

## The Four-eyed Prize fighter.

One of the most pleasurable activities for an enterprising working-class youngster in the Thirties was collecting cigarette cards. One of the most unpleasant experiences was being told you had to wear spectacles, since in those days it inevitably meant you would gain the nickname of 'Four-eyes'. These two emotional extremes came together for me one cold, hard winter, leading to a painful incident and a chain of events that left me a sadder but wiser lad.

Most boys from hard-up families used cigarette cards – or 'photos', as they were popularly known – as currency, and a boy with his pockets bulging with cigarette cards was rich indeed. The avid card enthusiast liked to collect whole sets of cards – famous footballers and cricketers, wild birds of Great Britain.

At the time of the adventure I am about to relate, I had reached the final stage of a bid to complete the collection of a set of cards entitled 'Famous Cricketers'. *It had been an uphill struggle, but* I had managed to pull together 49 of the set of 50, the only one missing being the Australian batsman and captain, Bill Woodfull. He was proving a difficult man to track down.

It was at this crucial point in my hunt that it was decided that I needed spectacles - an awful blow to my pride. The frustration of not being able to complete my set of Famous Cricketers, coupled with the indignity of having to face my peers in a pair of steel-rimmed specs, induced in me a feeling of depression that was difficult to shake off.

*There was only one thing to do in such a mood of black despair – pay a visit to Grandma Bassett. I could always count on her to raise me from the depths.*

*On Fridays I always ran to Grandma Bassett's house after school. Friday was pay day and Grandma always prepared a special tea for her husband and two grown-up sons. On Fridays there would be thinly-cut pieces of ham on every plate, and in the centre of the table, taking pride of place, would be a pile of shop-bought cakes shaped like the diamonds in a pack of cards. Grandma would let me have one of the cakes and I would sit in a corner and eat it as I watched my grandfather and two uncles arrive home from work, open their pay packets and lay them before Grandma.*

*On the night of my great depression I had stayed longer at my grandmother's house than I had planned, and when I set off for home (currently Aunt Kate's spare room) it was turned nine 'o' clock and quite dark. At the bottom of Palmerston Street, where Mr Cox's grocery shop stood, was a lamppost, and jostling about in its light was a crowd of youngsters. As I drew nearer I could hear them shouting words of encouragement and then I saw two boys engaged in a fist fight.*

I stood on the fringe of the crowd and watched. A tall, thin boy with a long pointed nose stepped forward and rang a bicycle bell. It was Lennie Cunliffe, who was in the same class as me at school.

'End of round two,' he announced. It was then I realised that this was no off-the-cuff street scrap. It was a well-planned affair.

Lennie Cunliffe, was a born organiser. He was always arranging things-*marbles contests, kite-flying marathons, inter-street football matches, or amateur talent competitions in his dad's big allotment shed.* Like all good impresarios, he always made sure he was in pocket at the end of every venture. And his currency, like everybody else's, was the cigarette card.

While the two fighters were having a breather between rounds, a rather fat boy wearing a Balaclava helmet walked over to me and shouted in my ear: 'Push off, Four-eyes!'

‘It’s a free country,’ I replied. ‘I’ve as much right to stay here as you have.’  
The fat boy, whose name was Barry Elmore, was ready with his answer to this one.

‘No you have not, Four-eyes,’ he yelled. ‘You can only watch this fight if you pay ten fag cards entrance fee – like we all have.’

Lennie came across to us.

‘Barry’s right,’ he said. ‘Give us ten cards and you can stay to watch.’

‘I haven’t got any photos with me,’ I said.

‘In that case, push off, Four-eyes,’ cried the fat boy, giving me a shove in the ribs. Immediately I pushed him in return and we stood glaring at each other.

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Lennie, his talent for organising coming to the fore. ‘Tell you what, why don’t you two have a fight? Fifty fag cards for the winner.’

He swung round and addressed the crowd. ‘We’ve got a grudge fight here,’ he shouted. ‘Ten photos each to watch a genuine grudge match!’

While Lennie was whipping up the enthusiasm, I was making the decision to tell him that I did not want to take part in this fight. I was about to make my verbal submission when I noticed the top card in the pile of Lennie’s hand. Wonder of wonders, it was the one depicting the elusive Bill Woodfull.

‘Is that the prize money?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ said Lennie. ‘*And there will be a bonus of ten photos for a knockdown.*’

The lure of the Bill Woodfull card was too much. I *abandoned my ‘peace at any price’ policy* and agreed to the contest.

‘Don’t forget to take your specs off,’ said Lennie, who never failed to show a fine regard for the welfare of his performers.

I removed my glasses and put them on the window sill of Mr Cox’s shop.

My opponent and I stood eyeing each other, fists clenched and raised and heads swaying from side to side – just as we had seen Max Baer do in the cinema newsreels.

‘Get on with it,’ one of the crowd shouted.

I decided not to prolong the agony any longer. Throwing caution to the winds, I dashed at the fat boy, fists flailing like a windmill. For a few fleeting seconds I thought I had the measure of him, but Barry was made of sterner stuff. He withstood my initial attack and then retaliated with gusto, his knuckles peppering my unprotected face.

The inevitable happened and blood began to pour from my nose. The crowd hooted their appreciation. There was nothing they liked better than a good nosebleed.

Just when it seemed that a monumental thrashing was to be my lot, a large figure emerged from the darkness and pushed through the crowd. It was Barry’s father.

‘Pack it in,’ he shouted and grabbed me by the shoulder, ‘Leave our Barry alone, you little bully,’ he roared, completely overlooking the fact that our Barry was doing very nicely and had not got a mark on him.

Most of the spectators scattered, including Lennie, taking with him the gate receipts and the prize money.

‘If I catch you hitting our Barry again, I’ll give you a clip round the ear,’ threatened Mr Elmore, before putting a protective arm around the shoulders of his smirking son and leading him away from the battlefield.

As for me, I set off home, vainly trying to stem the blood as it dripped off my chin on to my jacket and pondering the retribution that awaited me.

My mother was standing on the doorstep when I got back. *I was hustled up the*

*narrow stairs leading to the back bedroom that constituted our home and my explanation of events was received without much sympathy. I received a couple of smart slaps on the backs of my legs for my pains. But worse was to come.*

‘Where are your glasses?’ asked my mother.

It was then I remembered I had left them on the windowsill of Mr Cox’s shop.

‘They’ll be gone by now,’ said my mother, ever the pessimist and cuffing both my ears before adding in direct contradiction, ‘You go back there and get them before somebody pinches them.’

When I arrived back at Mr Cox’s shop there was no sign of my spectacles and then I saw them on the pavement, glinting in the light of the street lamp. Picking them up, I was horrified to see that one of the lenses was cracked. Somebody must have trodden on them.

My first thought was that I was in line for more trouble at home. Then I remembered once hearing Uncle Jack say that nobody in this country could be tried and punished twice for the same crime. Hoping for the best, I dropped the spectacles down the nearest street drain. Happily for me, my reasoning proved sound. My mother accepted the loss with a shake of her head and neither said nor did any more about it.

Despite my bleeding nose I was over the moon that I would no longer have to wear my spectacles for a while at least. However that could not compensate for the fact that I had come within an ace of obtaining the Bill Woodfull card, only to have it snatched from my grasp at the last minute.

I went to the drawer in the old cupboard where I kept my cigarette cards so I could take a look at the other 49 in the series and imagine how they would have looked with the Bill Woodfull card. But as I opened the drawer I realised that, even if the card had come into my possession, I would not have had a complete set of Famous Cricketers –

Far from it.

In the drawer was a broody white mouse who had chewed them all to pieces while trying to build itself a nest.

*But that’s another story.*