

CHAPTER I

“Curse and blast!” Denis tossed the oar into the dinghy’s bow and stared sullenly at the ebbing waters. He was five feet four, with curly brown hair and greyish blue eyes. In three months he would be seventeen; and in twenty-four hours time he would be back at Eton. He put on his coat and sat down in the stern-sheets of the *Cormorant*. He knew from a little red table in the hall that low water at Speenmouth steps would not be till four; and another two hours at least before the returning tide would lift the dinghy off the mudbank.

He wiped his face with a handkerchief. He was still hot from clumsy oar-thrusts at the black mud, that opened to the blade and closed with a sucking gasp, as he wrenched it free again. Once he had tried walking on the mud without pattens, and if a passing fisherman had not yelled to throw himself flat, the slime would have closed above his head before help could have come.

In the twelve-foot dinghy the lug-sail lay crumpled where he had let it down with a run. Ropes straggled everywhere and whipped the canvas in the breeze. Denis gazed ruefully at the slender trickle oozing from the flats and found it far from beautiful. As a rule he was fond of painting—slight water-colour sketches that had feeling in them. But the low April sun, tinging the last swirls of the river, left him unmoved. He did not notice the yellow green sprouts of the reed beds. At other times he would have puzzled their sunlit values against the cobalt of the distant island; ranged the zigzag course of the river into a pattern of sorts; steered the dinghy so that old Harry’s seedy looking booms slashed the skyline at a proper, if unboomlike angle. But there was no steering to be done for some three and a half

hours, and meanwhile the fairway sank to a gorge below him.

He was less angry now. From his high perch on the mud-bank he could see across the reed beds to the elm tops of Anglersmead. The red brick of the house showed between the elms. He could almost see his mother.

Mrs. Bailey would be at the boundary wall, a nautical sort of brass telescope levelled above the spearheads. She would have followed his zigzag beat into the south-west wind, while the white lug and the little red pennant sank from her sight on the falling ebb. Mrs. Bailey knew the river as well as Denis. She knew what hope he had on a lee shore with that tide. She would see his lug flapping on the bank off Miser's Creek, and would know he was there for four hours. But Mrs. Bailey never did know. She seemed to make a point of not knowing. She refused to accept Denis's frequent maroonings as unfortunate but inevitable delays. If he wasn't back by tea time, she gave the alarm. And the alarm took the shape of an organised relief party, and that humiliating journey over the mud on the shoulder of a pattered fisherman.

"Curse the tide," he said aloud. "And my last day, too." He'd have the centreboard in the dinghy by next holidays, that was some consolation. He was a fool to have gone out on the spring ebb with a wind like that. But, after all, it was the last sail of the holidays. He opened a square tin box. The Emergency Chest he still called it. You never knew, when you were on the sea. But the biscuits were damp with salt, and in any case smelt strongly of tarred twine. There was nothing to do but count the moments till the tide turned, or a relief party was organised.

And to-morrow he went back to Eton. Bursting chestnut trees, untrampled, green cricket pitches, getting up for early school at half past six; then that curious reshuffling of friends in house and work, and, detaching itself from the general confusion, the fear of being left out. Robin? Not that Denis minded being alone. He realised now what fun he had had in the *Cormorant* these holidays. But the

fear of being laughed at, because he "messed" with nobody; and through no preference of his own, like Holmes-Norton, who propped a novel against his teapot and seemed actually offended if anyone dropped in to see him.

Denis tried to think of the holidays in relation to the half. Of course there was more freedom at Speenmouth. But did he dislike school work? There was a good deal of it. Early school wouldn't be so bad now the mornings were warmer. But maths; that senseless butting of his head against an unseen wall. Could despair; then wilful blankness, and, next, the dreaded grip on the fleshy part of the forearm. He would be up to Daddy Long Legs again for certain. O God. There were good things too. Ragging a new beak. The whole div. kept in together for an extra hour. A grand fellow-feeling he got on these occasions, as when they had lined Windsor High Street for Alcock and Brown, the first airmen to fly the Atlantic. Anyhow, there was no use worrying. Things took their course at Eton. He was always hearing for how many centuries they had taken it. A new half more or less made little difference. The trouble was, his mother would force some emotion from the moment, that he simply did not feel, and his father confirm it with a piece of sound advice. And both made him blush sinfully. Could not they see it was as natural for him to return to Eton, as it was for Eton to go on being what it was? They might as well try to interfere with the Speenmouth tide, which was just now slackening off, before it started to make in half an hour's time. Half past four, and Maureen was coming to tea. Good heavens, he had forgotten all about Maureen. And Maureen would remind him that he had specially invited her, if she had not gone before he got home. Girls were like that. They always reminded you. Denis set his teeth, as if a maths problem lay before him.

Yet Maureen Roxburgh was as unlike a maths problem as possible. If he sometimes felt a furious revolt against her, he was still in the school age, when girls are soppy creatures at heart, and school pride the highest form of love. Some of the older boys had girls, and got scrawling letters from

them, which Denis thought rather dull. But there might be something in it. Anyhow, Maureen knew the tiller from the rowlocks, and she had nice, brown, long hair, and never wanted to do different things, and Phyllis Stetterley, who lived next door to the Baileys, hated her like poison.

If only the tide would hurry up. Should he hoist a distress signal and explain to Maureen afterwards that he had only walted to get back before she left? But that meant the shameful journey over the mud on a fisherman's shoulders; and Maureen would probably misunderstand. They would all pat him on the back and say "Poor old Denis, you must be cold. We've left some nice hot scones for you." Maureen would say later, if his mother left them alone, "It doesn't matter about the distress signal, Denis. It must have been beastly out there alone." No, distress signals were out of the question. He would wait till the tide rose; and just then he heard the splash of oars. He could see nothing from his mudbank, high above the sunken channel. But in a moment a black bow rounded the bend. Jack Hood, the salmon poacher, was sculling. In the stern-sheets sat his father. Jack was steering as he pulled, and Mr. Bailey in his knickerbockers and high laced boots looked more than incongruous. His face showed resigned protest. He was not angry. He seldom felt any bitterness towards his son. He was too fond of him. In his long experience as a London solicitor he had learnt the gift of infinite patience. And Denis feared his father's deadly patience more than Daddy Long Legs' grip on the fleshy part of the forearm.

"Have you left the boat securely fastened, Denis?" Mr. Bailey ignored the past and present of his son's predicament. His voice was very patient.

"No; not yet. I didn't know you were coming father. I say, I'm quite all right. The tide will lift her in a couple of hours, you know . . . or less." He looked furtively at Jack, who seemed unimpressed by his jargon. Could he defy the rescue party and retain his dignity? Mr. Bailey's voice banished hope.

“Hurry up, Denis, and get your things together. Hood here has kindly offered to carry you off”—the offer was worth five shillings—“Now don’t keep us waiting; you never think of your mother on these occasions.”

It was the final argument, which never failed. The appeal to Denis’s mother had the disarming effect of making him feel a cad, and it was a bad feeling for an Etonian. He furled the lug and made a last pretence of efficiency in the quick skill with which he coiled the sheet and halyard. He laid the oars neatly on the thwarts.

“That’s all right, Master Denis. I’ll be up for her, when the tide turns.”

“Come on, Denis,” said his father more wearily. Jack Hood’s pattens squelched across the mud. “Now then, up she goes,” and he staggered webfooted down the slope, with Denis clinging to his neck. “It’s no place for a dinghy without a keel on her, Master Denis; leastways not with them spring tides running.” He meant it kindly, but Denis did not answer. They rowed in silence to the steps. Denis leapt nimbly from the bow with the painter. His father stepped like a country gentleman over the obstacles in the boat and at the top of the steps produced a couple of half crowns.

“Thank you, sir; I’m sure I’m very obliged”; Jack Hood managed a note of surprise and touched his cap. Five shillings had long since been agreed on as fair payment for relief expeditions.

“I don’t suppose you ever think of what you cost me over that boat, do you?” said his father on the way home.

“I’m sorry, father.”

“Not that I grudge you the money. I wish I could give you more. I wouldn’t mind if you ever thought of your poor mother.”

“I’m sorry, father.”

“But you don’t.”

“No, father,” Denis always agreed. It was shortest in the end. The phrase had lost most of its meaning by now,

but he tried hard to think if he ever thought of his mother. Christmas and birthday presents, Sunday letters from Eton. He could not recall any other practical instance. How awful. And there she was, whenever he went out in the *Cormorant*; her eyes glued to the brass telescope, picturing a thousand disasters, if ever a shrub on the lawn's end hid the *Cormorant's* sail from view. But when he returned from his cruising in the Speenmouth creek—to cross the bar was forbidden—Mrs. Bailey seemed just the same outwardly. She didn't throw her arms round him and embrace him as Robin Manley's mother had done at the end of a lower boy football tie. Mrs. Manley had been surprised by Robin's manner afterwards. There was none of that sort of nonsense about Mrs. Bailey; except on the recognised occasion of going back to Eton. He had come to expect something of the sort, though it still made him blush. Then, what was all the fuss about? His father had once asked him if he knew how fond his mother was of him. Of course she was fond of him; after all she was his mother. But why rake up these futile and embarrassing subjects? His father had been to a public school—not Eton admittedly—and he ought to know that boys did not talk about that sort of thing.

They were at the front door now. Two ladies' bicycles leaned by the porch; Maureen was still there. Mrs. Bailey, being on occasions a sensible woman, did not run out to meet them. They found her in the inner hall. "Maureen's here, Denis," she said. "I told her to stop as I knew you wouldn't be long now."

"Thanks mum. Got caught on the ebb off Miser's Creek. Hadn't a chance on that lee shore. I'm sorry I'm late. Hullo Maureen, I didn't see you."

"What rotten luck, Denis; on your last day too. That's what comes of going out alone, isn't it, Mrs. Bailey?" She had rather hoped he would ask her out for a sail to-day.

"Well, Denis," said his mother, "there are some scones we've left for you. I'm afraid they'll be a bit cold."

"Doesn't matter, mum." He began to eat them out of the dish.

"Maureen and I have been having a splendid chat, haven't we Maureen?"

"We even discussed you, Denis." Maureen looked at her plate. Crumbled bits of cake lay in a mound. Talking to Mrs. Bailey about Denis was a delicate business.

"Have some more tea, Denis?"

"Thanks, mum." Maureen crossed her feet a different way and put on a smile. Mrs. Bailey looked at the clock. Maureen saw. "I think I really ought to be going now. I've stayed ever so long."

"Oh, no, you needn't go for a moment, I'm sure, now Denis has returned safely and everything. You must stay and make conversation." She smiled and they both watched Denis eat. He ate quickly, stuffing cake into his mouth, before he had finished swallowing. He was not really so very hungry. The clock on the mantelpiece was very noisy this evening.

"I say, about your sale of work next week, would you like any help?" said Maureen.

"That's very kind of you. Yes, I should appreciate it."

"I'll come round, then, in the morning, shall I?"

"If you would." Mrs. Bailey looked at Denis. He was cutting another slice. Going back to Eton didn't seem to worry him. He finished the cake and sat back. It was decent of his mother to have asked Maureen to stay, he had been thinking. Of course, Maureen was a good sort at sales and village fêtes and things. That was why his mother liked her. She didn't seem to care for girls as a rule. But it was jolly unselfish of her on his last day at home, when she was panting to get down to the real business. There would be questions and confidences later in the evening. O God.

"Have you shown Maureen your new dispatch case," said Mrs. Bailey. "It's a birthday present, a little premature."

"Do lets see, Denis ; where is it ?"

"I'll show you if you really want to see it." He led the way through into the inner hall. Showing off possessions reminded him of the poems he used to gabble as a small boy in the drawing-room. When the guests all clapped and tried to pat him on the head he had wanted to scream and kick them on the shins.

The dispatch case was lying open on a table. It was in morocco. It held a writing pad, nail scissors, file and pen-holders, all of which would be lost or stolen in the first week at Eton. Mrs. Bailey had scrapped her vision of a new summer hat, when she saw it in a Barford shop window.

"How lovely," said Maureen. "D. A. B. DENIS, whatever is your second name? I never knew you had one."

"Anthony," said Denis.

"Anthony, what a jolly name."

"Bloody silly, if you ask me." All the same he would leave the dispatch case in a pretty obvious position in his room at Wren's.

"Look," said Maureen. "It's even got a place for writing paper and envelopes. You'll be able to write to me on wet afternoons."

Denis considered. "All right, perhaps I will. Most of the fellows at m'tutor's write to girls, though god knows what they say."

Maureen smiled. "It's not so hard as it sounds; you try. But I don't believe you so much as think of me, when you are at Eton." Denis kicked a table leg. "You know I often wonder how you are getting on. It seems so funny to have two quite separate lives, if you know what I mean."

"I suppose so." Denis was trying to remember if he had ever thought of Maureen at Eton. Probably not. But he might try a letter, just for the fun of it, like other fellows did, especially now that he had the dispatch case. "But you're not getting soppy, are you?" he added. "Just because I'm going back to-morrow. School's all right. You needn't worry about me, Maureen."

"It's dull here, when everyone's away," said Maureen.

"There's only Phyllis, and you know how much Phyllis and I love each other; and Nancy Farrell, of course; but she's going off to learn to be a nurse soon."

"Yes," said Denis. "I suppose it is dull." It must be rather rotten for girls when boys went back to school. "Why don't you learn to sail, Maureen? That's a fine idea; you could have the *Cormorant*; I'll suggest it to father; and then you'll be good enough to crew for me in the handicap class next hols."

"I might. I don't know. What would your family say? You know your father goes down and scrubs the *Cormorant* every week when you are away."

"I expect mother makes him. I say, she rather likes you, Maureen, or she wouldn't have asked you to stay on to-day."

"Does she? I wonder."

"I swear she does. You're so good at sales of work and all that sort of sweat. I can't think how you do it."

"I'm not so sure," said Maureen. She glanced over her shoulder. The drawing-room door had opened. "Oh there you are, you two," said Mrs. Bailey. She sounded surprised; a little like Jack Hood, accepting the five shillings. She seemed relieved to find them still examining the dispatch case. "Isn't it a nice one?" she said. "You must look after it very carefully, Denis."

"Yes, mum."

"Oh, Maureen, I don't want to hurry you, but perhaps you ought to be going. I don't want to get into your mother's bad books. It's nearly seven o'clock."

"I'm afraid I've stayed simply ages, Mrs. Bailey. I think the case is too lovely." They trooped through into the hall. It was beginning to get dark. Outside in the drive there were big shadows under the elms. "Will you see Maureen off?" said Mrs. Bailey. "I must get back and finish your pair of socks before supper." She left them standing in the hall.

"Well, good-bye, Maureen," said Denis. He held out his hand. "See you soon."

Maureen mounted her bicycle. " Good-bye, Denis ; and don't forget to write." He stood by the door. The bike zig-zagged down the drive. It swerved wildly and a hand waved. Denis closed the front door and prepared for his last evening at home.