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1^D



DALLING'S SHOCK! Using the almost complete rabbit-hutch as a trestle, Specs started sawing. For five minutes he sawed away violently; then he was "through." (See p. 125.)

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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, but afterwards resigns his position on account of a mean plot instigated by Eldred Lacy and his brother, who is Squire of Lynwood. Soon after, the election for the position of captain, which Talbot has vacated, draws near, and Talbot's chum Brooke, who opposes Lacy, gains the majority of votes, and so is elected captain of St. Kit's. Lacy is asked by his brother to steal a silver box belonging to Talbot which contains important documents. One evening he enters Talbot's study when he is absent and secures the box; but as he is leaving the room he meets Talbot in the doorway. "What are you doing here," said Talbot. (Now go on with the story).

Robbed!

"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."

"You can do as you like, of course."

"Don't you think I have a right to a fresh trial, when I know that the majority is really on my side?" exclaimed Lacy.

"How did you get your majority? By bribery and bullying."

"So you say. If you can prove it, that's a different matter."

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."

Talbot's brows wrinkled. There was nothing of value in his study, and no secrets; nothing but the silver box deposited in the secret drawer of his desk—and he did not know that the prefect even knew of its existence.

Yet he was uneasy. He glanced about the room, and gave a sudden start. He had left books and papers on the table, and he saw that some of them had been moved. The drawer of his table, too, was an inch open, and he was almost certain that he had closed it the last time he was in the study.

And now, with his suspicions fully awakened, he looked carefully round the room and noted many little signs that would otherwise have escaped his attention—signs, now he noted them, that someone had been exploring the study. He stepped towards the desk quickly, and then paused.

"The silver box!"

Those words were on his lips, but he paused. It seemed so impossible that Eldred Lacy could know anything about the silver box, or could take any interest in it if he did. Yet why had the prefect been searching his study? And that he had been searching it was evident.

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!

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.

Lacy's partisans in the Sixth had a cuff for them whenever they came in sight, and the disappointed prefect himself had picked on Greene on a flimsy excuse, and given him a licking.

The end study were not to be treated like that with impunity. 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.

"And run right into him, fathead?"

"No good stopping here, is it?" said Greene.

Pat looked round quickly. There were curtains over the alcove which contained Lacy's bed, and it was about the only place where there was a chance of taking cover. The cupboard was not big enough for three. Pat jerked his comrades towards the bed.

"What are you going to do? We can't stop here! Let's make a rush for it!" gasped Greene.

"Shut up, and do as I tell you," said Pat.

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

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locked the door. The click of the key struck the juniors with dismay.

What on earth was Lacy locking his door for? Did he guess they were there, and intend to effectually cut off their escape before dealing with them?

Pat drew a quick breath. His hands clenched hard. But he soon saw that that was not the case. Lacy did not even glance towards the bed. He stood by the table, and the light, falling upon his face, showed it pale and set. He was breathing hard, and it was easy to see that his heart was throbbing painfully.

What was the matter with him? The prefect's hand glided into his breast, and he 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!

Lacy held it in fingers that trembled slightly, and his eyes were eager as he examined his prize. Through the opening of the curtains the juniors watched him in wonder.

The secret Arthur Talbot had so carefully guarded was in his hands at last! It was at the thought of his meeting with the late captain of St. Kit's at the door of his study, that made the prefect's heart throb so much.

Would Talbot suspect anything? It was not likely.

He could not imagine that Eldred Lacy knew anything about the secret drawer in the desk, or of the existence of the silver box. He was not likely, the prefect thought, to look and see if the box were missing. If he missed it, it might not be for days, and then he would have no grounds for attributing the loss to Lacy; at all events, he would have no proof.

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?

It was a mystery. Lacy had stolen the box at the direction and the bidding of his brother, Rupert Lacy, of Lynwood. He did not know the squire's motive. He knew that Rupert feared Arthur Talbot with a deadly fear. He could not guess the reason, but he could not doubt the fact. What had the silver box to do with it?

The prefect was intensely curious. He intended to take the stolen box to his brother, but if he could find out the secret first, he was resolved to do so. He keenly examined the chased surface of the little box. When he shook it, he heard no sound from within, yet he was certain that it was not empty. Where was the opening? A secret spring of some kind—but where?

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.

"Open this door!"

"I will not!"

"You thief!"

"Talbot, I—"

"You thief! Give me back what you have stolen!"

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 was shaking violently as Talbot flung his weight

against it. Talbot was evidently in earnest. If Lacy did not open the door he meant to break it down, and the prefect turned pale, as his study shook with the concussion. He picked up the papers, the ring, and the miniature, and thrust them into his jacket-pocket. Then he seized the silver box, snapped it shut, and put it into another pocket.

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."

"Why should I steal such trumpery, Talbot? Don't be a fool."

"I don't know why, but you have stolen it."

"It's a lie."

"It's the truth, you cur! You know it! I don't know your reason; but I know that Pat Nugent found you hunting through my study once, and I dare say you were after the same thing then. Give me the silver box."

"I haven't it."

"Liar!"

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!"

"I will acquaint all St. Kit's with the fact that you have stolen it," said Talbot. "And I will demand a search of you and your room. Mind, I am giving you a chance now. I don't want to disgrace the Sixth Form. Give me back the silver box, and you can consider yourself safe from punishment. Refuse, and I will brand you as a thief before all the school."

"Do as you choose."

"You refuse?"

"I have nothing more to say. Now, get out of my study."

Talbot's lip curled with a bitter expression.

"You would like me to go while you get rid of the stolen property!" he said contemptuously. "I am not likely to be so extremely simple."

"Are you going?"

"No; I am not!"

Lacy panted for breath. His glance went to a golf-stick lying on the table. Talbot smiled disdainfully.

"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."

Lacy's face was white as death.

If Talbot had only left the study for a minute or two, he could have opened the window and hurled the tell-tale silver box away far across the elms.

The papers could easily have been thrust into some crevice where they could not be discovered by a search.

But with the keen eye of Arthur Talbot upon him, anything of the kind was, of course, impossible.

A hunted look came into the prefect's eyes.

A search now could not fail to reveal the silver box, and it would be easy for Talbot to prove that it was his property. Dr. Kent would bear witness to that.

A sudden thought flashed into Lacy's mind.

His expression changed.

"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 find it—"

"Easily, I should think, as it was in your hands a few minutes ago. Give it back to me, and the matter can end there. You ought to be kicked out of any decent school. But I don't want to bring disgrace on St. Kit's."

"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 value 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.

It had not even occurred to Talbot that the box might have been opened.

He knew, of course, that the opening was a secret one, and he had never seen the box open, and it did not occur to him mind that Lacy might have discovered the secret by chance.

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 glazed 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 turned round in sheer amazement. Lacy bit his lip hard.

He had never dreamed, till this moment, of the presence of the juniors in his study. All was lost!

"Stop!" shouted Pat Nugent.

Talbot came back.

Talbot's eyes were fixed upon Pat in astonishment.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"How came you here?"

Lacy stood pale as death, biting his lips.

It was useless to order the juniors out of his study, for he knew they would not go; and as for flinging them out, Talbot would not allow anything of that sort until he had heard what Pat Nugent had to say.

That the juniors had seen the opening of the box, and seen Lacy put the papers in his pocket, was certain.

(Another long instalment next Saturday.)

Your Editor's Corner.

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

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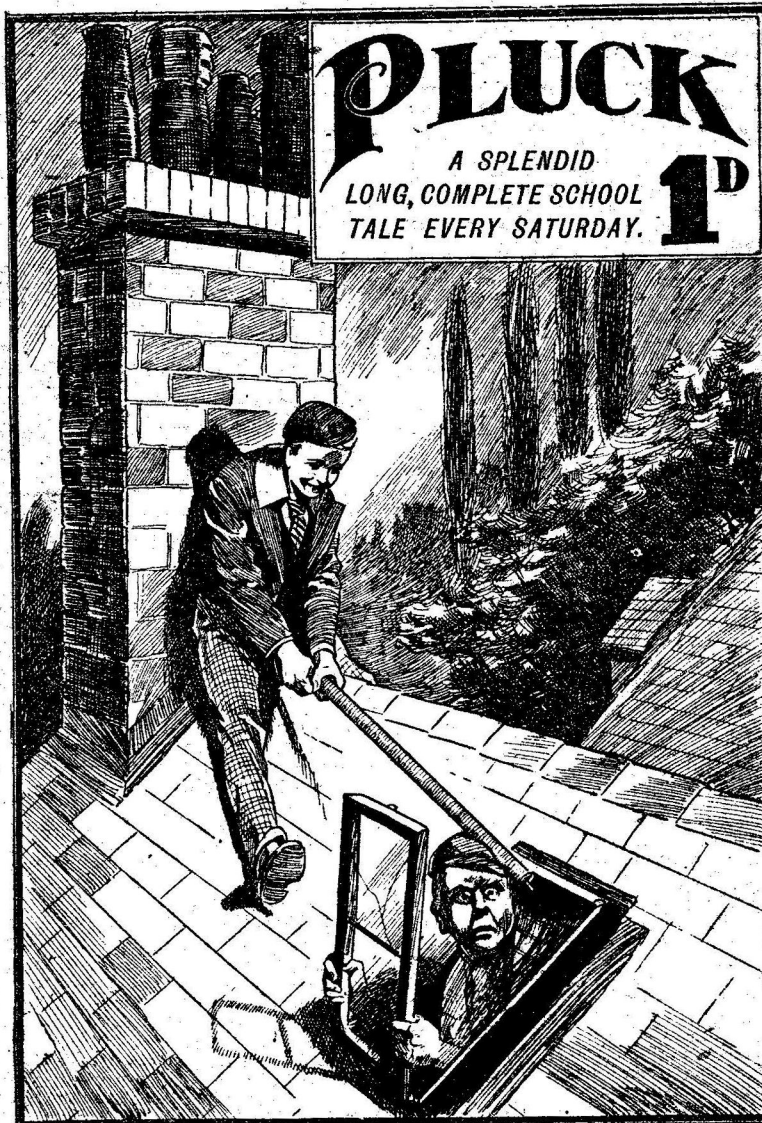
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