

CHAPTER XI

The deity came in at half-past eight. Denis had been awake for some time, listening to the sounds of London. With half closed eyes he watched the deity move round the room. Yesterday he had been in livery and buttons. To-day he wore a plain suit of dark grey. Denis was not even sure it was the same deity. The bowels of the Periton house must be alive with them. The man was in no hurry. Calmly he folded shirt, tie, socks, and underwear and put them away. Now he was busy with his Eton clothes. He made no sound.

*At first, Denis pretended to be asleep. But the silence was ridiculous. He must say something ; fraternise with the deity, to break the silence.

“ What sort of a day is it ? ” he said in a sleepy voice.

“ A fine morning, sir, and going to be hot later on,” said the man. He laid a spotted tie on the dressing-table. Denis wracked his brain for further conversation. What was topical besides Lord’s? Of horse racing he knew nothing. Politics? A little heavy for the bedroom. The Royal Academy, whose illustrated catalogue he had seen?

“ Who is going to win to-day, if I may ask, sir ? ” said the footman. He stooped to lay a shoe horn across his shoes. They shone with a lustre that would have infuriated old Hodge.

“ We are, I think,” said Denis. By Jove, the man was human. He knew about the match. He was a decent sort of cove after all.

“ It all depends whether we can get their captain out a second time. He’s a jolly sound bat.”

“ Yes, sir,” said the footman.

“ And if he gets set again they’ll make a draw of it.”

"Yes, sir," said the footman. He gathered up Denis's evening clothes and prepared to leave.

"Oh, I say, where's the bathroom?" said Denis.

"The second door on the right, sir. Would you like me to run your bath now, sir?"

"Oh, no hurry. What time does Peter . . . I mean Lord Ockley, have his bath?"

"His lordship is not yet awake. Perhaps you would care to have your bath first, sir?"

"Yes. Thanks very much. What time is breakfast?"

"Breakfast is at nine-thirty, sir, but Lord Ockley does not get down as a rule before ten." The footman smiled.

"Thanks. Oh, I say . . . Right, thanks very much." Denis could think of no further questions. The footman closed the door, and he was alone again in his small room in the big house. He had an hour before breakfast. He needn't get up for a moment. He opened *The First Hundred Thousand* and read a few pages. He wondered if the footman had turned on the bath and expected him to have it at once. If he lay reading, perhaps a thin stream of water would creep out under the second door on the right and flood the passage. He sat up in bed and there was a knock on the door. The footman came in with his evening clothes, brushed and folded. "Your bath is ready, sir," he said, and retired.

Denis got up and put on his grey woollen dressing gown. Damn. He had forgotten to pack his bedroom slippers. If Lady Periton saw him walking about her house with bare feet. He slipped into his cold, patent leather shoes and looked for a towel. There were only slippery linen face towels in the room. He shuffled along to the bathroom. Several big, woolly towels were warming on the hot water pipes.

At Anglersmead, the bath stood out a foot from the walls and there was a space between it and the floor. At Anglersmead he used to lower himself into six inches of tepid water and soap himself quickly and jump out. "Bath ready, father," and leaving the cold running, he would hurry back

to his room. But the Periton's bath seemed a part of the house. Broad mahogany bulwarks ran round its edge and joined with the wall. And the hot and cold taps were at the side. Through a good foot of clear, steaming water the enamel gleamed brightly. At Anglersmead it was chipped and stained red. The Periton bathroom was large and overlooked the chimney pots of a mews. Denis felt very small and naked. He tried the water with his hand. It was too hot. He turned COLD and a subterranean fount of bubbles welled up in the bath. An improvement on the slow trickle of Anglersmead or the shower at Wren's, that suddenly ceased or turned to ice, when the library took too much water. Denis sank into the bath and it covered him up to the chin. He let his legs float up on the surface and rested his head on the slope of the bath. His limbs looked long and very thin in the light, slanting through the water. When he raised a limb, soft hairs lay sleek on his thigh and drifted away in the water, when he lowered it. At Wren's he was always being ragged for his lack of hair. He had started shaving at the same time as other boys and his cheeks were dark and bristly every other morning. But the skin on his chest was pink and smooth, and lower down his body a downy shadow was the only witness to his age. Robin and Taunton were well developed and liked to stand about at the bathroom door. Taunton had once invited Denis to share the dregs of the library bath, and the tale of his hairlessness had spread all over the house. Not many boys alluded openly to the subject, but he saw that they knew. If some manly subject was being discussed, Denis hesitated to join in. It seemed silly to invent stories of his prowess, when they knew. On one occasion he had shaved off the soft, curling strands that sprouted from the veins of his stomach. But so far from redoubling their efforts, the hairs had taken a month to recapture their previous length. In vain he had put Tatcho to an unsuspected use. He was now trying cocoanut oil massage in his room at night. In the Periton's deep bath the shadow seemed darker. Perhaps the hairs were growing.

Someone banged on the door. "Are you in the bath?" said Peter.

"Hullo. Yes, shan't be a minute."

"No hurry. Can I come in?"

"Just a sec." Denis jumped out of the bath, wrapped a towel round his waist and opened the door. Peter appeared in a scarlet silk dressing gown and looked at himself in the mirror. He pressed a pimple between his fingers. "Hope you slept all right?"

"Rather," said Denis. He dried himself quickly, stooping to wipe his toes, when Peter finished his self inspection.

"What's the water like? Hot?"

"Yes, glorious. Sorry, I forgot to pull up the waste."

"Doesn't matter. I'll use yours. You don't seem to have spoilt it." Peter climbed into the bath. He stood stretching himself in the water. Denis struggled slowly into his vest. Peter lay limply in the cloudy water. He crossed his arms behind his head. Denis collected his things. "I'm going to dress now," he said.

"All right. Don't eat all the breakfast. You'll find father down, I expect."

Lord Periton was busy at the dining-room table. *The Times* was propped up before him. A row of dishes kept warm on a silver stand, and Lord Periton seemed to have sampled them all in turn. There were traces of fish and egg and sausage and kidney and bacon on his plate. "Try some smoked haddock with a poached egg to begin with," said Lord Periton. Denis tried it.

"*The Times* man has been accusing the Eton fast bowler of kicking up the pitch unnecessarily," said Lord Periton. "Prophesies some casualties to-day."

"I once batted against Andrews in a junior house match," said Denis. "He was plugging them down short on the leg side."

"That's the stuff to give them," said Lord Periton. "Short on the leg, that's it, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Denis, doubtfully.

"Help yourself," said Lord Periton. "I recommend the

kidneys. You'd better get them before Peter comes down." Denis reloaded his plate and ate while Lord Periton read *The Times*.

"I see that scoundrel Churchill has been making another speech. Reported revolution in South America, what's this?"

"A revolution, sir?"

"Fatstock have been fetching good prices. I must tell my agent to see about selling. Ha, old Fanny Branford has got her daughter off at last."

"Really, sir?"

"And about time, too, She's Bridget's age. Talk of another attempt to fly the Atlantic. Damned waste of good lives, eh?"

"We lined the streets of Windsor for Alcock and Brown when they visited the King," said Denis.

"A couple has just danced non-stop for ninety-six hours in California. Confound it, there's a depression approaching from Iceland. Rain expected by to-morrow. Well, well, I must be moving on. I've got a few things to attend to before we start. You'll forgive me if I leave you. Help yourself to everything." Lord Periton, with a bundle of crumpled newspaper under his arm, left the room.

"Match cards. Match cards," men were shouting at the gates of Lord's. Their faces were hot and shiny and their eyes were wild.

"Eton all out 144," read Lord Periton. "Good gracious, only four runs added."

"Dark blue, sir?" shouted a hawker and thrust a Harrovian baby at him. "Wear the winning colours, sir."

"That's you, mother," said Peter. "It's a bad day for dark blue sunshades. I'm afraid you'll have to scorch."

"How stupid of me," said Lady Periton. She closed her sunshade. All colour schemes were subordinate to the Eton and Harrow blues. Society was divided for the day into dark blue and light, and dark blue just now was in the ascendancy. In the stands, it was quiet. Strained Eton faces

watched the Harrow first pair adding slow singles. The light blue caps moved alertly, determined at all costs to keep down the scoring. Cover point fell prone to stop a certain boundary. The batsmen ran a single. "Well fielded, sir," shouted Lord Periton. There was a hostile chorus of "Well hit, Harrow," from the coach next door.

"Etonnnnn," shouted Denis. A ripple of "Etons" became a roar, which rose and fell and hardly ceased when the over was finished and the field changed their places. A counter roar of "Harrow" was promptly shouted down. The rivalry in the stands far outstripped the interest in the game. The luckiest snick between first and second slip, or a couple of byes brought wild cheering from the crowd.

As the afternoon wore on, the cheering subsided. The issue was too serious and too uncertain for noisy outbursts. All but the most fashionable of the spectators had ceased to perambulate. After a round on the asphalt they took their seats and watched the slowly moving score board. By five o'clock Eton, with two wickets down, were left with 141 to win. Stumps were to be drawn at seven. The task was not impossible, but the striped caps made superhuman efforts to check the score board's progress.

Denis sat with Lord and Lady Periton and followed every movement of the game. Peter walked round with his sister. Lady Bridget had gone home for lunch and had a second new frock to show off. Denis had fought his way round the hot asphalt more than once, but had seen nothing of Maureen and Oliver. Perhaps they had not come up for the second day. But, like the Fourth of June, it was possible to wander for a whole day without meeting someone, who might be a few yards ahead or behind. Now he sat leaning forward, with his top-hat beside him, his pink carnation tired and ragged in his buttonhole and his shoes covered with fine dust. His chin rested in hot, grimy hands. If Eton could score a run a minute or a little more, they would win.

The Harrow fast bowler had three slips and bowled wide

on the off in the hope of a catch. It was hard to score safely ; but score they must. A lucky snick rose above the heads of third slip and rattled against the boundary fence. Now the slow bowler tossed up simple looking leg breaks to tempt the batsmen to hit out. In the long field the striped caps were on the move. He sent down an extra slow one and Sanders Jacobs ran out and slashed it full pitch among the crowd many feet above the heads of the fieldsmen. Ninety to get and still eight wickets left. The slow bowler was expensive, but the Harrow captain knew his business. Two overs later the bowler's arm came over slowly and Sanders Jacobs ran out to meet the ball. A final flick of the wrist sent down a short fast one, which landed half-way down the pitch. The batsmen struck air and looked round to see the bails in the wicket-keeper's hands. A howl rose from the dark blue ranks. The next man hurried to the wicket, but, in his eagerness to win the match, skied a terrific drive high and far out in the field. But not far enough. As the batsmen crossed for the second time, the ball dropped in a striped cap's hands. Eighty-one for four.

Peter and Bridget joined them on the coach. The points of Denis's stick-up collar rubbed against his neck. His hands were hot and moist. His whole life was bound up in the match.

" Well, who's winning ? " said Lady Bridget.

" Can't tell." She sat down by his side and he scarcely noticed her. To get seventy runs in sixty-five minutes was all that mattered in the world. Other things must happen on the face of the earth ; births and deaths and marriages and wars and financial crises ; but surely not now. They must surely be suspended while the Eton caps were driving and hooking and cutting and glancing every now and then at the clock. There was not room in the world for anything else just then. There was a confusion between the wickets. Someone had called a run and his partner waved him back. Too late ; his bails were off and a good wicket was lost.

Time was the great thing. It was unlucky for the batsmen to cross ; but number seven was at the pavilion gate and almost ran to the wickets, as the last batsman returned. Eton's hopes were never still. The tempo of the game rose and fell with the noise of the crowd. A few quiet overs had succeeded an orgy of hitting. The crowd was silent and the shuffle of fashionable feet could be heard on the asphalt. The buses roared along St. John's Wood road. Their indifference was maddening. All London must keep still. A hush came and Denis heard the thud of the bowler's feet—and the hollow crack of the off stump, knocked flying from the ground. Six wickets. A long, long way off Lady Periton said something about introducing people at the dance and her daughter disputed the point. Their voices had no meaning at the moment.

Now, the sun was low and the pavilion threw a cold green shadow over a segment of the crowd. Fieldsmen crept closer and rubbed their hands like servants of the Inquisition. The bowler measured his run like a hangman preparing. The crowd gloated and gazed. Young men down from Oxford caught themselves with a secret thrill and quelled it with a cigarette. Girls in picture hats chattered and giggled and put their hand to their mouths when their brothers kicked them. In the pavilion, old men lit cigars and ordered a double Scotch. And the seventh wicket fell to a brilliant catch low down in the slips.

With twenty runs to get and last man in there was a movement in the crowd. Light blue prophets and pessimists elbowed their way from the crowd and told each other they had said Eton could never do it. Overwrought chaperons shooed their charges towards their cars and told each other what a splendid match it had been. The stir in the air made Denis angrier. When Lady Bridget collected her things and gave her face a last adjustment, he nearly pushed her off the coach. The fieldsmen had crept still closer. Eton's last man was nothing but a humorist. He showed his humour by skying three boundaries one after the other, and Denis knew

they would win. The crisis was over. A good drive for three from the other end and a couple of byes didn't surprise him. He felt cold where his vest touched his skin and his neck was suddenly sore. The winning hit itself was inevitable. It travelled quite perfunctorily to the rails. But his mouth opened with a thousand others and he clapped and cheered and waved his stick. Lord Periton's emotion was more violent. "Come on, boys," he shouted. He leaped from the coach and fought his way into the crowd surging over the field. "Well played, Eton," he roared. "Well played, Eton." The players had disappeared in the pavilion, but a fiercer game had started among the spectators with umbrellas and sticks instead of bats, and black and grey toppers in the place of cricket balls.

An old man with a curling white moustache and white spots struck Lord Periton on the hat. "Damned Etonian," he said.

"Scoundrel," cried Lord Periton. "Scug. Harrovian." With a powerful blow he shattered the crown of the old gentleman's topper. "Come on, Peter and Denis." He slashed and whacked his way through the crowd. Minor encounters between groups of boys gave way before his onslaught. Finally he caught sight of a small Harrovian enveloped in a smashed-in topper. "Hi, Denis, help me rescue the little scug. Damn it, he's suffocating." Between them they hoisted hat and boy into the air and the latter dropped to earth.

Denis dressed quickly that evening. His tie came nicely at the second attempt. The excitement of the day and the glory of the last minute victory were still uppermost in his mind. Nothing else seemed to matter in the triumph of the moment. If he had walked into the drawing-room minus collar or tie, Lady Periton would accept it as a reasonable gesture. He had not thought much about the dance. He had been vaguely conscious, as he climbed the stairs, of a difference in the house. The furniture in the hall and on the landings had changed its character. Stiff, formal chairs now hobnobbed in couples and ashtrays pressed their close

attentions. Through the drawing-room door, he had caught a glimpse of a vast polished surface, which stretched away and away. But Eton had won by one wicket and with three minutes to spare, and he was at Eton.

The dinner table was laid for twelve. Denis felt superior to the others. He was staying in the house and he had been through the knife and fork business. He knew how to refuse wine when it was offered and ask for lemonade. He was almost a member of the family and it was therefore his duty to talk to the other Etonians and put them at their ease. There was Matheson from Lowe's house, whom he just knew by sight, and two lower boys from Montagu's, and one or two others he had never seen. And then Swinley walked into the room. Swinley was in Wren's library and would be captain of the house, when Freeman left. He was a sleepy sort of person, tolerant and tolerated. But this evening he was the man of the world. He was not much use at games and the lower boys laughed at him and forgot to tidy his room; but he was in a white waistcoat and tails, and his trousers hung in elegant folds like Alec Williams's. He wore tortoise-shell glasses.

"How are you? I'm so glad you could come, Lord Swinley," said Lady Periton.

"How do you do?" said Swinley. "Hullo, Peter; and Bailey, I didn't see you."

"Hullo, Swinley," said Denis.

There were more boys than girls at dinner and Denis found himself between Swinley and Matheson.

"Marsala or sherry, m'lord," said Dunston.

"Sherry, I think," said Swinley.

"A glorious finish, wasn't it?" said Denis.

"So I heard," said Swinley. "I had to leave before the end. Are you staying with the Peritons?"

"Yes, since yesterday. We went to see *Honey Love* last night."

"Really? They tell me it is very good."

"Yes, it's a topping show."

"Who's coming to-night?"

"I don't really know. Oh, yes, Annette and Jean Wreath."

"Oh, Lord," said Swinley.

"Do you know the Peritons well?" said Denis.

"We're first cousins."

"Oh."

"How's cousin Agatha?" said Swinley to Lady Periton.

"She's not been too well. She is coming up to London for an operation shortly."

"I'm sorry," said Swinley. "Please remember me to her."

"What band have they got to-night?" said Matheson.

"I have no idea," said Denis.

"I hope it isn't that awful Bacchardi's. We had them last night at the Eton ball."

"We went to *Honey Love* last night. Some show."

"I saw Cousin Richard smoking his usual cigar in the stalls and admiring the chorus."

"Did you go on to the dance afterwards?" said Denis.

"Yes, and I wish we hadn't. The supper was rotten and there was nothing to drink but claret cup."

"Do you know those chaps over there?"

"The Hardings? They're cousins of Lady Periton. They were up staying in Scotland last year."

"They are not much of a pair to look at."

"Tim, the elder one, is a pretty good shot." Matheson turned to the girl on his left.

Soon after dinner the guests began to arrive. Peter stood by his mother on the top of the stairs. Fragile looking girls and pink-faced youths crowded up the stairs and Peter shook hands with all of them with the same gravity. Lady Bridget, under her mother's orders, introduced the younger boys to suitable partners. Programmes with light blue tassels were in a large china bowl. The band tuned up behind a barrage of hydrangeas.

"Denis Bailey, Lady Eileen Henty," said Lady Bridget

and hurried off. Denis saw a slender creature of his own height.

"How do you do?" She smiled.

"Jolly exciting match, wasn't it?" he said.

"Yes," said the creature. She had fair wavy hair and a sulky mouth, and wore a frock of pink georgette.

"I say, what about a dance?" said Denis.

"Thanks. I haven't got a programme."

Denis fetched a couple.

"Number nine?" she suggested.

"Couldn't we have one before that?" he said. She had delicate nostrils, that quivered when she spoke.

"Four, then."

"Right." He scribbled on his programme. He must discover her name afterwards.

"Shall we change programmes?" she said. Her mouth was sulky, but her eyes were big and round beneath long lashes.

"Bailey," he wrote on her programme. On his card, above the scrawl, he found "Eileen Henty." "Pink dress," he added for safety. He was introduced to more partners and his programme began to fill up. Peter and his mother were still shaking hands on the landing. The music had started and the floor was crowded. Denis had forgotten to book a partner for the first extra. He stood by the wall and an arm seized him. "Miss Hermione Pemberton, Denis Bailey," said Lady Bridget. Without saying anything, they took the floor. Miss Hermione Pemberton was a spotty-faced girl in light blue taffeta. Her breath was warm and smelt. Twice he trod on her toes as he sought for conversation.

"Are you at Eton?" she said.

"Yes, I'm at Wren's."

"What a coincidence. Then you know my cousin, Peter Ockley."

"Peter and I mess together," said Denis. "I'm staying here."

"What a coincidence," said Miss Pemberton. The music

stopped and they stood about till someone claimed her.

After that the dance went gaily. Quite a lot of Denis's partners had watched the match with interest and even knew the Eton eleven by name. One girl was the sister of the Eton slow bowler, who was at the moment smoking a cigarette on the balcony. He looked dirty and unimportant without his light blue cap and blazer. Swinley and Matheson were more in their element.

Then number four came. Denis stationed himself by the door and looked out for Eileen Henty. There she was, coming down the stairs with Matheson. He stuffed his programme in his pocket and straightened his tie. "Oh, I say, I'm so frightfully sorry, but I've promised to dance this one with Charles. Could we do number nine instead?" Denis looked at his card. "I thought we were doing number nine, anyhow," he said.

"Oh, are we? That's splendid. I'm so terribly sorry," and she glided away in Matheson's arms.

Denis went downstairs and drank two glasses of orangeade. Peter was eating a peach. "Enjoying yourself?" he said.

"I've just been cut," said Denis.

"All the more time for socking. Who's the girl?"

Denis showed his programme. "Oh, that little bitch, Eileen. She's always doing that. Tick her off if you get the chance. She wants it. I'm so stiff with shaking hands I can hardly eat. Have a peach?" Denis took one. "It was probably my mistake," he said.

During the next few dances he kept seeing her. She danced with a fine springy movement, her fair head thrown back and her body bent inwards to her partner. She looked up at him as she danced. When number nine came, Denis stood again at the door. She came in from the balcony and their eyes met.

"Is this ours?" she asked. Denis piloted her on to the floor and danced his mightiest. It was easy to dance with her. All her movement melted into his own clumsy rhythm.

She knew each halting decision before he made it. Her upturned face embarrassed him. He had to speak. "Jolly good dance," he said.

"Yes," she said. Her blue eyes looked away and her mouth drooped.

"It's an awfully good floor, isn't it?"

"Perfect."

"I like this tune. What is it?"

"'Cat's Cradle.' Do you mind if we sit out?"

A little hurt, he followed her upstairs to a sofa. He sat staring at his shoes. She leaned back and stretched her arms behind her. Denis wanted to say, "You know, I think you look ripping."

"Do you go to a lot of dances?" he said.

"A good many. It's my first season, you see."

Denis tied a knot in the tassel of his programme. He studied the name of his next partner. He had never found this difficulty in talking to Maureen.

"Are you a cousin of the Peritons'?" he said.

"No; why should I be?"

"I don't know," said Denis. "Only nearly everybody seems to be."

"There's the music. We must go back." She got up and he followed her downstairs. "Thanks, very much," he said.

"Thank you," she smiled quickly.

He had booked no partner for the last dance but one. He was hot and he wanted to see himself in a long mirror; so he went upstairs to his bedroom. The top landing was quiet. He climbed the last stairs and turned the corner. Then he saw them at the end of the bathroom passage. For a second they were together. Eileen's head was thrown back and Matheson was kissing her on the mouth. Her eyes were closed and her arms were quite limp. They jumped apart and sat up. Denis opened the door of his room and closed it behind him. Inside his room he stood still. He stood for five minutes, thinking of nothing. Then he got his handkerchief and went down again. The dance was getting noisy. In the dining-room, rolls and cherry stones flew

through the air. The band played louder. They had already played the Eton boating song and those who knew the words joined in. And then the band struck up "John Peel," and a wild scramble began. Couples galloped and slithered down the floor and crashed into each other before gathering speed for another mad dash. Denis lugged Annette Wreath into the fray. They butted into Lord Periton, who sent them flying. The music steadied and slowed into "God Save the King," and the dancers stood panting at attention. The dance was over.

It was two o'clock before Denis got to his room. He was hot and exultant. He had been a success. A chaperon had asked Lady Periton who her nice looking guest was, and Peter had ragged him about it. London dances were not so alarming after all. He held one sock in his hand and stared before him. He saw them clearly at the end of the passage. If she hadn't looked if she liked being kissed. But she obviously enjoyed it. Her mouth no longer drooped and her arms were curiously limp. He had kissed Maureen in fun, but not like this. And the thought struck him, had she expected him to kiss her and he had failed? He had read and heard a hundred stories about kissing girls; but they had never had much meaning. And a few minutes earlier he had been sitting on the sofa with the same girl and had been as dumb as the statue of the founder in school yard, to use Peter's expression. Denis shivered. It never occurred to him to kiss a girl he met for the first time. But they expected it. There must be something wrong with him. If he could only consult someone on the point. "Do girls expect to be kissed, when sitting out, father?" His mother might tell him. But that begged the whole question. He ought to want to kiss them. Down through his body he should feel the same desire as other boys. And he didn't. He threw off his sock and got into bed. Blue eyes laughed at him in his dream and he leaned forward and looked into them. They shimmered in the strong sun. A white figure rubbed its hands and crept closer. He must get the ball over her head somehow. But the ball sprang

back on an elastic band. He had five minutes to reach her eyes and the elastic was contracting. The score board had a face, which laughed. One tremendous effort and the elastic snapped. He woke up on the carpet. It was much too hot for an eiderdown on the bed.