

An Extra Grand Long, Complete School Tale in this issue.

PLUCK

FACING THE MUSIC.
A School Tale. By JACK NORTH.
A LANCASHIRE LAD.
By ERNEST BRINDLE.

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"OH, HOLD ME TIGHT!" GASPED JACK. "SIT ON ME, OR I SHALL BURST! BOWKER ON HIS KNEES TO TAFFY!" (See p. 12.)

NO. 128. NEW SERIES.

THE RIVALS OF ST KIT'S

By Charles Hamilton

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

When Pat Nugent arrives at St. Kit's an election is taking place for the captaincy of the school between Arthur Talbot and Eldred Lacy. Talbot gains the victory. Pat is thrown into a cupboard by some juniors, and falls asleep. On waking up he hears voices—the voices of Eldred Lacy and his brother, Rupert Lacy, the squire of Lynwood: "You must ruin and disgrace Arthur Talbot, and drive him from the school. He is a menace to me—to both of us. But ruined and disgraced, driven forth into poverty and obscurity, I shall no longer fear him!"

Pat is eventually released, and becomes great chums with Blagden and Greene.

One day a tramp, named Black, stops Arthur Talbot and tells him he is his father. The latter believes him, as he has never known his parents. He gives Black some money. A day or two after Talbot receives a note from Black demanding more money. He calls on the tramp at the Dragon inn. On entering Black's room he is surprised to find Rupert Lacy quarrelling with Black. However, Lacy at once leaves the room, and the tramp asks Talbot for £5. Arthur replies that his guardian, the Headmaster of St. Kit's, has never given him so much money. "That's what I call mean. Isn't he rich?" inquired the blackmailer. (Now go on with the tale.)



Talbot is Seen Leaving the Inn.

"Certainly not! He is not poor, and he is very generous to me, but I cannot ask him for money. I had a little saved from my allowance; all that I sent to you."

"Little enough!" growled Black.

"It was all I had. I shall be in difficulties for the rest of the term for want of money," said Talbot, his eyes contracting.

"Well, I can't help that. Ain't I your father?"

Talbot bowed his head. Was this man his father? The evidence was strong, but a doubt lingered. Fate could not, surely, be so cruel to him. But if Black's claim was genuine, he had some right to his son's duty. At all events, it would be easy for him to bring Talbot to shame before all St. Kit's.

"You've got to help me," said Black. "Why shouldn't you? The squire, he has been good." Here the ruffian grinned. "He's helped me a bit, for the sake of old times. But I've been unlucky on a hoss, you see. It's all gone. I must have money to pay my bill here, or I shall be kicked out. Ain't it a son's duty to help his ole father—hey?"

"Do you mean to say that you have gambled away the money I gave you, and which I could so ill spare?" exclaimed Talbot indignantly.

"What if I has? Don't you start preachin' to me! Look here, I must have that fiver, and then the sooner you take yourself off the better I shall like it. If you haven't got the money, ask the doctor for it. He'll give it to you."

Talbot was silent.

"Tell the truth, now. If you asked the doctor for a fiver, wouldn't he part?"

"I have no doubt he would."

"Then that's what you've got to do."

"I will do nothing of the kind! What I can give you you are welcome to, but I will not rob my benefactor for your sake!"

"Who's talking of robbing? Ask him for it."

"It comes to the same thing."

"I don't see it. Anyway, I must have the money."

"I may be able to get some a little later. You must wait. And—and if I pull off the Dunraven Scholarship I could help you. But that will be some time yet."

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"I am entered for the Dunraven Scholarship at the college," explained Talbot. "If I win it—and I have a good chance—it will mean fifty pounds a year in money for three years, as well as other advantages."

The ruffian's eyes glistened.

"Fifty pounds is a lot of money," he remarked. "When will it come off?"

"It may never come off. But my chance is as good as anybody else's, and I have only two rivals for the scholarship. It will be about a month."

"That's a long time. You can't expect me to wait, unless you let me have something to go on with."

"I will try," said Talbot wretchedly. "I will do my best."

But you must be patient. It is useless your writing to me at the school; and it may be dangerous."

"How do you mean?"

"Several people noticed the letter, I am sure. Your writing is—peculiar." Talbot knew that the ruffian's uneducated scrawl must have caused surprise to the persons through whose hands the letter had passed before it reached him, but he did not like to put it like that. "Please do not write again."

"If you let me have what I want I sha'n't need to write."

Talbot turned to the door. He knew that it was of no use appealing to the conscienceless blackguard.

"Very well," he said quietly, "I will do my best."

Seth Black grinned as he went out.

Talbot went down the stairs, and passed out of the inn. He walked slowly, with drooping head and a clouded brow. He was too preoccupied with miserable thoughts to notice Haywood and Dunn lounging against a wall opposite. They crossed the street, and Haywood startled him out of his reverie with a slap on the back.

Talbot looked up quickly.

"Hallo, you fellows!" he said, trying to smile. It instantly came into his mind that they must have seen him leaving the Dragon, and the lurking smiles on their faces confirmed it. Talbot turned red.

"Thought we'd wait for you and walk back with you," said Haywood.

"Just so," said Dunn. "May I ask who your friend is in that classic abode, Talbot?"

Talbot looked at them steadily.

"No!" he replied. "It's like your cheek to ask me questions about my private affairs."

Dunn flushed, and forced a laugh.

"Oh, that's all right," he exclaimed, "I was only joking! I don't want any introductions to bookmakers, thank you!"

"So you think I have visited the Dragon to see a bookmaker?"

"Well, I suppose so."

"You are quite mistaken."

"Glad to hear it!" said Dunn, with a grin. "I really thought it would be too bad for the captain of St. Kit's to get in with a crew of betting-men!"

"As you saw me here," said Talbot quietly, "I had better make some explanation. I went to the inn to see somebody who happens to be staying there."

"Yes; I know the class of fellows who happen to stay there," said Dunn. "If your friend's respectable, he's made an unfortunate choice in an inn, hasn't he? Of course, he's quite respectable? Nothing in the bookie line? Never seen a racehorse?"

Talbot flushed angrily as Haywood broke into a chuckle at Dunn's humour.

"You can mind your own business, both of you!" he exclaimed. "I've told you what I went there for, and if you

"Don't like to take my word, you can think as you choose. I certainly don't intend to argue about it with you."

And he turned on his heel and strode away. Haywood and Dunn looked at each other rather dubiously. They had intended to take Talbot down; but they felt somehow as if they had been taken down themselves instead.

"He's pretty cocky about it, considering that he's at our mercy, if we chose to tell!" Dunn exclaimed, snapping his teeth viciously.

"Of course, we can't tell," said Haywood hastily.

"Of course not! But I expect it will leak out that Talbot is in the habit of visiting the Dragon. Others will very likely see him besides us."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Not at all. Most likely the story will soon be all over St. Kit's," said Dunn, with a lurking grin.

He fully intended that it should. Troubles were thickening round the captain of St. Kit's.

A Strange Mystery.

"Have you seen Liddell and Scott?" asked Blagden. Blaggy, of course, was not alluding to the two learned gentlemen to whom those names belonged, but to the Greek lexicon which was the result of their labours.

"No," said Pat thoughtfully. "Do you want it for your work?"

Blagden made a grimace.

"Well, I certainly don't want to read it for giddy recreation!" he said. "Haven't you seen the beastly thing anywhere?"

"Yes; I remember chucking it at Hooper when he looked into the study last night," said Pat. "I don't remember picking it up again. Did you, Greene?"

"No; I wasn't here," said Greene.

"Oh, hang!" said Blagden. "Some fellow has picked it up, then, and will use it till we hunt it up and reclaim it. But what am I going to do about this beastly word?"

"Oh, it's all right!" said Pat. "Get on with the rest, and I'll go and find you one. I can borrow one somewhere."

"All right! Buck up, then! You're a good sort!"

And Pat Nugent sallied out of the end study on a borrowing expedition. But he met with no luck. He looked into two or three studies to ask for a Liddell and Scott, but he was sent empty away. Then a thought struck him.

"I'll borrow old Talbot's!" he murmured. "Sure, and he's gone out, and he won't miss it. And I can shove it back when Blaggy's done, before Talbot comes in."

The junior had seen the captain of St. Kit's set out for the village, and so he knew that he was booked for some time.

Pat quickly made his way to Talbot's study, and went in, closing the door behind him. He looked about for the lexicon, but could not see it. Talbot, as a matter of fact, had lent it to Brooke, and it was not in the study. But Pat did not want to return empty-handed to Blagden, so he hunted for it high and low.

But it was not to be found. The junior was about to give up the quest when there was a sound of footsteps coming along the corridor. Pat gave a start. Although his errand to the captain's study was a harmless one, he did not exactly like to be caught rummaging about in Talbot's quarters, and for the first time it struck him that it showed considerable "nerve" on his part to come there to borrow a book without the formality of asking permission.

He stopped, standing thoughtfully with a wrinkled brow, and the footsteps came to the door of the study; but that they were not Talbot's he was certain.

Probably it was only a chance visitor, who had come to see Talbot, and would go again when he looked into the room and found it empty. Pat whipped into the cupboard, and drew the door shut.

The study door opened. There was no sound of anyone entering. Pat guessed that the visitor was holding the door open and looking into the room. Then there was a sound of a door closing.

So the visitor, whoever he was, was gone! Pat was about to move, when he heard footsteps in the study. The visitor had not gone! He had closed the study door, himself in the room.

Was it Talbot, after all?

A strange feeling came over Pat as he listened to the sounds of stealthy movement in the room. It could not be Talbot moving about in that creeping manner. The intruder was wearing slippers, and if it had been Talbot he would have come in in his boots, after being out of doors. Whom could it be?

Pat remained quite silent. That a burglar should be in the room before nightfall was, of course, impossible. It was one of the boys of St. Kit's who was exploring the captain's

quarters. Who was he, and what was he looking for? It was not likely to be somebody else in search of a lexicon; besides, there was a stealthiness in the light tread of the intruder which seemed to show that his errand was not an innocent one.

Pat wondered what he ought to do. Nobody had a right to be prowling round in Talbot's room like that. Pat was inclined to show himself and catch the intruder in the act. Only if it should happen to be a senior, it would be awkward to explain his presence in the cupboard.

But the matter was settled without any action on Pat's part. The door of the cupboard suddenly opened, and the daylight streamed in.

Pat, taken by surprise, blinked at the individual who stood before him. The latter gave a sharp cry. He was infinitely more startled than Pat. It was the prefect, Eldred Lacy! He stared at Pat as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Nugent!" he gasped at length—"Nugent, what are you doing here?"

Pat stepped from the cupboard. He kept a wary eye upon Lacy.

"Nothing," he replied. He had quickly recovered his usual calmness. He cast a glance quickly round the room. Lacy did not seem inclined to touch him. The captain's desk was open, and the drawer of his table also. Lacy had evidently been rummaging before he opened the cupboard. Lacy's glance followed Nugent's, and he flushed scarlet.

"I insist upon knowing what you were doing here, Nugent!" he exclaimed, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"Well, if it comes to that," said Pat, "what are you doing here yourself?"

"I—I came here to speak to Talbot."

Lacy was so surprised and confused that it did not occur to him at the time that he was giving himself entirely away by condescending to make any explanation to a junior at all. Had his errand to the captain's study been an innocent one, he would never have dreamed of making any explanation to Pat Nugent. Pat knew that perfectly well, and it proved to him—if it needed proving—that Lacy had come to the study in the captain's absence for some reason that would not bear investigation.

"Oh, you came to speak to Talbot, did you?" said Pat, with a sweet smile. "And, finding that he wasn't here, you looked in his desk, thinking he might have got in there, I suppose?"

Lacy ground his teeth. Pat's sarcasm showed him that it would not be an easy task to pull the wool over the junior's eyes. He glanced at the open desk and drawer, and a hunted look came into his eyes.

"I did not open them!" he said thickly.

"Then they must have opened themselves, for they were closed when I stepped into the cupboard!"

"You little rat, what do you mean to insinuate?"

"Nothing. I don't know what your little game is, and I don't want to know; but my object in coming to this room was an innocent one, and I fancy that's more than you can say."

Pat's eyes fearlessly met the prefect's as he said this. The colour wavered in the prefect's face. He was inclined to spring upon Pat and give him a record thrashing, but he realised that this would make matters no better, and might make them worse. He had been caught in the act of prowling in the captain's study; for what reason it was best known to himself, but it was certainly not one he could state if called upon to do so. The unlucky chance of Pat Nugent's presence placed him at the mercy of the junior, and he knew it.

Eldred Lacy was keen and cunning, and he was seldom placed in a fix he could not contrive to wriggle out of, but now he seemed fairly cornered. He could not hope that Pat would keep silent as to what he had seen. Pat was Talbot's fag, and he would naturally warn the captain that his study was not safe from being rummaged in his absence. Any attempt to bribe the junior to silence would be fatal, for that might be repeated to Talbot along with the rest.

Pat turned to the door. Lacy stepped forward, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You have not yet told me what you were here for, Nugent."

"I came to borrow Talbot's Greek lexicon."

"And you were looking for it in the cupboard where I found you?" sneered Lacy.

"I nipped in there when I heard your tootsies."

"A likely story!"

Pat put his hand on the handle of the door.

"Stop a minute!" said Lacy thickly. "I suppose you have got a yarn all ready to tell Talbot—is that so?"

Pat pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I don't know if I ought to tell him," he said. "I shall think it over. He ought to know that his valuables ain't safe when he leaves his door unlocked!"

"Do you think I came here to steal something, you little fool?"

"I don't know what you came for; you can explain that to Talbot. If you meant no harm, there could be no harm in my mentioning the matter to him."

"You little hound, get out!"

Pat got out. Lacy looked after him like a demon. Pat made his way back to the end study, in a thoughtful and rather worried mood. He did not quite know what he ought to do, under the very peculiar circumstances. Blagden looked up as he entered.

"Hallo! You've been a thundering long time!" he exclaimed. "Where's the lexicon?"

"The lexicon?" repeated Pat. He had forgotten all about it.

"Yes, you silly fathead! What was it you went for?"

"Sure, and I had forgotten it!"

"Well, of all the asses I ever saw or heard of—" began Blagden.

"Shut up!" said Greene. "Can't you see something's happened? He wears a worried look. What is it, Tipperary? Get it off your chest!"

"Well, something peculiar has happened," admitted Pat.

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you fellows."

"Oh, rats!" said Blagden, interested. "Out with it!"

"Well, I should like some advice, for a fact."

"We've got lots of that to give away—haven't we, Greene?"

"Tons!" said Greene solemnly. "Go ahead, Nugent!"

Pat explained what had happened in the captain's study. The two juniors whistled in expression of their amazement.

"I say, you're not joking?" said Greene.

"Honour bright!" said Pat seriously. "It happened just as I said. What do you make of it?"

"Blessed if I can make anything of it," said Blagden.

"What on earth could Eldred Lacy want nosing around in Talbot's study for? You're sure he was nosing around?"

"Yes; he moved all over the room, creeping like a giddy burglar, and opened the cupboard door where I was. When I came out I saw the table drawer and the desk open. He had gone through them, and was going through the cupboard."

"I can't understand it. Talbot hasn't anything that I know of worth stealing; and besides, it's absurd to suppose that Lacy would steal."

"Well, I know that seems rather steep," admitted Pat; "but, then, what was he searching for? It's plain enough that he chose a time when Talbot was away. Most likely he had been watching him go. What was he hunting for?"

"He's rich," said Greene—"at least, his brother is—and Eldred Lacy always has plenty of money; and Talbot only has his allowance from the doctor. It's absurd to suppose that Lacy went there to steal anything, even if he was cad enough."

"Seems so," said Pat. "But you haven't answered my question. What was he hunting for?"

It was a knotty question, and the chums gave it up.

"Talbot may have something or other that Lacy wants to get hold of," said Pat musingly. "Maybe a letter or something. Anyway, it's quite certain that Eldred Lacy wasn't rummaging through his study for the fun of the thing."

Blaggy and Greene had to admit as much.

"So the question arises, what's to be done?" said Pat. "Lacy's stopped this time, but he may be at it again. Next time he may not be caught, and he may find whatever it is he was hunting for. That would be hard cheese for Talbot."

"Talbot ought to be warned," said Blagden decidedly. "I don't like giving anybody away, as a general rule, but this is a different case. He has a right to be put on his guard, especially as he's been so jolly good to you, Pat."

"That's what I was thinking."

"You ought to tell him," said Greene. "Besides, you're his fag, you know, and it's your duty to see that his things are safe."

"You both think I ought to speak to Talbot about it?"

"We do," said the chums together.

"Then I'll do it. I think so, too."

But the chums, while they discussed the knotty point, reckoned without Eldred Lacy. The prefect guessed the decision Pat Nugent would come to, and he had taken his measures beforehand. While Pat was talking, Eldred Lacy was acting.

Lacy Steals a March.

Talbot came in, after his interview with Seth Black at the village inn, in a moody frame of mind, and crossed the old close with a sombre shade on his brow. At the door he was met by Eldred Lacy.

"I want to speak to you a minute, Talbot."

Lacy's voice was unusually friendly, and Talbot stopped.

His relations with the prefect, his old rival, had been extremely strained of late, especially since Lacy had felt the weight of his strong right arm; but Eldred seemed to have forgotten all about that now.

"Yes," said Talbot, always willing to accept the olive-branch. Bad blood in the school was always irksome to him, though Eldred Lacy seemed to thrive on it. "What is it, Lacy?"

"It's not a very pleasant matter, but I think I ought to give you a word of warning."

Talbot looked at him in amazement.

"I went to your study to speak to you about half an hour ago," explained the prefect, with an appearance of great frankness. "You weren't there, but I saw that the room had been turned out. Somebody had been rummaging through your drawer and desk."

Talbot gave a start.

"Surely not?"

"It's a fact," said Lacy. "I heard a noise in the cupboard, and opened the door, and found a junior hiding there. He admitted that he had hidden himself there when he heard me coming to the study."

The captain's brow darkened.

"Who was it, Lacy?"

"The new boy—Nugent."

"Nugent!" exclaimed Talbot, in astonishment—"Nugent!"

It was clear that the opinion he had formed of Pat made him unwilling to believe in this accusation brought against the Irish lad.

"Yes, Nugent," repeated Lacy carelessly. "Of course, it's no business of mine, but I thought I'd just mention it to you."

"Thanks very much!" said Talbot, looking very puzzled. "I'm afraid there must be a mistake somewhere. I can't imagine Nugent doing a mean thing like that."

"I know that you think well of him," said Lacy, with a sour smile; "and you've often taken his part against me. For that reason I did not punish him at all, but simply turned him out of your study. I thought I'd leave you to deal with the matter exactly as you thought fit. It's no business of mine, but, in your place, I shouldn't care to have my papers rummaged over by a junior while I was away."

"Scarcely!" exclaimed Talbot. "If this is really as you say, I shall make him sorry for it; but I hope he'll be able to make some explanation."

"He told me a yarn about coming there to get a Greek lexicon, but I thought that a bit too steep. He couldn't have imagined you kept a Greek lexicon in your desk, but there was your desk wide open."

Talbot looked very worried.

"I'm much obliged to you for telling me this, Lacy," he said. "The junior had no business in my room at all during my absence. I shall see what he has to say."

And, with a nod, the captain of St. Kit's passed on. He went straight to his study, and sent a fag to fetch Pat Nugent there.

Pat was in the common-room when the summons reached him. He went at once to Talbot's study, thinking this a good opportunity of telling Talbot what he had to tell him. He was rather surprised by the captain's stern look as he came in.

"Nugent," said Talbot, "Lacy has told me about finding you in my study during my absence. What have you to say?"

"Lacy has told you!" exclaimed Pat, in astonishment.

"Yes. He found you hiding in the cupboard. I don't want to punish you without hearing what you have to say."

"Has he told you the whole story?" demanded Pat.

"I suppose so."

"Well, then, I have nothing to say, if he has told you the truth, except that I meant to tell you myself."

"What did you come here for?"

"I was going to borrow your Greek lexicon. Blaggy wanted it. I nipped into the cupboard when I heard somebody coming. You see," explained Pat, "it only occurred to me then that you might not like me to borrow your Liddell and Scott without asking you. I knew you were away, and thought it was some chap who wanted to speak to you, and would go as soon as he saw you weren't here."

"He saw the drawers turned out, and heard you moving in the cupboard, and—"

"Did Lacy tell you that?" asked Pat curiously.

"Certainly."

"Well, I never thought much of him, but I didn't think he could roll out lies like that," said the junior. "He's a regular scorcher, and no mistake! Why, I never touched the drawer, or the desk either. I just hunted round for the book in the places it was likely to be in. I didn't think you'd be likely to shove a big dictionary in your desk."

"Do you mean to say that you did not open the desk?"

"Of course I didn't."

"You can see that it is open now," said Talbot, pointing to it.

"Yes, I see it. Lacy did that while I was lying low. Of course, he didn't guess that I was there until he came to rummage in the cupboard too, and then he found me. He didn't hear me move. That's all moonshine. He looked flabbergasted when he saw me. I'm telling you the truth, Talbot," said Pat earnestly. "You can ask Blaggy and Greene. I came to borrow a lexicon for Blaggy, and when I went back I told them all that had happened. If you like to ask them they'll tell you."

Talbot looked hard at the junior.

"You had no business to come here to take a book without asking permission," he said. "But if that were all I could easily overlook it. But somebody has been turning out my study, and Lacy says that it was you."

"That's just like him. I suppose he guessed I should warn you, and thought he'd have first whack. Why, I was coming to tell you all about it, Talbot. You can ask Blaggy."

Talbot stood with his brows wrinkled in thought.

Somebody evidently had been prowling in his quarters, and had been able to assign a reason for it, he would rather have believed it of Lacy than of Pat. Lacy he knew to be mean and underhand; Pat had impressed him favourably. But what possible motive could the prefect have for committing such an action? It was impossible to think of one. Talbot, of course, had not the remotest idea of connecting Eldred Lacy in his mind with the silver box. He did not even know that Eldred knew of its existence.

Yet, on the other hand, what possible motive could Nugent have had? He was not the kind of boy to rummage and spy for the pleasure of the thing.

The captain of St. Kit's had to confess himself utterly puzzled.

"If you want to lick me," said Pat, as he noticed that Talbot's hand rested on a cane, "I don't mind. Lick away! But I shouldn't like you to believe I was such a howling cad as Lacy wants to make out. Of course, I don't know what he was rummaging here for. But he was hunting for something. And I meant to tell you, so that if you had any giddy secrets you could look after 'em when Lacy was around."

"I haven't any secrets," said Talbot, with an involuntary smile. "I cannot conceive why Lacy should want to look through my study. For that matter, I can't imagine why you should want to either, if what Lacy says is true. It's the word of one against the word of another, and I don't know what to think about it. You may go!"

Pat went to the door; but there he lingered for a moment. "I say, Talbot," he said timidly, "I—it isn't the licking I mind, you know. But—but it would make me feel rotten if I thought you believed I'd do a thing like that, especially after you've been so decent to me. I—I wish you'd believe me!"

"I don't know what to believe," said Talbot.

"No; but—but—" Pat stammered. "I say, Talbot, will this make any difference? If you think I could do a thing like that, you won't want me for your fag any more, will you?"

Talbot looked him steadily in the eyes.

Pat met his glance fearlessly, and in his blue Irish eyes honesty and faith seemed to shine.

"I believe you, Nugent," said Talbot suddenly. "There's a—a mistake somewhere. But I believe you, and there's an end of that."

"Thanks, Talbot!" said Pat, with a falter in his voice. "I don't care what Lacy thinks of me, but—but with you it's different."

And he left the study and closed the door.

Talbot remained in deep thought. He believed Pat, and it necessarily followed that he did not believe Eldred Lacy. He saw at once how probable it was that Lacy had only spoken about the matter at all for the sake of having first shot, for fear of what the junior might say. The captain of St. Kit's knew that there must be more than a "mistake" about that matter, though he had used that word to Pat Nugent.

But what could Lacy's object have been? That was a mystery. When the captain went down a little later Lacy spoke to him. Talbot's manner was cold as ice.

"You've spoken to that young rascal?" said Lacy, affecting not to notice the change in the captain's manner towards him.

"I have spoken to Nugent, if that's what you mean?"

"Yes; you know that's what I mean. I suppose he gave you a different version of the affair?" said Lacy, with a sneer.

"Yes; he gave me a very different version."

"I expected it. He is the most untruthful little hound in the Lower Forms!"

"He is nothing of the kind!"

"Indeed! Does that mean that you believe Nugent, and not me?"

"I don't know exactly what to believe," said Talbot slowly, and looking the prefect in the eyes; "but I certainly believe that Nugent has told the truth so far as he himself is concerned. For the rest, I am puzzled. I don't want to talk about it."

And he abruptly left the prefect. Lacy gritted his teeth. He had stolen a march upon Pat Nugent, but it did not seem to have done him much good, after all.

Pat's Ward.

The end study was very quiet. It was the evening hour, devoted—or supposed to be devoted—to preparation by the juniors of St. Kit's. Pat Nugent had finished his work, and was sitting on the side of the table, his hands in his pockets, staring into the fire, with an unusually thoughtful expression upon his sunny face. Blagden's pen was still travelling at a slow and painful rate over the paper. Greene was oiling his cricket bat.

Blagden laid down his pen with a sigh of relief. "That's done," he said. "What are you so quiet about, Pat? You haven't interrupted me once. What's the matter?" Pat Nugent grinned.

"I'm worried, Blaggy."

"Got something on your mind? Out with it! Thinking about your chance of getting into the second eleven, I suppose? I don't think you need worry."

"No; that isn't it."

"Well, what is it?" said Blagden, in surprise. "You're not much given to worrying, Pat. You haven't fallen in love, I suppose?"

"Don't be an ass!"

"I fancy that's what it is, though," said Greene, shaking his head solemnly. "I've seen him making sheep's eyes at the girl in the confectioner's shop in the village. You've hit it, Blaggy. He's in love. He's wondering whether he could ask her to set up housekeeping on a weekly allowance of four shillings, and—"

"Oh, dry up!" said Pat, turning red.

"My dear chap," said Blagden, "don't be bashful about it. Ain't we your chums, entitled to share your confidence? Four shillings a week ain't so bad for a start, if your governor will keep it up after you are—"

"Don't be a silly ass, Blaggy!"

"Besides, you could take in lodgers," said Greene; "and—"

Pat got off the table.

"I shouldn't like to give either of you a thick ear," he said considerably; "but, sure, you're going the right way to get one apiece!"

"Keep your wool on," chuckled Blagden. "If you're not in love, what is the matter? Not thinking of going in for the Dunraven Scholarship and cutting out the seniors?"

"I'm thinking about Talbot."

His chums stared at him in amazement.

"What's Talbot got to do with it?" asked Blagden.

"Not ill, is he?"

"There's something wrong with him."

"I've never noticed it."

"Well, I have," said Pat seriously. "Now, if you think it over, you'll see that he hasn't been the same for some time. He's been looking off his feed badly, and it's as plain as a pikestaff that there's something wrong."

"Come to think of it, I believe you're right," said Blagden thoughtfully; "but I don't see what it's got to do with us, Paddy."

"If you don't, I do. Didn't we make Talbot captain of St. Kit's?"

"Well, we had a lot to do with it."

"Isn't he the finest fellow and the best footballer and cricketer in the school?"

"Rather, he's all that!"

"And didn't he take me as his fag, and keep me out of the clutches of that beastly bully, Eldred Lacy? He's been so decent to me that I can't help taking an interest in him, and as it was really us who made him captain, he's a sort of ward of ours."

Blagden giggled.

"He'd feel flattered to hear you say so, Pat, I've no doubt."

"Flattered or not, it's the fact," said Pat, "and we're bound to look after him. Besides, this touches me in a peculiar way. I've got a suspicion."

"Get it off your chest, then."

"I believe there's some plot going on against the captain."

"Draw it mild, old chap," advised Blagden. "Who are

the giddy plotters, and what's the plot? What do you know about it, anyway?"

"That's what I'm going to tell you. I've never mentioned it before, but I think I can trust you to keep a secret."

"Rather!" said Blaggy and Greene together.

Pat's face was very serious, and the chums wondered what was coming. They knew that the merry Irish lad was not given to taking things too seriously, and he was the last boy in the world to make a mountain out of a molehill.

"It's something that happened on the day I came to St. Kit's," said Pat.

"And you never mentioned it before?"

"I've thought of doing so a good many times. You remember the time you shut me up in the cupboard in Lacy's study, because you were afraid I might vote for him?"

Blagden and Greene grinned at the recollection.

"Well, that's ancient history," said Blagden. "What about it?"

"You remember that when you let me out I was as keen to vote for Talbot at the election as you were, and you were surprised?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Well, I'll tell you the reason. While I was in the cupboard, Lacy and his brother, the squire of Lynwood, came in, and I couldn't help hearing what they said."

Blagden whistled.

"Was it anything about Talbot?"

"Yes, and it nearly made my hair stand on end. I can't remember exactly what their words were, but the squire said he hated and feared Talbot, and told Eldred Lacy that he expected his help to disgrace him and drive him from the school."

"Great Scott!"

"Lacy was to strain every nerve to get in as captain, so that he would have more chance of bringing about Talbot's ruin. Now you know why I was so keen to vote for Talbot and to get him in as captain of St. Kit's."

"It seems impossible. Why should Squire Lacy, of Lynwood, be afraid of Talbot?"

"I can't pretend to explain that, of course."

"But I say," said Greene suddenly, "we know there's something fishy about the squire, anyway. Don't you remember that time we snowballed Lacy, and that dirty tramp fellow spoke to him, and claimed to be a friend of the squire. Seth Black, he called himself. I thought at the time that it was mighty queer, and it looked as if the blackguard was a rotten black-mailer, or something."

Another long instalment in next Saturday's PLUCK

Your Editor's Corner.

All letters should be addressed, "The Editor, PLUCK, 2, Carmelite House, Carmelite Street, London."

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The Boys of St. Jim's—to wit: Jack Blake, Augustus, and Figgins & Co., undertake a most serious task in the reforming of an apparently rank outsider, known as "Marmy."

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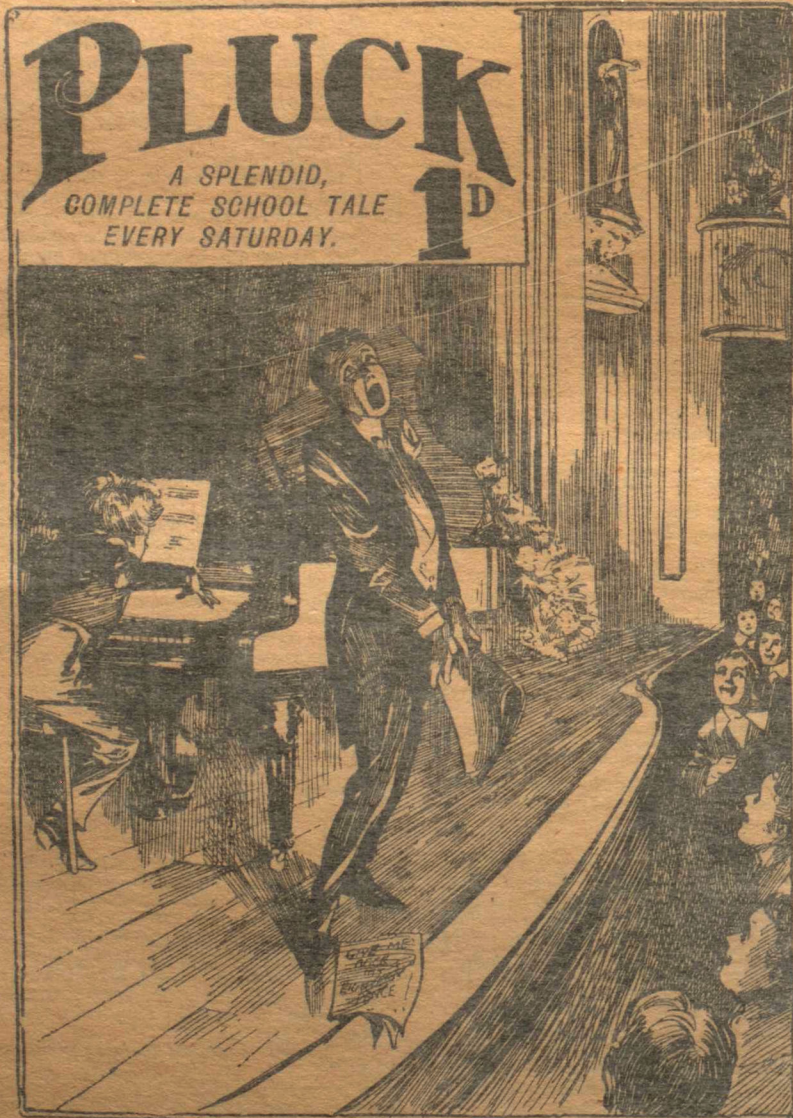
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YOUR EDITOR.



This picture depicts an incident from "The Reformation of Marmaduke," by Chas. Hamilton, one of the two complete tales for next Saturday's PLUCK. 32 pages, Price 1d.

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