

Here Again! Specs & Co.!

PLUCK

Mr. Crawford's Double.

A Tale of Specs, the Twins, and Co. By H. CLARKE HOOK.

The Patagonian Star.

A Story of Captain Frank Ferrett, Detective.

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THE DISGUISED SPECS AND THE TWINS STOPPED RATHER HURRIEDLY AS THEY CAUGHT SIGHT OF THE TOWN BOYS SITTING ON THE BRIDGE FISHING! (See page 10.)

NO. 127. VOL. 5. NEW SERIES.



THE RIVALS OF ST KIT'S

By Charles Hasulton

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

When Pat Nugent arrives at St. Kit's an election is taking place for the captaincy of the school between Arthur Talbot and Edred Lacy. Talbot gains the victory. Pat is thrown into a cupboard by some juniors, and falls asleep. On waking up he hears voices—the voices of Edred Lacy and his brother, Rupert Lacy, the squire of Lynwood: "You must ruin and disgrace Arthur Talbot, and drive him from the school. He is a menace to me—to both of us. But ruined and disgraced, driven forth into poverty and obscurity, I shall no longer fear him!"

Pat is eventually released, and becomes great chums with Singsen and Greene.

One day a tramp, named Black, stops Arthur Talbot and tells him he is his father. The latter believes him, as he has never known his parents. He gives Black some money and makes his way back to the school.

Brooke, a great chum of Talbot sees that something is wrong, and begs his friend to place confidence in him. "I want you to be sure that you can rely on me," said Brooke kindly. (Now go on with the tale.)

A True Chum.

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

"I'm about my birth," said Talbot, in a few words. 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 been a dirty, disreputable leather hanging about the neighbourhood lately? Talbot went on. "He says by the name of Seth Black."

"Yes, I have seen him," Brooke said. "He claims to be my father."

"Impossible!" Brooke said. "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—"

"No! How could he know it, if his claim is unfounded?" Brooke looked surprised for a moment.

"Well, he might have found this out," he said. "It's very likely that he worried that our school, then that he was father. But what was his proof?"

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

"That's possible," Brooke said. "How could he know it?" asked Talbot.

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

"How could he find it out?" asked Talbot. "In those old ways? Suppose he saw you bathing in the river? He's a tramp, and might have been that way last summer, and—well, in fact, anything's more likely than that he was father."

Talbot brightened a little. The possibility was far-fetched, doubtless, but it was a notion of being from the terrible conclusion that he was 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.

"Let he tell you that?" asked Brooke. "Yes," said Talbot. 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 ruffian should know so much. I own I suspect him. 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 ruffian threatens to do this too 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," said Brooke. "You can dismiss from your mind the idea that he's your father. It isn't possible."

Talbot shook his head. He was young enough to see that Brooke spoke from the warmth of his heart, to comfort him, and that doubts were dropping 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."

"Then show what his power 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 his weakness—I mean, till we can prove that he lies."

Talbot nodded sadly. "It isn't so 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 words being showing him already to be for his share. Suddenly he gave a start.

"That'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."

NEXT SATURDAY:

"TAKING THE MUSIC."

"A LANGSHIRE LAD."

IN "PLUCK," 12.

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.

Coats of Fire.

The Fourth Form at St. Kit's was amazed!

The news of Trimble's confession came like a bombshell.

The Fourth-Formers had made up their minds that Pat Nugent was guilty of upsetting Lacy's study. They had been bitterly down upon him for refusing to confess, and they had made things very warm for him. The discovery that he was innocent was not exactly a pleasant one.

But their amazement soon changed to wrath against Trimble. Trimble had been loudest in declaring his belief in Pat's guilt. He had taken the lead in sending him to Coventry, and persecuting him in every way.

"Now it turned out that Trimble was the culprit! There could be no doubt about it, for he had confessed."

"But why did he confess?" Blane said wonderingly. "If he was mean enough to put it on Nugent, why didn't he keep it up?"

"Perhaps his conscience pricked him," suggested Hooper.

"I don't think he's got one. Fancy egging us on to send Nugent to Coventry, when he was the guilty party all the time himself! I've never heard anything like it. He's a howling cad, and I'm pretty certain he never confessed of his own accord. He must have been found out."

"I wonder if he'll be expelled?"

"Serve him right if he is! I don't know what you fellows are going to do, but I shall go to the end study and tell Nugent I'm sorry."

"It's a rotten come-down, after the line we've taken," said Jones.

"Well, whether we own up or not, the fact remains that we were in the wrong, and we let that cad Trimble lead us by the nose like a lot of asses," said Blane. "So we may as well own up. That's my view."

Blane's view was shared by a good many of the Fourth, and a body of them went to Pat Nugent's study to "do the right thing," as Blane put it.

Most of them felt very shy and awkward about it, but each looked to the others to keep him in countenance while he went through the ordeal.

"Hallo, what do you kids want?" asked Pat cheerfully, as Blane came in, with his followers at his heels. "No more of that ragging business—eh?"

Blane turned red.

"No, that's all over, Nugent, of course."

"I'm glad of that—for your sake, kid."

"Look here, Nugent, it's come out that Trimble played that trick after all, and that you didn't know anything about it."

"I told you so all along, didn't I?"

"Well, yes; but we didn't believe you, you see."

"That only shows you are an ass, and a rather suspicious sort of ass."

"Oh, go on!" said Blane. "I know we've let Trimble make fools of us. But I've come to tell you I'm sorry we went for you. A chap can't say more."

"Oh, that's all right," said Pat. "You ain't a bad sort, only a bit of an ass. Consider it settled; your apology is

accepted—all your apologies are accepted. Close the door after you."

The Fourth-Formers accepted this very plain hint that the interview was at an end. But Blane paused as he went out.

"We're going to give Trimble something for telling all those whoppers," he said. "You three can come along and lend a hand if you like."

"Thank you for nothing," said Pat.

"I should think you owe him one, Nugent."

"Well, I don't believe in ragging. I've been rather fed up with it lately, you see," said Pat. "Let him alone."

"Let him alone," exclaimed Blane, in amazement, "after he's made such fools of us?"

"Well, you know, he had jolly good material to start on," said Pat. "Anyway, I'm not going to have a hand in anything of the sort. The doctor is pretty certain to take it out of him, if he's not expelled. There's no need for you to interfere."

"We're going to, all the same, then. Are you coming, Greene?"

"No, I'm not," said Greene.

"You, Blaggy?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Blaggy.

Blane went out, and shut the door with a slam.

His reception in the end study had not been exactly gratifying, and he was annoyed. He had expected the three chums to back him up in punishing Trimble. But their refusal to do so only made him more determined.

Most of the Fourth were in a humour to join in his idea. They felt that they had been deceived, and placed in a false position. Trimble was to blame, and Trimble should be made properly sorry for it.

Trimble was expecting something of the kind. He had so far escaped much more cheaply than he might have expected. The Head believed that his confession was voluntary, and had therefore let him off more lightly than he would otherwise have done. He had been spared the terrible sentence of expulsion.

But the doctor had soundly flogged both Trimble and Cobb. Not so much, as he was careful to explain, on account of the dangerous trick played in Lacy's study, as on account of their cowardice and meanness in allowing the blame to rest upon an innocent boy.

Trimble crawled back to his room, aching with the infliction. The Head was disgusted, and he had given Trimble the flogging of his life.

Now Trimble moved restlessly about his study, feeling quite unequal to sitting down, and wondering what the Form would do. Cobb had deserted him, and he was alone to face the storm which he felt certain his conduct would rouse against him. So he was not surprised when his door was burst open suddenly, and a crowd of boys belonging to Upper and Lower Fourth came in with grim looks. Blane was at their head, and Blane was angry. He planted himself before Trimble.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Get out of my study," said Trimble, with an attempt at defiance.

"That won't work with us," said Blane. "We've come on business. You led us to believe that Pat Nugent was the cause of the Form being detained, and egged us on to go for him. And it was you all the time."

"It was a—a joke. I never really meant it to go so far. I—"

"Don't start telling lies!" exclaimed Blane. "We know exactly how much to believe you now, Trimble."

"I—I meant to confess all along, and—"

"Rot! You've had to own up, that's the long and the short of it. Are you going to be expelled from St. Kit's?"

"No, I'm not!" growled Trimble.

"Then we'll teach you a lesson not to play a game like that again so long as you stay here," declared Blane.

"If you lay a finger on me—"

"I'll lay more than a finger on you," said Blane—"a cricket-stump, for instance. Have you got that stump, Hooper?"

"Rather!" said Hooper. "Here it is."

"Look here," exclaimed Trimble, "get out! You sha'n't—"

"Oh, shut up! You're too fond of talking. Collar him!"

"What are you going to do?" howled Trimble.

"We're going to give you a Form licking. Got anything to say against it?"

"Yes, I have. I'll break your neck for this!"

"That's not to the point. Anything else?"

"I've just been flogged, and—"

"That will make it all the warmer for you. Hold him, chaps."

"Hallo, hallo! What's the game here?"

It was Pat Nugent's voice.

He had opened the door and come into the study. Blagden

JUST
OUT!

"THE GEM" LIBRARY. A NEW PAPER. PRICE ONE HALFPENNY.

The British

and Greene were at his heels, looking rather dubious. But there was no dubiety about Pat.

"What's it got to do with you?" snapped Blane. "Get out!"

"Rats!" said Pat cheerfully. "It seems to me that you fellows are hogs. You are never satisfied. You've been making fools of yourselves long enough, I think. There's going to be no more of this ragging."

"Who says so?" demanded Blane fiercely.

"I do. Are you deaf?"

"You get out and mind your own business."

"Yes, mind your own business," said Hooper. "Get out!" Pat turned on him in a flash.

"I've had a little argument with you once, Hooper dear. Do you want to start another?"

"Nunno," said Hooper retreating. "I don't want to row with you, Nugent. Why can't you keep out of this? Why is it you that ought to be down on Trimble most?"

"Sure, and so I am. I think he's the biggest blackguard I ever came across, and a howling cad and a rotter. All the same, this kind of thing savours of bullying, and I don't approve of it."

"Who cares what you approve of?" snapped Blane. "Clear out, can't you?"

"My dear chap, you are not going to give Trimble that licking. The doctor has whacked him, and he must be awfully tender. Let him alone."

"Sha'n't!"

Pat made a couple of strides towards Blane, and seized him by the collar. Blane struggled furiously, but he was no match for Pat.

"Now," said Pat calmly, "I've no doubt you mean well, Blane darling, but you're an ass, you know, and I know best. You're going to let Trimble alone, or you're coming behind the chapel to settle the point with me."

"I don't want to fight you."

"Then you'll stop this bullying business."

"You beast! You suffered most from Trimble's caddishness, and you ought—"

"Oh, I'm a forgiving chap; besides, if I want to go in for vengeance, I can fight my own battles," said Pat. "Now, kids, don't be silly asses. Let Trimble alone. You can see he's had a big flogging, and it's enough."

"Oh, all right!" growled Blane sulkily. "I think you're an ass!"

"Thank you. Off you go. Quick march!"

The baffled juniors retreated from the study. The chums saw them all out, and followed them. Trimble did not speak a word. The last look Pat got from him was a scowl.

In the Tolls.

Arthur Talbot walked into the Dragon Inn. There was a dark cloud upon the face of the captain of St. Kit's. He was there to see Seth Black—the man who claimed to be his father, and whose claim Talbot did not know how to refute.

The Dragon Inn bore an unenviable reputation in the neighbourhood. It was the haunt of a betting set, and it was strictly out of bounds to the boys of St. Kit's. This latter fact had quite escaped Talbot's memory for the time.

He had matters of greater moment to think of just then than school bounds, and he had quite forgotten that the Dragon was "taboo." But a couple of Sixth Form fellows of St. Kit's, who were coming up the village street, had not forgotten it, and they stared in amazement as they saw Talbot stop at the Dragon and enter.

The two were Hayward and Dunn, both chums of Eldred Lacy's. They stopped and looked at one another when Talbot had disappeared into the inn. The captain of St. Kit's had been too preoccupied to notice them.

"By Jove!" said Hayward. "Did you see that, Dunn?"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Dunn. "Talbot going into the Dragon—my hat!"

"There's no mistake about it," said Hayward. "We've seen him with our own eyes!"

"We could hardly see him with anybody else's, could we?"

"Oh, don't be funny! This may be a serious business, Dunn. You know what Lacy's said all along—that the chaps were deceived in Talbot, and that he wasn't half so good as he made out to be."

"Yes, I know he's said so; but I never believed much that he said against Talbot. He hates him; that's no secret."

"Yes, I know; but this looks as if there might be something in it—don't you think so?"

Dunn gave an expressive whistle.

"Well, I should never have thought of it of Talbot," he said. "It's his business to see that the chaps keep out of places like the Dragon; and then to march in himself, as bold as brass, in the broad daylight! Phew!"

"He ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself! Captain of the school, too! Nice sort of captain for St. Kit's, I say!"

"We can't say anything about it, of course. Still, he ought to be shown up. But I've got an idea. Let's wait for him, and meet him coming out, and see how he takes it."

"It will make him look small."

"Well, serve him right. We're in no hurry. Let's wait."

"All right; we'll do it."

Quite unconscious of the comments of the two seniors of St. Kit's, or, indeed, of their presence near the inn, Talbot proceeded about the business that had brought him there.

"Is there someone staying here of the name of Seth Black?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Front room first floor."

Talbot went up the narrow, dark stairs. The door of the front room first floor was ajar, and the sound of angry voices proceeded from within. Talbot gave a start of amazement; for, following the hard, coarse tones of Seth Black, came a voice he had heard before and well remembered—the cold, clear voice of Rupert Lacy, Squire of Lynwood!

What on earth could the rich land-owner be doing in the room of the blackguard and ruffian whom Talbot had come to visit?

Talbot had no desire to play eavesdropper, and coughed loudly as he came along the passage, to give warning of his approach. The voices in the room ceased instantly, but Talbot had involuntarily caught one sentence in the voice of the squire:

"Not a shilling more! The sum was fixed; not a shilling more!"

Talbot knocked at the door. He could not help wondering what was the meaning of what he had heard. Was the squire, then, another victim of the scoundrel who called himself his father? Was there some secret in the past of Rupert Lacy which placed him in the clutches of Seth Black, even as the boy himself was in his clutches? It looked like it.

There was a growling "Come in, can't yer?" in reply to Talbot's knock at the door, and he entered the room. As usual, it reeked with the fumes of rum and tobacco.

The squire, in riding-clothes, with a switch in his hand, stood near the window, his face pale and furious. He was evidently trying to control his rage and assume an ordinary expression, but with slight success. He turned to the window and stared out as Talbot entered, as if he did not wish his face to be seen. Seth Black looked darkly at Talbot.

"Hallo! I didn't expect to see you here!"

"I came in reply to your note."

At the sound of Talbot's voice the squire, who had not yet seen him, swung round as if electrified. He stared at Talbot with blazing eyes and white lips.

"Talbot, you here?"

Talbot nodded quietly.

The squire's glance went from Talbot to Black, who was grinning evilly. Then, with the spring of a tiger, the squire threw himself upon the ruffian and bore him to the floor, with a fierce grip upon his throat.

"So you have betrayed me," he hissed—"you have betrayed me!"

Black went down with a crash. Powerful ruffian as he was, he seemed to be a child in the hands of the furious squire. He struggled desperately, and strove to cry out; but the grip on his throat was like that of a vice, and he could only utter a faint gurgle. He was becoming black in the face. Rupert Lacy appeared to have lost his senses with rage, and to be bent upon throttling the life out of him.

Talbot, astounded by this sudden and unexpected turn of affairs, stood for some moments motionless; then, as he saw Black's peril, he sprang forward, and strove to drag the squire from his choking victim.

His touch seemed to recall Rupert Lacy to himself. He released Black, and rose to his feet, his face still white, his form shaken with passion. Talbot helped Black into a chair. Black was gasping for breath, and there were deep marks of the squire's strong fingers in his throat.

"You—murderous brute!" he gasped, as soon as he found his voice. "Try that game again, and I'll—I'll shoot you like a dog!"

"In a word, Black," said the squire, in a low, concentrated voice, "what does this boy's presence here mean?"

"Nothing to do with you!" snarled Black.

"Is that the truth?"

"Of course it is! The business between Mr. Talbot and me is quite private. Ain't that the case, my boy?"

"It certainly has nothing to do with Mr. Lacy," said Talbot quietly. "If I had known anyone was here, I should not have come at this time."

The squire looked at him hard.

"Very well," he said. "I can believe Talbot, though I cannot trust you, Black. I admit I was hasty. There's a fiver to pay for it." He threw a note on the table. "But take care, Black—take care! You are playing a dangerous game."

He crossed to the door.

"A LANGLSHIRE LAD,"

AND "A SPENDID TALE
BY ERNEST BRINDLE.

IN "PLUCK," 1st.

NEXT SATURDAY:

"FACING THE MUSIC,"

A School Tale (Extra Long),
by JACK NORTH.