

But, alas! for poor Talbot and his stroke. Something had come between him and the full realization of his dream. Perhaps it was the washy tea we had been drinking, or perhaps the thick bread and butter; things enough in themselves to spoil the beauty of any dream that ever came. Anyway, the wonderful stroke was clean gone, and it was in vain that he postured and protested. It was in vain, too, that I sent him in some of the very easiest balls that had ever run the length of a table. Most of them were shot back into the net, many flew against the walls at a tremendous pace, and the last of the series made straight for Cantling's eye. After that, amid the jeers of the spectators, Talbot threw down his racquet in disgust.

"I've lost it," he groaned. "It's gone!"

So it was; and it has not returned up to the present moment. The worst of it was that the dream stroke ruined Talbot as a player, for he never found himself at the table after that without feeling an irresistible desire to try once more to recover it. Thus he made the wildest shots imaginable, and quite ruined a style of play which had once been very promising. Sometimes he gets in a shot which has some resemblance to the unplayable one, but it is never the real thing. For the rest, he grieves and worries about it, thinking of the great things he would have been able to do if the secret hadn't vanished in such a disappointing way. He had some faint idea, too, that he might dream the same stroke again, but it hasn't happened up to this time.

All this, however, is only the introduction to my story, put in to give you some idea of how the ping-pong craze took on at King Alfred's. I must now move a little forward with my chronicle.

It was not to be expected that the thing would be allowed to continue. The football captain began to complain that he couldn't get the fellows to the field, they were so taken up with the new craze, and, on the other hand, the masters began to notice how the school work suffered in every direction from the same cause. There must have been a consultation between the various powers, and I have no doubt that a proper plan of campaign was drawn up.

One day we received a gentle warning that there was to be no more playing either in the studies or the common-rooms, or, indeed, anywhere upon the school premises. For a couple of days the thing was checked, and we kept quiet, but as there were no signs of danger, we soon went at it again as hard as ever. Then the masters made a sudden raid one evening just before preparation, when a score of games were in full swing. Dozens of racquets and piles of celluloid balls were ruthlessly seized, and a stern warning given for future players.

"Well," declared Cantling when we of the Fifth had found time to draw breath, "that was a real stroke, anyhow. Doesn't seem like a dream, Talbot does it?"

"Not at all," admitted Talbot, sadly.

"It's old Wickham's idea, you may depend," said Roberts. Anything keen and mean and dodgy must be Wickham. I vote we protest."

"How?" asked Smythe.

"By holding a grand tournament!"

Roberts was sure to think of something bold and desperate, and just at that time we were quite in the mood to go with him. We waited eagerly.

"It's this way," he explained. "Of course we can't expect to play much more after this, but we might as well have a real good wind-up. Then, if the head gets to know of it, let us say straight out that we did it as a protest against the confiscation of our things. That will show them just what we think of a move like Wickham's."

The idea was taken up at once, and the six of us who were present turned ourselves into a committee. It was agreed that the tournament should be held in Talbot's study, which was the largest at our disposal. The table there was only three-foot-six square, but I volunteered to add my own to it