

CHAPTER XIV

A soldier wheeled a handcart through the arch under New Schools. He stopped and took out the rifles two at a time. Soon the racks in the colonnade were full of rifles, and in a few minutes pink grey uniforms began to appear. In small groups they drifted from the houses, setting corps caps at a jaunty angle, tightening webbing belts and thrusting back haversacks and water bottles till they bumped comfortably against their sterns.

Denis gave a last look to his puttees. They were even, yet loosely rolled and would neither slip nor reduce his legs to wooden splints. But his overcoat. He hitched it up another hole ; but still it hung loose on his back like a sack of coals, and his haversack and water bottle pulled down his tunic and collar, and dragged on his neck. His water bottle was full and in his haversack, besides the crème de menthe tin, was *The Mystery of Room 17*.

He went over to Cannon Yard and chose one of the newer looking rities. He fell in with the rest of Wren's section and stood at ease. He fidgeted and jerked his pack higher on his shoulders. But the weight of his equipment and the criss-cross straps on his chest gave him a pleasant manly feeling. They were up against it now. Next stop, Tidworth.

Major Sandymore was late, but did not seem to know it. He swung on to the parade ground with a jovial gait, whacking his breeches with a thin cane. Soon the head of the long pink column wound out of the yard into Eton High Street and the heavy corps boots echoed from the arch of New Schools. Y company got its orders. Denis slapped the butt, till his fingers stung, and hoisted the rifle on to his shoulder. The first company had already passed the chapel walls.

"Y company will advance in column of route from the right. Form fours. Right turn. Quick march." Denis shot out his feet and fixed his eyes on the back of Featherstone's neck. They tramped through the yard gates, and out of the corner of his eye he saw his tutor. Wren was standing in the drive. He looked very cool and holiday-like in a grey flannel suit, and his gaze wandered up and down the column for his section. Freeman, marching alongside, caught sight of him and gave his tutor a last salute. Wren gravely raised a forefinger and held it to his head till his section had passed. A white handkerchief fluttered from an upper window.

"Good-bye, ma'am," said someone from the ranks.

"Stop talking there," said Taunton. "Spencer-Mace, you're out of step. Lep. Ri. Lep. Ri."

Mr. Philbert was at the door of Denman & Goddard's as they passed. He gave them a benign smile. Several faces grinned as the baker's shop went by. The coy face of Winnie rose above a collection of cottage loaves. For the next seven weeks she would have to be content with butchers and bakers. As they crossed Windsor Bridge, whose structure was none too sound, the command was given to break step. Keeping a rather better step than before, Mr. Wren's section shuffled over the bridge. Townees stood on the pavement smoking cigarettes and passing remarks to each other. Red and green buses panted and steamed on the far side.

They turned out of the High Street and faced a large crowd that had gathered at the station. The faces of the crowd were dull and stolid. "Look at that toff," said a townee. "'E don't 'arf fancy 'imself in that 'at."

"Thinks 'e's doing the blooming goose-step."

"Pardon me, mister, but could you tell me the time?" Freeman stalked on majestic.

"You ain't got a cigarette card on yer?" said the first townee, falling into step alongside Taunton.

"Give us a fag, mister?"

"Please, sir, could yer tell me 'oose army this might be?"

"Get out, you little swine," said Taunton.

“ O mister, I’ll ’ave to tell the ’ead, I shall. Such ’orrible language I never did ’ear.”

There was a short delay in the station, while Daddy Long Legs strode hither and thither with sheets of blue paper and performed prodigies of rapid organisation. Then they were marched on to the platform and ordered to entrain. The train started and discipline relaxed. Overcoats were thrown into the racks and belts were loosed. Wisps of smoke and a rain of burnt match ends marked the progress of the train. Spencer-Mace took out a new meerschaum pipe from a leather case. Owen Jones, the senior member present, had relit the remnants of a foul-smelling briar.

“ I began this briar on the way back from Lord’s,” he remarked.

“ So I guessed from the odour,” said Swinley. He smoked a de Reszke in a long, amber holder. “ Have a cigarette, Robin ? ”

“ No thanks.”

“ Come on,” said Swinley. “ Don’t let the section down.”

“ I’ve got a bet you know. My people offered me fifty quid if I didn’t smoke till I left Eton. It’s worth while, after all.”

“ I couldn’t keep it, I know,” said Owen Jones. “ But surely camp doesn’t count. We’ve left Eton for the moment.”

“ Yes, that’s all right. Besides you’ll have to smoke in the lats,” said Denis.

“ I don’t think it would be fair.”

“ Oh, well,” said Denis. He sucked in a great draft of smoke and allowed it to escape in slow spirals. The train had stopped and a sergeant ran along the platform. “ Coats and haversacks may be taken off,” he shouted through the window.

“ You’re a bit late, old boy,” said Owen Jones.

Oliver uncorked his water bottle and offered it to Owen Jones. “ Thanks.” He sniffed it. “ Cider, is it ? Good for you Harbord.” The bottle went round the carriage and returned empty to its owner. Oranges, apples, chocolate,

turkish delight, toffee, and thirst quenchers were handed round, and the train crept on through the valley of the Thames and turned away into Surrey and the sandy heaths of north Hampshire. The carriage began to warm up and the floor was littered with silver paper. Denis fell asleep over *The Mystery of Room 17*. Spencer-Mace had put away his meerschaum and was a little white about the gills.

For the twentieth time the train halted. The line lay level with a clump of silver birches. There was no sign of life. Denis woke up and looked out of the window. The silver rails danced in the sun and vanished round a low cutting. He could see no signal, but the engine driver seemed satisfied. He rested his arm on the side of his cab and puffed away at his pipe.

"Do you mind if I get down a moment," said Oliver. "It seems a good opportunity."

"Hurry up, then," said Owen Jones, "and if anyone stops you, say it's their fault for not providing a corridor train."

Oliver opened the door and jumped down on the gravel. He climbed the wire fence and ambled away into the trees. A line of heads appeared from the train.

"Buck up, or you'll miss the train." "We're off." "Do one for me, will you?" "Same here." Oliver turned and grinned pleasantly at them; then disappeared behind a tree trunk. The engine driver put away his pipe and pulled back a long steel lever. The engine puffed and the train steamed quietly out of the wood. A gesticulating figure dashed from the trees and waved at the last coach. At Tidworth station, Private Harbord was reported missing.

"There's our playground for the next ten days," said Peter on the way up from the station.

"Alpine stocks and ropes will be carried," said Warburton.

"The Park is better than the Pennings anyhow," said Denis. "In the Pennings you can't stand up straight."

The column turned off the tarmac and passed into a large field, dotted with white tents. A few figures in khaki

breeches and shirts came out to see them. They marched past small white signposts on which were painted Winchester, Marlborough, Haileybury, Magnafields, Sherborne, Clifton, and other names. The battalion halted near a vast marquee, from which figures struggled with trailing burdens.

After dinner, fatigue parties were told off for setting up tents, fetching heavy wooden floorboards, whose clumsy segments overbalanced during transit, and filling palliasses. In the giant marquee dim forms wrestled in the dust and pushed wisps of straw into sausage skin cases, which bulged and squirmed away between the legs, as their stuffing grew.

"If you fill it like that, Spencer-Mace, you'll be lying on mother earth by midnight," said Taunton. "You're not making a lavender bag, you know."

"Perhaps he is," said Featherstone.

"Shake it down as you shove it in, you bloody idiot. Bailey, what do you think you're making? A punch ball?"

"You told us to pack them tight," said Denis. He had learnt from his last camp that straw has an odd way of evaporating beneath the weight of the human body.

"Here, look at mine," said Taunton. Everyone looked and returned to their efforts. Holmes-Norton's palliasse compared favourably with a worm, cut off in its prime and restored to health by a series of marvellous liaisons. Others only needed two eyes and a clay pipe to make excellent Aunt Sallies.

A list of tent orderlies had already been prepared, and Denis and Peter, being old stagers, were detailed for the first day.

"However am I expected to wash up greasy plates in a bucket of cold water," said Holmes-Norton after supper. Peter had gone off quietly to the cookhouse. A fat cook stood smoking a cigarette. He nodded and looked on idly while Peter filled his dixie with scum-faced water.

"At least, it's warm," said Peter. Washing up was soon over and Denis thrust the knives into the soil and threw them back in the box, ready for the next day's breakfast.

The canteen was open, but after a glance along the counter, Peter took Denis by the arm. "Why can't they get a man like Tom to run the canteen? Nothing to drink but bright yellow muck they call lemonade, and you can't even smoke. Let's have a fag up on the hill?"

"We mustn't miss last post," said Denis. "I wonder if Taunton will put lights out punctually. He reads by candle at m'tutor's."

"There will be some dirty work to-night, you see," said Peter. "We've got Lawrence and Worming Major in our tent."

"What do you mean? Anyhow, Taunton's too much of a prig," Denis added.

"When he's with Freeman and Manley. But Freeman has got a separate tent with the officers, and Manley is with Owen Jones's lot. Besides, Featherstone will back him up, you see."

"Well, I don't care," said Denis. Peter glanced at him.

"Worming Major and Lawrence have never been to camp before."

"Lawrence is pi," said Denis.

"So I've heard," said Peter.

As they climbed higher on the hill, wisps of smoke curled upwards from gorse bushes. On the topmost ridges boys sat in pairs and openly smoked pipes or cigarettes. Denis and Peter lit a couple of Abdullas and looked down on the camp. A thousand white pencil points lay below them and small dots crawled across the grey green spaces.

"I'm going to enjoy this camp," said Denis.

"It's a bloody sweat, but we'll make the best of it."

"I'm damned glad Taunton is leaving."

"He told me yesterday he was going to have the hell of a time in camp. He's left Eton, to all intents and purposes."

"Yes, but the head usher could stop his leaving book." The leaving book, a copy of Grey's poems, was the official mark of having left Eton. It was not given to boys who were expelled, nor were they entitled to wear the O.E. tie.

"All the same, you look out in the tent to-night," said

Peter. "Did you ever hear what happened on the first night of camp two years ago?"

"What?" said Denis. Peter looked at him again.

"You're pi, aren't you?"

"Well, I don't know. Yes, I suppose I am."

"I don't care," said Peter. "It's nothing to do with me, what others are like. I can't say I'm pi myself, but I disagree with bullying other people or interfering with them in any way. And that's Taunton's little programme for this evening."

Denis said nothing. "That's the worst of it," said Peter. "It's public opinion."

"How?"

"I mean about pi and not pi. It's like making friends at school; you don't get a chance of following your own inclinations, unless you are damned strong-minded, or a born prig like Freeman."

"No," said Denis.

"I suppose you've been laughed at for being pi?"

"I expect so."

"And I admire you for it. Damned few people can stand up against public opinion."

"I've never wanted to be anything else, really," said Denis.

"Yes, but that's not the point. It isn't a case of wanting or not wanting with people like Taunton in the house. Or Featherstone."

"I hate Taunton," said Denis. "Because he's a hypocrite and mean all through. But somehow, I've rather come to like old Featherstone."

"He's perfectly harmless. He simply doesn't see there's anything wrong in it. He's been brought up like that. What do you expect if you go to a private school like Flaxborough? Even the head beak was sacked for it."

"Do you think there's anything wrong with it, Peter?"

"I don't know. I'm open minded. I'm against bullying lower boys, if they don't want to. But after all, those cases don't amount to much. I've been gone on one or two chaps

and a few people were gone on me when I was a lower boy. It's so silly to get sacked for writing a note, saying 'Will you meet me at the Pumping Station on Sunday afternoon?' They ought to ask the head usher to come out with them as chaperone. He'd be surprised to know how little goes on."

"But what about poor old Beckford and Raugh Major?"

"That's a different thing. They were both in the debate. But cases between uppers and blue-eyed lower boys are mostly sentimental romances, and I can't see why the beaks should worry themselves about them."

"No, if they stop at that."

"At least, they are unimportant and do no permanent harm. Little bitches like Townsall always turn into guardsmen like my brother-in-law Alec. I bet he was a bitch in his youth, but he'd see red if you reminded him."

Denis laughed.

"Do you really think Taunton will try anything on to-night?"

"He'll muck about with those that don't object. I say, what about going back now? It's getting late."

Eight straggling palliasses were at length fitted in to a small circular space, the feet pointed inwards to the centre. Denis's toes rested firmly against Worming Major's shoulder. A wisp of straw from Peter's palliasse tickled his ear, whenever he shifted his head. Corps clothes lay in neat bundles beside them. Rifles leaned perilously against the tent pole and a candle burnt steadily in the close air. It was a funny feeling, this proximity of sever other bodies after his narrow iron bedstead at Wren's. Footsteps padded on the turf outside. At the end of every line was a tall tin bucket. In the stillness of the night the cracked notes of the last post broke across the camp.

"Lights out," said Taunton. "Lawrence, do the candle in." The tent was enormously dark; then slowly it recovered its small circle and Denis could distinguish the huddled forms on their palliasses. On all sides of him he knew were lines and lines of tents. The loneliness of the great gathering

was unbearable. He thought of the morning at Halkin Square, when he had feigned sleep on the footman's entry, and had felt compelled to make conversation. Now he wanted to shout out in the tent. Why didn't these boys round him say something to show they had tongues ?

"How's your palliasse, Denis," came a whisper.

"Not too bad ; if I don't roll off."

"I think I've stuffed a hedgehog into mine," someone whispered and laughed.

"By God, I hope it doesn't rain in the night."

"Owen Jones's tent has got a hole in it."

"I wonder if Harbord has turned up."

"Yes, I saw him just now."

"Did he stop a train ?"

"He walked along the line till he came to a station. Took him about nine hours altogether."

"Stop talking," said Taunton. "If anyone talks, I'll report him."

The tent was silent. Denis changed his position and closed his eyes. He gave a gentle snore. Peter's sock rubbed against his ear. He rolled himself more closely in his woollen blanket and snored louder. There were muffled sounds behind him. Something pressed against his toes. The tent was very hot. He raised the flap and put his head underneath. The night air was sweet and cool.

Taunton lost no time in getting his tent up next morning. A few minutes after réveillé he sat up in his palliasse and gave orders. Denis put on his breeches and shirt and crept on hands and knees through the tent opening. The grass was cold and damp. A little higher up the line a group of boys from Huntley's were laughing.

"What's the joke ?" said Denis to a boy he knew slightly.

"That idiot Gardner has gone and done it."

"Done what ?"

"The bucket. Someone put it outside our tent. Luckily I saw it in time, when I crawled out and shoved it in front of the next tent, Lyon's, who also spotted it and passed on the compliment. After working its way up the line, that

bleeding fool Gardner stuck it outside the C.O.'s tent, and poor little Bullock put his head straight in."

"Was it full?"

"To the brim. Gardner's been given extra drill for the rest of camp."

"Damned hard luck, if he didn't know it was the C.O.'s tent."

"That's what he told Bullock; but he wasn't in a fit state to see the joke."

Morning parade did not last long, as a route march had been planned for the afternoon. Colonel Bullock inspected the battalion and handed them over to an officer of the regular army, who discoursed to them on camps and discipline, and invited them to witness a display of rifle drill by a demonstration squad. Colonel Bullock, who had a house at Eton, had been through the war and was popular in the corps. The other masters, who served as officers in the O.T.C., were of varying efficiency. Captain Fall, for instance, of X company had a fine informal way with his troops. At the climax of a certain field day he had ordered his company to fix bayonets and "run as fast as they jolly well could." The result had been partly a retreat, partly a fierce attack on a rival public school. On another occasion, after a long and gruelling march, Captain Fall had shown his good sense by giving the command, "Now then, company, into the gorse bushes. . . . Wander," and the company had most gratefully wandered.

There was some delay at the beginning of afternoon parade. Freeman and Taunton strutted about before a skeleton platoon. Half a dozen members of Wren's were present and stood, nominally, at ease. Y company might have returned from a heavy action.

"Owen, where's the rest of the section?" said Freeman.

"I don't know. I can only guess." Two figures came out of a belt of trees, tightening their belts, as they ran.

"Why are you late?" said Freeman.

"Sorry," said Oliver. "It's that melon, I'm afraid."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"We had melon for dinner," said Oliver with a grin, "and it seems to have a very quick action."

A few more stragglers took their place in the ranks. Other platoons had not yet reached half strength. Officers conferred with sergeants. Several privates, who had fallen in, asked and obtained permission to leave the ranks. After half an hour the route march was cancelled in favour of company drill within the precincts of the camp.

The next few days were a long succession of hills. In the morning and in the afternoon the schools toiled up the incline from camp and returned in time for dinner or tea. Occasionally several O.T.C.s combined in major operations against each other. Once the whole camp was led out along a white dusty road to watch a display of artillery, which Denis found more entertaining than instructive. For the last night but one, a midnight attack had been planned, in which Eton and three other schools were to defend a neighbouring mountain against the rest of camp.

Though the work was hard, Denis enjoyed himself. He grumbled with everyone else against the sameness of the route marches and manœuvres and against the food, which was rarely edible. But, sitting in the sun, when parade was over, his back to the tent and a novel on his knees, he felt a virtuous languor. He had done his bit. He slept above the earth at night and the sky was over the tent. He was dirty and unshaven and he enjoyed it. He was brown round the neck and was always hungry. He shut his book and put his hands in his pockets. A game of stump was going on between the tents with a soap box as a wicket. He didn't care a damn for anyone.

Oliver came along. "Just been trying to rile the young gentlemen of Hamel," he said.

"Any luck?"

"Yes and no. Featherstone said that being R.C.s they would disapprove of bad language; so he tripped up over a tent peg in their lines."

"And said?"

"A lot of wicked things."

“What did Hamel do?”

“Featherstone said they would come out and cross themselves. Actually they came out and used more filthy words than I’ve ever forgotten. I was so surprised that I forgot to laugh.”

“They’re still at it,” said Featherstone. “I threatened to write to the Pope, and a little chap about two feet high told me precisely what he’d like to do to the Pope. Really, it was too much for me.”

“You look quite pale,” said Oliver.

“I feel it. I’m going in to Tidworth to have a drink.”

“Have you got leave yet?”

“Yes; are you coming. We might as well all three go and have a decent meal for once. What price the Skittles Hotel?”

“I’m with you,” said Oliver.

“I’ll come if I can get leave,” said Denis. “But I’ve only got a quid till the end of camp.”

“It won’t cost you all that,” said Featherstone.

“Shall we get Peter, if he’s doing nothing?” said Denis.

They found Peter in the canteen making the best of the bright yellow liquid known as lemonade.

Major Sandymore was in a friendly mood. “All right, you three. You must be back by last post. No drinking or smoking, of course?”

“Oh, no, sir,” said Oliver. Major Sandymore acknowledged their salute and turned away.

A few yards down the Tidworth road a lorry slowed down to their signals and they jumped up behind. “All aboard for the jolly old Skittles,” said Oliver, and the lorry rattled down the hill.

“Here’s to good old whisky,

“The stuff to make you frisky,” sang Featherstone.

“I hope Freeman isn’t there,” said Denis.

“Doesn’t matter if he is,” said Peter. “I shall offer him a ginger beer in my most courteous manner. Oh, yes, I’ve got a new scandal for you. I forgot about it.”

“Good old Peter,” said Oliver. “He’s the one for the latest piece of gossip.”

"Fire away. We shall be there in a second," said Featherstone.

"It's only the demonstration squad," said Peter.

"His Majesty's army," said Oliver.

"Apparently they felt lonely last night and invited a young woman into their tent."

"Very sensible," said Featherstone.

"But the silly soldiers left their candle burning and an officer saw it on his way to the lats and put his nose in. It seems that he was rather shocked by what he saw. The squad will not be on view after to-day."

"Is that a fact?" said Denis.

"So I heard someone say in the canteen."

"Talking about lats, did you hear what one of the wits among them did?" said Featherstone.

"I think so," said Peter.

"I never heard," said Denis.

"Here we are in Tidworth; I'll tell you later."

The Skittles Hotel, like all licensed premises, was keenly sensitive to social distinctions. But instead of private, saloon and public bars, there were separate rooms for officers, N.C.O.s, and privates. The four boys pushed their way into the former. "Too crowded in here," said Featherstone. "We'll join the N.C.O.s."

"This is better," said Oliver, "unless the place fills up with ticks from other schools."

"What can I get you, gentlemen?" said the barmaid.

"Port for me," said Featherstone. "What about you chaps?"

"Same here."

"I don't know what to have," said Denis. "What are you going to drink, Peter?"

"Oh, port, I suppose."

"All right, I'll have port, too." Four ports were ordered.

"Go on with your story, Feathers," said Oliver.

"Oh, yes, one of the fellows in the squad is, or rather was, a bit of a humorist, or had a grudge against his officers. Or both. Anyhow he got some nettles, nice long feathery

ones, and went along behind the officers' lats, tickling their bottoms." Featherstone caught the barmaid's eye and stopped.

"Don't mind me," said the barmaid, smiling.

"That's all there is," said Featherstone.

"Wasn't he caught?" said Denis.

"No. That's the joke. By the time the poor devils were ready to get up and chase him, he had wandered off. It's infallible. I vote we try it on Freeman."

"Damned fine," said Denis. The port was young and fiery and it burnt its way down his throat and warmed his stomach. "I'd like to tickle Taunton's bottom sometimes."

"Have another?" said Oliver. "It's my turn. Same again? Four ports, please."

"Have one yourself, won't you?" said Featherstone.

"Thank you very much," said the barmaid. "I'll take a glass of port with pleasure. Cheery ho." She took an elegant sip.

"Cheerio," said Featherstone with a telling look across the bar.

"Cheerio," said the others. It was Denis's first cheerio. They finished their drinks and went into the dining-room.

"She's hot stuff, that girl," said Featherstone. "I wouldn't mind . . ."

"Nor would I," said Oliver.

"She's a decent sort," said Denis. "It can't be much fun being a barmaid."

"It has its compensations," said Peter. "Such as Featherstone."

"Don't be offensive, Peter."

"On the contrary, I was flattering your powers of attraction. I believe she has fallen for you."

"Do you really? I wonder. Perhaps she has."

Denis wondered too. He had noticed nothing at the bar. The girl had seemed a very decent sort and not a bit standoffish. But as for falling for Featherstone, it was all rot.

"This food is swell after camp," said Oliver.

"The old Skittles isn't so dusty," said Featherstone. "I'm going to have another pop at the barmaid after dinner."

"I wouldn't mind something more to drink," said Denis. "Why couldn't they have a damned good evening together without making hopeless plots about the barmaid?"

"Whisky and soda," said Featherstone to the waiter.

"Same here," said Oliver.

"All right. I'll try one," said Denis. "Ugh, what foul muck."

"Cultivated taste," said Featherstone.

"I don't believe anyone likes the taste of whisky," said Peter. "My father always makes a face when he has a whisky and soda before going to bed."

"A night-cap," said Oliver.

"It's damned strong, isn't it?" said Denis. He wondered how he was going to finish his glass.

"Taunton had half a dozen the night before last," said Featherstone.

"I bet you my tent orderly turn you can't drink six whiskies," said Peter.

"You do tent orderly for me, if I polish off six?"

"Yes, and you do mine if you fail."

"Singles?"

"Yes."

"What happens if I'm sick?"

"I don't care, so long as you don't do it over me."

"Right," said Featherstone. "It's a bet. Oliver and Bailey, you are witnesses. Waiter, another whisky."

Dinner over, they went back to the bar. Several khaki figures were talking to the barmaid. One of them swished his puttees with a swagger cane. Two Etonian N.C.O.s were drinking port and smoking cigars in a corner.

"Cigars," said Featherstone. "No dinner is complete without cigars. 'Scuse me." He pushed his way to the bar.

"What do you want, Oliver? Coronas?"

"Anything you like."

"Four Coronas, please, and a whisky and soda," said

Featherstone. The khaki figures glanced curiously at his pink uniform with the pale blue edgings. They themselves looked coarse and rustic in common khaki. Denis stared at them. Their faces were red, and one of them who had taken off his hat, had damp curly hair. Peter's and Featherstone's was oiled and brushed straight back from the forehead. It must be pretty awful, thought Denis, to be at one of these other schools. Winchester and perhaps Harrow and Rugby and one or two others were all right. But as for the rest, they reminded him of a notice, which hung above a division room. "Someone must be last, but no one need be." Everyone couldn't be at Eton; but it was equally clear that no one had chosen of his own free will to go to one of these other schools. They weren't as bad as town cads, these khaki toughs, but they obviously weren't gentlemen. Denis wondered if he would ever meet any of them again in life, or whether they returned to some London slum or country farm, when they left school. Meanwhile, the toughs seemed careless of their inferiority. They laughed and talked among themselves and took no notice of Featherstone leaning against the bar.

"You'd better buck up, Feathers, if you want to win your bet," said Peter. "We shall have to leave in half an hour's time."

"That's all right. Just watch."

"Go it," said Denis.

"Another whisky, please," said Featherstone. The barmaid gave him a look, and the khaki figures moved away to a corner of the bar.

"Cheerio," said Featherstone, "grand stuff whisky. Have another, Bailey?"

"No thanks," said Denis.

"For God's sake take the band off your cigar, unless you want to be taken for a cad." Denis went very red and removed the red and gold label. He watched Featherstone warm the end with a match, then hold the flame to the circumference and pull gently, while he turned. He smoked quickly for a few minutes. The tobacco was very strong

and made him choke. At all costs he must not let it go out, as he had heard that cigars could never be lit again. But the ash would not burn evenly. It crackled away underneath without affecting the uppermost leaf. By alternately sucking and blowing, till his cheeks ached, he at last induced the smouldering ash to spread upwards. Now a glowing spark bit round the circle of the cigar and cut off a good inch of unscorched leaf. He knocked the end on the edge of a table and puffed furiously.

"Damned fine drink, whisky," said Featherstone to the barmaid.

"I prefer a glass of port myself."

"Have one," said Featherstone.

"Thank you, sir. Cheery ho, chin-chin." Denis noted her little finger with a big jewel ring, outcurled so delicately, when she raised her glass.

"Rotten place, Tidworth," said Featherstone.

"Not lively enough?" said the barmaid.

"Bloody hole," said Featherstone. He finished his fourth whisky. "Is there any fun in the village?"

"Well," said the barmaid. "There's the pictures on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Mr. Chaplin's new picture was very entertaining."

"I didn't mean cinemas," said Featherstone. "Hi, you others, what's the matter with you? Why don't you say something?"

"You've got ten minutes and two more for your bet," said Peter.

"Have you a wager on among you gentlemen?" said the barmaid.

"Bet me I wouldn't drink six whisky sodas," said Featherstone. "Easy."

"Have you gentlemen to get back to camp to-night?"

"Glass of port and two ginger-beers, please," said a voice.

"Bloody old camp," said Featherstone. "Double whisky and I win bet."

"Double whisky and splash, sir?"

"Glass of port and two ginger-beers," repeated the voice, louder.

"Ever been to camp?" said Featherstone. "No, I s'pose you haven't. Why not come to-night? Show you round." The barmaid displayed a row of ivory and gold.

"I say, I've asked twice for a glass of port and two ginger-beers," said the voice angrily. Featherstone turned towards the khaki figure and raised his glass with great courtesy. "Gentlemen from Magnafields, as I perceive from your badges, your health. Miss . . . What's your name?"

"Nellie," said the barmaid.

"Nellie, these gentlemen are my friends. Camp too. Know each other, see?"

The barmaid giggled and the khaki group moved closer together.

"A port and two ginger-beers, was it?" said Nellie.

"For the fourth time," said the khaki spokesman.

"No impertinence, please," said Nellie. "I happened to be serving these gentlemen first."

"Nellie's coming to camp," said Featherstone. "Good—Old—Camp." He gulped down the last of his bet-winning whisky. "Lord Ockley, tent orderly. Attaboy," he shouted.

"Do keep quiet," said Oliver.

"Who says impossible drink six whiskies? You do, khaki bags, or am I wrong?" There was no reply.

"Nellie, could khaki bags drink six whiskies? Nellie shall decide." But Nellie said nothing and kept smiling. Denis's toes began to curl. Peter leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets. The Magnafieldians whispered together, and then a clock struck.

"Come on Feathers," said Peter. "We must get back."

"Good night, gentlemen," said Nellie. She took up a glass and gave it a polish.

Featherstone banged his empty glass on the table and held out both hands. "Good old Nellie, come to camp. Friend here will lend you palliasse. Horrid things, palliasses. Never mind." He pulled her violently towards him and made a

half-hearted effort to land a kiss ; but Nellie's muscular arms kept him off with some ease.

" Good night, gentlemen," she repeated. " Be good."

" Come to camp," said Featherstone.

" Now then, you've had more than enough, hasn't he, gentlemen?" The appeal was successful. " Come on Feathers," said Oliver. He took his arm and together they staggered outside, followed by Denis and Peter. On the other side of the road a knot of boys were waiting. As the Etonians started off in the direction of camp, they came towards them.

" Bloody Eton," said the first.

" Poor little chap's tight," said another. " Eton can't hold its drink." The third member of the group barged into Oliver and Featherstone and sent them swaying into the ditch. Featherstone picked himself up and rushed at the khaki figures and a general engagement began. Someone slashed Denis across the cheek with a swagger cane.

" Bloody cads," he shouted and hit out with both fists. Featherstone had been knocked down again and collapsed whenever he tried to rise. Peter was being beaten back with blows from a cane and Oliver was wrestling closely with the third Magnafieldian. Each side meant murder. They were out for blood and blood would have been shed if a giant lorry, driven by a drunk soldier, had not thundered round the corner and scattered the fight with fine impartiality. More boys were coming up the road and the heat of the battle had passed.

" We'll see you again," Oliver shouted after them.

" Good night, baby Eton," came the reply. " Shall we hold his little head for him, if he wants to be sick?"

But Featherstone heard nothing. He sat on the side of the ditch with his chin in his hands.

" Come on, Feathers," said Oliver. " There are chaps coming. Give me a hand. You're not hurt are you, Peter."

" No, I'm all right. My eye's a bit painful. Got a cut above it, I think."

" Dirty cads to use sticks," said Denis.

"Take his other arm," said Oliver. "Pull yourself together, Feathers. We've got to get back to camp. CAMP you know."

"Camp," said Featherstone. "Camp."

"That's right. Now, then, off we go."

At the gates of Tidworth Park they were challenged by the guard, but Peter gave Featherstone an extra prod in the ribs and they slouched through without being noticed. Inside the tent, Featherstone collapsed on his palliase, and lay staring at the canvas.

"Been to Tidworth?" said Taunton.

"Yes, we had a very decent time," said Peter.

"So it seems. How did he get like that?"

"Well, we had a scrap on the way back with some people from Magnafields and poor old l'eacherstone got winded."

"His wind smells like whisky to me," said Taunton. Lawrence and Worming laughed. "You'd better look after him as you're responsible." And at that moment Featherstone was sick. He had rolled quietly over till his head rested on Taunton's tunic and breeches, folded ready for the next morning.

"Blast your soul," said Taunton. "Here, give me a hand you others. Get his head under the tent flap."

"Poor old chap," said Oliver. "You'll be better in a moment. That's the way, cough it up."

"Can I help?" said Denis. He felt suddenly fond of Featherstone.

"Creep out of the tent and get a tent cloth," said Taunton. "Don't get caught."

"Hadn't we better undress him?" said Peter.

"Yes, puttees first. Now his boots. Pull." When Denis returned with a cloth he found the patient in shirt and breeches. It was a warm night and Taunton agreed with his suggestion that the tent flap should be left open. When the last post went, Denis wrapped his blanket round him and turned away to the canvas. Drink and the fight had left him tired. The candle was put out, but Denis no longer felt alone. Poor old Featherstone. It was pretty foul to be

sick in the tent, and it smelt abominably. But it wasn't really his fault, and he was better now he had been sick. Taunton wasn't such a bad chap either. They had all helped to put Featherstone right. He had enjoyed looking after him and feeling so much better himself. Now he wanted to talk to someone. He wanted to tell them about himself and hear others talk. But there was plenty of time in the morning.