

THE BOY VENTRILOQUIST.

PLUCK

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A GRAND TALE

BY H. CLARKE HOOK.



SPECS THE VENTRILOQUIST'S NEW WHEEZE.
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A hissing sound came from beneath the floor. "Quick!" cried Pringle, "if you don't want the school blown up!"

The Secret of St Winifred's



READ THIS FIRST.

Clive Lawrence, a new boy at St. Winifred's, is put into the Fourth Form, which is at daggers drawn with the Fifth. The leaders of the Fourth are Fisher and Locke, Clive's study-mates, and those of the Fifth are Kendal and Keene. Courtney, a bully, takes Clive for "fag," and sends him on an errand to the Jolly Seaman, a public-house in the village. Clive arrives at his destination, and is shown into a back room to wait for a Mr. Napper. He overhears a plot between Napper and a German, whom he afterwards recognises as Herr Stossel, the German master at St. Winifred's. Clive returns to the School, and the next day quarrels with Fisher. The two agree to meet in a glove fight, and Clive knocks Fisher out. Ultimately there is a Form election, and Clive is elected Captain of the Fourth. After receiving numerous congratulations, Clive, Fisher, and Locke go down to the shore and explore the caves. After being there some time they are surprised to see Herr Stossel coming in their direction. "We'd better hide!" said Clive excitedly. "There's room for a hundred men to hide in this place!" (Now go on with the Story.)

"Who Is There?"

"That's so," said Fisher. "If he got on our track we could go further, and a little way further on it's too dark for a bat to see."

There was a sound at the entrance of the cave.

"Hush!" whispered Clive. "There he is!"

From the spot where the juniors were crouching among the rough rocks, the opening of the cave seemed like the end of a tunnel, with the blue sky and red sunset beyond.

A figure had stepped into the light.

It was that of the German master of St. Winifred's, and it was plain that he intended to enter the cave. The juniors hardly breathed.

Franz Stossel stood for a minute looking into the deep darkness of the cavern, and then he stepped under the rough arch of the rocks.

There was the scratch of a match, plainly heard in the silence of the cave, and the juniors silently watched the German lighting a lantern. He had come prepared for exploration.

He set the lantern on a rock, and did not immediately advance. From an inner pocket he extracted what seemed like a fragment of parchment, and scanned it carefully in the light of the lantern.

"My hat!" whispered Fisher excitedly. "What is that, I wonder? He can't be coming to a place like this to read a letter."

Clive drew a deep breath.

"It's a clue to the lost gold of the Spanish galleon," he murmured.

"What!"

"I am sure of it."

"My only Aunt Maria!" muttered Fisher, in amazement. "Fancy Stossel as a treasure-hunter! But after all, what else could he be here for? He's not the kind of chap to climb a high cliff to explore a cave for the fun of the thing."

"Not much," said Locke.

"Hush! He's coming this way."

The German had replaced the parchment, or whatever it was, in his pocket, and taken up the lantern.

He advanced into the cavern, holding the lantern before him to guide his steps, evidently nervous of pitfalls.

The juniors remained as still as mice.

"By Penwyn Point!"

The German muttered the words aloud, and they were distinctly audible to the St. Winifred's juniors in the silence of the cave, broken only by the distant sound of the wash of the sea.

Clive started.

The words had evidently just been read by the German on the parchment he had had in his hand. Back to the junior's mind came the words he had overheard on the first night of the term at the Jolly Seaman. Franz Stossel had admitted to Mr. Napper that he possessed a clue of some kind to the

lost gold of the Spanish galleon. Was the parchment he had held in his hand the clue which had guided him to the dark caves of Penwyn Point?

The German passed slowly on. His steps led him direct towards the spot where the Fourth-Formers crouched in the shadows.

Clive Lawrence made a sign to his companions.

"We shall have to shift," he breathed.

Locke and Fisher nodded without replying.

They moved as cautiously as they could back into the thicker darkness of the cave, but in spite of their caution, a foot clinked on a loose stone.

Clink!

The sound was faint, but in the silence of the cavern, and to the straining ears of the juniors, it seemed as loud as a gunshot.

It reached the ears of Franz Stossel.

The sudden glancing the lantern light showed how he started, and then he was seen to bend forward over the lantern, peering into the darkness.

"Who is there?"

The words came in a hissing tone from Franz Stossel.

The juniors held their breath.

"Who is there?"

Louder rang the words this time, and the cavern echoed the furious voice of the German.

There was no reply, save the echoes from the depths of the hollow cliff, and Franz Stossel, muttering something in German, sprang forward.

"Come on!" muttered Clive.

The three juniors ran back into the darkness. They stumbled over rough rocks, and it was useless to attempt to disguise their presence in the cave now. But so long as the German did not see them he could not guess their identity.

"Stop!"

Franz Stossel shouted out the word.

But the juniors were not likely to stop. They ran on stumblingly. The German broke into a run in pursuit. He stumbled over a ridge of rock, and fell to the ground, and there was a rush of darkness on the spot as the lantern crashed on the rocks and broke, and was instantly extinguished.

"Now's our chance!" muttered Clive Lawrence.

Blackness reigned in the cave. The German could be heard muttering to himself. Treading on tiptoe, the juniors stole towards the opening, and while the German was still rubbing his bruised limbs, they hurried out of the cave.

Their faces were pale with excitement now, their hearts beating almost painfully.

"Let's get off!" muttered Fisher. "He'll be in a wax if he finds us now. If he doesn't see us he'll think it was some fisher lad, most likely."

"Right-ho!"

The juniors hurried down the cliff path. Franz Stossel came out of the mouth of the cave, carrying a broken lantern

in his hand, and with a savage rage in his dark face. But the rocky plateau was clear; there was no one in sight now. The juniors were on the cliff path, hurrying down to the beach.

They lost no time in making the descent. When they stood on the pebble ridge again, somewhat breathless, they looked at one another in doubt.

"All up with our exploration, I suppose?" Fisher remarked.

"I suppose we may as well," he said slowly. "know that we were here at all. Let's get back to St. Winifred's."

Clive Lawrence hesitated for a moment.

"I suppose we may as well," he said slowly.

Fisher linked an arm in his.

"Come on," he said. "We don't want Stossel down on us any heavier than he is already. He rags us enough as it is. We'd better get in, and be pretty busy when he comes back, to throw the rotter off the scent."

Clive laughed.

"Right you are, Fisher! Come on, then!"

They walked quickly back to St. Winifred's. The Fourth-Formers were mostly on the cricket ground, taking advantage of the lateness of the sunset for a little more practice at the nets after tea. The chums of the Fourth joined them, and were soon batting and bowling away busily.

A quarter of an hour later the German master entered the gates. He glanced towards the cricket ground as the shouts of the juniors fell upon his ears. Clive Lawrence was batting, and Locke was bowling to him. The cloud on the German master's face cleared somewhat, and he looked relieved as he strode on.

The Celebration.

"We don't have an election every day," Locke remarked.

Clive Lawrence and his two chums had strolled into the junior common-room after coming in from cricket. Locke had been silent for some minutes, evidently thinking, and he made the remark suddenly.

"Quite right," said Fisher, looking at him—"you are quite right, Locke; but I can't call the information exactly new, though very interesting."

"What I mean is, we ought to celebrate the occasion in some way."

"That's a good idea. We'll have supper in the study," said Fisher, "and if the funds run to it, we'll have bloaters."

"I was thinking of a feed in the dormitory. What's your idea, Lawrence?"

Clive was apparently thinking, too, for there were lines of reflection upon his youthful brow.

"Eh?" he said. "I've been thinking that——"

"Hallo, kids!" said a voice at the door, and Kendal looked in. Keene, of course, was looking over his shoulder. The two Fifth-Formers were inseparable. "I hear you infants have got a new captain!"

"That's so," said Sugden. "No business of yours, though."

"We looked in to console Fisher. Why did you give him the order of the boot? That's what we want to know."

"Exactly!" said Keene. "Why did you give Fisher the order of the boot? Fisher, why did they give you the order of the boot?"

Fisher turned very red.

"Oh, got out!" he exclaimed.

Instead of getting out, the two Fifth-Formers stepped inside the room. They seemed to be looking for trouble.

"We came here for information," said Kendal gravely.

"It's only a little question, Fisher. Why did they give you the order of the push?"

Clive Lawrence pointed to the door.

"Better travel," said the new boy at St. Winifred's. "We don't allow kids to come and check us in our own quarters."

"Don't you?" exclaimed Kendal. "If you call me a kid——"

"If you call me a kid——" began Keene.

"Well, goat would be nearer the mark," said Clive, "or silly ass!"

"We didn't put you through it enough when we tackled you your first night here," said Kendal. "I thought you would be getting your back up again if we let you down lightly. What you want is a licking."

"There's nobody in the Fifth Form could give me one."

"I'll jolly soon show you! I say, kids, come in here."

There was a sound of footsteps in the passage. The boldness of Kendal and Keene's demeanour in the enemy's camp was explained. There were a party of the Fifth near at hand, ready to back them up.

But Clive Lawrence was equal to the occasion. He whispered to Fisher and Locke, and they nodded excitedly. The

word ran round among the Fourth-Formers, of whom there were a score or more in the room. Barely had Kendal called out to his friends, when the juniors made a rush.

The two leaders of the Fifth stood their ground. But they had never tackled the Fourth in quite such a humour before. Fisher and Locke grasped Keene and swung him headlong into the room, and he crashed against the table and rolled on the floor. Clive Lawrence closed with Kendal, and they staggered about in a deadly grip. Pye and Sugden slammed the door in the faces of the Fifth fellows without, and Sugden jammed his foot against it as the Fifth thumped on it to force it open.

"Quick!" panted Sugden.

Pye turned the key in the lock. The lock was a huge, old-fashioned one, the key ponderous. The door was of thick old oak. Once fastened, nothing short of a battering-ram could have opened it. The Fifth tore at the handle and kicked on the panels in vain.

Fisher gave a breathless chuckle.

"They can kick there till they wear out their shoe-leather," he gasped, "or till a master comes along and jumps on them! They won't get that door open! Collar that fellow Keene!"

Keene had staggered to his feet. He made a rush to the door to unlock it; but two or three fellows fastened on him like cats, and he went down to the floor again.

"Rescue, Fifth!" roared Keene.

"Rescue Fifth!" bellowed Kendal.

The Fifth were clamouring furiously at the door. But the door was fast, and it did not even creak under the furious attack of the Fifth-Formers. Kendal and Keene were abandoned to the vengeance of the Fourth, and there was no help for them.

Clive Lawrence and Kendal were wrestling desperately. Fisher came to Clive's aid, and Kendal was floored. Half a dozen of the Fourth grasped him, and he was a helpless prisoner.

"You young rotters!" he gasped. "I'll—I'll——"

"Got them!" panted Clive.

"Got them!" chorussed the Fourth.

"Let us out of this room!"

"Rats! You were given a chance to clear, and you didn't take it. Now you are going to stay," said Sugden.

"I'll wring some of your necks!"

"Some of whose?" asked Pye. "Some of mine? I've only got one, as a matter of fact."

"You young rascals!"

"Save your breath, Kendy," said Clive Lawrence. "We've got you. Do you remember what I told you the night the Fifth ragged me—the night I came to St. Winifred's?"

Kendal sniffed.

"Do you think I've got nothing to do but to remember all the piffle you may have talked?" he demanded.

Clive Lawrence laughed.

"Well, in case you've forgotten, I'll tell you again."

"Oh, don't trouble!"

"No trouble at all," said Clive Lawrence blandly. "I told you that I should put you through the same that I was put through myself."

"Ah, yes; I remember you talked some rot of that sort!" said Kendal.

"You will find it was very serious rot."

"Are you going to open that door?"

"Not this evening," said Pye. "Some other evening."

"If you open the door and let us out at once, we'll overlook this piece of fearful cheek on your part," said Kendal magnanimously.

"Will you really, Kendy?" said Locke. "You don't mean it, do you? You mustn't be too overpowering at once, you know."

"Look here——"

"Hallo, they're gone!" chuckled Sugden, as the hammering at the door ceased. "Some prefect on the track, I expect."

"They might have hammered till Doomsday without getting in," Clive Lawrence remarked cheerfully. "Are you ready for the ordeal, Kendal?"

"What ordeal, ass?"

"The one you put me through, fathead!"

"If you are joking, Lawrence——"

"I'm not. You made me run the gauntlet, and tossed me in a blanket. We're going to serve you the same—not because I bear you any malice, you know—I don't—but to keep my word, and for the honour of the Fourth Form."

"Hear, hear!"

The Fourth Form roared approval with one voice of that sentiment.

"You see, the honour of the Form demands that you should go through it, after putting a Fourth-Former through it," Clive explained.

"Oh, don't be an ass, you know!" grunted Kendal uneasily.

It was borne in upon his mind now that Clive Lawrence was in deadly earnest, and meant every word he said; and the humiliation of being tossed in a blanket by the juniors would be a blow to the prestige of the captain of the Fifth which he would not be prompt to recover from.

"Now, which will you have first—the gauntlet, or the blanket?" asked Clive.

"Rats!"

"Which will you have first, Keene?"

"Rot!"

"Very well. We'll say the gauntlet first, as we haven't a blanket here, and one will have to be got from the dormitory."

"The coast is clear out there now," said Locke. "I'll cut up to the dormitory, if you like, and sneak a blanket."

"Right you are!"

"Wait for me, though, and don't start the fun till I come back."

"That's only fair. Buck up!"

"I'll be back in a jiffy!"

The door was cautiously opened, and Locke looked out. The corridor was clear. He nipped out, and the door was shut and locked again. The juniors waited inside for Locke's return with keen anxiety.

It was possible that some scout of the Fifth Form was on the watch. There was a sudden patter of feet in the passage and a bump on the door.

"Open, quick!"

It was Locke's voice, in panting haste. The door was torn open, and Locke rushed in breathlessly, and, without stopping to ask questions, the juniors slammed it again and locked it.

Only just in time! A couple of Fifth-Formers were scudding down the passage in hot pursuit of Locke, and they bumped on the door only a few seconds after the key was turned.

Bump — bump! But the door was fast.

"Done again!" panted Locke, waving the blanket triumphantly. "I've got it!"

"Did you go to the dormitory?"

"No, I went to the Fifth-Form dormitory, as it was nearer, and this blanket is off Kendal's bed. I thought it better to get his blanket in case it gets damaged."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You young villain!" roared Kendal.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's bound to get a bit soiled, anyway," said Fisher.

"Rather, with Fifth-Formers in it!" said Pye.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on!" said Clive Lawrence, laughing. "As Kendal is captain of the Fifth, he shall have the honour of going first. Kendal, are you ready to be tossed in the blanket?"

"I'll be the death of you!"

"Are you ready to be tossed in the blanket?"

"I'll give you the thickest ear on record presently!"

"Are you ready to be tossed in the blanket?"

"You young rotter—"

"Well, he won't answer, so we'll toss him, whether he's ready or not!" said Clive Lawrence. "Yank him over here!"

And the captain of the Fifth was accordingly "yanked." Clive Lawrence, Fisher, Pye, and Locke held the corners of the blanket. Sugden, White, and Murphy yanked Kendal over to it.

"Lemme alone!"

"Shove him in!"

"I'll lick you all for this—"

"Chuck him in!"

"I'll—I'll—"

But the torrent of Kendal's words was choked off, as he was tossed headlong into the taut blanket. His weight made it sag down to the floor, and he bumped there, and gave a howl of pain. The linoleum was hard, and the planks under it harder.

"Your own fault," said Clive. "You remember what you said to me, Kendy? Don't struggle, or you will only make it the worse for yourself."

"You cheeky young cad—"

"Take it calmly, my boy, and you'll find it a healthy exercise," said Pye. "Tossing in a blanket can be regarded as a system of physical culture. It exercises every part of the body, especially the lungs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kendal's lungs were certainly getting plenty of exercise just now. He was shouting threats at the top of his voice, and shouting to the Fifth for rescue; but his faithful Fifth were powerless to rescue him.

"Keep still, Kendy! You may bump out of the blanket if you wriggle!" said Fisher.

The blanket was swinging now ready for the toss. Enraged as he was, Kendal had sense enough to keep still and to take the ordeal calmly, so far as that went, now that there was no help for it. A tumble over the side of the blanket would have meant a very nasty fall.

(Another long instalment of this splendid School Tale next Saturday. Please order your copy of *PLUCK* in advance.)



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