

# THE DEFEAT OF MR. WICKHAM.

## PART I.

The thing was very unpleasant while it lasted. Sometimes even now Talbot wakes up at night all in a sweat, after dreaming that he is in the middle of that final game once more, with an enemy before and a greater enemy behind. But really the thing is over and Mr. Wickham is gone. So the story may well be told, partly in relief because it is finished, and partly as a warning to all those junior masters whom it may concern.

It is quite a modern story. When we reassembled last September, it was found that ping-pong had come to King Alfred's with us, as well as all its necessities and accessories. In a couple of days it was all the rage, and the whole school, from lads to monitors, went in for it with all their hearts. It was not only the chief subject of talk at dinner and tea and supper; but it was strong enough, in some cases, to find its way into the region of our slumbers. Such was the case with my particular chum.

"Say, Hanley," cried Talbot, coming to me one morning in much excitement. "I've had such a dream!"

"Oh? What about?" I asked carelessly.

"Wily, I've dreamed a perfect stroke. There isn't one like it. It was as plain and simple as A B C. It's a masterpiece!"

He was so much in earnest that I began to be impressed. "What was it like?" I enquired.

"Well, I'll tell you." And Talbot took his hair-brush to play the dream-stroke out before me. "To get it in properly, the ball must be rising pretty well. You hold the racquet firmly, but straight up and down—like this. You hit hard, drawing the racquet from left to right as it touches the ball. That puts a screw on—see? But even without the screw the return is so swift that no one could play it."

By this time I was full of interest. "Hold on," I said, as I slipped my collar on. "We'll go and try it," and in three minutes we were down in the common-room, racquets and balls in hand. I took the balls, Talbot took his position, and I began to serve him, just the kind of thing he wanted.

He couldn't manage it at first, but at about the sixth service it came. The ball was rising a little, but not more than usual. He caught it hard and sudden, holding the racquet in a curious position which I had no time to study. The ball came to my left corner like a flash, and was gone. I knew that it had skimmed the net and touched the table, and that it was now upon the floor; but that was all. I could scarcely claim that I had seen it even.

"Got it!" I cried in admiration, and "Got it!" cried Talbot in triumph. I had never seen him so radiant, so excited; but he had good cause, for that stroke was absolutely unplayable, in my opinion. At any rate, and I am of the same opinion still. I served again and again; again and again he brought it off successfully. We began to have visions of a championship, and could scarcely consent to make a pause for breakfast.

At breakfast we told the story to our table. Fellows naturally refused to take it in, and demanded to see the thing with their own eyes. Full of confidence, we agreed, and went back to the common-room the instant the meal was over.