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CUCKOO'S NEST

Reminiscences, Reflections, and Ramblings of a Life—So Far



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I continued with cricket when I joined the King's school in Chester and played for the school team. After leaving school, on Saturdays I played for Northwich, the local town team. On Sundays and in mid-week knockout competitions, I played with Chester Crossbatters, a team made up of old boys from the King's School, of which I was, of course, one.

In the '60s, Chester Crossbatters had an array of cricketing talent to draw on, including a former Captain of England Schoolboys and several players who had played county cricket. Apart from being a very competitive cricket team, we had considerable camaraderie, because we all knew each other very well and had similar backgrounds. Our Sunday cricket matches were a lot of fun, and players took their wives or girlfriends, sometimes mothers and fathers, and occasionally children, to have a fun day out at cricket clubs on Merseyside, across Cheshire, and parts of Shropshire and North Wales. We didn't have a home ground of our own and were a visiting team, but occasionally we borrowed a ground for a "home" fixture.

In 1967 I was captain of our team, responsible for the tactical decisions on the field, including field placement, the disposition of the bowlers, and the batting order. Off the field, as captain I had a responsibility to help create a pleasant atmosphere within our own team and with the other teams we played, because these were friendly matches. I took this responsibility seriously.

On Sunday, August 27 of that year, we played at Hightown, near Southport in Lancashire. I am sure of the day because I still have the cricket calendar for that season. The day was one of those all too frequent in England, quite cool, overcast, and threatening rain throughout the day. In fact, much to everyone's surprise, it never did rain, and we completed the game around our usual finishing time of 6:30. I don't remember who won; it may have even been a draw, but I am sure we had a good game.

Hightown has a very pleasant ground and clubhouse, and we looked forward to a fun evening after we had showered and changed. Once in the bar we relaxed, the first couple of pints slipping down easily, perhaps too easily. In those days, the social mores and the driving and drinking laws were regrettably not up to the standards of today, but the roads were quieter, the cars slower, and that, combined with some luck, got us home safely. We chatted with the other team about the game. Usually after we had loosened up, the stories would come out, perhaps a heated discussion or two about a contentious umpire's ruling in the day's play or some other aspect of cricket. This evening something different happened. The captain of the Hightown team went to the centre of the room and cupped his hands round his mouth.

"I am pleased to announce that this evening," he bellowed in the style of a music hall announcer, "we have been able to attract a famous hypnotist to demonstrate his hypnotic powers." The Crossbatters looked at each other and smiled in anticipation, wondering what we were in for. "Ladies and gentlemen," the captain continued, "I give you"—his voice rising to a crescendo—"Mesmerist!" He waved to one side, and out from the changing room, to generous applause, came someone we quickly recognized, mainly because of his height and beard, as the opening fast bowler—only he wasn't dressed in his cricket gear. A checked tablecloth was wrapped around him like a cape, and he wore a straw hat. At best it was a rudimentary disguise, but we were an easy audience to please and we were very pleased.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and fellow cricketers," he began. "I am going to show you my powers of hypnosis. First, with a member of the Hightown team," he said, looking around. "I pick you," he said, pointing to a member of his team, the wicket keeper, who looked a bit reluctant but came forward nevertheless.

“Thank you, James, for volunteering,” Mesmerist said, motioning for him to sit down on a chair. “First, I must ask that you obey all the instructions I give you. Do that and you will come to no harm.” James nodded. Mesmerist produced a large, shining gold watch.

“I want you to watch this watch,” he said, and we sniggered over his little pun. “Specifically, I want you to watch the second hand go round and round for a minute.” More sniggering. “Please concentrate. Do not look at anything else. Watch the second hand go round and round and round.” James focused his eyes on the watch.

After a minute or so, Mesmerist said in a monotonic voice, “Now, James, you are very tired. Your eyelids are heavy. I want you to close your eyes. When I ask you to open them, you will do exactly as I say.” James did as he was told. “Please get up from the chair and walk around the room,” instructed Mesmerist. James obeyed the instructions, keeping a straight face, while everyone else was trying to make him laugh. Then Mesmerist went through a number of other similar commands, and James complied with all of them. The two of them were putting on a good show. Finally, Mesmerist said, “Return to your seat. When I snap my fingers, you will be awake.” James sat down. Mesmerist snapped his fingers, and James opened his eyes and shook himself as though he had been in a trance. Mesmerist took a big bow, and we all clapped and cheered. This was fun, and we wondered what would come next.

“I would now like a volunteer from the Crossbatters team,” Mesmerist said when the raucous applause died down. I can’t remember whether I volunteered of my own will or was pushed, but if the latter, I certainly didn’t mind. It was, after all, part of my job as captain to foster harmonious relations. Mesmerist came up to me and shook my hand, putting his left hand round my neck, pulling me closer, and winking as he did so.

“Please be a good sport,” he said quickly and softly in my ear. I understood him right away. He was a fake, just as I’d thought. But I am nothing if not a good sport and was happy to play along. When Mesmerist

asked me to sit down, I did so willingly. He went through the same preamble as he had with James, except that he asked me to keep my eyes shut the whole time. I thought to myself, *At least this makes it a little easier to keep a straight face, because I won't see the others trying to make me laugh.* On his command, I stood up with what I hoped was a very trance-like expression on my face. It was, at least, my best effort, because I was trying so hard to be an effective straight man for him.

"And now, Chris," Mesmerist intoned, "please walk five paces to your left." That was easy, I thought. "Now six paces to the right. Turn around." I followed his instructions to the letter, feeling increasingly proud of my efforts in giving everybody a good time.

"I would now like you to do some Irish dancing. You can do that, can't you? Please nod your head if you can." I nodded my head, although this was many years before anyone had heard of Michael Flatley and *Riverdance*, but I had seen some Irish dancing on television and proceeded, on his command, to give the best rendition I could. I must have been quite good, or at least credible, because the audience in the bar loved it and cheered me on. Everyone, including me, was enjoying themselves. I wished I could see them, but I was determined to keep my end of the bargain by keeping my eyes shut, as I had been instructed.

"That's enough," Mesmerist said, seeing I was getting a little tired. "Now I want you to take a rest. Please lie down on the floor." I obeyed his instructions. "Please raise and lower your left arm." I did. "Please raise your right arm." I did. After my Irish dancing I had no difficulty with these simple instructions, and the gathering seemed to be enjoying it even more, so I took no small pleasure in performing for their enjoyment. "Please raise your left leg." I did. "Now your right leg." I lifted my leg as I'd been told, and by now the laughter was very loud, although I could not account for why it should be so. "Hold it there," Mesmerist said, and I did, feeling the strain a little in my muscles, tired as they were after the day's cricket.

Next thing I felt was a rush of cold liquid as he emptied a large jug of water down my pant leg. I was soaked. I had been had—well and truly had! The audience, including my own team, was in stitches of laughter. But Mesmerist wasn't finished with me.

“Now he is awake,” he said, “and a little wet, let me ask him one question. Would you have allowed this to happen if you had known what was coming?”

“Of course not,” I blurted, feeling a little foolish.

“So that proves it, ladies and gentlemen! You heard from the man himself. He must have been hypnotized!” Mesmerist declared to the assembled throng as he twirled around with one hand raised in the air in a triumphant flourish.