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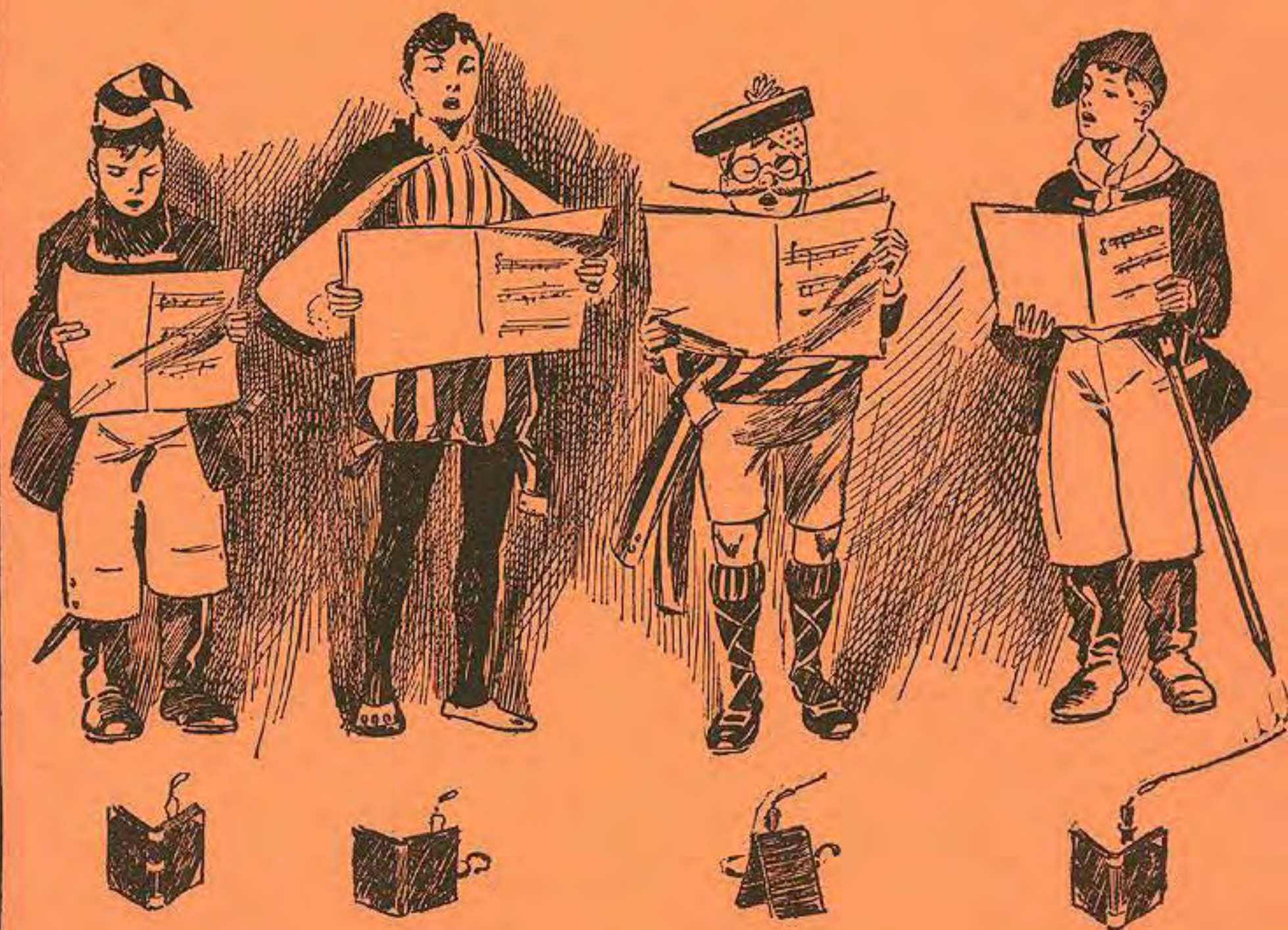
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Vol. 1.

WHARTON'S
OPERATIC COMPANY.

COMPLETE
SCHOOL
TALE.

By
FRANK
RICHARDS



NO. 1. FRANK NUGENT. NO. 2. HARRY WHARTON. NO. 3. BILLY BUNTER. NO. 4. BOB CHERRY.

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By **FRANK RICHARDS.**

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Harry Wharton's New Idea.

"**T**IME Harry's train was in!" said Bob Cherry, looking at his watch; and his words were followed by the rumble of a train down the line.

The boys from Greyfriars, standing on the platform of the little station of Friardale, were on the alert at once. There were four of them there—Bob Cherry, with his cap on the back of his curly head as usual, Nugent, with his cheery, good-tempered smile, Billy Bunter, blinking through his big spectacles, and Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh, the Nabob of Bhanipur.

Harry Wharton, the acknowledged chief of Study No. 1 in the Remove at Greyfriars, had been to London, and the chums of the Remove were waiting at the station to welcome him home.

"There she comes!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, as the steaming train came in sight down the line. "Now, be ready

to give Harry a cheer the moment he puts his head out of the window!"

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Nugent. "Hallo, there's his chivvy! Hip, pip!"

"Hurrah!"

Harry Wharton was looking out of the carriage-window, in the expectation of seeing his chums on the platform. There was a smile upon the boy's handsome face, and he waved his hand in greeting as he caught sight of the Removites. The latter waved their caps and shouted.

Harry Wharton had been away only a couple of days, but his chums had missed him. His uncle had taken him for a "little run" to town, and he had had a good time, but his look showed how glad he was to see Greyfriars and his chums again. The train slowed down, and the juniors rushed to open the door of Harry's carriage. Harry jumped out lightly, and was shaken hands with with great heartiness by the Removites two at a time.

"We're jolly glad to see your old chivvy again!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, shaking Harry's right hand.

"What-ho!" said Nugent emphatically, shaking his left. "Jolly glad!"

"The gladfulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, in his beautiful Hindoo-English. "The hurrahfulness of the jollyful meeting is great."

And as Harry had no more hands to be shaken, the dusky junior slapped him heartily on the back.

"Yes, rather!" exclaimed Billy Bunter. "We're glad to see you, Wharton, we are really! I say, you fellows, let a chap shake hands with the fellow!"

And Billy Bunter rushed up to a gentleman who had just alighted from the train and grasped his hand, and began to shake it effusively. Billy Bunter was extremely short-sighted, and his big spectacles seemed rather for ornament than use, as they did not assist his vision much. The man whose hand he was shaking stared at him in utter amazement.

"Jolly glad to see you, Wharton!" said Billy. "I suppose you will be standing a feed in the study to celebrate—"

Nugent caught the effusive Bunter by the collar and swung him away from the amazed stranger.

"That isn't Wharton, you ass!"

"Isn't it?" exclaimed Bunter, blinking in the bright May sun. "No more it is! I beg your pardon, sir! I'm sincerely sorry! Where is Wharton? Oh, here you are! We're all jolly glad to see you, Wharton; and if you are going to stand a feed in honour of your return, I'll cut ahead and get the things from the tuck-shop!"

"Oh, cheese it, Billy!" growled Bob Cherry.

Bunter blinked at him indignantly.

"I only want to save time," he said. "If there's going to be a feed, I should like to have it ready for you fellows when you get to Greyfriars, that's all. I was thinking that it was very thoughtful of me. If that's all the thanks I get—"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"It's a good idea, anyway," he said; "and I want to speak to you fellows, and I can't do it while Bunter's here, as he does all the talking—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"So he had better cut ahead and see to the grub. I'm getting peckish, too, as a matter of fact. My uncle tipped me a sovereign when he saw me into the train, and so I am in funds!"

"Good! Got any uncles like that to give away?" asked Nugent.

"There you are, Billy. Buzz off!"

"I'll buzz off fast enough, Wharton. Am I to spend all this?"

"No, you young villain; only half of it!"

"I thought you might like to have a really ripping feed to celebrate your return to Greyfriars!"

"I haven't been on an expedition to the North Pole," said Wharton, laughing. "And if you can't get up a decent feed for ten bob, you can leave the job to me."

"Oh, I can manage it, Wharton, first-rate, only—"

"Well, go and manage it. Mind, I shall want a half-sov. change."

"Right you are!"

And Billy Bunter darted off. He was not usually an active boy, but when he was making the arrangements for a study feed he could be as quick and alert as anybody.

"Come on!" said Nugent, linking his arm in Harry's. "We'll stroll down to Greyfriars and get in good time for the feed."

"Just a moment! Where's my bag?"

"I've got it," said Bob Cherry. "I'm going to carry it for you."

"Where's my book?"

"Your book! What book?"

"It's on the seat in the carriage. Hand it out, Inky, will you?"

"Certainly!"

The Nabob of Bhanipur handed out Harry Wharton's book. The Removites glanced at it in some curiosity. They had expected to see a copy of "Pluck" or "The Gem," but Wharton's book was of far greater magnitude. It was of quarto size, and rather thick, in stiff cloth covers, with a brown-paper wrapping outside.

"What on earth is that?" asked Nugent, as the nabob handed it to Wharton, who put it carefully under his arm.

Harry Wharton smiled.

"It's my score."

"Your what?"

"My score."

"Score! A cricket score?"

"Ha, ha—no! A vocal score! I'll explain later. I've

got it in connection with a new idea I've thought of. Come on!"

The juniors left the station. Harry Wharton was in a thoughtful mood, and his chums looked at him, and at the volume under his arm, in great curiosity.

"Well, what's the idea?" asked Bob Cherry, as they strolled down the village street towards the leafy lane that led to Greyfriars.

"You know I've been for a run up to town with my uncle," said Wharton. "We had a run round—saw the Zoo, and the waxworks, and the Tower of London, and so on. And last evening we went to the opera."

"My hat!"

Wharton coloured a little.

"You know I am a little bit musical," he said modestly; "as a matter of fact, that night at the opera was a greater treat to me than anything else I saw in town. We saw 'Carmen'—and it was ripping, too. Maria Gay was Carmen, and Zematello was singing Don Jose's part—and I wish you had been there. And an idea struck me—"

"What's the idea?"

"Why shouldn't we do something of the sort at Greyfriars?"

His chums stared.

"Something of what sort?" asked Nugent.

"Something in the operatic line," said Harry Wharton boldly. "We can sing, all of us—I've heard Bob hacking away at the Toreador song—"

"Thank you!" said Bob Cherry.

"With a little practice you could do it," said Harry Wharton. "I was thinking of myself for the hero, Don Jose—the soldier chap, you know, who falls in love with Carmen and deserts. Billy Bunter would do for Remendado—he's a funny little beggar. We could get up a company and perform 'Carmen' in the common-room—"

"By Jove, that would take the shine out of the Upper Fourth Musical Society!" said Bob Cherry, with a grin. "They gave the 'Beggar's Opera' last term, you know, and the whole school voted it rotten. They've never dared to tackle Grand Opera."

"Nothing venture, nothing win."

"That's true enough. I don't see why we shouldn't learn up the parts and give a performance of 'Carmen,'" said Nugent thoughtfully. "It's a ripping opera, and everybody knows something from it, and that's an advantage, as it would come familiar to them. Is that the score you've got under your arm?"

"Yes," said Harry, opening the volume. "I bought it in Berners Street on purpose, when I thought of the idea. It's the vocal score."

"Why, it's in French!"

"Of course it is. The opera was written in French."

Nugent whistled.

"Are you thinking of performing it in French?"

"Of course."

"But—"

"It will make the fellows polish up their French a little, and will do them lots of good in that way."

"But what price the audience?"

"The audience will be admitted free of charge."

"I mean, how will they stand the French? They won't understand French—especially Lower Fourth French."

"They'll have to the best they can," said Wharton. "Anyway, there will be the music for those who can't understand the words. Heaps of people go to Covent Garden and listen to operas they don't understand a word of. It's the music they want."

"Well, there's something in that; but where are you going to get an orchestra?" said Nugent dubiously.

Harry laughed.

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"I'm not going to try to get up an orchestra. That would be rather too big an order even for the Greyfriars Remove. Mr. Quelch would let us have his piano. He offered to let me use it for practice."

"And who will play?"

"My dear kid, there are lots of fellows at Greyfriars who can rattle off a piano accompaniment to a song or two," said Harry. "But I was thinking that we might have a professional, to make sure of getting the thing done properly. We could get a chap from the music shop in Friardale to come for the whole evening for a guinea, and it's worth clubbing up for, to make the thing go."

"Something in that."

"We should have to stipulate that he knew the music, and rehearsed it or something," said Bob Cherry. "You know what these cheap accompanists are, especially in the country. They give you a polka to the time of the 'Dead March in Saul,' and rattle you off a dirge at waltz time."

"We'll see that he's up to snuff. If he doesn't keep time we'll kill him and get a new one," said Harry Wharton. "But I say, what do you think of the wheeze?"

"It won't be easy."

"I don't expect it to be easy."

"Well, it's a jolly good one! Dabney, Temple & Co., of the Upper Fourth put on a lot of side over their musical society, and this will take the shine out of them. It's the first time Grand Opera has ever been performed at Greyfriars."

"That's so; and, if it's successful, we can go further, and perhaps later on give a performance of Wagner's Ring."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Still, we'll be satisfied with 'Carmen,' so far. Wagner is a little bit above the Remove, I suppose."

"Ha, ha! I fancy so—a trifle. Anyway, 'Carmen' will do to go on with. But about doing it in French?"

"My dear chap, it was written in French by Bizet, and so there's no alternative."

"But there are translations."

"You know what translations are! All the spirit of the original is lost. I've seen two translations of 'Carmen,' and both very weak stuff. Besides, the Wharton Operatic Company—"

"The what?"

"The Wharton Operatic Company."

"Well, that's a jolly good title, anyway!"

"The Wharton Operatic Company is not going to descend to the level of a travelling 'Grand-Opera-in-English' Company," said Harry, with an expressive sniff. "Grand Opera in English may be a good thing, but in the original it must naturally be better. People who don't know French and Italian can listen to the music. What's the good of spoiling a good song by sticking it into English words that don't suit it? Besides, the Upper Fourth fellows can only perform in English. Grand Opera in the original will knock them into a cocked hat."

"Well, there's something in that."

"I should say so. Anyway, I think you'll agree that we ought to go in for it?"

Bob Cherry grinned.

"There's one thing that's jolly certain," he remarked, "and that is that there will be some fun to be got out of it, and so I vote for 'Carmen.'"

"And my vote is coincident with that of the esteemed Cherry," said Hurree Singh. "The idea is really rippingfull."

And the chums of the Remove strode on towards Greyfriars, eagerly discussing the new idea.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Temple, Dabney & Co. are not Pleased.

"OH, so you're back?"

It was Temple, of the Upper Fourth Form at Greyfriars, who spoke, as the chums of the Remove came in at the ancient gate of Greyfriars. Temple was captain of the Upper Fourth, and between him and Wharton, who was captain of the Remove, there had been much warfare, generally ending to the advantage of the Remove.

Temple stopped in front of the chums, and stared at the score under Wharton's arm. He was rather musical, was Temple, and knew a score when he saw one.

Dabney and Fry were with him, and they stared at Wharton's score, too. They were the leading lights of the Upper Fourth Musical Society.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Yes," he said cheerfully, "I'm back."

"Did you go to the Zoo while you were in London?" asked Temple, with interest.

"Oh, yes!"

"And they let you come away again?"

"Yes; and your relations in the monkey-house sent their kind regards."

Temple turned red as the Removites chuckled.

"What's that you've got under your arm, kid?" he asked, changing the subject.

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"Oh, something you wouldn't understand!" said Harry Wharton loftily.

"What the dickens do you mean?"

"It's an operatic score."

"Well, you young ass, do you think I don't understand that a thousand times better than you do?" demanded Temple, rather excitedly. "I got up an opera here last term, you young rotter!"

"Yes; an old thing in English!"

"Oh, I suppose you could do it in German or Italian?" said Temple.

"Yes, rather, if we liked. But, as it happens, 'Carmen' was written in French, and we're going to perform it in that language," said Harry Wharton calmly.

Temple gasped.

"'Carmen'?"

"Yes."

"You're going to perform 'Carmen'?"

"Certainly!"

"In French?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You hear him, Dab?"

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's rather rich, isn't it?"

"Oh, rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha! How much French do you young worms know? You couldn't ask for your dinner in a French restaurant, let alone perform a French opera."

"I can speak Frenchfully!"

"We're all pretty strong on that language," said Wharton. "Nothing like the ongs and dongs you chaps work off and call French!"

"But you have to sing in an opera. How are you going to sing?"

"With our throats, you know!"

"Ass. I mean you can't sing! I remember hearing Cherry trying the 'Toreador' song once. It would have killed the Toreador if he had heard it!"

"Look here," began Bob Cherry wrathfully, "I've got a jolly good baritone—"

"Yes, sometimes it's a baritone, I know, and sometimes it's a bass, and at other times a high tenor!" sniggered Dabney. "I've heard it!"

"Well, that will add to the variety," said Harry Wharton. "Let's come by, kids! We've got to get to practice, you know!"

"And you're really going to perform an opera?"

"Of course, we are!"

"My hat! We'll come to see you do it. It will be a sight for the gods, and men, and little fishes, and no mistake!"

"You will be welcome to come, if you behave yourselves. We shall expect you to put on clean collars, and wash your hands!"

"Why, you—you—"

"Come on, chaps; we can't waste any more time with these chumps!" said Harry Wharton. "But I'll tell you what, Temple. I believe you fellows have done some singing, and, with a little trouble, I might be able to knock you into shape—"

"You—you—"

"And then if you rubbed up your French a bit—"

"You—you cheeky young—"

"And then, perhaps, I could find you some small parts, if you like to join in the thing!" said Harry Wharton genially. "We shall want a chorus, of course, and you fellows could do that all right, if you worked up to it! A dozen of the Upper Fourth could be used for the 'Chorus of Boys' in the first act—"

"You cheeky young villain!" roared Temple.

"Oh, if you don't like to accept the offer, don't! We can find plenty of kids in the Remove who'll do it better; but I thought we might do you a good turn! Come on, chaps!"

And the Removites walked on, leaving the Upper Fourth fellows almost speechless.

"Well, of all the cheek!" said Temple, when he recovered his breath. "We're the Musical Society of the Upper Fourth—"

"And he offered us small parts!"

"'Chorus of Boys' in the first act!"

"The cheeky young rotter!"

"I'll tell you what," said Temple. "If they gave this performance, and it was a success, it would take the shine out of anything we've done. But it can't be a success."

"Of course, it can't."

"Anyway, we'll keep an eye open, and see if we can get a chance to show the rotten, cheeky kids up!" said Temple. "If they don't muck up the opera themselves, we may get a chance to muck it up for them!"

"That's a good idea."

"But I say," said Fry, "very likely the chaps were only gassing to get our rag out."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Dabney.

Temple nodded.

"It's quite possible," he said. "But that chap Wharton's got cheek enough for anything!"

But when the chums of the Upper Fourth entered the School House a little later, they found that there was no doubt upon the point as to whether the Removites were in earnest or not.

A crowd was gathered round the notice-board in the hall, and Temple & Co. strolled up to see what the attraction was. A paper in Harry Wharton's hand was pinned up there among the school and cricket notices.

"NOTICE!"

"The Wharton Operatic Company will shortly be giving a representation of Bizet's opera, 'Carmen,' in the Remove-room at Greyfriars. Cast will be announced later. No charge will be made for admission, as the Wharton Operatic Company are working solely in the interests of Art, and not for reward. All lovers of Grand Opera are cordially invited to attend.

"(Signed) H. WHARTON,
"Manager."

Temple stared. Dabney whistled.

"They mean it!" said Fry.

There was a buzz of discussion before the notice-board over the startling announcement. The general opinion seemed to be that the kids in the Remove were growing a bigger nerve than ever; but, at the same time, there was little doubt that the programme announced would be carried out, in some fashion or other, by H. Wharton, manager."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Wharton Operatic Company Get to Business.

THERE was a cheering scent of hot tea in Study No. 1 at Greyfriars. Five juniors sat round the tea-table, looking very contented. The chums had arrived before Bunter had the tea ready, and Harry had filled up the interval by writing out the notice which had attracted so much attention downstairs. Now the tea was made, and Bob Cherry had filled the cups, and the plates were generously plenished, and, as Hurree Jamset Ram Singh remarked, everything was gardenfully lovely.

Harry Wharton glanced round the cheerful tea-table with much satisfaction.

"It's good to be here again," he remarked. "I had a nice little run up to town, but I'm glad to see your old chivvies again. Pass the marmalade, Bob!"

"Right-ho, my lord! Here you are!"

"The joyfulness of the occasion is only equalled by the excellentness of the grubful tommy!" remarked the Nabob of Bhanipur. "These bananas are toasted in really rippingful style, my esteemed Bunter."

"Glad you like them," said Billy Bunter modestly. "There are some things I can do, and cooking is one of them."

"It's a jolly good feed!" said Nugent. "So it ought to be for ten bob!"

"By the way, where's my change?" said Wharton.

Bunter blinked through his spectacles.

"I'm sincerely sorry, Wharton——"

"Now then, Billy, I gave you particular instructions——"

"I carried them out, Wharton; but——"

"Well, where's the change?"

"There isn't any!"

"How's that?" demanded Harry.

"Out!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"You see," explained Bunter, "I have been expecting a postal-order for a rather considerable amount for some days past, and owing to some delay in the post it hasn't arrived. I had promised to settle Mrs. Mimble's account at the tuck-shop to-day, thinking the postal-order was certain to come this morning——"

"You young Owl!"

"But it didn't, and Mrs. Mimble kept my account out of the sovereign. It was mean, wasn't it? There was only eighteenpence change, and I thought it wasn't worth while bringing that to you, so I bought young Norton's penknife. I wanted a penknife, you know, and I might never have had another opportunity."

"Well, of all the cheek!" gasped Nugent.

"I don't see it, Nugent. It seems to me that I am very unfortunate. Of course, it's all right about Wharton's change; I am going to settle up with him when my postal-order comes."

"Somewhere about the Day of Judgment, I suppose?" grinned Bob Cherry.

"I ought to have known better than to trust the Owl," said Harry, half-vexed and half-laughing. "Never mind."

"Of course, I am going to settle when——"

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in!" sang out Harry Wharton.

The door opened and Hazeldene of the Remove came in. He coloured a little and took a backward step as he saw the feast.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I——"

"Come in," said Harry cordially. "Come and have tea; there's plenty."

"I didn't know——"

"Of course you didn't," said Harry, rising and forcing Hazeldene into a seat at the table. "You haven't had your tea, have you?"

"No, but——"

"Then here you are! Another cup of tea, Bunt!"

"Certainly, Wharton."

"Oh, very well," said Hazeldene; "thank you very much! I didn't know you had a celebration on, or I'd have called later. I just looked in to speak to you as soon as I knew you were back, Wharton, that's all."

"I understand. Try these sausage-rolls."

"Thanks, I will."

"And the ham-pies, Vaseline," said Billy Bunter. "I can recommend the ham-pies; I selected them awfully carefully. You know Mrs. Mimble always works off some old, stale one among the new ones if she gets a chance. I'll guarantee that all these are new and fresh. There's your tea."

"I hear you've got a new wheeze on," said Hazeldene, as he stirred his tea. "What's this about the Wharton Operatic Company?"

Harry laughed.

"It's a genuine thing, Hazeldene. We're going to give a performance of 'Carmen' in French, singing the parts, you know, in the proper style. And you are just the fellow I want to see, as a matter of fact. You can sing?"

"Well, I sing in the choir on a Sunday, as you know."

"Good! That's a bit different from operatic singing, but if you can sing, you can sing, anyway. We want you to take a part."

"Willingly. My French is a bit weak——"

"You will have to give it some physical culture, then; we're going to sing the whole thing in French. But what I wanted particularly to speak about was Miss Hazeldene. You told me your people were living near Greyfriars now?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, what do you say to asking Marjorie to take a part in the performance?" said Harry. "It would be quite possible for her to come over here on a half-holiday for a rehearsal, and she could get the score to learn up her part at home."

"Ripping idea!" exclaimed Bob Cherry and Nugent together. Marjorie Hazeldene was a great friend of the chums of Study No. 1.

Hazeldene nodded thoughtfully.

"Marjorie would willingly do anything to help," he said. "She knows French, too; better than I do. She was very good at amateur theatricals last Christmas at home. But what part would you give her?"

Harry wrinkled his brows reflectively.

"Well, Carmen's part wouldn't be nice for Marjorie," he said. "She could do Micaela—you know, Don Jose's old sweetheart, who comes to find him in the smuggler's den in the Spanish mountains. We shall have to cut down the opera fearfully to make it short enough for performance here, and we can cut down Carmen's part and leave Micaela a bigger one in proportion, so as to give Marjorie a chance."

"That's a good idea."

"Good! Will you write to Marjorie and ask her, then? As for Carmen, we shall have to think about that; I don't know who can play that character yet. I suppose we shall have a boy for it. There's young Desmond; he's got a smooth face and a high voice, and he'd be glad to try, anyway. Finished your tea, chaps? We might as well get the parts allotted, and have the first rough rehearsal this evening."

"Good!"

"I say, Wharton, I haven't quite finished yet!"

"You never have, Billy! You can finish out in the passage, if you like. Shove the things into the cupboard now, kids, and let's get the table back."

The study was soon cleared. Harry Wharton opened the score at the first page.

"Now, as to the parts. I was thinking of myself for Don Jose——"

"Passed," said Nugent. "Go on."

"Bob Cherry as the Toreador."

"Hear, hear!" from Bob Cherry.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Oh, don't bother now, Billy!"

"But it's important."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"But it's about the opera, and it's an important point."
 "Go on, then; but buck up! What is it?"
 "You're allotting the part of the Toreador to Bob Cherry—"

"Yes."
 "I really think, Wharton, that I could do the part of the Toreador. I don't know the part, and I've never seen it performed, but I really think I could do it."
 "Scat! Now, as to—"
 "But, really, Wharton—"
 "Ass! Did you ever hear of a bull-fighter in spectacles?"
 "Well, I could leave the spectacles off for the performance."

"Yes, and blunder all over the stage and bump into everybody! This is going to be an operatic performance, not a bumping match."

"But really—"
 "Cheese it, Billy! I'm going to give you a part; but you're not going to be the Toreador, so don't bother. Now, as to Nugent, I think he will make up very well as Le Dancairo—a sort of smuggler chief."

"Right-ho!" said Nugent. "I rather fancy myself as a Spanish smuggler!"

"We want a funny little beggar for the part of Le Remendado," said Harry. "That will about suit Billy, and we can pass the spectacles."

"Really, Wharton, I think—"
 "Remendado's your part, Billy, and you can take it or leave it."

"What does he do?" asked Bunter. "Is it a big part?"

"Oh, no; but it can be made funny, and you're funny enough to start with, so it will be a success in that way!"

"Funny enough to have a Spanish smuggler with a full-moon face and a pair of spectacles big enough to eat your dinner off!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Oh, I don't mind!" said Bunter. "Is there any feeding in the play? If there is you ought to arrange to have me on in those scenes. I could do that very naturally."

"I've no doubt you could, but you won't get a chance. We can settle Morales and Zuniga and the other minor characters afterwards," said Harry Wharton. "Now, about the girls. Micaela is a nice part for any girl, and if Hazeldene can answer for his sister—"

"That's all right," said Hazeldene.

"I say," said Bob Cherry grinning, "I've been looking through the score, and isn't Micaela the girl who kisses chaps for their mothers?"

Harry Wharton turned red.

"Well, Micaela has to kiss Don Jose," he admitted, "but that can be cut out. Let's get on with the washing. We shall have to dress up young Desmond as Carmen, that's all; and two Remove kids can take the parts of Frasquita and Mercedes in girls' clothes. We can get the costumes from the place in Friardale, and send them back when the performance is over. Now for the programme!"

"Here's a pencil."

"Thanks."

Harry Wharton wrote down a list of names of the dramatis personæ, and of the amateur operatic singers who were to play them.

"There you are!"

The list ran as follows:

"'CARMEN.' By Georges Bizet. Performance by the Wharton Operatic Company.

Don Jose	H. Wharton.
Escamillo, the Toreador	Robert Cherry.
Le Dancairo	F. Nugent.
Le Remendado	W. Bunter.
Zuniga	Peter Hazeldene.
Carmen	Micky Desmond.
Micaela	Marjorie Hazeldene.
Frasquita and Mercedes	Two Remove Kids.'

"What do you think of that, kids?"

"Good!" said five voices.

"Goodful, indeed!" said the Nabob of Bhanipur. "But where do I come in, my esteemed and chumful friends?"

Harry Wharton looked rather puzzled.

"That's the difficulty," he said. "We can't leave Inky out of it, but how are we to put him in?"

"The dusky complexion is hiddenfully concealed by the greasy paint," the nabob suggested.

"Oh, it's not your beautiful colour that's the difficulty, but your still more beautiful language!" said Harry. "You see, your English is remarkable—"

"And your French would probably be remarkabler," said Bob Cherry.

"I studied English under the best native master in Bengal."

"Yes, and the result does him credit; but French—"

"I do not wish to blow my own praises trumpetfully," said Hurree Singh modestly, "but I speak the Frenchful tongue as excellently as I talk in the flowing language of this esteemed and respectable country."

The juniors chuckled.

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"I don't know whether that's quite up to the mark. However, we'll give you the part of Morales, and perhaps we can make it a non-speaking part," said Harry Wharton thoughtfully. "We can't leave Inky out, anyway. That's settled, then."

"And now for the first rehearsal!" said Bob Cherry.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Capturing the Costumes.

THE notice on the board had attracted general attention at Greyfriars, and the Wharton Operatic Company found themselves the centre of a great deal of attention.

Temple, Dabney & Co. shrugged their shoulders at the whole business; without, however, any perceptible effect upon the Operatic Company.

The Removites went calmly on their way, in spite of the shrugging of Upper Fourth shoulders.

Fellows listened in the passage outside Study No. 1 to the rehearsals, and chuckled over them. They listened when the Removites were at the piano in Mr. Quelch's room, hard at practice, and chuckled again. Mr. Quelch was the master of the Remove, and something of a pianist, and he had given the boys permission to use his instrument when he was not in his room—a permission of which they took full advantage. Harry Wharton played the piano very well, and on these occasions he "thumped the ivory," as Bob Cherry elegantly expressed it.

The swinging melodies of Bizet's music naturally caught on among the juniors, and fellows went about the school humming them; and even hummed them in class, sometimes bringing down upon themselves the wrath of the Form-masters. Even Temple, Dabney & Co. caught up the music, and hummed and whistled fragments of the "Habanera," and the "Seguidilla," and the Toreador Song, in season and out of season.

Meanwhile, Hazeldene had written to his sister, and Marjorie had replied that she would willingly do all she could to help the Wharton Operatic Company on with the good work.

The stage-managing was in the hands of Harry Wharton, and he bargained with the costumier in Friardale for the loan of the costumes, and obtained them at a reasonable figure, especially considering the fact that some had to be sent for to London.

The costumes had seen service, certainly. But, after all, Spanish smugglers were not supposed to be dressed in Sunday best.

There was much excitement in Study No. 1 at Greyfriars on the day when the costumes were expected.

The local costumier had written to say that they were ready; and that they would be delivered by the carrier from Friardale, and the chums of the Remove were in a state of great expectancy during afternoon school.

When the Remove were dismissed that afternoon Harry Wharton met Temple, Dabney, & Co. in the hall as he came out of the Lower Fourth Class-room.

Temple beckoned to him.

"I say, Wharton, I want to speak to you."

"Fire away!" said Harry cheerfully.

"You seem to be in earnest over this operatic business," the captain of the Upper Fourth remarked, in a careless sort of way.

"Only just found that out?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Don't you interrupt. I'm speaking to Wharton. I was going to say, Wharton, that we members of the Upper Fourth Musical Society are always willing to encourage budding talent, and we don't mind helping you in this matter, if you like."

"Thanks!" said Wharton. "But how do you mean?"

"Well, I suppose you realise by this time that you've taken on a rather big job?"

"Oh, yes; we knew that all along!"

"We're ready to help you. This idea of performing Grand Opera at Greyfriars is not a bad one, if it's properly handled. We are willing to take it up—"

"Go hon!" said Bob Cherry.

"Please don't interrupt, Cherry. I say we're willing to take it up, and give you kids some coaching. We should act the principal characters, but we could give you the minor parts."

"You're too generous, Temple!"

"Well, you know there's the chorus of boys, the soldiers, the smugglers, and the crowd at the bullfight," said Temple. "There will be room for half the kids in the Remove to fill up the small parts—"

"Ha ha, ha! What's the good of filling up the small parts, while you fellows make a muck of the big parts?" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Shut up, Cherry! I'm talking to Wharton. We should

save the thing from being a failure in this way, and we're quite willing to do it."

"I dare say you are," said Harry Wharton. "But the difficulty is that we're not at all willing to agree to anything of the sort."

"If you're going to spoil a rather good idea out of sheer vanity——"

"We are going to risk it, anyway."

"I tell you, Wharton, the Upper Fourth Musical Society is willing to take up the matter and make a success of it!"

"The Upper Fourth Musical Society can go and eat coke," said Harry Wharton. "No time to jaw now, either. We've got the costumes coming by the carrier, and we're going down to the gates to meet him. Come on, chaps!"

"But, I say——"

"Ta-ta!"

The chums of the Remove walked away. Temple and Dabney looked at one another in great disgust.

"Conceited asses!" growled Temple.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"They're really going it strong, though," said Temple. "The costumes coming down, are they? Wish we had a chance of——"

Dabney looked at him quickly.

"What are you thinking of, old chap?"

"Well, if we could get hold of the costumes, we could give those young rotters—a sort of Guy Fawkes procession."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But I suppose they'll be on the look-out," said Temple.

"Hallo, what's that row?"

The chiefs of the Upper Fourth looked out into the Close. A trap had driven up, and Harry Wharton was assisting a charming girl to alight.

"Oh, it's Hazeldene's sister!"

Dabney pulled his friend by the arm.

"I say, Temple, here's our chance!"

"What do you mean?"

"They're bound to stop talking to Marjorie Hazeldene a bit. Let's get down to the road and look for the carrier."

"Good idea! Come on!"

The two Upper Fourth juniors darted away. Meanwhile, the chums of the Remove were gathered round Marjorie Hazeldene. The girl shook hands with them all in turn with a bright smile.

"It's ripping of you to come down to help us!" Harry Wharton said, after greetings had been exchanged. "Have you been looking up your part?"

"Oh, yes!" smiled Marjorie. "I am already very well acquainted with Micaela's part. But who is playing Carmen herself?"

"Young Desmond, of the Remove. It's best to have a boy for that part, as I have to murder him in the last act, and I'd rather murder a boy than a girl; though, of course, it won't hurt him. He's got a smooth chivvy—I mean face," said Harry, blushing, "and he'll make up very well as Carmen, I think. The only difficulty is that he's got an Irish accent, only perhaps that won't be noticed when he speaks French."

The girl laughed.

"You have been rehearsing?"

"Oh, yes! That reminds me, the costumes are coming down now. The carrier may be here with them any minute now. Yours will be among them. Mr. Quelch allows us to hold the dress rehearsal to-day in his room, as we want the piano. You will be able to play for me and give me a chance of singing to music. We shall have a professional accompanist on the great night, of course. I have done all the thumping so far, except when Mr. Quelch has found time to play a little for us. He's awfully good."

"It's time for the carrier now," Bob Cherry remarked.

"Then you might run down to the gate and get the parcel when he brings it," said Harry Wharton. "You three could go together, as the package may be heavy."

Bob Cherry grinned.

"I was just thinking, Wharton, that you and Nugent and Hurree Singh might like to go."

Nugent grinned, too.

"What a curious coincidence!" he remarked. "It had just crossed my mind that you three chaps were the ones who ought to go!"

"The coincidentfulness is remarkable," purred the nabob. "The sameful thought crossed me mindfully, my esteemed chums."

Marjorie laughed.

"Suppose you all go?" she suggested. "I must go in now and speak to Mrs. Locke. I have promised to have tea with her."

The juniors looked blank.

"What about tea in the study?" said Harry Wharton.

The girl smiled and shook her head.

"Mrs. Locke asked me. Au revoir."

And she entered the house.

"May as well go down for the costumes," said Harry

Wharton rather glumly. "I was looking for a nice tea in the study same as we had last time. Never mind. Let's get the costumes. It will be a ripping rehearsal."

The Removites strolled down to the gate. They passed Temple and Dabney, and glanced at them rather curiously. The two Upper Fourth fellows were carrying a bulky parcel between them.

"Hallo!" said Harry. "What have you got there?"

"Oh, nothing in particular!" said Temple carelessly. "I say, if you decide to accept the offer I made you, it's still open for the present."

"Thank you for nothing!"

The Removites walked on to the gate. They looked out into the road, and Harry Wharton uttered an exclamation.

"There's the carrier's cart—and it's going away!"

"The ass has forgotten, and passed without delivering the parcel!" exclaimed Nugent.

"Perhaps he's left it with Gosling at the lodge," suggested Bob Cherry.

"The probableness is great."

"Yes, very likely assented Wharton. "Let's go and ask Goosey, anyway."

Gosling, the school porter of Greyfriars, greeted the juniors sourly. He was not fond of the Remove, and he was especially not fond of the chums of Study No. 1. To their question as to whether a parcel had arrived for them he replied only with a surly shake of the head.

"Nothing?" asked Harry Wharton blankly.

"No, nuffin'!" said Gosling. "So there you har!"

"But I was expecting a parcel from the carrier."

"Can't help that, can I?" said Gosling aggressively.

"But didn't he stop?"

"Oh, yes; he stopped!"

"Didn't he leave anything here?"

"He left a parcel for me, and a parcel for the young gents who was waiting for him at the gate," said Gosling—"leastways, I s'pose it was for them as they took it."

Harry Wharton gave a start.

"Do you mean Dabney and Temple?"

"Yes," said Gosling; "they was the two. They was waiting for the carrier."

"The rotters!" Harry Wharton hurried out of the porter's lodge with his chums. "You see what has happened, you kids?"

"Temple and Dabney have scoffed our costumes?"

"That's it! I'll wager a lot that it was our parcel that they took from the carrier! He wouldn't know them by sight, and the fact that they were waiting for him would make him think that it was all right. You remember, we saw them lugging a big parcel across the Close a few minutes ago."

"Our parcel, by Jove!"

Harry Wharton broke into a run.

"Come on! We must get it back before they have time to damage it, if that's what they mean to do! Follow your leader!"

The chums of the Remove did not need bidding twice. They dashed away at top speed after Harry Wharton, their destination being the Upper Fourth study shared by Temple and Dabney.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Brought to Book.

"GOT it!"

It was Temple who uttered the words, in tones of great satisfaction.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

Temple chuckled as he bent over the opened parcel on the table in the study. There were the costumes designed for the representation of "Carmen," all neatly folded up. The chiefs of the Upper Fourth had made the capture easily enough, in all conscience.

"Good!" chuckled Temple. "We'll rig up each costume with stuffing and sticks and things, like a guy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We can get Guy Fawkes masks to make the faces."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then we'll stick them all up in the Close, labelled with the names of those asses!" grinned Temple.

"Good wheeze!"

"I say, better lock the door, in case they should suspect we've got the things, though."

"Yes, that's a good idea."

Dabney turned the key in the lock. The chums of the Upper Fourth began to unpack the costumes. They were still chuckling over the intended joke on the Remove, when a knock came at the door.

"Who's there?" called out Temple guardedly.

"It's I—Wharton."

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you."

"Speak from that side of the door, then," said Temple, with a chuckle. "I can hear you very well, Wharton."

There was a thump on the door.

"Look here, you've got our parcel from the carrier."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've got our costumes for 'Carmen.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you going to give them up?"

"Not at present."

"Open this door!"

"Rats!"

"We're going to have our costumes."

"Go and eat coke!"

There was a thump at the door again that made it shake. Then a wrench at the handle, and another heavy bump. But the lock held firm.

"They won't get in that way," chuckled Temple. "I say, you kids out there, you may as well take a little run. We've collared the costumes, and we're not going to give them up till it suits us."

"You rotters, we'll bust the door in!" yelled the voice of Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha! I fancy you couldn't. You can go ahead and try if you like."

There was the sound of a whispered consultation outside the study. Temple and Dabney grinned, and went on unpacking. They felt that they were the masters of the situation.

There was silence for some minutes. Had the Removites given it up and gone away? It looked like it, but Temple did not unlock the door. He was suspicious of the Remove.

Creak! Bang! Crack! The sudden sounds after the silence made the Upper Fourth fellows jump. Temple looked round rather anxiously at the door.

"My hat! What are they up to?"

Bang! Creak! Crack! Bang!

"Phew!" gasped Dabney. "They're driving in a chisel or something between the door and the post, to prise it open."

Bang! Crack! Creak! Bang! Hammer, hammer, hammer! Bang!

"I say, that's serious," muttered Temple. "I never dreamed that even Wharton would have nerve enough. They'll bust the lock in a jiffy if they keep on—My only panama hat—they've done it!"

A wrench of the driven chisel, a terrific crack, and the lock parted. The door flew open, and the chums of the Remove rushed into the study. Temple and Dabney sprang to oppose them, but they had no chance against the famous four. They were bowled over and hurled upon the carpet in a twinkling. Temple gave a roar.

"Rescue, Upper Fourth!"

"Not much chance of that," grinned Wharton. "We've got help here, too."

Herring, Russell, Skinner, and half a dozen more of the Remove were crowding in. Temple and Dabney were seized by many hands, and jammed into the hearth. On the hot May afternoon the fire was not lighted. Bob Cherry jerked a cord from his pocket, and the two Upper Fourth fellows were quickly and efficiently tied to the bars of the grate by their wrists, in spite of their frantic struggles.

"Now get the costumes!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Here they are! Are you comfy like that, Temple? Anything more we can do?"

Temple wrenched furiously at the rope at his wrists.

"You rotters! Let us go!"

The Removites yelled with laughter.

"Not much, my pippins," chuckled Bob Cherry. "You collared our parcel, and now you have got to pay the piper. I dare say somebody will come along presently and set you loose, if you yell long enough."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You beasts—"

"Come along, kids," said Harry Wharton. "We've got our property, and those rotters are safe enough."

"The safefulness is great."

"It will be a lesson to you about interfering with the Remove," said Bob Cherry, wagging a warning forefinger at the prisoners. "You know, the Remove has always been a bit too weighty for you chaps. You should give it up."

"You rotters—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Come on!"

The Removites, carrying the recaptured costumes, crowded out of the study, and slammed the damaged door. Temple and Dabney dragged at the rope which fastened them to the bars of the grate, but they dragged in vain. The knots were too well made to come undone, and the rope was too strong to break.

"Well," gasped Dabney, "this is a bit of all right! What utter asses we shall look when somebody comes along and sees us!"

"Confound those cheeky young whelps! I never foresaw that they'd have the cheek to bust in our lock with a hammer and chisel."

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"It seems to me that you never foresees anything, Temple, as far as the Remove is concerned."

"Oh, don't talk rot, Dab!" said Temple crossly.

"I'm not talking rot," said Dabney warmly. "You're always getting into some row with the Remove, and getting the worst of it."

"You'll get the worst of something if you don't shut up!" growled Temple.

"Rats! Nice sort of a Form leader you are."

"How could I have helped this?"

"Don't ask me! You ought to have helped it. Look here, I'm going to yell. I'm not going to remain in this fire-grate till I grow old, I can tell you."

"We shall look silly asses—"

"Speak for yourself! Hallo! I can hear somebody coming. Hallo, there! Help!"

The study door opened, and Fry of the Upper Fourth looked in. He stared at the broken lock, and at the two juniors sitting in the fender.

"My—my hat!" he gasped. "Gone off your silly rockers? What have you busted your door-lock for? And what the dickens are you doing in the fire-grate?"

"Ass! Can't you see we're tied here to the beastly bars of the rotten grate?" howled Temple.

"By Jove, so you are! What have you tied yourselves up like that for?"

"Idiot! We didn't do it ourselves."

"Ha, ha, ha! I see! This is a little jape, and I'll bet anything the Remove is at the bottom of it!" exclaimed Fry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop that cackling and come and cut us loose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Will you cut us loose?" yelled Temple.

"Certainly," said Fry, opening his pocket-knife. "But it's funny. If you two chaps knew how funny you looked squirming there in the grate, you would laugh too, I assure you that you would."

"Cut this rope, you cackling idiot!"

"There you are! I suppose it was the Study No. 1 lot that fixed you up. You're always rowing with Wharton's gang, you two, and getting done in. I think you might consider the dignity of the Upper Fourth. You shouldn't let yourselves be done like this, for the sake of the Form."

"Oh, shut up!" said Temple irritably, as he rubbed his chafed wrists.

"That's all very well, Temple, but I say what I think. What do you want to go and get yourselves done in for by a gang of youngsters in the Remove?" demanded Fry indignantly. "That's what I want to know, and what the fellows will want to know, I can tell you. I think myself—"

But what Fry thought himself will never be known; for Temple and Dabney, losing patience, let out at the same time, and two fists caught Fry, one on the nose and one on the chin, and he sat down with a bump. And Temple and Dabney walked away and left him sitting there, rubbing his nose.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Full Dress.

HARRY WHARTON and his chums carried off the recaptured costumes in triumph to Study No. 1. Hazel-dene was waiting for them there, with Bunter.

"Marjorie is coming to the rehearsal in Mr. Quelch's room after tea," he said. "I say, what ripping costumes! It is to be a dress rehearsal this time, I suppose?"

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Yes, we may as well get into the things after tea. Let's take just a snack and get it over—"

"I say, Wharton—"

"Well, what's the trouble now, Billy?"

"It's all very well for you to talk about taking a snack, but I'm jolly hungry. This operatic business is all very well in its way, but it oughtn't to be allowed to interfere with more important matters, such as meals."

"You can feed in a corner all on your lonesome, Billy," laughed Harry. "We're going to allow five minutes for tea, and not a second more."

"Right-ho!" said Bob Cherry. "Buck up with that tea, Bunter."

"Oh, very well. I think you're idiots—"

"Buck up!"

A hasty tea was partaken of, and then the table was cleared back. Billy Bunter took advantage of Harry's permission, however, and went on having tea by himself in the corner. The others unpacked the costumes.

"We want a glass here to dress by," Bob Cherry observed. "While Mr. Lowndes is away, we may as well borrow the

big glass out of his bed-room. He won't be back for a few days."

"Good!" said Wharton. "Get it here, some of you."

Bob Cherry and Nugent soon had the glass there. It was big enough for the juniors to see themselves full length, and was a great advantage, of course, in dressing for the stage. The costumes were examined eagerly. The chief difficulty was in the matter of size. Most of them were too big, and would need taking in and altering. But, as Hazeldene remarked, Marjorie was very clever with scissors and needle, and she would come to the rescue in helping them to get a fit.

Harry Wharton's tall, handsome figure was set off to great advantage in the costume of Don Jose. If the costume would not have been passed as absolutely correct by an operatic stage-manager, it was quite good enough for Greyfriars. It was, at all events, a Spanish costume, and as "Carmen's" hero was a Spaniard, that was near enough.

Bob Cherry, in the garb of Escamillo, made a really imposing Toreador, only Bunter looking on him with an unfavourable eye.

"I say, you fellows," said Bunter, having by this time finished his tea—"I say, I think I ought to point out to you—"

"What is it, Billy? Anything wrong with the costume?"

"No, only with the chap who's wearing it. I think I ought to be the Toreador."

"Rats!"

"I know there's a lot of jealousy in a thing of this kind," said Bunter, shaking his head. "But I don't think any feelings of that sort ought to be allowed to interfere with the success of the show."

"Don't be an ass, Billy!"

"Cherry is rather taller than I am, but I have more brains than he has, and you can't deny that I can sing better. You haven't heard me do the Toreador song yet. Listen!"

"Oh, don't!"

"Listen, I tell you!" And Billy started in a wheezy voice:

"Toreador, now gua-a-a-ard thee,

Toreador, Toreador.

Be-ear thou in mind when——"

"Ass! It's got to be sung in French."

"Well, I can sing it in French, I suppose? I'd back my French against Bob Cherry's any day in the week. Here goes!"

"Oh, cheese it, Billy!"

But Billy did not cheese it. He started on the Toreador chorus again, in the original language this time.

"Toreador, en ga-a-a-arde,

Toreador, Toreador!

Et songe bien, et songe ong congbatlong——"

"Ha, ha! You put in too many ongs and bongs, Billy."

"That's the proper Parisian pronunciation."

"Let's hear you do it, Cherry."

"Right-ho, said Bob Cherry.

"Toreador, en garde,

Toreador, Toreador!

Et songe bien, et songe en combattant,

Qu'un œil noir te regarde,

Et que l'amour t'attend——"

"Good!" exclaimed Wharton.

Billy Bunter sniffed.

"I hope you don't compare Cherry's French with mine, Wharton. And then his voice. I don't want to say anything nasty about Cherry's voice, but you could burgle a safe with a voice like that."

"Cheese it, Billy! You can take the part of Remendado, or scoot."

"Oh, I'll take the part," said Bunter; "but if the whole thing turns out to be a ghastly frost, mind, I warned you that I ought to have had the part of the Toreador."

"We'll mind, Billy; we'll mind anything if you'll only shut up. Get into your things, and let's see how we look tout ensemble."

Harry as Jose, Bob Cherry as Escamillo, Nugent as Dancairo, and Bunter as Remendado were soon complete. They had the copies of their parts in their hands as they stood in a row, and really looked very businesslike. A row of bicycle lanterns shaded by books had been arranged to imitate the footlights they would have to face when the great night of the performance came.

"Ripping!" exclaimed Hazeldene. "You'll do! Sing up!"

The quartette sang up. Each was singing his own part, and as each part had no reference to the others, the result could not be called pleasing to a musical ear. But, as Wharton said, it was only an experiment to see how they went together, and they went very well.

"Goodful!" said the nabob. "The excellentness of the singing is only equalled by its terrific noisefulness."

There was a knock at the door. A curly-headed, smooth-cheeked Irish junior looked in. It was Micky Desmond, who had undertaken the part of the immortal heroine of Bizet's famous opera.

"Hallo, Carmen!" said Bob Cherry. "Here are your togs, and you're late."

"Sure, and I'm sorry!" said Desmond. "Faith, and ye look ripping!"

"You'll have to leave the faiths and the sures out of Carmen's part."

"Sure, I shall be talking in French entirely, and that will be all right!" said Micky Desmond confidently. "I've been practising the Habanera. How does this go?"

And the junior started in a high and really somewhat agreeable treble voice:

"L'amour est enfant de Boheme,

Il ne' jamais, jamais connu de loi.

Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime,

Si je t'aime, prends garde a toi!"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Harry Wharton heartily. "You'll do, Micky. I say, I think it's near time we got along to the rehearsal, so bundle into your clothes. There's a lovely wig for you to wear as Carmen. You get into Zuniga's duds, Hazeldene, and you into Morales's things, Inky. Buck up!"

The juniors were soon ready. And then Harry Wharton turned down the light in the study, and they sallied forth to go to Mr. Quelch's room.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Rehearsal.

"WHY—what—how—— Bless my soul!"

Dr. Locke, the respected Head of Greyfriars, jumped nearly six inches off the linoleum. He was coming along the passage in the dusk, when six Spanish smugglers suddenly bore down upon him.

Spanish smugglers were rare in the corridors of Greyfriars, and it was no wonder that the Head was surprised and alarmed.

"What the—how——"

Dr. Locke stared blankly at the smugglers. He was inclined to take to his heels, but his dignity as the Head of Greyfriars prevented that. But certainly there was a tremor in his limbs as the Spanish smugglers came closer.

But the next moment the voice of Harry Wharton reassured him.

"I hope we did not startle you, sir."

"Why, Wharton, what——"

"I'm Wharton, sir."

"Er—what—who—what do you mean by going about in this ridiculous garb, Wharton?" exclaimed the Head, recovering himself.

"I am Don Jose, sir."

"Don Jose! What do you mean?"

"The hero in 'Carmen,' sir."

"The hero in 'Carmen'! What do you know about 'Carmen'?" asked the Head, who was a great opera-goer when he had opportunities of visiting town in the summer, and so knew at once what the junior was alluding to.

"We're going to give a performance in the Remove-room, sir," said Harry demurely. "A Grand Opera Performance in the original by the Wharton Operatic Company."

The Head gasped.

"Dear me! That is really a very ambitious project, Wharton."

"Yes, sir; but we hope to make a great success of it."

"I—I hope you will, my boy. I certainly have no objection to your making the attempt, though I cannot help thinking that the task will be somewhat beyond your powers."

"I hope not, sir."

"And these boys are——"

"I am Nugent, sir, also Le Dancairo," said Nugent.

"And I'm the Toreador," said Bob Cherry. "Would you care to hear me give you a specimen of the Toreador's song, sir?"

"Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre,

Senors, senors, car avec les soldats,

Oui, les Toreros——"

"Er—thank you, Cherry. I—er—think that will do!" gasped the Head.

"And I'm Remendado, sir," said Billy Bunter. "I ought to have been the Toreador, but there is a lot of jealousy in this sort of thing."

"Oh, cheese it, Billy!"

"Really, Wharton——"

"I hope you will come and see the performance, sir," said Harry Wharton respectfully. "We should give you the best seat, and there is no charge for admission."

The doctor smiled.

"Well, we will see, Wharton," he said; and with this



Billy Bunter, left alone with the costumes, had been unable to resist the temptation to don that of the Toreador.

non-committal reply the Head of Greyfriars rustled on down the passage.

"Jolly lucky he didn't cut up rusty," said Bob Cherry. "Some masters would have got into a temper over a trifle like that. Hallo, here's Huffy!"

Hoffmann, the German junior, was coming along, and he stopped to stare at the Spanish smugglers as they approached Mr. Quelch's room. He grinned affably.

"Is vun of you Vharton?" he asked.

"Here I am!" said Harry.

"Goot! I vas tinkin' tat I should offer you mein services for te representation of te 'Carters'."

"The what?"

"Te 'Carters'."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Bob Cherry. "He means 'Carmen'."

"Ach! Vat is te difference between 'Carters' and 'Carmen'?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I not see vy for you cackle. But I tink tat I offer mein services. I tink tat I do te Toreador first-rate, ain't it? Would you care to see me do it before?"

"Toreador is booked," said Harry Wharton. "Bob Cherry represents Escamillo."

"Tat is all fery well, but you would rader the opera vas a success, ain't it? I am quite villing to sing as Escamillo."

"Yes," growled Bob Cherry, "and a jolly thing you would make of it with your double Dutch accent."

"I sings te French almost as vell as I speaks te English."

"Then your French must be simply ripping."

"Ach! I can sing te Toreador song first rate, and I soon learns te rest of te part. I vill give you specimen."

"Oh, don't! As you are strong, be merciful."

"Ach! I sings him finely before."

And Hoffmann opened his mouth, which was of a good size, and started upon the famous song of the Toreador, in French, with a strong German accent:

"Vot're doast, je peux fous le rendre,
Zenors, zenors, gar avec les zoldats,
Oui, les Doreros—"

But the chums of the Remove had fled. Fritz Hoffmann gazed after them indignantly.

"Ach! Tey vas vools, and know not vat is goot ting ven tey see him!" he murmured. "I vill not sing te Toreador part for dem now if dey go down on knees and peg of me."

The Spanish smugglers reached the Form-master's sitting-room. It was a rather large room, and there was a piano in one corner, and there was plenty of room for the rehearsal. Mr. Quelch, who was of musical tastes himself, was glad to encourage a similar taste in his Form, and he had given Harry permission to use his piano whenever he was not using the room. He knew he could trust Wharton to see that there was no damage done in the room.

Marjorie Hazeldene had just arrived there, and she smiled as she saw the characters in "Carmen" come in in their stage attire. The sight of Le Remendado in spectacles perhaps seemed comical to her. Billy Bunter noticed the smile, and he hastened to explain.

"I can see what you are thinking, Miss Hazeldene," he remarked.

"Can you?" said the girl, starting a little.

"Oh, yes, of course! You think as I do, that Bob Cherry is not much class as a Toreador."

"Nothing of the sort!"

"Oh, yes, you say that to spare Cherry's feelings. As a matter of fact, I ought to have had the part of the Toreador, which is especially suitable to my fine baritone voice. But really—"

"Oh, cheese it, Billy!" said Nugent. "You're stopping the procession. Is the ivory-puncher coming over this evening, Wharton?"

Harry nodded.

"Yes, I think so. I asked them to send him to rehearse with us, if possible. If he can't come I will play for you chaps, and Miss Marjorie will play for me."

"With pleasure!" said Marjorie.

"Now, I think we're ready."

There was a tap at the door.

"Oh, come in!" said Harry Wharton resignedly.

The door opened, and Temple, of the Upper Fourth, looked in. Temple was grinning. There was another figure behind him—that of a very slim young man, with a head of hair that would have done credit to an "after using" hair-restorer advertisement, and a long dreamy face that reminded one of Don Quixote.

"Hallo!" said Temple. "Thought I should find you here. I see it's a full-dress rehearsal this time. Regular Guy Fawkes show."

"Oh, clear out, Temple!"

"I've brought this merchant to you. He came in inquiring for Master Wharton, so I kindly brought him along," said Temple. "I thought he belonged to you."

"Oh, I suppose it's the accompanist," said Nugent.

Temple chuckled.

"Yes, rather! I say, may I stay and see the show?"

"No, you mayn't!"

"Oh, very well. I should like to, as a good laugh does you good. This is the monkey-show, Mr. Slymm. Come in, and if you're good they'll give you twopenoe to get your hair cut."

Mr. Slymm, the musical young man, stared at Temple, who went chuckling down the passage. Then he entered the room.

"You're the chap from the music-shop?" asked Harry Wharton.

"I am the accompanist," said Mr. Slymm. "I understand that I am required for a rehearsal this evening."

"Yes, we're all ready."

"There's the piano," said Bob Cherry. "There's the score on the desk. Thump away."

"Really—"

Harry Wharton led the young man to the piano. Mr. Slymm ran his fingers through his long hair, and sat down. He struck a few chords on the piano, and then dashed off into a medley of sounds.

"Hallo!—hallo!—hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "What are you up to?"

Wharton shook the musical young man by the shoulder.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Mr. Slymm seemed to start out of a reverie.

"Ah, I am sorry! It was a moment's forgetfulness. That was a small thing of my own," he said. "A mere trifle dashed off in an idle moment."

"Well, you can keep it for another idle moment. You're going to thump out 'Carmen' now for us to rehearse to," said Bob Cherry.

"Ah, I am ready."

The musical young man opened the score, and dashed off into the stirring prelude to Bizet's opera. He played very well, and the prelude to "Carmen" sounded as well as it was possible for it to sound upon a single instrument. But the juniors had no time to spare. They were there for business, not to hear the musical young man give a piano-forte recital. Bob Cherry poked him in the ribs.

"Here, chuck it!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Slymm broke off with a crash of keys.

"What is the matter?"

"Come to business," said Harry Wharton. "We want you to begin here." He turned the leaves of the score. "We haven't time for more than practising our parts. You can buzz off the prelude on the night of the performance."

"Ah," murmured the musical young man, and he smote his forehead, "barbarians! I might have expected it. Barbarians!"

"Eh—what's that?"

"Nothing. I am ready."

"Off his dot, I suppose?" whispered Nugent to Bob Cherry.

"I suppose so," Bob assented. "I believe all musicians are mad, you know, more or less, so that accounts for it."

"Here you are," said Harry, pointing in the score. "The soldiers are on guard. Morales—that's you, Inky—stands here."

The Nabob of Bhanipur came forward. His face was not made up, and very curious the dusky countenance looked in the Spanish military uniform.

"Now Micaela is going to enter. Are you ready, Miss Marjorie?"

"Quite," said Marjorie, with a smile.

"Now, then, Inky, you are talking to yourself!"

"I really am not, my esteemed chum. I was quite silently dumb."

"I mean, you are talking to yourself as Morales—that is to say, you are singing. Now start."

Hurree Singh looked at his part, and started.

"At the esteemed gate of the guard-house I smoke the respectable cigar to kill time—"

"Ass! Make it French."

"I beg your honourable pardon! It was the absence of the brain—I mean, the mind. A la porte du corps du garde—"

"Sing it, ass!"

"It was again the momentariful forgetfulness."

And Hurree Singh sang the opening remarks of Morales in a passable voice, and in passable French.

"We must leave out the chorus now," said Harry Wharton. "They come in later. This is where Micaela enters. All you fellows stand back; you're dead in this act."

Marjorie Hazeldene, as Micaela, entered.

"Now, then, Inky, you go on."

"The go-onfulness is immediate."

And the nabob sang again.

"Que cherchez-vous?" (What seek you?)

"Moi, je cherche un brigadier," sang Marjorie. (I seek a brigadier.)

Harry Wharton rubbed his hands like a satisfied stage-manager.

"Good!"

The scene continued very well. Marjorie's part was excellent, but the nabob made many a little slip. But, as he remarked, it was no use to expect a rehearsing person to be "letterfully perfect at so early a stagefulness."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Bunter is not Satisfied.

THE rehearsal proceeded. The stage-manager had made merciless cuts in the opera, to make it short enough for representation in the Remove room, and so the rehearsers were soon in the midst of the action. The Chorus of Boys was "understood," and then the Chorus of Cigarette-girls had to be understood also, and the musical young man at the piano had to be gently restrained from playing the music for them. Mr. Slymm evidently believed, like many accompanists, that an accompanist's duty was to give a pianoforte selection with a voice obbligato; but the stage-manager of the Wharton Operatic Company was firm as a rock, and Mr. Slymm's little excursions up and down the keyboard were restrained with a ruthless hand.

"Now, then, Micky Desmond, are you ready?" said Wharton, when the time came for the entrance of Carmen on the scene.

"Sure, and I am."

"The chorus is understood. You have to come in here and start."

"Faith, and here goes."

"Look here, don't you start singing French with an Irish accent."

"Sure, and I'll be careful."

"Go ahead, then. The chorus has welcomed you—"

"Faith, and it hasn't done anythin' of the kind."

"Ass! That's understood."

"Howly smoke! There seems to be a lot understood in this rehearsal."

"Oh, don't waste time! So long as you understand your part you will be all right. Now, the chorus has finished—that's understood—and you've got to reply to them. They ask you when you will love them?"

"Faith, and sure they're very polite!"

"Ass! Get on with your part."

"Now, then, you ivory-pusher!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, tapping Mr. Slymm on the shoulder.

The musical young man had gone off into a reverie. Mr. Slymm started.

"Did you speak to me?"

"Yes, rather. It's time for you to thump the keys."

"Oh, certainly."

And Mr. Slymm's long fingers began to perform gymnastics up and down the keyboard, while the musical young man cast his eyes up towards the ceiling, and appeared to be lost in ecstasy. Harry Wharton glared at him.

"That isn't the music," he exclaimed. "Give Carmen his note—I mean, give Desmond her note. What the dickens are you up to?"

Bob Cherry shook the musical young man. Mr. Slymm came back to earth with a start.

"Ah, what is it?"

"What are you playing, you ass?"

"I am sorry. It was a moment's forgetfulness. That was a small thing of my own. A mere trifle dashed off in an idle moment."

"You'll get dashed off in an idle moment if you don't attend to business!" said Harry Wharton severely. "Give us the start, now."

"Oh, certainly. I will play the music for the Chorus of Cigarette-girls—"

"Shut up! We haven't got an evening to spend listening to you pushing the piano. Begin at the 'Habanera.'"

"Oh, very well, Barbarians!" murmured the musical young man.

He thumped his fingers down on the keys.

"Now, then, Desmond, that's your note."

"Oh, sure I'm all right."

"Get on with the washing, then!"

"We are all waiting with great eagerness for the washfulness to proceed," said the Nabob of Bhanipur.

Micky Desmond started upon Carmen's famous song:

*"L'amour est un oiseau rebelle,
Que nul ne peut apprivoiser.
Et c'est bien en vain qu'on l'appelle,
S'il lui convient de refuser."*

Micky's French had an Irish accent, but he sang passably well, and he ploughed on right through the "Habanera," gasping a little at the finish. He took a flower from his corsage, and threw it to Don Jose, and it caught Harry Wharton in the eye. Harry gave a yell.

"What the dickens did you do that for, Desmond?"

"Sure, and I had to throw ye the flower."

"Ass! Carmen doesn't chuck a flower in Don Jose's eye."

"Well, that was an accident."

"Don't I come on in this scene?" asked Billy Bunter, who had been a somewhat impatient spectator so far.

"Of course you don't," said Harry Wharton, rubbing his eye. "Dancario and Remendado don't appear till the scene in the hostelry of Lillas Pastia."

"That's all very well, Wharton, but a fellow like me ought not to be given a small part like that."

"Now, then, it's—"

"Wait a minute, Wharton; I'm speaking to you. Don't you think that upon the whole it would be better for you to resign the part of Don Jose to me?"

"Oh, ring off, Billy! You make me tired."

"That's all very well—"

"Cheese it! Micaela enters here."

Marjorie re-entered. There was a slight colour on the girl's face. In this scene Micaela renders Don Jose a kiss from his mother. Harry Wharton had considerably cut that part of the scene; but the song had not been altered, that being impossible without spoiling the whole thing.

Marjorie sang the part of Micaela very well, and Wharton sustained that of Don Jose creditably, and there was a murmur of applause as they finished.

"Jolly good!" said Bob Cherry. "This will knock the Upper Fourth, and no mistake!"

"Rather!" said Nugent heartily. "I don't know what we should do without Miss Marjorie, though."

"Oh, you may be sure I shall not fail you," said the girl, laughing.

There was a knock at the door, and Mr. Quelch came in.

He nodded to the curiously-garbed juniors with a smile.

"I am sorry if I interrupt," he said. "Time is up, I think."

"Yes, sir," said Harry Wharton; "and we've had a jolly good rehearsal, sir. Thank you!"

"I say, Wharton—"

"Let's be off!" said Harry.

"But I say, Wharton—"

"Oh, dear! What is it, Billy?"

"I haven't done any rehearsing yet."

"We hadn't got to your part."

"That's all very well, but I don't see why I should be left out of it like this. I think that the more valuable members of an operatic company ought to have more consideration shown them; I do, really."

"You'd better re-write the opera!" grunted Bob Cherry. "Hallo! There's the ivory-merchant started again!"

The rehearsal being over, it was time for Mr. Slymm to leave the piano-stool. But he showed no desire to do so. His long fingers were rambling over the keys again, producing music that sounded like a mixture of a Chopin polonaise with a Liszt Hungarian rhapsody. Mr. Quelch looked at him in astonishment.

Hazeldene thumped him on the back.

"Here, ring off, Slymm!"

"Barbarians!" murmured the musical young man.

And he went on playing with his eyes fixed ecstatically on the ceiling.

Mr. Quelch tapped him on the shoulder.

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"I am afraid it is impossible for you to practice here," he remarked. "Nor should I, as a musician, recommend you to practice scales and presto exercises at one and the same time."

The musical young man looked at him dreamily, the sarcasm evidently quite lost on him. He rose slowly from the music-stool.

"Ah, I beg your pardon!" he murmured. "It was a moment's forgetfulness. A small thing of my own, dashed off in an idle moment."

And he ran his fingers through his long hair, and drifted out of the room. In the passage he put on a wide-brimmed Homburg hat.

"I say, ivory-merchant," exclaimed Bob Cherry, "can I lend you twopence?"

"Thank you; but I am not requiring any small loans!" said the musical young man, looking at him in surprise.

"Quite sure?"

"Yes, certainly! What do you mean?"

"Oh, then, I suppose it's due to a moment's forgetfulness that you haven't got your hair cut for the past few years?" said Bob Cherry.

"Cheese it, Bob!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. "It's only a joke, Mr. Slymm. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Mr. Slymm. And he murmured "Barbarians!" as he walked away.

Gosling, the porter, came along the passage.

"Trap for Miss Hazeldene, sir!"

Marjorie looked at her watch.

"It is time I was gone. I must go and get my wraps."

And the girl hurried away to the Head's house.

"Come and get these things off, kids!" exclaimed Harry. "We can't go into the Close to see Miss Marjorie off in this rig."

"Ha, ha! I suppose not!"

The juniors made a record in quick changing. They were in their ordinary attire in time to see Marjorie mount into the trap, and they all stood, cap in hand, as the girl was driven off. Then they returned to Study No. 1, in a mood of great satisfaction, to further learn up their parts.

The rehearsal, so far, had been a success, and they were looking forward to a really imposing representation of "Carmen" on the improvised stage to be put up in the Remove-room. If there was one in the number who was not quite satisfied, it was Billy Bunter. He still thought that he ought to have been selected as the Toreador.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Temple, Dabney & Co. Plot a Plot.

"IT'S rotten!"

Temple, of the Upper Fourth, delivered that opinion, with a decidedly gloomy expression upon his face.

Temple, Dabney, and Fry were standing before the notice-board in the hall at Greyfriars. They were reading a notice put up there, in the handwriting of Harry Wharton, of the Remove, general manager of the Wharton Operatic Company.

"NOTICE!"

"The date of the representation of Bizet's opera, 'Carmen,' by the Wharton Operatic Company, is now definitely fixed. The performance will take place on Wednesday evening, in the Remove-room, Greyfriars, commencing at seven precisely. The school is invited to attend. Upper Fourth fellows will be expected to behave themselves."

"HARRY WHARTON,

"General Manager."

"So it's coming off," said Dabney.

"It's coming on, you mean!" remarked Fry, who was rather given to making feeble jokes.

"They're in dead earnest," said Dabney.

"Well, I said so all along," Temple remarked. "And we're getting chipped without end now!"

"Grand Opera in the original is, of course, a bit above anything the Upper Fourth Musical Society has ever done," said Dabney.

Temple nodded gloomily.

"Yes, it will take the shine out of us, and no mistake. The Remove will never let us hear the end of it if it is a success."

"But perhaps it won't be a success."

"Well, you see, the audience won't be too exacting for a schoolboy performance, and there is no denying that Wharton sings his part well, and Cherry is getting on well as the giddy Toreador. I've heard him practising, and he does it well."

"Then Nugent is pretty good, too."

"That's so; and even young Desmond, in a girl's part, plays up pretty well. It looks to me as if it will be a ripping success."

"Then they're going to have Marjorie Hazeldene to help

them. That's not quite cricket, you know, as we sha'n't be able to hiss them when there's a girl on the stage."

"Oh, I dare say the rotters have counted on that!"

And the Upper Fourth trio looked at one another glumly. A party of Removites came by, and spotted them as they stood before the notice-board.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Hazeldene. "I hear that you chaps are giving up the Musical Society in the Upper Fourth, and have taken up fretwork instead."

"Rats!" snapped Temple.

"Isn't it a fact? Well, if you haven't, it's time you did, that's all. The Remove is the coming force in the musical line."

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"I suppose you're coming to the opera?" said Bob Cherry. "We are letting youngsters in for nothing, for the sake of improving them."

"That's our object," said Nugent. "We want to improve the infants, and spread the knowledge of music in the lower Forms; that's really why we've taken up Grand Opera in the original."

"The improvement which would make the Upper Fourth sahibs really musical would be tremendous!" purred Hurree Singh. "The singfulness I have heard proceeding from the study of the respected Temple was really in the manner of the expiring cat!"

"But I'll tell you what," said Nugent. "If you like to come into the chorus, and learn your parts up quick, we'll make room for you."

"Oh, get off!"

"It's a liberal offer. You'll have speaking, or, rather, singing, parts, if you can only learn to sing in tune."

Temple, Dabney & Co. made restive movements. The Removites, chuckling, passed on, and left the Upper Fourth fellows glowering.

"That's the sort of chipping we've got to stand," said Temple.

"And if they pull the thing off, and it's a success, we shall have a heap more of it, and worse!" said Dabney.

Fry sniffed.

"You two chaps call yourselves the leaders of the Upper Fourth," he remarked disparagingly; "yet you can't think of a way to put those cheeky youngsters in their places. Yah!"

"I don't see what we can do."

"Bust up the performance."

"We would if we could, and be jolly glad to!" said Temple. "But how are we to do it?"

"What's the matter with going there in a mob, and taking whistles and squeakers and things, and making such a fearful row that they can't hear themselves sing?" demanded Fry.

Temple shrugged his shoulders.

"Only—the masters will be present," he replied. "They'd jolly soon stop that sort of thing, Fry. Wharton is too jolly deep to give the performance without at least one master in the room—or, at least, some of the prefects."

"Well, that's right, I suppose. But I suppose we're free to hiss if we want to, aren't we? No law against that, if the Head himself were present."

"Bad form! They would say we were jealous."

"Let 'em!"

"Besides, we can't hiss with a girl on the stage!" said Dabney decidedly. "We don't want the Remove to crow over us, but we're not going to act like cads to stop 'em!"

"Quite right!" said Temple. "If any fellow in my Form hisses Miss Hazeldene, he will get a prize thick ear, so bear that in mind, Fry."

"Suppose Miss Hazeldene didn't turn up?"

"She's bound to turn up; she's promised."

"She might be stopped. Look here," said Fry determinedly. "this giddy opera is going to be busted up somehow. We may as well sink at once into a position equal to the Third Form, if we are going to let the Lower Fourth bring off a success like this. They busted up our debating society meeting once, and so it would only be tit for tat. We've got to put our heads together and bust up this performance."

Temple wrinkled his brow thoughtfully.

"You're quite right there, Fry, if it can possibly be done. Come up to the study and talk it over."

The three adjourned to Temple's study, and the chief of the Upper Fourth carefully closed the door. Then Fry was called upon to explain himself.

"How could Miss Hazeldene be prevented from turning up for the performance, without any rudeness of any kind?" demanded Temple.

"Easily enough!" said Fry promptly. "Suppose Wharton decided for some reason at the last minute that the performance couldn't be given—"

"But he won't!"

"Ass! Suppose he did! If somebody were ill or something, and it had to be put off, what would he do—wire to Miss Hazeldene, of course?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, then, the wire can go in any case!"

"My hat! A wire in Wharton's name, do you mean?"

"No; he would probably only put his initials—H. W.—to the wire. Well, young Herbert Williams, of our Form, could send the wire, and put his initials to it. They're the same as Wharton's, and if Miss Hazeldene supposed Wharton had sent her the wire, that wouldn't be our fault."

Temple and Dabney grinned.

"By Jove, you're jolly sharp, Fry! You ought to be a company-promoter or a confidence-trick man, or something!" said Temple. "Lemme see. How would this do? 'Very sorry opera unavoidably postponed. Don't come this evening.—H. W.'"

Fry chuckled.

"Yes, something like that; that's what I mean. Now, without Marjorie Hazeldene to take Micaela's part, they would be short of their heroine, and that alone would be pretty nearly enough to bust up the performance."

"Good!"

"But that isn't all," went on the astute Fry. "There's the ivory-puncher from Friardale who is coming over to grind out the music."

"That music chap who doesn't get his hair cut?"

"Yes. He's coming for the evening. Now, it would be the easiest thing in the world for one of us to meet him en route, and stuff him up with some yarn that would keep him away."

"Of course, we couldn't tell an untruth."

"Who's proposing to tell an untruth?" demanded Fry. "If we bust up the show, the opera will be postponed. Therefore, if we tell him that the opera is postponed, we shall be telling the solid truth."

"Quite right!" said Temple.

"We can tell him the same as we wire to Miss Hazeldene. Now, if the music grinder is absent, how are they to turn on the music?"

"Wharton is a good pianist."

"Yes, I know he is; but he can't play Don Jose in 'Carmen' and act the giddy orchestra at the same time, can he?"

"Well, no, I suppose not."

"They'll have to cut the part of Micaela, and then the part of Don Jose, and 'Carmen' without Micaela or Jose would be like 'Hamlet' with the Prince of Denmark left out."

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"And then," pursued Fry, growing more brilliant as he proceeded, "I don't see why we shouldn't make a raid and collar all their parts? You know what amateur performers are; if they can't keep on nosing into their parts they forget their lines."

Temple thumped him on the back.

"Good lad! We'll have them on the hip this time!"

Fry grinned.

"Well, I think we shall bust up the show," he said. "Of course, if they postpone it, and announce a new date, that won't save their face. The laugh will be up against them all the same. All Greyfriars will say that they had bitten off more than they could chew, and they would be chipped to death about it."

"Quite right. If we bust up this performance they're done in!" said Temple. "And we're going to bust it, or bust something trying."

And Dabney and Fry chimed in cordially:

"Hear, hear!"

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

The Plot in Operation.

HARRY WHARTON looked round the Remove-room with an anxious eye.

It was the evening of the great performance!

Half-past five had struck, and the performance was timed to commence at seven o'clock, and so the operatic company had still an hour and a half.

But in that space of time there was much to be done.

The Remove-master had willingly given permission for the representation to be given in the Form-room, and he had promised to be present himself among the audience. Mr. Quelch knew very well the rivalry that existed between Upper and Lower Fourth, and he knew that the presence of a master might be necessary to keep order. Wingate, the captain of Greyfriars, and several of the prefects had also accepted invitations to attend. As for the Middle School and the Lower Forms, they were likely to cram themselves into the room to the verge of suffocation.

The operatic company were now arranging the room.

An improvised stage had been erected on the dais at the upper end, draped with dark curtains. The forms were arranged in rows for the audience, and were eked out with chairs and benches borrowed from all quarters. The room was a very large one, and there was seating accommodation

for a very large audience, and it was pretty certain that a very large audience would turn up.

The piano was placed in front of the stage, just where the orchestra should have been if there had been one. Owing to lack of scenery, one scene had to suffice for the whole opera, but as Harry observed, it was always best to leave something to the imagination of the audience. They liked it.

"I think that looks all right now," said Harry, with a final glance round the room.

"The rightfulness is great," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Having spent a whole half-holiday on the work, it was boundful to turn out in the manner of satisfaction."

"It's all sereno," said Bob Cherry. "I only hope the thing will go off all right. I'm getting rather nervous now that it's close at hand."

"Well, there's really nothing to be nervous about. We all know our parts well."

"And we shall have the parts behind the scene, to consult whenever we go off," said Nugent.

"I don't see that anything could be seen to that we haven't taken care of," Hazeldene remarked.

"Oh, I say, Vaseline—"

"What's worrying you, Billy?"

"I don't want to throw cold water on the matter, you know, and I should be sincerely sorry to discourage anybody, but I must say that one important point has been overlooked."

"What is that, Billy?" asked Harry Wharton anxiously. As stage-manager, he had many anxieties on his young shoulders.

"Why it's about the Toreador's part. I don't deny that Cherry has improved, but the part of Escamillo ought really to have been allotted to me, and—"

"Oh, rats!" said Harry. "Let's go and snatch some tea now, kids! I don't feel much like eating, but it wouldn't do to get hungry in the middle of the performance."

"Not much," said Bunter emphatically. "Now you're talking! You can't do better than have a solid meal before undertaking anything. I feel rather in a flutter myself, but I must say that it hasn't affected my appetite. I'm jolly hungry."

The juniors went up to the study, where a solid and cheerful tea was soon in progress. Bunter had told the truth when he declared that stage fright could not affect his appetite. He distinguished himself on that occasion as upon all other similar ones, and consumed as much as all the others put together.

"Hallo, there goes six!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, as the school clock boomed out the hour. "Your sister was coming at six, Hazeldene."

"Yes, she may be here any minute now. She's going to dress in old Nadesha's room, and Nadesha will help her."

"Good! It's getting near time for us to change, too. May as well go down to the door, though, and meet Miss Hazeldene."

"Yes, rather!" agreed the Removites.

The juniors descended, leaving Billy Bunter to finish his tea—which meant finishing all the eatables left on the table. But there was no sign of the Hazeldene trap in the Close. The juniors hurried down to the gates. In the May sunset, on the long white road which ran past the gates of Greyfriars, no vehicle was visible.

The quarter past six chimed out from the clock tower. Harry Wharton's brow was wrinkled with a puzzled expression.

"Miss Marjorie is late, Hazeldene."

Hazeldene looked puzzled, too.

"Yes, and I can't understand it. She is never late for an appointment. I hope nothing has happened."

Two figures came in sight up the road from the village. They were Temple and Dabney, and they stopped at the gate to look at the Removites.

"Hallo! Looking for anything?" said Temple.

"We were expecting my sister," said Hazeldene. "She hasn't come."

"Dear me! That will rather muck up your opera, won't it?"

Harry Wharton looked at him quickly and suspiciously. The Upper Fourth captain's derisive look roused a curious suspicion in his mind.

"Is it possible that Temple has had anything to do with Miss Marjorie staying away?" he said, in a low voice, as Temple and Dabney walked in at the gate. Hazeldene stared.

"How could he have anything to do with it, Wharton?"

"I don't know. But—"

"It's curious," said Bob Cherry. "It's twenty past six, and the trap's not in sight. They were grinning like a couple of Cheshire cats."

"There may be some trick in it."

"I don't see how," said Hazeldene. "But I think I'll get out my bike and ride over to home and see whether anything's the matter."

"But you'd never get back in time for the performance?"

"If the trap's on the road, I shall pass it. If Marjorie

hasn't started, there's something the matter, though I don't understand why they don't wire." Hazeldene was looking troubled. His affection for his sister was well known to the boys of the Remove, and they understood his feelings at that moment. "I think I had better go."

In five minutes the junior was scorching away on his cycle.

The others watched him disappear in a cloud of dust. They turned back rather gloomily into the Close, and entered the house.

"We shall be in a fix if Marjorie doesn't come," said Wharton. "The worst of it is that she's in the first scene. Of course, nothing can have happened, or they'd have let us know—But—"

"I wonder if the ivory merchant has come yet?" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "He was to be here at six, to go over the music a bit first. We haven't seen him come in."

"He hasn't come," said Harry. "Confound the fellow! He'd better not worry us by being late, or there will be a row!"

"We may as well go and get changed into our things," said Nugent. "If anybody's missing when the show opens, we'd better have as many ready as possible."

"Ratherfully," said the nabob. "We have to dress and to make up the faces greasepaintfully, and it will take up timefulness. It is only forty minutes now to the commencement of the operatic show."

"Come on," said Wharton. "Look yonder; the audience are already going into the Remove-room. If we're not in time there will be a row. Temple is packing the room with Upper Fourth fellows on purpose."

"I wonder if Temple is at the bottom of this? It looks queer."

"Well, it's not much good wondering now. Let's get into our things."

They hurried up to the study. As he looked in at the door, Harry Wharton uttered an exclamation.

"Hallo, Harry, what's up now?"

Wharton, in spite of his anxiety, was grinning.

"Look there!"

The Removites looked into the study, and burst into an irresistible laugh.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

A Change in the Programme.

BILLY BUNTER was the cause of the merriment of the Wharton Operatic Company. The Owl of the Remove, left alone with the costumes, had been unable to resist the temptation to don that of the Toreador. He was clad now in the garb of Escamillo, with the addition of spectacles. He had placed three huge volumes on the table, and was standing upon them, to get a full view of himself in the glass on the wall.

The Owl was evidently very pleased with himself. He turned slowly round, to see the effect of the clothes from all points of view. A back view was not easy to obtain, and Billy's position was rather perilous as he squirmed round looking over his shoulder. Billy did his best to obtain a good view, and he was giving utterance to a murmur of admiration, when the laughter of the Removites fell upon his ears.

Billy Bunter was startled. He gave a jump, and one of the volumes slid from under his feet, and he sat down on the table with a mighty bump.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter.

Bob Cherry caught him, and jerked him to the floor with another bump that made him yelp.

"Ow! What did you do that for, Cherry?"

"Why, you were going to fall off the table. I saved you just in time."

"You—you—"

"What are you doing in my clothes, you young Owl?" demanded Bob Cherry. "The opera is booked to begin in thirty-five minutes, and here you are wasting time."

Bunter adjusted his spectacles.

"I thought that perhaps when Wharton saw me in the Toreador's costume, he would change his mind about giving you the part," he explained. "Look at me, Wharton."

"Ha, ha! I'm looking."

"Well, what do you think now?"

"I think that if we were giving a comic music-hall sketch you would do rippingly, Billy, but it's hardly the thing for grand opera."

"Well, I think you're an ass! If you—"

"No time for jaw, old chap. Get those things off, and get into your own. We've only got half an hour."

"Oh, very well!"

"I wish the piano puncher would turn up!" exclaimed Bob Cherry anxiously. "I did want to have a squint at my part again, but there won't be time now."

"Perhaps he's stopping to have his hair cut," remarked Nugent. "It's queer, anyway, about his being so late."

"Where are the parts?" asked Harry Wharton, looking round. "I left the music on the desk here. Have you moved it, Billy?"

"Oh, no; certainly not, Wharton."

"Then, where is it?"

"I really don't know. Perhaps Bulstrode moved it when he came into the study."

"Eh! Has Bulstrode been in here?"

"I think it was Bulstrode. I couldn't see because I had taken my glasses off to fit the black wig on, and—"

"Did he go near the desk, whoever he was?"

"Yes; and I heard something rustle; but I didn't pay much attention, as I was busy. I just asked him to lend me a hand with the tunio; and he only laughed, and went out."

Harry Wharton uttered an exclamation.

"Somebody's raided the music, kids. All our separate parts gone, and the piano score, too. If the accompanist comes, he won't be able to play without music, unless we can find out where it's gone, and get it back."

"My hat! Do you think it was really Bulstrode?"

"No, it wasn't," said Nugent; "Bulstrode went out for the afternoon with Skinner to see a cricket match, and he's not in yet."

"Bunter, you ass, who was it?"

"I tell you I had my glasses off, Wharton, and if it wasn't Bulstrode, I'm blessed if I know who it was. It was a big chap anyway."

Wharton snapped his teeth.

"It's clear enough! It was one of the Upper Fourth—Temple, or Dabney, or one of that set. They've done it to muck up the opera."

"Let's go and get it back."

"No good!" Harry Wharton shook his head. "Temple and Dabney are in the Remove-room now, with the audience."

"By Jove, you're right! We should look a lot of asses going there at the last moment and making a row; and it stands to reason that they wouldn't give it up if we did. What on earth's to be done?"

The operatic company looked at one another in dismay. Micky Desmond came into the study.

"Faith, and I'm ready to dress! Sure, and what are ye looking down in the mouth about?"

"The Upper Fourth have raided the music."

"Howly smoke!"

"The accompanist has been kept away by some trick, and so has Miss Hazeldene," said Harry Wharton. "We're in a hole."

"Begorra!"

"What's to be done?" said Bob Cherry desperately. "It would be idiotic to have an opera without music; and, besides, we could never keep in tune without the piano. What do you say to going on and speaking the parts?"

"We should be laughed off the stage!"

"Well, what's to be done?"

"Blessed if I know!"

The silence of dismay fell upon Study No. 1. Billy Bunter blinked through his big glasses, an idea working in his brain.

"I say, Wharton—"

"Oh, don't bother now!"

"But I've got an idea. You chaps probably wouldn't have made much of a show, anyway. Suppose I go on and give a series of solos as the Toreador?"

"Shut up, you ass!"

"I don't see it. I could—"

"If I might make the suggestfulness—"

"What is it, Inky—"

"The performfulness of the operatic show seems to be mucked up. Suppose, instead of a musical and operatic 'Carmen,' we give a comic entertainment? If our esteemed Bunterful chum went on as the Toreador, it would be screaming—"

"Oh, really, Inky—"

Harry Wharton's face brightened.

"There's something in that!" he exclaimed. "The opera's mucked up; but if we don't give something, we shall be chipped to death. As a matter of fact, most of the fellows would prefer a comic entertainment. We'll go on in costumes, and give some comic scenes. Billy Bunter can sing the Toreador song, and if that doesn't make the audience shriek—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"I'll go on and make an announcement. Then I can play some comic music to accompany you; and we may wriggle out of this after all, without looking like asses. If we give a good show we score, anyway."

"Good!"

Harry Wharton was greeted with a cheer when he appeared on the stage in the Remove-room, entering from

behind the scenes. The room was crammed with juniors, and there were a good many seniors present. Mr. Quelch, Wingate, and the prefects sat in a group, well to the front. Harry Wharton raised his hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen—"

"Hear, hear!" roared Temple, Dabney, & Co. derisively. They guessed that Wharton had come forward to announce a postponement of the performance, and they were joyful at the success of their plot.

"Silence!" said Mr. Quelch, looking round.

The ironical cheering died away. Harry Wharton went on calmly:

"Gentlemen, I have to announce a change in the programme. Owing to certain circumstances, over which we have no control, we are compelled to make a slight alteration. Instead of a serious representation of Carmen, we are going to give on this occasion a comic version—"

"Hear, hear!" roared the audience.

What else Harry Wharton said was lost in the cheering. There was no doubt that his announcement was quite welcome to the audience, and Temple, Dabney, & Co. looked rather blank. It looked as if the Wharton Operatic Company's entertainment was to be more popular than ever, and all the wind was taken out of their sails.

Seven o'clock boomed out from the clock tower as Harry Wharton retired, and then something like silence was restored. Harry Wharton was seen to take his place at the piano, and then a voice was heard behind the scenes:

"All right, Cherry, I'm going on. Don't push me! You might make my spectacles fall off, and break them, and then you would have to pay for them."

The audience began to giggle. The giggle became a roar as the Toreador came on the stage. A Toreador in spectacles, with clothes much too large for him, struck the audience as comic. Harry Wharton struck up a few bars on the piano.

"Go it, Bunter!"

"On the bawl!"

The shouts of encouragement did not seem to encourage Bunter much. He opened and shut his mouth several times, while Harry repeated his chord again and again. Then, suddenly taking his courage in both hands, as it were, Billy Bunter plunged into his solo, the Toreador song from the second act of "Carmen."

"Toreador, ong ga-a-ardey."

Toreador, Toreador!

Et songe byong, when combat thee elates.

Qu'un oeil noir thee regards,

Et que l'amour awaits, Toreador,

And that l'amour t' attend!"

The audience shrieked when Billy Bunter finished. The encore was unanimous and hearty; and Billy Bunter gave the song over again, his voice making wilder excursions into various octaves, his French growing more mixed, and his tune wandering into all sorts of major and minor keys. It is safe to say that the audience had never laughed so much in their lives before. And the comic entertainment was certainly a greater success than real Grand Opera could possibly have been. Bunter's turn gave the thing a good start, and the rest of the entertainment went off on the same lines, with a swing. The evening was half-through when Hazeldene arrived with his sister, who explained to Wharton about the telegram she had received informing her of the postponement of the opera.

Harry mentally chalked it up against the Upper Fourth, but for the present nothing was said. The situation was explained to Marjorie, and she took her turn with a solo, giving the audience Micaela's song in the smuggler's lair, with great effect. Harry Wharton gave the famous Flower Song, Marjorie accompanying him at the piano, and then Bunter was put on again for comic effect. The evening was a great success, though not in the manner originally planned, and the audience departed at last highly satisfied, and with aching ribs.

"Well, it's a success, anyway," the stage-manager remarked, when it was all over. "It wasn't exactly what we intended, but it was a success; and next time we'll take more care those Upper Fourth bounders don't take a finger in the pie."

"I say, you fellows. I suppose you'll admit that I can sing the Toreador's part now?" Billy Bunter remarked. "If you give the opera in proper form next time, Wharton, I suppose you'll cast me for the Toreador?"

"Well, Billy, I don't know about that," said Harry, laughing; "but we admit that you were the great bit of this evening, bar none."

A verdict which was endorsed unanimously by the Wharton Operatic Company.

THE END.

(Another long story of the Chums of Greyfriars next week. Please order your copy of "The Magnet" in advance.)

"A DRESS REHEARSAL."

Another Tale of Harry Wharton and his Chums, by FRANK RICHARDS.

NEXT TUESDAY.



NEW STORY SHOWING HOW TWO BOYS SUCCEED AS DETECTIVES.

By LEWIS HOCKLEY.

GLANCE OVER THIS FIRST.

Frank Dennis and Bob Lomax, two City clerks, are thrown out of employment. Having no prospects they decide to make the detective business their profession, and assume the name of "Maxennis."

Grip, their dog, in a strange manner is instrumental in getting their first client—a Mrs. Brewer—who is continually receiving threatening picture post cards from Leigh-on-Sea from a man evidently aware that his victim is coming into a legacy. Lomax visits Leigh, and pursues his investigations among the regular senders of picture post cards in the district. Meanwhile, Dennis having strong suspicions of one of Mrs. Brewer's lodgers—"Sleeping" McDonald, a pugilist—visits Wonderland. McDonald loses his fight, and, in a fit of temper, savagely attacks Dennis on leaving the building. However, Dennis eventually reaches home, and is awakened the next morning by Bob Lomax. Bob chaffs Frank unmercifully about late rising. "Come, get up, I want some grub! I haven't been gallivanting the streets all night, and not waking up till half a morning's work has been done, and, consequently, wanting no breakfast."

Bob Lomax has a Reverse..

"But I do, though," Dennis answered briskly. He hadn't tasted food since the afternoon before, and the pleasing odour of cooking fish that filled the office, bed, and sitting-room combined, was enough to make a dead man hungry.

"Hurry up, then, you lazy beggar; though you don't deserve it! I've got three dozen as fine whiting as ever a man'd wish to see; bought them for threepence down on Leigh beach before you turned into bed this morning."

"I'm with you, my boy!" Dennis shouted. "I'll be with you in ten minutes!"

Jumping out of bed, Dennis stripped and had a good scrub down with a wet loofah, the while Lomax opened the window, and, with one eye on toast and the other on grilling whiting, vigorously apostrophised the kettle, which showed some disinclination to boil.

Dennis made several remarks to his chum while dressing, but Lomax's mind was given entirely to the matter of breakfast, and he steadfastly ignored every question as to the details of the cause of his hurried return to town.

Within less than the promised time, Dennis was properly clothed and ready to lend a hand; but there was nothing to do, save place on the table the appetising meal for which Lomax was responsible, and eat it.

"People who don't work shouldn't eat!" the Yorkshireman grumbled, with his mouth full.

"Quite right, Bob; I agree with you," Dennis rejoined, attacking a liberal supply of buttered toast and well-browned whiting with avidity. "It's work that gives one an appetite, and that's why I'm so thoroughly enjoying the breakfast you've been so good as to provide. I'll do the same for you one of these days!"

"Humph! That's when you'll get up early enough! Pass the toast, please!"

"Yes; unless you happen to get up later."

"Couldn't; mustn't; have to work for my living!"

"So do I. Now, what's all the trouble about, Bob? What is it you've been discovering? What have you been doing?"

"What have you been doing? That's the more likely question!" Lomax rejoined, staring across the table at his partner's face.

"I? Nothing—that is to say, working."

"Fighting more like!" growled Lomax. "Why, what else do you look like? There's a bruise the size of a penny on your chin! Fine, respectable appearance it gives you!"

"Oh!" Dennis recollected the tap McDonald had given

him outside Wonderland. He had forgotten the blow for the moment, though a slight pain as he worked his jaws should have kept the fact from slipping his memory. "Oh, that's nothing!"

"Isn't it? I should say it is; something mighty disgraceful! I say, Frank"—and Lomax dropped his assumed humour of disagreeableness and ill-temper, and spoke quite anxiously—"I hope that brute McDonald hasn't been doing anything troublesome? Was it he? He looked as if he could have killed the pair of us yesterday!"

"Well, I'm afraid he has," Dennis said. "But never mind him, Bob; let us hear the news you have brought. What is it you've got to tell me?"

"Something good."

"Well, out with it! What an irritating chap you are, Bob!" Dennis cried impatiently. "You've discovered the solution of the mystery we're working on, and then you'll say nothing about it!"

"Yes, I will, at the proper time," answered the Yorkshireman composedly. "This is feeding-time now. If you'd been up, Frank, since five o'clock this morning, instead of half-past ten, you'd—"

"Drop it, or I'll shy the teapot at you!"

"Don't do that, I want some more tea! I say, these fish are good! Just a couple more, and then I'll tell you what I've been doing!"

"You have got a long-winded appetite, Bob!" his chum said resignedly. And then, just to show that Lomax was not the only one so gifted, he lent assistance in clearing the dishes of everything eatable; the loaf-sugar—still in its paper-bag—alone escaping annihilation.

"Hang the washing-up; I'm going to have a pipe first!" declared Lomax, when, with a sigh of contentment, he left off eating because there was nothing more to eat. "Don't care if anyone does come in; don't care if it snows!"

"More do I! Go ahead, Bob, and let's hear what you've got to say."

"I've solved the mystery," began Lomax complacently, as he leisurely stuffed the tobacco into his pipe.

"Yes? How?"

"I've found out who wrote those postcards that our client has been receiving."

Dennis sat up quickly.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"Fact."

"Which cards?"

"Which cards?" Lomax allowed a thin wisp of smoke to escape from his lips and curl upward. "Why, the cards, of course—Mrs. Brewer's! Your head's going wrong. Aren't you well?"

"Yes, yes; but which of those cards?" demanded Dennis impatiently. "The forged cards, or the other ones?"

"Keep your hair on, old man; the other ones, of course!" explained Lomax, in a tone of voice which plainly gave it as his opinion that the forged cards weren't worth worrying about.

"Oh!" Dennis fell back in his chair again. "Those! Well?"

"It's a joke."

Lomax put his hands deeper into his pockets, lay back still further in his chair, puffed smoke, and gazed benignly at his chum.

"What is?"

"The writing of those cards. Just as we thought."

"I didn't think so," corrected Dennis. And to himself he murmured, "Nor is it, either."

"Well, I did."

"Who has been writing them?"

"The joker."

"And who is he?"

There wasn't quite so much enthusiasm in Dennis's voice

as his partner thought the occasion demanded, and he looked at Dennis just a little discontentedly.

"No one whom you know," he answered. "It's a joke," he went on. "There's no more seriousness about the matter than there would be in Harvey J. Baxter's good intentions on our behalf. It's a pure bit of fun; a trifle foolish, perhaps, but one can't expect much from a kid. But there was nothing for Mrs. Brewer to worry herself to death about. I reckon she'll laugh when she finds out from us how absurd the trouble is. Think so, too?"

"You haven't told me yet how you found out, or who it is," put in Dennis mildly. "How can I tell if it's a joke, unless I'm in the know?"

"Found out, my boy, by sheer work; reasoning; hard, matter-of-fact inquiry; and putting two and two together! None of your story-book intuitions, brilliant ideas, or marvellous deductions!"

Perhaps it was his success; perhaps it was the result of his good breakfast; but Lomax was undeniably feeling on very good terms with himself. He felt proud, and his chum inwardly chuckled at the thought that he would presently take the conceit out of him.

He smiled at Bob's contemptuous reference to his own ideals of detective work. Was it by sheer hard work that he had happened upon McDonald's acquaintance with the matter? What had sent him to Wonderland, the outcome of which visit was to reveal the existence of a connection between the professional boxer and Mr. Solomon Abrams, picture postcard printer of Houndsditch?

When he thought of the surprise awaiting his partner, he could afford to smile.

"Well, tell me all about it, old chap," he said.

"Well, you know what I was doing—trying to locate the folks in Leigh who bought most picture postcards? I told you of the fisherman and the barmaid. They were no good; and that left one more, a schoolboy. When you told me Mrs. Brewer had been cook at a school before she married—it was you who told me, wasn't it?—I had an idea. I thought of that boy in Leigh who bought cards so freely. I worked out my idea going down, after leaving you, yesterday.

"In the afternoon I went up to the school where this kid is a boarder, and I saw the master. Previously to this, I must tell you, I'd paid a visit to Somerset House, dug out the record of Mrs. Brewer's marriage, and so got hold of her maiden name. It was Maria Harvey, I may tell you. Well, I asked the headmaster point-blank if he'd ever had a cook at the school of that name. He didn't know—he was a nice old chap, and quite willing to assist—but he sent for the housekeeper, or matron, or something. She remembered the name, and the woman, too, as well as if it were yesterday. And when I asked if there had ever been any ill-feeling between the cook and any of the scholars, she laughed, said it was a queer question, but that, as a matter-of-fact, there had. See?"

"Think I do, Bob. Go on, this is interesting. Though it strikes me this idea of yours was what I should call an inspiration."

"Inspiration be jiggered!" Lomax answered indignantly.

"It was an intelligent presumption from given facts! Well, then I asked if I could see this kid I told you of—Dick Martin, or whatever his name is; it don't matter, though he's an interesting youth, by the way. The master said 'No' at first, and then I mentioned the fact that I suspected the boy of having sent threatening letters—postcards, rather—to our client. Well, he 'hum'd' and 'ha'd' a good deal; ultimately, however, the boy was sent for. He was a bit scared at first; afterwards, he got sulky, as well as frightened; but we talked to him, and I put questions to him, and, after the expenditure of a good deal of time, he caved in and made a clean breast of the whole matter.

"It was he who had written the cards. For some reason or other he and the late cook had been at logger-heads; he'd got a down on her; and—boys are queer customers, one can never

tell what odd ideas they get in their heads—after she'd left to get married, it occurred to him that he'd give her a bit of a scare by sending her these postcards. Oh, I tell you, he is an interesting youth! Probably got the idea from some silly book or other that he'd been reading. He didn't understand that he was doing anything wrong; but he quickly altered his note when he learned I was a detective. He'd been sending these blessed cards for some time past! Of course, the master gave him a good talking-to, and then I came away. It was too late for me to get back last night, and so I got the first train up this morning.

"And so there you are, Frank," Lomax concluded; "the whole thing resolves itself into no more than a boyish, idiotic joke!"

"Well, Bob," Dennis said after a long pause, when his chum, with great evidence of self-satisfaction, had concluded. "Well, Bob, you've certainly done well! You've worked out your theory A1, and you've succeeded in what you undertook to do. What now?"

"Why, all we've got to do is to acquaint Mrs. Brewer, and collect the remaining half of our fee."

"Yes. And—and what about McDonald?" Dennis asked gently.

There was no answer. Lomax paused a second in the refilling of his pipe, continued the operation, and struck a match. But he said nothing, and, after a minute or two of silence, Dennis spoke again.

"What about those other postcards; those that weren't written by this schoolboy; that you yourself have examined and admitted to be forgeries, or imitations? Do you consider that our work is finished while they remain unexplained? Do you think we are entitled to collect the rest of our fee from our client until we've ascertained the meaning of them?"

Bob Lomax removed his pipe and banged his fist so violently on the edge of the table that the lighted tobacco was scattered abroad. He sat up straight in his chair and turned on his chum, looking at him with sparkling eyes.

"Confound you, Frank," he exclaimed wrathfully; "confound you! Just when I was congratulating myself on having done something really smart and clever, up you get and kick the bottom out of all my satisfaction, and make me appear a fool!"

"No, I don't, old chap," Dennis said, with quick frankness. "You've done wonders, and you have solved some of the mystery; but not all of it. You've justified yourself, and I haven't myself. I've only succeeded in mystifying myself."

"Well, let's hear what you've done."

Robert Lomax was too good a fellow to feel really hurt at what his chum had reminded him. He knew that Dennis had nothing further from his thoughts than any desire to depreciate what he had done, to minimise the value of his work, and his little outburst was, under the circumstances, perhaps pardonable.

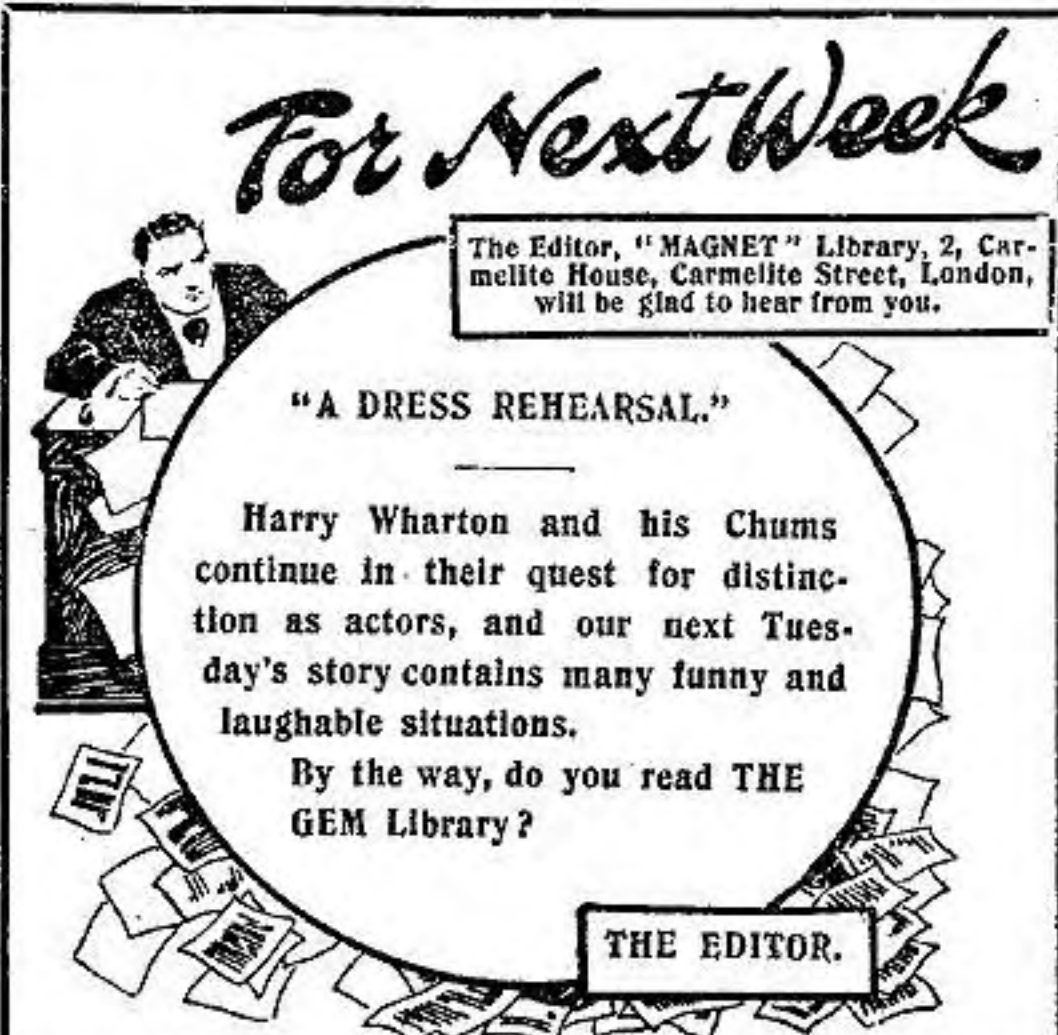
He hadn't forgotten the forged postcards; he was perfectly well aware that his discovery of Master Dick Martin's eccentric game hadn't gone any way towards making clear the other matter; he would have referred to it himself later on, but when Dennis mentioned it, the pride and exultation he quite naturally felt did receive a bit of a facer. However, he recovered quickly.

"Let's hear what you've got to say, Frank," he repeated good-temperedly. "Of course, you're right, I know it. Now, what have you been doing?"

"Engaged in dissipation, as you hinted," Dennis replied smilingly. "As a matter of fact, I didn't get to bed until nearly two o'clock this morning. I went to Wonderland to see our friend McDonald."

"Did he knock you out?" And Lomax chuckled.

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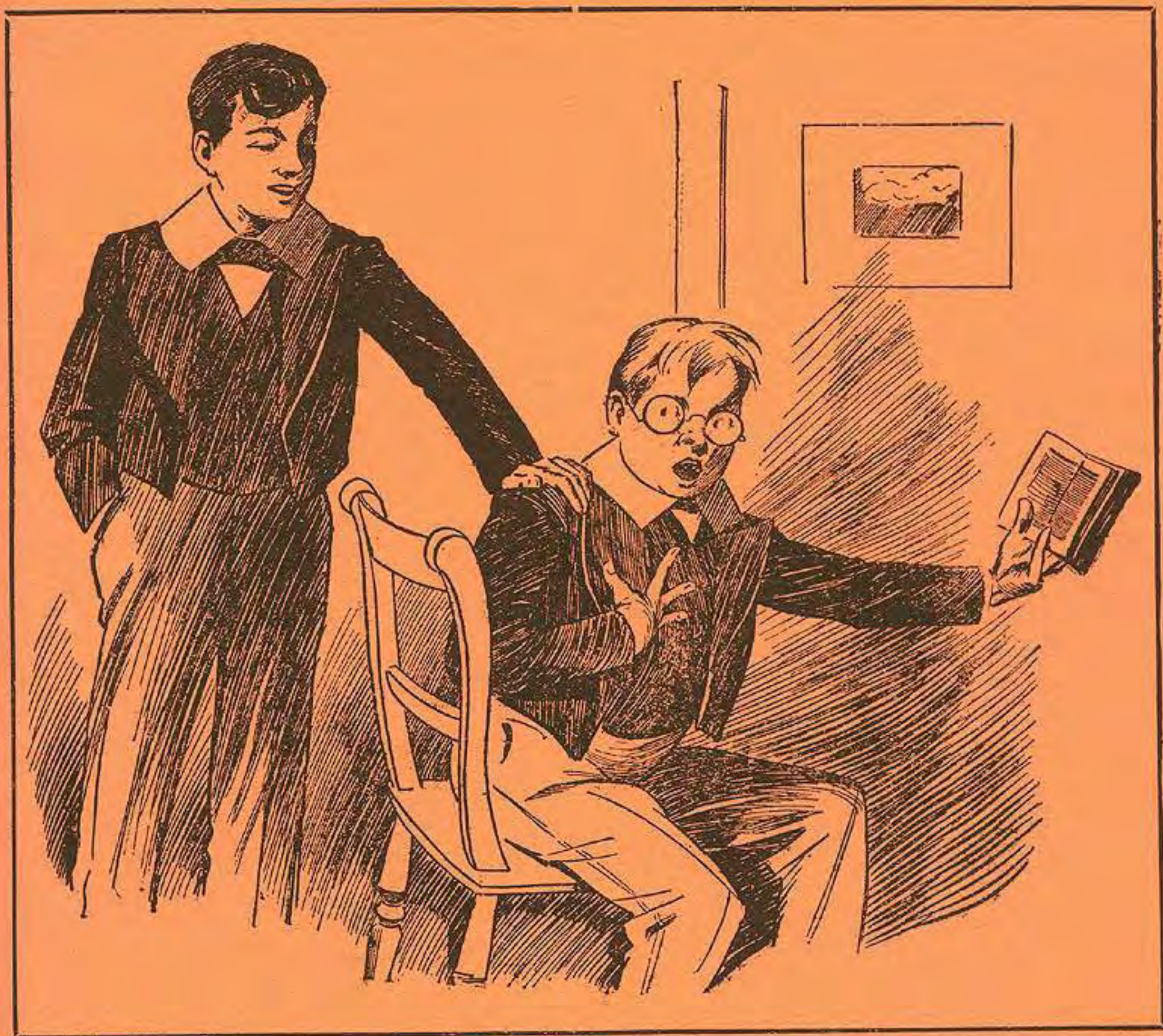
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“Avaunt, base varlet!” muttered Billy.

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4

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