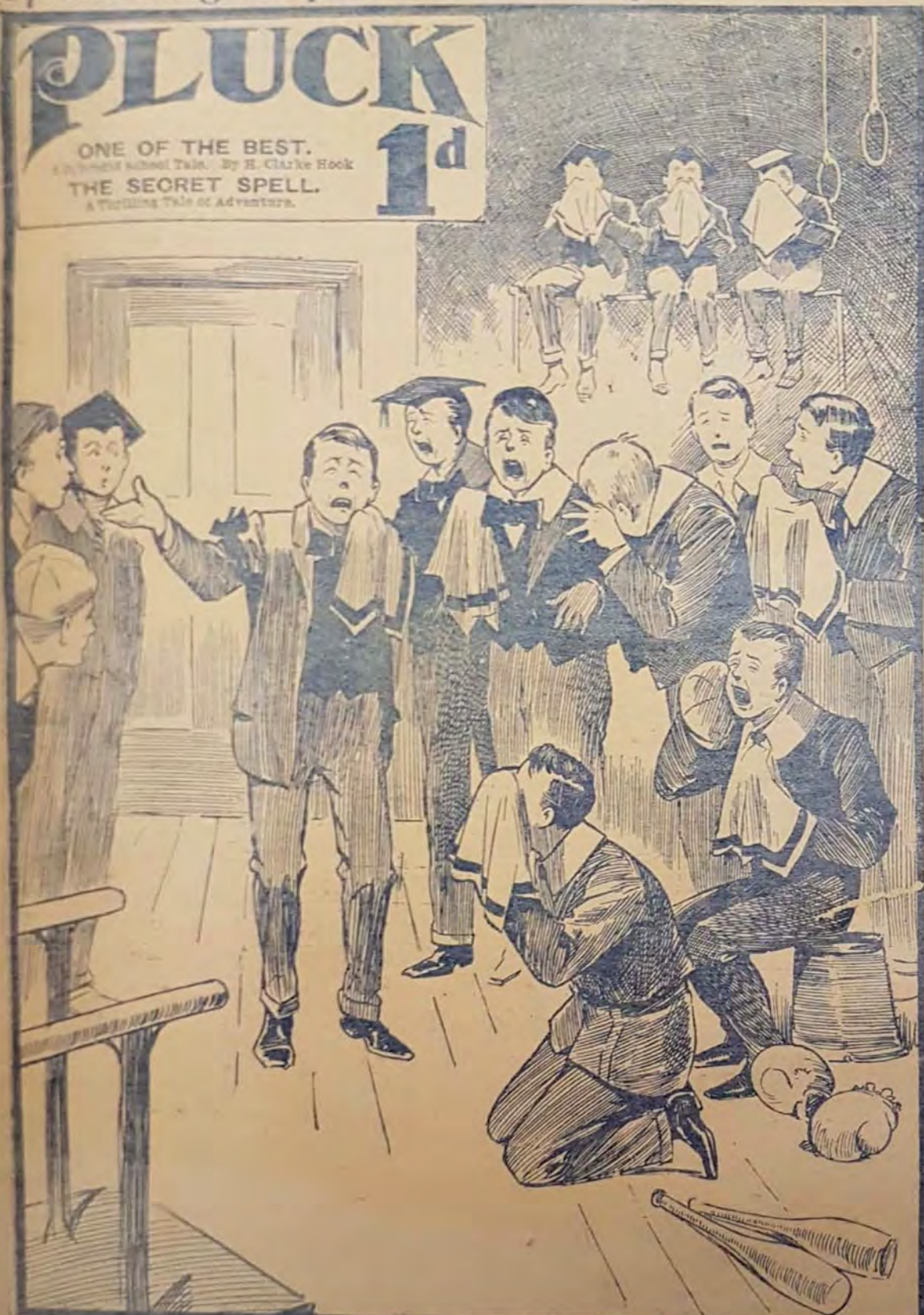


Special Long Complete School Tale by H. Clarke Hook.

PLUCK

ONE OF THE BEST.
A Complete School Tale. By H. Clarke Hook
THE SECRET SPELL.
A Thrilling Tale of Adventure.

1d



"AS I WAS SAYING, GENTLEMEN," SHUFFLED FEAIST, "THESE POOR LADS HAVE REACHED A CRISIS IN THEIR YOUNG LIVES. THEY ARE ABOUT TO GO OUT ON THE WORLD AT THE EARLY AGE OF TWELVE OR SO—WELL, PERHAPS FIFTEEN, IF YOU WISH TO 'SPLIT STRAW'."

NO. 162 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 a Lynwood. Soon after the election for the position of captain, which Talbot elected captain of St. Kit's. One morning the Head discovers he has been accused of the theft. 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. However, Arthur Talbot decides to run away from St. Kit's. He leaves the school by night, and as he is passing over the bridge which spans the river he hears a splash, followed by a weak cry for help. The cry is from the lips of Seth Black, a tramp who has been bribed by Squire Lacy to claim Talbot as his son. When Lacy hears that Arthur is going to leave the school he knows that Black will be a hindrance to his plans, so on the night that Arthur leaves St. Kit's the squire attacks Black on the river-bank, and then throws him into the water. Arthur Talbot, however, eventually saves Black from drowning and takes him to the school. For a whole day Seth Black lies unconscious in one of the bed-rooms. In the night the three chums, by shadowing Trimble and Cleeve, are instrumental in recovering the doctor's stolen money; and it is so proved that Arthur Talbot is no thief. Squire Black for ever. He is frustrated by Talbot, and in endeavouring to escape meets with a terrible accident. He is taken to a room adjoining the one in which Seth Black lies, and in the morning, on recovering consciousness, he asks for Talbot. He then commences to relate the pitiful story of how he had been plotting against the late captain of St. Kit's. "I came here last night," said the squire, in a low, clear voice, "to finish the work I began on the bridge the other night—to silence Seth Black." (Now go on with the story.)

had been plotting against the late captain of St. Kit's.

* Eldred Lacy's Crushing Blow.

"Talbot guessed, and he was watching. He baffled me, and in seeking to escape recognition I found my death."

The prefect was silent.
"I feared Black because he knew secrets of my past life, and blackmailed me without mercy, and gave me no peace," said the squire. "I don't regret anything, except the failure. It was a viper that ought to be crushed. But Eldred, my poor fellow, you must make up your mind to a terrible blow."

"I don't understand you, Rupert."
"I mean that I have failed—that Black will recover now—"

"He has already recovered."
"Is it so? Then it is doubly too late. If he has spoken, all is lost! Well, it could not be prevented. With my doom the struggle ceases. You are not of the stuff to carry it on, my poor Eldred. Believe me, I would have done my best for you. I would have played the game out to the end, and left you the estates; but it is useless. Black knows the truth, and will speak. He will speak now; and even if he did not, the silver box would reveal the truth in a few years' time."

Eldred looked at his brother in amazement. It came into his mind that the squire was wandering. Rupert Lacy read the thought in his face, and smiled bitterly.

"No, I am not wandering," he said; "I am not mad. Eldred, I never was master of Lynwood, save by wrong; and after I knew that the true heir lived, I still kept the estates. I could not and would not give them up."

"You were not—"
"My father's elder brother left a son. He is the true heir."

Eldred Lacy looked bewildered.
"But our father's elder brother, Arnold, died at sea—he and his wife and child. So, at least, I have heard, Rupert."
"He died; his wife died; but the child—no."

"Good heavens!"
"The child lived," said the squire bitterly—"lived to darken my life; to darken our father's life, Eldred; but I knew nothing till my father had his fall in the hunting-field, and then for my own safety he told me ere he died."

"Told you what?"
"That his nephew lived; where, and under what name, he did not know; but lived—he was sure of that."

Eldred Lacy was silent and dismayed. The dream of succeeding his brother as master of Lynwood had faded away.

"You are sure the boy still lives, Rupert?"
"Quite sure."
"Do you know where?"
"Yes."

"Tell me—tell me."

"Here, at St. Kit's."

Eldred Lacy felt as if his head were turning round.

"Arnold Lacy's son is living at St. Kit's?" he repeated faintly. "Are you mad, Rupert? It is impossible—impossible!"

Rupert Lacy smiled grimly.

"It is true. That is what I wanted to warn you of, Eldred. I say again that I would have kept the secret, and died with it on my conscience, but it is too late. Seth Black knows, and he will speak. It is written in the papers in the silver box; and now that I am going, there is no one to deprive Talbot of that. There is no hope. You must make what terms you can with Talbot, my poor fellow."

"With Talbot?" said Eldred Lacy huskily. "I—I don't understand. You say that the son of Arnold Lacy is living at St. Kit's?"

"I have said so."

"His name—his name? What name is he under here?"

"Have you not guessed? You are dull, Eldred. His name here is—"

"Not—not Arthur Talbot?"

"Yes, Arthur Talbot is the son of Arnold Lacy, and the true master of Lynwood."

The squire sank back. Eldred Lacy remained staring at him with stony eyes.

The secret was out at last—the secret of the squire's relentless pursuit of Talbot, of the attempted thefts of the silver box, of the efforts to drive Talbot forth from St. Kit's, ruined and disgraced, to be lost in the great world, far from the friends who could help him to come into his own.

That was the secret!

"Talbot—Arthur Talbot, my cousin, and master of Lynwood! Good heavens!"

Eldred Lacy covered his face with his hands.

The Cousins.

Dr. Kent was seated in his study, when a tap came at the door, and Talbot entered. The Head of St. Kit's looked up, a smile of welcome breaking through the clouds upon his face.

"Come in, Talbot! What have you there?"

There was a packet in Arthur Talbot's hand. He laid it on the table beside the doctor, who glanced at it curiously.

"That packet contains the papers from the silver box, sir."

"The silver box? But—"

"I have not yet explained to you, sir," said Talbot quietly. "The silver box has been opened."

NEXT SATURDAY: "BRIAN AT THE FAIR,"
A Splendid Long, Complete School Tale,
by Lewis Buckley.

AND "MANSDEN'S RAID,"
A Thrilling Tale of the Australian Bush,
by George Sook.
IN "PLUCK," 1d.

The Squire's Secret.

Squire Lacy stirred slightly as Dr. Kent entered the study, followed by Talbot. His eyes rested upon Talbot with a curious expression.

"I wanted to see you, Talbot," he said, without waiting for either to speak. "My time is short, and I have a deal to say. Dr. Bayley thinks that I shall live till midnight, but I feel that I am close to the finish."

The physician nodded.
"I am sorry—" began Dr. Kent.
The squire smiled grimly.

"That is nothing. I am not asking for compassion. I have lived hard, and I can die hard. But I have one thing to say before I go—and something to ask of Talbot."

Arthur looked at him. The grim smile lingered on his haggard face.

"You think it curious that I should venture to ask anything of you, Talbot, after what has passed—after what have done? You are quite right."

"I was not thinking so," said Talbot quietly. "You have injured me, but I would do anything I could to help you. I am not one to bear malice—especially at such a time."

"I know it, and that is why I shall ask. I shall ask to have pity on my brother, who loses everything."

"I—I do not understand!"
"I will explain. Come nearer; my voice is faint, and my strength is going. Nurse, give me something to drink. I must speak before I go." He wetted his lips with the glass the nurse held to them, then his eyes turned to Talbot again.

"Talbot, you do not know your name—you do not know who and what you are. You are about to learn."

Talbot nodded; he could not trust himself to speak.
"Years ago," said the Squire of Lynwood, "before you were born, Talbot, there were two brothers at Lynwood—Arnold the elder, and Henry the younger, my father. They lived with their uncle, the then Squire of Lynwood. The elder—the heir—quarrelled with his uncle, and left Lynwood, and never returned. He had married against his uncle's will, and was cast off during the old man's lifetime, though as the estates were entailed, they were bound to come to him when the uncle died."

Talbot nodded again. He wondered what this could have to do with him; and perhaps now a faint light was breaking through the darkness that had long shadowed the secret of his life.

"The younger nephew married according to his wish—the lady whom the old gentleman had in the first place selected for the elder. He was a dutiful nephew, and he knew upon which side his bread was buttered. The old squire could not cut off the entail, but he was determined that the Lynwood estates should come to the nephew whom he loved. How was it to be done? He fell into his last illness—a fatal one, but lingering; he lay for two years in the shadow of death, brooding over the thought that when he was gone the estate would go to the nephew he hated, and Henry would be cast out. But shortly ere he died Arnold, who had heard of his state and was returning to England, was wrecked in the cargo-boat he was travelling upon—for he was poor—and was drowned at sea, with his wife and—as was supposed—his child."

Talbot started.
"Talbot started."

"You guess now?" said the squire grimly.
"I—I think— But go on—go on!"

"I was a boy then. I knew nothing but that the man was drowned at sea. The old squire died; my father reigned in his place—Henry Lacy was Squire of Lynwood. I went to college; afterwards abroad; and in another land I met Seth Black. What my life was like there does not concern anyone now, but it gave Black a hold upon me which he never loosened."

The squire's eyes glimmered.
"But that was not all. Black knew me under another name there, but he knew more than I thought. He tracked me out. I knew, too, that he knew some secret that he hinted at in his cups, but never fully spoke of. I had dreamed then what it was. I came home to Lynwood, leaving as I thought that wild life dead behind me; and then came my father's death. He had a fall on the hunting-field; his doom came suddenly; he had only time to speak to me, counted by minutes, ere he died. It took few minutes he told me a terrible secret."

The squire paused. His auditors made no sound. The nurse placed the glass to his lips again, and he drank.

"The old squire, brooding under the shadow of death, had probably lost something of his sanity, and he had taken good care that the hated nephew did not come home to displace his favourite. The shipwreck was no accident; it had been brought about by scoundrels hired by the old man's gold, and Arnold Lacy's death lay at the door of his uncle."

Talbot shuddered.

"You have your revenge now," he said, between his teeth. "I thought I had ruined you; but you have ruined me in reality. I am going out into the world, branded, and a beggar, curse you!"

Talbot looked at him in astonishment.
"As a beggar?" he repeated. "I do not understand! Are not you—?"

"You will understand soon. Go!"
Talbot did not speak again. Without a word he followed the doctor to the sick-room, where Rupert Lacy lay in the shadow of grim doom.

"I am sorry—" he spoke in a low voice—"I am sorry for this."

The prefect looked at him with gleaming eyes.
"You have your revenge now," he said, between his teeth. "I thought I had ruined you; but you have ruined me in reality. I am going out into the world, branded, and a beggar, curse you!"

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"By whom?"
"By Eldred Lacy," said Talbot.
"But how did Lacy—?"
"He stole it from my room—urged on, I have no doubt, by the squire. All he has done has been done at the instigation of the Squire of Lynwood."

"I think I understand that now," Talbot. Yet the squire's motive—
"I do not know that myself, sir, except that he fears me for some reason. Eldred Lacy purloined the silver box, and by chance discovered the opening. He took the papers, but had no time to read them. I, of course, have not read them, or even looked at them. My promise held good, although the box had been opened by chance."

"That is right, Talbot."

"I have seen only the miniature which was in the box—the face I believe to be that of my mother, sir," said Talbot, deeply moved—"a face that is very like mine, as I see it in the glass. The papers are there intact. When I made up my mind to leave St. Kit's, I gave them into Brooke's charge for safety, and I left a letter for you explaining the whole matter. I returned, as you know, with Seth Black, and then destroyed the letter and took back the papers. I think they will be better in your charge, and it may be necessary to use them."

"My pledge to Narroys was that the silver box should not be opened till you were twenty-one," the Head observed; "that still holds good."

"Quite so, sir; but, unless I am mistaken, Rupert Lacy knows the secret of the silver box, and ere long there will be no secret to keep."

"You mean that he will speak before he dies?"
"I should imagine so, sir; but if he does not, Seth Black will."

"What does Black know?"
"As much as Lacy, I fancy; which is why the squire tried to kill him that night on the bank of the river."

The doctor passed his hand over his brow.
"Talbot, the squire insinuated to me that you had struck that blow—that you were the cause of Black's state!"

Talbot smiled bitterly.
"He insisted that you should remain at the school till Black recovered."

"I think I can explain his motive for that, sir."

"How would you explain it?"
"He intended to silence Black; that was why his visit was paid here last night. If he had done so, the deed would have been discovered in the morning, and attributed to—whom? To me, probably, with that suspicion instilled into your mind."

The Head started.
"The execrable traitor! That was undoubtedly his plan!"

"Now that he—"
Tap!

It was a knock at the door, and Talbot ceased to speak. The Head looked round.

"Come in!"
Eldred Lacy walked into the study. Both Dr. Kent and Talbot started at the sight of the prefect. He was as white as chalk, and there was a strange gleam in his eyes. He seemed to walk unsteadily, like a man tottering from the effects of a crushing blow.

"Lacy, what is the matter?"
The prefect did not reply to the question. His eyes did not meet the doctor's as he spoke.

"My brother wishes to speak to you both."
"The squire wishes—"

"Yes. Will you go at once? The doctor tells me that he will not live till midnight."

Dr. Kent rose from his chair.
"Certainly we will go. Come, my lad."

And he walked from the study. Talbot hesitated a moment ere he followed. Bitterly, cruelly, Eldred Lacy had injured him, yet the white misery in the prefect's face touched the heart of the generous lad.

"Lacy"—he spoke in a low voice—"I am sorry for this. I am sorry—"

The prefect looked at him with gleaming eyes.
"You have your revenge now," he said, between his teeth. "I thought I had ruined you; but you have ruined me in reality. I am going out into the world, branded, and a beggar, curse you!"

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"I am sorry—" he spoke in a low voice—"I am sorry for this."

"The old man was mad," said Rupert Lacy—"half mad, at all events. My father did not know till afterwards—I hope he did not know."

"Go on."

"But those had been a mischance. The scoundrels could not do their work thoroughly. Arnold Lacy had a friend on that ship—a man named Norroy."

Dr. Kent exchanged a glance with Talbot. All was becoming clear now.

"When the ship was sinking, he gave his child into the hands of Norroy, while he took charge of his wife. Fastened up in the child's clothing was a silver box, containing the papers necessary to prove his claim to the Lynwood estates, if he reached the shore. All this was known to at least one of the old squire's minions—a man named Seth Black."

"Seth Black?"

"He was there—that was his secret. There were others of the same stamp. He, like the rest, believed that the work had been well done—for a time. But, as a matter of fact, Norroy was not drowned, after all, though the shock of the shipwreck and his narrow escape certainly unhinged his brain."

"That is true," said Dr. Kent.

"And he died soon afterwards. He must have known that the shipwreck was no accident, and he was haunted by the constant dread as to what would happen if the old squire of Lynwood learned that the child was living, and that he would live to claim the estates. The old man had only been able to learn that Norroy had escaped from the wreck with the child; of his whereabouts or his fate he could learn nothing. He had told my father as much; and that was what my father repeated to me when he lay at death's door."

The squire paused.

"It was black news to me," he went on presently, in a fainter voice. "Can you wonder that I was determined not to give up the fortune I had always regarded as mine? I did not seek the missing boy. I did not seek him either for good or ill. I hoped he would never come in my way. Then I saw him; you remember, Dr. Kent? It was when I came back from a journey abroad, and I came here, and I saw Arthur Talbot on the football field."

"I remember."

"You noticed his resemblance to me," resumed the squire, with a grim smile. "The truth did not occur to you—how could it?—but I knew."

"Then, when you asked me the story of Arthur Talbot?"

"I was seeking for information. You told me, little dreaming of the interest it was to me. I learned all I wished to know—that Norroy had come to you, and, haunted by fear of the old squire and of my father, had placed the child in your hands under an assumed name, and exacted your promise that the silver box should not be opened till he was of age—old enough to enforce his claim and protect himself."

"I understand now."

"All was clear to me; Talbot was the heir of Lynwood. But I determined that he should never claim the estates. Then came Seth Black, to trade upon the secrets he knew of my past under another sky. He saw Talbot, and he, too, guessed the truth. Talbot is the living image of his father. The picture at Lynwood of Arnold Lacy in his boyhood might be taken for Talbot's portrait. Besides, Arnold Lacy's wife was a Talbot; that was her maiden name, and it was why Norroy chose it, of course. That was a clue. Black knew the truth, and then his hold upon me was doubly sure. He has paid dearly for the use he put it to."

And the squire's eyes glittered savagely.

"Now you know why I plotted and planned to drive Talbot from St. Kit's. Ruined and disgraced, and deprived of the silver box, I should not fear him. I forced my brother to help me; believe me, I gave him no choice."

Talbot did not speak. He knew that Eldred Lacy had been unhelped quite as much by his own feelings of hatred as by any compulsion from the squire. But it was not needed to say so. In his last hours the squire was troubled in his mind as to his brother's fate, and that at least showed a kindly trait in his nature.

"I fought for the fortune the law would have taken from my hands," said the squire, in a fainter voice. "Eldred knew nothing; I trusted no one but myself. I did wrong, but I would not be a beggar. Talbot is the son of Arnold Lacy, and the papers in the silver box will prove it. But for that, and for the fact that Seth Black would speak, I should have carried this secret to my grave, for my brother's sake. Poor Eldred! I was fighting as much for him as for myself, and I have lost all, and he is a beggar."

"He is not a beggar," said Talbot quietly. "He is my cousin, if this tale be true, and I shall be his friend, if he will let me."

"You mean that, Talbot?"

"From my heart."

"God bless you! If—if I had been more like you," Talbot said, "I should never have come to this. God bless you!"

There was silence in the room for some minutes. The light was fading from the squire's face. It seemed that he had been kept up by the necessity of uttering his secret, and now that it was spoken his strength was gone.

A grim white look was coming over his face—a look of which they knew the meaning only too well.

"I—I am, going," said the squire, in a faint voice. "Remain with me till the end, cousin."

Cousin! Yes, Talbot was this man's cousin, and the word thrilled him strangely. Till now he had never known what it was to have a blood relation, one who was more to him than a friend, more than anything else in the world. The man had injured him deeply, but he was his cousin, of his flesh and blood. Talbot took the white, nerveless hand of the squire in his own, and held it firmly.

He felt a slight pressure in return.

"God bless you, cousin!"

They were the last words of Rupert Lacy. Life yet lingered for half an hour, and the eyes showed intelligence, but no word more passed the frozen lips. And at last from the squire's eyes the light faded. Talbot drew away his hand from a touch that was growing chilly.

Squire Lacy of Lynwood was no more!

The Hand of Friendship.

Eldred Lacy started as a tap came at his door. The prefect was standing by the window, staring out into the gloomy quadrangle, his brows knitted, his hands deep in his pockets. His face was dark, the reflection of the gloom and misery in his heart.

"Come in!" he said huskily.

The door opened, and Arthur Talbot stood before him. Eldred looked at him without speaking. His eyes asked a question which Talbot very well understood. The gleam of compassion in Talbot's face warned Eldred of the truth.

"He is dead?"

"I am sorry—yes."

Eldred leaned heavily against the window. His face was whiter, his glance had sunk. To Talbot's surprise, he saw the tears welling from the hard eyes of the prefect. He had never believed that any deep feeling could dwell in the cold heart of Eldred Lacy, and he was moved. He came quickly towards the prefect.

"Lacy, I want to speak to you, but I will choose another time, if you like."

The prefect broke into a bitter, mocking laugh.

"Speak now," he exclaimed; "it is all one, and I know what you are going to say. My brother is dead, but I am not the master of Lynwood. He was a usurper, and the place was yours by rights. I know it."

"I was not going to speak of that."

"I should be an intruder there," went on Eldred, unheeding. "But I shall not come there, my cousin. You will not be put to the trouble of kicking me out."

"Eldred—"

"I am forced to leave St. Kit's through you. I am a beggar now through you. All my misfortunes have come through you." He ground his teeth. "I hate you! Well, I go in the morning; you have done with me. I leave you my curse!"

Talbot changed colour.

"Lacy, I did not come here to exchange bitter words with you. We have been enemies, but we have now made a discovery—we are of the same blood. I am the master of Lynwood, as you say, but that need make no difference to your position there. You will have to leave St. Kit's; after what has happened you would not care to remain. But there are other public schools, and there is no reason why you should not go up to the University, as was intended by your brother."

Eldred Lacy stared at him in amazement.

"What are you saying?"

"I am speaking from my heart," said Talbot quietly. "You are my blood relation, the only one I have. You are my cousin. I am willing to let bygones be bygones, if you are. I have come into the place you regarded as yours, but I am willing to stand by you—willing and eager. You have injured me, but perhaps I was not without fault, either. Anyway, it is all over now, and I want to start fresh."

Lacy was silent. He was silent from sheer amazement. These were the last words he had expected to hear upon the lips of Arthur Talbot. Was it all a dream, or was Talbot mocking him?

He had injured and disgraced Talbot, he had pursued him with unrelenting enmity. All his treachery had recoiled

NEXT SATURDAY:

"GRIAN AT THE FAIR."

A Picaresque Long, Complete School Tale, by Lewis Buckley.

AND

"MARDEN'S RAID."

A Thrilling Tale of the Australian Bush, by George Scott.

IN "PLUCK." 1d.

upon his own head, and now he himself stood degraded before the school. And in this the hour of his humiliation and his misfortune, Talbot held out the hand of friendship to him.

His hand, and his heart, with it! There was no mistake about it. His hand was outstretched, and the eager expression upon a handsome face showed how he longed to be taken at his word.

Lacy looked at him, and then silently grasped his hand.

"You—your mean that!"

"Every word. The past is dead and buried; let us look only to the future."

"After what I have done?"

"It is forgotten."

Lacy pressed his hand almost convulsively. The tears were running down the hard cheeks of the prefect.

"Talbot, I—I never—I never knew you as you were. I hated you; I thought you hated me. Yet why should I say so? I was determined to believe it; I was determined to be against you, and, you see, I am frank enough now, though you never knew me so before. I don't know what to say to you, but—but I shan't forget this. I don't deserve it, but I'll try to."

Talbot pressed his hand, and left the study. His own heart was lighter now. In the hour that had brought vindication and triumph to him, he was glad to know that the old hatred was dead, and that even his rival and enemy wished him well.

Captain of St. Kit's.

St. Kit's was amazed.

For the next few weeks nothing was talked of in the school—or almost nothing—save the startling discovery that had been made with respect to Talbot.

The Squire of Lynwood's dying confession had been made public. It was corroborated by the confession of Seth Black, now recovered and able to leave St. Kit's, to the relief of those he left there.

And now that the secret was out, Dr. Kent had no hesitation in making public the papers contained in the silver box; in fact, it was now necessary for him to do so.

The documents simply furnished what proof was necessary of Talbot's claim to the name of Lacy and the estates of Lynwood.

His parents' marriage certificate, his own birth certificate, and a statement of the whole affair written out by Norroys were in the box with the miniature of his mother.

[To be concluded.]

Next week the opening chapters of a grand new school tale, entitled "The Secret of St. Winifred's," by Martin Clifford, will appear.]

Your Editor's Corner.

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

"BRIAN AT THE FAIR."

Lewis Hockley contributor to our next issue

A SPLENDID, LONG, COMPLETE SCHOOL TALE, dealing with the adventures of Brian Deanghlu.

Don't miss it! "MARSDEN'S RAID," our second long, complete story, by George Scott, deals with HUSHRANGEN AND TRACKER.

A thrilling tale. Another very important feature which will be contained in next Saturday's issue of PLUCK will be

"THE SECRET OF ST. WINIFRED'S,"

a new school tale, by Martin Clifford, author of the famous stories of Tom Merry, now appearing every week in "The Gem" Library, price one half-penny.

CRITICISMS, PLEASE!

At all times I am pleased to hear from you, and I hope that when writing to me you will not fail to state your candid opinion of our stories.

Just a postcard will do!

Now, let me again remind you that there are

THREE

new additions to "The Boys' Friend" Three-penny Library,

NOW ON SALE.

Here are the numbers and titles:

No. 33: "LION AGAINST BEAR."

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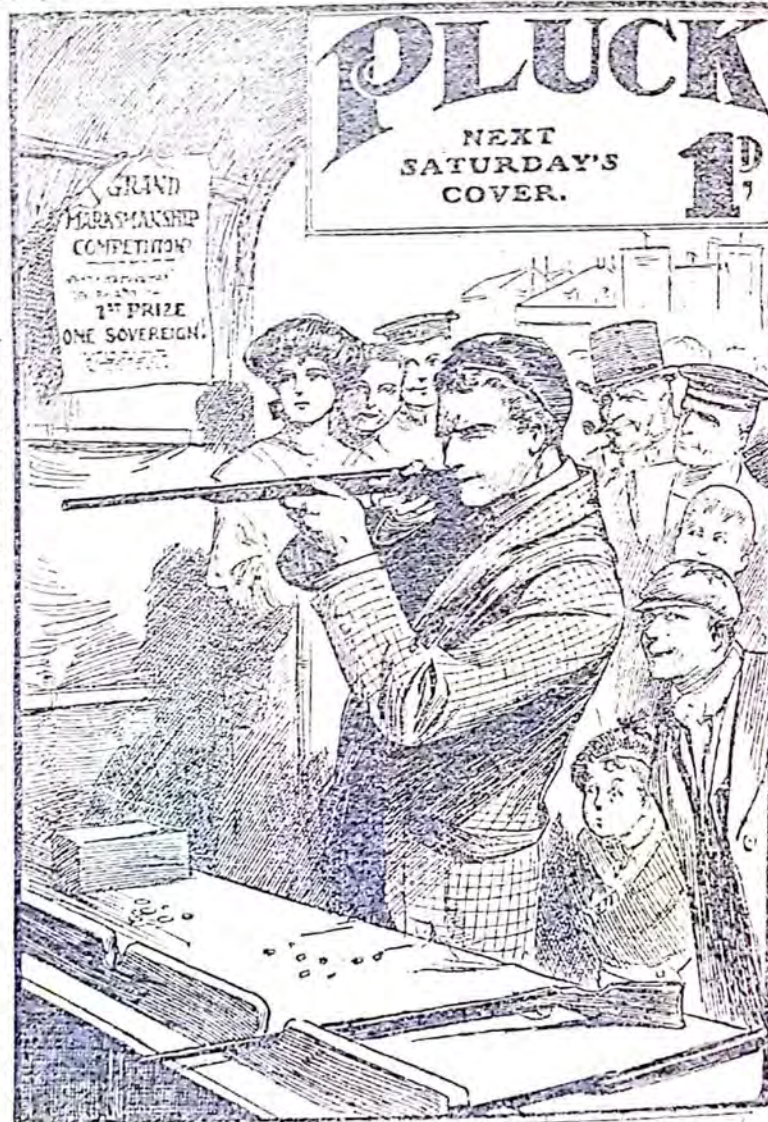
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