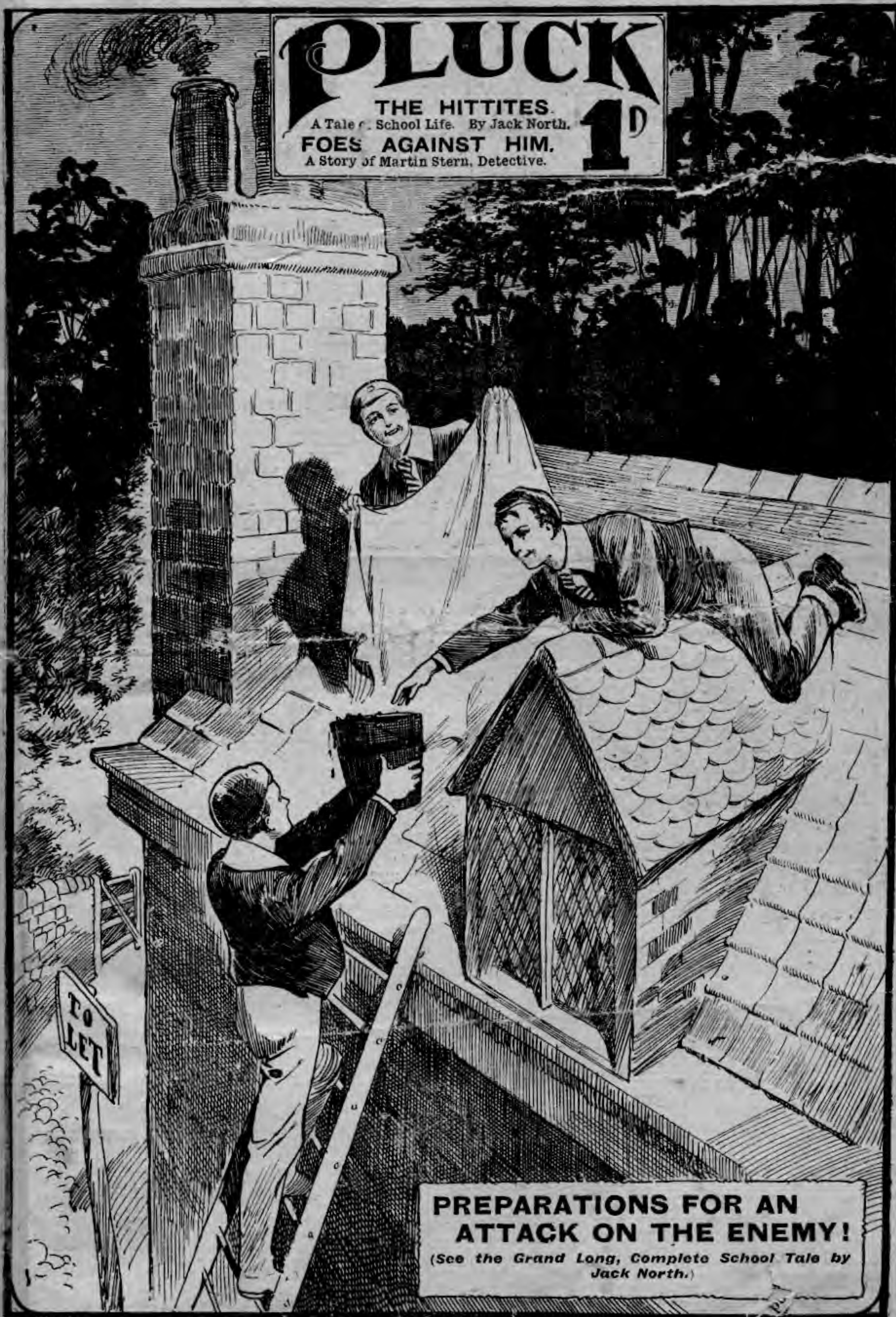


PLUCK

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FOES AGAINST HIM.
A Story of Martin Stern, Detective. **1D**



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THE RIVALS OF ST KIT'S



BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

When Pat Nugent arrives at St. Kit's, an election is taking place for the captaincy of the school between Arthur Talbot and Eldred Lacy. Talbot gains the victory, but afterwards resigns his position on account of a mean plot instigated by Eldred Lacy and his brother, who is 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, is elected captain of St. Kit's. One morning the Head discovers he has been robbed of £80. He calls a meeting in the hall, and Arthur Talbot is openly accused of the theft. His study is searched, and the notes are found hidden beneath the carpet; but Arthur declares he is innocent. He is sent to Coventry by the whole school except Nugent, Blagden, and Green, three chums, who believe in his innocence, and who are determined to stand by him. They form themselves into a committee of investigation and put the whole school to Coventry. One day Talbot meets Seth Black and tells him he has decided to leave St. Kit's. "You are not going to leave!" exclaimed Black. "Do you think I'm going to allow you out of my sight—out of—"

(Now go on with the story.)

Talbot Thrashes Haywood and Dunn.

Seth Black checked himself, for he was on the point of saying too much.

It was Talbot's turn to be astonished.

"What can it possibly matter to you if I leave St. Kit's?" he exclaimed.

"Never mind—never mind!" said Black, recovering his composure a little. "You can't, and you sha'n't go! Why should you go?"

"Because I am disgraced there."

"Wot have you been doing?"

Talbot gave him a glance of contempt.

"I have been doing nothing. Dare you deny that you were bribed by Eldred Lacy to come up to the school and disgrace me before all the fellows? Well, they mostly believe that you are my father. That has made the rest easy for Lacy. Some of the fellows saw me giving you money. Now, a large sum has been stolen from the doctor's desk, and I am accused of stealing it."

"You?"

"Yes, I. Why should they think the son of a tramp and ruffian above committing a theft?" said Talbot. "And the knowledge that you blackmailed me supplies the motive. I am believed to have stolen the money and handed it to you—or some of it. The banknotes were found, the gold is still missing."

"Where were the notes found?" asked Black, with eager interest.

"In my study."

"But you—"

"No," said Talbot scornfully; "I did not steal them! The banknotes were hidden under the carpet in my study by someone who meant to ruin me—someone who afterwards proposed a search of the studies—in a word, by Eldred Lacy."

"And they believe you are a thief?"

"Yes. The whole school has turned against me. Even the doctor does not believe in my innocence. I am ruined for life!"

"The hound!"

"What, do you feel for me, then?" said Talbot. "You have done me harm enough. But for you this could never have come to pass!"

"I wouldn't have done what Lacy wanted if I had known it would lead to this."

"Why should you care?"

"Because it suits me for you to remain at St. Kit's," said the ruffian coolly. "I know the squire's little game. He would be safe at Lynwood Manor if only he could contrive to drive you out into the world with a stain on your name."

"What do you know about the squire's plans?"

"As much as you do, or more. I know that he is at the bottom of this little game, and that his brother at St. Kit's is only his catspaw, and does not even know his object."

Talbot started a little.

"Eldred Lacy is a willing tool in the task of effecting my ruin," he said. "And do you know, Seth Black, what the squire's object is?"

"Yes."

"What is it? Why should he harm me, who have never harmed him?"

"It's a secret," said the ruffian coolly. "I dare say you'll know some day, but not now. But I can tell you one thing. You need not leave St. Kit's."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I can make the squire clear you and undo what he has done. That's what I mean! And I'll do it, too!" said Seth Black, with emphasis.

Talbot shook his head.

"You don't believe I can do it?"

"No."

"Well, you will see!" exclaimed Seth Black. "If the squire gets rid of you, my hold on him is gone. I can tell you that much, and so I am not likely to let you go. Remain at St. Kit's, and rely upon me."

Arthur Talbot's lip curled.

"Are you the kind of man for me to rely upon?" he asked. "I know you only as a liar and a blackmailer, and I do not believe that you are my father. I certainly shall place no reliance whatever upon you, and I never desire to see you again."

"All the same, I shall keep my word."

Talbot turned, and walked through the wood, leaving Seth Black with an angry and troubled expression upon his coppery face.

The meeting with the ruffian had interrupted Talbot's reflections. He had not yet decided upon his course of action, although it was becoming very clear to him that he must leave St. Kit's for ever.

"Hallo!"

Talbot started at the sound of Haywood's voice. Haywood and Dunn were coming through the wood, and they had come full upon Talbot. Their glance passed him, and fell upon the ruffian standing under the trees, and then they exchanged significant looks.

"Hallo!" repeated Haywood. "My kind regards to your pater, Talbot."

Talbot flushed crimson.

"Been handing him over the tin?" said Dunn, with a sneering laugh.

NEXT SATURDAY:

"BRIAN'S BADGERING."
A Splendid Long, Complete School Tale,
by Lewis Hockley;

AND

"THE TARTAN PLAID."
A Thrilling Detective Story,
by Phil Granby.

IN "PLUCK," ID.

Talbot made a step towards him.
 "What did you say, Dunn?"
 Dunn showed a strong desire to retreat behind Haywood.
 "Will you repeat your remark, Dunn?"
 "I said, 'Have you been handing him over the money?'" said Dunn savagely. "I suppose that's what you're meeting him here for?"
 "Put up your fists, Dunn!" said Talbot between his teeth.
 "I won't!"
 "You had better!" said Talbot, with ominous quiet.
 "I'm not going to fight with a thief!"
 Talbot did not waste more time in words. His open palm came ringing upon Dunn's face, leaving a mark there where it fell, and Dunn staggered back.
 "Now will you fight?" said Talbot, in a low voice of concentrated rage. "Will you fight, or are you an utter coward?"
 Dunn sprang towards him, his face aflame with rage.
 "Go it, Dunn!" said Haywood, encouragingly. "Give the thief a hiding!"
 Dunn tried his best. He was not over-endowed with pluck, but the blow had roused what little he had, and he put up as good a fight as he could. But he went down hopelessly before the indignant, and enraged lad whom he had so wantonly insulted.
 Talbot hit out right and left, and finally he went with a crash to the ground, and stayed there, blinking up dazedly from the grass.
 "Have you had enough?"
 "Yes!"
 "Will you apologise for the words you have used to me?"
 "No; I won't!"
 "Give me your cane, Haywood."
 "Shan't!"
 Talbot advanced upon him. Haywood lifted his walking-cane to strike, but Talbot wrenched it away from him in a twinkling.
 "Your turn now!" he said grimly.
 "I don't want to fight you—I don't—ah!"
 Talbot's fist crashing in his face cut short his objections. He flung himself savagely at Talbot, realising that he had no choice in the matter. He fared as badly as Dunn. Talbot knocked him to and fro, receiving hardly a blow in exchange, and finally laid him across Dunn, with a terrific right-hander between the eyes. He rolled off Dunn, who pushed him in a far from gentle manner, and sat up, blinking. Talbot picked up the thick cane.
 "Are you going to apologise?"
 "I—I do!" gasped Dunn, nervously.
 "And—and I!" stuttered Haywood.
 "Very well,"—Talbot tossed the cane into the thickets—
 "I am satisfied. If you fellows are mean enough—base enough—you can believe that I am a thief. But you had better take care how you tell me so. It will not be safe."
 And Talbot walked away. Haywood and Dunn looked at one another in dismay, their discomfiture increased by the fact that Seth Black was watching them with evident amusement.
 Talbot strode back to St. Kit's, without giving a thought more to the two. He was finished with them—and with St. Kit's. His mind was made up. That night he would leave the old school—for ever!

The Committee of Investigation at Work.

"Ere, you youngster!"
 Pat Nugent looked round. He was standing at the gates of St. Kit's, gazing out over the summer woods, when the rough, coarse voice of Seth Black fell upon his ears. The ruffian had lounged up from the direction of the village. Talbot had come up only a quarter of an hour ago, and it immediately occurred to Pat that Seth Black was following him, to repeat the former scene at the school, and his eyes blazed as he turned towards the ruffian.
 "What do you want, you brute?"
 Seth Black removed his pipe from his mouth.
 "Nothin', younker, only you to take a note in to the school."
 "Rats!"
 "And I'll give you sixpence," said Seth Black, persuasively.
 "Keep your sixpence!"
 But even as he spoke, a thought came into Pat's mind. Had the ruffian come there to communicate with Lacy? Black knew nothing of Pat's discovery of his plotting with the prefect. To him Pat Nugent was simply one of the scores of juniors at St. Kit's.
 As the thought crossed his mind, Pat's manner changed.
 "I'll take the note if you like," he said.
 "Good; and I'll give you the sixpence when you bring Mister Lacy's answer back."

Pat's eyes sparkled. His swift suspicion had been correct. Black had come there for some communication with the prefect. Did it relate to the disgrace of Arthur Talbot? Here, at least, was a chance for the self-constituted committee of investigation to commence operations. Black handed him the dirty envelope, carefully sealed, which he drew from his pocket.
 "Give that to Master Lacy," he said.
 "Right-ho!"
 Pat took the letter.
 "Ere, no tricks, you know!" said Seth Black. "Remember that tanner? You're one of the young rips that set on me on this werry spot, now I come to think of it."
 "Did I?" said Pat.
 "Yaas; you did! Gimme that note back."
 "Don't you want it taken to Lacy?"
 "I'll find someone else to take it."
 "Rats!"
 And, as the ruffian made a grasp at him, Pat bolted across the close. Within the precincts of St. Kit's Seth Black dared not follow him, and he waited in some uneasiness at the gate. Pat was soon in the end-study, where he had left Blagden and Greene finishing their prep.
 "Hallo!" said Blagden, looking up. "You seem excited."
 "I am excited," said Pat.
 "What's the matter?"
 "Look at that!"
 Pat held up the note for his chums' inspection. They looked it over.
 "Well, I don't see anything remarkable, or very surprising in that," said Blagden. "It's a remarkably cheap and common, and dirty envelope, certainly."
 "And there's no name or address on it," added Greene.
 "Is there anything inside it, Paddy?"
 "Yes!"
 "Well, what? Get it off your chest!"
 "That ruffianly blackguard, Black, has just given it to me to take to Eldred Lacy."
 Blagden and Greene both gave a simultaneous whistle.
 "Is that a fact?"
 "Do I ever deal in anything but facts, ye spalpeen?" demanded Pat. "Is it a thick ear ye are asking for, intirely, Blaggy?"
 "Sorry!" said Blagden. "I did not mean to imply a doubt of your statement, you wild, Tipperary Irishman, but simply to express surprise."
 "Your apology is accepted, and——"
 "Rats! I haven't made one. I——"
 "Oh, that's all right. Now, Black gave me this note for Lacy. He doesn't know that I am the chairman of the committee of investigation."
 Blagden grinned.
 "No! I dare say there's a little secret inside that note."
 "And the question arises," said Pat seriously, "whether we should be justified, under the circumstances, in opening it."
 Blagden shook his head.
 "Rather not."
 "No," said Greene.
 "Well, I agree with you," said Pat. "It's horrible to open another fellow's letter. They say sometimes that the end justifies the means, but——"
 "But that's an excuse for acting in a way you know to be wrong, that's all," said Greene.
 "I suppose it is."
 "No doubt about it," said Blagden decidedly! "We couldn't think of opening a chap's letter, whatever was at stake."
 Pat Nugent nodded assent.
 "But there's nothing to prevent us from getting on the track now," he remarked. "If I take this note to Lacy, he may get suspicious; but I'll send young Badger, of the Third, with it, and he won't know it's been in my hands."
 "You've got a head on you, Paddy."
 "Yes, I was born with one! Then we'll watch Lacy, and see what he does. If he goes out to meet Black, we'll stick to him like his shadow. I shadowed him once before, you know, and it was a really howling success."
 "Good!" said Blagden and Greene.
 Badger, of the Third, took the letter in to Lacy willingly enough. Lacy was having tea with some of his friends when the Third Form youngster presented himself.
 "Letter for you, Lacy."
 Lacy stopped talking to Rake.
 "Hand it over here."
 Badger, of the Third, did so.
 Lacy looked at the envelope in surprise.
 "Who sent this?" he asked. "Is there any answer?"
 "Man waiting at the gate," said Badger, who had received full instructions from Pat Nugent. "It's the chap who came here and said he was Talbot's father."

Lacy gave a violent start. The other fellows looked at him curiously.

"Hallo!" said Rake. "Didn't know you were cultivating the acquaintance of Talbot's respected pater, Lacy!"

"My hat!" said Dunn. "I saw the chap talking to Talbot in the wood not half an hour ago, and now he's come to pay an afternoon call to Lacy."

"Did he give you that black eye, Dunn?"

"No, he didn't!" snapped Dunn.

"Who did, then?"

"No business of yours!"

Lacy had opened the letter. He scowled darkly as he crumpled it in his hand.

"Let's see it!" exclaimed Rake. "We're all curious, Lacy. You don't often get a billet-doux from a gentleman of Seth Black's standing."

"It's nothing!" said the prefect.

"Any answer?" asked Badger, of the Third.

"No. Get out!"

"I don't mind waiting——"

"Get out!" roared Lacy.

And the Third-Former thought he had best get out.

"You're not going to keep your friend waiting at the gate, Lacy?" said Rake, who evidently took a delight in tormenting the prefect. Even his friends did not like Lacy very much. He never inspired the same loyal attachment as Talbot, and his evident disturbed state of mind only made them curious and troublesome. "Haden't you better ask him in to tea?"

"Don't be an ass, Rake?"

"I'm not. I say, you're not going to leave us?"

"You must excuse me, you fellows," he said. "I must go and speak to this chap. You can finish your tea without me."

"Easily," said Rake. "I'll take your place, and do the honours. But it's really too bad of Talbot's pater to take you away from us like this, and we never knew he was a chum of yours."

"Don't talk rot!" snapped Lacy. "If you want to know all about it——"

"Of course we do; we're interested. What was the beginning of this romantic friendship?" asked Rake, with an air of great interest.

The other fellows were chuckling. Lacy did his best to keep his temper, but his eyes were glinting.

"You know he's not my friend!" he growled. "If you want to know, he's been my go-between in putting some money on a horse, and now he's come to tell me about it."

"Oh-o—oh-o! The Head would like to hear that!"

"I suppose you're not going to bear tales?"

"Not at all," grinned Rake. "I'm not blaming you. We're all human at times. And, to judge by the amiable expression of your countenance when you read the letter, the gee-gee has lost the race."

"You are right."

"Sorry. You must really go!"

Lacy quitted the study and closed the door. Rake looked round the table with a grin.

"Funny business," he remarked. "Fancy Lacy thinking that old hands like us would be taken in by a palpable lie like that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wonder what he is really going to see Blake for?"

"Ha, ha!"

"Anyway, we'll finish the tea," said Rake. "Pass the jam-puffs this way, Dunn. You've been scoffing them all the time, and I haven't had a look in. Old Lacy looked as if he had a worry on his mind. But he does know how to stand a good tea—I'll say that much for him."

Lacy strode down to the gates with a savage, sullen brow. And from the window of the end study three pairs of eyes eagerly watched him. Pat Nugent gave a chuckle of triumph.

"There he goes, kids!"

"He does—he do!" said Blagden and Greene.

"He's gone to see Black."

"He looks as if he's seeing red!" grinned Blagden.

"Rotten!" said Pat. "Anyway, this is where the committee of investigation get to work."

It was the chance the juniors had long wanted, and it had come at last. The committee of investigation were on the trail.

Shadowed by Three!

Eldred Lacy was white with rage as he crossed the quadrangle towards the gates of St. Kit's. He could not venture to disregard the summons of Seth Black, but at the same time he knew that his leaving the tea-party in the study so suddenly had excited suspicious comment. He had left the study in a buzz of curious speculation behind him, and he knew it. He had reason to be uneasy; and he had more reason than he knew of, for Pat Nugent was on the track.

The chance had come sooner than the "committee of investigation" had hoped for, and they were not the fellows to miss it. Lacy was thinking of anyone and of anything but Pat Nugent at that moment. He was not on the alert in the least. He passed out of the gates, and found Seth Black lounging against a tree, smoking a filthy pipe, the familiar fur cap on the back of his bullet head. The ruffian did not seem in the least disturbed by Lacy's white and furious look.

"Evenin'!" he said, with a cool nod, and without taking the trouble to remove the pipe from his mouth.

Lacy snapped his teeth.

"How dare you send a note to me?"

"'Cause I wanted to speak to you, Mister Lacy."

"Fool! Idiot! You might ruin all!"

Seth Black shrugged his shoulders.

"Might I? Perhaps that's what I intend to do!"

Lacy gave him a sharp look.

"Are you mad?"

"No, Mister Lacy; I ain't mad—not by no means," said Seth Black coolly. "I ain't mad enough to let you drive Arthur Talbot from St. Kit's, for one thing."

"What is it to you?"

"A father——"

"Don't talk that rot to me!" snarled Lacy. "You are no more his father than you are mine! You want more money, I suppose! Is that it?"

"I want a civil tongue, fust of all," said Black, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

The prefect endeavoured to rein in his temper.

"Let us get somewhere where we can talk without being seen," he said quickly. "It would be enough to ruin me if the Head or one of the masters saw us together."

"Come along to the Dragon, then."

"The Dragon!" said Lacy, hesitating.

"Yes; it won't be your first visit by any manner of means, and I know it."

"I cannot come there with you."

"Then we'll talk here," said Seth Black determinedly.

"What I've got to say to you won't keep, Mister Lacy."

"You don't understand! I mean I will come to the Dragon. You go now, and I will drop in in ten minutes or so, and so we sha'n't be seen together."

Black hesitated.

"You mean to come?" he said. "Mind, if you don't, I shall come up to the school, and maybe you'll be worse off for it than——"

"Of course, I will come. For goodness' sake, go now!"

Eldred Lacy was in a tremor of uneasiness. Black slouched away, and the prefect leaned against a tree, his breast throbbing, and perspiration thick upon his brow. He could not understand this latest move of the ruffian at all. It did not seem to be merely money that Seth Black wanted. There was something else in it, something the prefect could not understand, but which threatened defeat to his carefully-laid schemes.

Ten minutes elapsed, and the school clock chiming the quarter reminded Eldred Lacy of it. He stepped away down the lane, and did not dream that a boyish figure followed him like his shadow.

Pat Nugent had shadowed the prefect once before, and overheard a consultation between him and the ruffian Seth Black, and though Pat was far from being a mean lad, and heartily hated the idea of eavesdropping, he was prepared to take every chance of learning something to the benefit of Talbot.

Arthur Talbot had been ruined by his enemies, and Pat, convinced that he was innocent and the victim of a dastardly plot, was determined that, by hook or by crook, he would discover the truth. This meeting between Lacy and Black might or might not have a bearing upon the affair of the robbery at the school, but Pat suspected that it had, and, in any case, he meant to learn all that there was to be learned.

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IN "PLUCK," 10

In the dusk it was easy to follow the prefect undetected, especially as Lacy had not the faintest idea that Pat knew anything at all about the matter, and was far too disturbed in his mind to give a single thought to the junior.

For caution's sake, the committee of investigation were acting separately. As Pat said, three shadowers in a bunch would be bound to excite notice. But Blagden and Greene were by no means dead in the act!

A dozen yards behind Pat, moving along as cautiously as a Red Indian on the war-path, came Blagden, just keeping Pat in sight ahead. At the same distance behind Blagden, Greene was on the track, keeping Blaggy in view for guidance.

Lacy was shadowed by three, but they were so far apart that no one would have imagined that they were acting in concert, and the prefect had not the faintest idea of the proximity of any of them. He reached the village, and turned into the lane beside the Dragon, not caring to go into the disreputable inn by the front entrance.

Pat drew a deep breath.

"The Dragon!" he muttered. "That means that he's coming here to have a jaw with Black, and very likely some low gambling business, too. Dr. Kent would be glad to hear of this, begorra!"

Pat turned into the lane beside the inn and followed on. A minute later Blagden was on the same path. Another minute and Greene came on.

Eldred Lacy stopped at the garden gate of the inn and entered it. The garden was very dusky. The window of a room on the first floor was open to the summer night, and from the open window came a scent of strong tobacco.

Lacy looked up.

"Hallo!" came a hoarse voice from above. "That you, Mister Lacy?"

"Yes."

"You can come up."

Lacy passed into the house. The room where Seth Black sat was not lighted; the ruffian had been seated by the open window in the dusk smoking his pipe while he waited for Eldred Lacy. Pat Nugent stopped under that window as Eldred Lacy disappeared into the house, and a door shut behind him.

"Sh!" he whispered, as Blagden joined him.

"Where's Lacy?"

"Gone in."

"Have you seen Black?"

"He was at the window over our heads."

"My hat, we shall have to lie low!"

"It's all right. He's gone from the window. Hark! I can hear them speaking."

The two juniors listened attentively.

(Another fine instalment next Saturday.)

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