

The Turkish Cap

The school bell rang. Recess at last! We rushed out of the classroom. I took the 'gulli' ° out of my satchel before I ran out. Khushal took the 'clanda' and followed me. Panna, Raghubir, Brijpal, Prakash, Kaushal, Bishen, Nityanand, all dashed out, followed by others. We reached the ground outside our school compound where we usually played.

Prakash drew a big circle. Khushal entered it. It was his turn to begin the game. He placed the 'gulli' in the centre of the circle, and took the 'danda' to strike the gulli. The others took their positions round the circle. Everybody's eyes were on Khushal. He struck the 'gulli' hard. It flew out of the circle and went quite far. None of us could catch it.

Nityanand was the first to reach the 'gulli'. Picking it up, he threw it back with all his strength. Khushal struck hard again. It went flying in another direction.

Bishen was fielding that side. He tried to catch

"Short stick used in the game of tip-cat (gullidanda).

"Stick used in the same game.

it but it slipped through his fingers. He picked it up and threw it back towards Khushal. Khushal once again hit it back.

It was my turn next. But the way Khushal was hitting I felt my turn would never come. I would have to wait till the next day. I was hoping Khushal would miss just once. Then I would be able to start. But Khushal was proving too good a player for us.

Then Panna threw the '*gulli*' to Khushal. It did not even reach the circle. Khushal struck it forcefully towards Brijpal. Brijpal could not catch it either. It should have been an easy catch. I cursed him for missing it. Brijpal was also sorry for the slip. But what could he do now? He flung the *gulli* back with a vengeance. Khushal didn't miss this time either.

The '*gulli*' was now flying towards me. I was ready to catch it. But it never came!

All of a sudden there was a lot of noise. A man in *kurtci** *pyjama* was standing in the middle of the play field. His turkish cap was lying on the ground, upside down. The '*gulli*' seemed to have hit the cap on its way to me. The wonder of it all was that the '*gulli*' had landed inside the cap.

The man was furious. "You naughty boys! See, what you have done. I will teach you a lesson," he shouted.

"Long loose shirt worn with pyjamas.



"I am sorry, Sir," Khushal said promptly. "I did not do it deliberately. It just happened. But, I am very sorry."

. "Is this your playground? Why don't you play in your school compound?" the man shouted.

Brijpal went up to him. "Sir, we are sorry for what happened. Our school compound is very small."

"That is why we play here everyday," Bipin added.

"And this is how you play here, isn't it?" the man said wryly. "I'll go to your headmaster. Then you will learn how to play and where to play."

Khushal and Brijpal pleaded. "Sir, please excuse us. We will be careful in future."

The man did not appear to be satisfied. I thought I could save the situation. I picked up his cap to hand it over to him. He snatched it from me. I could not remove the '*gulli*' from it. Turning round, he started walking rapidly towards the school. All of us followed him, begging his pardon all the way. But he would not listen. I stole a glance at my friends. They all looked mournful. I too was scared of the headmaster's temper.

The man entered the school building, and went straight to the headmaster's office. The peon outside tried to stop him. He just brushed him aside and went in. We could hear loud voices coming

from within. All of us were praying silently. We had crept to the courtyard facing the headmaster's room. We tried guessing the conversation they were having and the consequences. Soon the peon came and called us. One by one we entered the headmaster's room.

"Who is responsible for all this?" he asked in a thundering voice. "How many times have I told you to keep within the school compound?"

We looked at one another. No one could say a word. The headmaster raised his voice, "Are all of you dumb? Why don't you speak up?"

I made bold to reply, "Sir, we are sorry. We shall be careful in future."

The headmaster merely said, "Apologise to this gentleman, all of you."

"We have been begging his pardon, Sir," it was Brijpal.

"You must apologise in my presence," the headmaster insisted.

We chorused, "We are very sorry, Sir."

"O.K. boys," the man said and turned towards the headmaster. "And thank you, Sir." He looked satisfied, and moved towards the door.

Just as he was going out and we were about to leave, the headmaster asked, "Now, whose stroke was it?"

I looked towards Khushal. He was looking at me. I looked round. My heart was beating faster

and faster. But how could I blame my friend? With a sinking feeling, I decided I would take the blame. A faint smile played on the headmaster's face. Somehow I felt it was not for any punishment that the question was asked. I opened my mouth to reply.

But Khushal was quicker. "Sir, it was my stroke. I am very sorry."

"What a stroke!" the headmaster exclaimed. "You strike the '*gulli*', hit a man's cap, make it fall, and then land the '*gulli*' inside it! A master player, no doubt!"

I could not suppress my laughter. But I could not laugh in the headmaster's presence, either. So, I checked myself and with some difficulty managed a wide smile. When I looked round, the others were also trying to suppress their laughter. We were eager to go out and have a hearty laugh. The man with the turkish cap also turned round at the door. He too looked amused. Still smiling he went away.

We trooped out of the room. Then we let ourselves go.