MONSTER EASTER HOLIDAY NUMBER

GREAT 50,000-WORD LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL TALE INSIDE

No. 374. April 10th, 1915. Vol 9.

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- - - THE - - - FALL OF THE FIFTH!

A Magnificent 50,000-word Long, Complete School Tale of HARRY WHARTON & CO. of Greyfriars.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Bunter's Discovery!

"FIFTY guineas!"

Billy Bunter's fat face was wreathed in smiles as he murmured the magic words.

Billy Bunter was standing by the window in the Rag at Greyfriars. He had the "Friardale Times" in his fat hands, and was blinking at the paper through his big spectacles, and almost purring with satisfaction.

"Fifty guineas! My hat! Fifty guineas!"

There was a tramp of feet, and Harry Wharton & Co. of the Remove came into the Rag. Billy Bunter did not notice them. He was absorbed in the "Friardale Times." As a rule, the local paper was not of absorbing interest. But Billy Bunter had evidently found something unusually attractive in the current number.

"Fifty guineas! That'll be forty guineas for me, and ten, say, to whack out among the rest—quite enough, too!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry.

Bunter did not heed. He was reading over again that extremely interesting paragraph, and he was deaf and blind to everything else.

"Fifty guineas!"

"What on earth is he burbling about?" said Harry Wharton, in surprise.

"Day-dreaming!" said Bob Cherry. "I'll wake him up!"

"Fifty guineas—yaroooh!" roared Billy Bunter, as Bob's heavy hand descended upon his shoulder with a resounding smack.

"The sleeper awakes!" grinned Nugent.

"Yow-ow! You silly ass!" roared Bunter, rubbing his fat shoulder, and blinking furiously at Bob Cherry. "You—you fathead! Yow!"

"Buzz off, Bunter!" said Wharton briskly. "We've come here to rehearse."

"Rats!"

"Help him out, Bob!"

Harry Wharton & Co. were there on business. Greyfriars was soon to break up for the Easter vacation, and the Remove Dramatic Society had made great plans for that vacation.

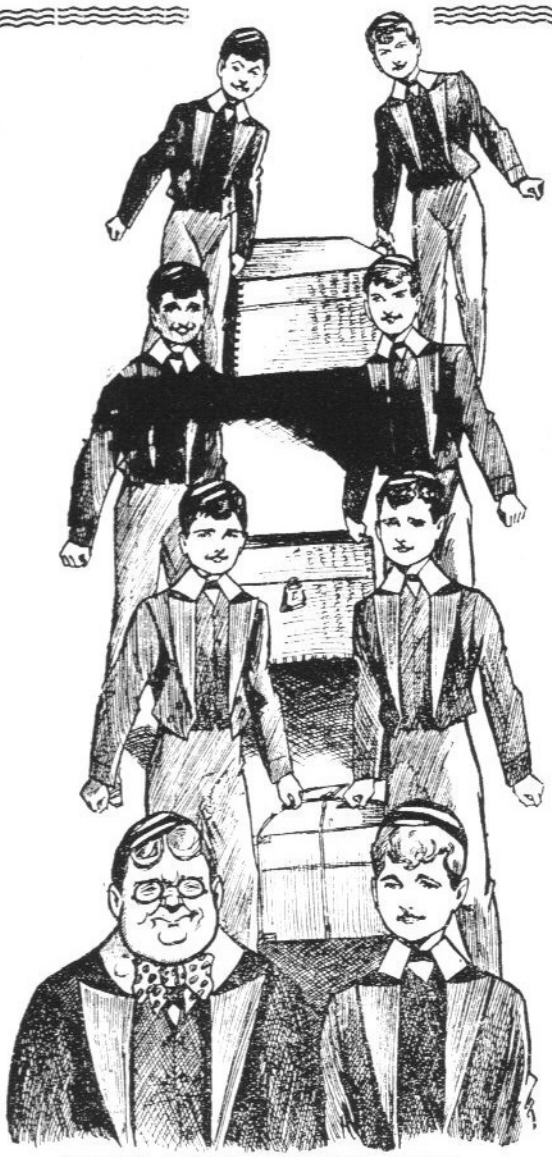
The Remove Dramatic Society was a great institution, and they gave frequent performances during the term, covering themselves with glory, and covering with confusion Coker's Stage Club in the Fifth Form. At least, they were satisfied that they did; though Coker's view was quite different.

And Wharton's idea for the vacation was really ripping. The Dramatic Society were to get together at Wharton Lodge, and performances were to be given in aid of the Belgian Fund. They counted upon getting enormous audiences, what with the popularity of the object in view, and the first-rate quality of the acting.

Rehearsals were the order of the day now.

They were looking forward to their histrionic campaign with great anticipations. In the vacation, as Bob Cherry remarked, they would really have a chance. At school there were all sorts of interruptions and bothers — lessons interfered seriously with the work of the Dramatic Society, and evening preparation took up a lot of time that should have been devoted to rehearsals. But in the vac. they could fairly let themselves go.

"I say, you fellows——" began Bunter, as Bob Cherry



took him by one fat ear to help him out of the Rag. "I say, you know——"

"Run away!" said Wharton. "Don't bother now, Billy. We're busy. There isn't time for many more rehearsals before we break up."

"But I say—— Leggo, Bob Cherry, you beast! I'm not going——"

"Your mistake—you are!" said Bob cheerfully. "At least, your ear is. Please yourself about coming along with it!"

"Yow—ow!" Billy Bunter had to follow his ear, which Bob Cherry was leading gently but firmly towards the door. "Leggo, you beast! I say, Wharton——"

"Buzz off!"

"I've got something to tell you!" roared Bunter.

"Bow-wow!"

"It's important—very important——"

"My dear chap, we know you've got a postal-order coming," said Bob Cherry. "We know you've been expecting it for whole terms——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And we know it's coming by the next post," grinned Nugent; "and we know you want us to cash it in advance, and we know we're not going to. So clear off!"

"'Tain't that!" roared Bunter. "If you don't leggo my ear, Bob Cherry, you rotter, I'll knock you down!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's about the Dramatic Society!" howled Bunter. "Listen to me, you silly duffers! It's awfully important!"

"Well, buck up!" said Harry Wharton. "What is it?"

"I'm going to make you an offer," said Bunter, jerking his ear away from Bob Cherry. "It's a very important matter. I suppose you fellows would like to bag fifty guineas for a performance in the vac?"

"What-ho!"

"Well, I can put you on to it."

"Fathead!" said Wharton.

"Honest Injun!" roared Bunter. "I tell you I can get you an offer—fifty guineas for a performance—I know all about it!"

"Oh, rot!"

"The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed and fat-headed Bunter," said Hurree Singh. "You are talking out of the back of your ludicrous neck!"

"Oh, all right! I'll go to Coker," said Bunter. "Coker will jump at it, I can jolly well tell you that! Fifty guineas don't grow on every bush!"

"I suppose he's wandering in his mind," said Wharton, in wonder. "Cut the cackle, and get to the hosses, Bunter!"

The Remove amateur actors were all regarding Bunter curiously now. The fat junior felt that he was an important person, and he swelled accordingly.

"It's genuine," he said—"quite genuine! I happen to know of it, that's all; and you fellows don't. There's fifty guineas to be bagged for giving a theatrical performance in a country house."

"My hat!"

"Schoolboy theatrical company essential—only open to a schoolboy Co.," said Bunter.

"I suppose he isn't pulling our leg?" said Squiff. "If there's anything in it, we're on to this, my infants."

"Yes, rather! Where did you hear of it, Bunter?"

"Is it in that paper?" demanded Wharton.

Billy Bunter hastily tucked the "Friardale Times" under his waistcoat. It was not an easy thing to do—Bunter's waistcoat fitted him very tightly.

"Oh, no—ahem! I mean, I'll explain! But, first of all, you fellows have got to agree to do the right thing."

"Oh, we'll do that!"

"I mean, the performance will have to be good; and so we can't have any of your little games, Wharton."

"My little games!" repeated Wharton.

"Yes—shoving out good actors so as to keep yourself in the limelight, and that kind of thing, you know!"

"Why, you fat idiot——"

"That's got to be agreed on for a start," said Bunter loftily. "In a matter like this, swank and personal jealousy will have to be put aside. You'll have to take a back seat, and play second fiddle to a chap who's known to be a better actor."

Wharton's face was quite pink.

"You fat duffer! What are you fellows cackling at?" demanded Wharton a little gruffly. "I've given up first place to Wibley—I own that Wib is better than I am."

"So you have—so he is!" agreed Vernon-Smith. "Bunter's only talking out of his neck! Kick him out!"

"I wasn't referring to Wibley!" roared Bunter.

"Then whom, you porpoise?"

"Me, of course!"

"Oh! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! It will have to be understood, first of all, that I play the title-role. You see, we've got to make the thing a success, or we can't expect them to whack out fifty guineas."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The second condition is that I take forty guineas——"

"What!"

"And you chaps can whack out the other ten among you ——"

"You're too generous!" said Squiff, with a shake of the head.

"Well, I mean to be generous!" said Bunter. "Nothing mean about me. Now, if you fellows agree to those conditions, I'll put you on to the thing at once. Otherwise, I shall go to Coker!"

"You can go to Jericho or Jerusalem!" said Wharton. "If anybody's advertising in that paper for a schoolboy theatrical company, hand it out, and we'll see. If there's anything in it we'll stand you a feed as a reward for spotting it."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"And we'll put you in the cast, and give you the title-role, the next time we play 'The Prize Porpoise!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" roared Bunter. "I won't show you the advertisement now! I'll tell Coker about it. I'll bar you out of it—leggo, Bob Cherry!—'tain't in that paper at all! There isn't an advertisement, and it ain't on the middle page——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter had succeeded in exciting the curiosity of the Removites. They were not likely to give him the title-role in the play, but they were prepared to give him a bumping if he did not hand over the "Friardale Times." That was the best the Remove Dramatic Society could do for him.

"Chuck out that paper!" said Bob Cherry.

"Look here——"

Bob Cherry grasped the end of the folded paper, which was sticking out from Bunter's waistcoat. The paper was tightly jammed, and as Bob dragged at it, there was a rending sound, and half Bunter's waistcoat-buttons flew off. Bob captured the paper with one hand, and Bunter's hair with the other, and held the fat junior at arm's length as he proceeded to examine his prize.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
X. Y. Z.

HARRY WHARTON & CO. gathered round with considerable eagerness.

If anybody wanted a schoolboy amateur theatrical company to perform, for the generous fee of fifty guineas, Harry Wharton & Co. were quite prepared to offer their services.

It seemed very improbable; but Bunter had evidently seen something of the sort in the paper, and they were curious to know precisely what it was.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here it is!" said Bob Cherry.

"Read it out!"

"Let's all have it."

Bob Cherry read aloud the advertisement which had so excited William George Bunter, and had dazzled him with a vision of fifty guineas and unlimited feeds.

"NOTICE TO AMATEUR THEATRICAL SOCIETIES!

"A gentleman interested in amateur theatricals, and desiring to give entertainments of this nature in his country house during the Easter holidays, to a party of schoolboys, wishes to secure the services of a junior Amateur Theatrical Society. Average age not under fifteen. Must be Public Schoolboys.

"A fee of fifty guineas will be paid for the entertainment, if conditions satisfactory to the advertiser are fulfilled.

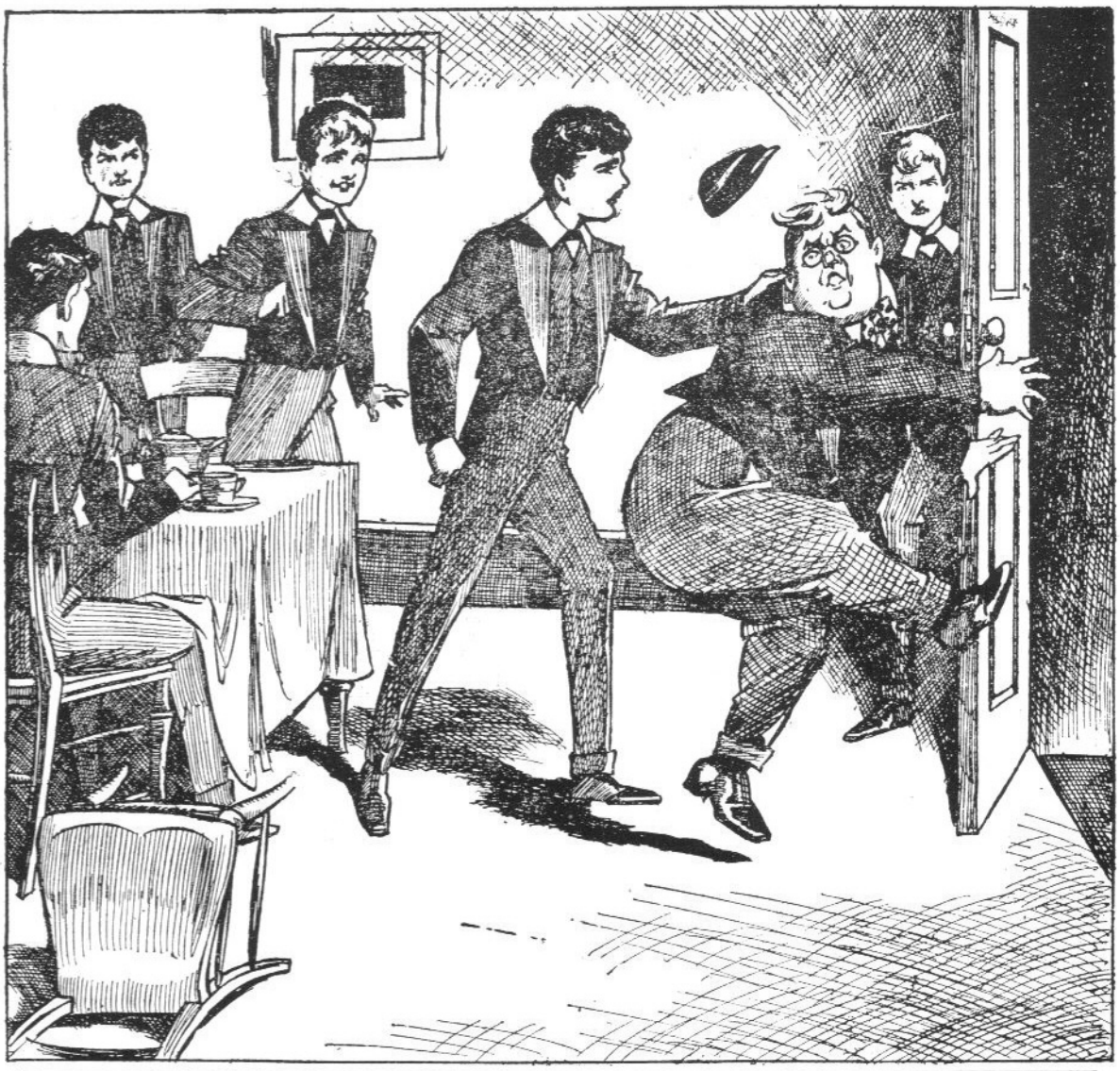
"Further particulars may be obtained from X. Y. Z., care of 'Friardale Times,' Friardale, Kent. Stamped addressed envelope should be enclosed for reply."

"Well, that beats the band," said Harry Wharton. "Blessed if I think it can be genuine! Chap who's willing to pay fifty guineas for a performance could get swarms of amateur actors without advertising for them."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Bob Cherry. "It's some old johnny whose kids are coming home from school for the holidays, and perhaps bringing their pals with them. The old chap is going to amuse the party like this. Seems to me rather a good idea."

"It's a lot of money!" said Frank Nugent.

"Not for a party of fifteen or twenty chaps, and there may be a big railway fare to pay, you know."



"My only hat!" said the Caterpillar. "Was—was that you speaking?" "Yes, rather," replied Bunter. I can imitate anybody's voice. I'll imitate yours now, and you—here, I say, wharrer you at, Bob Cherry? Leggo my ears, Nugent, you beast! Field, you rotter, I'll smash you! Oh, crumbs!" (*See Chapter* 6.)

"Well, that's so," agreed Nugent. "It wouldn't work out at very much for each chap, especially if the fare's big."

"Still, it's a good offer, if it's genuine," said Wharton. "I think we'll look into it, anyway."

"I say, you fellows——"

"Oh, don't bother, Bunter!"

"Why, you rotters!" roared Bunter. "That's my paper—that's my advertisement—that's my idea entirely! You're not going to rob me, I can tell you!"

"Fathead!" said Bob. "Advertisements are addressed to the public generally, not specially to prize porpoises. We were bound to see this—it's in the next column to our own football results for the season."

"I tell you it's my idea," howled Bunter, "and I'm jolly well going to Coker——"

"S'hush!"

"Coker's certain to see it," said Squiff. "He's bound to read the footer results. Everybody at Greyfriars will see it."

"Oh, really Squiff——"

"Still, Bunter has drawn our attention to it first," said Wharton, "you can come to tea in the study if you like, Bunter."

"I'm going to be in the cast——"

"Bow-wow!"

"I'm going to play the title-role——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cheeky rotters!" yelled Bunter indignantly. "I—I'm not going to stand this. I'll tell you what I'll do. Either you'll put me in the cast, if you get the job, or I'll apply personally."

"'Taint an advertisement for walruses," said Wibley.

"I'll make up a dramatic company myself, and bag the job," said Bunter determinedly. "I'll soon get the fellows together, to bag fifty guineas. With a really good actor to coach them——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you fellows won't have an earthly," said Bunter. "Now, you'll agree to my conditions at once, or I'll go round getting my company together."

The Removites received that threat with yells of laughter. The Owl of the Remove blinked at them furiously, and rolled out of the Rag. He was determined. If his striking talents were not recognised and appreciated as they deserved to be, he was going to start a rival company and put the Remove company hopelessly in the shade.

"Don't forget tea in the study, Billy," called out Wharton.

"Blow tea in the study!"

"It's still open, if you don't get that company."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter snorted, and rolled away. He was not to be bribed by tea in the study from carrying out his fearful threat.

"Now, about this johnnie who signs himself X. Y. Z.," said Wharton, when the indignant Owl had disappeared. "It looks to me like a catch or a swindle. Most likely when you answer the advertisement, you receive a reply saying that money must be sent. Lots of swindles are worked like that. Still, there's no harm in looking into it. We'll write for the particulars, and if X. Y. Z. asks us for any money, we'll let the thing drop at once."

"Good egg!"

"You chaps get on with 'Julius Cæsar,' and I'll cut off and write the letter," said Harry Wharton. "May as well catch the next post. If it's genuine, we may as well get in before Coker."

"Hear, hear!"

Leaving the amateur actors to "worry" Julius Cæsar, Wharton hurried away to his study, No. 1, in the Remove.

He had little belief in the genuineness of the advertisement, well knowing that the advertisement columns of the newspapers are largely used by unscrupulous rascals in want of other people's money. But it was certainly worth looking into. In fact, in his mind's eye, he could picture some kindly, white-whiskered old gentleman, preparing that nice entertainment for his dear boys fresh home from school.

It did not take Wharton long to write the letter, asking X. Y. Z. for particulars. He carefully enclosed a stamped and addressed envelope.

There was still time to catch the collection at the school-box, and Wharton hurried out of the School House with the letter.

In his hurry he almost ran into a big Fifth-Former, who came striding along with a letter in his hand.

"Now, then, where are you going?" growled Coker of the Fifth. "Looking for a thick ear? Clear off!"

"But I'm going to post a letter," said Wharton mildly.

Coker started.

"Oh, you're posting a letter, too!"

"Certainly!"

"Writing home?" asked Coker.

Wharton stared at him. Why Coker of the Fifth should care whom he was writing to was a mystery.

"No," he replied.

"Oh! A letter to one of those chaps at St. Jim's, perhaps?" said Coker carelessly.

"No. What the deuce does it matter to you whom my letter's to?" demanded Wharton, mystified, and a little annoyed.

"Oh, not at all!" said Coker. "Sure you've stamped it?"

"Yes, of course."

"You fags are so careless," said Coker. "I dare say you've forgotten. Let me see it. I've got a stamp you can have, if you like."

Wharton was astounded. Such inquisitiveness on the part of Billy Bunter would have been natural enough. But Coker! And Coker was offering him a penny stamp!

"Well, let's look," said Coker.

"You blessed Peeping Tom!" said Wharton. "What does it matter to you whom the letter's to?"

Coker coloured.

"'Tain't that," he said, "only—only—ahem!—better let me see it. You may have forgotten the stamp, you know."

"Rats!" said Harry, and he pushed past Coker and slipped his letter into the box.

"Look here," exclaimed Coker, dropping all diplomacy at once. "whom is that letter to?"

"Find out!"

"I mean to," growled Coker, "I think I can guess. Is it to anybody in Friardale?"

Then Wharton understood at last.

"Is yours?" he demanded, in his turn.

"Never mind mine," said Coker. "I'm asking you a question. Is that letter addressed to anybody in Friardale—a chap with initials, f'rinstance?"

Wharton grinned. It was evident that Horace Coker had already seen the advertisement in the "Friardale Times." He could guess to whom Coker's letter was written. The Fifth Form Stage Club were inquiring for the "particulars" offered by X. Y. Z.

"Well, what are you grinning at?" demanded Coker. "Just you tell me whether that letter was written to Friardale—to a fellow's initials?"

"What initials?" asked Wharton innocently.

Coker coughed. If the junior was not on the track of X. Y. Z., Horace Coker did not mean to put him on the track.

"Never mind—never mind that," said Coker. "I'm asking questions, not answering them. You just answer my question, or——"

"Or what?"

"Or I'll jolly well lick you!" roared Coker.

"Go hon!"

Wharton cheerfully knocked Coker's hat off, and ran for the School House. The great Coker gave a yell of wrath, and plunged after his hat, and then raced after the junior. But Harry Wharton disappeared into the House long before Coker could get near him, and the great man of the Fifth had to content himself with breathing threats of future vengeance.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Special Occasion!

"'LET me have men about me that are fat,
Fat-headed men, and such as eat at nights!'"

"Oh, you ass!"

"Wharrer marrer?"

Wibley of the Remove almost tore his hair. Sampson Quincy Iffley Field was going through Julius Cæsar's lines. The rehearsal in the Rag was going strong. It was that old favourite, Shakespeare, who was being patronised by the Remove Dramatic Society, with some modern improvements by themselves, for the Remove fellows agreed with many great modern critics that Shakespeare needed some improvement.

Wibley, since he had come to Greyfriars, had been the moving spirit in the Remove Theatrical Society. Wibley was a born actor, and a clever manager. Harry Wharton had yielded first place to him cheerfully.

Wibley had the pleasure—or otherwise—of putting the youthful players through their paces.

He was a good stage-manager and a good coach, but some of the actors gave him plenty to do. Even Squiff, adaptable as he was, was far greater on the playing-fields than on the histrionic boards.

"Haven't you mugged up your lines, fathead?" demanded Wibley.

"Yes, rather!"

"Haven't you got your script with you?"

"Here it is. I was reading from it," said Squiff. "Some of the lines are a bit smudgy."

"I should think your brains are a bit smudgy, too," hooted Wibley. "Do you think Shakespeare ever wrote lines like that? Look at it again!"

Sampson Quincy Iffley Field looked at his copy again, and once more he broke forth in the style of Julius Cæsar:

"'Let me have men about me that are fat,
Weak-headed men, and such as squeak at nights.'"

"Oh, you blithering chump!" said the exasperated Wibley. "Look at the book, you howling fathead, and write it out afresh, you wandering lunatic! Here it is!"

"'Let me have men about me that are fat,
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights.'"

"Blessed if I ever heard of sleek-headed men!" said Squiff. "Are you quite sure that's right, Wib?"

"Yes, ass!"

"Well, I think——"

"Are you going to improve on Shakespeare, like Bernard Shaw?" demanded Wibley, with heavy sarcasm. "Just you spout the lines as Spokeshave—I mean, Shakespeare—wrote them, and none of your blessed cheek!"

"Oh, all right," said Squiff. "Anything for a quiet life. But I can't help thinking that weak-headed sounds better than sleek-headed."

"'Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look,
He drinks too much——'"

Wibley gave a shriek.

"'He thinks too much,' you fathead!"

"Sure that's right?"

"Yes, dummy!"

"Oh, all right," said Squiff, in his obliging way.

"'Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look,
He thinks too much, you fathead!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yarooh!" roared Squiff, as a cushion caught him fairly upon the chest. "Wharrer you up to, Wibley?"

"'Tain't time for Julius Cæsar to fall yet," grinned Nugent.

"I—I'll scalp him!" said Wibley. "He's turning my hair grey! We'll turn him out and make him an Extra Citizen."

"You burbling ass!" exclaimed Squiff, jumping up and charging at the stage-manager. "I'll jolly well——"

"Order!"

Cassius and Mark Antony and Brutus and several more noble Romans seized Julius Cæsar just in time, and saved him from committing assault and battery upon the stage-manager.

"Order! This isn't a dog-fight!" said Bob Cherry.

"That silly ass——"

"That burbling idiot——"

The door opened, and Harry Wharton came into the Rag.

"How's the rehearsal getting on?" he asked cheerily.

"This bit is unrehearsed," said Bob Cherry. "Chuck it, Squiff! You ought to mug up your lines better. Still, bunging cushions is barred at rehearsals. I was just thinking, too, that I feel rather like Cassius—lean and hungry. It's time for tea."

"Same here," said Nugent. "Done the letter, Harry?"

"Yes, and posted it, and spotted Coker at the letter-box posting a letter, too," grinned Wharton. "He was mighty curious about my letter, and I'm pretty certain that he has written to X. Y. Z. himself."

"That ass!" said Wibley disdainfully. "The cheek! He can't act for toffee!"

"Well, if there's anything in it, I don't think the Fifth Form Stage Club will get the fifty guineas away from us," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Let's get off and get tea now. Our giddy visitors will be here soon."

And the rehearsal of Julius Cæsar was promptly "chucked."

The Famous Five proceeded to Study No. 1. Harry Wharton & Co. were expecting two guests to tea from Highcliffe School. There was one fellow in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe with whom they were very friendly, though they were on fighting terms with most of the Highcliffians.

It was a very special occasion, and the Famous Five were making special preparations. While Squiff and Hurree Singh and Nugent were making the study awfully tidy, and making other preparations, Wharton and Bob Cherry wheeled out their bicycles, to run down to Friardale for a special supply of tuck. Funds were high in Study No. 1, and ran to something a little more special than was supplied at the school shop.

Bob Cherry, indeed, had recommended cold chickens. The two fellows who were coming to tea had no end of money, and were doubtless accustomed to doing themselves very well, and the Co. naturally wanted to give them something rather good. And cash being plentiful, Bob Cherry's ambitious suggestion was adopted.

Wharton and Bob pedalled down to the village in very quick time.

On their way to the provision-dealers, they passed the office of the "Friardale Times." Bob uttered an exclamation:

"Highcliffe cads!"

Wharton looked round.

Five Highcliffe juniors were coming out of the local paper office—Ponsonby and Vavasour and Monson and Drury and Gadsby of the Fourth—the old rivals and enemies of the Famous Five.

They stared at the two cyclists, and Ponsonby extracted an eyeglass from his pocket, and turned it upon them in a supercilious way.

Bob Cherry put his brake on.

"Oh, come on, Bob!" said Wharton. "No rags now! We've got to get back with the giddy chickens!"

"Oh, all serene! Blessed if I can stand that cad Ponsonby!" growled Bob.

They rode on and dismounted outside the shop they had come to visit. Ponsonby & Co looked after them with grinning faces.

"Our dear young friends from Greyfriars," murmured Ponsonby. "That cad Courtenay and that other cad De Courcy are going over to tea with them this afternoon."

"Rotten, I call it," said Vavasour—"absolutely!"

"And they're getting in the giddy provisions, by the look of it," grinned Ponsonby. "I think this is where we get a little of our own back. Come on!"

"What's the little game?" asked Gadsby.

"You'll see, my son. Follow your leader."

And Ponsonby led his merry men away at a great rate, out of the village and down the lane that led to Greyfriars.

Meanwhile, Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry were making their purchases. The purchases were very satisfactory. They obtained four really nice chickens, cooked and cold, and they were wrapped up in two parcels, which were tied on the handle-bars. Then the chums of the Remove remounted for the ride home.

"I wonder what those cads were doing at the newspaper office?" Bob Cherry remarked as they rode out of the village. "Do they go in for amateur theatricals at Highcliffe?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Looks to me as if Ponsonby is after Mr. X. Y. Z. and his

fifty guineas," said Bob. "Still, those worms wouldn't have any chance against us—no more than Coker!"

"No fear! I'll ask Courtenay."

The two Removites rode swiftly down the lane. As they came round a bend in the lane, under the shadow of the big trees, Bob, who was a little ahead, suddenly jammed on his brakes, and shouted:

"Hold on, Harry!"

Wharton put his brakes on quickly.

It was only just in time.

Across the lane, which was its narrowest there, a long pole had been placed, from hedge to hedge. If the cyclists had turned the corner recklessly and run into it, they would certainly have been hurt. Harry Wharton's eyes glinted as he jumped down.

"What silly idiot has played a dangerous trick like that?" he exclaimed.

Bob Cherry clenched his fists.

"Might have busted our bikes, if not our necks!" he exclaimed.

The two juniors looked round angrily. The pole was a long scaffold-pole, and had evidently been taken from a building which was in the course of construction in the neighbouring field. The juniors seized it, and dragged it away, and pitched it over the hedge. As they did so, there was a sudden shout:

"Sock it to them!"

Through a gap in the hedge five juniors came dashing.

"Look out! Highcliffe cads!" yelled Bob Cherry.

The next instant Ponsonby & Co. were upon them.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Ponsonby's Little Joke!

PONSONBY of Highcliffe had laid that little trap for his old rivals—a dangerous trick to play; but Cecil Ponsonby did not care about that. All he cared about was to stop the two cyclists where they could be taken at a disadvantage.

The chums of the Remove were great fighting-men, but five to two were long odds, and they were taken by surprise.

Both of them hit out, and as they closed in conflict Ponsonby and Gadsby went heels-over-head in the dust.

But the other three rushed on, and Wharton and Bob went down under the rush, with the Highcliffians sprawling over them.

"Back up!" panted Wharton.

They would soon have thrown off the three, but Ponsonby and Gadsby jumped up at once and piled in again.

Harry Wharton and his chum put up a desperate fight.

But they were down, and the odds were too great. Ponsonby & Co. did not mean to give them a chance of getting up again.

But before they lay breathless under their assailants, the two Removites had done a good deal of damage.

Ponsonby's nose was streaming red, and Gadsby's eyes were both growing bluish, and the other three were hard hit.

"Squat on the cads!" panted Ponsonby. "Keep 'em tight while I uncoil this blessed cord!"

"We've got 'em!"

"You rotters!" roared Bob Cherry, struggling in vain under the weight of Gadsby and Monson. "Lemme gerrup, and I'll lick the lot of you!"

"Oh, you shut up!" said Gadsby, dabbing a handful of turf into the unfortunate Bob's mouth, and Bob Cherry gurgled wildly.

He had no choice about shutting up.

Cecil Ponsonby rapidly uncoiled a thin, strong cord, lately purchased in Friardale for this especial purpose.

"Hold the cads!" he said, dabbing his nose. "We'll fix 'em!"

"Oh, you rotters!" panted Wharton.

Ponsonby mopped his nose, and grinned down at the gasping Removites.

"We're not going to hurt you," he said, with a chuckle. "Only, as some of our fellows are coming over to tea with you, we're just chipping in to celebrate the occasion. I dare say you'll find Courtenay and De Courcy there when you get in. You'll be rather late for tea, in fact, I fear!"

"Absolutely!" chirped Vavasour.

"But we're going to send you home all right," said Ponsonby. "Don't you be afraid. Only our little joke, you know. You're such jokers yourselves that I'm sure you'll appreciate the humour of it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled the Highcliffians.

They had the upper-hand for once, and they were enjoying it, in spite of the damages they had received.

While his comrades were holding the helpless Removites, Ponsonby cut the cord into lengths with his pocket-knife.

Then he tied up the hands of the two prisoners. The Highcliffians dragged them to their feet, but resistance was no longer possible. The Greyfriars juniors had to make up their minds to grin and bear it.

Their furious looks only made the Highcliffians chortle. Ponsonby dragged the two bicycles together.

"Get on your jiggers, dear boys," he said.

"What!"

"Help them on," said Ponsonby. "I'll hold the bikes. Mind they don't fall; we don't want to hurt the poor little dears!"

The grinning Highcliffians shoved the two juniors into their saddles. They got their feet on the pedals, and sat well enough, leaning on one another to keep from pitching over. Ponsonby tied Wharton's right arm to Bob Cherry's left, leaving a length of cord of about a foot between them. Then he tied their feet to the pedals.

The Greyfriars juniors did not say a word. They were in the hands of the Philistines, and there was no help for it.

"There, that's all right, so far," said Ponsonby, with a chuckle. "I fancy they can ride like that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You utter idiot!" said Wharton, between his teeth. "If you start us with our hands tied, there will be an accident!"

"I'm sure I shall be sorry," said Ponsonby. "I hope you are insured, dear boys. Your relatives will benefit in that sad eventuality. Probably they will prefer your insurance to yourselves; I should not be surprised."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now we will see what is in the parcels," said Ponsonby. "Something nice for Courtenay and the Caterpillar, I dare say. You should not hide your lights under a bushel, dear boys. We will have these nice things on view!"

The parcels were dragged open, and the four plump cold chickens revealed. Amid howls of laughter from his comrades, Ponsonby proceeded to hang them round the necks of the two cyclists.

Wharton and Bob Cherry were crimson with rage.

They understood now that it was Ponsonby's intention to send them back to Greyfriars like that, tied to their machines, and with the chickens hanging round their necks.

They could imagine the yell of laughter that would greet them.

But Ponsonby was not finished yet.

He proceeded to jerk off their collars, and ties, and caps, which he stuffed down their backs. Then he ruffled their hair, and daubed a handful of mud on their faces.

The Highcliffians were almost in hysterics by this time.

Still the victims bore it with heroic fortitude. They would have perished rather than have asked Ponsonby to go easy.

"There's a picture for you!" said the humorous Ponsonby. "This is really nearly as good as the tarring and feathering you gave me once, dear boys!"

"You cad!" said Wharton. "We tarred you because you were a sneaking rat! And I'll give you the hiding of your life for this some time!"

"I think they're finished now," said Ponsonby.

"Hang it, Pon, we don't want them to break their necks!" said Gadsby, rather uneasily. "That would be a bit too thick!"

"Quite so," agreed Ponsonby. "It would be a waste of time attending the inquest, too. They're not going to break their poor little necks!"

Wharton's left hand and Bob's right hand were untied from their sides, and placed on the handle-bars of their machines, and tied again there.

The two juniors were now able to hold their handle-bars, and pedal closely abreast, the cord between them keeping them from separating.

Only two excessively good and active riders could have kept going in such a position, and if the two cyclists had come crashing to the ground, the result would have been exceedingly serious for them.

"Now start them!" said Ponsonby.

The grinning Highcliffians wheeled the cyclists forward in the direction of Greyfriars.

Their feet went round with the pedals, and they guided their bikes each with a single hand, tied to the bar.

"Think you can do it?" smiled Ponsonby. "You Greyfriars chaps brag of what you can do on the cycle track, you know. Here's a chance for you!"

Wharton and Bob Cherry did not reply. Their feelings at that moment were far too deep for words.

The Highcliffians marched them on, wheeling the bikes, the helpless riders' feet going round with the pedals.

"We'll see you as far as Greyfriars, and turn you in at the gates," said Ponsonby. "After that you must look out for yourselves!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Gadsby. "What giddy guys they look! I say, Pon, suppose they run into the Head or somebody?"

"That's their look out. I'm not responsible for clumsy cyclists!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As they came in sight of Greyfriars, Ponsonby & Co. released the bikes. Wharton and Bob Cherry pedalled on to keep their balance. They were good riders, and not really in danger, unless the pedals should catch from their being held so near together. In that case, there would certainly be trouble.

"There's a giddy crowd at the gate yonder!" yawned Ponsonby. "I don't think we'll call in this evening. Think you can manage, Wharton?"

"You rotter!"

"Think you can manage, Cherry?"

"You cad!"

"Ungrateful, I call that, after all the trouble we've taken," said Ponsonby. "Well, it's their look-out now. I really hope there won't be an accident—two shining lights to be extinguished all of a sudden. What would the great dramatic society do without them, I wonder?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good-bye, dears!" said Ponsonby.

"Ha, ha! Good-bye!"

The Highcliffians disappeared through a gap in the hedge, and the two unhappy cyclists rode on towards Greyfriars. They had no choice about that, for they could not stand still, and it was impossible to turn in the narrow lane, tied as they were. But as they saw the crowd at the gates, they would have given a good deal to be able to ride away and take their chance elsewhere.

But there was no help for it. It was only by riding very steadily that they kept their balance, and avoided a bad fall. And with their muddy faces glowing with rage, the victims of Ponsonby's little joke rode grimly on.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Welcome Home!

NO. 1 STUDY was presenting a festive appearance.

Nugent and Squiff and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh had not been idle.

It was high time that the two cyclists should have returned from the village, but they had not put in an appearance yet.

The trio had made the study quite merry and bright with its unaccustomed tidiness, and laid the table, and had the kettle boiling. All was ready for the visitors—excepting the two absent juniors and the expected cold chickens.

"What the dickens is keeping them?" said Nugent. "It's more than time they were back. I suppose they haven't been collecting punctures. We don't want them to come walking in with chickens under their arms when the visitors are here."

"Time the visitors were here, too," said Squiff, looking at the clock.

"They are arrivefully coming," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, looking from the study window. "I can see the esteemed Courtenay and the ludicrous Caterpillar."

"Where the deuce are Wharton and Bob?" growled Squiff.

"They are not in sightfulness," said Hurree Singh. "Our esteemed visitors have arrived first. We will let them startfully commence with tea and toast. As your English proverb says, 'Where there is a will there is a wisp.'"

There were footsteps in the passage, and Nugent threw the door open.

The two Fourth-Formers of Highcliffe came in.

Frank Courtenay and De Courcy, generally called the Caterpillar, shook hands cordially with the Co. Courtenay was very "pally" with Harry Wharton & Co., who had known him when he was less prosperous. It was not very long since Courtenay, then known as Arthur Clare, had been a scholarship boy at Highcliffe, and had had many troubles with Ponsonby and his fellow nuts. A poor boy, his parentage unknown, Clare had found his path a thorny one at Highcliffe. But matters had changed since then—since Clare had found his father in Major Courtenay. But he was still the same frank, good-natured, unaffected lad the juniors had taken a liking to when he was a boy without a name.

De Courcy was a different kind of fellow. The Caterpillar was of the nuts nutty. The Greyfriars fellows hardly knew what to make of him; but they concluded that he must be pretty decent, or Courtenay would not have chummed with him. They knew, too, that the Caterpillar had stood by Clare like a good pal in his rough times at Highcliffe, when he had been a scholarship "kid."

"Trot in!" said Nugent. "Have you seen anything of Wharton and Cherry?"

"No," said Courtenay. They didn't meet us on the way. I hope they haven't started and missed us."

"Blessed if I know where they are. They went down to the village on their bikes, but they ought to have been back before this. Well, we won't wait for them. It's past tea-time."

"Oh, wait," said Courtenay; "let's walk down to the gates and meet them."

The Caterpillar sank into the study armchair.

"You can walk down to the gates, Franky," he said. "I'll sit here and admire the scenery, if you don't mind."

"Oh, come on!" said Courtenay. "Don't be such a beastly slacker, Caterpillar. This isn't Highcliffe, you know—the fellows here don't slack."

"The energy I have seen displayed here," said the Caterpillar solemnly, "is marvellous—almost unnervin'. I've watched these chaps playin' footer, when they used to play Highcliffe, till it made me feel quite fatigued."

"The footerful game is excellent for the esteemed health, my esteemed and ridiculous friend," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The Caterpillar jumped. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's weird variety of the English language was a surprise to him.

"Would you mind saying that over again?" he asked politely.

"I remarkfully observed that the playfulness of the esteemed footer is beneficial to the ludicrous health. It promotes the buckupfulness."

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "I dare say you're right. I've never heard it put so eloquently before. May I compliment you on the way you have picked up our language."

"The esteemed language was not pickfully acquired," explained Hurree Singh. "Before coming to this ludicrous country, I studyfully worked under one of the best native masters in India."

"He must have been tophole," said the Caterpillar.

"The topholefulness was terrific."

"Was—was what?"

"Terrific, my ludicrous friend."

The other juniors were grinning. The Caterpillar rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"May a fellow venture to inquire why you apply that very complimentary term?" he asked.

"In Bhanipur, it is the customary politefulness to give the magniloquent compliments in the friendly meetings," explained the dusky nabob. "My esteemed native master instructed me in the complimentary terms of this ridiculous language. Since I have arrivefully been transplanted in this country, I have found that there are some differences, but my native master has warned me that the best English is no longer spoken in this country. The first-class English of the poet Shakespeare has fallen into neglectfulness, and, as your proverb says, 'Speech is rotten, and silence saves a stitch in time.'"

"Oh, my hat!"

"My esteemed Form-master, the estimable Quelchy, has sometimes remonstrated with me on this matter," pursued Hurree Singh. "I have respectably but firmfully pointed out to him that, though the modern English speech is careless and slovenful, there is no reason why a foreign person should not speak the very best English, in the manner of the great poets, such as Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, and Dan Leno."

The Caterpillar sank back in the armchair, apparently overcome.

Bob Cherry had sometimes remarked that Hurree Singh's native master, who had instructed him that "ludicrous" and "ridiculous" were complimentary expressions in English, must have been a regular corker.

Courtenay quitted the study with Nugent and Squiff, leaving the Caterpillar in the armchair, and Hurree Singh keeping him company. The nabob was very eloquent on the subject of the decadence of the English language, and the Caterpillar found him very entertaining.

The three juniors looked out at the gates, but there was as yet no sign of Wharton and Bob Cherry. Their chums little guessed what had delayed them. But a few minutes later two cyclists came into view.

"Hallo, there's a pretty pair of specimens!" remarked Nugent. "Where on earth did they come from?"

The juniors looked in amazement at the two riders who were coming slowly up the lane.

Their aspect was extraordinary.

It was not often that two fellows with ruffled hair, muddy faces, collarless necks, and chickens hanging on them, rode up that lane. In fact, Nugent had never seen such a sight before.

Wharton and Bob Cherry were unrecognisable.

A good many fellows spotted them, and gathered in the road outside the gates to stare at the amazing sight.

The two cyclists came on steadily.

"What on earth can they be?" exclaimed Bolsover major of the Remove. "Must belong to a circus, I should think!"

"Sure they're riding tied together!" said Micky Desmond.

"My only hat!" gasped Nugent at last. "It's Wharton and Bob! I know them now."

"Wharton!" gasped Vernon-Smith. "Bob Cherry! Ha, ha, ha! They've been in the wars!"

"They look muddy!" yelled Peter Todd. "Have they been shopping? Do you fellows bring home chickens tied round your necks when you go shopping?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter greeted the unhappy cyclists as they came pedalling up, with almost painful care, towards the gates of Greyfriars.

Their faces, where they were not smothered with mud, were crimson.

"They're tied to the bikes!" howled Tom Brown. "My only hat! Must be some of the Highcliffe cads have done that—ahem!—I mean the Highcliffe chaps."

Courtenay was grinning.

"That's rather more than a joke, whoever it was," he said. "Let's lend them a hand."

Nugent and Squiff were already running to meet the riders. Courtenay dashed after them. A crowd of Greyfriars fellows rushed after them, too. They were howling with laughter.

"I—I say, it's really you, I suppose?" ejaculated Nugent.

"Hold these blessed bikes!" gasped Wharton. "I've been expecting to go wallop every minute——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?"

"N-n-nothing! Was I cackling? I say, you're tied up——"

"Do you think we should stick like this if we weren't tied up?" bellowed Bob Cherry. "Can't you get us loose, and cackle afterwards—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha—I mean, right-ho—yes—ha, ha, ha!"

"You're muddy!" said Peter Todd. "You look rather funny. Did they hang those chickens round your necks in the shop? Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's too bad!" exclaimed Courtenay, who was busy with his pocket-knife on the cords. "Who did this, Wharton?"

"Some rotten cads!" growled Wharton. "And if they hadn't been more than two to one, we'd have knocked them into little pieces!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly, cackling asses——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You burbling idiots——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nugent and Squiff and Courtenay tried hard not to smile as they cut the cords, but it was hard. It was very rough on the two unfortunate victims of Ponsonby's peculiar sense of humour, but there was no doubt that they looked funny.

They were freed at last, and they jumped off the bikes in great relief.

"Shall I carry your provisions?" murmured Peter Todd. "You don't mind if I carry them with my hands? I'm not used to carrying chickens round my neck."

"Silly ass!"

"You—you can't go in like that," said Nugent. "You'd better wash your faces in the pond, and I'll fetch you some collars—ha, ha!—and a hair-brush—ha, ha, ha!"

"Fetch 'em a looking-glass first," said Skinner.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wharton and Bob, with feelings unspeakable, washed the mud off their faces in the pond, and the collars being discovered down their backs, they were extracted, and the two juniors made themselves presentable enough to go into the school. A hilarious crowd accompanied them to the School House, yelling with laughter. If Ponsonby could have been there, he would have been quite satisfied with the success of his little joke.

The two victims escaped to the Remove dormitory, where they proceeded to put themselves in a little better order.

Nugent and Squiff and Courtenay returned to No. 1 Study with smiling faces.

"What's the cackle about?" asked the Caterpillar lazily, as they came in.

"The cacklefulness is terrific," said Hurree Singh.

"Oh, nothing!" said Nugent. "They've come in, that's all. They met Ponsonby & Co. on the road, and they looked a little muddy—a—a trifle untidy, that's all. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Still, it was a rotten trick," said Courtenay. "They might have had an accident."

"By gad, I wish I had come down to the gates now!" said the Caterpillar.

"The wishfulness is terrific."

Wharton and Bob Cherry came into the study to find tea quite ready and smiling faces to greet them. They did not say anything about Ponsonby & Co. It would not have been polite to utter their thoughts in the presence of Ponsonby's Form-fellows from Highcliffe. But they thought the more, and they fully intended to make Cecil Ponsonby properly sorry for himself at the very first opportunity.

But under the influence of a merry tea their faces quite cleared, and all in No. 1 Study was merry and bright.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Bunter Comes to Tea!

BILLY BUNTER opened the door of No. 1 Study, and blinked in through his big glasses. There was a merry flow of talk in the study, and Harry Wharton & Co. and their visitors seemed in great spirits. But there was an injured expression upon the fat face of Billy Bunter.

"I've come," he said, with dignity.

"Oh, you've come, have you?" said Bob Cherry. "Then the next proceeding is to go."

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"This is our prize porpoise," said Bob, presenting Bunter, as it were, to the visitors. "Warranted forty yards round the waist, and able to beat a boa-constrictor in his own line of business. His great gift is that he can smell out a feed at any distance."

"I saw you come in," said Bunter. "You looked funny! Blessed if I'd have let Ponsonby handle me like that!"

"What!"

"You, too, Wharton. You looked an awful idiot——"

"Did I?" said Harry Wharton sulphurously.

"You jolly well did!" said Bunter. "He, he, he! It's rather rotten to let Ponsonby do you in like that. It reflects on the Remove, you know. Pity I wasn't there."

"Why, you fat octopus——"

"He, he, he!"

"Are you going out on your feet or your neck?" demanded Wharton.

"Oh, really, Wharton, if that's the way you talk to a chap you invite to tea——"

"I—I—I——"

"After the way you pressed me to come, I call it uncivil," said Bunter. "I hardly know what these Highcliffe chaps will think of you. Still, I dare say you're a bit ratty at having been made to look such a silly idiot, so I'll excuse you. I'm not a fellow to take offence."

"Not at teatime," remarked Squiff.

"Oh, really, Field, if you're finished, I'll have your chair ——"

"Thanks! I'm not finished."

Bunter snorted, and stood. He would have eaten standing on his head, for that matter, rather than not have eaten.

"I say, help a fellow to the chicken!" he said. "Fancy coming home with chickens hanging round your necks! He, he, he!"

"Are you going to dry up?"

"Well, I suppose you're rather touchy about it," said Bunter cheerfully. "You looked such an awful idiot. He, he, he! Never mind; I'll let it drop. I don't want to rub it in. Pass the ham, Nugent. You might have a chair for a chap when you ask him to tea. But never mind."

"Who asked you to tea?" demanded Nugent.

"Wharton did. I've given up the idea of forming a rival dramatic society, and come to tea instead, as Wharton suggested."

"Oh!"

"The fellows have no enterprise," explained Bunter, with his mouth full. "They decline to back me up. With a splendid actor like me to coach them, I should be able to lick them into shape all right; but they don't see it. Do you mind if I sit on your knee, Cherry? Ow-yow-yow! I don't mind standing—in fact, I rather like it. You might help a chap to the chicken. As I was saying, I could have licked them into shape, but they have refused to follow my lead. Set of idiots, you know! I was going to help them get the fifty guineas, and I'm still open to help you chaps, if you like to do the sensible thing."

"Bow-wow!"

"You see, I've got an idea for improving the performance," said Bunter. "You know what a splendid ventriloquist I am——"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I know you're jealous of my ventriloquism, Wharton, but I wonder you're not ashamed to say so before these Highcliffe chaps. My idea is to introduce ventriloquism into the performance—see? I should be prepared to act in every scene, in each act, and, in fact, to take the whole play on my shoulders."

"My only hat! I believe he's wound up!" exclaimed Squiff.

"A ventriloquist—what?" said the Caterpillar, looking interested.

"Yes, rather!" said Bunter immediately. "It's a wonderful gift—wonderful! And I can teach it, too! I've given some lessons to my pal D'Arcy, of St. Jim's. I dare say you've heard of D'Arcy? He's a son of Lord Eastwood, an old friend of mine. Gussy—his name's Augustus, but I always call him Gussy—Gussy is an old pal, and he simply revels in my ventriloquism. I'll give you lessons if you like."

"You're awf'ly good!" said the Caterpillar.

"Not at all! I sha'n't charge you any fees," said Bunter. "I should treat you entirely as a friend, De Courcy. I should simply want my expenses—say, a couple of guineas each time I give you a lesson——"

"Will you shut up, you fat cad?" bawled Nugent.

"Oh, really, Nugent, if De Courcy is keen to learn ventriloquism, I don't see why I shouldn't help him. I like helping people. Look here, De Courcy, I'll give you a specimen of what I can do."

"Thanks awf'ly!"

"The esteemed De Courcy is a ludicrous idiot," said Hurree Singh's voice—or, at least, a voice that ought to have been Hurree Singh's. "His talkfulness is terrific rot, and his face would scarefully frighten a crow."

The Caterpillar stared at the dusky nabob, and so did all the other fellows in the study.

"Thank you!" said De Courcy drily.

"Inky," gasped Wharton, "are you dotty——"

"I did not speakfully open my lips!" shouted the nabob. "It is that ventriloquious beast Bunter!"

Billy Bunter chuckled.

"That was a specimen," he explained.

"My only hat!" said the Caterpillar. "Was—was that you speaking?"

"Yes, rather! I can imitate anybody's voice. I'll imitate yours now, and you—— Here, I say, wharrer you at, Bob Cherry? Leggo my ears, Nugent, you beast! Field, you rotter, I'll smash you! Oh, crumbs!"

Bump!

Three or four pairs of boots started operations on Billy Bunter when he was landed in the passage. The unfortunate ventriloquist picked himself up and fled. One specimen of his wonderful powers had been enough for No. 1 Study.

"I am truly sorrowful that you should have supposed me to make a rottenful and rude remark, my estimable De Courcy," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, in great distress. "It was a cadfully rotten joke of the disgusting Bunter."

"Oh, don't mench!" said the Caterpillar gracefully. "Bunter must be an awfully popular chap, I should think, by gad. By the way, you fellows go in for amateur theatricals a lot, I believe? There's an advertisement in the Friardale paper——"

"And we're on it, rather!" said Bob Cherry. "You've seen it, too?"

"I haven't seen it," yawned the Caterpillar. "I never read newspapers. But I've heard Pon talking about it; in fact, Pon insisted on tellin' me about it. I told him he was borin' me, but he went on just the same. Pon's goin' in for it. I think he wants to know whether you fellows are doin' the same. Yaas, now I come to think of it, he asked me to see."

"We are, rather!" said Squiff.

"Of course, if you don't want Pon to know, I won't tell Pon," said the Caterpillar. "I told him he was borin' me, but he would run on. He's never bothered about amateur theatricals that I know of before."

"No secret about it," said Wharton. "I fancy the advertisement's spoof. It's a bit too good to be true, I think. But if it's genuine, the Remove Dramatic Society is going to have a try to bag the fifty guineas."

"Then you'll have Pon for a giddy rival," said the Caterpillar. "Is there anythin' you chaps don't do? Footer, cricket, theatricals! My hat! Simply burstin' with energy—what?" said the Caterpillar, in great admiration.

It was not till dusk was falling over Greyfriars that the two Highcliffe fellows came down to the gates, accompanied by the chums of the Remove. A fat figure loomed up in the Close.

"I say, De Courcy——"

"Hallo!" said the Caterpillar.

"About those lessons in ventriloquism——"

Billy Bunter did not get any further. Bob Cherry and Squiff seized him and bumped him down in the quad, and left him gasping as they went on to the gates. The Caterpillar chuckled. Apparently Billy Bunter was not to find

The parcels were dragged open, and the four plump cold chickens revealed. Amid howls of laughter from his comrades, Ponsonby proceeded to hang them round the necks of the two cyclists. Wharton and Bob Cherry were crimson with rage. *(See Chapter 4.)*

another victim quite so easy as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of St. Jim's had been.

"We'll see you again before breaking-up," said Courtenay, as he shook hand with the Co. "I'll give Pon a licking for you, if you like, when I get in."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Thanks—you can leave that to me. I'm really sorry that we're on such rotten terms with the fellows in your Form, but it can't be helped."

The Caterpillar looked very thoughtful as he went down the road with his chum. Courtenay was thoughtful, too. Ponsonby of Highcliffe was his cousin, and he would have been very glad to see Pon a different kind of fellow. The Caterpillar broke the silence at last.

"It's queer," he remarked.

"What's queer, Caterpillar?"

"About Pon. He seems awfully keen about that amateur theatrical wheeze—awf'ly. He's never cared for anythin' of the sort."

"Confound Pon!" said Courtenay.

"You can confound him, and all your relations, as much as you like, Franky," chuckled the Caterpillar. "Still, I think it's queer. Pon was awf'ly keen to find out whether the Greyfriars chaps had seen that advertisement and were going in for it. It looks to me as if our dear Pon has got somethin' up his sleeve."

"Some trick on the theatrical party, do you mean?" asked Courtenay.

"Somethin' of the sort—yaas."

Courtenay frowned.

"It's rotten!" he exclaimed. "We get on rippingly with those chaps, and Ponsonby would spoil it all, if he could. Any one of them is worth a dozen of Pon."

"A gross," smiled the Caterpillar.

"And they'll never get on good terms while Ponsonby's such a howling cad," said Courtenay.

"Try to reform him," suggested the Caterpillar.

"Oh, rats!"

"Well, you reformed me, you know," argued the Caterpillar. "I used to be a wicked sinner, a smoker, and a bridge-player, and a regular dog, you know, before you opened my eyes to the sinfulness of my conduct——"

"You fathead!"

"And led me into the right path, like a lost lamb, or a brand from the burnin'," said the Caterpillar imperturbably, "and impressed upon my mind the stern morality of the workin' classes. Why don't you try with Pon, Franky, and see if you can pluck him like a brand from the burnin'?"

Courtenay laughed. To pluck Cecil Ponsonby like "a brand from the burnin'," as the Caterpillar expressed it, was a task far beyond his powers.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
Quite Genuine!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! Letter for you, Wharton."

"Type-written, by Jove!" said Nugent.

Wharton smiled as he took down the letter from the rack. Lessons had just ended, and the chums had looked for letters immediately coming out of the Form-room. They were anxious to see the reply from X. Y. Z., if it had come.

"This must be from X. Y. Z.," said Wharton. "I don't know anybody else who'd write to me on a giddy typewriter."

"Makes it look genuine," said Squiff. "Only business people use typewriters."

Wharton slit open the envelope. It was addressed to "Master H. Wharton, Greyfriars School, near Friardale," and the address was written in type, apparently by a somewhat smudgy typewriter. The fact that a typewriter had been used indicated, of course, that it came from a business person. It gave the juniors a favourable impression.

They were very keen to see the letter. A dozen members of the Remove Dramatic Society gathered round to hear it as Wharton read it aloud:

"'Dear Master Wharton,—I have received your application for particulars, and enclose a list of conditions of the amateur theatrical performance, which I desire to take place in my country house.

"'My object is to provide an entertainment for my sons, who will be returning home for the Easter holidays and bringing a party of friends with them. My boys are very keen on amateur theatricals at school, and for this reason I have decided upon employing a school dramatic club to entertain them.

"'If arrangements are satisfactorily made, the sum of fifty guineas (£52 10s.) will be paid as a fee, for one or more performances, as may be decided. Comfortable quarters will be provided in my country house for the party. My residence is in Hampshire, and the theatrical party will be reimbursed for railway expenses, in addition to the fee, second-class fares.'"

"That sounds all right," interjected Bob Cherry. "Railway fares to Hampshire would have made a hole in the giddy guineas."

"Might have made it first-class fares," said Skinner.

"Oh, rats! Second-class will do us all right. No need for the man to waste money. In fact, if he was too jolly open-handed I should think it was rather fishy."

"Hampshire!" said Nugent. "Some of us will be going to Hampshire, anyway, for part of the vac. D'Arcy of St. Jim's lives in Hampshire—a place called Easthorpe."

"Yes, rather! I've been there," chimed in Billy Bunter. "D'Arcy had me down for the vac. before, you know. He's got a topping place, Eastwood House. His father's a lord, you know, and his elder brother's a viscount, and I can tell you they do things in style. His place is quite as good as my pater's."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, Bunter! Let's hear the conditions," said Bob Cherry. "We haven't had the conditions yet. Does the man want us to send any money? If he does, it's a swindle, and it's all off."

"No, there's nothing about sending any money," said Harry. "The conditions are steep."

"Read it out!" chorused the juniors.

Wharton went on reading:

"'The conditions are as follows:

"'The play chosen for representation must be topical—i.e., dealing with the present war with Germany.

"'2nd. The play must be an original composition. In case of a successful representation, X. Y. Z. reserves the right to purchase the copyright at a reasonable figure.

"'3rd. The play to be written in verse; not blank verse.

"'4th. The first representation to be given in the first week of the Easter holidays.

"'5th. The play must be submitted as soon as possible to X. Y. Z., and, in case of approval, notification will immediately be given, the address of X. Y. Z. furnished, and final arrangements made. A theatrical agent will then call on behalf of X. Y. Z. to witness a dress rehearsal. This being satisfactory, the arrangement will be regarded as concluded.

X. Y. Z.'"

"Well, it's a bit queer," said Squiff. "Still, it seems genuine enough. It can't be a swindle if the man doesn't want any money."

"He's paying out money, not getting it in," said Nugent. "Advertisements in the 'Friardale Times' cost something; not much, but something."

"And a theatrical agent is calling to see a rehearsal," said Wharton. "That looks all right. Of course, they'd have to sample us before they engaged us. I must say this looks like a good thing."

"But the conditions are a bit steep, all the same. 'Tain't so jolly easy to write a play, and to write it in verse, too."

"Well, we're written plays before," said Wharton. "We've had some practice in that line. About the giddy poetry——"

"You can leave that to me, if you like," said Billy Bunter. "I'm rather a dab at writing poetry——"

"Bow-wow!"

"We shall all have to put our heads together," said Bob Cherry. "After all, we make Latin verses, so why shouldn't we make English ones?"

"Latin verses don't have to rhyme, though."

"Well, there are lots of rhymes," said Bob Cherry cheerfully. "It'll really be jolly good practice for us. There may be some budding poets in the Remove, too, who'll discover themselves unexpectedly——"

"I'm rather a dab——"

"Oh, shut up, Bunter! We'll hold a meeting of the whole society," said Wharton, "then we can discuss it, and arrange the lines the play is to run on. Then we'll all have a whack at making it up, and when it's finished, we'll compare notes, and pool all the poetry, and select the best."

"That's a good idea."

"It's jolly queer, though," remarked Vernon-Smith. "Rhyming plays are quite out of date; they went out of fashion two hundred years ago, and nobody has been idiot enough to want to revive them! This must be some old chap who's been brought up on Dryden and those old johnnies."

"I pity him if he gets a lot of rhyming plays to read," grinned Bob Cherry. "I dare say lots of school clubs have answered his advertisement. He may get a whole stack of poems."

"There's a typed letter for Coker in the rack!" chuckled Squiff.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The idea of Coker of the Fifth as a poet tickled the Removites. Coker came along just then to take his letter. He frowned at the juniors, and walked off with it.

"Poor old Coker will be sitting up with a wet towel round his head, trying to find rhymes for Ypres!" grinned Squiff.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows had sense enough to leave it to me——" began Billy Bunter.

"Oh, cheese it!"

"Look here, Wharton, if you don't do the sensible thing, I shall jolly well help Coker!" said Bunter threateningly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors walked off, discussing X. Y. Z. and his peculiar conditions, and the task before them, which was not an easy one even for the enterprising Removites.

Billy Bunter blinked after them angrily.

"The silly asses!" he growled. "I'd have been willing to write the whole poem for them for half the fee!"

"I guess it's a good stunt!" remarked Fisher T. Fish, the American junior, in a thoughtful way.

"You think I could do it, Fishy?"

"Eh? What are you burblin' about?" said Fish. "I guess I'm going to join the dramatic society, and have a whack in that fifty guineas; and I'll write the poem for them for ten guineas out of the fee!"

"Why, you silly ass," said Bunter, in disgust, "you can't even write English, let alone write poetry——"

"I guess I'm on this!" said Fisher T. Fish.

And he walked away, without heeding Bunter.

Billy Bunter rolled away to the Fifth-Form passage. He knocked at Coker's door, and rolled in. Horace Coker was sitting at his study table, with a typewritten letter before him. Evidently it was a replica of the letter received by Wharton.

Coker looked up, frowning.

"Clear off, tubby—I'm busy!"

"I've come to see you about that," said Bunter. "Wharton's just had a letter the same as that, if that's from X. Y. Z."

"So that cheeky young ass is in it, after all!" said Coker.

"Yes. He begged me to help him with the poetry," said Bunter. "I'm the only chap in the Remove who can write verse, you know. I refused. I decided that I would help you, Coker!"

Coker stared.

"Help me!" he said. "Why, you silly young ass——"

"Oh, really, Coker! You know jolly well that you can't write poetry," said Bunter warmly. "I heard Potter say that old Prout had a fit once when you wrote some Latin verse, and real poetry is harder to do than Latin verse. I'm willing to take it all off your hands——"

Coker pointed to the door.

"I should only want a guinea in advance, and then another nineteen guineas if you get the job!" said Bunter temptingly.

"Are you going?"

"Now, look here, Coker, you'd better let me help you!" urged Bunter. You know very well what a silly idiot you are—— If you touch me with that bat, I'll —— Yow! Ow, ow, ow!"

Billy Bunter departed hurriedly, and Coker threw the bat into a corner, and sat down again over the typewritten letter.

Coker was still conning over the letter, when his study-mates, Potter and Greene, came in.

"Look at that!" said Coker. "It's the reply from X. Y. Z. —that advertising chap, you know. Looks like a good thing—what?"

Potter and Greene read the letter.

"The Fifth-Form Stage Club will bag it, I feel convinced," said Coker. "Those cheeky Remove kids are trying, but, of course, they haven't an earthly. Rather a twist writing a play in rhyme. Still, I'm a pretty handy fellow. I dare say I shall do it all right."

"You will?" said Potter.

"Yes. You fellows can make suggestions if you like. Every little helps."

"It's not to be a farce?" asked Greene.

"No. A serious play about the war."

"Then you'd better let it alone," said Greene, with a shake of the head. "If you start writing a serious play about the war, Coker, the audience will take it for a screaming farce when they see it. They're bound to."

"If you want a thick ear——" roared Coker.

"Shush!" said Potter. "Let's talk it over while we have tea. It's tea-time, Coker. Going to do any shopping?"

"Hang tea! I'm starting on this play at once! I've got some good ideas already!" said Coker. "I think we ought to start with a prologue."

"A which?"

"A prologue. That's the bit that goes first, you know. When they used to write plays in rhyme, they always had a prologue, you know," said Coker. "Something classic—that's my idea. What about the goddess of war appearing on a battlefield scene, to recite the prologue——"

"Ahem!"

"That's it," said Coker. "We'll make up Fitz as the goddess of war, to speak the prologue. We could rig him up as Ceres."

"As—as whom?" stuttered Potter.

"Ceres."

"I—I thought you said the goddess of war."

"Well, wasn't Ceres the goddess of war, fathead?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Coker angrily.

"Well, I had a faint idea that Ceres was connected with the agricultural department," said Potter. "I fancy it's Bellona you're thinking of—or trying to think of!"

"Bellona?" said Coker. "Rot! It was Ceres, right enough!"

"But, really, you know——"

"I say it was Ceres!" said Coker, in a tone of finality.

Horace Coker never could stand opposition.

"Oh, you can say it was Diana, if you like!" said Potter amiably. "Make it Juno, if you choose, or Minerva! I don't care!"

"Ceres appears as the goddess of war, speaking the prologue," said Coker, evidently much taken with his idea. "Scene: A Stricken Field——"

"A what?"

"A stricken field," said Coker—"battlefield, you know. Ceres comes on and starts something like this—I've got the idea already:

"'"'Mid Belgium's bloodstained fields, in war's alarms,
Affrighted Europe all turns up, in arms.
Fair Belgia's realm, although a neutral State,
Hears Hunnish legions thundering at the gate.
Oh, who shall paint the horrors of the siege,
Or deeds of arms wrought on the walls of Liege?'"

"Leeje!" said Potter. "What's Leeje?"

"Liege, you ass! That's the first town in Belgium that the Prussians dropped on."

"Oh, Liege! I didn't know it was pronounced 'Leeje,'" said Potter meekly. "I had a sort of dim notion that it was a French word!"

"It can be rendered into English for the purposes of poetry," said Coker loftily.

"Oh, I see! What you've just recited is poetry?" asked Potter.

Coker glared.

"What did you think it was?" he roared.

"Blessed if I know! I was going to ask you when you'd finished," said Potter innocently.

That was too much for Coker. He made a jump for the cricket-bat, and Potter and Greene made a jump for the passage.

The study door slammed ferociously after them, and Coker sat down to get on with his prologue. But his poetic labours had several interruptions. Potter and Greene, having spread the report in the Fifth that Coker was writing poetry, fellows came to look into the study to see how he was getting on. They asked him if he felt a pain, and if he would have a wet towel to tie round his classic brow, and whether he wanted any more rhymes for Leeje.

Coker's wrath was soon at boiling-point, and he brought the cricket-bat into play again, and after Fitzgerald had been nearly brained, there were no more callers.

Then Coker finished his prologue in triumph, and had it all ready to be spoken by Ceres—whom Coker, in his usual high-handed manner, insisted upon making into the goddess of war.

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THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
The Play's the Thing!

HARRY WHARTON & Co. were busy, too.

In the Rag a full meeting of the Remove Dramatic Society had gathered.

The question was put to the meeting whether the offer of X. Y. Z. should be accepted, and the play written and submitted, and it was passed nem. con.

The Remove Dramatic Society was, in fact, very keen about it.

They knew that they would beat Coker, anyway; and they were not afraid of any other rivals that might be in the field. As for Ponsonby of Highcliffe, they dismissed him with sniffs. Ponsonby simply hadn't an earthly. Ponsonby knew all about cigarettes and geegees, and Snooker's chances for the Spring Handicap; but what he didn't know about amateur theatricals would have filled large volumes. Besides, the Highcliffe fellows were too slack to take the trouble to write a war play in rhyme. It was not an easy task.

Having fully decided that the play was to be written, the enterprising Removites proceeded to discuss it. Billy Bunter renewed his offer of taking the whole trouble off their hands, and was promptly ejected from the Rag on his plump neck. Then came Fisher T. Fish, as a volunteer for the society, and, wonderful to relate, he offered to pay his subscription if accepted as a member. But the Remove society were not looking for new members, and Fish was persuaded to leave—Bob Cherry's boots being the method of persuasion.

Then the door was locked, and the proceedings proceeded.

The juniors agreed that a topical play was a ripping idea. They were all, of course, very keen about the war, and some of them had relations at the front. It was agreed on all hands that X. Y. Z. knew something, and that it was a big improvement on Shakespeare.

But the lines upon which the play should be written afforded scope for much argument. The title, too, was difficult to decide.

Bob Cherry suggested "The Beastly Bully of Berlin," which had the advantage of being extremely alliterative.

Wharton shook his head.

"Too funny!" he said. "This is a tragedy, really."

"'The Horrid Huns!'" suggested Peter Todd.

"'The Blood of the Brave!'" said Ogilvy.

"Grooh! Not too much gore!" said Wharton.

"'"Mid War's Alarms!'" said Nugent.

"Well, that isn't really tragic—that rather suggests alarum-clocks——"

"Must have something striking," said Squiff. "What about 'Advance, Australia'? We really started the whole game, you know, in capturing the Emden."

"Still, there are other places in the British Empire, you know, that might feel hurt if they were left out," said Vernon-Smith solemnly.

"What about 'The Call of the Empire'?" said Wharton.

"Rather reminds one of music-halls, doesn't it?" said Squiff.

"Yes; might as well made it 'The Call of the Cinema,'" said Todd.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or 'The Call of the Alhambra,'" said the Bounder.

"Oh, rats!" said Wharton. "We shall have to call it something. We'll call it that till we think of a better title, anyway. Now, about the play. Where's the scene going to be laid?"

"Oh, Belgium!" said Wibley. "That's where the bizney is going on at present. Must introduce Belgian characters, too. Now, the question really is, are we going to observe the unities?"

"The which?"

"The unities?"

"What in thunder are the unities?" demanded Bob Cherry.

Wibley smiled superior. Wibley knew all about the dramatic art, and he was not averse to enlightening the darkness of the Remove Dramatic Society on the subject.

"The three unities," he explained. "Time, place, and action. According to the unities, the play mustn't deal with anything that would take longer than the actual time of representation; it must all be in one spot, and——"

"Then I think the unities are rot!" said Wharton decidedly. "Shakespeare doesn't bother about them."

"If you had read the French critics on Shakespeare, my boy, you'd see how they cut him to pieces for neglecting the dramatic unities——"

"Yes; but they were silly asses!" said Wharton. "They couldn't write plays—only yards and yards of silly stuff——"

"The Greeks always observed the unities."

"Yes; but the Greeks were rather duffers, you know!"

"Why, you ass——"

"Bother the Greeks!" said Bob Cherry. "And blow the unities. I've never heard of 'em before. Dash the dramatic unities! We want a good play. You can go and eat coke, Wibley, with your blessed unities! How could Shakespeare have written 'Julius Cæsar,' for instance, if he had taken notice of any such rot?"

"According to the correct rules for the drama, 'Julius Cæsar' isn't a play at all——"

"Then the rules are rubbish! I vote that we write this play without taking notice of any rules whatever," said Bob.

"Hear, hear!"

"That's all very well," said Wibley. "But the dramatic unities——"

"Dry up!"

"According to Aristotle——"

"Look here, you're not going to spring Aristotle on us!" roared Bob Cherry. "I put it to the meeting that anybody who says unities is to be chucked out!"

"Hear, hear!"

Wibley sniffed, but he did not say "unities" any more. The Remove play was evidently not to proceed on classic lines.

"The action of the play will have to extend over a week, at least," said Bob Cherry, "and I suppose Wib doesn't want to make the representation last a week, to observe his giddy unities!"

"Chuck him out!"

"Why, what——"

"Outside!"

"I withdraw the word unities," said Bob Cherry hurriedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Act I.," said Wharton. "Where does Act I. take place, and what happens? Now, put your beef into it."

The Removites wrinkled their brows over that problem of construction. Pens and pencils started to work on scraps of paper. The Remove players had written plays before, and they had some idea how it ought to go.

The meeting was a long and busy one. Wibley's unities having been disposed of by general consent, and it having been agreed that no rules were to be observed, there was plenty of scope for the dramatists.

Many hands make light work, and the play gradually grew under the busy hands and tongues of the juniors.

Three acts were sketched out, and jotted into scenes—lists of characters were drawn up, and discussed and re-discussed, till it was long past tea-time, and famine drove the enterprising dramatists from their task.

At tea there was only one subject of discussion—the play.

Shakespeare's celebrated remark, that the play is the thing, was certainly true of the Removites that evening.

They thought of nothing else.

Prep was very much cut down that evening, the amateur dramatists heroically making up their minds to "risk it with Quelchy" in the morning.

By bedtime the play had grown, and the characters had been finally decided upon.

Dialogue had been sketched out in prose. All the fellows agreed that dialogue in verse was idiotic, only Wibley demurring—Wibley having thrived in the perusal of the old dramatists who wrote their plays in that peculiar manner. Everybody but Wibley agreed that X.Y.Z. was a silly duffer to give them all that trouble in order to produce a worse effect.

But it was in the conditions, and the conditions had been accepted, so there was no help for it.

There did not appear to be any "budding poets" in the Remove—no "mute, inglorious Milton" came to light. It seemed clear that the poetry, when completed, would be only so-so, as Bob Cherry put it. Hurree Singh, indeed, said that the so-so-fulness would be terrific.

Still, it had to be done.

The characters having been assigned—for the Removites did not let the grass grow under their feet—every character was provided with a prose sketch of his part, and ordered to turn it into verse to the best of his ability.

Afterwards the whole thing was to be put together, and the dramatic committee would go over the verses, pruning them, as it were, and knocking them into shape. That was the arrangement; but some of the amateur poets were heard to remark that if any blessed committee knocked their verses into shape, the committee itself would jolly soon be knocked out of shape.

Still, some supervision was necessary; Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, for instance, splendid and picturesque as his flow of language was, could not be considered as a master-poet in English. Inky was assigned the part of a Prussian orderly, who had to report to General Von Snortz that a party of unhappy Belgians were ready for execution. Hurree Singh worked hard on his lines, and before bedtime he had them fairly going, and read them out in the common-room for the judgment of his esteemed chums.

For an orderly to make his report in rhyme was certainly not lifelike—still, as Bob Cherry thoughtfully observed, it wasn't so funny as in grand opera, where he would have to sing it.

Inky's lines, however, could not be regarded as anything but funny, to judge by the expressions of the Removites when he recited them.

"Esteemed and venerable Herr von Snortz
I come to make my excellent reports,
A hundred captivated wretched scamps,
Are readyful for execution in our camps,
Now orderfully shall the blessed lot
Be forthwithfully, instantfully shot.
So may all Deutschland's foemen go to pot!"

Hurree Singh looked round for applause. To his surprise, he found his esteemed chums almost in hysterics.

"Where does the smilefulness come in, my ludicrous and disgusting friends?" asked the nabob. "Is there any faultfulness in my sublime verses?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, we'll knock 'em into shape," grinned Wibley; "we'll leave out a foot or two in some of the lines—or a yard or two——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is not the English firstful-class?"

"Top-hole!" said Wharton. "We don't usually say 'instantfully——'"

"But you say 'delightfully,' in the esteemed English speech——"

"Ye-e-es."

"And you say 'regretfully.'"

"Yes, but——"

"Then why should you not say 'instantfully'?"

"Blessed if I know, but we don't, and you're jolly well not going to," said Harry, with a chuckle.

"I bow to the sublime judgment of my esteemed chum, but I thinkfully regard these versified effusions as top-rate."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bedtime!" said Wingate of the Sixth, looking into the common-room.

And the juniors moved off to the dormitory, still chuckling over the nabob's versiful effusions.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.
Coker Means Business!

DURING the next two or three days, Harry Wharton & Co. were very busy.

So was Coker of the Fifth.

Coker had fairly hurled himself into the thing.

The great Horace had a determined character, and when he had once made up his mind, his mind was made up. Then

his determination was like unto the laws of the Medes and Persians—it never changed.

Anything in the nature of opposition confirmed Coker in his determinations. There was no arguing with Coker.

So it will be easily understood, that when the fiat went forth from Coker's study, that the Fifth-Form Stage Club was to have a "whack" at that fifty guineas so generously offered by Mr. X. Y. Z., the Fifth-Form Stage Club had to toe the line.

Coker, in fact, was the Stage Club.

It had been Coker's idea—borrowed from the Remove, as a matter of absolute fact—he had founded it, he had nursed it, and he had made it a success—or so he fondly dreamed.

Six or seven of the Fifth were in the club, and they really had to give Coker his head, because there were no subscriptions to be paid by members; Coker, out of his plentiful supply of cash, standing all the expenses.

If Coker had not backed the club financially in that way, the club would not have lasted long—if indeed it had ever come together at all. For Coker was a somewhat heavy-handed president and stage-manager.

It was always a foregone conclusion that Coker played the title-roles, that Coker had all the limelight; in short, that Coker was the play, and the play was Coker.

Indeed, Coker reserved the right of making the most sweeping alterations in any play undertaken by the club, in order to give himself a bit in every act. Some of the fellows said that when the Fifth did Julius Cæsar, Coker had insisted that Cæsar should recover from his wounds, received at the hands of Brutus & Co., and appear in person at the battle of Philippi—because Coker was playing Cæsar, and didn't mean to be assassinated and finished with in the middle of the play. And Julius Cæsar would have been played, too, on those original lines—Coker being monarch of all he surveyed—had not the fellows induced Coker to take Brutus's part instead, and let Potter play Cæsar and be killed in the right place.

But over the X. Y. Z. play, the Fifth-Form Stage Club came near to going on strike.

Coker condescended to discuss the matter with them; he would sometimes unbend as far as that, the club having to play the part of an applauding chorus.

"I'm hard at work on the play," said Coker, to the restive Fifth-Formers. "When I've got it done, I'm going to read it out to you——"

"Good Lord!" murmured Fitzgerald.

"What's that?"

"I said go on, plaze, Coker," said Fitzgerald urbanely.

"I'm going to read it out," resumed Coker, giving Fitzgerald a suspicious look, "and you fellows can make suggestions. It's possible that you may be able to suggest improvements."

"Very likely," agreed Potter.

"Don't be an ass, Potter!"

"Eh?"

"You can leave the play in my hands, you fellows, and depend absolutely on having something good," said Coker, unheeding Potter. "I never really thought I was such a dab at poetry, but you never know what you can do till you try. I find that it comes quite easily."

"Dear me!" murmured Smith major.

"Simply runs off my pen," said Coker. "I'm doing the whole bizney in heroic verse, and it's as easy as falling off a form."

"You'll need a heroic audience, too," remarked Fitzgerald.

"If you've come here to be funny, Fitzgerald——"

"Sure and I'm not going to poach on your preserves, Coker darling. But what about all of us having a hand in the play—writing it, I mean——"

"No good at all!" said Coker decidedly.

"Why not?" asked Smith major, rather warmly.

"You fellows haven't much idea of poetry. Besides, a play is a work of art—it ought to be the complete work of a single master-mind," explained Coker. "But I'm going to read it out to you for suggestions. I don't suppose you fellows will be able to suggest any improvements. But you might. We'll see. Now, I've got the list of characters practically finished, and I'll hand them out this evening. We shall have to get a lot of new things from old Lazarus's. I've written to my Aunt Judy, and she's going to send me a whacking tip for the expenses."

"Good old auntie!"

"And don't you fellows make any engagements for the first week in the vac, as we're not certain of the date of the representation yet," said Coker.

"Oh!"

"We may go directly to the place when we break up—I don't know yet. You'll all be ready to receive my instructions."

"Bedad!"

"As for the fifty guineas, I'm not going to touch that," said Coker. "My idea is, half of it to be divided among the cast, and the other half to go to the club as a whole. I sha'n't take a whack in it."

There was a murmur of applause. Old Coker always was generous in money matters. But the fifty guineas had not been bagged yet, as Smith major remarked.

"It's certain, practically certain," said Coker. "You see, the play will whack anything else that's sent in to X. Y. Z. I'm sending it in to-day. Quelchy is lending me his type-jigger to write it out. It will beat anything else that's entered."

"How do you know?" queried Tomlinson.

"Well, I do know," said Coker. "Those Remove kids have entered. We're going to put a stop to that. Can't have fags in the Lower Fourth competing with us—not in the same school."

"Ahem! But how——"

"I shall stop them," said Coker, frowning. "I simply say I won't have it. That's settled. I hear that the Highcliffe fags are in it, too—but I suppose we can't interfere with Highcliffe. Anyhow, they haven't an earthly, so it doesn't matter. But with the Remove here, it makes us look ridiculous to be competed with by our own fags. I shall point out to Wharton, and tell him it's got to stop."

The Stage Club grinned. They could guess exactly how much Harry Wharton, the captain of the Remove, was likely to obey such instructions from Horace Coker.

Coker seemed to have no doubts, however. Coker was quite sure that his lordly will would not be disputed. Coker often made little mistakes like that.

"Now, I'll read you the first act," said Coker, "that'll give you an idea of the thing. It begins with a prologue, spoken by Ceres as goddess of war——"

Potter seemed to be suffering from a sudden pain; but he recovered quickly as Coker's gleaming eye turned on him.

"The title of the play," resumed Coker, "is 'Red Ruin.' I think that's striking."

"My hat!"

"You see, 'Red Ruin' describes the effect those beastly Prussians have had on Belgium. They've mucked up the whole place, you know."

"But why red?" asked Potter meekly.

"Blood's red, isn't it, fathead? And the country's in ruins, isn't it? Haven't you got any sense, George Potter?"

"But are the ruins red?" asked Potter. "I've seen pictures of them, and they generally look black—rather grimy, in fact!"

Coker sniffed.

"That shows that I've got to keep the thing in my hands, so far as composition goes," he said. "You've got no poetic imagination. Of course, the ruins aren't really red, but it's a poetic allusion. See?"

"Nunno, I don't quite see. If the ruins ain't red, and you say they are red, it sounds to me like a cram."

"Better stick to the truth," said Greene. "You see, perhaps some of the audience will have seen the ruins, and will know jolly well that they ain't red."

"Oh, my hat! And you think you can help me write the play!" said the exasperated Coker. "You've got about as much poetic imagination as—as a Prussian junker! You leave it to me. The title of this play is 'Red Ruin.'"

"But——"

"There are no 'buts' in the case. The title of this play," roared Coker, "is 'Red Ruin'!"

The Stage Club subsided. When Coker shouted, it was useless to argue, and if Coker persisted that the title of that play was "Red Ruin," why, the title of that play was "Red Ruin." That was settled. Having reduced the Stage Club to order, Coker sorted out his manuscripts, and prepared to read out the first act.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.
Coker the Poet!

"WHERE are you going, Fitzgerald?"

"Sure, I'm going to see Blundell."

"Sit down!"

"But——"

"Sit down!"

Fitzgerald made a grimace, and sat down.

"Where are you off to, Potter?"

"Just—just going to—to——" stammered Potter.

"Sit down!"

Potter grunted, and sat down. There was evidently no escaping the first act of Coker's drama. The Stage Club were very restive. Never had they felt so much inclined to go on strike. There was one consideration that held them within the bonds of discipline. They hadn't had tea yet, and Coker was standing one of his usual magnificent spreads after the discussion. And they could not very well leave

Coker to read his play out to himself, and come back to the feast afterwards.

So they made up their minds to grin and bear it. Indeed, it was likely to be easier to grin than to bear it.

"As I've told you, the prologue comes first," said Coker. "Ceres, goddess of war, enters and speaks before the curtain goes up. She begins——"

"You've told me the prologue," said Potter.

"I haven't told these other chaps. She begins:

"'Mid Belgium's gory fields and war's alarms,
Affrighted Europe all turns up in arms.
Fair Belgia's realm, although a neutral state,
Hears Hunnish legions thundering at the gate——"

"What gate?" asked Fitzgerald.

"Any gate, you ass! It means she hears them coming—sees 'em, in fact. It's a poetical expression.

"Oh, who shall paint the horrors of the siege,
Or deeds of arms wrought on the walls of Liege——"

"Good old Leeje!" murmured Potter.

"If you interrupt me with idiotic remarks, George Potter, there'll be trouble in this study. That last line is really a corker. It reminds one of the Crusaders, and the Paladins, and things like that."

"Throughout the city ring the loud alarms:
To arms, to arms, to arms, to arms, to arms——"

"Hold on!" said Potter. "Let's have this clear. Whose arms are you referring to?"

"You ass! The Belgian arms, of course—The garrison's."

"But had they only two arms among the lot?"

"Eh?"

"Every chap in the place must have had two arms before the battle," said Greene. "Of course, they may have had less afterwards."

"You duffers!" howled Coker. "I said 'to' arms, not two' arms. T O—to! See?

"Alas for Belgia fair! The savage Huns
Have secretly prepared tremendous guns—
Tremendous guns that raged and raved and roared,
And hapless Liege was levelled with the sward——"

"Oh, my hat!"

"I can't help thinking that's a bit off-side," said Tomlinson. "What harm did the guns do, if the town was levelled with the sword?"

"Not the 'sword,' ass—the 'sward.' That means the level ground. You can't say ground in a poem; you have to say sward, or something of the sort. It's one of the rules.

"But hark, but hark, but hark, but hark, but hark!
From Albion's shores comes many a bounding bark.
Brave boys in khaki land upon the shore,
And more, and more, and more, and more, and more——"

The Stage Club members looked at one another speechlessly as Coker declaimed those telling lines.

"Swift to the battle, 'neath the Union Jack,
The Huns reel back, and back, and back, and back.
Back to his frontier reels the savage Hun,
Far, far away dies the last Prussian gun.
'Tis done! 'Tis done! 'Tis done! 'Tis done! 'Tis done!"

"Seems to be a lot of repetition about that," said Tomlinson reflectively. "What they call in Italian—ahem!—ditto repeato."

"That makes it effective," said Coker, in explanation. "The audience will simply rise in that prologue."

"But if they go out after the prologue, what about the play?"

"I don't mean they'll rise to go out, fathead! They'll be simply taken by storm," said Coker. "When you write verse, the thing is to make it spirited. I flatter myself I've done that. Now then, Act I. First scene—A Field in Belgium. Enter Prussians marching. The characters in this scene are the Kaiser, the Crown Prince, and General Von Kluck. It's effective to begin with the nobs, you know. The Kaiser starts:

"Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by the fall of Ghent——"

"I—I say, I've heard something like that before," murmured Potter. "Haven't you borrowed part of that from Shakespeare?"

"There may be some resemblance," said Coker. "I suppose you've heard about great minds running in grooves, haven't you?"

"Oh!"

"The Kaiser goes on:

"Soon shall the hated, hated British foe
By Prussian arms be laid completely low.
Hoch! hoch! hoch! hoch! The Prussian Guards shall rally
At La Bassee, Dieppe, and eke at Calais.
Then o'er the Channel in our conquering fleet,
And England, hated England's at our feet!

"Then the Crown Prince puts in a bit. I've made the Crown Prince talk sense for the sake of variety," explained Coker. "Of course, he wouldn't, really. He's as big an idiot as the old gentleman. But that's poetic licence.

"Alas, mein vater, gaze around, around!
The hated, hated British hold their ground;
They snap their fingers at our biggest guns,
And shove their bayonets through our wretched Huns,
Who lie in thousands strewn upon the sward,
To wait no more at any festive board.

"Then Von Kluck chips in:

"Waiters! Ha, ha! They once knew how to wait
In restaurants, where Britons dined in state.
But now they will not wait for British steel—
They reel, they reel, they reel, they reel, they reel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker ceased to declaim, and glared ferociously at the Stage Club. From every member had proceeded a yell of laughter. They could hold it in no longer. Coker's poetry was too much for them.

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Coker wrathfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Potter. "They reel, they reel, they reel, they reel, they—ha, ha—reel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker jumped up.

"Look here, you silly chumps——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's still better further on" said Coker.

"Then it must be a regular corker further on!" gasped Potter. "Coker, old man, I don't want to be rude, but do you think any audience will really stand that?"

"Stand it!" yelled Coker. "Why, they'll simply rise to it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, you chumps! Have a little sense. You have to put yourself into a poetic mood to understand poetry. Listen to this bit by the Kaiser:

"Alas! too true! I feel it in my bones,
My fleet's destined to go to Davy Jones.
My choicest troops go back, and back, and back,
With hated Britons raging on their track!
In vain, in vain commands the Highest Hun—
They run, they run, they run, they run, they run!"

"Oh, don't!" gasped Potter. "You're giving me a pain—you are, really!"

"Mercy!" moaned Fitzgerald.

"I say, if they run, they run, they run, they run, they run, it shows their sense, if the Kaiser was spouting that kind of poetry at them," said Greene. "I'm jolly well going to do the same."

And Greene ran.

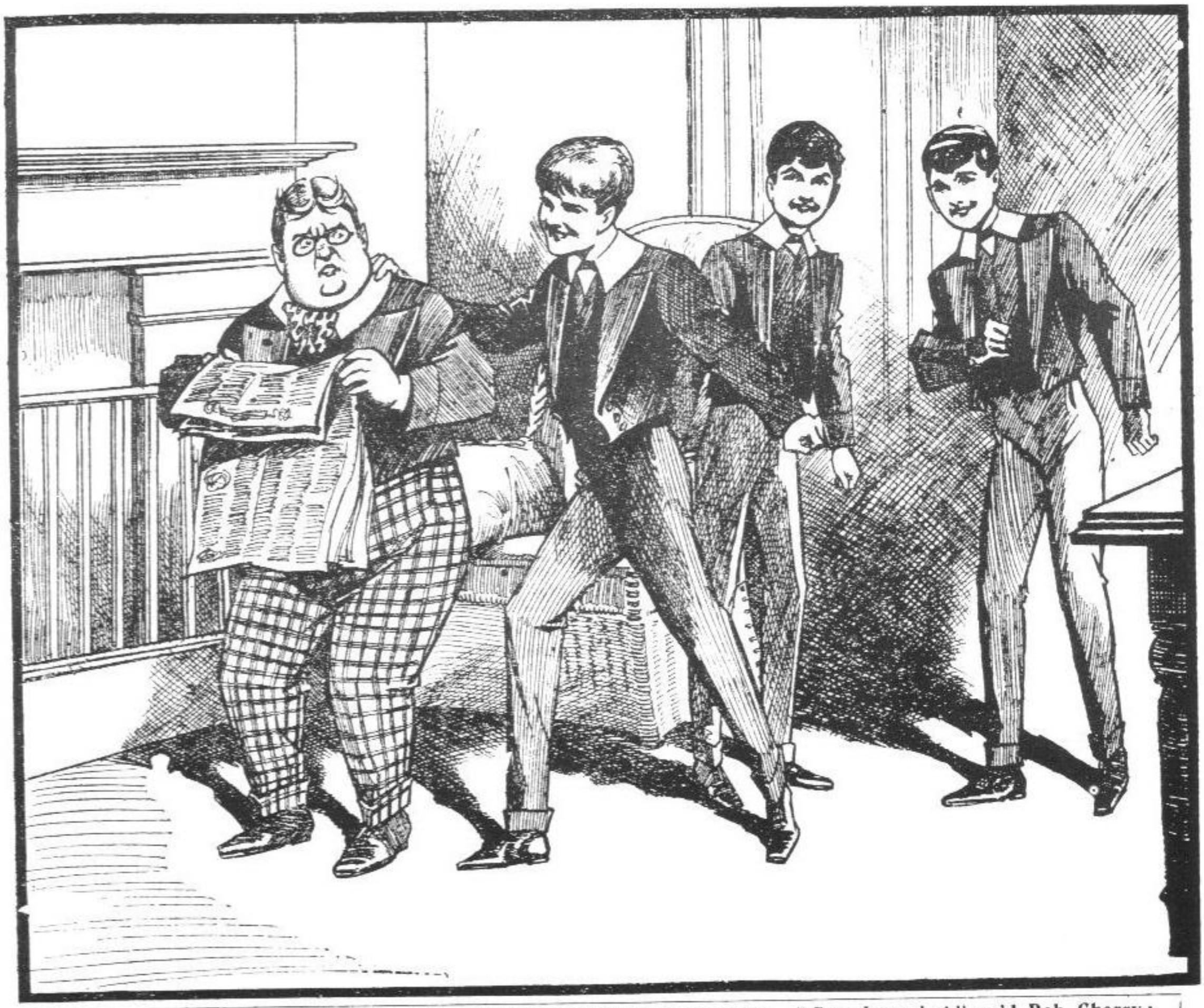
The Stage Club followed Greene's example. They ran. Tea or no tea, feed or no feed, they could not bear any more.

Coker simply glowered.

He had hardly started on the first act of his drama, "Red Ruin," and the Stage Club had fled to the last member. The great Horace remained alone in his study.

"The silly idiots!" ejaculated Coker. "The burbling duffers! Fat lot they know about poetry! It's first-class—simply top-hole, full of spirit. I know I'm jolly well not going to alter a line—not a syllable. If they jolly well don't act it just as I've written it, I'll dissolve the club, by Jove!"

And the reading of the play having to be unavoidably postponed, Horace Coker marched off wrathfully to borrow Mr. Quelch's typewriter. For the lack of appreciation on the part of the Stage Club had not made any difference at all to Coker. "Red Ruin" was going in to Mr. X. Y. Z.,



"What on earth is he burbling about?" said Harry Wharton, in surprise. "Day-dreaming," said Bob Cherry; "I'll wake him up!" "Fifty guineas—yarooh!" roared Billy Bunter, as Bob's heavy hand descended upon his shoulder, with a resounding smack. "The sleeper awakes!" grinned Nugent. (*See Chapter* 1.)

and Coker had not the slightest doubt that by return of post he would receive a letter glowing with admiration, to bag that splendid drama and the services of the Fifth-Form Stage Club.

For the next hour or so Horace Coker was clicking away industriously on the machine. When he came out with his manuscript all ready for the post he was greeted with smiles on all sides.

"You—you're really posting that thing?" asked Potter. Well as he knew the great Coker, he could hardly believe that even Coker was so thumping an ass.

Coker snorted.

"Of course I am, fathead! What do you think I've written it for?"

"There'll be casualties when they read it," said Greene. "This is rather rough on poor old X. Y. Z."

"I'd punch your silly heads all round!" said Coker. "But I put this down to your ignorance. When I get the answer from X. Y. Z., you'll see!"

"Ha, ha! We shall!"

"And when he accepts the play, and asks us to play it, you'll sing to a different tune!" snorted Coker.

"When he does!" grinned Fitzgerald.

"If X. Y. Z. asks for our services after he's read the play, Coker, we'll back you up no end," said Potter. "We'll play it if he wants us to."

"Certainly," said Greene; "that's agreed."

"That's all I want," said Coker. "If the man doesn't like the play he won't want us to act it. But I think he will; his letter gave me the impression that he was a man of sense."

And Coker marched off to post his manuscript, leaving Potter and Greene and Fitzgerald cackling till they had no breath left to cackle with.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.
The Caterpillar is Suspicious!

"COMIN'?"

The Caterpillar asked the question.

Frank Courtenay was sitting on the corner of the table, in Study No. 3 in the Fourth, at Highcliffe. He had been talking cricket, but the Caterpillar had yawned so portentously that Courtenay gave it up. Courtenay had determined that, sooner or later, he would make the champion slacker of Highcliffe into a footballer and a cricketer, but he had a difficult task before him.

"Where are you going?" asked Courtenay, as the Caterpillar asked him if he were "comin'."

"Callin' on Pon."

"Calling on Pon?" said Courtenay, lifting his eyebrows. "What the dickens are you calling on Pon for?"

"Well, it's a long time since I've called on Pon. I used to be always callin' on Pon you know, before you came. We used to play bridge for quids before you brought me to meditate on my sins."

"Oh, cheese it, Caterpillar. I suppose you're not going to play bridge now. If you are, you don't want me."

"But I'm not," said De Courcy imperturbably. "Haven't you shown me the error of my ways and brought me up in the way I should go? But Pon is a very attractive chap. Come with me and give him a call."

"But I'm not on calling terms with Ponsonby," said Courtenay. "Besides, ever since he played that caddish trick on Wharton and Cherry, I never see him without wanting to punch his head."

"But you ought to call on your relations sometimes," urged the Caterpillar. "What about family affection, you know, and all that? Besides, Pon's an attractive chap. He's such a humorist."

Courtenay stared at the Caterpillar. He could see that De Courcy had some reason for wanting him to call on the dandy of the Fourth.

"What's the little game?" he demanded.

"That's what I'm goin' to find out," said the Caterpillar. "You know what an inquisitive chap I am."

Courtenay smiled. The Caterpillar was the reverse of inquisitive. So far from being interested in other people's affairs he was bored to tears by them.

"I'm simply burnin' with curiosity," went on the Caterpillar. "Yearnin' for information, you know. I smell a mouse—a large-sized mouse. Do you remember when Pon was layin' a little scheme for your benefit, Franky? I smelt a mouse, didn't I?"

"You did, old chap."

"Well, now I smell another mouse. I'm an astonishin' keen chap sometimes—astonishin'. Come along and let's give Pon a friendly call."

"But I don't see——"

"Oh, it's not up against us!" said the Caterpillar. "If Ponsonby was plottin' our giddy downfall I'd let him plot himself black in the face. But we're not goin' to have any more dirty tricks played on those Greyfriars chaps. I disapprove."

Courtenay's brow darkened.

"Oh, that's it, is it?"

"I have a kind of idea that it is. A jape's a jape, but our good Pon never knows when to stop. I like those Greyfriars fellows a little. I find somethin' to admire, you know, in their surprisin' energy. And that black bounder—what's his name?—Jampot or somethin'——"

"Hurree Jamset Ram Singh," said Courtenay.

"Ye gods! What a name!" said the Caterpillar. "Well, I like him. I like the way he speaks English. He's a prince, too, and you know what a snob I am, Franky. I'm not goin' to have Pon japin' a prince; it would make my snobbish blood boil. So we're goin' to give Pon a call. Comin'?"

"Oh, all right!"

"You see," murmured the Caterpillar lazily, as they went down the passage, "the excellent Pon is changin' his spots. He never cared a dashed dash about amateur theatricals. Now he's takin' them up as if he meant to look for a job as a super on the stage, by gad! I must say he's rather clever at it, too. And they're always chucklin', and Pon was so tickled when he heard that the Remove kids had taken up that A B C advertisement biz——"

"X. Y. Z., fathead!"

"Yaas, I mean X. Y. Z. Pon was simply killin' himself laughin' when I told him—he asked me, you know. There's somethin' fishy about it. I scent a jape, and he's not goin' to pull a prince's leg while there's a snob like me to stop him—what? Hark at 'em now, the merry japers!"

There was a sound of laughter from Ponsonby's study, and chuckling voices. But much as the Caterpillar wanted to know what Ponsonby's little game was, he did not think of listening to the voices. He knocked at the door at once and opened it.

"Excuse my intrudin', gentlemen!" he said gracefully.

"Hallo! Come in, Caterpillar!" said Ponsonby, quite graciously. It was a new thing for De Courcy to call upon him, and he hoped it was a sign that the Caterpillar was returning to the fold.

"My pal's with me," said the Caterpillar. "Come in, Clare—I mean Courtenay. The nuts are quite good-tempered—warranted quite harmless, by gad!"

Ponsonby and Vavasour and Monson and Gadsby were in the study. Ponsonby had a most peculiar look. The nuts had evidently been practising for their amateur theatricals. Ponsonby was dressed in man's clothes, a somewhat flashy check suit, with light brown boots and white spats, and he was padded out till he looked nearly twice as fat as usual, Pon being naturally a somewhat slim and elegant young person. There was a box open on the table, and the juniors had apparently been about to make up Pon's face. There was already a dab or two on his cheeks.

"Goin' strong—what?" asked the Caterpillar.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Ponsonby.

"Goin' to bag that fifty guineas the advertisin' chap offers—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ponsonby & Co. burst into a roar of laughter. The Caterpillar looked a little surprised. He did not see why his question should have drawn forth that outburst of merriment.

"I suppose I'm rather dense," he said politely. "I don't see the joke. I understood you were goin' in for that play bizney."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So we are," said Ponsonby. "It's all right, Caterpillar; of course we are. That's what we're practising for. We're going to leave those Greyfriars cads out in the cold, you know."

"Absolutely!" chirruped Vavasour.

"Yaas, but it's odd," said the Caterpillar. "Wharton showed us a letter he'd had from the X. Y. Z. johnny. I suppose you've had one—what?"

"Oh, yes!"

"So you've got to write a play?"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Again I fail to see the merry joke," said the Caterpillar. "But I'll take your word for it there is one, as you're laughin'. You haven't written that play yet—what?"

"Not yet!" grinned Gadsby.

"Pretty close on the vac, too, isn't it?"

"Oh, lots of time yet!"

"And you're goin' to act in the play—eh?"

"Naturally," grinned Monson.

"Then it's very remarkable," said the Caterpillar, with a shake of the head.

"What's remarkable?" asked Ponsonby blandly.

"Why, you're the only chap who ever does any practice in makin'-up. You're always at it, and always those same togs," said the Caterpillar. "You never rehearse or anythin'—only in those togs. And they're not the kind of clobber for a war play. What's the little game, Pon?"

"Eh? What little game?"

"Are all the other fellows going to act without rehearsin' or anythin'?"

"Oh, they'll get that at my place early in the vac!"

The Caterpillar shook his head.

"Pon, old man, I'm sorry to say it," he remarked, "but you're talkin' like a Prussian Chancellor. You ain't stickin' to the truth!"

"What's the matter now?" asked Ponsonby.

"You're not enterin' for that X. Y. Z. bizney at all," said the Caterpillar deliberately. "It's all moonshine—all gammon, dear boy. If you were goin' to write a play like those Greyfriars chaps, you'd be writin' it. If you were goin' to act a play, you'd all be rehearsin' it. You're not goin' to do anythin' of the sort. You've got a little game on, and you're only pretendin' to be goin' in for Mr. X. Y. Z. to throw dust in our eyes!"

Ponsonby shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I take the trouble to do that?" he said.

"Because we are so doocid pally with the Greyfriars chaps, and you don't want us to warn them that you're goin' to jape them," said De Courcy at once.

Courtenay started. He had not thought of it before, but now that the clear-witted Caterpillar pointed it out, it was pretty certain that it was correct. If Ponsonby & Co. had been entering seriously for Mr. X. Y. Z.'s scheme, their preparations for the same would certainly have been very different.

The nuts of the Fourth looked at one another with rather startled glances. Their expressions were enough to show that the Caterpillar was right. Cecil Ponsonby bit his lip.

"You're awfully keen," he said, with a sneer. "But even suppose we were going to jape the Greyfriars cads, I suppose you wouldn't be cad enough to warn them?"

"You see, my good Pon, your japes are not always quite the thing," explained the Caterpillar. "You are such a howlin' cad——"

"What!"

"Excuse me; I always tell the truth, you know—I find it's less trouble in the long run," said the Caterpillar urbanely. "That trick you played the other day was caddish. Those two fellows might have broken their limbs, or got bad sprains. Then once you cut them adrift in a barge, and they might have been drowned. There's a limit to japin', Pon, and you don't seem to see the limit. Therefore, my dear boy, I remark quite plainly that I won't have it. As I don't want you to accuse me of sneakin', I've really come here, more than anythin' else, to tell you that I'm up against it, and warn you to look out!"

"Thanks!"

"I'm goin' to spot your game, and I'm goin' to give the Greyfriars fellows the tip," said De Courcy. "I tell you so plain, dear boy, so that it will be all above board. See?"

"You can be a sneakin' cad if you like," said Ponsonby.

"Go and eat coke. Get out of my study, and your workhouse pal with you!"

"Certainly, dear boy. I only wanted to give you a fair warnin'. Your japes are so dashed blackguardly, Pon, that I can't stand them—can't, really. I'm goin' to chip in and frustrate your giddy knavish tricks, Pon—that's my little game. Now you can go on with the washin'!"

And the Caterpillar lounged elegantly out of the study, followed by Courtenay, who had not spoken a word. Ponsonby & Co. exchanged glances when the door was closed.

"He hasn't tumbled?" said Vavasour.

"How could he?" said Ponsonby. "We shall have to be awfully careful. The rotter means what he says!"

"Rather an ass to come and warn us!" said Gadsby.

"Oh, those cads pride themselves on playin' the game! But they'll never tumble to the wheeze in a month of Sundays. What the silly burbler said shows that he hasn't the faintest idea of it. It's the jape of the season, and the Caterpillar hasn't the brains to spot it. I thought we'd taken him in, too. But it doesn't matter; he'll never tumble. Let's get on."

The nuts proceeded with their business. They were all lending a hand to make-up Ponsonby's face with greasepaint and false whiskers and beard and moustaches.

They had been putting in a good deal of practice lately, all on the same object, and certainly they were growing very successful. Ponsonby couldn't have been recognised by his nearest and dearest relation when they had finished.

Courtenay and the Caterpillar returned to No. 3. Courtenay was looking thoughtful and a little worried.

"Well?" said the Caterpillar, watching his face with an amused smile.

"There's something on," said Courtenay.

"Yaas, by gad!"

"You've spotted it, and I didn't," said Courtenay. "Of course, if it is only a jape, such as the Greyfriars chaps would play themselves, we couldn't say anything. But most likely it isn't. Ponsonby is such a howling cad, it may be some more of his dirty tricks. He doesn't care how much he disgraces Highcliffe!"

"And Highcliffe couldn't stand much more disgracin'!"

"One thing's certain—we'll jolly well stop him if we can!" said Courtenay. "Those fellows at Greyfriars have been decent to me, and if he's going to play them a dirty trick, it's up to us to chip in!"

"Hear, hear!" said the Caterpillar. "But what the dence can it be, Franky? It won't be easy to know. We can't condescend to listen at a keyhole, as one of the excellent nuts themselves might do. Must play the game. What is it they're plannin'? They're not goin' in for the X. Y. Z. play, that's plain enough. But what are they schemin'?"

Courtenay shook his head. He had to give it up.

The two chums gave the matter a good deal of thought, but they had to confess that it baffled them. All they could be sure of was that it was a dirty trick. They took that for granted, as it was Ponsonby who was planning it. It was possible, of course, that it was only some harmless jape, and in that case their interference would not be called for. But they did not trust Ponsonby.

But there was nothing to be learned from Ponsonby & Co.

The happy nuts were often seen chuckling and whispering among themselves, but they did not allow any information to escape them. They were evidently in possession of some tremendously good joke, but what it was they were equally evidently determined to keep to themselves.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.
Coker is Too Cool!

"THE waitfulness is the painful infliction," Hurree Jamset Ram Singh remarked, a few days later. "The esteemed X. Y. Z. is keeping us upon the tenderhooks!"

Probably Hurree Singh meant tenterhooks.

Certainly there were a good many fellows at Greyfriars upon tenterhooks, as the date of the school breaking-up came nearer and nearer.

For the "Call of the Empire" had been completed—finished, revised, re-revised, and revised over again, and turned into what was really a work of dramatic art, and duly despatched to X. Y. Z. at the office of the "Friardale Times."

Then the schoolboy playwrights had to wait for the decision of that unknown gentleman.

Harry Wharton & Co. were not the only fellows who were on tenterhooks.

There was Coker of the Fifth.

But Coker was not so anxious as the Removites. Confident in the sublime qualities of "Red Ruin," Coker awaited the result with something like equanimity. The only doubt was whether X. Y. Z. had sense enough to understand and appreciate "Red Ruin."

To that extent, Coker was on tenterhooks. But it was a great comfort to feel that the play in itself could not have been better done, and that it all depended upon X. Y. Z. being gifted with common-sense.

The Fifth-Form Stage Club persisted in regarding Coker's efforts as a joke, much to the annoyance of the great Horace.

But it was agreed that if X. Y. Z. accepted the play and called for their services, they would back Coker up as one man.

If the unknown advertiser was willing to pay them fifty guineas for acting Coker's awful rot, they had no objection at all, as Potter declared. But they were willing to lay heavy odds that X. Y. Z., however big an idiot he might be, would not be quite so big an idiot as that.

"You'll jolly well see!" growled Coker, a dozen times at least. "You fat-headed pifflers don't understand poetry. Why, there are some verses in my play that beat anything I've ever read. You'll see!"

So the rivals of Greyfriars waited on "tender-hooks," as Inky expressed it, for the verdict from X. Y. Z.

That verdict could not be much longer delayed, as it was stated in the conditions that the selected play was to be represented in the first week of the Easter vacation, and the vacation was close at hand now.

Harry Wharton & Co. watched every post eagerly for a letter from the unknown.

It came at last.

Trotter, the page, brought a typed letter up to No 1 Study, where the Famous Five were at tea. Harry Wharton & Co. were in great spirits just then. Wharton had had a letter that day from his old chum, Johnny Bull, announcing that he intended to return to Greyfriars. The Co. had missed Johnny Bull, and they were very glad to hear that he was coming back to the old school.

They were discussing Johnny Bull's letter when Trotter brought in the typed missive. At the sight of it even Johnny Bull's letter was put aside.

"The blessed play back!" said Bob Cherry, as he observed that the envelope was a large and heavy one.

"Well, he was bound to send it back, anyway," said Wharton: "we want the copy. But we'll soon see what the giddy verdict is."

The letter was quickly opened.

There was the "Call of the Empire," which Wharton had typed on Mr. Quelch's machine, as Coker had done with "Red Ruin."

There was a typed letter with it.

The chums of the Remove read it eagerly. And their faces lighted up as they read, for it was good news.

"Dear Master Wharton.—I have read the 'Call of the Empire' with very great pleasure. I was far from expecting an original composition by schoolboys to attain such a very high quality ——"

"That chap knows something!" commented Bob Cherry.

"I may say at once that the play is quite satisfactory, and all depends upon the rehearsal, which my agent will call to witness at a date fixed by yourselves ——"

"Hear, hear!"

"I have engaged Mr. Cholmondeley, the celebrated theatrical agent, for this purpose, and shall depend entirely upon his verdict. Mr. Cholmondeley's fee will be paid by myself, and you will be put to no expense in the matter——"

"Bravo!"

"As Mr. Cholmondeley has to witness other rehearsals, there being a large number of plays submitted to me, I should be glad if you could make it convenient to fix next Saturday afternoon for the rehearsal——"

"That's all right!" said Nugent. "We should have had to choose a half-holiday, anyway. That will suit us."

"Mr. Cholmondeley will also be witnessing another rehearsal at your school on the same date——" went on the letter.

"That must be Coker," said Squiff.

"Man must be an ass, after all," remarked Nugent. "He must know that Coker's play is all rot!"

"Well, I suppose he wants to be fair all round," said Wharton. "If he's had a crowd of plays sent in to him by amateur dramatic societies, I dare say he's engaged this Cholmondeley to see them all rehearsed one after another."

"Yes, perhaps. Go on with the giddy letter."

"Please reply, by return if possible, stating whether Saturday afternoon will be convenient to you, as I desire to meet your wishes in every way. Perhaps I may tell you here that if you are selected to give this performance at my place in Hampshire you will on that occasion meet some very old acquaintances.

Faithfully yours,

"X. Y. Z."

"Old acquaintances!" said Bob Cherry. "That sounds rather interesting."

Wharton looked very thoughtful.

"Blessed if I don't think I see it!" he exclaimed. "You know, D'Arcy's place is in Hampshire—Eastwood House. They've asked us there for the vac, you know. Is it possible that it's some of D'Arcy's people who've put in this advertisement, and the performance is to be at Eastwood House?"

"The St. Jim's chaps!" exclaimed Nugent.

"It looks likely enough to me," said Wharton. "The St. Jim's chaps will be going home for the Easter holidays to a place in Hampshire, you see. Well, the man says here quite plainly that we shall meet some very old acquaintances. Whom are we likely to meet at a place in Hampshire, excepting the St. Jim's fellows?"

"By Jove!"

"I say, that would be ripping!" said Bob Cherry. "They do amateur theatricals at St. Jim's, you know; and we could just show 'em how we do it—writing the play ourselves, too. It would be ripping!"

"Well, if the rehearsal's satisfactory, we shall know then," said Harry. "If it's decided to engage us, they will tell us where the place is, and the real name of X. Y. Z. I shouldn't wonder if it turns out to be Lord Eastwood. You see, in that case, it's pretty clear that he's going to let it be a surprise to the St. Jim's chaps. I had a letter from Tom Merry the other day, mentioning that he would see us in the vac, but he mentioned nothing about private theatricals."

Harry Wharton promptly wrote and posted an answer to X. Y. Z., informing him that the rehearsal should be arranged for Saturday afternoon, when the Remove Dramatic Society would be glad to see and welcome Mr. Cholmondeley, and submit their play and their acting to his expert judgment.

Word was passed round to the members of the Dramatic Society, and from that moment every member was hard at work "mugging up" his lines.

Later that evening Horace Coker looked in at No. 1 Study, where the Famous Five were going over their lines, somewhat to the detriment of their prep.

Horace Coker's brow was stern.

"I want a word with you kids," said Coker.

"Sorry—no time!" said Wharton.

"I want a word with you!" roared Coker.

"Can't you see we're busy?" demanded Nugent.

"I suppose you've had a letter from X. Y. Z. to-day?" said Coker, unheeding.

"Oh, yes!"

"He's refused to have anything to do with your play, I suppose?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Not exactly!"

"We're rehearsing on Saturday, and the theatrical agent is coming to criticise," said Wharton. "So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it, Coker, old man."

Coker snorted.

"Well, I've had a letter from him. He's asked me to fix my rehearsal for Saturday, as Mr. Cholmondeley will be coming."

"We'd better have ours first," said Squiff. "It's quite possible that poor old Cholmondeley may not survive Coker's rehearsal."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I didn't come here to listen to rotten jokes!" shouted Coker.

"Well, that wasn't a rotten joke—that was a good joke," said Squiff.

"I'm going to put it plainly to you kids," said Coker. "I dare say there are lots of other amateur theatrical societies going in for this. That can't be helped. But I can't have a set of fags in my own school competing with me. It's simply not to be borne. A fellow must think of his dignity to a certain extent. So I want you kids to withdraw."

"To—to what?"

"Withdraw. You can tell X. Y. Z. that you've changed your minds. You can see for yourselves that it's impossible for a fellow like me—a senior in the Fifth—to be competing with a gang of fags in the Lower Fourth. As sensible kids, you will see that at once."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Coker wrathfully.

"I'm cackling at a cheeky ass!" said Wharton. "What are you cackling at, Bob?"

"A silly burbler!" said Bob. "What are you cackling at, Squiff?"

"A howling duffer!" said Squiff. "What——"

"Look here, I've had enough of this!" said Coker. "I didn't come here to talk rot!"

"You've done it, all the same!" remarked Nugent.

"The rotfulness of the esteemed Coker's remark is terrific!"

"I want a plain answer," said Coker. "I like things put plain. I'm a plain chap——"

"You are!" agreed the Famous Five with one voice, looking at Coker's countenance; and Inky added that the plainfulness was terrific.

"You know what I mean!" roared Coker. "You'll give me a plain answer, you cheeky young cads! Are you going to chuck up this play?"

"No fear!"

"You refuse—what?"

"What-ho!"

"Then I shall have to make you!"

The chums of the Remove roared. Coker had a high-handed way always; but that even Coker should think that he could dictate to the Remove Dramatic Society struck them as funny.

"And I'll begin by giving you a jolly good hiding all round," roared Coker; "that's what you fags want—a jolly good hiding. You'll get it! See?"

"You're going to whop us?" asked Wharton, wiping away his tears.

"Yes—and pretty stiff, too!"

"You won't let us off?"

"No," said Coker loftily. "I won't!"

"Then we won't let you off!" said Wharton. "We've got an idea that a hiding would do you good, too, Coker. We'll try it, anyway! Collar him!"

"You cheeky—yah—you young—yow-ow! My hat! Why, I—I—I—yah!"

Coker's further remarks were incoherent. He was on his back on the study carpet, and the Famous Five were sitting upon him. Under such circumstances coherent speech was difficult.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.
Awful Cheek!

"COKER ought to be here!" said Potter.

The Fifth-Form Stage Club had met in Coker's study.

They had met, called together by Coker, in a state of great astonishment.

Not a single member of the club had had the slightest doubt that Coker's play, "Red Ruin," would come back with some uncomplimentary remarks along with it. They could scarcely believe their eyes when Coker showed them a letter from X. Y. Z., announcing that "Red Ruin" was approved, and that the celebrated theatrical agent, Mr. Cholmondeley, would call on Saturday to witness a dress rehearsal.

But they had to believe their eyes, all the same—there was the typed letter, and that was genuine enough. Mysterious Mr. X. Y. Z. had evidently seen beauties in "Red Ruin" which had wholly escaped the eyes of the Fifth-Form Stage Club.

Astonished, and somewhat pleased, too, the Stage Club turned up in Coker's study for a talk over the rehearsal over tea.

But Coker had not appeared.

As tea was ready, and the Stage Club were hungry, Potter and Greene decided not to wait for Coker.

"He's gone to talk to those Remove kids, I think," said Potter. "Coker's rather ratty at those cheeky young sweeps competing at all. Of course, it is rather thick; we ought to stop them somehow."

"Obstinate little beasts," said Greene; "they'll stick to their idea, you see. Of course, Cholmondeley will tell 'em 'em off fast enough when he's seen 'em act."

"Blessed if I can understand the man passing Coker's play," remarked Tomlinson, rubbing his nose. "We all know that it's blank piffle."

"He may intend it to be played as a comedy," suggested Smith major.

"Well, it wouldn't make a bad farce," agreed Tomlinson. "Coker's made it very funny. I dare say if he tried to write a farce it would be serious enough. But where the deuce is he? There won't be much left for him if he don't come."

"Here he comes!" said Potter.

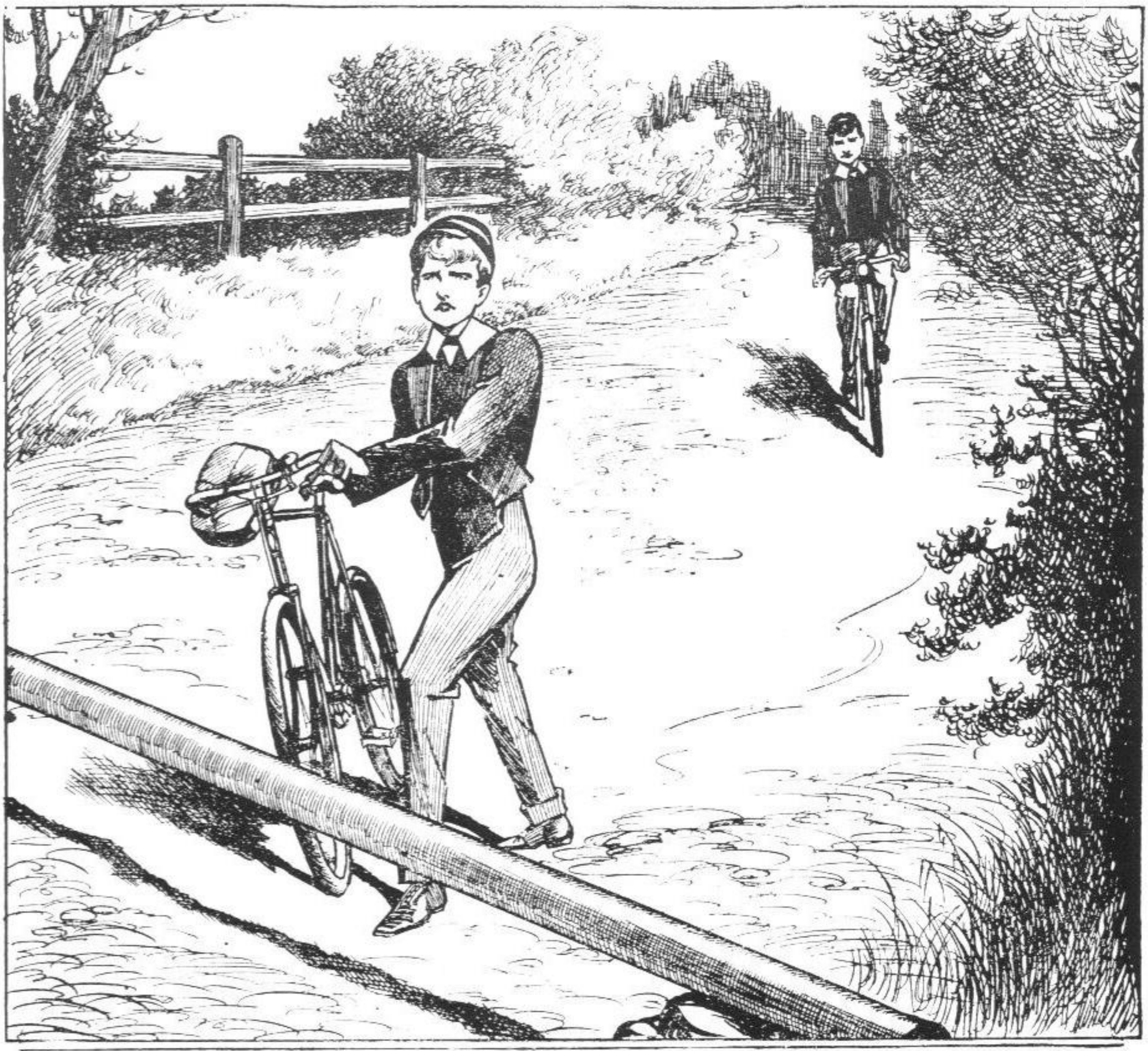
There were heavy footsteps in the passage, and the door was flung open.

But was it Coker who entered?

The Stage Club jumped up in amazement, staring at the peculiar-looking object that stamped into the room.

It was Coker!

But he presented a most surprising aspect. His collar and tie were gone, and his jacket was split, and his hair was



Wharton put his brakes on quickly. It was only just in time. Across the lane, which was at its narrowest there, a long pole had been placed, from hedge to hedge. If the cyclists had turned the corner recklessly and run into it, they would certainly have been hurt. Harry Wharton's eyes glinted as he jumped down. "What silly idiot has played a dangerous trick like that?" he exclaimed. (*See Chapter* 3.)

streaming with ink. Grease-paints had been lathered on his face. His nose was a brilliant red, his cheeks were blue, and there were yellow circles about his eyes.

He was panting for breath, and wild with rage.

"What the merry deuce——" ejaculated Potter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is—is that you, Coker?" stuttered Greene.

"Grrrrrro!" gurgled Coker. "You silly idiots!"

"Eh?"

"Didn't you hear me yelling?" demanded Coker furiously.

"No; we were having tea."

"How on earth did you get like that, Coker? If that's the way you make up, sure it won't do for the play," said Fitzgerald. "You've got the colours on too thick, Coker darling."

"You burbling Irish idiot!"

"But, sure, I appeal to the whole club," said Fitzgerald. "Is Coker's make-up any good for the stage, you fellows? Ain't it overdone?"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"You're too heavy-handed with the paint, Coker," said Tomlinson, with a shake of the head. "You'll have to go easier than that."

"You shrieking asses!" roared Coker. "Do you think I did this myself, you burbling jabberwocks? Those Remove cads did it."

"Oh! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I went to see 'em," snorted Coker. "I warned 'em I'd give 'em a hiding all round if they didn't back out of the play. I couldn't say fairer than that. Then the young beasts actually had the cheek to pile on me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They got me down on the floor——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And swamped their blessed make-up stuff over me like this!" roared Coker. "There's nothing to cackle at. I'll skin 'em! I'll scalp 'em! I'll—I'll—— Oh, my hat! The whole blessed Remove came along, and when they let me go, I believe about fifty young villains all kicked me at once. I fell downstairs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Stage Club simply shrieked. Coker's tale of woe might have touched a heart of stone, but the Fifth-Form Stage Club seemed quite heartless. They yelled with merriment.

Coker glared at them. He had expected sympathy and indignation. He utterly failed to see anything funny in the matter at all.

"You silly, burbling, cackling, guggling idiots——"

"Look in the glass, Coker!" moaned Greene. "Look in the glass and you'll see how funny you look."

"Oh, don't," said Potter. "You'll crack the glass!"

Slam!

Coker stamped out of the study, and closed the door with a slam that rang along the passage. He left the Stage Club almost in hysterics. It was quite a long time before they could calm themselves sufficiently to go on with their tea.

They had nearly finished when Coker came in, looking a little cleaner and less highly-coloured, but in a state of suppressed fury.

"Sure it was hard lines, Coker, old man," said Fitzgerald soothingly. "We'll bring those Remove kids to book yet."

Coker snorted; he was not to be easily appeased.

"We'll leave it till after the rehearsal," said Fitzgerald. "If Cholmondeley is ass enough to pass them, we'll stop them somehow."

"They've got to be stopped!" growled Coker. "It's utterly ridiculous for us to be competed with by fags. I'm certainly not standing it."

"Still, Cholmondeley will give 'em the kybosh at the rehearsal," said Potter consolingly. "They won't be accepted."

"It's undignified to be rehearsing in competition with those fags," said Coker. "I was going to give 'em a hiding, to stop 'em, but they had the cheek to pile on me. This school is coming to something, I must say. But let's get to business. How are you fellows getting on with your parts?"

"Ahem! We're going to learn 'em up, of course," said Potter. "As the theatrical gent is coming to see us play, we've got to. Of course, we never expected that there would be a rehearsal at all, so we haven't mugged up the lines so far."

"I told you plainly enough, didn't I?" growled Coker.

"Well, I admit you did! But who'd have thought it?" said Potter.

"I thought it."

"Ahem—yes! But—— Well, it is a corker!" said Potter. "How on earth the man can have seen anything in that bally rot——"

"What!"

"I—I mean——"

"If there's any more silly rot talked about my play, I shall make a new company, and leave you dunder-headed dummies out," said Coker. "Here I'm taking all the trouble to write a play, and offering you an easy chance of bagging fifty guineas, and all I get in return is fatheaded criticism. You're ignorant. You don't know good verses when you see 'em. You don't know anything about plays. I'm about the only fellow in the Fifth with the barest idea of what poetry is."

"Oh!"

"And the proof is that my play's been accepted," said Coker. "I knew it would be, and all you duffers were against it. I should think the facts speak for themselves. Do you think that advertiser is paying a celebrated theatrical agent a big fee for nothing?"

"It beats me," said Potter. "Still, if he wants us, he shall have us. If he's thundering idiot enough to pay out fifty guineas for that—ahem!—that first-class play, there's no reason why we shouldn't bag the cash."

"Hear, hear!" All the Stage Club were agreed upon that.

They couldn't understand it; but they had to admit that Coker had been right. And it was in a state of wonder, but submission, that they received their lines from Coker, and promised to "mug" them at once.

From that hour the Fifth-Form Stage Club were as busy as the Remove Dramatic Society, and both those sets of enterprising histrionic amateurs looked forward with great anticipation to Saturday.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.
Mr. Cholmondeley Arrives!

SATURDAY came round at last.

A crowd of Greyfriars fellows were keen and eager for the arrival of Mr. Cholmondeley, the "celebrated" theatrical agent, who was to arrive that afternoon to witness two rehearsals, one after another.

The Greyfriars fellows, naturally, knew little of the theatrical world, and certainly they had never heard of Mr. Cholmondeley before he was mentioned in the typed letter from X. Y. Z. But he might have been ever so celebrated without his celebrity reaching to Greyfriars. They took the word of the advertiser for it that he was a celebrated gentleman.

Naturally, they were anxious to stand well with Mr. Cholmondeley, and they intended to put on their politest manners and customs when he arrived, and make the best possible impression on him. Not exactly that they meant to "butter him up," but it was only prudent to be very nice to him.

He was to arrive early in the afternoon, and, early in the afternoon, there was an army at the school gates waiting for his arrival.

Coker & Co. came down, and frowned portentously at the sight of the Removites already on the scene. Coker was inclined to order a frontal attack, and clear the juniors off by main force, but he restrained himself. It would not make a favourable impression upon the theatrical gentleman when he arrived if he found the two dramatic societies engaged in a free fight.

So the rival actors waited in strong force in the gateway, casting disdainful looks at one another, but keeping the peace.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here comes a giddy taxi-cab!" said Bob Cherry, at last.

There was a buzz at once.

The taxi-cab came whirring up from the direction of Courtfield, and it slacked down at the school gates.

The cab was closed, but the fellows caught a glimpse of the man inside—a little man, in a fur-lined overcoat, with a silk hat, and brown beard and whiskers and moustache, and a pair of large, gold-rimmed spectacles.

Harry Wharton politely opened the door of the taxi. Mr. Cholmondeley, if it was he, was a man whom Greyfriars delighted to honour.

"This ish Greyfriars?" asked the stout, whiskery gentleman, in an accent which reminded Wharton of Mr. Lazarus of Courtfield.

"Yes, sir!" said Harry.

"Shank you!"

"You are Mr. Cholmondeley, sir?"

"Yeth."

Mr. Cholmondeley stepped from the taxi-cab.

The Greyfriars fellows all looked at him with great interest. He was somewhat expensively-dressed; his astrachan-collared coat looked very theatrical, and he wore several gold rings, with big stones in them, carrying his gloves in his hands perhaps to display that striking jewellery.

His somewhat loud tie was adorned by a big diamond, and more or less precious stones also gleamed from his cuffs.

His face was very dark in complexion, and somewhat shiny. His nose was not so prominent as might have been expected from his accent, however.

In height he was only a little taller than Wharton, and even that was accounted for by the fact that he had extremely high heels to his patent-leather boots. Apparently Mr. Cholmondeley liked to make the most of what inches he had.

His overcoat was striking, but the clothes under it were more striking still, being of a check pattern that would almost have served as a chess-board.

Still, a little loudness in attire was naturally to be expected from a theatrical gentleman. Certainly he looked very prosperous. And his Hebrew accent was not against him, the juniors being aware that the theatrical profession is largely in the hands of gentlemen of that nationality; besides, there was a Jewish junior in the Remove who was one of the best, and was very popular. Upon the whole, Harry Wharton & Co. were highly satisfied with the aspect of Mr. Cholmondeley.

"Welcome to Greyfriars, sir!" said Bob Cherry.

"Clear off, you fags!" said Coker. "Let me show you in, Mr. Cholmondeley. I'm Coker—Coker of the Fifth!"

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Choker!"

"Coker, sir!"

"Yeth, I said Choker." Apparently Mr. Cholmondeley was not aware of the slight distinction in his accent, and Coker let it pass.

"You vill call for me at thix o'clock, my man," said Mr. Cholmondeley, as he paid the taxi-driver.

The juniors could not help observing that Mr. Cholmondeley's purse, as he opened it, was full of money, silver and gold. Evidently a very prosperous theatrical agent.

Coker and Wharton glared at one another, and accompanied Mr. Cholmondeley in at the gates, one on either side of him. Mr. Cholmondeley's manner was very affable. The rest of the crowd followed them in.

"We're going to rehearse in the Rag, sir," said Wharton—"this way."

"Of course, you will see the Fifth-Form rehearsal first, Mr. Cholmondeley," said Coker.

"It is a matter of indifference to me, young thir," said Mr. Cholmondeley. "But I must thee both before thix o'clock."

"Now, look here, Coker——"

"Look here, Wharton——"

"Toth up for it," said Mr. Cholmondeley.

"Hear, hear!"

Mr. Cholmondeley was evidently a sporting gentleman.

"I'll thpin a thovereign," said Mr. Cholmondeley, as he sat down in the most comfortable chair in the Rag.

"Anything you like, sir."

Mr. Cholmondeley "thpun" a sovereign.

"Head!" said Coker.

"Tail!" said Wharton.

Mr. Cholmondeley showed the coin. It was head. Coker grinned with triumph. After his rehearsal had been seen, he had little expectation that Mr. Cholmondeley would waste his time seeing the Remove show. The dress rehearsal of "Red Ruin" would take him by storm, if he had any taste at all.

"Our game!" said Coker. "You fags can clear out. Can we get you some tea, sir, while the rehearsal is getting ready."

"Shank you!" said Mr. Cholmondeley. "I have lunched quite rethently. However, you may get me a cup of tea thince you are tho good. Have you any thigarettes?"

"Ahem! We—we don't smoke here, sir," said Coker. "But I'll get you some; I'll send for them immediately, sir. Potter, see about the tea at once. Greene, send a fag down to Friardale on a bike for some cigarettes—the best they've got."

"Shank you, Choker!"

"You'll have tea with us after the rehearsal, sir," said Harry Wharton. "We've been making some little preparations for tea in the study. We should be very honoured."

"Shank you. You are tho good. I will have tea with pleasure," said Mr. Cholmondeley. "Thay about half-past four."

"Yes, rather!"

"I'm afraid the rehearsal won't be over by then," said Coker.

"Yeth, it will."

"But——"

"I have tho many engagements, I mutht get these rehearsals both over to-day. His lordship has many more for me to see. There have been a great many replies to the advertithment in the paper."

"His lordship!" ejaculated a dozen voices.

Mr. Cholmondeley smiled.

"Yeth."

"It's a lord we're going to play for?" asked Tomlinson, greatly impressed.

"Yeth. But I am not to tell the name excepting to the company thelected to give the performance at his lordship's country house."

"Right-ho, sir!" said Coker. "We don't want you to be indiscreet, of course. Naturally, his lordship doesn't want to be bothered personally by a lot of fags who think they can act."

"Precithely!" said Mr. Cholmondeley.

Harry Wharton & Co. retired, leaving Mr. Cholmondeley in the hands of the Fifth-Formers.

Coker & Co. were looking after Mr. Cholmondeley as if he were a long-lost uncle. They meant to make a good impression upon him, and they flattered themselves that they were succeeding.

"Looks more than ever as if it's the St. Jim's chaps we're going to play to," Bob Cherry remarked. "D'Arcy's father is a giddy lord, you know!"

"Looks like it," agreed Wharton. "Cholmondeley seems a decent sort, too. Rather overpowering, but he's all right. He will have to cut the rehearsal rather short if it's going to finish by half-past four."

"I dare say he can judge it, by seeing part of it, as he's read the play, of course," remarked Squiff. "He only wants to see what kind of actors they are. As a matter of fact, I expect he'll soon be fed up with Coker's lot."

"Ha, ha—very likely! We shall have to cut our show short a bit, too, if he's leaving at six. Still, if he sees one act, it will show him what stuff we're made of. Pass the word round to the fellows to be ready at half-past four. And we'll give him a whacking feed in the study, and please him."

"Hear, hear!"

While Mr. Cholmondeley was watching the histrionic efforts of the Fifth-Form Stage Club in the Rag, the heroes of the Remove were making great preparations. Courtenay and the Caterpillar were coming over to see the rehearsal, the Caterpillar especially being greatly interested. They were coming early, as they did not know whether the Remove rehearsal would come first or second. Nugent minor of the Second Form was induced to watch for the expected visitors, while Harry Wharton & Co., in the dormitory, proceeded to make themselves up all ready for the dress rehearsal of "The Call of the Empire," when Mr. Cholmondeley should be ready to witness it.

One or two curious fellows ventured to peep into the Rag, to see how Coker & Co. were getting on with the theatrical gentleman. They brought the report to the dormitory that the Fifth-Form Stage Club were going strong, and that Cholmondeley was taking it like a lamb.

"He isn't even laughing," added Skinner. "Couldn't see a grin anywhere about him. Just smoking cigarettes and watching them."

And the Removites agreed that Mr. Cholmondeley must possess remarkable powers of self-control.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.
Mysterious!

"WALKIN'?" asked the Caterpillar.

"Bike it if you like," said Courtenay.

The Caterpillar shuddered.

"Too much fag, dear boy. I was thinkin' of 'phonin' for a taxi!"

"Rats! Come on!"

"Frightfully exhaustin', walkin' all that way!"

"Oh, come on, fathead!"

The Caterpillar sighed, and dragged himself out of the comfortable armchair in No. 3 Study. The two chums walked out of the House, and sauntered down to the gates. As they quitted Highcliffe, a crowd of fellows were coming in, with smiling faces. They were the select nuts of the Fourth, but Ponsonby, the champion filbert, was not with them.

"Hullo, my giddy filberts!" yawned the Caterpillar. "You're lookin' merry an' bright. Gettin' on with the little game—what?"

"Absolutely," grinned Vavasour.

"Where's Pon—the esteemed Pon?"

"Find out!" said Gadsby shortly.

"I'm askin' you for that very purpose, my sweet-tempered tulip," said the Caterpillar. "The good Pon has gone off on his own, has he? Well, good-bye! Go an' play bridge, and mind Langley don't catch you smokin'."

"Go and eat coke!" growled Monson.

"Thanks! What I like about our nuts is their rippin' manners. Come on, Franky, or we shall be late for the show. It's a long, long way to Greyfriars."

The nuts, who were going in, jumped as they heard De Courcy's lazy remark. They spun round like humming-tops.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Gadsby. "Are you fellows going to Greyfriars?"

"Yaas."

"I—I say—— What for?"

Courtenay and the Caterpillar looked at the nuts in surprise. It was nothing new for them to pay Harry Wharton & Co. a visit, and they did not see any reason why the Highcliffe nuts should look so dismayed. For they did look dismayed—surprised, startled, and dismayed. There was no mistake about that.

"We are going to see a rehearsal," said Courtenay. "Nothing surprising in that, is there?"

"A—a—a rehearsal!" stammered Monson.

"Yaas," said the Caterpillar.

"Coker's rehearsal, perhaps——"

"Hardly," said Courtenay, laughing. "We shouldn't go over for that. We're going to see the Remove rehearse their play."

"Oh, my hat!"

"I—I say——" murmured Vavasour. "I—— Oh, by Jove!"

"Anythin' wrong?" drawled the Caterpillar, with a twinkle in his sleepy eyes. "Shall we be in the way at Greyfriars? Is the sublime Pon playin' his little jape at last, that you've been schemin' and plannin' so long?"

"Oh—oh no! Nothing of the sort! But——"

"I—I say!" said Gadsby desperately. "Courtenay, old chap——"

"Hallo!" said Courtenay, in astonishment. "How long have I been an old chap?"

"I—I say, you've been talkin' a lot about getting up a team," said Gadsby, unheeding. "Well, I'll tell you what. Come and let's do some cricket."

"Eh?"

"In fact, we'd be glad of some tips from you," said Gadsby. "We're going to do a lot of cricket in the vac, gettin' ready for next term, you know. Will you come and give us some coaching?"

Courtenay simply stared.

For the slackers of Highcliffe to be suddenly keen about cricket was surprising enough. But for them to ask their old enemy to coach them was astounding. But they were

evidently in earnest. The whole party chimed in, backing up Gadsby's extraordinary request with great heartiness.

"Yaas, do come—absolutely!"

"We'll be ever so much obliged, Courtenay."

"Awfully obliged, old chap."

"We're really keen, you know."

The Caterpillar burst into a chuckle. Courtenay looked astounded, as well he might. He looked suspicious, too.

"I suppose you're trying to pull my leg?" he said at last. "You don't care twopence about the game, and you don't want me to coach you. You need it, right enough, but you don't believe that you do. What's the little game?"

"Oh, my innocent little lambs!" murmured the Caterpillar. "Dear little innocent baa-lambs, it's a little too transparent! Why don't you want us to go to Greyfriars to see the rehearsal?"

"Of—of course we don't care anything about your going to Greyfriars," stammered Gadsby. "It isn't that."

"Then why are you tryin' to keep us away?"

"We—we're not. We want Courtenay to coach us at—at cricket."

"Well, even if you mean it, I can't," said Courtenay. "We've got an engagement at Greyfriars, and we don't want to break it—can't break it, in fact. If you're not rottin', I'm sorry I can't oblige you. Come on, Caterpillar!"

Gadsby exchanged a quick look with his comrades. There were six of the nuts, and though they were not fighting-men as a rule, they had evidently made up their minds on the spot to use force if necessary. They whipped in front of the two chums and barred the way.

"Hallo! What's the little game now?" drawled the Caterpillar.

"You can get in," said Gadsby determinedly. "You're not going to Greyfriars this afternoon."

"Why not?" asked the Caterpillar, gently as the cooing dove.

"Because we don't choose," said Gadsby loftily. "Mind, we mean business. There are six of us, and we all mean business."

"Absolutely."

"Dear me!" said the Caterpillar. "It's a frost, Franky. Gaddy says we sha'n't go, and Gaddy is on the ferocious war-path. Either we've got to chuck up the idea, else we've got to walk over Gaddy & Co.—and they mean business. Gaddy says so. Whatever is to be done?"

Courtenay laughed, and the nuts frowned. The Caterpillar spoke in a tone of comical despair.

"We're going," said Courtenay. "Clear out of the way, you duffers! It won't take us long to wipe up the road with you if you don't."

"We don't want trouble with you," said Gadsby, faltering a little; "but you jolly well sha'n't go to Greyfriars, and that's settled."

"Are you going to get aside?"

"No!" yelled Gadsby. "Back up, you fellows!"

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "What ferocity! I know now what would happen if the Germans landed. I can picture Gaddy standin' in the way, and sayin' 'Halt!' I never knew before that Gaddy was such a hero. I'm really sorry to have to pitch you over, Gaddy, but you're delayin' us. Do go away and be peaceful."

"You're not going to Greyfriars!"

"Come on!" said Courtenay. "Charge!"

"Hear, hear!" said the Caterpillar.

For all his lazy ways, the Caterpillar was an athlete very nearly equal to Frank Courtenay in that line. The two chums, in fact, had little to fear from the somewhat weedy and extremely elegant nuts, who spent more time on parting their hair and selecting their ties than on keeping themselves fit.

They charged.

Gadsby & Co. stood their ground.

There was a terrific struggle for a couple of minutes. But Courtenay and the Caterpillar were hard hitters. Gadsby received Courtenay's left on his chin, and a moment later that athletic youth's right was planted in Monson's eye. And the two nuts dropped in the road and stayed there. They were not in the least inclined to rise and continue the battle.

Courtenay struggled in the grasp of two more, but the Caterpillar was driving Merton and Vavasour both before him, and they were furiously giving ground before his attack.

Courtenay hurled off Drury, who dropped in the road with a yell, and then got Tunstall's head into chancery. Tunstall roared and struggled wildly, till Courtenay pitched him across Drury.

Courtenay turned at once to aid his comrade, but the Caterpillar did not need any aid.

Vavasour and Merton had taken to their heels, and the Caterpillar, who was far too lazy to pursue them, set his tie straight and smiled.

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "The awful combat seems to be finished. But perhaps Gaddy is goin' to get up and give us some more?" He stirred the groaning Gadsby gently with his foot. "Are you goin' to get up and give us some more, Gaddy?"

"Yow!" mumbled Gadsby. "Lemme alone, you cad!"

"Are you goin' to get up and give us some more, Monson?"

"Oh, dear!" groaned Monson, nursing his nose. "Oh, crikey!"

"No offers!" said the Caterpillar. "There isn't any more to be had, Franky. Suppose we continue on our little walky-walky?"

Courtenay laughed, and they walked down the road together. The miserable nuts picked themselves up, mumbling and moaning.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" said Gadsby. "This is a go! Well, we've done our best! Pon can't say that we haven't done our best! Ow—ow!"

Courtenay and De Courcy sauntered on. They had not been hurt much in that brief encounter. The nuts were not dangerous at close quarters.

"Looks to me as if we shall have an interestin' afternoon at Greyfriars," yawned the Caterpillar. "Somethin's in the wind—what?"

"I can't quite see why they should want to keep us away," said Courtenay, puzzled.

"Pon's springin' his jape at last. Pon went out with them after dinner, and they came back without him. Then they tried to keep us away from Greyfriars. Two and two make four, dear boy. Pon's at Greyfriars playin' one of his little jokes."

"But I don't see——"

"Neither do I, dear boy. But we shall soon see. By gad," said the Caterpillar, "I'm so curious to know what Pon's up to, that I believe I could walk a little faster! Come on!"

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.
The Caterpillar is Surprised!

NUGENT MINOR met the chums of Highcliffe when they arrived at Greyfriars. There was no sign of Harry Wharton & Co. to be seen.

"You'll find the fellows in the dorm," said Dicky Nugent. "They're getting ready for the rehearsal. Wharton asked me to tell you. I'll show you up if you like."

"Thanks!" said the Caterpillar. "So the rehearsal hasn't started yet? I am afraid we should be late for the beginnin'."

"Remove's doing the second rehearsal. The Fifth are rehearsing now, in the Rag," explained Nugent minor. "Cholmondeley's there—a fat Jew chap. Come this way, and you'll hear Coker going it. They've locked the door since I looked in last time—Coker don't like pea-shooters at rehearsals."

The Highcliffe fellows grinned, and paused for a moment or two outside the door of the Rag. Horace Coker's powerful voice could be heard going full blast. Coker, being the author of the play, had naturally given himself a "fat" part, and there wasn't a single scene in which Coker did not appear, in his character as a British captain.

Leading his company, or making speeches to his men, or defying the Germans, or being taken prisoner, or escaping, or something or other—Horace Coker was quite busy all through the play.

The two Highcliffe fellows had an opportunity now of hearing what good poetry was like, as Horace Coker's stentorian tones boomed out:

"Stand fast, my gallant hearts—stand fast, stand fast!
The Hunnish foe stands trembling and aghast;
In thousands lie the Huns upon the ground.
Now rally, rally, rally, rally round!
From Britain's shore the reinforcements pour,
And more, and more, and more, and more, and more!
Stand fast, stand fast, and face the murderous Hun;
They run, they run, they run, they run, they run!"

Courtenay and the Caterpillar did not stay to hear any more. They retreated, almost suffocating with laughter.

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "If that's the kind of play they're goin' to play, I should say the Remove will romp home an easy first—what?"

Courtenay chuckled. Coker's sublime verse had not had an impressive effect upon them, whatever effect it might be having upon Mr. Cholmondeley.

"This way!" said Nugent minor.

He guided the visitors to the Remove dormitory, kicked upon the door, and left them there.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Trot in!" called out Bob Cherry.

"Busy?" asked Courtenay, with a smile.

"Yes, rather!" said Wharton. "You fellows don't mind? We've got to be ready for the rehearsal at half-past four. We're going to have tea with our war-paint on."

"Blessed if I can tell one from t'other!" said Caterpillar, seating himself on a bed. "Go on; this is mighty interestin'!"

The Removites were in their stage costumes, some of them as German soldiers, some as British Tommies, some privates and some officers. Then there were Frenchmen and Belgians, bristling with whiskers. They were making up their faces with great skill.

Frank Nugent was in feminine costume, being a Belgian young lady, whose hard fate it was to fall a prisoner to the horrid Huns. Nugent's smooth and good-looking face suited him for the part; and Squiff, who was not quite so good-looking, was made up as an older lady. They were the only female characters. Bolsover major was General Von Snortz. He was the biggest fellow in the Remove.

"We're having tea at half-past four, in full war-paint," said Wharton, who looked very well in khaki as a British lieutenant—on a somewhat reduced scale, of course. "The theatrical agent I told you about is seeing the Fifth Form play now, and he chucks it at half-past four—not before he'll be pretty well fed-up, I think. Then he's coming to tea in the study, and afterwards we have our rehearsal."

"Judgin' by what we've just heard of Coker's little lot, you ought to bag the thing," said the Caterpillar.

"Well, I think we shall beat that ass, anyway!" said Wharton. "By the way, are those fellows at your school still going in for it?"

"I fancy not."

"Well, they wouldn't have much chance against us," remarked Peter Todd. "Anybody seen my whiskers?"

"You haven't seen anythin' of Pon this afternoon?" asked the Caterpillar.

"No. He hasn't been here."

"By gad!"

Wharton looked at him inquiringly.

"Was Ponsonby coming here?" he asked. "We've got a walloping saving up for him!"

"Blessed if I understand it!" said the Caterpillar. "I'm a keen chap—ain't I, Franky?"

"You are," agreed Courtenay, laughing.

"And I concluded that Pon was over here japin' you," said the Caterpillar. "I don't understand it. I'm off-side for once. Astonishin'!"

"But why——" said Bob.

"I'll explain. For some time I've had the impression that Pon was schemin' a big jape on you chaps. I warned him that I should give him away. Well, that would depend. If it was a decent jape, I should be as mum as an oyster. But if it was one of his dirty tricks, I was goin' to tell you. I trust you observe the distinction?"

"Quite so," said Wharton; "and we're obliged. But we've seen nothing of Ponsonby."

"Yaas, that's the surprisin' part. He went out with the whole family, and they came back without him, this afternoon. Then they found we were comin' here to see the rehearsal, and they piled on us ferociously. There was a terrific combat—simply terrific. The red and ragin' nuts nearly slaughtered us. How we escaped with our lives I hardly know. But we did, and we got here, in a state of exhaustion. So we concluded that Pon was here japin' you. Can't understand it."

"They tried to keep you away?" said Wharton thoughtfully. "I don't see why they should. And Ponsonby wasn't with them?"

"That's it!"

"It's jolly odd! Still, he hasn't been here, so far as I know."

The Caterpillar rubbed his nose thoughtfully. As he said, he could not understand it. Unless Ponsonby was at Greyfriars playing some trick, why should Gadsby and the rest have been so determined to keep them away? The Caterpillar had to confess that he was beaten.

Four o'clock chimed out, and the Famous Five were finished, though most of the rest of the company were still busy. It was necessary to get ready for the theatrical gentleman, and the Famous Five descended to the study, with Courtenay and De Courcy.

The shopping had already been done, and the Famous Five proceeded to prepare the festive board. De Courcy sat in the armchair and looked on serenely, while Courtenay lent a helping hand. In their stage costumes, the Famous Five looked very incongruous in the study, getting tea. Courtenay kindly relieved them of the task of poaching the eggs. The Caterpillar offered to make the tea, but without making any movement to do so. He was content to watch. Before the half-hour sounded all was ready for the distinguished visitor who was coming.

"I'll meet him at the Rag, and bring him here," said Wharton.

And he left the study, drawing many glances upon him, downstairs, as he went down in khaki.

The door of the Rag had not yet opened, and Wharton took up his position in the passage, to wait for Mr. Cholmondeley to come out.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.
So is Ponsonby!

COKER & CO. were going strong.

Time was nearly up, but the great drama of "Red Ruin" was nowhere near its conclusion. That was impossible in the time. But doubtless Mr. Cholmondeley had seen enough of it to be able to judge of the quality of the Fifth-Form Stage Club.

Mr. Cholmondeley, in spite of the surmises of the Removites on the subject, seemed to be standing it very well.

The stout gentleman reclined in an armchair, and smoked cigarettes, and watched the performance.

He did not laugh—perhaps having great facial control—and he did not go to sleep. He smoked and watched.

The Fifth-Form actors did their best. More than half the Fifth were in the company, and a goodly number of Shell fellows had been taken in for the minor parts, and even two or three of the Fourth had been allowed to join as supers.

Indeed, Coker had made the Remove a generous offer to take some of them on as supers, if they would have the sense to give up their silly idea of competing with him. That offer had been declined by the Remove without thanks—in fact, with several rude remarks.

Coker & Co. were in the second act when half-past four chimed out. Coker's voice was booming away. It was noticeable that Coker did a good half of the talking, the other half being divided among the numerous company. Coker, at this moment, was a prisoner in the hands of the Germans, and Potter had just sentenced him to be shot—in verse, of course. Potter could hardly keep solemn as he spouted the telling lines:

"Take him away, away, away, away,
To execution at the break of day!"

Still, if a theatrical agent—a celebrated theatrical agent—was willing to sit through the performance, and gravely consider it, Potter had to admit that there was possibly something in the play that he himself couldn't see.

Mr. Cholmondeley had not gone into hysterics, as might have been expected. And if there was an engagement to be bagged, with a fee of fifty guineas at the end of it, Potter and all the rest were agreed that they were going to bag it, however idiotic might be the play they were going to produce.

"False Hun! False tyrant! Bah, bah, bah, bah, bah!
I perish for my native land afar.
The day will come when every rascal Hun
Will flee in fear before a British gun;
When men in khaki, pouring o'er the brine,
Will drive the foe back—back across the Rhine!
When, 'mid the clash of steel and cannons' din,
Defeated Huns will flee into Berlin!
The pallid Kaiser, from high Potsdam's towers,
Shall see advance victorious British powers!
My death, my death, my death avenged shall be,
When crimson runs the waters of the Spree!
Lead me away, away, away to death!
Hear my defiance with my latest breath!"

Coker had a great deal more to say, but time was up. Mr. Cholmondeley rose from the armchair. He was ready for tea.

"Thank you!" he said.

"This is only the second act, sir," said Coker. "Wouldn't you like to hear it to a finish? You needn't waste time on those Remove kids."

"Yeth: but I mutht hear both thides," said Mr. Cholmondeley. "I am very pleathed with thith. I regard thith as a great play, and I mutht they that I have theldom theen thuch good acting among amateurs."

Coker & Co. looked pleased. They could not help being gratified by such high praise from such a quarter.

"Jolly glad you like it, sir," said Coker. "I thought you would. I told these fellows it was a sure thing, but they had their doubts. I knew it would be all right. I could see you were a man of taste, Mr. Cholmondeley."

"I have had conthiderable experience," said Mr. Cholmondeley. "But I have theldom theen anything to equal thith. You will thuit admirably. As I may not thee

you again before I go we will make the final arrangements now. You are engaged for the entertainment."

"My hat!" murmured Potter. He had to believe it, now that Mr. Cholmondeley himself said so. But he was astounded. He was still convinced that the play was the awfullest of awful rot. And the players, naturally, had not been able to appear at their best in a play which was enough to excite the risible faculties of a cat. Still, if the critic was satisfied, there was no more to be said. Mr. Cholmondeley must be supposed to know what he was talking about.

The opinion the Stage Club had had of Coker went up several degrees. They had to admit that the great Horace had been right all along, and that he had secured them this splendid engagement.

But for Horace Coker, the Fifth-Form Stage Club would never have been engaged to play, for a fee of fifty guineas, before his unknown lordship. There was no denying that. Never had Coker been so popular.

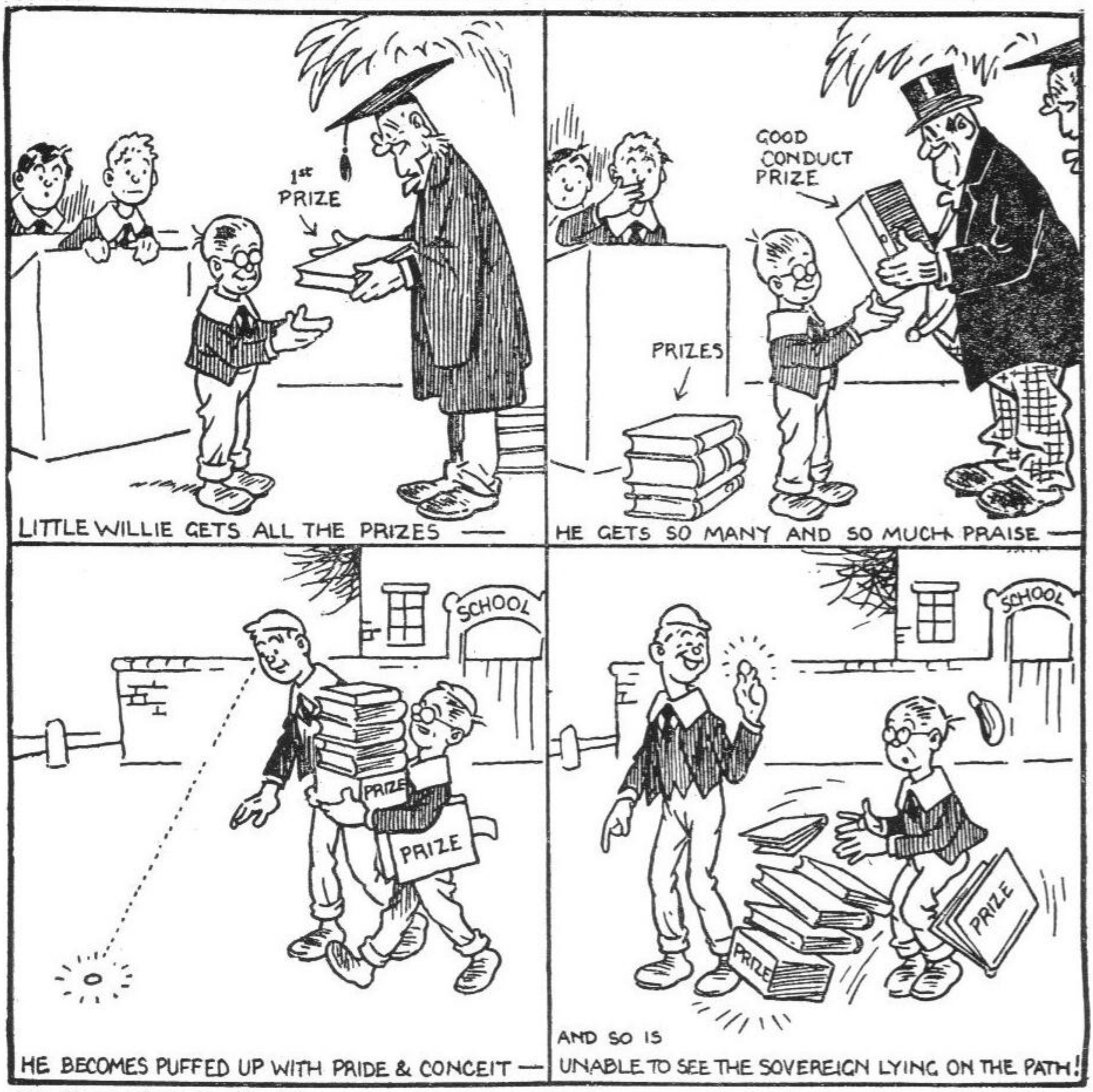
"You—you are satisfied, sir?" murmured Smith major.

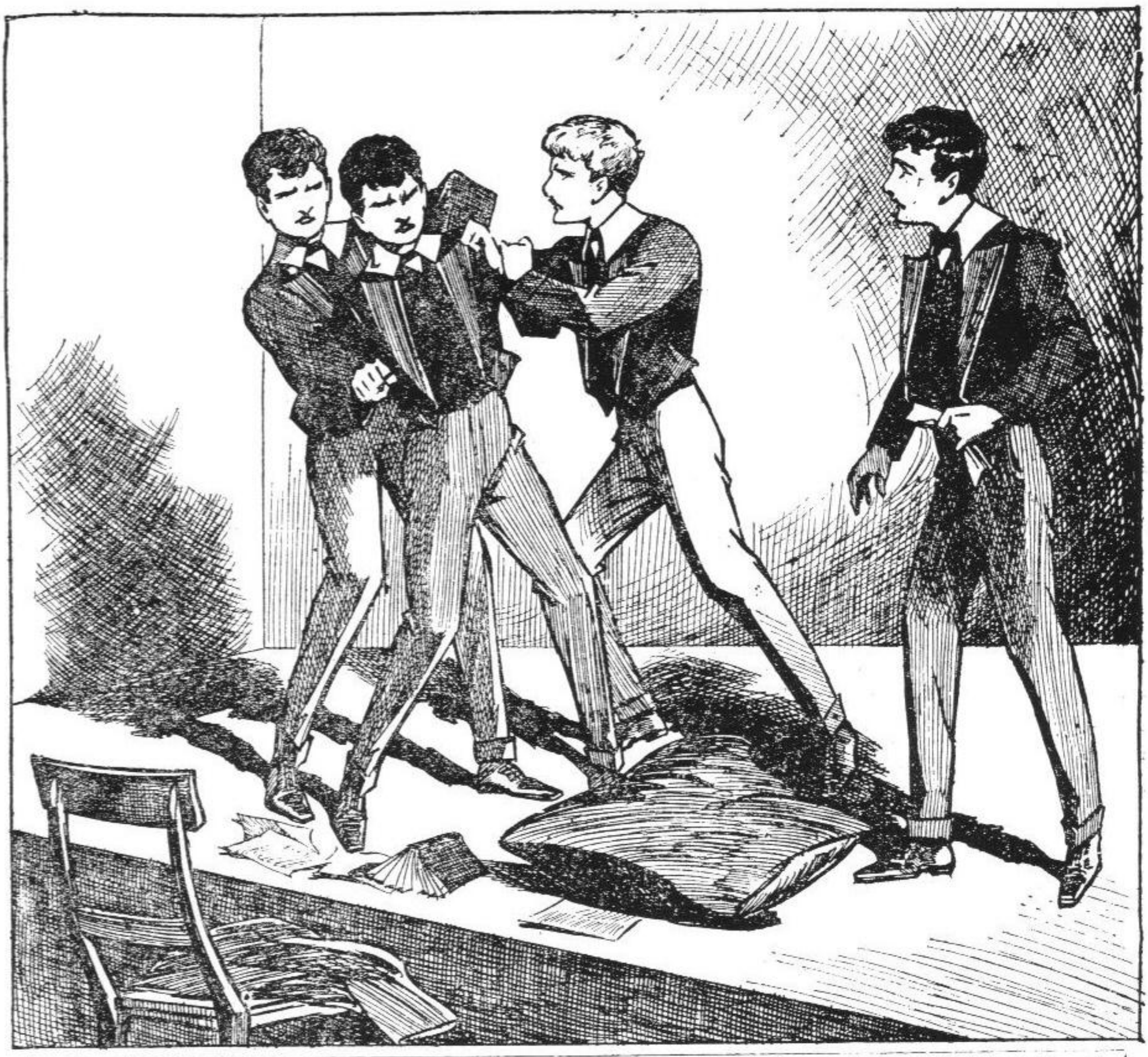
"Quite thatisfied," said Mr. Cholmondeley. "His lordship will be delighted, I am thure of that. Now that you are definitely engaged, Master Choker, there is no need for further secrecy. But his lordship is particularly anxious not to be troubled by the unsuccessful applicants for the engagement and you mutht therefore agree not to mention his name outside your own circle."

"Oh, certainly, sir!" said Coker. "I quite understand that. We're willing to accept the engagement, perfectly willing. But if we are engaged, why see the Remove rehearsal at all?"

"His lordship will engage both companies, if both are approved," explained Mr. Cholmondeley. "He is arranging a series of entertainments at his country mansion, and probably half a dozen different performances will be given. I may thay, however, that though I have already attended more than a dozen rehearsals, yours is the first I have approved of. His lordship is very particular. He is most particular of all about not appearing personally in the matter, and he has left everything in my hands. All your dealings will be with me. I will now tell you his name—a very well-known name—Lord Eastwood."

OUR SCHOOL CARTOON SERIES.—No. 5.





"You burbling ass!" exclaimed Squiff, jumping up and charging at the stage-manager. "I'll jolly well——" "Order!" Cassius and Mark Antony and Brutus and several more noble Romans seized Julius Cæsar just in time, and saved him from committing assault and battery upon the stage-manager. (*See Chapter* 3.)

"I've heard that name before," said Coker, "somewhere. I think a kid, a son of Lord Eastwood, comes over here with a team from a school called St. Jim's."

"Quite tho, very probably," said Mr. Cholmondeley. His lordship has two sons at St. Jim's, and they are coming home for the Easter holidays with a large party of boys from that school. Your efforts will be to entertain them. His lordship, as you are probably aware, is extremely rich, and he does not spare money in entertaining his guests. Your fee, however, will be paid by me, by cheque, immediately after the performance."

"That's all right," said Coker.

"Hear, hear!" murmured the delighted Stage Club.

"You will kindly keep an exact account of your expenses in travelling to Eastwood House, and render me the account, as it is his lordship's desire that all expenses should be paid."

"Good!"

"Second-class fare will be allowed. Although his lordship has left the question of expenses entirely in my hands, I do not feel juthtified in wasting his lordship's money."

"Second-class fare will do us all right, sir."

"Oh, yes, that's all serene!"

"I may thay that you will ha e a very pleathant reception at Eastwood House. His lordship is famous for his hospitality. If you are desired to give more than one representation, which is very likely, fees will be arranged—a reduced fee for the later performances, I think."

"Oh, quite so, sir! We don't want to drive a hard bargain."

"Then that is very thatisfacto-y," said Mr. Cholmondeley. "Now for the date. I thuppose you can come down to Eastwood House on Easter Monday."

"Any date you like."

"Very good. You will stay the night, of course, even if you do not stay longer, but I shall certainly recommend his lordship to engage you for a repetition of the performance. Will you arrange to arrive at Eastwood House between six and seven—as near seven as possible—tho as to be in good time to prepare for the evening performance."

"Earlier if you like," said Coker.

"No, not earlier, as his lordship will be very busy with his numerous guests."

"Righto!"

"And you understand that a thertain amount of discretion is needed in the matter. His lordship does not wish to be troubled by unsuccessful aspirants. He does not desire his name to be mentioned. That is why the advertisement was put into the paper by X. Y. Z."

"I understand. Mum's the word."

"Very good. I congratulate you, Master Choker."

The door of the Rag was unlocked, and the stout gentleman walked out, almost into the arms of Harry Wharton.

Coker looked triumphantly at the Co.

"What did I tell you?" he demanded. "Now, who was right all along the line—what?"

"Well, you were right," agreed Potter. "Blessed if I understand it now. But old Cholmondeley seems a good sort, and we're after that fifty guineas."

"What-ho!" said the Stage Club, with one voice.

The Fifth-Form club were in a state of evident satisfaction. They could not help feeling grateful to Coker, too, for putting them on to a good thing like this. Great satisfaction reigned on all sides.

Mr. Cholmondeley nodded kindly to Wharton in the passage.

"I am ready for you now, Master Wharton."

"Tea's ready, sir," said Wharton, "and all the fellows are ready for the rehearsal. May I ask how you like Coker's show, sir?"

"I have engaged Choker."

Wharton's face fell.

"Then—then there's no chance for us, Mr. Cholmondeley?"

"Not at all, my dear boy. I am empowered to engage both companies if thatisfactory. His lordship is providing a series of entertainments for the friends of his sons during the vacation. Master Coker's company is engaged for Easter Monday. If your rehearsal is thatisfactory I shall engage you for the following day."

"Oh, good!" said Wharton, brightening up "That's all right. We're going to do our best, Mr. Cholmondeley. This way to the study."

Harry Wharton conducted the distinguished visitor upstairs to the Remove passage in the politest possible manner.

He threw open the door of No. 1 Study. A fragrant scent of tea and toast came from within.

"Here you are, sir!"

Mr. Cholmondeley walked into the study.

Courtenay gave a start, and looked at him hard. The Caterpillar stretched his long limbs and rose from the armchair, smiling.

"By gad!" he said. "Rippin'! Toppin'! How do you do, Pon?"

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.
Ponsonby's Jape!

"PON!"

The Removites echoed the word blankly.

For a moment they thought that the Caterpillar was going "off his rocker."

With a cheery smile on his face he had addressed Mr. Cholmondeley as "Pon!"

Strange to say, Mr. Cholmondeley started violently, and backed away to the door. He backed into Wharton, who was following him in.

"Don't run away, dear boy," urged the Caterpillar. "It isn't like you to be shy, Pon. Never let it be said that the great Ponsonby was shy in company, and such rippin' company, too. Don't run away, Pon!"

"Ponsonby!" ejaculated Wharton.

"Are you dotty?" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "That's Mr. Cholmondeley."

"Rippin' name," agreed the Caterpillar.

Mr. Cholmondeley seemed rooted to the floor. Harry Wharton closed the door of the study quietly, but very determinedly. The Caterpillar had astonished him, but Mr. Cholmondeley's hasty movement to back out of the room was suspicious, and there was no reason why he should go.

"You must be dreaming," said Squiff, after a pause of dead silence. "That's Mr Cholmondeley, the theatrical agent, ain't you, sir?"

The theatrical agent did not reply. He seemed to be unable to find his voice. He opened his lips, but they closed again.

"It's Ponsonby right enough," said Courtenay quietly. "What trick is he playing here?"

"But—but——"

"Blessed if I should have known him," said the Caterpillar admiringly. "I must say Pon is surprisin'. Blessed if I ever thought he was such a giddy genius. Pon, you ought to go on the stage—you ought, really. You're wasted in a school. Take my tip, Pon, and go on the stage."

Still no reply from Mr. Cholmondeley.

His silence was enough.

The Remove fellows exchanged grim looks.

"I—I suppose there's no doubt about it?" said Wharton at last. "We hadn't the faintest idea!"

"I shouldn't have known him," said Courtenay; "but we've seen him at Highcliffe in those clothes. He was getting himself up in that character—practising it. We've seen him looking exactly like that half a dozen times."

"But—but——"

Even yet the Greyfriars Removites could scarcely believe it.

They gazed at Mr. Cholmondeley. Not in the slightest degree did he resemble Ponsonby, of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe.

He was a good inch taller; but the high heels accounted for that. But his make-up was perfect.

Even the Caterpillar would have been deceived, but for the fact that he had seen the Highcliffe nut practising that very character, and had expected to find Ponsonby at Greyfriars that afternoon engaged upon a jape.

There could be no doubt, impossible as it seemed; for if Mr. Cholmondeley had been Mr. Cholmondeley, and not Ponsonby, he would have said so.

He evidently realised that words were useless.

It needed only a jerk at his beard to prove that he was in disguise.

"Well, my hat!" said Squiff at last. "This beats it!"

"The beatfulness is terrific!"

"Why don't you speak?" demanded Wharton. "If you are Mr. Cholmondeley, and not a rotter fooling us, why don't you speak?"

"I'll soon settle that," said Bob Cherry; and he reached out and jerked at the brown beard.

It came off in his hand.

Even then Ponsonby was not recognisable; but, of course, no further proof was wanted.

"The rotter!" growled Squiff. "Bump him!"

"Scrag him!"

"Hang you!" said Mr. Cholmondeley at last; and his accent was quite gone, and his voice was the voice of Cecil Ponsonby of Highcliffe. "Hang you, Caterpillar! I didn't know you two cads would be here!"

The Caterpillar smiled.

"Now, you see, if you'd been a good boy, we should have been pally with you, and told you all our little plans," he remarked. "It's your punishment for not bein' a good boy, Pon—your own fault!"

Ponsonby ground his teeth.

"Hang you! Why couldn't those fools keep you away?"

"Gaddy and the rest? They tried to when they found we were coming here," grinned the Caterpillar. "When you go home, Pon, you'll find them nursin' fearful injuries. They tried to stop us, and there were casualties."

"What does this rotten trick mean, Ponsonby?" demanded Wharton angrily.

"I suppose he found out that Mr. Cholmondeley was coming here, and got himself up like that to take us in," remarked Nugent.

"Then where's the real Mr. Cholmondeley?" said Wharton.

Squiff grunted emphatically.

"There isn't any Mr. Cholmondeley, of course. It's a jape all along the line. I know now why all the letters were typed. We should have known that cad's handwriting!"

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "By gad! So that's why you hired a typewriter, was it, Pon? Blessed if I could make it out when I've heard you clickin' at it in your study!"

"The—the letters!" stammered Wharton. "But—but—but X. Y. Z.——"

"There isn't any X. Y. Z.!" howled Squiff. "Don't you see, it's a jape all along the line? Ponsonby's been spoofing us all the time. Ponsonby put that advertisement in the Friardale paper."

"What!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The truth dawned fully on the astounded Removites at last.

The whole thing was "spoof."

Ponsonby had been pulling their leg from start to finish.

The advertisement in the "Friardale Times," the typed letters, the visit of Mr. Cholmondeley—they were all successive steps in the same jape.

And if the Caterpillar had not happened to be there, and bowled Ponsonby out, the jape would have gone on.

The Remove Dramatic Society, engaged to give a performance at a titled gentleman's country-house by his supposed agent, would have presented themselves there, much to the astonishment of his lordship, who would never even have heard of their existence.

The juniors felt almost giddy as they realised the escape they had had.

If they had been fooled to that extent, they would certainly never have heard the end of it.

Mr. Cholmondeley—minus his beard—stood staring at the Removites. Much politeness had been expended on Mr. Cholmondeley. But he had something quite different from politeness to expect now. Bob Cherry and Harry Wharton had their backs to the door. There was no escape for the humorous Highcliffian.

"Well, this takes the cake!" said Harry Wharton at last. "What a thumping jape! Blessed if I ever thought Ponsonby would have brains enough to pull our leg like that!"

"The brainfulness is terrific, and the pullfulness of our esteemed legs is also great," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The august Ponsonby is a terrific spoofer!"

"Spoofing Greyfriars, by gum!" said Bob Cherry. "The awful cheek!"

Ponsonby grinned savagely.

"If that cad hadn't given me away, I'd have fooled you right up to the finish," he snarled. "You hadn't sense enough to see that you were being done. You'd never have tumbled, any more than that idiot Coker did!"

"Sorry!" said the Caterpillar. "By gad, you know, it was a thumping wheeze! Why didn't you tell me all about it, Pon? I warned you that I was goin' to chip in. I naturally concluded that you were playin' a dirty trick. Knowin' you so well, how could I imagine that any trick you were playin' wasn't a dirty trick?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hang you!" said Ponsonby.

"Hang away!" said the Caterpillar. "Gentlemen, I trust you will excuse me for remarkin' that if I had known Pon was simply indulgin' in a harmless and necessary jape, I shouldn't have said a word? Although I should have been sorry to see my friends spoofed, I should have felt that it was up to me to keep mum, considering that the good Pon belongs to my show. I must remark that Pon's idea was a corker, and quite worthy of my hearty support. But I was under a misapprehension. I naturally thought Pon was playing a dirty trick, as usual. How was I to know that, for once in Pon's life, he was merely bein' humorous without bein' a disgustin' cad? I couldn't be expected to guess that, could I?"

"Certainly not!" said Wharton, laughing.

"But the game's up now," said the Caterpillar. "Bein' convinced that poor Pon was playin' it low down, as usual, and disgracin' his school by a dirty trick in his well-known style, I dropped on him. It dawns on me too late that he is only japin' in a harmless and necessary manner. I suppose it's no good my withdrawin' my remarks, and askin' you to continue to regard Pon as Mr. Cholmondeley?"

"Ha, ha! No!"

"Then all the fat's in the fire," said the Caterpillar. "Pon, you are clean bowled. Your mistake, old man. If you'd ever given a fellow any reason to suppose that you could play a jape without disgracin' yourself, you'd have been all right. Your own fault entirely. Why didn't you take your little Caterpillar into your confidence? I'd have kept away, honest injun, and never uttered a whisper!"

"I don't believe you," said Ponsonby. "I knew you'd have given me away in any case!"

"Dear me!" said the Caterpillar. "He doubts my word. The word of a De Courcy, by gad! I ought to lick him for that!"

"Pile in!" said Nugent.

"But it's too much fag," continued the Caterpillar calmly. "Besides, the word of a De Courcy isn't any superior to the word of a Smith, Jones, or Robinson, so far as I can see. Pon can go on doubtin' it. I'll sit down!"

The Caterpillar stretched himself gracefully in the armchair, completely unperturbed.

Evidently the Caterpillar was sufficient unto himself, and utterly regardless of what opinion others might entertain of him.

"I say," began Courtenay doubtfully, "I suppose you fellows feel a bit rusty at being fooled like this! But it's a bit awkward for us. Although it's up against you, you will admit it was a good jape?"

"Ye-e-es," said Wharton, rather slowly.

"And not a dirty, caddish trick, such as you might have expected from Ponsonby——"

"Yes, that's so."

"And we've given him away," went on Courtenay. "Under the circs, I feel inclined to ask a favour of you."

"Any old thing!"

"Well, I suppose you're feeling inclined to rag Ponsonby bald-headed?"

"What-ho!"

"I'd like you to let him clear," said Courtenay.

"Oh!"

"Yaas," said the Caterpillar. "It's quite an awkward position for us. Under the natural belief that Pon was playin' dirty tricks, as might have been expected, we've given him away. It turns out that he wasn't. Let him retire with the honours of war!"

The chums of the Remove looked at one another a little dubiously. Their natural inclination was to impress upon Ponsonby that he couldn't jape Greyfriars with impunity. They were inclined to bump him, and scalp him, and send him home to Highcliffe with his disguises tied round his neck, especially considering the way the nuts had handled Wharton and Bob Cherry the previous week.

But they had to consider Courtenay and the Caterpillar.

Their position was a little awkward. They were chummy with the Famous Five, and on ill terms with Ponsonby & Co. But they were Highcliffe fellows, and so was Ponsonby, and that could not be left out of account.

Ponsonby's jape, if they had known of it before, would have placed them in an awkward position, too. They would not have felt entitled to give him away, and at the same time they would not have cared to stand by and see their friends taken in.

But as it happened, Ponsonby's own rascality had solved that difficulty. Taking it for granted that he was playing a caddish trick, they had given him away without pausing to reflect, as they had fairly warned him that they would. The discovery that the trick was not a caddish one, for once, had come a little too late. Ponsonby had only himself and his general character to thank for that.

Harry Wharton & Co. made up their minds, and there was a general nod of assent.

"Peace, my infants!" said Bob Cherry. "Considering all the circs, it's up to us to let Ponsonby clear off unragged, unbumped, unscalped, and unslaughtered."

"Hear, hear!"

"I agreefully assent," said Hurree Singh, "the hear-hearfulness is terrific."

Ponsonby shrugged his shoulders. He was immensely relieved, but he did not care to show it.

"I'll make you squirm for this, Caterpillar," he said. "You've given me away——"

"Alas!" said the Caterpillar. "Why are you such a howling cad as a rule, Pon? How was I to guess that, for once, on a special occasion, you were not actin' like a howlin' cad? Be reasonable!"

"You slackin' rotter——"

"'Nuff said!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "You can clear off, Ponsonby, and if it wasn't for these chaps, you'd get the ragging of your life before you went. You're getting off pretty cheaply. Shut up, and clear!"

Wharton opened the door. Bob Cherry made a suggestive movement with his boot, and Ponsonby hurriedly stepped into the passage. There he quickly replaced his beard. He dreaded meeting Coker as he departed. For if Horace Coker had discovered that jape, before the japer was out of reach, the prospect would have been terrific for Ponsonby. Coker would not have let him off lightly.

"Mr. Cholmondeley" disappeared down the passage.

He had ordered the taxi-driver to call for him at "thix" o'clock. But he did not wait for the taxi. He hurried away to Courtfield as fast as he could go to get to Mr. Lazarus's shop, where he had put on his disguise, and where he had to get rid of it. And he breathed more freely when Greyfriars was left safely behind.

So far as the Remove was concerned, the great jape was a dismal failure.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.
The Dramatic Society is Wrathy!

"WHAT a giddy escape!" said Bob Cherry.

Wharton drew a deep breath.

"It was an escape!" he said. "I'll admit that I never had the slightest suspicion. We took the advertisement at the face value——"

"Who'd have thought that X.Y.Z. was really Pon?" said Nugent. "Blessed if I'd have guessed it in a thousand years!"

"We ought to have smelled a mouse," said Squiff, with a shake of the head. "It didn't occur to me before, but such an advertisement, if genuine, wouldn't be likely to appear in a little local paper like the 'Friardale Times.'"

"Of course, he knew we'd see it there," said Harry. "And he got De Courcy to find out for him that we were going in for it."

"Usin' me as a catspaw, by gad!" said the Caterpillar. "It was rather low-down of Pon, that little bit. It was a doocid awkward position for us. I don't feel quite satisfied about givin' him away."

"Dash it all, you couldn't have sat there, knowing it was Ponsonby, and let him go on fooling us, I suppose," said Squiff warmly.

"I suppose not," agreed the Caterpillar. "It would have

been pretty mean. If I'd known in advance, I suppose I should have kept away."

"I'm jolly glad it's come out!" said Wharton. "The bounder was going to send us to some blessed place, where they've never even heard of us—Lord Eastwood's place, very likely. I thought it was D'Arcy's place we were to go to—and most likely it was. Pon knows we're chummy with the St. Jim's chaps. Fancy their faces when we walked in unexpectedly to play a blessed play——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the rotter's given us all the trouble he could—making us make up a play in verse. That was to make it as difficult and ridiculous as possible, of course," said Wharton. "And he's actually engaged Coker!"

"Oh, by gad!" grinned the Caterpillar.

"He told me; it's settled with Coker, and he's engaged for the performance of 'Red Ruin' on Easter Monday!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We shall have to give old Coker the tip," said Bob Cherry, with a chuckle. "We can't let Coker be taken in. It would be a topping joke, but it's up to us to warn him."

"We'll speak to him on the quiet," assented Wharton. "The fact is, we don't want all Greyfriars to hear about this. After writing a play, giving out the parts, and rehearsing, and so on, we don't want to tell everybody that it was all spoof, and the play's not going to be played at all. It would make us look such blithering idiots!"

"Yaas, it would!" assented the Caterpillar. "Mum's the word. Give Coker the tip on the quiet, and say nothin'."

"The speechfulness is silver, but the silence saves a stitch in time," remarked Hurree Singh, with a wise shake of the head.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's the idea," said Harry. "No need to give Mr. Cholmondeley away to everybody. We shall have to tell the Dramatic Society that it's all off, that's all, but we're not going to have this jawed all over the school. We should never hear the end of it!"

"What a rotten sell, though!" said Bob. "The play's all ready, the costumes all ready, every fellow's letter-perfect—what a ghastly sell!"

"We'll turn it into prose, and play it all the same in the vacation," said Nugent.

The chums of the Remove sat down to tea. They were still in the costume of "The Call of the Empire." Their cheeks burned at the idea of the whole school learning how completely they had been fooled. For the honour and glory of No. 1 Study, it was necessary to keep dark the real identity of Mr. Cholmondeley.

But there were difficulties ahead. The Dramatic Society were all ready for the great dress rehearsal, and they had to be put off. Tea was going on, when the door opened and Bolsover major looked in, as General Snortz.

"We're all ready!" said Bolsover. He looked round the study. "Hallo, where's Mr. Cholmondeley? I thought he was having tea here!"

"Ahem! He was going to," said Wharton.

"He's not gone?"

"Yes."

"Gone!" exclaimed Bolsover.

"Ye-e-es!"

"He has departfully taken his esteemed French leave, Bolsover!"

"But—but what about the rehearsal?" exclaimed Bolsover major. "Isn't it coming off?"

"It's off already," said Bob ruefully.

"Look here, what does this mean?" demanded Bolsover major, in his bullying manner. "Have you silly asses made a muck of it?"

"The fact is, it's chucked," said Harry Wharton. "Mr. Cholmondeley has gone. We sha'n't see anything more of him. We—we weren't satisfied with him!"

"You've sent him away?" howled Bolsover.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Harry Wharton & Co. were not inclined to tell Bolsover major why. If one were told, all would have to be told, and in a quarter of an hour the whole school would be howling over the way No. 1 Study had been spoofed. Naturally, the Famous Five did not feel inclined to hold themselves up to ridicule.

"It wasn't satisfactory," said Wharton. "It can't be helped. We shall play the drama all the same in the vac, for the benefit of the Belgian Fund."

"But what about the fifty guineas?"

"Ahem! The—the fact is, we found out that the fifty guineas wouldn't be paid at all. No doubt about that."

"Well, that alters the case," said Bolsover. "I suspected all along that it was a swindle of some sort. I told you fellows so!"

"I don't remember your telling us so—but it's the case. There wouldn't have been any fifty guineas."

"That's all very well," said Bolsover. "But I think it's jolly high-handed of you chaps to break off negotiations without consulting us!"

"Ahem!"

"I think it's like your blessed cheek, if you want to know."

"We don't particularly want to know," murmured Bob Cherry.

"Well, I think all the fellows will agree with me, too!" exclaimed Bolsover. "My idea is that you've taken too much on yourselves, and you jolly well ought to be ragged."

"You—you see—it couldn't be helped——"

"Rot!"

"Dash it all, we're the managing committee, and entitled to make arrangements," said Wharton testily.

"Well, we'll see what the fellows say."

Slam! Bolsover banged the door and stamped away.

The Caterpillar whistled softly.

"Looks to me as if you fellows are goin' to have trouble," he remarked.

"Can't be helped!"

Trouble certainly was at hand. Bolsover was raging with indignation, and the Dramatic Society, when they heard his indignant tale, raged, too. There was a trampling in the passage, and a swarm of British Tommies, ferocious Prussians, and Belgians came into No. 1 Study.

The numerous members of the Remove Dramatic Society were all in full war-paint, ready for the rehearsal, and they were all angry and disappointed.

"Now, then, what's this Bolsover tells us?" demanded Wibley warmly.

"Better ask Bolsover."

"Oh, don't be funny! You've sent Cholmondeley away!" roared Ogilvy.

"Yes."

"I say, you fellows, scrag 'em!" yelled Billy Bunter. "I know now why they wouldn't let me come to tea. I'd have stopped 'em."

"You've broken off negotiations?" demanded Peter Todd.

"Yes."

"And why?"

"We weren't satisfied with Cholmondeley. His bona-fides were no good. There wouldn't have been any fee."

"Well, if that's so, it's all right," said Todd. "But we've taken an awful lot of trouble, and we'd rather have been told, so that we could talk to Cholmondeley ourselves."

"I should jolly well say so!" exclaimed Tom Brown.

"Awful cheek, begorra!" exclaimed Micky Desmond. "Rag the spalpeens!"

"Look here," said Wharton, "we're the managing committee——"

"And a precious way you've managed it!" howled Bolsover major. "Here we've been slogging away for a fortnight, and what is there to show for it? If Cholmondeley was a swindler, you've let yourselves be taken in, and given us all this trouble for nothing."

"Rag 'em!"

"Bump 'em for their cheek!"

"Bump 'em for being taken in!"

"Rag the blessed study!"

"By gad!" murmured the Caterpillar. "This looks interestin'!"

Harry Wharton & Co. looked at one another helplessly. It was useless to explain. The amateur actors would have been still more furious if they had known that it was Ponsonby of Highcliffe who had taken in the managing committee. Certainly it was up to the managing committee to manage a little better than that.

And there was no time to talk.

From words the indignant Removites proceeded to actions. Their disappointment had to be wreaked on somebody or something. It was the fact that the play was "off," after all their great preparations, that exasperated them. And their wrath was visited on the Famous Five, and it would not have been averted by telling them all the facts of the case. In any case, they held the managing committee responsible, as was only just, in a way.

"Look here, you can clear off!" said Bob Cherry. "We're sorry it was a frost, but it can't be helped."

"The sorrowfulness is terrific!"

"We'll make you sorrier!" roared Bolsover major. "Rag 'em!"

"We—we had to chuck the arrangements, you see. It couldn't be helped——"

"Then you shouldn't have started the arrangements."

"Well, you see, we were rather taken in——"

"And you're the managing committee, and you were rather

taken in. We always rag managing committees who are rather taken in!" snorted Bulstrode.

"Hear, hear! Rag 'em!"

"I say, we've got visitors here, you know——"

"Blow your visitors!"

"Bless your visitors!"

"Your blessed visitors can see how we handle silly idiots who make silly arrangements, and give us no end of trouble for nothing!" roared Bolsover. "Come on!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Line up!"

Crash!

Bolsover major led a frontal attack. The tea-table went over with a terrific crash, and the crockery was scattered far and wide.

The next moment the scene in No. 1 Study could only be described as terrific.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.
Something Like a Ragging!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. lined up for defence.

Courtenay and the Caterpillar lined up with them. They were seven good fighting-men, but the exasperated swarm of juniors were almost numberless.

The study was crammed, and there was little room for fighting.

The combatants simply tumbled over one another.

A stranger looking in upon the scene, and beholding that wild crowd of Tommies, Prussians, and Belgians engaged in deadly strife, might have supposed that he was looking upon one of the battlefields of Belgium.

The Famous Five and their two chums put up a first-class fight. But they were simply overwhelmed.

Fighting valorously, they went down before swarming numbers.

They were strewn on the floor, and exasperated assailants were strewn over them, and No. 1 Study echoed with the sounds of woe.

They were bumped, and they were ragged, and their "clobber" was soon in a state which made it unlikely that it would ever figure upon the histrionic boards again.

Then the study was simply wrecked.

When at last the raggers, somewhat satisfied, departed, the celebrated apartment looked as if it had been visited by several severe cyclones.

Seven hapless juniors sat up.

They blinked at one another dazedly.

There was a chorus of heavy groans.

Harry Wharton put his handkerchief to his streaming nose, and dabbed, and dabbed, and dabbed, and blinked round the study at the havoc that had been wrought. The table was over, the crockery smashed, the bookcase on its side, the books in the fender, the ashes from the gate scattered over the room, the carpet jerked up, the clock smashed—never had the study presented so terrific an aspect.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Wharton.

"Ow-wow-wow!"

"Groo-hoooh!"

"By gad!" murmured the Caterpillar. "I call this excitin'. This is what I call really excitin', by gad!"

"Oh, my eye!" murmured Courtenay. "Oh, crumbs!"

"The crumbfulness is terrific. I am sufferfully languishing under great anguish. The punchfulness is excessively painful."

"He, he, he!"

Billy Bunter binked in at the doorway, through his big glasses, and chuckled. The Owl of the Remove apparently found something amusing in the scene of havoc.

The juniors blinked at him. They were too utterly "done in" even to kick Bunter out.

The fat Removite chuckled spasmodically.

"He, he, he! You do look a sight! I'm jolly glad! He, he, he!"

"Oh, dear!" moaned Bob Cherry.

"He, he, he! Serve you jolly well right! You wouldn't let me come to tea, you rotters! I'd have managed it all right if you'd left it to me. You've got what you deserved. He, he, he! You look a precious set of scarecrows! He, he, he!"

Bob Cherry groped weakly for a cushion, and hurled it at Bunter. He had the satisfaction of seeing the Owl of the Remove swept out of the doorway, and hearing a bump in the passage. The "He, he, he!" was heard no more.

The juniors staggered to their feet. They looked at one another with doleful grins.

"I—I say, I'm sorry for this, you chaps," said Wharton. "Tain't exactly the way visitors should be entertained, I know. They—they were rather wild, you know."

"Oh, don't mench," groaned the Caterpillar; "I like an excitin' time myself. I found this awf'ly excitin'."

"It's all right," said Courtenay. "You chaps have been ragged at Highcliffe, and it's only fair we should stand by you. I'm sorry that a fellow of our Form was the cause of it."

"You needn't—ahem!—you needn't mention this to Ponsonby," murmured Bob Cherry.

"Not a giddy syllable!"

"Better come up to the dorm, and put yourselves to rights a bit," groaned Wharton. "Oh, my hat! What an afternoon this has been!"

The disconsolate Co. proceeded to the Remove dormitory. The Famous Five changed their things; the theatrical costumes they discarded were almost in tatters. Courtenay and the Caterpillar were provided with new collars and ties, and brushed down, and made as tidy as possible.

Tea in No. 1 Study had come to a sudden end, and the study was in no state for entertaining guests. As soon as they were a little more presentable, the chums of the Remove and their visitors quitted the School House, and started for the gates. There was a howl from some of the members of the Dramatic Society who spotted them, but fortunately there was no more ragging. The Co. were glad enough to get out of gates, to give the Remove time to cool down.

They walked slowly down to Courtfield, with an ache in every bone. Courtenay and the Caterpillar were taking it quite good-humouredly. The Co. were glad to remember that they had been ragged by Ponsonby & Co. on the occasion of a visit to Courtenay at Highcliffe; that made matters a little more even. But certainly it was a most deplorable state of affairs.

They had tea at the bun-shop in Courtfield. It was a safer quarter than No. 1 Study in the Remove at Greyfriars till the Dramatic Society had calmed down.

Over tea, they recovered their spirits a little.

"Don't worry about us," said the Caterpillar, when the Removites once more expressed their regret for that unexpected and violent ending of a friendly visit. "I tell you it was an excitin' time, and we enjoyed it. Besides, it was all Pon's fault—Pon's fault from start to finish."

"It's all serene," said Courtenay, laughing. "Don't worry! I'm only sorry that it was a Highcliffe chap caused you all this blessed trouble."

The juniors parted at last on the best of terms, after arranging to meet in the vacation. Harry Wharton & Co. took their way homeward to Greyfriars in the dusk.

"After all, we needn't grumble," Bob Cherry remarked. Bob looked on the best side of things as a matter of habit. "We've had a giddy time; but it's better than being taken in. I'd rather be ragged by the Remove than spoofed by Ponsonby. Suppose we had turned up at some giddy lordship's country house when he wasn't expecting us——"

"We're well out of that," said Wharton; "and it would be only decent to give Coker the tip."

"Oh, rather!"

The juniors reached the school, and passed in at the gates just before Gosling locked them. They crossed the Close in the dusk. As they passed under the elms there was a sudden rush of feet in the gloom.

"Collar 'em!"

It was the voice of Coker of the Fifth.

Before the Famous Five could lift a finger they were rushed over. In the grip of many hands they were swept off their feet and rushed away.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.
Coker Asks For It!

HORACE COKER chuckled gleefully.

The great Coker had laid that ambush, and it had succeeded perfectly.

The Famous Five, for once caught napping, had been swept away without a blow in self-defence—rushed off, helpless prisoners, by Coker & Co.

Before they quite knew what was happening they were dumped down in the wood-shed, with a crowd round them, and Coker had closed the door.

Potter lighted a bike-lantern, and in its rays the captured Removites blinked at their captors.

The wood-shed was swarming with them. There were Coker and Potter, Greene and Fitzgerald, and Tomlinson and Smith major, and several more of the Fifth. There was Hobson of the Shell, and several more Shell fellows. There were Temple, Dabney & Co. of the Fourth. In fact, it was the whole Fifth-Form Stage Club, with their "supers" from the Lower Forms—every fellow who had a part, great or small, in the great drama "Red Ruin" had taken a hand in that sudden attack upon the leaders of the Remove Dramatic Society.

Harry Wharton & Co. sat on the floor of the wood-shed and blinked.

They did not understand.

A dozen fellows were holding them, and a dozen more stood round, and so resistance was out of the question.

They could only wait to see what was on. If it was a ragging, they were powerless. They had had enough ragging for one afternoon, but it couldn't be helped.

"Got 'em!" said Potter.

"Safe as houses!" chuckled Greene.

"And now we're going to talk to 'em!" said Horace Coker.

"Oh, rather!" chimed in Dabney of the Fourth.

"Talk to 'em like Dutch uncles!" said Hobson of the Shell. "Got the birch, Coker?"

"You bet!"

The Famous Five stared as Coker produced the birch, and made it whistle through the air. It was one of the doctor's birches, which was used on the painful occasions when Dr. Locke had to administer corporal punishment. Coker had evidently succeeded in abstracting it, for the benefit of his junior rivals.

"Why, you cheeky idiot!" exclaimed Squiff indignantly. Sampson Quincy Iffley Field was red with wrath. "If you think you're going to use that on us, Coker——"

"You thumping chump!" roared Wharton. "Why, we—we'll——"

Words failed the indignant captain of the Remove at the bare idea of being birched by Coker.

Coker grinned.

"It depends entirely on yourselves," he explained.

"Oh, rather!" chuckled Dabney.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're going to talk to you—talk business," went on Coker. "We're going to explain things to you. We're going to make you see sense. But as you're such cheeky young cads I've brought the birch along, in case you don't see reason. See?"

"You silly ass——"

"Still as cheeky as ever!" smiled Coker. "Perhaps I'd better give 'em a flick or two, as a warning what to expect. Turn 'em over!"

"Yes, may as well make a good beginning," agreed Hobson. "Then they'll listen to reason."

The Famous Five struggled desperately. But their struggles were of no avail. They were whirled over, face downward, and Coker started with the birch.

Swish, swish, swish, swish, swish!

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker gave them one each, but the strokes were well laid on. The Removites simply squirmed.

"Let 'em sit up!" said Coker.

The Famous Five sat up. They were crimson with rage.

"Oh, you rotter!" gasped Wharton. "I—I—I'll——"

"Shut up!" said Coker, flourishing the birch. "You listen to me! I'm doing the talking. Now, Mr. Cholmondeley has seen our rehearsal, and he's engaged us to play for his lordship's party."

If the Removites had felt like grinning they would have grinned at that moment. But they did not feel like grinning.

"Mr. Cholmondeley," went on Coker, "said something about engaging you kids, too Now, as reasonable chaps, you can see that it's impossible. The Fifth-Form Stage Club has its dignity to consider. We can't be competed with by fags. We can't have a gang of fags playing the giddy ox at the same place where we're giving dramatic representations. You ought to be able to see that for yourselves. I tried to explain it the other day, but you——"

"We jolly well ragged you!" said Bob Cherry. "Of all the silly burblers that ever burbled, you capture the cake, Coker."

The birch flourished again.

"I want to do the sensible thing," said Coker. "I want you to see it! You ought to have sense enough to see it. But if you haven't, that's your look out. Now, I tell you plainly that we utterly refuse to have fags playing the silly goat at the place where we do our acting. We want you to chuck up the idea."

The Famous Five grinned this time.

Coker, of course, was still utterly in the dark as to the real identity of Mr. Cholmondeley, and did not know that the representation of "The Call of the Empire" was completely "off."

Coker, as usual, was on the wrong track. The Famous Five exchanged glances. The thought came to them all at once to leave Coker on the wrong track.

They had intended loyally to give Coker the tip. But Coker's high-handed methods had the effect of changing their intention. Coker had birched them. Coker had to pay for it!

"Mum's the word!" said Harry Wharton quickly.

His chums understood at once.

"The mumfulness is terrific!" murmured Inky.

"Eh—what's that?" demanded Coker.

"Oh, go on, dear boy!" said Nugent. "You're getting interesting. Let's hear the rest. We've got nothing to say."

"In the first place," said Coker, "You've got to understand that we require your word, honour bright, not to play the giddy ox—I mean, not to accept any engagement from Mr. Cholmondeley."

"Go hon!"

"Otherwise you will be birched!"

"Eh?"

"That's what I've got the birch for," said Coker determinedly. "If you can't do the sensible thing I'm going to birch you!"

"My hat!"

"It's up to me, as a senior, to teach you cheeky fags manners," explained Coker. "The prefects let you run wild. I'm taking you in hand now."

"You silly fathead!"

"Now, answer up! Did Mr. Cholmondeley see your rehearsal? I didn't see anything of it in the Rag. Has it been put off?"

"Ahem! It's certainly put off," said Wharton.

"Then you're not engaged?"

"Hardly. I'm not old enough to be engaged."

"Don't be a funny young idiot!" roared Coker. "I mean, you're not engaged to play for X. Y. Z.'s country house-party?"

"No!"

"That's all right, so far. Now, I want you to undertake to refuse any engagement if Mr. Cholmondeley is ass enough to offer it to you, and to decline to give him a rehearsal if he should be duffer enough to want to see one."

"That's it!" said Potter.

"And if you don't jolly well agree, you're going to be jolly well flogged!" chuckled Temple of the Fourth.

"We've booked that engagement, and we're not going to have any cheeky fags playing the ox, and making us look ridiculous," said Coker. "You catch on?"

The Famous Five grinned.

If "Mr. Cholmondeley" had not been shown up, and if the Remove Dramatic Society had been engaged by him, still believing him to be a genuine theatrical agent, Harry Wharton & Co. were have cheerfully defied Coker to do his worst. A dozen birches would not have made them give in.

But the case was altered now. As Mr. Cholmondeley had turned out to be Ponsonby of Highcliffe, and as the whole thing was spoof, they were quite willing to leave it to Coker.

As a reward for his high-handed methods, their idea was to leave Horace Coker in the dark and let him rip.

The good-natured tip they had intended to give him would not be uttered now. When the Fifth Form Stage Club turned up at some country house where nobody expected them, and found that they had been spoofed, they could have the satisfaction of knowing that they had Coker to thank for it—and themselves.

"Think it out!" said Coker loftily. "I don't mind giving you a few minutes to think it over. But I mean business. I want your definite promise to refuse any engagement from Mr. Cholmondeley. Although you're rotten cheeky fags, I know you won't break your word. Now, then!"

"Suppose we refuse?" asked Wharton meekly.

"Then I'm going to birch you," said Coker.

"And suppose we still refuse?"

"I shall keep on birching you until you leave off refusing."

"Isn't that a little bit high-handed?"

"I don't believe in kid-glove methods with cheeky fags," said Coker. "I mean business, and I'll jolly well let you know it! Now, what are you going to do?"

"You!"

"Eh?"

"We're going to do you," explained Wharton.

"I don't want any rot!" roared Coker, flourishing the birch. "Will you give me your word to refuse any engagement from Mr. Cholmondeley, or will you be flogged?"

"We'll give you our word,"

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright," chorussed the Famous Five.

Coker stared at them. He was determined to have his way. But this sudden and complete surrender surprised him. It wasn't like the Famous Five of the Remove to give in like that without a struggle.

"No spoof, you know?" said Potter suspiciously.

"We've given you our word," said Wharton. "We under-

take not to accept any engagement that Mr. Cholmondeley may offer us, and not to give him a rehearsal. We promise!"

"And not to have any more communication whatever with X. Y. Z.?" said Coker.

"Agreed!"

"Honour bright!" said Bob Cherry solemnly.

"Well," said Coker, after a pause, "that's quite satisfactory."

"Yes, that's all right," said Hobson. "They won't break a promise. They're cheeky young cads, but they wouldn't do that."

The Fifth Form Stage Club all nodded assent. The Famous Five were well known to be the soul of honour; their word was their bond. If they promised to have nothing more to do with X. Y. Z. or Mr. Cholmondeley, they could be relied upon to have nothing more to do with X. Y. Z. or Mr. Cholmondeley. That they might have secret reason, totally unconnected with Coker and his birch, for giving that promise, naturally did not occur to Coker.

"Well, I'll say that you've shown sense—more sense than I expected of you," said Coker. "I thought I should have to lick you. You've done the sensible thing. This shows that it's the best system to have a firm hand with fags. I always said so."

"A Daniel come to judgment!" said Squiff.

"Can we go now, please?" asked Bob Cherry meekly.

"Let 'em go," said Coker. "They've done the sensible thing. If the prefects knew how to handle fags as well as I do, it would be all the better for Greyfriars. A firm hand is all that's required; that's all—a firm hand."

Harry Wharton & Co. were accordingly released, and they quitted the wood-shed, leaving Coker & Co. in a state of supreme satisfaction. Some of the Fifth-Form Stage Club had had their doubts about the efficacy of Coker's high-handed methods. But they had to admit now that Coker was right. Indeed, Coker was getting a very unusual amount of "kudos" in these days. Coker was proving himself right all along the line in every way. The Fifth-Formers began to feel that they hadn't done Coker justice up to now.

Harry Wharton & Co. scuttled away, restraining, with great efforts, any sign of merriment till they were safe in Study No. 1. They did not want to give Coker a chance of suspecting their real reasons for yielding to his threats.

Study No. 1 was in a state of wreck and ruin, but the Famous Five looked on the wreck with cheerful eyes. They found consolation in the thought of what was going to happen to the egregious Coker.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob Cherry, as he slammed the study door and let himself go at last. "Oh, my word! Poor old Coker!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The awful nerve! A birch for us!" said Wharton. "The cheek of it! And they think we've given in because we didn't fancy the birch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And now we'll let 'em rip!"

The Removites yelled.

"They can go on rehearsing, and on Easter Monday they can turn up in full force at the country-house, wherever it is."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And surprise his lordship, whoever he is."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Cherry executed a wild war-dance amid the wreck of the study. The Co. gasped with merriment. Coker had asked for it, and Coker was going to get it!

If Horace Coker could have seen the Famous Five just then, perhaps he would not have been so satisfied. But he could not see them, and he was eminently satisfied. His eminent satisfaction was to last until the Fifth Form Stage Club presented themselves at Eastwood House to perform "Red Ruin."

THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER.
Off For the Holidays!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! D'Arcy, by Jove!"

Zip, zip! Whirr!

A big motor-car stopped outside the School House at Greyfriars, and an extremely elegant youth stepped out. A handsome youth was he, elegant from the crown of his shining hat to the tips of his lovely boots. An eyeglass gleamed in his eye, and a gold-headed cane gleamed under his arm.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, an old acquaintance of the Famous Five. Harry Wharton & Co. came out to meet him. It was breaking-up day at Greyfriars, and the chums of the Remove had packed up for the vacation. But although they were going to spend the first part of the vacation with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy at Eastwood House, they had not expected to see the swell of St. Jim's that morning.

"Heah we are again, deah boys!" said the elegant Fourth-Former, as he shook hands all round with the Famous Five. "How do you do—what? Wathah surpwised to see me this mornin', old scouts—what?"

"The surprisefulness is terrific!"

"Yaas; I wathah thought I should astonish you," grinned Arthur Augustus. "You see, we bweak up a day earlier at St. Jim's. Tom Mewwy and Blake and the west are at my place now, you know. And the ideah flashed into my bwain of wushin' ovah heah in the patah's cah and wunnin' you home—see? Bettah than wottin' about over a wotten railway—what? So I made Wobinson beat the speed limit all the way, and heah I am—what?"

"Bravo!"

"Tell somebody to put your baggage and things in the cah," said Arthur Augustus. "Lots of woom. But don't huwwy for me. Take your time."

"We were going to catch the mid-day train," said Harry Wharton, with a smile; "but we'd rather catch the morning car. This is simply a ripping idea of yours!"

"Yaas, wathah," said the swell of St. Jim's, with considerable satisfaction. "It flashed into my bwain, you know. I told Tom Mewwy at once, and he said it was a wippin' idea. As a wule, Tom Mewwy lacks the intelligence to see how wippin' my ideahs are. By the way, if you fellows would like to bwing any pals along, there's lots of woom in the car. I believe you wathah play cwicket heah?"

"We do—rather!" agreed Bob Cherry.

"Just a little bit!" said Squiff.

"We're goin' to make up two elevens, and have some cwicket," Arthur Augustus explained, "so if you've got some cwicketin' pals not othahwise engaged, make them come along with you."

"By Jove, I wish Courtenay could come!" said Wharton. "But he's going home with the Caterpillar. Two ripping chaps, D'Arcy. You'll see them when you come to my place later."

"Let me see them now, deah boy, and we'll make them chuck their othah engagements and come along. That is wathah a bwilliant ideah."

"They're at Highcliffe," said Wharton. Wharton would have given a good deal to have Courtenay along with him at Eastwood House, and D'Arcy's hospitality was unbounded. He had carte blanche from his noble pater. Both Courtenay and the Caterpillar were to visit Wharton at his home after his stay with D'Arcy. "I wonder what De Courcy would say? You don't know him by any chance, D'Arcy?"

"De Courcy!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have met Sir Wobert de Courcy. He is a bwothah officah of my eldah bwothah, Lord Conway, out in Fwance, now, whoppin' the Pwussians."

"That's the Caterpillar's elder brother," said Nugent.

"Then D'Arcy as good as knows him," said Wharton, laughing.

"Yaas, wathah!" chirped Arthur Augustus. "Let's wope him in."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fellows get into the cah, and we'll call for them, and collah them," said Arthur Augustus. "Can they play cwicket?"

"Well, Courtenay can. De Courcy is rather a slacker, but a first-rate chap."

"We'll make him play, then. Buck him up, you know. If they're fwiends of yours, deah boys, they're fwiends of mine. We'll wope 'em in."

Harry Wharton & Co. assented at once. Arthur Augustus was evidently much taken with the idea of "wopin'" in Courtenay and the Caterpillar.

The Famous Five took their seats in the tremendous car, and their friends came round in a crowd to bid them farewell. In great spirits they started off on their journey.

As the car glided down the drive a fat figure came bolting out of the School House.

Billy Bunter had just heard of the arrival of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Unfortunately, he had heard of it a little too late.

"Hold on!" roared Bunter. "Stop the car, Gussy! I'm here!"

The car whizzed on.

Whether or not Arthur Augustus D'Arcy heard that frantic shout from William George Bunter, the Famous Five could not say. His face showed no sign of it. Perhaps he was afflicted with a sudden deafness.

"I say you fellows, stop! Here I am, Gussy, old pal!"

"Pway don't waste time, Wobinson," said D'Arcy to the chauffeur.

"Yessir!"

The car whizzed down to the gates.

After it, down the drive, came William George Bunter

at top speed, his spectacles sliding down his fat little nose, his cap flying off in the breeze, and his fat hands waving wildly.

"I say, you fellows—— Oh, dear, stop, you beasts! Oh, crumbs!"

The car had to slack down to get out of the gates.

Billy Bunter put on a spurt.

For a moment he thought he would overtake the car. But once in the road it gathered speed again, and whirled off towards Highcliffe.

Billy Bunter pelted after it desperately.

"I say, you fellows! I say, Gussy, old pal! Here I am—Bunter, you know! Yah! Beasts!" The Owl of the Remove halted at last, and shook a fat fist after the car. "Yah, you rotters! I wouldn't come now if you asked me! Beasts!"

And Billy Bunter rolled back to Greyfriars to seek some more amenable victim upon whom to plant himself for the vacation.

"Was that somebody wunnin' aftah the cah just now?" asked Arthur Augustus.

The Famous Five grinned.

"I think I saw something like a walrus rolling along," said Bob Cherry. "No need to stop. It's all right."

"By the way, your fwiend Bull isn't with you this vac?"

"He's away," said Wharton. "He's coming back to Greyfriars, but he isn't back yet. Johnny Bull will be with us again next term. There's Highcliffe!"

The car rolled up to Highcliffe, and turned in at the gates. Highcliffe was breaking up, too. Ponsonby & Co. were starting in a big car, a crowd of them. They stared at the Greyfriars fellows as they rolled off. Harry Wharton caught sight of Courtenay and the Caterpillar in the quad. The car stopped, and Wharton and Arthur Augustus jumped down. The two Highcliffe juniors came up at once.

"Called in to say good-bye—what?" said the Caterpillar.

"I've got a friend to introduce," said Harry; and he presented Arthur Augustus. "D'Arcy knows your brother, De Courcy."

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar.

"Yaas, wathah, if your bwothah is Sir Wobert de Courcy, who is with the Loamshire Tewwitowials in Fwance."

"That's the chap," said the Caterpillar.

"He is a gweat chum of my eldah bwothah, Lord Conway," explained Arthur Augustus. "They are bwothah officahs."

"I've met Lord Conway," said the Caterpillar. "He came down to our place with Bob—we call Sir Robert Bob in the family circle."

"Bai Jove! Then I know your bwothah, and you know mine," said Arthur Augustus. "We can wegard ourselves as acquaintances, then."

"By gad, you're very good!" said the Caterpillar.

"I twust you will excuse me pwesumin' on such a short acquaintance," went on Arthur Augustus, in his most stately manner. "If you two fellows could awwange it, and if you like the ideah, I should be pleased and honahed if you would come to my place along with my Gweyfwiahs fwiends, and stay a week or two. You will meet some wathah decent chaps."

The Caterpillar gave Arthur Augustus a rather comical look. Courtenay smiled. He liked Arthur Augustus at once. That was always the effect Arthur Augustus had.

"I am awah that this is wathah sudden," said Arthur Augustus, "and I should be vewy fah fwom wishin' to intahfeah with any awwangements you would not care to put off. But as I undahstand you are spendin' part of the vac with my fwiend Wharton, pewwaps you would like to begin it togethah with me? It would be a gweat pleasuah to me."

"It's for you to say, Caterpillar," said Courtenay.

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "I should like it immensely—immensely!"

"Heah, heah! We'll give you some good cwicket."

"Eh?"

"Oh, my hat! Not compulsory, I hope," said the Caterpillar, in alarm.

"Not at all, deah boy!"

"Good! I'll watch you. I'm splendid at watchin' cricket. It's a go."

When the car quitted Highcliffe it was piled higher with baggage, and there were two additions to the passengers—Courtenay and the Caterpillar.

It was a merry party that started on the long run to Eastwood House in Hampshire. The whole party were glad to be together. They stopped for the Caterpillar to send a wire home, and then the long run was uninterrupted. The juniors were in great spirits; even the Caterpillar came out of his shell, under the influence of Arthur Augustus's kindly good-humour.

And when they arrived at Eastwood House they found the St. Jim's fellows there to give them a hearty greeting—Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, and Blake and Herries and Digby and Talbot—a merry crowd.

It was a merry meeting.

When the Greyfriars party, after a happy day, retired to their rooms that evening, Bob Cherry had a sudden explosive attack of merriment.

"Thinking of Coker!" he explained to Harry Wharton, his room mate. "You remember we had a suspish that this was the place Mr. X. Y. Z. was going to send us to for those amateur theatricals. If this is the place, Pon's little joke would have been bowled out after all. He never counted on us coming to D'Arcy's place for the vac; he never knew of that. But Coker——"

Bob exploded again.

"Coker's bound for somewhere with a theatrical party. If this is the place Mr. Cholmondeley arranged with Coker, it's here that Coker will come."

Wharton chuckled.

"This may not be the place," he said. "But if it is——"

"Ha, ha, ha! I shall be pleased to see Coker, especially to watch his face! Ha, ha, ha!"

THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER.
Coker Arrives!

HORACE COKER looked out of the car window in the dusk.

"That's the place!" he said.

It was Easter Monday.

The Coker Company were en route.

Coker, who was always lavish, was doing the thing in style. He had collected up his Stage Club, and he was bringing them to the scene of action in a couple of big cars. On top of the cars were the "props," very considerable in extent, which the Fifth-Form Stage Club required for the representation of "Red Ruin."

Mr. Cholmondeley had offered to pay the railway fares. But Horace Coker believed in doing things in style. Besides, the members of the company had to come from different directions. So Coker had arranged a meeting-place at a town near Easthorpe, and ordered the cars to be ready there. Coker was not the fellow to spoil a ship for a ha'porth of tar. He intended to arrive at Eastwood House in style.

Besides, there was the fifty guineas to be bagged, and more and more fees to be bagged afterwards if Lord Eastwood liked the performance of "Red Ruin." And how could he fail to like it? Coker asked himself that question, and found no answer. His lordship must be supposed to be a man of some taste. It was assured, therefore, that he would be enraptured with "Red Ruin."

That was how Coker looked at it.

And for once the Stage Club had to admit that Coker might be right. In spite of criticism and opposition, Coker had carried the matter through to this happy result. He had written the play; the club had grinned at it, but the theatrical agent had approved, and they were silenced. He had undertaken to make the cheeky fags of the Remove sheer off. The club had doubted, but Coker had done it. Coker had been successful all along the line.

And now here was the collected Stage Club, fifteen fellows in all, bearing down on Eastwood House in great style.

They would, like Cæsar of old, come, and see, and conquer. Veni, vidi, vici, should be the motto of Horace Coker after this.

"Mind, you fellows have got to back up, and put your beef into it," said Horace Coker impressively, as the leading car glided through the open gateway. "You back me up, and it will be a howling success. If there's one thing I can do it's acting."

"Acting the giddy ox!" murmured Potter.

"What did you say, George Potter?"

"I said we'd back you up no end, old chap," said Potter blandly. "Not that we've got much to do in the play."

"Sure Coker does half of it on his own," said Fitzgerald.

"More than half," remarked Greene.

Coker sniffed.

"I arranged that specially when I wrote the play," he said. "With a thoroughly good actor appearing in every scene it's bound to go well; that was my idea."

"Oh!"

"All you fellows have to do is to play up to me," said Coker. "Do that, and leave the rest to me."

"Oh, rather!" murmured Dabney of the Fourth. "O-o-oh, rather!"

"By Jove, looks like a merry meeting!" said Coker, looking out again as the cars glided up to the house.

The great facade of Eastwood House was brilliant with lights.

"I say, it seems to me that we shall arrive about dinner-time," remarked Hobson of the Shell. "Rather an awkward moment for a theatrical company to drop in."

"I thought of that," said Coker. "But Cholmondeley said plainly at seven o'clock. He said it very particularly."

"That's right enough," remarked Temple of the Fourth. "It struck me at the time. But I suppose he fixed it with Lord Eastwood."

"Of course he did," said Coker. "I should have suggested a little earlier, or a little later. But they know their own business best. Here we are!"

The cars stopped at the great entrance, and Coker & Co. alighted. The big doors stood open. Through a lighted window the new arrivals could see into the big dining-room, and they could see a large number of guests at dinner.

"By gum, there's that kid Wharton there!" murmured Temple.

"They're here for the vacation, I believe, some of them," said Coker. "I think I heard of it. Only some of them—not the silly Dramatic Society. I put the stopper on that."

"There's that Highcliffe kid, too—Courtenay!"

"I—I say, I wish we hadn't come at dinner-time," murmured Hobson.

"Rot!" said Coker. "Come on!"

Horace Coker led the way into the old hall, followed by the Stage Club.

A stately figure came to meet them. It was Chillingham, the imposing butler of Eastwood House. Chillingham's chief object in life was never to show any emotion of any kind; but he could not help looking slightly surprised at the sight of Coker & Co.

"Lord Eastwood is at home, I suppose?" said Coker.

"His lordship is dining," said Chillingham.

"I suppose we're expected?"

"His lordship has not acquainted me. I am his lordship's butler."

"I'm Coker."

"Coker?"

"Yes, Coker."

"Indeed!"

"Coker! Don't you understand? Coker!"

Apparently Chillingham did not understand.

"Very well, Master Coker, his lordship has not acquainted me with the fact that further guests were expected."

"We're not guests exactly," said Coker. "We're the theatrical company."

"The—the what?"

"The Fifth-Form Stage Club of Greyfriars," explained Coker, astonished himself by the butler's astonishment.

"Oh!" said Chillingham, thinking he understood at last. "Greyfriars! You are friends of Master Wharton?"

Coker snorted.

"Certainly not! We have nothing whatever to do with those fags. We've come here to act."

"To—to act!" stammered Mr. Chillingham. His professional impassiveness was very nearly overcome.

"Yes, rather! Hasn't Lord Eastwood told you?"

"Nunno!"

"I suppose the arrangements are made for the performance this evening?" demanded Coker warmly.

"N-n-not that I am aware of. His lordship has said nothing about a theatrical performance this evening."

"My hat! Is Mr. Cholmondeley here?"

"Mr. Cholmondeley! There is no guest of that name at present at Eastwood House."

"His lordship's theatrical agent, I mean."

Chillingham almost fell down.

"His lordship's what?"

"Theatrical agent; the man he employed to see us at Greyfriars—see the rehearsal, you know. I suppose you know about Lord Eastwood's advertising as 'X. Y. Z.'?"

Mr. Chillingham drew himself up with stately dignity.

"I presume that this is a joke, Master—er—Croker——"

"Coker."

"Master Coker, then. His lordship does not approve of jokes. Neither do I. You had better retire."

"But we've come here to act!" roared the puzzled Coker. "Call Lord Eastwood."

"It is impossible to disturb his lordship at dinner."

"There's something wrong," murmured Potter. "Coker's put his hoof into it, somehow. We might have known he would."

Mr. Chillingham turned away; his presence was required in the dining-room. But Coker of the Fifth was not to be put off like that. Coker was getting angry. It looked to him as if Lord Eastwood, after arranging through his agent for the Fifth-Form Stage Club to come to Eastwood House, had forgotten all about the matter. If that was so, Horace Coker meant to make it clear that the Fifth-Form Stage Club of Greyfriars could not be treated in that offhand manner.

So Horace Coker laid a heavy hand on the stately Chillingham's shoulder and spun him round. The butler gasped.

"Look here," said Coker, "you'll announce us to Lord Eastwood at once! See?"

"Impossible! His lordship is with his guests at dinner."

"Blow his guests, and hang his dinner!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"Tell Lord Eastwood we're here, at once!"

"Impossible!"

"Then I'll tell him," said Coker.

He made a stride forward, and Chillingham jumped in the way.

"You cannot—you must not!"

"Get out of the way!" roared Coker. "Do you think I'm going to have my Stage Club jawed at by a dashed butler? I'm going to see Lord Eastwood. If he's not expecting us, after the arrangements he's made, he's jolly well got to explain! You can let me pass, or I'll pass over you, Fatty! Take your choice—sharp!"

Mr. Chillingham wildly debated in his mind whether he should call the footmen to hurl Coker & Co. forth upon their necks. There was evidently no other way to prevent the angry Coker from seeing Lord Eastwood. Coker's booming voice could be heard in the dining-room already, and must have caused some surprise there. Mr. Chillingham decided not to adopt so drastic a measure as chucking out—especially as fifteen sturdy fellows would probably have made hay of all his footmen in a tussle.

"I—I—I will speak a word to his lordship," stammered Chillingham. "Pray wait here."

"Buck up, then!" growled Coker.

Mr. Chillingham disappeared into the dining-room.

Lord Eastwood gave him a severe, inquiring glance. A booming voice had been heard, and although the guests affected to hear nothing, they could not help being surprised. Chillingham whispered hastily. Lord Eastwood, looking very much surprised, rose to his feet, and begged his guests to excuse him, and followed the agitated butler to the hall.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER.

Unexpected!

COKER was fuming.

The Stage Club were worried and depressed.

They could all see that something was wrong, though they could not guess what it was. Some of them took up strategic positions very near the door. Indeed, but for the determination of Coker himself, it is probable that the whole party would have retreated to the cars. But Coker wasn't the fellow to retreat. He had been engaged to come there, and he had come. If anything was amiss, Coker wanted an explanation—and Coker meant to have it.

A stately gentleman with white whiskers and a severe face bore down upon him. Coker guessed that this was his lordship.

"My butler tells me that you insist upon seeing me," said Lord Eastwood. "May I ask who you are, and what you desire here?"

"Well, I like that!" said Coker. "I take it you are Lord Eastwood?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, I'm Coker."

"You mean, your name is Coker?"

"Of course I do!"

"Very well. Your name is Coker. Now, will you kindly explain why you are here, as briefly as possible?"

Coker felt as if his head were turning round.

"I'm Coker!" he stammered. "Coker, you know—Horace Coker!"

"You have already said so. As I cannot remain away from my guests, I beg you to retire. If you have any business with me, you may call in the morning. Surely you are aware that this is a very awkward time to disturb me?"

"But you said we were to come at seven."

"Eh?"

"It was distinctly arranged for seven o'clock."

"I—I do not understand."

Lord Eastwood's severe face relaxed. Coker's excited looks showed him that this unknown person evidently had the impression that he was expected there. It was plain that there was a mistake somewhere.

"I don't understand, either!" gasped Coker. "It's a bit thick, if you ask me, to treat me like this, after asking me to come."

"You are under the impression that—that I requested you to come here, Master Woker——"

"Coker!"

"Master Coker—yes, quite so. But I have never seen you

before that I am aware of. You have apparently come to the wrong house."

"This is Eastwood House, isn't it?"

"Certainly."

"And you are Lord Eastwood?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then there's no mistake. I'm Coker. These fellows are the Fifth-Form Stage Club."

"But—but I have never heard of you——"

"Your agent arranged it. I suppose he told you all about it?"

"My—my agent!"

"Yes; Mr. Cholmondeley."

"Cholmondeley! My agent is named Jenkins!" said Lord Eastwood.

"I don't mean your agent on the estate—I mean the theatrical agent, Cholmondeley."

"The—the—the theatrical agent!"

"Yes; the man you engaged to see us rehear-e at Greyfriars."

Lord Eastwood almost fell down.

"For goodness' sake, let's get out!" groaned Potter. "There's a mistake somewhere. I knew Coker would make a muck of it somehow!"

"Let's get out, Coker," whispered Greene.

"I'm not getting out without an explanation!" roared Coker. "I'm not going to be treated like this, and my Stage Club's not going to be treated like this!"

"Either you are the victim of some absurd joke, or else you are attempting to make me the victim of one!" exclaimed Lord Eastwood sharply. "I have never heard of a theatrical agent named Cholmondeley!"

"What!"

"I have never heard of you, either, and I certainly made no arrangements for you to come here."

"M-my hat!"

"If any person named Cholmondeley has told you so, he was making a most impudent and unjustified use of my name!"

"Oh, dear!"

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Potter. "That puts the lid on! That man Cholmondeley must have been an impostor! Oh, dear!"

"Certainly he was an impostor, if he asked you here in my name!" said Lord Eastwood sharply. "I am willing to believe that you are the victims of some absurd practical joke. You had better retire. I cannot remain longer away from my guests!"

"Hold on!" shouted Coker. "We're jolly well going to have this out! If we've been japed, I'll scalp that villain—I'll slaughter him! Lord Eastwood, did you advertise in the 'Friardale Times' for a schoolboy dramatic company?"

"Certainly not!" said the astounded earl. "I should be hardly likely to do any such thing!"

"Under the name of X. Y. Z.?" said Coker.

"No, certainly not!"

"And—and you didn't send me typewritten letters?"

"Of course not!"

"And—and you didn't send that man Cholmondeley to engage us to give a performance of our play here this evening?" stammered Coker.

"I did nothing of the kind."

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Coker.

The utter dismay in his face touched his lordship's heart. He could see that the unfortunate Coker had been misled and mercilessly fooled by someone.

"You seem to have been the victim of a practical joke, my boy," he said, kindly enough. "I am sorry. Someone has used my name without my knowledge or permission!"

"I see it now," said Coker dejectedly. "I don't know why the villain should have done it, but he has. I—I see it now. I'm sorry I've disturbed you; I apologise. We'll get away at once. I hope you'll excuse us for troubling you like this; but, you see, we were engaged to come here by that villain Cholmondeley——"

"I excuse you, certainly," said Lord Eastwood. "It is a very cruel joke. I hope you have not had a long journey!"

"We've come from all quarters," said Coker. "We were rather scattered when Greyfriars broke up!"

His lordship started.

"You do not mean that you are Greyfriars boys?"

"Yes, we are."

"Dear me! There are some Greyfriars boys, friends of my son, staying with me now," said Lord Eastwood, unbending very considerably. "They are perhaps friends of yours?"

"Well, we know the young bounders," said Coker. "They're only fags. I—I'm sorry we've bothered you, sir. Come on, you fellows, the sooner we get out of this the better!"

"Stay!" said his lordship kindly. "If you are Greyfriars boys, I cannot let you go away like this. It is a very awkward position; but—but you said something about coming here to give a representation of something."

"Yes," said Coker dolefully. "Our war play, 'Red Ruin.' That villain Cholmondeley——"

"Exactly. You are a schoolboy company, I presume—you are doing amateur theatricals?"

"That's it, sir."

"If you would care to stay as my guests for the evening, there is no reason why you should not give your performance, if you choose," said Lord Eastwood. "If you have come a great distance, you must certainly stay the night. I will make all arrangements. If I had known at first that you were Greyfriars boys, I should—— But no matter. I am sure my guests would like to see your play."

The good-hearted old gentleman was feeling sorry for the downcast and dejected heroes of Greyfriars, and he wished to soften the blow as much as possible. Coker brightened up very much at the suggestion. The Stage Club brightened up, too.

They had a long way to go home, some of them, and they had already told their people that they were staying the night at Eastwood House. Anything was better than sneaking away with their play unacted, and crawling home at weird hours in the morning.

"You're awfully good, sir," said Coker. "We'd like to give the play, like anything. It's a top-hole play, sir, and we act it toppingly. Of course, under the circumstances, there would be no question of a fee. That villain Cholmondeley——"

"Just so. Have you dined?"

"Yes; I fed 'em at the town," said Coker. "We understood that we should be getting ready for the performance while you were at dinner, sir."

"Then all is well. You may do precisely as you arranged. You will find the stage, and scenes which my son and his friends use for amateur theatricals. My butler will show you the room. Pray act exactly as if you were at home here," said his lordship. "Chillingham, you will see that these young gentlemen want for nothing. You see that they have everything they require. Master Coker, you will excuse me now? My guests will be really very much surprised!"

Coker drew a deep, deep breath when his lordship was gone.

"What a ghastly sell!" said Potter. "If ever I see that jokey villain Cholmondeley again, I'll scrag him!"

"That's why those Remove cads gave in so easily," murmured Greene. "I knew jolly well they weren't afraid of Coker's birch. I said so all along. They'd found out that Cholmondeley was spoofing!"

"Oh!" said Coker.

"And they let us be spoofed like this, begorra!" said Fitzgerald. "I dare say they'd have warned Coker if he hadn't started with the birch. Just like Coker!"

"Oh, just like Coker!" said the Stage Club, with one voice.

Everybody agreed that it was all Coker's fault, and that it was just like Coker.

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Coker. "His lordship's a brick—a real brick. We're going to give the play, anyway!"

"What about the fifty guineas?" snorted Hobson of the Shell.

Coker gave him a look of withering contempt.

"If you're thinking about rotten money, Hobson——"

"Well, what did we come here for?" demanded Hobson.

"We came here," said Coker, "to play a drama—a ripping drama. We came here as artistes, not as money-grubbers. If any fellow here says that he's sorry we're not going to be paid, I'm ready to wipe up the floor with him on the spot. I can't say fairer than that!"

Like Brutus of old, Coker paused for a reply.

There was no reply. Nobody wanted to be used for the purpose of wiping up the floor.

"And any fellow who doesn't want to play for art's sake, without thinking of filthy money, is at liberty to clear off, and get home how he can," added Coker.

Nobody cleared off.

"Then if you're all satisfied, we'll get to business," said Coker. "And if anybody has any criticisms to make concerning the way I've arranged this, I'm willing to fight him before the performance!"

Nobody had any criticisms to make. Coker's arguments were evidently unanswerable.

"If you young gentlemen will follow me——" hinted Chillingham.

The young gentlemen followed him.

THE TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER.
"Red Ruin!"

HARRY WHARTON & Co. were on what Hurree Jamset Ram Singh called "tender-hooks."

The Famous Five were almost sure they had heard Coker's voice; they had heard, at all events, a booming voice that reminded them of Coker's.

But they were not quite sure—not till Lord Eastwood returned to the table.

His lordship, with a smiling face, proceeded to explain, and there was a ripple of laughter along the table at the story of the misadventures of Horace Coker and the Fifth-Form Stage Club.

Bob Cherry squeezed Wharton's arm ecstatically.

"Then this was the place Pon was planting them on!" he murmured.

"Looks like it!" grinned Wharton.

"Bai Jove! What a jape!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "That fellow Cholmondeley must have been a wegulah wottah! Wathah weminds me of some of our japes at St. Jim's—the way we dish Figgins & Co. sometimes!"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Poor old Coker!" murmured Hurree Singh. "The esteemed and ludicrous duffer is always and incessantly putting his august hoof in it!"

"But what's becoine of 'em?" chuckled Bob Cherry. "Have they been sent out into the cold and unsympathetic world?"

The Famous Five exchanged startled glances as Lord Eastwood went on to explain that the Fifth-Form Stage Club of Greyfriars were going to give their performance after dinner; and were, indeed, at that moment making their preparations.

"Wippin' ideah!" commented Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove, what is the mattah, Chewwy, deah boy?"

Bob Cherry gasped.

"N-n-nothin'. It's all right! Oh, my hat!"

"What is the play like, you chaps?" asked Arthur Augustus innocently. "I suppose you have seen them wehearsin' it."

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Somethin' funnay, what?"

"Funny isn't the word, by gad!" drawled the Caterpillar. "I've heard a bit of it. It's in heroic verse, written by Coker. Coker is a poet, as well as an actor. It's a patriotic war play."

"Bai Jove!"

"Coker must be very clever to write a play in verse," remarked D'Arcy's Cousin Ethel.

"Yaas, that seems to me awf'ly clevah!"

"Clever isn't the word," gasped Bob Cherry. "It—it—it's a regular corker!"

The idea of Coker & Co. really acting that utterly idiotic play was almost too much for the Famous Five. It was with difficulty that they restrained a roar of merriment that would have been more suitable to the Remove passage at Greyfriars than to Lord Eastwood's dining-table at Eastwood House.

They looked forward to that entertainment after dinner with great anticipations.

At that moment they felt that they could forgive Ponsonby.

After dinner, Lord Eastwood and his guests proceeded to the apartment which was used as a theatre for amateur theatricals at Eastwood House. On the stage there, Tom Merry & Co. had played many and varied parts. But it was quite certain that those boards had never seen such a play as was about to be played.

Coker's preparations were completed.

Horace Coker had recovered all his spirits now, and he was quite Coker again. He was arranging everything with a high hand. The services of half a dozen of Chillingham's staff had been requisitioned. Coker had tried the curtain, and ascertained that it really went up and down without a hitch—a very important point in private theatricals. In the green-room at the back of the stage the Fifth-Form Stage Club were already in costume for their parts. Coker was exhorting them to do their best, and back him up all through.

Everybody but Coker had some doubts. Their opinion of "Red Ruin" had been silenced by the approval of Mr. Cholmondeley. But the discovery that Mr. Cholmondeley was a practical joker, and had been spoofing them, revived their original opinion of the play. But it was evidently too late to change it now, even if Coker would have consented to change it, which was certainly not the case.

The Stage Club had to go through with that play, and trust to fortune.

Coker peered through the curtain, and saw the audience taking their places. There were numerous guests at East-

wood House, as well as the St. Jim's and Greyfriars juniors. Lord Conway, on leave from the front, was there and Cousin Ethel, and Aunt Adelina, and Hazeldene of the Remove had come over with his sister Marjorie, and Miss Clara, of Cliff House School, and there were a dozen more. It was quite a numerous and distinguished audience, and Coker smiled with satisfaction as he saw them filling the seats.

The stately Chillingham handed round the programmes. Coker had come ready provided with nicely-printed programmes; Coker did everything in style. The audience read the programmes, and some of them looked puzzled, and some smiled.

"Prologue spoken by Ceres, the Goddess of War," said Lord Conway. "By Jove, they've given Ceres a new part since I was at school!"

"A printer's error, perhaps," said Lord Eastwood.

"No—a Coker error," murmured Wharton, to his chums.

"A what?" said Cousin Ethel, in surprise.

"Coker's a rather high-handed chap," explained Bob Cherry. "If Coker says that Ceres is the goddess of war, she is the goddess of war. It's no good contradicting Coker. He has a four-point-seven punch!"

Ethel laughed.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob. "There goes the curtain! Friends, Romans, and countrymen, lend Coker your ears! If you have tears, prepare to shed them now!"

But it was not the curtain yet. It was the entry of the Prologue. Ceres—whom Coker insisted was the goddess of war—recited the prologue. It was listened to by the distinguished audience with amazement.

As it was evidently intended to be taken seriously, they did not like to laugh But they had difficult work to keep serious.

Then the curtain went up, and Scene 1, Act I., was disclosed.

The dialogue between the Kaiser, the Crown Prince, and General Von Kluck made the audience stare. Potter and Greene and Fitzgerald did their best—Fitzgerald adding unconsciously to the effect by giving the Kaiser a strong accent of County Tipperary.

But when Coker came on there was a general gasp.

Coker was in fine form. He brandished his sword, and called to the men in khaki to come on—in heroic verse.

"Forward my gallant lads, the day is ours!
Advance, advance, advance to Potsdam's towers.
See, see, see, see, see, see, the flying Huns!
They run, they run, they run before our guns!
No more, no more our pathway shall they block.
No more shall thunder Hoch, hoch, hoch, hoch, hoch!
Back up, back up, back up, the work's begun!
They run, they run, they run, they run, they run!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Famous Five could hold it no longer—they yelled!

Tom Merry & Co. stared, and gurgled, and yelled, too. They could not help it. Lord Eastwood seemed to be suffering from an inward struggle. Lady Eastwood was concealing her face with her handkerchief. Arthur Augustus was grinning, and his young brother Wally was roaring. Lord Conway almost collapsed. Courtenay and the Caterpillar seemed on the verge of hysterics. Coker's role, in fact, had taken the audience by storm—but not quite in the way that Coker had anticipated.

Horace Coker paused in his declamation, as that irresistible howl of merriment broke out, and stared at the audience. Temple, and Dabney, and Hobson, and Smith major and the rest of the gallant lads in khaki on the stage looked at one another sheepishly.

Coker strode to the front of the stage, and shook his fist at the Famous Five. His idea was that it was a rag. He forgot, for the moment, that it was not quite the part of a British captain in the stress of battle to turn to the audience and address them personally.

"You young rotters!" roared Coker.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They run, they run, they run, they run, they run!" sobbed the Caterpillar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Back up, back up, back up, the work's begun!" groaned Bob Cherry. "Oh, dear, Coker will be the death of me! I know he will!"

"Go it, Coker!"

"On the ball, Coker!"

"Play up! The play's the thing, you know!"

Coker remembered where he was. He shook his fist at the chums of the Remove and went on acting.

"Advance, advance, advance, advance, advance!
Don't give the blessed Huns a blessed chance!
Rush on, rush on, rush on, rush on, and slay!
'Tis glory, glory, glory shows the way!"

And Coker rushed on, with Temple and Smith major and the rest after him, leaving the audience almost in convulsions.

From that moment the great drama went hot and strong.

The audience laughed till they ached, as scene followed scene, and act followed act. Behind the scenes there was nearly a mutiny. Potter refused to go on and be laughed at, and Coker had to rub his nose on the floor before he gave in. Coker explained that the audience weren't laughing at the play—it was only a rag of those Remove rotters, out of sheer jealousy. The actors did not believe Coker's version, but there was no arguing with Coker—he was too heavy-handed. The play went on, till the audience were almost feeble with laughter.

"It's funnay, vewy funnay," said Arthur Augustus, wiping away his tears. "I don't quite appwove of comic plays on the subject of the war, but I must say it is vewy funnay."

"But this isn't a comic play," gurgled Bob Cherry. "I mean, Coker doesn't mean it as a comic one. It's tragic."

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, dear!" said Cousin Ethel. "Are you sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Then—then we must not laugh any more."

Cousin Ethel made a really heroic effort not to laugh any more. But Coker's next appearance was too much for her. Coker had captured the Kaiser by that time, and was disposing of him in his usual high-handed manner

"False tyrant, highest Hun, oh, fool, fool, fool!
A prison waits for you, your heels to cool!
The plot you laid is scattered in the dust,
Your Empire—made in Germany—is bu'st!
What now of Bernhardi and Clausewitz?
Your plot is knocked sky-high in little bits!
Repent, repent, repent you of your crime!
Your life henceforth shall pass in doing time!"

That was too much! The audience screamed. Cousin Ethel was almost weeping. Lord Eastwood was laughing like a schoolboy.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "What an awf'ly funnay beggah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dear—oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was one more act to come. But it never came. The irresistible shrieks of the audience were too much for the Stage Club, if not for Coker. At the end of the fourth act there was a fresh outbreak of mutiny. This time Coker could not quell it by rubbing Potter's nose on the floor. The whole Stage Club was in a state of wrath and exasperation. They had never been laughed at so much in their lives, and they were feeling very naturally fed-up. They felt that they simply couldn't face the audience for the last act—they couldn't!

"Ready?" said Coker.

"Fathead!" roared Potter, in a voice that could be heard by all the audience as well as the Stage Club. "We're not going on any more!"

"Look here, George Potter——"

"Yah! Fathead! Chuck it!"

"I'll jolly well——"

"Oh, bump him! Rag the burblin' idiot!"

"Why, I'll—I'll——"

There was a rush of the Stage Club, and Horace Coker was overwhelmed. They bumped him and they ragged him, they rolled him, and squashed him. Coker, as became a British captain in khaki, put up a tremendous fight. The whole Stage Club didn't have an easy task with him. But they managed it. They handled him. During the next five minutes Coker of the Fifth had the time of his life.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Bai Jove! Somethin' w'ong, deah boys!"

Crash! Crash!

"Sounds like battle behind the scenes," murmured Bob Cherry. "What they call in the stage directions, 'combat off.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bless my soul!" said Lord Eastwood. "Is something amiss?"

"Sounds like it, sir," grinned the Caterpillar. "By gad, I wonder they haven't slaughtered Coker already! Oh, by gad, my ribs will never get over this. Franky, have you ever chortled so much before in your life?"

"Never!" chuckled Courtenay.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crash! Smash! Crash!

There was a yell, as the back scenes collapsed, as Coker and the struggling bumpers crashed into them from behind. A wild and whirling mass of combatants came rolling through the scenes on the stage, in full view of the audience. Horace Coker, struggling like a regular Goliath, was putting up a tremendous fight. The Stage Club seemed to have forgotten the audience—they were only thinking of Coker.

Bump! Crash! Smash!

"Oh, dear!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

The curtain came down—the stately Chillingham saw to that. Coker & Co., bumpers and bumped, were shut off from view. And the audience wept with merriment.

* * * * * * *

Harry Wharton & Co., and Courtenay and the Caterpillar had a "topping" time at Eastwood House, with the St. Jim's fellows. But, topping as that time was, they all agreed that the very best was that famous evening when Coker & Co. had performed the great drama, "Red Ruin." The Fifth-Form Stage Club departed sheepishly the next morning, all of them showing signs of damage—especially Coker. They had all received hard knocks in that final, unrehearsed scene of the great drama—especially Coker. And when they took their departure, they seemed shy, and anxious to avoid the public gaze—especially Coker!

And after the vac., when the heroes of Greyfriars gathered once more at the old school, it was only necessary, in order to excite Coker of the Fifth to a state of almost homicidal frenzy, to whisper gently in his ear the words, "Red Ruin!"

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CHARACTERS.

HARRY WHARTON FRANK NUGENT BOB CHERRY JOHNNY BULL HURREE SINGH	The Famous Five of Greyfriars School.
BILLY BUNTER SQUIFF	Two Removites.
CECIL TEMPLE - -	Captain of the Fourth.
DABNEY FRY - - -	Temple's Chums.
JOHN ARTHUR BULL, Esq.,	Johnny Bull's Uncle.
TROTTER - - - -	The School Page.

ACT I.

Scene.—No 1 Study. (Temple of the Fourth is busily engaged in carrying out a "rag" against the chums of the Remove. He fills the inkpot on the table with cycle-oil, first pouring the ink into a jar of jam; then he empties a pot of honey upon the seat of the armchair.)

TEMPLE (surveying his handiwork with satisfaction): "There! That's one in the eye for the Remove. They whopped us last night in the pillow-fight, but I reckon we're quits now." (He gives a start. Footsteps are heard without.)

TEMPLE: "Caught, by gum! What the dickens are Wharton & Co. coming in for? They were going to watch the First Eleven. Oh, my hat!" (He dives desperately under the table, the big cloth effectually concealing him.)

(Enter the Famous Five.)

BULL: "No need for you fellows to bother. You can cut off and watch old Wingate piling up runs."

WHARTON: "No fear!"

CHERRY: "We're going to help you write the letter, dear boy. We're going to see that you put it nicely."

HURREE SINGH: "A letter to your worthy uncle requires great carefulness, my esteemed Johnny."

BULL: "Rats!"

CHERRY (taking a seat in the armchair): "Now, look here, Johnny; we — Why, what — Groogh! I'm sticky! What thundering ass has been sticking treacle in the armchair?" (He jumps up in alarm.) "My only hat! Why, I'll—I'll— Groogh!

THE OTHERS: "Ha, ha, ha!"

CHERRY: "What are you cackling at, you silly idiots? This must be a jape by one of those Fifth-Form bounders. You fellows can help Johnny with his letter. I'm going to change my bags. Groogh!" (Stamps out of the study.)

BULL (drawing a chair up to the table and sitting down): "You fellows had better go and watch the cricket. I can write this letter all right."

NUGENT: "Bow-wow! We've brought you in here to write it, and we're going to keep an eye on you. We know what you want to do. You want to be rude to a dear, affectionate old relative, who's rolling in quids, and we won't allow it. Think of the quids!"

BULL: "Blow the quids!"

WHARTON: "Besides, he's not a bad sort. He's never seen you, Johnny, but he writes quite affectionately."

NUGENT: "And he's only lately come home from Australia, Johnny. It's up to you to be nice to him."

BULL: "Look here, my uncle has treated me badly. He thinks I'm going to look over it because he's rolling in money. Well, I'm not. I'm going to show him how precious little I care about his beastly money. Coming down to see me, by gum, just as if nothing had happened! I'll show him. Hang his money! He can keep it, and be blowed! Now, you see what kind of a letter I'll bung on him!" (He dabs the pen into the inkpot, and utters a yell of wrath.) "You thundering idiots, is this your idea of a joke when you bring a chap into your study to write a letter?"

WHARTON: "What on earth——"

BULL: "This isn't ink: it's oil!"

NUGENT: "Never mind, Johnny. Here's a fountain-pen." Bull proceeds to write his letter, then reads it aloud:

"Dear Uncle,—I have received your letter. I don't want you to come and see me. I think it was rotten to

send your beastly secretary down here to spy on me. If you can't take a chap on trust, don't take him at all.

"J. BULL."

"There, that's straight from the shoulder!"

WHARTON: "A great deal too straight from the shoulder. You're jolly well not going to send that letter?"

BULL: "I tell you I am!"

HURREE SINGH: "My esteemed Johnny, I beg you take a sweetfully reasonable view!"

BULL: "Go and eat coke! I tell you—— Why—what——" (He breaks off in astonishment as his boot knocks against something beneath the table.)

TEMPLE (who has been kicked): "Yow-ow!"

BULL: "My hat! There's somebody——"

(Temple rises up, lifts the table on his shoulders, pitches it over, and bolts for the door.)

WHARTON: "Great Scott! He was under the table——"

NUGENT: "All the time!"

BULL (who has been knocked down by the table, which pins him to the floor): "Oh, crumbs! Help me up, you fellows!"

(The juniors drag the table from their prostrate chum. Johnny Bull leaps to his feet, and rushes pell-mell from the study. Wharton crumples Bull's letter up, and throws it away.)

WHARTON: "Poor old Johnny! He'll slaughter Temple if he finds him. He'll have to rewrite that letter now. Let's get along to the cricket."

(They all quit the study.)

(Enter Temple, Dabney, and Fry.)

TEMPLE: "Ha! I thought we'd dodge those fags. That idiot Bull has been rushing around like a cat on hot bricks, but he ain't found me yet; no jolly fear! These kids can't keep their end up against us, you know, if we take them in hand properly. We've let the Remove swank too long. They can down old Coker of the Fifth—Coker's an ass—but they can't down us—what?"

DABNEY and FRY: "No fear!"

TEMPLE: "You should have seen that fathead Cherry sitting in the honey——"

DABNEY and FRY: "Ha, ha, ha!"

TEMPLE: "And that idiot Bull trying to write a letter home with cycle oil!"

DABNEY and FRY: "He, he, he!"

TEMPLE: "But that's only a beginning. I've got an idea, you chaps—a first-class, gilt-edged idea, which, when put into operation, will make those Remove kids look quite green and yellow."

DABNEY and FRY: "Go it!"

TEMPLE: "There's been a lot of jaw among those kids about Bull's uncle lately. He's come home from New Zealand, or South Africa, or somewhere, and there's been some trouble between him and his nephew—I don't know exactly what. But from what they were saying, he's going to visit Bull, and Bull doesn't want him. He's quite a stranger—fresh from Tasmania, or wherever it is—and Bull's never seen him, and don't want to. Now, what do you think is my idea?"

DABNEY: "Give it up."

TEMPLE: "You remember the time Bunter pretended he had an uncle in the Army, and Wibley of the Remove made himself up, and pretended to be Bunter's uncle? I don't mean to say that I've borrowed my idea from that Remove fag. Of course, I wouldn't do that! I'm only mentioning that as an illustration."

FRY: "Ye-e-es, of course."

TEMPLE: "Well, then, what's the matter with making up an uncle for Johnny Bull, the same as Wibley did for Bunter?"

DABNEY and FRY: "My hat!"

TEMPLE: "Bull's never seen his uncle, you know, and won't know him from Adam. Suppose a particularly ferocious old gent dropped in as Uncle Bull, with a big stick——"

DABNEY and FRY: "Oh, crumbs!"

TEMPLE: "And gave Bull a jolly good hiding for not answering his letter? I heard him say that he hadn't answered it."

DABNEY and FRY: "Ha, ha, ha!"

TEMPLE: "You see, Bull is rather a tough beast to tackle in a scrap, but he couldn't whop his uncle. There's such a thing as respect for one's elders. What a lark if his uncle comes here and thrashes him with a big stick!"

DABNEY: "Oh, rather!"

FRY: "Cecil, old man, you're a giddy genius! Blessed if I know where you get these ripping ideas from!"

TEMPLE: "You fellows come along with me to Courtfield, and I'll get made-up for the occasion. Then you can come back with me, and be on the scene ready to see the fun. I'll come in a taxi from Courtfield, as if I'd come there by train—what?"

DABNEY and FRY: "Topping!"

TEMPLE: "Right-ho, then! Let's get off!"

(Exit Temple, Dabney, and Fry.)

(End of Act I.)

ACT II.

Scene.—No. 1 Study.

(Enter Wharton, Nugent, Bull, and Hurree Singh.)

WHARTON: "Here we are again! Time for tea, you fellows! Bob's gone along to the tuckshop to lay in supplies."

NUGENT: "Good! Hope he won't be long. It's given me an appetite to watch old Wingate lashing out at half-volleys."

VOICE FROM WITHOUT: "Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

BULL: "Here he is!"

(Enter Bob Cherry, laden with tuck, and looking very excited.)

NUGENT: "What's on now?"

CHERRY: "We shall have to muzzle Johnny. Johnny, old man, you're in for it. Promise us that you'll behave nicely."

BULL: "Eh? What are you driving at?"

CHERRY: "Your uncle's come."

BULL: "Great pip!"

WHARTON: "The dear old gent's just in time for tea. Johnny, you're going to be nice and polite. No incivility to elderly relations allowed in the Remove."

BULL: "Rats!"

(Voices and footsteps are heard without. Enter Temple, disguised as Uncle Bull, with Dabney, Fry, Squiff, and Billy Bunter in attendance.)

FRY: "This way, sir. He'll be jolly glad to see you, sir. He's been talking about you quite a lot, sir."

BUNTER: "I say, you fellows, here's Johnny Bull's uncle!"

TEMPLE: "Huh! My nephew here?"

WHARTON: "Yes, sir. Here he is, Mr. Bull. Johnny, here's your uncle."

TEMPLE (advancing into the study, while his escort remains in the doorway): "Huh! Why haven't you answered my letter, you young vagabond—what?"

BULL: "Some silly idiots interrupted me when I was going to."

TEMPLE: "Is that the way to speak to your uncle? Where are your manners, boy?"

FRY (from the doorway): "He hasn't any, sir."

BULL: "Look here——"

TEMPLE: "Don't argue with me! I will have no impertinence! You are a bad-mannered boy. Now let us have some tea."

WHARTON: "T-t-tea, sir?"

TEMPLE: "Huh! Haven't you a cup of tea to offer a man who has come twenty thousand miles to see his nephew?"

WHARTON: "Oh, yes! Yes, rather! Certainly! Any old thing! Pray take a seat, sir!" (He pulls out the armchair, forgetting the presence of the honey. The bogus Uncle Bull, however, is quick to notice it.)

TEMPLE: "What! What! You want to play a trick on me—ME? You think you can play tricks on a simple gentleman from the Colonies—what? Take that!" (He administers a severe cuff to Wharton, who staggers back, blinking.)

WHARTON: "Oh, crumbs! I forgot the honey was there—on my word, sir! It was put there by a silly idiot ragging us, sir. Oh, I wish you weren't an old man; I'd—I'd——"

TEMPLE: "What? What?"

NUGENT (pulling out another chair): "Do sit down, sir!"

(Temple sits down to the table without removing his hat.)

TEMPLE: "Now give me some tea. I'm hungry. Is this the hospitality of the old country? Huh!"

BUNTER: "I say, you fellows, I want to have tea with Johnny Bull's uncle."

TEMPLE: "Get out!"

BUNTER: "Eh? What?"

TEMPLE: "Get out! I don't like your looks. You look to me like a young pickpocket!"

BUNTER: "Why, you—you—you——"

(Temple seizes his stick, and Bunter flees from the study, yelling.)

TEMPLE: "Those two well-mannered boys who showed me in may come to tea. Come in, my boys. It is very agreeable to see two lads who have nice manners, after what I have seen in this study."

FRY: "Certainly, sir!"

DABNEY: "Oh, rather!"

(They take seats at the table, and Squiff follows. Temple glares at him.)

TEMPLE: "Who are you?"

SQUIFF: "I'm an Australian, sir. I come from your part of the world."

TEMPLE: "An Australian? Huh! You don't look like one. Pasty-faced young donkey! Give me some more tea!" (Squiff refills the guest's cup.)

TEMPLE: "Can't you make fresh tea for me? Isn't it worth while to make fresh tea for a visitor?" (He hurls the cup and saucer into the fireplace.)

TEMPLE (addressing Dabney and Fry): "How is it that you two boys are so nice-mannered and well-behaved, while my nephew and his friends are little better than hooligans?"

DABNEY: "Oh, we're Fourth-Form fellows, sir! These kids are only fags in the Remove. We don't expect good manners from them, sir."

TEMPLE: "Wharton—ahem!—I think your name is Wharton?"

WHARTON: "Yes, sir."

TEMPLE: "Do you call this a tea?"

WHARTON: "I—I—I—— We've done our best, sir."

TEMPLE: "Huh! Get me another cake at once!"

(Wharton rushes from the study, to return shortly afterwards with a cake.)

TEMPLE: "Very good! Would you two nice boys like this cake? You may cut it up and put it in your pockets!"

FRY: "Thank you, sir!"

DABNEY: "Oh, rather! You're very good, sir."

TEMPLE: "As I asked you to tea, I wish you to be treated well. As for myself, that does not matter. I should like some more jam-tarts, but I will not ask my nephew to provide them—oh, certainly not!"

WHARTON: "Tarts, sir? Oh, certainly, sir! I'll have 'em here before you can say——"

TEMPLE: "Don't stand there babbling! Fetch them!"

WHARTON: "Oh yes—certainly!" (He rushes out again, and returns with a large bag of tarts.)

TEMPLE: "Are these tarts good?"

WHARTON: "The the very best, sir."

TEMPLE: "Huh!" (He hurls the tarts also into the fireplace.)

(Enter Trotter.)

TROTTER: "Which I begs to hinform you, gentlemen, as 'ow Master Bull's uncle is 'ere!"

WHARTON: "You you—you've got two uncles, Johnny?"

BULL: "Oh, my hat!"

(Dabney and Fry spring to their feet in dismay. *Enter the rightful Uncle Bull.)*

UNCLE BULL: "Is my nephew here?"

BULL: "You're my uncle?"

UNCLE BULL: "If you are John Bull, I am your uncle."

BULL: "From Australia?"

UNCLE BULL: "Certainly!"

BULL: "Then—then who's this? He calls himself my uncle from Australia."

UNCLE BULL: "What?"

BULL: "He came here this afternoon, saying that he was Mr. Bull. I never thought of doubting him."

UNCLE BULL: "Then he is an impostor! I am Mr. Bull from Australia. Keep back, sir! You will not leave this room without an explanation!"

TEMPLE: "Oh, my hat! The game's up!"

BUNTER (peeping into the study): "I say, you fellows, I'll go for the police!"

DABNEY: "Hold on! Draw the line!"

UNCLE BULL: "Do you know this man?"

DABNEY: "Oh, crumbs! Yes, rather!"

THE FAMOUS FIVE: "You do?"

DABNEY: "Oh, rather! I say, we don't want any blessed police! Better own up, Temple, old man!"

THE FAMOUS FIVE: "Temple!"

TEMPLE: "It was a jape on you fellows. Mr. Bull—pardon me for using your name—I hadn't the faintest idea you were coming this afternoon."

WHARTON: "Temple!"

NUGENT: "Temple of the Fourth!"

CHERRY: "It's a jape!"

BULL: "We've been taken in!"

HURREE SINGH: "We have been dishfully done!"

Temple, Dabney, and Fry move towards the door.

CHERRY: "Collar the rotters!"

(A wild and whirling conflict ensues. Temple & Co. are at length secured, and the remnants of the feed are plastered over them.)

TEMPLE: "Oh, do chuck it! It was a jape, you duffers—only a jape! Can't you take a joke? Ow! Yarooh!"

DABNEY: "Oh, gerroff! Don't! Yow! Keep that jam away! Keep those pickles away, you beasts!"

UNCLE BULL. "The boys are mad—mad! Nephew—Johnny, do you hear? Stop this—stop that! Bless my soul!"

CHERRY: "On the ball, you fellows! Chuck 'em out!"

(Temple & Co. are violently ejected from the study. Bunter, Trotter, and other sightseers also retire.)

UNCLE BULL: "Well, I should be sorry to interrupt your activities. Have you finished?"

WHARTON: "Yes, sir."

HURREE SINGH: "We have finishfully done with the esteemed rotters, honoured sahib! Will you honour us by sitfully taking a chair?"

(Uncle Bull sits down.)

NUGENT: "I hope you are going to stay to tea, sir?"

UNCLE BULL: "I have arranged to have tea with the Head. I came here to see my nephew. John, you did not reply to my letter. It is a serious matter. I was prepared, nephew, to take you to my heart, to adopt you as my heir and successor, and to leave you a very large fortune at my death."

BULL: "Well, I don't want to be taken to your heart, I don't want to manage your business, and I don't want your fortune!"

UNCLE BULL: "John, what does this mean? How dare you speak to me like this?"

BULL: "How dare you send your rotten secretary to spy on me, and find out things about me?"

UNCLE BULL: "My dear John, it was very necessary for me to do so, for I knew nothing of you."

BULL: "I don't call that sort of thing playing the game."

UNCLE BULL (rising): "Then there is nothing more to be said, nephew. I shall not press my offer upon you. One word more. If you are thinking that by this rude display of independence you will deceive me——"

BULL: "There you go again! I don't want your money, and I don't want you!"

UNCLE BULL: "I shall take you at your word." (Exit.)

WHARTON: "You've done it now, Johnny."

BULL: "And a jolly good job, too!"

SQUIFF: "I suppose you couldn't put in a word for me? I'm willing to be adopted."

THE OTHERS: "Ha, ha, ha!"

BULL: "I—I say, I didn't put it too plain, did I? After all, I'm willing to be civil."

SQUIFF: "If that's what you call being civil, Johnny, don't you ever be uncivil to anybody. You'd be taken for a Red Indian, if not a Prussian."

BULL: "Well, it's done, anyway. The old chap's gone, and I suppose it's a case of good-bye for ever. Who's game for a sprint in the Close? I'm fed-up with moping about here!"

CHERRY: "I'm on, old son!"

WHARTON: "Same here. Come on, you fellows!"

Exit everybody.

(End of Act II.)

ACT III.

Scene.—The Remove Dormitory. (Johnny Bull is busy packing things into a portmanteau.)

(Enter Wharton, Nugent, Cherry, Hurree Singh, and Squiff.)

CHERRY: "Here's the bounder! We've been hunting for you everywhere, Johnny! We want you to come and put in some practice at the nets. We're playing Redclyffe on Wednesday."

BULL: "Blow Redclyffe!"

CHERRY: "Well, that's a nice, polite way to address your uncle, I must say. What the dickens are you doing here, in the dorm?"

BULL: "Packing."

CHERRY: "But wherefore this thusness?"

BULL: "I'm leaving Greyfriars!"

ALL: "What!"

BULL (picking up a newspaper): "I wish to goodness I'd been a bit easier with my uncle when he was here. After all, I dare say he meant decently enough; it was only his way. Poor old chap!"

WHARTON: "Something about him in the paper?"

BULL: "Yes."

NUGENT: "Bad news?"

BULL: "Yes."

WHARTON: "I'm sorry. But what——"

BULL: "He's ruined!"

ALL: "Ruined?"

BULL: "Yes; the poor old chap! It's rotten! It seems that the firm—it's a shipping concern, you know—has lost a lot through the war. And now another of their steamers has been sunk; and the long-and-short of it is that the giddy firm's gone bust! Here you are. Read it!" (He hands the paper over to his chums.)

(Enter Trotter.)

TROTTER: "Is Master Bull here?"

BULL: "That's me."

TROTTER: "'Ere's a letter for you, sir. Which I thort it might be urgent, sir, and brought it 'ere at once."

BULL: "Thanks!" (He hands a tip to the page, who touches his forehead and passes out.)

BULL: "Listen to this, you fellows! It's from uncle. I knew directly I saw the news in the papers that I should have to leave Greyfriars, and go and chuck in my lot with him."

"Dear John,—You have probably seen the news in the papers. If not, you will soon do so. You were wiser than you knew in refusing to accept your uncle's offer. At this hour, my boy, you would have been a support and a comfort to me. But I suppose it is asking too much to expect you to leave Greyfriars and all its happy recollections simply because of the terrible blow which has befallen me. Good-bye.—Your affectionate uncle,

"JOHN ARTHUR BULL."

CHERRY: "Poor old chap! It must be a fearful blow to lose all one's cash at one fell swoop!"

BULL: "And at his age, too. I—I say, I feel a horrid worm! I was a brute!"

WHARTON: "You can't blame yourself, old boy! You hadn't the slightest idea this was coming."

BULL: "No; thank goodness for that! He can't think I had any idea of it. I suppose that 'good-bye' means that he's going back to Australia. I'd better wire to say that I'm joining him. Can't leave the old fellow in the lurch. I'll pop off, and put the matter to the Head." (Exit.)

WHARTON: "I say, isn't he a brick? Good old Johnny! Of course, he ought to do it; but there's heaps of fellows who wouldn't."

CHERRY: "I should say so. He is a brick, and no mistake! If Uncle John Arthur isn't proud of him, he ought to be boiled in oil!"

SQUIFF: "Perhaps we'd better begin packing for him? His train might be leaving soon."

NUGENT: "That's so; but, hang it all, it does make a fellow feel cut-up. Johnny was the best pal a chap ever had."

(The Removites start packing for Bull, and in a few moments the portmanteau is ready.

(Re-enter Bull.)

BULL: "It's all right, you fellows. The Head agrees that my place is with uncle. The train goes in half an hour."

WHARTON: "We've just packed your things up, Johnny. Must you go absolutely at once?"

BULL: "At once! If I miss the giddy train I'm cornered! Good-bye, you fellows!" (He shakes hands all round.) "I sha'n't forget you, and I sha'n't forget Greyfriars."

(Enter Temple.)

TEMPLE: "I—I say, Bull, good-bye, old fellow! And—and you don't bear any malice for our little jape—what? I'm awfully sorry you're going."

Bull shakes hands cordially.

BULL: "Of course not, old kid! That's all right. See you again some day."

TEMPLE: "And—and if you get stony out there, remember me!"

BULL: "I will. Good-bye!"

ALL: "Good-bye, Johnny!"

(Exit Bull, with portmanteau.)

(End of Act III.)

ACT IV.

Scene.—No. 1 Study. (The table is laid for tea, and Wharton, Nugent, Cherry, Hurree Singh, and Squiff are present. All are looking very glum.)

WHARTON: "Wonder what old Johnny Bull's doing now?"

CHERRY: "He's well on the way to Australia, I expect. It's four days now since he left us."

HURREE SINGH: "His esteemed presence will be sorefully missed, my esteemed chums."

WHARTON: "It means the breaking up of the Famous Five, I'm afraid. Johnny's said good-bye to Greyfriars for ever."

SQUIFF: "I understand pretty well how you fellows feel about it. Johnny's going to the finest country in the world, bar none; but it's rotten, all the same!"

(Enter Bunter.)

BUNTER: "I say, you fellows——"

CHERRY: "Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's that—a nightmare in the daytime? Sheer off, Fatty!"

BUNTER: "Oh, really, Cherry, I've come——"

WHARTON: "Oh, you've come, have you? Well, now you can go!"

BUNTER: "I say, you fellows, considering what a good friend I've been to all of you, I think you might ask a chap to a feed. I'm willing to cook all the bacon and eggs——"

SQUIFF: "And to eat them?"

THE OTHERS: "Ha, ha, ha!"

CHERRY: "Oh, let him come in! But the first time he says anything out of place, he goes out on his neck!"

NUGENT: "It's a ripping spread, but blessed if I care whether the fat bounder wolfs the lot up or not! I've gone off my feed since old Johnny left."

(Bunter draws a chair up to the table and attacks the feed.)

BUNTER: "Well, this is a measly spread, I must say! You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

NUGENT: "Not at all. There's something else we should like you to say, too."

BUNTER: "What's that?"

NUGENT: "Good-bye!"

BUNTER: "Oh, really, Nugent, I haven't started yet! Now, what I really wanted to say to you fellows was this: Johnny Bull's left Greyfriars——"

CHERRY: "Queen Anne's dead!"

BUNTER: "And I consider I have the chief claim to his position in the Famous Five."

THE OTHERS: "Ha, ha, ha!"

BUNTER: "There's nothing to cackle at, you fellows. You'll want someone to take Bull's place, and I'm your man."

WHARTON: "We wouldn't have you at any price, you burbling great bladder of lard!"

BUNTER: "Oh, really, Wharton, is that the way to speak to a guest? None of you have got any manners in this study! You ain't gentlemen! Yah!"

CHERRY: "Blessed if we're going to stand that, you chaps! Pitch him out!"

(Bunter leaps up in alarm, and dashes from the study. The juniors propel him from behind with their boots. *Enter Trotter*, who collides with Bunter as the latter goes out. There is a wild yell.)

BUNTER: "Yarooh! Why can't you look where you're going, Trotter, you idiot? You've fractured my spinal column!"

WHARTON: "We'll put you out of action permanently if you don't clear off!"

(Exit Bunter. Bob Cherry hurls a loaf of bread after him.)

WHARTON (raising Trotter to his feet): "Never mind, old son. What have you got there?"

TROTTER (rubbing his head): "A letter for you, Master Wharton."

WHARTON: "Good! Hand it over."

(Trotter hands him the letter and departs.)

WHARTON: "This letter is from Johnny, you chaps!"

CHERRY: "Spout it out!"

WHARTON (reading the letter):

"Dear old chaps,—Don't worry about me. I never thought the old sport was so deep. Fancy a giddy old shipping merchant being able to spoof the Remove! It simply beats me!

"You remember that paragraph in the paper? It was all bunkum! The long-and-short of it is, that uncle pretended he was ruined simply to see if I'd stick to him. It was what he called 'A Test of Loyalty.' I'm going to have a first-rate time, from what I hear, and I can return to Greyfriars after I've had a good look at Australia.

"Upon the whole, everything in the garden is lovely! Nugent can have my cricket-bat, and I want you to give Linley my bike, with my kind regards. Don't forget to look after my white mice; and you can give Bunter a kick—from me. So no more at present, from your old chum,

JOHNNY.

"P.S.—As you'll only be four while I'm away, you'd better take Squiff into the Famous Five, and don't forget to keep our end up."

WHARTON: "Well, my hat! It's jolly good news. Johnny's a lucky bargee. We'll give Bunter what he's sent him——"

THE OTHERS: "Ha, ha, ha!"

WHARTON: "And we'll take Squiff into the Co. Eh, Squiff?"

SQUIFF: "Hear, hear! Very thoughtful of Johnny! He knew you required some brains in this Co."

WHARTON: "Why, you ass!"

NUGENT: "Why, you fathead!"

CHERRY: "Order, gentlemen! Sampson Quincy Iffley Field is now a fully-accredited and esteemed member of the select circle known as the Famous Five, and I suggest that this Co. forthwith proceeds to drink his health, and a good voyage to the retiring member of this firm."

ALL: "Hear, hear!"

(The juniors rise from the table, and proceed to drink Squiff's health with acclamation.)

CURTAIN.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS OF OUR NEW SERIAL.

"THE STAR OF THE CIRCUS!"

A Magnificent Story of Thrilling Adventure and . Circus Life .

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sir Richard Battingley, a much-travelled scoundrel, has some mysterious reason for wishing the death of Clive Clare, a handsome and daring circus performer, also known as the King of Equestrians. He, therefore, engages another villain, named Paul Murdway, to compass Clive Clare's death for the sum of ten thousand pounds.

Paul Murdway follows the circus in its wanderings, and, under the name of Adrian Deering, leagues himself with a member of Cyrano's Circus, named Senor Miguel Gurez, a Mexican dead shot, to bring about Clive's death, and arranges that the Mexican shall shoot with a noiseless air-rifle at one of the ropes of a trapeze from which Clive takes a daring leap on to the back of a galloping horse.

This plot fails, but the two villains do not give up their intention of injuring Clive when an opportunity occurs.

Clive Clare one day hears a shriek coming from one of the tents, and finds that Ben Ellis—or, Professor Durnette, the King of Lion Tamers, to give him his stage name—is ill-treating his daughter, May Ellis, a clever equestrienne in the troupe. Clive Clare rushes to the rescue, and his interference causes Professor Durnette to have a grudge against Clive, although the affair has apparently been patched up by an apology.

(Now go on with the story.)

Professor Durnette Tries to Frighten His Daughter—And Tells Her a Secret.

If Roly-Poly had been wrong in his suspicions of Professor Durnette with regard to the latter's connection with the disappearance of Sando, the clown certainly had some grounds for his opinion of the lion-tamer. For undoubtedly Durnette was on very friendly terms with Paul Murdway—or, as he called himself, and as we shall for the time call him, Adrian Deering. Deering had, as Roly-Poly had stated, followed the circus from place to place after leaving Abbeyford. By the judicious standing of a capital little dinner to Mr. Adolph Cyrano he had ingratiated himself in that gentleman's good graces, and his nightly hiring of a reserved seat at the circus was sufficient to cement their friendship.

Deering had also found his way to Professor Durnette's heart via a bottle or two of whisky; while as to his friendship with Senor Gurez, the Mexican dead-shot, we have already spoken.

Adrian Deering had visited the circus in the first place in order to carry out his purpose against Clive Clare, but now he found his original intention supplemented by another. In short, Adrian Deering wanted to marry May Ellis. It is hardly necessary to say that the girl did not like him, and his growing friendship with her father caused her no little uneasiness.

The reason of that friendship she did not know, but a day or two after the events narrated in the previous chapter there ensued between her and her father a conversation which opened her eyes.

"May, my girl," remarked Professor Durnette, as he sat in his lodgings at Milchester, a large town where Cyrano's Circus was making a three days' stay, "how old are you?"

His daughter looked up, a little surprised at the question.

"Seventeen," she answered

"M'm! Seventeen! I s'pose you'll be thinking about leaving your poor old father one of these days, and getting married—eh?"

May, with a blush, said she had no thought of marriage yet.

"Oh! But, my girl, you must have some thought of marriage," remarked the professor. "I sha'n't be with you always, you know, to support you"—this with a sublime indifference to the fact that her share in the performance at Cyrano's brought in quite as much as his, and that, so far from supporting her, the greater proportion of her weekly earnings was invariably confiscated by him—a thing which, in his capacity of paymaster of the circus artistes, he was easily able to do. "I sha'n't always be with you to support you," he repeated, "so you will have to be supported by somebody else."

"But I shall be able to earn my own living, father," May observed gently.

"Able! Yes, my girl. But why should you? There's many a gentleman would be proud to call you his wife."

"But I don't want a gentleman, father—that is, a gentleman in the sense you mean. I don't want to marry for money."

"Oh, no; of course you don't! But supposing, now, a nice gentleman came along that you happened to like; and supposing he happened to have money—you wouldn't let that stand in your way, would you?"

Not knowing quite what to answer, May kept silence.

"Now, what do you think of Mr. Adrian Deering for a husband—eh?" went on the lion-tamer.

May Ellis started back aghast.

"Mr. Deering!" she gasped. "That man! That man, who is always with you, and encouraging you to——" She checked herself. "No, father; I could never dream of marrying him!"

Professor Durnette looked up, astonished at the vehemence of his daughter's words.

"Why? What have you against him?" he demanded.

"Against him! No particular charge, father. And yet, in the position in which you have placed me with regard to him, there is everything against him."

"Be quiet, girl!" snapped Durnette. "I know what you would say. You want that young whelp, Clive Clare! Bah! Get the idea out of your head, my girl! He's no good to you—he's no good to anybody!"

"Don't speak of him like that, father," the girl remonstrated.

Professor Durnette rose from his chair, and paced the little room. His quick temper was rapidly getting the better of him, and he felt that movement was necessary to enable him to control it.

"Look here, May, my girl," he said; "this is a very important matter. The nonsense between you and this fellow Clare is just a boy-and-girl affair. You've got to forget that.

Do you understand me? You've got to wipe it clean out of your mind. When you marry, you've got to marry well. You can do it easily. Your beauty will ensure that. You've got to marry a gentleman, I tell you—a gentleman with money—who can take you out of this life, and"—he was going to say, "support me in my old age," but he did not—"and keep you in comfort, if not luxury. Now, as it happens, Mr. Adrian Deering has been discussing the subject with me this very day. He's a gentleman, and he's got money, and he does you and me the honour—not but what I think you're good enough for anybody—to offer you, through me, his hand."

"And banking account!" added May, a little bitterly.

"Yes, if you like!" snapped her father, swerving round. "And, mark you, a banking account isn't a thing to be sneered at!"

"No; perhaps not," returned May. "But neither is it a thing to marry for!"

The tamer of beasts bit his lip. He knew the girl's spirit too well to think that he could alter her determination by a mere display of temper; and yet make her alter her determination he must. There was a greater necessity for that than she knew of—a necessity the details of which he would have liked to conceal from her. But now, if he was to gain his way, he must tell her.

For a minute or two he paced the room in silence; then, in a strangely-hollow voice and subdued manner, he turned once more to his daughter.

"May," he said slowly, "if I asked you to do me a great favour, would you do it?"

The girl turned lovingly towards him, her heart softened by his change of mien.

"Oh, father!" she cried, out of her full heart. "You know that I love you—love you dearly!"

"Yes," he said; "I think you do. May, all my life, whatever else I may have been, I've been an honest man until——" He broke off again for a moment, and then resumed: "If, my girl," he went on, "you knew that a great danger threatened me—that I might be imprisoned——"

May gasped.

"Yes, my girl, imprisoned—ruined for life—disgracing myself, you, and the memory of your dear mother—if you knew that, I say, would you do anything to save me from such a fate?"

May gasped again. She seemed to be choking; she turned pale, and reeled a little where she stood.

"Father," she cried, at last recovering her voice, "you know I would do anything!"

"Anything—ah! Then you will, for my sake, marry Adrian Deering?"

May hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, father," she moaned, "anything—anything but that!"

"Then, if you refuse, I am a ruined man!"

"Ruined! What do you mean, father?"

"I mean this," returned the tamer—and his voice was hollower than before—"I mean that, as Cyrano's trusted business manager, I am two hundred pounds short in my accounts. Cyrano is certain to go through the books within the next week or two, and then my defalcations must come to light. You alone can save me! Do you refuse?"

May Ellis was as white as a ghost; but the momentous words which her father had uttered kept her from fainting. She rocked to and fro where she stood.

"You hear what I say?" her father repeated. "I am two hundred pounds short in my accounts, and Cyrano is certain to discover my defalcations soon."

May Ellis, rocking there, with white face and clenched hands, strove hard to control herself.

"Father," she gasped, at length finding her voice—"oh, father, is it possible that you can be a——"

She broke off, her lips refusing to frame the word.

"Thief?" the lion-tamer said, finishing her sentence. "Yes; call me that if you will, my girl. I have been tempted, but I won't excuse myself now. It is done, and in a few days my crime will be discovered. That's the hard, grim fact I've got to face, and it's because of that that I ask you to help me. Will you help me?"

She did not reply to his question. She only stood there with fixed eyes.

"Two hundred pounds!" Her lips framed the words, and they escaped in a kind of moan. "Two hundred pounds!"

She stood there, lost in contemplation of the immensity of the sum. The tamer of beasts stood watching her for a moment.

"Yes," he observed, in an undertone; "it's a big sum of money—big, that is, to me and to you, but an insignificant trifle to some men—to Mr. Adrian Deering, for instance."

Professor Durnette eyed his daughter closely, to watch the effect of his words.

"Mr. Adrian Deering," he pursued, "could pay that two hundred pounds just as easily as I could pay a shilling. Just a pen and ink and a few marks in his cheque-book, and the thing would be done. And just as easily, my girl, as Mr. Deering could write the cheque, so could you induce him to do so."

May Ellis looked up, dry-eyed, but grief-stricken.

"I induce him? How?" she inquired.

"By marrying him, my girl!"

"Father, how dare you?"

There had been grief and definite sorrow in her tones just previous, but now, as she started back a step and drew herself up to her full height, there was withering scorn in her voice and eyes, while the blood surged to her face in a flood of indignation.

At the sudden change in his daughter's manner Professor Durnette started.

"Father, how dare you?" she repeated, contempt flashing from her eyes.

The tamer gazed at the floor, a trifle cowed.

"I'm not daring much——" he began.

"Not daring much?" she echoed. "And you ask me to marry this man—a man for whom I do not care—in order that he shall pay you two hundred pounds!"

"But it is to save me from ruin, my girl!" Durnette interpolated.

May Ellis bowed her head, the scorn fading out of her eyes, the colour once more fleeing from her face.

"To save you from ruin?" she murmured. And then, shaking her head, added: "No, no, father—not that! Don't ask me to do that! I will do all I can to save you; but don't—don't ask me to marry that man!"

Into the tamer's eyes there came a sudden glint of anger.

"You'll do all you can to help me," he snarled, "and yet you refuse to do the one thing that would help me! You profess to love me, and yet the very first thing I ask you to do for my sake, you refuse to do! Pah, you are a nice, dutiful daughter, you are! You'd throw a chance like this away, would you? You'd refuse to marry this man—you'd cast him aside for that young cub of a Clare! But you sha'n't do that. You shall marry Adrian Deering. I'll make you!"

Once more the girl drew herself erect, and met her father's furious glance fearlessly.

"Never!" she retorted. "You may bully me, father, you may threaten, you may do what you will, and I shall always try not to forget that I am your daughter, and that as such I owe a duty to you; but equally I shall also try not to forget that I am the daughter of my mother, and that to her sacred memory and to myself I also owe a duty!"

Her voice, which had been firm, faltered as she muttered the last words; and at the mention of his dead wife, Durnette's eyes dropped, and his lips trembled slightly.

"But you love me still, May?" he said, a little brokenly.

"Yes, father," she returned, a strange commingling of softness and determination in her tone, "I love you still with all my heart; but I must also tell you now, once and for all, that I want Clive Clare, and that if ever I become the wife of any man, he alone will be that man!"

"Then," murmured the tamer sullenly, "if that's your final decision, I am a ruined man. I have told you of the one way of saving me, and you have refused."

"Yes," returned May, "I have refused, and do refuse, because I would not cover up the traces of your crime by committing a greater crime—and it would be a greater crime to marry a man whom I do not like."

Professor Durnette felt his temper once more rising. He saw, however, that there was no use in prolonging the discussion just then. He rose from his chair, therefore, took up his soft, wide-brimmed hat, jammed it viciously on to his head, and, with a muffled oath, strode heavily from the room.

In which Roly-Poly Makes a Laughing-Stock of Mr. Adrian Deering.

"Hallo, Roly, old chap!" exclaimed Clive Clare, as he entered the dressing-tent that evening an hour or two before the performance, preparatory to practising a new equestrian feat he had recently invented. "How go things, Roly?"

"Things is well," returned the fat clown, pausing in some instruction he was giving to Bimbo, the Educated Ape, and welcoming Clive with a broad grin—"things is A 1!"

"Glad to hear it," rejoined Clive. "But what's the matter with Bonomi? He looks quite down in the mouth."

He pointed as he spoke to the lank clown, who, with long, melancholy face, sat brooding in a most dispirited attitude on a bench near by.

Roly-Poly looked across at his colleague.

"Looks like 'Amlet, don't he?" he observed. "Melancholy enough, anyway. I expect he's thinkin' out a new joke."

The seas, thanks to the unsleeping vigilance of the British Navy, are gradually being cleared of that cowardly pest, the German mine-layer. Our ships, however, do not always get the chance of sending them to the bottom, as is instanced in the above picture, where, as a result of fouling a mine they themselves have laid, the Germans are forced to abandon their boat and go aboard the destroyer, which is standing by to receive them. Thus is poetic justice carried out—they are "Hoist with their own petard."

"New joke?" exclaimed Clive mischievously. "New joke at Cyrano's? Never!"

"Boy," said Roly-Poly, straightening his face and frowning severely, "hast thou not heard my jokes?"

"Alas!" replied Clive, with a mock gravity, "almost nightly since I was a child!"

He ducked as he spoke, to avoid a bundle of clothes which Roly-Poly promptly pitched at his head.

"Never mind, Clive," observed the clown, "I'll forgive you. "I'm ready to admit that my wheezes may be a bit grey-whiskered, but I can always get a laugh, and that's the main thing, ain't it?"

"It ain't exactly what you say, but the funny way you say it," quoted Clive.

"Oh, it's a gift, laddie—it's a gift!" said the fat little clown airily. "Most of us have gifts of some sort. I have a gift for saying things funny. Bononi has gifts"—his face assumed suddenly a very broad grin—"Bononi has gifts of face and figure, so he says. Do you know, Clive," he continued, "that friend Bononi is the most conceited man I have ever met?"

"Conceited?" inquired Clive incredulously.

"Fact, 'pon me word! Thinks every lady as comes to Cyrano's comes specially to see him. He's the shrine at which all womenkind worships in secret. Told me so himself!"

"Perhaps that accounts for his present look of dejection?" suggested Clive. "Perhaps he's thinking of some fair admirer?"

"By the stars and stripes, that's given me an idea!" exclaimed Roly-Poly, giving his knee a terrific smack.

"An idea?" queried Clive. "Be careful, Roly—be careful! That sort of thing wants careful treatment."

"Come now, doncher poach on my preserves, young 'un!" expostulated the clown. "You're a most honcommon fine horseman, but you'd make but a fifth-rate wheeze merchant. Jest now I ain't jestin'—ahem! I tell you I've got an idea—a brilliant idea—a real, scintillatin' sparkler of an idea!"

"Well, what is it, Roly?"

"For your saucy himperence just now, hinfant, I sha'n't tell you—see?"

"Oh, all right!" rejoined Clive good-humouredly.

Then, happening to turn, he caught sight of a quaint-looking object quietly seated in the background.

"Great snakes! What on earth——" he began. Then, interrupting himself, added: "Why, it's Bimbo!"

And sure enough it was Bimbo. The Highly-Educated Ape was squatting close by. Upon his head was a tall silk-hat, cocked a trifle jauntily on one side, in his eye a single eyeglass, and in his hairy paw a clouded cane. His body was attired in a man's suit of clothes, and, but for his unmistakable ape's face and hairy feet and hands, he might have passed at a casual glance for a representative of the "k-nut" type of humanity.

"Whatever are you doing with Bimbo?" inquired Clive.

"Oh," answered Roly-Poly, "we've just been rehearsin' a new bit of biz, that's all."

"Going to try it at to-night's show?"

"Well—er—no, not exactly—yes, I should say, if you know what I mean."

"I don't, then," said Clive. "What do you mean?"

Your equestrian majesty, wait and see! The new and original act of Brother Bimbo may take place to-night, or it may not. So be in time, and tell yer friends."

"Is Bononi in it?" queried Clive laughingly.

"No, sire, Bononi is not in it!" answered Roly-Poly, with dignity. "The new business is ab-so-lute-ly my own conception—the whole kudos is mine!"

"Oh -oh! Is that why Bononi's so dismal to-night?" observed Clive.

Then, advancing to where the tall clown sat in melancholy reverie, he smacked him vigorously on the shoulder, and inquired:

"Why so glum, old chap?"

Bononi looked up slowly and sadly, his long, thin hands dropped helplessly to his sides, and, in a voice that trembled with its own pathos, he made answer:

"My boy, I am so hungry!"

Clive and Roly-Poly burst out into a hearty roar of laughter.

"Is that all?" said Clive. "Why, Roly and I thought it was an affection of the heart!"

"Well," returned Bononi, with an injured air, "it's an affection of the stomach. That's close enough to the heart, anyway."

"Oh, you can soon remedy that," said Clive.

Bononi shook his head mournfully, and tears glistened in his eyes.

"Alas!" he sighed, "there are hours to wait ere supper-time arives, and it is a life-long and inflexible rule with me never to eat between meals."

"Never to work between meals, you mean, Bill," put in Roly-Poly.

"Work!" reproved Bononi, frowning at his colleague. "What right have you to discuss subjects of which you do not even know the meaning?"

Which remark was the beginning of a wordy duel between the two clowns; and Clive thereupon took the opportunity to slip into the ring and get a little practice at the new feat he was rehearsing.

One by one Cyrano's other artistes began to drop into the dressing-tent and make-up for their respective performances. In company with Gurez, the dead-shot, and shortly after the appearance of Professor Durnette, arrived the so-called Mr. Adrian Deering.

As usual, he was smartly dressed—frock-coat, tall hat, eyeglass, and walking-stick complete. It had been his invariable custom since that memorable day when he had first visited the circus at Abbeyford to walk into the dressing-tent before the performance, and to stroll hither and thither, talking to one or other of the artistes, as if the whole place belonged to him.

"My Lord Dook has arrived!" muttered Roly-Poly, as he caught sight of Deering.

Roly-Poly looked up and snorted.

"I can't stand that bloke!" he observed, in a tone of disgust. "He's that bloomin' patronisin', as you'd think he owned the earth. Look at that walk! A more idiotic, Piccerdilly mooch I never did see in me natural!"

"His demeanour certainly is haughty," assented Bononi.

"Yes, he thinks hisself terrible impressin', no doubt, a-swankin' round and swingin' his cane in that style; but believe me, William, it ain't nothin' like so rare an accomplishment as he'd have us believe. I'll prove it to you, Bill, in half a no."

Roly-Poly stooped as he spoke to beneath the bench, whispered a word or two, and then, seemingly oblivious of Adrian Deering's presence, set about completing his make-up.

Deering strolled slowly round. Presently a slight tittering became audible. Hearing it, Mr. Deering looked up, a little surprised, then continued his haughty promenade.

The tittering increased. Mr. Deering, upon whose face emotion of any sort rarely betrayed itself, felt himself flushing inwardly.

Louder and louder grew the tittering, and now there were one or two guffaws from various corners of the tent. Mr. Deering felt annoyed. Was it possible that he was the object of this general mirth? Was there anything about him that——

A loud roar of laughter caused him to turn round sharply, and then in an instant he descried the cause of the merriment.

For there, a few yards behind him, following direct in his footsteps, was a most ludicrous-looking object. Dressed as nearly as possible like himself, with tall hat tilted rakishly, even as his own was tilted, an eyeglass screwed in the left eye, even as his own eyeglass was screwed in his left eye, and with a clouded cane, carried daintily between the handle and the ferrule, walked Bimbo, the Ape.

The creature's attempts to imitate the long strides of Adrian Deering were ludicrous in the extreme, and it was little wonder that the onlookers should roar with laughter.

Those continued bursts of merriment irritated Deering. Hitherto he had fancied himself, as a patron of Cyrano's circus, to be held in the highest respect by the artistes; and now here he was an object of absolute ridicule!

Although his face showed little signs of it, he completely lost his temper. Stepping quickly towards the ape, he raised his stick, and with a swishing blow cut the animal smartly across the neck. In a moment Bimbo, chattering angrily with pain, skipped out of the way, to avoid a second cut.

Mr. Adrian Deering, a little relieved by the concluding part of the incident, walked over to the corner where Senor Miguel Gurez sat alone, and engaged with him in conversation. He had no wish to court further ridicule.

"Hang that infernal ape!" he said, in an undertone, to the Spaniard presently. "It must have been taught to do that by somebody!"

Gurez looked at his companion cunningly.

"Taught?" he said. "Of course it was taught! That fat pig of a clown taught him!"

"Hang the clown, then, and the ape, too! I'd like to poison them both! At any rate, I got one cut at the ugly beast, and if I see half a chance I'll repeat the dose with compound inter——"

Deering did not finish his threat, for suddenly, as he sat there, with his elbows on a bench and his chin between his hands, he felt a heavy, wriggling weight fall plump on to the crown of his tall silk hat, jamming it right over his eyes.

A moment later the sound of another roar of laughter burst on his ears, and simultaneously he felt a sharp pain across the back of his neck—not the pain of a blow, but of a hard, deep scratch from a hairy paw.

Two seconds later, when he had regained his feet, and removed his battered hat from over his nose and eyes, it was to perceive, perched upon a junction of ropes some fifteen feet above his head, the puckered features of Bimbo the Ape, chattering away as fast as he could, and shaking his hairy fist threateningly.

"What d'you think o' that, Bill?" observed Roly-Poly admiringly, as soon as he could stop laughing. "Ain't that there animile a puffick corfdrop? He's got original talent, he has. I taught Brother Bimbo to imitate that cove's walk, but he didn't want teachin' how to get his own back!"

"No, not a blessed ape'orth!" punned Bononi.

"As it was a case of a blow on the neck, you should have said, 'not a nape-orth'!" corrected Roly-Poly.

"Oh, necks, please!" sighed Bononi, and buried his face in his hands.

But fortunately at that moment the clowns received their call, and an end was brought to the series of excruciating puns.

Adrian Deering fumed inwardly for the next hour. He fumed against the ape, he fumed against Roly-Poly, and, although Clive Clare had had nothing whatever to do with the incident, he fumed against Clive, too. He talked maliciously with Gurez until it was the latter's turn to go into the ring, and then he sat moodily awaiting the Spaniard's return.

The dead-shot went through his performance with his usual listless, mechanical precision, and amid almost dead silence. Although clever in his way, Miguel Gurez had of late gone through his performance in a most uninteresting style; and now on this night when he had left the ring, there was absolutely no applause for him whatever.

Mr. Adolph Cyrano happened to be standing at the entrance to the ring.

"Not a hand!" murmured the circus-proprietor to himself—"not a solitary hand! Senor," he said, addressing

Gurez, who now approached sullenly, "you seem to have gone off a bit lately. Not a hand, you see—not a hand!"

"Bah, those fools!" exclaimed the Spaniard, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

"No, senor," responded Mr. Cyrano warmly, "the British public are not fools! They're willing to pay for a good thing, and when they get a good thing they signify the same in the usual manner. But when they pay for a good thing and get a—well, something that isn't as good as it ought to be, they also signify the same in the usual manner—they just let you make your exit in silence. Now, just listen to that! There's a contrast!" Mr. Cyrano jerked his thumb towards the ring, where Clive Clare—whose turn on this night chanced to follow that of Gurez—had just performed his opening feat. "You see, the house is with him to a man!"

Once more the Spaniard shrugged his shoulders, and an angry look came into his eyes now.

"I cannot help it," he snapped, "if they prefer his performance to mine! It is a matter of taste."

"Exactly!" assented Cyrano drily. "It is a matter of public taste, and that's the only taste I've got to consider. Come, senor, you used to get applauded, and if you like to buckle to you can get applauded again. But you never change your programme, you know. Week after week, month after month, you give 'em the same old stale business, so no wonder the people get sick of it. Now, young Clare yonder is always thinking out new things. He's coming out in another novelty shortly; been practising it every day for the last week. Why don't you buck up, senor, and do the same?"

The dead-shot made no reply. He simply turned on his heel, and rejoined Adrian Deering. There was a scowl on his sallow face as he sat down.

"Hallo! What's wrong, senor?" interrupted Deering.

"Wrong? Everything is wrong! That fellow Cyrano complains of me. I was his star a few years since, but now that boy Clare—he's the star, while I—pah!—I am nobody! Blamed by Cyrano—I, Miguel Gurez, who challenge the world!"

"Why don't you chuck it?" suggested Deering.

The Spaniard scowled.

"It is not for me," he said, "to what you call chuck it. This girl May Ellis is here—that is sufficient. You know my feelings towards her. Where she is, there must I be!"

Deering puffed at the cigar he had lighted.

"Oh, the fair Miss Ellis!" he remarked. "She is still the attraction, then? You haven't relinquished your hopes in that quarter yet, in spite of Clive Clare?"

"In spite of that boy?" growled Gurez. "Think you that a boy shall stand between me and her? No! I have sworn she shall be my wife, and that she shall be!"

Deering removed the cigar from his lips, and blew out a thin cloud of smoke. In his mind, as the Spaniard finished speaking, he was thinking that he, too, had arrived at the same determination, and in the brief interval he was speculating as to what would happen between himself and Gurez, since both had resolved to win May Ellis for a wife.

But Deering was too cunning a man to pursue the subject in any way that might betray himself. He wanted the assistance of Senor Gutez for the furtherance of his own plans, and not for an instant did he think of giving utterance to any words which might deprive him of that.

So he discussed the matter generally with his ally in such an adroit manner as to fan the flame of Gurez's hatred for Clive Clare, and without in any degree betraying his own feelings with regard to the object of their mutual regard—May Ellis.

A Wordy Duel Between the Clowns—In Dire Peril—Clive Clare to the Rescue.

If Clare had been applauded at the beginning of his performance that night, it was nothing as compared with the veritable tornado of cheers that followed the completion of his turn.

Flushed with his exertions and feelings of triumph, Clive rode from the ring, dismounted, and entered his dressing-compartment.

As he passed the spot where Roly-Poly and Bononi were seated talking together, Professor Durnette happened to be passing the other way. The lion-tamer's turn was about to begin.

"Notice it, Bill?" queried Roly-Poly, nudging his colleague. "Notice the look Durnette gave young Clare?"

"Joe, I did!"

"And what do you think of it?"

"'Twas ugly, Joe. There's mischief in his rolling eye."

"And there's whisky in his rolling legs, if you ask me anything, Bill! The professor's in hard training for the Toper Stakes."

"Yes," assented Bononi commiseratingly, "he has certainly been going the pace a bit lately. And I'm dead sorry for it, because, in his line of business, it's more than a trifle dangerous. More than that, it seems to have changed Durnette's character. He used to be a decent sort in the old days, but now his face wears a chronic scowl, and in his voice there's a chronic growl."

"That's poetry, William!"

"Even so, Joseph—'tis poetry. You will excuse me, but I am always taken that way when I'm hungry."

"Maybe, Joe—maybe; but chronic hunger is better than chronic thirst, any day; and we are discussing the professor's weakness."

"Yes, a chronic thirst is a weakness," assented Roly-Poly; "and yet Durnette says that drink is the only thing that'll keep up his strength and nerve."

"Rot!" returned Bononi, with no shadow of a jest in his manner now—"absolute rot! Where would you find a couple of men with greater strength or finer nerve than Sando and Dando? Do you find them drinking? Not likely! They know too much for that. Catch either of the Herculean Twins drinking considerable quantities of alcohol at any time, and I—well, I'll undertake to drink the ocean dry! Strong drink in excess will make the best man weak; I've heard Sando say so himself."

"William," observed Roly-Poly, "you've mistook your vocation. You ought to be on the temp'rance platform—that's where you ought to be. Not but what I agrees with you, though."

"Well, well," returned the gratified Bononi, "I fancy if I did make a speech on the temperance platform, I should rouse some of 'em up."

Roly-Poly stared in mock astonishment.

"I—I didn't mean as a speaker!" he gasped. "I meant as a horrible example!"

"It is a pity, Joseph," reproved Bononi, "that you are never serious except when you are doing your comic turn."

"Ah," sighed Roly-Poly, "I could never 'ope to equal you, me friend! You're always serious, when you're a-doin' yer turn, and when you ain't! Not that I'm a-blamin' you, Bill; it's no fault o' yourn. We've only got what we're born with, and becos you 'appened to be born wi' nothin' worth 'avin', that ain't your fault. Still, as a funeral mute, Bill, yer face 'ud be a fortune."

"Joseph," returned the other, "if your face was your fortune, what a bloomin' Rothschild you would be!" And Bononi accompanied his words by describing with his hands a huge circle.

"I must withdraw part o' my words, Bill," said Roly-Poly solemnly. "I admit that you have got a gift—the gift o' the gab!"

"And, you, Joseph, possess the gift of the grab! You grab every joke you can lay your hands on, and—who-o-o-a!—g-r-r-rh! Here, what's the game?"

Bononi had been suddenly interrupted by a sensation of something pulling at his red wig. He leapt out of the way, losing his wig in the movement, and stared round. Behind him stood Napoleon, the comic performing donkey, with which he was shortly about to do a turn in the ring.

Next Monday's Number of The "MAGNET" will be the usual price, 1d., and will contain a Splendid, Long, Complete Story, entitled: "SPECIAL CONSTABLE COKER!" By Frank Richards.

"Jee-roosalem!" gasped Bononi. "He's got my wig!"

"You see," chipped in Roly-Poly, with a grin, "yer brother likewise has a gift o' the grab. He mistook yer hair for carrots; and not much of a mistook, either!"

Bononi put on an injured look.

"My hair," he protested, "is not red, 'tis golden."

"Yes," retorted Roly, eighteen-carat!"

"Come, Napoleon," said Bononi, taking the donkey by the neck, "let us quit this atmosphere of feeble jokes, and prepare to enter the arena, there to perform our Napoleon-Bononi-part."

"What!" cried Roly-Poly aghast. "You're a-goin' to make that pore, defenceless animile work while he's hungry?"

"He is not hungry!" replied Bononi loftily.

"Well, he's thirsty then; he'd like a drink o' water."

"Do you think I would give the poor beast cold water on a night like this?"

"I didn't say cold water," responded Roly-Poly. "Give him lu'-warm water."

"Lu'-warm water?"

"Certingly. Napoleon is sure to like his water lu'!"

Scientists are divided as to the possession by animals of the sense of humour, and, therefore, we cannot speak definitely regarding the motive of Napoleon's next action. We can only record that the donkey, upon hearing the last vile example of Roly-Poly's punning, walked gravely over to where the stout little clown was standing, turned his back upon him, and then, before Roly-Poly could get out of the way, planted his two hind hoofs gently but firmly on Roly-Poly's chest, sending him sprawling.

"That's what comes of outraging an animal's commonsense," observed Bononi.

Roly-Poly was about to make a retort, when suddenly from the direction of the arena came a low, ominous growl.

Instantly the clowns, like the rest of the artistes in the dressing-tent, hurried to the entrance of the ring. Almost facing them, on the opposite side of the arena, stood the lion's cage, in which for the past few minutes Professor Durnette had been going through his usual performance with the three forest-bred lions which the cage contained. It was evident as they looked that the exhibition was not going as smoothly as it generally did. The lions seemed sullen; they would not jump and caper as the professor wanted them to. Where usually Durnette only gave an order once, he had to-night to repeat it several times. It was not only the lions that were out of temper, either; plainly there was something the matter with their tamer, too. He stood with bloodshot and bleared eyes, glaring angrily at the animals, grinding his teeth occasionally when they failed to do his bidding promptly. With his feet planted wide apart, he made the sullen beasts creep one by one between his legs. Then he made them leap unwillingly over the short whip which he carried, and perform various other tricks which made up the nightly programme.

Two of the animals were rather more tractable than the third. This one—Monarch by name—a huge specimen of his tribe, lay prone upon the floor in a corner of the cage. Up to the present, finding the brute disinclined to move, Professor Durnette had left Monarch largely to himself, taking the two others through their tricks first; but now the time for Monarch's performance had arrived, and the tamer called him by name.

"Monarch!"

The lion did not budge.

"Monarch!"—still more loudly.

Still the animal lay sullenly, with its huge head upon its paws. Durnette took a step forward, and the whole arena echoed with the loud crack of his whip.

At the sound, Monarch turned his head slowly, rolled his great ferocious eyes upward, and raised his upper lip, disclosing the long yellow fangs; but, otherwise, he did not move. Again the whip cracked, louder than before, and this time the end of the lash just flicked the prostrate lion, stinging his hindquarters. Monarch raised his head, opened his cavernous mouth, and emitted a long, low, rumbling growl, such as had before attracted the attention of those in the dressing-tent.

The audience sat still, thrilled by that growl. Mr. Patross and the attendants in the ring looked anxiously in the direction of the cage. Mr. Adolph Cyrano, standing out of sight near the bandstand, advanced into the arena, and spoke to the ringmaster. The result of their hasty colloquy was, that Mr. Patross went to the door of the cage and suggested to Professor Durnette that he had better come out. Thinking of the audience, and wishing to avoid anything in the nature of a panic, Mr. Patross spoke in an undertone; but Durnette, being in a half-drunken condition, ignored this cautious manner, and replied aloud:

Come out? Not I! Not before I've given my show!

Monarch, come on, you obstinate devil!" He cracked his whip twice in succession, flicking the sulky lion harder than before.

Still the animal would not obey. Roused to fury by the brute's refusal to do his bidding, the tamer advanced to the corner in which Monarch lay.

"Come on!" he ordered. "Will you come or not?" He grasped his whip by the thong-end, and raised the loaded butt over the lion's head threateningly.

That was sufficient.

With the agility of his species, Monarch sprang to his feet, and sprang full on to the tamer.

The force with which the animal sprang knocked Professor Durnette backwards, and he fell on to the floor of the cage.

Instantly there ensued a wild uproar. The three caged beasts gave vent to the most terrifying roars;, the eyes of the angry Monarch blazed with fury. Every person in the audience had risen, and as they saw the angered lion leap on to the body of the prostrate tamer, all made a mad rush for the exits. Even the attendants, used as they were to the varying tempers of caged beasts, stood stockstill, thunderstruck for the moment by the lion's ferocious demeanour.

All except Clive Clare, who with the rest had been watching for the past few minutes. Instantly he realised Durnette's peril, and like a greyhound he now bounded across the ring and up the steps leading into the cage.

With one strong wrench he pulled open the outer door, closed it after him, and opened the inner door.

Even while everyone else in the arena stands paralysed with terror, another figure flits across the ring—a light, slender figure, in a dark dress—a girl this time!

She, like Clive, also mounts the steps, and places her hand on the door of the lions' cage. As she does so, Mr. Patross, partially regaining his presence of mind, catches sight of the girl's face, and shouts:

"Merciful Heaven! It's Miss Ellis!"

How May Ellis Saved Clive Clare.

In moments of panic it takes but a trifle to turn the tide of human emotion and action. When Professor Durnette had been hurled back by the force of the springing lion, the whole audience, roused to a state of unreflecting terror, had risen and commenced making for the exits in mad confusion. The prompt action of Clare Clive in bounding across the ring and entering the den of lions did something to stay the panic; and when the graceful and slender figure of May Ellis glided across the arena and followed Clive's footsteps right into the cage, the audience stood spellbound, watching and waiting with bated breath.

On entering, Clive had at once rushed to the tamer's assistance, regardless of his own great risk. His intrepid behaviour had met with a reward which might have been expected. Monarch, crouching over the prostrate form of Durnette, raised one huge paw, and brought it with mighty force against Clive's chest, knocking the wind clean out of him, and sending him unconscious to the floor. What would have happened then, with the two men half insensible on the floor of the cage, might indeed have been terrible; but even as the other hitherto tractable lions were about to spring, May Ellis entered.

With one little white hand raised, she commanded with all the sternness she could put into her sweet voice:

"Monarch, be quiet, sir! And you, Leo, and you, Prince! Quiet, I say!"

There was dignity in her tone—queenly dignity, which might have made a man hesitate and look at her if the words had been addressed to him. But that these three kings of the forest should heed her commands was truly wonderful; and yet heed them they did.

At the sound of her voice, the three great brutes looked quickly up at May. Prince—the animal nearest to her—actually seemed to smother a growl as, without one atom of fear in her manner, the girl advanced to where Monarch crouched over her father. Fearlessly, too, she sank on to her knees, put out one small hand on the huge head of the angry Monarch, smoothing his mane, while with the other she gently tried to raise the paw which lay firmly across the tamer's breast. As she did this she gazed unflinchingly into the animal's eyes, murmuring some words of soft reproach the while. It might have been a pet dog she was talking to, judging by the change that came into Monarch's eyes; for really, as in obedience to her gestures and words, the lion shifted his position, rose to his feet, and retired into a corner, he looked as docile and sheepish as a reproved pug.

"Get up, father!" the brave girl said, in an undertone. "Get out of the cage as quickly as you can, and take Clive Clare with you! He is insensible, I think. I'll see to the lions!"

Quickly and cautiously Professor Durnette did as he was bid. Although dazed, he had been quite conscious all the time. His knowledge of the ways of lions had informed him that his only chance was to lie still; and to this fact he owed his preservation from attack before the timely arrival of his daughter. While May fixed the animals—now cowed and huddled together in a corner—with her eyes, Durnette moved a couple of paces, lifted the unconscious form of Clive Clare, and a second later passed out of the cage, closing the barred doors behind him.

May Ellis was alone with the lions.

As they crouched together in the corner she gave a side-long glance over her shoulder, to see that her father and Clive were safe, and then she herself commenced backing towards the cage-door.

But she did not make her exit; for suddenly a change of purpose occurred to her. Once more she advanced into the middle of the den, threw out one arm, and called upon Monarch to come to her. The great brute, now looking thoroughly contrite, roused himself, and instantly did her bidding.

"Jump, Monarch—jump!" she ordered, holding up one of the big hoops which her father was wont to use in his performance. "Jump, I say!"

There was one look of final resentment in the lion's eyes, which was met with the steady, commanding gaze of the fearless girl, and then the huge, lithe, muscular form of the lion swept up and through the hoop.

And now the audience, previously held spellbound by the terror of the scene, regained their senses, and gave vent to a mighty roar of applause. May Ellis had not finished yet, however. What her father had failed to do with Monarch, she achieved triumphantly. Through every trick in the tamer's repertoire she put, not only the recalcitrant Monarch, but the other two lions—Leo and Prince—as well. Then, having patted the animals' heads, she quietly and gracefully slipped out of the den and shut the iron gates after her.

Now, indeed, were the tongues of the hundreds of people present loosened! They cheered and clapped until their throats were hoarse and their arms ached. Even after May, with a smile, in which sadness seemed mingled with her triumph, had bowed to the vast concourse and disappeared, the cheering still continued. Three times did she have to return to bow her acknowledgments.

Then, when finally the applause had subsided, she made her escape, and fled towards the improvised couch in the dressing-tent upon which Clive Clare had been laid. A moment later she was by his side, bathing his temples with water, and pouring a little brandy down his throat.

A hasty examination had revealed the fact that Clive, in addition to his bruised ribs, had sustained a severe cut upon his head in falling on the iron-lined floor of the cage; and this injury it was that had rendered him insensible. A doctor who chanced to have been among the audience was promptly on the spot. Carefully he examined Clive, and deftly bandaged up his wound.

"Mr. Clare will be all right in a few hours," he said to May Ellis, who returned a fervent "Thank Heaven!"

"He's bruised about the ribs," went on the doctor; "but he will soon recover from that. And the cut on his head isn't very serious. What would have happened, Miss Ellis, but for your timely entrance to the cage, I don't like to think. Mr. Clare and Professor Durnette must assuredly have been torn to pieces. You must allow me to congratulate you on performing what is quite the bravest deed I ever witnessed!"

May Ellis smiled.

"Oh, but there was really nothing in what I did!" she said simply. "You see, Professor Durnette is my father, and I know those lions as well as he does himself. I have been in their cage scores of times."

"Well, at any rate, Miss Ellis," rejoined the doctor, as he lifted his hat and prepared to leave, "you must permit me to retain my own opinion as to your great bravery."

Nor was the doctor the only person who held that opinion. For that night May Ellis had to receive the congratulations of Mr. Adolph Cyrano and her fellow-artistes, who all, with scarce an exception, were loud in her praises.

Napoleon's Queer Complaint.

"Hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw!"

It was the last day of Cyrano's Circus in Milchester, and the morning after the exciting adventure in the lions' cage. Roly-Poly, having strolled down from his lodgings to the circus, had his ears assailed by the asinine cry:

"Hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw!"

Putting as much gravity into his round, dimpled face as he could, Roly rushed into the tent from which the sound proceeded.

"Well, what is it, William?" he gasped concernedly.

"Eh? What? Wherefore this agitation, Joseph?" returned Bononi, somewhat puzzled.

"You called, William."

"Joseph, you are mistaken."

"But I heard you distinctly."

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" broke in Napoleon the donkey, who was standing near.

Roly-Poly's face puckered up into a broad grin.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in a relieved tone. "Now I see it all, Bill. It was Napoleon who called. Pray pardon me for my herror, but your dulcet voices are so much alike that——"

"Joseph," warned Bononi, with lofty dignity, "will you discontinue these vulgar insults, or do you hanker for severe corporal punishment?"

"Not for Joseph!" retorted Roly, edging away. "But, there, Bill, I reely beg yer pardon."

"Don't come begging here. It is no use begging here, Joseph."

"No, I forgot," observed Roly-Poly. "You never give anything away except yerself!"

"Really, William, you are a most extraordinary person. You talk like the wind."

"Like the wind? How?"

"Why, you always come to blow(s)."

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" brayed Napoleon once more.

"Mark how Napoleon protests!" said Bononi. "I was at at loss to understand why the animile was acting so strangely this morning; but it must be the pernicious influence of your feeble humour, Joseph. I have been trying to teach him a new accomplishment to-day, and he's as obstinate as a——"

"Donkey!" chipped in Roly.

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw-w-w-w!"

"There he goes again," remarked Bononi. "I can't think what ails the creature this morning."

"P'r'aps it's bra(y)in-fever?" suggested Roly. "Was he ever took like it so vi'lent before?"

"No not to my knowledge," replied the other gravely. "See, he can't keep still a moment. Now, you understand animiles, Joe—you know a lot about horses—so perhaps you know what's wrong with Napoleon. Seriously, Joe, what d'you think is the matter?"

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" again brayed the donkey.

Roly-Poly conjured up into his face an expression of grave concern.

"He's got the moozlems, Bill—that's what he's got, undoubtedly. "There's no mistakin' the symptoms."

It was now Bononi's turn to look anxious.

"Moozlems!" he said, aghast. "Is that catching, Bill?"

"All depends," answered Roly. "It's a sort o' donkey-measles."

"Do you think he'll be laid up?" faltered Bononi.

"Not if it's took in time," replied Roly, with the professional air of a physician. "He wants a dose o' powder, William—that's what he wants."

"Dose of powder!" exclaimed the horrified Bononi. "Do you want to blow Napoleon up, Joseph?"

"No, silly! I don't mean gunpowder. I mean a powder such as you and other children take when indisposed."

"But you don't give 'em to donkeys, do you?"

"Now, William, in the days o' yer tender youth didn't you ever take one?"

"Joseph, in the days of my innocent and tender youth I took dozens!"

"Then why shouldn't yer brother take one now?"

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw-aw-aw-aw!" broke in the donkey.

"Oh, lor', he's at it again!" moaned the melancholy clown. "You are cruel in your aspersions, Joseph; but I cannot resent them, because I want your help. How shall I give Napoleon a powder for these awful moozlems? Tell me, Joe—quick!"

"Patience, William, and I will show you. I shall be back in a mo' and a 'alf."

"Now," said Roly, when he presently returned, "here's a powder that'll quiet the pore thing's nerves, and this," he went on, as he rolled up a sheet of paper into a sort of tube—"this is the way to give it to him." Roly placed the harmless white powder inside the tube at one end. "Now, Bill," he proceeded, handing it to Bononi, "you place the other end of the tube in Napoleon's mouth—I'll hold his head—and then from your end blow the powder down his throat. Understand?"

Roly-Poly took hold of the donkey's head as he spoke, while Bononi arranged the tube in the manner indicated.

"Are you ready, William?"

"Quite ready, Joseph!"

And Bononi placed his lips to the end of the tube.

"Ready! Ready! Blow!"

(Don't fail to order next Monday's "MAGNET" now, if you haven't already done so. An enthralling instalment will appear next week; be sure you read it!)

MY READERS' PAGE

YOUR EDITOR.

The Editor is always pleased to hear from his chums, at home or abroad, and is only too willing to give his best advice to them if they are in difficulty or in trouble. . . . Whom to write to: Editor, The "Magnet" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.

CONTROLLER OF—
THE "MAGNET" LIBRARY, 1d. Every Monday.
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"THE PENNY POPULAR," 1d. Every Friday.
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FOR NEXT MONDAY:

"SPECIAL CONSTABLE COKER!"

By FRANK RICHARDS.

All "Magnet" readers will be moved to mirth by the screamingly funny antics of the great Coker, as set forth in next week's splendid long, complete story of Greyfriars School. Fired by patriotic motives, the high-and-mighty Horace hits upon the idea of forming a body of special constables, made up from the ranks of the Fifth Form. Harry Wharton & Co., after surviving their first convulsions of merriment, evolve a gigantic jape whereby the "specials" are taken down several pegs, and the Fifth-Formers are so completely humbled in the dust that nothing more is heard at Greyfriars of

"SPECIAL CONSTABLE COKER!"

EASTER GREETINGS FROM YOUR EDITOR.

Some months ago—when our Christmas Number made its appearance, to be precise—I urged my numerous readers not to let the war make them listless and despondent, but to have a jolly good time on that festive occasion, since, by so doing, they would be maintaining the cheerful traditions of the British race. A Britisher can generally be relied upon to "keep a stiff upper lip" when things look black, and the fact that a gruesome war is raging on the Continent should in no wise diminish our cheerfulness. It should rather stimulate and enhance it, for a depressing man or boy in these days is a menace to all he meets.

As at Christmastide, so at Easter I would recommend my chums to let nothing disturb the harmony of their holiday. I hope, now that one of the most dispiriting winters on record has passed, and spring is here with its fine, exhilarating influence and its call to the fresh, open air, my reader friends will see that they have a right ripping time of it. I feel satisfied that I have accomplished my part towards this end in providing for my chums the present superb number, which should prove a boon companion to thousands of boys and girls during their happy Easter exploits.

I say this, not out of any desire to blow my own trumpet, but that my readers may know that the preparation of a number such as this is anything but child's play. It entails much hard work and the burning of a considerable quantity of midnight oil, for the staff of the good old "Magnet" Library is not so large as of yore, several of my erstwhile assistants being engaged in something more exciting than wielding pens in an editorial office. And although my chums will soon be participating in all sorts of holiday revelry, there will be very little relaxation for those who are responsible for the production of the "Magnet" Library. Printers are very callous creatures—"How dare you, sir?"—(Printer of the "Magnet.")—and they have no scruples in keeping a harassed Editor up to the mark; and I am well aware that if this journal failed to appear on the market one of these fine Monday mornings, there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But I am happy in the assurance that my efforts to provide Magnetites with the absolute "best"—and nothing but the best—will be well repaid. During their holidays my chums are bound to make new acquaintances who do not read the "Magnet" and its companion papers. Thus a golden opportunity will be given to them of saying a good word for our popular little journal, and many new Magnetites will be added to the long list of loyal readers.

That is the favour, then, that I ask of you all this Eastertide, and I know that my chums will gladly do their Editor's bidding in this respect, and still further increase the popularity of their favourite school-story paper

In conclusion, I wish you all from my heart a right royal time, with plenty of good cheer, healthy recreation, and all that goes to make up a really first-class holiday.

AN IRISH CHUM'S COMMENTS.

The letter from a bogus schoolmaster which I reproduced on this page a few weeks back was hailed with mingled indignation and amusement by hundreds of my chums. Had S. P. S. been possessed of the average amount of commonsense, he would have thought twice before hurling his precious indictments against a paper of the reputation and standing of the "Magnet." I have pleasure in quoting an Irish girl chum's letter on the subject:

"Upper Clifton,
"Bangor, Down.

"Dear Editor,—As you say, it is hardly worth while to protest against S. P. S's ridiculous letter.

"Apart from the spelling, no gentleman would write such a silly, and, if I may say it, insulting letter. I should like to know where the 'bloodthirsty tails' come in.

"My sister and I, though we are 'only girls,' take in the 'Magnet,' 'Gem,' and 'Penny Popular' every week, and have never found anything in them the slightest bit 'bloodthirsty' or out of place. Wishing your splendid papers every success, I remain,

"Yours sincerely,
"'AN IRISH READER.'"

Thank you, my friend from the Emerald Isle! I agree with you that nothing could be more absurd than to class our splendid school stories as "bloodthirsty," but one must not take the wild and rambling statements of S. P. S. too seriously. I wonder if he still continues to confiscate the "Magnet" from "the most depravitated set of pupels he has ever, in his 30 year of experience as a master at a public school, come across"? I wonder, also, in which of our famous public schools the presence of such an ignorart and ill-bred person is tolerated?

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

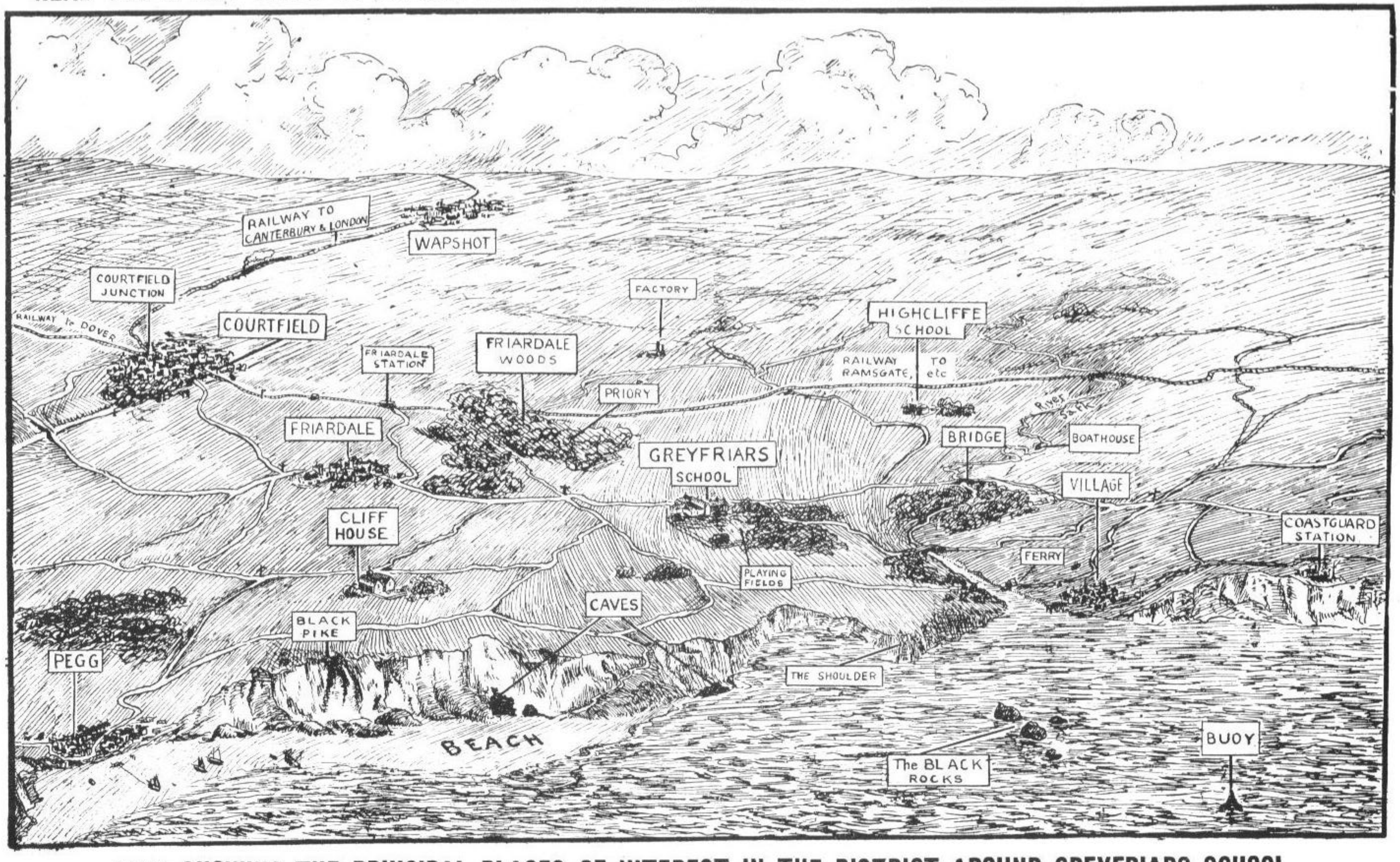
E. J. Hayward (Ilford).—"The Boys' Journal" has now been amalgamated with "The Dreadnought."

N. Robinson (Erdington).—You would require not only considerable talent, but also very powerful influence, in order to adopt the calling you name. I advise you to stick to your present position.

A. B.—Y. Z. (Montreal).—A good book dealing with ventriloquism is published by Messrs. Glaisher & Co., Charing Cross Road, London, W.C. Very many thanks for your cheery letter!

The Editor

Printed and Published by the Proprietors at The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, England. Agents for Australia: Gordon & Gotch, Ltd. Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z., for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd., Cape Town and Johannesburg. Subscription, 7s. per annum. Saturday, April 10th, 1915.



MAP SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL PLACES OF INTEREST IN THE DISTRICT AROUND GREYFRIARS SCHOOL.