

School, Detective & Adventure Tales for All.

GRAND
CHRISTMAS
DOUBLE
NUMBER

PLUCK 2^D

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ASJ

of the end study, and was terrified by it. He had been in bed only a few minutes, and the fear of discovery was heavy upon his heart.

"Cleeve!" Mr. Slaney spoke quietly but firmly. As if there were some resistless power in the master's voice, Cleeve opened his eyes.

He had not the nerve to keep up the deception with the Form master's keen gaze fixed upon his face. His eyes opened, and met Mr. Slaney's.

"Cleeve, why were you pretending to be asleep?"

Cleeve trembled.

"Answer me! Why were you pretending to be asleep?"

"I—I—I wasn't, sir!"

"Don't lie to me! You were pretending to be asleep," said Mr. Slaney, his voice low, but hard and stern. "Why? Because you have been out of the house to-night? Because you have just returned from the chapel?"

Cleeve's eyes distended with terror.

He could only imagine that Mr. Slaney had himself seen him, and he was too terrified to think of a lie in time to be of any use to him.

"I—I—I—" he stammered helplessly, and broke off.

"You have been to the old chapel to-night? Answer me—the truth, mind!"

"Ye-es!"

"Why did you go?"

"I—I went because Trimble wanted me to."

"Why did Trimble want you to?"

"Only for—for fun!"

"You went into the old crypt for fun, did you?"

Cleeve gasped.

It was clear that Mr. Slaney knew all about it. The thought of the fifteen sovereigns hidden in his inner pocket weighed upon Cleeve's mind. A search of his clothes would reveal them, and the game would be up.

He had one chance left—to put all the blame upon Trimble, if he could. That was the only loophole of escape he could see.

"Tell me the truth, Cleeve," said Mr. Slaney sternly.

"What did you go into the crypt with Trimble for?"

"To—to get the money that was hidden there," gasped the wretched junior—"the money that was stolen from Dr. Kent's desk!"

"How did you know it was hidden there?"

"I—I saw Lacy hide it there!" groaned the miserable wretch, the words, as it were, torn from him.

There was a general exclamation. Half the dormitory had been awakened, and a dozen ears had caught Cleeve's startling statement.

"You saw Lacy hide the money in the crypt?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Why did you not take it before, then?"

"I—I was afraid! I told Trimble about it, and we agreed to take it to-night, when it would be quite safe to go to the old chapel."

"What did you intend to do with the money?"

"I—I—we—"

"That is enough! You intended to keep it!"

"I—I—no—yes—I—"

"Enough! Now, will you swear that it was Lacy you saw hide the money in the old crypt?"

"Yes, sir. I wondered what he was skulking into the ruins for at night, and I watched him, and I saw it all."

"Where is the money you took as your share?"

"In—in my pocket, sir."

"Give me it."

Cleeve reached tremblingly out of bed, and picked his jacket off the chair. There was a chink of coin as he picked it up with his shaking hands.

Mr. Slaney took the garment from him.

"I will take this just as it is," he said. "I am glad you have spoken out, Cleeve. The proof was clear enough, but you have made things better for yourself by speaking out."

The wretched boy burst into tears.

"Will you—will you intercede with the doctor for me, sir?" he groaned. "He—he will expel me—I know he will!"

"I should consider that very likely. You must consider yourself lucky if you are not given into custody for theft," said Mr. Slaney grimly. "You will certainly have to leave the school you have disgraced!"

"Oh, sir, I—have mercy on me—I—I—"

"You need say no more. Boys, you must be quiet. I forbid you to interfere with Cleeve in any way. His punishment will be severe enough."

Mr. Slaney, carrying Cleeve's jacket under his arm, turned and left the dormitory, followed by Brooke and the chums of the end study. In spite of his warning, he left the room in a buzz of talk behind him.

"The money's found at last!"

"It was Lacy stole it, not Talbot!"

"Talbot's innocent!"

"And Cleeve knew it all the time, and never let on!"

"The cad! The sneak!"

"He'll be expelled!"

"And serve him jolly well right, too!"

Such were some of the remarks the wretched boy, cowering under the bedclothes, had to listen to, as he wept in the Upper Fourth dormitory.

Meanwhile, Mr. Slaney and his companions proceeded to the long, dark apartment, and caught the eyes of Trimble, who was not yet asleep. He had not the faintest idea of what had occurred in the Lower Fourth room, but he instinctively felt that the coming of the Form master meant no good to him, and he promptly closed his eyes and shrank under the bed.

The master of the Fourth halted beside the head of the bed.

"You need not pretend to be asleep, Trimble!"

Trimble had more nerve than Cleeve, but there was a very thing in the Form master's tone that struck a chill to his heart. He opened his eyes involuntarily.

His startled gaze passed the Form master, to whom Brooke and the chums of the end study stood, and then turned to the Form master's stern face.

"What—what's the matter, sir?" he stammered.

"You have just returned from the ruined chapel, Trimble?"

Trimble's heart sank.

But he mustered all his nerve to meet the situation. "No, sir; certainly not! If those fellows say I have they're telling lies! I have not been out of the dormitory."

"I have heard a very different story from Cleeve!"

The captain of the Upper Fourth jumped.

"From Cleeve, sir?"

"Yes. Cleeve has confessed!"

"The—the cur! I mean, I don't know what he may have said, but if he says I was in the chapel to-night, he's telling an untruth, sir!"

"Take care, Trimble! You were seen to go there by Nugent, Blagden, and Greene."

"They're liars, sir! Those fellows hate me, and would do anything to injure me. They'd do anything against me because I made the Fourth Form send them to Coventry for sticking up for the thief, sir!"

"You young rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Slaney. "You know perfectly well that Talbot was innocent. You know perfectly well that you have just been to the chapel to take away the money which Eldred Lacy concealed for safety in the old crypt!"

Trimble's jaw dropped.

Cleeve had given him away, with a vengeance!

"It's—it's not true, sir!" he gasped.

"Then if I search your clothes I shall not find any of the money in them?" asked the master of the Fourth sternly.

Trimble turned as white as a sheet.

In his fear and confusion, he had forgotten the money, it was a piece of evidence that could not possibly be disputed.

"The—the money, sir!"

"Ah, you are changing your tune now, I see!" Mr. Slaney exclaimed scornfully. "You had forgotten that. You had forgotten the proverb which says that a liar should have a good memory, Trimble!"

Trimble gasped for breath.

"I—I—I never meant to keep the money. Ask Cleeve! He told me that it was there; he had seen someone put it there—"

"Whom? Tell me whom?"

"L-Lacy, sir!" Trimble had no thought of keeping anything back now. If he could save his own skin, it would be as much as he could do, without trying to save anybody else's. "Lacy, sir, so he told me. Lacy hid the money in the old crypt, and—"

"And you and Cleeve determined to rob the robber, eh?"

"N—no, sir. I meant to take the money back to Dr. Kent!"

"Indeed! Then why did you divide it with Cleeve?"

"I—I—I—"

"Don't say any more, Trimble. Your falsehoods are as palpable for a child to be deceived by them. You expect me to believe you. Where is the money?"

"In—in that pocket, sir."

Mr. Slaney picked up the garment which Trimble had died with a trembling finger.

"Very good. I will take this away with me, Trimble!"

"Oh, sir! Will you—will you speak for me to Dr. Kent?"

"I never really meant to keep the money. I should have thought better of it. I should—"

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I mean, backed—that is to say, gone away. Then we thought that perhaps something had happened to you, especially as Squire Lacy is hanging round the school, and we saw him dodging in the closet."

Talbot gave a violent start.
"You have seen Squire Lacy in the closet?"

"Yes."
"I knew it—I knew he would come!"

Talbot muttered the words unconsciously aloud. Pat heard them with amazement.

"You know he would come, Talbot?"
"Never mind. You are sure you saw him—you are certain that it was the squire of Lynwood in the closet, Nugent?"

"Arrest, yes! I think I know him well enough by this time."

"But what were you doing in the closet yourself?"
"Thereby hangs a tale," said Pat. "It's quite an interesting story, and I will tell you if you like. You know that we made a committee of investigation—a committee of three—to look into the matter of that theft from the doctor's study."

"Yes, yes; go on."
"Well, we've done it, and this is the last lap. We've unearthed lots of evidences, and proved that you are innocent."

"If you are joking, Nugent—"
"I say, Talbot, old chap, do you think I would joke on such a subject?" said Pat, becoming very earnest. "It's serious, honour bright."

"Tell me all, Nugent. I believe you."
Whereupon Pat concisely related the happenings of the night. Blagden and Greene bore out the tale, but Pat, as usual, did most of the talking.

Talbot listened with an interest that can easily be understood. When all was told, he gripped Pat's hand in the darkness, and wrung it hard.

"I shall never forget this, Nugent."
"Oh, that's all right!" said Pat cheerfully. "It was luck as much as anything else, you know. And you've been so decent to us that we were bound to stand by you in time of trouble. You see, we've sort of taken you under our august wing."

Talbot smiled.
"I am very grateful to you, my lads," he said. "You have done more for me than I dreamed it was possible for anyone to do. Heaven be thanked that my innocence of that wretched theft will now be clear! If I can ever repay this debt, you will not find me wanting."

"Well, if you're anxious to be quits, Talbot—"
"What can I do for you, Nugent?"

"You can explain what's the meaning of this giddy mid-night vigil," said Pat. "Greene suggests that perhaps your worries have made you go off your rocker; but, upon the whole, I don't think that's the true explanation. But I'm blessed if I know why you should be spending a night leaning up against a wall in a beastly draughty passage. You're not off your rocker, are you, Talbot?"

"No, I'm not off my rocker," said Arthur quietly. "I am here for a purpose, and as I know you youngsters can be trusted, I don't mind telling you—"

"Oh, I say, don't tell us unless you wish to, Talbot! I was only joking just now."

"There will be no harm in telling you. I want you to keep secret that you have seen me here; but I may, as well explain. I am keeping watch over the safety of Seth Black."

"But he's not in any danger."
"He is, I firmly believe, in terrible danger. You know that he was murderously attacked and hurled into the river, and has not yet recovered consciousness!"

"Yes, I know that; but—"
"When he recovers, he will denounce the man who attacked him."

"That's Squire Lacy," said Pat. "There's no doubt upon that point."

"So I believe. But, whosoever it was, the scoundrel must be trembling in his shoes, and awaiting with fear the hour of Black's recovery."

"Yes, rather. I shouldn't like to be in his place."
"He is a desperate man, and he has much to lose by the truth becoming known," said Talbot quietly. "He has at-

tempted Black's life once, and may do so again. The only way he can be saved from damnation is by Black's recovering consciousness. Do you understand? I think that he will make some attempt to prevent Black ever speaking again in this world."

Pat Nugent shuddered.

"My hat! I never thought of anything of that kind!"
"I have said nothing to the doctor. It is useless to wait until he has spoken," said Arthur Talbot. "You understand now? I believe it was the squire who attacked him."

"I believe it will be the squire who will come here like a thief in the night to silence him for ever."

"Great Scott! And we saw him—"

"Yes; the fact that you saw him lurking about the school proves to me that my suspicion is well founded," said Talbot with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "He can have no motive for being here, save to carry out such a purpose as I have suggested."

"The—the scoundrel! I believe you are right!"
"He will find it easy to obtain admission to the school at the time he desires to enter, his brother will let him in."

"Then, when we saw him, he was—"

"He was coming here. Seeing you here doubtless scared him off for a time, he may give up the idea for the night, or he may simply leave it till later."

"You are going to keep on the watch?"

"Yes, until dawn."

"I say, let us stop with you, Talbot. It's beastly lonely, and besides, there may be danger. We could lend a hand, you know, when the pinch comes."

Talbot shook his head in the darkness.

"No, my lad, I cannot permit that. I should never forgive myself if any harm came to you. I cannot allow you to remain, simply because there is danger."

"But, I say—"

"It is no use arguing, Nugent. I cannot allow you to remain. Now, go away to bed, my dear boys. You know I don't like to refuse you, after what you have done; but I must be firm upon this point. It is very probable that after such an alarm the squire will not come at all to-night, and you would lose your sleep for nothing."

"We shouldn't mind that. Still, if you want us to spot the squire's world! Good-night, Talbot! Come along, kids!"

"One moment, Nugent. Go straight back to your dormitory."

"Right-ho! We'll go straight back to the dormitory."

"I say—" began Blagden.

"No, you don't," said Pat, nudging him. "Come along! Good-night, Talbot, old son!"

"Good-night, my lads!"

Pat dragged his chums away. Talbot remained alone in the darkness, watching and waiting with the iron patience of an Indian hunter.

The chums of the Fourth made their way back to the dormitory.

"We're here," whispered Pat. "Here's the giddy dormitory. Nothing like being obliging, is there? Talbot wanted us to come straight back to the dormitory, and we've done it. We're not going in, of course. We didn't say we'd do that, did we?"

"Ha, ha! No, we didn't!"

"We've come straight back to the dormitory, and kept our word. Now we're going to do as we like," said Pat.

"Good! What's the game, now?"

"We're not going to let Talbot tackle that scoundrel alone. Why, he might be in danger of his very life. We're going to keep on the watch, and if there's an alarm—"

"We shall chip in and help Talbot!"

"Exactly!"

"Good idea! I don't mind losing my beauty sleep for the good of the cause."

"Come on! We'll stay near the head of the stairs, and then we shall be able to hear any sound from where Talbot is."

The chums of the Lower Fourth were soon settled on the watch. In the darkness at the head of the staircase they were silent and invisible. Sleep did not visit their eyelids; they were too excited for that.

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The door opened out from the clock tower, and still the silence of the night had not been broken by any other sound. Suddenly Pat clutched his companions, and drew them back into the darkness of a doorway. A figure was coming along from the direction of the clock tower, and it passed down the stairs with an ominous step. Silence reigned again. "Who was that?" whispered Blagden, in a shaking voice. "Talbot Lacy." "No! Sure of that?" "Yes!" "Then he's gone to let the squire in?" "Not a bit of doubt about that, my infants! This is the night of the fun starts," murmured Pat Nugent. "Keep your eyes open." The three of the end study watched and waited with bated breath.

Squire Lacy's Last Blow.

Arthur Talbot remained where the juniors had left him, and waited patiently on the watch. Whether the squire, after the alarm he had had, would attempt the attempt to some other night, he could not guess. But, whether or not, he was certain that Rupert Lacy would come, and when he should come, Talbot was prepared to be prepared. He hardly seemed to feel the want of sleep. He waited and watched, alone and quiet in the deep silence of the night. The hour had boomed out, and silence had again upon the school. The night was growing old. Suddenly Arthur Talbot gave a start. A faint, almost imperceptible sound had caught his ears. He stiffened up unconsciously, his eyes gleamed, and his hands clenched hard. It was the sound of a faint footstep in the darkness that had fallen upon his straining ears. Was his long vigil to be rewarded at last? He made no movement, no sound. He waited, with hard-bitten breath, every sense keenly on the alert. A whisper came faintly through the gloom. "That is the room." "Come and show it me. I do not want to make a mistake." Faint as the whispers were, Talbot knew the voices—the voice of Squire Lacy of Lynwood and his brother Eldred, the prefect of St. Kit's. He smiled grimly as he heard them. His surmise had been perfectly correct. Eldred Lacy had wanted his brother to the house in the dead of night, and the squire was come, at last, to do the dastardly work he had planned—to purchase oblivion for a crime by a still later crime. "I-I cannot!" Eldred Lacy's voice was faltering, faint. The prefect was evidently the prey to a deep and unnerving terror. "I-I dare not!" "Fool, what do you fear?" "Nothing! But for Heaven's sake, Rupert—for mercy's sake, think what you are going to do—think!" "Do you imagine I have not thought? Do you think I am lightly entered upon such an accursed adventure?" said the brother hoarsely. "But—but it will be—"

"If Seth Black speaks again in this world, I am lost!" "It was you—you who—"

"Yes, it was I." "Good heavens!" "You know now why Seth Black must never speak again. You are afraid, go back to your bed. I don't want to see you into it. Go back!" "I'll go back, but—but—"

"Bah! Why do you tremble? You, at least, are in no danger. You are sure that that is the room yonder? I don't want to make a mistake." "The next door on the right is the one." "Good! Leave me, then!" "Rupert, think—even if matters are as bad as you say—they may never recover, anyway, and as yet you are not—"

"Fool! Besides, no one can ever suspect. If anyone is suspected, it will be Talbot." "Talbot?" "Yes! I have instilled into the doctor's mind the suspicion that it was Talbot who made the attack upon Seth Black, and when the discovery is made in the morning—"

"Rupert!" "You see, I am safe. Go back to your room! I will not tell you are safe in your bed." There was a note of bitter scorn in the hoarse voice of the squire. "Go back!" There was a faint sound of footsteps. Eldred Lacy was gone.

The minutes crawled by. Arthur Talbot stood silent in the darkness, waiting. The squire had not yet moved since his brother left him.

He moved abruptly, and came along towards the door of the sick-room. His hand was feeling for the handle, when Talbot's strong grip fell upon his wrist. The sudden, unlooked-for contact in the darkness sent a thrill of terror to the very heart of Rupert Lacy. He staggered back, white as a sheet.

But his nerve quickly returned. He tried to snatch his wrist away, but Talbot's grip was like iron. "Who—who are you?" hissed the Squire of Lynwood. "I am Arthur Talbot!" hissed the Squire of Lynwood.

Lacy gasped. "You—you?" "Yes, I! You are caught, Rupert Lacy! You are my prisoner!"

The squire made a terrible effort to tear himself free. Talbot closed with him, and the next moment they were struggling like tigers in the black gloom of the passage.

The struggle was furious, but almost silent. Talbot would make no sound, for fear of disturbing the man who lay unconscious in the sick-room. The squire, of course, was only too anxious not to attract attention. If he could escape from the house unseen by anyone but Talbot, he could deny Arthur's story afterwards—he might brazen it out; there would be a chance, at all events. But if he were captured—

The struggle was deadly. Squire Lacy was a powerful man, but he had to do with the finest athlete of St. Kit's. Hard and bitter was that deadly wrestle in the darkness. Scarce a sound came from the combatants, save sharp, panting breath, and an occasional gasp.

There was a sound up the corridor—a sound of footsteps, of more than one.

Faint as the sounds of the struggle were, they had caught the straining ears of the chums of the Lower Fourth, watching and listening in the silence of the night.

Pat Nugent, Blagden, and Greene, careless of danger, were hurrying to the scene.

"Talbot's got him!" "Come on, kids!" "Get a light, Greene!" Pat and Blagden ran swiftly up. Greene paused to light the bicycle-lantern he carried, and then came running on the scene.

Squire Lacy's teeth came together hard. If that light fell upon his face he was a lost man! His hand relaxed its grip upon Arthur Talbot, and went swiftly into his breast. Talbot gripped him harder, and he went down heavily, Talbot on top.

The next moment Arthur reeled off him, with a cry of agony.

Something sharp, something that glimmered in the darkness, was in the hand of Rupert Lacy, and Arthur Talbot struggled from him, with the blood running down his side.

The squire was on his feet in a moment. Without a look at the lad he had struck, he darted away just as the lantern gleamed on him. Pat sprang after him. He did not know how Talbot was hurt.

"After him, kids!" The three juniors dashed on.

"Come back—come back!" cried Arthur, in agony. "Come back! He is armed!"

The juniors heeded not; they hardly heard him. They were running like hares in pursuit of the squire. Doors were opening now, voices calling. Lights gleamed here and there. The whole house was alarmed now.

"Come back—come back!" Talbot's voice died away in a groan. The juniors were gone. Careless of danger, they raced on. The squire had gone down the passage like a hunted hare, the youngsters hot on his track.

"What is the matter?" It was Mr. Slaney's voice, and he had come out of his room at the head of the stairs, with a lamp in one hand, and a golf-club in the other.

He stood directly in the path of the squire. "Stop him, sir!" yelled Pat Nugent. "Burglars! Murder!"

The golf-club was whirled aloft. The squire, more afraid of the light than of the stick, stopped, and turned back with a desperate snarl.

Before the juniors knew that he had doubled he was upon them. Right and left the youngsters went reeling before his desperate rush, and he was past them in a twinkling.

Pat reeled against the wall. "He's gone!" he gasped, recovering himself. "My hat! He's not going to get away like this! Stop them! Burglars! After him!"

Somewhat dazed, but very determined, the juniors resumed the chase.

Your Editor's Corner.

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

HOW DO YOU LIKE THIS CHRISTMAS NUMBER? It is yet some weeks before Christmas, so I will press the hope that you have enjoyed reading this, our

DOUBLE NUMBER, and put off till a more seasonable time the pleasure of greeting you with all the good old wishes. I should very much like to have posted a card to you concerning our three stories; and if you are a reader of "The Gem" Library, you might at the time let me know what you think of

"TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS."

You should order the Double Number of "The Gem" now, price 1d.

Now about our Saturday's tale, "PLUCK," and its price - 1d.

The first has a powerful, convincing tale by Michael Storm, entitled "THE HEAD VERSUS THE SCHOOL."

THE SCHOOL will thoroughly grip your imagination. In fact, I think that these stories by Michael Storm are to put it in your words - good and true. You feel you've read a story by this author, and you've had something with genuine work in it, and I make bold to say that many of the scenes and memory of characters in

"THE HEAD VERSUS THE SCHOOL" will stick in your mind for years to come.

NEXT SATURDAY'S COVER!

Our second story, "DR. NEVADA'S TRAP," will deal with a thrilling adventure of this famous very interesting character. It's a good story, but as I have so much space to fill, I must leave it to you that, in order to remind you that we have three new stories in "The Gem" Library, please Liberty now on sale.

The squire was racing away in the darkness, hardly knowing where he was going. His escape by way of the back door was not yet, and his only hope lay in getting out of the house. But as he took up the chase again, heard the sound of breaking glass.

"Crash, crash!" he yelled excitedly. "He's getting out of the corridor window."

They dashed on. Mr. Slaney overtook them, and his lamp glared out ahead as they ran on together.

"Crash, crash!" At the end of the corridor was a high window, and it was evidently here that the squire was endeavouring to make his escape. There was no other means of exit from the corridor, except by turning back or entering one of the bed rooms.

"Crash, crash!" "Stop!" shouted Mr. Slaney, flashing the lamp upon the desperate figure at the window. "Stop! Madman! You will go to your death!"

The fear of death was little to the Squire of Lynwood at that moment.

He was through the smashed window now, and crouching on the sill, striving to penetrate the darkness below with his straining eyes.

"Come back!"

The squire muttered a savage curse. Below him was a sheer drop of thirty feet or more, and nothing - no projection, not even a water-pipe, to assist his descent.

He was lost!

His eyes swept wildly round. Death was better than capture, for capture meant disgrace and prison - worse than death!

Before him a gigantic elm, stripped of leaves by the autumn wind, stretched its creaking branches towards the house. If he dared -

It was that or capture!

At that moment he dared anything. Mr. Slaney was already reaching up to grasp him from within, rather to save him from his own rashness than to make him a prisoner. The squire eluded his grasp, set his teeth, and desperately sprang!

Mr. Slaney gave a cry of horror.

"He is lost!"

He clambered upon the sill. Where was the desperate man gone?

That frantic spring had carried the squire upon the nearest branch, but the branch was not equal to his weight.

His hands grasped it, his fingers closed upon it tenaciously, and the branch bent and cracked, and broke!

One wild, despairing cry escaped the lips of the wretched man as he shot downwards into the darkness.

(Another fine instalment next Saturday.)



This picture depicts an incident in "The Head versus The School," by Michael Storm, one of the two complete tales in next Saturday's PLUCK. Price 1d.