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FOTHERINGTON-TOMAS AND THE ASHES AFFAIR



Fotherington-Tomas and the Ashes Affair
By R.A. Gregory

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Begin Reading...

“Why are we here, FT?” asked Maxwell. He gave his Mister Whippy a lick, which left a trail of ice cream along the bottom of his waxed moustache.

“Well, from a biological perspective, it is to ensure the widest possible spread of our genes, thus maximising the success of our line through to the next generation and beyond. However, from a philosophical point of view, I always tend towards the teachings of Nietzsche, who said —” replied Fotherington-Tomas. A steady crunching sound, from the vicinity of his lips, suggested that his granite-like jaw was making short work of the bubble gum treat, hidden at the bottom of his Two Ball Screwball.

“No, I mean why are we here, at The Oval?” interrupted Maxwell. He swept his hand in a wide arc, to emphasise the huge stadium, which was packed to capacity with avid cricket fans, on a rare and beautiful English summer’s day.

“Ah, I see what you mean,” said Fotherington-Tomas. He winced, as the splinters from the little, plastic spoon, which he had mistaken for the second bubble gum in his ice-cream treat, scraped down his throat and made it hard for him to talk. “Tip-off from MI5. They have received information that Yorkshire based villain, Aldo Passlington, is planning to steal the Ashes and from under the very nose of the Prince Regent, too!”

“The Cad!” exclaimed Maxwell.

“Indeed, and that is why we have to be extra vigilant. We need to make sure that the nefarious, whippet loving, ne’er-do-well, doesn’t get an opportunity to bring shame on the Empire and on one of the greatest traditions of the noblest sporting game in the world,” said Fotherington-Tomas. His bushy eyebrows furrowed in anger, at the thought of his beloved cricket, being sullied by such a base deed.

“So, how are we going to apprehend Passlington? There are thousands of people here and as a master of disguise, he is going to be almost impossible to detect. He could be dressed as anybody, even me, and you would be hard-pressed to know,” said Maxwell. He finished speaking and

scanned the Pavilion, in the vain hope of spotting the reprehensible fiend, there and then.

“Well, I have been thinking about that,” replied Fotherington-Tomas. He stroked his beard, which he had trained into a fine-looking replica of that worn by his hero, W.G. Grace. “You are going to provide close support to the Prince Regent, so that you can pounce on Passlington, should he try to snatch the Ashes during the presentation ceremony, while I shall maintain a lookout from the pitch itself.”

Maxwell looked sideways at his great friend, aware of a smug note that had crept into the other man’s voice and said: “Of course, it has always been one of your dreams to play for England during a Test Match, hasn’t it, FT?”

Fotherington-Tomas did his best to avoid Maxwell’s knowing stare. “Well, if one is offered the chance, during the course of one’s duty, then one would be a fool to refuse the honour, wouldn’t one?” he mumbled.

“But how are we going to maintain communication over such a great distance, FT? What do you propose: semaphore; a series of bird calls, like we used that time in Marrakesh; or maybe Venezuelan throat singing? I have been practising, you know,” said Maxwell. He relaxed his windpipe, in the hope of being allowed to give Fotherington-Tomas a short demonstration.

Before Maxwell could begin warbling like a foetid leper, Fotherington-Tomas blanched and cried out: “No!” Then, he composed himself and carried on, in a less flustered tone. “Throat singing wouldn’t carry far enough over the noise of the crowd. Bird calls could be an option, but then I would look like a bit of a buffoon, if I were to go tweeting and cawing my way around the boundary. And the way that I swing a cricket bat, semaphore would be too confusing. No, I am afraid that we will have to put our faith in these new-fangled, radio communication devices, from MI5,” he said. He dug a massive hand into his trouser pocket and handed Maxwell a tiny, flesh-coloured, earpiece, then shoved its counterpart into his hairy lughole, with a grimace of distaste.

Maxwell inserted the earpiece that Fotherington-Tomas had given him, into his own, hair-free, ear canal. “Great idea, FT. I can hear you perfectly!”

he ejaculated.

“Well, that is because you are standing right next to me, you foolish young duffer! Sometimes, I despair of you. Now, go and take your place. The match will be starting soon, and I still have to change into my cricket whites,” said Fotherington-Tomas. He gave Maxwell a withering stare and turned on his heel, in the direction of the changing rooms.

“Right-O, FT,” replied Maxwell. He, in turn, shuffled past the mass of spectators and headed in the opposite direction to his mentor, towards the executive luxury of the Pavilion building.

The sun blazed hot and high, in the clear, blue, sky. England won the toss and chose to bat against the Australians. Malinga was up first. He opened with a mighty six that sent the ball deep into the delighted crowd. Three runs later, he was caught out by Ullabong. Dickwella was up next and worked with Chameera, to begin a splendid batting partnership that saw almost a century put on the massive digital scoreboard. Then, an easy, long bowl-spin, from Loogaborooga, knocked the bails from the stumps and Dickwella was sent, humiliated, from the pitch.

Throughout the excitement, Maxwell remained vigilant and took up a position just behind and to the left of the Prince Regent. The royal in question, was making the most of his big day out and knocked the tops off glass after glass of iced sherbet with gay abandon. He cheered just as loud as the rest of the spectators, as England continued to pile the pressure on their ancient rivals, with a series of stunning fours from Udawatte. However, no matter how hard Maxwell strained his eyes, he could see nothing out of the ordinary. Everything was just as a well-run, top-level game of cricket should be. He grazed on his own glass of sherbet and continued to monitor both the match, which was indeed turning out to be a superb start to the Test, and the surrounding landscape. A shiver ran down his spine, as the ice-cold concoction hit his stomach and he wondered, not for the first time that day, when Aldo Passlington would reveal himself.

For his part, Fotherington-Tomas sat with the rest of his team at the edge of the pitch and waited for his turn to bat. He was a fine amateur spin bowler and would have preferred it, if England had opened by fielding, rather

than by batting. That way, he could have demoralised the Australians early on, by bowling a few of them out, before they had a chance to set up a decent lead. As it was, he was impressed with the headway that England had made and looked forward to adding to it, when his moment came.

He looked at the other players and was almost certain that he would be paired with either Weerakoddy or Munaweera. Both of them were formidable sportsmen in their own right and as well respected off the pitch, as they were on it. The only things that worried him, apart from the threat of Passlington's planned assault on the Ashes, were that he had decided to play with his trusty 'Zuru X-Shot bat', which he had bought from Argos, twenty years earlier and to wear his antique Bexhill Cricket Club cap for protection. As he appraised the Australian bowlers, in particular, Todger, who was hurling the ball around like a live hand grenade, Fotherington-Tomas realised, with mounting apprehension, that the game had got a lot faster and a lot more dangerous than the last time he had played in a professional tournament.

After an hour and a half, the morning session came to an end and the umpire called a halt for lunch. The players, most of whom were slicked with sweat from their exertions, proceeded into the welcome shelter of the rest area. There, they were treated to a round of cucumber sandwiches and a refreshing glass of home-made lemonade, which had been made, the night before, by Fotherington-Tomas' devoted wife, Sarah.

Back in the Pavilion, the Prince Regent settled down to a fine repast of cold salmon mousse, French truffles and chocolate ice-cream. Maxwell, who was not part of the official party, was forced to make do with a rather soggy, cucumber sandwich, which he had filched from one of the platters in the back of Fotherington-Tomas' car, before the match had begun. To help pass the time, he watched a selection of previous Test Match highlights, which were being displayed on the side of the Goodyear blimp, which itself, floated languidly above the famous cricket ground. In between moments of historical cricketing excellence, he turned his attention to the pitch and strained his eyes again and again, as he searched for any sign of Aldo Passlington.

Then he spotted it. Right on the edge of the boundary, sat a small bush, where a small bush had no right to be. Certainly not on the crisp baize of a cricket pitch, that was for sure. How he had missed it before was beyond him,

but there it was, as large as life and twice as annoying. Maxwell stared at the bush and wished that Fotherington-Tomas had given him X-ray glasses, instead of the tiny earpiece that had started to irritate his eardrum. He squinted, to the point where his eyes began to water and then shot bolt upright, as the bush gave a twitch. Someone was hiding in there and Maxwell was in no doubt that it was the despicable, mischief-maker, who hailed from the Dales.

What an amazing disguise, thought Maxwell. Passlington was known to be a master of altering his appearance, but up until now, he had impersonated little old ladies, Heads of State and Swedish poultry chefs, not topiary. The bush wobbled again and tried to emulate the effect of the light, summer breeze, on its man-handled branches. Then, Maxwell remembered the radio communicator. He pressed a finger to his ear and made contact with Fotherington-Tomas.

“FT. Are you there? I think that I’ve found Passlington,” he whispered.

Fotherington-Tomas was in the middle of a cucumber sandwich, when Maxwell’s voice exploded into his cerebellum, like a bomb going off. He jumped up from his seat in surprise and tried not to choke on the half-chewed lump of bread and watery vegetable, which had lodged itself in his throat. With a Herculean effort, he forced the traitorous luncheon down his windpipe and answered his colleague. “I’m here, Maxwell,” he said, with a cough. “Now, where do you think that Passlington is hiding?”

“Far end of the field, disguised as a small bush, FT. I am sure that it is him. What are we going to do? Do you want me to call security?” said Maxwell. While he spoke, his hawk-like gaze remained fixed on the artificial shrub, which quivered at the edge of the pitch.

“No, leave it to me. I have a better idea. We are due to go back on the field, in a few minutes time. I will have a word with the captain and get the batting order changed,” said Fotherington-Tomas. He coughed once again, then sighed with relief, as the line between them went dead.

Without thinking, Maxwell scooped a truffle up from the table next to him and in the process, earned himself an angry stare from the head of the

Prince's private security team. He popped it into his mouth, with a guilty smile and wiped his waxed moustache with the back of his hand. Then he waited for the Oval Bell to announce the start of the afternoon session.

A few minutes later, the two teams marched back onto the pitch and resumed their positions. Each was eager to continue the encounter, and both were revitalised from Sarah's cool lemonade and wonderful cucumber sandwiches. Todger examined the ball and rubbed it up and down his trouser leg a few times. Then he took a short run-up and launched the missile, like a red, leather heatseeker, at Chameera, in his first devastating delivery of the afternoon. The ball whistled through the air and slammed past Chameera's defences. A split second later, it had come to rest in Nullonga's trusty, wicket-keeping, gloves, while the toppled bails lay scattered on the grass beside him.

Chameera began his despondent walk back to his team, accompanied by a round of polite applause from the crowd. Then, Fotherington-Tomas took to the grass. He pulled his cap down low over his eyes, strode up to the crease and stood facing Udawatte and Todger, beyond. With a curt nod towards his batting partner, Fotherington-Tomas tapped his Zuru X-Shot on the ground, for good luck and waited for Todger to begin his run-up.

Todger thundered down the pitch, his arm twisted around, as if he was going to bowl a googly. Fotherington-Tomas remained motionless and thought of the time that he had once faced down a charging bull-elephant in Somalia. Then, with a grunt, Todger released the ball. It sliced through the air and Fotherington-Tomas realised, with a start, that it was not a googly, but a leg-break, instead. He swung his bat around in a mighty arc and sent the ball right back over Todger's glistening head, where it came to rest at the edge of the boundary.

Fotherington-Tomas and Udawatte charged down the twenty-two-yard strip, twice and twice more, and ended up back where they had started, while the crowd went wild with excitement at such a magnificent opening shot. And then, it was all on...

Over the next hour and a half, Fotherington-Tomas played the game of his life. He revelled in the repeated crack of leather on willow and first

equalled, then surpassed Dickwella's outstanding, morning performance. With his first century racked up with ease, Fotherington-Tomas started on his second, all the time, with one eye fixed on the innocuous-looking bush at the far end of the field.

A short while later, an exhausted Todger, tried a different approach, in order to try and thwart the grizzled old bear of a batsman, who had, so far, resisted everything that he had thrown at him. Fotherington-Tomas watched with interest, as the outback bowler walked halfway to the boundary line, then turned around and began a long, loping, run-up. When he reached the umpire, Todger changed his grip on the ball and sent it flying towards Fotherington-Tomas, in a flipper. Fotherington-Tomas shifted his grip on the Zuru X-Shot and bent forwards to meet the ball. With a smack that sounded as if the wood effect, polycarbonate bat had snapped in two, he scooped the spinning orb way into the air, where it clipped the side of the Goodyear blimp and bounced off it at high speed. Seconds after that, it landed in the small bush at the end of the pitch, where it made a very un-shrub-like, thunk.

Fotherington-Tomas held his hand up, to quell the cheering at yet another brilliant defence of his wicket. Then he walked over to the umpire and asked him if he would be prepared to suspend the match for a moment or two, while a serious crime in progress was investigated. The umpire, amazed at having seen such astounding cricket in play, agreed and with a bemused look on his face, he followed Fotherington-Tomas, who sauntered towards the boundary to retrieve his lost ball.

When he got there, much to the continued amazement of both the umpire and the crowd, he yanked the bush hard and pulled it up and over the limp form of Aldo Passlington, who sported an egg-sized lump, on the crown of his, otherwise, baby-bald head.

“Arrest that man!” shouted Fotherington-Tomas. His foghorn voice echoed around The Oval. “This is Aldo Passlington and I have it on good authority that he was going to steal the Ashes at the end of the match, from under the very nose of the Prince Regent himself!”

The crowd booed their disapproval of Aldo's misdemeanour and a squad of policemen ran onto the pitch, to apprehend him. They clamped the

unconscious body of Passlington in irons and dragged it off the pitch, while Inspector Cromwell of The Yard, approached Fotherington-Tomas.

“To think that anyone would want to steal the Ashes and a Yorkshireman at that! The sheer audacity of it is beyond me. Well done, FT. Once again, you have saved the nation and also, put up a formidable score, which the Aussies will find hard to beat. In fact, I would be surprised if it was not still standing by the time that Passlington gets out of prison, which, for the record, will be a fair way in the future, for such a heinous crime as this,” said Cromwell. He tipped his black, bowler hat towards Fotherington-Tomas, in a mark of respect.

“Thank you, Cromwell, but the day is not over yet. There are still a few hours of light before sundown and the last time that I looked, I wasn’t out,” said Fotherington-Tomas. He nodded to the umpire, who nodded in assent and called for play to resume.

Inspector Cromwell of The Yard watched Fotherington-Tomas make his way back to the crease, where he examined his Zuru X-Shot for signs of damage and then signalled for Todger to continue bowling. “What a man, what a man, what a mighty, mighty good man,” he muttered to himself.

Three hours later, England declared for the day, which left Fotherington-Tomas with a second century in his pocket and then some. After copious pats on the back from his ecstatic team mates and receiving the thanks of the Prince Regent, in person, Fotherington-Tomas stepped out of the changing room shower, to find Maxwell waiting for him, with the tell-tale traces of yet another ice-cream, smeared around the bottom fringe of his moustache.

“Well done, FT. What an amazing shot. I assume that you planned it?” said Maxwell.

“I did indeed, Maxwell. I watched Passlington’s bush, as it made its way around The Oval and when the moment was right, I struck like a snake and used that airship as a deflector. But, had it not been for your eagle eyes in the first place, then I would never have spotted him. That bush was a most cunning disguise. His best yet, in fact. So, in no small way, today’s victory

was down to you, my friend,” said Fotherington-Tomas.

Maxwell blushed at the unexpected praise and said: “Talking of victory, you played superbly, FT. I mean a double century and more, to boot. It was amazing. One of the best performances that I have ever seen.”

“It isn’t over yet, either,” said Fotherington-Tomas. He gave Maxwell a broad smile. “The captain was so impressed by my performance today, that he asked me to play for England in the rest of the Test Series!”

“Is that so? Then it is a dream come true for you, FT!” replied Maxwell.

“Something like that. But only if we win, of course. Which, I am sure is what will happen with me on the team. Now, come on. We need to go home and tell Sarah the good news!” said Fotherington-Tomas. Then, he clapped Maxwell on the shoulder and marched, as naked as a newborn baby, out of the changing room and into the warm evening beyond.

THE END

**Stay tuned for the next exciting instalment of the Adventures of
Fotherington-Tomas, coming soon!**

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About the author

R.A. Gregory (a.k.a. Robin Alexander Gregory, or just plain old Rob Gregory) is an author and animal welfare expert, who splits his time predominantly between Northern Thailand and New Zealand, writing books and helping people to help animals. He doesn't worry too much about what he writes about, just hopes that it makes people of all ages smile and think for themselves about the world that they live in.

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