

# PLUCK

HERR SPECS.

By H. CLARKE HOOK.

DARING AND CO.

By MARK DARRAN.

1<sup>d</sup>



"OH, CRUBS!" GASPED SPECS, GIVING HIS NOSE A LITTLE MORE PRESSURE. "SHOULD TINK WE'RE GOIND TO BE BLOWN UB. OPUD THE WINDOW." (See page 7.)

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# THE RIVALS OF ST KIT'S

By Charles Hamilton

## BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

When Pat Nugent arrives at St. Kit's an election is taking place for the captaincy of the school between Arthur Talbot and Eldred Lacy. Talbot gains the victory. Pat is thrown into a cupboard by some juniors, and falls asleep. On waking up he hears voices—the voices of Eldred 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 becomes great chums with Blagden 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 him some money.

The three chums see that the captain is worried over something and Pat, remembering what he had overheard when locked in the cupboard, decides to shadow Lacy. One night he follows the bully and passes him as he is talking to Black. Lacy stops Pat, but the latter gets leave from him to go into Northley for his cricket-bat. However, Pat tracks the two to an old wooden hut and overhears a terrible plot against his favourite—Arthur Talbot.

Pat eventually gets back to the school very late, and Mr. Slaney asks him who gave him leave to be out after call-over.

"Lacy, sir," replied Pat. (Now go on with the story.)

### The Only Way.

The master of the Fourth looked hard at Pat. He knew very well the terms the prefect and the junior were on, for more than one of their skirmishes had come to his ears.

"Lacy gave you permission to stay out after locking-up, Nugent?"

"Certainly, sir."

Mr. Slaney stretched out his hand.

"Then why have you not given me your permit? You are wasting my time. Give it me!"

"I—I haven't one, sir."

"Under the circumstances, Nugent, I shall require Lacy to confirm your statement before I overlook your offence," said the master stiffly. "Go and tell him I wish to speak to him."

"Yes, sir."

Pat scuttled off. He found Lacy in the prefects' room, and gave him Mr. Slaney's message. Lacy growled, as he usually did when he was wanted to take any trouble.

"Tell him I'm coming."

Pat carried the prefect's answer back. A few minutes later Lacy came into the study, and he stared at Pat, and then the master of the Fourth.

"Nugent told me you wanted to speak to me, sir."

"I do wish to speak to you, Lacy. Did you give Nugent permission to remain out after locking-up time?"

"No sir."

Mr. Slaney turned a severe glance upon the Fourth-Former.

"Nugent, I am sorry to find that you have descended to—"

"Excuse me, sir," said Pat politely; "Lacy has forgotten. Don't you remember, Lacy?"

"No, I don't."

"It was when I met you at the stile, and I told you I wanted to fetch a bat from Northley. You said I could do it."

Pat was looking the prefect full in the eyes.

Lacy drew a sharp breath. As plain as a look could speak, Pat's glance said that if the prefect did not back him up, Seth Black's name would come out.

"It was when you were speaking to your friend at the stile," said Pat sweetly, as if to refresh the prefect's memory.

Lacy's eyes dilated for a moment. He could have knocked Pat's head against the wall with great pleasure just then, but he knew he must come to terms.

"Yes—I-I had forgotten, sir," he said, choking back his wrath and turning to Mr. Slaney. "I remember now that I did give Nugent the permission he speaks of. I remember there was a bat he wanted to fetch, and I never wish to allow the juniors' practice to be interfered with if it can be helped."

Mr. Slaney looked from one to the other; he thought

there was something under the surface here. Still, it was no business of his. If Pat had had a prefect's permission to go to the village, the matter was at an end.

"Very well, Lacy," he said coldly, "the next time, please give a written permit, and you will save my time and your own."

"Certainly, sir," said the prefect submissively, and he left the study inwardly fuming. Pat followed him out, and as he closed the study door, Lacy turned upon him with a snarl.

"You little hound! For two pins I'd break your neck for you!"

"Oh, rats!" said Pat serenely. "One good turn deserves another, old sport. I haven't told Mr. Slaney about your gentlemanly friend."

Lacy gave him a furious look and strode away. Pat grinned over his victory 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 blooming confectioner's!"

"Poor old Talbot!" said Greene. "But it can't be true—that horrid boulder 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."

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"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 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 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 him and Brooke 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 were talking about you, and—"

"I tell you I don't want to hear!"

"You must! I—they were going to—"

"Clear out, Nugent! If you say another word, I'll box your ears for you!" exclaimed Talbot sharply. "I don't care what they were saying, and I wouldn't listen to a listener's tales, anyway! I'm disappointed in you, Nugent! I did not think you were that kind of boy. You deserve to be licked! Go out!"

"I tell you—"

"Leave the room instantly!"

"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 do 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 Green 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.

"Beggara," 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."

"We'll try it," agreed Blagden. "There's only one way he can come in, anyway, and we can wait for him there. Come along!"

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.

### 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 snow-balling 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!"

"It's got a lot to do with me. I belong to this school, you see!" said Pat, in his airy way, as if he meant to imply that the school belonged to him. "We don't want bounders of your sort round here. There's nothing to be given away, so you can hock it!"

"You cheeky young rat!"

"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.

Pat went down into the road with a bump that made every bone in his body ache, but he cared nothing for that. He was still holding on, and Blagden and Greene were now piling themselves on top of the fallen ruffian.

"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!"

"Lemme go!" roared Black. "I'll half kill you for this! Lemme go!"

"Rats to that!" replied Pat. "You were warned off, and you wouldn't go. Now you can take the consequences."

"That's the cheese!" exclaimed Blagden. "Come on; over with him!"

Black struggled desperately, and almost freed himself; but the juniors were equally determined, and now that the ruffian was down they had the advantage.

Pat Nugent felt pretty certain that when the scoundrel had had a thorough soaking in the deep muddy ditch he would not feel fit for carrying out his purpose, and the junior was quite prepared to keep him in the ditch till he was completely tamed.

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 bounder 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 going in to see my son!"

Mr. Slaney stared at him. Pat's heart sank. It would all come out now. His well-meant, if rather extraordinary, efforts had all been in vain.

"What are you talking about, man?" exclaimed the Form-master testily. "I am quite sure that no son of yours is employed in the school. What is your name?"

"My name's Seth Black, mister."

"Black—Black! Then you have made a mistake. If any of the servants had that name I should have heard it. You had better go."

Black laughed mockingly.

"Only it don't appen to be a boot-boy, or a page, or nothin' of that sort, I've come to see!" he sneered. "My son is a scholar here!"

"You are intoxicated, I suppose. Go away!"

"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 going on 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?"

"Well, the idea crossed my mind," said Lacy diffidently. "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."

Mr. Slaney started.

"It's impossible—utterly impossible, Lacy!"

"Well, it does seem so," said Lacy; "but strange things happen sometimes. It's funny the man should make such a claim. I say, you fellow, have you got any proof to offer of what you say?"

"The boy won't deny it!" snarled Black. "Ask him!"

Lacy looked at the Form-master in a significant way.

"Suppose we settle it, sir, by calling Talbot?"

"But Talbot is batting; and the man's claim is too absurd to be entertained for a moment," said Mr. Slaney impatiently.

"Look here," said Seth Black, in his dogged way, "I'm going to see my son! If he denies that I'm his father, you can chuck me out. Ain't that fair?"

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.

"That's only fair, sir," said Lacy. "Probably the fellow has made a mistake, and when he sees Talbot, he will be satisfied of that."

"I'm goin' to see 'im, anyway, mister. If you don't let me in, I'll see what the police 'ave to say about keeping a father away from his blooming son!" snarled Black.

"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 settling 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 exultantly.

"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. But he had a last card to play. He came quickly towards Mr. Slaney.

"If you please, sir, will you listen to me for a moment?"

"What is it, Nugent?"

"It's—it's a plot against Talbot," said Pat hurriedly.

"We—we knew that that brute was coming here to try to disgrace Talbot, and that's why—that's why we collared him, sir. He wants to disgrace Talbot before all the fellows."

"That is impossible, Nugent, unless his claim is a true one."

"Perhaps it is, sir; but—but—"

Mr. Slaney shook his head sharply.

"I don't quite understand how there could be a plot against Talbot, Nugent, or how you could know anything about it if there were. I am afraid you are allowing your regard for the captain of the school to run away with you. I think it will be better to let Talbot see this man. You need say no more."

Pat was baffled. The last chance was gone. Now he could only wait to see the triumph of Eldred Lacy; the success of the dastardly plot against Arthur Talbot's honour and happiness.

### 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 ome!"

"He says he is your father!"

The prefect uttered those 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?"

Talbot's voice was harsh and unnatural.

"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.

A dozen voices rang out in amazed questioning, but Talbot appeared to be deaf to all. He was walking swiftly towards the gates, his face white as death, his eyes fixed in a set gaze straight before him. The blow he had vaguely dreaded had fallen at last. Never, never again would he be able to hold up his head at St. Kit's.

The anguish in the unfortunate lad's heart was terrible, and it was no wonder that even the cricket had faded from his mind. He could only think of this horrible misfortune that had fallen upon him, to shadow his life, perhaps for ever.

For he knew who awaited him at the gates. It was Seth Black, the ruffian and scoundrel who had already claimed to be his father, and advanced what seemed to be proof of his claim.

Once he had had his dreams of finding his father, still living, perhaps; and once the mere word "father" would have caused his heart to beat with joy. Now it was only horror that possessed him.

Was this man his father—this blackguard, this scoundrel, who ought to have been in prison long ago, probably had been there in his time?

No wonder Talbot was heedless of the looks and words round him as he walked away, with drooping head and unsteady gait.

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. "Perhaps this is Talbot's precious friend from the Dragon."

"It may not be true, you know," remarked Haywood; "the fellow may be lying."

"Talbot looked as if it was true."

This could not be gainsaid. 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, hey?" 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."

The Form-master looked deeply distressed. The boys crowding round were silent and dismayed. Few, even among those who did not like Arthur Talbot, but pitied him at that terrible moment. The white, drawn misery in his face might have touched a heart of stone.

"This is—most—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!"

"Rather!"

"It's all lies, of course!"

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.

"Kick him out!"

"Duck the blackguard in the ditch!"

"Thump his dirty lies back down his throat!"

A dozen hands were laid threateningly upon the ruffian, who began to look alarmed. If the boys once started on him in earnest, he had no chance against them, and he would be certain to have a warm time.

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 to regard from this unfortunate lad. Go!"

"I'm goin' to take my son with me if I go!" said the ruffian doggedly.

Talbot winced as though he had been struck. Mr. Slaney's eyes blazed with anger, and he stepped towards Black so quickly that the scoundrel took several paces backward in alarm.

"You will do nothing of the kind!" the Form-master cried. "If you have a claim, the law exists to enable you to enforce it! You are free to invoke the law. Until then, no one here recognises the slightest claim on your part. If you

stop within these gates, I will have you arrested as a trespasser!"

"Oh, sir!" cried Talbot.

Mr. Slaney motioned him to be silent.

"Leave me to deal with this man, Talbot. If he is telling the truth, he can bring the law to his aid, and then we shall know what to do. I hope he is lying. I believe he is lying. A scoundrel like this requires to be dealt with sharply. Are you going, you utter ruffian, or will you force me to lay hands on you?"

The athletic master of the Fourth seemed to tower over the slouching ruffian in his righteous anger. Black shrank back.

"You'll hear from me ag'in!" he mumbled threateningly.

"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, all wondering what would come of it.

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.

### 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 cricketer flannels as he was, and sat there, motionless, 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!"

(Another long instalment of this school tale next Saturday.)

## Your Editor's Corner.

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

### "PREFECTS OF BOWKER'S HOUSE."

Jack North has written the first long, complete school tale for our next issue of PLUCK. There are many fine situations in this, his latest story, and I am sure that, excellent as have been our school tales, you will rank "Prefects of Bowker's House" among the best.

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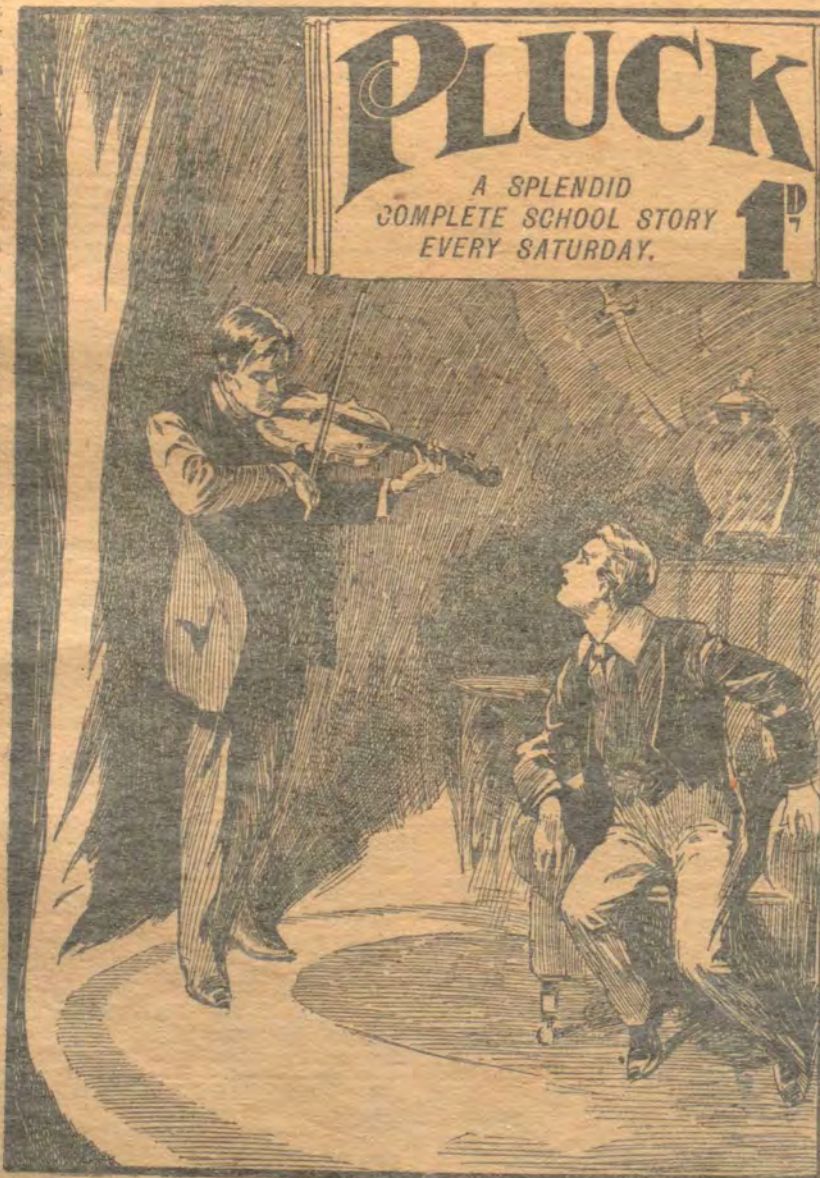
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YOUR EDITOR.



This picture depicts an exciting incident from "Prefects of Bowker's House," by Jack North, one of the two complete tales for next Saturday's PLUCK. 32 pages. Price 1d.