

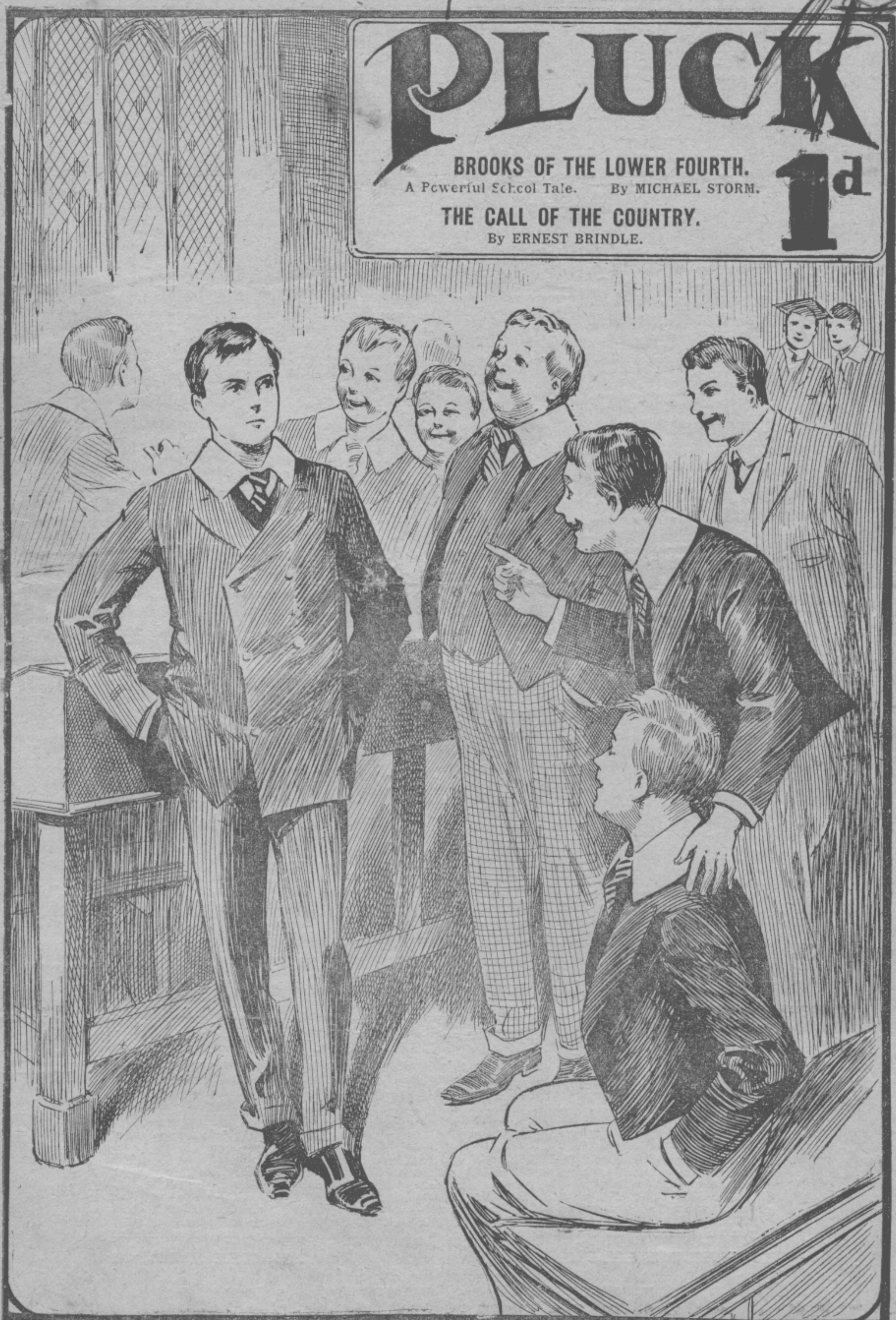
Special Extra Long, Complete School Tale.

PLUCK

BROOKS OF THE LOWER FOURTH.
A Powerful School Tale. By MICHAEL STORM.

THE CALL OF THE COUNTRY.
By ERNEST BRINDLE.

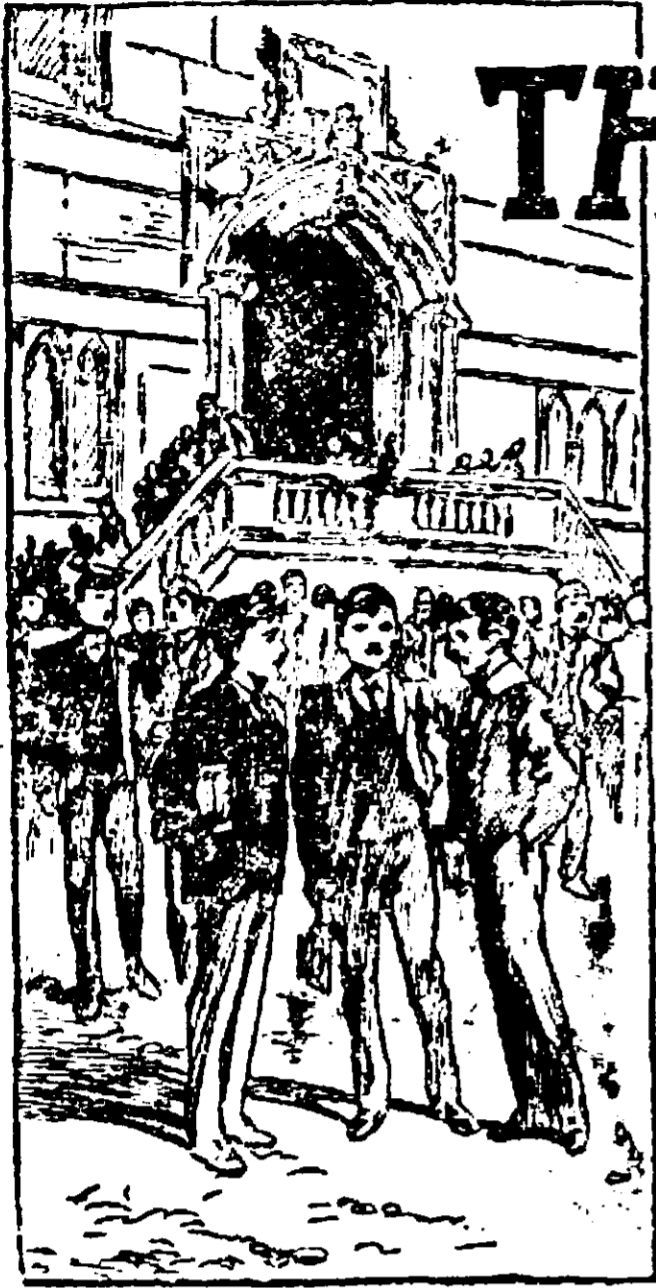
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HE STOOD GLARING DEFIANTLY AT THE GRINNING FACES!

GRAND SCHOOL TALE.

YOU CAN START NOW!



THE RIVALS 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, is elected captain of St. Kit's. One morning the Head discovers he has been robbed of £80. He calls a meeting in the hall, and Arthur Talbot is openly accused of the theft. His study is searched, and the notes are found hidden beneath the carpet; but Arthur declares he is innocent. He is sent to Coventry by the whole school except Nugent, Blagden, and Greene, three chums, who believe in his innocence, and who are determined to stand by him. However, Arthur Talbot decides to run away from St. Kit's. He leaves the school by night, and as he is passing over the bridge which spans the river he hears a splash, followed by a weak cry for help. The cry is from the lips of Seth Black, a tramp who has been bribed by Squire Lacy to claim Talbot as his son. When Lacy hears that Arthur is going to leave the school he knows that Black will be a hindrance to his plans, so on the night that Arthur leaves St. Kit's the Squire attacks Black on the river-bank, and then throws him into the water * * * * Hidden in the blackness under the trees, the Squire stared with eyes full of terror at the face that looked down from the bridge—the face of Arthur Talbot.

(Now go on with the story.)

Talbot's Heroic Deed!

Arthur Talbot, as he came up to the bridge from the direction of St. Kit's, had heard the splash in the river, and the cry, the last Seth Black had uttered.

Little dreaming of the true state of affairs, the outcast of St. Kit's knew that some human being was in danger of death, and that was enough for him to know. Someone was struggling for life in the deep waters, and at the thought Arthur Talbot dropped his bag and his stick and dashed on towards the bridge with a pace seldom seen off the cinder-path.

In a second or two he was on the bridge. The cry had come from above it, and Arthur Talbot leaned over the low parapet, searching the water with keen, flashing eyes for a sight of the supposed drowning man.

The moonlight glistened on the surface of the river, and it glimmered and swam before the lad's eyes. Where was the object he sought?

His eyes flashed. He had caught a glimpse of Seth Black's deathly face as the wretched man, quite insensible now, was swept away under the bridge.

In that momentary glimpse Arthur knew whom it was—knew that it was the man who had brought him to shame, who had helped him to ruin—the man who had claimed to be his father, and lied foully in claiming it.

Yet not for a moment did he hesitate. The man was going to his death, if he was not dead already. But he should not perish if Arthur Talbot could save him.

Of the squire, standing invisible in the blackness under the trees, Talbot saw and heard nothing. He did not even know yet that Black had fallen into the river under a murderous attack. He had no time to think of anything but the man's deadly peril.

He crossed the bridge to the opposite parapet with a single bound, and watched for the white face to reappear below. Out from the dark arch of the bridge came the body, borne by the current, and again there was a glimpse of a deathly face.

Talbot put his hands together, and went down from the bridge like an arrow. That the water was deep just below the bridge, that the current was swift and strong, did not deter him.

Down he went, cleaving into the deep water, down and down, and then up again to the surface, swimming with strong, steady strokes. He had calculated well. A few moments later his hand touched something that floated, his fingers slid along to the head, and he gripped the thick, coarse hair.

The face of Seth Black was brought well out of the water. The swift waters were singing in the lad's ears; the current was whirling him away, past banks that fled by like shadows. He did not know that a white, terrified face looked after him from the bridge—that Squire Lacy stood there, pale as death, with the anguish almost of death in his heart!

For matters, however they turned out, were beyond the reach of Squire Lacy now. The rapid current whirled the swimmer away so swiftly that he only caught a glimpse of Arthur Talbot, with Seth Black in his grip.

Talbot did not attempt to stem the current. It was doubtful if he could have done it alone, unencumbered; but with Seth Black to support, the attempt would have been inevitably futile. He let himself go with the stream, swimming and supporting the insensible man, and with a few strokes bringing himself closer to the bank.

But he was two hundred yards from the bridge or more ere he came to the bank, so rapidly did the river rush him along. And then his attempt to get ashore failed. For the banks here were high and steep, and the water deep close to the land, and a lump of soil came away in his clutch, and he was whirled on, out into the broad stream again, whirled by an eddy, still supporting his burden, and swimming gamely.

Again he came close to land; again he clutched and lost his grip. Then again and again. And still the current drove him on, and he was growing exhausted now. The fight was tiring him; his strokes grew feebler, and lights danced before his eyes. Was it to be death, then—death for both of them?

Yet it never even crossed his mind to let his burden go, and fight for his own life alone. His grip upon Seth Black never relaxed.

And now a new thought, a flash of hope, came through his mind. He had been borne so far from the bridge that he must be near the school boathouse now. If his dazed eyes could have seen it, the tower of St. Kit's rose blackly there over the trees, dark and silent in the moon's rays. He could not see it; he saw nothing but the whirling waters, the fleeting banks wrapped in darkness. But he knew that he must be near St. Kit's.

There was a chance yet. Yes, there was the boathouse, showing through the trees—there the plank landing-stage that he knew so well.

He was exhausted now, but he clutched at the edge of the planks, and he held on. It was something fast to hold to, and he held fast. He held by one hand, the other supporting Seth Black, till something of his strength returned, and his brain cleared.

It was not easy, even then, to climb out without losing his hold upon the insensible man, but he managed it. He dragged Black slowly and painfully upon the planks, and then sank down beside him, and for a time he knew no more.

He had made a gallant fight, and he had won it. But he was spent, and he lay beside the man he had saved, with reeling brain, in a semi-unconscious state, incapable of movement.

Boom! He started at the sound. It was a stroke from the clock-tower of St. Kit's, and it startled him from his swoon. He sat up, rubbing his eyes dazedly. Boom again—and so on till twelve strokes had been told.

Midnight! Arthur Talbot staggered to his feet. He looked down at the man he had saved. Seth Black was still insensible, and lay without motion.

A sudden fear gripped Arthur's heart. Had his labour been in vain? Little care did he owe Seth Black, but death is always terrible. Was the man dead?

He knelt beside him, and felt for his heart. It was still beating. Arthur Talbot drew a deep breath of relief. He lived! But what was he to do now? Seth Black still lived, but the flame burned faintly, and needed little to extinguish it. Without prompt care he would be a dead man.

And Arthur himself? He had set out from St. Kit's to face the world, intending never to look upon the school again—at least, never till his name was cleared. But this strange happening had upset all his calculations. His bag, containing his few poor possessions, was lying somewhere a mile up the river. He was soaked to the skin, and in an exhausted condition.

In spite of all, it is probable that if Arthur Talbot had had only himself to consider, he would have turned his back upon St. Kit's. But there was the man lying insensible at his feet. He must be saved.

Help must be had for him, if not for Talbot, and the only place at hand was the school. With slow and heavy steps Arthur Talbot followed the familiar way, and stopped at the big gates of St. Kit's. There he rang a loud peal upon the bell.

It was midnight, and the school slept. Silence and slumber reigned within the walls of St. Kit's. Strange and eerie sounded the bell, echoing through the ghostly silence.

Talbot's Return.

Clang!

Dr. Kent started.

It was past midnight; but, while the rest of the building was silent and dark, a light still burned in the doctor's study. Others might sleep, but the Head of St. Kit's was wakeful through the small hours of the night.

His eyes were sad and heavy, his kind, old face was lined and haggard. One day of strain and trouble had made a great difference to the doctor.

Arthur Talbot, his favourite—the boy he had always looked upon as a splendid specimen of young British manhood—was proved to be a thief!

In the face of the overwhelming evidence discovered against him, the Head could allow himself no further doubts.

Talbot was guilty!

With that wretched thought in his mind, and the crumbling away of all the high hopes he had had of the boy, it was not likely that the doctor could sleep. He did not think of it himself.

While the great building fell silent, while slumber reigned in dormitory and bed-room, the doctor remained up, seated in his chair staring at the fire, or pacing his study with restless feet.

He had heard successive hours strike from the tower—midnight the last. It was then that the sudden clang of the bell startled him from his gloomy meditations.

Clang!

The sound echoed eerily through the silent school.

Dr. Kent started and listened. Who could be ringing the bell at that dead hour of the night?

Clang!

Louder and more imperative came the ring at the bell.

Whether the porter heard it was a question, but the Head heard it plainly enough, though he was at a considerable distance. In the dead silence of the night the sharp sound travelled far.

The Head left his study. He looked out into the close, dim in the midnight, ghostly with the moving shadows of rustling branches. He crossed with a rapid step towards the gate. Dimly seen, the great bronze gates rose before him, and a shadowy form on the other side of the thick bars. The doctor stopped.

"Who is there?"

"Dr. Kent!"

The Head started forward. He knew that voice.

"Talbot?"

"Yes; it is I!"

"Talbot, what are you doing outside the gates of St. Kit's at this hour?"

"I will explain later," said Talbot quietly, speaking through the bars. "At present there is no time to lose. A man's life hangs in the balance!"

"A man's life?"

"Yes. Will you get the gates opened?"

"As quickly as possible."

The amazed doctor hurried to the porter's lodge. He was

as quick as possible, it is true, but some minutes elapsed before he returned with the keys.

The gates swung open. Arthur Talbot staggered rather than walked in. Dr. Kent caught him by the arm.

"What has happened? Heavens, you are drenched with water!"

"I have been in the river," said Talbot briefly.

"In the river! What for?"

"To fetch out a man who was in the water."

"Ah, I see! You have saved someone from drowning?"

"Yes; he lies by the boathouse. I could not carry him here. If he is not sent for immediately and cared for, he will die!"

"That shall be done. You— But I will not question you now."

The school porter had now come out of his lodge. Dr. Kent explained to him in a few hurried words, and the porter lighted a lantern.

"You must go in and change your clothes, Talbot," said the doctor quickly. "I will speak to you again afterwards. Don't lose an instant, or the consequences may be serious. Knock at Mr. Slaney's door as you go, and ask him to come here."

Talbot hesitated.

He had been compelled to come back to St. Kit's to save the life of the man who lay insensible on the planks close by the school boathouse.

But it was far from being his intention to remain.

His project was only postponed, and he had not meant it to be postponed for long. But it was impossible to disregard the doctor. He went slowly towards the house, and up the stairs to his own quarters.

He knocked at Mr. Slaney's door, and gave the master of the Fourth the Head's message, much to Mr. Slaney's astonishment.

Then he entered his own room—the room that had been his, and which earlier that evening he had, as he believed, looked his last upon.

He lighted the gas, and proceeded to dry himself and change his clothes.

This took some time, but he was finished at last. When all was done, he descended again, and met a strange-looking procession at the door.

Mr. Slaney and the porter, between them, were carrying the insensible Seth Black. Black showed no sign yet of coming to himself.

Dr. Kent held the lantern, lighting the way.

Seth Black was carried into the lighted study, and laid upon a couch there. Then the porter was despatched for a doctor.

"Come in, Talbot!"

Talbot quietly entered the study.

"Explain how you found this wretched man," said the Head quietly. "There has evidently been foul play. He is insensible, not from immersion in the water, but from two terrible blows he has received on the head."

Talbot started. He glanced at Seth Black, and saw that what the doctor observed was correct.

"Did you not know that, Talbot?"

"I knew nothing, sir, except that he was in the water," said Talbot. "As I was passing over the bridge I heard a cry, and I saw him in the water. I went in for him, and the current had brought us down as far as the school boathouse before I could get him ashore."

Mr. Slaney and the Head were looking at him in a very peculiar way.

"That is all, sir," said Talbot quietly.

"But how came you on the bridge at a late hour of the night?" asked the Head.

Talbot coloured.

"I was on my way to the railway junction."

"For what purpose?"

"To catch the night express to London," said Talbot firmly. "I had made up my mind to leave St. Kit's, sir!"

"Without asking my permission?"

"I had little doubt that you would be glad to be rid of me, sir, after what has happened. It was impossible for me to remain at the school, and I was willing to save you from a difficult position."

"You should have spoken to me first."

Talbot was silent.

"What has happened," said the Head, "has, of course, altered much. But I still desire to be your friend, and to help you in every way in my power."

"I desire no help from one who believes me to be a thief!" said Talbot coldly. "You have been very kind to me in the past, sir, and I hope I shall always be grateful. But I could never again accept anything at your hands!"

Dr. Kent bit his lip.

"Then you deny your guilt, even now, Talbot?"

"I must do so, as I am innocent."

"If the proofs were not so clear—"

"I do not regard them as clear. I am innocent. I have no more to say than that. It is best for me to leave the school. I can still catch the early morning train at the junction, and—"

The Head made a decided gesture.
"You will do nothing of the kind!"

"I must leave the school, sir!"

"You will not leave it to-night! Talbot, I think I have a right to exact obedience from you. You will not leave the school to-night!"

"I will not if you do not wish it, sir."

"Then you will remain."

"I will do as you like."

"Then go to bed, my boy! We will speak of this further in the morning."

"Very well, sir."

Arthur Talbot left the study.

He was worn out, and by no means disinclined to repose. He was soon in bed, and, in spite of the troubles stirring in his mind, fast asleep.

Dr. Kent looked at Mr. Slaney with a worried expression.

"What do you think?" he said uneasily. "Is there—is there a possibility that this is the truth—that the boy is, after all, innocent?"

The master of the Fourth looked puzzled.

"Face to face with him, it is hard to believe him guilty," he said frankly; "but considering only the evidence, it is hard to believe him innocent."

Dr. Kent sighed.

"Oh, if only I could learn the truth! If only I could be certain that my boy was innocent—that he was not a thief!"

He moved restlessly about the study.

Mr. Slaney's glance followed him with sympathy, but there was nothing he could say that would be of comfort.

Little more was said in the study till the doctor arrived from Northley.

The medical man made an examination of Seth Black. His face was very grave as he did so, and he finished by shaking his head in a very dubious way.

"You do not think he will die?" said the Head.

The medical man pursed his lips.

"I hope not. But when he recovers consciousness, I greatly doubt whether he will awake with a knowledge of his surroundings. But we must hope for the best. Is the man to remain here?"

"Certainly, if you consider it best."

"Well, I should hardly consider it safe to move him to the village."

"Then he shall remain, decidedly."

And so Seth Black became an inmate of St. Kit's. The physician's prediction proved correct. Seth Black awoke to consciousness before morning; but his surroundings were a blank to him, and he lay like a log in the bed where he had been placed—silent, motionless, with grim, staring eyes fixed upon the ceiling.

Something Like a Mystery!

Pat Nugent was the first out of bed in the Fourth Form dormitory the following morning. The rising-bell was ringing, but with a dull and muffled sound, instead of the usual clangorous one.

"Faith!" exclaimed Pat. "What's the matter with the bell? Do you hear it, Blaggy?"

"Yes," yawned Blaggy. "Wish I didn't!"

"I mean, can you hear that it's different?"

"Yes; it sounds quieter than usual."

"That's what I mean."

"Sounds as if they didn't want to disturb us too suddenly," remarked Greene. "Getting awfully considerate in their old age!"

Pat Nugent grinned.

"Sure, and it's not on our account, I fancy," he exclaimed. "There's some other reason for it, kids. Hallo! Here's Mr. Slaney!"

The master of the Fourth had put his head in at the door. His face was very grave and quiet.

"Time to rise, boys!" he said. "I looked in as I thought that perhaps some of you have not heard the rising-bell, also to ask you to be as quiet as possible this morning."

"Sure, and we're always that, sir!" said Pat.

The Form master smiled slightly.

The Fourth Form at St. Kit's generally made their presence known in the school, and Pat Nugent usually made as much noise as any other two.

"Well, I must ask you to be more quiet than usual," said Mr. Slaney.

"Certainly, sir. Is anything wrong?"

"Yes; there is an invalid in the school."

"Someone fallen ill, sir?" asked Pat, serious at once.

"No; not exactly that. A man who has met with an—accident, that is all. He has been brought into the school as the nearest refuge," explained Mr. Slaney. "He lies now in a most precarious condition. That is why the rising-bell is muffled, and I ask you to be quiet this morning, my boys."

"Sure, and we will be as quiet as lambs!" said Pat Nugent.

Mr. Slaney nodded, and quitted the dormitory.

Pat Nugent proceeded with his dressing, in an interested and somewhat excited frame of mind.

"There's something queer about this," he remarked. "Slaney hasn't told us all."

"Queer, that," Blagden remarked. "It's such a common custom for a Form master to take the juniors into all his secrets!"

"Oh, don't be funny, Blaggy! Can't you be satisfied with looking funny? You haven't an equal in that line!"

"Look here, Tipperary—"

"Arrah, dry up while I'm talking! You'd talk the hind-leg off a mule, Blaggy; you would, really! I say there's something fishy about this business."

"What is there fishy about it? People do meet with accidents."

"Well, yes; I've known 'em to. But this chap Slaney speaks of—When did he drop on that accident? It wasn't before we went to bed last night, was it? And we're about first up in the morning. You see, it must have happened during the night."

"Good old Sherlock Holmes!"

"Now, who was wandering about in the middle of the night, meeting with giddy accidents?" demanded Pat.

"It's a jolly tall story, kids."

"You don't think Slaney was yarning to us, surely?"

"Of course not. He's told us the truth; but not all of it. There's a jolly lot more behind that he hasn't told us. Do you see?"

"Well, I don't know that it's any business of ours," Blagden remarked thoughtfully.

"You don't know anything at all, I fancy, Blaggy. It may be our business; we've had to look into a good many things lately—things the masters are not quite up to dealing with."

"Ha, ha! That's so. Are you going to deal with this?"

"I may have to look into it," said Pat airily.

The Fourth Form went down to breakfast. They found that knowledge of the mysterious invalid had been spread over the school, and most of the Forms were discussing that and nothing else.

There was a great deal of conjecture afloat as to whom the individual might be, but as yet the identity of Seth Black had not been disclosed.

It was noted that Arthur Talbot's place at the Sixth Form table was empty.

There was some speculation as to where the late captain of St. Kit's was, and some hazarded the opinion that he had left the school. Brooke, the new captain, sat with a solemn and serious face, and did not answer at first when appealed to for his opinion.

"Don't you know what has become of Talbot?" asked Eldred Lacy at last pointedly. "I heard that he had a long jaw with you in the study last night, Brooke."

"We had a talk," said Brooke coldly.

"Well, has he left St. Kit's?"

"I believe so."

Lacy smiled with satisfaction.

"Well, it was about the best thing he could do," he remarked. "We didn't want a thief among us, and I know the Head would have made some bones about expelling him. He was always a favourite with the Head."

Brooke looked the prefect full in the eyes.

"Arthur Talbot is no thief," he said.

"Changed your opinion since yesterday, haven't you?" said Lacy, with a sneer.

"I never fully believed it."

"You didn't stand by Talbot, anyway. This is the first I've heard you say in his favour, for one."

"I admit that I didn't stand by him as I should have done. But I know that he is innocent now, and I stand by him to the end."

"That won't do him much good if he's gone."

"I don't know! He has gone, but he may come back if the real thief is discovered."

"Oh, rot!"

"The real thief's discovered right enough," said Rook. "The real thief's Talbot himself. We shall never see him again, and a jolly good job too."

"It was a bit off, anyway, having a son of that horrid tramp Black at the school," Haywood remarked. "I thought all along that he ought to go."

"So did I," assented Dunn.

Brooke gave them a glance of contempt, but did not trouble to speak.

Some of the talk had been noted and repeated, and Brooke's statement that Arthur Talbot had left St. Kit's was not long in reaching the Fourth Formers.

After breakfast, while the others went towards the close, Pat Nugent turned to the stairs to go up to the studies.

Blagden tapped him on the shoulder.

"Where are you going, Paddy?"

"Sure, and I'm Talbot's fag, ain't I?" said Pat. "I'm going to see if he wants me for anything this morning, kid."

"To see if he's in his study, you mean," said Blagden, with a grin.

"Well, I suppose I shall see that, too."

"Brooke says he has left the school."

"Nothing like making sure."

And Pat Nugent ascended the stairs. He tapped at the door of Talbot's study, and gave a start as the strong, clear voice bade him enter.

Talbot was at home!

Pat Nugent went into the study. Talbot was breakfasting in his own room. He had not cared to face the school in the dining-hall.

"Sure and ye're at home, Talbot, then!" said Pat, with satisfaction. "You haven't given us the slip in the night, after all."

Talbot smiled.

"They're saying down there that you were gone," explained Pat. "Can I do anything for you this morning, Talbot, before school?"

Talbot shook his head.

"No, thanks, Nugent. You can run along."

"Right-ho! But, I say, Talbot, I really came here to see if you were at home, not to fag," said Pat, with charming frankness. "Are you thinking of leaving St. Kit's still?"

"Yes," said Talbot briefly.

"Brooke thought you were gone."

"I did go," said Talbot, after a momentary hesitation—

"I did go, but unforeseen circumstances compelled me to return for a time. I am going to-day."

"Faith, and I wish ye'd make up your mind to stay, Talbot," said Pat persuasively. "I've got a lot to tell you."

"Indeed!"

"Can I tell you now, Talbot? It's important. There's twenty minutes before first lesson."

"Certainly! You do not mean to say that you have discovered anything?"

"Haven't we made up a committee of investigation?" exclaimed Pat, somewhat indignantly. "Did you think the committee was going to sit down and twiddle its thumbs?"

Talbot laughed.

"No; certainly not. I am sure you have been very active. But what can you possibly have discovered?"

"I'll tell you," said Pat. "The worst part of it all is, that we haven't any proofs beyond our bare word, and that's not enough to accuse a fellow on. But we know the whole story from start to finish, and that's something, isn't it, Talbot?"

"Certainly. Go on."

And Pat went on to relate all the investigations and discoveries of the committee of the end study.

Talbot listened with keen interest.

When Pat, in speaking of the interview between Eldred Lacy and his brother, mentioned the appointment between Seth Black and the squire on the bridge at ten o'clock, Talbot gave a violent start.

"Pat Nugent, are you sure of that?"

"Sure of what?" asked Pat, in surprise.

"That Seth Black was to meet Squire Lacy on the bridge at ten last night?"

"Quite sure."

"You are certain you have made no mistake upon that point?" exclaimed Talbot, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "It is of vast importance, Nugent."

"Sure, and I don't see it," said Pat, puzzled. "But, anyway, I'm sure, and Blagden and Greene will bear me out."

"Then it was Rupert Lacy?"

Talbot muttered the words unconsciously aloud. Pat caught them.

"What was Rupert Lacy?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing. I am glad you have told me all this, Nugent. Have you anything more to tell me?"

"No, I think that's about all," said Pat, reflecting.

"But you see how the matter stands, don't you? Eldred Lacy and the squire put this up between them, and Lacy as good as said so in their talk. They fixed it between them to get rid of you from St. Kit's, Talbot."

"Yes, that is clear."

"The squire said he could prevent Black from interfer-

ing, and told Eldred he needn't have any fear on that score," went on Pat. "I don't know how he intended to keep Black quiet, though, as he said it wasn't a question of money with him now."

"I think I do," said Talbot grimly.

The whole thing was clear to him now.

The squire had met the ruffian as appointed on the bridge at ten o'clock. It was just after ten that Talbot heard that cry, and found Seth Black in the river. Now, the physician declared that Black had been struck down with murderous intent. The inference could not be mistaken. The deed had been done by the hand of Rupert Lacy.

A bell began to ring.

"Hallo, I must be off!" exclaimed Pat; and he darted from the study.

He joined the Fourth Form going into their class-room. Blagden nudged him, and Pat saw that his chum's face was full of excitement.

"What's the matter, Blaggy?"

"There's something on, Pat."

"Go ahead."

"The police have come!"

"The police!"

"Yes, an inspector and a constable, and they've gone to the room where the invalid is. There's something in it, Pat, just as you said—something more than an accident. And—and a chap says he heard one of the servants say that—"

"That what?"

"That the injured man is that ruffian who claimed to be Talbot's father—the fellow who was talking to Lacy last night at the Dragon."

"Seth Black?"

"Yes."

Pat gave a low whistle. This was a surprise for him.

"But I say, Blaggy—"

"Silence there!" said the Form master. "Fall in!"

Pat had to be silent. He took his place in class with the rest; but during first lesson his mind wandered very far from the subject which ought to have engrossed his attention, and led to his being called sharply to order several times by Mr. Slaney.

A Terrible Suspicion.

Squire Lacy of Lynwood rode up to St. Kit's, and dismounted at the gate.

The squire's face was paler than usual, but he had himself well under control, and his looks did not betray the fear and uneasiness that were inwardly devouring him.

He had come to St. Kit's to learn what had become of Seth Black, and to learn what was known there; and he came with the feeling of a man who carries his life and liberty in his hands.

For aught he knew, all might be known. He might be known as the attempted murderer of the previous night. The police might be looking out for him.

On the other hand, nothing might have transpired, if Talbot had not seen him from the bridge, and if Seth Black had been unable to speak.

He did not know whether the ruffian was alive or dead; but he greatly feared the former.

Whether he would be greeted at the school as the respected Squire of Lynwood, and one of the governors of St. Kit's, or as a known criminal, remained to be seen. It may be easily imagined what his feelings were like as he left his horse at the lodge and walked up to the doctor's house.

The door of the schoolhouse was open, and two men were coming down the steps as the squire approached them.

He gave a convulsive start, and his hands involuntarily clenched.

The two men were Inspector Legge and a constable from Northley. They had evidently been up to the school to see Talbot and Seth Black. Was the man living or dead? Had he spoken?

The squire stopped, his heart beating hard.

The two policemen would pass him in a few moments. Would they salute him in the usual respectful way, or— He gritted his teeth as he thought of the other possibility. He would never be taken alive!

They came down the steps and came towards the squire. Little did they dream of the storm hidden within the breast of the wretched man.

Inspector Legge touched his cap. The squire breathed again.

"Good-morning, Legge!" he said, as affably as he could.

"Nothing wrong here at the school, I hope."

"Yes, sir," said the inspector, "there is, Mr. Lacy."

The inspector was exceedingly civil to the local magnate.

"It looks like a case of attempted murder, sir."

"Attempted—murder?" gasped the squire.

NEXT SATURDAY: "BRIAN'S EXCURSION," A Splendid Long, Complete School Tale, by Lewis Hockley; AND

"THE CLUE OF THE BROKEN LANCE," A Thrilling Tale of Stanley Dare, Detective, IN "PLUCK," 1P.

"That's it, sir."

"But surely no one at St. Kit's—"

The inspector smiled.

"Oh, no, Mr. Lacy. It's a fellow that was found in the river last night by Master Talbot, and brought into the school, this being the nearest place to where he got him ashore."

"Oh, I see! Nobody belonging to the school?" said Rupert Lacy casually.

"No; the man is rather a bad character, a fellow called Seth Black, who has been hanging about the village for some time, sir," said the inspector. "We've had an eye on him. He's a low, disreputable rascal, to speak the plain truth, and I've not the slightest doubt that he got that crack on the head in some drunken row."

"Ah, very likely!" assented the squire. "Has he been able to make any statement?"

"No, sir; he lies like a log, without moving or speaking. He's had two nasty cracks on the head, and the wonder is they didn't kill him. If Master Talbot hadn't dragged him out of the water, he'd have been a dead man."

The squire's teeth came together hard.

"Very creditable of Talbot," he remarked. "But I understood you to say that the affair happened last night."

"Yes, about the middle of the night."

"What was a boy belonging to St. Kit's doing up the river at such an hour?"

The inspector looked puzzled.

"I don't quite know," he confessed. "It's no business of ours, I suppose. I should look into it if I were headmaster here, sir. Still, Talbot behaved in a very plucky way. He was carried all the way from the bridge down to the school boathouse by the current, and he must have had a narrow shave altogether."

"Very plucky of him. Did he see anything of Black's assailant?"

"No; he thought at first that the man had become intoxicated and fallen into the river all by himself."

"Isn't that possible? The marks on the head might have come by knocking against the bridge or a stone."

The inspector shook his head.

"No, sir; they were made by an instrument—probably the butt of a pistol. The doctor says so, and I agree with him."

"You have some suspicion—"

"I suspect those rascals at the Dragon," said the inspector, sinking his voice. "Of course, I can say so to you, sir, as you're a magistrate."

"You can speak confidentially to me, of course, Legge."

(Another fine instalment next Saturday.)

Your Editor's Corner.

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

"BRIAN'S EXCURSION"

is the title of next Saturday's first special school tale. It is written by Lewis Hockley, and deals with the schooldays of Brian Donoghue. The picture below is an incident from the tale, and is the one you must look out for on the cover of our next number.

The second tale, entitled

"THE CLUE OF THE BROKEN LANCE,"

deals with the thrilling adventures of Stanley Dare, the young detective, and is one you must not fail to read.

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YOUR EDITOR.



This picture depicts an amusing incident in "Brian's Excursion," by Lewis Hockley, one of the two complete tales in next Saturday's PLUCK. Price 1d.