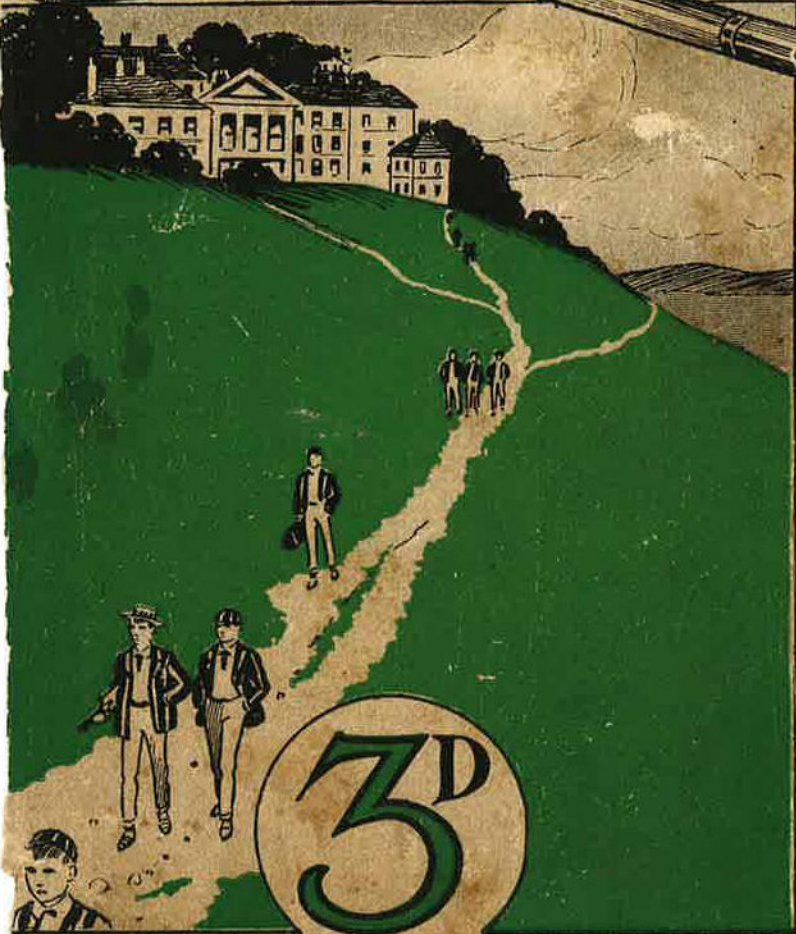


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By
Charles
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The Rivals of St. Kit's.

A Splendid Long, Complete Tale of School Life.

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

Introducing the Boys of St. Kit's.

ROUND the football ground at St. Kit's a great crowd thronged, and it was growing greater every moment. A buzz of talk filled the air, and ebbed and flowed, but never ceased for a moment.

At St. Christopher's College, more familiarly known as St. Kit's, they took football as it should be taken—seriously. They fancied themselves at the game, and they played it well. To win recognition in the footer field, and to shine in the college eleven, was the ambition of every sportsman in the upper Form. A safe custodian, a reliable back, or a sure kick at goal was assured of respectful attention at St. Kit's, whatever might be his failings in other respects.

The match about to be played was not one of the usual fixtures, but a trial match between two elevens picked from the Sixth and Fifth Forms. But the sides were captained by Arthur Talbot and Eldred Lacy, and therein lay the cause of the keen interest displayed by the whole school.

For at St. Kit's the post of school captain had fallen vacant, and there were two candidates for election—Talbot and Lacy. In considering the merits of a candidate, every fellow asked himself the important question—how were the school sports likely to flourish under his rule? In this respect, however, there seemed to be little to choose between the two aspirants. Talbot was the more popular personally, for he was a frank, cordial fellow, whom everyone liked, while Lacy was somewhat given to putting on side. But Lacy had the influence which inevitably attends wealth and high connections. His elder brother, Squire Lacy, of Lynwood, was one of the governors of St. Kit's, and a county magnate. Both fellows were keen footballers, and played well for the school in the first eleven. Their chances of election seemed, therefore, about even, and the contest was certain to be a close one.

In the eyes of the St. Kit's fellows, it was quite in accordance with the fitness of things for the captaincy to be won or lost on the football field, and some of the fellows had openly declared their intention of voting for the winning captain in the trial match when the election of the new captain of St. Kit's came about. Other things being equal, that seemed a fair and sportsmanlike way of deciding between the two candidates.

It was Wednesday afternoon, a half-holiday at St. Kit's. The kick-off was timed for half-past two, but long before that the ground was crowded. A

The boys wore the colours of the side they favoured—red for Arthur Talbot, and blue for his rival. It was hard to tell which colour pre-

dominated. Some, whose minds were still open on the subject, wore no colours at all.

Everybody was anxiously awaiting the kick-off, and watches were frequently consulted. There was a cheer as the doctor was seen to descend the steps of his house and make his way to the ground, an imposing figure in cap and gown.

The hour was at hand!

At sight of the doctor, Blagden and Greene, two juniors who were racing the length of the ground, ducked under the ropes, and disappeared among the legs of the crowd.

The cheer was renewed as the rival captains entered the pavilion together. The crowd was now deep all round the ropes, very nearly all St. Kit's being on the spot. Mr. Slaney, the master of the Fourth, who was refereeing the match, in Norfolk jacket and whistle, looked at his watch.

"Hallo, here they come!" exclaimed Blagden, of the Fourth, as the teams came streaming into the field. "Hurrah! Good old Talbot!"

"Good old Arthur!" roared Greene, waving his cap.

And the group of Fourth-Formers round the pair joined heartily in the cheering for Arthur Talbot. It could easily be seen that, in the lower Forms at least, Talbot was more popular than his rival.

The two captains tossed for choice of goal, and there was a fresh cheer as Arthur Talbot was seen pointing to the end from which the wind was blowing.

"We've got the wind," chuckled Blagden, digging Greene violently in the ribs—"we've got the wind, old son!"

Greene gasped.

"You've knocked all mine out of me, you ass!"

"Never mind! How fit Talbot looks, doesn't he?"

Handsome and very fit Arthur Talbot looked in the scarlet shirt and white knickers of his side. Sturdy and stalwart, straight as a pine, a splendid specimen of young British manhood.

Eldred Lacy, facing him, did not cut so good a figure. He was about Talbot's age and height, but slimmer and less compact in build. His face was handsome, but the chin was weak and the mouth obstinate. His brow was clouded now, the result of losing the toss. With so much at stake on the game, he grudged the slightest advantage to his adversary, and the flush of annoyance in his face showed how little of a real sportsman he was at heart.

The whistle went, and Lacy kicked off. There was a hush round the field, every eye being fixed eagerly upon the play. The silence was broken by a cheer as the red shirts were seen swarming over the enemy's territory.

"Go it, Red!" shouted Talbot's partisans, to be answered by counter-shouts from the backers of Lacy, "Buck up, Blue!"

The Blues did buck up, and the rush of the Reds was stopped short of goal. The ball was brought back into the Reds' half, and there was a desperate tussle in midfield, from which the leather came out to the foot of Talbot, who was away with it like a shot.

A buzz round the field gradually grew to a roar as the Red captain was seen streaking like lightning for the goal.

"Kick—kick!"

"Look out in goal!"

"Stop him!"

"Go it!"

"Oh, well kicked, sir—well kicked!"

"Goal!"

The ball was in the net!

Loud and ringing were the cheers that greeted Talbot's feat. Blagden and Greene roared till they were black in the face. The Blue goalkeeper picked up the ball, and slung it out ruefully. Eldred Lacy set his teeth hard.

"For goodness' sake buck up!" he said, as he walked back to the centre of the field. "They will simply walk over us at this rate!"

The irritable remark was received in silence. The backs had done their best, but Talbot had done better, and that was all there was to be said about it. Lacy's reproach was quite uncalled for. The teams lined up again, and again the Blue captain kicked off.

A prolonged tussle for the ball followed. The Reds did most of the attacking, but the defence of the Blues was sound, and the goal long remained intact. At the Reds' end of the ground the Red goalkeeper was waving his arms and stamping to keep himself warm, but the Blue goalie was given plenty of exercise by his opponents. Still the goal did not fall, and the minutes wore away with incessant, lively, but unproductive play.

At last came a chance to Lacy, and he improved it at once. With a fine exhibition of machine-like passing, the Blues brought the leather up the field, beating the Red backs hollow, and Lacy sent the ball whizzing in. The shot beat the Red goalie all the way, and at once there was a roar:

"Goal!"

A few minutes later the whistle went, and the first half ended with the scores level. The Reds had certainly had most of the game; but, on the other hand, the Blues had taken their goal against the wind. Which was the better team, and which the better captain, it would have been hard to decide so far.

In the interval, the boys eagerly discussed the performances and the prospects of the rivals. During the buzz of excited talk, a new spectator arrived upon the scene. He was a tall, darkly-handsome man, of about thirty, in riding-clothes. He made his way directly towards the doctor, and joined the Head of St. Kit's, who greeted him cordially.

"Hallo!" said Blagden. "Wonder who that is? The Head's awfully chummy with him, ain't he?"

The juniors stared towards the man who had joined the doctor. The stranger, evidently, was on the best of terms with Dr. Kent. He sat down beside the Head, and entered into conversation with him.

Greene gave a whistle.

"I think I know who it is," he remarked. "You know somebody said Lacy's brother was coming to see the match. This must be Lacy major."

"My hat!" exclaimed Blagden. "Of course it must. Now I look at him, I can see that he is like Lacy in the dial."

The juniors looked at the stranger with renewed interest. Eldred Lacy derived a certain importance from being younger brother of the Squire of Lynwood, who was a governor of the school.

But the squire was quite a stranger at St. Kit's. He had been abroad for a good many years, but had recently returned and taken up his residence at Lynwood. As his name passed through the crowd many curious glances were turned upon the young squire.

He did not appear to be aware of it, as he sat and chatted easily with the doctor.

"I am sorry to be late," he remarked. "It seems that I have missed the first half. How does the score stand, doctor?"

"Level, so far—one goal each," replied the doctor.

"Ah, yes! Well, I hope I shall see Eldred the victor. He wished me to come very much, and I am very glad to see the old school again. I understand that there is something of unusual importance depending upon this match."

"Yes; there is to be an election of a new captain of St. Kit's, and it is extremely probable that the winning captain in this trial match will secure the post. You see, there is little to choose between the two candidates personally, and many of the boys seem to have made up their minds to allow this match to decide how they shall vote."

"And a good way, too!" exclaimed the squire heartily. "The post to the best sportsman—that is a good idea. Who is my brother's opponent?"

"Arthur Talbot; a fine fellow—a very fine fellow indeed!" said the doctor, with an unusual warmth in his manner.

The squire smiled.

"Ah, yes; I remember now that Eldred mentioned him to me. A sort of protege of yours, is he not—a founding, or something?"

"A protege of mine, certainly," said the doctor briefly. "I am his guardian. But there he is, Mr. Lacy."

The teams were taking up their position again. The doctor pointed out Talbot, and Squire Lacy glanced carelessly at him.

The next moment, however, his glance became fixed and earnest, and a strange look came over his face.

"That is Arthur Talbot?"

The doctor looked at him in surprise. He could not imagine why the sight of Talbot should awaken such a sudden and evidently deep interest in the Squire of Lynwood.

"Yes, that is he."

"His name is Talbot? I mean"—the squire stammered a little—"I think I have seen him somewhere. His face seems familiar. His name is Talbot?"

"It does not seem possible that you have met him," said the doctor, smiling. "He has always lived at St. Kit's since I have been here as Head, while you have been abroad. But, see, they are kicking off!"

He turned his attention to the game. The squire's glance was upon the field also, and it followed Arthur Talbot wherever he moved, but he was giving little attention to the game.

If the doctor had looked at Rupert Lacy then, he would have seen that the colour was wavering in the squire's sunburnt cheek.

"By Jove," said the doctor to himself, "the Reds have it!"

That certainly seemed to be the case. The change of ends had brought the wind in favour of the Blues, but they did not seem to be able to make much of this advantage.

They were penned up in their own half from the start, and Eldred Lacy's desperate efforts to get his forwards going were baffled by the Reds; and ere long there were cheers, as the scarlet shirts bore down upon the Blues' goal, and shots were rained in thick and fast upon the custodian.

And Haywood, the Blue goalie, after manfully holding his own for a long time, missed a keen daisy-cutter from the foot of Arthur Talbot, which found the net, and a roar of cheering made the air rock.

"Goal!"

"Talbot—Talbot!"

Desperate were the efforts of the Blues to equalise after that; but grim and determined was the opposition of the red shirts, and the latter more

than held their own. Try as they would, Lacy and his men could not get to the Reds' goal, while again and again the tussle was brought right up to the citadel of the Blues.

And at last the ball again found the net, and the Reds were two up. Right up to the finish Lacy and his men fought out the fight, but their fate was fixed. Mr. Slaney blew his whistle, and the score was still three to one.

Pretty well fagged out by a gruelling game, the rival teams quitted the field, followed by ringing cheers. Dr. Kent turned to the squire.

"This boy Talbot seems to be a splendid footballer," Rupert Lacy remarked. "I'm afraid there's no doubt that he's streets ahead of my brother."

Dr. Kent nodded.

"Yes; the best side won, and that is as it should be. I fancy this will settle the question of the election."

But that remained to be seen. Eldred Lacy well knew that he had lost ground in losing the trial match, but he was still determined to make a desperate fight for the captaincy of St. Kit's. And he had at least one advantage over his opponent; for, while Arthur Talbot "played the game" upon all occasions, and never thought of doing anything else, there were few things that would come amiss to Eldred Lacy if only they helped him on to the goal of his ambition.

CHAPTER 2.

Pat Nugent Comes to St. Kit's.

PAT NUGENT stepped from the station hack at the gates of St. Kit's, and walked calmly in. It was the first time he had set foot within the precincts of St. Christopher's Collegiate School; but no one would have thought so, judging by his perfectly unconcerned manner as he strolled across the close.

Trimble, of the Upper Fourth, was the first to spot the new boy. Trimble was a big and somewhat ungainly fellow, with red hair that grew in tufts upon a large head, and his best chum had never called him handsome; but he was nearly a head taller than any other boy in the Form, and so he was cock-of-the-walk there.

Trimble was accustomed to inspiring terror in the bosoms of small boys, and the cool way the new boy surveyed him as he bore down upon him was more than sufficient to rouse his ire.

"Hallo!" he said majestically, stopping directly in the path of the new arrival. "Hallo!"

Pat Nugent smiled agreeably.

"Same to you," he said, "and many of them."

Trimble glared.

"Don't you give me any of your cheek, young 'un! I'm Trimble, captain of the Upper Fourth."

"Are you really? Very pleased to meet you, Trimble, captain of the Upper Fourth. Ta-ta! See you again, Trimble, captain of the——"

The jocular new boy was interrupted. A large hand descended upon him, and gripped his ear.

"Now, you cub——"

"Let go my ear, Trimble, captain of the Upper Fourth!"

"Rats! I'll——"

Biff! A fist, which seemed to Trimble as hard as a lump of iron, smote him full upon his prominent nose, and he sat down with a suddenness that jarred every bone in his body.

Pat Nugent waited a moment, looking at him, and then walked away unconcernedly with his hands in his pockets, leaving Trimble sitting on the ground holding his injured nose in his hand, and staring dazedly after him. The new boy grinned to himself.

"Faith, I think I have surprised that merchant!" he murmured. "Hallo! I suppose this is where I go in. I wonder what kind of chaps I shall meet here! If they're all like that long-legged specimen, I don't think much of St. Kit's."

He mounted two wide granite steps, and entered the schoolhouse. The next moment, with a loud whoop, half a dozen juniors swooped down upon him.

"A new kid!" exclaimed Blagden. "Collar him!"

"Bring him into the common-room!" cried Greene.

"Here, I say," protested Pat, "sure and I——"

"Sure and you'd better shut up!" said Blagden, grinning. "We're not going to hurt you, young Ireland. Just you come along, that's all."

They hustled him into the juniors' common-room. There were a good many youngsters there, and they gathered round Blagden and his prize. Pat, after the first moment of surprise, was taking it calmly. Calmness seemed to be the new boy's strong point, and he saw that the intention of the juniors was not yet, at all events, hostile.

"Well, here I am!" he remarked. "Faith, and is this the way you always welcome new-comers to St. Kit's, kids?"

"My hat, here's a cool merchant!" said Blagden. "Look here, Tipperary, or whatever your name is, there's a giddy election on to-night, and we want to explain to you, so that you sha'n't go and vote on the wrong side. See? There's two candidates—Talbot, the finest fellow that ever breathed, and Eldred Lacy. Lacy is a prefect, and a pig, and a rotter, and a howling cad. You can't vote for him. The election's at eight. You'll come into the hall with us and vote for Talbot."

"Perhaps."

"Look here, we're not going to fool with you! Are you going to vote with us?"

"Faith, and that depends. I can promise you one thing. I shall vote exactly as I please, without taking advice from anybody but myself."

"Oh, you will, will you?"

"And the more you worry me, the less likely I shall be to vote with you," continued Pat cheerfully. "So there's the case in a nutshell."

"So that's the sort of giddy mongrel you are, is it? You think too much of yourself, young Tipperary. We'll teach you a lesson, and I hope it will do you good! Got the rope there, you kippers?"

"Here it is," replied Greene.

"That's right! Fasten the young brute up. Don't mind if you hurt him. It's all for his own good, you know."

"I say——" began Pat, in expostulation.

He got no further. Blagden squeezed a handkerchief into his mouth, and he choked into silence. The juniors, chuckling with glee, fastened the cords about his legs and arms, binding him hand and foot.

"There, that looks like a workmanlike job," said Blagden, as he stood back and surveyed the new boy with extreme satisfaction. Pat was leaning against a desk, absolutely helpless; but, in spite of his bonds and his gag, he was as cool as ever.

"Of course, it's rot for a new kid to be allowed to vote at all," continued Blagden, rather illogically. "It's our duty to keep him off the grass. The election's at eight. Where can we shove him till it's over?"

Pat began to struggle as he heard this. But the rope held him fast, and a judicious pinch or two in tender places soon quieted him.

"In the box-room," suggested one junior.

Blagden shook his head.

"I know!" exclaimed Greene suddenly.

"Well, what place have you thought of?"

"Lacy's study."

"What!"

"I mean it. Lacy is busy electioneering, and he won't be in his study again till after eight, sure as a gun. The Sixth studies will all be empty, and nobody will hear the beast if he wriggles."

"But if Lacy should come and find him?"

"He'll give him a hiding for being there, without stopping to ask questions. That's his sweet way. And it's just what the cheeky kid requires."

"Greene, you've got some sense," said Blagden emphatically. "I've never noticed it before, but you have, really. Bring him along, chappies!"

The grinning juniors lifted Pat and carried him in their midst out into the dark passage. It was easy to convey him undiscovered to Lacy's study; and Blagden, scouting ahead, found that the study was dark and empty, as he expected.

"Stick him here," said Blagden, opening a cupboard door. "Hallo! What have you shoved him on? My aunt, that's Lacy's Sunday topper in that box, and you've smashed it as flat as a pancake! Tipperary, I don't envy you if Lacy comes in and finds you sitting on the wreck of his Sunday topper! But cheer up! We'll come and have you out after the election. I'll take that gag off. Good-bye, young Ireland!"

And the juniors decamped.

Pat, as we have said, remained perfectly cool in his plight, but his feelings were not to be envied. He could not get loose. If the juniors did not choose to return and release him, he was a prisoner till after the election of the new captain of St. Kit's. And if Lacy came in and found him and the damage his presence had done in the cupboard, it was certain that something awful would happen.

Suddenly there was the sound of an opening door. Pat drew a quick breath. Someone had come into Lacy's study. He wondered whether he should wriggle, and make his presence known. He was still undecided, when a gleam of light, penetrating under the cupboard door, showed that the gas was lighted in the study.

"Sit down, Rupert."

It was Lacy's voice. A deeper voice replied:

"I suppose you are busy now, Eldred, with the election at hand. But it's that I want to speak to you about. You must leave no stone unturned to get in as captain of St. Kit's!"

"You're very good to take such an interest in——"

"Tut-tut! You must become captain of the school, because it will give you power to do what you must do, what I shall help you to do by every means, fair and foul."

"And what is that?"

"To ruin and disgrace Arthur Talbot and drive him from the school! Do you understand? He must be ruined—utterly crushed—and driven away! Listen! I am Squire Lacy, of Lynwood, to-day, the richest landowner in the county. Arthur Talbot could make me a beggar to-morrow if he knew—if he only knew!"

"Rupert, you must be mad! How——"

"I am not mad. I am speaking in sober earnest. Arthur Talbot is a

menace to me—to both of us. But ruined, disgraced, driven forth into poverty and obscurity, I shall no longer fear him!"

And every word came distinctly to the ears of the hidden boy, filling him with horror and amazement.

Pat Nugent remained silent. What would happen if the brothers discovered his presence in the study he did not know, but he knew that it would be something extremely unpleasant to himself.

It was by no wish of his own that he had been placed in the position of an eavesdropper, and he did not feel called upon to risk a severe punishment by betraying his presence. He devoutly wished that the speakers would leave the room, or turn to less dangerous topics. A long silence followed the squire's last words, and Pat hoped that they were going; but he was disappointed.

Eldred Lacy's voice broke the silence; it was very strange and shaky.

"I don't understand you, Rupert. I can't imagine what you can possibly have to fear from Talbot. He is a nobody. The fellows say that the Head picked him out of the gutter, and brought him up out of charity. It's quite certain that his parents are unknown, and he has no money but what the Head allows him. He's awfully keen on getting the Dunraven Scholarship, and I believe it's for that reason. How can a beggar's brat like Arthur Talbot be dangerous to us?"

"It is not necessary for you to know," replied the squire coldly, "and I have no intention of explaining. But you may take my word for it that what I say is correct. The question is, are you willing to help me in this?"

"I don't know. I can't say that I like Talbot. But——"

"You hate him."

"Well, perhaps I do. But——"

"But you are chicken-hearted," sneered his elder brother. "Well, we will talk over this again. Meanwhile, strain every nerve to get in as captain. That will give you a power in the school that will be useful for our purpose."

"I shall certainly do that," said Lacy. "I mean to get in as captain if I can do it by hook or by crook."

"What means have you used—beside the ordinary ones, I mean? If money would be of any use, you can have as much as you want."

"I don't think that would help much. It would be sure to come out; and a fellow employing bribery in an election would be sent to Coventry by all St. Kit's."

"Then you are depending upon fair voting? I know little of the state of affairs here, but, after that football match, I imagine Talbot is more popular than you are."

"Possibly; but I have a card up my sleeve. My sag, Trimble, is a cunning rascal, and he is doing his best for me. He has invited half a dozen of the Lower Fourth to a feed in his study, and just before eight he's going to nip out and turn the key on them, so they'll be kept there till after the election. The voting will be very close, and half a dozen of Talbot's backers being away will be almost certain to turn the scale in my favour."

"By Jove, that is a good idea!" The squire looked at his watch. "I won't keep you longer, Eldred; you'll be wanted. The time's close now. Remember what I've told you."

"I am not likely to forget."

Pat, in the cupboard, drew a deep breath of relief. He heard the brothers quit the room, and the study door closed. He writhed in his bonds. Lacy had gone to the hall, and very soon the election would be held there. And here he was, tied up, helpless.

It was exasperating. For what he had heard had quite decided Pat

Nugent. He knew little of Arthur Talbot, but it was certain that Eldred Lacy was not fit to be captain of the school. Talbot—the fellow against whom the treacherous pair plotted—he was the man who should have Pat Nugent's vote.

If Pat could help it, Lacy would never be captain of St. Kit's. He wriggled in his bonds, but they had been tied too well. Suddenly he heard a sound in his study. The door of the cupboard was opened.

"Hallo, you new kid!" It was the voice of Blagden. "Have you decided to vote for Talbot? It is just on eight. There's time yet. If you mean yes, grunt."

Pat grunted. Blagden bent over him, grinning, and removed the gag.

"You are going to vote for our man?"

"Yes!" gasped Pat. "Not because I'm afraid of you, you bounder, but because of——" He paused. Perhaps it would not be wise to reveal what he had accidentally overheard. "Because I've changed my mind."

"Right you are!" grinned Blagden. "I don't care a rap what your reason is, so long as you vote for Talbot. There you are."

His fingers worked rapidly. Pat rose, free, but feeling decidedly cramped. He was strongly inclined to start on Blagden, but he restrained himself.

"Come on!" said the junior. "There's no time to waste. They're beginning."

Pat followed him from the study. There he caught Blagden's arm and stopped him.

"Do you know Trimble, Lacy's fag?"

"Rather, the beast! What about him?"

"He's got some of our voters locked up in his study."

"How do you know?" demanded Blagden, in amazement.

"Never mind how I know," said Pat. "Sure, it's releasing them that wants doing. Are you going to do it? We've got to get Talbot in?"

"You seem to have changed your tune a lot in that cupboard," said Blagden.

"Never mind that. Let's get a move on. I tell you it's a fact."

Blagden asked no more questions, but led the way to Trimble's study. The captain of the Upper Fourth was just coming away from it. He started as he saw Blagden.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Ain't you going to vote? There's no time to lose; they're just starting in the hall."

"We're looking for voters," replied Blagden. "Thought there might be some in your study."

"Ha, ha! You're joking, I suppose. Come along, and——"

Trimble was interrupted by a thumping on the door from the interior of his study. There was a din of voices within.

"He's locked us in!"

"Let us out, you beast!"

"Trimble, you cad, open this giddy door, or we'll kick it down!"

Trimble scowled darkly. There wasn't much chance of the youngsters within kicking the door down, because it was a solid one of thick oak, but they seemed to be trying their best, and the noise was deafening. The key was in Trimble's pocket, and but for the presence of Blagden and Pat his trick would have been a perfect success. The hall, where all the school had assembled, was too far away for the noise in the study to be heard there. But Blagden's looks showed that he meant business.

"So that's your game, you cad!" he exclaimed. "You were right, Tipperary. Give me the key, Trimble, you howling rotter!"

"Sha'n't! You'll get hurt if you try to stop me!"

And the big Upper Fourth fellow tried to shove himself past the two.

But they fastened upon him like cats and dragged him to the floor. Had Blagden been alone, Trimble would have made short work of him, and indeed he succeeded in sending Blagden to the floor; but with Pat Nugent it was a different matter. Trimble was already aware of the quality of the new boy.

"Let me go, you new cad!"

"Rats!"

Pat jammed him against the wall, and kept him there. There was a loud shout from the direction of the hall. Blagden struggled up, mopping his nose with his handkerchief.

"Hold him—hold him!" he gasped. "He's squashed my nose, the beast! Hold him!"

"I've got him safe."

"Gimme that key, Trimble, you pig! My hat, hark how they're shouting in the hall! They must be nearly through with the election, while we've been wasting time over that cad! Knock his head against the wall, Tipperary, if he won't give up the key! We shall be done, after all, if we don't buck up!"

Pat obeyed. Trimble's head was knocked against the wall till he saw stars. He dragged the key from his pocket and flung it savagely at Blagden.

"There it is, hang you!"

Blagden picked up the key.

"Let the brute go, Nugent. I've got it. Come on!"

The crashing on the study door showed that the imprisoned juniors were wielding Trimble's chair against the solid oak. The din was incessant. Crash, crash, clatter! and a yell.

The door had not given way, but the chair had, and apparently somebody was hurt. Blagden thrust the key into the lock and opened the door.

The rescued juniors rushed away. At their head went Blagden and Pat, running their hardest. As they drew near the hall they heard a loud shouting and stamping of feet. Was the election over? Were they too late?

The great hall of St. Kit's was crammed.

The election of the new captain was a question which stirred the school to its depths, and few were the boys who would willingly have absented themselves upon the great occasion.

The seniors, of course, had all the good seats at the front. The rival candidates were both on the spot, each surrounded by a group of friends and supporters. The body of the hall was packed with juniors, who kept up a ceaseless buzz of conversation.

That the election would be a very close one, and might be decided either way by two or three votes, was well known, and this made the general interest in the proceedings all the keener. Glances were continually thrown upon the clock, the hand of which was pointing very near to eight.

There was a louder buzz as Brooke of the Sixth was seen upon his feet. Brooke was Arthur Talbot's closest chum, and Talbot's partisans cheered him. Brooke had the honour and the pleasure to propose his friend Arthur Talbot for the vacant post of captain of St. Kit's.

The cheering burst forth again, louder than before, and the great hall rang from end to end. It was evident that Arthur Talbot had plenty of backers there.

Then Haywood proposed Eldred Lacy, and it was the turn of Lacy's backers to cheer. They did so with a hearty goodwill. It was not easy

to tell which side made the most noise—in fact, the honours appeared to be about equally divided.

"Hallo, they're going to take the vote!" said Greene, of the Lower Fourth. He jumped up on a form and looked towards the door. "Where's that ass Blaggy?"

"Sit down, there!" came a shout from the rear, from those whose view of the proceedings was obstructed by Greene.

Greene took no notice.

"Blaggy ought to be here now, whether he brings the new chap or not!" he exclaimed. "Hallo, that must be him!" The door opened. "No; it's Trimble!"

Trimble, captain of the Upper Fourth, entered the hall.

He was looking decidedly the worse for wear and tear. His collar was rumpled, his face dirty, and there was a red smear on his nose. His clothes were covered with dust.

"Hallo!" said Greene. "Trimble's been in the wars. Can he have been fighting with old Blaggy?"

"Sit down there!"

"Sha'n't! I say, Trimble——" shouted Greene across the hall.

"Knock that young cad down!"

"Oh!" yelled Greene, as someone obeyed that order, and gave him a dig in the ribs that sent him to the floor. "Oh, oh, oh!"

"Shut up!"

Something like silence was restored. Eldred Lacy looked towards Trimble, but failed to catch the eye of his fag. Had Trimble succeeded in locking up in his study the six voters for Talbot, whom he had taken there for a "feed" with that intention? Lacy could not tell; but the fact that Trimble avoided his glance made him feel dubious.

"Vote! Vote!" was shouted now; and a show of hands was demanded for Eldred Lacy.

Up went a forest of hands, and the counting slowly proceeded.

Two tellers had been appointed, and as their results did not agree, the counting was again proceeded with. Meanwhile Greene, whose eye was on Trimble, noticed a rather peculiar action on the part of that young gentleman. He had been whispering among his friends, and now nearly a dozen of the Lacyites had withdrawn themselves with exaggerated carelessness from the crowd, and were leaning against the door.

"Look at those cads!" whispered Greene to his companions. "They're trying to keep Blagden out—that's their little game!"

"Silence!"

"Votes for Eldred Lacy, one hundred and four."

Lacy's backers cheered loudly, Trimble and his friends shouted themselves hoarse, at the same time stamping on the floor, and the din was tremendous. The row they made was not without its object. It served to drown the sound of shouting and kicking on the other side of the oaken door.

Blagden and Pat Nugent, with the rescued voters from Trimble's study, had arrived. They found the door shut and held against them, and they were kicking and hammering at it with all their strength.

Greene jumped upon the form again.

The seniors were trying to restore silence to take the vote for Talbot, but Trimble and his friends were still going it for all they were worth.

"Fair play!" yelled Greene. "Open the door!"

There was a shade of anxiety on Lacy's face. He guessed how matters stood, and he was very anxious for the voting to be got over before the door should be opened.

"They're trying to break up the meeting!" he exclaimed, loud enough for Talbot to hear. "They know I've got the majority, and they want to break up the meeting. They don't want fair play!"

Talbot flushed angrily. He knew that the words were meant for his ears and for himself, and, as a matter of fact, the disturbance was mainly caused by his partisans. He rose quickly to his feet.

"Silence! Order, there!" he cried. "Greene, sit down, or get out of the hall! Behave yourselves, you youngsters!"

"They're keeping our voters out!" yelled Greene.

Talbot caught the junior's words through the din, and his face changed.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "What's that about keeping voters out?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Lacy. "Let's get on to the voting, for goodness' sake! We sha'n't get away to-night!"

Talbot's eyes flashed.

"What are those juniors leaning up against the door for?" he asked.

"It looks as if what Greene says is true. Silence there! Open that door!"

Trimble pretended not to hear.

"Open the door!"

Still Trimble was deaf.

Talbot spoke a few words in a low tone to Brooke, who immediately pushed his way down the hall—the juniors making way for him—and reached the door.

"What are you doing, Trimble?" he demanded.

"It's—it's draughty," stammered Trimble, "and—and we——"

"Stand aside!"

"But——"

Brooke took him unceremoniously by the collar and swung him away. His companions surged back as the Sixth-Former began to box their ears right and left.

The door, thus suddenly released, gave way with equal suddenness to the attack from without. It flew open, and a crowd of juniors tumbled in headlong.

"Didn't I tell you so?" exclaimed Greene triumphantly.

Blagden had been shoving his hardest against the door, when it gave way. He came in like a shot, and rolled over. Pat Nugent fell over him, and sprawled on the floor, and the half-dozen juniors behind came tumbling over the two leaders. Greene dragged Blagden to his feet.

"Buck up, Blaggy! I made the rotten bounders let you in!"

"Are we in time?" gasped Blagden.

"Yes, they haven't counted for Talbot yet."

"Hurrah!"

"Sort yourselves out!" exclaimed Brooke. "And look here, no more of this kind of thing, Trimble. This is carrying zeal a little too far."

Trimble made no reply. He shook his fist at Greene and Blagden. Brooke went back to his friends, and a semblance of order having been restored, the counting started. Blagden was chuckling gleefully.

He had been a good deal hurt in effecting the rescue of the imprisoned voters, but he didn't mind that, since they had got into the hall in time. He cheerfully mopped the red stream flowing from his nose.

"We've done 'em!" he said. "It was all due to the new chap, too. Young Tipperary warned me that Trimble had a lot of voters locked up in his study, and we made the cad give up the key and let them out."

"The horrid bounder!" exclaimed Greene. "That's just the kind of trick he would get up to. What a pity you didn't lock Trimble up in their place!"

"Silence!"

The counting was proceeding carefully. Pat Nugent had his hand up with the rest. The tellers finished their task, and compared notes. The results were the same, and the announcement was made, the whole hall listening with breathless attention.

"Arthur Talbot, one hundred and eight votes! Eldred Lacy, one hundred and four votes!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Blagden.

And Talbot's partisans burst into deafening cheering. The long, high hall echoed with the sound, and the very air seemed to rock.

"Hurrah!"

"Arthur Talbot is captain of St. Kit's!"

The election was over. Eldred Lacy, with a somewhat pale face and eyes burning, made his way from the hall, too enraged by the result to trust himself to speak to anyone. Many of his friends followed him, and the rest were silent and dismayed.

But the Talbot faction were by no means silent. They had triumphed: their candidate was elected, and they let themselves go in their exuberant satisfaction. The hall rang again and again with cheering.

CHAPTER 3.

A Study Row and an Eviction.

"YOU'LL have to keep your weather-eye open, young Dublin," said Blagden, with a shake of the head.

It was the day after the election. St. Kit's had settled down into its usual calm again, and, after the excitement of election night, was pursuing the customary evenness of its way.

"Hallo! What's the trouble now?" asked Pat.

He did not seem very much alarmed. Pat Nugent had a very cool way of taking things as they came.

"Lacy is going to claim you for his fag," said Blagden solemnly. "I was told by a chap who heard Trimble say so."

"That's a bad look-out."

"Rather—for you. Lacy knows that he owes his defeat to you now, and he means to make you sit up for it. There's nothing of the sportsman about Eldred Lacy. He's going to make you smart, and if you're his fag you'll be at his mercy."

"Can't I get out of it any way?"

"Not unless some other senior appropriated you first. I say, I've got a jolly good idea. Cut along to Talbot's study and ask him."

"Good wheeze!" said Pat, jumping up at once. "It's a chance, anyway."

And he lost no time in carrying out the idea. As he made his way towards the new captain's study he heard his name called down the corridor. He recognised Lacy's voice, and took no notice. A few moments later he was tapping at Arthur Talbot's door, and the voice of the new captain of St. Kit's bade him enter.

"Hallo!" said Talbot, in his genial way, with a kindly glance at the junior. "You're the new kid, aren't you?"

"Yes. My name's Pat Nugent."

"Ah, yes! I hear that it was you who let out some voters who were locked up in a study last evening."

"I helped," said Pat modestly. "I wanted to see fair play, you know."

"Quite right. Now, what can I do for you, Nugent?"

"I came to ask you a favour, Talbot."

"I'm always willing to help a new boy in any way. What can I do?"

"Will you let me be your fag?"

"Are you anxious for the post?" asked Talbot, looking at him, with a smile.

"Faith, and I am!"

"It isn't an easy one, you know. You'll have to share the duties of Blagden, my present fag. You may have the lion's share of the work."

"I don't mind a bit."

"Very well; I'll take you on, if you like."

"Thank you very much, Talbot! Is there anything I can do now?"

"No," laughed Talbot. "Blagden will show you the ropes, and he'll tell you at what times I'm free to help you with your lessons."

"Thanks awfully!"

And Pat, in a very satisfied frame of mind, quitted the captain's study. He had gained his object; and, once being installed as the captain's fag, he thought he would be pretty safe from the reprisals of Eldred Lacy. At all events, Lacy could now claim him as a fag, and so he would not find it impossible to avoid his enemy.

"Talbot's a brick," said Blagden, when Pat rejoined him—"a jolly brick! But, my hat, you'll have to look out for Lacy after this!"

"I say, Nugent, I wish they had put you in our study," said Greene regretfully. "You'll have a horrid time of it in No. 9 with Jones and Hooper."

Considering the reception Blagden and Greene had given Pat on his arrival at St. Kit's, they had come to agree with one another remarkably well. The three were, in fact, kindred spirits, and their friendship dated from the evening of the election.

It was a disappointment to Pat that he could not become study-mate with his new friends. He pulled so well with Blagden and Greene that he would have been glad to share their quarters. But the powers that were had decided otherwise. The juniors generally went three to a study, and the third in Blagden's room was a youth named Cleeve, with whom the two chums did not agree very well. But he was a fixture there, and Pat was put in No. 9, where there happened to be room for him.

"Faith, it's rotten!" agreed Pat. "Suppose we could get Cleeve to change with me, and go into No. 9 with Hooper and Jones instead of me?"

"I've already asked him, the pig!" replied Blagden, with a shake of the head. "He won't. You see, our study is larger and lighter, and looks out upon the close, and he likes it better. He actually had the cheek to suggest that, if I wanted a change, Greene and I should change into No. 9 ourselves, and let Hooper and Jones join him in our room."

"Awful boulder, Cleeve!" said Greene solemnly. "He's got cheek enough for anything. He's a toady of Trimble's, so we can't make things too warm for him."

Pat grinned.

"Now, look here," he said, "we three want to be together, and so we ought to persuade Cleeve to shift, somehow. You can't be expected to turn out of the quarters you're used to. Cleeve is a new-comer there, isn't he?"

"Yes; he hasn't been with us a month. And all the study furniture is ours. We bought it and paid for it; and Cleeve hasn't contributed a red cent. He gets the use of it for nothing, and never even stands a study feed, the blessed Shylock!"

"Then clearly he is the person who ought to go. He's the giddy intruder who ought to be ejected. Hooper and Jones are welcome to him."

"Yes; but they wouldn't like to have him. He's a mean beast, you know; and, besides, those two are pigs, and don't want to oblige us. They think we are cocky," said Blagden, with the air of one suffering under an undeserved aspersion.

"Sure, and it will be easy for me to make them want to change me for anybody under the sun," grinned Pat. "If you start on Cleeve, and I start on Hooper and Jones, I dare say things will work out as we want them."

"But then we shall have Trimble down on us, you know."

"Who cares for Trimble?"

"Well, he's the biggest chap in the Upper Fourth, and, of course, he could lick any of us."

"I don't think so. I'd be willing to back myself against Trimble any day in the week," said Pat confidently. "I've had some rubs with him already, and he hasn't come off best. If he interferes I'll take him on, anyway, and see if I can't shut him up."

"All right!" said Blagden gleefully. "If you could lick Trimble that will settle it. He's a beast, and has the cheek to fag some of the Lower Fourth, just as if he were a senior. He wants taking down a peg or two."

When Pat entered Study No. 9 to commence operations there he found Hooper and Jones in possession, and their reception of him was far from agreeable. Both of them were big boys—much too big really to be in the Lower Fourth, but kept there principally by idleness and want of ambition. In a Form with boys mostly much smaller than themselves, they put on airs, and developed bullying tendencies, and were pretty thoroughly detested by their fellow-Formers. But they were dreaded more than they were detested, and they usually succeeded in getting half their work done by smaller and cleverer boys.

They looked at Pat far more amiably as he entered. Nobody was anxious to share No. 9 with them, and for a long time they had had it to themselves. At St. Kit's the studies were far from roomy, and there was a squeeze at the best of times. Consequently, they were far from regarding with favour the advent of a new-comer.

"Hallo! What do you want?" growled Hooper, as Pat came in with his books under his arm. "What are you showing yourself into this study for?"

"Not from choice!" said Pat cheerfully. "I'd just as soon go into the monkey-house at the Zoo, which, faith, wouldn't be unlike this, as far as the inhabitants are concerned!"

"None of your cheek! We don't want you in here. Do you mean to say that Slaney has shoved you in here without asking us?"

"Sure, and he has!"

"Well, don't make yourself a nuisance, or you'll get it!"

"Get what?"

"A thick ear, my son!" said Hooper darkly. "I've heard about you. You're the cheeky new kid that biffed Trimble. If you give me any of your cheek you'll get some biffing here that will make you look sick, I can tell you!"

"What-ho!" chimed in Jones. "Suppose we give him a hiding to start with, Hooper?"

"Spare my tender youth!" said Pat, in mock terror. "As you are strong, be merciful; and don't be bigger cads than you can help."

Hooper and Jones looked at one another.

Pat was only fourteen, and of medium size for his age. He was certainly

strongly built, and had a quick, keen eye and a firm mouth. But there was nothing particularly dangerous in his look—in fact, he didn't look half as tough as he really was. But his coolness made the two bigger boys feel a little uncertain.

Pat came to the table, and tried to find room for his books. There was none, and neither of the two occupants of the study showed the least desire to make room for him.

"Come, give us a little room!" said Pat. "Don't be hogs, you know! I've got to do my work here, and I must have a little space."

"You can sit on the floor, and shove your books on a chair!" said Hooper.

"Faith, and I won't!" said Pat Nugent.

"Well, you won't have any of this table!" answered Hooper.

"Won't you, please, kindly give me the tiniest bit of room?" asked Pat politely.

"No, we won't! So buzz off!"

"Ah, then I shall have to take it!"

With perfect coolness Pat reached out and swept Hooper's books and papers from the table to the floor. Another sweep of the hand, and he had cleared off Jones's property.

"There, you see," he said, with a sweet smile, "I thought I could make room. Please don't get excited, my dear schoolfellows."

But his dear schoolfellows were frantically excited. They jumped up, raging, and went for Pat with a rush. They intended to give him, between them, the biggest licking of his experience, and make him properly sorry for having provoked their anger. But, somehow, it didn't work out that way.

They had to deal with a lad who possessed strength, science, and boundless pluck. So far from quailing from the unequal contest, Pat met his assailants with a smile, his hands up for defence in a twinkling. His right flashed out, and what seemed to Hooper like a lump of iron caught him on the nose, and he staggered backwards and fell over his chair. The next moment Pat's left was on Jones's mouth, and Jones crashed against the table and rolled over on the study floor.

Hooper sat up, wondering whether there had been an earthquake, and Jones rose on his elbow and stared stupidly at his comrade.

Then they looked at Pat. He was standing smiling at them, and rubbing the knuckles of his hands.

"Come on!" he said. "That's a start. Give me some of that biffing you were talking about. I want to know exactly how you are going to do it!"

Hooper and Jones exchanged a sickly look.

"You're not tired already, surely!" continued Pat. "Here I am, awaiting instructions. Aren't you going to give me a lesson?"

"N-n-not just now," said Hooper, picking himself up. "We don't want to hurt you. I—I only spoke in fun, you know."

Pat grinned.

"And you—did you speak in fun, Jones?" he demanded.

"Yes!" gasped Jones.

"Oh, very well; then I only slogged you in fun. But I'm an awfully funny chap, you know, and whenever you speak in fun like that again, I expect I shall slog you in fun in just the same way. We shall have a regular funny time, sha'n't we?"

"N-no—ye-es!" mumbled Hooper. "Of course, we're glad to have you in the study."

"I thought you would be, when you came to know me better."

Pat sat down at the table. He took a goodly share of it, and set to work. Hooper and Jones followed his example, but more slowly. They were still dazed, and did not quite know what to make of this tough customer.

They had learned, however, that it was not safe to attempt to jump on the new boy. Pat Nugent knew how to take care of himself.

Pat Nugent had just finished his preparation for the morrow, when Blagden put his head into the study. Blagden looked in surprise at the unusually quiet Hooper and Jones, and noted the swollen state of Hooper's nose, and the thin, red smear on Jones's mouth. Then he looked at Pat, and grinned.

"Hallo! How are you getting on, young Ireland?"

"Finished," said Pat, rising.

"Then come along with me."

Pat joined him in the corridor. Blagden was looking curious.

"Have you been having a row with those two?"

"Well, we had a little argument; but we're awfully friendly now."

"Then I want you to come and have a little argument in the end study."

"You were going to show me over the gym. after prep."

"Yes, I know; but we haven't done our prep.," said Blagden ruefully.

"Cleeve has invited Trimble into our room, and we can't work while he's there. He often comes in there and jaws to Cleeve, and now he's fixed himself there to worry us because we dished him over the election. They won't let us work, and there will be a row with Slaney in the morning if our preparation isn't done."

"And you can't shift him?"

"They're both bigger than we are," said Blagden, with a shrug. "We've tried it before. But I think it would be fair for three chaps our size to tackle them, don't you? Trimble has no right to stick himself in our study and spoil our work."

"Right-ho!" said Pat. "Let's interview Trimble."

Blagden's study was at the end of the corridor. Its number was 16, but it was usually called the end study. The sound of voices proceeded from it, and Pat recognised Trimble's far from dulcet tones.

Trimble had dragged the table near the fire, and was sitting on it, with his feet on the fender. Cleeve, a lanky youth, with a sour face, occupied the only easy-chair. They were talking loudly, and eating roasted chestnuts—"our chestnuts," as Blagden wrathfully muttered in Pat's ear.

Greene was trying to get his work done with his book on his knees. He looked up hopefully, as Blagden came in with Pat. Trimble glanced round. He gave Pat a scowl.

"So you've come back!" he sneered. "What have you brought the bog-trotter into this study for? Get out of it, Nugent!"

"Rats!" said Pat cheerfully. "It's you that's got to get out!"

"Perhaps you'll put me out?"

"Yes, perhaps I will, if you don't go quickly!"

"Give me another chestnut, Cleeve. Don't take any notice of the cheeky little beast!"

"Are you going?" asked Pat.

"No, I'm not, and there's an end of it!"

"Not at all; that's only a beginning," said Pat calmly. "Cleeve, my man, if that animal's a friend of yours, tell him to get out!"

"I'll give you a thick ear if I have any of your cheek!" growled Cleeve,

"Very well."

Pat took hold of the end of the table upon which Trimble was sitting, and tilted it. Trimble gave a yell, as he slid off, and was deposited in the fender. He scrambled up, considerably hurt and wild with rage.

"Go for him!" cried Cleeve.

Trimble did go for Pat, with a rush like a wild bull.

In a flash the two were locked together in a close embrace, and reeling about the study in a wild and whirling struggle. Trimble was considerably the bigger of the two, but he seemed to have met his match in Pat Nugent.

To and fro they went reeling, crashing into the table, and sending it flying, and then into Cleeve, and flooring him as if he had been shot. Blagden and Greene, shouting encouragement to Pat, jumped and skipped actively out of the way.

The struggling pair were slowly but surely nearing the door. Finally, with a herculean effort, Pat whirled Trimble out into the passage, and they were brought up with a thump against the opposite wall. Trimble, with all the breath knocked out of his body, relaxed his grasp, and Pat, exerting himself, sent him spinning along the passage.

Cleeve had rushed to his friend's aid, as he saw that Pat was getting the best of it, but Blagden and Greene had promptly fastened upon him.

Pat came breathlessly back into the study.

"Let him follow Trimble!" he exclaimed.

"Here, I say," cried Cleeve, "I—I, you know—I—"

"Out with him!" said Pat, panting. "Put your beef into it!"

Blagden and Greene put their "beef" into it, and Cleeve went flying into the passage.

"Now let him have his belongings; he's not coming back here!"

Pat gave his directions like one born to command. Willingly enough the chums of the end study obeyed. A shower of books and papers followed Cleeve, and pelted him down the passage.

"Here, I say——" he yelled.

But he got no further, for a Greek lexicon caught him on the chin and bowled him over.

The two defeated bullies glared furiously at the three juniors standing in the doorway of the end study. Dearly they would have liked to charge the trio, but they felt that it was too big a task for them. Blagden and Greene they had been able to bully, but the new boy was a tough customer. They looked at the chums, and they looked at each other, and they did not "come on." They had had enough.

"This is where you clear out, you two rotters!" said Pat, with a wave of the hand. "Cleeve, if you want a home, apply at No. 9 Study, and Hooper and Jones will take you in. You're not coming back here again. These are my quarters. Shut the door, chaps, and let's get the room to rights!"

The door of the end study slammed. Trimble, scowling darkly, walked away, and Cleeve ruefully collected up his books and followed.

CHAPTER 4.

The Silver Box

"I CONFESS I am interested in the lad," said Squire Lacy, looking at the doctor through the blue haze from his cigar. "I should like to know more of him."

The Squire of Lynwood had dined with the Head of St. Kit's, and now they were chatting over their cigars. The squire had skillfully brought the conversation round to the subject of the captain of the school.

It was a topic not at all distasteful to the doctor. He was proud of his protege, and gratified by his success in winning the captaincy.

"You will remember," continued the squire, "that I thought I knew him the other day at the football match, but that was hardly possible. I think I must have known his father, for certainly his features are very familiar to me."

"It is quite possible," assented the doctor, looking interested. "There can be no harm in telling you the facts, if you care to hear them. If your supposition is correct, it may even be of use to Arthur Talbot."

"I should be very glad to hear the story."

"There is very little of it," smiled the doctor. "I am greatly in the dark myself. Talbot was placed in my charge by a friend, now dead. When I say a friend, I mean a man who had once been my friend, as a matter of fact. He belonged to my college, but I had lost sight of him for years, and he had gone to the bad, to tell the truth. I still had a kindly remembrance of him, though, for he was rather weak than wicked, and I pitied him. I did not hesitate for a moment to accede to his request."

"And you took the boy, knowing nothing of the facts?" asked the squire, in wonder.

Dr. Kent nodded.

"Yes, as Norroys refused to explain, or else did not know them himself. He was very mysterious about it, and although he gave me a name for the boy, he as good as admitted that it was not his true one."

"That was very strange."

"Decidedly! He said—so earnestly that I could not fail to believe him—that the boy's life was in peril if he were found by certain parties, and that he would fall a victim to their hatred unless his existence was kept a dead secret. That seemed to me like romancing; but he was in such deadly earnest, as I have said, that I believed him. I took charge of the boy, and he has grown up in my care as Arthur Talbot, and—well, he has repaid me for the trouble I have taken."

And the expression of the good old doctor's face grew very soft.

"That must be a cause of great satisfaction to you," the squire remarked. "Then I take it that Talbot's real name and parentage will never be known?"

Dr. Kent smiled.

"No, that is not correct."

"You possess a clue to them, then?"

"Talbot does. Norroys gave me at the same time a silver box, which, according to his account, contained the papers necessary to establish the boy's identity when he should be old enough to take care of his own safety."

The squire's eyes gleamed strangely.

"But have you not examined the contents of the box, my dear sir?"

"That was impossible, as he exacted a pledge from me that it should not be opened till the boy was twenty-one. Then he would be able to claim his own, and hold it."

"And it has never been opened?"

"Never!"

"Then you have only the word of this Norroys that it contains the papers described?"

"Yes; but I have not the slightest doubt that he told me the truth. When Arthur is twenty-one the secret will be revealed. Until then he is my son."

"Naturally, he is anxious to learn what the mysterious box contains?"

"Yes; but he is quite content to wait."

"It is possible that some property is involved in the matter?" suggested the squire. "The opening of this box may prove your protege to be a rich man."

Dr. Kent laughed.

"I have little expectation of that. Of course, it is possible; but I don't think Talbot allows such visionary possibilities to disturb him. He is working hard to prepare to make his own way in the world, and he thinks a good deal more of his chances of winning the Dunraven Scholarship than of the possibilities of the silver box."

"Yes, I suppose so. That is a sensible view to take of the matter," the squire assented. "I suppose that the box is lodged for security in a bank?"

"Oh, no! No one is likely to attempt to steal it," smiled the doctor. "I gave it into Talbot's possession when he was sixteen, and he has taken care of it ever since."

"But the enemies of whom Norroys spoke——"

"They have made no sign all these years, so, if they still live, it is clear that they have not the faintest knowledge of the boy's whereabouts."

"Yes, that is clear. Talbot and the box will be quite safe until the time comes for the secret to be revealed."

"Undoubtedly!"

The squire lighted a fresh cigar. His face was careless enough, but his eyes were gleaming.

"But does anything I have told you give you a clue?" asked the doctor.

Rupert Lacy shook his head.

"No. I suppose it is, after all, only a chance resemblance that struck me," he replied.

The doctor looked at him with a sudden intentness.

"I think I can explain it," he said, smiling.

"How so?"

"It is strange that it did not occur to me before," went on the doctor.

"Arthur Talbot bears a resemblance to yourself, Mr. Lacy."

Rupert Lacy gave a violent start.

"To me?"

"Certainly! Now that I remark it, it is quite plain. He is more like you in feature than your brother Eldred."

"That is very curious," said the squire, with a peculiar note in his voice.

"I should certainly never have hit on that myself."

"A curious coincidence, that is all. Of course, there can be no relationship."

"No," said the squire, laughing. "That is not likely."

After that the conversation turned from Arthur Talbot; but while the Squire of Lynwood chatted easily and freely, the thought of Talbot was still in his mind. And when he left the doctor, to take his homeward way to Lynwood, his brow was dark with gloomy thought.

"So I was not mistaken?" he said to himself. "My first suspicion was correct, and matters are even worse than I supposed. This, then, is the meaning of that half-uttered confession—that confidence unfinished when death sealed my father's lips. This makes all clear. I knew it—I felt it when first I saw the boy!"

He set his lips hard. A picture had risen up in his mind—a vision from the past. A picture of a man fallen in the hunting-field, of a face ghastly with the imprint of swift-coming death, of a broken, muttering voice, a half-

spoken confession of wrong and treachery. And that dying man was his father, the last Squire of Lynwood!

What the stumbling, unfinished mutterings of remorse had implied Rupert Lacy had not fully understood at the time; but he understood now—now that he had heard the story of Arthur Talbot. It rested with him to right the wrong of the past. His lip curled bitterly at the thought. It was not likely.

"I must have the silver box!" he muttered. "That is where Eldred can help me—and shall help me! When that is in my hands, Talbot will never know the truth, and I shall be secure!"

CHAPTER 5.

Pat is Persuasive.

"COMFY, isn't it?" said Pat Nugent, glancing round the study with an eye of pride.

Pat had quite settled down in his new quarters. He had brought his books and other belongings there, and had just finished arranging them. He had laid out a considerable portion of pocket-money in adding to the embellishment of the study. A new square of carpet, containing all the colours of the rainbow, a looking-glass, and a clock gave quite a homelike finish to the room. It was, as Pat said, comfy.

"Jolly comfy," said Blagden, "only——"

"Only what?"

"Suppose you ain't allowed to dig here with us? It's much nicer for Greene and me to have you here instead of that bounder Cleeve, but——"

"Well, having kicked out Cleeve, sure I'm entitled to his place by right of conquest," said Pat, laughing.

"Only if he brings the Form-master into it, you'll have to shift. And Trimble will very likely put him up to it, out of spite now you've licked him."

"Faith, we shall have to see about that," exclaimed Pat. "I'm here, and I've come to stay. Cleeve can go into No. 9 along with Hooper and Jones, and they'd rather have him than me, after our little skirmish. We must persuade the bounders not to—— Hallo, Greene!"

Greene came hastily into the study.

"Hallo! You've made this look nice," he said, looking round. "It's comfy, and no mistake. But I'm afraid it's no go, Nugent."

"Why not?"

"Trimble's got Cleeve in his study, and he and Cobb are persuading him to go to the Form-master and complain about getting turned out of his study."

Blagden nodded glumly.

"I told you so, Paddy," he remarked.

"Then there's no time to lose," said Pat. "I dare say we can do something in the persuading line ourselves. Come along!"

"Where are you going?"

"To call on Trimble."

And Pat hurried out of the study. Blagden and Greene exchanged glances, and followed him. They did not know what his intentions were, but they were already getting accustomed to following Pat Nugent's lead.

Trimble's door was half open, and as Pat approached it he could hear Cleeve's voice inside, and the threatening tones of the bully of the Upper Fourth.

"But I don't want to stay in the end study, Trimble. I shall be all right with Hooper and Jones."

"No, you won't. I'm not going to have you turned out of your quarters, Cleeve."

"But I don't mind! I really don't mind in the least."

"Well, if you don't, I do. You're going to Mr. Slaney to complain. Do you hear?"

"But I—I don't want to."

"That's got nothing to do with it. It's that, or take a licking."

"But Nugent may go for me if I do, and—"

"Well, I shall go for you if you don't, and so will Cobb. Here, Cobb, we'd better give him a lesson. Hold him while I touch him up."

"Oh, don't, Trimble! I'll—"

Pat kicked open the door and strode into the study.

Trimble and Cobb glared at him.

"What do you want here?" snarled the former. "What do you mean by shoving yourself into my quarters? Get out!"

"All in good time," smiled Pat. "Come in, chaps!"

Blagden and Greene entered the room, and Pat closed the door.

Trimble and Cobb looked rather alarmed.

"What are you up to?" growled Trimble. "You'd better clear out."

"I hear that you're doing some persuading here," exclaimed Pat. "We've come to lend a hand. We're great at persuading."

"Get out!" roared Trimble.

"You're trying to persuade that beautiful specimen to complain to Mr. Slaney because I've changed studies with him," answered Pat.

"None of your business!" snapped Trimble uneasily.

"Your mistake; it is my business. This is where I come out strong. Cleeve, I want you to go to Mr. Slaney and ask his permission to change into No. 9. He's sure to agree if you ask him nicely."

Cleeve looked dubiously at Trimble.

"You'd better not," said the latter.

"Oh, yes, he had better!" said Pat. "And you're going to ask him to do it, Trimble. I'm going to persuade you to persuade him!"

And Pat seized Trimble by the collar.

In a moment he had twisted him round and flung him face downward across the table, sending ink and pens and papers flying in all directions.

Trimble struggled furiously, but Pat's grip was like iron.

"You're not wanted here, Cobb!" he exclaimed. "Get out! You're dead in this act. Chuck him out, chaps!"

Blagden and Greene promptly hurled themselves upon Cobb.

He dodged round the table and escaped from the study, slamming the door after him.

"Now, Trimble," exclaimed Pat, pinning the bully down in spite of his frantic efforts to tear himself loose, "you're going to persuade Cleeve to do as I asked him."

"I'll see you hanged first!"

"Do you decline?"

"Yes, hang you! I'll pulverise you for this!"

"There's a stick in that corner, Blaggy. Hand it over!"

Blagden, grinning, handed the stick to Pat.

"Now hold his legs—one each. Cleeve, stay here! If you leave the room I'll scalp you! Hold the brute tight, kids; he's wriggling like a beastly eel. Now, Trimble, are you going to do that persuading?"

"No!" yelled Trimble.

He made a desperate effort to get loose as the stick whistled in the air. But it was in vain.

Blagden and Greene held a leg each, and Pat had a grip of iron on the back of his collar, and he was sprawled helplessly upon the table.

Down came the stick with a sounding thwack, and the dust arose from Trimble's garments, and from Trimble himself arose a terrific whoop.

Thwack again, and again!

"Leave off!" roared Trimble. "Leggo! Lemme alone!"

"Are you in a more sweet and reasonable frame of mind?"

"Leggo!"

Thwack!

"Will you do what I want?"

"No! Yes! Leggo! What do you want?"

"You've got to persuade Cleeve to visit our kind teacher, and ask him for permission to change into No. 9, and let me have the end study."

"I won't!"

Thwack!

"Yes, I will!" yelled Trimble. "Oh, won't I pay you out for this! Yes, I will!"

"Very good! Sure, I thought I should be able to bring you to reason in time, Trimble dear. Now, ask Cleeve very nicely, and I dare say he'll oblige you."

Cleeve was grinning now.

"I'll do whatever you want, Trimble," he said.

"You little beast! I'll——"

Thwack!

And the bully yelled again.

"I'm waiting for you, Trimble," said Pat, with the stick in the air.

"Cleeve, will you go to Mr. Slaney," gasped Trimble, "and ask him—ask him——"

"Certainly!" said Cleeve. "Ask him what?"

"Ask him—— Oh, won't I make you sit up for this, you beast!"

Thwack!

"Leave off! I'm asking him, ain't I? Ask Mr. Slaney if he'll let you——"

"If he'll kindly let you," corrected Pat.

"If he'll kindly let you change into No. 9, because——"

"Because you'll be more comfy there, and Blaggy and Greene would rather have me," said Pat.

"Because you'll be more comfortable there," gasped Trimble, "and Blaggy and Greene would rather have me—I mean Nugent."

"Certainly!" grinned Cleeve.

"Mind you ask him nicely," said Pat. "If he refuses, I shall take it for granted that you didn't ask him nicely, and I shall have to give you some instruction."

"I'll do my best," said Cleeve, very sincerely.

He guessed what the instruction would be like, and he didn't want any.

"Well, buzz along!"

Cleeve left the study.

"Now let me go," growled Trimble.

Pat jerked him off the table.

"Sure, and I hope this lesson will do you good, Trimble," he remarked.

"If it doesn't, I'll give you another any time you like. You'll find me a very obliging chap when you know me better."

"You—you beast!" hissed Trimble, tenderly rubbing the injured portions of himself where the stick had fallen heaviest.

"Now, that's ungrateful. I shouldn't wonder, Trimble, if you have some idea in your head of thumping Cleeve, although he's only doing what you

persuaded him to do. Just remember that if you touch him, I shall be on your track. I take him under my wing over this affair, you see, and I'm bound to protect him."

Trimble only snarled.

In a few minutes Cleeve came back into the study.

"Well, what says the oracle?" asked Pat.

"Mr. Slaney says we can change if we like, and don't bother him," replied Cleeve.

Pat grinned.

"Well, that's satisfactory, if not exactly polite. Trimble, I'm much obliged to you for persuading Cleeve to do me this little favour. It was kind of you."

"You beast!"

"I'm afraid you're in a bad temper, Trimble. Never mind, I sha'n't forget your kindness. Come on, chaps!"

The three quitted the study. Cleeve scuttled away first to get out of Trimble's reach. Pat, Blaggy, and Greene returned to the end study.

"Well, that worked all right," said Blaggy, with much satisfaction. "It's settled now. After asking Mr. Slaney, Cleeve can't back out of it, whatever Trimble says or does. It's settled, and I'm jolly glad!"

"It all shows what can be done by persuasion," said Pat. "You should never go in for violence when persuasion will serve your purpose. It ought to be a great satisfaction to Trimble to reflect that he's done a kind action."

CHAPTER 6. In Ambush.

"HALLO!" said Pat. "Snow!"

It was morning, and Pat was first out of bed in the Fourth Form dormitory. The gleam of white through the window had caught his eye, and he went to it and looked out. The close and the school buildings were glimmering with spotless white.

"Snow," yawned Blagden; and he sat up in bed. "That's a bit of all right, as it's a half-holiday this afternoon! We shall be able to have snow-balling in the close."

"Good idea!" said Greene. "We'll go for Trimble and his set, and give 'em a warm time. I wish I could get a chance of giving Lacy one in the back of the neck without being caught."

"We'll keep our eyes open," said Blagden thoughtfully.

The snowfall came as a boon and a blessing to the youngsters of St. Kit's.

It happened to be a Wednesday, which was always a half-holiday at St. Kit's, and when morning school was over the boys turned out joyously into the close.

The paths had been cleared, but the ground was still mostly thick with snow, as well as roofs and walls. There was ammunition in plenty for a general engagement, and a battle was not long in starting.

The juniors pelted each other with high good-humour, amid rallying cries and shouts of laughter, and the fun was waxing fast and furious when Eldred Lacy came out.

Lacy had on his hat and overcoat, and he strode directly towards the big gates, frowning at the youngsters, who, however, were too excited with the game to take much note of the senior just then.

A band of the Upper Fourth, headed by Trimble and Cobb, were charging the three chums, who, backed up by a dozen others, offered a desperate resistance.

The fight was furious, and as Lacy came along, a rush of the juniors surrounded him, and the air round him was thick with flying snowballs. He gave a yell as one smashed into his face, and another broke in the back of his neck, and a third knocked his hat off.

Who had thrown the balls it was impossible to discover. They might have come from any of the combatants. But it was upon Pat Nugent that the prefect's vengeful eye fixed. He made a rush for the junior, his face inflamed with rage.

Pat, who was busy repelling an attack by superior odds, did not see him coming. But, fortunately, Blagden did, and he hurled a snowball just in time.

The missile caught the prefect on the side of the head, and he staggered, and lost his footing in the slippery snow, and sat down suddenly.

Pat turned his head then and saw him.

"Hallo, Lacy!" he exclaimed. "Don't you find it cold taking a rest there?"

It was, perhaps, an injudicious question.

Lacy jumped up, and went for Pat with a howl of rage. Pat promptly dodged, and Lacy blundered into Trimble, whom he sent spinning with a tremendous box on the ear.

"What's that for?" roared Trimble.

"Get out of my way!"

And Lacy continued his pursuit of the elusive junior. Biff, biff! came snowballs from Blagden and Greene, one on either side of his head.

But Lacy ground his teeth, and kept on.

He ran Pat to earth in an angle of the schoolhouse wall and seized him.

"Now, you little beast!"

And he began to punch the junior with all his force.

Pat landed out, and Lacy got some stingers; but the junior certainly suffered most, and his punishment would have been extremely severe if the others had not come to the rescue.

"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 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, 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.

CHAPTER 7.

A Strange Meeting.

"**E**LDRED! 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—hey?" 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—ch? He's got nearly as much at stake as you have. H——"

"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 chalk, turned to his brother.

"You'd better defer your visit a bit, Eldred. Come to-morrow, 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 an 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 wouldn't hurt me."

"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 Lynwood. 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 experiences 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, Eildred 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 rag, you'll have to reckon with me!"

"If you choose to take 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!" hissed 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 which 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, gov'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 'card you call him a beggar's brat, and a charity whelp, and some more fancy names. What did you mean by that?"

"What I said!" snarled Lacy. "But I don't see what it matters to you. Mind your own business, confound you!"

And he went into the gateway. Black cast a dark look after him, and then hurried on the track of the captain of St. Kit's. He overtook Talbot in a few minutes.

"Can I speak to you a minute, sir?" he exclaimed.

"Certainly!" said Talbot, stopping. "What is it?"

Talbot was courteous to everybody, for it was his nature; but there was a good deal of disfavour in his look as he glanced at the ruffian.

Seth Black's gaze was fastened upon his face again.

"By thunder!" he muttered. "It's the same! I can't be mistaken! That's why he wanted me to get out of the neighbourhood, is it? I see his game."

"What do you want with me, my man?" asked Talbot impatiently.

"Only a few words, sir. I think I've seen you afore somewhere, and I'd like to know what your name is, if you don't mind telling me."

"My name is Talbot," said the captain of St. Kit's coldly, "and I have certainly never met you before."

And he turned away.

"Wait a minute," persisted Black. "I mean, is that your real name, or—?" He caught at Talbot's sleeve eagerly as he spoke. "I want to know."

Talbot's eyes flashed. He jerked his arm free and strode on. But Black, who seemed to be strangely excited, persisted, and the captain of St. Kit's swung round on him sharply.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I don't know who you are, or why you should be curious about my affairs, but if you don't take yourself off at once you'll be sorry for it!"

The ruffian fell back, scowling darkly. Talbot strode on, and soon forgot the existence of Seth Black. But Black did not forget. And ere long Talbot was destined to have cause to bitterly regret that chance meeting.

CHAPTER 8.

The Squire's Secret.

SQUIRE LACY passed quickly into the Dragon Inn. It was late evening, and very cold. The squire was muffled up, with a cap pulled down over his forehead. He went quickly up the stairs and knocked at a door on the first floor.

It was opened as soon as he knocked. A coppery visage with reddened eyes peered out at him in the gloom.

"Thought it was you," said Seth Black. "I saw you coming, squire, but you was so muffled up that I—"

"Let me come in, fool, and don't stand chattering!" said Rupert Lacy sharply.

The man sullenly stepped back, and the Squire of Lynwood stepped into the room, and closed the door behind him. He looked round him with an expression of ill-concealed disgust.

A big fire was blazing in the grate. There were the remains of a meal on the table, and several bottles. A half-filled tumbler stood close by the chair near the window, where Seth Black had evidently been watching for his visitor. The atmosphere of the room was heavy with the fumes of tobacco and whisky.

Black caught the look on the squire's face, and sneered savagely.

"You don't like my quarters!" he said. "I dessay I should be better fixed if I came up to the hall. P'r'aps I'd better come."

"Nonsense, Black!" exclaimed the squire, his expression changing. "You seem to me to be very well fixed here, and quite comfortable."

Black drew down the blind, and pulled his chair to the fire.

"You can sit down, if you like," he said. "We've got to talk business."

"I'll stand," said the squire. He stood with one hand resting on the

table. Black sipped the tumbler of whisky-and-water, and waited for him to speak. "There's little to say," resumed the squire, after a short pause.

"We've come to settle the matter. In a nutshell, you know some things——"
 "Some little matters that happened when you was abroad, and when you wasn't called Rupert Lacy," grinned Black over his tumbler. "Of course, you never dreamed I'd turn up here. But I knew, even in them days, that you didn't sail under your real name. I knew more than you guessed, squire, about you, and your father, too. I knew that——"

"Never mind all that. You needn't go into details."

"Why not? There's nobody here to listen, I s'pose? I hunted you out, though you thought you had covered your tracks. Though I never expected to find you such a swell. Things have changed with you."

"You knew me before I came into my property. I had displeased my father, and he kept me on a short allowance."

"I see. You had to get money, then, and you got it the easiest way, which wasn't by working honestly. It would surprise the folks round here to learn that Squire Lacy of Lynwood had once——"

"Hold your tongue, confound you! That's all over, long ago, and I haven't come here to rake up old stories out of the past!" said the squire angrily.

"No; I dessey they ain't agreeable to you," grinned Black. "Well, to come to business. What have you got to propose?"

"In the first place, you must leave the neighbourhood. Select any place you choose for a residence, excepting this locality, and I will pay you two hundred pounds a year."

"And why mustn't I stay here?"

"Because people will talk. They may find out there is some connection between us. You may babble in your cups. You are certain to do so."

"And that's the only reason why I should go?"

"Of course," said the squire uneasily. "What are you driving at?"

"I'm driving at this—that you lie, Mr. Lacy!"

The squire's eyes blazed, and he took a step towards the ruffian. Black met his furious gaze without quailing.

"You don't like that," he sneered. "But it's the truth, and you know it. I dessey you'd like to get rid of the sight of me; but that ain't your chief reason."

"Fool! What could my reason be, then?"

"You want to get me away from the neighbourhood, not of your home in particler, but of St. Kit's College."

The ruffian fastened his eyes upon the squire's face as he spoke, and he chuckled as he saw the wave of pallor that passed over it.

"What do you mean?" demanded Lacy hoarsely. "What have you to do with St. Kit's? You are raving!"

"I've seen the chap who is called Arthur Talbot there."

The squire's hand gripped the table hard.

"Talbot! I think I have heard the name."

"Yes, I think you have!" sneered Black. "When I saw him, do you think I didn't know at once why you wanted to get me out of the place?"

"What can you know about Talbot? What is he to me, or to you?"

"You don't know?" sneered Black.

"Certainly not! You are talking in riddles."

"Bah! Do you think I am blind? You gave yourself away the moment I mentioned the name. You know who Arthur Talbot is as well as I do, and how he could if he knew——"

"Enough!" said the squire savagely. "Supposing there is anything in what you say—which I do not admit—it makes no difference to us."

"Whether you admit it or not makes no difference. I know what I know. But this 'ere is the point. I'm not going away—at least, not till I think I will."

"What object have you to serve by staying?"

"Well, I shall be able to keep my eye on you and on the boy."

"If you were to speak to him once on this topic, you could say good-bye to the hope of ever getting a penny out of me."

"I might be able to make better terms with him."

Rupert Lacy ground his teeth.

"You had better take care!" he hissed. "You are dealing with a desperate man. You, better than anyone else, should know that I am not to be trifled with, Black."

Black shrugged his shoulders.

"We're not in Africa now," he said, "and you dare not put a bullet through me, much as you'd like to do it. I'm not afraid of you!"

"Well, let us finish this discussion," said the squire, changing his tone. "Do you mean that you refuse to accept my terms?"

"Yes, so far as going away from here is concerned. I'm going to suit myself about that. As for the figure you have named, that will suit me."

The squire took out his pocket-book.

"There are ten fivers. In three months' time you shall have the same again."

Black grinned as he gathered up the crisp notes with a grimy hand.

"Good enough, gov'nor! But if I ran short of money, you wouldn't be mean enough to refuse a loan to an old pal, would you?"

"I may consider about that. If we were on the veldt now I would shoot you like a dog, and you know it! You may drive me too far. Take warning!"

And Squire Lacy strode from the room.

His last words had made a considerable impression upon Seth Black. The ruffian's coppery face was thoughtful and serious as he sipped his whisky. Better than anyone else, probably, Seth Black knew of what the squire was capable when his evil nature was roused. He held the whip-hand, but it might be dangerous to push his advantage too far.

Squire Lacy strode from the inn, with his teeth set hard, his eyes gleaming under his contracted brows.

"Another danger," he muttered. "What wretched ill-luck that Black should have met Talbot! He was certain to recognise him. But if they had not met he would never have dreamed that he was at St. Kit's." He ground his teeth savagely. "All the more reason for getting rid of him. I must have the silver box. When that is in my hands, and Arthur Talbot is driven from St. Kit's, I shall be safe!"

CHAPTER 9.

A Precious Pair.

It was a fine day. Trees and hedges were putting forth their early green as Arthur Talbot, captain of St. Kit's, left the school gates and strode down the lane. Handsome and cheerful Talbot looked; the brightness of the spring weather reflected in his face.

He stopped at a stile some little distance from the school, which gave admittance to a footpath—a short cut to the village. As he turned towards the stile his face darkened somewhat.

A man was lounging against the stile—a man with an unshaven, coppery

face and a dirty fur cap. Talbot knew him well enough by sight. It was the disreputable ruffian who had spoken to him once by the gates of St. Kit's, and ventured to question him. Several times since then Arthur had seen the fellow, and once or twice Seth Black had tried to speak to him.

The man looked up as the captain of St. Kit's came by. He fixed his eyes upon Talbot with an evil look. The deep flush, showing through his coppered skin, indicated that he had been drinking. He was in a quarrelsome mood, having drunk sufficient to make him take offence at the slightest thing or at nothing at all.

"Good-day to yer!" he said thickly, as Talbot came up to the stile.

He was lounging against the steps, and did not offer to move.

Talbot made no reply. He did not desire to enter into an altercation with a semi-intoxicated vagrant, so he put his hand on the top bar to vault over without troubling Black to move.

The ruffian scowled as no reply was made to him.

"I spoke to you, young gentleman," he said. "Ain't you got a word to say to a civil feller?"

Talbot looked at him sharply.

"I don't see what you want to speak to me for," he said. "I don't know you, and don't want to. You're not the kind of man I want to speak to. You've several times tried to force your presence on me. You had better keep your distance. Bear that in mind!"

The ruffian's eyes glinted, and he shoved himself in front of the captain of St. Kit's to prevent him from crossing the stile.

"Can't speak a civil word—eh?" he sneered. "And why shouldn't I speak to you if I want to, me lord duke? Ain't I good enough?"

"Please let me pass."

"Jest you answer me fust!" said Black, leering. "Ain't I good enough to speak to yer—eh?"

"I tell you I don't want any words with you!" cried Talbot. "Get out of my way!"

"Suppose I don't?"

"If you don't move, I shall move you!"

"Will you?" The ruffian gave a snarl. "I'd like to see you do it. Mr. Gutter-brat! Ah, you didn't think I knew that, did you?" he added, with a sneer, as Talbot started.

Talbot's eyes blazed with anger.

"Are you going to move?"

"No, I ain't! I—"

Talbot's patience was exhausted. Black had no time to finish. The stalwart young captain of St. Kit's laid his hands upon him, and with a single powerful twist sent him spinning across the lane.

Black staggered and reeled right across the lane, and pitched helplessly into the ditch on the other side. There was no water in it, but there was plenty of mud and rotten vegetation. Black was not in an enviable condition as he scrambled out.

His coppery face was red with fury. Talbot stood facing him, his fists clenched, his glance contemptuously disdainful.

"Now, if you want a lesson, come on!" he exclaimed. "I will willingly spare five minutes to give you the hiding you've wanted for a long time!"

Black made a couple of steps towards him, and then stopped.

The aspect of the young athlete was not inviting, and Black's courage oozed out as he met the flashing eyes.

He began to mutter curses, and Talbot, with a scornful smile, turned and stepped over the stile, and strode away across the field.

Seth Black shook his fist after the young captain of St. Kit's.

"Wait till my chance comes!" he muttered savagely. "I could make you sit up if I liked. I could——"

He broke off. A new-comer had appeared on the scene. He scowled savagely at Eldred Lacy, who was looking at him with his hands in his pockets, and a smile of amusement upon his face.

"I saw it all," said Lacy, with a nod. "He handled you easily enough."

"Not so easily as he handled you the other day, Master Lacy!" snarled Black.

Lacy turned red. He did not like the reminder.

"Still, I didn't stop to speak about that," he said hastily. "Look here, my man, you know something about Arthur Talbot."

"Do I?" said Black, eyeing Lacy dubiously.

"Yes, you do. I've been thinking over what you let drop the other day, too. You know something about Talbot—something we don't know at the school."

Black's look was very curious as Eldred Lacy made this statement.

"Maybe I do," he assented. "And what about it?"

"I want you to tell me what it is." Again that curious look on the ruffian's face. "We only know at the school," continued Lacy, "that he's a nameless nobody, whom the doctor took in out of charity. Some of the fellows say he's a beggar's brat, picked up out of the gutter. I shouldn't be surprised if his father came along to claim him some day. Do you know who his father is?"

"Maybe I might make a guess," said Black, with a grin.

"Then tell me," said Lacy eagerly. "Look here, I don't suppose you have any love for that fellow who just pitched you across the road, have you?"

"I hate him!" said Black, between his teeth.

"Good! And you're not particularly flush with money?"

"I don't know that I am."

"I'll make it worth your while to tell me anything you know about Talbot. Mind, I want proof with it. I want to settle him at the school. It stands to reason that his origin was respectable. Tell me what you know."

The ruffian was silent, looking at Lacy out of the corners of his eyes, as if weighing something in his mind.

Lacy watched him impatiently.

"Out with it!" he exclaimed. "I tell you I'll make it worth your while. I'd give a good deal to show him up before the school. Do you know who his father is?"

"Yes."

Lacy gave a sudden start.

"You—you don't mean to say that—that you——" he broke out. His look became eager, his face pale with excitement. "Look here, Black, tell me the truth. Is Talbot any relation of yours?"

Black looked at the prefect hard before replying,

"What if he was?" he said at length slowly.

Lacy burst into a chuckle.

"Then he is?"

"I haven't said so."

"Look here, I must know the truth." The prefect took a couple of sovereigns from his pocket. "Are these any good to you? Now tell me. Is Talbot any relation of yours? Are you his father?"

Black gave a peculiar chuckle.

"Stranger things than that might be true," he said.

"There's your tin. Have you got any proof? Would you have the nerve

to claim him, and give him a showing up before the school?" demanded Lacy eagerly.

"Ha, ha! That would be a fine revenge!" grinned Black. "Yes, if you pay me for my trouble, I'll claim him before the whole school, and prove my claim up to the hilt, too!"

"I'm not rich," said Lacy, "but my brother would let me have a couple of fivers if I asked him specially. What price that?"

"I'll do it! It's a go!" said Black. "I don't know that I would if I didn't owe him one myself. I'll make him sorry he slung me about, the puppy! I'll teach him to be disrespectful to his daddy!" And he finished with a ghoulisn chuckle.

Lacy's eyes were gleaming with excitement. Never before had such a chance come to him of dealing so terrible a blow at the rival he hated.

In his hatred of Talbot he was willing to believe anything against him, and certainly the ruffian did know something about Arthur. His tale might be true; at all events, true or false, it would cause Talbot keen suffering, and degrade him in the eyes of the schoolfellows who now liked and admired him.

"You mean it, honest Injun?" Lacy asked. "Mind, it's worth ten pounds to you if you can make out a good case."

"I mean it. I'll claim him, and see if I don't prove it! I'll do it before you if you like, and as soon as you like."

"I don't want to appear to have a hand in it," said the prefect quickly. "It would look bad if they knew I had raked this up against Talbot; but before I part with the money, I want a bit of proof, of course. Talbot's just gone to the village to see about a new cricket-bat he's ordered. He won't be long before he's back this way. Would you have the nerve to tackle him on the subject, then? I'll get on the other side of that fence, so that I can hear without showing up. I want to keep out of it."

"I don't mind. I'll do as you say."

The ruffian's manner was earnest. He evidently meant to keep his word. And Eldred Lacy, feeling that his vengeance was in sight at last, laughed aloud in his glee.

CHAPTER 10.

Father and Son.

QUITE unconscious of what was in store for him, Arthur Talbot came along the footpath to the stile with his swift, springy stride. His eyes gleamed as he saw that the ruffian was still lounging there.

Seth Black was smoking a short, dirty pipe. He made a movement as the captain of St. Kit's stepped over into the lane.

"Stop a minute!" he said, with an evil look. "I've got something to say to you. You wouldn't listen afore; and, mebbe, if you hadn't been so cocky, I wouldn't have spoke out. Now, I'll let you have it plain. Stop, I tell you!" He planted himself directly in Talbot's path. "I'm going to speak to you!"

"Get out of my path!"

Talbot clenched his hand. Seth Black did not stir.

"You'll raise yer 'and agin your own father, will you?"

Talbot stared at him, doubting if he had heard aright. His clenched hand fell to his side again.

"What did you say?"

"You heard what I said. You don't know me, my fine bird, but I know you. Yes; I'm your father, and you can make the most of it!"

Talbot's face was white as death.

"You lie!" he said, between his teeth—"you lie!"

"Do I? I can give proofs, if that's necessary!" sneered the ruffian. "If I ain't your father, who is? Answer me that!"

Talbot stared at him dumbly. He could certainly not answer that question, for he did not know who his father was—did not even know whether the name he bore was his true one.

Seth Black grinned evilly.

"You can't answer? Course you can't! Ashamed of your old father, ain't you, among all your blessed swell friends?"

"You lie! You are not—you cannot be my father!"

"Do you want me to prove it?"

Talbot's teeth set hard.

"Yes. Prove it, or I'll give you the thrashing of your life! Quick! Prove your words—prove that you have not lied, or you shall repent it!"

Black shrank for a moment from his blazing eyes; but his bravado quickly returned.

"I'll prove it fast enough. I parted with you when you was a youngster, but I haven't forgotten nothing. You've got a mark—a birthmark—on you, and I can describe it to a T."

Talbot reeled back against the stile, staring wildly at this scoundrel who spoke with mocking certainty. How could Seth Black know that if his claim was a false one?

Often had Talbot wondered to himself who was his father. He had thought sometimes that his father might have been a poor man; but anything like this had never crossed his mind.

He had hoped some day to find his father—to find him living; though all the time he knew that the chances were that he was long since dead. But to find him living, and to find him in the person of this brutal, disreputable ruffian! It was not—it could not be true! It was too terrible! Yet how, otherwise, did Seth Black know so much?

The ruffian grinned as he saw the agony of doubt and distress in the boy's face.

"Do you believe me now?" he sneered. "Shall I describe the mark to you? A red mark in the form of a cross, on the right arm between the elbow and the shoulder."

Talbot groaned.

It was impossible that the ruffian should ever have seen that mark, unless he had, as he declared, seen it when the boy was an infant, too young to remember him.

Some of Talbot's intimate friends, doubtless, knew that the mark was there, but it was impossible that Black could have received information from any of them.

How did he know?

"Shall I tell you more?" sneered Black. "Shall I tell you the name of the man who brought you to Dr. Kent?"

"You cannot!"

"His name was Norroys."

Talbot's face grew whiter. How could the ruffian know that unless his tale was true? The doubts were fading away in Talbot's mind. He had found his father at last—found him in this drunken, disreputable ruffian, the mere sight of whom filled him with loathing.

"It cannot be—it cannot be!" he almost moaned.

"It is true, and you know it," said Black coolly. "I was 'ard up in them days. Mr. Norroys, he took pity on you, and he gave me a ten-pound note for you. That's the frozen truth. Now I'm going to claim you. You're my

son, and I've got my rights as a parent. We'll see whether an affectionate parent is to be parted from his handsome son!"

Talbot started. It was not only that this scoundrel was his father, but there was worse to come. The wretch meant to claim him!

"You—you cannot mean that!" panted Talbot. "You will not dare!"

"Can't a father claim his own son?" grinned Black. "I'll show you, my boy. I'm coming up to the school with you now. Where my boy is I can be, can't I? If the doctor don't like my company, he can 'and over my son, and we'll go together. You can be the prop of my declinin' years."

"You—you hound——"

"Nice language to your father, I must say!"

"I do not—I cannot believe it!"

"You do believe it, and you know you do," said Black coolly. "Anyway, I'm coming up to the school. We'll see if the doctor dares to dispute my claim!"

"You must not come up to the school!" gasped Talbot.

"Who says I mustn't?" sneered Black.

"Man," cried Talbot, in an agony, "if this horrible tale is true—if you are indeed my father, you cannot want to shame me before all the school!"

"Yes; I said you'd be ashamed of your ole father! I ain't good enough to show to them swells, of course!"

"You—you don't understand. You must not go to St. Kit's. Man, be reasonable. I—I beg you not to go to the school. Give me time to think!"

"Changed your tune, ain't you?" sneered Black. "Still, I don't want to be 'ard on you. Maybe, I won't show you up at the school, if you behave decent. I'm hard up. There's no law agin a boy helpin' his ole father that I know of."

Talbot drew a breath of relief.

"You are welcome to all I have!" he gasped.

And he felt in his pockets, and turned out every coin there, without counting them, into the hands of the ruffian.

"Good enough! I'll let you off, for all you've been so cocky—for a bit, at any rate!"

"Oh, Heaven help me!"

Talbot leaned heavily upon the stile. His face was colourless, and thick beads of perspiration were on his clammy brow. In that ten minutes he seemed to have aged as many years.

"That's all right, so far," said Black. "I'll let you off for a bit. But got to see you again. I'm an affectionate bloke, I am, and I hain't my dear boy for so long, you know. When shall I see you again—hey?"

"I—I don't know—I——"

"This here tin won't last me long. I shall want some more. Of course, I'm always willing to come and share with you up at St. Kit's!"

"For mercy's sake——"

Talbot seemed utterly crushed. The horrible revelation had come so suddenly, he had had no time to prepare for it. His whole life seemed to be shattered by this discovery. He longed to get away, to be quiet, to have time to think it out.

"I'll see you when you like," he said wearily. "I—I must think! I—will write to you if you like."

"O.K. Name of Seth Black, at the Dragon Inn."

"I will remember."

Talbot turned, and went blindly up the lane. All the spring was gone out of his step, and he walked with drooping head.

Seth Black watched him with eyes twinkling with spiteful satisfaction till he disappeared from sight. Then his glance turned towards the board fence on the other side of the lane, behind which Lacy had concealed himself.

"You can come out!"

The prefect of St. Kit's drew himself over the fence, and jumped across the ditch. He joined Black, his face agleam with excitement. He had heard every word, and had watched the scene through a crack in the boards.

"Are you satisfied now?" said Black, with a leer.

"Yes, yes; more than satisfied! It's true, then—you are really his father?"

"Don't you believe it?"

"It does not seem possible."

"Hain't I proved it?" demanded Black. "He's satisfied, anyway."

"Well, yes, it looks like it. By Jove, this is a stroke of luck I never dreamed of! He's captain of St. Kit's! My hat, I'll have him down—right down in the dust—before long!" Lacy laughed aloud in his satisfaction. "So far, he has won all along the line. I'll change all that!"

"You're a pleasant young gentleman, you are!" said Black admiringly. "Your friends must be proud of you, I don't think!"

"Mind your own business! I must go now. We mustn't be seen together. Where can I see you to fix matters up, about showing him up, and to bring you the tin?"

"You can come to the Dragon."

"Right! It may be some days before I can get the money; but as soon as I have it I'll come. My hat, it's my turn now, and no mistake!"

With a nod to the ruffian, Lacy strode away towards the school. Nearly at the gates he overtook Talbot. The captain of St. Kit's was walking slowly, and, with his head bent down, seemed to be buried in gloomy reflection.

"Hallo, Talbot!" said the prefect. "Anything the matter?"

Talbot looked up with a start.

"No, nothing," he said.

"You look ill."

"I am all right."

"Sure?" said Lacy. "You look as white as a sheet. Had a shock of any kind?"

"I am all right," said Talbot.

Lacy walked on. Never had he seen that look in Talbot's face before. The rival he hated seemed to be utterly crushed beneath the weight of the misfortune that had fallen upon him. But in Eldred Lacy's heart there was no mercy and no relenting.

CHAPTER 11.

A True Chum.

"CAN it be true—can it?" Talbot muttered the words feverishly between dry, burning lips. "Can it be true?"

He had reached his study—how, he hardly knew, for he was like one in a dream, scarcely conscious of his movements. Now he paced the room, to and fro, to and fro, with tireless steps, his face colourless, his eyes burning, his hands clenched.

Could it be true? Was that man, that brutal, disreputable ruffian, indeed his father?

Was the secret of his birth revealed at last, and in such a manner?

Seth Black his father! He the son of that unclean, unscrupulous brute! Could it be?

There was a knock at the study door, but in his absorption Talbot did not notice it. It was repeated, and then the door opened.

Brooke, of the Sixth, stood in the doorway, looking in amazement at the captain of the school. Brooke was Talbot's closest chum, and his look immediately became concerned at the sight of the captain's worn, white face.

"Talbot, in goodness' name, what is the matter?"

He came quickly into the study, and closed the door. Talbot turned towards his chum, with a red flush in his cheeks.

"It's—it's nothing, Brooke!" he stammered.

Brooke shook his head.

"It's no good telling me that, Talbot," he replied. "You're in trouble. Can't you tell me what it is? If you don't want to, I'll clear; but perhaps I could help you out. You know I'd do anything I could."

The yearning was strong in Talbot's heart to confide in someone—to ask and obtain counsel in this terrible hour of trial.

There was the doctor; but Talbot shrank from speaking to him, and bringing upon him the trouble that overwhelmed himself.

He looked at Brooke hesitatingly. The Sixth-Former looked him straight in the eyes.

"You can rely on me, can't you, Talbot?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," said Talbot slowly. "But this—this—"

"I know it's something out of the common, to cut you up like that," said Brooke. "But, whatever it is, you know I'm your friend."

"You might not be after you knew."

Brooke stared at him in amazement.

"What do you mean, Talbot? You don't think this, whatever it is—and I haven't the faintest idea—would make any difference to our friendship, do you?"

"It might."

"Nonsense! You haven't done anything to be ashamed of, old man; I'm jolly sure of that! And I don't see what else could—"

"Suppose a horrible disgrace were to fall upon me?" said Talbot, with a shudder. "Not my own disgrace, you understand, but a disgrace all the same—"

"Then you could depend upon me to stand by you."

"I believe you, Brooke. But—but—"

"If you'd rather not tell me, don't," said Brooke. "I don't want to force your confidence. But if I could help you in any way, I want you to be sure that you could rely on me."

"I'd like to tell you, Brooke, but it's a terrible thing. Anyway, you'll say nothing if I tell you? It all come out soon enough," replied Talbot to his chum.

"Of course."

"It's about my—my birth," said Talbot, in a low voice. "You know more about me than any other fellow at St. Kit's, Brooke. You know I was given into Dr. Kent's charge, long ago, by a man I can't remember, and that I don't know who my father was, nor even whether Talbot is really my name?"

Brooke nodded without speaking.

"Have you seen a dirty, disreputable loafer hanging about the neighbourhood lately?" Talbot went on. "He goes by the name of Seth Black."

"Yes, I have seen him."

"He claims to be my father."

Brooke gave a start.

"Impossible!"

"He says so," said Talbot, with a groan.

"Then he lies!" said Brooke decidedly. "It's utterly impossible! Does he offer to bring any proof of his claim?"

"He gave me proof—what seemed proof, at any rate."

"Let's hear what it was. It can't be true, Talbot. It's some scheme to blackmail you. He knows there's a mystery about your birth, and——"

"But how could he know it, if his claim is unfounded?"

Brooke looked nonplussed for a moment.

"Well, he might have found that out," he said. "It's more likely that he wormed that out somehow than that he's your father. But what are his proofs?"

"He knows that there is a birthmark on my arm, and he described it to me."

Brooke whistled.

"That's peculiar."

"How could he know?" groaned Talbot.

"Well, it's peculiar, as I said, but it isn't proof. He may have found that out."

"How could he find it out?"

"Oh, there are ways! Suppose he saw you bathing in the river? He's a tramp, and might have been this way last summer; and—and, in fact, anything's more likely than that he's your father."

Talbot brightened a little. The possibility was far fetched, doubtless, but it was a loophole of escape from the terrible conclusion that he was the son of Seth Black.

But in a moment his face clouded again.

"He knows the name of the man who brought me to Dr. Kent, Brooke."

"Did he tell you it?"

"Yes."

Brooke began to look more serious.

Was it possible, he began to wonder, that there was anything in the ruffian's claim?

Talbot was watching his face, and he read his thoughts easily enough. He began to pace the room again restlessly.

"You think there's something in it, Brooke?"

"No, I don't," said Brooke stoutly. "It's strange, very strange, that the scoundrel should know so much. I can't account for that. But that he's your father, I'll never believe for a moment, and I know the doctor would say the same."

"The doctor!" muttered Talbot. "He knows no more of my origin than I do, and I will never allow this shame to be brought publicly upon him. What if Seth Black should come up to the school, as he has threatened to do? Dr. Kent has done too much for me already. I will never expose him to that!"

"What do you mean to do, Talbot?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think. But if Seth Black is truly my father, I shall leave St. Kit's."

"Leave St. Kit's!" exclaimed Brooke, in dismay. "You can't mean that?"

"What else is there for me to do?" said Talbot hopelessly. "The scoundrel threatens to claim me before all the school. Suppose he forces his way here some time, and carries out his threat? I think it would kill me!"

"If he did, we'd give him a warm reception!" exclaimed Brooke. "You can dismiss from your mind the idea that he's your father. It isn't possible!"

Talbot shook his head. He was keen enough to see that Brooke spoke from the warmth of his heart, to comfort him, and that doubts were creeping into his mind.

"He wouldn't dare," continued Brooke, "I suppose he has extorted money from you under threat of coming up to the school?"

"Yes, he asked me for money, and I gave him all I had."

"That shows what his game is, then. It's blackmail, pure and simple. I don't say that you can defy him at once. It may be necessary to temporise with him. Keep him quiet if you can, till we can find out for certain—I mean, till we can prove that he lies!"

Talbot smiled sadly.

"It can't be true, Talbot. Keep that in mind."

"I wish I could think so."

There was a short silence. Talbot paced the room with a white, troubled face. Brooke stood still, his sombre brow showing how deeply he felt for his chum. Suddenly he gave a start.

"There's one thing you've forgotten, Talbot."

The captain stopped in his restless walk, and looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"The silver box."

Talbot gave a slight start. Truly he had forgotten that. He had been too stunned, too confused by this terrible misfortune that had suddenly fallen upon him to think of anything clearly.

"The silver box?" he repeated.

Brooke's face became eager and hopeful.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "You remember what you told me about that? It is supposed to contain something concerning the secret of your birth."

"So I have always believed; but, of course, I cannot be sure."

"Yet, if it does, it would clear up this matter, and prove Seth Black's claim to be false," said Brooke quickly. "Surely, in such a case—"

Talbot shook his head.

"But the silver box cannot be opened."

"Yes; but under the circumstances—"

"Dr. Kent gave a solemn pledge to Norroys on the subject, and when the doctor handed the box to me I promised him," said Talbot slowly. "Of course, nothing of this kind could be foreseen. But the pledge could not be broken."

Brooke nodded gloomily.

"Then we must think of other means of circumventing that wretch," he said. "And we will do it, Talbot. The more I think about it, the more certain I feel that his claim is an impudent lie. And we will prove that it is."

Brooke spoke hopefully; but the shadow did not lift from Talbot's face. But he had one comfort in his misery and distress. In spite of the lowering shadow of shame and disgrace, his chum did not dream of deserting him. He had at least one true friend who would stand by him through thick and thin.

CHAPTER 12.

A Strange Mystery.

"HAVE you seen Liddell and Scott?" asked Blagden.

Blaggy, of course, was not alluding to the two learned gentlemen to whom those names belonged, but to the Greek lexicon which was the result of their labours.

"No," said Pat thoughtfully. "Do you want it for your work?" Blagden made a grimace.

"Well, I certainly don't want to read it for giddy recreation!" he said.

"Haven't you seen the beastly thing anywhere?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was it Talbot, after all?

A strange feeling came over Pat, as he listened to the sounds of stealthy

movement in the room. It could not be Talbot moving about in that creeping manner. The intruder was wearing slippers, and if it had been Talbot he would have come in in his boots, after being out of doors. Whom could it be?

Pat remained quite silent. That a burglar should be in the room before nightfall was, of course, impossible. It was one of the boys of St. Kit's who was exploring the captain's quarters. Who was he, and what was he looking for? It was not likely to be somebody else in search of a lexicon; besides, there was a stealthiness in the light tread of the intruder which seemed to show that his errand was not an innocent one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I—I came here to speak to Talbot."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pat's eyes fearlessly met the prefect's as he said this.

The colour wavered in the prefect's face. He was inclined to spring upon Pat and give him a record thrashing, but he realised that this would make matters no better, and might make them worse. He had been caught in

the act of prowling in the captain's study; for what reason it was best known to himself, but it was certainly not one he could state if called upon to do so. The unlucky chance of Pat Nugent's presence placed him at the mercy of the junior, and he knew it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A likely story!"

Pat put his hand on the handle of the door.

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

Pat pursed his lips thoughtfully.

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

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

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

"You little hound, get out!"

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

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

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

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

"Sure, and I had forgotten it!"

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

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

"Well, something peculiar has happened," admitted Pat. "I don't know whether I ought to tell you fellows."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blaggy and Greene had to admit as much.

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

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

"That's what I was thinking."

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

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

"We do," said the chums together.

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

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

CHAPTER 13.

Lacy Steals a March on Pat Nugent.

TALBOT came in, after his walk to the village, in a moody frame of mind, and crossed the old close with a sombre shade on his brow. At the door he was met by Eldred Lacy.

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

Lacy's voice was unusually friendly, and Talbot stopped. His relations with the prefect, his old rival, had been extremely strained of late, especially since Lacy had felt the weight of his strong right arm; but Eldred seemed to have forgotten all about that now.

"Yes," said Talbot, always willing to accept the olive-branch. Bad blood

in the school was always irksome to him, though Eldred Lacy seemed to thrive on it. "What is it, Lacy?"

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

Talbot looked at him in amazement.

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

Talbot gave a start.

"Surely not?"

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

The captain's brow darkened.

"Who was it, Lacy?"

"The new boy—Nugent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Talbot looked very worried.

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

And, with a nod, he passed on. He went straight to his study, and sent a fag to fetch Pat Nugent there.

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

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

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

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

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

"I suppose so."

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

"What did you come here for?"

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

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

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

"Certainly."

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

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

"Of course I didn't!"

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

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

Talbot looked hard at the junior.

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

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

Talbot stood with his brows wrinkled in thought.

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

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

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

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

"I haven't any secrets," said Talbot, with an involuntary smile. "I cannot conceive why Lacy should want to look through my study. For that matter, I can't imagine why you should want to either, if what Lacy

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says is true. It's the word of one against the word of another, and I don't know what to think about it. You may go!"

Pat went to the door; but there he lingered for a moment.

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

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

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

Talbot looked him steadily in the eyes.

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

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

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

And he left the study and closed the door.

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

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

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

"I have spoken to Nugent, if that's who you mean!"

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

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

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

"He is nothing of the kind!"

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

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

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

CHAPTER 14.

Pat's Ward.

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

Blagden laid down his pen with a sigh of relief.

"That's done," he said. "What are you so quiet about, Pat? You haven't interrupted me once. What's the matter?"

Pat Nugent grinned.

"I'm worried, Blaggy."

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

"No; that isn't it."

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

"Don't be an ass!"

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

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

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

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

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

Pat got off the table.

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

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

"I'm thinking about Talbot."

His chums stared at him in amazement.

"What's Talbot got to do with it?" asked Blagden. "Not ill, is he?"

"There's something wrong with him."

"I've never noticed it."

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

"Come to think of it, I believe you're right," said Blagden thoughtfully.

"But I don't see what it's got to do with us, Paddy."

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

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

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

"Rather—he's all that!"

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

Blagden giggled.

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

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

"Get it off your chest, then!"

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

"Draw it mild, old chap!" advised Blagden. "Who are the giddy plotters, and what's the plot? What do you know about it, anyway?"

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

"Rather!" said Blaggy and Greene together.

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

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

"And you never mentioned it before?"

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

Blagden and Greene grinned at the recollection.

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

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

"Yes, I remember that."

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

Blagden whistled.

"Was it anything about Talbot?"

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

"Great Scott!"

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

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

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

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

Pat Nugent nodded.

"Yes; I had that in my mind, too. But I'm quite sure of what I've told you. The squire and Lacy are plotting against Talbot. They want to disgrace him for some reason, and drive him away from St. Kit's. That's solid fact."

"You ought to tell him, and put him on his guard."

Pat shook his head.

"It wouldn't do. He'd think I'd dreamed it. He wouldn't be likely to listen to such a tale from a junior about a prefect of St. Kit's. Besides, the yarn does sound impossible, for the squire's motive is a mystery."

"I suppose you're right there."

"You see, you two chaps are half inclined to believe that I dreamed it all," said Pat practically.

"Well, not exactly; but—but——" stammered Blagden.

"Oh, I don't mind. I know it sounds too steep for anything. But, if that's the way you look at it, it stands to reason Talbot wouldn't believe a word of it."

"N-n-oo, probably not."

"And if he did, he's just the chap to go to Lacy and tax him with it. Lacy, of course, would deny everything, and he'd be more careful in future, knowing that his game was suspected. We don't want to put him on his guard."

"That's true. Look here, Nugent, I believe you," said Blagden. "I remember how you came round, and got as keen about getting Talbot in as captain as we were, and I couldn't understand it at the time. That's proof, I think. Of course, I wouldn't dream of doubting your word; but except for that proof I might think you had had a nightmare."

"That's just it," agreed Pat. "Now, you see, I have a jolly good reason for suspecting that a plot is going on against Talbot, haven't I?"

"My hat! Rather! But I don't see what the game is yet. How can they hurt Talbot?"

"Lacy's cunning enough for anything. Some of the chaps are saying that Talbot has been seen going in and out of the Dragon—that low pub in the village. Now, we know that Talbot isn't that sort, don't we?"

"I heard that yarn, and never attached any importance to it," said Greene. "But I know some of the fellows say they are certain of it. Dunn, of the Sixth, said in my hearing that he saw him there; but Dunn's no class!"

"He's a chum of Lacy's," said Pat. "As likely as not, this is the first step. But it isn't that, or only that, that is worrying Talbot. He's got something on his mind. I went into his study to-day to fag, as usual, and he was sitting staring into the fire, with a face as white as chalk."

"What the dickens can be the matter, then?" said Blagden, puzzled. "Talbot isn't the fellow to let a thing knock him over easily. It looks as if there was something wrong; but I can't see how Lacy could do anything to worry him. He's always setting himself against Talbot in the school, I know; but that wouldn't bother the skipper much."

"Well, I've thought it out," said Pat, "and I've come to a decision."

"What's that?"

"We're going to take up the matter and look into it," said Pat calmly. "If there's any underhand game going on, we're going to show the scoundrels up. We're going to get Talbot out of the mess he seems to be in."

"I say, mind your eye!" said Greene warningly. "We'd all like to see Talbot right, but he might think it a cheek of us to interfere. And, between ourselves, it does look a bit that way, Pat."

"We sha'n't trumpet forth our intentions to all the school, fathead!" replied Pat. "Of course, we're going to keep it dark, even from Talbot. Talbot's such an easy-going, unsuspecting chap that he'll never see anything himself. He's got no chance against a fellow of Lacy's calibre."

"That's true enough; but it's easy to decide to look into the thing, but it's not so beastly easy to know how to do it," said Blagden sagely.

"I know. But we must go into the thing scientifically. I've been reading up a lot about Sherlock Holmes and Sexton Blake lately," explained Pat. "I've got the whole bag of tricks at my finger-tips. This is how you work it out: First of all, there's a crime committed. In this case the crime seems to have been left out; but we know there's something wrong."

"Yes, that's the first point. There's something wrong—somehow, somewhere," agreed Blaggy.

Pat looked at him quickly, suspecting chaff; but Blagden's face was as solemn as a judge's.

"Next point: Find out the party to be suspected," said Pat. "That's Lacy."

"Yes; Lacy is the giddy suspected party."

"Now we've got to prove him guilty."

"Guilty of what?"

"Well, not exactly guilty," said Pat hastily. "I don't mean that. We've got to prove that he's at the bottom of the—the something wrong."

"That's the idea! You put it awfully clearly!"

"Look here, Blaggy, if you start being funny——"

"I wasn't being funny. There's something wrong—somehow, somewhere. That's admitted. It follows that somebody, somewhere, somehow, has been up to something. Now, if somebody has somehow done something somewhere——"

Blagden was interrupted by a cushion that flew through the air and smote him upon the chest. He sat down on the floor of the study with surprising suddenness.

"I say, what are you up to?" he exclaimed. "Gone off your rocker?" He scrambled to his feet. "I was only putting the case clearly and concisely."

"Well, don't do it any more," said Pat. "I've another cushion here. Now we come to the third point: The suspected party has to be shadowed next."

"Shadowed!" ejaculated Blagden. "Well, that's a good word, anyway."

The second cushion flew, but Blagden dodged it this time, and it crashed against the wall.

"Hold on, Pat. I'll be as sober as a judge."

"Well, we've got to shadow Lacy," said Pat. "That's the proper caper, and it is the only way to discover what the little game is."

"But where are we to shadow him? We might follow him from his study to the Sixth Form room, and from the Sixth Form room to the gym., and from the gym. to the prefects' room, and from the prefects' room back to his study, and keep that up for a month of Sundays without discovering anything very important."

Greene giggled. But Pat was perfectly serious.

"He sometimes leaves the school, doesn't he?" he exclaimed. "Anyway, if he's plotting a plot, he can't do it all on his lonesome; that stands to reason. And so if we keep an eye on him we must discover something in time."

Blagden shifted uneasily.

"I say, Pat, that's a rotten game, watching a fellow about, isn't it?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, yes," said Pat. "If we had nothing definite to go upon. But that isn't the case now. We have it out of their own mouths that they are plotting against Talbot. Are we to stand by quietly while they do it?"

"No. That wouldn't be cricket."

"If you've got any other suggestion to make——"

"I haven't."

"Then don't start criticising my methods," said Pat. "I don't like the idea any more than you do; but I'm not going to see old Talbot done in without raising a finger to help him."

"I'm with you!" said Blagden heartily. "Talbot's a jolly good sort,

and we ought to stand by him. The only thing is, that I don't see how we're going to do him any good."

"We don't know what we can do till we try. Hallo! Talk of the Prince of Darkness——"

Pat nodded towards the window. The evenings were lengthening out now, and it was still light in the close. The figure of Eldred Lacy could be seen crossing towards the gates.

"He's going out," said Blagden.

"Now's your chance, Pat," said Greene. "This is where you shadow him."

Pat hesitated.

"Ain't you going?" demanded Blagden. "Why, you were a regular Sexton Blake two minutes ago, and now you're too lazy to move. You can risk breaking bounds for once, I suppose, for the sake of your—ahem!—detective work?"

"It isn't that," said Pat slowly. "But—but—but——"

"He's all 'buts'!" said Greene. "Afraid Lacy will spot you?"

"No, I wouldn't care. He could only lick me. But now it's come to the point I feel—well, it seems so beastly mean to follow a chap," confessed Pat. "It's all very well in theory, but to do it is a different matter."

"Oh, buck up!" said Greene encouragingly. "I understand all that, but the motive's the thing."

"Of course!" chimed in Blagden. "Think of poor old Talbot being done in, and us sitting comfy here and not lifting a giddy finger!"

Pat jumped to his feet.

"Bedad, and sure I'll do it, kids!"

"Right-ho!" grinned Blagden. "He's in deadly earnest, Greene. He always begins to talk in Irish when he's on the war-path. Go it, Tipperary!"

"I've no time to punch your head, Blaggy!" said Pat, snatching up his cap. "I'll do it when I come back."

And he hurried out of the study.

Blagden and Greene, looking with great interest from the window, saw Pat stalking the prefect across the close. The shadower and the shadowed disappeared. Pat was on the track!

CHAPTER 15.

The Only Way.

"ALLO, guv'nor!"

Eldred Lacy halted at the stile in the Northley lane. There, in the same spot where he had encountered Arthur Talbot on a memorable occasion, Seth Black was lounging, his hands in his pockets, the black pipe in his mouth, the filthy fur cap upon his head. He grinned at Lacy as the latter stopped.

Lacy looked about him nervously. He had come to that spot especially to meet the man, for he was very chary about going to the Dragon Inn if he could help it. But he was far from wishing to be seen in conversation with such an utter ruffian as Seth Black.

The dusk was closing in over the fields, and the lane seemed deserted. Black saw what was passing in the prefect's mind, and grinned.

"It's all right," he said, removing the pipe from his mouth. "It's all serene, mister. There ain't nobody to see you."

"One has to be careful," said Lacy apologetically. "I am a prefect up at the school, you know, and people are always looking for an excuse to talk about a chap."

"Yes, they'd open their eyes a bit if they knew the game you was playing at the school," Black remarked. "Mum's the word, of course. You can trust me."

Lacy made an uneasy movement. It occurred to him that he was playing a dangerous game by dealing with this scoundrel at all, and that he would have to be very careful. But the opportunity to bring about his rival's ruin was too good to be lost; and, besides, there was the squire to be considered. The game had to be played out.

"Yes, of course, I can trust you," he said. "Besides, what you said is quite true, isn't it? You are Arthur Talbot's father?"

"Of course I am. Haven't I proved it?"

"Yes, yes," assented the prefect hastily; "of course! But— Hallo!" His eyes had fallen upon a figure in the lane some distance towards St. Kit's.

It was that of Pat Nugent. The junior was strolling along in the most careless manner imaginable, his hands in his pockets, and humming a tune.

No one, looking at him, would have dreamed that he was shadowing anybody, and, as a matter of fact, nothing of the kind occurred to Lacy; but he was naturally of a suspicious turn of mind, and he was caught at a very awkward moment.

He glared savagely at the junior, who was coming round a bend in the lane. Pat looked at him, and met his glance. He had not known that Lacy had stopped, and now he realised that he had not done his shadowing in a very workmanlike manner; for he had walked right on into the view of the shadowed party, which was certainly not what Sexton Blake would have done. However, there was no help for it now, and Pat could only carry it off as boldly as possible.

At the same time, his heart beat as he saw whom Lacy's companion was. He had succeeded in one part of his object, at least—he had surprised Eldred Lacy in what was evidently a secret rendezvous with a man no St. Kit's fellow ought ever to have spoken to.

It was useless to cut and run now that Lacy had seen him, so Pat strolled on, pretending not to notice the glance of the prefect. Lacy stopped him as he came near.

"Where are you going, Nugent?"

"Northley," said Pat carelessly.

"Don't you know it is near locking-up time at the school?"

"I haven't a watch on," said Pat.

"You must have known you ought not to be out now, watch or no watch. Go back instantly to St. Kit's," said Lacy, frowning.

"But, I say—"

"Return to the school at once, do you hear, and report yourself to Mr. Slaney as having been out of bounds!" exclaimed the prefect angrily.

"Sure, and what should I do that for?"

"Because I tell you. Now, be off, or I'll give you a licking into the bargain!"

Pat looked at the prefect with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Anything else for me to report to Mr. Slaney?" he asked.

"No! What do you mean?"

"Sure, I thought you might like me to report what gentlemanly friends you come out to meet, Lacy," said Pat innocently.

Lacy's brow turned black as night. He made a movement as if to strike Pat, but checked himself. He realised that it would do him no good if the junior talked about what he had seen at St. Kit's.

"Look here, Nugent," said the prefect thickly, "you'll go too far with your impudence one of these days! Go back to the school at once!"

"Must I make that report to Mr. Slaney, Lacy darling?"

"N-no; you need not bother about that. But you must not stay out, and you know it. I will let you off. Now go!"

"But I want to go to Northley," said Pat, feeling that he had the victory on his side. "I want to go particularly, Lacy."

Lacy breathed hard. He would have given a good deal to take Pat by the collar and thrash him within an inch of his life, but he felt that it would not do.

"You cannot go, Nugent. What do you want there?"

"I'm having a bat mended at Simpson's," said Pat, truthfully enough.

"Oh, very well; you can go if you like!"

"Thanks, Lacy," said Pat demurely; and he strolled on.

Lacy looked after him with a black scowl.

"I'd have wrung the little brute's neck!" growled Seth Black.

"You don't understand," said the prefect uneasily. "It was a beastly bit of ill-luck his coming on us like this. I don't want this meeting to become the talk of St. Kit's."

"I s'pose not," grinned Black. "The fellows might suspect something when I come in on the scene and claim Talbot."

"That's it. Let's get somewhere out of sight to talk."

"There's a shed in the field," said Black. "We can talk there without being seen, and it's not a minute's walk."

"Right!"

They crossed the stile. The shed was an old, ruinous building, sometimes serving as a shelter for cattle. It answered the purpose of screening the plotters from observation very well.

Pat had walked on towards the village, and passed out of sight. But as soon as the hedge hid him the junior stopped, his heart beating hard.

He felt that he was upon the track of something, he did not know exactly what. But, as a shadower, it was wisest to be thorough. Through an opening in the hedge he saw the prefect and his strange companion cross part of the field, and enter the shed. What could be the object of their meeting, when they found it necessary to keep it so secret? Could it be anything to do with Talbot?

The squire and Lacy were plotting against Talbot—Pat knew that. This ruffian Black had some connection with the squire. Lacy was keeping what was evidently an appointment with him for some secret purpose. It decidedly looked as if Black was in the plot, too.

Pat thought it over, and then ran along the lane for some distance, and passed through the hedge at the end of the field, and cut across the field behind the shed. It was growing dusk over the fields, and he had little fear of being discovered. He had no definite plan in mind, but he was on the alert. He reached the shed, which, as we have said, was in a tumble-down condition. The sound of voices came to him from within the little building, with the wafted scent of tobacco.

And then Pat paused. His motive was good, and the fortunes of an unsuspecting lad might hang upon what these rascals were plotting. Yet to listen—that was repugnant! Could he—should he do it?

As he hesitated, Lacy's voice came to his ears with distinctness:

"It will be his ruin, absolutely, for he will not have the nerve to remain at St. Kit's afterwards. Carry out your instructions without a bungle, and I shall be rid of Arthur Talbot for good!"

Pat set his teeth hard. There could be no further doubt now. Seth Black was in the plot, and the plot was nearing its culmination, and the ruin of the unsuspecting captain of St. Kit's was what was at stake. The boy remained quite still, his face white and determined. He would know what their cowardly scheme was, and baffle it if he could. The ruffian's hoarse chuckle followed Lacy's words.

"You hain't werry partickler about a father's feelings, Mr. Lacy!"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Lacy. "You know you don't care a rap for Talbot, except for what you can screw out of him! Don't try to put on any rot with me! Whether he's your son or not, you love him about as much as I do!"

Pat's heart almost stopped beating. For a moment he wondered whether he had heard aright. Talbot's father! This brutal ruffian the father of the captain of St. Kit's!

Seth Black chuckled again.

"Oh, all right!" he said. "I'm your man, as I said; and if you make it worth my while, I'll work it as you choose. If you pay the piper, you can call the tune. Mind, I want my price. If I break with Talbot, I give up all I can get from him."

"What can you get from him?" said Lacy contemptuously. "He's as poor as a church mouse!"

"There's that scholarship, you know."

Lacy started.

"What the dickens do you know about that?"

"He told me. He expects to win it, and there will be fifty pounds down on the nail for me when it comes off."

"Bah!" said Lacy scoffingly. "That's all talk! I'm going in for that scholarship, and so is Haywood, and Talbot hasn't a ghost of a chance against either of us!"

"He spoke as if he was almost sure of it."

"Well, I'm quite sure he won't get it. You can bet anything on that."

"Then he was taking me in!" said Black, with a growl. "Maybe that's what you are doing, though. Anyway, my price is fifty."

"You said——"

"Never mind what I said, Master Lacy. If you don't choose to make it fifty, I'll wait and see how the scholarship turns out for the other party. I'm getting something from him pretty frequent to go on with."

Lacy muttered something under his breath.

"Take it or leave it," said Black; "I don't care much which. Your brother is a rich man, and he'll stand the fifty."

"I dare say he will; but—— Well, if that's the price, I'll pay it. I've brought you twenty. You'll have to wait for the rest until afterwards."

"Cash in advance, Mr. Lacy."

"Not a shilling but the twenty now. Do you think I'm going to pay you, and then have you put up the figure again, confound you?" said Lacy savagely.

"I'm pretty sure you wouldn't pay me if I did the job first."

"I'll give you a note of hand; then I shall have to pay up, for if you sent it on to the doctor I should get into a fearful row," said Lacy. "You'll have a hold on me then, and I'll redeem the paper with the thirty."

Black reflected for a few moments.

"I suppose that's all right," he said at last.

"Of course it is! I shouldn't dare to play you false if I wanted to; and

I shouldn't want to. It's worth the money to me to bring Talbot's head down to the dust!"

"Gimme the paper, then!"

"Strike a match, and I'll write it out on a leaf of my pocket-book."

There was a scratch in the gloom. A match flickered, and then another. Pat, through a crack in the crumbling wall, caught sight of Lacy, and saw him scribble something on a leaf, tear it out of his pocket-book, and hand it to Black.

Black struck another match, and examined it closely. Apparently satisfied, he folded it and stowed it away in an inner recess of his coat.

"I reckon that will do," he said. "Now the twenty."

Lacy handed him four five-pound notes. Pat's ears caught the crisp rattle of them as Black counted them over.

"Good!" said the ruffian, in tones of deep satisfaction. "That's the real stuff; and now I'm willing to take your orders, Mr. Lacy."

"I'll tell you what to do. To-morrow's a half-holiday at St. Kit's, and now the cricket's on all the fellows will be on the cricket-ground. Talbot is making up the first eleven, and he's certain to be there—either at practice or watching the form of the others. If things work out well," went on Lacy, between his teeth, "I shall be captain of the St. Kit's first eleven instead of Talbot; but that's by the way. I want you to come up while the whole school is on the ground, and claim Talbot before the lot of them."

"Shall I be able to get on the ground?"

"Yes; there's no difficulty there. The villagers are allowed to come and see the matches if they like, and there's no restriction. You'll simply have to walk in."

"It sounds easy enough. I don't want to get chucked out, though, or mobbed by a blessed lot of them!" said Black, evidently not quite easy in his mind.

"That will be all right. There's bound to be a master on the ground; and, besides, I shall be there, and I'll see there's nothing of that kind. Besides, Talbot isn't that sort. He fully believes that you are his father, doesn't he?"

"Of course he does. I've proved it to him."

"Then, whatever he feels like, he won't want you to be hurt; and he'll be so knocked into a cocked hat that he won't feel like doing anything but sneaking off and hiding himself somewhere out of sight," said Lacy, with a chuckle.

Pat, in the gloom outside, clenched his hands hard.

"I s'pose so," assented Black. "I'll be there, Mr. Lacy. Mind, after it's over, I shall expect that other thirty. I shall keep this paper on me, and the doctor will see it right enough if there's any dodging."

"There won't be any dodging," said Lacy impatiently. "Take care of the paper, and don't let it be seen, and I shall redeem it all right. Now, I think that's about all. I can rely upon you for to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes. It will be a good joke," grinned Black. "So long as there's no chucking out, I shall enjoy it."

"I'll take care of that. Now, good-bye!"

"So-long!"

Lacy hurriedly left the shed, and strode away towards the school, his eyes gleaming. He felt that he had victory within his grasp at last. The rival he had so long hated and feared was to be brought so low at last that he could afford to pity him. Not that there was much pity in Eldred Lacy's breast for a vanquished rival.

Seth Black lounged out of the shed. Pat crouched low in the shadows. The ruffian slouched off and disappeared; then Pat rose to his feet.

The boy's face was white and hard. The cruel plot he had listened to had almost taken his breath away, and his breast was filled with a righteous anger and indignation against the remorseless schemers. To baffle them Pat would have given a year of his life; but how was he to do it?

The game was in their hands. What could be done? It did not seem possible for the boy to do anything, yet something, somehow, he was determined to do. He must, he would help Arthur Talbot somehow.

He walked rapidly towards the village. It was necessary to fetch his mended bat, in order to afford a good pretext for his absence from the college. Lacy must not suspect that he knew. He must have time to think, time to consult with his chums, before he allowed the prefect to get a hint of his discovery.

Half an hour later Pat knocked at the school gates, with his bat under his arm. The gates were, of course, closed for the night, and when Pat was admitted he had to go and report himself to Mr. Slaney.

The master of the Fourth was in his study, and he gave Pat a severe look when he presented himself there. Pat had had time to pull himself together, and he did not allow his face to betray anything of what was in his mind when he explained to Mr. Slaney that Lacy had given him a permit to go into the village for his cricket bat.

Pat grinned as he left the master's room, and hurried off to the end study to consult his chums.

Blagden and Greene were awaiting Pat's return with a good deal of curiosity. They were in the study when he entered, and both looked at him eagerly.

"What price the shadowing?" was Blagden's question. "Have you caught the giddy criminal? Have you proved Lacy to be guilty of the murder of his grandmother? Have you—"

"Shut up!" said Pat. "I've got on to the whole thing, and it's a great deal more serious than I ever imagined."

Blagden became grave again at once.

"All right, old chap. Go ahead!"

Pat related the incidents of his pursuit of Lacy. His chums listened with growing wonder, mingled with indignation. They knew Pat too well to feel incredulity, strange as the story was.

"My only top-hat!" ejaculated Blagden. "If this doesn't take the cake, collar the biscuit, and mop up the whole blessed confectioner's!"

"Poor old Talbot!" said Greene. "But it can't be true—that horrid bounder can't be his father! It's impossible!"

"I only know about Talbot what you chaps have told me," said Pat. "It's a fact, isn't it, that his father is not known?"

"Yes, that much is right enough; it's an open secret that the doctor adopted him when he was a little chap, and has brought him up. Some of the fellows say his name isn't Talbot at all, and some say he doesn't know what it is."

"Lacy and Black both said that Talbot believed that Black was his father," said Pat. "That looks as if there might be something in it."

"But if he's his father, surely he wouldn't be brute enough to show him up and disgrace him before the school?"

"He's brute enough for anything, I think."

"But he'd have some sort of a feeling left for his own flesh and blood, I fancy. You can depend upon it that it's all a yarn, got up to give poor old Talbot trouble."

"That's what I'd like to believe," said Pat. "Exactly how much there is in it, of course, we can't decide. But it's quite clear that Black has been blackmailing Talbot on the strength of it."

"That accounts for Talbot's worried look lately."

"Yes, I told you something was wrong, though I didn't expect to discover what it was so soon."

"What are you going to do?" said Blagden, with rather a hopeless look. "If you say a word out in the school, Lacy will deny it all, and you'll not get a soul to believe you."

"I know that, and I'm not idiot enough to think that a junior has any chance of tackling a prefect with success," replied Pat. "I don't mean to start on Lacy. I want to do something for Talbot. Those brutes mean to show him up to-morrow afternoon before the whole school. If he's going to be shown up, we can save him having it in public like that, anyway."

"Yes, we can do that much," agreed Blagden thoughtfully. "If he knows that fellow is coming, he can stay away from the cricket-field to-morrow afternoon."

"But will he believe you, Pat?" asked Greene.

"Well, I should say so, for he'll know I know something, as soon as I mention Seth Black," said Pat. "It's a beastly delicate matter, of course. He'll feel it pretty deeply, my knowing anything about the matter at all, and—and—"

"And he may think you've meddled, and not give you credit for your good intentions," Blagden remarked. "That's what you generally get in this world, when you try to do anybody a good turn, I know."

"Yes, that's what I'm afraid of. I shouldn't like Talbot to think I'd put my nose into another fellow's business out of curiosity."

"You'll have to risk it if you're going to warn him."

"Yes, that's certain."

"Go and get it over," advised Blagden. "The sooner, the better."

Pat looked rather undecided. It was, as he had said, a very delicate matter, and he had laid himself open to being misunderstood.

"No good," said Greene. "Talbot's gone out."

"Sure?" asked Pat. He was disappointed, and yet a little relieved, to have his dubious task postponed.

"Yes, I saw Brooke and him wheeling their bikes out of the Close. I think they've gone for a spin, and may not be back for a long time."

"Well, I'm not anxious for the interview," said Pat. "Let's go into the gym."

The chums spent an hour in the gymnasium, and when they came in, Pat went to Talbot's study. But all was dark there; the captain of St. Kit's was evidently not in his quarters.

"Has Talbot come in, Brooke?" asked Pat, meeting the Sixth-Former in the passage.

"Yes; he's in the prefects' room."

Pat's heart sank. The prefects' room was certain to have at least three or four fellows in it, and very likely a master or two. He could speak to Talbot there, certainly, but anything in the nature of a private communication was, of course, impossible. And it would hardly be feasible to ask Talbot to step outside for a few minutes. It would excite too much remark, even if Talbot did not regard it as impertinence and order him out of the room.

"Do you want to speak to Talbot?" asked Brooke, noticing Pat's expression.

"Yes," said Pat. "I've got something I want to say to him. Is he likely to come to his study yet, Brooke?"

"I fancy not; he's playing chess with Mr. Slaney."

And Brooke walked away.

Pat went towards the prefects' room. Juniors were not allowed to enter that sacred apartment, unless with messages for the high and mighty prefects who congregated there. The door happened to be open, and Pat caught sight of Talbot, immersed in a game of chess with the master of the Fourth. It was evidently impossible to approach the captain of St. Kit's then, and Pat went back to the end study disappointed.

"Never mind," said Blagden. "There's plenty of time. You'll see him to-morrow morning."

"Yes, I suppose it will be all right then," said Pat resignedly. "I wish I could get it over though."

Shortly afterwards the Fourth Form went up to bed, and Pat saw Talbot no more that night. In the morning he looked across at the Sixth Form table, at breakfast, and saw Talbot chatting with Brooke. The captain of St. Kit's was evidently unsuspecting of the blow that was planned to fall upon him that day.

Morning school claimed Pat then, and it was not till school was dismissed for the day that he found it possible to speak to Talbot. The captain had gone to his room after dinner to change into his flannels, when Pat, nearly desperate by this time, tapped at the door.

"Come in!" called out Talbot. "Is that you, Brooke?"

"It's I—Nugent!"

"Well, come in! What do you want? I'm in a bit of a hurry to get down to the ground."

"I want to speak to you, Talbot—I must speak—"

"Buck up, then!"

"It's about—about Lacy," jerked out Pat, thrown into a state of considerable confusion between the difficulty of the subject, and the necessity of haste. "I saw him meet a chap—that fellow Black, and I heard him—"

Talbot's good-natured face became hard and cold.

"You listened to what they said, do you mean?"

"Yes, I—"

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" said Talbot sternly. "How dare you come to me and admit having done such a dishonourable thing!"

"It wasn't dishonourable!" fired out Pat. "If you knew—"

"I don't want to know anything about it. Be off with you!"

"They're going to—"

Talbot made a quick step towards him, his eyes flashing. Pat dodged out of the door, and ran into Brooke, who was coming into the study.

"Hallo—hallo! What's the matter here? Who are you running into, young shaver?"

"I'm sorry, Brooke," stammered Pat. "I—"

"Cut off! Are you ready, Talbot?"

"No; not quite. Wait a minute! That little ass has been wasting my time!"

"Right-ho! Cut off, Nugent, if you don't want a thump!"

The case was evidently hopeless. Pat reluctantly went down the passage. He was in a heated frame of mind, between Talbot's injustice and his disappointment at not being able to put the captain on his guard.

"Have you told Talbot?" asked Blagden, as Pat joined him.

"No; he wouldn't listen, and then Brooke came in. I don't know what

to think about it," said Pat. "It's simply rotten! Talbot thinks I've been listening to a conversation, and want to repeat it to him."

"He's no right to think anything of the kind," said Greene indignantly.

"Well, I hadn't time to explain."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm blessed if I know," said Pat. "There goes Talbot, with Brooke. No chance of speaking to him now."

Talbot had come out with his chum, and several other fellows had joined him, and they were going down to the cricket ground together.

"No chance now," Blagden agreed. "The first eleven is going to play a scratch team out of the Sixth, and Talbot will be busy. It seems to me that it's all up. You can't do more than you have done, Paddy, and it's no good looking down in the mouth about it."

"But it's horrible!" said Pat. "Think of Talbot's feelings when that low brute comes up to him before all the fellows and shows him up."

"Yes, I know; but we can't stop him."

"Can't we?" exclaimed Greene suddenly. "Why can't we stop him? Suppose we keep a watch for the brute, and prevent him from going on the cricket-field?"

Pat started.

The idea had not occurred to him, but it seemed to be feasible. There was a chance, at least: and three Fourth-Formers of St. Kit's ought to be a match in strength and in wit for the shambling blackguard they would have to deal with.

"Begorra," cried Pat, "that's the idea! And, sure, it's a genius ye are, Greene, my boy! We know the way Black will come in, and there's nothing to stop us from waiting for him, and giving him a reception. It's a chance, anyway, and we can try it."

They went down to the gate opening on Northley Lane. Talbot was on the cricket-ground now, and the two elevens were preparing for the scratch match. Talbot was captain of the first eleven, and Eldred Lacy was in the team. The first were playing a scratch team, picked out of the Sixth, captained by Haywood. It was a fine afternoon, pleasant and sunny, and a good number of St. Kit's lads had gathered on the green to watch the cricket.

If Seth Black played his part, as he had arranged with the prefect, he would have an audience of nearly the whole of St. Kit's.

Talbot won the toss, and his side batted first. Pat was keeping one eye on the cricket and the other on the road. Blagden had gone out with Greene to scout, and keep watch either way, so as to be sure of spotting Black when he should come.

There was a cheer from the cricket-ground. Talbot had gone in with his bat, and was playing up well. He had just cut a ball from Haywood to the boundary.

"Bravo!" shouted Pat.

Blagden and Greene came pelting in the next moment.

"He's coming!"

"Black is coming?"

"Yes; as large as life, up the lane from Northley."

Pat's eyes gleamed with the light of battle.

"Let him come! We're ready for him!"

And a minute later the burly figure of Seth Black came into view, slouching on towards the gates of St. Kit's.

CHAPTER 16.
In Vain.

THE hour had come. Perhaps there was a slight tremor in Pat's heart as he fully realised, for the first time, the extent of the task he had set himself. But he did not falter.

They were cheering on the cricket-ground again—cheering Arthur Talbot. Pat could imagine how that cheering would die away, how a terrible silence would fall, if Seth Black were once allowed to carry out his purpose. It should never be!

Pat exchanged a glance with his chums, and set his teeth hard, as the copper-faced ruffian came slouching on towards the school gates. Seth Black cast a far from amiable glance at the three juniors, who had stepped into his path. He remembered Pat very well; he had not forgotten the snowballing of weeks ago. He scowled at the boy savagely, but would have passed him without speaking. He had business in hand, and no time to waste on the junior. But it was not Pat's intention to allow him to pass.

"Hallo!" said the junior. "What do you want here, my man?"

Black stared at him.

"What's that got to do with you?" he growled. "Get out of the way, young shaver!"

"Here, you be off!" exclaimed Pat. "Clear! Do you hear? You're not wanted here!"

"Are you going to let me pass?"

"Sure, we're not going to do anything of the kind!"

"I'll break your neck!" roared Black.

"All right. Start as soon as you like. You'll find us all there when you start the neck-breaking!" said Pat cheerfully.

Black had by this time completely lost his temper. He made a rush forward, intending to sweep the three juniors out of his path, never thinking for a moment that the youngsters would be able to stand their ground against him.

But in this he made a slight mistake. Pat and his chums were ready for that rush, and quite prepared to deal with it. The three juniors flung themselves upon Black like three wild cats. Pat received a thump on the chest that sent him flying; but Blagden and Greene were clinging fast to the ruffian, and before he could shake them off Pat was up again, and hanging round his neck from behind.

"Get the brute down!" panted Pat. "Down with him!"

Black, gasping with rage, strove furiously to free himself from the juniors; but Blagden and Greene clung to him pluckily, while the ruffian with his efforts dragged them to and fro over the dusty road. Meanwhile, Pat, as nimble as a monkey, had planted his knees in the ruffian's back, clinging round his neck the while. Black staggered drunkenly, and, unable to keep his balance, went over backwards with a crash.

"Got him!" gasped Pat. "Oh, my bones! Never mind: we've captured the beast! Now roll him over into the ditch. A bath will do him lots of good, and take some of the mischief out of him!"

Over went Black, through the dust of the road, towards the edge of the ditch, and into it he would certainly have gone but for an unlooked-for interruption.

The luck of Pat Nugent was out that day. A terrifying figure in cap and gown appeared in the gateway, looking out with angry astonishment at the scene proceeding in the road.

"Boys!" The voice of Mr. Slaney, their Form-master, startled the

juniors, and they jumped; and Black, taking instant advantage of the relaxation of their hold, twisted himself loose and sprang to his feet.

"Boys, how dare you? What are you doing?"

Blagden and Greene looked decidedly sheepish, but Pat was not abashed. He touched his cap calmly enough to the Form-master.

"If you please, sir, we were only going to give that boulder a bath! He needs one, sir; don't you think so?"

"Nugent, I— Where are you going, my man?"

Seth Black, deferring vengeance upon his assailants till a more convenient time, had endeavoured to pass Mr. Slaney into the school grounds.

"I'm going in here!" said Black doggedly. "Them young rips tried to stop me!"

"Oh, is that the case, Nugent?"

"Yes, sir. He was trying to force his way in, and he's up to no good, sir!"

"In that case— Stop, my man; you can have no business here!"

"I'm going in!"

"Excuse me, you are not!" said the master of the Fourth, placing his athletic form in the ruffian's path. "Men of your kind are not wanted here, and you can certainly have no business within the precincts of this college. I am sorry the boys have handled you roughly; but if you were trying to force your way in here, their action is quite justified. You had better take yourself off!"

"I'm coming in. I'm coming in to see my son—him you call Arthur Talbot!"

"Mad," murmured Mr. Slaney—"quite mad, of course! My good man, will you kindly take yourself off? I should be sorry to use violence, but I cannot allow you to enter here!"

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I do not believe such nonsense!"

"Ask Arthur Talbot, and see if he denies it."

"Don't be a fool, man! Clear off!"

Pat's hopes began to rise. It looked as if Mr. Slaney would bar the scoundrel's path as efficaciously as the juniors could have done, or more so. For the master of the Fourth was an athlete, and Black, after looking him over like an ill-tempered dog, came to the conclusion that it would be wiser not to attempt to pass him by force.

But again luck befriended the ruffian. Eldred Lacy had told him that he would be on the look-out, and he was. Lacy was out now, and he was standing idle, with his bat in his hand, watching the game, but with one eye on the distant gate. And so he soon became aware of the altercation proceeding there. He looked annoyed as he saw that Mr. Slaney was stopping the ruffian, and he strolled down to the gate in case his assistance should be required.

"Anything wrong, sir?" the prefect asked, affecting not to know Black, who, on his side, was careful to show no sign of recognition.

"No, not exactly," said Mr. Slaney. "This peculiar person has announced himself as the father of one of the boys here, and refuses to go away."

Eldred Lacy burst into a laugh.

"Well, that's rather funny! Whose father do you happen to be, my man?"

"Arthur Talbot's!" growled Black.

"Ha, ha! Shall I call Talbot, sir? That will satisfy the man, perhaps; unless you'd rather we chucked him out!"

"We don't want any violence here if it can be helped," said the Form master, with a look of annoyance. "The man has been drinking, but he does not seem intoxicated. I cannot in the least understand his motive for his conduct, unless he is mad!"

"I suppose there can't be anything in it, sir?" said Lacy, in a low voice.

Mr. Slaney stared at him blankly.

"Anything in it, Lacy! What on earth do you mean?"

"As you know, Talbot's birth is a mystery, and some of the fellows say he comes of awfully low people, and that the Head took him up out of charity."

The master of the Fourth hesitated. A doubt was creeping into his mind as to whether there might not be some foundation for the claim of the scoundrel, impossible as it looked.

"Perhaps it would be better to call Talbot," said Mr. Slaney uneasily. "It's impossible, of course; the man must be suffering from a delusion; but that will be the simplest way of setting the matter at rest."

"Then I'll call him, sir."

And Eldred Lacy, with a concerned look upon his face, but a mean exultation beating in his heart, walked away towards the cricket-pitch.

Black grinned exultingly.

"Now you'll see!" he remarked.

Mr. Slaney made no reply. The ruffian's evident confidence, now that the matter was to be put to the test, could not fail to impress him. He began to believe that Black's claim was founded in truth.

Pat and his chums had been silent spectators of this scene. Now Pat realised that all was up.

CHAPTER 17.

The Blow Falls.

"BRAVO, Talbot!"

The shout rang from a hundred throats round the cricket-pitch. With a mighty stroke, Arthur Talbot had just sent the ball humming away over the pavilion—a stroke that counted four, without the trouble of stirring from the crease.

"Well hit!"

"Hurrah!"

It was at this moment that Eldred Lacy came upon the scene again. There was a buzz of amazement as the prefect walked on to the field towards Talbot's wicket.

"Hallo, there!"

"Where are you going?"

"Keep off the grass!"

Taking no notice of these remarks, Lacy walked up to Talbot, who was regarding him with astonishment.

"I want to speak to you, Talbot."

"Well, this is a peculiar time to choose!" exclaimed Talbot. "What on earth's the matter?"

"There's a fellow at the gates wants to see you."

"Tell him to go and eat coke!"

"He says he is your father!"

The prefect uttered these words in a quiet and matter-of-fact tone, but

there was a cruel gleam of anticipation in his eyes as he watched the captain's face.

The effect of his words was startling. Talbot turned deadly white, and the bat slid from his hand and thudded down on the crease.

"What did you say, Lacy?"

"He says he is your father."

"Oh, Heaven!"

Several fellows heard Lacy's words, and saw Talbot's agitation. The umpire at his end and a couple of fieldsmen heard every word.

"Hallo—hallo! What does this mean?" exclaimed Haywood. "Your father turned up, Talbot! Well, this is a surprise!"

The captain of St. Kit's did not appear to hear him. He passed his hand over his brow in a dazed way.

"Well, are you coming?" asked Lacy.

"Coming? Yes; I—I suppose so."

"I say," began Haywood, "you can't leave a wicket like this, you——"

Talbot, without heeding, walked straight towards the gates. The rest of the players regarded him with amazement.

The match was a rather important one, though the first eleven was only playing a scratch team, for the selection or rejection of new first eleven players depended upon it.

To see Talbot walking off the field in the middle of his innings was a sight the boys of St. Kit's had never expected.

The cricketers stared after him blankly, and some of them surrounded Eldred Lacy to question him as to what had happened.

Lacy had little to say—only that a man had come to St. Kit's, claiming that he was the father of Arthur Talbot, and offering to prove his claim.

"But what sort of a man?" exclaimed Haywood. "Talbot doesn't look much like a chap who has just found a long-lost pater."

Lacy shrugged his shoulders.

"No wonder. The fellow's an awful blackguard!"

"My word, that's hard cheese for Talbot!"

"Let's go and see how it turns out," said Dunn, rather maliciously.

The cricket was forgotten in the excitement of the moment; that innings was never completed. The boys crowded towards the gates, and the news spreading swiftly, half the school followed them.

Arthur Talbot had quickly reached the gates. Mr. Slaney, with a very gloomy expression upon his face, nodded to the captain of St. Kit's.

Seth Black smiled evilly.

"Talbot," said the Form-master abruptly, "this man has made a most astounding claim—a most impudent and lying claim. I cannot but think it. He says that he is your father. I thought it would be better for you to see him, so that he will see his mistake, and save any further unpleasantness."

Talbot did not speak. His eyes dwelt for a moment upon Seth Black's face, with an expression in which misery and scorn and reproach were mingled—a look which made even Seth Black feel a little bit uncomfortable. Then the lad's eyes sought the ground.

A painful silence followed. Mr. Slaney's look grew more dark and harassed. If the claim were unfounded, why did not Talbot speak and shatter it with a word?

"Talbot, you heard what I said?"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot, in a low voice, his eyes still on the ground; "I heard."

"Well, have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing, sir."

The Form-master compressed his lips.

"Do you mean to admit that this—this person is speaking the truth—that he is, in fact, your father, Talbot?"

"Wot did I tell you—eh?" chuckled Seth Black.

"Silence! Answer me, Talbot!"

"I do not know, sir," said Talbot dully. "I do not know my father's name, as all the school is aware. I do not, I cannot, believe that that man is my father. But he has advanced proof—proof of a sort, at all events; and I know nothing for certain. That is all I can say."

"This is—is most unfortunate," said Mr. Slaney haltingly. "It appears to me that this man has gained some information concerning your private affairs, Talbot, and has based an impudent claim upon it. That it is true I refuse to believe without the clearest proof. I believe the boys of St. Kit's hold the same opinion."

"Yes, sir."

A score of voices hastened to give the assurance. For a moment a gleam brightened Talbot's face. He had friends left, in spite of this horror that had fallen upon his life! Brooke stepped quietly to the side of the captain of St. Kit's.

"It's all lies, of course," he said. "The man can't prove it. If he can, let him do so. And till then he'd better keep clear of St. Kit's."

Seth Black gritted his teeth, and cast a savage glance round him. The boys, taking their cue from Brooke, began to hustle the ruffian. But Talbot's voice rang out, sharp with pain:

"Let him alone, fellows! Don't—don't touch him! He may be—what he says may be true! Let him alone!"

The appeal, so full of shame and misery, had its effect. Seth Black was released, and stood sullenly scowling. Mr. Slaney bent a stern glance upon him.

"You had better go," he said. "You have done all the harm you can to this boy, whom you pretend is your son. If your claim is based on fact, you have acted in a cruel and heartless way, which completely deprives you of any right of regard from this unfortunate lad. Go!"

Black gave the master one doubtful look, and then swung round and slouched away. Talbot stood, white, wretched, crushed. Brooke drew his arm into his own, and walked away with him. The crowd slowly dispersed, eagerly discussing the strange happening.

Pat, Blagden, and Greene stood looking at each other in a very glum mood. All their well-meant efforts on behalf of their idolised captain had come to nothing.

"We did our best," said Pat gloomily; "we couldn't do more. Oh, I'd like to make Eldred Lacy pay for this work of his!"

"We'll try," said Blagden. "We— Hallo! What's that?"

It was a folded paper, lying in the dust of the lane where they had rolled Seth Black over towards the ditch. Blagden stooped and picked it up, glancing at it as he did so. Then his eyes blazed with excitement.

CHAPTER 18.

Talbot's Resolve.

BROOKE walked with Talbot as far as his study, and there he left him. He would have been glad to offer his chum words of comfort if he could have found any to utter. The blow that had fallen was too terrible for that.

The Sixth-Former saw that Talbot, though grateful for his friendship,

wished to be alone at that moment; and he did not wonder at it. So, with a rather wistful look at his chum, Brooke closed the study door and went away slowly down the corridor.

Arthur Talbot was alone—alone with his shame and misery—in an hour of sorrow and suffering such as comes to but few at his boyish age. He threw himself into a chair, in his cricketing-flannels as he was, and sat there, nerveless, helpless, hardly thinking—only conscious of his pain and shame. What was to become of him? Could he ever hold up his head at St. Kit's again? He was captain of the school—looked up to and respected as a leader by boys of all Forms. That was what he had been. Now—who would respect him now? Claimed as his son by a disreputable, blackmailing scoundrel, without being able to utter a word of denial, who would respect him now?

His captaincy of St. Kit's must end! Could he even remain at the college—remain, to be the object of scornful pity, of concealed sneers and contempt? It was impossible!

There came a gentle tap at the door. It opened, and Dr. Kent entered the room and quietly closed the door behind him. The good old doctor's face was pale and distressed. He had evidently heard all, knew all the details of the happenings that afternoon at the gates of St. Kit's.

Talbot looked at him dully, dumbly. Dr. Kent crossed towards him and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Courage, my boy—courage!"

Talbot did not reply, but the kindness of the doctor's look and tone moved him to the heart, and his eyes filled with tears.

"It may not be true," said the doctor quietly. "Mr. Slaney has told me all—all he knows. The man appears to have advanced no proof whatever."

"He gave me the proofs!" groaned Talbot.

"Then you knew about this before to-day?"

"Yes."

"My poor boy, why did you not tell me?"

"What was the use of troubling you, sir? It would have caused you pain; and you could not have helped me."

"That was like you, my dear boy. But I wish I had known. Some of the juniors appear to have known what was coming, and they attempted to prevent this scoundrel from entering the school grounds."

Talbot started. He remembered Pat Nugent's vain attempt to tell him something—something of a plot, which he had paid no attention to at the time.

So it was this that the junior would have warned him against, and he would not listen! But Pat had mentioned Lacy's name. Could Lacy have had anything to do with it?

"I wish I had known, too," said the doctor. "But that cannot be helped now. You say that this man Black gave you proofs, Arthur? What kind of proofs can he have given?"

"He described a birthmark—you know it well, sir—which he can certainly never have seen, unless he saw it when I was a child."

The doctor started.

"Anything else?"

"He gave me the name of the man who brought me first to you, sir."

Dr. Kent's expression grew more serious.

"I do not understand this," he said slowly. "But you must remember that the man may know something of your origin without being what he claims to be—your father."

Talbot nodded, but in a hopeless way. He could see that even the doctor

was staggered by Black's knowledge, in spite of his determination not to believe in the claim.

"There is one way," continued the doctor slowly, "in which a ray of light could, I think, be let in upon the matter. You have the silver box?"

"Yes; but——"

"Norroys, when he gave it into my charge, certainly led me to suppose that it contained a clue to the secret of your birth, if nothing more."

"But he exacted your solemn promise that the box should not be opened till I was twenty-one," said Talbot wearily. "You cannot break your word."

Dr. Kent hesitated.

"Under ordinary circumstances, Talbot, certainly not. But at such a conjuncture as the present it might be justifiable——"

Talbot shook his head.

"No, sir. You would do so to relieve my mind, but you would be acting against your conscience, and I cannot have that. Your word must be kept; it was a sacred trust. Leave the silver box out of the question."

The doctor was silent. He knew that Talbot was right—that nothing could in reality justify the breaking of a solemn promise.

"Besides," said Talbot, "it is likely enough that the silver box contains nothing of the kind. The man Norroys appears to have been scarcely in his right senses, judging from the strange stories he told you. For instance, his assertion that I have enemies, from whom I stood in some danger."

"Perhaps you are right."

"I was not to know the secret," continued Talbot, "till I was twenty-one, in order that I might then be able to protect myself. Why, it may be that Norroys knew that this wretch was my father, and that he wished me not to know it till I was old enough to be out of his power."

Dr. Kent felt his heart sink.

Truly, this was the most plausible theory of the secret of the silver box. It would be no gain to learn for certain that the ruffian Black was in reality, and indisputably, the father of the boy he claimed as his son.

"No," said Talbot; "we can leave the silver box out of the question. I have never attached any great importance to it; and, in any case, a pledge solemnly given to a man now dead cannot be broken. We must deal with this man who claims to be my father. I try not to believe that he speaks the truth, and yet I am aware that my feeling comes from the heart, not from the head. I cannot resist a conviction that this shame is real—that I have found my father at last in that unspeakable blackguard!"

And the captain of St. Kit's dropped his head upon his hands with a groan.

"My poor boy, take courage! And, anyhow, we are not certain yet. And, in any case, the man cannot claim you."

"At all events, I must resign the captaincy."

"Perhaps that might be advisable for the present," said the doctor, with some hesitation. "Only for the present, I say, till we have some further light upon this miserable matter."

Talbot braced himself up a little. The look of sadness and distress on the doctor's kind old face touched him deeply.

"I'm a fool to let this thing knock me over," he said, with an attempt at a smile. "If it hadn't come so suddenly I could have stood it better. I'll see if I can't show a little more pluck, and see it through without whining."

"That's the right spirit, my boy; and hope for the best."

It was some time before the doctor left his protege. He left Talbot in a calmer, though hardly a happier mood. The captain of St. Kit's had made up his mind upon one point, and he proceeded to write out a notice of his resignation of the captaincy, to be put up on the notice-board in the hall.

It was bitter to him to have to do it, but it was plainly for the best. He had not the slightest doubt that Eldred Lacy, his enemy and rival, was already at work against him. If he did not resign of his own accord, it was quite probable that he would be asked to do so. His voluntary resignation would take the wind out of the enemy's sails, and would propitiate many who turned against him. Apart from that, Talbot felt that under the circumstances it would be unseemly for him to continue to act as captain of the school. But it was a blow to him, for he had been happy and proud to captain the whole school; and he knew, too, that St. Kit's needed his aid to guide it through the coming days. The cricket season was in full swing now, and the difficulties of the cricket captain were many and great. At a time when care and skill were most needed, he was forced to leave the helm.

But it could not be helped.

The resignation was written out, and pinned up on the notice-board, for all St. Kit's to see and read.

Arthur Talbot was no longer captain of St. Kit's.

CHAPTER 19.

Blagden's Find.

"WHAT have you got there, Blaggy?"

Blagden's face had gone quite pale, and his eyes were blazing as he stared at the paper he had just picked up out of the dust of the lane. Pat Nugent and Greene looked at him in utter amazement.

"What is it, old man?"

Blagden hastily thrust the paper into his pocket, and glanced up and down the road. Then he quickly put his arms through those of his chums, and hurried them in at the school gate. Too amazed to resist, Pat and Greene were hurried across the quadrangle by the excited Blaggy, but at the door Pat called a halt.

"If you've not gone right off your rocker, Blaggy, explain what you're up to!" he exclaimed. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"Come up into the study."

"But—"

"Don't talk; it's serious! Come up into the study!"

Blagden's face showed that he was in deadly earnest.

Amazed as they were, his chums obeyed, and they quickly ran up the stairs, and reached the end study. As soon as they were inside Blagden closed the door and turned the key in the lock.

Greene tapped his forehead significantly.

"Clean gone!" he exclaimed. "Mad as a giddy hatter!"

"Looks like it," said Pat. "But we'll give him a chance to explain before we jam his head against the wall. Now, Blaggy, expound, before we slay you."

"Right-ho!" said Blagden, with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid we might lose it."

"Lose what?"

"The paper! Suppose that ruffian had come back to look for it?"

"What ruffian?"

"Seth Black. Or suppose Lacy had tumbled to it?"

"To what? If you don't explain what you're talking about," exclaimed Pat, exasperated, "I'll buzz the giddy inkpot at you!"

"Hold on!" said Blagden hastily. "It's the paper—the paper I picked up in the lane—the paper you saw Lacy give to Seth Black!"

Pat gave a jump.

"You don't mean to say you've got hold of that?"

"Yes, I have. Black must have dropped it out of his pocket."

"Let's look at it."

Blagden spread out the captured document on the table, and the chums looked at it eagerly. It was briefly worded, but very much to the point.

"I promise to pay Seth Black the sum of thirty pounds (£30) when he has publicly claimed Arthur Talbot of St. Kit's as his son. (Signed)

"ELDRÉD LACY."

The three chums stared at one another with startled faces. This was indeed a capture from the enemy! There was proof in black-and-white that the prefect had been at the bottom of the plot against the captain of St. Kit's. If that paper were placed in the hands of Dr. Kent, Eldred Lacy would have to face the music in a way he would probably find exceedingly unpleasant.

"My hat," said Greene, "it would be one up against Lacy to pin this on the notice-board in the hall, wouldn't it?"

"Yes; but we have to think of Talbot. Poor old chap! I wonder what he's feeling like now?"

"What shall we do with this paper, then?" asked Blagden. "We ought to show Lacy up—don't you think so—now we can do it?"

"Well, I think Talbot's about the proper person to have that," said Pat. "It concerns him, and we can leave him to decide whether to make it public or not."

"Well, yes," said Blagden slowly; "but you know how he received you when you tried to warn him of Lacy's little game before."

"I know; but he misunderstood—"

"That's all very well; but, to tell you the exact truth, Nugent, I don't care to risk it," said Blagden, with a grimace. "I don't like being jumped on, as a rule—especially by a chap for whom I'm doing a good turn."

"That's all right! I'll take the paper to him, if you like. It will give me a chance to set myself right with him."

"You can have it, then," said Blaggy. "When are you going to take it?"

"Not just yet. He won't feel inclined to see anybody just now, I think."

Pat put the paper in his pocket. "We've got some impots to do; let's knock them off. This affair has given me the blues, and I don't feel up to much, anyway, just now."

"Same here."

And the chums of the end study settled down to work, and only the scratch of three busy pens, and an occasional remark, could be heard in the room.

CHAPTER 20.

Talbot Returns Lacy's Promissory Note.

BROOKE was in his study, staring gloomily out of the window in the quadrangle. He was in a miserable mood, thinking of the trouble that had come so blackly upon his friend. He would have been glad to be with Talbot then, but he felt that it was better to leave the captain of St. Kit's to himself just then.

Captain, indeed, Arthur Talbot no longer was.

Brooke had read the notice in the hall, and though he said little, he felt it deeply.

He felt, too, that Talbot had done the only possible thing under the circumstances, and that he had, upon the whole, acted wisely in immediately relinquishing the captaincy of the school.

Yet the loss to St. Kit's was certain to be great.

There would be a new election, and it was already known that Eldred Lacy meant to put up as a candidate.

At the last election Talbot had beaten him by a narrow margin, and if he tried his luck a second time, it was extremely probable that he would get in.

With Eldred Lacy as captain of the school, things were not likely to go as smoothly as of old, especially in the matter of sports, a matter of the greatest consequence at St. Kit's, where athletics were the order of the day.

That Lacy did not approve of Talbot's selections for the first eleven was no secret, and if Lacy became captain, there would be radical alterations.

If the result was a better team to represent the college on the cricket field, no one at St. Kit's, least of all Brooke, would care to grumble.

But that result was not likely to be attained by Lacy's methods, Brooke felt quite certain about that.

The look-out was a bad one all round, in his opinion, for he could not think of any fellow in the school who would have a real chance against Eldred Lacy at the poll.

In the midst of his gloomy meditations there was a tap at his door, and Talbot came in.

Brooke turned towards him quickly.

The late captain of St. Kit's was somewhat pale, but his habitual calmness had returned to him, and he was quite himself again now.

He held a paper in his hand, and Brooke glanced at it curiously.

"I want to consult a bit with you, Brooke," said Talbot quietly. "Not about myself, but about that."

He tossed the paper across the table.

Brooke picked it up and read it. It was Eldred Lacy's promissory note to Seth Black, and which Pat Nugent had handed over to Arthur Talbot.

The Sixth-Former's eyes blazed with indignation.

"Did Lacy write this?"

"You know his writing. He wrote it, sure enough."

"But how did you get hold of it?"

"It got by some chance in the hands of Pat Nugent, who brought it to me."

"The hound! Then he was at the bottom of the whole business!"

"It looks like it."

"But this shows that it's all lies, Talbot," said Brooke eagerly. "If Lacy's at the bottom of it, it shows it's all a put-up affair."

Talbot shook his head sadly.

"I wish I could think so, Brooke, but I can't. Lacy has made use of the ruffian's claim upon me to degrade me before all the school, but that doesn't alter the fact that Black has a claim."

"But—but you don't believe that he really has, Talbot?"

"I don't know what to believe. It looks as if he had. But that isn't the point. While this horrible shadow hangs over me, I cannot act as captain of St. Kit's. The fellows are mostly sorry for me now, but there would soon be trouble. And, anyway, I shouldn't care to hold a position on sufferance. I've resigned. You wouldn't have advised me to hold on, Brooke?"

"Perhaps not, under the circumstances, but it will be a blow for the college, Talbot. Lacy is almost certain to take your place, and you know what kind of a captain he is likely to make for the school."

Talbot compressed his lips.

"You are right. That's what I feel the most about it; that that scoundrel—for a scoundrel he is, in plain English—should become captain of a good old school like St. Kit's, and drag it down, very likely, to his own level."

"It would be easy enough to put a spoke in his wheel," said Brooke quickly. "We have only to make this letter public to show him up in his true colours to all St. Kit's."

The other shook his head.

"It wouldn't do, Brooke. We have no right to the paper, in the first place; and besides, a fellow who would write that would denounce his own writing as a forgery if need arose. That's almost certainly the game he would play."

"Phew! I never thought of that."

"He would think of it. Besides, I don't know whether it would be exactly playing the game to show that about. Anyway, it wouldn't do, would it?"

"I suppose not."

"I shall take it back to Lacy. I dare say he'll be glad to get his note of hand back again," said Talbot, with a grim smile. "But even that won't shame him into withdrawing himself as a candidate. He will stick it out."

"Yes; and the worst of it is, that he's almost certain to get in," said Brooke ruefully.

"That's what we've got to stop if we can."

"I should be glad to hear of a way."

"Mind, I don't want to be understood as wanting to act against Lacy personally," said Talbot. "I admit I dislike him, and he has done me a great injury; but I declare that I haven't the least thought of revenge in my mind. I'm thinking of the school in this matter."

"I know that, old fellow. But what do you propose?"

"Lacy has already put up for the post I have vacated. He has lost no time about it. Now, so far no rival candidate has appeared."

"And my private opinion is, Talbot, that one won't appear," Brooke replied, shaking his head. "The fellows know they have no chance against Lacy, and there's a feeling, too, that he ought to be allowed to get in, as he was so close to winning the last election."

"I'm aware of that. But a candidate can be found."

"Whom do you suggest?"

"Yourself," said Talbot quietly.

Brooke gave a start.

"You don't mean that, Talbot?"

"Yes, I do. You are the man; the only one who has a chance of defeating Eldred Lacy at the poll."

"But—well, I've never thought of becoming captain of St. Kit's."

"Think of it now, old man. You ought to come forward."

Brooke hesitated.

"If you really think so, Talbot, I'll certainly put up my name. I think as much as you do that Lacy ought to be kept out of it if possible. He will do the school harm if he is elected; there's no doubt on that point. But I don't feel up to the post myself, Arthur, and that's a fact."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't make as good a captain as myself, any day," said Arthur Talbot. "And it's absolutely certain that you will make a better one than Lacy."

Brooke laughed.

"Yes, you're right there; I can't let even my modesty blind me to the fact."

"Then you will put up?"

"Yes, I will."

"Good! Mind, I don't say it will be an easy task. You'll have a fight to get in. But there's a sporting chance of beating Lacy at the poll, and you may score."

"I'll do my best," said Brooke. "Rather! It won't be a walk-over for Lacy, anyhow, as he and his friends seem to anticipate."

"I shall back you all I can," Talbot observed, "and, of course, vote for you. I fancy my influence in the Upper Forms isn't what it was before this affair, but most of the juniors are still ready to stand by me."

He picked up the paper from the table.

"Suppose you draw up a sort of manifesto, old fellow, while I take Lacy's property back to him?"

"Good!" said Brooke. "Come back here and help me with it."

He sat down at the table, and Talbot, with a nod, quitted the study. Lacy's study was dark, and Arthur saw that the prefect was staring moodily from the window. Straight towards the prefect he walked, the tell-tale paper in his hand.

"This belongs to you, Lacy," he said.

He held out the paper. Lacy glanced at it, recognised his own writing, and crumpled it in his palm.

"How—how—how did you—" he gasped, quite losing his self-possession for a moment.

"Your friend Black dropped it, I suppose," said Talbot scornfully.

Lacy's hand was closed convulsively upon the paper.

"I—I—" he stammered.

"Have you no lie ready?" asked Talbot ironically. "Have you no pretext—no falsehood! I am sorry I took you so much by surprise."

The words were bitter, but Talbot had endured much at the hands of Eldred Lacy, and his breast was full of angry scorn.

Lacy stared, and bit his lip hard.

"Talbot, you—I—"

"Enough!" said Talbot contemptuously. "I don't want to say anything more to you, Eldred Lacy. You are hardly the kind of fellow I care to speak to."

He swung away on his heel and left the room.

Back to Brooke's study he went, and the Sixth-Former looked up anxiously.

"What has happened, Talbot?"

"Nothing; only Lacy has come into the open at last, and I swear I will prove him guilty of this awful business!"

CHAPTER 21.

A Council of War—The Election.

"HOW do you think it will go?"

Blagden asked the question, and he and Greene fixed their eyes inquiringly upon Pat Nugent, who sat at the table in the end study, with a pen and paper in his hands.

Pat was making calculations, his boyish brow wrinkled in thought. The paper was covered with all sorts and conditions of hieroglyphics, mysterious enough to anybody but the person who had dotted them down.

"I can't be exactly sure," said Pat slowly. "I've dotted down all I can think of, but there are so many uncertain voters. Fellows are not taking so much interest in this election as in the last one, when Lacy was opposed by Talbot. Lots of them won't vote at all, I believe. Lacy has a dozen over us. I'm sure of it. The question is, how are we going to get rid of them? It's no good any of us voting with both hands, because

Lacy's lot would start doing the same; and, besides, it ain't playing the game."

"We can't kill 'em."

"No. There's a law against that. I know it's absurd; but we have to take the law as we find it. We can't kill 'em or take 'em out and lose 'em. But, somehow or other," said Pat, bringing his fist down with a thump that made the table dance—"somehow or other, we're going to get rid of twelve of Lacy's backers before seven o'clock to-morrow evening."

Blagden and Greene looked extremely doubtful.

"As I have remarked before, you're leader," said Blagden, grinning. "Greene, old man, ain't you coming down to the fives-court? We don't want to miss our game, and our great leader is quite capable of thinking this out by himself, with his mighty brain."

"Right-ho!" grinned Greene; and he took up his cap.

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Pat. "You bounders—"

"Ta-ta!" said Blagden. "I hope you'll have an idea, old son, by the time we come in to tea. Come on, Greene."

The two juniors quitted the study, leaving Pat Nugent looking very wrathful. As they said, he was leader; but it wasn't all honey to be a chief and looked up to for plans and ideas when none were forthcoming.

"Faith," growled Pat, "I think I'll resign! I've had enough of being leader of this study. How am I to get Trimble and a dozen more out of the way to-morrow?"

Election day!

Very different from the last one at St. Kit's. Fellows went about their business as if nothing unusual was impending. Lacy and some of his backers were anxious and busy, and the end study were highly excited. The rest of St. Kit's took it quite calmly.

Pat's electioneering had hardly prospered. The general feeling that Lacy would get in took the heart out of Brooke's party, and they had not been very enthusiastic to start with.

In the Upper Forms it was practically certain that at least half the fellows would vote for Lacy, while a quarter, at least, would not vote at all.

In the Lower Forms, where the end study had been untiringly at work, Lacy's majority was not so large. The fags would have plumped for Brooke, as a matter of fact, but for the underhand methods Lacy's backers had adopted to secure votes.

Many of the youngsters declared that they would vote for Brooke, if they could do so without catching the eye of their masters, so that Lacy's majority on paper was not likely to be wholly realised at the election.

The prefect knew that very well, and he was leaving no stone unturned to get votes.

Since the affair of Seth Black, Arthur Talbot was no longer a name to conjure with at St. Kit's.

It was bound to be so. Disgrace had fallen upon him by no fault of his own, and all the snobbish and mean elements in the school were set against him.

After school upon the important day, as the hour of election drew nigh, a little more excitement manifested itself at St. Kit's.

Trimble kept a careful watch upon Pat Nugent. Lacy suspected, very naturally, that Pat would do his best against him, and the prefect never knew exactly what to expect from the Fourth-Formers in the end study.

Pat noted it, and grinned to himself, but took no outward notice of the

circumstance. In the Irish lad's active brain ideas were working, and he fancied that Trimble's alert watchfulness might be of use to him.

He went into the end study, and Trimble leaned against the wall opposite the door and remained there. Nothing escaped Trimble.

When Pat came out of the end study and hurried down the corridor with a preoccupied look on his face, Trimble's heart beat. Was something on at last?

He followed Pat down the corridor with a careless air, and looked down the stairs after him. Pat, in the lower corridor, was looking up and down, as if to ascertain whether he was being watched, and then glanced up the stairs.

Trimble's eyes glittered. He felt that he was on the right track. He hurried down the stairs, and reached the door of the class-room, treading softly. It was ajar, and he could see into the room.

His lips tightened as he saw that Pat was not alone there. Blagden and Greene were with him in the deserted class-room, and they were talking in eager, low tones.

"Are you sure nobody tumbles to the wheeze?" Blagden asked.

Pat nodded emphatically.

"Quite sure. I've dodged Trimble and Cobb. They seem to have been very watchful to-day. He hasn't been watching you?"

"I think not."

"The game would be up if they knew that we had eight of their lot shut up under the old chapel!" chuckled Pat. "Not that we'd let them get the fellows out without a tussle. How many have you left on guard?"

"Four!"

"Good! If Trimble smells a rat, and thinks of going to the chapel, we'll collar him and shove him in, too."

"Serve him right! Sure you fastened the chaps up safe?"

"Rather! They're in the crypt under the ruins, and you know it's impossible for anybody to get out of that without the door being opened from above."

"Good! And we'll take jolly good care that it isn't opened!"

"But, I say, if Trimble tumbled to the wheeze, he might take a strong party to the Upper Fourth there and let them loose."

"I tell you he won't," said Pat. "You get back to the chapel now, and wait till you hear my signal. The election is at seven, and I'll give the signal at five minutes to seven. Then you can cut into the hall with the others just in time, and even if Trimble misses his voters, he won't have time to go for them."

"Right-ho! What's the time now?"

"Five-and-twenty to seven. Only twenty minutes before I signal."

"All right. Come on, Greene! Don't forget the signal, Nugent."

"Trust me!"

Blagden and Greene came towards the door of the class-room. Trimble, who was trembling with excitement, whipped away and fled down the corridor. He burst into the study he shared with Cobb in a state of breathless hurry.

"What's the matter?" said Cobb. "It's not time to go to the hall yet!"

"It's time to go to the old chapel!" gasped Trimble.

"What the dickens do you want to go there for?"

"Because the end study have shut up eight of our voters in the old crypt."

"Eh? Is that Pat Nugent's little game? How did you find that out, Trimble?"

"I've just discovered it through watching Pat Nugent," said Trimble. "We've got to get our fellows out, and while we're about it we'll shove Blagden and his lot in, and bolt the door on them."

"That will be a good joke. But——"

"No time for buts. Come on, and let's get some of the fellows together!"

Cobb followed Trimble from the study. The two were not long in gathering a force of Lacy's backers among the juniors for the purpose of effecting a rescue.

Trimble left nothing to chance. Besides himself and Cobb there were Hooper, Jones, and Cleeve, and nine other juniors in the party.

They hurried to the old chapel. The west chapel at St. Kit's had been a ruin for a couple of centuries, and only the lower portion of the walls remained standing, with the wide flagged floor. Underneath it was the crypt, reached by a narrow stair, upon which a low oak door, deep set in the stone, opened.

Trimble & Co. approached the ruined chapel cautiously. They heard a murmur of voices from the shadows within.

"It's getting pretty near seven, ain't it, Blagden? Hallo!"

There was a sudden rush of feet.

Trimble came in with a rush, his backers at his heels, and the half dozen juniors in the dusky chapel were down on the ground in a moment.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Trimble. "Got you, you rotters!"

"What's the little game?" demanded Blagden, who was underneath Trimble. "What do you mean by rushing on a chap like a lot of giddy wild Indians?"

"Ha, ha! We know what you are up to here!"

"We weren't doing any harm."

"No; of course not. You haven't eight of our voters shut up in that crypt, have you?" said Trimble jeeringly.

"No; we haven't."

"That's a lie, Blaggy! Cleeve, open the door of the crypt and get our fellows out, and we'll shove these rats in!"

"Here, I say," exclaimed Blagden, "you're not going to shove us in there, Trimble?"

"You'll soon find out that we are, Blaggy!"

"Do you call that playing the game, Trimble?"

"I call it winning an election, Blaggy," said Trimble, with a roar of laughter, in which the others joined.

The old chapel rang with it. Cleeve had opened the door of the crypt, not very easily, for it was stiff and set. He peered into the gloom.

"Call to them, can't you?" said Trimble impatiently.

"Oh, all right!" said Cleeve. And he called: "Hallo, there! Hallo! Hallo!"

The crypt rang with the echoing sound, but there was no other answer.

"My hat!" ejaculated Cobb. "It's a giddy hoax, that's what it is!"

"Rescue!" yelled Blagden.

"Rescue!"

A voice came ringing back from the dusk.

"At 'em, kids!"

There was a shout and a wild scrambling of feet. Twenty forms came bursting into the ruins on all sides, and Pat Nugent was in the lead.

"Collar 'em!" he shouted.

And Trimble realised that he had been trapped.

As Pat's party rushed to the attack, the captain of the Upper Fourth

thought only of escape; but that was not possible, for Blagden was clinging to him like a limpet to a rock, and was not to be shaken off.

Blagden and Greene held Trimble fast, while Pat Nugent had Cobb by the collar, and Blane collared Cleeve. All the rest were held fast by Pat's followers.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Pat. "What do you think of this for a surprise, Trimble?"

"Let me go!"

"You—you ass!" said Pat cheerfully. "Why, I knew you were listening at the class-room door all the time, and I was leading you by the nose when you thought you were so clever. You've fallen into the trap like a giddy babe, Trimble, old man!"

"Confound you, let me go!"

"Bosh! Shove him into the crypt, kids!"

"Rather!" said Blagden and Greene together. "Come along, Trimble!"

And so Trimble was hurled into the crypt. The rest of the prisoners, after some vain struggling and loud protesting, agreed to go in quietly, and one by one they descended into the gloomy recesses below the old chapel. Pat took hold of the door when the last had descended.

"You won't have to stay there long," he called out. "We'll let you loose when the election's over, you know."

A yell of rage from Trimble was the only response. Pat laughed and slammed the door. The bolts were soon fastened, and the fourteen juniors were prisoners in the dark, powerless to escape till Pat chose to let them out.

Boom! The clock from the school tower began to strike.

"Hallo," exclaimed Pat, "seven o'clock! Those bounders have wasted a lot of time. Come on, kids, and we'll be in the hall by the time the clock has struck."

"Right-ho!" said Blagden. "Get a move on you, chaps!"

The hall was already pretty full, and, mindful of the disorder that had taken place at the last election, a couple of masters were present to conduct proceedings with due decorum. As Pat Nugent and the crowd of juniors forced their way in, North was just rising to propose his friend Brooke as captain of St. Kit's.

Pat grinned at his comrades.

"Just in time!" he said cheerfully. "This is where we win hands down, children! Now then—North's finished talking—three cheers for Brooke!"

And the hall rang with the loud hurrah.

It was evident that Brooke had plenty of friends in the crowded assemblage.

Haywood was left to propose his friend Eldred Lacy in peace, and he did so, and was seconded by Dunn.

Lacy's partisans gave a cheer, and then the question was put to the vote.

"Hands up for Eldred Lacy."

Up went the hands for Eldred Lacy.

The prefect had plenty of followers there, especially, as it was noted, among the Upper Form fellows.

Mr. Slaney counted the votes, and then a second master went through them.

The counting finished, the two masters compared notes, and as the two totals agreed, the result was taken as the correct number.

The announcement of the number was made at once, and it was eagerly listened to.

"Votes for Eldred Lacy, ninety-seven!"

The prefect's face was a study. The number was at least thirty below that which he had counted upon as absolutely assured to him.

"The number of votes for Eldred Lacy stands at ninety-seven!" repeated Mr. Slaney. "Voters for Brooke will now put up their hands!"

Pat and his chums were in a fever of excitement. Up went their hands for Talbot's chum, and up went scores of others, and the counting proceeded through the hall.

When it was finished, and Mr. Slaney and the other master were seen comparing notes, the excitement was breathless. A silence in which a pin might have been heard to drop was broken by the voice of Mr. Slaney announcing the result.

"Votes for Brooke, ninety-nine!"

Silence reigned—only for a moment. Then a tremendous shout rang through the hall from end to end.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Pat and his chums shouted, and stamped, and raved till they were red in the face, and as hoarse as crows.

Mr. Slaney rapped for silence in vain, till full five minutes of deafening noise had elapsed. Then the boys of St. Kit's ceased from sheer exhaustion.

"Brooke is captain of St. Kit's," said Mr. Slaney. "I congratulate you, Brooke."

He shook hands with the successful candidate and went out of the hall. And so the assembly dispersed in high good humour.

CHAPTER 22.

A Visitor at Lynwood.

"A PUSSON to see you, sir."

Squire Lacy, of Lynwood, looked up with an irritable start. He was seated in one of the deep windows of the old library at Lynwood, looking out absently over the wide stretch of park, thick with elms, and beeches, and oaks, with a silvery stream winding among the trees.

But Rupert Lacy did not see what he was idly looking on, and as he gazed unseeingly he had fallen into a deep and troubled reverie. The voice of the butler of Lynwood startled him from it. He looked angrily at the fat and pompous Manners.

"I can't see anybody now, Manners."

"Can't you, old sport?" said a hoarse voice at the door. "Can't you see an old friend—ch?"

The squire sprang to his feet. The portly butler of Lynwood was unceremoniously elbowed out of the way by the rough and ragged-looking individual who had evidently followed him from the hall, and who now pushed his way into the library.

"Seth Black!"

The squire muttered the words between his teeth. It had come at last. Ever since the ruffian had taken up his quarters in the neighbourhood the Squire of Lynwood had lived in fear of this visit. Now the blow had fallen.

"You may go, Manners," said Rupert Lacy, white to the lips.

The butler staggered away, and the door closed. Manners went down to confide the amazing story to the servants' hall, and Squire Lacy of Lynwood was left alone with his enemy. The squire's hands were tightly clenched, his eyes gleaming with rage. He took a step towards the ruffian.

"Seth Black, how dare you come here?"

"Why shouldn't I? You come to see me in my quarters, don't you? Ain't it only friendly to return an old pal's visit?"

Rupert Lacy breathed hard.

"And now," said the squire, in a low, hard voice, "what do you want?"

"Money."

"I have told you that you can have nothing beyond the fixed allowance I make you."

"And I've told you that I will! I'm stony—broke to the wide! That's why I've come 'ere. Shell out, or I'll come again—yes, and again. I want a hundred pounds!"

"Fool!"

"A hundred pounds!" said Seth Black emphatically. "And I'll have it before I stir from this house, and so I tell you straight!"

The squire reflected.

"I will send to the bank. They do not keep such sums down here. It will be impossible to get it before to-morrow afternoon. I will meet you in the evening. I cannot risk being seen meeting you, especially after your reckless visit here to-day."

"All right. I suppose it will do. Where am I to meet you?"

"Anywhere where it is quiet. Suppose we say the bridge over the river. That is about an equal distance from here and from the village."

Seth Black rose to his feet.

"Right you are, squire!"

He nodded, and lurched out of the room. The squire heard him staggering away, and ground his teeth with rage and shame.

A deadly light was gleaming in the eyes of the Squire of Lynwood. He had fixed a sum as the price of Seth Black's silence, and he had warned the ruffian to beware if he passed the line laid down for him.

Seth Black had passed it recklessly. It was clear that he was not to be kept within bounds; that he was determined to squeeze as much as he could get from his victim. It was quite clear to the hard, practical brain of Squire Lacy of Lynwood. And Seth Black would have been somewhat less satisfied with his success if he had known what terrible thoughts he left working in the brain of Rupert Lacy.

CHAPTER 23.

Like a Thief in the Night.

"YOU—you young cad!"

Eldred Lacy snarled out the words as he sprang towards Trimble. The latter had just entered the prefect's study, and he was looking very nervous and dubious. He evidently did not know what his reception would be like. But Lacy soon set that doubt at rest. He seized Trimble by the collar and began to box his ears furiously.

"You young cad! You deserted me at the last moment, after all!"

"I couldn't help it!" gasped Trimble. "I was kept away!"

"Who kept you away?"

"Pat Nugent."

Lacy started, and a gleam came into his eyes.

"Pat Nugent! Then there was some trickery about it, just as I suspected."

"Yes; Pat Nugent shut me up in the crypt under the old chapel, and there were thirteen of our chaps shut up there with me," said Trimble, rubbing his ears ruefully.

"So I lost fourteen votes like that," said Lacy, gritting his teeth. "And Brooke beat me only by two. You can see how the election would have gone if you had had sense enough to keep clear of Pat Nugent."

"Is it too late now?" asked Trimble. "I know Brooke wouldn't have said anything if it had been he, but there's no reason why you shouldn't."

"Well, we'll see!" exclaimed Lacy. "I'll see Brooke and put it to him. Do you know where he is just now, Trimble?"

"I saw him go out with Talbot. They went down towards the gymnasium."

"All right. You can go."

Trimble went out of the study. Lacy stood for some minutes in deep thought.

"I've got to do it!" he exclaimed, aloud, at last. "It's risky, especially after that Irish kid seeing me there the other day. But it's got to be done. If Arthur Talbot leaves St. Kit's, he must not take the silver box with him. Rupert was very emphatic about that. Now's my chance to try again."

The studies were almost wholly deserted. From only one or two doors came a gleam of light. The prefect could not have a better opportunity of making a second attempt to surprise the secret of Arthur Talbot. He went quietly along the passage and opened Talbot's door. It was not fastened, and the gas in the study was turned low. Lacy entered and closed the door.

For a quarter of an hour the spy was busy. The result was—nothing. He paused, and stood with a savage and baffled look on his face. He did not like the task, but he was completely under his brother's influence. For everything, including his fees at St. Kit's, he was dependent upon Rupert Lacy. He dared not disobey the orders of the Squire of Lynwood.

His eyes rested upon Talbot's desk. Once already he had been through that; but now, as he looked at it, it occurred to him that the desk, which was a large, old-fashioned one, might contain a secret drawer.

He stepped towards it and made a second examination. He patiently examined every part of it, pressing with his fingers wherever he thought there was a chance of a secret spring existing. Suddenly there was a faint click. The prefect's heart gave a bound. In the dim light he stooped and looked closely at the spot. A little panel had shot back, and a small cavity was revealed. Within the cavity something white glimmered.

He drew it out with trembling fingers. It was a metal box, dull in hue, but evidently of silver.

"The silver box!"

The prefect's heart beat hard. It was not prudent to stop there and examine his prize, and he thrust it into his inside breast-pocket, and stepped to the door of the study. Then his heart gave a painful throb. Footsteps were coming along the passage without. Was it Talbot?

The prefect's brain worked quickly. To be caught in Talbot's study with the door closed would lead to awkward questions. He could not escape from it without being seen. He silently opened the door wide and stepped into the doorway. The footsteps came nearer. It was Talbot! The corridor was dimly lighted, but he saw Lacy in the doorway of his study as he came up, and looked at him in surprise.

"What do you want here, Lacy?"

"I was just looking in to speak to you," said the prefect coolly.

"Indeed! Well, here I am."

"I want to complain of Pat Nugent and the kids of the end study," said Lacy.

"You are always on their track, it seems. What have they been doing now?" said Talbot.

"They shut up fourteen juniors who were going to vote for me in the crypt under the old chapel," said Lacy.

Talbot laughed.

"I suppose your fellows were trying to do the same for them?" he remarked.

"That's nothing to do with it. I came here to speak to you and Brooke about it. I shall demand a fresh election!"

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, go and demand your fresh election if you like! Good-night!"

And he went into his study. Lacy walked down the corridor. He was greatly relieved. That unexpected and awkward meeting had passed off very well.

Talbot closed his door. He turned up the gas, and then stood for some moments in thought.

"I can't trust that fellow an inch," he muttered. "Did he really come for the reason he stated? I can't forget what Pat Nugent told me about his rummaging in my study that time."

The captain's brows wrinkled.

"The silver box!"

Talbot, with compressed lips, opened the desk, and felt for the secret drawer. The secret spring clicked, and he felt in the cavity. It was empty! For a moment he could hardly believe it; he had acted on vague suspicion, and it was startling to find it changed into an absolute certainty.

But there was no room for doubt. Eldred Lacy had robbed him. The silver box was gone!

CHAPTER 24.

The Secret of the Silver Box.

"THERE'S someone coming!"

"Scott! Suppose it's Lacy!"

"Just our luck!" growled Pat Nugent.

The gas was turned half-down in Lacy's study, and in the dim light the figures of Pat Nugent, Greene, and Blagden might have been seen in the room. The chums of the end study were on the war-path. Since the election of Brooke to the vacant post of captain of St. Kit's, the three juniors who had taken so much trouble to bring about that desired result had found themselves in for a warm time.

Seeing by the window that Lacy's light was turned down, and knowing thereby that the prefect was not in the study, the three had entered their enemy's quarters with the intention of making reprisals.

To plug up the gas-burner with sealing-wax, and put cycle-oil in the ink-pot, and cinders in the bed, were among the polite intentions of the three juniors.

But their luck was out that night. They had barely entered the study when footsteps came along the corridor, and at the thought of Lacy catching them in his quarters they were seized with dismay. There was no telling what the prefect might do with so good an excuse for brutality.

"Better hook it," suggested Blagden, starting towards the door.

Pat caught him by the shoulder and stopped him.

"Shut up, and do as I tell you!" he said.

He stepped on the bed, and Blagden and Greene followed him. Crouching there in the shadow, they were concealed by the curtains from general view, and safe, unless the prefect should glance purposely behind the curtains.

If Lacy had come to retire for the night they were in a bad box, but

there was no time to think of that. They were barely ensconced there when the prefect entered. Lacy walked in, and turned up the light, and then closed and locked the door. The click of the key struck the juniors with dismay.

What on earth was Lacy locking his door for? What was the matter with him? The prefect's hand glided into his breast, and it reappeared with an object in it that glimmered dully in the light. It was a small box, and apparently made of silver, dull and unpolished.

The silver box!

The prefect examined the box with keen, searching eyes and fingers. It appeared to be entirely without an opening of any kind. That an opening must exist was, of course, certain. The box contained something, and there must be a way of getting at the contents. What did it contain? What did the Squire of Lynwood want with the silver box and its contents?

Again and again Lacy searched over the surface—in vain! He sought, and pressed, and squeezed, and twisted, but the secret still baffled him. The box remained unopened in his hands.

Knock!

Lacy gave a sudden, violent start, as the sharp knock came at the door of his study, and the silver box fell from his hands, and dropped with a crash on the floor.

For a moment it lay unheeded, and the prefect, with a wildly palpitating heart, gazed towards the door.

"Who is there?"

"It is I, Arthur Talbot."

"What do you want?"

"I want what you have stolen from my study!"

The prefect gasped for breath. He was found out, then; Talbot knew. The Sixth-Former outside was already trying the handle of the door. The lock held fast.

Lacy set his teeth hard. It immediately flashed through his mind that Talbot could prove nothing, and he was determined not to yield up the silver box. He stooped quickly to pick it up, and uttered an exclamation.

The silver box was open! The concussion on the floor had evidently done what his keen search had failed to do—it had jerked open the secret spring, and the box had fallen into two halves, held together by hinges.

Two or three papers, yellow with age, had fallen from the open box. The prefect gathered them up instantly. So that was the secret of the silver box! Two or three old yellow papers, folded into small compass—yes, and a ring, and a small miniature—nothing more than that, to make the Squire of Lynwood go in deadly fear of the possessor of the silver box!

What did it all mean?

Crash!

The door shook and groaned, and an ominous crack came from the lock. It was not built to withstand such usage as that. Lacy crossed quickly to the door, unlocked it, and flung it open.

Arthur Talbot strode into the room. His brow was dark with anger, his eyes flashing fire. He walked straight towards Lacy. The prefect instinctively shrank back,

"Where is the silver box? Listen to me!" said Talbot, speaking calmly with difficulty. "I found you in my study, and I discovered that the secret drawer in my desk had been opened, and a silver box taken out of it."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"You have stolen my silver box!"

"So you call me a thief?"

"Yes; I do call you a thief—a low-down, dirty thief!" said Talbot, between his teeth. "And I'll call you that before all St. Kit's if you do not restore what you have stolen!"

The prefect turned pale with rage.

"Get out of my study!" he said shrilly. "Do you hear? Get out!"

Talbot did not stir.

"Are you going to give me the silver box?"

"I refuse to speak about it. Get out!"

Talbot's lip curled with a bitter expression.

"Listen to me, Lacy, for the last time! I shall not lose sight of you for an instant till I have recovered the silver box, and so I cannot leave your study. I shall step to the door and shout to the fellows, and send a fag to fetch the Head. If necessary, I will send for a policeman. You will be searched, and your room. If you think you can stand that test, do so. I give you one minute to decide. Give me back the silver box, and you can consider yourself safe from punishment. Refuse, and I will brand you a thief before all the school!"

A sudden thought flashed into Lacy's mind.

"You say that you are willing to let the matter drop if this box you speak of is restored to you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Talbot contemptuously.

"I might have taken the silver box out of curiosity, intending to restore it—"

"Yes; or you might have intended to keep it. In any case, you took the box, and now you've got to restore it. Time's up!"

Lacy took the silver box from his pocket, and flung it on the table.

"Confound you, there it is! I did not mean to keep it!"

Talbot picked up the box with a sigh of relief.

"I do not believe you, Lacy."

"Fool! Of what use would it be to me?"

"That I cannot say; but you have not taken all this trouble and risk out of mere curiosity; I am certain of that," replied Talbot. "However, as you have restored the box, the matter ends here, as I said."

And Talbot thrust the silver box into his pocket, and turned to the door. The prefect's eyes blazed with triumph.

The silver box—the empty shell—had been given back, ransoming the thief from the consequences of his theft, and allaying all suspicion. The papers—all that the silver box had of value about it—were still in the possession of the thief!

No wonder Lacy's eyes blazed with a keen exultation as he watched the late captain of St. Kit's turn to the door.

But a change came o'er the spirit of his dream. There was a crash, as Pat Nugent bundled off the bed. Behind him came Greene and Blagden. Pat's face was wildly excited.

"Talbot! Stop!"

Talbot came back, and his eyes were fixed upon Pat in astonishment.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "How came you here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, I see!"

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

"Like a Cheshire cat," said Greene.

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

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

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

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

Talbot fixed his eyes upon the prefect's startled face.

"Are you going to give me the papers you have in that pocket, Lacy?"

"No; they are not yours!"

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

"You—you dare not!"

"You shall see. Are you going to restore them?"

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

"No, you don't!"

Lacy turned on him like a wild-cat, hitting and kicking and snarling. Talbot's grip tightened. Locked in a deadly grasp, they reeled across the study in fierce conflict.

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

"Let me go!"

Talbot turned his head slightly.

"Will you take the papers from the pocket you saw Lacy put them in, Pat Nugent?"

"Rather, yes!" said Pat, grinning.

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

Pat thrust his hand into the prefect's jacket-pocket, and drew out the folded papers, and the ring, and the miniature, that had fallen from the silver box. He laid them on the table.

"Is that all, Nugent?"

"That's all, old son."

"Then you can go, Lacy."

He released the prefect.

Eldred Lacy staggered away, gasping for breath. He was red with rage and humiliation.

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

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

"Right-ho!" said Pat, Blagden and Green together.

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

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

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

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

A sudden thought came into his mind, and he stepped to the glass. He compared the reflection of his own face with that in the miniature, and then he knew where he had seen the features before. His own eyes, his own brow, his own mouth, seemed to be accurately reproduced in the painting, more delicate and womanly, but otherwise the same.

The boy trembled. It was his mother! He was sure of that now. How came his mother's face in the silver box? What were the papers that had accompanied it—did they hold the secret of his birth? Talbot turned to them quickly and took them in his hand. Then he stopped with a decided shake of the head.

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

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

The hour was growing late. Talbot tapped at the door of the doctor's

study and entered, as he was accustomed to do. The gas was turned down and the study was empty. Dr. Kent was not there. Talbot hesitated a moment. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly ten o'clock. After all, the matter would do as well in the morning; during the night, at all events, he need fear no further attempt on the part of Eldred Lacy. And so Talbot left the study.

"Hallo, Talbot! Is the doctor there?"

Two fellows stopped him in the passage. They were Haywood and Dunn, the chums of Eldred Lacy, and they had evidently been coming to Dr. Kent's study.

"No," said Talbot briefly.

And he strode straight out without another word. Haywood stared after him.

"Hallo! What's the matter with Talbot?"

"He doesn't like us," said Dunn, with a chuckle.

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

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

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

"Yes, that's likely enough."

"Anyway, no harm in looking."

"I say, Haywood!" said Dunn, touching his friend's elbow. "You still think it a good idea to tell the Head about it?"

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

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

"What can they say?"

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

"I don't suppose all that will come out. If it does we shall deny it," said Haywood coolly.

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

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

"It will have to wait till to-morrow then," said Dunn.

Haywood nodded, and they retraced their steps. As they came out into the corridor where the Sixth-Form studies were situated, they met Eldred Lacy.

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

"Just been to see the Head about the election, but he wasn't there," said Haywood. "We met Talbot coming out of his study, and he was mighty off-handed with us."

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

CHAPTER 25.

The Doctor's Discovery.

"DEAR me!"

Dr. Kent adjusted his pince-nez, and stared through them into his open desk. It was half-past ten, and the Head of St. Kit's had returned to his study. He had left it to speak to Mr. Slaney, the master of the Fourth, intending to return in ten minutes or so. But he had entered into a discussion with the master of the Fourth, which had waxed so interesting that it had lasted nearly an hour.

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

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

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

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

"Good heavens!" murmured the doctor.

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

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

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

The doctor looked up with a white, weird face.

"Someone has stolen eighty pounds from my desk."

Mr. Slaney started.

"Is it possible?"

"It is certain," said the Head miserably.

The doctor passed his hand across his brow.

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

The Fourth Form master shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir. That is a judicious plan."

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

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

"Isn't the doctor coming, sir?" asked Elderd Lacy.

"Not at present," said Mr. Slaney. "By the way, the doctor wishes to know if anyone went to his study last evening? Is anyone in the class aware?"

Haywood and Dunn looked at one another wonderingly.

"Yes, sir," said Haywood, "I was there."

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

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

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

Haywood and Dunn arrived at the doctor's study, and entered.

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

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

"Yes, sir."

"At what time?"

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

Dunn nodded.

"I was not here, of course. Did you enter the study?"

"I knocked, sir, and then opened the door. The gas was turned down, and nobody was here, so we went away."

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

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

The Head did not reply to the question.

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

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

The doctor gave an eager start.

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

"Yes; rather sir! Arthur Talbot."

Dr. Kent almost jumped off his seat.

"Did you see anyone else near my study?"

"No one, sir."

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

"Certainly, sir!"

Dunn went back to the Sixth-room, his heart beating with excitement. Many of the fellows noticed his looks, and whispered inquiries. Dunn freely confided to them all the known facts, and some unknown ones, in whispers. In ten minutes the Sixth Form all knew that the doctor suspected Talbot of breaking open his desk, and robbing it—for that was the impression Dunn gave them.

The doctor was in truth far from suspecting anything of the kind. It has not even crossed his mind yet.

Haywood went on to the Fourth Form room and found Talbot there.

"The Head wants to see you in his study, Talbot," he said. "He says I'm to look after the Fourth while you're gone."

Talbot nodded, and left the Fourth Form-room.

CHAPTER 26.

The Head Interviews Arthur Talbot—Accused.

ARTHUR TALBOT entered the Head's study at St. Kit's, little dreaming of what awaited him there. He gave a slight start as he saw the pale, harassed expression upon the face of the good old doctor.

"Is anything the matter, sir?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, Talbot; something is very much the matter," said Dr. Kent, in a low, and troubled voice. "Something has happened that I never dreamed would happen in this school. Last evening, while I was away from my study, my desk was robbed!"

Talbot stared at the doctor. The news amazed him.

"I have just spoken to Haywood and Dunn," said the Head. "I learned that they came to my study last evening to speak to me on some matter connected with the late election, and, finding me absent, did not come in."

"Yes, sir. I met them near your door," said Talbot innocently.

"That is what I was coming to. They mentioned that they met you here, but they saw no one else near the study. I hope you may be able to give me the clue they could not give me. When you were here, or going or coming, did you see anyone about?"

Talbot reflected.

"No, sir. Only those two fellows you have named."

The doctor looked disappointed.

"Then you cannot help me, Talbot? I am sorry. It will be necessary, I am afraid, to make the matter public. It is impossible to submit quietly to the loss. Nothing is worse for a boy inclined to dishonest ways than

impunity. It would encourage him to commit the same rascality again on another occasion. Thank you, Talbot!"

"Shall I go back to the Fourth-room, sir?"

"No. You may go into the Sixth. I had hoped to settle this matter without calling public attention to it, or it would have been dealt with before lessons commenced. Now I shall have to assemble the school in hall."

And the doctor gave a sigh.

Arthur Talbot quitted the study, and made his way slowly to the Sixth Form class-room.

There was a buzz of excitement in the hall. The Forms of St. Kit's were assembled there to hear what the Head had to say; but already the news had spread like wildfire through the school. There had been a theft in the doctor's study, and Arthur Talbot was suspected of being the thief.

The boys were amazed at the accusation, even Talbot's enemies; but few of either his friends or his foes waited to hear any evidence before making up their minds on the matter.

His friends, to a boy, believed him innocent; while his enemies—and they were numerous at St. Kit's—shrugged their shoulders and sneered.

The Fourth was buzzing with suppressed indignation when the doctor entered and took his place.

All eyes were on the Head at once. All noticed how pale and worn he looked, years older than he had looked the previous day. The matter was telling heavily on Dr. Kent.

The doctor cleared his throat. The buzz in the hall died away.

"My boys," said the doctor, and his voice, though very quiet, reached to every corner of the big lecture-hall—"my boys, there has been a terrible happening in this school. Some of you know what it is, others are still in ignorance. Last evening, while I was absent from my study, a sum of money in gold and notes was taken from my desk."

Dead silence!

"I was forced to the unpleasant conclusion that there is a thief in the school," went on the Head. "I have made some inquiries, and I have learned that during my absence three boys went to my study with the intention of speaking to me. Those three boys are above suspicion."

There was a buzz. The doctor waved his hand for silence.

"I had hoped that they might have furnished me with some clue to the thief, but I was disappointed. I have no clue at present. But unless the truth is immediately made known, I shall have no alternative but to call in the police, when I have little doubt that the thief will be speedily brought to light."

The police! A sort of shudder went through the hall at the word.

"Before such a serious step is taken, however," resumed Dr. Kent, "I wish to give the unhappy boy who has done this wretched deed a chance. If he will come to me and confess his guilt, and restore the stolen money, I will do my best for him."

There was a dead silence, and then Eldred Lacy stepped a little forward.

"May I speak, sir?" he exclaimed.

The doctor looked fixedly at him.

"Certainly, Lacy! I shall be glad to hear anything which you, or any one else, may be able to say that will throw the least light upon this matter."

"Thank you, sir! As a matter of fact, it is the duty of the captain

of the school to speak for the boys, as you are aware, but Brooke does not seem inclined to do so."

Brooke turned red.

"I have nothing to say," he blurted out, "except that I don't for a moment put any belief in any slander."

"Very well," said Lacy; "you have nothing to say, so I will speak, with the doctor's permission. We have a strong feeling, sir, that the school ought not to be disgraced by the police being brought into the matter, if it can possibly be helped."

"I quite agree with you, Lacy," said the doctor cordially enough. "But unless the thief confesses I am unable to see what else can be done."

"There is only one person in the school, sir, upon whom suspicion centres."

"To whom do you refer, Lacy?"

"The person I mean is Arthur Talbot, sir."

"Very well. Now, Lacy, this has been hinted at before, and I am not sorry to have the matter thrashed out before the school. It was only for the purpose of sparing an innocent lad's feelings that I refrained from referring to it myself."

"I don't like speaking against a fellow, sir——"

"It's too late to think of that now. You have already spoken against Talbot. It is now your duty to substantiate your charge, and my duty to hear you. If you cannot substantiate it, you stand exposed to the whole school as a slanderer!"

"Very well, sir. Then I will say right out that Talbot has already been the cause of disgrace being brought on St. Kit's, through his father!"

"You refer to the statement made by a ruffian called Seth Black that he was the father of Arthur Talbot?"

"Yes, sir."

"The claim was so evidently false that I am astonished that any boy at St. Kit's could be so simple as to place any faith in it."

"Well, sir," said Lacy, "it's a pretty general idea that Seth Black was blackmailing Talbot, under the threat of coming to the school again and giving him another show-up, and, of course, we don't know how much money he may have demanded. Where did Talbot get it all from?"

A grim silence followed the prefect's words.

"Is that all you have to say, Lacy?" asked the doctor, breaking the silence at last.

"That is all, sir."

"You are aware, I suppose, that it all amounts merely to a bare suspicion?"

"A pretty strong suspicion, I think, sir."

"Talbot, I need not ask you if there is anything in this."

"I am innocent," said Arthur. "That is all I can say."

"Then let it be put to the proof!" cried Eldred Lacy. "We know that no one has left the school, sir, since the theft. The stolen money must be still in St. Kit's. A search would be bound to find it."

The doctor was silent.

"I know it's not a nice idea, sir," said Lacy, "but anything's better than having a thief in the school. We are willing."

"If it is the wish of the school," said the doctor, "I will not oppose it. Boys, are you willing for a general search to be made of your persons and belongings by the porter under my supervision, or shall I call in a detective? I leave it to you. The matter must be settled now, after what Lacy has said."

A forest of hands went up.

Everyone was eager for the unpleasant matter to be settled as quickly as possible, and without the interference of the police, and Lacy's suggestion seemed a good way of solving the difficulty.

"Very well," said the doctor quietly. "It is decided."

CHAPTER 27.

The Search—Guilty!

THE search, which had been assented to by the whole school, was to commence in Talbot's quarters. Talbot was the only one against whom any suspicion had been raised, and so, although the search was to be general, it was fitting that it should commence with him.

If the notes were discovered, as Eldred Lacy declared he expected, it would be needless for the search to extend further.

Arthur Talbot was in his study, and Brooke was with him, as well as Eldred Lacy, and Dunn, and the porter Josling. They were waiting for the arrival of the doctor for the search to commence.

The Head entered the study, followed by Mr. Slaney. The Head glanced round.

There were a dozen fellows in the corridor, among them the three chums of the Fourth Form—Pat Nugent, Blagden, and Greene.

The three chums of the end study felt that they had to be upon the spot, not from mere motives of curiosity, of course, but to back up old Talbot.

The Head turned to Josling, the porter, who was looking very red and uncomfortable.

"You will make a thorough and complete search in the study, and if you find any sovereigns or banknotes, you will produce them."

Josling commenced the search. Everyone was silent now, and all eyes were bent upon the porter as he proceeded. What was the result to be?

He first examined Talbot's desk. Nothing was discovered there that did not belong to the late captain of St. Kit's. He was about to close it again when Talbot stepped forward.

"There is a secret drawer there," he said. "You had better open that, too."

He clicked the secret drawer open. It was empty. The Head gave Talbot an approving glance.

The search proceeded. Josling went slowly and methodically through the bookcase, and each separate volume was taken out and shaken.

The gold was not likely to be there, but the banknotes might be hidden between the leaves of a book, and so not one was missed. Still no result. Then the bed and the other articles of furniture in the room were examined. It was in vain. The result was nil.

"What price the carpet?" asked Dunn.

"You are right," said the doctor coldly. "You will examine the carpet also, Josling."

The porter went down on his hands and knees to make the examination. He gave a slight exclamation. In a moment every face was keen with interest.

Talbot's floor was covered with a square of carpet, which extended to within a foot of the wall on every side. At one edge the porter had made the discovery that some of the tacks had been drawn, and the border of the carpet was loosened. He lifted up the edge of the carpet and put his fingers underneath. There was a faint rustling sound.

The doctor became deadly pale. Mr. Slaney glanced involuntarily at him, and then dropped his eyes. Well they knew the crisp rustle of banknotes!

Josling, who was a little pale himself now, drew the rustling paper from beneath the edge of the carpet where it had been concealed.

Talbot stood as if turned to stone. The banknotes had been found—hidden in his room! It seemed to him that the room was turning round him—the doctor, the Sixth-Formers, and Josling seemed to be spinning before his eyes. What did it mean?

"Talbot!"

It was the Head who spoke. His voice was almost a groan.

"Talbot! Oh, my boy, my boy!"

Talbot's face was strained and grey.

"Doctor, I never took them! I do not know how they came here!"

The doctor did not speak. Talbot looked round him wildly, seeking belief in every face, and finding none. Even Brooke's glance had dropped. The unhappy lad caught at the table to support himself. It seemed to him like some frightful dream. Even in the doctor's kind old face there was unbelief!

"Doctor"—his voice was husky and unnatural—"doctor, is it possible that you think me—that you think me a thief?"

The doctor kept silent. Talbot turned from him, and looked towards Brooke. He turned to him like a drowning man clutching at a plank, but his chum did not meet his eyes.

"The truth is out," said Eldred Lacy quietly. "There is no need to speak of the police, or of prison. If Talbot leaves St. Kit's, the matter need not become public."

Talbot looked him straight in the face.

"Leave St. Kit's!" he said. "Is that what you want?"

"It is what all the school will want now, I fancy."

"You know something of this, Eldred Lacy!"

The prefect coloured.

"What do you mean?"

"You have had a hand in this business," said Talbot. "It is a plot to ruin me, and you are at the bottom of it. I am convinced of it."

The prefect shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a little too thin," he said. "A convicted thief is never at a loss for a yarn to tell, and it usually takes the form of a plot against him. I am afraid that it will not hold water; Talbot. Come, Dunn, we're finished here."

The two Sixth-Formers quitted the room.

CHAPTER 28.

Pat Speaks Out.

ARTHUR TALBOT was alone. Alone with his shame and misery. He was adjudged guilty! In all St. Kit's he felt that he had not a friend—even Brooke, who had always stood by him, had turned against him at last. The discovery, or supposed discovery, that he was the son of the disreputable tramp, Seth Black, had turned a large portion of the school against him. This was the finishing blow. He was disgraced and ruined. The whole school believed that he was a thief! His days at St. Kit's were numbered. He could not stay now. He had hoped to live down the disgrace of Seth Black's claiming him. He could not think of living this down. He was branded a thief before the whole school, and the unhappy lad felt nothing so strongly as a desire to go away and hide himself from all eyes.

Tap! It was a knock at the door of his study. Talbot looked up heavily. For a moment there was a gleam in his eyes—a gleam of hope. Was it Brooke—was it the doctor—come to speak a few words of renewed faith in him?

"Come in."

His voice was strange and husky. The door opened, and three youthful figures presented themselves to his view. Talbot felt a thrill of disappointment. It was not Brooke—it was not the doctor.

The chums of the end study were the ones who had come to him in this black hour of misery and disgrace.

"What is it, Nugent?"

Pat was always the spokesman of the end study, and Talbot naturally turned to him for an explanation. Pat coughed and cleared his throat.

"We know we oughtn't to bother you at such a time, Talbot," he said. "but we felt that we must come. The fact is, we've come to tell you that we know you're true blue."

Pat, encouraged by having got so far, proceeded more boldly.

"We believe in you, Talbot. We stick to you."

"You are very good to come and tell me this, lads," said Talbot. "Believe me, I deeply appreciate your trust in me. Now——"

"But that isn't all."

"What else is there?"

"I never told you before, Talbot, because it seemed like talk-bearing, and I was afraid that you might think I was romancing."

"But what have you to tell me?"

"Sure, and I'll tell you all now. It happened the first day I came to St. Kit's. You remember, there was an election on—you and Lacy were putting up for captain?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Blagden and Greene were canvassing for votes for you, and as I wouldn't promise them mine—sure, I didn't know you then, you know—they fastened me up in the cupboard in Lacy's room, so as to keep me out of the election."

Talbot smiled slightly.

"Indeed! That was a drastic measure."

"While I was there, I accidentally heard Lacy talking to his brother, the Squire of Lynwood, in the study. The squire said that he feared you, though he would not explain why, and insisted upon his brother joining him in a plot to bring disgrace upon you, and drive you from the school."

Talbot passed his hand over his brow. Back to his mind came a recollection of more than one strange look and word of the Squire of Lynwood. Of the meeting, too, between the squire and Seth Black, the ruffian who had been instrumental in bringing disgrace upon him.

"Thank you for coming and telling me this," said Talbot quietly. "Thank you, too, for the faith in me that you have shown. I feel it very deeply, my dear boys, at a time like this. If I leave St. Kit's I shall always remember you."

Pat looked anxious.

"But you won't leave St. Kit's, Talbot, now, will you?" he asked. "Now you know it's a plot, what's the good of turning your back upon the scoundrels?"

Talbot did not reply. The junior's evident sorrow touched him deeply.

"But I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Pat, after a moment's thought. "If you go, Talbot, we shall remain, at all events, and we'll look into the matter."

We'll form ourselves into a committee of investigation, and discover the truth. Won't we, chaps?"

"Rather!" said Blagden and Greene together.

Talbot smiled. He had not much faith in the success of that committee of investigation, but it showed him the juniors were devoted to him, and he held out his hand.

"I may not see you again," he said. "Give me your hand, my lads. Good-bye! When we meet again, if we ever do, things will be cleared up!"

He shook hands with the three juniors in turn. Then, without further words—for their hearts were too full for them—they left the study of the unhappy lad. Their faces were grim and sad as they walked away. They had said good-bye to Arthur Talbot, the hero of St. Kit's. Were they to meet him again?

Blagden and Greene looked rather hopeless.

"We're a committee of investigation now," said Pat. "We're going to investigate."

He spoke cheerfully and resolutely enough, but the way to clear Arthur Talbot's name was not easy to find. All St. Kit's were satisfied of Talbot's guilt, and, with the exception of his suspicion of Eldred Lacy, Pat had no clue to go upon.

"And there's another thing," said Pat. "Those cackling geese are sending us to Coventry, unless we chuck over Talbot. Well and good! We'll meet them half-way, and send the Fourth Form to Coventry!"

"Well, I didn't think of that," Blagden said. "It will be a good wheeze. Hallo! Here comes Blane! What does he want?"

Blane, of the Fourth, came into the study. He had always been on pretty good terms with the end study, but in the present instance he was backing up Trimble, like the rest of the Form.

Pat, Blaggy, and Greene looked out of the window as Blane came into the room.

"Hallo!" said Blane.

The chums made no reply. Not by a single sign did they show that they were aware of the presence of the Fourth-Former in the study.

"I say, Pat Nugent, did you hear me?"

Pat was looking steadily out of the window. He seemed to be intensely interested in the fluttering of the doctor's pigeons in the close, under the old elm-trees. For any sign he gave he might have been totally unaware of Blane's existence.

"I say, Nugent!"

Pat did not turn his head.

"We're sending the Fourth to Coventry," he said. "You don't seem to quite understand it yet, that's all."

A couple of juniors had been hanging round the door, and they had heard the talk, and they hurried off to tell the news to the Fourth.

"Sending the Form to Coventry!" gasped Trimble, when he heard it.

"Well, of all the cool cheek, this fairly takes the cake!"

CHAPTER 29.

Arthur Talbot's Farewell.

THE new captain of St. Kit's sat in his study. His darkly-clouded brow told of the worry upon his mind. He was thinking of Talbot. Never, until that day, had Brooke's faith in his friend been shaken; but shaken it was now—shaken to the very roots.

He had stood firmly by Arthur Talbot until that last scene—the discovery

of the stolen money concealed in Talbot's study. He had stood by Talbot through thick and thin, and aided him in many troubles before this; but at the shadow of disgrace he blanched. He could not stand by a thief!

It was not pleasant to think of. If there had only been room for doubt! If there had been a flaw in the evidence! Brooke's heart still yearned for his old chum, even at the time he told himself that he never wished to see Talbot again. There was a tap at his door.

"Come in!" said the new captain of St. Kit's resignedly.

Arthur Talbot walked into his study. Brooke bit his lip, and his eyes sought the floor.

"I haven't had a chance of speaking to you since the banknotes were discovered in my study, Brooke," said Talbot quietly. "But from the fact that you have avoided me, I infer that you believe me guilty?"

Brooke did not speak.

"I haven't come here to ask for any consideration from your hands," continued Talbot, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "If you believe me guilty, and have made up your mind about it, I will go. If there is a doubt left in your mind, I should like to do two things—to assure you of my innocence, in the first place; and, in the second, to ask a favour of you before I leave St. Kit's for ever!"

Brooke started.

"Talbot," he explained, "if you can take my hand, and tell me that you are innocent, I will believe you!"

He held out his hand, and Talbot looked him full in the eyes.

"Do you mean that, Brooke? No half-faith—no doubts?"

"I mean it!"

Then Talbot grasped his hand with a firm, hard grip.

"Upon my honour, by all that I hold sacred, I am innocent!" he said steadily.

"I believe you!"

Brooke pressed his hand hard. He closed the door, and made Talbot sit down.

"I believe you!" he said. "I was mad to doubt; but the proof seemed so complete! Forgive me! I believe you!"

Talbot drew a deep breath. In that solemn moment all doubts had been brushed away. Brooke had looked, as it were, into the very soul of his chum, and found it clear of taint.

"I am glad, old man!" Talbot's voice shook a little. "I hardly thought that you could think such things about me. Yet I do not wonder, for even Dr. Kent doubts me. He has been a father to me, and now he doubts. I shall not see him before I go; it would be too painful. But I have written him a letter, and I hope that he will believe what I have written."

"You must go?"

"It may be only for a time," said Talbot. "It may be for ever. If anything comes to light to help to clear me, I shall have a friend here now to see to it."

"I will leave no stone unturned to get to the truth."

"And you will find help in the youngsters at the end study. I know they are only juniors, and their ways are comical enough sometimes, but they are fine lads, and in deadly earnest over this matter. And now for the favour I wanted to ask of you."

"Anything that is in my power you know I will do."

"It is very simple, but immensely important to me. I have told you that Eldred Lacy succeeded in opening the silver box, and abstracted its

contents. I recovered them; they are here now, in this envelope." Talbot drew a large, thin envelope from his breast, and laid it on the table. "My promise not to learn the secret of the silver box holds good; I have not looked at the papers. They are here, and I want you to take care of them for me, Brooke."

"I will gladly do it, old fellow."

"Lacy is determined to obtain them; and, for some unexplained reason, so is his brother, the Squire of Lynwood. I believe that the papers contain the secret of my birth, and, once lost, that secret will never be revealed. I cannot take them to the Head now, for I cannot see him before I go. I want you to take them, and guard them well, and to-morrow deliver them to Dr. Kent, and he will do with them as he thinks best. In my note I have explained the danger they are in, and he will take care of them. They would not be safe in my possession. I am going out to fight my way in the world, and I do not know where I may go, or among what rogues I may fall."

Brooke silently rose, locked the papers up in his desk, and placed the key in an inner pocket. The two then left the study. Talbot went to his room for his coat and cap and bag, and then the friends walked down through the dark close together to the gates of St. Kit's. There, with a few last words and a last strong grip of the hand, they parted.

Brooke returned with slow steps and downcast face to the school building. Talbot stepped out in the dim night, striding down the lane towards Northley. But he did not go through the village. His idea was to put as good a distance as he could between him and St. Kit's before morning, and he struck off across country towards the junction, where he hoped to catch the midnight train for London.

He left the lane by the footpath leading towards the bridge over the river. It was a clear autumn night, and a silver crescent of moon was sailing in the sky. All round him lay the dark, silent woods; before him the dark bridge, the swift-flowing river glimmering in the moonlight. As he came through the wood he heard the village clock chime the hour of ten. Little dreaming of what lay before him, Arthur Talbot strode on through the night towards the bridge.

CHAPTER 30.

A Deed in the Dark.

TEN! Squire Lacy listened as the ten strokes boomed out from the village church.

The sound floated over the dusky woods and along the river, and reached the squire as he stood upon the lonely bridge. It was the hour appointed for the meeting of Seth Black.

A heavy footstep was audible through the stillness of the night as the last stroke from the village clock died away. A burly figure, in a rough coat and a fur cap, loomed up out of the darkness.

"Hallo, gov'nor! Are you there?"

"I am here!"

The squire's voice was low and quiet, but there was a strange quiver in it which did not escape the ears of the ruffian. He gave a low chuckle.

"Have you got the tin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's right. No need for you to get your back up over this, squire. What's a few hundreds to you?"

The squire did not reply. He had given a start, and was staring away

from the bridge into the shadows of the footpath that led through the trees towards the distant village.

"I don't want to be seen talking to you," he muttered quickly. "Someone may pass at any moment. Come here!"

"Where's the tin?"

"I have it here."

The squire's hand went into his breast-pocket, and Black heard the crisp rustle of banknotes. But at the same moment Rupert Lacy strode down from the bridge into the black shadows of the trees at the side of the glistening river.

Black followed him impatiently. He had heard no sound, and he had put down the footstep to the squire's nervous imagination. He did not suspect as yet that the imaginary sound was an invention, designed to trick him into leaving the dim light of the bridge for the darkness under the trees.

The squire had played his part well. The ruffian had no suspicion of the desperate resolve in his breast.

"Hand it over, squire!"

"Take it!"

The squire's voice came in a sibilant hiss now, and the ruffian started back; but it was too late. The squire's hand came out of his breast, but the banknotes were not in it. His fingers were clutching a short, heavy life-preserver. The weapon whirled up, and came down with a fearful blow, as the ruffian started away.

"Take your deserts, you thief!" hissed the squire. "Take them! That is the price of your silence!"

The weapon went up again, and again it descended on the reeling ruffian; but at the same moment as he cried out Black lost his footing, and fell back heavily, and the blow hurled him fairly into the stream.

Splash! The squire muttered an imprecation. Both the blows had been terrible, but had not fallen with full force, and now the ruffian was out of his reach.

Then suddenly the squire started with terror. A face was looking down from the bridge—a face white and strained in the moonlight, with keen eyes searching the glistening water.

Lacy stared at it from the bank below in terror and amazement. Well he knew that face! It was Talbot's!

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 eyes for a sight of the supposed drowning man.

In that momentary glimpse Arthur knew whom it was; knew that it was the man who had brought him shame, who had helped him to ruin—the man who 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.

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 away 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.

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

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?

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.

"Who is there?"

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?"

In hurried words Talbot explained his adventure.

"You must go in and change your clothes, Talbot," said the doctor, when the sleepy porter had arrived and opened the gates. "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. 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 river," 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.

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, 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.

CHAPTER 31.

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. As he walked through the quadrangle he met the village police-inspector, who hurriedly explained to the squire what had happened during the night. Eldred Lacy left the inspector in relieved spirits, and he was shown into the doctor's study.

Dr. Kent was looking worried, but he tried to banish the trouble from his face as he received his visitor.

"I hear that you have some excitement in the school," the squire remarked. "I have just met Inspector Legge in the quadrangle."

"Yes. It is a very strange affair," said the Head.

"Talbot appears to have distinguished himself."

"He acted very bravely."

And the Head of St. Kit's proceeded to detail Talbot's action, the squire listening with keen attention.

"A lad you should be proud of, doctor," he remarked.

"Yes, certainly."

"But—excuse me for being curious—how came Talbot on the bridge at such an hour?" asked the squire carelessly.

The troubled look settled again on the doctor's brow.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Lacy, he was leaving St. Kit's."

"Leaving St. Kit's!"

"Yes. There has been a most unhappy occurrence here—some money was abstracted from the desk in my study, and suspicion fell strongly upon Talbot. Part of the missing money was found concealed in his study."

"Then there is no doubt as to his guilt?"

"I feared not."

"Has he admitted it?"

"No. He maintains his innocence; and really he has shaken my belief," said the Head slowly. "I do not know what to believe."

"Had he any strong motive for wishing to take the money?" suggested the squire.

"Unfortunately, yes. That ruffian—I mean the man who lies upstairs unconscious now—was blackmailing him," said the Head, with a look of keen distress.

"Then," said the squire thoughtfully, "it was through this Black that Talbot was ruined here; and—and I suppose it is not possible—"

He broke off.

"I really wish you would speak out, Mr. Lacy."

"Well, if Talbot met Black in that lonely place, with such an injury ranking in his breast," the squire said slowly, "if—if the man then used threats, perhaps—"

The Head started back in horror.

"It is impossible—impossible!"

The doctor almost moaned out the words; but the very vehemence of his utterance showed that the terrible thought had taken root in his mind.

"I am afraid that you have been greatly deceived in that lad," the squire resumed. "However, let us say nothing about the matter now. It is not our business to furnish clues to the police. If they think of it themselves it is a different matter."

"Yes, yes!"

"Meanwhile, he must remain."

"He has declared his intention of leaving St. Kit's at once."

The squire shrugged his shoulders.

"I am sorry for him, then; but he must remain. You understand, doctor, that I do not wish to be hard upon him, but it would not be consistent with my duty as a magistrate to allow him to go with so grave a suspicion against him."

"You—you will interfere?" cried the Head.

Squire Lacy looked very grave and concerned, but very inflexible.

"I am very unwilling to do so. But can you answer for Talbot?"

"Yes—yes! He shall remain at the school."

"That is satisfactory," said the squire. "I hope—I trust—that Talbot will be cleared of all suspicion. But, in case of the reverse, I could not consent to his being allowed to depart. If you answer for him, I am satisfied."

"I answer for him," said the doctor heavily.

The squire took his hat.

"Good-day, sir!"

CHAPTER 32.

Trimble and Cleeve Make a Strange Visit to the Old Crypt.

PAT NUGENT started and awoke. It was night—dark night—and silence and slumber reigned in the Lower Fourth dormitory in the ancient college of St. Kit's. Pat Nugent was a light sleeper. Some sound in the dormitory had awakened him; he hardly knew what, as he sat up in bed, and glanced round the sleeping dormitory.

But there was no enemy to be seen. Pat glanced towards the door, and he started as he saw dimly that it was moving. Some dim figure was visible for a moment, and then the big door shut silently, and all was silent and still again. The Irish lad knew now what had startled him from his slumber. One of the occupants of the dormitory had quitted it, and his faint footfall in passing Pat's bed had been sufficient to disturb a light sleeper.

Who was it that had left the dormitory at that hour, considerably past midnight, as Pat knew—left it so cautiously, without a light? The door had been closed so silently and cautiously that it was evidently the night-wanderer's wish not to awake anyone else in the dormitory. What was the little game? That was the question he put to himself.

He determined to know what was "up," at all events. In a moment he was out of bed, and looking to see which of the long row was vacant. He soon found out.

"Cleeve's bed!" he muttered. "So it was Cleeve! This will want looking into." He crept back towards Blagden's bed, and shook his chum by the shoulder. "Wake up, Blaggy!"

Blagden opened his eyes, and stared up at his chum.

"Hallo! Who's that? Pat, what are you doing out of bed at this time of night?"

"Get your clothes on while I wake Greene."

Blagden, greatly wondering, proceeded to dress himself. Pat Nugent awakened Greene, and Greene, after some preliminary grumbling, got up also.

"You seem to be in a beastly grumbling state," said Pat. "Listen to me! Cleeve has just gone slipping out of the dormitory on tiptoe like a giddy burglar!"

The juniors bundled on their clothes, and went quietly to the door. Pat Nugent opened it without a sound, and they stepped out into the corridor. Pat closed the door behind them, and they stood listening.

There was a faint sound from the direction of the Upper Fourth dormitory.

"He's gone to Trimble!" whispered Pat. "I guessed it!"

They stole on tiptoe along the corridor. That there was something "up"—very probably something against themselves—was now certain. The sound of whispering voices came to their ears in the dead stillness of the house.

"Is that you, Cleeve?"

"Yes, it's me, Trimble—it's m-m-me!"

"Oh, stop that stuttering! You set my nerves on edge!" said Trimble irritably. "There's nothing to be afraid of! Come on!"

"How are you going to get out, Trimble?"

"Out of a window, of course, and you're going to help me; then I'll help you. It's all easy enough. It won't take us many minutes to get to the old chapel."

"It's such a—such a lonely place at night, Trimble!"

"All the better for us, silly!"

"Ye-es; but I'm—I'm——"

"You're afraid of ghosts, I suppose? You wish you hadn't said a word to me about the money, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, no—no, not that! Only I—I——"

"Only you're a white-livered funk!" said Trimble contemptuously. "Yes, I know. Well, it's too late to think of that now. You're in for it, and you've got to come and guide me, and the cash is ours. It will be rather a joke on Lacy when he goes for it!"

There was a sound of faint footsteps receding down the passage. In the gloom the chums of the Lower Fourth stood silent, breathless. Not till Trimble and Cleeve were quite gone did Pat make a movement or a sound.

"We will follow them," said Pat grimly, "and catch them in the act."

"I'm on!"

And the juniors hurried swiftly but silently downstairs.

Trimble and Cleeve were gone, but it was easy to find the unfastened window by which they had left the house.

"Come on!" whispered Pat. "They're in the old chapel by now!"

The chums hurried towards the ruined chapel. The clink of a falling stone caught their ears. Keeping in the shadows, they caught sight of two forms at the entrance of the old crypt. Pat nudged his companions.

"It's the crypt, lads. Look!"

Trimble and Cleeve had the door open, and a moment later 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.

"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."

"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 at once, then, and get in first," said Pat hastily. "You go, Greene, and open the window again after they're safe. 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 visible 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 divvy 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 whack to-morrow."

"No, you won't, Trimble; you'll give it me now." There was an unusual firmness in the usually cringing Cleeve as he spoke. "Hand it over now!"

"Hold your row. I'll settle up now if you like."

There was a chink of coin. It came clearly to the ears of the two juniors crouching in the black shadow of a fragment of the ancient wall.

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

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

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.

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

"Great Scott! It's Squire Lacy of Lynwood!"

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

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 unaware 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.

"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 is 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 hand in.

"Where are those two rascals?" asked Pat.

"Gone to their little bunks," chuckled Greene. "I watched 'em, and then came back and unfastened the window. Where are you going now?"

"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.

CHAPTER 33.

Mr. Slaney Gets at the Truth—Talbot's Lonely Vigil.

BROOKE 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.

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

"I believe your story, Nugent. 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!"

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!"

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.

"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!"

"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.

"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.

The wretched boy burst into tears.

"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.

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

The master of the Fourth halted beside the head of Trimble's 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 where 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 jaw dropped.

"It's—it's not true, sir!" he gasped.

"Then if I search your clothes I shall not find any money in them?" asked the master of the Fourth sternly.

"The—the money, sir?"

"Don't say any more, Trimble. Your falsehoods are too 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 indicated with a trembling finger.

"Very good. I will take this away with me, Trimble."

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

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

"Go back to bed now," he said. "This matter will be threshed out in the morning, and the innocence of Arthur Talbot proclaimed to all St. Kit's. My lads, you have done well—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 stopped outside the dormitory.

"I say, kids," he murmured, "I'm not going in to bed for a bit. Don't you think Talbot would think it worth while to be woke up, to know what's been discovered?"

"I know I should be 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 could 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.

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

"He's not here!"

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!

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.

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?"

It was Arthur Talbot's voice.

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."

"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.

"I don't mind explaining," replied Pat. "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—I mean, bunked—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!"

Talbot muttered the words unconsciously aloud. Pat heard them with amazement.

"What's the meaning of this very strange midnight vigil, Talbot?" 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!"

"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 attempted Black's life once, and may do so again. The only way he can be saved from denunciation is by Black's never recovering consciousness. Do you understand? I think that he will make some attempt to prevent Black ever speaking again."

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. But each night I shall watch over the safety of Seth Black 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 has 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 scoot, scoot's the word! Good-night, Talbot! Come along, kids!"

Outside, however, Pat exclaimed:

"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."

CHAPTER 34.

Squire Lacy's Last Blow.

ARTHUR TALBOT remained where the juniors had left him, quietly and patiently on the watch.

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 whisper came faintly through the gloom:

"That is the room."

"Come and show it me. I do not want to make a mistake."

"The next door on the right is the one."

"Good! Leave me, then!"

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?" hissed the Squire of Lynwood.

"I am Arthur Talbot!"

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.

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.

"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.

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.

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.

"Heavens," muttered Mr. Slaney—"heavens!"

Thud!

A faint, dull sound from the darkness below, a deep groan, and silence! Mr. Slaney stepped down from the window, white as chalk. The hand that held the lamp trembled and shook.

"Who was it, boys? Do you know? A burglar, of course?"

"It was Squire Lacy, of Lynwood!"

The chums of the Fourth Form returned to where they had left Talbot. He had taken off his jacket. In the light of the lantern his face was deadly white, and his shirt showed red, drenched with blood. Pat uttered a cry.

"Talbot, you are wounded!"

Arthur Talbot smiled faintly.

"It is only a scratch," he said. "The knife glanced along my ribs. He meant ill enough, but it was a blow at random. It is only a scratch. Where is the squire?"

"He jumped from the window at the end of the corridor, and fell in the close," answered Pat quietly.

Within the ancient walls of St. Kit's the Squire of Lynwood lay dying!

There had been no hope for Rupert Lacy from the first. The fall from the window had shattered the strong frame, and the marvel was that he yet lived. He lived, half-conscious, while another day ran its course. Night was falling again, and with the spent day the life of Rupert Lacy was ebbing.

There had been strange news for St. Kit's when the school awoke that morning. The discovery that had been made over night had cleared the name of Arthur Talbot. The most obstinate of his enemies could not doubt him further.

His innocence was proved. Eldred Lacy had been the thief—or, to be more correct, had brought about the theft in order to throw guilt upon Talbot. He had succeeded for a time, but he was known in his true colours now. Of the intention to steal himself he might be acquitted, but there was no doubt that he had planned to ruin Talbot, and that but for the chums of the end study his success would have been complete.

Now the truth was known.

It came as a stunning blow to the prefect. He had not dreamed of this; when he least expected it, his fate had found him out.

But the accident to the squire threw even this into the shade.

It was impossible to expel Eldred Lacy from the school when his brother lay dying within the walls of St. Kit's.

The Head spoke to the prefect plainly—very plainly: it was made clear that Lacy was to leave St. Kit's, and there the matter ended.

Talbot received congratulations from all sides. Fellows who had been down upon him all the time came up and begged his pardon openly; and as Arthur was not a fellow to bear malice, he allowed bygones to be bygones.

Trimble and Cleeve left St. Kit's that morning, it being pretty well known that they had been expelled, although the expulsion was not public; and so the greatest enemy of the chums was gone, never to trouble them again.

The hours that brought death nearer to the Squire of Lynwood brought recovery to Seth Black.

His first demand when he awoke to his surroundings was for Arthur Talbot.

Talbot came to his bedside at once.

The injured man turned a pale and ghastly face towards him in the shaded sick-room.

"Is that you, Master Talbot?" he asked, peering at the athletic figure beside his bed.

"Yes," said Arthur quietly.

"How did I come here?"

"You were picked out of the river and carried here."

"Who did it?"

The ruffian's voice and look were strangely eager.

"I did," said Talbot quietly.

"I thought so. I had a sorter feelin'—as if I had dreamed it—that I was in the water, and I seed your face, Master Talbot. I felt it must be you who had saved me."

Talbot nodded.

"You must not talk much," he said. "I can only stay a few minutes with you."

"I'm in a bad state, I know. But I shall get well?"

"The doctor says so."

"Good! I shall get well, if that murderous villain does not get at me again. You know who threw me in the river?"

"Yes, I think I know."

"It was Squire Lacy."

"I thought so."

"He met me on the bridge that night, pretending to give me money, and he tricked me down to the bank and struck me down. A wonder he didn't kill me; he meant to!"

The ruffian gritted his teeth.

"Let the police know," he went on. "I'm going to tell them everything now. Let them arrest him—don't let him get away!"

"Listen!" said Talbot. "Rupert Lacy will never be arrested, for he met with such a terrible accident last night that he will be a dead man before the morning."

Black gave a start.

"Then all is safe. You will come into your own now, and—"

The nurse touched Talbot upon the arm. He understood, and nodded.

"I must go now," he said gently. "I will come and see you again if you wish."

CHAPTER 35.

The Squire's Secret.

SQUIRE LACY stirred slightly as Dr. Kent entered the room, followed by Talbot. His eyes rested upon Talbot with a curious expression. "I wanted to see you, Talbot," he said, without waiting for either to speak. "My time is short, and I have a good deal to say. Dr. Bayley thinks that I shall live till midnight, but I feel that I am close to the finish."

The squire smiled grimly.

Arthur looked at him. The grim smile lingered on the haggard face.

"You think it curious that I should venture to ask anything of you, Talbot, after what has passed—after what I have done? You are quite right—"

"I was not thinking so," said Talbot quietly. "You have injured me, but I would do anything I could to help you. I am not one to bear malice—especially at such a time."

"I know it, and that is why I shall ask. I shall ask you to have pity on my brother, who loses everything."

"I—I do not understand!"

"I will explain. Come nearer; my voice is faint, and my strength is going. Nurse, give me something to drink. I must speak before I go." He wetted his lips with the glass the nurse held to them; then his eyes turned to Talbot again. "Talbot, you do not know your name; you do not know who and what you are. You are about to learn."

Talbot nodded; he could not trust himself to speak.

"Years ago," said the Squire of Lynwood, "before you were born, Talbot, there were two brothers at Lynwood—Arnold the elder, and Henry the younger, my father. They lived with their uncle, the then Squire of Lynwood. The elder—the heir—quarrelled with his uncle, and left Lynwood, and never returned. He had married against his uncle's will, and was cast off during the old man's lifetime, though, as the estates were entailed, they were bound to come to him when the uncle died."

Talbot nodded again. He wondered what this could have to do with him;

and perhaps now a faint light was breaking through the darkness that had long shadowed the secret of his life.

"The younger nephew married according to his uncle's wish—the lady whom the old gentleman had in the first place selected for the elder. He was a dutiful nephew, and he knew upon which side his bread was buttered. The old squire could not cut off the entail, but he was determined that the Lynwood estates should come to the nephew whom he loved. How was it to be done? He fell into his last illness—a fatal one, but lingering; he lay for two years in the shadow of death, brooding over the thought that when he was gone the estate would go to the nephew he hated, and Henry would be cast out. But shortly ere he died, Arnold, who had heard of his state, and was returning to England, was wrecked in the cargo-boat he was travelling upon—for he was poor—and was drowned at sea, with his wife and—as was supposed—his child."

Talbot started.

"You guess now?" said the squire grimly.

"I—I—think— But go on—go on!"

"I was a boy then. I knew nothing but that the man was drowned at sea. The old squire died; my father reigned in his place—Henry Lacy was Squire of Lynwood. I went to college, afterwards abroad, and in another land I met Seth Black. What my life was like there does not concern anyone now, but it gave Black a hold upon me which he never loosened." The squire's eyes glittered. "But that was not all. Black knew me under another name there, but he knew more than I thought. He tracked me out. I knew, too, that he knew some secret that he hinted at in his cups, but never fully spoke of. I little dreamed then what it was. I came home to Lynwood, leaving, as I thought, that wild life dead behind me. And then came my father's death. He had a fall in the hunting-field. His doom came suddenly; he had only time to speak to me, counted by minutes, ere he died. In those few minutes he told me a terrible secret."

The squire paused. His auditors made no sound. The nurse placed the glass to his lips again, and he drank.

"The old squire, brooding under the shadow of death, had probably lost something of his sanity, and he had taken good care that the hated nephew did not come home to displace his favourite. The shipwreck was no accident—it had been brought about by scoundrels hired by the old man's gold, and Arnold Lacy's death lay at the door of his uncle."

Talbot shuddered.

"The old man was mad," said Rupert Lacy—"half mad, at all events. My father did not know till afterwards—I hope he did not know."

"Go on."

"But there had been a mischance. The scoundrels could not do their work thoroughly. Arnold Lacy had a friend on that ship—a man named Norroys."

Dr. Kent exchanged a glance with Talbot. All was becoming clear now.

"When the ship was sinking he gave his child into the hands of Norroys while he took charge of his wife. Fastened up in the child's clothing was a silver box, containing the papers necessary to prove his claim to the Lynwood estates if he reached the shore. All this was known to at least one of the old squire's minions—a man named Seth Black."

"Seth Black?"

"He was there—that was his secret. There were others of the same stamp. He, like the rest, believed that the work had been well done—for a time. But, as a matter of fact, Norroys was not drowned, after all, though

the shock of the shipwreck and his narrow escape certainly unhinged his brain—”

“That is true,” said Dr. Kent.

“And he died soon afterwards. He must have known that the shipwreck was no accident, and he was haunted by the constant dread as to what would happen if the old squire of Lynwood learned that the child was living, and that he would live to claim the estates. The old man had only been able to learn that Norroys had escaped from the wreck with the child; of his whereabouts he could learn nothing. He had told my father as much; and that was what my father repeated to me when he lay at death's door.”

The squire paused.

“It was black news to me,” he went on presently, in a fainter voice. “Can you wonder that I was determined not to give up the fortune I had always regarded as mine by right? I did not seek the missing boy. I did not seek him either for good or ill. I hoped he would never come in my way. Then I saw him; you remember, Dr. Kent? It was when I came back from a journey abroad, and I came here, and I saw Arthur Talbot on the football field.”

“I remember.”

“You noticed his resemblance to me,” resumed the squire, with a grim smile. “The truth did not occur to you—how could it?—but I knew.”

“I understand now.”

“All was clear to me; Talbot was the heir of Lynwood. But I determined that he should never claim the estates. Then came Seth Black, to trade upon the secrets he knew of my past under another sky. He saw Talbot, and he, too, guessed the truth. Talbot is the living image of his father. The picture at Lynwood of Arnold Lacy in his boyhood might be taken for Talbot's portrait. Besides, Arnold Lacy's wife was a Talbot; that was her maiden name, and it was why Norroys chose it, of course. That was a clue. Black knew the truth, and then his hold upon me was doubly sure. He has paid dearly for the use he put it to.”

And the squire's eyes glittered savagely.

“Now you know why I plotted and planned to drive Talbot from St. Kit's. Ruined and disgraced, and deprived of the silver box, I should not fear him. I forced my brother to help me; believe me, I gave him no choice. And I ask you to help him, now, Talbot. You are cousins.”

“I will, you need not worry!” replied Arthur quietly. And that promise was never forgotten.

There was a silence in the room for some minutes. The light was fading from the squire's face. It seemed that he had been kept up by the necessity of uttering his secret, and now it was spoken his strength was gone.

A grim white look was coming over his face.

“I—I am going,” said the squire, in a faint voice. “Remain with me till the end, cousin!”

Cousin! Yes, he (Talbot) was this man's cousin, and the word thrilled him strangely. Till now he had never known what it was to have a blood relation—one who was more to him than a friend, more than anything else in the world. The man had injured him deeply, but he was his cousin, of his flesh and blood. Talbot took the white, nerveless hand of the squire in his own, and held it firmly.

He felt a slight pressure in return.

“God bless you, cousin!”

They were the last words of Rupert Lacy. Life yet lingered for half an hour, and the eyes showed intelligence, but no more words passed the frozen

lips. And at last from the squire's eyes the light faded. Talbot drew away his hand from a touch that was growing chilly.

Squire Lacy of Lynwood was no more!

CHAPTER 36.

St. Kit's is Amazed.

FOR the next few weeks nothing was talked of in the school—or almost nothing—save the startling discovery that had been made with respect to Talbot.

Exactly how much of the great result was due to the committee of investigation of the end study it would be difficult to say, and the juniors did not attempt to decide. They settled the matter by calmly appropriating the whole of the credit to themselves. The way they patronised the Fourth Form made the seniors smile to see it.

They had manfully stood by Talbot in the hour of adversity, and the Form had sent them to Coventry. As we know, they had, in return, promptly sent the Fourth Form to Coventry, much to the amazement and indignation of the Form.

The discovery that the chums had been in the right all along brought the Form round—all the more easily because Trimble was gone.

"And now," said Pat one day to his chums, "to-day we are going to make Talbot—I must call him Talbot—captain of the school again."

"Right-ho!" grinned Blagden. "Now that Lacy's gone, and Brooke has resigned, it's time Talbot took the captaincy again. Very decent of Brooke to resign."

"I'm sorry there's no rival candidate," said Pat reflectively. "An election without a rival candidate is pretty tame. We sha'n't have an excuse for locking up any of the kids in the crypt, or shoving the hall door shut before they can get in. There won't be the remotest prospect of a row!"

"Rotten!" said Blagden.

"Beastly!" said Greene.

"Still, we can do some shouting," said Pat, brightening up. "The seniors always want to have the proceedings conducted to largo time, like a giddy funeral, and we can make things hum a bit if we get the whole of the Fourth Form to buck up."

"Jolly good idea!"

"Let's go and start the ball rolling," Greene suggested.

And the chums of the end study lost no time. The Fourth Form at St. Kit's were only too eager to follow Pat's lead in giving Talbot a tremendous ovation, if only for the sake of making up for their previous condemnation of him, and showing that there was no ill-feeling left.

When the hour of the election came round the big hall was crammed. No rival candidate had appeared. Talbot's popularity was too great; and, besides, it was unanimously recognised that he was the best captain St. Kit's could possibly have.

The election, therefore, was only a matter of form, but it gave the juniors the opportunity they desired for making a fearful row.

And they did not miss that glorious opportunity. Pat led the cheering. He had provided himself with a referee's whistle, and at every chirp on that whistle the cheering was to start. In the crammer-hall, with the juniors scattered and separated, that was about the best signal that could be thought of.

The doctor was there in cap and gown to open the proceedings. His

appearance was greeted by a chirp of the whistle, followed by a tremendous three-times-three. Then he made a little speech, which was listened to with more interest than was usually shown in speeches from the Head.

He said that the candidate for the captaincy had lately been through a time of stress and trial, and had borne himself manfully and bravely all through it.

Cheers made the rafters ring as the doctor said this. He went on to say that the candidate had emerged triumphantly from the trial, and now he was willing to take his old place as captain of the school, if that were the wish of St. Kit's.

That it was the wish of St. Kit's was evident, from the roar of cheering that followed the retirement of the doctor. Then Brooke proposed Talbot, and he was seconded, and Arthur was elected captain of St. Kit's without a single dissentient voice.

The Sixth cheered, and the Fifth cheered, and the Fourth yelled themselves hoarse.

Arthur Talbot made a very brief speech, thanking the electors for the honour they had done him, and promising to do his very best to deserve it. But it might have been one of the most highly-finished orations of Pitt or Burke, by the way the hearers appreciated it and cheered it. When the Sixth had finished cheering, the Fifth went on a little longer, and when they were done the Fourth were far from finishing.

Arthur, laughing, led the way out of the hall, and the seniors followed him, most of them laughing, too. The Fourth Form were left in possession, and in an extremely gleeful mood.

They had cheered the seniors out, and they went on giving themselves nine-times-nine in honour of their victory, when the gas was suddenly extinguished, and that put an abrupt end to the demonstration.

"Well, it's been a jolly time!" said Pat, as he walked out with his arms linked in Blagden's and Greene's, in the midst of the stream of juniors. "We've made Arthur captain again, and now everything in the giddy garden will be simply ripping. Hallo, Talbot!"

Talbot tapped him on the shoulder.

"I want to speak to you young rascals!" said the captain of St. Kit's.

"Oh, I say, Talbot, sure, and you're not going to row with us now—"

"No, I'm not going to, though you deserve it. I'm going to ask you to come to tea in my study," said Talbot, laughing.

The juniors gave a jump.

"Oh, Talbot!"

"There's some fellows coming in, in celebration of the election," said Talbot. "I've laid in a good feed. We all want you to come—you three!"

"Well, this is ripping!" said Pat. "We'll come—oh, yes, rather! It isn't every day we get invited to dine—I mean, to take tea with a real live captain, and such a jolly good fellow as in the present instance—"

"Come, no blarney!" said Arthur. "Come along!"

"Come along, my infants! Our merit is recognised at last. The great guns of the Sixth are honouring us and themselves by taking tea with us. I have always told you that merit—real merit—was bound to be recognised in the long run, and—here we are!"

It was a jolly tea in the captain's study—the best they ever had, the chums of the end study agreed; and their hearts were light as they took their leave of the captain of St. Kit's.

THE END.

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