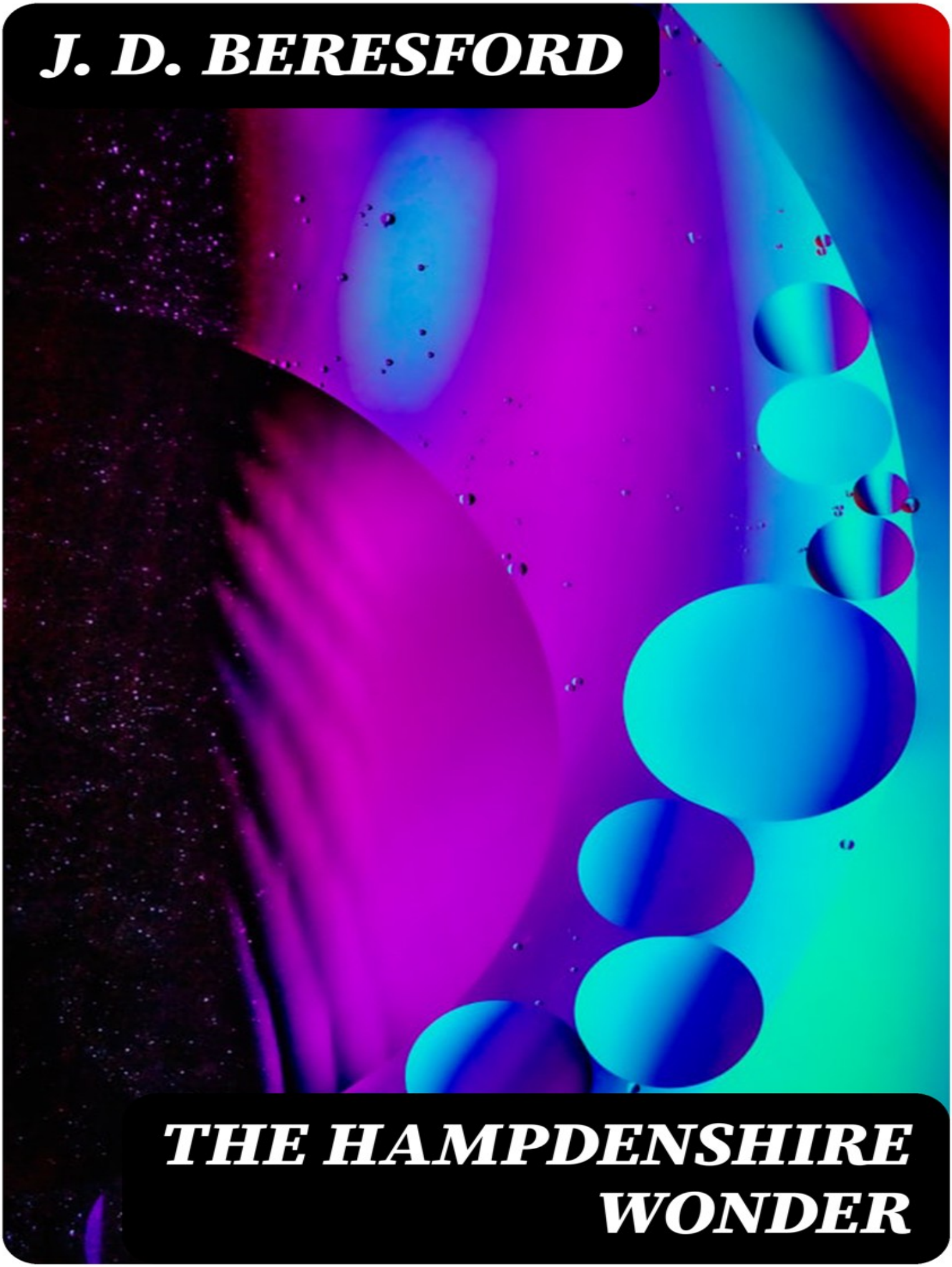
J. D. BERESFORD
THE HAMPDENSHIRE WONDER

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The Hampdenshire Wonder

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PART I

MY EARLY ASSOCIATIONS WITH GINGER STOTT

CHAPTER I

THE MOTIVE

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I could not say at which station the woman and her baby entered the train.

Since we had left London I had been engrossed in Henri Bergson's "Time and Free Will," as it is called in the English translation. I had been conscious of various stoppages and changes of passengers, but my attention had been held by Bergson's argument. I agreed with his conclusion in advance, but I wished to master his reasoning.

I looked up when the woman entered my compartment, though I did not notice the name of the station. I caught sight of the baby she was carrying, and turned back to my book. I thought the child was a freak, an abnormality; and such things disgust me.

I returned to the study of my Bergson and read: "It is at the great and solemn crisis, decisive of our reputation with others, that we choose in defiance of what is conventionally called a motive, and this absence of any tangible reason is the more striking the deeper our freedom goes."

I kept my eyes on the book—the train had started again—but the next passage conveyed no meaning to my mind, and as I attempted to re-read it an impression was interposed between me and the work I was studying.

I saw projected on the page before me an image which I mistook at first for the likeness of Richard Owen. It was the conformation of the head that gave rise to the mistake, a head domed and massive, white and smooth—it was a head that had always interested me. But as I looked, my mind already searching for the reason of this hallucination, I saw that the lower part of the face was that of an infant. My eyes wandered from the book, and my gaze fluttered along the four persons seated opposite to me, till they rested on the reality of my vision. Even as these acts were being performed, I found myself foolishly saying, "I don't call this freedom."

For several seconds the eyes of the infant held mine. Its gaze was steady and clear as that of a normal child, but what differentiated it was the impression one received of calm intelligence. The head was completely bald, and there was no trace of eyebrows, but the eyes themselves were protected by thick, short lashes.

The child turned its head, and I felt my muscles relax. Until then I had not been conscious that they had been stiffened. My gaze was released, pushed aside as it were, and I found myself watching the object of the child's next scrutiny.

This object was a man of forty or so, inclined to corpulence, and untidy. He bore the evidences of failure in the process of becoming. He wore a beard that was scanty and ragged, there were bare patches of skin on the jaw; one inferred that he wore that beard only to save the trouble of shaving. He was sitting next to me, the middle passenger of the three on my side of the carriage, and he was absorbed in the pages of a half-penny paper—I think he was reading the Police News—which was interposed between him and the child in the corner diagonally opposite to that which I occupied.

The man was hunched up, slouching, his legs crossed, his elbows seeking support against his body; he held with both hands his paper, unfolded, close to his eyes. He had the appearance of being very myopic, but he did not wear glasses.

As I watched him, he began to fidget. He uncrossed his legs and hunched his body deeper into the back of his seat. Presently his eyes began to creep up the paper in front of him. When they reached the top, he hesitated a moment, making a survey under cover, then he dropped his hands and stared stupidly at the infant in the corner, his mouth slightly open, his feet pulled in under the seat of the carriage.

As the child let him go, his head drooped, and then he turned and looked at me with a silly, vacuous smile. I looked away hurriedly; this was not a man with whom I cared to share experience.

The process was repeated. The next victim was a big, rubicund, healthy-looking man, clean shaved, with light-blue eyes that were slightly magnified by the glasses of his gold-mounted spectacles. He, too, had been reading a newspaper—the *Evening Standard*—until the child's gaze claimed his attention, and he, too, was held motionless by that strange, appraising stare. But when he was released, his surprise found vent in words. "This," I thought, "is the man accustomed to act."

"A very remarkable child, ma'am" he said, addressing the thin, ascetic-looking mother.

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The mother's appearance did not convey the impression of poverty. She was, indeed, warmly, decently, and becomingly clad. She wore a long black coat, braided and frogged; it had the air of belonging to an older fashion, but the material of it was new. And her bonnet, trimmed with jet ornaments growing on stalks that waved tremulously—that, also, was a modern replica of an older mode. On her hands were black thread gloves, somewhat ill-fitting.

Her face was not that of a country woman. The thin, high-bridged nose, the fallen cheeks, the shadows under eyes gloomy and retrospective—these were marks of the town; above all, perhaps, that

sallow greyness of the skin which speaks of confinement....

The child looked healthy enough. Its great bald head shone resplendently like a globe of alabaster.

“A very remarkable child, ma’am,” said the rubicund man who sat facing the woman.

The woman twitched her untidy-looking black eyebrows, her head trembled slightly and set the jet fruit of her bonnet dancing and nodding.

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

“Very remarkable,” said the man, adjusting his spectacles and leaning forward. His action had an air of deliberate courage; he was justifying his fortitude after that temporary aberration.

I watched him a little nervously. I remembered my feelings when, as a child, I had seen some magnificent enter the lion’s den in a travelling circus. The failure on my right was, also, absorbed in the spectacle; he stared, open-mouthed, his eyes blinking and shifting.

The other three occupants of the compartment, sitting on the same side as the woman, back to the engine, dropped papers and magazines and turned their heads, all interest. None of these three had, so far as I had observed, fallen under the spell of inspection by the infant, but I noticed that the man—an artisan apparently—who sat next to the woman had edged away from her, and that the three passengers opposite to me were huddled towards my end of the compartment.

The child had abstracted its gaze, which was now directed down the aisle of the carriage, indefinitely focussed on some point outside the window. It seemed remote, entirely unconcerned with any human being.

I speak of it asexually. I was still uncertain as to its sex. It is true that all babies look alike to me; but I should have known that this child was male, the conformation of the skull alone should have told me that. It was its dress that gave me cause to hesitate. It was dressed absurdly, not in "long-clothes," but in a long frock that hid its feet and was bunched about its body.

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"Er—does it—er—can it—talk?" hesitated the rubicund man, and I grew hot at his boldness. There seemed to be something disrespectful in speaking before the child in this impersonal way.

"No, sir, he's never made a sound," replied the woman, twitching and vibrating. Her heavy, dark eyebrows jerked spasmodically, nervously.

"Never cried?" persisted the interrogator.

"Never once, sir."

"Dumb, eh?" He said it as an aside, half under his breath.

"'E's never spoke, sir."

“Hm!” The man cleared his throat and braced himself with a deliberate and obvious effort. “Is it—he—not water on the brain—what?”

I felt that a rigour of breathless suspense held every occupant of the compartment. I wanted, and I know that every other person there wanted, to say, “Look out! Don’t go too far.” The child, however, seemed unconscious of the insult: he still stared out through the window, lost in profound contemplation.

“No, sir, oh no!” replied the woman. “’E’s got more sense than a ordinary child.” She held the infant as if it were some priceless piece of earthenware, not nursing it as a woman nurses a baby, but balancing it with supreme attention in her lap.

“How old is he?”

We had been awaiting this question.

“A year and nine munse, sir.”

“Ought to have spoken before that, oughtn’t he?”

“Never even cried, sir,” said the woman. She regarded the child with a look into which I read something of apprehension. If it were apprehension it was a feeling that we all shared. But the rubicund man was magnificent, though, like the lion tamer of my youthful experience, he was doubtless conscious of the aspect his temerity wore in the eyes of beholders. He must have been showing off.

“Have you taken opinion?” he asked; and then, seeing the woman’s lack of comprehension, he translated the question—badly, for he conveyed a different meaning—thus,

“I mean, have you had a doctor for him?”

The train was slackening speed.

“Oh! yes, sir.”

“And what do *they* say?”

The child turned its head and looked the rubicund man full in the eyes. Never in the face of any man or woman have I seen such an expression of sublime pity and contempt....

I remembered a small urchin I had once seen at the Zoological Gardens. Urged on by a band of other urchins, he was throwing pebbles at a great lion that lolled, finely indifferent, on the floor of its playground. Closer crept the urchin; he grew splendidly bold; he threw larger and larger pebbles, until the lion rose suddenly with a roar, and dashed fiercely down to the bars of its cage.

I thought of that urchin’s scared, shrieking face now, as the rubicund man leant quickly back into his corner.

Yet that was not all, for the infant, satisfied, perhaps, with its victim’s ignominy, turned and looked at me with a cynical smile. I was, as it were, taken into its confidence. I felt flattered, undeservedly yet enormously flattered. I blushed, I may have simpered.

The train drew up in Great Hittenden station.

The woman gathered her priceless possession carefully into her arms, and the rubicund man adroitly opened the door for her.

“Good day, sir,” she said, as she got out.

“Good day,” echoed the rubicund man with relief, and we all drew a deep breath of relief with him in concert, as though we had just witnessed the safe descent of some over-daring aviator.

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As the train moved on, we six, who had been fellow-passengers for some thirty or forty minutes before the woman had entered our compartment, we who had not till then exchanged a word, broke suddenly into general conversation.

“Water on the brain; I don’t care what any one says,” asserted the rubicund man.

“My sister had one very similar”, put in the failure, who was sitting next to me. “It died,” he added, by way of giving point to his instance.

“Ought not to exhibit freaks like that in public,” said an old man opposite to me.

“You’re right, sir,” was the verdict of the artisan, and he spat carefully and scraped his boot on the floor; “them things ought to be kep’ private.”

“Mad, of course, that’s to say imbecile”, repeated the rubicund man.

“Horrid head he’d got,” said the failure, and shivered histrionically.

They continued to demonstrate their contempt for the infant by many asseverations. The reaction grew. They were all bold now and all wanted to speak. They

spoke as the survivors from some common peril; they were increasingly anxious to demonstrate that they had never suffered intimidation and in their relief they were anxious to laugh at the thing which had for a time subdued them. But they never named it as a cause for fear. Their speech was merely innuendo.

At the last, however, I caught an echo of the true feeling.

It was the rubicund man, who, most daring during the crisis was now bold enough to admit curiosity.

“What’s your opinion, sir?” he said to me. The train was running into Wenderby; he was preparing to get out; and he leaned forward, his fingers on the handle of the door.

I was embarrassed. Why had I been singled out by the child? I had taken no part in the recent interjectory conversation. Was this a consequence of the notice that had been paid to me?

“I?” I stammered and then reverted to the rubicund man’s original phrase, “It—it was certainly a very remarkable child,” I said.

The rubicund man nodded and pursed his lips. “Very,” he muttered as he alighted, “Very remarkable. Well, good day to you.”

I returned to my book and was surprised to find that my index finger was still marking the place at which I had been interrupted some fifteen minutes before. My arm felt stiff and cramped.

I read “... this absence of any tangible reason is the more striking the deeper our freedom goes.”

CHAPTER II

NOTES FOR A BIOGRAPHY OF GINGER STOTT

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I

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Ginger Stott is a name that was once as well known as any in England. Stott has been the subject of leading articles in every daily paper; his life has been written by an able journalist who interviewed Stott himself, during ten crowded minutes, and filled three hundred pages with details, seventy per cent. of which were taken from the journals, and the remainder supplied by a brilliant imagination. Ten years ago Ginger Stott was on a pinnacle, there was a Stott vogue. You found his name at the bottom of signed articles written by members of the editorial staff; you bought Stott collars, although Stott himself did not wear collars; there was a Stott waltz which is occasionally hummed by clerks, and whistled by errand-boys to this day; there was a periodical which lived for ten months, entitled *Ginger Stott's Weekly*; in brief, during one summer there was a Stott apotheosis.

But that was ten years ago, and the rising generation has almost forgotten the once well-known name. One rarely sees him mentioned in the morning paper now, and then it is but the briefest reference;

some such note as this “Pickering was at the top of his form, recalling the finest achievements of Ginger Stott at his best,” or “Flack is a magnificent find for Kent: he promises to completely surpass the historic feats of Ginger Stott.” These journalistic superlatives only irritate those who remember the performances referred to. We who watched the man’s career know that Pickering and Flack are but tyros compared to Stott; we know that none of his successors has challenged comparison with him. He was a meteor that blazed across the sky, and if he ever has a true successor, such stars as Pickering and Flack will shine pale and dim in comparison.

It makes one feel suddenly old to recall that great matinée at the Lyceum, given for Ginger Stott’s benefit after he met with his accident. In ten years so many great figures in that world have died or fallen into obscurity. I can count on my fingers the number of those who were then, and are still, in the forefront of popularity. Of the others poor Captain Wallis, for instance, is dead—and no modern writer, in my opinion, can equal the brilliant descriptiveness of Wallis’s articles in the *Daily Post*. Bobby Maisefield, again, Stott’s colleague, is a martyr to rheumatism, and keeps a shop in Ailesworth, the scene of so many of his triumphs. What a list one might make, but how uselessly. It is enough to note how many names have dropped out, how many others are the names of those we now speak of as veterans. In ten years! It certainly makes one feel old.

II

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No apology is needed for telling again the story of Stott's career. Certain details will still be familiar, it is true, the historic details that can never be forgotten while cricket holds place as our national game. But there are many facts of Stott's life familiar to me, which have never been made public property. If I must repeat that which is known, I can give the known a new setting; perhaps a new value.

He came of mixed races. His mother was pure Welsh, his father a Yorkshire collier; but when Ginger was nine years old his father died, and Mrs. Stott came to live in Ailesworth where she had immigrant relations, and it was there that she set up the little paper-shop, the business by which she maintained herself and her boy. That shop is still in existence, and the name has not been altered. You may find it in the little street that runs off the market place, going down towards the Borstal Institution.

There are many people alive in Ailesworth today who can remember the sturdy, freckled, sandy-haired boy who used to go round with the morning and evening papers; the boy who was to change the fortunes of a county.

Ginger was phenomenally thorough in all he undertook. It was one of the secrets of his success. It was this thoroughness that kept him engaged in his mother's little business until he was seventeen. Up

to that age he never found time for cricket—he certainly had remarkable and very unusual qualities.

It was sheer chance, apparently, that determined his choice of a career.

He had walked into Stoke-Underhill to deliver a parcel, and on his way back his attention was arrested by the sight of a line of vehicles drawn up to the boarded fencing that encloses the Ailesworth County Ground. The occupants of these vehicles were standing up, struggling to catch a sight of the match that was being played behind the screen erected to shut out non-paying sightseers. Among the horses' feet, squirming between the spokes of wheels, utterly regardless of all injury, small boys glued their eyes to knot-holes in the fence, while others climbed surreptitiously, and for the most part unobserved, on to the backs of tradesmen's carts. All these individuals were in a state of tremendous excitement, and even the policeman whose duty it was to move them on, was so engrossed in watching the game that he had disappeared inside the turnstile, and had given the outside spectators full opportunity for eleemosynary enjoyment.

That tarred fence has since been raised some six feet, and now encloses a wider sweep of ground—alterations that may be classed among the minor revolutions effected by the genius of that thick-set, fair-haired youth of seventeen, who paused on that early September afternoon to wonder what all the fuss was about. The Ailesworth County Ground was

not famous in those days; not then was accommodation needed for thirty thousand spectators, drawn from every county in England to witness the unparalleled.

Ginger stopped. The interest of the spectacle pierced his absorption in the business he had in hand. Such a thing was almost unprecedented.

“What’s up?” he asked of Puggy Phillips.

Puggy Phillips—hazarding his life by standing on the shiny, slightly curved top of his butcher’s cart—made no appropriate answer. “Yah—*ah*—AH!” he screamed in ecstasy. “Oh! played! Pla-a-a-ayed!!”

Ginger wasted no more breath, but laid hold of the little brass rail that encircled Puggy’s platform, and with a sudden hoist that lifted the shafts and startled the pony, raised himself to the level of a spectator.

“’Ere!” shouted the swaying, tottering Puggy, “What the ... are yer rup to?”

The well-drilled pony, however, settled down again quietly to maintain his end of the see-saw, and, finding himself still able to preserve his equilibrium, Puggy instantly forgot the presence of the intruder.

“What’s up?” asked Ginger again.

“Oh! Well *’it*, WELL ’IT!” yelled Puggy. “Oh! Gow on, gow on agen! Run it *aht*. Run it AH-T.”

Ginger gave it up, and turned his attention to the match.

It was not any famous struggle that was being fought out on the old Ailesworth Ground; it was only second-class cricket, the deciding match of the Minor

Counties championship. Hampdenshire and Oxfordshire, old rivals, had been neck-and-neck all through the season, and, as luck would have it, the engagement between them had been the last fixture on the card.

When Ginger rose to the level of spectator, the match was anybody's game. Bobby Maisefield was batting. He was then a promising young colt who had not earned a fixed place in the Eleven. Ginger knew him socially, but they were not friends, they had no interests in common. Bobby had made twenty-seven. He was partnered by old Trigson, the bowler, (he has been dead these eight years,) whose characteristic score of "Not out ... O," is sufficiently representative of his methods.

It was the fourth innings, and Hampdenshire with only one more wicket to fall, still required nineteen runs to win. Trigson could be relied upon to keep his wicket up, but not to score. The hopes of Ailesworth centred in the ability of that almost untried colt Bobby Maisefield—and he seemed likely to justify the trust reposed in him. A beautiful late cut that eluded third man and hit the fence with a resounding bang, nearly drove Puggy wild with delight.

"Only fifteen more," he shouted. "Oh! Played; pla-a-a-yed!"

But as the score crept up, the tensity grew. As each ball was delivered, a chill, rigid silence held the onlookers in its grip. When Trigson, with the field collected round him, almost to be covered with a

sheet, stonewalled the most tempting lob, the click of the ball on his bat was an intrusion on the stillness. And always it was followed by a deep breath of relief that sighed round the ring like a faint wind through a plantation of larches. When Bobby scored, the tumult broke out like a crash of thunder; but it subsided again, echoless, to that intense silence so soon as the ball was "dead."

Curiously, it was not Bobby who made the winning hit but Trigson. "One to tie, two to win," breathed Puggy as the field changed over, and it was Trigson who had to face the bowling. The suspense was torture. Oxford had put on their fast bowler again, and Trigson, intimidated, perhaps, did not play him with quite so straight a bat as he had opposed to the lob-bowler. The ball hit Trigson's bat and glanced through the slips. The field was very close to the wicket, and the ball was travelling fast. No one seemed to make any attempt to stop it. For a moment the significance of the thing was not realised; for a moment only, then followed uproar, deafening, stupendous.

Puggy was stamping fiercely on the top of his cart; the tears were streaming down his face; he was screaming and yelling incoherent words. He was representative of the crowd. Thus men shouted and stamped and cried when news came of the relief of Kimberley, or when that false report of victory was brought to Paris in the August of 1870....

The effect upon Ginger was a thing apart. He did not join in the fierce acclamation; he did not wait to see the chairing of Bobby and Trigson. The greatness of Stott's character, the fineness of his genius is displayed in his attitude towards the dramatic spectacle he had just witnessed.

As he trudged home into Ailesworth, his thoughts found vent in a muttered sentence which is peculiarly typical of the effect that had been made upon him.

"I believe I could have bowled that chap," he said.

III

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In writing a history of this kind, a certain licence must be claimed. It will be understood that I am filling certain gaps in the narrative with imagined detail. But the facts are true. My added detail is only intended to give an appearance of life and reality to my history. Let me, therefore, insist upon one vital point. I have not been dependent on hearsay for one single fact in this story. Where my experience does not depend upon personal experience, it has been received from the principals themselves. Finally, it should be remembered that when I have, imaginatively, put words into the mouths of the persons of this story, they are never essential words which affect the issue. The essential speeches are reported from first-hand sources. For instance, Ginger Stott himself has told me on more than one

occasion that the words with which I closed the last section, were the actual words spoken by him on the occasion in question. It was not until six years after the great Oxfordshire match that I myself first met the man, but what follows is literally true in all essentials.

There was a long, narrow strip of yard, or alley, at the back of Mrs. Stott's paper-shop, a yard that, unfortunately, no longer exists. It has been partly built over, and another of England's memorials has thus been destroyed by the vandals of modern commerce....

This yard was fifty-three feet long, measuring from Mrs. Stott's back door to the door of the coal-shed, which marked the alley's extreme limit. This measurement, an apparently negligible trifle, had an important effect upon Stott's career. For it was in this yard that he taught himself to bowl, and the shortness of the pitch precluded his taking any run. From those long studious hours of practice he emerged with a characteristic that was—and still remains—unique. Stott never took more than two steps before delivering the ball; frequently he bowled from a standing position, and batsmen have confessed that of all Stott's puzzling mannerisms, this was the one to which they never became accustomed. S. R. L. Maturin, the finest bat Australia ever sent to this country, has told me that to this peculiarity of delivery he attributed his failure ever to score freely against Stott. It completely upset

one's habit of play, he said: one had no time to prepare for the flight of the ball; it came at one so suddenly. Other bowlers have since attempted some imitation of this method without success. They had not Stott's physical advantages.

Nevertheless, the shortness of that alley threw Stott back for two years. When he first emerged to try conclusions on the field, he found his length on the longer pitch utterly unreliable, and the effort necessary to throw the ball another six yards, at first upset his slowly acquired methods.

It was not until he was twenty years old that Ginger Stott played in his first Colts' match.

The three years that had intervened had not been prosperous years for Hampdenshire. Their team was a one-man team. Bobby Maisefield was developing into a fine bat (and other counties were throwing out inducements to him, trying to persuade him to qualify for first-class cricket), but he found no support, and Hampdenshire was never looked upon as a coming county. The best of the minor counties in those years were Staffordshire and Norfolk.

In the Colts' match Stott's analysis ran:

overs	maidens	runs	wickets
11.3	7	16	7

and reference to the score-sheet, which is still preserved among the records of the County Club, shows that six of the seven wickets were clean bowled. The Eleven had no second innings; the match was drawn, owing to rain. Stott has told me that the