

CHAPTER X

The special long leave train to Paddington had been made up on a basis of roughly ten boys to a compartment. Daddy Long Legs was in charge of dealings with the railway companies, and his mathematical touch was invaluable. In some compartments there may have been twelve and in others eight. In Denis's carriage there were exactly ten.

There was also a variety of luggage. In the racks were bulging suitcases, that threatened to fall on their owners' new toppers and crush them to inferior opera hats. On the suitcases lay rolled umbrellas with pale blue tassels and silver knobbed canes and a few overcoats. Peter and Denis sat in opposite corners. Oliver was going home and coming up to Lord's with his people later.

"That's too much," said Peter. "Look behind you, Denis. 'Windsor Castle from the Thames,' 'Eton College,' 'Romney Lock, Windsor.' They might at least spare us pictures of the place."

"Nothing like rubbing it in," said Denis. "Like that ointment. Which reminds me, does your father know about our swiping?"

"Yes, I told him. He seemed rather amused. He'll probably make heavy jokes about it."

"What shall I talk to him about?"

"You can try cricket or rowing, but he knows nothing about either. Egyptology is his subject, and Marsala. You'll like that. I'm only allowed half a glass. It's sweet, but damned strong."

Denis felt a little uncertain about Lord Periton. He had never spoken to an earl and he wondered whether he addressed him as your lordship, or m'lord, which sounded too much like servants, or just sir, like Wren. It was a nasty problem and so was the servant question. His mother had sent him one pound for tips. She had written,

“Ten shillings for the butler. Five shillings for the valet or footman, who looks after your clothes, and two and sixpence to be left on the dressing-table for the housemaid.” He must remember to get some change.

“Damn your soul,” exclaimed Peter. “Get off my toe, blast you.”

“Sorry, this idiot pushed me,” said a smaller boy. Two boys got up. “Let’s mob the train,” said one of them. He jumped on to the seat and examined the communication cord. He put his head out of the window. “Hi, there, we’re going to bust the communication chain in our carriage. Pass it down the coach to someone to break it at the other end and we’ll have a tug-of-war.”

There was a pause while the idea was explained. Then a dozen heads crowded out of the windows. The message was passed down the eight compartments. “First four against the last four carriages.”

“Right you are. Say when you’re ready” In Denis’s compartment a boy produced a steel train key and prised open a link of the chain and the end was pulled down from the other side of the carriage. The team took a firm grip. The tension slackened suddenly when the chain was cut at the other end of the coach. “Are you ready up there?” A white handkerchief was waved and the tug-of-war began.

The last four carriages must have held all the heavy weights in Eton. Inch by inch they pulled in the chain, while the team of the first carriage dropped the last links with smarting fingers and left three compartments to carry on against four. In Denis’s carriage the chain fell in coils on the floor. They hauled it hand over hand till all resistance vanished. The heaving mass collapsed on the seat and the rest of the chain came through with a rattle. It was coiled with great reverence, and when the train drew in at Paddington, a boy presented it solemnly to the guard and ran away in the crowd, before the man could express himself.

The taxi stopped in a large and shady square. Number

nine was a tall house with unwashed pillars. Of all the houses in Halkin Square it needed a wash and a coat of paint most of all. Peter and Denis got out and a butler appeared on the doorstep.

"Pay the taxi, will you, Dunston," said Peter. "Is father-in?"

"Yes, m'lord. His lordship is upstairs with her ladyship and Lady Bridget."

"Come on up, Denis. He'll see to our bags."

"Well, I'm pleased to see you, Peter," said Lord Periton. "And this is Denis. We met on the Fourth of June, I think. You know my wife."

"How do you do?" said Denis and shook hands with Lord Periton and then with Lady Periton and felt it was the wrong order. Lady Periton gave Peter a kiss on the forehead.

"So you were one of the young dancers, too?" said Lord Periton, twisting his moustache. "I expect the head made you dance, what?"

"Yes, sir," said Denis with a smile.

"I'm afraid it was my wicked daughter's fault," said Lady Periton. "She ought to have known better. She will be down in a moment."

"Is that Alec coming with us to-night, mother?" said Peter.

"You mustn't talk of your brother-in-law like that. Yes, I think so."

"Blast," said Peter.

"Who's going to win to-day?" said Lord Periton.

"We ought to, I think, sir," said Denis.

"Hum. Good. We'll tell my son-in-law that, what? He was a Harrovian, poor fellow."

"Was he, sir?"

"I wonder where that daughter of mine has got to? We ought to be starting, I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think I should wear my grey topper to-day?"

"Don't fish for compliments, father," said Peter. "You

know you look the hell of a dog in that hat, and you know you're going to wear it whatever Denis says."

"Do wear it, sir," said Denis.

"Sorry if I kept you all waiting," said Lady Bridget, sweeping into the room. "I've been up talking to nanny. She said she hoped the best side won."

"Cautious old woman, I'll teach her," said Peter.

"She knew Alec was at Harrow. How do you do, Denis? I didn't see you." Lady Bridget looked slightly embarrassed.

"Aren't you going to ask his forgiveness, Bridget?" said Lady Periton. "Do you realise you got him . . . swished is it?"

"Swiped," said Peter. "And damned hard, Bridget, I can tell you."

"No swearing," said his mother.

"It wasn't your fault," said Denis. "It was awfully decent of you to take us there. We didn't mind it a bit."

"I do," said Peter. "Every time I sit down I think of my dear sister."

"The car is at the door, your ladyship," said the butler.

"Now come along, all of you," said Lady Periton. She collected a variety of objects from the sofa. "I told Florence we should be at the coach by half-past eleven."

"Are the twins coming?" said Peter.

"Of course. Now mind you say something nice to Jean. She has probably got a new frock in your honour."

"If it's anything like her last, I shall have to tell lies again, and you wouldn't like that, surely, mother?"

"You Etonians are so blasé nowadays," said Lord Periton.

"Denis isn't."

"Quite right too at your age," said Lady Periton.

"Denis will probably fall in love with Annette," said Peter.

"She has got very nice manners," said Lady Periton.

"And as much conversation as the statue of our founder in school yard."

"Alec sat next to her the other night at dinner," said Lady Bridget, "and said she was a nice little thing."

"Of course, Alec has simple tastes. Like all gardees."

"Oh shut up, Peter; don't be superior."

"I am . . . to gardees."

"Well, here we are boys," said Lord Periton. By Jove, what a crowd. Andrews, you'd better be here by six with the car." He gave his grey topper a rakish twist and took his wife's arm.

There was a big crush by the entrance gates of Lord's. Men were hawking trays of celluloid babies in bows of dark and light blue ribbon. Newsboys shouted the racing editions of the evening papers. People were still surging into the ground. Inside the gates, the asphalt walks were a mass of toppers and nodding picture hats. Denis had a glimpse between two shoulders of a yellow green distance and small figures in white, doing nothing in particular in its centre. The crowds buzzed and hummed. A wicket must have fallen.

A smiling, harassed face greeted them at the coach.

"Lady Florence, this is Denis Bailey, who is staying with us," said Lady Periton. "Miss Annette and Miss Jean Wreath." Everybody shook hands. Jean Wreath's hands were moist and clinging, thought Denis, but she was beautifully dressed.

"How's the London season, Annette?" said Peter. "Having a success?"

Annette laughed. "We'll take a top seat. Denis, Come on, Jean and Annette, up you come."

"Be careful, girls," said Lady Florence.

"Make room for father," said Lord Periton. "By Jove, four Harrow wickets down for thirty-three."

"Eighty-one for one wicket," said Peter. "Last man thirty-three. Number four batting. Even I can do that, though I'm supposed to be a wetbob."

"Never mind," said Lord Periton. "Once we start tumbling them out, eh, Jean?"

"Yes, Lord Periton. Ow!"

"You mustn't pinch débutantes, father. It's very fast," said Peter.

"Are you a cricketer, Mr. Bailey?" said Annette.

"Drybob," remarked Peter.

"Yes, but I'm not much good."

"Then you can tell me all about the match. I want to know everything, but nobody will ever tell me. Why did that man in the white coat stretch his arms just now?"

"Yawning," said Peter, "and I don't blame him."

"He's the umpire. He was signalling a wide," said Denis.

"Oh. And what is this boy doing by the rails? Is he part of the match?"

"He's trying to get off with somebody's sister in the crowd," said Peter.

"Shut up, Peter," said Lord Periton. "Let Denis tell Annette. He's showing off in front of you, Jean."

"What about your grey topper, father? Do you think it suits him, Jean?"

"It's very smart. Hullo, what's that?" A bestial roar had gone up. Old men were waving sticks and toppers. Old women smiled gallantly and straightened their hats.

"Middle stump. It's their captain," cried Lord Periton, standing up and clapping wildly. "Watch the score board, Jean. No, it isn't. Number two. Look on your card. Who is it? It must be the captain. By Jove, he's getting a fine reception. Who was it? never mind. Two wickets for eighty-five. That's better. What did I tell you? Once we get them on the run."

"Mother says, what about lunch?" said Peter.

"What, lunch with Harrow on the run? We'll have the whole side out in half an hour, you watch, Jean. Yes, I'm ready for lunch. Come on, everyone." Lord Periton jumped nimbly to the ground, took his wife's arm and strode away towards the luncheon tents.

"Eton are doing quite well, a.en't they?" said Annette.

"Not too bad," said Denis. "That sounds like another wicket." An exultant howl came from the ground and they

quicken their steps. Denis hoped that Harrow wouldn't be all out before lunch was over. Peter knew that if they didn't get in to lunch early all the strawberries and cream would be finished.

In the Old Etonian tent the air was close and shut away from the noise of the crowd. A monastic quiet brooded under the canvas. Few tables were occupied and a trio of hired waiters with grey hair and disingenuous zeal bobbed and breathed over their shoulders. They hurried them through salmon, cold chicken, and a number of salads and sweets and brought the inevitable carafe of swimming fruit. The oldest of the three waiters tried to unload a dangerous looking blancmange.

"Strawberries and cream," said Peter firmly. "If you don't bring some strawberries, I'll murder you."

"Hi, do you think you could get me a whiskey and soda?" whispered Lord Periton.

"I'll see, sir," said the waiter, and pocketed his half-crown.

"Just hired for the day," said Lord Periton. "They don't get much, poor fellows."

"Have some more strawberries now. I've got them, Annette," said Peter. "Finish them up, Denis. There's nobody else."

"Yes, certainly I'll look after them," said Lady Periton. "I'm so glad the twins can come."

"You see a box at the opera is not to be refused after all, is it, don't you feel?" said Lady Florence.

"No, my dear, of course it isn't. And it's such a small dance I'm having; just for the boys and a few young friends. The twins will be perfectly all right."

"They are so grateful for your kindness, Agnes."

"Now what about some more cricket?" said Lord Periton. He had got his whiskey; a good half a crown's worth, and his cigar was going nicely. The grey-haired waiter had not the heart to tell him that smoking was forbidden in the tent till half-past two.

"Shall we walk round, Peter?" said Denis. The cider

cup had gone to his head. There was a weight above his eyes and all the sharpness had gone out of the sounds he heard. The frocks and hats, which drifted towards the luncheon tents, moved in a deadened atmosphere. His head was a little top-heavy. Everyone seemed equally indistinct and he felt a great self-confidence.

“ Will you walk round with me, Miss Wreath ? ”

“ I'd like to, very much,” said Annette, but when they reached a gangway they saw that the ground had become a vast garden party, and only the score board bore witness to the game.

Peter and Denis and the twins went out to the centre. A square of worn turf was roped off from the crowd and four walls of faces stared reverently at the strip of yellow between the wickets. They gazed at the dusty rabbit scrapes by the crease, like tourists in the grass-grown trenches of a Flanders battlefield.

“ That's Andrews, our fast bowler,” said a small boy in jackets. “ He kicks up the ground like that.”

“ And we shall have to bat on it later,” said another boy. “ They'll bump and shoot all over the place.”

“ It all seems so funny and small, when you get there,” said Annette. Denis was staring at the pitch.

“ That's life,” said Peter.

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Oh, you'll find out when you are older.”

“ I believe you're pulling my leg, Peter.”

“ I believe I am,” said Peter. “ Wake up, Denis, I've seen Oliver over there with his people. At least, they can't be anybody else's people. Come on, girls, we're going over there.”

Oliver saw them. “ Hullo, Peter. You've never met my people, have you ? Mother, this is Peter, and Denis Bailey.”

“ Miss Annette and Miss Jean Wreath,” said Peter. Denis started and the cider cup passed away. “ Maureen. I never thought I should see you here. You never told me you were coming.”

“ So you two know each other,” said Mrs. Harbord.

"How very nice. What a heavenly day for the match, and how thankful we ought to be that it isn't like yesterday."

"Yes, it's lucky," said Denis.

"And how well Eton are doing after their bad start. Seven Harrow wickets down for 118. Oliver tells me you ought to win."

"Yes, we ought to," said Denis, glancing at Maureen.

"Are you a drybob like Oliver?"

"Excuse me, what were you saying?" Mrs. Harbord turned to Peter. "You and Oliver have tea together, Lord Ockley? It's so nice for Oliver to be able to share his things with others; and the little Spencer-Mace boy is one of you, so I hear."

"Unfortunately," said Oliver.

"Such a lovely place they've got, quite near us. Mrs. Spencer-Mace is a charming woman."

"Is she?" said Peter. The twins were with Colonel Harbord, listening to his school days. Maureen stood alone.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to Lord's?" said Denis.

"Why should I, after all?" She laughed. "As a matter of fact I couldn't let you know because I only heard myself two days ago that I was coming. Mrs. Harbord apparently discovered that mother was a long lost cousin and asked me to stay the week end."

"I see," said Denis.

"You're not angry, are you? Isn't Lord's marvellous?"

"Marvellous. I suppose Oliver had been raving about you to his people."

"Oh don't be so silly, Denis. How do I know? And, anyhow, you seem to be enjoying yourself. Who is your smart lady friend I saw you with just now?"

"Annette Wreath. Lady Florence Wreath's daughter. She's a very decent sort."

"Oh."

"And that reminds me, I've promised to take her round before the game starts."

"Shan't I see any more of you?"

"I don't know. I'm sitting on the Periton's coach. It's the black and yellow one on the right of the pavilion over there, if you like to come along any time. They are giving a dance for Peter and me to-morrow night."

"How splendid for you," said Maureen. "Do you remember the last time we danced together at Speenmouth?"

"Oh, shut up, Maureen. Don't be like a girl. Besides, I danced with Ockley's sister in a club the other night and she said I was damned good."

"I was only joking. I know you won't tread on Miss Wreath's toes. But why must we quarrel?"

"I'm not. And I must go now. Good-bye."

"See you later?"

"'Xpect so." He hurried after the rest.

"Oliver has asked us to come and have strawberries in their arbour at tea," said Peter. "We'll go."

"Good," said Denis.

A dinner bell sounded in the pavilion. Boys took their mothers by the arm and moved faster towards the stands. A few veterans in grey toppers lingered near the pitch; then walked with slow, deliberate strides to the pavilion. The ropes were removed and the green field regained its respect in the eyes of the crowd. Denis and his party had just climbed on top of their coach, when two white-coated figures took possession of the pitch. The umpires placed the bails delicately on the stumps. A roar from the crowd as the Eton side streamed out from the pavilion, and stood tossing the ball from hand to hand. A suitable pause and numbers four and nine of the Harrow Eleven swung out in long step and passed into the middle of the fieldsmen. Within half an hour, numbers nine and ten had returned to the pavilion, and when the last man's bail was knocked flying past first slip, the score stood at 147, number four carrying his bat for an invaluable seventy-three.

Eton fared slightly worse. When tea was taken at four-thirty, three good wickets were down for forty, and the dark blue rosettes were shouting themselves hoarse in the stands. In the Harbord's tea arbour the conversation was disjointed,

Roar after roar came from the ground. Colonel Harbord looked grave. Peter piled his plate with strawberries, helped himself to cream and sugar, squashed them with a fork, and ate them. The rest of the party found it hard to chatter when the crowd out there was shouting and clapping. Besides, after the seventh outburst of clapping, it was clear that boundaries or clever singles and brilliant pieces of fielding, as well as wickets, were being applauded. At each new roar Denis had wanted to jump up and discover who was out. Now he sat eating and listening to fragments of conversation.

Maureen and Oliver were laughing helplessly over something, with frequent reference to each other. They seemed to have a jolly good joke between them. Denis turned to Annette Wreath. Annette's small talk had given out in the last half-hour.

"Are you coming to the Periton's dance to-morrow?"

"Yes, will you be there?"

"Rather. I'm looking forward to it. It's my first London dance." Denis wanted to make a joke. Say something at which they could both roar with laughter together. "What's a London dance like?" he asked. Annette thought for a moment. "There's an awful crush and you can never get anything to eat or drink; though there is lots of food really."

Denis laughed loudly. "I bet Peter would. Have you ever seen Peter eat? Peter would smell out food anywhere."

"Peter has a very good appetite," said Annette.

No good, thought Denis to himself. "Did you hear about us at Devil's Island, Miss Wreath?"

"Yes, Lady Periton told me. You were birched, she said."

"Jolly hard," and Denis launched into a lurid account of the evening. Annette listened gravely and asked questions at intervals. Denis tried to remain interested in his story, but he kept hearing his voice and it sounded bored and boring. "And someone saw the rope and told the headmaster, you see," he said, telescoping the conclusion of the evening. The trouble was that he did not want to talk to

Annette Wreath at the moment. He wanted to explain to Maureen that he had not meant to be rude. He was always saying things that he didn't mean. But Maureen was still giggling at Oliver. Denis had never seen much to laugh at in Oliver's conversation, though he had the reputation at Wren's of being a comic sort of ass. Why must she go on laughing? Was it to annoy him? Damn. Damn. Damn. He fidgeted in his chair and an extra loud burst of cheering broke out, followed by spasmodic shouts and clapping.

"I'm going back to see what's happened," said Colonel Harbord. "Is anyone coming?" Most of the party got up. Denis hurried to a gangway and looked at the score board. Nothing much seemed to have happened. The 100 had just gone up and five wickets were down. Two good bats were in and the striped caps were chasing boundaries in the slanting rays of the sun. Maureen and Oliver had vanished.

"We are dining at seven-thirty," said Lady Periton, when they got back. "The show starts at half-past eight. Peter, will you show Denis his room? Don't be late, boys."

"All right, mother. Don't get the wind up," said Peter. "And if that Alec's late, tick him off. Your room's up here, Denis. Ring if you want anything. Dinner is half-past seven and the dressing bell will go in a few minutes."

Denis shut his door. His clothes were laid out ready. It was his first dinner jacket and he had ordered it from Denman & Goddard specially for the visit. A fortnight before Lord's he had realised that he had nothing to wear at night. At Speenmouth dances a dark blue suit and pumps were more than enough. So he had slipped down town after twelve and visited Denman & Goddard's, Gane's, the boot-maker, and one of the school hosiers, and had told no one where he had been.

The new dinner jacket had been hung across the back of a chair and underneath lay a pair of patent leather shoes, the tongues rolled back, and across them a shoe horn. On the bed were his trousers and waistcoat and his new silk socks, folded socket wise. Imitation gold studs had been put into his shirt front and cuffs. On the dressing table were

a collar, a clean cotton handkerchief, and the dreaded black tie with its baffling butterfly ends.

From the rest of the house came muffled sounds. A door slammed somewhere below him and all was quiet. When Peter had left him at the door, he had felt cut off from the rest of the big house. The door itself seemed hermetically sealed. Beside the bed was a bell-push and at the other end of the wire was the underworld. Wherever he looked he saw signs of the underworld. There was a towel, now hot and damp, laid across a can of water. Significantly, there was no sign of his shabby, brown suitcase. The Bible he had packed on top of his new dinner jacket now lay among a pile of selected works by the side of his bed. Above it were *The First Hundred Thousand*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Mr. Standfast*, and *She*. Denis put the Bible on top of *The First Hundred Thousand*, and PRESS caught his eye for the second time. If he pressed, a strange world would stir low down in the bowels of the house, yet olympian in its knowledge of life. All that he knew of this world was that the particular deity, to whom he had been allotted, preferred Ian Hay to the Bible. Lest there be some etiquette on the matter, he moved the Bible to one side of the pile of books.

He had half an hour to dress. He threw off his dusty shoes and a gong made him jump. Then he remembered it was the dressing bell that Peter had mentioned. He took off his shirt and went to the washstand. It was extraordinary how silent the tall house could be. Taxis hooting in the square only deepened his sense of isolation. He was alone with PRESS. And the Bible. And the black butterfly tie. How stupid he had been to get into his shirt before putting on the new starched collar. His finger nails wrenched furiously with the narrow slit. Half the big bone stud was through and he forced down the other side of the collar slit with his nail scissors. Once round with the tie, a single knot, a loop, in and under with the other end, just as the man in the shop had shown him. But meanwhile the first loop had slipped. It had seemed easy enough at the time. Now easy does it. Quite calm. There was plenty of time. Nearly quarter of

an hour before dinner. But although he slowed down his efforts to a calculated series of loops and twists, the tie refused to be tied. Sometimes the two loops projected in clown-like bows. More often the ends drooped in the fashion of the Latin Quarter. Denis determined not to panic. He reviewed the situation calmly. But it was difficult to keep calm with the seconds passing and dinner drawing nearer, and "don't be late, boys," in his ears.

And then he remembered that he had no idea where Peter's room was. He opened the door cautiously and looked out. No one in sight. No one stirring. The household might be at dinner for all he knew. Everything was so quiet. He could see half a dozen doors. They were shut. But at any moment they might be opened and Lady Periton or Lord Periton step smartly dressed into the passage. If he opened them himself, he might stumble on a delicate moment in his hostess' toilet. He was cut off from the house. He shut the door again and stood thinking. There was nothing for it but PRESS. He pressed and waited. After a long silence there was a quick knock on the door and a hot and flurried young man appeared. His coat had been flung on in haste, and if Denis had looked, he would have seen that a group of hairs had parted company with their fellows and coiled boyishly over his forehead.

"Yes, sir?"

"Oh, I say, I'm so sorry for troubling you," said Denis, "but I've got a new tie here. There's something wrong with it, you'll find, I think. But if you could . . . It doesn't really matter, but it would save time . . . Thanks awfully." He raised his chin while the footman fumbled.

"Too long, sir, I'm afraid."

"Too long, is it? I thought there was something the matter with it," said Denis, feeling happier. "It's those fools at Eton."

"I shall have to tie a knot in it behind, if you don't mind, sir?"

"All right. Tie it."

"There you are, sir, that's the best I can do." The

footman pulled out the two ends, smoothed them and hurried off to help the butler with the dinner table.

"Thanks very much," said Denis. He wondered what the man thought of him and whether he would tell the butler, and whether he ought to have given him anything on the spot, as Lord Periton had tipped the waiter in the tent. He would never be able to look the man in the face again. Whenever he brought him anything, he would be thinking, "I don't mind doing this for you, as it's my job. But who couldn't tie his tie? And who pretended it was the tie's fault? And who had never seen a black tie before?" He might even tell the butler that his young gentleman preferred the Bible to *The First Hundred Thousand*. However, the tie was tied. Denis did not notice a faint smudge where the footman's fingers had rested on his shirt front. And he had not noticed, when the deity bent over him, that his breath smelt strongly of onions. He slipped on his dinner jacket and looked at himself in the glass. Pretty smart. He felt equal to all the night clubs of London. He danced a few steps on the bedroom carpet. In his room at Wren's he had been practising in the way Lady Bridget had shown him. Apparently a clean handkerchief was usual at dinner. He took it from the dressing table, arranged it temptingly in his breast pocket and opened the door. Silence. He padded down three flights of stairs and went into the drawing-room. It was empty. Could he have missed the gong? He stood listening, while the hideous ormolu clock beat out the seconds. Then he hurried downstairs and peered into the dining-room. A long narrow table sparkled with glass and silver. A tail-coated figure was busy at the sideboard. Before it could turn, Denis crept out and upstairs again. As he reached the drawing-room, Lady Periton appeared on the stairs. She was in a dark red satin dress, with a single string of pearls. She sank slowly on the stairs like a passenger on an escalator.

"Hullo, Denis. You're down early," she said.

"I thought I was going to be late," said Denis.

There was no ceremony about the Periton household.

When everyone was down and Alec and Lady Bridget had arrived they wandered down to dinner. Lord Periton urged them on from the rear. Denis had seen Peter eyeing his new dinner jacket. He hoped it wasn't too dressy at the waist as Mr. Philbert had said in Denman & Goddard's. "We don't want you to look like a Harrovian, sir." And then he saw Captain Williams. He was in tails and a white gardenia peeped from his buttonhole. He wore a white waistcoat with sharp points, crossed by a slender gold chain. The folds of his trousers lapped gently on his pointed shoes. There was a double row of braid on his trousers. Mr. Philbert had advised "one row to start with," but Denis decided to have another row added, when he got back to Eton, even if Captain Williams was a Harrovian.

"Will you sit next to me?" said Lady Periton. "And, Alec, will you come here." Denis stood by his place till a footman thrust a chair violently into his legs. He sat down abruptly. "What was the final score?" said Captain Williams, leaning across the table. "I hadn't time to get a paper."

"Harrow 147. Eton 142 for seven," said Denis.

"Hum. Pretty close. Pretty close."

Denis had never dined before in a big house. At Anglersmead he had a knife, two spoons, and a fork. Here, a variety of different sized implements lay by his place. There was also a tumbler and two wine glasses. He glanced down the table. Everyone had three glasses.

"Marsala, sir?" said the butler. Denis had no idea what he had said. "No thanks." He looked to see what he had missed. Captain Williams's glass had been filled with a dark brown liquid. He drank his soup busily.

"I hope you haven't seen the show we're going to?" said Lady Periton. "Peter told me to get tickets for *Honey Love*."

"No. I've seen hardly anything lately," said Denis. "I'm looking forward to it tremendously."

"*Honey Love*?" said Captain Williams. "Not again? It's the fifth time."

"Who's your attraction in it, Alec?" said Peter.

"Mind your own business, young man."

"You watch the chorus, Bridget, and see your rival wink at Alec," said Peter.

"Peter, 'you are a disgrace to the family,'" said Lord Periton. "I can't think what you do at Eton except read the *Tatler* and eat."

"Nor can I, father. Your picture is perfect."

The butler hovered again. "White wine, sir?"

Denis looked over his shoulder. He would have preferred lemonade or water, but there seemed no alternatives. "Yes, please," he said and the butler filled his glass. "Thanks," he murmured half way, but the butler was not to be balked. He filled the glass to the brim. Denis bent down to drink.

"My daughter tells me you are a great dancer," said Lady Periton. "You'll be able to show us to-morrow." Denis looked up quickly and a wave of white wine flowed over on the table.

"Yes, Lady Periton. I mean no, not really." He saw her trying not to look down.

"Of course, my daughter is a very keen dancer. She is always dancing somewhere."

"Yes, of course," said Denis. He took a gulp from his glass and coughed. Lady Periton decided to leave the conversation for the moment. Denis wiped the table with his napkin and felt cooler. The footman approached with a dish of *vol-au-vent*. Lady Bridget had already taken some. He looked at the cutlery by his plate. So far he had used a fish knife and fork and a soup spoon. It had been easy. Remaining were a big knife and fork, a small spoon and fork, and a small knife and fork. He must make a start or he would be left behind. Lady Bridget was using a fork only. Lord Periton was using a knife as well, but he could not see of what size. He pressed the side of his big fork into the pastry and sawed off a corner. He brought the large knife to the rescue and the butler said, "Claret, sir?"

"Thanks," said Denis, without thinking. Captain Williams raised his eyebrows and Denis took a gulp.

"Would you like to see what is coming?" said Lady Periton. She pushed the menu towards him. "*Selle d'agneau*," read Denis. That was something to do with lamb. But he had only a small knife and fork left. He had given himself away this time. Perhaps no one would notice if he used them. Or he might refuse the *selle d'agneau* and sit idle while everyone ate. The footman took away his plate, swooped down again and put a clean plate before him. On it were a large knife and fork. Denis breathed. Then he saw it was his footman; the deity, who had tied his tie. He must have spotted that he had used the wrong knife and fork and brought fresh ones to his aid. But Lady Bridget seemed to have done the same, and Lord Periton, and Peter. It was all right after all, and the small knife and fork were for the savoury. He tasted the claret. It was rough and sour after the white wine.

"Would you like some lemonade?" said Lady Periton.

"Thanks, if you don't mind, I think I would." He saw that Peter was also drinking lemonade. He drank two glasses, and it was cool and not too sweet.

Dinner went more smoothly after that. And then came dessert. Denis had never seen so much fruit on a table. Dishes of peaches, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, figs, and grapes were handed round. Lord Periton and Peter added a specimen from each dish to their collection. Denis took a peach, because the peach dish was handed first.

"Do have some grapes, won't you?" said Lady Periton. A pair of scissors lay on the dish. He snapped them at a promising branch and two single grapes fell on the table. Another snap and the scissors skidded on the stalk. The dish quivered slightly in the footman's hand. No wonder the man was getting impatient. Lady Periton was peeling a nectarine. Denis seized a small bunch with one hand and twisted with the other. A few grapes fell. A bedraggled stalk with three bloomless grapes came away at last. The footman set down the dish in the centre of the table. A muscle ached in his arm.

There was no time for gossip after dinner. They bundled

into the car and Lady Bridget and Captain Williams followed in a taxi. They reached the theatre before the curtain had gone up. Lord Periton bought a sheaf of programmes and a large box of chocolates. Denis sat between Lady Bridget and Peter. He looked round on the stalls and saw several faces he knew. There was Holmes-Norton, drawing on a pair of white kid gloves. Lord Periton did not wear gloves. He sat puffing a cigar with an air of anticipation. He was not short-sighted, but he liked the front row of the stalls, and the Eton and Harrow match was his annual excuse. One of the boxes was draped in Eton blue and swarmed with jackets and Eton collars. From the upper and dress circles a few boys looked down on the stalls and dropped chocolate papers with nice precision. Denis felt very comfortable. For the first time since his arrival at Halkin Square he felt thoroughly at home. He took a chocolate from Lord Periton's box and stretched out his feet. The orchestra looked comic in their secret basement. The conductor worked like mad as the curtain went up. Palm trees and a south sea lagoon lay before them. Across the stage pranced a row of smiling ladies, each lovelier and fluffier even than the fluffy white ball of the Devil's island cabaret.

Up flew a row of gymnastic limbs and the stalls looked critical. Denis's toes curled, when the chorus kicked and screamed in time. One goddess in particular seemed to fasten her kicks and screams on Denis Bailey. He looked quickly away down the line, but she only smiled the more meaningly and kicked as if Bailey and no one else were defending some goal behind him. He stared at her and the colour came to his cheeks. Lord Periton puffed at his cigar. Had he noticed? Alarming implications occurred to him, and all the time the goddess grew more gracious in her glances. Denis began to feel angry. Why should her aim be at him, when the stalls were full of people like Alec in white waistcoats and gardenias, simply longing to be kicked and smiled at? He glared at the goddess till the scene ended. Several times through the show she fixed him with her

smile, and in a final *mêlée* bombarded him with a hail of woollen snowballs. A ball landed sharply on Lord Periton's nose. Lord Periton inclined his head and smiled graciously. Denis envied him his charm and knowledge of the world. He dealt with waiters and programmes and chorus girls in the same easy way. Of course, he was a grown-up. He must be fifty, thought Denis, as he undressed that night. One day, presumably, he too would suddenly become a grown-up and all these things and a hundred others would become plain and possible. Life was something that revealed itself naturally at the right time, and the time was a long way ahead. There was no use trying to learn it. Meanwhile, he was a boy and his life was full of good things and carefree. Lord's and theatres and to-morrow the dance. He switched on the standard lamp by his bedside, and because the lamp was there, he took up his Bible. He read a chapter of Isaiah and thought of the long splendid day behind him. Lady Bridget, Annette, Maureen. He switched out the lamp and slept.