

## Once we won Matches

### Charlie Cochrane

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“It shouldn’t do that.”

“That’s the third time you’ve said the same thing. And it doesn’t matter how many times you repeat the phrase, it won’t change the facts. It can and it does.” Jonty Stewart smiled kindly; he loved it when Orlando Coppersmith found things that contradicted his powers of intellect and reason.

“But it defies all logic. Whatever variables you apply, it makes no sense.” Orlando shook his head, loosening the curls which always seemed keen to fight free from the restraint of comb or pomade.

“Well, you can’t deny the evidence of your eyes.” Jonty wrinkled his nose in delight.

“And *you* do it, don’t you—with your flippers or whatever you call them.”

“That’s a matter of the finger action, although some people do it from the wrist. Similar thing here. The hand position makes all the difference.” Jonty made a series of movements with his fingers, flexing and twisting.

“But I’ve taken the hand position into account and it can’t just be that. Or the positioning of the seam. It’s since it got humid, that’s when it’s been spraying about everywhere. I’ve never seen a ball swing like that.” Orlando looked out over the hallowed Kennington Oval turf and wondered why the place seemed to form a stronghold against the laws of mechanics.

“You should see what it’s like at down at Hove when the tide turns to the flow.” Jonty suddenly stopped short and then turned around as a familiar voice cut through the conversation. “Anderson!”

“Stewart!” A flaxen-haired young man—thin, nervous looking, of patrician demeanour—beamed at seeing his old acquaintance. He slapped Jonty’s shoulder and offered his hand to Orlando.

“Allow me to introduce my friend. Dr. Coppersmith, this is Reggie Anderson, an old friend of the family. Anderson, this is Dr. Coppersmith.” Jonty was amused to see his friend’s obvious displeasure at being interrupted.

“Is that the Dr. Coppersmith who published the paper on left arm spin?” Anderson’s left eyebrow shot up, producing what appeared to be an exaggerated, theatrical expression of curiosity. “Fascinating stuff, I thought.”

“Thank you,” Orlando bowed rather stiffly. He wasn’t entirely sure he wasn’t being made game of. That often happened to him at the hands of fair-haired sprigs of the nobility. One in particular.

“And I happen to agree with your conclusions.” Anderson waved his hands enthusiastically. “For all the formulae you can apply to the flight of the ball or condition of the pitch, the heart of the matter is that we simply don’t know why the wretched thing turns like that. Would make life a lot easier for us batsmen if we did.”

Orlando, happy that this man must have taken his article seriously, even though it was only published in the sports pages of the Daily Telegraph, nodded his head vigorously. “I’d like to do a similar analysis of swing bowling, but that seems even more arcane. The deliveries here were behaving normally until the day got hotter and clouded over. Since then they’ve been completely unpredictable.”

Anderson grinned. “I’ve been on the receiving end of it many a time. Although it’s working in our favour so far.” They all nodded, enthralled at the exploits of Barnes and Woolley who’d smote the Australians hip and thigh and who would eventually have them out with the score on Nelson.

“And would you gentlemen be involved in anything, shall we say *professionally*, at the moment?”

Orlando frowned. “I have a paper on four dimensional trigonometry that I’m working on in tandem with my one about swing bowling. And Dr. Stewart is as usual pursuing the dark lady...”

“I’m sorry, I’ve expressed myself poorly. I meant your detecting.” Anderson tipped his head towards Jonty, “We were discussing it last summer. I don’t mean to be nosy, I appreciate that I must resemble one of those poor maiden ladies for whom all pleasure must be obtained vicariously, but I merely wanted to know whether you had any time to spare. And if you’ll be in the vicinity for a while.”

Jonty grasped the situation straight away. “You have a commission for us?”

“Ah, not me. The club secretary, Captain Palmer. I saw you here and suggested he might let me have a word with you.”

“Is this to do with Surrey Cricket Club business or is it a…” Orlando lowered his voice, “personal matter?”

“It’s political business, but I’d better let him explain.” Anderson extended his hand towards the pavilion, encouraging his friends to accompany him. “He’s waiting in the committee room.”

Captain Palmer looked anxious. Jonty knew him vaguely—through his father, inevitably—and had always regarded him as a bluff, efficient ex-officer type. Not one to be easily perturbed, although now he looked like a maiden aunt who’d lost her handbag.

“Gentlemen, this is a very delicate matter, but Anderson says you’re to be trusted. There are some papers that have gone missing from the England dressing room. Mr. Fry had them in his keeping and when he checked at lunchtime they were no longer there.” Palmer tapped the table, distractedly. “This is disastrous, not just for the club, but for the country.”

“As important as that?” Jonty took a deep breath. “Can we see the scene of the crime, if I can use the term?”

Palmer ushered them out of the committee room, leading the little party up the stairs to the England dressing room.

“Can you tell us the exact nature of these papers?” Orlando stopped them halfway up, where he could ensure they weren’t overheard. He had the feeling this all sounded too much like an

invention of Conan Doyle's actually to be happening. Perhaps he'd fallen asleep and was dreaming it all.

"Political. Documents of vital importance to national security that someone needed to have conveyed by carriers beyond suspicion."

"Mr. Fry being one of those carriers?" Orlando winced at the suggestion.

"Don't be so ready to snigger, Dr. Coppersmith." Jonty briefly laid a hand on his friend's arm. "He's got hidden depths, that young man. And discretion can be found in the most unexpected places."

"I stand corrected." If there was anything he and his lover had been forced to learn these last half dozen years, it was the value of prudence.

Palmer carried on, with the conversation and with climbing the stairs. "Rumour has it interested parties have identified that Mr. Fry temporarily possesses these papers. He'd been warned they'd have to be guarded with the utmost care."

Jonty almost snorted, whipping out his hankie just in time and making the sound into a sneeze. If he didn't know better he'd think they were being gulled; Anderson was quite capable of pulling such a stunt. But the troubled look on Palmer's face couldn't be faked unless the man was a consummate actor. This was evidently real and Jonty felt like capering in delight at the fact. By the light in both his friends' eyes, they felt the same.

As they reached the door of the dressing room, Anderson gestured theatrically. "Missin' papers, do you say?"

Jonty noted his friend's sudden dropping of the g as a sign he was playing the fool, lulling people into a false sense of security. It duped no-one, except the steward of the dressing room, Crenshaw, who seemed to be its intended recipient.

"Yes, sir." The man who had been charged with keeping an eye on things while the team were out in the field looked like he'd lost the crown jewels. "But as far as I could tell there'd been no-one in or out of the dressing room that whole morning session."

“And Mr. Fry was sure that he had left them here, safe and sound, when he went out to field?” Jonty wanted to make sure that this wasn’t a case of *terribly sorry, left them at home, actually*.

“Indeed, sir. He was most put out to find them gone. Too much of a gentleman to raise merry hell, if you’ll pardon my French, although you could tell he was wild. I may add he never accused me of anything.” Crenshaw eyed Palmer nervously.

Orlando asked if he could inspect the room, which was strewn with kit and equipment. The twelfth man having been firmly but politely sent out to the balcony, it was easy for Anderson and Orlando to poke and pry to their heart’s content, although what they expected to find was beyond Jonty’s comprehension. He turned to Captain Palmer. “If these things disappeared during the morning session, you’d have known at lunch. Why did you wait until now to ask us to help? And have the police been informed?”

“As to the latter, Mr. Fry would rather we held fire on it for the moment. Keep everything hush hush. And as for the timing,” Palmer shrugged. “Well, let’s say we just wanted to make sure that he hadn’t mislaid them.”

“Does he often mislay things?”

Palmer grinned. “I couldn’t possibly comment. Gentlemen,” he attracted the bloodhounds’ attention, “I must tell you that we’ve already gone over the room with a fine-toothed comb. The papers are definitely not here.”

“It wasn’t those we were necessarily looking for.” Orlando raised an eyebrow at Anderson, who nodded his agreement.

“We’re just lookin’ to see if anyone might have sneaked in here, despite the eagle eye of our Cerberus. They may have left their callin’ card, don’t you know?”

Jonty didn’t feel convinced, not by the theory nor by Anderson’s put on accent. There was one door to the room and Crenshaw promised faithfully he’d been there all the length of the morning session and no-one would have dared to climb in over the balcony, in full view of the crowd. He lowered his voice. “Has the twelfth man been searched?”

“He has and he’s clean, him and his bags.” Palmer nodded. “He agreed straight away after we found the papers had gone. In fact, he’s the only one of the players who knows about them. Mr. Fry didn’t want the whole team rattled, as he termed it.”

“So you can’t be sure one of them *doesn’t* know something about it? We should ask them at tea, you know.” Anderson was evidently *enjoyin’ joinin’ in with the detectin’*.

“Mr. Crenshaw,” Orlando adopted his sleuthing expression, stern and studious and a bit frightening to the unwary, but absolutely fatal to the fair sex who immediately fell over themselves to help him. Shame that Crenshaw was probably immune to it. “Did anyone try to gain access to this room during the morning session?”

“They did, sir, but I didn’t oblige any of them. Mr. Fry had asked, particular like, that no strangers was to enter. Were to enter.” He corrected himself under Palmer’s glowering stare.

“And did you recognise these people? Were they club members?” Orlando fixed the doorman with a gimlet gaze.

“A few, sir. They wanted to have a chat with Mr. Ramsay,” Crenshaw pointed to the twelfth man, “but he had to come out and speak to them in the corridor. Then there was another man I didn’t know at all and a couple of ladies who were anxious to be allowed the chance of touching Mr. Woolley’s batting gloves.” Crenshaw rolled his eyes at such tomfoolery. “I made a point of not obliging them.”

“Perhaps we should talk to Mr. Ramsay.” Orlando had a light in his eye that seemed determined to pierce into the twelfth man’s conscience. Ramsay was called back into the room and peppered with a series of questions, which quickly established he’d known about the papers all along. He’d been told about them—and the need for enhanced security—by Fry himself. “And what did the club members want to talk to you about?”

“The state of the wicket. And whether I’d like to come and play in a testimonial game. All the usual sort of stuff.”

“Could they have sneaked past you?” Anderson was eyeing up the door, the room, the corridor, everywhere a person could have hidden. “The conversation acting as a distraction?”

“Of course not. I’m not that daft, nor is Crenshaw.” Ramsay, wary of this triumvirate of strange gentlemen, seemed flustered and angry.

“Did you see the papers themselves?” Orlando wore his *I’m onto something* look. There was a keenness about it that Jonty only ever saw when Orlando was on the trail of a criminal or hoping to persuade his lover into half an hour’s passion.

“I saw them briefly.” Ramsay turned to Palmer. “I am trying to help, you know. I didn’t expect Holmes and Watson here to be quite so intrusive.”

Orlando looked as if he was about to launch into a tirade about how they weren’t Holmes and Watson, thank you very much, but a swift kick in the shins from Jonty forestalled him. “I’m sorry we seem to have been a touch too enthusiastic.” Jonty adopted his best diplomatic manner. “It’s just that we’re pressed for time. The umpires will call tea soon. These papers—can you tell us what were they like? A foolscap folio or something similar?”

“Oh no.” Ramsay seemed to have calmed down. “They were two small books, rather like the tiny diaries that ladies carry. The pair of them were wrapped in waterproofing. Oiled silk or some such.” He indicated with his fingers an approximate size and shape for the packages.

“Small enough for a man to palm easily, as a prestidigitator might do?” Orlando mimicked the movement of the packages being pocketed.

Ramsay bridled again. “Are you suggesting...”

“We’re not suggesting anything,” Jonty interceded tactfully. “I wonder if Dr. Coppersmith is simply thinking that these packages were so small they may have been accidentally picked up and mislaid. Perhaps by one of the team.”

Orlando nodded agreement, although that hadn’t been his intention.

“Perhaps. It wouldn’t surprise me if Mr. Fry hadn’t done something similar himself. He can be a bit careless at times. I think that’s part of the reason he brought those papers here, as well as feeling it should be easier to guard this room than a safe in his home.” He shrugged at the misplaced confidence.

“Mr. Ramsay,” Jonty had a sweet, mollifying tone to his voice, “was anyone else aware about these papers, do you know?”

“Fry only took me into his confidence, because he knew I’d be here most of the time. Although I think that Mr. Smith the wicketkeeper might have overheard us. I did try to stop our captain spreading the information too far. Safety in discretion and all that.”

“Indeed.” Jonty had the germ of a theory forming in his mind.

Ramsay was dismissed back to the balcony and the others began to eye each other, waiting to see who’d be the first to propound his hypothesis. Palmer soon lost his patience. “This seems a desperate thing, gentlemen. Can you offer me any hope?”

“I’d propose we seek out the members who tried talking to Mr. Ramsay.” Orlando opened the metaphorical batting.

Anderson nodded. “And I’d keep an eye on that young man himself. Just out of interest, is there anyone sitting within easy reach of that balcony?”

Palmer looked distressed at the implications of dirty work, not only among his club members but by the sanctified gentlemen and players of the England team. He turned to Jonty, almost pleading. “I see where this is going Dr. Stewart, and I don’t like it. Are you in agreement with your colleagues?”

Jonty smiled and screwed up his nose, as he often did when he had it in mind to put one over on Orlando. “Mr. Palmer, I’d like you to stand witness to my promise. I think I can put my hands straight on those papers when the tea interval comes. And if I fail, I’ll give fifty pounds to any charity my friends care to nominate.”

“How did you know? How?” Jonty and Orlando were sitting in a rather superior restaurant in Park Lane, feeling replete with fillet

steak and an English victory. Orlando had his lover firmly in his sights.

“I just used logic, Dr. Coppersmith. You should try it sometime.” Jonty stifled a cry of pain as his Orlando whacked him under the table. “I tried to imagine the scene in that dressing room and then I put myself into it. A touch of the *what would I have done?* Then it all seemed obvious.”

“To you perhaps, but then you always had a devious mind.” Orlando thought about the nice, comfortable beds in the nice comfortable suite at their hotel. Maybe that same devious mind could be employed there, after dessert and port. “So if you’d been the one overhearing the conversation between Fry and Ramsay you’d have done the same?”

Jonty nodded. “Everyone expressed the view that Mr. Fry is a bit absent minded. I bet he put those little books in his cricket bag because he’d be more careful with that than with an attaché case. If he gave any hint of how important they were and how someone might just be after them, any patriotic Englishman would have wanted to ensure their safety.”

“And stuck them inside his wicket keeping gloves.” Orlando rolled his eyes, like a villain in pantomime.

“That’s where I’d have put them. Ideal size and in a nice waterproof packet. They’d make wonderful padding when Barnes is whizzing them down.” Jonty grinned puckishly.

“But why didn’t Smith tell his captain? Why let him go through such anguish?”

“I think that Smith just didn’t realise Fry had found out that they were missing.” Jonty tapped the table. “Think of the timings. Come the luncheon interval, Fry hadn’t let on anything was wrong and so our noble wicket keeper kept up his fine job. Just as well considering those two minxes were in the offing. We might have Tiger Smith to thank for saving something vital for the nation. What if Crenshaw had let those ‘women’ in?”

The two ladies who’d expressed such hero worship for Frank Woolley had been flushed out, quite by coincidence, by a sharp-eyed steward who’d spotted their Adam’s apples. He’d told the

club secretary, thinking only of the place's reputation, and Palmer had brought them to police notice. He suspected they'd been on the trail of the little booklets and were at present at Scotland Yard trying to explain their actions.

"I hope Palmer manages to keep it all covered up. Imagine the scandal." Orlando shuddered.

"About the papers? That story will never see the light of day."

"No, about the female impersonators. What would the women of Surrey Cricket Club who'd used the same 'facilities' as those two do if they found out? There's not enough sal volatile in the world to cope."

"Sal volatile my elbow. They'd have savaged them with their parasols." Jonty scooped up the last piece of steak and smiled contentedly.

"Am I to pay a sum to a charity of *your* choice now?" Orlando reached into his pocket.

"No, that wasn't the agreement. Anyway, I've been paid beyond all measure by both an England win and the look on your face when Tiger Smith took his gloves off. It would be greedy to desire any more."

The look crossing on Orlando's face, luckily not spotted by the waiter who'd come for their plates, spoke of all the things that he might desire. There was a score to be evened now, not here and now but later, in their suite. Some marvels of finger and wrist action to be performed. And he didn't need the help of humidity, moisture or the turn of the tide to do it.

*This match was real - it took place at Kennington Oval on 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd August 1912 (timeless match). Please note that England won by 244 runs.*