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FEAR TO TREAD

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Michael Gilbert



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FEAR TO TREAD

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UNUSUAL HERO

Mr. Wetherall staggered into a friend's office after being beaten up by thugs. His friend gave him a drink and proposed a toast "to the small boy who thought it such fun fiddling with the detonator of a ten-thousand-pound bomb."

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expensive **LANCER** reprint.



C O M P L E T E A N D U N A B R I D G E D

1. South of the River : An Uncalculated Inspiration

WHEN WILFRID WETHERALL learned that the boys called him "Wellington" Wetherall he was not displeased. He was an admirer of the Duke, and he had no doubt that it was his references to this hero in the course of his history lessons that had planted the idea. A headmaster had to have a nickname. It could have been a good deal worse. There were physical resemblances, too, in the bony structure of his face, the jut of his nose, the spare frame and forward-bending carriage. It finished there. Nobody, not even Wetherall himself, imagined that he had the Wellingtonian character, useful though it would have been in the daily difficulties which beset the headmaster of an understaffed, overpopulated secondary day school for boys in the southwest of London.

The room in which he was sitting did not much resemble the traditional headmaster's study. It was almost without adornment. The walls were painted (as were the walls throughout the school), the bottom half in pastel green, the top half in primrose, with a horizontal dividing band of dark green. These were the colors which the consultant psychologist to the School Planning Committee had stated to be most conducive to study and relaxation. After six years' practice, Mr. Wetherall found himself able to ignore their message. The floor was covered with dark linoleum. The furniture and fittings were those of a managing director who did not believe in frills.

The modern, iron-framed windows looked bleakly north and east; but there was compensation for this in the skyline of distant masts and cranes where the river swung south, into Limehouse Reach.

Mr. Wetherall replaced on the table a letter he had been reading, and sighed. It was a thing he often found himself doing. The letter was from a Mr. Turvey who considered (with an optimism which, in Mr. Wetherall's view, bordered on lunacy) that his son might have a chance of a university scholarship.

Swing doors creaked outside.

They were swing doors which, in the first innocent youth of his associations with the school board, he had managed to get installed to cut off the end of the passage and so afford a little privacy to his study and the administration office on the other side of the corridor.

Five deliberate steps, and a knock.

"Come in," said Mr. Wetherall. "Oh, it's you, Croke, do sit down."

"I won't sit down," said Mr. Croke, "because I shan't be a minute. It's Mr. Barlow."

"Not again? We had him last week."

"He won't let his son start calculus."

"I can't find it in me to blame him," said Mr. Wetherall. "I have never been able to see the faintest glimmerings of sense in it myself."

"It's in the Higher Board Syllabus," said Mr. Croke, rather stiffly.

"Oh, quite so, quite so. Why does Barlow's father object to it?"

"He says that calculus leads to the splitting of the atom."

"I see. How unfortunate. He's an ardent pacifist, too, isn't he?"

"Extremely ardent."

"Why not tell him that as the atom has been split once already it is most unlikely to be split again in our lifetime. Then if that doesn't work I'll have a word with him."

"It would be useless, I suppose, trying to persuade him that the differential calculus has no connection whatever with nuclear physics."

"Quite hopeless. You remember what he was like about Guy Fawkes."

"Yes. Well, all right, I'll try."

Mr. Wetherall resumed his contemplation of the skyline. There was something romantic, he thought, about masts along a tideway.

Miss Donovan came in from the Administrative Office across the passage. It should perhaps be made clear that the Administration Office was an even smaller room than Mr. Wetherall's study and had been originally designed—the matter was uncertain—either as a very small extra staffroom or a very large cloakroom. Miss Donovan was

simply Peggy, who was the sister of Sammy and of Patsy Donovan, and whom Mr. Wetherall had known, on and off, since she was a slum child of five. She was now seventeen and looked neat, competent and twenty.

"It's this milk," she said.

"What about it?"

"Its the return."

"What's wrong with the return?" Mr. Wetherall was cautious. He knew the power of returns. "Have we shown more milk than we drank, or drunk more milk than we showed—incidentally that's rather a good example of the difference between the aorist and perfect tenses, isn't it?" Mr. Wetherall made a note for his grammar class.

"The figures come about right with a little cooking—"

"Adjustment."

"Adjustment. But now they want them showed—shown, I mean—in two separate lots. 'Milk served' and 'Milk Drunk.'"

"What the devil," said Mr. Wetherall, "do they think we do with it? Throw it at each other?"

"They've done that before now," said Miss Donovan.

"Show the totals as the same in both headings. If they don't like it, it's up to them to object. If they object perhaps we shall see what they're getting at."

How would the Duke of Wellington have dealt with this?

"There's the boxing lists. I'm just going to put them up."

"I'd like to see them. Schools Area Final. That's tomorrow afternoon, isn't it? Where's it to be this time?"

"The Co-op Hall. Starting four o'clock."

"That's that rather dim place north of the Elephant, isn't it?" Mr. Wetherall made another note on his desk pad. "Is Sammy still in?"

"He surely is," said Miss Donovan. "Eighty-eight and under. He had to sweat off four ounces to make the weight."

"He ought to try standing on his head," said Mr. Wetherall.

The telephone rang.

"Who—oh, Mrs. Ambler. How are you? Your husband—I'm sorry to hear that. Laryngitis? He does seem to have bad luck, doesn't he? No, of course he can't turn up if he's feeling bad. I'll manage somehow."

"Though why," he added, having rung off, "these things always happen to Mr. Ambler on Tuesday morning is more than I can make out. I suppose I'll have to take his class myself. I really couldn't know less about it."

Mr. Ambler was the visiting drawing master.

He became aware that Miss Donovan was still with him. "Is there anything else, Peggy?"

"Well, yes, Mr. Wetherall, there is. It's Sammy."

"Hullo, what's this?" He came out of the clouds with a jerk. A thing to do with boys could be important.

"He's been in trouble with you lately, I know, Mr. Wetherall. But it isn't really his fault. It's that new master. He was quite all right with Mr. Rollinson, but—"

"Look here," said Mr. Wetherall. "I can't have this special pleading. If Sammy gets sent up for anything, I shall hear about it from him. Besides I haven't seen him here for some time."

"You'll be seeing him," said Miss Donovan.

Left to himself Mr. Wetherall picked up his pen, started to write such a letter as would deflate, without irritating, Mr. Turvey, then put his pen down again and looked out of the window.

Creak of double doors, seven short and rather nervous steps along the passage.

"Come in," said Mr. Wetherall.

It was a boy of fifteen. The hair which might, in Miss Donovan, have been described, at a pinch, as auburn was here unblushing carrot.

"What is it, Donovan?"

"I've got a book, sir, from Mr. Pelley."

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Wetherall.

It should be explained that (unlike our great public schools in which, having paid a great deal more money, a boy is privileged to be beaten by almost anybody older than himself) in most state schools the headmaster enjoys a monopoly of this form of punishment. If a form master wished for a boy to be so dealt with he entered his name and offense in a book and sent the boy with the book to the headmaster, who attended to the matter and recorded the result in a further column. These rather incongruous civil service trappings did nothing to allay Mr. Wetherall's distaste for the barbaric rite which followed.

"What is it this time?"

"Impertinence," said the boy.

"Yes, I can read. I'm asking what actually happened."

"Well, sir," Donovan charged his lungs with a deep breath, "Mr. Pelley said something wasn't cricket and someone asked him what it meant and he said that cricket was the most important game in a school and if you said a thing wasn't cricket you meant that it wasn't done and I said cricket wasn't the most important game in this school by half boxing was and he said that in any decent school cricket was the game that mattered and I said well cricket's a sissy game what's the good of being able to play cricket if a chap came up in the street and tried to take your girl friend away and then," concluded the narrator putting his finger unerringly on the real heart of the offense, "people laughed."

"I see," said Mr. Wetherall. (Curse Pelley and his old school tie.) "It doesn't seem perhaps a very serious offense" (got to back the man up all the same, very young) "but it was certainly impertinent. I think, in the circumstances, I'm going to set you enough work to keep you busy after school, during sport time. Tomorrow's a games day—"

Alarm flared.

"Not tomorrow, sir."

"What—oh, it's the boxing tomorrow, isn't it?" Considering the nature of the offense it would have been very fitting to deprive the boy of his boxing, but he knew himself to be incapable of such chilly logic. "Very well, on Wednesday then." He made a note in the book. He was quite aware that he was being weak. "And look here," he said. "I don't want any more of this. You're coming up here a lot too much. You're growing up now. You've got to think before you say silly things. Next time you'll get hurt—"

"Yes sir," said Donovan cheerfully. Next time was a long way ahead.

It was a warm October day and even the brick and mortar of S.E.17 responded grudgingly to the ancient magic. The South Borough High School for Boys is in the middle of the quadrilateral formed by the Old Kent Road, the New Kent Road, the Camberwell Road and Peckham High Street. It is a square half mile which is almost indescribable because it lacks the first element of

description, which is character. It is made up of two or three hundred streets of uninspiring houses; seven churches and twenty-seven chapels; two very small open spaces, created by some bygone town planning enthusiasm and a dozen larger ones opened up by the German Air Force, but even these are subdued to the general pattern of uneasy neatness; the rubble is stamped flat, the yellow bricks are piled into neat heaps. It is an area which lies in the middle of things greater than itself but takes nothing from them. The Old Vic Theatre on the north, the Oval cricket ground on the west, the roaring goods yards of Bricklayers Arms and Crossways and the passenger stations at Waterloo and London Bridge. In this depressing arena the only arteries of life are the High Streets, where the blood flows red from chain store to chain store; where the social center is the butcher's queue and the spiritual temple is the Gaudeon Super Cinema. Away from the High Street the splashes of color are pubs, late and lonely flowerings in reds and greens and golds.

Mr. Wetherall made his way to the Old Kent Road and boarded a No. 53 bus, going south. Twenty minutes later he got off at the stop after Deptford Broadway. He was on the fringes of Blackheath. Not Blackheath proper, which lies at the top of the hill, around the open space, but near enough to it to put it on his notepaper. Postally Brinkman Road was in Blackheath, if spiritually in Deptford.

The Wetheralls leased the top floor of No. 20. The house, which had suffered subdivision in the thirties, was owned by a doctor, and though he was twenty years retired from active practice a faintly antiseptic smell still clung to the lower floors. Above the doctor lived two Japanese. Above the Japanese, the Wetheralls.

Immediately Mr. Wetherall got home he knew that something was amiss. Alice Wetherall was in the kitchen, her hands folded and her lips pursed.

"It's too bad," she said. "Major Francis' food parcel hasn't arrived."

"Oh, dear. Perhaps it's lost—"

"You know how regular he's been. When it was a week late I began to wonder. I wrote to the railway on Friday. This came this morning."

It was hardly a letter. A printed memorandum. "Unable to trace the package in question—was there any proof of posting?—admit no responsibility."

"It doesn't look very helpful," admitted Mr. Wetherall. "I might ask Major Francis next time I write. It's rather awkward, though. Supposing he had decided not—"

"It's been stolen," said Mrs. Wetherall.

"Stolen?"

"By those railways. Didn't you see that bit in the paper last Sunday? No. It was the Sunday before. About all the parcels they were losing. Food parcels chiefly, and cigarettes. Why should they be allowed to? What do we—what do we pay our fares for?"

He thought for a moment she was going to cry.

"Never mind," he said. "I expect we can manage. We'll have a meal or two out for a change. Why don't we go to Luigi's tonight?"

"I'll think about it. Come and get your lunch now before it gets cold."

"That's to say, if the journey won't be too much for you—"

"Now don't you fuss," said Mrs. Wetherall, more cheerfully. She had, of course, been fussing herself, but like most women found instant solace if she could accuse someone else of it. "It's the principle of the thing that upset me. It's *our* parcel. Why should they be allowed to steal it? Can't we do anything about it, now they're nationalized?"

Instead of attempting to unravel this tangled piece of logic, Mr. Wetherall said he would ring the police immediately after lunch.

He knew that he was not at his best on the telephone. He was very slightly deaf, and was apt to get flustered. The Sergeant in charge of the station was plainly neutral. He was not obstructive, nor was he helpful. He took particulars. He spelled Mr. Wetherall's name wrong, then got it right, then got the address wrong. He, also, wanted to know if there was any proof that the parcel had been dispatched, and when Mr. Wetherall had to admit that there was not, he lost most of his remaining interest. He said he would do what he could. He added that he was afraid there was a lot of pilfering on the railways.

When Mr. Wetherall was on the point of leaving the house (it would, in many ways, have been easier to have his lunch at a restaurant near the school, but with his wife in her present condition he liked to get back as often

as he could) he remembered their plans for the evening.

"I'd better meet you at Luigi's," he said. "I'll have to go straight there. Ambler's ill again, and I've got to take his drawing class this afternoon. That'll mean putting off my specials until after tea, so I shall be late anyway. I'll see you there at seven."

"Do we want to go to Luigi's?"

"Why," said Mr. Wetherall, surprised. "We've always liked the food there so much. Do you want something a bit more classy?"

"Silly," said his wife. "It's only that I heard the other day—I think it was Mrs. Ormerod. She was saying that Mrs. Lewis told her—something about the food not being quite clean."

"I'd rather believe my own eyes," said Mr. Wetherall mildly, "than something Mrs. Ormerod said to Mrs. Lewis."

"Well, I always thought it was very nice, too."

"Luigi's let it be, then. If you observe so much as a single cockroach in the minestrone, we can always go on somewhere else."

"Don't be horrid," said Mrs. Wetherall.

There are people who cannot draw. Mr. Wetherall was one of them. In a way this was odd, because he had a good appreciation of line and an eye for the beauty in unlikely places. It was his execution which was hopeless. He often wished that the training he had received, a scrupulously careful training which had covered every conceivable subject from Bible study to eurythmics, had dealt with this important matter. For he was convinced that it was important. For one thing, the boys enjoyed it, and that was half the battle in any school subject. Furthermore he was certain, in an instinctive way, that it did them good.

His usual solution to the problem was to announce that the hour would be devoted to free inspiration, then to allot a suitable subject (the choice was not easy. He still remembered some of the unfortunate results when he had asked the senior class to exercise its imagination on the subject of a pig in a poke) and leave them to it.

That afternoon, after some thought, he selected "A Street Accident" and retired to the master's desk to correct history papers.

For half an hour there was silence, broken only by some hard breathing, the scrape of feet and the squeak of pencils. Red crayon seemed to be in demand. At the end of this time Mr. Wetherall climbed to his feet and toured the classroom to give an interim judgment on the results.

In the back row, somewhat to his surprise, he found a boy with an untouched sheet of drawing paper in front of him. It was Crowdy, a quiet creature whom he liked; according to Mr. Ambler, something of an artist.

"What is it?" he said. "No inspiration?"

"I was just wondering, sir," said Crowdy, with a blush, "what a car would look like upside down."

"Why not draw it the right way up, and then turn the paper round?"

Crowdy looked up with faint scorn and said, "I didn't mean resting on its back, sir. I meant the moment it hit the road, after being turned over. Why, the wheels might still be spinning—like this."

He picked up the pencil and quickly drew four or five lines. Thinking it over afterward Mr. Wetherall was prepared to swear that it was not more than five. And in front of his eyes an accident was born. He could see at once what must have happened. The car, cornering too fast on a greasy road, had turned, first onto its side and then right over. He could see by the crumpling of the coachwork and the distortion of the body how powerful the impact must have been. The drawing was foreshortened and the nearest wheel, unnaturally large, was spinning; it was actually spinning in front of Mr. Wetherall's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I see what you mean. I should go on with that. It looks very promising."

He walked back to his desk aware that, in a small way, the thing might have happened which every schoolmaster dreams will happen to him. That he may be privileged to act midwife at the birth of genius; to watch the infant Keats scratching his fingers through his hair and his nib through his first halting sonnet; to listen to the stubby, chilblain-covered fingers of the young Beethoven stumbling along the octave. It is the most intoxicating thought a schoolmaster can have. Mr. Wetherall felt partially intoxicated as he went back to his desk.

He made one more round, toward the end of the hour, and commended several of the more dashing efforts. They

were none of them lacking in incident. In one, a fire brigade had become involved with a squadron of tanks. In another a lady had been cut completely in two. Crowdy had blocked in a little background, but had done nothing much else to his sketch. It was entirely in hard pencil, in line, with no shading at all.

"Cleanly, sir, you went to the heart of the matter," he found himself saying as he collected the drawings and dismissed the class.

That wasn't quite right. It wasn't "heart of the matter."

"Cleanly, sir, you went to the core of the matter."

It was a poem in some paper or literary magazine. Mr. Wetherall had a good visual memory, if he cared to use it. Sometimes for a bet, he would read once, and then repeat, a whole paragraph of prose. More often it was scraps of verse that stayed in his mind.

This came now, out of its pigeonhole.

A calligraphic master, improvising, you invent
The first incision, and no poet's hesitation
Before his snow-blank page mars your intent:
The flowing stroke is drawn like an uncalculated
 inspiration.

That was right. That was absolutely right. No hesitation. No fumbling. "An uncalculated inspiration." Come to think of it the poem was not really about drawing. It was a description of a famous surgeon, in the theater, performing a difficult operation. But the simile was just. As Mr. Wetherall looked at the clean lines of the sketch he felt an inner certainty that the hand which had drawn them must one day claim recognition.

Then his practical sense asserted itself. Crowdy would be sixteen at the end of the summer. The next step was therefore important. After some thought and a hunt through a well-used address book, Mr. Wetherall took up his pen and wrote:

I've got a boy here who looks as if he might be useful to you. I'm no art expert, as you know, but he draws a neat, clean line and has lots of self-confidence. He's leaving here in July. Would your people like to take him on? The only thing is, I'm afraid there's no question of appren-

ticeship. His family have got no money at all, so he'll have to be paid something, even when he's learning. I expect he can run errands and pour out the tea. How's Wright getting on? Best wishes to your wife and family.

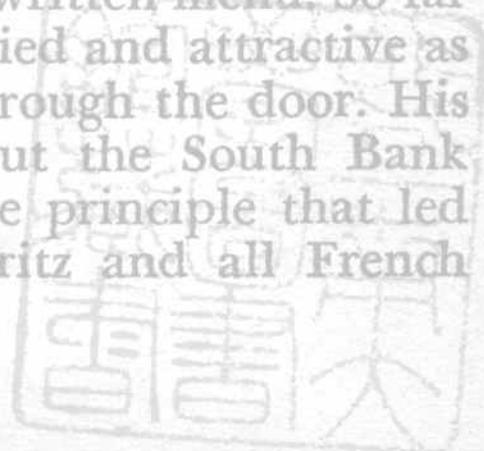
The letter was addressed to the Managing Director of Lithography & Artists Services, Ltd. It was on occasions such as this that Mr. Wetherall, who was an inverted snob of a not uncommon type, was thankful that he had been at Oxford and had made, and kept, a few useful friends.

After tea, which was brought in by Miss Donovan—her heart was kind, but her taste in pastries was more flamboyant than Mr. Wetherall's—and after dealing with the not unjustified complaints of Mr. Edgecumb that the Examination Sub-Committee had introduced elementary physics into the curriculum while the Finance Sub-Committee had allowed no expenditure of any sort on equipment, and after devoting an hour to the special coaching of four candidates for future university scholarships, and after reading and signing fifteen papers produced by Miss Donovan, Mr. Wetherall sat back in his chair, looked at the clock which now said half past six, and sighed once more.

He was wondering, and not for the first time, whether he was really suited to his job. He liked boys. He enjoyed teaching, particularly the teaching of the less precise subjects, like history and English. On the other hand he found the routine of administration and management increasingly distasteful. Committees terrified him.

Having allowed plenty of time, he naturally picked up a bus at once, and arrived at Deptford Broadway with ten minutes to spare. All its lights were blazing, but Luigi's had a deserted look, and when he got inside he saw that only one of the tables was occupied, by a depressed-looking couple who were talking in whispers. Three months before, at that hour, the place would have been crowded.

Mr. Wetherall sat down at his usual table, opposite the service door, and picked up the handwritten menu. So far as he could judge the food was as varied and attractive as ever. At that moment Luigi came through the door. His name, actually, was Castelbonato but the South Bank called him Luigi on the same simple principle that led them to call all German waiters Fritz and all French



hairdressers Aphonse. His family had been in England for two generations. His turn of phrase was still apt to be foreign, particularly when he was excited, but his accent was purest cockney.

"What's up, Luigi? Have you been frightening the customers away?" Then he saw the look on the little man's face and felt sorry for him.

"What'll it be, Mr. Wetherall?"

"I think I'll wait for my wife."

The couple at the other table signaled their bill. Luigi went over to them. When he came back he did a thing he had never done before and which, in a trained restaurateur, gave a little indication of how upset he was. He sat down in the chair opposite Mr. Wetherall.

"You can have what you like," he said. "Chicken—duck—I'm shutting up tomorrow."

"What's it all about?"

"No customers." Luigi waved his hand round the empty room. The bright lights. The clean cloths. The fresh flowers.

"What's it all about?" said Mr. Wetherall again.

Luigi took a deep breath.

"They bin saying my food's dirty. They bin coming along here making a fuss. Fortnight ago they come along and find a dead beetle in my ravioli. In *my* ravioli. Who would be likely to put such filth in, I ask you, them or me? They throw it in my face. A whole plateful—"

"Who—?" began Mr. Wetherall.

"Do not ask who. Ask why. I'll tell you. I used to take food from them. There's no secret. Bacon and sugar. All took it, you understand. I wasn't the only one. If we couldn't get it other place, we had to get it from them. Then I wanted to stop, you understand?"

"I don't—"

"They asked too much. Bacon and sugar and butter and tinned meat are good, but they are not good at five and six and seven shillings a pound. You can reckon it up for yourself, Mr. Wetherall, you know what I charge. In the West End, perhaps. That's West End prices. Not here. So I said I must stop. Then they warned me—"

Luigi suddenly cut off the torrent of his speech, and Mr. Wetherall at last got the chance to say, "Who are these people you're talking about, Luigi?"

Luigi was not listening. He had his head half turned,