

## The Spirit of the Game

Giles, the fellow's name was. And he'd have been all right if he hadn't seen the picture looking at him.

It was Midsummer's Eve, you see, and he'd been sitting out with his friends, quaffing a gentle pint or two. The blackbird sang his evensong, the lengthening shadows suffused the cricket pitch with a golden glow and all that; then they went back indoors, blinking a little in the light and smoke of the bar, for they'd begun to get a bit chilly.

'My round, I suppose,' said Giles.

'No, thanks,' said the other man. 'Early start tomorrow. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight,' said the girl.

'You're still breaking my heart, Amelia,' said Giles, winking. 'Don't know what you're missing. Well, if Lol doesn't give you what you want tonight, you know where my room is.'

I could've told him that wasn't the way to win a girl's heart. She gave him a look and said something dismissive, before going off to bed.

'Well then,' said Giles to the landlord, 'a pint of Old Widow and a scotch please.'

While the landlord pulled his pint, Giles looked around the bar. It was small and cosy in an olde-worlde way, with framed photos covering the walls, and an old oak trophy cabinet in one corner.

'Thanks. I'm something of a cricketing man myself,' he said, nodding at the pictures. I'd heard him saying earlier that he'd fallen out with his captain, one Neil Crudgley, and was at a loose end for a season or so. I could see why.

'Ah! Then you'll have heard of Swinley, Sir,' answered Brian.

'Er, no...'

'Oh, we were quite a famous club side once upon a time. Won the County Cup in '85.'

'Really,' said Giles, turning away; but the landlord was in full flow.

'Ah yes, Sir. My brother Jack was in that side. Mind you, they weren't a patch on the team that won the cup five times, back before the war. Names are on this plaque here...'

Giles was trying to ignore him by feigning an interest in the photographs, of cricketers in various postures and of various vintages. He noticed a particularly striking picture, of a bowler in mid-action. His wide turn-ups swirled around his ankles, his sleeves were rolled up, and his muscular bowling arm was extended vigorously forward. The chin jutted out beneath a roman nose, and the brilliantined hair flicked up off his head. But then, as Giles watched, the picture seemed to become three-dimensional. It was if he were looking at a *real* bowler, frozen in time; or as if his outline had become embossed upon the newspaper. Then, Giles' jaw dropped; because the bowler actually turned his head and stared at him with beady black eyes.

He took a step backwards, spilling some of his beer. 'What – what's this?' he exclaimed, interrupting the landlord.

'Oh, now,' he answered, 'that's the famous Aubrey Heyworth. He was a character, and no mistake. You'll hear many a tale about old Aubrey.'

Shaken, Giles looked first at the picture, which had now returned to itself; then at his beer, and then back again.

'Ugly looking fellow,' he said at last. Obviously not the discerning type.

'Not everyone thought so,' said the landlord. 'By all accounts he was a regular ladies' man, and most o' the men in Swinley hated him. But of course, bein' Lord Heyworth's son he got away with a fair bit. He drank, and he gambled, too – but what a cricketer! A fair bat

– used to open and make quick runs – but he was the best bowler Swinley’s ever had. No-one ever took a six off him, and he nearly broke the record for wickets taken by a Swinley man. That picture was taken the last summer before the war.’

‘A long time ago,’ said Giles, pensively.

‘True enough. Of course, nowadays he’s the village ghost.’

‘What?’

The landlord leaned forward and lowered his voice. ‘The story goes, that before he was called up, Aubrey swore he’d come back and beat the record. He swore it in blood, too – cut his arm and dripped some blood on the pitch over there. One more wicket, he said, that’s all I’ll need. But he didn’t come back, ever – got sunk at Dunkirk, they said. So now, folk say he haunts the pavilion, waiting for someone to challenge him.’

Giles tried to laugh. ‘Oh, come on, that’s ridiculous.’

The landlord raised his eyebrows. ‘It’s true I’ve never seen him myself, sir, but one does hear stories...’

‘What kind of stories?’

The lights went out in the adjacent bar, and the room became dimmer. ‘Strange noises,’ whispered the landlord. ‘Folk out at night say they’ve heard knocking noises coming from the pavilion, and things rattling. Other people reckon they’ve heard wild laughter. And just last year Dan Worsley said he’d seen a figure, all in white, out on the pitch, with a kind of glow around him.’

Giles slugged down his whisky in one, and thumped his glass down. ‘This is bloody stupid,’ he said loudly, not caring who heard. ‘We’re in the twenty-first century, aren’t we? Hey? Come on, then! Come on, I’ll take him up! I’m going out there now. Where do I get the key to the pavilion?’

‘Oh, no Sir, I can’t let you do that. It might be dangerous.’

‘Come *on!* I know you keep them in here.’

Now, when you frequent a place you get to know a thing or two. The girl behind the bar, for instance. Pretty little thing, but not stupid. Giles had noticed her, and had I daresay he’d been having impure thoughts about her for most of the evening. Anyhow, the upshot was that he spotted her quietly moving the cherry jar further into the corner by the till, as if to hide something. Such as keys.

‘Oh, *very* well then,’ he said resignedly. ‘Good story though, eh?’ And off he went to his room, not forgetting to give the girl a wink and a suggestive leer.

When he sneaked out of the pub an hour or two later, I saw that he’d brought his whites with him, and I must say he looked quite the part. He crossed the road and looked up at the dazzling full moon floating in the clear sky, while around the edges of the field the crouching willows cast black velvet shadows amongst pools of silver. It was an ideal setting for a midnight game of cricket, and if Giles thought he was being a fool, it never crossed his mind to turn back. He hunched his shoulders against the night air and strode on.

He got to the pavilion, and turning the key smoothly in the lock, pushed the protesting door ajar. Inside, all was dark.

‘Aubrey Heyworth?’ he whispered. Then he said, louder, ‘I’ve come to challenge you. One over, I’ll bat, you bowl. I’ll take a six off you before you can take my wicket, guaranteed.’

Nothing broke the silence. ‘Damn you!’ cried Giles, and beat on the flimsy wall.

‘Are you there or not? Well? Come on! Are you scared or something?’

From the village church came the muffled sound of a bell tolling. The wooden bones of the pavilion gave a creaking sigh. Then, suddenly, a crash and a clatter came from the next room. Shaking, Giles peered around the door. By the moonlight which filtered in through

the window, he saw that a locker had been opened and its contents spilt: bat, pads; a set of stumps.

‘Ha ha!’ he laughed. ‘What’s this? An invitation?’ He sounded hysterical. ‘All right!’ he shouted, ‘all right! Nothing to lose!’ Fastening on his pads, he picked up the bat and stumps and blundered his way to the door. ‘Moonlight cricket! Never catch Crudgley playing against a ghost – argh!’

He swore, and felt blood running down his arm. He’d scratched himself on a nail as he left the pavilion, some of the warm drops falling on the pitch. ‘That’s not playing fair,’ he muttered, ‘injure the batsman, would you, before he gets out there?’ And he laughed again. The moon looked down at him.

He set up the stumps, as neatly as he could. ‘You’ll never knock these down, mate,’ he said. Then he became aware of a whisper, a murmur running through the night. It must have seemed to him that, around the edges of the field, the patches of moonlight began to take on definite shapes among the shadows. Here he saw an old man in a deckchair, there a couple of children, and yonder a little knot of young lads...

He grasped his bat and took his stance. And then, emerging gradually from the silence, he heard them – the footfalls of a bowler taking his run-up. Closer they came; then something shiny gleamed for a moment in the moonlight, and he wafted his bat at it. Thwack. The ball rolled away toward the covers, while the sound echoed about him. It had been real enough; his hands still tingled. Could he hear someone laughing?

He stood forward again. This time I’ll do it, this time I’ll get him. Again, the sound of feet pounding up to the crease. Here it comes...

This time, willow kissed leather and the ball sailed sweetly up and up, hanging like a planet in the sky before landing with a resounding thud upon the pavilion roof.

‘Yes!’ cried Giles, ‘Yes, yes, yes! A six! I’ve done you, my friend! Where’s your bloody record now, mister smartarse Heyworth? Stuffed you good and proper, haven’t I? Y-yess!’

Finish the over, said the moon. Finish the over, said the spectators. Finish the over, I said; nobody gets the better of Aubrey Heyworth – especially you. Giles took his stance again. I collected the ball, and returned to start my run-up. Pound, pound, pound... watch him, watch him... right on the crease, pitch it short –

And now it was my turn to celebrate, as the ball took him straight between the eyes and knocked him back over his stumps. Out. Trod on wicket.

Well, I don’t know what happens now. I confess I’m a bit doubtful. Sixty-five years is a long time to take about keeping your word, but after a while you sort of get used to the waiting. Then suddenly it happens, it’s done, and you wonder what you’ll do next. I think I read somewhere that you have to see the night out, and then you simply fade away with the dawn. I quite like that idea: melting away like the mist. I hope that’s what it’ll be...

Giles? Oh, he’s still lying out there, but I don’t think he’s dead. Shame really. He’d have enjoyed haunting the pavilion.