn that life is stern and life is earnest, William. Has Gethryn come back yet?'

William, who had been gasping throughout this harangue, for the intellectual pressure of Marriott's conversation (of which there was always plenty) was generally too much for him, caught thankfully at the last remark as being the only intelligible one uttered up to present date, and made answer—

'Mr Gethryn 'e's gorn out on to the field, Mr Marriott. 'E come 'arf an hour ago.'

'Oh! Right. Thanks. Goodbye, William. Give my respects to the cook, and mind you don't work too hard. Think what it would be if you developed heart disease. Awful! You mustn't do it, William.'

Marriott vanished, and William, slightly dazed, went about his professional duties once more. Marriott walked out into the grounds in search of Gethryn. Gethryn was the head of Leicester's this term, *vice* Reynolds departed, and Marriott, who was second man up, shared a study with him. Leicester's had not a good name at Beckford, in spite of the fact that it was generally in the running for the cricket and football cups. The fact of the matter was that, with the exception of Gethryn, Marriott, a boy named Reece, who kept wicket for the School Eleven, and perhaps two others, Leicester's seniors were not a good lot. To the School in general, who gauged a fellow's character principally by his abilities in the cricket and football fields, it seemed a very desirable thing to be in Leicester's. They had been runners-up for the House

football cup that year, and this term might easily see the cricket cup fall to them. Amongst the few, however, it was known that the House was passing through an unpleasant stage in its career. A House is either good or bad. It is seldom that it can combine the advantages of both systems. Leicester's was bad.

This was due partly to a succession of bad Head-prefects, and partly to Leicester himself, who was well-meaning but weak. His spirit was willing, but his will was not spirited. When things went on that ought not to have gone on, he generally managed to avoid seeing them, and the things continued to go on. Altogether, unless Gethryn's rule should act as a tonic, Leicester's was in a bad way.

The Powers that Be, however, were relying on Gethryn to effect some improvement. He was in the Sixth, the First Fifteen, and the First Eleven. Also a backbone was included in his anatomy, and if he made up his mind to a thing, that thing generally happened.

The Rev. James Beckett, the Headmaster of Beckford, had formed a very fair estimate of Gethryn's capabilities, and at the moment when Marriott was drawing the field for the missing one, that worthy was sitting in the Headmaster's study with a cup in his right hand and a muffin (half-eaten) in his left, drinking in tea and wisdom simultaneously. The Head was doing most of the talking. He had led up to the subject skilfully, and, once reached, he did not leave it. The text of his discourse was the degeneracy of Leicester's.

'Now, you know, Gethryn—another muffin? Help yourself. You know, Reynolds—well, he was a capital boy in his way, capital, and I'm sure we shall all miss him very much—but he was not a good head of a House. He was weak. Much too weak. Too easy-going. You must avoid that, Gethryn. Reynolds....' And much more in the same vein. Gethryn left the room half an hour later full of muffins and good resolutions. He met Marriott at the fives-courts.

'Where have you been to?' asked Marriott. 'I've been looking for you all over the shop.'

'I and my friend the Headmaster,' said Gethryn, 'have been having a quiet pot of tea between us.'

'Really? Was he affable?'

'Distinctly affable.'

'You know,' said Marriott confidentially, 'he asked me in, but I told him it wasn't good enough. I said that if he would consent to make his tea with water that wasn't two degrees below lukewarm, and bring on his muffins cooked instead of raw, and supply some butter to eat with them, I might look him up now and then. Otherwise it couldn't be done at the price. But what did he want you for, really?'

'He was ragging me about the House. Quite right, too. You know, there's no doubt about it, Leicester's does want bucking up.'

'We're going to get the cricket cup,' said Marriott, for the defence.

'We may. If it wasn't for the Houses in between. School House and Jephson's especially. And anyhow, that's not what I meant. The games are all right. It's—'

'The moral *je-ne-sais-quoi*, so to speak,' said Marriott. 'That'll be all right. Wait till we get at 'em. What I want you to turn your great brain to now is this letter.'

He produced a letter from his pocket. 'Don't you bar chaps who show you their letters?' he said. 'This was written by an aunt of mine. I don't want to inflict the whole lot on you. Just look at line four. You see what she says: "A boy is coming to Mr Leicester's House this term, whom I particularly wish you to befriend. He is the son of a great friend of a friend of mine, and is a nice, bright little fellow, very jolly and full of spirits."'

'That means,' interpolated Gethryn grimly, 'that he is up to the eyes in pure, undiluted cheek, and will want kicking after every meal and before retiring to rest. Go on.'

'His name is—'

'Well?'

'That's the point. At this point the manuscript becomes absolutely illegible. I have conjectured Percy for the first name. It may be Richard, but I'll plunge on Percy. It's the surname that stumps me. Personally, I think it's MacCow, though I trust it isn't, for the kid's sake. I showed the letter to my brother, the one who's at Oxford. He swore it was Watson, but, on being pressed, hedged with Sandys. You may as well contribute your little bit. What do you make of it?'

Gethryn scrutinized the document with care.

'She begins with a D. You can see that.'

'Well?'

'Next letter a or u. I see. Of course. It's Duncan.'

'Think so?' said Marriott doubtfully. 'Well, let's go and ask the matron if she knows anything about him.'

'Miss Jones,' he said, when they had reached the House, 'have you on your list of new boys a sportsman of the name of MacCow or Watson? I am also prepared to accept Sandys or Duncan. The Christian name is either Richard or Percy. There, that gives you a fairly wide field to choose from.'

'There's a P. V. Wilson on the list,' said the matron, after an inspection of that document.

'That must be the man,' said Marriott. 'Thanks very much. I suppose he hasn't arrived yet?'

'No, not yet. You two are the only ones so far.'

'Oh! Well, I suppose I shall have to see him when he does come. I'll come down for him later on.'

They strolled out on to the field again.

'In *re* the proposed bucking-up of the House,' said Marriott, 'it'll be rather a big job.'

'Rather. I should think so. We ought to have a most fearfully sporting time. It's got to be done. The Old Man talked to me like several fathers.'

'What did he say?'

'Oh, heaps of things.'

'I know. Did he mention amongst other things that Reynolds was the worst idiot on the face of this so-called world?'

'Something of the sort.'

'So I should think. The late Reynolds was a perfect specimen of the gelatine-backed worm. That's not my own, but it's the only description of him that really suits. Monk and Danvers and the mob in general used to do what they liked with him. Talking of Monk, when you embark on your tour of moral agitation, I should advise you to start with him.'

'Yes. And Danvers. There isn't much to choose between them. It's a pity they're both such good bats. When you see a chap putting them through the slips like Monk does, you can't help thinking there must be something in him.'

'So there is,' said Marriott, 'and it's all bad. I bar the man. He's slimy. It's the only word for him. And he uses scent by the gallon. Thank goodness this is his last term.'

'Is it really? I never heard that.'

'Yes. He and Danvers are both leaving. Monk's going to Heidelberg to study German, and Danvers is going into his pater's business in the City. I got that from Waterford.'

'Waterford is another beast,' said Gethryn thoughtfully. 'I suppose he's not leaving by any chance?'

'Not that I know of. But he'll be nothing without Monk and Danvers. He's simply a sort of bottle-washer to the firm. When they go he'll collapse. Let's be strolling towards the House now, shall we? Hullo! Our only Reece! Hullo, Reece!'

'Hullo!' said the new arrival. Reece was a weird, silent individual, whom everybody in the School knew up to a certain point, but very few beyond that point. His manner was exactly the same when talking to the smallest fag as when addressing the Headmaster. He rather gave one the impression that he was thinking of something a fortnight ahead, or trying to solve a chess problem without the aid of the board. In appearance he was on the short side, and thin. He was in the Sixth, and a conscientious worker. Indeed, he was only saved from being considered a swot, to use the vernacular, by the fact that from childhood's earliest hour he had been in the habit of keeping wicket like an angel. To a good wicket-keeper much may be forgiven.

He handed Gethryn an envelope.

'Letter, Bishop,' he said. Gethryn was commonly known as the Bishop, owing to a certain sermon preached in the College chapel some five years before, in aid of the Church Missionary Society, in which the preacher had alluded at frequent intervals to another Gethryn, a bishop, who, it appeared, had a see, and did much excellent work among the heathen at the back of beyond. Gethryn's friends and acquaintances, who had been alternating between 'Ginger'—Gethryn's hair being inclined to redness—and 'Sneg', a name which utterly baffles the philologist, had welcomed the new name warmly, and it had stuck ever since. And, after all, there are considerably worse names by which one might be called.

'What the dickens!' he said, as he finished reading the letter.

'Tell us the worst,' said Marriott. 'You must read it out now out of common decency, after rousing our expectations like that.'

'All right! It isn't private. It's from an aunt of mine.'

'Seems to be a perfect glut of aunts,' said Marriott. 'What views has your representative got to air? Is *she* springing any jolly little fellow full of spirits on this happy community?'

'No, it's not that. It's only an uncle of mine who's coming down here. He's coming tomorrow, and I'm to meet him. The uncanny part of it is that I've never heard of him before in my life.'

'That reminds me of a story I heard—' began Reece slowly. Reece's observations were not frequent, but when they came, did so for the most part in anecdotal shape. Somebody was constantly doing something which reminded him of something he had heard somewhere from somebody. The unfortunate part of it was that he exuded these reminiscences at such a leisurely rate of speed that he was rarely known to succeed in finishing any of them. He resembled those serial stories which appear in papers destined at a moderate price to fill an obvious void, and which break off abruptly at the third chapter, owing to the premature decease of the said periodicals. On this occasion Marriott cut in with a few sage remarks on the subject of uncles as a class. 'Uncles,' he said, 'are tricky. You never know where you've got 'em. You think they're going to come out strong with a sovereign, and they make it a shilling without a blush. An uncle of mine once gave me a threepenny bit. If it hadn't been that I didn't wish to hurt his feelings, I should have flung it at his feet. Also I particularly wanted threepence at the moment. Is your uncle likely to do his duty, Bishop?'

'I tell you I don't know the man. Never heard of him. I thought I knew every uncle on the list, but I can't place this one. However, I suppose I shall have to meet him.'

'Rather,' said Marriott, as they went into the House; 'we should always strive to be kind, even to the very humblest. On the off chance, you know. The unknown may have struck it rich in sheep or something out in Australia. Most uncles come from Australia. Or he may be the boss of

some trust, and wallowing in dollars. He may be anything. Let's go and brew, Bishop. Come on, Reece.'

'I don't mind watching you two chaps eat,' said Gethryn, 'but I can't join in myself. I have assimilated three pounds odd of the Headmagisterial muffins already this afternoon. Don't mind me, though.'

They went upstairs to Marriott's study, which was also Gethryn's. Two in a study was the rule at Beckford, though there were recluses who lived alone, and seemed to enjoy it.

When the festive board had ceased to groan, and the cake, which Marriott's mother had expected to last a fortnight, had been reduced to a mere wreck of its former self, the thought of his aunt's friend's friend's son returned to Marriott, and he went down to investigate, returning shortly afterwards unaccompanied, but evidently full of news.

'Well?' said Gethryn. 'Hasn't he come?'

'A little,' said Marriott, 'just a little. I went down to the fags' room, and when I opened the door I noticed a certain weird stillness in the atmosphere. There is usually a row going on that you could cut with a knife. I looked about. The room was apparently empty. Then I observed a quaint object on the horizon. Do you know one Skinner by any chance?'

'My dear chap!' said Gethryn. Skinner was a sort of juvenile Professor Moriarty, a Napoleon of crime. He reeked of crime. He revelled in his wicked deeds. If a Dormitory-prefect was kept awake at night by some diabolically ingenious contrivance for combining the minimum of risk with the maximum of noise, then it was Skinner who had engineered the thing. Again, did a master, playing nervously forward on a bad pitch at the nets to Gosling, the School fast bowler, receive the ball gaspingly in the small ribs, and look round to see whose was that raucous laugh which had greeted the performance, he would observe a couple of yards away Skinner, deep in conversation with some friend of equally villainous aspect. In short, in a word, the only adequate word, he was Skinner.

'Well?' said Reece.

'Skinner,' proceeded Marriott, 'was seated in a chair, bleeding freely into a rather dirty pocket-handkerchief. His usual genial smile was hampered by a cut lip, and his right eye was blacked in the most graceful and pleasing manner. I made tender inquiries, but could get nothing from him except grunts. So I departed, and just outside the door I met young Lee, and got the facts out of him. It appears that P. V. Wilson, my aunt's friend's friend's son, entered the fags' room at four-fifteen. At four-fifteen-and-a-half, punctually, Skinner was observed to be trying to rag him. Apparently the great Percy has no sense of humour, for at four-seventeen he got tired of it, and hit Skinner crisply in the right eyeball, blacking the same as per illustration. The

subsequent fight raged gorily for five minutes odd, and then Wilson, who seems to be a professional pugilist in disguise, landed what my informant describes as three corks on his opponent's proboscis. Skinner's reply was to sit down heavily on the floor, and give him to understand that the fight was over, and that for the next day or two his face would be closed for alterations and repairs. Wilson thereupon harangued the company in well-chosen terms, tried to get Skinner to shake hands, but failed, and finally took the entire crew out to the shop, where they made pigs of themselves at his expense. I have spoken.'

'And that's the kid you've got to look after,' said Reece, after a pause.

'Yes,' said Marriott. 'What I maintain is that I require a kid built on those lines to look after me. But you ought to go down and see Skinner's eye sometime. It's a beautiful bit of work.'

2 — INTRODUCES AN UNUSUAL UNCLE

On the following day, at nine o'clock, the term formally began. There is nothing of Black Monday about the first day of term at a public school. Black Monday is essentially a private school institution.

At Beckford the first day of every term was a half holiday. During the morning a feeble pretence of work was kept up, but after lunch the school was free, to do as it pleased and to go where it liked. The nets were put up for the first time, and the School professional emerged at last from his winter retirement with his, 'Coom *right* out to 'em, sir, right forward', which had helped so many Beckford cricketers to do their duty by the School in the field. There was one net for the elect, the remnants of last year's Eleven and the 'probables' for this season, and half a dozen more for lesser lights.

At the first net Norris was batting to the bowling of Gosling, a long, thin day boy, Gethryn, and the professional—as useful a trio as any school batsman could wish for. Norris was captain of the team this year, a sound, stylish bat, with a stroke after the manner of Tyldesley between cover and mid-off, which used to make Miles the professional almost weep with joy. But today he had evidently not quite got into form. Twice in successive balls Gosling knocked his leg stump out of the ground with yorkers, and the ball after that, Gethryn upset his middle with a beauty.

'Hat-trick, Norris,' shouted Gosling.

'Can't see 'em a bit today. Bowled, Bishop.'

A second teaser from Gethryn had almost got through his defence. The Bishop was undoubtedly a fine bowler. Without being quite so fast as Gosling, he nevertheless contrived to work up a very considerable speed when he wished to, and there was always something in every ball he bowled which made it necessary for the batsman to watch it all the way. In matches against other schools it was generally Gosling who took the wickets. The batsmen were bothered by his pace. But when the M.C.C. or the Incogniti came down, bringing seasoned county men who knew what fast bowling really was, and rather preferred it on the whole to slow, then Gethryn was called upon.

Most Beckfordians who did not play cricket on the first day of term went on the river. A few rode bicycles or strolled out into the country in couples, but the majority, amongst whom on this occasion was Marriott, sallied to the water and hired boats. Marriott was one of the six old cricket colours—the others were Norris, Gosling, Gethryn, Reece, and Pringle of the School House—who formed the foundation of this year's Eleven. He was not an ornamental bat, but stood quite alone in the matter of tall hitting. Twenty minutes of Marriott when in form would