

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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Is there any nation, other than England, which could have invented a game which can be played and completed in either one hour, or two hours, or an afternoon, or a day, or three days, or five days – and could, and often does, end up with no result after five days of toil?

We call it cricket.

And there is no game in history that has given rise to such varied comic writing, combining West End farce with the game's unbelievably rich harvest of zany vocabulary and hilarious antics. This is what the following tale celebrates – paying humble tribute to those comedy greats – Neville Cardus, John Arlott, Brian Johnston and a host of others....but above all, for me, Herbert Farjeon, whose little gem '*Herbert Farjeon's Cricket Bag*' was the first book given to me after the war, in 1947, and which I have treasured ever since.

French Cricket

Felicity de la Valastiere, Fifi, was the best thing that had happened to St Stephen's School Languages Department for many a long year.

It was not just that she was...well...simply beautiful in the classical manner... but she was vivacious, clever, witty, full of life. St Steve's had hosted French Assistants for years, but not one like this. Never had so many boys opted for French at A Level. Never had Sixth Formers had to pass tests before being allowed to attend Mademoiselle's conversation classes.

Each pupil had his own way of summarising her special point of interest.... the flashing of the smile, the shortness of the skirt, the amplitude of the bosom, the length of the leg, the Frenchness of her accent.... All had their admirers.

And the same went for the girls at the sister school, St. Agnes's down the road, where 'Fifi' also took her French conversation lessons. Instead of being jealous the girls revelled in the modernity of style.... the pixie hair-style, the delicate mascara, the sultry eye shadow, and the fetching use of lipstick.... that Mademoiselle brought into their daily round.

Fifi de la Valastiere loved life and life loved her. And having admired the British ruggedness, the down-to-earth sturdiness and the laughter of the English Assistants who had spent a year at her Parisian lycée, she was now determined to find out as much as she could about England and zee Eenglish.... And what could be more quintessentially English?...why cricket, of course. All the English assistants had told her so.

And that is why the St. Stephen's chaplain, the Reverend Aloysius Possington-Smythe found her sitting alone on a bench watching the first school cricket match of the season, the annual

Old Boys match. And that is why she was alone on the bench yet surrounded by a posse of Upper and Lower School boys, lolling about on the grass at her feet or by the side of the bench..... all watching carefully....but discretely....the long Fifi legs as they crossed (frequently) right over left...and left over right....waiting for the moment that this left and right interchange swung into action...in the hope of a glimpse of thigh and perhaps a speck of white frill, underneath the bright yellow pelmet that passed as a skirt.

They were disappointed. Like the view of France from Dover cliffs, the hoped-for sighting was so often thwarted by the swiftness of the changing clarity of scenery. Fifi was a skilled crosser of legs.

The Reverend Aloysius advanced and doffed his straw boater. 'Is this anyone's seat, mam'selle?'

'Mais non,' smiled Felicity and edged further to her left. Aloysius settled down at the right-hand edge. It was his favourite bench. He could always be caught sight of there at every first-eleven home match. Apart from his God, his Church and his vast array of books and CDs, Aloysius loved cricket. He could not play the game to save his life. Poor eyesight and unco-ordinated limbs prevented that, but, goodness me, his knowledge of the game.... it's Laws (always a capital L), it's tactics, it's history. it's personalities...all were at the chaplain's finger-tips. And the traditional start to the season was this School versus Old Boys match, which brought back to St. Stephen's all the old stars of bat and ball that had thrilled him over the years.

But, he had to admit, in all the years of service to the school and devoted attendance at cricket matches he had never sat next to anyone half as attractive as Mademoiselle de la Valastiere

Felicity, ever gregarious, turned to the chaplain.

'Meester Reverend. You are a great cricketer, no?'

Aloysius chuckled. 'No, ma'am, I love the game, but I do not play it very well....Oh, and by the way, call me Chaplain....it is so much more...er...friendly....personal, if you see what I mean.'

Felicity was puzzled. 'Chaplain....zat is your name?'

'No, no. I am the school chaplain. My name is Aloysius Possington-Smythe, but people just refer to me as 'Chaplain'.'

'If Aloysius is your name zen I call you Aloysius. No...I shall be even more friendly...more personal... I will call you Al...You must call me Fifi. That is what my friends and family call me, so you must, too.'

'I say,' murmured Aloysius, or Al as he now was, running a finger round his dog-collar which was now feeling decidedly sweaty. 'I say.... I am not sure such....er...intimacy is proper at St. Stephen's, you know.'

'No-one will know.....Al. It is between you and me. It is our little secret.'

'I say... ' was all Aloysius could say.

Now, explain to me thees game, Al...thees cricket.'

This was safer ground, thought Aloysius. But he was not going to fall into the trap of trying to explain the game to a foreigner. He knew the pitfalls. It might be 50 years ago but the famous tea-towel summary still stuck with him.

'You have two sides, one out in the field and one in.

Each man that's in the side that's in goes out, and when he's out he comes in and the next man goes in until he's out.

When they are all out, the side that's out comes in and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get those coming in, out. Sometimes you get men still in and not out.

When a man goes out to go in, the men who are out try to get him out, and when he is out he goes in and the next man in goes out and goes in.

There are two men called umpires who stay out all the time and they decide when the men who are in are out.

When both sides have been in and all the men have been out, and both sides have been out twice after all the men have been in, including those who are not out, that is the end of the game.'

Oh no, Aloysius was certainly not going down that road!

Al played safe, a straight bat. 'It is far too complex to explain in a short time....mamselle....er.... Fifi...I will tell you what is happening and answer any questions you might have.'

'Zat is very good....So, Aloyisius, why are all zee players wearing white clothes, hein? Eez eet a symbol zey are all zee virgins – like zee vestal virgins? And zose two men in white coats and straw hats, zey are symbolising zee archangels, non?

Aloysius, ever kind and indulgent, smiled and raised a hand in some kind of blessing. 'In a way, they are, Mamselle. They make all the decisions about who is in and who is out.'

'Where is in? and where is out?' said Fifi looking around.

Alarm bells rang. Aloysius could see the labyrinth of tea-towel explanation looming.

'You are making things far too complicated for me, mam... Fifi. Look here, just listen to me....and I will describe what is happening and tell you why.' That was meant as a generous offer. It was a mistake.

At that moment one of the Old Boys fielders sauntered over and stood in front of them, obscuring Fifi' view. Fifi pounced.

'Excusez-moi, monsieur.... Please sit down. I cannot zee what is going on.

'Don't speak to the fielder, mamselle. He's playing! He cannot sit down.

'Oh, la,la. Quel dommage! Ee has got a sore derriere, yes? Ze poor boy.'

'No, he does not have a sore bottom...or a sore anything else. He is here to see if he can make a catch out in the long grass.'

Fifi stared incredulously at young and handsome Rufus Atherton-Cooke, the Old Boys wily spin-bowler and last year's school captain.

'Mon dieu.....'Ee want to make a catch....in zee long grass?' She stared longingly at Atherton-Cooke ' Ee is very beau...in an English sort of way...ee would be a good catch, I think.... ee can catch me, non?' She did not wait for Aloysius's answer. She rose to her feet and hailed the unsuspecting Rufus.

'Ere M'sieur..... I too know about zee catching. And I know all about zee long grass.....' Fifi took a step forward.

Reverend Aloysius put out his hand to stop her.

'No... no...mamselle Fifi, do not do that. You will interfere with his movement.'

Fifi halted and stared pityingly at young Rufus, and then sat down again.

' I should think 'ees sore derrière will also interfere with ees movement. But if I cannot get to 'im, then, 'ow is he going to catch anyone in zee long grass?'

Aloysius rubbed his chin and considered how to describe a catch.

'Look, he makes his catch, Mamselle, by put ting his hands up....

'Sacre bleu!' cried Fifi, pressing her skit tightly to her legs.'Ee does what, M'sieur!'

The good reverend now in some confusion and wishing to save he situation raised his arms.

'He puts his hands up, mamselle, like this....and cups the ball in his hands.'

' Ee likes ze balls? So, 'ee is homosexual, then?'

Aloysius was at a loss. He looked around wildly for help. None was available.

' Beg pardon, Mamselle? What on earth do you mean?' Aloysius felt a worrying perplexity with the different national and cultural perceptions growing in him.... ' I do not know if he is gay or not.... He might be... or he might not....'

'Ah, I see, 'Ee is androgynous?'

'What are you talking about? His sexuality does not come into it! It does not matter!'

Fifi raised her voice a decibel. 'M'sieur! If I am going into zee long grass wiz 'im it matters to me!'

Aloysius grabbed Fifi's arm, and pointed towards the pitch. 'Look, let's start again. The ball I am talking about is the one the bowler has got in his hand and is bowling at the boy's stumps.... He is aiming to hit the stump.... you can see him bowling...throwing it, no....I mean non?'

'Zere is no need to grab my arm, m'sieur Al.' Fifi felt aggrieved at the suddenness of the Chaplain's physical contact. ' I can understand perfectly well....'

She held Aloysius's arm now and pointed to the fielders. ' Ze man 'ere....ee is trying to hit zat boy zere in the stump, eh?'

'Yes, good. That's roughly right.'

She shook her head. 'Monsieur Aloysius. 'Iting in zee stump will be very painful, n'est-ce pas? It could ruin eez chances of a catch....now or always. Does ee not know zat? 'Ave you not told eem?'

No, no, Fifi, a stump is not a euphemism for a.....er... delicate part of the anatomy. Those are the stumps...you see.... the three bits of wood!' Aloysius was about to grab her arm again but thought better of it.

'I see eet. I always see eet. But what is zat boy doing wiz ze piece of wood in ee's 'and?

'Ah,' said the Chaplain brightening up. 'That's easy. He is trying to hit the bowler's balls as hard as he can...'

'Ee is WHAT, Monsiuer? Mon dieu! Ee, too, is trying to bash balls? Quelle horreur! I did not realise what a violent game zis cricket is... It is no wonder we French do not play ze cricket.'

Fifi sank back into the bench, eyes agog, muttering to herself...*quelle folie....ce pays, c'est vraiment remarkable.*

The bowling changed ends and the fielders began to take up fresh positions.

'And why, Monsieur Chaplain, are all zese men walking around zee field?

Aloysius thought hard, trying to work out whether he was about to say something else that he would regret.

'Zey.... I mean ,,They are the fielders whose job it is to field the ball, and to prevent the batsmen from running from one end of the pitch to the other.' That seemed innocuous enough.

Fifi contemplated this new knowledge.

'Hm. Since zee cricket ees such a violent game would it not be easier to tackle ze boys in ze middle like ze rugby football?... and hit them with their balls before they could get up, hein?

Aloysius cleared his throat. 'Oh no, that would be quite unacceptable... illegal, in fact!'

'And zee hitting of zee balls with a big piece of wood ees not illegal, monsieur? Zat is very strange.....What is zee difference, Monsieur? Eh?'

The Chaplain' mouth gaped. It was poppycock, but he could not find words to say why.

'Because....because....well.....because the game has to be played according to the Laws...and it is the Law that bowlers can throw a ball at the batsman only from behind 'the crease'...' *O Lord, he thought to himself, I must not get into explaining the crease!* 'You see, Fifi, it has to be bowled according to the Law of Cricket, or otherwise the bowler has a 'no ball' against his name.'

'Ze bowler might lose ees balls?.... Ees zat what you are telling me, Al....in your English way?... *quelle délicatesse.*'

The six-ball over was completed and the fieldsmen moved again.

'Look, zay move again. 'Ow do they know where to go.

Once again Aloysius felt on safer ground. Another mistake.

'Let me explain.' He said enthusiastically. The captain of the fielding side, which is the Old Boys, puts the fielders where the bowler expects the batsmen to hit the ball. You see here... this bowler has got a fine leg...'

A fine leg....O,la,la. I cannot see eet because of ees trousers. Perhaps, monsieur you could persuade 'im to take them off....It should not be a problem for a man trying to make a catch....Ee could show off ees fine legs.'

But the Reverend was not listening. He was taking an intense interest in the field placing, as students of the game do.....

'By Jove! He's got a square leg, too,' he muttered half to himself. He was jolted out of his study by a loud exclamation next to him.

'Sacre bleu! Ee 'as a square leg as well as a fine leg? Le pauvre garçon. Fifi stared at Mr Meldrum, the Old Boy's oldest player, now about to bowl from the pavilion end. His silver hair showered over his shoulders.

'So, you 'ave able bodied players and ze disabled and ze very old men and ze very young boys playing each other. That is very noble, Al....noblesse sauvage. Eet is typically British, I think.'

Aloysius stared at her. had no idea what she was talking about. So, he chose to ignore her murmured admiration. That was a mistake, too.

'And now he has a long leg,' said Al pointing vaguely in that direction. 'He has put Rupert Grafton-Fitzpatrick there. That is very strange, but it could be coup, you know. A fine leg, a square leg and a long leg. Not normal at all, but could be brilliant.'

You are telling me, m'sieur, zis long leg and zee square leg ees very abnormal. What a man! I admire him, m'sieur.'

And so you should. Rupert has just bowled a maiden over.

'Ee 'as? And I did not see 'im' !

'He bowled six maidens last match.'

'Six? Six maidens!' She looked admiringly across to where Rupert Grafton- Fitzpatrick was guarding the long leg area. 'Quel homme! Qu'un taureau! C'est un homme que j'aimerais connaître – bientôt. I zink 'ee and I will get on, do you not think so, Al?'

'Do not get too enthusiastic, young lady.' Aloysius chuckled. 'He also dropped a dolly!'

'He did? Ze poor man. Was she not good for him?'

'It was terrible. Fell right into his arms and then it went right through to the ground.'

Fifi eyed Rupert wistfully. 'I would not let 'im drop me from his arms, your reverence.'

The umpire called 'over' and took off the bails from the stumps. The Old Boys moved towards the pavilion for the tea break.

'Zee archangel, ee has said the match is over, Al?'

'Not quite. This is the tea interval. Half-time, you might say....Let's go and join them.'

The chaplain marched off towards the pavilion with Fifi in tow.

'I will introduce you to Rupert – the one you rather liked.... who is good with maidens. I know he will be scoring for the Old Boys team during their innings. Perhaps he will let you score with him.'

Fifi squealed with delight, stood on tiptoe and gave Aloysius a big smacking kiss in the cheek.

'Zank you, my favourite reverend chaplain Aloysius Al. I know how to score...wiz zee Rupert in zee long grass!...I go *immediatement*...'

The Reverend Possington-Smythe stood transfixed in the middle of the field.... With his hand stroking his cheek, muttering contentedly to himself.

'I say.....I say.....'
