

School, Detective & Adventure Tales for All.

GRAND  
CHRISTMAS  
DOUBLE  
NUMBER

# PLUCK 2<sup>D</sup>

CONTENTS.

3

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CHRISTMAS.

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THE RIVALS  
OF  
ST. KIT'S.

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AN EXTRA LONG INSTALMENT OF THIS POPULAR SCHOOL TALES

# 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 elected captain of St. Kit's. One morning the Head discovers that Talbot has been robbed of £50. He calls a meeting in the hall, and Arthur Talbot is accused of the theft. His study is searched, and some of the money is found hidden beneath the carpet; but Arthur declares he is innocent. He goes to Coventry by the whole school except Nugent, Blagden, and Greene, who believe in his innocence, and who are determined to clear him. However, Arthur Talbot decides to run away from St. Kit's. One night he hears a splash, followed by a wailing cry for help. He goes to the river to see what has happened, and finds a tramp who has been bribed to claim Talbot as his son. When Lacy hears that Arthur is going to claim Talbot as his son, he knows that Black will be a hindrance to his plans, so he attacks Black on the bank, and then throws him into the water. Arthur Talbot, however, eventually saves Black from drowning and takes him to the school. One whole day Seth Black lies unconscious in one of the bed-rooms, while Pat Nugent, Blagden, and Greene are awakened by hearing Trimble and Cleeve creeping out of the dormitory. The three lads decide to follow them towards the ruined chapel. The clink of a falling stone caught their attention, and they hurriedly entered the crypt. "Come on!" whispered Pat. "It's the crypt, boys. Look!" (Now on with the story.)



### A Burglar!

Trimble and Cleeve had the door open, but they hesitated to enter the dark, forbidding recess under the ruins. Trimble had been there before, for our readers will remember how he had been imprisoned there with a number of Lacy's voters just before the late election. But in the dead of night the crypt looked extremely uninviting.

"I—I'd rather not go in, please, Trimble," muttered Cleeve, shaking in every limb.

"Silly young fool! Are you afraid?"

"Ye-e-es."

"Well, buck up. There's nothing to be afraid of. You don't believe in ghosts, I suppose?"

"N-no; but I don't want to go in. I—I believe you're afraid, too, Trimble."

"I'm not, you young fool! I'll show you."

Trimble struck a match to light the lantern he carried in his hand. The flicker showed that his face was white as chalk. It was evident that, in spite of his boastful words, Trimble by no means relished the task in hand; but he could not confess himself a coward to Cleeve. Besides, the task for which he had come there had to be performed. On the morrow it was probable that it would be too late.

"Come on, confound you, and stop shivering!" he growled. And he led the way down into the crypt.

"If you please, Trimble, I—I'd rather not come."

Trimble stopped with a muttered curse.

"Do you want me to chuck you in neck and crop?" he demanded savagely.

"N-n-no!" stammered Cleeve.

"Then, follow me at once. I'm not going in alone. Say another word, and I'll shove you in, and fasten the door, and leave you there, too!" growled Trimble.

Cleeve shuddered.

"I'm c-c-coming, Trimble."

"Then, c-c-come, and don't be all night about it!" snarled Trimble.

The precious pair disappeared into the crypt, and the light vanished from the eyes of the watchers in the ruined chapel. In the dimness the committee of investigation looked at one another.

"What's the next move?" muttered Blagden.

Greene had a suggestion to make at once.

"Shove the door of the crypt shut, and fasten them up there. It would serve the cads right!" he said.

Pat Nugent shook his head.

"That won't do. I believe Cleeve would go right off his nut from sheer cowardice if he found himself fastened up there at night. He's in a state of the bluest of blue funk as it is."

"You're right. Shall we follow them, then?" asked Blagden.

"They would be bound to see or hear us. No, let's lie low, and wait for them to come out. We want to nab them with the cash in their possession."

"Then, we'll collar them as they pass us?"

"No, we won't; we've got to have witnesses."

"Hang it! I should think three of us would be witnesses enough."

"Not good enough, Blaggy. You see, we three backed up Talbot through thick and thin, and we don't want to leave Lacy a loophole. He might say that we've it all up to clear Talbot, and we might not be believed."

would be his word against ours. Trimble and Cleeve might say that we took the money from the crypt, for instance, and Lacy would back them up in that, or anything else, to save his own skin."

"My hat! You think of everything, and no mistake!"

"One needs to, in dealing with a rotter like Eldred Lacy."

"That's so; but what's to be done, then, if we're not to collar the cads?"

"Let 'em get back into the house with the cash," said Pat, "and then wake up Brooke, and get him to nail them with it in their hands."

"By Jove, that will be sure work! But why not Talbot?"

"No, Talbot had better keep right out of it. We want disinterested outsiders as witnesses, so that nobody can have an excuse for doubting the evidence," said Pat.

"Brooke is captain of St. Kit's now, and the proper person to take the matter in hand. He's a chap whose word couldn't be doubted, either."

"Good! But I say, Pat, if we let those bounders get back into the house first, they'll fasten the window, and we shall be shut out."

"Sure, and I had forgotten that! One of you cut off the door, then, and get in first," said Pat hastily.

"You and I, Greene, and open the window again after they're out. Mind you don't let them spot you, you know."

"Trust me," said Greene. "I'm off!" And he disappeared promptly.

Pat Nugent and Blagden remained on the watch.

Five slow minutes passed, and then the light gleamed again in the entrance of the crypt. Trimble and Cleeve came into view again.

In the light of the lantern Pat Nugent saw their faces. They were pale and uneasy yet, but there was a very marked satisfaction in them.

Trimble extinguished the lantern.

"Close that door, Cleeve, and come on."

Cleeve closed the door of the crypt.

"I say, Trimble, wait a minute. We had better get up here, you know, it's safer; we want to go straight to bed when we get in."

"Oh, that's all right; I'll give you your whole night's sleep to-morrow."

"No, you won't, Trimble; you'll give us a good night's sleep as he spoke. "Haud it over now!"

Trimble clenched his fist.

"Do you want me to give you a hiding, you young scoundrel?"



"If you lay a finger on me I'll yell and wake the place," said Cleeve, in a shrill whisper. "Mind, I mean it! Take care!"

The bully of the Upper Fourth dropped his hand to his side with an uneasy laugh.

"I wasn't going to hit you; but what's the difference between settling up now and settling up to-morrow? We've no time to waste now."

"I know you, Trimble. I'm going to have my share now. I hadn't told you about it, you wouldn't have had it."

"Now, look here, don't be a fool, young Cleeve. I tell you—"

"Hand it over!" Cleeve was raising his voice. Trimble muttered something under his breath, and thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Hold your row. I'll settle up now if you like." There was a clink of coin. It came clearly to the ears of the two rascals crouching in the black shadow of a fragment of the ancient wall.

"That's fifteen," said Trimble. "That's just half."

"That's fifteen," Trimble, there were more than thirty. "Look here, Trimble, there were more than thirty."

"There weren't. Lacy must have kept the rest about him. Now come on."

"I don't believe—"

"Oh, shut up, and come on! You make me tired." Trimble strode away, and Cleeve followed him, grumbling.

It was evident that he did not believe that his escapade in dishonesty had dealt fairly by him.

"Honour among thieves," murmured Pat Nugent. "A precious pair, begorra!"

Trimble and Cleeve disappeared. The chums of the Fourth remained where they were until the two rascals had had time to return to the school, then they rose to their feet.

"This is a stroke of luck," murmured Pat. "The committee of investigation are coming out strong, and no mistake. Come on, Blaggy; quiet does it."

"Right-ho! Lead the way." Pat led the way from the ruins. Keeping carefully in the shadow of the trees, the boys drew nearer to the house. Pat suddenly seized Blagden and dragged him deeper into the shade of an old elm.

"What's the matter?" muttered Blagden.

"Someone's there."

"But they're in long ago. They—"

"It's not Trimble or Cleeve. Look!"

"My hat! It's a man—a giddy burglar!"

In the dim starlight a figure could be seen crossing the dew towards the School House. It was the figure of a well-built man, who certainly did not belong to the place. His steady manner naturally suggested that he was a burglar.

"A burglar!" muttered Pat Nugent. "But I've seen him before somewhere—there's something familiar—Great Scott!"

"You know who it is?"

"Yes, it's Squire Lacy of Lynwood." "Great Christopher Columbus!"

Pat Nugent was not mistaken. The man stealthily approaching the house was indeed Rupert Lacy, the squire of Lynwood. The committee of investigation seemed destined to make more than one discovery that eventful night.

Suddenly the squire stopped. He stood staring towards the old elm-tree in the shadow of which the juniors were crouched.

They knew well enough what that meant. He had heard something—a movement, or else the echo of muttered words. Suddenly he moved again, and came straight towards the tree with rapid steps.

The juniors' hearts beat like hammers. They dodged away from the tree, and ran for the house. They heard a muttered exclamation behind them.

Squire Lacy had caught a glimpse of them in the starlight. For a moment he had moved in pursuit; then he stopped, swung round, and strode away. He was certainly aware that he had been recognised, and he desired to remain unknown. At the window Pat turned back, and was greatly relieved to see that the squire had disappeared.

"I say, that's awfully curious, Blaggy!" he muttered. "What on earth was Squire Lacy doing, hanging round the school at this time of night?"

"Up to some dirty work," replied Blagden. "Something we ought to look into, probably."

Pat chuckled.

"Mum's the word, Blaggy. We'll tell Talbot to-morrow, and see what he says. Now let's get in, and see if Greene has there."

Greene's face was looking at them through the window. He opened it as he saw Pat at the sill, and gave them a

"Where are those two rascals?" asked Pat.

"Gone to their little bunks," chuckled Greene. "I

watched 'em, and then came back— and unlocked the window. Where are you going now?" and unlocked the door.

"To wake up Brooke."

And the committee of investigation made their way at once to the room where the new captain of St. Kit's lay in slumber.

### Mr. Slaney Gets at the Truth.

**B**ROOKE was sleeping soundly, little dreaming of what was passing in those same hours in the silent school. In the visions of slumber, he saw his chum once more cleared, and filling once more his old position of captain of St. Kit's. From that pleasant dream he was suddenly awakened by a violent shaking.

He started up from slumber.

"Hallo! Who the—what the—how the—"

"It's all right, Brooke; it's only us."

Brooke stared through the gloom at the speaker, vainly trying to discern him in the dark room. He thought he knew the voice.

"And who may 'us' be?" he exclaimed.

"The committee of investigation," replied Pat Nugent. "We're on the track."

"You'll be getting the biggest licking of your life in a minute," muttered Brooke savagely. "Just you wait a minute, you little beast. I'll teach you to come waking up a Sixth-Former in the middle of the night."

"I say, Brooke, don't get waxy, you know. It's important."

"What do you mean?"

"It's important, really. Honour bright. No larks."

"What are you driving at?"

"We've made a discovery—one that will clear Talbot."

"If this is a joke, Pat Nugent—"

"Honour bright."

Brooke sat on the edge of the bed.

"Tell me what you mean, then, and be quick."

"It's like this—"

"It's like this—"

"One at a time, confound you."

"Dry up, Blaggy; don't be talking when I'm on the job. You see, Brooke, it's like this. We have found the hidden guilty gold."

"You have found what?"

Pat proceeded to explain, as briefly as he could. Brooke listened keenly, with growing amazement. When Pat had finished he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"If this is all true, Nugent, you have done the best bit of work of your life. This will clear Talbot if we can prove it. Do you give me your word of honour that it is all true, and that you are not romancing?"

"Honour bright!"

"And you two others—"

"Honour bright!" said Blagden and Greene together solemnly.

"I believe you, lads. Mind, we shall not go into this matter alone. It is of too great importance for that. I shall call up Mr. Slaney, your Form master."

"The more the merrier," said Pat cheerfully.

"Wait here for me," said Brooke, "I'll be back in a minute or two."

"Right-ho! We'll wait."

Brooke had slipped on his clothes while Pat was talking. He hurried from the room now, and the juniors waited patiently for his return with the master of the Fourth.

In a few minutes Brooke re-entered, accompanied by Mr. Slaney.

The latter was in dressing-gown and slippers, and looked extremely grave.

"Tell Mr. Slaney what you have told me, Nugent," said Brooke.

Pat went through the story of the night's adventures once more, omitting nothing except the meeting with the squire in the starlit close. That incident was for Talbot to hear later.

"I believe you, Nugent," said the Form master gravely; "but the story will soon be put to the test, in any case. Come with me."

Brooke lighted a candle. Mr. Slaney took it in his hand and proceeded to the Lower Fourth dormitory. They followed him in silence.

The dormitory was dark and silent. The flickering candle glimmered eerily upon the long row of white beds. Mr. Slaney passed on till he came to Cleeve's bed, and there he stopped.

Cleeve's face was on the pillow, and his eyes were closed, but it was easy for the experienced master to see that he was only shamming slumber. His lips were quivering, and his eyelids twitched convulsively. He had evidently seen the master enter the dormitory, with Brooke and the chums

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of the end study, and was terrified by it. He had been in bed only a few minutes, and the fear of discovery was heavy upon his heart.

"Cleeve!" Mr. Slaney spoke quietly but firmly. As if there were some resistless power in the master's voice, Cleeve opened his eyes.

He had not the nerve to keep up the deception with the Form master's keen gaze fixed upon his face. His eyes opened, and met Mr. Slaney's.

"Cleeve, why were you pretending to be asleep?" Cleeve trembled.

"Answer me! Why were you pretending to be asleep?" "I—I—I wasn't, sir!"

"Don't lie to me! You were pretending to be asleep," said Mr. Slaney, his voice low, but hard and stern. "Why? Because you have been out of the house to-night? Because you have just returned from the chapel?"

Cleeve's eyes distended with terror. He could only imagine that Mr. Slaney had himself seen him, and he was too terrified to think of a lie in time to be of any use to him.

"I—I—I—" he stammered helplessly, and broke off. "You have been to the old chapel to-night? Answer me—the truth, mind!"

"Ye-es!" "Why did you go?" "I—I went because Trimble wanted me to."

"Why did Trimble want you to?" "Only for—for fun!" "You went into the old crypt for fun, did you?" Cleeve gasped.

It was clear that Mr. Slaney knew all about it. The thought of the fifteen sovereigns hidden in his inner pocket weighed upon Cleeve's mind. A search of his clothes would reveal them, and the game would be up.

He had one chance left—to put all the blame upon Trimble, if he could. That was the only loophole of escape he could see.

"Tell me the truth, Cleeve," said Mr. Slaney sternly. "What did you go into the crypt with Trimble for?"

"To—to get the money that was hidden there," gasped the wretched junior—"the money that was stolen from Dr. Kent's desk!"

"How did you know it was hidden there?" "I—I saw Lacy hide it there!" groaned the miserable wretch, the words, as it were, torn from him.

There was a general exclamation. Half the dormitory had been awakened, and a dozen ears had caught Cleeve's startling statement.

"You saw Lacy hide the money in the crypt?" "Yes, sir!"

"Why did you not take it before, then?" "I—I was afraid! I told Trimble about it, and we agreed to take it to-night, when it would be quite safe to go to the old chapel."

"What did you intend to do with the money?" "I—I—we—" "That is enough! You intended to keep it!"

"I—I—no—yes—I—" "Enough! Now, will you swear that it was Lacy you saw hide the money in the old crypt?"

"Yes, sir. I wondered what he was skulking into the ruins for at night, and I watched him, and I saw it all."

"Where is the money you took as your share?" "In—in my pocket, sir."

"Give me it." Cleeve reached tremblingly out of bed, and picked his jacket off the chair. There was a chink of coin as he picked it up with his shaking hands.

Mr. Slaney took the garment from him. "I will take this just as it is," he said. "I am glad you have spoken out, Cleeve. The proof was clear enough, but you have made things better for yourself by speaking out."

The wretched boy burst into tears. "Will you—will you intercede with the doctor for me, sir?" he groaned. "He—he will expel me—I know he will!"

"I should consider that very likely. You must consider yourself lucky if you are not given into custody for theft," said Mr. Slaney grimly. "You will certainly have to leave the school you have disgraced!"

"Oh, sir, I—have mercy on me—I—I—" "You need say no more. Boys, you must be quiet. I forbid you to interfere with Cleeve in any way. His punishment will be severe enough."

Mr. Slaney, carrying Cleeve's jacket under his arm, turned and left the dormitory, followed by Brooke and the chums of the end study. In spite of his warning, he left the room in a buzz of talk behind him.

"The money's found at last?"

"It was Lacy stole it, not Talbot!" "Talbot's innocent!"

"And Cleeve know it all the time, and never let on!" "The cad! The sneak!"

"He'll be expelled!" "And serve him jolly well right, too!"

Such were some of the remarks the wretched boy, cowering under the bedclothes, had to listen to, as he wept himself of terror and misery.

Meanwhile, Mr. Slaney and his companions proceeded to the Upper Fourth dormitory.

The candle carried by the Form master flickered in the long, dark apartment, and caught the eyes of Trimble, who was not yet asleep. He had not the faintest idea of what had occurred in the Lower Fourth room, but he instinctively felt that the coming of the Form master meant no good to him, and he promptly closed his eyes and shrank under the bed.

The master of the Fourth halted beside the head of the bed. "You need not pretend to be asleep, Trimble!"

Trimble had more nerve than Cleeve, but there was something in the Form master's tone that struck a chill to his very heart. He opened his eyes involuntarily.

His startled gaze passed the Form master, to whom Brooke and the chums of the end study stood, and then returned to the Form master's stern face.

"What—what's the matter, sir?" he stammered. "You have just returned from the ruined chapel, Trimble?"

Trimble's heart sank. But he mustered all his nerve to meet the situation.

"No, sir; certainly not! If those fellows say I have they're telling lies! I have not been out of the dormitory."

"I have heard a very different story from Cleeve!" The captain of the Upper Fourth jumped.

"From Cleeve, sir?" "Yes. Cleeve has confessed!"

"The—the cur! I mean, I don't know what he may have said, but if he says I was in the chapel to-night, he's telling an untruth, sir!"

"Take care, Trimble! You were seen to go there by Nugent, Blagden, and Greene."

"They're liars, sir! Those fellows hate me, and would do anything to injure me. They'd do anything against me because I made the Fourth Form send them to Coventry for sticking up for the thief, sir!"

"You young rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Slaney. "You know perfectly well that Talbot was innocent. You know perfectly well that you have just been to the chapel to take away the money which Eldred Lacy concealed for safety in the old crypt!"

Trimble's jaw dropped. Cleeve had given him away, with a vengeance!

"It's—it's not true, sir!" he gasped. "Then if I search your clothes I shall not find any of the money in them?" asked the master of the Fourth sternly.

Trimble turned as white as a sheet. In his fear and confusion, he had forgotten the money; it was a piece of evidence that could not possibly be disputed.

"The—the money, sir!" "Ah, you are changing your tune now, I see!" Mr. Slaney exclaimed scornfully. "You had forgotten that. You have forgotten the proverb which says that a liar should have a good memory, Trimble!"

Trimble gasped for breath. "I—I—I never meant to keep the money. Ask Cleeve! He told me that it was there; he had seen someone put it there—"

"Whom? Tell me whom." "L-Lacy, sir!" Trimble had no thought of keeping anything back now. If he could save his own skin, it would be as much as he could do, without trying to save anybody else's. "Lacy, sir, so he told me. Lacy hid the money in the old crypt, and—"

"And you and Cleeve determined to rob the robbery, eh?"

"N—no, sir. I meant to take the money back to Dr. Kent!"

"Indeed! Then why did you divide it with Cleeve?" "I—I—I—"

"Don't say any more, Trimble. Your falsehoods are so palpable for a child to be deceived by them. You cannot expect me to believe you. Where is the money?"

"In—in that pocket, sir." Mr. Slaney picked up the garment which Trimble had deicated with a trembling finger.

"Very good. I will take this away with me, Trimble." "Oh, sir! Will you—will you speak for me to Dr. Kent?" "I never really meant to keep the money. I should have thought better of it. I should—"



"I hope that is the truth. Trouble, though I doubt it very much. But your fate is in the hands of Dr. Kent, and not in mine. I leave you to such sleep as you can obtain."

And the visitors quitted the dormitory, leaving Trimble alone and miserable, and half the Upper Fourth wide awake while discussing the astounding discovery.

The hour of one was booming from the clock-tower as Mr. Slaney returned to his companions in the passage, after closing the dormitory door.

"Go back to bed now," he said. "This matter will be discussed on in the morning, and the innocence of Arthur Talbot proclaimed to all St. Kit's. My lads, you have done very well. Go back to bed now. Good-night!"

"Good-night, lads!" said Brooke.

The chums of the end study went back towards the Lower Fourth dormitory. Mr. Slaney went into his room, and Brooke went back to bed. The juniors heard the doors close, and then Pat murmured, "I'm not going in to bed for a bit. Don't you think Talbot would think it worth while to wake up, to know what's been discovered?"

"I know I should in his place," said Blagden.

"That's what I was thinking. We'll go and tell him. I'll bet a lot that he will be glad enough to lose his beauty sleep for the news we can give him."

"Rather!"

"Come on, then!" said Pat.

The committee of investigation made their way silently to Talbot's room. Pat tapped lightly on the door; he would not venture to knock hard in case the sound should reach Mr. Slaney or Brooke. There was no sound from within, and Pat silently opened the door and looked into the room.

The blind was up, and the window was wide open, for Talbot was a believer in fresh air. The pale starlight streamed into the room, and fell upon the bed.

Pat advanced into the room.

"I say, Talbot!"

Then he broke off suddenly.

"My hat!"

"What's the matter?" whispered Blagden uneasily.

"He's not here!"

"What?"

"Look for yourself!"

Pat pointed to the bed. It was true enough; the bed was empty, and had evidently not been slept in that night. Arthur Talbot was gone!

**A Watcher of the Night.**

Pat Nugent stared at the empty bed in amazement. Arthur Talbot was gone!

The bed had evidently not been disturbed that night; Arthur Talbot had not retired to rest at all. Where was he? "He's gone!" muttered Pat, in dismay.

"Gone!" repeated Greene and Blagden.

It was natural that they should jump to the conclusion that Arthur Talbot had, after all, shaken the dust of St. Kit's from his feet.

He had left the school once, and had returned, and it had been understood that he was to remain—for the time, at least. Now it looked as if he had reverted to his original intention. The room was deserted; the bed had not been slept in. Had the discovery of Talbot's innocence come too late?

Pat looked about the room, in the glimmer of starlight from the open window. There were books and papers upon the table; Talbot had evidently been working during the evening. A Greek lexicon was still open, where he had left it. His cap was on the door, his straw hat lay on a locker. Pat's eyes gleamed.

"He's not gone, chaps."

"Where is he, then?"

"Blessed if I know! But he wouldn't leave his props about like this if he had left the school. He's not gone from St. Kit's."

"But it's past one, and he hasn't been to bed."

"No; I can't imagine where he's got to. He ought to have been in bed two hours ago, like a good boy. I suppose nothing can have happened to him?"

"How could anything happen to him in the school?"

"Well, I don't know, but it's curious that he hasn't been to bed, and hasn't been in his room for some time. We should have noticed before if there had been a light here, and of course he wouldn't be here in the dark, and out of bed. Therefore, he hasn't been in the room for some time."

"Good old Sherlock Holmes!"

"I'm afraid there's something wrong somewhere."

"Perhaps his worries have turned his brain," was Greene's brilliant suggestion. "He may be off his rocker, you know, and wandering about."

Pat gave him a withering look.

"Perhaps you're off your rocker," he replied. "That's more likely. Talbot isn't that sort of a silly owl. There's something up."

"Talbot's up, and we're up, and—"

"Oh, dry up! The question before the meeting is, whether we ought to look into this. If Talbot has any reason for leaving his little wooden hut in the middle of the night, and wandering round for hours, he might think it impertinent of us to bother our heads about it, you know."

"That's so. People have thought us impertinent before this, though, and we've survived it," said Blagden.

"On the other hand," said Pat, "it's no good forgetting that we're a committee of investigation, and that we've taken Talbot under our protection."

Blagden chuckled.

"Of course, we mustn't lose sight of that!" he assented.

"Let's look into the matter. Talbot may be in danger, and he may be up to some fearful villainy, for all we know."

Pat started.

"I say, is it possible you've hit it? Squire Lacy is hanging round the school; you know we saw him in the quadrangle. He scooted off, I know, but he may not have gone for good. Is it possible that he's done Talbot any harm?"

"We're going to see," said Blagden. "Come on; it's no good sticking here! We're going to find Talbot."

"Sure, and we will, if we have to hunt the whole length and breadth of St. Kit's!" Pat assented. "Come on, kids!"

The chums of the end study left the room. They were really anxious about Talbot now; the meeting with the squire in the close had filled Pat with a vague fear, when he thought of it in connection with Talbot.

Squire Lacy had planned to drive Talbot from St. Kit's, and had succeeded, but a chance had brought the injured lad back again. Had the idea of trying more desperate measures crossed the mind of the squire of Lynwood?

It did not seem likely, but it was certainly possible. Pat knew very well who had struck down Seth Black and hurled him to doom in the deep waters of the river. The man who was capable of one murderous deed was capable of another.

Only in one window of the vast pile of St. Kit's was a light glimmering—only in the room where Seth Black lay in uneasy sleep, his senses not yet returned, perhaps never to return. The chums, scarcely knowing in which direction to first turn their steps, found themselves in the passage upon which the sick-room opened, hardly aware of it till they caught the glimmer of light under the door.

Pat stopped as he caught it.

"No good going this way," he whispered; "Talbot isn't likely—"

"Nugent!"

Pat broke off with a sudden start as he heard his name pronounced in the darkness of the corridor.

"Who—who spoke?"

"I—Talbot. What are you youngsters doing out of bed this time of night?"

It was Arthur Talbot's voice.

Now that he knew he was there, Pat could dimly make out the form of the athletic Sixth-Former, leaning against the wall by the door of the sick-room.

The chums were utterly amazed and startled by the unexpected meeting. Why Talbot should be spending the night outside the door of Seth Black's room was more than they could comprehend.

"Talbot! You here!"

"What are you doing, I say? Don't speak loudly—don't make a noise, or you may disturb the poor fellow yonder."

Pat thought he understood then.

Seth Black claimed to be Talbot's father; was this the anxiety of a son on the part of the former captain of St. Kit's?

"Right-ho, Talbot," he said, in a whisper, "we're mum. If Blaggy or Greene makes a noise, I'll give him a thick ear on the spot."

"You haven't told me yet what you are doing out of bed in the middle of the night," said Talbot, with rather an ominous tone in his voice.

"Well, come to that, you haven't told us what you are doing," murmured Pat.

A finger and thumb closed on his ear.

"I say, Talbot, ease off, or I shall very likely yell out and wake up that chap!"

"You young rascal!"

Talbot released him.

"I don't mind explaining," went on Pat. "The fact is, we were looking for you."

"Looking for me?" said Talbot.

"Yes. You weren't in your room, and the bed hadn't been slept in, and we thought at first that you had sloped—"

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I mean, backed—that is to say, gone away. Then we thought that perhaps something had happened to you, especially as Squire Lacy is hanging round the school, and we saw him dodging in the close."

Talbot gave a violent start.  
"You have seen Squire Lacy in the close?"

"Yes."  
"I knew it—I knew he would come!" Pat Talbot muttered the words unconsciously aloud. Pat heard them with amazement.

"You know he would come, Talbot?"  
"Never mind. You are sure you saw him—you are certain that it was the squire of Lyngwood in the close, Nugent?"

"Arrah, yes! I think I know him well enough by this time."

"But what were you doing in the close yourself?"  
"Thereby hangs a tale," said Pat. "It's quite an interesting story, and I will tell you if you like. You know that we made a committee of investigation—a committee of three—to look into the matter of that theft from the doctor's study."

"Yes, yes; go on."  
"Well, we've done it, and this is the last lap. We've unearthed lots of evidence, and proved that you are innocent."

"If you are joking, Nugent—"  
"I say, Talbot, old chap, do you think I would joke on such a subject?" said Pat, becoming very earnest. "It's serious, honour bright."

"Tell me all, Nugent. I believe you."  
Whereupon Pat concisely related the happenings of the night. Blagden and Greene bore out the tale, but Pat, as usual, did most of the talking.

Talbot listened with an interest that can easily be understood. When all was told, he gripped Pat's hand in the darkness, and wrung it hard.

"I shall never forget this, Nugent."  
"Oh, that's all right!" said Pat cheerfully. "It was luck as much as anything else, you know. And you've been so decent to us that we were bound to stand by you in time of trouble. You see, we've sort of taken you under our august wing."

Talbot smiled.  
"I am very grateful to you, my lads," he said. "You have done more for me than I dreamed it was possible for anyone to do. Heaven be thanked that my innocence of that wretched theft will now be clear! If I can ever repay this debt, you will not find me wanting."

"Well, if you're anxious to be quits, Talbot—"  
"What can I do for you, Nugent?"

"You can explain what's the meaning of this giddy midnight vigil," said Pat. "Greene suggests that perhaps your worries have made you go off your rocker; but, upon the whole, I don't think that's the true explanation. But I'm blessed if I know why you should be spending a night leaning up against a wall in a beastly draughty passage. You're not off your rocker, are you, Talbot?"

"No, I'm not off my rocker," said Arthur quietly. "I am here for a purpose, and as I know you youngsters can be trusted, I don't mind telling you—"

"Oh, I say, don't tell us unless you wish to, Talbot! I was only joking just now."

"There will be no harm in telling you. I want you to keep secret that you have seen me here; but I may, as well explain, I am keeping watch over the safety of Seth Black."

"But he's not in any danger."  
"He is, I firmly believe, in terrible danger. You know that he was murderously attacked and hurled into the river, and has not yet recovered consciousness?"

"Yes, I know that; but—"  
"When he recovers, he will denounce the man who attacked him."

"That's Squire Lacy," said Pat. "There's no doubt upon that point."

"So I believe. But, whomsoever it was, the scoundrel must be trembling in his shoes, and awaiting with fear the hour of Black's recovery."

"Yes, rather. I shouldn't like to be in his place."  
"He is a desperate man, and he has much to lose by the truth becoming known," said Talbot quietly. "He has at-

tempted Black's life once, and may do so again. The only way he can be saved from denunciation is by Black's recovering consciousness. Do you understand? I think that he will make some attempt to prevent Black ever speaking again in this world."

Pat Nugent shuddered.  
"My hat! I never thought of anything of that kind!"

"I have said nothing to the doctor. It is useless to speak until he has spoken," said Arthur Talbot. "You understand now? I believe it was the squire who attacked him. I believe it will be the squire who will come here like a thief in the night to silence him for ever."

"Great Scott! And we saw him—"  
"Yes; the fact that you saw him lurking about the school proves to me that my suspicion is well founded," said Talbot with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "He can have no motive for being here, save to carry out such a purpose as I have suggested."

"The—the scoundrel! I believe you are right!"  
"He will find it easy to obtain admission to the school. At the time he desires to enter, his brother will let him in. Eldred Lacy is at the orders of the squire."

"Then, when we saw him, he was—"  
"He was coming here. Seeing you here doubtless scared him off for a time, he may give up the idea for this night, or he may simply leave it till later."

"You are going to keep on the watch?"  
"Yes, until dawn."

"I say, let us stop with you, Talbot. It's beastly lonely, and besides, there may be danger. We could lend a hand, you know, when the pinch comes."

Talbot shook his head in the darkness.  
"No, my lad, I cannot permit that. I should never forgive myself if any harm came to you. I cannot allow you to remain, simply because there is danger."

"But, I say—"  
"It is no use arguing, Nugent. I cannot allow you to remain. Now, go away to bed, my dear boys. You know I don't like to refuse you, after what you have done; but I must be firm upon this point. It is very probable that after such an alarm the squire will not come at all to night, and you would lose your sleep for nothing."

"We shouldn't mind that. Still, if you want us to scout the scot's the word! Good-night, Talbot! Come along, kids!"

"One moment, Nugent. Go straight back to your dormitory."  
"Right ho! We'll go straight back to the dormitory."

"I say—" began Blagden.  
"No, you don't," said Pat, nudging him. "Come along! Good-night, Talbot, old son!"

"Good-night, my lads!"  
Pat dragged his chums away. Talbot remained alone in the darkness, watching and waiting with the iron patience of an Indian hunter.

The chums of the Fourth made their way back to the dormitory.  
"We're here," whispered Pat. "Here's the giddy dormitory. Nothing like being obliging, is there? Talbot wanted us to come straight back to the dormitory, and we've come. We're not going in, of course. We didn't say we'd do that, did we?"

"Ha, ha! No, we didn't!"  
"We've come straight back to the dormitory, and kept our word. Now we're going to do as we like," said Pat.

"Good! What's the game, now?"  
"We're not going to let Talbot tackle that scoundrel alone. Why, he might be in danger of his very life. We're going to keep on the watch, and if there's an alarm—"

"We shall chip in and help Talbot!"  
"Exactly!"

"Good idea! I don't mind losing my beauty sleep for the good of the cause."  
"Come on! We'll stay near the head of the stairs, and then we shall be able to hear any sound from where Talbot is."

The chums of the Lower Fourth were soon settled on the watch. In the darkness at the head of the staircase they were silent and invisible. Sleep did not visit their eyelids; they were too excited for that.

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The beam out from the clock tower, and still the silence of the night had not been broken by any other sound. Suddenly Pat clutched his companions, and drew them back into the darkness of a doorway. A figure was coming along from the direction of the square, and it passed down the stairs with an audible step. It disappeared, and silence reigned again. "Who was that?" whispered Blagden, in a shaking voice. "Eldred Lacy." "My hat! Sure of that!" "Then he's gone to let the squire in!" "Not a bit of doubt about that, my infants! This is the night he's coming," murmured Pat Nugent. "Keep your eyes open." The chains of the end study watched and waited with breath.

**Squire Lacy's Last Blow.**

Arthur Talbot remained where the juniors had left him, and patiently on the watch. Whether the squire, after the alarm he had had, would attempt to come that night, he could not guess. But, this night or some other, he was certain that Rupert would come, and when he should come, Talbot was determined to be prepared. He hardly seemed to feel the want of sleep. He waited and watched, alone and quiet in the deep silence of the night. The hour had boomed out, and silence had fallen again upon the school. The night was growing old. Suddenly Arthur Talbot gave a start. A faint, almost imperceptible sound had caught his ears. He stiffened up unconsciously, his eyes gleamed, and his hands clenched hard. It was the sound of a faint footstep in the darkness that had fallen upon his straining ears. "Was his long vigil to be rewarded at last?" He made no movement, no sound. He waited, with hard-drawn breath, every sense keenly on the alert. A whisper came faintly through the gloom. "That is the room." "Come and show it me. I do not want to make a mistake." Faint as the whispers were, Talbot knew the voices—the voice of Squire Lacy of Lynwood and his brother Eldred, prefect of St. Kit's. He smiled grimly as he heard them. His surmise had been perfectly correct. Eldred Lacy had invited his brother to the house in the dead of night, and the squire was come, at last, to do the dastardly work he had planned—to purchase oblivion for a crime by a still later crime. "I—I cannot!" Eldred Lacy's voice was faltering, faint. The prefect was evidently the prey to a deep and unnerving terror. "I—I dare not!" "Feel, what do you fear?" "Nothing! But for Heaven's sake, Rupert—for mercy's sake, think what you are going to do—think!" "Do you imagine I have not thought? Do you think I am lightly entered upon such an accursed adventure?" said the brother hoarsely. "But—but it will be—"

"If Seth Black speaks again in this world, I am lost!" "It was you—you who—"

"Yes, it was I." "Good heavens!" "You know now why Seth Black must never speak again. You are afraid, go back to your bed. I don't want to see you into it. Go back!" "I will go back, but—but—"

"Bah! Why do you tremble? You, at least, are in no danger. You are sure that that is the room yonder? I don't want to make a mistake." "The next door on the right is the one." "Good! Leave me, then!" "Rupert, think—even if matters are as bad as you say—they may never recover, anyway, and as yet you are not—"

"Food! Besides, no one can ever suspect. If anyone is expected, it will be Talbot." "Talbot?" "Yes; I have instilled into the doctor's mind the suspicion that it was Talbot who made the attack upon Seth Black, and when the discovery is made in the morning—"

"Rupert!" "You see, I am safe. Go back to your room! I will not tell you are safe in your bed." There was a note of bitter scorn in the hoarse voice of the squire. "Go back!" There was a faint sound of footsteps. Eldred Lacy was gone.

The minutes crawled by. Arthur Talbot stood silent in the darkness, waiting. The squire had not yet moved since his brother left him. He moved abruptly, and came along towards the door of the sick-room. His hand was feeling for the handle, when Talbot's strong grip fell upon his wrist. The sudden, unlooked-for contact in the darkness sent a thrill of terror to the very heart of Rupert Lacy. He staggered back, white as a sheet. But his nerve quickly returned. He tried to snatch his wrist away, but Talbot's grip was like iron. "Who—who are you?" "I am Arthur Talbot," hissed the Squire of Lynwood. Lacy gasped. "You—you!" "Yes, I! You are caught, Rupert Lacy! You are my prisoner!" The squire made a terrible effort to tear himself free. Talbot closed with him, and the next moment they were struggling like tigers in the black gloom of the passage. The struggle was furious, but almost silent. Talbot would make no sound, for fear of disturbing the man who lay unconscious in the sick-room. The squire, of course, was only too anxious not to attract attention. If he could escape from the house unseen by anyone but Talbot, he could deny Arthur's story afterwards—he might brazen it out; there would be a chance, at all events. But if he were captured—

The struggle was deadly. Squire Lacy was a powerful man, but he had to do with the finest athlete of St. Kit's. Hard and bitter was that deadly wrestle in the darkness. Scarce a sound came from the combatants, save sharp, panting breath, and an occasional gasp. There was a sound up the corridor—a sound of footsteps, of more than one. Faint as the sounds of the struggle were, they had caught the straining ears of the chums of the Lower Fourth, watching and listening in the silence of the night. Pat Nugent, Blagden, and Greene, careless of danger, were hurrying to the scene. "Talbot's got him!" "Come on, kids!" "Get a light, Greene!" Pat and Blagden ran swiftly up. Greene paused to light the bicycle-lantern he carried, and then came running on the scene. Squire Lacy's teeth came together hard. If that light fell upon his face he was a lost man! His hand relaxed its grip upon Arthur Talbot, and went swiftly into his breast. Talbot gripped him harder, and he went down heavily, Talbot on top. The next moment Arthur reeled off him, with a cry of agony. Something sharp, something that glimmered in the darkness, was in the hand of Rupert Lacy, and Arthur Talbot struggled from him, with the blood running down his side. The squire was on his feet in a moment. Without a look at the lad he had struck, he darted away just as the lantern gleamed on him. Pat sprang after him. He did not know how Talbot was hurt. "After him, kids!" The three juniors dashed on. "Come back—come back!" cried Arthur, in agony. "Come back! He is armed!" The juniors heeded not; they hardly heard him. They were running like hares in pursuit of the squire. Doors were opening now, voices calling. Lights gleamed here and there. The whole house was alarmed now. "Come back—come back!" Talbot's voice died away in a groan. The juniors were gone. Careless of danger, they raced on. The squire had gone down the passage like a hunted hare, the youngsters hot on his track. "What is the matter?" It was Mr. Slaney's voice, and he had come out of his room at the head of the stairs, with a lamp in one hand, and a golf-club in the other. He stood directly in the path of the squire. "Stop him, sir!" yelled Pat Nugent. "Burglars! Murder!" The golf-club was whirled aloft. The squire, more afraid of the light than of the stick, stopped, and turned back with a desperate snarl. Before the juniors knew that he had doubled he was upon them. Right and left the youngsters went reeling before his desperate rush, and he was past them in a twinkling. Pat reeled against the wall. "He's gone!" he gasped, recovering himself. "My hat! He's not going to get away like this! Stop thief! Burglars! After him!" Somewhat dazed, but very determined, the juniors resumed the chase.

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# Your Editor's Corner

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

HOW DO YOU LIKE THIS CHRISTMAS NUMBER? It is not some weeks before Christmas, so I will press the hope that you have enjoyed reading this, our

DOUBLE NUMBER, and put off till a more reasonable time the pleasant greeting you wish to send. I should very much like to have postcard congratulations from you concerning our three stories; and if you are a reader of "The Gem" Library, you might at the same time let me know what you think of

"TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS." You should order the Double Number of "The Gem" now, price 1d.

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"THE HEAD VERSUS THE SCHOOL" will stick in your mind for years to come.

**NEXT SATURDAY'S COVER!**

Our second story "DR. NEVADA'S TRAP" will deal with the thrilling adventures of this famous very interesting but as I have said much space must be left that, in order to mind you that the three new issues of "The Gem" Library are complete Library now on sale.

The squire was racing away in the darkness, hardly knowing where he was going. His escape by way of the window was cut off, and his only hope lay in getting out of the window. That, as he took up the chase again, heard a crash of breaking glass.

"Come on!" he yelled excitedly. "He's getting out of the corridor window!"

They dashed on. Mr. Slaney overtook them, and his lamp glared out ahead as they ran on together.

Crash, crash! At the end of the corridor was a high window, and it was evidently here that the squire was endeavouring to make his escape. There was no other means of exit from the corridor, except by turning back or entering one of the bed rooms.

Crash, crash! "Stop!" shouted Mr. Slaney, flashing the lamp upon the desperate figure at the window. "Stop! Madman! You will go to your death!"

The fear of death was little to the Squire of Lynwood at that moment.

He was through the smashed window now, and crouching on the sill, striving to penetrate the darkness below with his straining eyes.

"Come back!" The squire muttered a savage curse. Below him was a sheer drop of thirty feet or more, and nothing—no projection, not even a water-pipe, to assist his descent.

He was lost! His eyes swept wildly round. Death was better than capture, for capture meant disgrace and prison—worse than death!

Before him a gigantic elm, stripped of leaves by the autumn wind, stretched its creaking branches towards the house. If he dared—

It was that or capture!

At that moment he dared anything. Mr. Slaney was already reaching up to grasp him from within, rather to save him from his own rashness than to make him a prisoner. The squire eluded his grasp, set his teeth, and desperately sprang!

Mr. Slaney gave a cry of horror. "He is lost!"

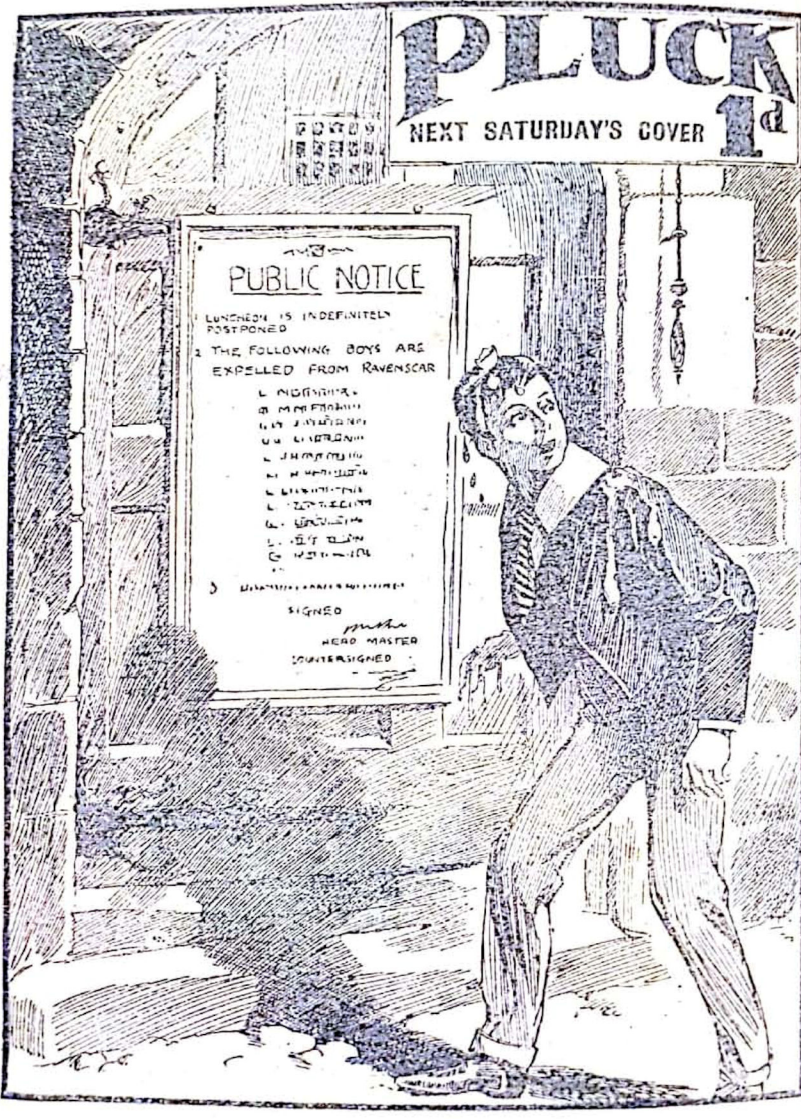
He clambered upon the sill. Where was the desperate man gone?

That frantic spring had carried the squire upon the nearest branch, but the branch was not equal to his weight.

His hands grasped it, his fingers closed upon it tenaciously, and the branch bent and cracked, and broke!

One wild, despairing cry escaped the lips of the wretched man as he shot downwards into the darkness.

(Another fine instalment next Saturday.)



This picture depicts an incident in "The Head versus The School," by Michael Storm, one of the two complete tales in next Saturday's PLUCK. Price 1d.

