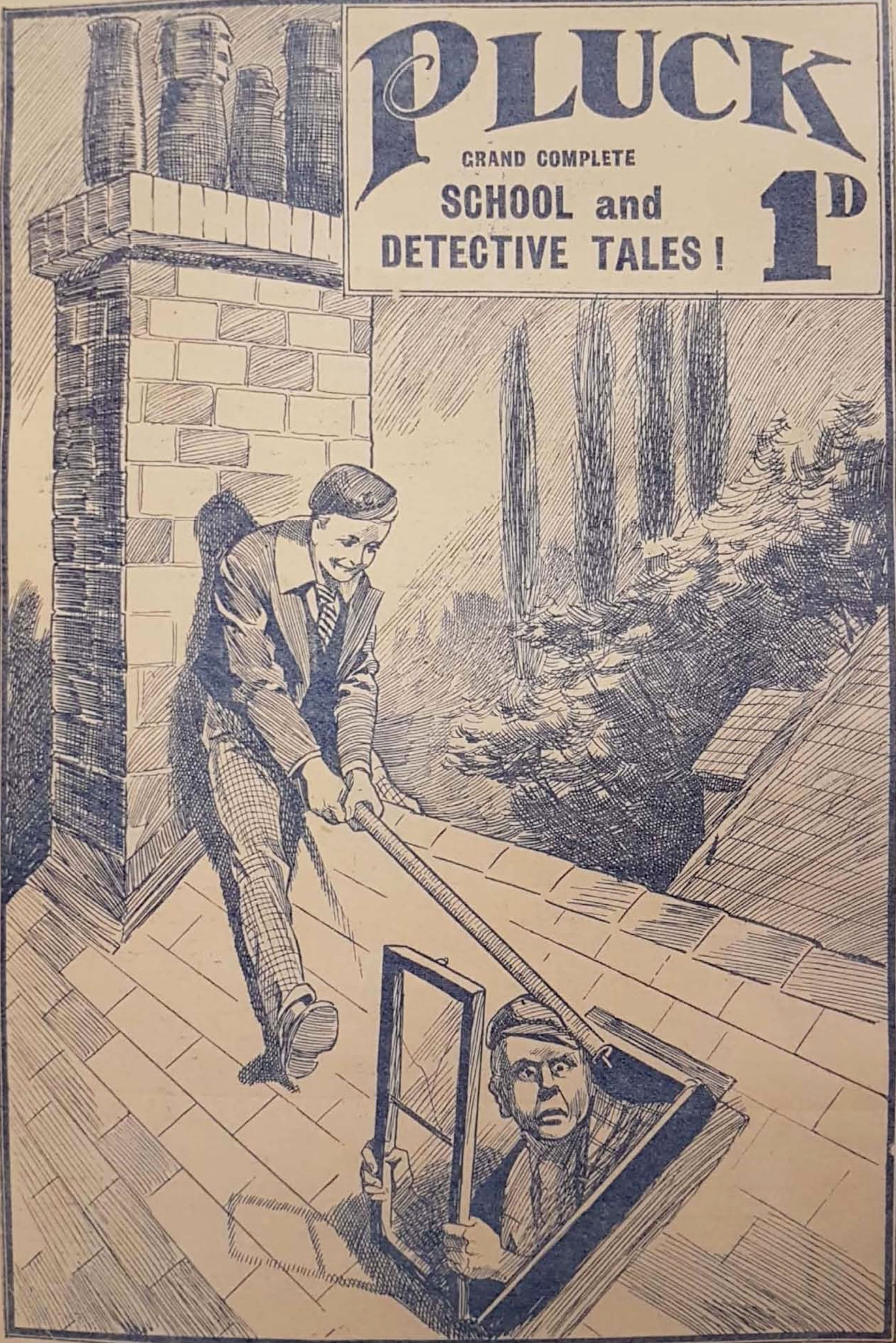


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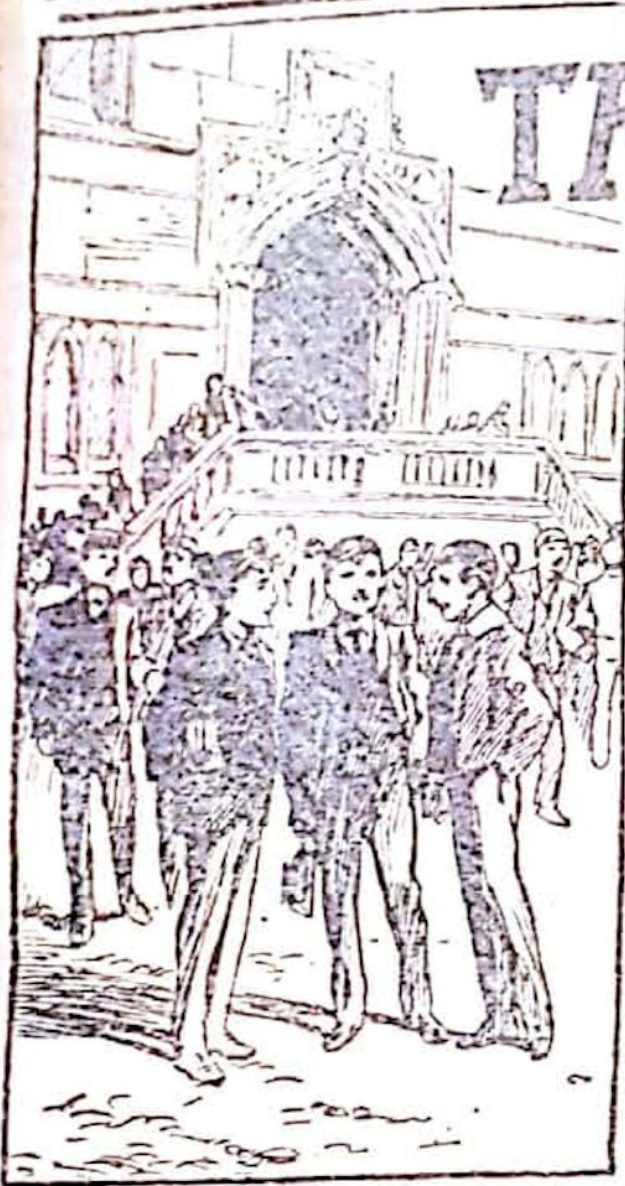


THE RED FACE OF BARTY EMERGED FROM THE SKYLIGHT, AND BOB PROMPTLY TAPPED HIM GOOD AND HARD WITH THE BLIND-ROLLER. (See page 164.)
NO. 140. VOL. 6. NEW SERIES.

NEW SCHOOL TALE.

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THE RIVALRY OF ST KIT'S



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, but afterwards resigns his position on account of a mean plot instigated by Eldred Lacy and his brother, who is Squire of Lynwood. Soon after, the election for the position of captain, which Talbot has vacated, draws near, and Talbot's chum Brooke, who opposes Lacy, gains the majority of votes, and so is elected captain of St. Kit's. Lacy is asked by his brother to steal a silver box belonging to Talbot which contains important documents. He gets possession of it, and goes to his study, where Pat Nugent and his chums are hiding. Lacy locks the door, and in taking the silver box from his pocket drops it. The lid flies open, and secret papers are revealed. A knock comes to the door, and the thief is obliged to let Talbot in. He has discovered the theft, and in the end Lacy hands over the box, but not the papers. Talbot is just leaving when Pat, Greene, and Blagden show themselves. Lacy stood, pale as death, biting his lips. (Now go on with the story).

A Question of Price.

His triumph was shattered in a moment; and again it was Pat Nugent, the junior whom he hated, who had baffled him.

"Talbot! He—he—"

Pat gasped for breath in his excitement.

"He——" gasped Greene.

"He——" gasped Blagden.

Talbot smiled slightly.

"One at a time," he said. "Now, what's the row about?"

"He——"

"He——"

"He——"

"One at a time, I tell you!"

"Arrah, then, shut up, can't ye" exclaimed Pat. "Let your uncle talk! Talbot, he's——"

"He's got——" gasped Greene.

"The papers," finished Blagden.

It was out at last!

"He's got the papers!" howled all three juniors in chorus.

Talbot stared at them.

"The papers! What papers?" he demanded. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"The box——"

"He opened——"

"Opened it!"

Pat caught Blagden and Green by the collars, one in each hand, and hurled them back upon the bed.

"Sure, and now ye can shut up while I explain!" he exclaimed severely. "Never saw such kids for talking. Greene would talk the hind legs off a donkey, and as for Blaggy——"

"Get on with what you were telling me," said Talbot quietly. "You say that Lacy opened the silver box."

"Yes, we saw him!"

"We saw him!" howled Blagden and Greene, scrambling off the bed. "Hands off, Pat Nugent! We saw him as much as you did."

"I'm not saying you didn't, ye spalpeens, but why can't ye shut up?"

"Suppose you do some of the shutting up? I'll explain to Talbot."

"Rats! You couldn't explain the rule of three, or how many beans make five. You dry up and listen!"

"Yes, dry up," said Talbot. "Let Nugent explain. The first thing to explain is, how you came to be hidden here at the time, Nugent?"

And he fixed his eyes on the cheerful junior.

"We came to play a little joke on Lacy," explained Pat. "He's been chivvying us something awful since the election. He whacked Green——"

"Laid into me with a carpet-beater," said Greene.

"Yes, the brute, I saw him," said Blagden.

"Then he came in, and we bunked behind the curtains

on the bed," said Pat. "Then he lugged that box out of his pocket and started trying to open it."

"There is no opening known," said Talbot, taking the silver box from his pocket. "I have examined it many times, though not with the intention of opening it. Do you mean to say that Lacy discovered the secret?"

"No, he dropped it when you knocked at the door, and then it burst open of its own accord."

"Oh, I see!"

"Some papers fell out, and one or two other things. He put them in his pocket, and now he's given you the silver box back empty. You should have seen him grinning when your back was turned, when he thought you were going away with the empty box."

"Like a Cheshire cat," said Greene.

"Like a giddy clown in a pantomime," was Blagden's comment.

Talbot looked straight at the prefect.

"What have you to say to that, Lacy?"

"Only that it's a string of lies," said the prefect sullenly.

"On the contrary, I believe every word."

"You are welcome to do so if you want to."

Talbot's fist tightened.

"Are you going to give me the papers?"

"I have none."

"You told me at first that you had not the silver box, and afterwards produced it. You certainly cannot expect me to believe a single word you say."

"Do as you like. I have no papers to give you."

"You will be wiser to hand them over."

The prefect shrugged his shoulders.

"I have papers in my pocket," he said, "but they are my own. I defy you to prove that any of them belong to you! Call in your policeman if you like. You will get nothing from me. Call in the Head! Call in all St. Kit's if you choose!"

Talbot hesitated. He believed every word that the juniors had told him. It was so evidently true. Lacy had discovered the opening by chance, and the papers the box had contained were in his possession at this moment. But if Talbot demanded a public search, how was he to prove his title to them? The difficulty at once occurred to him.

The silver box had never been opened since it was brought to Dr. Kent, when Talbot was a child. Talbot and his kind guardian had surmised that it contained papers, doubtless relating to the secret of his birth. But they had never seen them. No one at St. Kit's knew for certain what was in the box; the man who could have told them was dead, long years ago.

If the papers related to Talbot's birth, his name would be upon them—but it was pretty certain that his real name was not Talbot at all—and what it was he had not the remotest idea. The name on the papers, therefore, would prove nothing.

If the search brought the papers to light, and Eldred Lacy persisted that they were his property, what was to be done?

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CONTAINS A COMPLETE SCHOOL TALE.

A sneering smile came over the prefect's face as he saw Talbot's hesitation. He felt that he held the winning hand after all.

"Well," he said insolently, "what are you going to do? Call in your search-party if you like. I am getting tired of this scene."

"So am I," said Talbot quietly. "You're not going to let him keep the papers, Talbot?" said Pat anxiously. "He put them into that pocket; the one he has his hand in now."

Lacy gritted his teeth. If looks could have killed, Pat Nugent would have fallen lifeless at that moment.

"No," said Talbot, "I am not going to let him keep them. Lock the door, Nugent!"

Pat promptly obeyed, scenting ructions. He darted to the door, locked it, and dragged out the key in a twinkling. Eldred Lacy drew a sharp, quick breath.

"What does that mean?" he cried. "How dare you lock my door! Open it instantly!"

"Don't open it, Nugent," said Talbot. "Rather not!" grinned Pat. "Not half!"

Talbot fixed his eyes upon the prefect's startled face. "Are you going to give me the papers you have in that pocket, Lacy?"

"No; they are not yours!" "We need not discuss that. I know they are mine."

"Can you prove it?" sneered the prefect. "Probably not; but I am not going to try. The question won't come to proof at all. You have stolen my papers, and I am fully justified in taking the law into my own hands."

"What do you mean to do?" muttered the prefect, with a hunted look towards the locked door.

"If you do not give up the papers, I shall take them from you by force."

"You—you dare not!" "You shall see. Are you going to restore them? If I call in the doctor for a searching, as you say, I may not be able to prove my title to my own property. I shall not call him in. I am going to take those papers from you by force if you do not give them up. Now, what is your answer?"

Lacy's answer was a desperate spring towards the door. The next instant Talbot's grasp was upon him.

"No, you don't!" Lacy turned on him like a wild-cat, hitting and kicking and snarling. Talbot's grip tightened. Locked in a deadly grasp, they reeled across the study in fierce conflict.

Lacy Has to Give In.

Pat Nugent stood with his back to the door and his hands in his pockets, calmly watching the struggle, which was a terrible one while it lasted. Blagden and Greene dodged out of the way of the combatants and scrambled on the bed for safety. To and fro the two seniors reeled in that deadly grip, Lacy fighting savagely to escape; Talbot determined that he should not.

But the prefect was no match for the champion athlete of St. Kit's. Back he went at last, reeling with Talbot's weight flung upon him, back against the table, till he bent backwards over it, and could struggle no more. There Talbot kept him pinned in a grasp of iron. The prefect wriggled.

"Let me go!" "His voice was a hoarse gasp of exhaustion. "Will you give me the papers?"

"No!" Talbot turned his head slightly. "Pat Nugent!"

"What-ho!" said Pat, coming towards them. "Will you take the papers from the pocket you saw Lacy put them in?"

"Rather, yes!" said Pat, grinning. The prefect made a desperate effort to tear himself loose. It was in vain. Arthur Talbot's weight and strength pinned him down on the table, and he was powerless to free himself.

Pat thrust his hand into the prefect's jacket-pocket, and drew out the folded papers that had fallen from the silver box. There were three of them, and he laid them on the table.

"Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "There's something else!"

He groped in the prefect's pocket again. "Ah, here they are!"

He drew out the ring and the miniature. "Is that all, Nugent?" "That's all, old son."

"Then you can go, Lacy." He released the prefect. Eldred Lacy staggered away gasping for breath. He was red with rage and humiliation, and ready for anything. His

hand fell upon the golf-stick lying across the table, and he caught it up in a twinkling, and aimed a savage blow at Talbot's head.

Had that blow taken effect, Talbot would have been stretched senseless on the floor. But Pat Nugent hurled himself at the prefect in time, and butted him fairly in the chest. Lacy staggered backwards and plumped down in a sitting attitude, and the descending stick hit Pat instead of Talbot, giving him a sharp rap on the shoulder.

"Arrah!" howled Pat, clapping his hand to his shoulder. "Ye baste!"

Blagden snatched at the golf-stick. "Let's lay it round him," he suggested. "Let him alone," said Talbot quietly. "Nugent, I am greatly obliged to you. Let that cowardly brute alone."

"Right-ho, if you like!" Talbot picked up the papers, the ring, and the miniature. He did not look at them. The silver box had been opened, in spite of the pledge given and so long kept, but Talbot still regarded its secret as sacred. He thrust the papers into his pocket without a glance at them. Then he fixed his eyes upon Eldred Lacy, who had risen to his feet, and stood glowering like some baffled demon.

"You have tried to rob me, Eldred Lacy," he said, in a cutting, contemptuous voice. "You are a cur, and ought to be kicked out of St. Kit's. But as far as I am concerned the matter ends here. I do not want a scandal. You juniors will say nothing unless Lacy does."

"Certainly not," said Pat. "Mum's the word!" "Right-ho!" said Blagden and Greene together.

Talbot opened the door of the study. The juniors went out first. They were in high good-humour. Once more their friendship had proved a boon to Arthur Talbot, the idol of the youngsters of St. Kit's.

"Come along!" said Pat, linking his arms in Blagden's and Greene's. "We haven't worked that wheeze off on Lacy, as we intended, but I'm jolly glad we were in his study."

"Rather!" said Greene. "Fancy a prefect of St. Kit's a thief! But what I want to know is, what value were a few bits of old paper to Lacy?"

"Some giddy secret," said Pat carelessly. "No business of ours. Maybe something to do with old Talbot's birth, or something; nobody seems to know anything about that."

"But that's not a mystery any longer, if there's any truth in what Seth Black says about Talbot being his son," Blagden remarked.

"You can bet your Sunday socks that there's no truth in it," said Pat decidedly. "I said so all along. Anyway, I'm jolly glad we saved his papers for him."

Meanwhile, Eldred Lacy watched Talbot with burning eyes as he followed the juniors out of the room. The prefect was quivering with rage and chagrin. Never had his hatred of Arthur Talbot been so bitter.

"Hang you!" he hissed, as Talbot passed out of the door. "Go, but I will make you sorry for what has happened to-night, Arthur Talbot."

Talbot glanced back. There was a smile of contempt upon his handsome face.

"I'm not afraid of your threats," he said coldly. "You have already done me all the injury in your power. You can do me no more. If you could, it would make no difference; I should not be sorry for treating you as you deserve."

And he closed the door of the study and walked away. Straight to his own room he went, and there he sought to discover the secret opening of the silver box, in order to replace the papers in it. But it was not to be found.

He sought for it for a long time in vain. Then, remembering how Lacy had opened it, he dropped it several times sharply on the floor, in the hope of jerking the spring open. But it did not chance to fall in exactly the same way, for it did not open. Talbot stood with a clouded brow. He could not open the silver box, and it was impossible to replace the papers. What was he to do with them?

He took them from his pocket again with the ring and the miniature. The face in the latter caught the light, and shone up clear and beautiful. He saw it by chance; the next moment he was looking intently at it. He had seen it now; in spite of that ancient promise given to a dead man, there could be no harm in more closely looking at that beautiful face! The face of a woman, young and beautiful! Where had Talbot seen that wide, white brow, those clear, dark-blue eyes, before? Where had he seen those regular features, that well-shaped mouth?

Never before had his eyes fallen upon that miniature, yet he felt that the face was familiar. His hands trembled a little; a dimness came over his sight. Was it his mother's face? His mother, whom he did not remember—his mother, who had doubtless died before he was old enough to remember her—of whose fate he knew nothing—nothing!

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IN "PLUCK" 10.

A sudden thought came into his mind, and he stepped to the glass. He compared the reflection of his own face with that in the miniature, and then he knew where he had seen the features before. His own eyes, his own brow, his own mouth, seemed to be accurately reproduced in the painting, more delicate and womanly, but otherwise the same. The boy trembled! It was his mother! He was sure of that now. How came his mother's face in the silver box? What were the papers that had accompanied it—did they hold the secret of his birth? Talbot turned to them quickly and took them in his hand. Then he stopped with a decided shake of the head.

The silver box had been opened by a thief, but the secret was sacred still! He could not look at the papers. It was not easy to resist the temptation, but he did resist it. He placed the papers, the ring, and the miniature in a large envelope, and put the latter in his pocket. Then he left the study and made his way towards the principal's house.

After the raid by Eldred Lacy, Talbot did not feel inclined to trust his precious possessions in the study. There was no secure place except the secret drawer in the desk, and that was now known to Lacy. He intended to tell the doctor as much as was necessary of what had occurred, and place the papers in his charge.

The hour was growing late. Talbot tapped at the door of the doctor's study and entered, as he was accustomed to do. The gas was turned down and the study was empty. Dr. Kent was not there. Talbot hesitated a moment. The gas being still alight showed that the doctor intended to return to the study. Should he wait for him there? He glanced at his watch. It was nearly ten o'clock. After all, the matter would do as well in the morning; during the night, at all events, he need fear no further attempt on the part of Eldred Lacy. And so Talbot left the study.

"Hallo, Talbot! Is the doctor there?" Two fellows stopped him in the passage. They were Haywood and Dunn, the chums of Eldred Lacy, and they had evidently been coming to Dr. Kent's study.

"No," said Talbot briefly. And he strode straight out without another word. Haywood stared after him.

"Hallo! What's the matter with Talbot?" "He doesn't like us," said Dunn, with a chuckle. "Had the cheek to tell me to-day that it was caddish to bully the fags into voting for Lacy."

"Cheek! We're likely to take lessons from the son of a common tramp!"

"If the Head's not there, we may as well go back."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Haywood. "If the Head's not there, what was Talbot doing in his study? More likely he guesses what we came for, and wants it put off."

"Yes, that's likely enough."

"Anyway, no harm in looking."

"I say, Haywood!" said Dunn, touching his friend's elbow.

"You still think it a good idea to tell the Head about it?"

"Certainly. Fourteen of our voters were shut up in the crypt and couldn't vote. Brooke's no more captain of St. Kit's than I am, if right were done."

"But if we complain of the opposite party's tactics, they may begin, too."

"What can they say?"

"Well, about bullying the fags—and distributing half-sovereigns among the junior voters."

"I don't suppose all that will come out. If it does we shall deny it," said Haywood coolly. "We're going to have a new election and get Lacy in. It's mere humbug—Brooke being captain. He's right under Talbot's thumb, and we might as well have had Talbot still."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, let's get on. Anyway, it will be one up against Talbot to complain, and it can't do us any harm."

"All right; I'm game if you are."

And the two seniors marched on to the Head's door, and knocked. There was no reply, and Haywood opened the door, and glanced into the dimly-lit study.

"Talbot was right; he's not here."

"It will have to wait till to-morrow, then," said Dunn. Haywood nodded, and they retraced their steps. As they came out into the corridor where the Sixth Form studies were situated, they met Eldred Lacy.

"Hallo, where have you been?" asked Lacy, looking at them.

"Just been to see the Head about the election, but he wasn't there," said Haywood. "We met Talbot coming out of his study, and he was mighty off-handed with me. I think he knows we are going to make a fuss about foul play in the election."

Lacy nodded. The two seniors strolled on, and entered Haywood's study. Lacy stood for some minutes in thought, and then walked quietly down the passage leading to the principal's quarters.

The Doctor's Discovery.

"Dear me!"

Dr. Kent adjusted his pince-nez, and stared through them into his open desk. It was half-past ten, and the Head of St. Kit's had returned to his study. He had left it to speak to Mr. Slaney, the master of the Fourth, intending to return in ten minutes or so. But he had entered into a discussion with the master of the Fourth, which had waxed so interesting that it had lasted nearly an hour; and when the striking of the half-hour by the school clock announced that it was half-past ten, Dr. Kent had come suddenly back with a start from his enjoyable excursion deep into Greek roots, and realised that the examination-papers he had intended to prepare that evening would have to be left over till to-morrow.

He had said good-night to Mr. Slaney, and returned to his own study, intending to put his papers away, and turn out the gas. But as soon as he entered the room he noticed that the gas was turned a little higher than he had left it, and that the door was ajar.

"Ah, someone has been here for me," murmured the Head. "I really hope that it was nothing important."

Then he gave a start. He was certain that he had left his desk closed, and here was the lid of it quite open, and the interior had certainly been disturbed.

"Dear me!"

He stared in dismay into the desk. He could hardly believe his eyes at first. Someone had been in his study, and had opened his desk, and dared to meddle with the contents. Whom could it have been? What could have been the object?

The doctor suddenly changed colour. A painful thought flashed into his mind. He stepped quickly closer to the desk, and opened one of the little drawers. It was the drawer in which he usually kept the money used for the house accounts, and sometimes there was quite a large sum there in gold and notes. The little drawer was never locked, but it was the doctor's custom to keep the desk itself locked when he left it. On the present occasion, having merely stepped out of the study for a short time, intending to return almost immediately, he had not locked it.

"Good heavens!" murmured the doctor.

His kind old face had gone deadly white. The drawer was empty. The little leather bag which should have been there, with forty sovereigns in it, was gone! The envelope in which banknotes to the value of as much more had reposed, had disappeared!

The money had been stolen! There was not the slightest doubt about that. Someone had entered the room in the doctor's absence—had found the desk unguarded and un-locked—and then the rest had followed. The doctor had no doubt about it. Undoubtedly some boy belonging to St. Kit's had yielded to a sudden temptation.

The money was gone! There was a thief in the school! The doctor covered his face with his hands, and groaned aloud. How careless he had been! He felt that it was his fault that this horrible thing had happened.

But who could have done it? He had never dreamed that there was a thief in the school. It must have been some fellow in the Upper Forms. The juniors were all in bed long ago. Some senior had come to the study to speak to the doctor—that was the most plausible theory—had come there for some innocent purpose, and opportunity had made him a thief.

"Good heavens!" murmured the doctor again. A thief at St. Kit's! The horror, the shame of it, rushed overwhelmingly upon the good old doctor's mind, as he stood there with his face in his hands. The honour of the old school was very dear to him. What was to happen now! An inquiry—perhaps the police—scandal, and disgrace! It was terrible!

There was a tap at the half-open door, and Mr. Slaney came in.

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"Excuse me, sir. I have been thinking that—" Mr. Slaney had thought of a new argument, and had pursued the Head to his study to elaborate it, but at the sight of the doctor's attitude, it vanished from his mind. "My dear Dr. Kent, what can be the matter?" he exclaimed, in startled tones.

The doctor looked up with a white, weird face. "I have been careless, Mr. Slaney," he said. "Look at the result!"

He pointed to the empty drawer. "What has happened?"

"Someone has stolen eighty pounds from my desk." Mr. Slaney started.

"Is it possible?" "It is certain," said the Head miserably. "I intended to be away from my study only a few minutes, and I did not trouble to lock my desk. Someone came in during my absence, and must have noticed that the desk was not locked. Many of the boys know that money is kept there, and on finding the desk unlocked—"

He broke off with a quiver in his voice. It was needless to go into details—it was all only too terribly clear, and Mr. Slaney understood.

"This is a terrible business," he said. "It was a sudden temptation, doubtless, but the boy in question must have been dishonest in mind and heart; and probably desperately in want of money."

"What could a boy at St. Kit's want with so large a sum?"

Mr. Slaney hesitated a moment before replying. The doctor looked straight at him.

"If you know anything, or surmise anything, Mr. Slaney, for goodness' sake tell me, and throw what light you can upon this dark matter!" he exclaimed.

"I will do, sir. I have suspected for a long time that some of the Upper Form boys have dealings with the betting set at the Dragon, in Northley. I know nothing for certain, but I think it will probably turn out that the thief is one of those boys."

The doctor passed his hand across his brow. "It is impossible to let such a theft pass," he said heavily. "There must be an inquiry. If it could be kept secret—but that is impossible. Can you think of any boy in particular, who could be questioned without the whole school being taken into the matter, Mr. Slaney?"

The Fourth Form master shook his head. "It would hardly be fair to mention names, without a particle of proof of any kind," he observed; "and my knowledge does not extend so far. If I might venture to advise—"

"Certainly!" "I should leave the matter till the morning. Then make inquiries, and discover what boy could have been in your study this evening. That can be done without making the crime public property. A thief is detestable, yet I should be in favour of discovering him if possible without a scandal, and sending him away quietly from the school."

"You are right, Mr. Slaney. I think we will say nothing till the morning."

And the doctor, with a heavy sigh, locked his desk. He went to bed, but there was very little sleep for him that night. The wretched thing that had happened lay like a leaden weight upon heart and mind, and banished slumber from his eyelids. Yet, in his most gloomy moment he did not dream of what the morrow was to bring forth—of the blow that was preparing for him!

The Doctor Inquires.

Dr. Kent usually took the Sixth Form in the morning, but on the morning following the events we have related, he did not appear in the Sixth-Form room. He was seated in his study with Mr. Slaney, the master of the Fourth, and the Fourth Form for the nonce had been placed under the charge of Arthur Talbot.

It was not an uncommon thing, of course, for the head-boy of the Sixth to take charge of a lower Form, and the circumstance excited no comment whatever.

The Fourth Form was elated at having Talbot in the place of Mr. Slaney, but they soon found that there were to be no high jinks in class. Talbot was quite as keen a disciplinarian during lessons as Mr. Slaney could have been, and the work of the Fourth went forward in the usual way.

Talbot sat at Mr. Slaney's desk, and did his own work there, during the time the Fourth were busy, and did not require his attention. But although Arthur was doing his duty perfectly, it is probable that he was thinking at that time less of his work, and less of the Fourth Form, than of the packet reposing in his breast-pocket.

He had not been able to open the silver box, and so the

papers, the ring, and the miniature, were still in the envelope where he had placed them, and naturally he did not care to leave them in his study when he had quitted it. He had intended to ask the Head to take charge of them, but Mr. Slaney had asked him to look after the Fourth, and so he had not seen Dr. Kent since prayers.

He was thinking as he sat at Mr. Slaney's desk, of the fair, sweet face of the miniature—the face he firmly believed to be that of his mother. Little did he dream of what was passing in the doctor's study; of the storm that was then, in those very moments gathering, ready to burst upon his head.

"In my opinion," Mr. Slaney was remarking, "it must have been a Sixth-Former who came into your study last night, sir. The juniors were all in bed, and most of the Fifth. At all events, we should confine our questioning to the Sixth first, and inquire further if we fail to discover anything there."

"I agree with you, Mr. Slaney," the Head replied. "I do not care to question the class, however, concerning such a matter, if it can be helped. Will you inquire first if any of them know of a boy who came to my study last night. If any do let them come here, and I will ascertain what they know. The theft need not be mentioned."

"Yes, sir. That is a judicious plan." And Mr. Slaney went to the Sixth-Form room. The Sixth were all in their places, wondering why the doctor did not come. They all looked inquiringly at the Fourth Form master as he came in.

Mr. Slaney glanced over the class. All the Sixth were there with the exception of Arthur Talbot.

"Isn't the doctor coming, sir?" asked Eldred Lacy. "Not at present," said Mr. Slaney. "I am to take charge of the class for first lesson. I—"

"I hope Dr. Kent is not ill, sir." "He is not ill, Lacy. By the way, the doctor wishes to know if anyone went to his study last evening? Is anyone in the class aware?"

Haywood and Dunn looked at one another wonderingly. "Yes, sir," said Haywood, "I was there."

Mr. Slaney looked at him quickly. Haywood certainly did not look or speak like a fellow who had anything to conceal, and the instant admission hardly had the appearance of guilt.

"So was I, sir," said Dunn. "I went with Haywood to speak to Dr. Kent."

"Indeed! Was Dr. Kent there at the time?" "No, sir. He wasn't in the study, so we came away again."

"H'm! Well, Dr. Kent would like to see you about it. You had better both go. You will find Dr. Kent in his study."

Haywood and Dunn exchanged another glance, wondering, and somewhat uneasy. Then they left the Sixth-Form room, and the seniors were soon hard at work with Mr. Slaney.

Haywood and Dunn arrived at the doctor's study, and entered. The head was looking very pale and worried, as they noticed at once.

"Mr. Slaney said you wished to see us, sir," said Haywood.

"About our coming here last night, sir," added Dunn. The doctor looked at them quickly.

"Certainly! That is quite right. You came here last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alone, or both together?" "Together, sir."

"At what time?" "I think it was just on ten, sir." Haywood glanced at Dunn. "Didn't we hear the clock strike just after we spoke to Lacy, Dunn?"

Dunn nodded. "Tell me as near as you can," said the Head.

"I think I should say about five minutes to ten," said Haywood. "That would be right within a minute or two, anyway."

"I was not here, of course. Did you enter the study?" "I knocked, sir, and then opened the door. The gas was turned down, and nobody was here, so we went away."

"Did you come right in?" "Well, I think I stepped just inside and looked round."

"What was the reason of your coming at such an hour to see me?"

"It was over the election, sir." The doctor looked at him inquiringly.

"We had just discovered that there was foul play in the election, sir," said Haywood boldly. "We thought we ought to come to you, and complain at once. If we had left it, Brooke and his lot would have said we thought of it afterwards."

NEXT SATURDAY: "JACK'S DEGRADATION,"
A Splendid Long, Complete School Tale,
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AND

"CRANK'S CASTLE,"
A Thrilling Tale of a Most
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IN "PLUCK" 1st

"The election! Well, never mind that now. When you entered my study, did you notice whether my desk was open?"

"I didn't look towards it, sir," said Haywood, glancing curiously now towards that article of furniture, and wondering what on earth the doctor mentioned it for.

"Then you didn't notice?"

"No, sir."

"Nor you, Dunn?"

"I didn't enter the room, sir, so I couldn't have seen, anyway."

"And you were both together all the time you were here?"

"Yes, sir. Is anything the matter?" asked Haywood, curiously. "Has anything happened?"

The Head did not reply to the question.

"Now, my boys," he said, in his kindly voice. "Did you see anybody else near my study; anybody in it, or looking as if he had been in it?"

"Yes; there was a fellow coming out as we came up."

The doctor gave an eager start.

"Ah, are you sure of that?"

"Yes, sir, of course. We stopped and spoke to him, and he said he had come here to see you, and you weren't in. But we looked in to make sure for ourselves," Haywood added by way of explanation.

"You remember whom that boy was, of course?"

"Yes; rather, sir! Arthur Talbot."

Dr. Kent almost jumped off his seat.

"What! Whom did you say?"

"Arthur Talbot, sir."

The doctor drew a deep breath.

"Ah, then it is evident we are on a false scent! Did you see anyone else near my study?"

"No one, sir."

"Do you know if anyone else was coming to speak to me last evening?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, you may return to the Sixth Form room, Dunn. Haywood, will you kindly go to the Fourth room, and take charge of the Form, and ask Talbot to kindly step into my study?"

"Certainly, sir!"

The doctor turned to his papers again, and dipped his pen in the ink; but he did not write. The two seniors left the room, and closed the door. Then they stared at each other meaningly.

"What's the meaning of all that?" said Dunn, in a low voice.

"Pretty plain, I think," said Haywood. "Somebody's been boning something out of the doctor's desk—that's what it means—and he wants to know who was prowling round in his study last night while he was gone."

(Another long instalment next Saturday.)

Your Editor's Corner.

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

"JACK'S DEGRADATION."

Our first long, complete tale of school life for next Saturday's issue of PLUCK will deal with quite a new phase of school life, and will be written by

MAURICE MERRIMAN,

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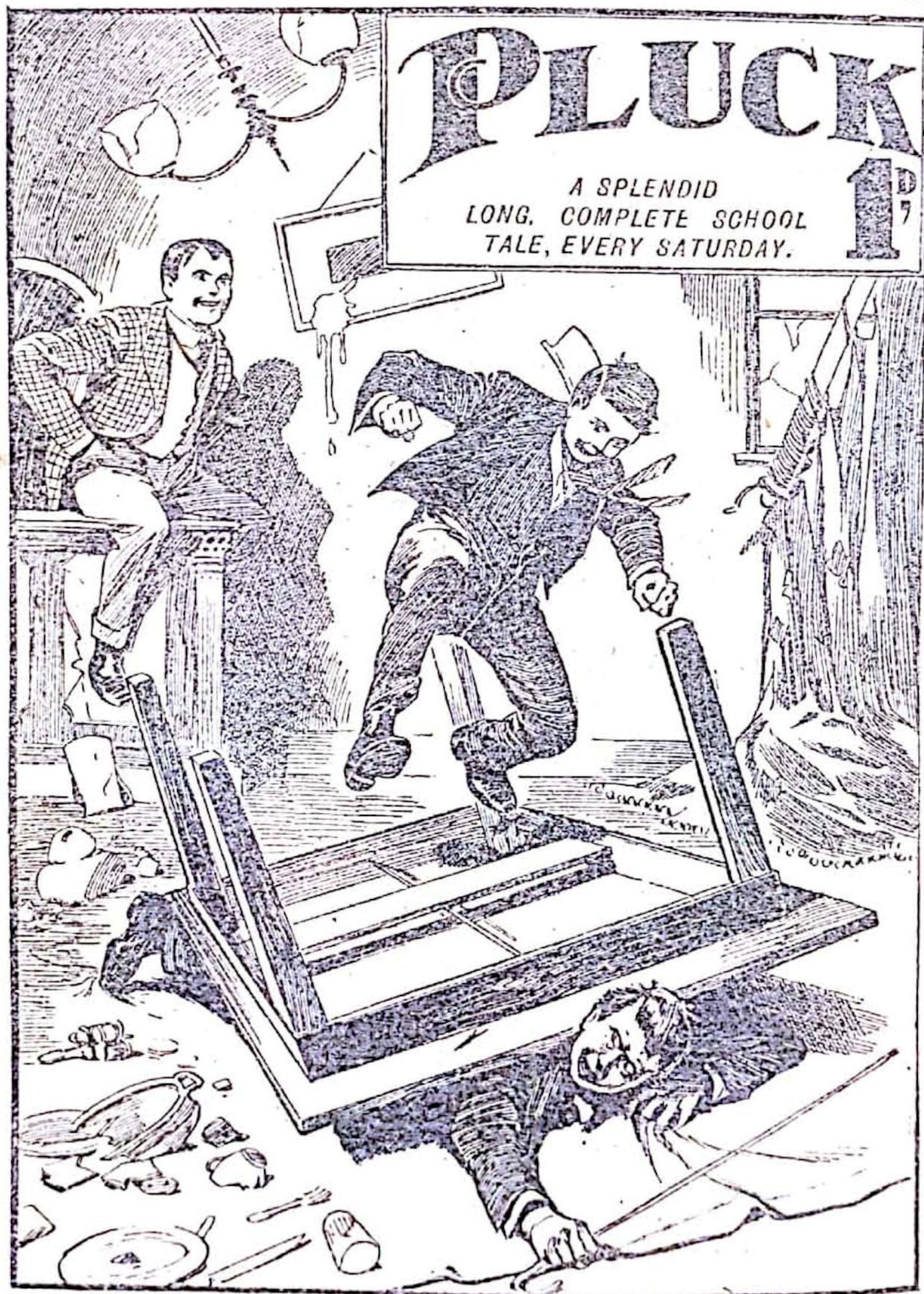
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YOUR EDITOR



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