Wimbledon

Nobody laughed when the elderly man appeared on Court 16 on the first day of the Wimbledon Championships. Even though he was dressed, head to toe, in tennis whites and was obviously there to play. His opponent, busy arranging his bananas and bottles of water to his satisfaction, didn't so much as glance up. And the few spectators who'd scattered themselves around the gallery to watch certainly didn't notice that the old man had materialised out of thin air. To them, it seemed that he'd come out of the changing rooms as normal. And the fact that he must be at least three times older than the man who was to take to the opposite side of the net didn't register with anyone.

The match began, after the compulsory warm-up, during which neither spectators nor officials saw that the old man sat in his chair at the side of the court and let the tennis balls do all the work by themselves. And, very soon, the match ended. The Peruvian dragged himself forward to the net to congratulate his opponent, unable to fathom quite how he'd been trounced 6-0, 6-0, 6-0 without winning a single point. And then, having shaken hands, the old man vanished. And nobody noticed.

One person *almost* noticed. Geoffrey Bradford-Smythe, CBE, Chairman of the Management Committee overseeing the championships, kept feeling a strange itch in the back of his mind as he examined the results that evening. An itch that refused to be scratched, much as he tried. There was something – he struggled to narrow it down – something about that first result on Court 16. What was the name of that player? He searched down the page. Ah yes – E R Crangwillie-Epsom. His eyes almost slid over the name and dismissed it with a "That's all right, then." Then they slid back and locked onto it with a start. *Crangwillie-Epsom*? Who on Earth was he?

He stared at the name until his eyes began to water. Taking out a spotless white handkerchief and giving them a wipe, he studied the score behind the name. How the hell could that be any kind of proper result? he wondered. With great suspicion he wrote himself a mental note to look out the player's biographical details. Then he turned a page. And promptly forgot all about E R Crangwillie-Epsom.

Except – he kept feeling a strange itch in the back of his mind…

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On Saturday of that week, committee member David Cholmondeley popped in to Bradford-Smythe's office to discuss the order of play for Monday. Knocking on the chairman's door and strolling in, he was astonished to see Geoffrey, filing-cabinets thrown open on all sides of the room, scrabbling through their drawers and with muttered oaths hurling documents to the floor. The only word that David could make out was "Epsom".

As he watched, Bradford-Smythe disappeared into another drawer. Seconds later a slew of paper came flying in his direction. “Geoffrey, what are you doing?” he asked, now thoroughly alarmed.

Geoffrey turned, a post-it note stuck to his forehead like a deflated limpet attached to a shiny pink rock. “Bloody Epsom!” he growled.

“I know a jockey in the 5.50,” David said. “He could give you a good each-way bet.”

Geoffrey glowered at him, eyebrows knit together. “What?”

“Epsom,” David explained. “I thought you might want to back a horse in the Derby.”

Geoffrey harrumphed in an old-majorly kind of way. “No, you bloody fool. I mean Whatshisname Epsom. You know – the tennis chap who’s been beating all the foreign johnnies this week.”

David stared at him blankly. Geoffrey thrust his head forward, examining his colleague’s face. “You don’t know who I’m talking about, do you?” he said at last.

Dumbly, David shook his head. “Hah!” Geoffrey exploded. “I knew it!”

He hooked the chair from behind his desk and thrust himself into it, indicating that David should seat himself likewise. “It’s just like everyone else,” he huffed. “You know, David, I’ve spoken to just about everybody I can. Radio commentators, TV presenters, cameramen, umpires, ball-boys and -girls, even spectators as they’ve left the courts he’s been playing on. And not one of them remembers him. Nobody!

“What’s more,” he went on before David could ask what on Earth he was on about, “there’s not a single second of footage. Not one!” he emphasised, brandishing a fountain pen like King Arthur’s sword about to do battle with the Black Knight, “not one recorded TV highlight of the man – even though he was on Court One this morning beating the second seed in full view of the BBC coverage. It’s just as if he’s somehow managed to wipe every tape. Not only those in the cameras, but those in people’s minds, as well!”

David was just about to remark that he didn’t think they used videotape in cameras nowadays, but Geoffrey was staring at one of his thumbs with a worried expression. “Damn near got fooled myself,” he whispered. “Only the fact that I didn’t turn the page this time.” He suddenly leaned forward and buried his head in his hands, and David nearly bolted in panic to fetch one of the tournament’s medical team.

Geoffrey uncovered his face. “Again, you don’t know what I’m talking about. It’s this –” he grabbed a scree of paper from his desk and thrust it at David. “Read that page. Just that one. For God’s sake don’t turn it over.”

David took the proffered papers, still with half a mind to call emergency. He glanced down at them. “About half-way down,” Geoffrey told him.

He looked. And saw the name. He gasped as intense pain and sparkles of light shot through his brain. His eyes blurred. “Don’t give in to it,” Geoffrey instructed. “Concentrate on the name.”

David did. It took a supreme effort of will. “Who the hell is it?” he asked, his voice a strangled rasp.

Geoffrey shook his head. “I haven’t a clue,” he said. Then steel entered his voice. “But, David, as sure as I am that you should never drink Montrachet with roast beef, I’m certain that he’ll be on Centre Court on Monday. And then,” he growled, “I’ll have him. Whoever he is!”

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“Game, Crangwillie-Epsom,” the umpire called. “Crangwillie-Epsom leads by five games to love, third set, and by two sets to love.”

David felt Geoffrey tense beside him. “Right, I’ve seen enough. Time to take action.” He sprang off his chair like a sprinter at the starting gun, and David, startled, hurried to catch him up.

They’d commandeered two seats at the side of the court, as near as they could get to the action. And really, the action they’d seen was astonishing. At the start of the match Crangwillie-Epsom had shuffled onto court like an elderly housewife plodding around the kitchen in her carpet slippers. Each time it came his turn to serve he lightly tossed the ball into the air, then patted it – there was no other word – in the general direction of his opponent. The ball would then take off, rocketing over the net at upwards of 140 miles an hour, dipping at the last possible second to land within the service lines, then swerving crazily in either direction to flat-foot his opponent and score a clean ace. Every serve the same, from either side of the court. And on receiving, Crangwillie-Epsom stood casually by as his opponent’s serves, delivered with all the power he could muster, screeched either long or wide of the service box, or else crashed hopelessly into the net. Some kind of mind control? David thought. Briefly he wondered how he could learn it – it would come in very handy to clear the cars from his path in his daily commute.

Nobody else on Centre Court seemed to have the first clue what was going on. The crowd sat absorbed, cheering wildly each point won; the officials and ball-kids went about their jobs with their normal efficiency – to all intents and purposes, it was just another normal match.

Geoffrey had reached Crangwillie-Epsom’s side of the court. “Hey, you!” he thundered at the old man. “What the hell do you think you’re playing at?”

Crangwillie-Epsom, leaning on his racket as he prepared to serve, glanced up, an eyebrow raised quizzically. “Ah,” he said, and David heard a cultured voice, surprisingly strong in a frame so wizened, “you have penetrated my mist of confusion, I perceive.” Who on Earth uses phrases like “penetrated my mist of confusion”? David wondered.

The old man didn't seem overly perturbed, even though Geoffrey was towering over him, quivering with anger. Instead, he smiled a beatific smile. "Are you yet aware of who I really am?" he asked.

Geoffrey glowered. "No I'm not, and I want to know who the hell you are and what the hell you're doing messing up my championships!"

The old man straightened himself, and an unrestrained laugh from the spectators caused David to whip his head around and study them in bewilderment. "You're making them see something, aren't you?" Geoffrey growled.

"Merely a pigeon wandering the baseline on the other side of the court," Crangwillie-Epsom replied. "I will allow my opponent to shoo it away when we have finished speaking."

"Do you think you'll still be able to once I've finished with you?"

The old man raised the other eyebrow to join its fellow. "I believe so." He sounded so confident that a spasm of fear shot through David, and he hoped fervently that Geoffrey wouldn't rile the player beyond his limit.

Crangwillie-Epsom continued. "The appellation you have for me is, of course, an anagram. My real name is one that you may have remarked in the annals of this competition. It is Spencer William Gore."

David stared, astonished, and he felt Geoffrey start beside him. "Spencer William Gore!" the chairman exploded. "You can't be!"

"But I am." The elderly tennis player gazed at them with such an expression of calm assurance that David felt certain he must be telling the truth. But that would mean…

"The only Spencer William Gore that I'm aware of," Geoffrey continued, emphasising every word, "won the very first Wimbledon Championships in 1877. You cannot possibly be that man."

"Oh, but I am," the old man repeated.

David gaped at him, unable to join in the conversation. Geoffrey also seemed momentarily lost for words, and continued to stare at Spencer Gore.

"Are you also aware of the extent of my prize money when I won these championships?" Gore asked.

Geoffrey shook his head. David followed suit.

A dark expression crossed the old man's face. "I won a paltry twelve guineas," he told them. "Oh, and I was presented with a silver cup worth twenty-five guineas.

"A king's ransom for that time, you may expect. No!" He raised his tennis racket and pointed it at them for emphasis. "In today's currency – rather inferior coinage, I have to say – the sum of thirty-seven guineas is worth a mere twenty-five-hundred pounds.

"How much do the winners of this competition receive this annum? Greater than one million pounds," he answered his own question. "Why," he went on, prodding Geoffrey with the racket, "even the first-round losers will receive fourteen-and-one-half thousands. That is almost six times as much as I received – including the cup; which, I may add, could not be sold for its full value. I know – I attempted the sale."

"But –" David managed to interpose. Gore and Bradford-Smythe both turned to face him. "But you're dead," he spluttered on. "Surely – you died in 1906; that's over 100 years ago."

The old man – or old ghost, David couldn't help thinking – smiled again. "Oh, being dead is no barrier to achievement. In fact, it has certain advantages."

Geoffrey harrumphed importantly, attempting to take control of the conversation. "You may, sir, have once won these great championships. And you may be attempting – with some success I admit – to do so again. But I tell you, sir, that I will not stand idly by and let you do so!"

He might not have spoken for all the notice Gore took of his threat. "I also, you may know, played cricket for the county of my birth, Surrey. And for that I received precisely nothing! Unlike the indulged, over-compensated players of the current regime. Not a gentleman amongst them," he concluded with the slightest of sneers.

"So why don't you go and plague them instead of us?" Geoffrey snapped.

"All in good time," Gore replied complacently.

"There's something else," David said, remembering a history of the championships he'd once read. "You were only 56 years old when you died, I believe. Why do you look so old?"

"Life was hard in the 19th Century," the ghost told him simply.

"But look, this is nonsense," Geoffrey said. "I mean – I don't know how you are performing these tricks of yours: the winning, the wiping of everyone's memories and so on – but, in the name of heaven, *why* are you doing it?"

Gore regarded him with a keen eye. "Name it whimsy. Name it caprice. But mainly, it is for the money."

"But what on Earth can you do with money. You're dead!"

"For myself, nothing. But I have great-great-great-great grandchildren who are soon to come of age, and any advantage in life that I may give them I am sure will be appreciated."

David felt that the time had come to give his chairman some back-up. "Well, now we've seen through you, you must admit your plans are scuppered. There is no way we're going to let you carry on."

The old man regarded him with what seemed to David sinister amusement. All around them people were still laughing at the other player's attempts to get rid of the non-existent pigeon. "As you are

aware, I have the ability, in my deceased state, to control the minds of all around me." He glanced at the television cameras covering every inch of the court. "Not to mention the technology that appears to now control all aspects of this once noble sport. Do you honestly envisage being able to halt my progress to the title once again?"

Something in his certainty made David shudder. "How – how do you propose to stop us from stopping you?" he quavered.

Gore looked at him pityingly. "Oh, nothing malevolent, I assure you.

"I imagine," he continued, "that in some form you managed to keep my name – my assumed name, that is – in the forefront of your mind; possibly some form of documentation?" Geoffrey nodded curtly.

"Well, that is easily remedied. Presuming that you do not have the documentation with you?" He waited. "I perceive from your non-response that that is so.

"The only object, then, that is maintaining your fragile hold on my identity would be the scoreboard there." He indicated the giant system of LED lights at the other end of the court, which was proclaiming Crangwillie-Epsom's near-victory. David turned towards it, fascinated. He sensed Geoffrey replicate his movement.

The elderly ghost shot a final enigmatic smile at them both. "Sadly, my victory this annum will never be committed to the chronicles of history, unlike that in 1877. However," he quirked an eyebrow in amusement, "the prize-money will be most useful for my descendants." Swiftly, the lights on the scoreboard snapped off.

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The men's final on the following Sunday was the shortest on record. When the umpire announced the final score, nobody even noticed that the victor winked out of existence immediately after shaking hands. Nobody noticed that they couldn't remember who on Earth they'd just been watching win the title. Nobody noticed that the trophy was presented to no-one, and no champion was interviewed by the television presenter afterwards. And in his office, Geoffrey Bradford-Smythe also didn't notice that he made out the winning check to the name of Gore rather than Crangwillie-Epsom. Because, despite the strange itch he kept feeling in the back of his mind, he, like everyone else in the world, had never heard of Crangwillie-Epsom.

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Nobody laughed when the elderly man appeared at the Oval cricket ground on the first day of the first test match of the summer. Even though he was dressed, head to toe, in cricket whites and was obviously there to play...