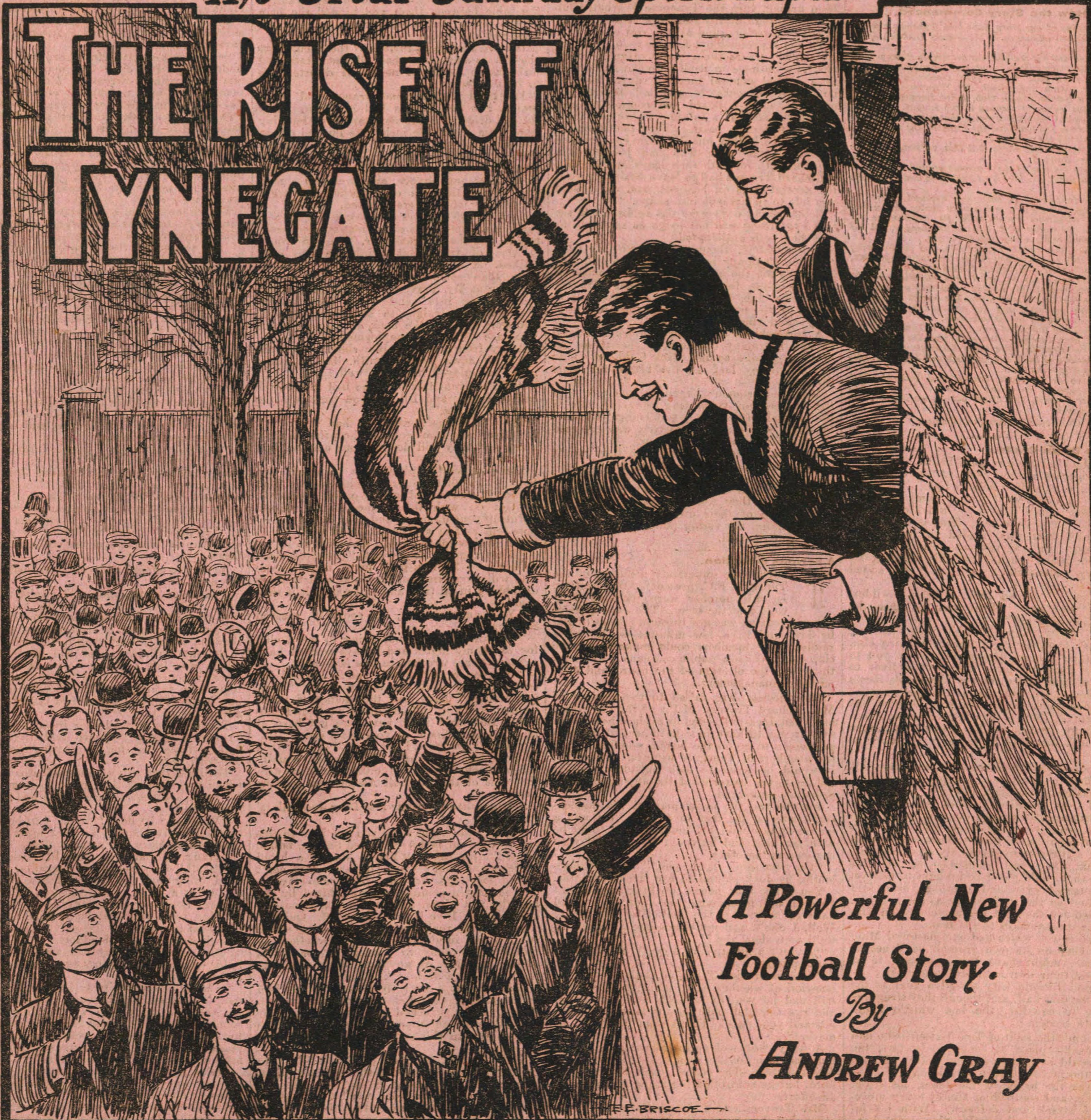


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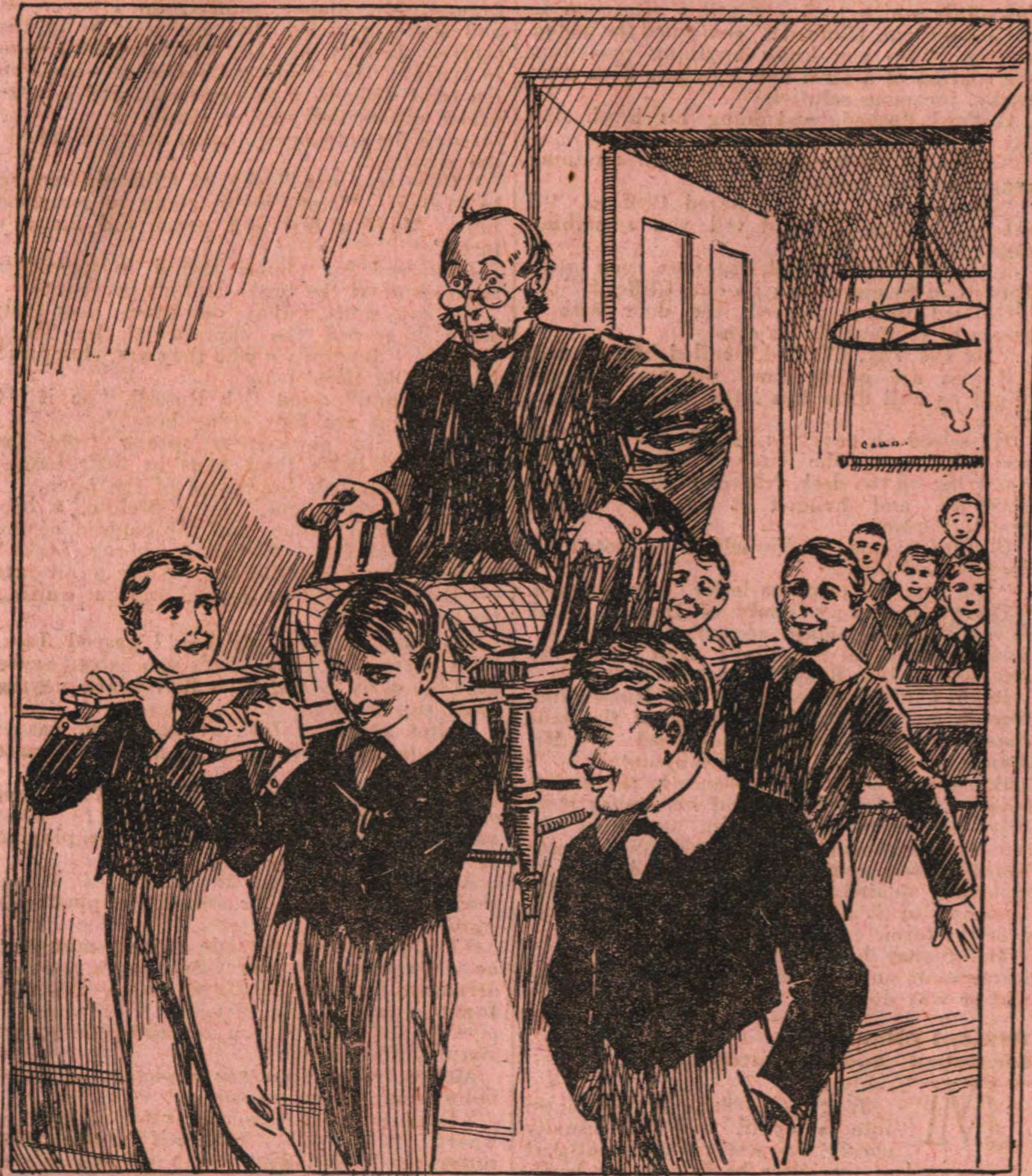


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*By
ANDREW GRAY*

THE OLD BOYS' MATCH.

A Rollicking Long, Complete Tale of Jack Noble and Pelham School.



Amid irrepressible gusts of laughter, Mr. Slaney was hoisted up on the boys' shoulders, and solemnly carried out of the room.

THE 1st CHAPTER.

Russell's Stickhard Cement—And a Use for It.

BOB RUSSELL, the eccentric inventive genius of Pelham School, gave vent to a fiendish chuckle of delight, and stirred vigorously at the evil-smelling contents of a jampot, which was suspended by a wire over the flame of a gas-jet in Jack Noble's study. Bob was an inventor in name only. The previous creations of his brain had failed lamentably; but Bob turned a stony eye on failure, and swivelled a glimmering orbit on the future success he hoped to attain.

He gave another scooping stir at his steaming concoction, and Jack Noble, the captain of the Pelham Third Eleven, who was busily engaged in jotting down on paper his team for the following Saturday's match, looked up with a sniff and a terrible frown.

"What the dickens are you up to, Bob?" he yelled. "For goodness' sake chuck that filthy muck out of the window! It's enough to choke a chap!"

Bob gave a snort of disgust, and then spluttered and sneezed, as a cloud of yellow smoke puffed up in his face.

"It's not a pleasant smell," he acknowledged bravely. "But then, one must put up with these little drawbacks in the all-glorious cause of science."

"All-glorious fiddlesticks!" growled Jack. "What is it? Another of your rotten inventions?"

Bob drew himself up haughtily.

"This," he snapped, pointing to the contents of the jampot, "is what is destined to be known in the world of trade as Russell's Patent Stickhard Cement. It'll stick anything from stamps to boiler-plates. A few drops on the hoofs of an elephant would hold the mighty quadruped as though rooted to the ground. It's wonderful stuff! It'd stick anything!"

"Well, I can't stick the niff of it, at any rate," coughed Jack Noble. "Great Scott, it's enough to peel the paper off the walls. Can't you go and juggle with it somewhere else?"

"You don't realise what a wonderful discovery I've made!" cried Bob angrily. "Your feeble brain can't grasp the possibilities of my invention. It's—"

"Rats to your inventions!" broke in the Third Eleven captain rudely. "What about your patent football-boot? That was a howling success, wasn't it? Give over, Bob, my lad, give over! You know as much about inventing as the lordly Clifford does

about football. Give it a rest." And Jack buried his head in his papers again.

Just at that moment the study door opened, and Macalpine, Pelham Third's right-back, Valence, and Murphy, the irrepressible Irish lad, came bounding in.

"Oh, here you are, you bounders!" cried Mac. "We've been looking all over the place for you! Drake and McIlvaine are holding a football meeting in their study, an' require the honour of your presence, old sons."

Jack grabbed up his papers, and sprang to his feet with a grin.

"Right, my bonnie haggis! Lead on MacMac of MacMacville!"

Bob carefully placed his precious cement on the mantelpiece, and the five went clattering down the corridor.

Several minutes afterwards the study door was pushed open, and Clifford, of the Shell, poked his long nose cautiously round the corner.

Clifford was the captain of the Junior Football Eleven at Pelham, and, as such, had always treated the members of the Third Form with scant respect. However great their ability, he would never select any of them to play for the junior team. This unfair treatment had excited the anger and indignation of Jack Noble and his chums to such an extent that they had formed an eleven of their own.

The Third Eleven, as it was called, soon made a name for itself on the football-field, and eventually challenged the Juniors to a match.

This challenge Clifford had at first refused to accept, but at last circumstances compelled him to do so, and the result of the match was a defeat for his team by the odd goal in three.

Since then the Juniors and the Third had always been at loggerheads, and Clifford and his cronies seized every opportunity to wreak their spite on their younger rivals, but with very little success. Jack and his merry chums were not easily to be caught napping, and generally managed to turn the tables on the Juniors.

Clifford glanced round the study, and, seeing it was empty, stepped in, followed by his special cronies, Marker, Prince, and Bayne.

"My maiden aunt, what a shocking niff!" sniffed the captain of the Juniors. "Like a blessed soap-factory! I always said the dirty little beasts never washed. It's enough to stifle one. Hallo, what's this?"

He stepped across to the mantelpiece and picked up Bob Russell's cement. There was a

label on the jampot, and, turning it round to the light, Clifford read the rudely-printed inscription on it.

"Russell's Patent Stickhard Cement! My hat, another of that young ass's rotten inventions. Phew, it niffs like bad drains!"

Clifford smacked a small quantity of the cement on the mantelpiece, and then placed the jampot on it. The look of surprise on his face was acute when he tried to pick it up again, and found it stuck as hard as iron. He stared at it open-mouthed for a second, and then suddenly gave vent to a quiet chuckle of delight.

Prince, Bayne, and Marker, scenting trouble for someone, grouped round expectantly.

"What's the matter, Cliffy—what's the wheeze?"

"Out with it, old son! Don't keep it to yourself!"

"What's the giddy jape?"

Clifford gazed vacantly at the ceiling.

"It's just struck me," he said, with a sly wink, "that our venerable young friend Russell is a very clever child, and ought to be encouraged in his scientific researches. I am sure he doesn't realise what an excellent cement he has concocted, and I think it is our duty to open his eyes to the fact."

His three chums looked puzzled.

"What do you mean?" Prince asked.

Clifford gave another chuckle.

"Well, we're due for mathematics in another twenty minutes," he continued, "and the Third take them with us under old Slaney. Noble, Russell, Mac, and Valence all sit on the same form—the front one on the left-hand side, opposite us."

"What the dickens are you raving about?" snapped Marker. "I fail to see what that has to do with young Russell's stinking cement."

"Come along with me, and I'll show you," grinned Clifford, picking up the pot of stickhard, and also the broad, flat paste-brush. "Let's get down to the Form-room before any of the others turn up."

THE 2nd CHAPTER.

Fun in the Form-room.

IN mystified silence Prince, Marker, and Bayne followed Clifford down the corridor to the Third-Form class-room. It was empty at the time, though another quarter of an hour would find it tenanted by several dozen intelligent and industrious scholars, being drilled in the rudiments of geometry by Mr. Slaney, the quick-tempered master of the Third Form.

"This is the form where Noble and his mouldy crew sit," grinned Clifford, with a wave of his hand, when they had gained the room. "Don't you chaps think it could do with a coat of varnish?"

Prince, Marker, and Bayne looked at one another, and a broad smile spread simultaneously over their faces.

"My hat, you're a genius, Cliffy!"

"Great Scott, what a howling good jape! Ha, ha! I can see young Noble's face when he sits down!"

"Jemima, it's a champion idea!"

Clifford blushed beneath this volley of praise, and then, uncorking the pot of stickhard cement, slapped a thick coat of it along the Form with the brush.

The cement was thin in consistency, and almost colourless, and showed hardly at all on the shiny, polished, wooden form.

Clifford surveyed his handiwork with a look of satisfaction.

"Well, if that don't surprise Noble & Co., I don't know what will!" he grinned delightedly.

"It won't do their bags any good, at any rate," smirked Prince. "They'll either have to leave them behind, or call the carpenter in and be sawn out."

"Come on, we'd better shift off now. We don't want to be found here when young Noble and his gang of infants come in!" said Clifford. He made a grab at the pot of cement, which he had stood on Mr. Slaney's desk, and at the same moment Bayne knocked clumsily against him. Clifford staggered, and over went the cement, a sticky stream gushing down right on to the seat of Mr. Slaney's chair.

"You walloping great idiot!" cried Clifford, aghast. "Look what you've done! By jingo, there'll be no end of a row! If old Slaney gets stuck down he'll raise the roof! Come on—quick! Barg off!"

The Junior captain grabbed up the remains of the pot of cement and the brush, and, with his three chums at his heels, dashed out of the room.

They were only just in time, for no sooner had they vanished than footsteps came clattering down the corridor, and Jack Noble, Mac, Russell, Murphy, and Valence came rushing in.

"That's settled, then," said Jack. "You'll have to stand down on Saturday, Valence, and—"

He broke off short. "What the dickens is the matter with you, Bob?"

Bob Russell, a puzzled look on his face, was sniffing at the air.

"Funny—sniff—smell," he said. "What on earth is it? Seems familiar to me somehow. I can't—"

"Why, it's your rotten cement!" cried Jack indignantly. "You don't mean to say you've brought it in here with you?"

"Of course not, ass!" retorted Bob. "I left it on the mantelpiece in our study. And yet it's just like it. By jingo, it seems stronger over here!"

He walked over towards the form Clifford had

so carefully prepared, sniffing all the time, and then let out a wild howl of rage.

"Here it is—here it is!" he shouted frenziedly. "Some rotten cad's pinched my stickhard an' smeared it all over our seat!"

"What a dirty trick!" yelled Valence angrily. "Who the dickens did it?"

"I'm thinkin' that's not hard to guess," put in Mac quietly. "I saw Clifford and his gang come out of here as we came down the corridor."

"Right first time, Mac!" cried Jack indignantly. "The beastly sneaks! They must have pinched it out of the study an' smeared it all over our form!"

"I'll wring Clifford's rotten neck!" bawled Bob, positively dancing with rage; then he suddenly stopped, and a slow smile crept over his freckled face. "No, I won't," he said with a quiet chuckle—"no, I won't! Ha, ha, ha!" And he suddenly burst out laughing.

Murphy touched his head pathetically.

"Poor beggar, the shock's turned his brain! Stark, staring mad!"

"Mad your grandmother!" scoffed Bob. "I'll soon show you whether I'm mad or not! Which form do Clifford and his crew sit on?"

"That one!" said Jack, surprised at the sudden question.

"Well, supposing we change forms with 'em? Exchange is no robbery, eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As the others caught the gist of Bob's idea they burst into a roar of laughter, and Jack smacked his chum on the back.

"Ha, ha, ha! By jingo, you're a marvel, Bob, old son! We'll hoist Cliffy & Co. with their own petard. They'll only have themselves to blame!"

Working with feverish activity they dragged the heavy forms across the room, and soon had the cement-besmeared one placed ready for Clifford, Bayne, Marker, and Prince.

A few seconds later the tramp of many feet approaching down the corridor, gave notice of the advent of the rest of the mathematics' class. Jack and his chums darted to their seats, and were each deeply engrossed in a book when the door opened a second later to admit the rest of the Third and the Fourth, including Clifford & Co. The captain of the Juniors cast his beady eyes keenly around the room as he entered, and a cunning gleam of triumph shone therein as he noticed Jack Noble and his chums seated, as he thought, on the fatal form. He nudged Bayne, and smothered a chuckle of delight.

"Diligent youths!" he sneered. "Wrapt in their studies, improving the shining hour—rotten lot of prigs!"

At that instant the door opened again, and Mr. Slaney stalked in, and threw a sour glance around.

"Silence!" he cried. "Kindly note that this is a class-room, not a bear garden! To your seats!"

With many an ill-concealed grin Jack and his chums watched Clifford, Bayne, Marker, and Prince plant themselves unsuspectingly on the prepared form—the form which they themselves were supposed to be adorning.

Mr. Slaney donned his mortar-board, and leaned back in his chair.

"Open your books at page sixteen," he bade. "Clifford, kindly go to the board and solve this problem for the edification of your fellow students. If two straight lines intersected by—"

Did you hear what I said, Clifford?"

Clifford had heard what Mr. Slaney had said, and tried his best to carry out the Form-master's orders. But Bob's stickhard cement had got to work with a vengeance, and the form and the seat of Clifford's trousers had sworn lifelong friendship, and were locked in a loving and inseparable embrace. Clifford writhed, twisted, tugged, and grew very red in the face, not yet realising what was the matter.

"Let go my bags, you fathead!" he hissed, turning furiously on Trimble, a fat, lazy Fourth-Former who sat behind him. "Don't play the giddy goat; let 'em go!"

The guileless Trimble, whose thoughts were far away, centred on the contents of the school tuckshop, turned a pair of surprised eyes on Clifford.

"Your bags—your bags!" he stammered. "What do you mean? I haven't touched them!"

Then blank, horrible realisation suddenly dawned on Clifford, and his eyes nearly goggled out of his head in mingled rage and chagrin. His splendid joke had miscarried—in some inexplicable way the forms had got jumbled up, and here he was caught in his own trap, securely cemented to his seat. The captain of the Juniors nearly choked with anger, and made another ineffectual effort to free himself, but with no success.

"What is the matter with you, Clifford?" roared Mr. Slaney, banging his fist on his desk. "Do you refuse to do what I tell you? Get up at once!"

"I—I—I can't!" stammered the unhappy captain of the Junior Eleven. "I can't move—I'm stuck!"

"Can't move—stuck? Rubbish! Fiddlesticks! Get up at once!"

Clifford, stung to desperation, gave a terrible wrench, and then sunk back with a yell of dismay as a loud rending sound echoed through the room. Something had torn, that was evident.

"Ha, ha, ha!" A roar of laughter echoed through the room.

"Clifford!" snapped Mr. Slaney, the Form-master sarcastically, "since you are unable to rise unaided, perhaps Bayne and Marker can assist you. Bayne, Marker, kindly set Clifford on his feet and bring him over here."

Bayne and Marker rose with alacrity; at least, they tried to rise, but their effort met with no result. They, too, were glued firmly to the seat.

Bayne glared accusingly at Marker, Marker glared at Bayne, and Clifford glowered at both of them. What a horrible fiasco! What a terrible humiliation! And then Clifford suddenly thought of Mr. Slaney's chair. What of that?

"I—I can't move!" gasped Marker at last. "Nor can I!" echoed Bayne, in horror-stricken tones. "There's something wrong with the seat!"

Mr. Slaney reddened with rage. "How dare you shilly-shally with me?" he howled, and then sprang to his feet.

Taking into account the energy which Mr. Slaney put into his vehement upward bound, it would not be exaggerating to say that his leap ought to have landed him well out into the centre of the room. This doubtless would have happened had it not been for the fact that at the last moment Mr. Slaney decided to take his chair with him.

At least, that is the impression appearances gave one.

The truth of the matter was the chair refused to be left behind. It clung to Mr. Slaney like a leech, considerably impeding his movements, and wilfully mixed itself up with his legs.

The Form-master strove manfully under these adverse circumstances to retain his balance, but without success. He bounced from the platform, the chair in tow, ricocheted into the big blackboard, which fell to the floor with a crash, and then came to rest, seated upright in his chair, in the centre of the class-room.

To say that Mr. Slaney was amazed, is to say nothing. He was flabbergasted, astonished, struck dumb with surprise, overwhelmed, chaotically bemazed, and in the midst of all these conflicting emotions, blind anger struggled for supremacy.

Mr. Slaney panted, Mr. Slaney puffed, he tugged and he pulled. But no, the chair was not to be got rid of so easily. It had got a strong hold on the little Form-master, and seemed very much averse to parting company with him.

Meanwhile, roar after roar of laughter was echoing through the spacious room, threatening to bring the roof down. Bob had collapsed in his seat like a wet sack, Jack was almost hysterical, Murphy in convulsions, and Mac and Valence suffocating with mirth.

"Go on, Cliff!" grinned Bob. "Help Mr. Slaney up! Have you forgotten your manners, or do you value your trousers more?"

"You rotten cad!" yelled Clifford, purple with rage. "I'll break your confounded neck!"

Grabbing a heavy dictionary from his desk, the captain of the Junior Football Eleven hurled it blindly at Bob. But Clifford's aim was evidently affected by his rage, for the volume missed its mark by a good six feet, and struck Mr. Slaney fairly on the side of the head, sending his mortar-board skimming across the room.

Mr. Slaney was by no means in a good temper. Seated there, an object of ridicule in the centre of the floor, he was only too eager to seize the opportunity to wreak his wrath on someone, and Clifford sprang into the breach like a lamb to the slaughter. From his sitting position Mr. Slaney directed the batteries of his anger upon him.

"Get up, sir—get up!" he roared, shaking his fist helplessly. "Get up at once and go to my study. I'll settle with you later on. Do you hear what I say? Get up at once!"

"I can't get up!" snarled Clifford sullenly, like a jackal at bay.

Mr. Slaney seemed to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

"Noble, Russell, help Clifford up! Do you hear what I say? Pull him from that seat!"

Jack and Bob sprang from their seat with grins of delight.

"Yes, sir!" they cried. And, moving over to the helpless Fourth-Former, seized him by the arms, one on either side.

"Leave me alone, you cads!" barked Clifford, struggling desperately.

"Now, then, all together!"

Bob and Jack heaved, Clifford yelled, something gave way with an ominous tearing sound, and the captain of the Junior Eleven was free. With a very red face he clutched desperately at the seat of his trousers, and glared around at his laughing companions.

"Now go to my study, sir!" barked Mr. Slaney. "Go at once, and wait there till I come to you. You shall be severely punished!"

Clifford backed towards the door amid fresh howls of mirth.

The door closed behind him, and Bob and Jack transferred their attention to the glowering and helpless Mr. Slaney.

"Shall we help you up, sir?" inquired the youthful inventor meekly.

"Me—I? Certainly not!" replied the Form-master nervously, gripping the arms of his chair. "Certainly not! I refuse to move from my seat—in fact, I—er—er—I can't move!"

A muffled titter ran round the room.

"What are you going to do then, sir?" inquired Jack politely. "You can't go up, stairs as you are. Perhaps we had better—er—carry you up, sir?"

Mr. Slaney hesitated, and then flushed hopelessly.

"I think you had better," he said nervously. "Yes, I think that is the best thing to be done. If you could only get me up to my room I think I could—er—get rid of this—er—"

—impediment. It really is most unaccountable. I can't make it out. I shall see that this matter is sifted to the bottom."

Valence and Murphy came to their chums' assistance, and the blackboard easel was passed under the seat of Mr. Slaney's chair. Then, amid irrepressible gusts of laughter, the Form-master was hoisted up on the boys' shoulders, and solemnly carried out of the room.

It surely was the funniest procession that ever passed along the corridors of Pelham School. Mr. Slaney clung to his chair like grim death, palpitating with nervousness, and Jack and his fellow-beasts of burden could hardly walk straight for their stifled mirth.

Up the short flight of stairs they carefully climbed, Mr. Slaney rocking like a ship at sea, and along the studies' corridor to the master's room.

Jack and his chums placed chair and occupant on the floor inside the door, closed it without waiting for any thanks, and sped down the corridor.

Once round the corner, they fell into each other's arms with howls of laughter, and shrieked until the tears ran down their cheeks.

"Don't speak to me. I shall bust!" panted Bob hysterically.

"Leave me here to die!" sobbed Jack.

"It was a champion wheeze," put in Mac faintly, holding his sides. "And Clifford ought to have a putty medal for originating it!"

And the others thoroughly agreed with him.

Meanwhile, Clifford, after being ordered from the class-room by Mr. Slaney, rushed up to the dormitory, and changed his nether garments with all the speed he could muster up, and with many a growl and threat.

"And all through that rotten Noble crowd!" he snarled. "By George, I'll get even with the beastly cads!"

Then, remembering Mr. Slaney's injunction, he hurried along to the Form-master's study, by no means pleased with the prospect of his impending interview. Mr. Slaney was no tyro in the art of manipulating the cane as the Fourth-Former had good reason to know.

Clifford knocked at the study door, and entered, to find it empty. The Form-master had not yet arrived.

He strolled across to the window, and as he passed Mr. Slaney's desk his eye caught an open letter lying on the blotter, and penned in Mr. Slaney's writing.

Clifford was troubled with very few scruples, and blessed with inordinate curiosity. Without a second's hesitation he picked up the letter and glanced through it. It read as follows:

"Dear Burchell,—Lecky being away at present, he has entrusted to me the task of seeing to all the football correspondence, and has asked me to write and let you know that the date he has selected for the match between the First Eleven and the Pelham Old Boys is the 21st ult. A brake will meet you and your team at the station.—Very sincerely yours, "PETER SLANEY."

As Clifford read the letter through a sudden cunning gleam came to his eyes as a plan flashed into his mind. Burchell, he knew, was the secretary of the Pelham Old Boys' Football Club, and Mr. Slaney's letter was to acquaint him with the date upon which the match between that club and the Pelham First was to be played. As the Form-master said in his letter, Lecky, the big-hearted and all-round sporting captain of Pelham, was away for a few days.

"The 21st," muttered Clifford. "By jingo, what a chance to get even with old Slaney! There'd be no end of a shine, an' he'd get all the blame. Let me see."

He drew out a little football handbook from his pocket, and rapidly turned over the leaves.

"Next Saturday, the 14th—Pelham First versus Bramall School—away. Good! I thought so. My hat, this is a great wheeze!"

With a chuckle the captain of the Junior Eleven picked up a pen, spread out the letter, and with a few deft strokes altered the date therein from the 21st to the 14th. Mr. Slaney's handwriting was very scrawling, and his twenty-one very closely resembled an ill-formed four.

Clifford glanced at his handiwork with a grin of cunning delight.

"By jingo, I can imagine the Old Boys' faces when they arrive next Saturday an' find no match for 'em! Ha, ha, ha! Old Slaney'll get the dickens of a wigg'in'!"

Clifford replaced the letter as near as possible where he had found it, and then scurried across to the other side of the room as footsteps approached down the corridor. The next instant the door-handle turned, and Mr. Slaney came jerking in.

The Form-master had managed to sever his connection with the chair, and that it had not been an easy matter was evident by the fact that he was wearing another pair of trousers. Mr. Slaney had also had time to cool down somewhat, and his temper was by no means so fiery as when Clifford had last seen him. He plumped himself down on a chair, after carefully feeling the seat of the same, and glanced at his watch.

"After due consideration, Clifford," he said pompously, "I have come to the conclusion that perhaps you had some provocation for your impudence. I shall, therefore, not punish you so severely as I had intended doing, but

will want to see three hundred lines of Virgil by lunch-time to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir!" snapped Clifford ungraciously; and turned to go.

"One minute, Clifford; I haven't finished with you yet." Mr. Slaney's voice grew sterner, and he adjusted his pince-nez.

Clifford stood at attention. He knew what was coming, and his cunning brain was working swiftly.

"Do you know anything about the disgraceful affair which took place this afternoon in the class-room, Clifford?" continued the under-master. "Do you know anything regarding the coating of a form and my chair with some sticky, tenacious solution?"

Clifford flushed, and hung his head, and Mr. Slaney gazed at him sharply.

"I repeat, Clifford, do you know anything regarding this matter?"

"No, sir—yes, sir!" faltered Clifford. "I—I think Russell could tell you something about it, sir."

"Ah, Russell! Well, suppose you send Russell in to me as you go out, Clifford."

Clifford turned towards the door with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"By the way, Clifford," called Mr. Slaney, "if you are going down the corridor you might as well drop this letter in the post-box for me."

He seized an envelope, hastily addressed it, and, picking up the letter to Burchell which was lying on the desk, folded in up, sealed the envelope, and handed it to the waiting Fourth-Former.

Clifford grinned to himself as he closed the door behind him.

"Oh, yes, I'll post the letter!" he laughed. "There's not much doubt of that. I think this will about square accounts, Mr. Slaney. You just wait till Saturday! And I dare say I've settled Bob Russell's hash as well!"

But if Clifford hoped to get Bob Russell into trouble by his sneaking evasion of the true state of affairs, when questioned by Mr. Slaney, he was to be vastly disappointed.

Bob soon proved his innocence to the under-master, and Jack Noble and his chums were only too ready to back him up. That the cement was of his own composition the popular Third Eleven centre half admitted, but he truthfully denied having had a hand in the smearing of it over Mr. Slaney's chair and over the form.

Mr. Slaney had no reason to doubt Bob's word, and, no solution presenting itself, the matter was dropped.

THE 3rd CHAPTER. Scratched—And a Scratch Match.

"MY only hat!" Jack Noble flung himself down into a chair, and his usually cheery face was a study in disgust as he gazed at the letter he held in his hand. It was the Saturday morning following the laughable cement incidents.

"What's the matter, old son?" inquired Mac, looking up from an impot. he was scribbling for Mr. Slaney. "Bad news fra' the old folks at home?"

"Bad news right enough, but not from home. This letter"—Jack waved the sheet of paper above his head—"is from the secretary of the Nomads' team, and it expresses their sorrow—I don't think—at being unable to play us this afternoon. They've scratched!"

"What?"

"The rotters!"

"Great Scott, no match to-day!"

A groan ran round the study, and Bob Russell positively danced with uncontrollable rage.

"What a beastly shame!" he snorted. "I think they might have had the decency to let us know earlier so we could have arranged a game with some other team!"

"Hear, hear!" growled Drake. "Fancy a Saturday afternoon and no match!"

"It is a bit rotten," admitted Jack moodily. "I suppose the best thing we can do is to pick sides and play a practice game."

"The First are playing away to-day," interjected Lawson minor. "We can play on their ground, an' get Slaney to referee for us."

"Good idea, my son!" cried Jack. "We shan't fare so badly after all. Hallo, there goes the old bell, confound it! Come along, chappies!"

After morning school Jack and his chums dashed up to their dormitory to get their football-kit, and then started off for the First Eleven ground. Mr. Slaney, who was in a very amiable mood that day, joined them at the quad. gate, and walked up with them, when sides were picked.

Jack was elected to captain one side and Bob Russell the other, and in this manner two fairly evenly-matched elevens were speedily got together.

As they emerged from the dressing-room Jack cast a glance around the field, and then gave vent to a whistle of surprise.

"Hallo!" he cried. "There's the lordly Clifly and his gang! What the dickens are they doing up here? Looks as if they've got some rotten wheeze on!"

Standing in a bunch just inside the entrance gate, were the captain of the Junior Eleven and his special cronies—Bayne, Marker, Prince, and Carroll. A broad grin was visible on the face of each, and Clifford kept casting furtive glances up the road which led to the village, and he glanced once or twice at his watch.

"It ain't often they honour us with their company as spectators," grunted Valence; "unless they think we're going to get a licking."

"They probably thought the Nomads were going to turn up, an' came down to cheer 'em," put in Mac drily, shoving his hands in his trouser-pockets.

A second later, giving them no further time for speculation on the point of Clifford and his chums' unlooked-for presence on the ground, Mr. Slaney, muffled up in overcoat and scarf, whistled the two captains to the centre. Just as the coin was being still spun in the air, there was the rattle of wheels in the road without, a cheery shout, and a large brake containing twelve sturdy lads swung through the entrance-gate and drew up outside the pavilion.

"Here they are!" choked Clifford, turning to Marker. "Now, we're going to see some fun. Wait a bit, and watch old Slaney's face!"

Jack and his chums stared in speechless amazement at the brake and its occupants.

"Great Scott, what on earth does this mean?" gasped the captain of the Third Eleven. "Do you see who they are, chappies? It's the Old Boys' team."

"My aunt," cried Bob Russell, "so it is! What—what are they doing here?"

The twelve new-comers sprang from the brake, and, with their bags in their hands, advanced towards the centre of the pitch.

"I say, you chaps," cried Melton, a big, sturdy 'Varsity Blue, and the captain of the Pelham Old Boys' Eleven, "where's Lecky? Where's the First Eleven? We're a bit late—I thought they'd be dressed and out waiting for us!"

"Bit late—what? My hat!" gasped Jack. "Bit early, you mean, don't you—about seven days too early? The First Eleven are playing away this week!"

Melton gazed at Jack as though he was of the impression that the junior had taken leave of his senses.

"Look here, young 'un!" he cried. "What on earth are you babbling about? First Eleven playing away? Why they're playing us to-day—the Old Boys!"

A gasp ran round the crowd of Third-Formers, and then Mr. Slaney stepped forward.

"I'm afraid you've made a slight mistake," he said smilingly. "Next Saturday's the date arranged for the Old Boys' match—the 21st. I am certain of the fact, for I arranged it myself, and notified you accordingly. Didn't you get my letter?"

Melton, whose face was a picture of angry indignation, nearly exploded.

"Look here; is this meant for a joke, or what?" he blurted. "Cause, if so, it's a jolly rotten one! You don't think we're going to be dragged all this way down here for nothing. Of course, I got your letter, an' it says as plain as punch that the date arranged for the match between the Pelham Firsts and the Old Boys is the 14th. To-day's the 14th, an' here we are; an' now where is the First Eleven?"

"But I tell you the 21st was the date I gave you in my letter," reiterated Mr. Slaney confidently—"not the 14th. If you had the missive here you could see for yourself that I am right."

"I have got your letter here!" cried Melton triumphantly, and with a flourish he produced an envelope from his pocket. He drew out a sheet of paper, and spread it out in his palm. "There you are, in black and white—the 14th! What did I tell you?"

Mr. Slaney grabbed the letter from the Old Boys' captain, and his eyes almost bulged out of his head as he scrutinised it.

"Good gracious—good gracious!" he stammered. "Really—really, this is inexplicable—most extraordinary! I am certain, positive that I put the 21st—absolutely certain; and yet here, as you say, it has the 14th. I am at a loss to understand, I—I—" He glared at the letter again, and then a look of anger slowly overshadowed his perplexed countenance.

"The audacity of it, the impudence, the unprincipled and brazen effrontery!" he jerked. "Look—look, this date has been altered; you can see plainly; some miscreant has altered it from the 21st to the 14th!"

"Impossible!" said Melton. "How could it have been done, an' who could have done it?"

"But I tell you it has been done!" vowed Mr. Slaney. "There is not the slightest doubt about it. Who has done it I really cannot say—I do not know. Unless—"

Mr. Slaney stopped short as his eye fell upon Clifford and his cronies, who were leaning over the fence convulsed with laughter. As he saw the master gazing at him the captain of the Junior Eleven straightened up, and assumed an air of careless indifference.

"Shut up, you asses!" he hissed to his companions. "Pull yourselves together. Look at old Slaney glaring over here. I believe he suspects me!"

And that is just what Mr. Slaney did do. The little master was quite capable of putting one and one together and making two, and he remembered that it was Clifford who had posted the letter to the Old Boys' secretary for him, and also that the Shell boy had been in his study alone with the letter lying unsealed on his desk.

But whatever Mr. Slaney's suspicions may have been, he kept them to himself. He had no desire to make a scene in public on the

