

# **THE PRO: (A CRICKET STORY)**

P. G. WODEHOUSE



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I believe this story to be fictitious. It was told me by a man, a perfect stranger, whose eye gleamed with untruthfulness. He told it to me in the knowledge that I would be unable to take any steps towards verifying his statements, for I had already informed him that I was only resting in the village for a few hours, and intended to do another twenty miles on my bicycle before nightfall.

My own belief is that the man was a novelist, and that he told me as a true story what was really the plot of his next romance. Before using, in fact, he tried it, as the saying is, upon the dog. If this was the case, he will now be sorry that he spoke. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright, and if he attempts to produce the story now there will be trouble.

I had stopped in the course of my bicycle tour to lunch in a village, the name of which I never learnt. After lunch, I wandered out with my pipe till I came to a field where cricket was being played. A tall, thin man was bowling very slowly to a huge rustic, and the latter, in spite of spirited efforts, was failing altogether to hit the ball. The last ball of the over took his leg stump. And it was during the pause between his exit and the entrance of his successor that the untruthful man came and sat beside me.

"Cricketer?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Fine game.

I agreed. He lit his pipe.

"Know who that is?" he inquired, nodding towards the tall bowler.

I explained that I was a stranger, merely passing through his beautiful little village. It seemed to me that the statement relieved him.

"That's Fendall."

"I don't think I know," I said.

"I was forgetting. You would probably know him better as Gray. Though he got his blue as Fendall. You must remember Gray? Bowled for Middlesex one year."

I thought I recalled the name. After some searchings of the brain, I placed the man. His disappearance from first-class cricket had caused something of a sensation at the time. After one brilliant year, which landed him second in the bowling averages, he had forsaken the game.

"So that's Gray!" I said.

I had always had an idea that he was a much shorter man. But up to the present I had had no cause to doubt my companion's word. Reflection came later. Thinking it over, I don't believe the man was Gray at all. However—

"His," said my friend, "is a rather curious story. If you think it wouldn't bore—"

"Bang it out," I said agreeably.

And he proceeded to bang as follow:

\* \* \* \* \*

Desmond Fendall proposed to Alice Bond during the luncheon interval of the third day of the 'Varsity match in the little balcony at the top of Lord's pavilion. He had taken her up there ostensibly to enable her to obtain a bird's-eye view of the ground, which, he said, with perfect justice, presented a quaint and beautiful appearance when seen from above during the after-luncheon promenade. His real reason for selecting this spot was that he knew it would be empty at that time. And Miss Bond, who saw through his scheme with the keen penetration which is the property of the modern young lady, had agreed with a readiness which should have encouraged him, if he had been cool enough to observe it.

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"Jolly, isn't it?" he said, as they reached the balcony and surveyed the kaleidoscope beneath.

"Offly cunning," agreed Miss Bond. She was from New York, where the duchesses come from. Her father, Mr. Paul Bond, was a power on Wall Street. By means of a series of big deals, each perceptibly shadier than the last, he had amassed a very large fortune. He was now reaping the reward of wickedness, for his wife and daughter, stimulated by the figures in his pass-book, had shanghaied the poor man, and landed him at the Hotel Cecil before he knew what was happening to him. After which they went out and did a little shopping.

A dinner at the house of a mutual friend had made them acquainted with Fendall. And Fendall had done the rest. Skipping the intermediate pages of their love-story, we find ourselves on the little balcony of Lord's pavilion, with Alice leaning over the balustrade, wondering why the man does not go at it bravely, and Fendall breathing on her brown back hair, conscious only of feeling a most awful idiot, don't you know.

After a long silence, Fendall spoke. "I say," he said. "By Jove, I love you! I mean—What?"

"Mr. Fendall!"

"It's a fact," continued that wreck, miserably. "I know—not worthy—ordinary sort of chap like me—what I mean is, will you be my wife—Alice?"

"Why, of course I will, silly," said the lady briskly. "Let's go and fix it up with Pop."

Fendall folded her in his arms, to the great contentment of some scores of observers on the turf below, who, having noticed Desmond's blazer, were scanning the balcony with field-glasses to see which of the Oxford team it contained.

An acute newspaper-man, with his finger on the public pulse, wired an account of the incident to his journal, which came out that evening with the following headlines:

THE LADY AT LORD'S. TENDER INTERLUDE AT 'VARSITY MATCH. DID SHE ACCEPT HIM?  
AMOROUS OXONIAN POPS IN PAVILION.

No names, however, were mentioned.

"And now," said Alice, "let's go and find Pop. You haven't met him yet, have you? Well, you go and hunt through the crowd till you strike a man who looks as if he had no friend on earth but a yellow dog, and that'll be Poppa. He don't enjoy cricket, Pop don't."

"Before seeing your—er—Pop," said Desmond, "I should like to have a word with mine. It would be as well just to find out how I stand with him. I mean, your father will want to know how I propose to support you, and so on; and I haven't a penny except what my father allows me. So I think I'll call on Mr. Bond to-morrow. And, in the meantime, I don't think I should say anything to him if I were you. Let it be our secret, /darling/."

Once more the sun flashed on a hundred up-turned field-glasses. Then the bell rang for the clearing of the ground, and Desmond had to get ready to go out and bowl.

He went home that night in an uplifted state of mind. The relief of having won Alice made him bowl as he had seldom bowled before. The wicket had crumbled a little at the other end, and he made the ball leap from the pitch like a live thing. His luck was thoroughly in that day. Men took catches off his bowling which on any other day they would have dropped without shame. Nothing could go wrong. When the Cambridge hitter showed signs of knocking him off his length, deep mid-on, doubling himself backwards over the pavilion rails, caught him with two finger-tips of the left hand. And when the Light Blue captain settled down to play for a draw, the Oxford wicket-keep, wriggling round the stumps with the earnestness of a Boneless Wonder, brought off a marvellous catch a quarter of the way down the pitch. He finished up his afternoon's work by clean bowling the last two men with successive balls.

Oxford won with a hundred runs to spare, and Desmond had to bow his acknowledgements from the window of the dressing-room.

Desmond lived with his parents in Ovington Square, S.W., that genteel haven from the storm of modern hustle. His father was a man of no profession and considerable fortune. As he drove home that evening, his head fizzing with the day's doings, Desmond felt that he could count on obtaining from him an addition to his allowance which would enable him to approach Mr. Paul Bond in a practical manner. He never had denied him anything, and there seemed no reason why he should begin now.

Coming down to the drawing-room after dressing for dinner, he found Mr. Fendall there alone.

"Your mother has gone to bed, Desmond," said his father. "She was not feeling well."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry. Anything much the matter?"

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"A temporary headache. Nothing more. Come, let us go in, my boy. I have something to say to you of no small importance." Mr. Fendall always spoke in this cultured way—this was due to Blood. The Fendalls had come over by the same boat as the Conqueror.

"I was glad to read of your success this afternoon, Desmond. I see the paper says that you mixed them up well, and frequently had the opposition strikers scratching like rabbits. I am not sufficiently abreast of the English of this generation to gather the precise meaning of the remarks, but they sound complimentary."

"Oh, they only mean that I rattled them with googlies, rather," explained Desmond.

"I see," said Mr. Fendall.

"What was it you wanted to speak to me about, father?"

"It was this, my boy. You are a Fendall, and will consequently bear the blow with fortitude, so I will not endeavour to lessen it with soothing words. Briefly, we are ruined."

As his father had said, Desmond was a Fendall.

"Yes?" he said. "How's that?"

"Some months ago I was induced to put the bulk of my fortune into a speculation. I was informed that it would be a profitable speculation. And so it was."

"But I thought you said—"

"But not to me. It was profitable to the other man. I lost everything."

"Everything!"

"Well," Mr. Fendall waved a depreciatory hand, "I speak in a loose sense when I say everything. We shall have possibly a bare thousand or two thousand a year. Not more. For myself I care little. I can bear a life of poverty, I fancy. Your mother is also reconciled to the prospect of penury. It is with regard to you, my boy, that we are exercised. I fear it will be a shock to you, Desmond, but it must be faced. I shall be able to continue your allowance, but I am afraid you will have to look about for some profession as a means of earning a living. We Fendalls have rarely had to do such a thing in the past, but necessity compels. I believe there are many quite passable professions. I will leave you to select one at your leisure."

"All right," said Desmond. "By the way, father, what was the speculation you went into?"

"It was connected with a mine. A good mine, but incomplete. It had no gold in it."

"Who was the man who let you in for it?"

"He was an American. From what I gather, an excellent man of business. He is a Mr. Paul Bond, of New York."

(At this point my companion paused dramatically, and I could see him placing a mental row of stars below that last sentence. After a moment's silence, during which I relit my pipe, he resumed his narrative).

Desmond's feelings, said he, when he heard this dramatic piece of news may be imagined. The day is warm, and you might go to sleep if I turned this story into an analysis of the emotions of those concerned. With your leave, therefore, we will stick to the purely narrative aspect of the tale. Whatever emotions he had, he did not show them. He was a Fendall and the Fendalls did not show emotion. He contented himself with asking his father to pass the walnuts, which the old gentleman obligingly did. The conversation then turned with well-bred ease to the current piece at His Majesty's Theatre.

After dinner Desmond withdrew to his room, and set himself to think things over. The Fendalls were not much of a family for thinking— Blood was their long suit, not Brains—and the problem of what he was to do in the immediate and the more distant future kept him up long past his usual bedtime.

At last, after carefully weighing every other alternative, he decided to write to Alice explaining that he was now hardly in a position to offer himself as an eligible suitor, owing to the unfortunate accident of his father's speculation.

He did not mention who was responsible for the fact that the speculation had proved unfortunate. Alice was a pure-minded girl, and her parents had always carefully kept from her the secrets of her father's Wall Street life. To tell her all would have given her great pain, and this Desmond vowed he would never do. He concluded his letter by saying he would release her from her engagement if she wished it, but that he hoped she would not; and that if she were willing to wait for him, he would work for her with all the accumulated energy of generations of ancestors who had never done a hand's turn. Having read this over and corrected, with the aid of a dictionary, one or two spelling mistakes which had crept into the text, he went out and posted it at the pillar-box at the top of the

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square. It was just in time for the three o'clock collection.

Thinking that he had exercised his brain sufficiently for one night, he postponed the choice of a career till the morrow, and turned in.

"Well, my boy," said Mr. Fendall at breakfast next morning as he began to assail his rasher, "and what have you decided to do? In what particular profession are you going to amass laurels to adorn the family name?"

"The fact is, I haven't quite settled yet, father. Can you suggest anything?"

Mr. Fendall thoughtfully smalded a section of his bacon with mustard.

"If you were not handicapped by a public school and University education," he said, "I could suggest many professions. But I fear that your up-bringing has hardly fitted you for them. There is the Church, of course."

"Couldn't preach for nuts," said Desmond.

"Finance again. There is much money to be made in that branch of modern life." Here Mr. Fendall sighed reminiscently. "But there, too, you are handicapped."

"I tell you what I shall do, father," said Desmond suddenly. "I'm going to be a pro."

"A--? You said, what?"

A pro. Professional cricketer. Middlesex will take me on like a shot. At least, they've always wanted me to play for them so far. Thank goodness I was decently educated at a good public school. Think what a hole I should be in if I hadn't been taught to bowl and field property."

"But, Desmond, the family name! /Can/ a Fendall become a professional cricketer?"

"I shall adopt a thingummy."

"What is a thingummy?"

"You know what I mean. /Nom de plume/, isn't it? An /alias/, don't you know."

"Ah," said his father, relieved. "Then the outlook is not so grey."

"Gray!" said Desmond. "That'll be top-hole. Quite a good name to play under."

So D. Fendall, Esq., the Dark Blue, dropped out of first-class cricket: and in their match against Surrey, in the second week of July, the Middlesex committee gave a trial to a new professional, called Gray. After he had taken eight Surrey wickets in the second innings and won the game for his side, Gray received an offer for the lucrative post of sub-deputy-under-acting-assistant-vice-secretary of the Blankshire C.C., always on the look-out for promising young men (from other countries). But he preferred to play as a professional for Middlesex.

(Here my informant paused with the remark that talking always /did/ make him thirsty. He told me the rest of the story over a cooling tankard outside the village inn.)

We now, he said, leave Desmond Fendall for a space, and return to Miss Alice Bond.

The Bonds had left London at the end of the season, and the beginning of August found them established in a house in the country. While in town Mr. Bond, with his usual astuteness, had gathered in as an ally that eminent member of the unemployed, Lord Teddy Trimble. In exchange for a comfortable home Lord Teddy had given his services, and succeeded in taking the Bonds to a great many houses which, but for him, would have been closed to them.

"In a strange country," said Mr. Bond, "you must have a friendly native to do the wise guide act."

And, for a consideration, Lord Teddy had agreed to take up this /role/. He was now in the country with them.

"Look here," Mr. Bond was saying to him one lovely morning in the first week of August, "let's get this square. At present you have me guessing. I don't care for myself. My own society's good enough for me. But my wife and Alice have got that hankering to mix with the Upper Ten, so, I suppose, they've got to do it. See here. You corralled Lord This and Lady What's-her-name and Sir Everard Whatever- they-called-him when we were in London. And you did it without straining yourself. Now what's the matter with these country guys that you can't put the hypnotic eye on to them, too? Here have we been here a fortnight and well---- You can see for yourself. The front steps ain't worn through by the haughty and exclusive feet of titled visitors, are they now? What's it all mean? Haven't you got a pull in this ward, or what is it?"

"It's a little difficult to explain, Mr. Bond," replied Lord Teddy. "You see in London people are--shall we say, more friendly? More sensible is perhaps the word. They realise that a man has not to be born in a place to be a pleasant companion. But in the country the English county family is unique. You have nothing like it on your side, I believe. Everybody round here has stuck in the same place since the Stone Age, and they can't see that a man isn't necessarily a pariah because he has only just come among them. They like to wait a few dozen years and



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keep an eye on him. If he seems all right at the end of that time they call, one by one, very cautiously. If an angel came to settle here they would wait and watch him to see if he hadn't got his wings from Clarkson's. It is hard on Mrs. Bond and Miss Alice, but I really do not see what can be done."

"But, great Roosevelt! you don't mean to say we've got to stay in this desert all along till the cows come home! Why-----"

Through the half-open door came the sound of a piano. Miss Bond was singing in the drawing-room.

/"Give my regards to Broadway!"/

Second line inaudible.

/"Please remember me to Forty-second street, and---"/

Mr. Bond went to the door and shut it. "I can't stand it," he said. "It makes me home-sick. See here, Trimble, either we rope in these exclusive guys quick, or I go straight back to old New York. Which is it to be?"

This remark stimulated the brain of Lord Teddy to a painful activity. If Mr. Bond left England his occupation would be gone; and he had not the slightest desire to give up so snug a situation. Besides, he half thought of marrying Miss Alice Bond.

So Lord Teddy Trimble had a violent brain-wave, and proceeded to speak wisdom.

"I have it," he said. "What you must do is to get up a cricket-week."

"What's a cricket-week?"

"Why, get together a houseful of men and play matches with the people round here. It's the only way. Fortunately this is a cricket neighbourhood. They'll come and play with anyone if they think he's likely to give them a good game on a good wicket. Then if you beat them, they'll come again next year."

"I shan't be here next year," said Mr. Bond, firmly.

"Well, anyhow, it'll break the ice, and that's what you want. The great thing is to win, though. If we don't we might as well not have played. We have got to justify our existence."

It was pretty to see the way Lord Teddy identified his interests with those of his host.

"Give me a free hand," he continued, "and I'll get together a decent lot. It'll be rather short notice, so I may not be able to make the team as strong as it might be. Then I'll arrange a match for them. Old Ellershaw, of the Priory, has his week on in a few days. He'll be ready enough to put on an extra match. I'll see about getting the field into order. It used to be a cricket-ground last year, I've heard, so there should be no difficulty. Oh, and there's another thing. We shall want someone to bowl."

"Bowl? Ah, I take you. You mean to pitch."

"If you prefer it. We must have down a pro."

Mr. Bond took up the day's paper.

"Let's have the best that's to be got," said he. "Here's the list of averages. Write to the man at the top. Offer him his own price."

"Who is it?" asked his lordship.

"His name's Gray," said Mr. Bond.

(My companion paused again to insert another row of mental stars. After a pull at his mug, he proceeded.)

"You will be saying to yourself," he resumed, "that Middlesex would never have let off their best bowler to go and play in a country match. But it happened that the county, which, as you know, has a small fixture-card, was without a match in the earlier half of the week for which Gray had been invited, and he was consequently enabled to accept."

Had I not promised to refrain from describing Desmond's emotions, I should say his heart leaped when he read Lord Teddy's letter. For weeks he had been chafing at his enforced separation from Alice, and here, at last was his chance of seeing her. He wrote two letters that night, one to Lord Teddy, accepting his invitation, the other to Alice, informing her of what had happened, and begging her to treat him with a statuesque calm when witnesses were present, as it would get the M.C.C. a bad name if a professional sent down by them were observed to embrace or be embraced by the daughter of the house.

Lord Teddy, spending Mr. Bond's money lavishly on telegrams, got together the rest of his team, and arranged the match with Mr. Ellershaw.

"They're rather a scratch lot," he told Mr. Bond. "The best of the men I asked couldn't come. But with Gray to bowl, we should worry through all right."

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In due season the match-day arrived.

"See here," said Mr. Bond to Desmond in the morning. "It occurs to me that if you're such a champion at this game it won't do for you to play under your own name, or we shall have the other side hollering that it isn't fair."

"Very well, sir. I'll play as Fendall."

"Say, why do you choose that name, young man?"

"The name occurred to me," said Desmond.

"Queer. I knew a man named Fendall. One of your real first family men. Just the sort of man Mrs. Bond would have been crazy to know. But— well, I guess this don't interest you, young fellow. Call yourself Fendall, if it makes you feel good."

"You are very kind," said Desmond.

Lord Teddy, who was captaining the side, won the toss, and decided to bat. The wicket looked good, and there seemed a chance of a big total. But it soon became evident that there were all the salient points of a whited sepulchre about that wicket. On the surface it was good and true, but it had a treacherous heart. Little patches began to appear on it.

Balls which should have come along stump-high, sprang up, hit the batsman on the fingers, and found a resting-place in the slip's hands. Three men fell in this way in rapid succession. The next two, seeing that the wicket was playing tricks, attempted to force the game, and were caught in the long-field.

Desmond, watching the ball with the care bred of a couple of seasons of first-class cricket, stayed at one end, while the rest of the team walked to and from the other crease. When the last wicket fell, he had made forty-one, and was not out. The total was one hundred and twenty-three.

The visiting side put up fifteen for the loss of one wicket, and then the luncheon interval arrived.

After luncheon Alice and Desmond met by appointment in a secluded spot near the house.

Were it not for the fact that I have pledged myself to abstain from emotional analysis, I could put in some fine descriptive work at this point. When one remembers that the two had not seen each other for a weary stretch of weeks, one will readily understand that they----- However, suffice it to say that they were in the middle of a conversation of peculiar interest when Desmond from the corner of his eye observed Mr. Paul Bond approaching.

"Get behind that tree," he said, "quick. Here comes your father." Alice vanished.

From his manner, Mr. Bond appeared to have seen nothing.

"Well, young man," he said, "from what I hear this game's in an interesting state."

"Very interesting," said Desmond.

"I want a word with you in your capacity of champion pitcher on our team. See here, now. You seem a fairly discreet young man, so I guess I don't mind telling you why I want to win this game so particular. My wife has a fancy to mingle with these county families, and it seems that the quickest way to do it is to beat them at cricket. So it's up to you to pitch your level best after the intermission, and if we win I'll put another ten pounds on top of what I'm paying you. See?"

It was here that Desmond Fendall got his Bright Idea. The Fendalls were not given to getting ideas as a rule, which makes it all the more remarkable.

"Mr. Bond," he said, "I do not want your money."

"Then you ought to exhibit yourself in vaudeville," said the other. "You're a freak."

"When I say that, I mean I want something more than money."

"Yes?"

"And that is—your daughter."

Mr. Bond exhibited an almost Fendallian /sang froid/.

"You don't want much, young man, do you?" he said.

"We love one another."

"I didn't know you'd met."

"We have been engaged since the beginning of July."

"I'm getting some nice new friends in the old country, sure I am. Young man, I appreciate Gall, but it won't do. You must not scratch in that alkali patch."

"Very well," said Desmond. "Then we shan't win this match."

For the first time Mr. Bond betrayed some consternation.

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"Young man, this begins to resemble a hold-up."

He reflected.

"How would you propose to support my daughter?"

"I was thinking that you would come in there."

"Oh, you were thinking that, were you?"

"You see, Mr. Bond, but for you, I should be well off. You—well, we won't say swindled—you deprived my father of his fortune by means of a business artifice, so it's only fair that some of it should come back into the family."

"What! Was old man Fendall your father?"

"He was. Indeed, he still is."

"So you see, Poppa," said Miss Bond, coming out from behind her tree, "if it's all true (and I believe every word Desmond says), you ought to pay him back. Desmond told me the whole thing, only he didn't mention your name, and I think you were offly wicked."

"But," added Desmond, magnanimously, "it is not too late for forgiveness. Be a sportsman, Mr. Bond. Hand us back what you got from my father, with your blessing. Why," he said, warming up as he proceeded, "if you could see that poor old man, once accustomed to every luxury, steeped now in poverty, even you would be touched. You left him a bare two thousand a year, Mr. Bond."

The financier started.

"No, no, don't say that. He hasn't only got two thousand! Great Tammany Hall! I didn't figure to make the man a beggar."

"It is only too true," said Desmond. "And remember what you were saying to me only this morning, what a help my father would be to you in society, and how pleased Mrs. Bond would be to know him."

The financier wavered.

"Come along, Pop," said his daughter briskly. "It's got to be done, so do it smiling. Pass out that blessing, and let's all be happy."

For a moment the man from Wall Street hesitated. Then in a low but distinct voice he said, "I consent."

\* \* \* \* \*

That was the story. As I said before, I believe the man to have been a wilful perverter of the truth. He had an untruthful eye.