

BOYS AND GIRLS



(By M. Collins, in 'Early Days'.)

'Come out, and have a game. Do! there's a good chap; we want one more on our side,' said Harry Grace to a younger schoolfellow.

'I don't think I can play; my foot hurts so.'

'What is the matter with it?'

'Chilblains, I suppose; but it aches very much.'

'Well! I don't know what we shall do, then. You promised to come,' said Grace, rather angrily.

'Yesterday I did; but my foot wasn't bad then.'

'I wouldn't make a fuss about such a little thing as that. I don't believe you want to play, and are trying to sneak out of it.'

'Indeed I'm not!' sighed poor Cyril.

'Try just for this once, then, and you could have a good rest afterwards.'

'Shall I ask the housekeeper to put something on it to ease the pain?'

'Oh, no, don't do that; she won't let you come out at all then. Don't be a coward. Running about may do it good.'

'Do let me off this time,' pleaded Cyril.

'Of course, you are not bound to play, even though you promised. I know that,' said Grace, getting still more angry. 'But I felt sure we should win the game if you would make up the number; and you are not half a bad player, though you are such a little chap.'

'I really will come to-morrow,' said Cyril.

'Yes, that's all very fine, and then some of the other fellows won't be there,' growled Grace.

'Well, I'll try,' said the younger boy, slowly rising from his seat, and putting his aching foot to the ground.

'That's right,' said Grace cheerfully, taking a different tone now that Cyril had decided to come. 'I always said you were a brick.'

Every time the foot went to the ground a sharp pain made poor Cyril flinch; but he could not bear to be thought a coward, so he struggled along, wondering how ever he should manage to run after the ball.

When they reached the playground Grace just had time to whisper in his ear, 'I say, you'll try to keep going till the game's over, won't you?'

'How queer you look! what's the matter?' more than one boy asked Cyril.

'Oh, nothing much,' he said; 'my foot hurts a little, that is all.'

'Come on! let's start at once,' said Grace, anxious to begin now the number was made up.

So the ball was kicked, and as it came flying close by Cyril, he tried very hard to reach it, but instead fell down flat on the ground.

Up rushed the other boys full of excitement; but stopped suddenly when they saw him lying there, with white lips and closed eyes.

'Hallo! youngsters, what is the matter?' said Jackson, an elder boy, who happened to be passing.

'Cyril Mason's fainted,' was the answer.

'Cut off, then, and get some water, while I undo his collar.'

The boys all stood round, breathlessly watching.

After a minute or two Cyril gave a long drawn sigh, and then opened his eyes.

'Here,' said Jackson, 'drink some of this water. Do you know what made you go off like that?'

'Perhaps it was the pain in my foot; it does hurt rather,' said Cyril.

'What a silly little chap you were, then, to come out and try to play.'

'Oh, it's nothing very much. I'm better now,' said Cyril; 'don't let it spoil the game, please. Couldn't some one take my place? I don't think I could play to-day.'

'Never you mind about the game,' said Jackson kindly. 'You only look fit to go to bed. Take hold of my arm, and see if we can get indoors.'

Poor Cyril stood for a minute or two holding up the painful foot, and then tried very hard to walk. But it was no good; every time it touched the ground he felt like going off again. So two of the big fellows made a bandy chair and carried him upstairs, leaving him in charge of the good housekeeper.

'What a little muff not to say he felt bad!' said Jackson.

'"Muff" you call him. I call it plucky to try to play,' said another boy.

Grace had not spoken a word, but had been feeling very guilty all this time. Of course, he knew perfectly well that it was he who made Cyril come out.

He was sorry enough now, and would have been glad to say so, but could not quite see how to manage it.

Another boy took Cyril's place, and playing went on; but Grace took no interest in the game now. His thoughts were with Cyril all the time. So absent-minded was he that his comrades had to rouse him up more than once when he missed what could have been a splendid kick.

After tea he ran upstairs to the housekeeper's rooms, and, knocking at the door, asked if he may see Cyril.

'No, that you can't,' was the answer. 'The poor little fellow has just gone to sleep. The chilblain has broken, and he has sprained his ankle. The foot was so swollen we had to cut his boot off, and the doctor says it may be a long time bad. He should have spoken of it before, and ought not to have gone out this afternoon.'

When the door was shut Grace turned away, feeling very miserable. How he reproached himself for dragging the little lad out when he pleaded so hard to be let off!

It was not that he meant to be unkind, for there was not a better-hearted boy in the school; but he was so fond of games that it often made him act selfishly. Now he could do or think of nothing till he had seen Cyril and asked his forgiveness.

Next morning found him again upstairs knocking at the door to enquire after the invalid.

'He had been having a bad night with the pain, but it was easier towards morning, and he was sleeping now. Master Grace might come up and see him after school if he wished,' said the housekeeper.

What a long morning it seemed! But twelve o'clock came at last, and the moment the boys were dismissed Grace flew upstairs two at the time. This knock gained him admission. Cyril was lying on a couch looking very pale. He seemed surprised to see Grace; and as the housekeeper left the room he looked up and said, 'I hope I didn't spoil your game, but I really did try to keep up.'

'Yes, I know that, and I've felt such a brute ever since that I couldn't rest without telling you how awfully sorry I am. Can you forgive me?' he said, holding out his hand.

Cyril shook it heartily, and the elder boy let a tear fall, which he hastily brushed aside.

'I feel much happier now. I am so glad you came up,' said Cyril, 'for somehow I couldn't help thinking about you last night when I lay awake. I was so afraid you might believe I was shamming.'

'Not a bit of it,' replied Grace. 'You don't look much like shamming this morning, and yesterday you looked a great deal worse. It was so good of you not to tell the fellows I made you come out. I didn't tell them myself, but I feel as though I ought to.'

'Oh, please don't,' said Cyril. 'I would so much rather you didn't.'

'Well! I'd "rather" not, even though I feel it would be the right thing to do. But I tell you what, Cyril, I can see now how utterly selfish it was, and this will be a lesson that I shan't forget in a hurry.'

'Now, young gentleman, it's time for you to go down,' said the housekeeper, coming into the room with Cyril's dinner.

'Right you are, Mrs. Attwood. I'll be off; but may I come up again?'

'Yes, certainly,' she said. 'My patient looks all the better for your visit. It will be some days before he can come downstairs.'

Now that Grace had seen Cyril he felt more light-hearted; but he did not mean to forget that it was mainly his fault the little lad was a prisoner. So every day the play-time was spent upstairs with the invalid.

In vain did Cyril beg him not to lose all the games. He had determined not to play any more until the foot was well, and they could be out together.

In spite of being confined to the house