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ONE HELL OF A CAPER

(Written for "The Listener" by A. P. GASKELL)



THE football match at Carisbrook was over. Dusk was already falling, and during the last part of the game, the flight of the ball and even the movements of the players had been hard to follow in the failing light. Now, looking across the field, I could see the crowd dimly massing around the gates. Here and there a small yellow flame flickered where a smoker was lighting up, and the whole crowd moved under a thin blue haze of tobacco-smoke. After all the cheering, the place seemed very quiet, and from the street outside came the noise of cars starting up and whining off in low gear, and a tram screeching round the corner under the railway bridge. Overhead, the sky was clear with a promise of frost. A few small boys ran with shrill cries under the goalposts; the rest of the field lay empty in the grey light, and the smell of mud came through the damp air. I shivered and glanced down at my steaming jersey.

"Well, you'd better go and get changed," said Betty. "I don't want you to catch cold. You'll be playing Southern next Saturday now, won't you?"

"Yes," I said. "They were bound to win to-day. Beating Kaikorai puts us level with them."

"Will you be too tired for the dance?"

"My old knee feels a bit sore, but I'll ring you after tea. I must go and get changed now. So long."

* * *

I TROTTED in under the stand. The lights were on, the unshaded bulbs threw a cheap yellow glare over the walls of the dressing-rooms, and up into the girders and struts above. My football boots clumped along the boards of the passageway. I stamped to get some of the mud off, and pushed open the door chalked "Varsity A."

Inside the dressing-room there was a strong human smell of sweaty togs, muddy boots, and warm bodies as the men came prancing back naked from the showers and stood on the seats drying themselves. The room was crowded. Togs and boots lay over the floor, clothes hung emptily from the pegs, and men were everywhere, shoving, jostling, reaching out their arms to dry themselves, or climb into a shirt and taking up more room. Everyone was happy now that the strain was over, talking, yelling, singing, intent on their warmth and comfort and clean feel of dry clothes. It was good to relax and know that we wouldn't have that feeling of before-the-game nervousness for another week. Next week it was going to be solid. The match against Southern was the Big Game.

"Shut that door!" roared Buck, as I came in. "Hello, it's Bennie. Did she think you played a nice game? Did she see my try? What did it look like from the stand?"

"They couldn't see it from the stand," I said. "They all thought you'd torn your pants when we gathered round you. Nobody knew it was a try." I sat

down and started picking at my muddy laces. My hands were too cold to grip them properly.

"Blasted liar," said Buck amiably. "It was a damn good try." He had a very powerful voice. "Boy, oh boy, oh boy!" he chanted, "won't I knock back those handles to-night. You wait till I tell old Harry about my try. He'll shout after every round."

"What try?" said Mac, our captain. "Hell, you aren't going to claim anything for that bit of a scuffle? You were a mile offside." His head disappeared into his shirt and came grinning out the top. He put on his glasses and the grin seemed more complete.

"Like hell," shouted Buck, dancing about on the seat and sawing the towel across his back. "I took the ball off him and fell over. When they all got off me there I was over the line. A clear try."

"Offside a mile. Rabbiting. You handled it on the ground. I was walking back for the free kick," said the boys. They all liked Buck.

"Free kick be damned," he roared. "It was a good forward's try. Right out of the book. Plenty of guts and initiative."

"Yes, a typical forward's try," said Bob, our half-back. He was small and very sturdy and freckled. "Why can't you do something nice and clean-cut like the backs?"

"The backs? The pansies? I sweat my guts out getting the ball for you and then you canter along very prettily about 10 yards and then drop it."

Someone shied the ball at Buck and left a muddy mark on him. I went out to the shower. I could hear Buck's voice as I trotted along the passage. One of the Kaikorai men was still in the shower-room.

"How are you now?" he said.

"Pretty tired. It was a tough game."

"We didn't want you to have it too easy. You jokers will be playing off with Southern now."

"Yes. The big championship. Next Saturday."

"Think you'll lick them?"

"Hope so. We'll give them a good go, especially if it's a dry ground."

"Their forwards are good. Pack very low. Well, good luck!"

"Thanks." I turned on the taps. There was still plenty of hot water left, and it was great. Gosh, I enjoyed it!

* * *

WHEN I got back, most of the boys were dressed, and the coach was there talking to Mac. "Shake it along, Bennie," said Bob, "or we'll miss the beer. It's well after five now."

"I'm practically there already," I said. "Don't rush me. Give me a smoke. Hell, I feel good now." I was in digs with Bob. "What did the coach think of it?"

"He said you were lousy, but the rest of us went well."

I knew Bob was joking, but I didn't like it much. I knew I wasn't particularly good, and the coach was always

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