

NEW STORY OF CALCROFT SCHOOL!

The Boys' Realm



STORIES OF SPORT & ADVENTURE.

THE WINNING GOAL.

A Story of League Football.

By Popular CHARLES HAMILTON.



A red shirt bobs up, a ready head meets the ball, and it is in again in the twinkling of an eye.

TELEGRAM for Mr. Russell!" Handsome Jack Russell, the finest forward in the Hilton United team, came forward and took the telegram. A shade of anxiety crossed his face as he slit the buff envelope. Hilton United were playing Bristol Rovers that afternoon, and a huge crowd had assembled to watch the match between the two famous teams. From the crowded enclosures came a deep murmur like the sound of the sea, mingling with the strains of the band. The time for the kick-off was drawing nigh.

Manager Spratt, of the United, rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he looked out over the sea of heads. It would be a record gate; and a large proportion of the thousands present were keen backers of the home team, and had come to see their favourites win. In this the manager had not the slightest doubt that they would be gratified.

The Rovers, certainly, were in fine fettle. But the home team were remarkably fit, and Jack Russell, their champion forward, was a host in himself. If Russell played up to his usual form, Mr. Spratt had no doubt whatever that United would win easily. And that afternoon Jack was looking at the very top of his form.

"Good heavens!"

Mr. Spratt turned quickly towards Jack, who had uttered that sudden, horrified exclamation. The telegram had fluttered from the young forward's hand, and lay on the floor; while Jack stood like one stricken with utter dismay, his face pale as death.

A sort of shudder went through Manager Spratt. Was anything going to happen to put his finest forward off his form just before the match?

"Russell, what is the matter?"

Jack looked at him dazedly.

"My father—my poor father!"

"Bad news?"

Jack made a gesture towards the telegram. Harry Neville, the United captain, picked it up, and read it aloud. There was a hush in the room.

"Come at once. Father dangerously ill.—GEORGE."

The men of Hilton United looked at one another.

"I knew he was ill," said Jack brokenly. "I never dreamed it was so serious, though. Why, my brother George wrote me a few days ago that if father did not get worse he would come to the match to-day. I half expected to see George here. And now—"

He broke off, the tears rushing to his eyes. Neville and Mr. Spratt exchanged a glance.

"What's to be done?" said the manager gloomily. "You know how we stand, Russell. You know that with you we win, and without you we have about half a chance. You know how important this match is to us. You know how much depends upon the points at stake. But I waive all rights in the matter. You shall decide for yourself whether you go or stay."

There was a struggle in the young forward's mind, which was reflected in his pale, troubled face. His natural instinct prompted him to rush at once to his father's bedside, but he could not be deaf to the voice of duty.

His club depended upon him, and his duty was to stay and fight for his colours. He knew that he had no more right to abandon his comrades at such a juncture than a soldier has to turn his back upon an enemy. The cases were exactly similar. The struggle was keen and bitter, but it was not long.

Jack Russell raised his head.

"I shall not go!"

Mr. Spratt gripped his hand.

"Spoken like a man! It's hard—horribly hard—on you, Russell, but duty comes first. Your brother did not know how you were placed when he wired. Your father, I know, would be the first to tell you to stand to your guns."

"He would. I shall play!"

The manager looked at his watch.

"It's time you were ready, lads."

There was a tremendous shout from the vast crowd when the teams came scampering out into the field.

Fine and fit looked the Rovers in their blue and white; and fit, too, looked the home team in red shirts and white knickers. Ringing cheers greeted them. Jack Russell being especially singled out for applause. The Hilton crowd knew him, and knew his quality.

Many of them remarked how strangely pale his face was, though he walked with a firm step enough. And in that great crowd one man looked at him with amazement and rage in his glance. Mr. Slyme was a short, stout fellow, dressed in loud checks, with a great watch-chain, and wearing a silk hat at a rakish angle. His red, coarse face was suffused with rage.

"He's playing!" he muttered. "Russell's playing!"

Hilton United won the toss, and Bristol Rovers kicked off against a stiffish wind. It was noticeable from the start that the boys from Bristol were out for scalps. They came right into the home territory with a rush that was not to be denied, and the red shirts fell back to defend their goal.

A home half captured the ball, and passed quickly to Jack Russell as the enemy bore down upon him. Russell was quickly off with the ball, dribbling it down the field. The crowd looked on with intense keenness. Jack had the ball, and they looked to see him take it through the Bristol defence in his usual brilliant style. Cheers were trembling on their lips, but they were never uttered. A gasp of dismay came from the crowd instead. A Bristol half had robbed Jack of the ball in the nearest kind of way, and it was soaring over the half-way line.

What was the matter with Jack Russell? The Hilton crowd asked each other that question. Manager Spratt, wringing his hands as he looked on, could have answered it.

Jack Russell was playing, in duty bound; but the thought of his father, dangerously ill—perhaps dying—would not leave his mind. He was playing up as well as he could, but he could not drive that terrible vision from his mind, and his play suffered in consequence. The manager realised it with dismay.

If Jack played no better than this, United would have been better without him. It was too late now to play a substitute, so even that consolation was not left.

The manager's feelings may be imagined. He gave almost a groan when the visitors, following up their advantage, slammed the leather home, in spite of the efforts of the home custodian.

"Goal!" shouted the supporters of the Rovers gleefully.

The home crowd was silent. First blood to the Rovers!

It was not what had been expected, and the disappointment was keen. It was clear to all now that Jack Russell was off his form.

The teams lined up again, the Rovers in high spirits, the United trying to bear up against misfortune. It was not merely the loss of a goal that worried Neville. It was the knowledge that Jack was off his form, that this was only a fore-taste of the wrath to come.

Jack realised that he was not doing what was expected of him. He made a great effort at the restart, and for a time played up well, and the crowd cheered him, but it was only a flicker. He kicked once for goal, and the ball rebounded from the post into play, and a visiting back cleared. After that the red shirts fell back, and were kept pretty well confined to their own half, and the Rovers pressed them hard, and ever harder.

There was a buzz and a shout as the Rover captain sent the ball into the net, and the visitors were two up. Then the United defended desperately, and succeeded in keeping their citadel intact for the rest of the first half. As for scoring themselves, they never once looked like it.

The whistle went, and the teams, pretty well fagged by a gruelling game, went off for the short interval.

The feelings of the home team were too deep for words. Without Jack Russell, they would have been hopelessly outclassed by the Rovers; and with him—so long as he failed to play up—their plight was as bad. Added to that, there was the natural demoralisation caused by the utter failure of a player upon whom the whole team relied.

Mr. Slyme, the bookmaker, grinned as the teams went off. For some reason, best known to himself, he had not expected to see Jack Russell play; but if he played in the second half as in the first, the bookmaker's money was safe. The shock he had received had spoiled his play, and he might as well have been absent.

Not a single word of reproach did Mr. Spratt utter as he met Jack coming off; neither did any of Jack's comrades. They pitied him, and could understand how he felt about it. Jack flushed red as he caught the manager's eye.

"I've played rottenly!" he said, with a catch in his voice.

"I don't blame you, Russell," said Mr. Spratt quietly. "I suppose it was expecting too much of a man. But for goodness' sake, old fellow, do buck up a little in the second half, if you can. They are two up, and now they have the wind in their favour. Do your best!"

Jack drew a deep breath.

"I will buck up. I—I was a bit dazed, you know. But I will buck up, sir; and I promise you that if I can do anything towards pulling the game out of the fire, I sha'n't be found wanting."

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Harry Neville, slapping him upon the shoulder. "Make up your mind to it, Jack, and go ahead!"

"I will!"

The Hilton crowd received the players in silence when they streamed into the field again. The wind was now against the home team, and the Rovers, full of confidence from their successes, were very aggressive. From the kick-off they came gaily on. But they soon found that they were not to have things so much their own way now.

Jack they had marked as a feeble player, little to be feared. When the ball went to him in a pass from Harry Neville they were quite unprepared for what followed. For Jack was through them with it like lightning, and before the Rovers realised what was happening, he was streaking for goal, with only one back and the goalie to stop him.

The back, seeing that there was nothing else for it, charged right at him, and was staring upward at the sky the next moment, while Jack swept onward, dribbling the ball.

The Hilton crowd roared:

"Kick, kick!"

And Jack kicked, a low, sure kick that completely baffled the goalie, and the ball tried to climb up the back of the net, and the air rocked with cheering.

"Goal!"

"Goal!"

"Hurrah!"

Jack Russell's face was flushed, his eyes sparkling. He had bucked up with a vengeance, throwing himself resolutely into the game, and driving every other thought from his mind.

And his comrades realised that the Hilton champion forward was himself again, and the thought enlivened them and gave them new grit. Neville slapped Jack on the shoulder as they walked back to the centre of the field.

"Good old Jack! Keep that up!"

Jack's teeth were set.

"Rely upon me, Neville. We are going to win!"

Eager were the watchful eyes as the play recommenced. The Rovers, put on their mettle, fought hard, and showed their sterling quality. The play surged to and fro, and twice the home goal narrowly escaped, and as narrow were the escapes of the Rovers. Play was hard and fast, but there was no change in the score for a long time. At last there was a roar.

"On the ball, Russell!"

"Hurrah!"

The Bristol goalkeeper stood as watchful as a cat. He saw at a glance that the backs would never stop Russell, and that everything depended upon himself. Kick! The leather came in. Was it a goal?

Out it came from the goalie's fist; the backs were rushing in to clear, but a red shirt was there before them. Before the goalkeeper knew what was happening the leather had flown in from Jack's foot, and he was hopelessly beaten. He grimly picked up the ball.

"Goal!"

"Hurrah!"

The crowd were frantic with enthusiasm.

But the Rovers were on their mettle now. They came onward from the kick-off with a fierce rush, and fairly wedged themselves through the defence. And their sympathisers shouted as the ball found the net.

Again the visitors were ahead!

The second half was wearing away. There was a shade of anxiety on Manager Spratt's brow. Had the reawakening of Jack Russell come too late?

No! For the United were away again now, bearing the ball goalward with a splendid exhibition of machine-like passing, before which the Rovers' defence floundered helplessly. The leather went in from the foot of Harry Neville, and the crowd roared.

Three all!

Manager Spratt looked at his watch. Five minutes to time!

The crowd were silent now. They knew how much the minutes meant. From the kick-off both teams struggled desperately for the mastery. It was a battle of giants. They were equally determined that the match should not end in a draw—but to which side was the winning goal to fall?

At last the red shirts are going—going, breaking through the Rovers in gallant style. Russell has the ball, and he tricks the halves in a masterly style. But the Rovers have marked him well, and he will not get through. He is down—charged off the ball—a fair charge enough, though a rough one. But before he is down he has transferred to Neville, who is going strong. And he is up again in a fraction of a second, and backing up his captain as though nothing had happened.

Neville kicks, and kicks well; but the ball comes out again, well fisted. The goalkeeper breathes again; but he congratulates himself too soon. For a red shirt bobs up, a ready head meets the ball, and it is in again in the twinkling of an eye.

Phip!

It's the whistle. The game is done and won! From thousands of throats goes up the roar:

"Goal!"

"Russell! Russell!"

Jack Russell has kicked the winning goal! His comrades carry him off the field shoulder-high amid a scene of the wildest enthusiasm. And as he leaves the field a young fellow fights his way through the crowd, and springs towards Jack, who stares at him in blank amazement.

"George!"

"It was glorious, old fellow! I got here late for the first half, but I saw you in the second. It was great!"

Jack Russell looked at his brother dazedly.

"But—my father! The telegram!"

"What telegram?"

"The one you sent saying that father was dangerously ill."

George Russell looked bewildered.

"I never sent one! It's a mistake—or a trick!"

The telegram was produced. George shook his head as he looked at it.

"I never sent it. It was a trick to get Jack off the ground before the match. Some rascally bookmaker, I should imagine. Father is much better, or I shouldn't be here."

"Thank goodness!" said Jack. "And thank goodness I never went, after all!"

Manager Spratt gripped his hand.

"You did your duty, my lad," he said; "and I know at what a cost to yourself. But a man who does his duty never has reason to regret it in the long run. You've won for us, Russell, and we've beaten the Rovers, but I'm not more glad of that than I am to hear that your father is well. But, by Jove," said the manager, clenching his fists, "I'd like to know who the scoundrel was who sent the telegram!"

That could not be guessed, but probably a gentleman in loud checks and a rakish hat who was leaving the ground with a face so white and savage that people turned to look at him, could have told. It was well for the bookmaker that the crowd around him knew nothing of his villainy. Had they been aware of it, he would probably not have left the ground with a whole bone in his body. But the scoundrel had not escaped punishment. His losses on the match had hit him hard, and there was no prospect before him but instant flight.

Glad enough was Jack Russell to learn that his alarm had been unfounded; that the telegram was a cruel hoax. And glad was he, too, that he had not obeyed the false summons and deserted his comrades in the hour of need, but had remained to play up for his side and kick the winning goal.

THE END.