

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF SCHOOL LIFE

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The Lighter Side of School Life by Ian Hay

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IAN HAY

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OF SCHOOL LIFE**

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The Lighter Side of School Life

BY

IAN HAY

AUTHOR OF "PIP: A ROMANCE OF YOUTH," "A SAFETY MATCH,"
"THE RIGHT STUFF," "THE FIRST HUNDRED
THOUSAND," ETC.

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TRANSFER FROM C. G.

SEP

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF SCHOOL LIFE

CHAPTER I

THE HEADMASTER

FIRST of all there is the Headmaster of Fiction. He is invariably called "The Doctor," and he wears cap and gown even when birching malefactors — which he does intermittently throughout the day — or attending a cricket match. For all we know he wears them in bed.

He speaks a language peculiar to himself — a language which at once enables you to recognise him as a Headmaster; just as you may recognise a stage Irishman from the fact that he says "Begorra!" or a stage sailor from the fact that he has to take constant precautions with his trousers. Thus, the "Doctor" invariably addresses his cowering pupils as "Boys!" — a form of address which in reality only survives nowadays in places where you are invited to "have another with me" — and if no audience of boys is available at the moment, he addresses a single boy as if he were a whole audience. To influential parents he is servile and oleaginous, and he treats his staff

with fatuous pomposity. Such a being may have existed — may exist — but we have never met him.

What of the Headmaster of Fact? To condense him into a type is one of the most difficult things in the world, for this reason. Most of us have known only one Headmaster in our lives — if we have known more we are not likely to say so, for obvious reasons — and it is difficult for Man (as distinct from Woman) to argue from the particular to the general. Moreover, the occasions upon which we have met the subject of our researches at close quarters have not been favourable to dispassionate character-study. It is difficult to form an unbiassed or impartial judgment of a man out of material supplied solely by a series of brief interviews spread over a period of years — interviews at which his contribution to the conversation has been limited to a curt request that you will bend over, and yours to a sequence of short sharp ejaculations.

However, some of us have known more than one Headmaster, and upon us devolves the solemn duty of distilling our various experiences into a single essence.

What are the characteristics of a *great* Headmaster? Instinct at once prompts us to premise that he must be a scholar and a gentleman. A gentleman, undoubtedly, he must be; but now-

adays scholarship — high classical scholarship — is a hindrance rather than a help. To supervise the instruction of modern youth a man requires something more than profound learning: he must possess *savoir-faire*. If you set a great scholar — and a great scholar has an unfortunate habit of being nothing but a great scholar — in charge of the multifarious interests of a public school, you are setting a razor to cut grindstones. As well appoint an Astronomer Royal to command an Atlantic liner. He may be on terms of easy familiarity with the movements of the heavenly bodies, yet fail to understand the right way of dealing with refractory stokers.

A Headmaster is too busy a personage to keep his own scholarship tuned up to concert pitch; and if he devotes adequate time to this object — and a scholar must practise almost as diligently as a pianist or an acrobat if he is to remain in the first flight — he will have little leisure left for less intellectual but equally vital duties. Nowadays in great public schools the Head, although he probably takes the Sixth for an hour or two a day, delegates most of his work in this direction to a capable and up-to-date young man fresh from the University, and devotes his energies to such trifling details as the organisation of school routine, the supervision of the cook, the administration of justice, the diplomatic handling of

the Governing Body, and the suppression of parents.

So far then we are agreed — the great advantage of dogmatising in print is that one can take the agreement of the reader for granted — that a Headmaster must be a gentleman, but not necessarily a scholar — in the very highest sense of the word. What other virtues must he possess? Well, he must be a majestic figurehead. This is not so difficult as it sounds. The dignity which doth hedge a Headmaster is so tremendous that the dullest and fussiest of the race can hardly fail to be impressive and awe-inspiring to the plastic mind of youth. More than one King Log has left a name behind him, through standing still in the limelight and keeping his mouth shut. But then he was probably lucky in his lieutenants.

Next, he must have a sense of humour. If he cannot see the entertaining side of youthful depravity, magisterial jealousy, and parental fussiness, he will undoubtedly go mad. A sense of humour, too, will prevent him from making a fool of himself, and a Headmaster must never do that. It also engenders Tact, and Tact is the essence of life to a man who has to deal every day with the ignorant, and the bigoted, and the sentimental. (These adjectives are applicable to boys, masters, and parents, and may be applied