6

Letting Paul win

As soon as the bell rang for the end of the lunch break, the sun began to shine again. It sailed out from silvery edges of cloud, and blazed over the playground.

The puddles on the tarmac steamed gently, and then disappeared. The damp stains on the nursery wall dried. Sunlight reflected brightly off the rooftops.

Mrs Collins stared out of the window, shaking her head in quiet disbelief. Then she turned to the class.

‘Pack up your work,’ she said. ‘I don’t care if lunch break is over. We’re going outside before it starts raining all over again.’

The class was astonished. It wasn’t often Mrs Collins ignored the timetable on the back of the door. It was hard enough to get her to let them take time off to make decorations at Christmas and all the other festivals, or paint the back-cloth if they did a little play. Now here she was offering an hour or so in the sunshine without being asked.

Nobody argued. They slid their books into neat piles, and put their pens and pencils and rubbers away.

‘Races!’ said Mrs Collins. ‘We’ll have a few races. We haven’t had races for such a long time.’

They spilled down the steps out into the playground, and Mrs Collins led them quietly round to the back of the nursery where there was grass. Races were pleasanter on grass, and this patch was not even overlooked by classes still imprisoned in front of their work books.

Out here they could have a really good time.

The races came in every size and description, one after another, as fast as Mrs Collins could think them up. The light haired raced against the dark haired. The straight haired against the curly haired.

‘Those in frocks against those in trousers!’ roared Mrs Collins.

She looked round. Only Bill had a frock on.

‘Forget it!’ called Mrs Collins. ‘That race is cancelled. Think of something else!’

Someone did. Those wearing red raced against those wearing no red at all. Those who liked cats better than dogs raced against those who preferred dogs to cats. The first five in the class (in alphabetical order) raced against the next five, and
so on and so on.

The first few times he ran, Bill slowed himself up, trying to keep down the flapping sides of his dress. Then he stopped bothering. If he were in shorts, he wouldn't mind, he decided. So why risk losing a good race just because he was haunted by a silly pink frock. He might be right back to normal tomorrow — but you could just bet there wouldn't be races again!

Soon everyone, not just Bill, felt much better. Their bodies unstiffened, their heads felt clearer, their spirits rose. Even Paul, who had a serious illness when he was a baby and could hardly run, scampered about, enjoying coming in last in the races.

Mrs Collins had cheered up enormously too.

‘Those who have wheely-bins against those whose families put rubbish out in large plastic bags!’

Everyone has rubbish. So everyone stood in line.

‘There are far too many again,’ said Mrs Collins. ‘We shall have to have heats.’

As usual she divided them in fives, with one left over. This time it was Paul, so she sent him off in a heat of his own. He pranced along in his curious, loping fashion, and threw himself merrily over the finishing line.

‘I'm in the finals now! I won my heat!’

Mrs Collins pushed the hair back from her face. She was hot.

‘Small break before this final,’ she called. ‘All of you stay here quietly while I slip inside for a moment. Whispering only!’

And she hurried off to fetch a quick drink.

Bill tucked the pink frock in tightly around his legs and lay back. The grass felt tickly under his arms and his neck. Above,

the fat clouds sailed over an enormous sky. The cool breeze fanned his face. He felt perfectly happy.

He heard Astrid whispering in his ear:

‘You’re in this final, aren’t you? You won your heat. So did I. So did Taliyah and Kirsty.’

‘And Paul,’ Bill reminded Astrid. ‘He won his heat, too.’

He narrowed his eyes against the sunlight to make them water and form rainbows between his eyelashes.

‘Kirsty will win,’ said Astrid. ‘She’s the best runner in the whole
class. And I only won my heat because Nicky tripped.'

'Races aren't nearly so much fun,' said Talliah, 'when you know exactly who's going to win.'

'It must be much worse,' whispered Kirsty, 'if you're someone like Paul, and know you're going to lose.'

'Paul can't have won a race in his whole life!'

Bill blinked the rainbows away. Now he was seeing shapes in clouds - a pig, a jug, a serpent with three heads, a wigwam.

Beside him, the girls were in one of their huddles, still whispering away.

'What if Paul did win, though?'

'He'd be so thrilled.'

'Wouldn't his mum be pleased? She's so nice. She sees me over Blackheath Road every morning.'

'She'd think we fixed it so her Paul won, though. And so would Paul.'

'Not if we were clever.

'Not if we thought it out first, and made it look good.'

Bill barely listened. He was distracted by the clouds still. He watched his three-headed serpent float over the wide sky overhead, and turn, slowly, slowly, into a giant wheelbarrow.

The whispering at his side went on and on.

Then:

'Right,' Kirsty said. 'That's settled.'

She turned to Bill.

'Now don't forget,' she whispered sternly. 'Just as you're reaching the finishing line, you get a really bad attack of stitch. You can't go on. You let Paul go past you. You let Paul win, is that understood?'

Bill took a last look at his cloud wheelbarrow. One of its handles was just floating away.

'Right-ho,' he agreed. It wasn't exactly his idea of a really good race - letting Paul win. But that was girls for you, wasn't it? Put them in a group and order them to whisper, and they'd be bound to come up with something like this.

And what did it matter on such a lovely afternoon? If it would make Paul happy, let him win the race.

'On your marks!'

Mrs Collins strode round the corner. They jumped to their feet.

Astrid looked horrified.

'The back of your dress is covered with grass stains!' she said to Bill. 'And they're the sort that never come out!'

Bill shrugged, and made for the starting line. Paul was already there, hopping about with excitement. Astrid, Talliah and Kirsty took their places.

'Get set!'

Kirsty turned to Bill.

'Bad luck, then,' she whispered, and grinned.

Bill winked back.

'Go!'

Talliah, Kirsty and Bill set off running. Paul shot away from the line in one of his extraordinary leaps. And as soon as he was a few feet ahead of Astrid, she fell tidily sideways and rolled on the ground, clutching her foot.

'Oh, my ankle!' she groaned - but softly, so that Paul would not overhear her, and turn back to help. 'My ankle's gone all
wobbly, I can't run at all.'

Then, cheerfully, she picked herself up and, limping heavily on the wrong foot, returned to the others waiting around the line.

'Bad luck!'

'Never mind, Astrid!'

Up at the front of the race, Kirsty and Talilah seemed to be battling it out for first place. Now Kirsty had the edge, now Talilah. Then Kirsty was in front again. But just as she might have pulled ahead of Talilah, the two girls' bodies seemed to become entangled: ankles wrapped round ankles, legs wrapped round legs.

Together they fell, rolling over and over on the grass, giggling loudly.

As Bill ran up, they managed somehow to roll in his way and bring him to a standstill. Twice he tried to get round them, but they rolled the way he was going. Paul was catching up behind, so finally Bill just jumped over their wildly flailing arms and legs. As he did so, he saw Kirsty wink.

Of course! He'd almost forgotten! Let Paul win!

And now there were only himself and Paul left in the race. So he would have to fall back and let him pull ahead very soon. The winning line was not all that far away. He was already halfway round the circuit.

Right, then.

Bill tried to slow his pace. He couldn't do it. It was remarkable, but though he could pound along like a well-oiled machine, and leap over tufts of rough grass without thinking, and even do a fancy sideways hop when he saw something glinting like broken
So it wasn't important.
But still he couldn't slow up and let Paul win. It would look
quite ridiculous, he thought. Everyone would guess, and Paul would be really embarrassed.

And then he remembered that he wasn’t supposed to slow down. The girls had sat in their huddle and worked all this out before the race began. They’d known he wouldn’t be able to slow down. They’d thought it all out – weren’t girls amazing?

He was supposed to pretend to have a stitch.

Right, then.

But he couldn’t do that either! And time was running out so fast. He’d almost completed the circuit. There was the finishing line, looming up only a few metres ahead. And there was the whole class, watching.

And he could not stop and double over, grinning and clutching his stomach as though in the grip of a fierce spasm of pain, pretending he had a stitch.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t act. It wasn’t that he would feel embarrassed about it. It was simply that he could not bring himself to do it. There was the finishing line, and here was he, and there was Paul, a really long way behind him now. He wanted to reach the line first, that was all. He didn’t want to let Paul win.

He wanted to win himself.

Ten metres to go. Now or never. The girls would kill him if he let them down.

Five metres. Now or never. Surely even the girls, if they had come this far, would find it difficult to stop and lose.

Three metres. Now or never.

One metre. Now.

There! Over the line!

(Never.)

A smile of triumph spread across his face. He’d won. He’d won!

He shut his eyes, the better to appreciate the sound of hands clapping, and the cheers.

Then, opening them, he met a cold and hostile glare from Astrid. And one from Kirsty. And one from Tailah.

There was everybody else, cheering and applauding madly. And there were three pairs of witch eyes, glowering at him balefully.

He’d let them down horribly. It was almost as if he’d cheated to win the race. And since all three had dropped out one after another, expecting that he would as well, he had in a way won it unfairly. If everyone had run properly, Kirsty would almost certainly have won.

The victorious smile on Bill’s face faded. He felt small and selfish and ungenerous. He felt ashamed.

But while Bill was standing, picking miserably at the embroidered roses on his pink frock, feeling quite rotten and wishing that everybody would stop cheering, Paul was still bravely pressing round the last bit of the circuit in his funny loping way. He looked happy enough. He had a huge smile on his face. In fact, he looked positively radiant.

He threw himself across the finishing line, and lay like a tortoise on its back, beaming up at the sky.

‘Second!’ he yelled in triumph. ‘I came second! Second!’ Everyone was cheering and clapping for Paul now.
Bill joined in, louder than anybody else.
'Hurray for Paul!' he yelled. 'Second!'
And he reached down to help Paul up.
Paul was a bit unsteady on his feet after the run. Whether it was excitement or exhaustion, Bill didn’t know. But Mrs Collins took one brief look at Paul’s thin, trembling legs, and said:
'That’s it! That was the very last race! Well done, everybody!
Happily they all trooped back towards the classroom. Astrid and Tailalah came up on either side of Paul just in time to hear him confessing excitedly:
'I’ve never come second in a race before. Never!
Kirsty came up behind Bill, and drew him quietly to one side.
'You just weren’t listening, were you?' she scolded. 'Lying there on your back staring at clouds, away with the fairies. You were supposed to pretend to get a stitch!’
'I’m sorry,’ said Bill.
'It doesn’t matter,’ Kirsty said. ‘In fact it was probably all for the best. If he’d come first, Paul might have guessed.’
She turned to face Bill.
'It’s just –’ Now, tipping her head to one side, she looked him very closely in the eye. ‘It’s just –’
'What?’
Kirsty shook her head, sighing.
'It’s just that somehow you seem different today. I can’t think what it is about you that’s odd. But you’re not you.’
She turned to go.
Bill reached out to try to stop her.
‘But who am I?’ he asked her desperately. ‘Who am I?’