

PLUCK

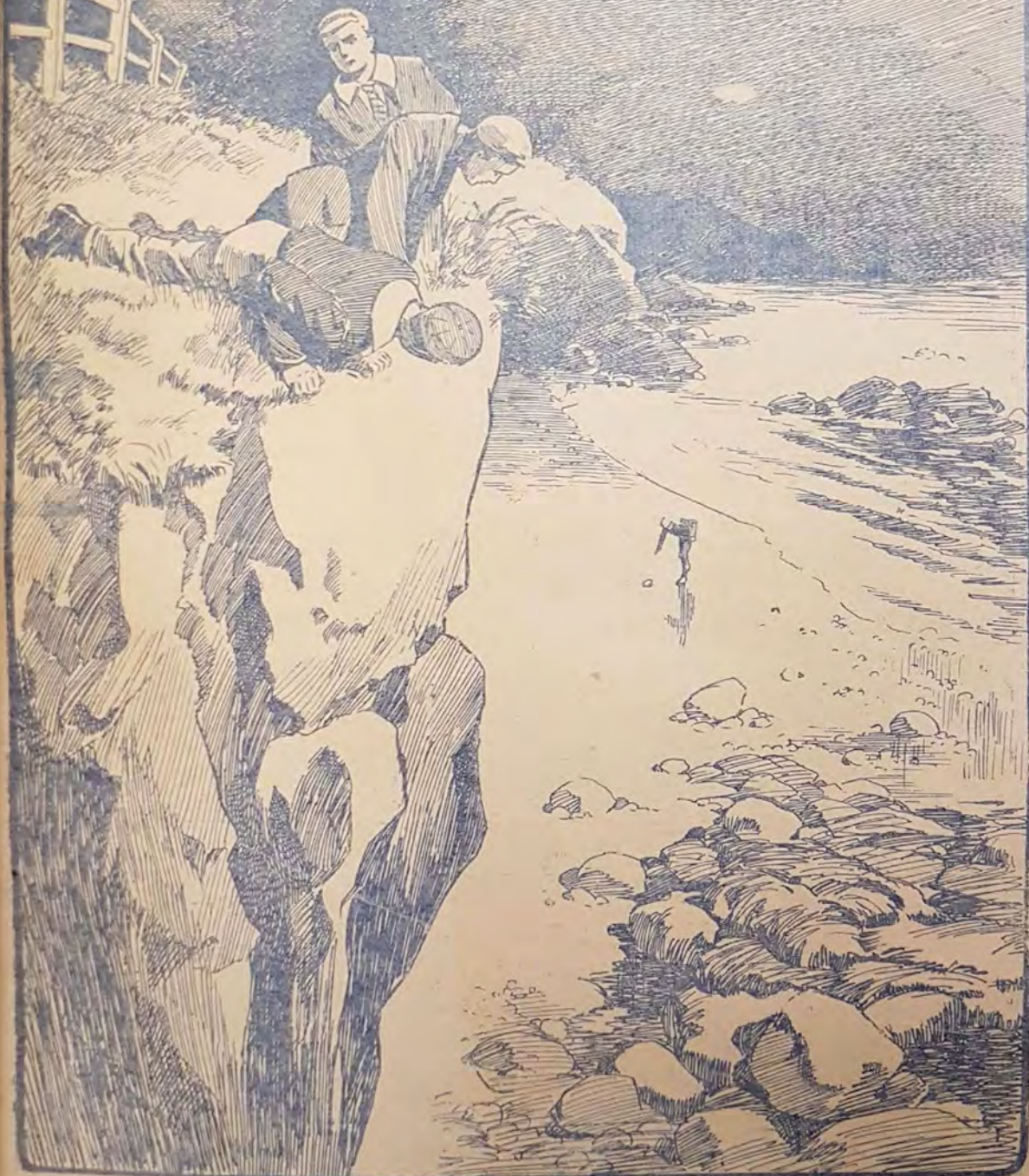
THE BULLY'S FAG.

A Splendid School Tale. By H. Clarke Hook.

WHO DID IT?

A Story of John Smith, Detective, of Daring & Co.
By Mark Darran.

1^p



"GRACIOUS!" EXCLAIMED HOLLIS TO HIS CHUMS, AS THEY SAW THE MAN PICK UP THE CAP. "I WONDER IF THAT WAS WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR?"

NO. 154. VOL. 6. NEW SERIES.

GRAND SCHOOL TALE.

YOU CAN START NOW



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 Greene, 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. At the same time they shadow Seth Black, a tramp, and also the two Lacys. One night, the chums are obliged to take cover behind a hedge as they meet the two Lacys in a lane. In this way they are obliged to listen to their enemy's conversation. At last, however, the two brothers say good-night to one another.

(Now go on with the story.)

Called Over the Coals.

"Good-night, Rupert!"

The squire disappeared into the shadowy trees, and the prefect went with a slow step towards the distant school. His brow was clouded as he walked away. There was something in the squire's manner that he could not understand—something that filled him with a sense of foreboding. It seemed as if the shadow of some terrible calamity were hanging over him—a shadow, intangible, which he could not define or grasp.

The dim, dark lane remained silent and solitary as the brothers strode in different directions, till, after the lapse of some minutes, three shadowy forms detached themselves from the hedge.

"Sure, and I've got the cramp through sticking still so long!" murmured a voice with the beautiful accent of Tipperary. "How do ye feel, Blaggy?"

"Doubled up," said Blagden.

"I've got a crick in the spine, or something like it," said Greene. "Never mind. It's all for the good of the cause!"

"Sure and ye're right!" said Pat. "The committee of investigation is a howling success, ye see, kids. How long has it taken us to get at the truth?"

"We haven't any proofs," said Blagden.

"Oh, we'll get some proofs fast enough," said Pat airily. "The first thing was to ascertain the facts, and we've done that. The proofs are the next thing. My hat, won't the silly asses who are snapping at Talbot now feel small when we yank the giddy truth out into the daylight for the biggest ass at St. Kit's to see!"

"Rather! I say, hadn't we better be getting back to the school?"

"Yes; and on the way we must try to think of some explanation of being late for calling-over," said Pat. "We can't very well state the facts."

"And we can't state anything that's not a fact," Blagden remarked.

"Certainly not!"

"And we can't refuse to answer," said Greene. "Seems to me we're in a little bit of a diff, chappies."

"Oh, we shall wriggle through somehow!" said Pat cheerfully.

They reached the gates of St. Kit's, and as it was useless to make a secret entrance, when they were certain to be called over the coals for their absence, they presented themselves boldly at the gates and rang up the school porter. The latter individual grunted meaningly as he let them in.

"You're wanted in Mr. Slaney's study," he said.

"Sure?" asked Pat. "We don't want to bother Mr. Slaney if it can be helped; it would be inconsiderate, and so."

The porter grinned.

"You're wanted in the study," he repeated. "Mr. Slaney."

he says to me, say he, when those three young himps come in, says he, send 'em to me, says he, and I'll—"

"Yes, I fancy I can hear him saying all that," said Pat. "You have imitated his choice of language in a really surprising manner, old fellow."

"Get along with yer!"

"Sure and we're getting along. I say, chappie, would you like the price of a good long drink?"

"You're very kind, young gent—"

"You'd like it?"

"Yes."

"Then I sincerely hope that you will meet somebody who will give it you," said Pat. "Come along, kids!"

The chums of the end study marched on, leaving the school porter murmuring things to himself which would have gained him his dismissal on the spot if the head of St. Kit's had heard them.

"I suppose we must see Slaney," said Pat. "He'd be hurt if we neglected him."

"So should we, I fancy," remarked Blagden.

"Ha, ha! Come on, and get it over!"

Pat tapped at the door of the Form-master's study.

"Come in!" said the deep voice of Mr. Slaney.

The three delinquents entered.

"Ah, it is you, Nugent, Blagden, and Greene!" said the Form-master, stretching out his hand to a cane on the table.

"Where have you been?"

"Down to the village, sir."

"Have you only just come in?"

"Well, we've been in a little while, sir."

"How long?"

"About—er—about two minutes, sir," ventured Pat.

Mr. Slaney smiled grimly.

"Hold out your hand, Nugent."

Pat obeyed, outwardly solemn, but inwardly glad to escape with a caning without any questions being asked. He received two on each hand, laid on with pretty good force, too, and then Blagden and Greene were served in a similar way.

"Do you think that will be a lesson to you, my boys?" asked Mr. Slaney kindly. "I am quite willing to repeat it if occasion should arise. You may go!"

"Thank you, sir!" said Pat.

The chums left the study. Pat closed the door, and then he placed his hands under his arms, and squeezed them hard against his armpits to ease the pain; but his jolly face wore a grin all the time.

"We're well out of that," he remarked. "Come to the study. There's still time for a feed before bedtime, and I feel as hungry as a hunter. Fried sausages and bacon and tea are about the proper caper now, and I think we have earned a feed. After tea we're going to see Brooke."

His chums stared at him.

"What are we going to see Brooke for?"

"To back him up in standing up for Talbot."

"Rather not!" exclaimed Greene. "Why, he believes Talbot guilty just as the rest of them do. He's not standing up for him!"

"That's why we're going to back him up in doing it," said Pat, condescending to explain. "You see, when he sees that we're sticking to the old flag, it'll make him feel ashamed of himself, and he won't like to confess that he meant to leave old Talbot in the lurch. See?"

Blagden and Greene confessed that they saw. The trio made their way to the end study. They passed many of the members of the Fourth Form on the way, but did not deign to glance at them. The Fourth Form had sent them to Coventry, and they had sent the Fourth Form to Coventry in turn, and it is safe to say that the Form were the most exasperated of the two parties.

The Vote of Confidence.

The new captain of St. Kit's sat in his study. For a fellow who had won that coveted post, against a keen and determined opposition, Brooke did not look very happy. He had tried to work, but he found the effort useless, and he had pushed his books impatiently away.

His darkly-clouded brow told of the worry upon his mind. He was thinking of Talbot.

Never, until that day, had Brooke's faith in his friend been shaken; but shaken it was now—shaken to the very roots.

He had stood firmly by Arthur Talbot until that last scene—the discovery of the stolen money concealed in Talbot's study.

To Brooke, as to the rest of St. Kit's, that discovery seemed convincing.

He was of too kind and simple a nature himself to imagine the depth of baseness to which a nature like Eldred Lacy's could descend. He did not even think of a plot against Talbot.

The supposed motive of his chum was only too clear. The man who claimed him as his son had been extorting money from him, doubtless under threats. Talbot had been compelled to satisfy him, and he had had no money of his own. The rest had followed.

It seemed clear enough to Brooke, as to the rest of the school. And so, in the hour of trial, when his friendship was most needed, he had fallen away from his friend.

He had stood by Talbot through thick and thin, and aided him in many troubles before this; but at the shadow of disgrace he blenched. He could not stand by a thief!

Since that scene in the study he had not seen Talbot—had not wished to see him. His former friend would, of course, leave St. Kit's now, and Brooke did not wish to see him before he went. Yet as he sat there in the study, alone, there was a heavy weight upon Brooke's heart.

The breaking up of an old friendship was painful, and the humiliating circumstances made it more painful still.

He could not help thinking of Talbot and what would become of him. He must leave St. Kit's—there was no doubt about that. Where would he go? What would he do?

He was wholly dependent upon the doctor. If he left St. Kit's, he would have to look out for himself, and fight his way alone in the world. He would have to start life without a helping hand, and with a stain on his name.

It was not pleasant to think of. If there had only been room for doubt! If there had been a flaw in the evidence! Brooke's heart still yearned for his old chum, even at the time when he told himself that he never wished to see Talbot again.

There was a tap at his door.

"Come in," said Brooke dully.

The door opened, and he was glad to see that it was not Talbot. He had feared that Arthur might come to him—might seek to make explanations, protestations of innocence. Believing as he did, Brooke shrunk from such an interview.

Three boyish figures presented themselves in the doorway, the chums of the end study—Pat Nugent, Blagden, and Greene.

"Can we come in, captain darling?" asked Pat persuasively.

"Yes, if you like," said Brooke indifferently.

"Sure, and he's glad to see us, kids! Come in, and shut the door, like good boys!"

Blagden and Greene came in.

"Well, what do you want?" asked the new captain of St. Kit's.

The three juniors stood in a row. They exchanged glances, and Pat cleared his throat. So did Blagden.

"You see, Brooke—" began Pat.

"You see—" Blagden started.

"Sure, and we can't both talk at once, Blaggy."

"Dry up, then."

"Now, look here, don't be an ass, Blaggy, or not a bigger

ass than you can help, anyway," said Pat. "Who's the spokesman of this party?"

"Why, I am!"

"Well, of all the nerve—"

"Here, get out!" said Brooke.

"You hear that, Blaggy? You're making Brooke wild. Why can't you dry up?"

"Oh, all right!" said Blagden. "Go ahead!"

"That's better. You see, Brooke, we've come on important business."

"You youngsters have always got some important business on hand, I believe," said Brooke, with a smile. "What is it this time?"

"We've formed ourselves into a committee."

"Of investigation," explained Blagden.

"That's it," said Greene—"a giddy committee of investigation, to look into this affair of poor old Talbot."

"Knowing him to be innocent," said Pat, "we decided to look into the matter."

Brooke gave a start.

"What's that you say, Nugent?"

"We decided to look into the matter," said Pat innocently.

"I mean before that—about Talbot."

"Oh, that we knew him to be innocent!"

"How can you possibly know anything of the kind?"

"Oh, we know old Talbot too well to think he could possibly be guilty of anything of that sort," said Pat.

"Sure, and I haven't fagged for him all this time without learning the kind of a bhoy he is, begorra!"

"But you must know that—"

"That there is a plot against him. Of course, we know that!"

"A plot!" ejaculated Brooke, starting again.

"Yes, of course! You guessed it, too. We've found proof of it, but that does not matter now. We've really come to back you up."

"To back me up?"

"That's the idea," said the three simultaneously and emphatically.

"But I don't understand," said Brooke, looking puzzled.

"I don't understand at all. What are you going to back me up in, you absurd kids?"

The committee of investigation looked at each other with rather red faces, and feelings too deep for immediate speech.

To be referred to as absurd kids, after all they had done and suffered, was rather too much for their equanimity.

Pat was the first to find his voice. He kept his temper, and proceeded with really admirable calmness.

"My dear Brooke, we're going to back you up in backing up Talbot."

"But I'm not—" Brooke paused.

"You're not expecting much support in the school? No, I suppose not; but you can depend upon us, Brooke, I give you my word for that," said Pat glibly.

"To the last shot in the locker," said Blagden.

"To the last bone in the larder," asserted Greene solemnly.

"You back up Talbot, and we back you up in doing it," said Pat. "We'll gradually bring the others round, and make them see what silly asses they've been."

"But you don't understand—"

"Oh, yes, I understand what obstinate asses they are!" said Pat. "But we shall make 'em see sense in the long run. We shall be able to prove Talbot's innocence before long. I—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said the new captain of St. Kit's resignedly.

Arthur Talbot walked into the study. Brooke bit his lip. Pat Nugent looked from one to the other.

"Sure, and I think we'd better be going," he remarked.

"We'll finish our little talk with you some other time, Brooke."

"You needn't trouble," said Brooke.

"No trouble at all, old fellow. We've passed a vote of confidence in you, Brooke, and we expect you to live up to it."

"Clear out!"

"We're going. But remember the vote of confidence."

"Come, come! Good-night!"

"Good-night! And don't forget!"

And the chums of the end study at last quitted the room.

"I think we've pretty well rubbed it in," said Pat, with a chuckle, as they travelled back to their own quarters. "I could see that Brooke was set against Talbot, but we've shaken him up a little bit, at any rate. I wonder what the captain was there for, though?"

"Hallo, Nugent!"

It was Blane, of the Fourth.

Pat walked straight on, without apparently seeing him in the passage. The chums of the end study kept their noses well in the air.

"Nugent!"

Not a sign did the chums give of being aware of the speaker's existence.

"You silly asses!" said Blane. "How long are you going to keep up this rot of sending the Fourth Form to Coventry?"

No reply.

"If we're willing to speak to you sometimes, you ought to be jolly glad of it. You mayn't have another chance."

Stony silence!

"Asses! Rotters!" howled Blane, as the chums went into the end study, and the door closed; and then he bawled through the keyhole: "Pigs! You won't get another chance!"

Pat Nugent grinned broadly.

"Seems to me the Form will get tired of this Coventry business before we do," he remarked. "But we're going to keep our word, kids. Until they come round to our way of thinking, the Fourth Form are sent to Coventry."

And Blagden and Greene chuckled assent.

Arthur Talbot's Farewell.

Arthur Talbot stood silent while the chums of the end study quitted the room. When the door closed behind them he turned to Brooke.

His erstwhile chum's eyes sought the floor.

"I haven't had a chance of speaking to you since the banknotes were discovered in my study, Brooke," said Talbot quietly. "But from the fact that you have avoided me, I infer that you believe me guilty."

Brooke did not speak.

"I haven't come here to ask for any consideration at your hands," said Talbot, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "If you believe me guilty, and have made up your mind about it, I will go. If there is a doubt left in your mind, I should like to do two things—to assure you of my innocence, in the first place, and in the second to ask a favour of you before I leave St. Kit's for ever."

Brooke started.

"You are going to leave St. Kit's?"

"I am going to-night."

"To-night?" echoed Brooke.

"Yes. Will you listen to the few words I have to say?"

Brooke shifted uneasily.

"What can you possibly have to say?"

"Only a few words. You have known me for some time, Brooke. We were in the Fourth Form at the same time, we came up through the Fifth and Sixth together. Till to-day you have always been my best chum. Have you, in all that time, ever known me to be guilty of an action that wasn't clean and honourable—that wasn't cricket?"

Brooke hesitated.

"Answer me, Brooke."

"No," said the new captain of St. Kit's slowly, "I never did, Talbot."

"Yet you have believed this infamous charge against me, with all those years of faith and friendship behind us."

"You deny that it is true?"

"If it were true, I should not be standing here now. If it were true, I should not be the fellow you have always known. No, it is not true. It is a lie—a horrible lie, which I hope will some day be proved to be a lie. I know that my honour has been plotted and lied away, and I know by whom."

"Tell me!"

"What is the use? I have only my word to give."

"I never knew you tell a lie," said Brooke huskily.

"Talbot, you must know that this is a horrible blow to me, as well as to you. If you can say anything in defence of yourself, it's your duty to say it."

"The person I refer to is Eldred Lacy."

"What do you charge him with?"

"With having managed this affair from start to finish. Exactly how, I don't know; but that he is at the bottom of it I am certain. He aimed to drive me from the school, and he has succeeded. I am going, with a stain on my name. I thought I should have left one friend behind—one chum who would have stood up for me when I was gone. I was wrong."

Brooke raised his eyes to Talbot's.

"How do you account for the money being in your study?"

"It was placed there."

"By Lacy?"

"So I believe."

"Then he must have taken it from the doctor's desk."

"Why not?"

"Without a shadow of proof, how can you expect one to accept that story?"

"I don't expect it," said Talbot wearily. "I don't expect it of the school at large. I expected it of you, because you

were my friend, and I thought you had faith in me. But that was expecting too much, it seems."

Brooke was silent.

"As for Lacy," continued Talbot. "Him I know to be a thief. He stole the silver box from my study, and I forced him to give it back to me. He had accidentally discovered the opening of it, and abstracted the papers it contained, and but for the juniors of the end study I should never have known it, and he would have succeeded in robbing me of them."

"I never heard of that before."

"I spared him; but he has not spared me. He has determined to gain possession of the silver box; why, I cannot say. But you do not believe me?"

"I believe every word you have spoken."

"That I am innocent?"

Brooke hesitated.

"Very well," said Talbot, with a bitter smile, "you do not trust me. Perhaps you are right. I am going. I hope the time may come when you will know me better, though we can never be friends again. Good-bye!"

He turned to the door.

"You said something of a favour you wished to ask."

"Not of a fellow who thinks me a thief."

Talbot's hand was on the door-handle.

There was a struggle in Brooke's breast, which showed plainly enough in his face. His eyes never left Talbot. The door opened.

"Stop!"

Brooke cried out the word sharply, suddenly.

Arthur Talbot turned his head, his hand still upon the door.

"What is it?"

"Come back!"

Talbot stepped back into the study. Brooke's eyes met him steadily.

"Talbot," he exclaimed, "if you can take my hand, and tell me that you are innocent, I will believe you."

He held out his hand.

Talbot looked him full in the eyes.

"Do you mean that, Brooke? No half faith—no doubts?"

"I mean it."

Then Talbot grasped his hand with a firm, hard grip.

"Upon my honour, by all that I hold sacred, I am innocent!" he said steadily.

"I believe you."

Brooke pressed his hand hard. He closed the door, and made Talbot sit down.

"I believe you," he said. "I was mad to doubt; but the proof seemed so complete. Forgive me! I believe you!"

Talbot drew a deep breath. In that solemn moment all doubts had been brushed away. Brooke had looked, as it were, into the very soul of his chum, and found it clear of taint.

"I am glad, old man!" Talbot's voice shook a little. "I hardly thought you could really think such things about me. Yet I do not wonder, for even Dr. Kent doubts me. He has been a father to me, and now he doubts. I shall not see him before I go; it would be too painful. But I have written him a letter, and I hope that he will believe what I have written."

"You must go?"

"The whole school is against me. They jeer and sneer at me in the passages." Talbot's cheek reddened for a moment.

"I could not stay here with all believing me guilty; and besides, the Head would be in a difficult position. That he would turn me out I do not believe, but his position would be extremely difficult if he allowed me to remain. The boys would soon write home to their parents that there was a thief in the school, and that would be very bad for St. Kit's."

Brooke nodded. He felt the force of what Talbot said. If his innocence could not be proved it was better for him to go.

"It may be only for a time," said Talbot. "It may be for ever. If anything comes to light to help to clear me, I shall have a friend here now to sea to it."

"I will leave no stone unturned to get at the truth."

"And you will find help in the youngsters of the end study. I know they are only juniors, and their ways are comical enough sometimes; but they are fine lads, and in deadly earnest over this matter."

"I know that," said Brooke, with a slight smile. "I have already learned that they have formed themselves into a committee of investigation."

Talbot laughed—like a gleam of sunshine on his sad, serious face.

"I hope they will investigate to some purpose," he remarked. "Meanwhile, I must go. It will save the Head from an unpleasant dilemma, and I owe him too much not

to consider him in every possible way. And now for the favour I wanted to ask of you."

"Anything that is in my power you know I will do." "It is very simple, but immensely important to me. I have told you that Eldred Lucy succeeded in opening the silver box, and abstracted its contents. I recovered them; they are here now, in this envelope." Talbot drew a large linen envelope from his breast, and laid it on the table. "My promise not to learn the secret of the silver box holds good; I have not looked at the papers. They are here. I want you to take care of them for me, Brooke."

"I will gladly do it, old fellow!" "Lucy is determined to obtain them; and, for some unexplained reason, so is his brother, the squire of Lynwood. I believe that the papers contain the secret of my birth, and, once lost, that secret will never be revealed. I cannot take them to the Head now, for I cannot see him before I go. I want you to take them, and guard them well, and to-morrow deliver them to Dr. Kent, and he will do with them as he thinks best. In my note I have explained the danger they are in, and he will take care of them. They would not be safe in my possession. I am going out to fight my way in the world, and I do not know where I may go or among what rogues I may fall."

Brooke silently rose, looked the papers up in his desk, and placed the key in an inner pocket.

"They will be safe enough there, Talbot—till to-morrow, at least!"

"Thank you, Brooke. That is a weight off my mind."

"When are you going?"

"Immediately. I have packed my bag with the few things I intend to take with me, and I came to speak to you last of all."

"What of money? Have you enough?"

"Enough for my immediate needs," said Talbot quietly. "I hope soon to find some work to do. No, I cannot take money from you, Brooke. I shall not want."

"At least, promise me this—that if you are in dire need at any time you will let me know, and let me help you," said Brooke earnestly.

"I promise you that; but I hope to do very well. The world is wide, and fellows have done well for themselves who started worse off than I am."

"But—you are not going now?"

Talbot had risen. He nodded.

"It's no good leaving it too late."

"I shall come down to the gate with you."

Brooke left the study with Talbot. The latter went to his room for his coat and cap and bag, and then the friends walked down through the dark close together to the gates of St. Kit's.

There, with a few last words, and a last strong grip of the hand, they parted.

Brooke returned with slow steps and downcast face to the school building. Talbot stepped out in the dim night, striding down the lane towards Northley. But he did not go through the village. His idea was to put as good a distance as he could between him and St. Kit's before morning, and he struck off across country towards the junction, where he hoped to catch the midnight train for London.

He left the lane by the footpath leading towards the bridge over the river. It was a clear autumn night, and a silver crescent of moon was sailing in the sky. All round him lay the dark, silent woods; before him the dark bridge, the swift-flowing river, glimmering in the moonlight. As he came through the wood he had heard the village clock chime the hour of ten.

Little dreaming of what lay before him, Arthur Talbot strode on through the dusky night towards the bridge.

A Dead in the Dark.

Ten! Squire Lacy of Lynwood listened as the ten strokes boomed out from the village church.

The sound floated over the dusky woods and along the river, and reached the squire as he stood upon the lonely bridge.

It was the hour appointed for the meeting with Seth Black.

Squire Lacy was prompt to the appointment.

Yet it was with no pleasant feelings that he had come to the rendezvous at that dark and silent hour to meet the relentless blackmailer.

His face was white under the sun-fan that bronzed it, and his eyes had a restless gleam in them, his glance shifting to and fro in constant uneasiness.

He listened for the sound of the approach of the ruffian.

Seth Black was not likely to fail in keeping that appointment. He had overcome the squire's resolve; he had compelled the man who writhed in his clutches to pass the lines he had marked out for himself, and he had made the proud,

haughty squire of Lynwood feel what it was to be under the thumb of another.

He knew that the squire was enraged, but he did not know what a storm of deadly hate raged in the breast of the man he had forced to come to this meeting—the man he had boarded before his servants in his own hall!

A heavy footstep was audible through the stillness of the night, as the last stroke from the village clock died away.

The squire started, and drew a quick, deep breath.

He tried to compose his face into its ordinary calm, but he could not banish the pallor from his cheeks. He knew it was there, and he kept his face in the gloom, so that the eyes of the man who was coming should not perceive it.

A burly figure in a rough coat and fur cap loomed up out of the darkness.

"Hallo, governor! Are you there?"

"I am here."

The squire's voice was low and quiet, but there was a strange quiver in it which did not escape the ears of the ruffian.

He gave a low chuckle.

"Have you got the tin?"

"Yes."

"That's right. No need for you to get your back up over this, squire. What's a few hundreds to you?"

"It is not the few hundreds," said the squire quietly. "It is the disgrace you have put upon me by coming to my house, and lowering me in the eyes of my own servants. It is the having to yield to the demands of a disreputable ruffian."

"The money is nothing."

Seth Black laughed.

"I shouldn't have troubled you, squire, if you had forked over without it."

"If I had allowed you to make ducks and drakes of my money without setting a limit to your greed and folly, you mean," said Robert Lacy bitterly.

"Whose money?"

"My money, confound you!"

Seth Black chuckled again.

"Easy come, easy go, squire. Why shouldn't I have a share in the loot, eh? As for whom the money belongs to—"

"Hold your tongue!" said the squire, between his teeth.

"I did not come here to bandy words with you."

"Just as you like, squire. You have only got to hand over the tin, and I'll say good-night with a great deal of pleasure. There's some fellows waiting for me at the Dragon."

"Waiting for you to gamble away the money you have extorted from me!"

"That's my affair, squire. I suppose I can spend it how I like."

"And to-morrow, when it's gone—"

"Very likely I shall come to you for more," said Black coolly. "Why not? You are in possession of a fortune that doesn't belong to you—not to put too fine a point on it. Why shouldn't you shell out to the man who could give you away if he liked?"

The squire did not reply.

He had given a start, and was staring away from the bridge into the shadows of the footpath that led through the trees towards the distant village.

Black followed his glance in surprise.

"What's the matter now? What are you alarmed at?"

"I thought I heard a footstep."

"Then you was mistaken. I passed nobody on the road; it was as lonely as a churchyard."

The squire's eyes gleamed for a moment.

"I don't want to be seen talking to you," he muttered quickly. "Someone may pass at any moment. Come here!"

"Where's the tin?"

"I have it here."

The squire's hand went into his breast, and Black heard the crisp rustle of banknotes.

But at the same moment Robert Lacy strode down from the bridge into the black shadow of the trees at the side of the glistening river.

Black followed him impatiently. He had heard no sound, and he set down the footstep to the squire's nervous imagination.

He did not suspect as yet that the imaginary sound was an invention designed to trick him into leaving the dim light of the bridge for the darkness under the trees.

The squire had played his part well. The ruffian had no suspicion of the desperate resolve in his breast.

"Hand it over, squire."

"Take it!"

The squire's voice came in a sibilant hiss now.

The ruffian started back, but it was too late.

The squire's hand came out of his breast, but the banknotes were not in it. His fingers were clutching a short, heavy life-preserver. The weapon whirled up, and came down with a fearful blow as the ruffian started away.

"Take your deserts, you thief!" hissed the squire. "Take them! That is the price of your silence."

Crash!

The backward movement of Seth Black saved him from the full force of the blow, which might otherwise have killed him on the spot. But the concussion upon his head as the heavy weapon struck was terrible. He reeled away, throwing up his hands wildly, a choked cry breaking from his lips.

Rupert Lacy, with gleaming eyes and parted lips, his teeth showing like those of some wild animal, sprang forward to repeat the blow.

The weapon went up again, and again it descended upon the reeling ruffian; but at the same moment Black lost his footing, and fell backward heavily, and the blow hurled him fairly into the stream.

Splash!

The squire muttered an imprecation. Both the blows had been terrible, but had not fallen with full force, and now the ruffian was out of his reach.

A sharp, terrible cry broke from Seth Black as the waters closed over his head.

The squire, in the deep shadow of the trees, watched the water, where the moonlight fell, with feverish, eager eyes.

A face came up to view—a white, set face, with closed eyes. Seth Black, if not dead, was insensible, and a few moments more the swift current was whirling him away under the bridge.

The squire's teeth came together with a snap; his eyes blazed with exultation. If not dead already, Seth Black had gone to his doom, and the weight of that terrible incubus was gone from him.

Then suddenly the squire started with terror. A face was looking down from the bridge—a face white and strained in the moonlight, with keen eyes searching the glistening water.

Lacy started at it from the bank below in terror and amazement. Well he knew that face.

When he had told Black that he heard a footstep he had lied, to trick the ruffian from the bridge down to the dark bank of the river. He had not dreamed that anyone was at hand. But now—now he knew that Black's last cry had been heard by a passer, that there was one on the bridge who knew that a man had gone to his death in the river.

Hidden in the blackness under the trees, the squire stared with eyes full of terror at the face that looked down from the bridge—the face of Arthur Talbot.

(Another fine illustration next Saturday.)

Your Editor's Corner.

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

"BROOKS OF THE LOWER FOURTH."

I have great pleasure in announcing for our next Saturday's issue a thoroughly interesting and powerful, long, complete school tale by Michael Storm. The author of "Brooks of the Lower Fourth," is new to you; but I am sure that when you have read

"BROOKS OF THE LOWER FOURTH."

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YOUR EDITOR.



This picture depicts an incident in "Brooks of the Lower Fourth," by Michael Storm, one of the two complete tales in next Saturday's PLUCK. Price 1d.