

FRENCH LEAVE!

By

FRANK RICHARDS



The old military gentleman glanced at the fat face

CHAPTER I

TO GO OR NOT TO GO!

“COME all the same!” said Smithy.

It was like the reckless Bounder to give that advice. In similar circumstances, Herbert Vernon-Smith would not have hesitated for a moment.

Harry Wharton, as a rule, was very little disposed to follow the Bounder's example in flouting authority. But for once, he was inclined to listen. His temper, which had been rather sorely tried, was not at its best. He was keen—very keen indeed—to play Soccer at Redclyffe that afternoon: and it was really by no fault of his own that he was booked to miss the last football match of the term. He was wanted in the team: he was captain of the side. It was in a way disinterested of Smithy to advise him to “come all the same”, for in his absence Smithy would have captained the team. And after all, why shouldn't he? Wednesday was a half-holiday. Why shouldn't he go?

The motor-coach was ready to take the footballers across to Redclyffe. It

was time to start. Up to the last moment, Wharton was undecided. But it seemed that Smithy's words decided him, for he nodded.

"I'm coming!" he said.

"Good man!" said Smithy.

"Now, look here, Wharton—!" began Johnny Bull.

"I'm coming!" repeated Harry, interrupting him. "Quelch can wait for his dashed lines. I've done them once; and if I have to do them again, tomorrow will be soon enough."

"That isn't the point," said Johnny Bull, shaking his head. "Quelch said jolly distinctly that he wants them this afternoon. If you cut without doing them, it isn't merely leaving them over and getting them doubled again—it's as good as telling Quelch that you don't care a boiled bean for him or his orders—"

"I don't, just now," snapped Wharton.

"It will mean a row," said Bob Cherry, uneasily. "If you take French leave, old chap—"

"I don't care if it does!"

"My esteemed Wharton—!" murmured Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

The captain of the Remove knitted his brows. In his present mood, opposition from his friends had the unfortunate effect of making him all the more stubborn.

"Look here, am I wanted in the team, or not?" he demanded.

"Of course you are," said Bob. "Likely as not we shall be licked at Redclyffe if you stay out. But—"

"That settles it then."

"But—!" said Frank Nugent, very dubiously.

"Oh, chuck butting!" exclaimed Vernon-Smith. "Let's get off. We don't want to keep the Redclyffe men waiting."

"I'm ready," said Harry.

"Look here, have a little sense," urged Johnny Bull. "You're in a temper now—"

"Who's in a temper?"

"You are!" said Johnny, calmly. "And a fellow in a temper ought to listen to advice from his pals before he makes a fool of himself. Quelch will be as mad as a hatter if you walk out on him like that."

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders: from which it appeared that he couldn't have cared less, whether Quelch was "mad as a hatter" or not.

"Take my tip," went on Johnny, "Quelch isn't any too pleased with you just now, but he's not a bad old bean. Take that impot to him and explain that it was soaked in ink by accident—"



"Look here, am I wanted in the team, or not?"

"I've tried that."

"Try again, then—"

"You heard what he said in hall, after tiffin. He doesn't want to hear anything about accidents to a fellow's lines. He wants the lines. I'm not going to try again."

"You'd rather cheek him, and leave him to whistle for his lines?" inquired Johnny, sarcastically.

"Much rather," said Wharton, coolly.

"It won't do, Harry," said Frank Nugent, uneasily.

"It will have to do," said Harry. "Fellows have left over their impots before now, and I don't see why I shouldn't. Quelch can double them again if he likes."

"More likely to be whops," said Johnny.

"I can stand whops—I'm not made of putty."

"Well, if that's how you look at it—"

"Just like that! Come on—we shall be late at Redclyffe at this rate."

"After all, it's only lines," said Peter Todd.

"It isn't only lines—it's directly disobeying an order," said Johnny Bull.
 "That sort of thing is good enough for Smithy—"

"Thanks," said the Bounder, laughing.

"And for me too," said Harry Wharton. "You can talk till you're blue in the face, Johnny, but I'm coming to Redclyffe all the same. I'm not cutting a football match because that fat villain Bunter mucked up my impot. Come on, you fellows."

"Oh, come on," said Johnny, sarcastic again. "Let Quelch see you rolling off for the afternoon: it's sure to please him."

Harry Wharton paused.

Johnny's good advice had no more effect on him than water on a duck. He was in no mood to listen to good advice. He was going to play football at Redclyffe, and that was that. But he realised that if Quelch did see him "rolling off for the afternoon", as Johnny expressed it, he was not likely to be allowed to "roll" very far. The sharpest of sharp voices would certainly call him to order at once.

"It won't do for Quelch to see me go," he admitted.

"Hardly," said Bob.

"Easy enough," said Vernon-Smith. "We'll get off, and pick you up on the road afterwards. You hang about the quad, and let Quelch see you from his study window, till we're clear. Then you can run your bike out quietly and follow on."

"Good!" said Harry.

"Quelch won't know a thing," said Smithy, with a grin. "If he thinks of you at all, he'll think you're in your study, grinding out lines. He won't know a thing till you don't show them up at tea-time. You've only got to get out quietly after we're gone, and it's all serene."

"Quite!" said Harry.

"But—!" said Nugent.

"The butfulness is terrific," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

"But—!" said Bob.

"Oh, cut out the buts," exclaimed the Bounder, impatiently. "We're wasting time. Let's get off."

"Let's!" said Peter Todd. "If you've made up your mind, Wharton—"

"Quite!"

"Then let's get started."

Harry Wharton strolled in the quad, while a crowd of fellows piled into the motor-coach. They rolled away, leaving him sauntering idly with his hands in his pockets. Mr. Quelch, walking and talking with Mr. Prout, gave him a glance, and frowned slightly. Perhaps he thought that Wharton would be



"I say," squeaked Bunter. "Have they gone without you?"

better occupied writing his lines than idling about the quad. However, the junior had till tea-time for those lines, and so long as they were shown up by then, the Remove master had nothing to say.

Wharton was still idling in the quad, when Mr. Quelch went into the House, and to his study. Remembering the Bounder's advice, Wharton strolled past his form-master's study window: evidence that he was still within gates if the Remove master looked out. Under that window, a fat junior gave him an inimical glare through a pair of big spectacles.

"Beast!" squeaked Billy Bunter.

Harry Wharton gave him an expressive glance, and walked on. Kicking Bunter, under a form-master's window, was not a practical proposition. The fat Owl, in that spot, was secure from the booting he richly deserved.

"I say," squeaked Bunter, as he walked on, "have they gone without you? Serve you jolly well right! He, he, he!"

Harry Wharton paused for a moment. Even under Quelch's window, from which the Remove master might be glancing, Billy Bunter had a narrow escape of a boot landing in his tight trousers. However, prudence prevailed: and the captain of the Remove walked on, and dismissed Billy Bunter from his mind—with a mental reservation to kick him next time he saw him.

For five or six minutes more, he loitered about the quad, with a casual air, as if he had nothing particular on his mind. It was easy to overtake the footballers, on a bike, and join up. He was heading for the bike shed, at last, when he came on Lord Mauleverer, who stopped, and gave him a sympathetic nod.

"Hard luck, old man," said Mauly, "All in the day's work, though—chap can't do just as he likes, at school. I say, hadn't you better get started on that impot?"

"I'm just getting started for Redclyffe."

Mauleverer looked very grave.

"I wouldn't, old man," he said.

Harry Wharton paused. Johnny Bull's advice had rolled off him like water from a duck. Somehow Mauly's made more impression. He paused: but it was only for a moment. It was too late now to back out—the footballers were expecting him to join them on the road, and he could not let them down.

"I'm going," he said.

And with a nod to Mauly, he walked on. Lord Mauleverer shook his head, but he said no more: and Harry Wharton went for his bike.



"Hard luck, old man!" said Mauly

CHAPTER II

BUNTER DOES HIS BEST!

BUZZZZZZ!

Mr. Quelch very nearly said "Bother!"

Quelch had settled down in his study, with a volume of Lucretius to keep him cheery company. T. Lucretius Carus, with the celebrated Lachmann's Latin notes on the same, was the kind of company Quelch enjoyed, in his hours of leisure—a taste that certainly was not shared by a single member of his Form! Deep in those majestic hexameters, the telephone-bell was the very last thing that Quelch wanted to hear.

Buzzzzzz!

Mr. Quelch laid Lucretius on the table, and stepped to the telephone. He jerked off the receiver.

"Well?" he almost barked.

"Is that Mr. Quelch—?" a deep voice came through.

"Speaking."

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Quelch. This is Colonel Wharton, speaking from Wapshot. I trust that I am not interrupting you."

Colonel Wharton's trust was unfounded. Undoubtedly he was interrupting Mr. Quelch. However, the old Colonel was a man whom Mr. Quelch liked and respected and he was also a member of the Governing Board of Greyfriars School. So the Remove master's voice, as he replied, resembled rather less a bark.

"Good-afternoon, Colonel Wharton. Pray go on."

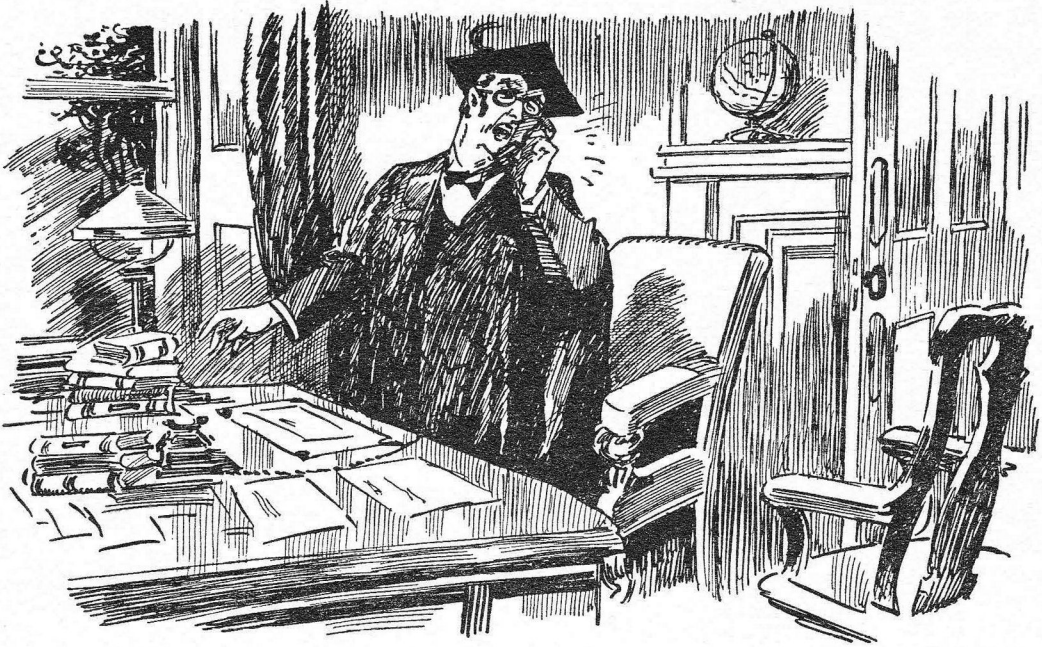
"I had to come down to Wapshot to-day on a business matter, Mr. Quelch: and I find that I have time to come across to the school before catching my train back to London. As it is a half-holiday at the school, I conclude that my nephew will be at liberty for me to see him. My stay must be brief."

"Certainly," answered Mr. Quelch.

"I thought I would ring up first, in case Harry might be going out for the afternoon, as would be very probable on a half-holiday. Perhaps you would be kind enough to send him word that I shall be coming over, in about an hour's time, and that I should like to see him."

"I will do so at once, Colonel Wharton."

"If by chance he is gone out already, it cannot be helped—but no doubt you could tell me whether that is the case or not."



"Certainly," answered Mr. Quelch

"It is certainly not the case, sir, for, as it happens, he has an imposition to write, on which he will be engaged for some considerable time this afternoon. I will send him a message immediately. You may rely upon seeing him here."

"Thank you, Mr. Quelch."

"Not at all, sir," said Mr. Quelch, quite graciously.

Colonel Wharton, ten miles away at Wapshot, rang off. Mr. Quelch put up the receiver. He stepped to the study window, opened it, and looked out. He remembered that he had seen Harry Wharton loitering in the quad, and if he was still there, it was easy to beckon him from the window, and impart the message from his uncle.

Wharton, however, was not to be seen: and Quelch had no doubt that he had gone up to his study in the Remove to write his lines: as undoubtedly he ought to have done. Others were to be seen in the quad: and nearest at hand was a fat junior leaning on the wall under the window. Quelch glanced down at a fat head.

"Bunter!" he rapped.

"Oh!" ejaculated Bunter.

He jumped at that sharp voice over his head. He blinked up at Quelch in

alarm through his big spectacles. The fat Owl had had a wary eye for Harry Wharton: but he was not thinking of Quelch, and he was startled.

"It—it wasn't me, sir!" stammered Bunter.

Quelch stared at him.

"What do you mean, Bunter?" he snapped, testily.

"I—I mean, it—it really wasn't me, sir—"

"What was not you, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I mean, anything! I—I mean—" stuttered Bunter. The Owl of the Remove had many little sins on his fat conscience, and his impression was, that Quelch was about to call him to account for one or another of them.

"Do not be absurd, Bunter," snapped Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! But it—it wasn't me, sir—"

"Silence, you foolish boy! I desire you to take a message," snapped the Remove master.

"Oh! Certainly!" gasped Bunter, relieved of his apprehensions. "Certainly, sir! With—with—with pleasure, sir."

"Find Wharton at once—"

"Wh—Wh—Wharton, sir?"

"Yes, Wharton. Probably he is in his study at the moment, as he has an imposition to write. Go to him at once, and tell him that his uncle, Colonel Wharton, will be here in about an hour's time, and desires to see him. Go at once, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey! I—I mean, I—I—I—"

"Do you hear me, Bunter?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! But—but—"

"That is all! Take my message to Wharton immediately."

With that, Mr. Quelch shut his study window. He returned at once to T. Lucretius Carus: and once more immersed in majestic hexameters, dismissed the trifling matter from his mind.

Billy Bunter blinked at the shut window, in dismay:

"Oh, lor'!" he murmured.

Even Billy Bunter, lazy as he was, and disinclined to any sort of exertion, would not have minded very much taking that message—in other circumstances. But in present circumstances he did mind. Quelch, naturally, had no idea that Harry Wharton, just then, was a person whom William George Bunter desired particularly to avoid.

However, there was no help for it: and the fat Owl rolled away to carry out his form-master's behest. He rolled into the House, and slowly and reluctantly heaved his weight up the stairs to the Remove studies.



"Oh, crikey!" "Do you hear me, Bunter? That is all!"

At the door of No. 1, he hesitated. The door was half-open, and he blinked round it cautiously, prepared to dodge. But caution was unnecessary: Harry Wharton was not there.

Having blinked into the vacant study, the fat Owl turned away. Skinner was coming down the passage, and he called to him.

"Seen Wharton, Skinner?"

"Lots of times," answered Skinner.

"Look here, do you know where he is?" yapped Bunter. "I've got a message for him from Quelch."

"Couldn't care less," answered Skinner.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter descended the stairs again. He blinked into the Rag. Only one fellow was there: Fisher T. Fish, deep in an account-book. Fishy was making financial calculations, which was often his happy occupation on a half-holiday.

"Seen Wharton, Fishy?" squeaked Bunter.

"Nope!"

"Blow him!" breathed Bunter, and he rolled out of the House. In the quad he came on Lord Mauleverer.

"Seen Wharton, Mauly?"

"Yaas."

"Is the beast about?" asked Bunter. "I've got a message for him, blow him. I say, know where he is now?"

"Look in the bike-shed: he's just gone there."

"What the dickens is he gone to the bike-shed for, when he's got to stay in and do his lines," grunted Bunter. "I say, sure?"

"Yaas! Hurry up and you'll catch him."

"Oh, all right."

Billy Bunter rolled away to the bike-shed. He was just in time to encounter Harry Wharton wheeling his machine out. At the sight of him, Bunter stopped: preferring to deliver his message from a safe distance.

"I say, Wharton!" he yelled. "I say, stop!"

Harry Wharton glanced round at him, knitting his brows. His wish, at that moment, was to get out quickly and quietly, unobserved. Why Bunter was yelling to him he had not the faintest idea: but it was an unpropitious moment for a fat Owl to yell out his name at the top of his voice. Neither had he for-



There was a frantic yell as a foot helped him on his way

gotten that the fat and fatuous Owl was the cause of all the trouble that had accrued, and that a booting was due to him.

He did not answer Bunter. He lodged his machine against the bike-shed, and cut towards the fat Owl, with an expression on his face that was quite alarming to Bunter.

One blink at that angry face was enough for Bunter. He did not stay to deliver his message. He did not linger a second. He turned to flee. His motions were unusually swift. But Wharton's were swifter. There was a frantic yell from Bunter, as a foot crashed behind him, and helped him on his way. Billy Bunter, yelling, bolted: and Harry Wharton ran back to his machine, and ran it out into the road. A moment more, and he was in the saddle: greeted, ten minutes later, by a waving of hands from the motor-coach ahead on the Redclyffe road.

Mr. Quelch, in his study, if he remembered the matter at all, had no doubt that Harry Wharton, duly apprised that his uncle was calling that afternoon, was on the spot. In point of fact, Harry Wharton was playing Soccer at Redclyffe, a good many miles distant from Greyfriars, when a taxi-cab from Courtfield Station landed Colonel Wharton at the school.

CHAPTER III

NOT AT HOME!

"OH, crikey!" breathed Billy Bunter.

He blinked out of No. 4 Study in the Remove, at a tall, soldierly figure that was coming up the passage from the landing.

Bunter, of course, had no business in No. 4 Study, which belonged to Herbert Vernon-Smith and Tom Redwing. But the Bounder was miles away, playing football: and his chum had gone with the team, to watch Smithy kicking goals for Greyfriars: and it seemed to Billy Bunter quite a golden opportunity for exploring the study cupboard in No. 4. Having discovered a cake therein, the fat Owl had happily proceeded to surround the cake with his ample circumference. He was about to leave Smithy's study, when that firm military tread came up the passage, and he blinked at Colonel Wharton.

The old military gentleman glanced at the fat face looking out of No. 4, with a glance of some disfavour. Perhaps he had not forgotten that fat Owl's ventriloquial tricks at Wharton Lodge in the summer "hols". Then he turned to No. 1 Study and walked into that apartment. Bunter heard his deep voice as he went in:

"Harry, my boy—"

That was all Bunter heard from him. No doubt he observed the next moment that his nephew was not present. Certainly, he had expected to find him there. He had called on Mr. Quelch—once more interrupting the perusal of Lucretius—but had stayed only a few minutes and then came up to see his nephew. He had only half an hour to spare before returning to Courtfield for his train.

"Oh, crikey!" repeated Bunter.

In his deep interest in Smith's cake, the fat Owl had forgotten Harry Wharton and the undelivered message. Now he had to remember both. Wharton, unaware that his uncle was coming, had gone out on his bike. Bunter, really, had done his best. In spite of his reluctance to go anywhere near the captain of the Remove that afternoon, he had run him down and sought to deliver Quelch's message. But could any fellow deliver a message to another fellow who was kicking him? Obviously, a fellow couldn't: and Bunter hadn't. But the sight of Colonel Wharton, calling to see a fellow who was not there, made him feel very uneasy.

Again there was a heavy tread, and Colonel Wharton came out of No. 1 Study. He did not glance at the fat face in the doorway of No. 4 again. He walked back to the landing.

He was frowning a little as he went down the stairs. As Harry had lines to do for his form-master, he should have been in his study writing them: as Mr. Quelch had taken for granted. It was not likely to occur to the Colonel that the junior had "walked out" on his beak: still less could he have guessed that Wharton was wholly unaware of his impending visit. With lines to do, and with his uncle and guardian coming to see him, Harry should have been in his study; but he was not there, and the old Colonel had to look farther afield.

He tapped at Mr. Quelch's door. For the third time that afternoon, the perusal of the majestic hexameters of T. Lucretius Carus was interrupted. Mr. Quelch rose politely, if with a suppressed sigh. Much as he respected the bronzed old soldier, he preferred Lucretius. But Lucretius had to be laid aside once more.

"I am really sorry to interrupt you again, Mr. Quelch—"

"Not at all!" said Mr. Quelch, with perhaps more politeness than sincerity.

"I have little time to stay, and my nephew is not in his study. Perhaps you could send for him? I will wait in the visitors' room."

"He is not in his study?" repeated Mr. Quelch. He frowned a little. If the junior was still loitering idly about, instead of getting on with his lines, it did not look as if Mr. Quelch would receive them by tea-time. "Pray take a seat, Colonel Wharton, and I will send for him immediately."

"Thank you, Mr. Quelch."

The old gentleman sat down in Mr. Quelch's armchair, and the Remove master touched a bell. Trotter, the House page, appeared at the door; and was instructed to find Master Wharton at once and send him to the study.

Trotter departed on that mission: not a very hopeful one. Mr. Quelch, with a side-glance at Lucretius, sat down, prepared to expend a few minutes of his valuable time in the cause of politeness to a visitor who was also a governor of the school. Neither expected to have to wait more than a few minutes, more or less happily occupied by desultory conversation.

But more than a few minutes had passed, when footsteps arrived at the door. But it was not Harry Wharton who appeared there. It was Trotter who had returned.

Mr. Quelch gave him a frowning questioning glance.

"If you please, sir—!" said Trotter.

"Why have you not sent Master Wharton here?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Please I can't find him, sir."

"You cannot find him?" repeated Mr. Quelch.

"No, sir! I've looked everywhere, and asked a lot of the young gentlemen, sir, but nobody has seen him."

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch, blankly.

"He must have gone out, sir," ventured Trotter. "I looked in the bicycle-shed, sir, and his bicycle is gone."

Mr. Quelch breathed hard.

"Very well, Trotter," he said. "That will do."

"Yessir." Trotter retired.

Colonel Wharton's brow was knitted in a deep frown. That frown was reflected on the Remove master's face. They looked at one another, in silence, for a moment or two.

"This is very extraordinary, sir!" said Colonel Wharton, at last.

"Very!" said Mr. Quelch, his lips set.

"I suppose there is no doubt that my nephew knew that I was coming to see him this afternoon?"

"I sent him a message to that effect immediately after receiving your telephone call, sir."

Not for a moment did it occur to Mr. Quelch that that message had been undelivered. Quelch was accustomed to speak as one having authority, saying, "Do this!" and he doeth it! He had sent a Remove boy with a message to Wharton: and that was that! There was no room for doubt!

Colonel Wharton rose.

"As it appears that my nephew has gone out, it is useless for me to remain

longer, and I have a train to catch," he said. "I am sorry to have wasted your time, Mr. Quelch."

"Not at all, sir."

They shook hands, and the old Colonel left the study: leaving Mr. Quelch with a very grim expression on his face. But Colonel Wharton did not immediately return to his waiting taxi. He walked into the quadrangle with a thoughtful and troubled frown on his brow. It was hard to believe that his nephew, who had never been lacking in respect and affection, had deliberately disregarded him, without leaving even a word of explanation. If, indeed, he had done so, Colonel Wharton was prepared to be very angry indeed. But he was slow to anger, and he hoped that there might be some explanation to come. Pacing in the quad, with frequent glances at the gates, it would have been a great relief to him to see his nephew coming in—and he half-expected it.

But Harry Wharton did not come in: and at length, having left himself only just time to catch his train, the Colonel stepped into the taxi and departed. His bronzed face was grim as he drove to Courtfield. Certainly, unless Harry Wharton had a very good explanation to give, the vials of wrath were going to pour, very emphatically, upon the captain of the Remove.

CHAPTER IV

CALLED TO ACCOUNT!

"WHARTON!"

"Yes, Wingate."

"Quelch's study—at once."

"Very well," said Harry, quietly.

He had, of course, expected it.

The footballers had returned from Redclyffe. They came back in quite cheery spirits, after having beaten the home team by three goals to two. Of those three goals, Harry Wharton, at centre-forward, had kicked two—the Bounder having supplied the other. It had been a hard game, and while it lasted, Harry had banished Quelch and consequences from his mind. But on the run home he had to remember them, and he came back in full expectation of a "row".

But he was not sorry that he had gone. He had been wanted in the team—and without him, it was extremely probable that defeat would have taken the place of victory, in the last match before the holidays. All his friends had

been glad that he was there; even Johnny Bull admitted that perhaps, after all, it had not been such a bad idea. But after the feast came the reckoning: and when Wingate of the Sixth came up to him, Harry knew what was coming. Quelch wanted him: it was now long past the time when those miserable lines should have been handed in: and there was no doubt that Quelch would be "wrathy". Those lines might be doubled, or trebled—or it might be "whops" or detentions, or both. Wharton was prepared to face it, whatever it was. As yet, he had no suspicion that there was anything more serious in the offing than the matter of the lines. It was a couple of hours since Colonel Wharton had come and gone: and Harry had not the faintest idea that his uncle had been at the school that day at all.

"I'll go at once, Wingate," he said.

"You'd better," said the prefect, dryly.

"I say, Wingate, did Quelch look shirty?" asked Bob Cherry, as the Sixth Form man was turning away.

Wingate smiled slightly.

"Just a few," he answered, and he walked away.

Harry Wharton gave a shrug of the shoulders. He was not in a penitent mood, and apparently cared little whether Quelch looked "shirty" or not.

"You're for it, old man," said Bob, rather dismally.

"Looks like it," agreed Wharton, indifferently.

"Well, we beat Redclyffe," said Smithy. "It was worth it."

"Quite!" said Harry.

"But the callfulness of the tune must be followed by the payfulness of the piper, as the English proverb remarks," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The esteemed and ridiculous Quelch will probably be infuriated."

"If you'd gone to him," said Johnny Bull, shaking his head, "if you'd gone to him, as I wanted you to—"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Are you going to tell me that you told me so?" he asked. "Guard with your left, if you do, fathead."

"Well, you'd better go and get it over," said Peter Todd. "Like me to lend you a sweater to pack?"

"Ass!"

With that polite negative, Harry Wharton left his friends and walked away to his form-master's study. It was quite likely that it would be "whops": but the captain of the Remove certainly had no idea of "packing".

He tapped at Mr. Quelch's door.

"Come in."

There was a very deep note in the voice from the study. Harry Wharton

breathed a little hard as he entered. He had expected Quelch to be angry: but he had not expected quite so grim a look as he discerned on his form-master's face. His own face hardened.

"So you have returned, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch, his gimlet-eyes glinting like steel across the table.

"Yes, sir."

"You have not done your lines."

"Not yet, sir."

"You were told distinctly to bring them to my study this afternoon."

"I had written them, sir, but they were destroyed by an accident, as you will remember I told you in hall."

"That is quite immaterial. Such accidents should not happen, and if they do occur, the lines should be re-written, as you know very well."

"I know, sir! But—"

"But you have not written them?"

"Not yet, sir! I can hand them in by prep."

"It appears that your form-master's instructions are regarded, by you, as mere trifles to be set aside, Wharton."

Harry Wharton coloured.

"No, sir," he answered, in a low voice. "Nothing of the kind, sir. But—"

"I cannot but take a serious view of this, Wharton. Carelessness and thoughtlessness may be excused: but deliberate disobedience is a more serious matter. Still more serious, in my opinion, is your conduct towards your uncle and guardian, Colonel Wharton."

Harry Wharton gave quite a jump. He had expected Quelch to be irate over those wretched lines. But why he mentioned Colonel Wharton was quite a mystery.

"My uncle, sir!" he repeated, blankly.

"Your uncle, Colonel Wharton," said Mr. Quelch, sternly. "Your uncle is, I understand, your guardian, and he has taken your father's place since you were left an orphan at a very early age. You owe him every duty and respect. Yet you have treated him with utter neglect and disrespect—with what I can only term contemptuous disrespect—"

Harry Wharton felt as if his head were turning round.

"I—I—I don't understand, sir," he stammered. "What have I done?"

"What have you done?" repeated Mr. Quelch, thunderously. "You are well aware of what you have done, Wharton. Colonel Wharton had to leave without seeing you—"

"Has my uncle been to the school, sir?" gasped Harry, in utter dismay.



Mr. Quelch stared at him across the table. He was angry

“What do you mean?” snapped Mr. Quelch. “You were aware that your uncle was coming to see you this afternoon—”

“I—I never knew!” gasped Harry. “I had a letter from him the other day, about the Christmas hols, but he never mentioned that he was thinking of coming down to the school. I hadn’t the faintest idea that he was coming, sir—he must have known that I never knew . . .”

Mr. Quelch stared at him across the table. He was angry: intensely angry: but the trouble and distress in the junior’s face moved him. His frowning brow relaxed a little.

“Wharton! Are you telling me that you were unaware of your uncle’s visit this afternoon?” he exclaimed.

“Of course, sir!” exclaimed Harry. “He had not said a word about it in his letter—how could I know? He must have called in by chance, and any fellow might be out of gates on a half-holiday—my uncle knows that. He can’t have believed that I knew he was coming and went off all the same. He knows me too well to think anything of the kind.”

“Colonel Wharton telephoned to me that he was at Wapshot on business, and had time to call and see you before he took his train back to London. I sent you a message at once.”

"I never had it, sir! I never knew—"

"You did not receive my message?"

Harry Wharton panted.

"How can you suppose that I did, sir? Do you think that I would treat my uncle with disrespect—the kindest man that ever lived—who has done everything for me since I was a little kid—that I'd go out, without even leaving a word for him? If you think so, sir, I know my uncle will not—he wouldn't—he couldn't." The words came in a passionate stream.

Mr. Quelch was not frowning now.

"My uncle can't have supposed that I knew, sir—"

"What else was he to suppose, Wharton, when I had told him that you were certainly in the school, as you had lines to write, and that I had sent you a message on the subject? But if you did not receive that message—"

"I did not! I did not."

"Bunter did not tell you—?"

"Bunter!" repeated Harry.

"It was Bunter to whom I gave the message."

"Oh!" gasped Harry. He remembered that little scene at the bike-shed.
"Oh! If—if it was Bunter—"

Mr. Quelch's brow grew grim again.

"Did Bunter give you my message or not?" he rapped.

"No! I—I—I suppose he was going to—but—but—but—" Harry Wharton stammered. "I—I—I was in a hurry, and—and—and I—I—I suppose I was in a temper too, because he had mucked up my lines—and—and—if he had a message for me, he never got it out—"

"It appears, then, that Bunter is not to blame. He came to you with my message, to which you did not listen."

"I—I—I suppose so—yes—"

"If you had been in your study, writing your lines, Wharton, your uncle would have found you there, although my message did not reach you. As it is, he had to leave, and I need hardly tell you that he was very deeply troubled and pained by what he could only suppose to be deliberate disrespect—"

"May I use your telephone, sir?"

"Eh! What? What?" ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

"Do please let me, sir. I must explain to my uncle—I must tell him—I must! I can't let him think me an ungrateful young rotter—I've got to let him know how it is—may I telephone, sir?"

Mr. Quelch sat silent for a long moment, staring at the junior across the table. He had been angry—very angry indeed. But he knew now that Wharton was not so culpable as he had supposed: it was, after all, only the affair of the

lines in which he had offended. And he could not but be moved by the distress in the boy's face.

"You may telephone, Wharton," he said, at last.

Harry Wharton ran to the instrument.

CHAPTER V

RIGHT AS RAIN!

"**W**HARTON Lodge."

It was the fruity voice of Wells, the butler, that came to Harry Wharton's ears, as he held the receiver in Mr. Quelch's study. His hand was almost trembling with eagerness as he held it.

"Wells! Harry speaking from Greyfriars. Please ask my uncle to come to the telephone."

"I am sorry, Master Harry—"

"At once! At once!"

"I am sorry, Master Harry," came the fruity voice again. "But the master has been away all day, and has not yet returned home."

"Oh!" panted Harry.

It was an unexpected blow: yet he might very well have expected that answer. Colonel Wharton, by that time, was probably only as far as London, on his homeward way.

"Can I take a message, Master Harry?"

"Yes! No! Is my aunt at home, Wells?"

"Certainly, Master Harry. Miss Wharton is in the drawing-room."

"Ask her to come to the phone, Wells. Tell her it's important."

"Very good, sir."

There was a brief interval, which seemed very long to Harry Wharton. Mr. Quelch, sitting at his table, watched him curiously. All his anger had departed now. In his eager anxiety to set matters right with his uncle, the boy had forgotten the matter of the lines and the impending penalty. Quelch, under his crusty exterior, was a kind-hearted man: and even in the matter of the lines, he was feeling disposed to be lenient now.

"Harry, dear!" The rather sweet and rather tremulous voice of old Miss Wharton, the Colonel's sister, came through. "Is that you, Harry, dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Amy: Harry speaking. I wanted to speak to uncle, but—"

"James is not home yet, dear. He has been in London, and I think was going to a place in Kent—Pot-shot, I think—or was it Crock-shot—"

"Wapshot," said Harry. "It's only a few miles from here, Auntie, and I've just heard that Uncle James found that he had time to run across and see me before he had to take his train back—"

"How very nice, Harry dear. How pleased you must have been to see him at your school—"

"Of course I should have been, Auntie, but I was out of gates, as I never knew he was coming—"

"Dear me! Did James leave without seeing you, then? That must have been a great disappointment to him."

"I want you to explain to him, Auntie, as soon as he comes home. You see, he telephoned from Wapshot to my form-master, who sent me a message that he was coming, but I never had the message, and went out—"

"How very unfortunate, Harry."

"Yes, yes: but as uncle doesn't know that I never had the message, he may think that I went out knowing that he was coming—"

"Oh! No! That is quite impossible, Harry. James would never think anything of the kind."

"I hope not, Auntie. But I want him to know—I want you to explain to him the minute he comes home—"

"Of course, my dear."

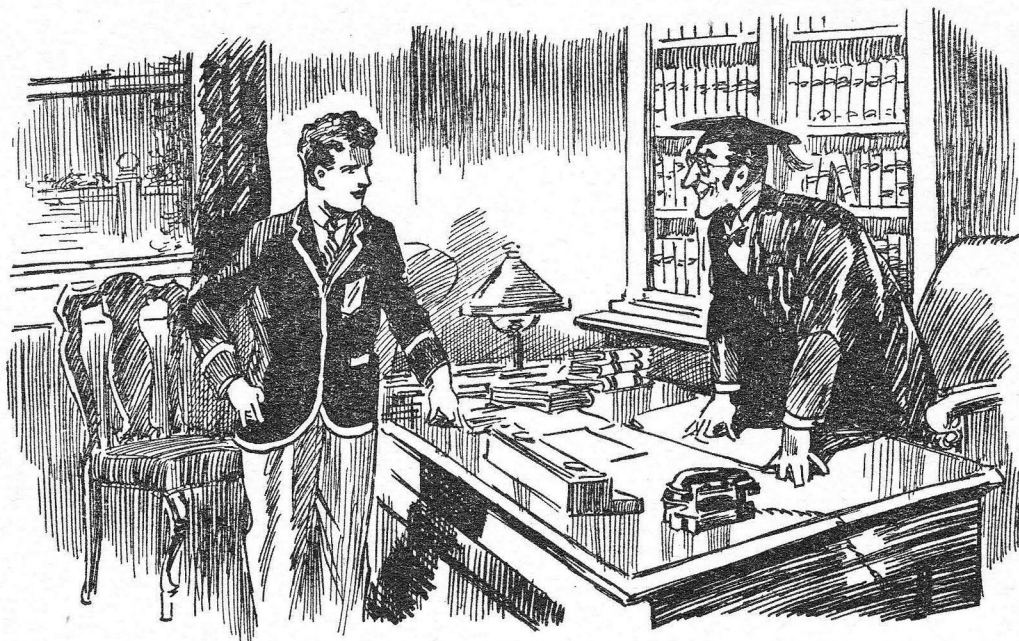
"Tell him I never had the message from Mr. Quelch, and never even dreamed that he was anywhere near Greyfriars. I was quite knocked over, when I came in, and Mr. Quelch told me that Uncle had been here, and had had to leave without seeing me. I just couldn't bear him to think that I didn't care. You'll tell him the minute he comes home, won't you, Auntie?"

"Certainly I will, dear. The moment James comes in at the door I will explain it all to him. But you need have no uneasiness whatever, Harry—I am quite sure that your uncle will not suppose that you were to blame in any way. But I will tell him everything you have said."

"You're a dear!" said Harry, gratefully. "Now good-bye till Christmas, Auntie dear."

"Good-bye, Harry."

Wharton put up the receiver. He stood for a moment, a little breathless, but immensely relieved in his mind. Whatever Colonel Wharton might be thinking, in his train home, all would be explained as soon as he reached Wharton Lodge. He would know, no doubt, that Harry had taken French leave that afternoon, regardless of orders: which the junior certainly would have preferred him not to know. But he would know, too, that so far as he personally was concerned, his nephew was blameless. And that was what mattered.



"Thank you for allowing me to use your telephone. It was kind of you"

Harry Wharton turned from the telephone, and coloured a little under Mr. Quelch's keen glance.

"Thank you for allowing me to use the telephone sir," he said, in a low voice. "It was very kind of you."

"Not at all, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch, almost graciously. "I am very glad to know that, so far as concerns your uncle at least, you have been blameless. As for the lines—!" He paused.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Wharton. "I know I ought to have been in my study when my uncle came, and that it's my own fault that all this has happened. I—I wish—!" He broke off.

There was a long pause.

"You will write the lines again, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch, at last.

"Certainly, sir."

"You may bring them to me to-morrow. That is all! You may go!" added Mr. Quelch, in quite a kindly tone.

"Thank you, sir."

Harry Wharton left the study.

He found a crowd of fellows waiting for him in the Rag. There was a shower of questions as he came in.

"Licked?"

"Whopped?"

"Going up to the Head?"

"What's the verdict?"

"Worth it, anyhow, to beat Redclyffe," said Vernon-Smith. "But you don't look whopped, old bean."

Harry Wharton smiled.

"Quelch is a good sort, and I was a hot-headed fool to cheek him," he said. "Johnny, old man—"

"Hallo!" said Johnny Bull.

"You told me so—"

"I jolly well did!" said Johnny.

"Well, you can tell me so again, if you like, and as often as you like," said Harry. "Quelch has let me off jolly lightly, and I could jolly well kick myself for having cheeked him."

"Then it's all right?" asked Nugent.

"Right as rain!"

"I say, you fellows." It was a fat voice in the doorway, as Billy Bunter blinked in through his big spectacles. "I say, is that beast Wharton about?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle about. I want to keep clear of the beast if he's in one of his rotten tempers—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I jolly well hope that Quelch gave him six, and that he laid it on jolly hard—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fat villain!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

Billy Bunter jumped, as he discerned the captain of the Remove in the crowd in the Rag.

"Oh, crikey!" he ejaculated.

Bunter did not stay to ascertain whether Harry Wharton was in "one of his tempers". He disappeared from the doorway like a fat ghost at cock-crow. But really the fat Owl had nothing to apprehend. The captain of the Remove was no longer feeling any urge to plant his foot on Bunter's tight trousers—everything now was "right as rain".

Or was it?

END OF SECOND SECTION