

## Two

# *Introduces an Unusual Uncle*



**O**n 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 often completely alter the course of a match. He had been given his colours in the previous year for making exactly a hundred in sixty-one minutes against the Authentics when the rest of the team had contributed ninety-eight. The Authentics made a hundred and eighty-four, so that the School just won; and the story of how there were five men out in the deep for him, and how he put the slow bowler over their heads and over the ropes eight times in three overs, had passed into a school legend.

But today other things than cricket occupied his attention. He had run Wilson to earth, and was engaged in making his acquaintance, according to instructions received.

'Are you Wilson?' he asked. 'P.V. Wilson?'

Wilson confirmed the charge.

'My name's Marriott. Does that convey any significance to your young mind?'

'Oh, yes. My mater knows somebody who knows your aunt.'

'It is a true bill.'

'And she said you would look after me. I know you won't have time, of course.'

'I expect I shall have time to give you all the looking after you'll require. It won't be much, from all I've heard. Was all that true about you and young Skinner?'

Wilson grinned.

'I did have a bit of a row with a chap called Skinner,' he admitted.

'So Skinner seems to think,' said Marriott. 'What was it all about?'

'Oh, he made an ass of himself,' said Wilson vaguely.

Marriott nodded.

'He would. I know the man. I shouldn't think you'd have much trouble with Skinner in the future. By the way, I've got you for a fag this term. You don't have to do much in the summer. Just rot around, you know, and go to the shop for biscuits and things, that's all. And, within limits of course, you get the run of the study.'

'I see,' said Wilson gratefully. The prospect was pleasant.

'Oh yes, and it's your privilege to pipe-clay my cricket boots occasionally before First matches. You'll like that. Can you steer a boat?'

'I don't think so. I never tried.'

'It's easy enough. I'll tell you what to do. Anyhow, you probably won't steer any worse than I row, so let's go and get a boat out, and I'll try and think of a few more words of wisdom for your benefit.'

At the nets Norris had finished his innings, and Pringle was batting in his stead. Gethryn had given up his ball to Baynes, who bowled slow leg-breaks, and was the most probable of the probables above-mentioned. He went to where Norris was taking off his pads, and began to talk to him. Norris was the head of Jephson's House, and he and the Bishop were very good friends, in a casual sort of way. If they did not see one another for a couple of days, neither of them broke his heart. Whenever, on the other hand, they did meet, they were always glad, and always had plenty to talk about. Most school friendships are of that description.

'You were sending down some rather hot stuff,' said Norris, as Gethryn sat down beside him, and began to inspect Pringle's performance with a critical eye.

'I did feel rather fit,' said he. 'But I don't think half those that got you would have taken wickets in a match. You aren't in form yet.'

'I tell you what it is, Bishop,' said Norris, 'I believe I'm going to be a rank failure this season. Being captain does put one off.'

'Don't be an idiot, man. How can you possibly tell after one day's play at the nets?'

'I don't know. I feel so beastly anxious somehow. I feel as if I was personally responsible for every match lost. It was all right last year when John Brown was captain. Good old John! Do you remember his running you out in the Charchester match?'

'Don't,' said Gethryn pathetically. 'The only time I've ever felt as if I really was going to make that century. By Jove, see that drive? Pringle seems all right.'

'Yes, you know, he'll simply walk into his Blue when he goes up to the Varsity. What do you think of Baynes?'

'Ought to be rather useful on his wicket. Jephson thinks he's good.'

Mr Jephson looked after the School cricket.

'Yes, I believe he rather fancies him,' said Norris. 'Says he ought to do some big things if we get any rain. Hullo, Pringle, are you coming out? You'd better go in, then, Bishop.'

'All right. Thanks. Oh, by Jove, though, I forgot. I can't. I've got to go down to the station to meet an uncle of mine.'

'What's he coming up today for? Why didn't he wait till we'd got a match of sorts on?'

'I don't know. The man's probably a lunatic. Anyhow, I shall have to go and meet him, and I shall just do it comfortably if I go and change now.'

'Oh! Right you are! Sammy, do you want a knock?'

Samuel Wilberforce Gosling, known to his friends and admirers as Sammy, replied that he did not. All he wanted now, he said, was a drink, or possibly two drinks, and a jolly good rest in the shade somewhere. Gosling was one of those rare individuals who cultivate bowling at the expense of batting, a habit the reverse of what usually obtains in schools.

Norris admitted the justice of his claims, and sent in a Second Eleven man, Baker, a member of his own House, in Pringle's place. Pringle and Gosling adjourned to the School shop for refreshment.

Gethryn walked with them as far as the gate which opened on to the road where most of the boarding Houses stood, and then branched off in the direction of Leicester's. To change into everyday costume took him a quarter of an hour, at the end of which period he left the House, and began to walk down the road in the direction of the station.

It was an hour's easy walking between Horton, the nearest station to Beckford, and the College. Gethryn, who was rather tired after his exertions at the nets, took it very easily, and when he arrived at his destination the church clock was striking four.

'Is the three-fifty-six in yet?' he asked of the solitary porter who ministered to the needs of the traveller at Horton station.

'Just a-coming in now, zur,' said the porter, adding, in a sort of inspired frenzy: 'Orton! Orton stertion! Orton!' and ringing a bell with immense enthusiasm and vigour.

Gethryn strolled to the gate, where the station-master's son stood at the receipt of custom to collect the tickets. His uncle was to arrive by this train, and if he did so arrive, must of necessity pass this way before leaving the platform. The train panted in, pulled up, whistled, and puffed out again, leaving three people behind it. One of these was a woman of sixty (approximately), the second a small girl of ten, the third a young gentleman in a top hat

and Etons, who carried a bag, and looked as if he had seen the hollowness of things, for his face wore a bored, supercilious look. His uncle had evidently not arrived, unless he had come disguised as an old woman, an act of which Gethryn refused to believe him capable.

He enquired as to the next train that was expected to arrive from London. The station-master's son was not sure, but would ask the porter, whose name it appeared was Johnny. Johnny gave the correct answer without an effort. 'Seven-thirty it was, sir, except on Saturdays, when it was eight o'clock.'

'Thanks,' said the Bishop. 'Dash the man, he might at least have wired.'

He registered a silent wish concerning the uncle who had brought him a long three miles out of his way with nothing to show at the end of it, and was just turning to leave the station, when the top-hatted small boy, who had been hovering round the group during the conversation, addressed winged words to him. These were the winged words—

'I say, are you looking for somebody?' The Bishop stared at him as a naturalist stares at a novel species of insect.

'Yes,' he said. 'Why?'

'Is your name Gethryn?'

This affair, thought the Bishop, was beginning to assume an uncanny aspect.

'How the dickens did you know that?' he said.

'Oh, then you are Gethryn? That's all right. I was told you were going to be here to meet this train. Glad to make your acquaintance. My name's Farnie. I'm your uncle, you know.'

'My what?' gurgled the Bishop.

'Your uncle. U-n, un; c-l-e—kul. Uncle. Fact, I assure you.'