

SPLENDID TALE OF SCHOOL LIFE.

THE RIVALRY OF ST KIT'S



~BY CHARLES HAMILTON~

Lacy's Strange Companion.

"We can't stand this, prefect or not!" exclaimed Blagden. "Come on—all together!"

And a dozen juniors closed in on Lacy, pelting him with snowballs.

Lacy at last released Pat, as the missiles smashed and broke all over him, and the juniors fell back as he charged at them.

With a savage scowl, Lacy passed on to the gates, and went out. Blagden and Greene joined Pat. He was white and gasping.

"My hat!" he panted. "How that beast can thump! I believe I've got bruises all over me. He's knocked all the breath out of my body!"

Blagden was bursting with indignation.

"I wish old Talbot had seen him pitching into a kid like that!" he exclaimed. "You must be black and blue. Let's tell him. Come on! That brute ought to be exposed!"

"No, no, we won't!"

"He's no right to knock a kid about like that. He wouldn't be a prefect long if the doctor knew it."

"Well, he won't know it."

"But—"

"Faith," said Pat, his eyes sparkling, "we can fight our own battles, kids. Lacy's gone out. Let's follow his giddy trail, and—"

"Right-ho! Come on!"

Leaving the crowd still snowballing one another, the three hurried out after Lacy. All three were in a mood for vengeance, and they wanted it hot and strong. It was easy enough to follow Lacy's track in the deep, soft snow.

"He's not gone to the village," said Blagden. "The way he's gone leads to Lynwood."

"Lynwood?" asked Pat.

"Yes. That's his brother's place, you know. His brother Rupert is Squire of Lynwood."

"Oh, yes, I know. I remember."

Back to Pat's memory came that strange adventure in Lacy's study, when, fastened up in the cupboard by the mischievous juniors, he had been compelled to hear the talk between the two brothers.

Not a word of it had passed his lips since that day, though more than once he had thought of taking Blagden into his confidence.

Blagden looked at him curiously.

"You remember?" he said. "Have you seen the squire?"

"He was here on the day of the election," said Pat.

"Oh, yes, so he was! He was rotten about Eldred Lacy losing, too, I hear. He wanted Lacy to get in as captain of St. Kit's. He must be awfully strong on brotherly love to have any for that waster who thumped you."

"There's Lacy," said Greene, pointing along the lane.

The figure of the prefect could be seen ahead, tramping along in the direction of Lynwood.

Blagden grinned as a thought came into his mind.

"Let's cut across the fields, and I know a lovely spot where we can ambush him," he said. "We can make the bounder hop, and he won't be able to get at us."

"Lead on, Macduff!"

Blagden led on. They crossed a couple of fields, skirted another, and sprinted along a snowy path under leafless trees. They came out upon a high bank sloping steeply down to a

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READ THIS FIRST.

Pat Nugent, a new boy at St. Kit's, early distinguishes himself by the timely assistance he is able to give Arthur Talbot in his successful fight for the captaincy of St. Kit's.

He incurs, however, the animosity of Lacy, Talbot's rival; and Lacy loses no opportunity of showing his spite.

One day, during a junior snowball fight in the Close, Lacy is accidentally snowballed. He rushes straight at Pat Nugent, and begins to punch him savagely.

(Now go on with the story.)

lane. In summer the bank was easy of access, but now it was thick with snow, and anyone attempting to climb it would have risked going down again in the midst of an avalanche.

There was a ragged fence along the top of the bank, coated with snow, with here and there rusty, leafless bushes. Pat looked down into the lane.

"Sure he'll pass this way, Blaggy!"

"Of course. This is the lane to Lynwood."

"Good enough. Let's make some snowballs."

They set to work, and soon had a heap of missiles ready. A footstep was heard crunching the snow in the lane below. Pat looked through the low fence.

"It isn't Lacy," he said.

A man in a dirty ragged coat, with a fur cap on his head, was slouching along the lane. He had his hands in his pockets, and a short black pipe in his mouth. His face was almost the hue of copper from continued use of strong drink. The chums looked at him with considerable disgust.

"Nice-looking sorter bounder," remarked Blagden. "A wash would do him good. Shall we liven him up with a ball or two?"

"Nunno! There comes Lacy, and we don't want to put him on his guard."

Lacy, who was striding rapidly along, soon overtook the tramp. The latter stopped him to speak to him.

"I've got nothing to give away," said Lacy shortly.

"Who's asking yer?" said the man, with an unpleasant leer.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want to ask yer a civil question," said the ruffian, "and if yer can't be civil, too, I might knock yer head off as like as not."

"Well, well, what is it?"

"Is this 'ere the way to Lynwood?"

Lacy stared at his questioner.

"What do you want to know that for? What business can you possibly have at Lynwood? If you take a word of advice, you won't go."

The man leered again, in an indescribably cunning and unpleasant way.

"Why shouldn't I go if I want to?"

"Because your sort are not wanted there," said Lacy. "I happen to be the squire's brother, you see, and so I know what I'm talking about. The squire sets his dogs on tramps. That's all. So you'd better keep off the grass."

And he swung round and strode on again. The man quickened his pace and overtook him.

"All right, young mister, I'll come with you, if you're the squire's brother. He'll be glad to see me, I'm certain."

Lacy stopped, staring at him in blank amazement.

"Are you mad," he asked, "or drunk?"

"Do I look either? I'm an old friend of the squire's, though he hasn't seen me for a long time. Hain't he ever mentioned to you the name of Black—Seth Black?"

"Of course not. You must be drunk!"

Black grinned.

"He'll know me—you see," he replied. "The squire's just come back from abroad, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's where I knew him—abroad. Never mind where. Mebbe he'd rather you didn't know. But, you'll see,

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he knows me—you'll see, my pippin! I'm coming to Lynwood along of you."

"You're going to do nothing of the kind."

"Ain't I? Who's going to stop me?"

Lacy did not answer that question. He started off again at a quicker pace; but the ruffian, grinning evilly, kept pace with him. And so they came abreast of the waiting chums, who had heard the foregoing colloquy with astonishment.

"Let her flicker!" exclaimed Pat.

Three snowballs flew with unerring aim. Each of them biffed Lacy in the countenance, and he sat down in the snow.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Pat. "Let him have some more!"

As fast as they could hurl them, the chums pelted Lacy with the snowballs as he tried to rise. Seth Black stood with his hands in his pockets, looking on with loud guffaws. But his amusement ceased suddenly when a ball, missing its target, plumped upon his coppery nose and broke in his face.

He broke into a stream of savage imprecations.

"Crumbs!" ejaculated Blagden, in disgust. "Hark at the beast!"

"We shall have to stop that, or he'll shock us if he goes on long enough," said Pat; and he sent the next ball full into the tramp's face.

Seth Black staggered. Lacy scrambled to his feet, and shook his fist at the boys on the top of the high bank. He was wild with rage, but it looked too risky to climb.

"I'll—I'll— Oh, ooch!"

His threats were cut short by a smashing snowball.

He spat the snow out of his mouth, and, forgetting all prudence in his rage, essayed to clamber up the bank to get at the juniors.

"Hold hard!" whispered Pat. "Let him get half-way up, and then give him a volley."

Lacy scrambled up fiercely, and Black, equally enraged, followed him. Had either of them got hold of the boys, the latter would certainly have been hurt. But long ere they were within reach Pat gave the word, and the snowballs volleyed down.

Lacy gave a yell, and lost his footing as the missiles crashed upon him, and throwing his arms out wildly, caught hold of the tramp.

"Leggo!" yelled Black.

But Lacy, who felt himself going, was not likely to let go. For a moment they swayed, and then down they went together. A huge mass of snow, displaced from the steep bank by the struggle, went with them. They rolled into the lane in the midst of a veritable avalanche.

The chums yelled with laughter.

"Oh, dear!" said Pat, wiping his eyes. "I shouldn't have taken Lacy for such a giddy acrobat! But come on, kids; this is where we do a guy!"

And the trio were soon far from the scene.

A Strange Meeting.

"Eldred! What on earth have you been doing with yourself?"

Squire Lacy stared at his brother in astonishment as he asked the question.

He came striding along the lane from Lynwood as Eldred Lacy dragged himself from the mass of snow which had rolled down the steep bank with him.

Eldred rubbed the snow out of his eyes, and looked at his brother.

"I've had a tumble," he said sulkily.

"Been trying to climb the bank? What on earth for?"

"Some kids up there were snowballing me."

"Ha, ha! You would have been wiser to let them alone."

"There's nothing to laugh at that I can see."

"You can't see yourself, my dear boy. You look comical—extremely so. You seem to have had a companion in misfortune. Who's your friend?" asked the squire, with a grin, as he glanced at the disreputable tramp.

"No friend of mine, but according to his own account," said Eldred maliciously, "he's one of yours."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Ask him."

Seth Black was on his feet now. He was rubbing the snow from his coppery face. He caught Eldred's words, and looked at the squire with an evil grin.

"Don't you know an old pal, Lacy?" he said coolly.

The squire started violently.

He came a pace or two nearer the man in the fur cap, staring at him as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

Eldred Lacy looked from one to the other in amazement.

He had regarded the tramp's statement as an impudent invention, but it was pretty clear now that the squire did know Seth Black; and, to judge by the wavering colour in his bronzed face, he stood in some kind of fear of him. He stared at Black as a man might stare at a ghost.

"You!" he ejaculated at last.

"Surprised to see me—eh?" said Black, leering. "I thought you would be. I was coming to call on you, when I met this young gentleman. Nice young gentleman he is, too. Said you'd set the dogs on me if I came to Lynwood."

Squire Lacy was silent.

He was evidently suffering from a strange shock, and hardly heard what the man said.

"If I ain't welcome," continued Black, "I won't come. I'll go to the police instead."

A look of terror leaped into the squire's face.

"What do you mean?"

"I dare say they would be glad to see me."

"You are mad!"

"Oh, no, I ain't! I could tell 'em something that would open their eyes—something about Rupert Lacy of Lynwood when he wasn't called Rupert Lacy—"

"Silence!"

"What's the matter? We're all friends here," grinned the ruffian. "Master Eldred won't split—oh? He's got nearly as much at stake as you have. If—"

"Hold your tongue!"

"Certainly. It'll keep. But, you know, they say silence is golden, squire. I'm afeared you'll find it expensive. I reckon it will be worth a big price to you, Mr. Lacy."

The squire, with a face as white as death, turned to his brother.

"You'd better defer your visit a bit, Eldred. Come tomorrow, or the next day. I shall be occupied just now."

"With me," said Black.

"But you said you had an important matter to speak about!" exclaimed Lacy.

"Yes, yes; but I will see you again."

"I came over from the school on purpose to see you," said Lacy sulkily. "I've cut the half-holiday to waste just to come."

The squire made an irritable gesture.

"It can't be helped. I can't attend to you now. Good-bye!"

But Eldred lingered. He was intensely curious to know the meaning of this strange encounter.

He had expected his brother to reply to the tramp's familiarity with a blow, and the evident fear Black inspired in the squire's breast amazed him. That there was some secret here was plain, and Eldred Lacy would have given a good deal to know what it was.

He had been asked by the squire to come over that afternoon for a special purpose, which he guessed was something in connection with Arthur Talbot. This meeting with the tramp, unlooked-for on the squire's part, had changed Rupert Lacy's plans. He was now only anxious to get rid of Eldred.

"But, Rupert—"

Rupert Lacy looked at him savagely.

"I've told you," he said, "that I'll see you another time. Can't you understand plain English? Then clear!"

"Oh, all right!" said Lacy sulkily.

The Squire of Lynwood stood with darkly wrinkled brows.

"He's curious!" grinned Black. "The young gentleman wants to know all about it."

"Mind, not a word to him!"

"I don't see why not. He—"

"You'll do as I tell you!" said the squire savagely. "You've come here to make money out of me. You want the price of your silence. I will pay it, but you will have to keep silent. Not a word to a soul!"

"I'm agreeable to that, so long as it's made worth my while!"

"How did you come here?" said the squire restlessly, gnawing his moustache. "What freak of Fate guided you on my track, when I thought you were—were—"

"Dead!" grinned the ruffian. "Come to think of it, you had reason to believe so. But I am alive, squire, and turned up like the bad penny. It's taken me some time to hunt you out, but here I am, you see, come to pal on to you for the rest of your life!"

Rupert Lacy shuddered.

"Look here, Black, you must not stay in this neighbourhood," he said quickly. "You must go away at once, and I will come to you and arrange—"

"You won't do nothing of the kind!" said the man in the fur cap obstinately. "I know a good thing when I see it, and now I've found you I'm not going to let you out of my sight!"

"Fool! Do you think I could run away and leave everything?"

"I don't know what you might do, but I know what I'm going to do, and that's keep on eye on you," said Black.

"I know you of old, squire. You are too slippery a customer. I'm going to put up at the Dragon in Northley—unless you'd rather I came to Lynwood for a stay."

"Impossible! It would start everybody talking."

"Well, that won't hurt me."

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"You cannot come there. It would be better for you to leave the neighbourhood. I am willing to come to any reasonable terms—"

Black shook his head.

"I'm not going—that's settled. If you like to come to the Dragon to make terms, I'll leave you alone at Lynwod. I shall expect you this evening."

"I will come."

"Mind you don't forget."

"I shall not forget."

The squire, with his teeth set hard, turned and strode back the way he had come, and disappeared down the snowy lane to Lynwood.

Black looked after him with an evil grin. When the squire was out of sight, he, too, turned to leave the spot. He caught sight of Eldred Lacy in the distance, watching him. The prefect had stopped to watch the two men, but now he turned and strode away towards the school.

Eldred was in a state of utter amazement. What was the connection between the squire and the disreputable ruffian he could not imagine, except that Rupert Lacy was somehow in the man's power.

The squire was little given to speaking of his experience during his long absence from his native land. Lacy wondered whether there were dark episodes in that untold history. It looked like it now.

The sight of Pat Nugent, however, at the gates of St. Kit's banished the thought of Seth Black from his mind.

Pat was standing there, with his hands in his pockets, looking away towards the village of Northley, and he did not see the prefect coming from the opposite direction.

Lacy's eyes gleamed, and he quickened his pace. Pat was not aware of his approach till he was close at hand; then, turning his head at a crunching footstep, he saw the prefect bearing down upon him.

He promptly bolted through the gateway. Lacy looked as if he meant business, and Pat knew by painful experience how hard the prefect could thump.

Pat went through the gateway like a shot, and the next moment there was a yell. Arthur Talbot was just coming out, and Pat had dashed into him with the force of a battering-ram.

The captain of St. Kit's staggered back, gasping, and Pat, dazed by the collision, sat down abruptly. As he scrambled to his feet, Eldred Lacy was upon him.

Talbot came forward quickly.

"Hallo—hallo! What's the matter?" he exclaimed. "What are you pitching into my fag for, Lacy?"

Lacy, heedless of the captain's presence, had started "pitching into" Pat with a vengeance, and Pat was struggling in his grasp.

The prefect made no reply. His sounding thumps still fell upon the wriggling junior.

Talbot's brow darkened. He made a quick step towards the prefect and grasped his wrist, thus effectually stopping the rain of blows.

Lacy glared at him savagely.

"Let me alone!"

"I shall do nothing of the kind! How dare you strike a boy in that brutal manner?" exclaimed Talbot, his eyes flashing. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Talbot, if you interfere with me—"

"I would interfere with anybody I saw behaving like a brute and a coward!"

"You call me those names?"

"That's how you are acting! Let that kid go!"

"I won't!"

Talbot's teeth came hard together. With a twist of his powerful arms, he forced the prefect to release Pat, who tore himself away and reeled, gasping, against the gate.

Lacy jerked himself free, and stood facing the captain, his eyes blazing, his chest heaving, his fists clenched. It looked as if he were about to hurl himself upon Talbot, but some last vestige of prudence restrained him, in spite of his rage.

"Do you know what he has done?" he said thickly. "He has snowballed me—his prefect—and tumbled me down a bank!"

"Well, if you chose

to punish him in a proper way, I shouldn't interfere between a prefect and a junior," replied Talbot; "but when you start acting like a hooligan—"

"You have no right to interfere!"

"Don't talk rot! I think you'll be sorry yourself when you're cooler. If the doctor saw you treating a junior like that you'd get sacked, and you know it!"

Lacy ground his teeth.

"You have picked on Nugent since he first came to St. Kit's," continued the captain. "I was told you were ill-using him in the Close to-day, and I've no doubt that that's why he snowballed you."

"It was, Talbot!" exclaimed Pat. "I don't see why the pig should have it all his own way!"

"You must not speak like that, Nugent. Cut off!"

"But, I say—"

"Scoot!"

Pat grinned, and scooted. Lacy made a movement as if to follow. Talbot stepped into his path, his face very grim.

"This is to go no further, Lacy," he said. "You understand me? If you touch my fag, you'll have to reckon with me!"

"If you choose to put the cheeky brat under your wing—"

"You can put it like that if you like. There's going to be no beastly bullying so long as I'm captain of St. Kit's."

"You may not be captain long!" Lacy. "You—what are you? A nameless beggar's brat, picked out of the gutter!"

Talbot turned crimson.

"Lacy!"

"And you dictate to me, you nobody—you charity whelp!" Smack!

Talbot's hand came across the speaker's face with a sound almost like a pistol-shot, and Lacy staggered across the road.

"Hallo! Where yer coming to?" exclaimed a rough voice. And Lacy received a push that sent him back towards Talbot.

It was Seth Black again. His way to the village lay past the gates of St. Kit's, and he had been but a little distance behind the prefect.

Lacy took no notice of the ruffian. Talbot's blow had roused him to fury. He saw nothing but the flushed, scornful face of the captain of the school before him. He flung himself at Talbot like a tiger.

But the captain was angry, too. Lacy's insult had stung him to the quick. He met the attack willingly, his eyes flashing, and his right fist—clenched, and seemingly as hard as iron—came crashing into the prefect's face.

Lacy gave a gasp, and went down as if he had been shot. It had been a terrible blow, and the prefect lay dizzily on the ground, staring stupidly at the captain of St. Kit's.

Talbot, breathing hard, waited for a few moments to see whether he would rise and renew the conflict; but Lacy showed no intention of doing so. Talbot, with a scornful look, turned away.

Seth Black had stopped to watch the encounter. His eyes were fixed upon Talbot now with a strange expression.

The captain of St. Kit's hardly looked at him. He strode away down the road to Northley, leaving the ruffian staring after him with utter amazement depicted upon his coppery face.

"Well, I'm jiggered," muttered Seth Black—"I'm blessed well jiggered!"

Lacy staggered to his feet.

"Who's that chap, guv'nor?" asked Black, turning to him. "What's his name?"

"What's that to do with you?" growled Lacy, who was in no mood for answering questions. "Mind your own business!"

"I reckon it is my business, if he's the chap I take him for."

grinned Black. "What is he called here?"

"His name is Arthur Talbot."

"H'm! More or less, I suppose. I heard you call him a beggar's brat, and a charity whelp, and some more fancy names. What did you mean by that?"

(Another instalment of this splendid school tale will appear next Wednesday.)

Next Wednesday!

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