

CHAPTER XII

Denis walked upstairs. As he walked, he jingled two half-crowns in his right trouser pocket. Monday morning found him with enough change for the butler and footman. But the housemaid must go unrewarded ; unless he asked Lord Periton to change a pound note for the very obvious reason of tipping his own servants / or even Peter. But Peter was as good as host, where the servants were concerned.

Denis paused on the top stair. "Thanks very much for looking after me," he said aloud. Or better, "Here's a little present for you," as his uncle had said, when he once gave him five shillings at Eton. Or better still, just mutter, "Oh, by the way, here's . . ." and leave it at that. He opened his bedroom door and found the room empty. He had expected to find the footman packing his suit-case or waiting about for his tip. But the room had a swept and garnished air and it seemed to question his presence. It belonged again to Lady Periton and there was no sign of his tenancy. The suit-case had vanished. *The First Hundred Thousand* and the other books had been put away, pending the arrival of another guest with similar tastes in literature. He realised that it was no longer his room and to remain longer was to intrude. He had the idea of leaving the five shillings on the dressing table, like Mr. Salteena in *The Young Visitors*. But the housemaid would almost certainly find it and keep it, if he did. He left the room and wandered downstairs. Peter was with his mother in the drawing-room. He could hear their voices and he did not want to butt in on family affairs. He mooned about in the hall, hoping that the footman would appear from the bowels of the house. But the footman seemed perversely careless of his tip. Denis opened a green baize door and looked down a flight of stairs. He

could not shout for the footman, even if he dared, as he did not know his name. He shut the door again and waited. In the corner of the hall were their two suit-cases. The car had been ordered for twelve to take them to Paddington, and they had to be back at Eton for midday dinner.

Denis had decided to make some sort of noise through the green baize door, when Peter came out of the drawing-room with his mother. Lord Periton followed. The green baize door itself was opened and the hall was suddenly full of people. While Peter was saying good-bye to his mother, Denis slipped the ten shilling note into the butler's hands. "Thank you, sir," said Dunston. The footman was outside with the luggage and Lady Periton held out her hand.

"Thank you tremendously for my visit," said Denis, thinking of the footman.

"We were very glad to have you," said Lady Periton, "I hope you will come and see us again."

"You must come up to Scotland, eh?" said Lord Periton. He gave Denis's hand a hearty shake and followed the two boys out on to the steps. The footman, with a rug over his arm, stood by the car. Denis's heart failed him. He could not present him with five shillings in full view of Lord Periton and Peter. Somewhere he had missed his chance. Looking straight in front of him, he jumped into the car and searched for something in his coat pocket, till the footman had closed the door. He looked up to wave his hand to Lord Periton as they drove away.

Peter leaned back in his corner. "Back to the mill again," he said.

"I don't mind so much after such a ripping Lord's. I can't thank you enough for the time I've had."

Peter laughed. "You had a great success with mother. She said what charming manners you had."

"Good God!" said Denis. "I say, Peter, I've done an awful thing."

"You haven't pinched all the notepaper, as Spencer-Mace did, when he stayed in Scotland? Even father drew

the line at that, though I don't believe the little squit had the guts to write on it."

"No, I haven't done that. Only, I forgot to tip the footman. I had it all ready, when your father appeared."

"Good Lord, is that all? Father is always complaining about tipping the servants; but they will burn holes in people's evening trousers, if you don't. So he can't stop it."

"I've got five bob here. Could you send it to the footman for me?"

"Don't be an ass. I'll tell father to give Edgar something from you."

Denis felt relieved. He got a corner seat in the Windsor train and looked out of the window. The train gathered speed through Royal Oak and raced through lanes of slate grey house backs and tall factories. Everything was full of interest and life, and he was glad to be going back to Eton. He wondered how the shirts and underclothes on the washing lines could ever dry clean in the smoke and coal dust from passing engines. He saw the Maypole factory, and remembered the last years of the war and the horrible bright yellow margarine on the tea table. Maypole margarine had been a rare treat in those days. A fisherman in a sou'-wester stood for a second with a giant cod. Miss Fuller had prescribed Scott's Emulsion to fatten him up for the holidays, and he had got to like its thick creamy flavour. The train roared through West Drayton and he thought of all the problems he had got the better of during the week-end. Now he felt equal to anyone and anything. Carters' seed ground passed in a blaze of colour and the train ran into Slough. A few boys got out and took cabs to Eton. The ticket collector came along and two boys searched for their return halves and found them, when the collector had passed.

The train swung off the main line and climbed through the red brick villas of Chalvey. Now he saw the castle, high up and very near above the tops of the trees. A motor mower spluttered faintly on Agars Plough. A car came down the

Eton Wick road, where the mile was run in the Lent half. It came slowly and seemed to halt till the train had passed. There was a low rumble and the Thames was beneath them. The river was blue and grey and the willows on the bank were bowed in the breeze. The train slackened speed on the curve and Denis remembered. The problem of girls was unsolved. The goods station crawled by on the right. They were at Windsor. Girls wore smart frocks and walked round the asphalt, while Eton was winning the match of the century. Girls. The train had stopped and he and Peter made a dash for a cab.

"Ah, Denis, would you care to come sketching this evening?" said Wren, after lunch.

"Thanks, very much, sir. I'd like to."

"Right. We'll meet after school."

No work for to-morrow, thought Denis, and if it didn't rain, the lights would be good. It was kind of Wren. Monday evening after Long Leave was always a blank time. He might have played stump cricket or bowled at someone in nets. But it was hard to wake up in London and play cricket with any keenness in the afternoon.

After five o'clock school he put on a change coat and scug cap and went through into the private part of the house. Wren was searching for lost materials. He wore a long shaggy coat of no recognised shape and grey flannels.

"Ah, Denis, good, there you are. Are you ready? Confound it, I've lost my water bottle. Ah, there it is. Come on." They strode down the drive together. From the banks of Fellow's Eyot, where Denis and his family had watched the fireworks, they took a punt across a branch of the Thames and landed near Romney Island Lock. The clouds had blown away and the air was clear and bright. A pleasure steamer rose slowly above the walls of the lock. By the further shore cranes were hoisting coal from low sunk barges and tipping it on the quay. A line of black and brown coaches of the South Western Railway stood in a siding. Blue smoke from the station drifted across the terraces of ash and birch trees, which climbed against the castle walls.

The Union Jack on the top of the Round Tower was stiff and straight in the wind.

"By Jove," said Wren, "What about the castle from here? With those old barges in the foreground, what do you think, Denis?" Denis screwed up his eyes, as Llewellyn did when viewing a subject.

"Yes, sir. It's a good composition. The values won't be too easy."

"All the better exercise," said Wren.

They sat down beside each other and set to work. Wren drew in charcoal with broad facile sweeps. Denis traced a wavery outline of the castle walls and filled in the rest to scale. Wren said nothing till he had finished his drawing. Then he mixed a fat wash on his palette and said:

"Had a good leave?"

"Yes, sir. I stayed with the Peritons in Halkin Square."

"Good. Good. Lady Periton is a charming woman." He soaked his brush in the wash and drew it across the sky.

"They had a dance on Saturday for Peter and me," said Denis.

"Did they?" said Wren. He added a touch of crimson, as the sky ran lower on his paper. "I had forgotten you were a dancer. Did you get to the Academy?"

"No, sir. we hadn't time."

"A pity," said Wren. "A better show than usual. Don't give up going like so many people do when they get older. The Academy is a fine thing in its way."

"Yes, sir," said Denis.

Wren removed a superfluous blob of colour with a dry brush. "Ah, Denis. I had a letter from your father to-day. By Jove, look at the light on the castle now. We must catch it before it goes."

"I haven't finished my drawing yet."

"And he asked me how you were doing. He asked me exactly . . . if that barge starts to move off, I shall. . . . No, it hasn't finished unloading yet . . . was your work satisfactory and why weren't you in a better cricket game, and

... confound, here's another of those river steamers going to stop plumb in the view."

"No, I think it's going through the lock, sir," said Denis.

"—and how you were getting on in the house. I haven't had time to write to him yet. I wanted to talk to you first. Ah, now my sky has run into the top of the castle. That's the worst of this paper; you've got to slap it on wet. You see, I don't want to tell your father that your work has not been so good this half. You haven't been feeling ill at all? Anything been worrying you lately? You can tell me in confidence, of course." Wren quickly put in some blue shadows on the castle, before the paper dried.

"No, sir," said Denis. "I don't think there's anything." He could scarcely tell his tutor that he had merely ragged Shivers Hunter a little more than the rest, and, as a result, was lower in division order.

"Well, well," said Wren. "I shan't say anything to your father about that. Let's see some of your old work in the future."

"Yes, sir." Denis put down his pencil and got out his paint-box.

"Now about cricket." Wren himself was an ardent wet bob. "I don't know much about these things. By the way, I had a day's sailing at Bourne End yesterday. Fine little boats they have at the club."

"I wish I'd been there," said Denis.

"We must go one day. Now would you like me to speak to Taunton about it? Ask him to see if he can't get you into a better game? Your father seemed to think you weren't getting a fair chance."

"Oh, yes, I am, sir, I've had lots of chances, but I've been no good this half. If you don't mind, sir, I'd much rather you didn't say anything to Taunton."

"Very well," said Wren. He sympathised strongly with boys against the good intentions of their parents. He was only in doubt as to how he should answer Mr. Bailey's letter.

"And now about the house. I must have some clean water first." He emptied the blue-green paint water and

filled his can from the river. Denis added a few dabs and waited. Wren rearranged his limbs on the bank. "I had a talk with Freeman some time ago," said Wren. "You seem to have altered a good deal this half, Denis? Freeman agreed with me."

"I don't know, sir. Yes, I suppose, I hope I have."

"It is difficult to make you understand. I know you think I know nothing of what goes on in the house, but I gather—tell me if I am wrong—that you have, so to speak, lost your sense of, well, responsibility."

Denis said nothing. His tutor had never spoken so plainly. But how could he understand the intricacies of house life? He was a beak and thought as a beak. Responsibility had nothing to do with popularity.

"Are you satisfied with your position in the house?" said Wren.

"Yes, sir, I think I am."

"Well, in that case, there is nothing more to be said. I suppose you know your own mind. Confound'it, now the reflection has gone from that water, just as I was putting it in. But what I mean is, that in a year—I don't know how things will plan out—but there is a chance in a year's time of your being at the head of the house, and we shall be thinking of making you captain, if you stay on."

"Yes, sir," said Denis. It was too far away to think of.

"And captains have a big responsibility in the house. They have to set an example themselves, for one thing. I'm afraid you've been beaten and swished this half."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, aren't you getting a little old for that sort of thing?" Denis did not answer. Old for Devils' Island? He was only just growing up and getting to know the world. Besides, old and young meant nothing. They were terms of abuse employed by beaks and parents as a last resource. They worked both ways. His mother said, "Of course, you are too old to kiss me," and his father, "Really, you're old enough to know better." But there was no use arguing. Wren simply did not understand.

"You see, your father told me," said Wren, "when he first sent you to my house that you had got to work. Many boys in the house will never have to do anything for a living, though I don't say that they won't. Peter Ockley, for instance. But your father told me that it was essential for you to get a scholarship if you were to go up to the Varsity."

"Yes, sir."

"And at the moment I can't see you getting one next half. By all means mess with Peter and Oliver Harbord. First rate fellows, but you must remember the difference. You've got to work for your living, and they haven't. I think that's how your father would have put it."

"Yes, sir," said Denis. There was a horrid emptiness in his stomach and a dull heat in his back. Wren had raised a doubt that after all he might be wrong. What was right for Peter might be wrong for him. He was suddenly ashamed of his visit to the Peritons. All his little triumphs in Halkin Square had been silly and vain. The hard working unsociable life was the life for him. He saw the shame of his mistake and the heat climbed to his neck. He touched up the outline of a tree and his dry brush wandered round its contour. And then he was strong again. Wren was talking about his sketch, but he did not hear him. He had remembered that every question has two sides to it and that Wren and his father could not see the other side. His father could not understand the secret of success at school. Order cards and scholarships were all right, but by themselves they did not bring popularity, and to get on in the world it was necessary to be popular. He had always looked on the world as something a little out of his reach. But now he was getting on top of it. Breaking bounds with other fellows. Socking strawberry messes. Ragging Shivers. If he had been good at games and had got a school colour, it might be different. He might get into pop. But he wasn't. Denis was confident again. In Peter's words, he was "one of them." His mother understood and sent him two dozen eggs every week. But his father was like Wren.

Denis swept a wash of green across the trees under the

castle walls, and glanced at his tutor's sketch. Wren had finished his pijaw, thank God. He had meant well, of course.

"That's awfully good, sir," said Denis. "It's so much broader than mine."

"Um. Not quite the effect I wanted." Wren held out his sketch and smiled. "However, we live and learn."

"I wish I could get those big washes. Mine's an awful mess."

"Not at all," said Wren. "It's a little uncertain of itself; and I'm not quite sure of the tone of your trees. I'm afraid we'll have to finish another time. It's getting late."

Denis threw away his paint water and packed up his things. But for the pijaw, it had been a good evening.

"I didn't see you at Lord's, Robin," said Denis at supper.

"I've been staying with the Tauntons and we motored up each day for the match. Colonel Taunton is a damned good sort, and they've got a lovely place."

"I've done a show and a dance and I went to Hurlingham yesterday."

"You are becoming a dog."

"That's what Maureen called you," said Oliver. "She's a decent sort, that girl, and plays tennis like a boy."

"She's not a bad kid," said Denis.

"She told me lots of stories about you at Speenmouth."

"Did she? What sort of stories?"

"Oh, just stories. You're the hell of a fellow in a boat, it seems. I say, I wonder how long we can keep m'tutor to-night?" Wren was having supper with the boys.

"Fill up your plate," said Denis. "Go on, Warburton. The first person to finish has to do the nose trick and everyone pats him on the back."

"Peter, you're eating too fast," said Featherstone. "M'tutor isn't nearly ready." Oliver emptied a dish of pickles on to his plate and made futile prods with his fork. Freeman and the top few boys had already finished. Wren worked his toothpick and glanced down the table.

"All right, m'dame," said Oliver with his mouth full.

"I can't eat any faster. I shall get indigestion." There was a dreadful explosion. Featherstone, quite unintentionally, had taken Denis's advice. The whole house looked at him and the lower boys giggled at their table. Peter and Warburton banged him on the back and fragments of bread and cheese shot out of his nose and mouth. His face was crimson with laughter and choking. Wren put away his toothpick. "Now then, Featherstone," he called down the table. "Pull yourself together. It isn't quite so bad as you make out."

The room was silent and Featherstone stopped coughing. Freeman gave him a look and Denis and the others finished their bread and cheese. Denis rolled a bread pellet. When the house was on its knees, he looked up between his fingers and flicked it at Freeman. It hit him nicely on the chest. Freeman patted his hair, fingered his tie and repeated the prayers in a louder voice. He had a great sense of dignity. Bloody hypocrite, thought Denis, and he didn't care if the lower boys thought so too.