

favour of a compromise, exclaiming—as they always did—that England was quite in the wrong; that had their party been in, the difficulty would never have arisen; and that we had no right to try and coerce a friendly nation into playing against a team including members to whom they objected; and that it would be, in fact, better if we acted up to the traditions of the Liberal party and allowed the Americans to choose the members of the team for us. By this, what they called “meeting the enemy halfway,” the whole difficulty would be solved. They professed to be virtuously shocked that the nation had become so drunk with vanity that it treated the suggestion either as a joke or with contempt.

The rumour had got about that the Foreign Secretary, who was the Duke of Birmingham, and the grandson of a very great Imperial politician indeed, was wavering, and that pressure had been brought to bear by more than one European Chancellerie to exclude Toplift.

It would have been strange had it been so, for the Duke of Birmingham, with the rest of the English aristocracy, was strongly imbued with the sporting traditions of the age.

As the excitement grew the crowd did indeed become dense, having collected for the purpose of cheering or hooting the Committee during the final scenes. They amused themselves, as crowds will, by cheering celebrities on their way to the Foreign Office to listen to the proceedings. The Prime Minister, who was still of great muscular build, despite his advanced years, received a specially enthusiastic greeting. He had owed his first political successes to the fact of his being the Ping-pong Champion of the world.

There came a whisper, which grew by degrees to a frenzied shout: “Toplift’s in.”

In another minute his name was spelt out on the sky, and the inhabitants of many a far-off hamlet turned bedwards with the proud conviction that, come what might, the die was cast and that England had done her duty.

The American press fulminated and threatened, for they had not been accus-

tomed to this firm attitude on the part of the country which had always treated them as spoilt and ill-balanced children. They held meetings, they warned England to beware, and were amazed to find that, contrary to the prophecies of popular politicians and orators, England was adamant, and quite ready to grapple with the consequences. So they gave in and Toplift crossed the Atlantic with the rest of the team.

On arriving in New York, they were received coldly. The papers were full of imaginative descriptions of Toplift’s demeanour on coming off the steamer. Some declared that he turned pale and shook like an aspen leaf, while others professed to have definite information that he had been landed in a very large cricketing bag.

But certain it was that till the day of the match no member of the public had set eyes on him.

By one of those curious revulsions in public feeling there had come into existence quite an amount of sympathy for Toplift, and all but those who understood the charming elusiveness of the American character thought the danger past and the quarrel buried.

The cricket-ground was worthy of the nation, which is never so high-minded as when putting up tall buildings. It was a copy of the Colosseum. It held one hundred thousand spectators, and the arena was of such dimensions that there was not the least danger of the hardest hitter reaching the auditorium. In front of each seat, all of which were numbered and reserved, rose a rod which could be lowered or raised at will, having at the top a glass magnifying sufficiently to bring the players within reasonable distance, and so conveniently adjustable that the spectator could lean comfortably back in his seat as if he were merely looking into a mirror. There were besides a number of electric stations at the base of the auditorium, whence by certain contrivances the scene was reproduced simultaneously on biographs in most of the great towns. There was also a horse-racing track around the outer edge of the arena.

The Americans won the toss and went in first. The teams presented the usual