

CHAPTER XV

But the next morning was wet and everyone was in a bad temper. Denis put on his corps cape and crept out under the tent. A soft drizzle drifted down from a leaden sky and the turf was sodden and slippery.

The wind was blowing the rain into the mess tent, which had therefore been closed on all sides. Wren's section, marching in to breakfast, were greeted by the warm smell of stale food and unwashed wooden tables. A pair of orderlies stumbled in with a dish of damp, fat bacon, and tempers did not improve.

"Who'll go across to the canteen and buy a pot of marmalade?" said Beckett. No one answered. Denis looked at Featherstone, who looked gloomily at his plate. The fat bacon had been the last straw.

"Here's sixpence," said Beckett. "Any offers?" North and Peter produced sixpence each and Worming Major collected the offertory and hurried off through the rain.

Soon after breakfast an orderly came round with a message cancelling morning parade. Novels and magazines were brought out and rolled palliasses made a comfortable rest for the back and head. The rain fell softly on the canvas. In Owen Jones's tent Oliver had earned the gratitude of the rest by getting up clumsily and rubbing his shoulder against the roof, with the result that the water leaked through and formed a large puddle by Robin's place. Robin and Oliver had taken up temporary quarters in Taunton's tent. Featherstone snored unevenly in his corner, and Denis opened his diary. For three years he had noted each evening the main facts of the day, without expressing an opinion of his own on their significance. He had a notion that one day this factual record of his life would

come in pretty useful for purposes of deduction. The great thing was to get it all down as it happened. He could sum it up later. Up till last half he had also kept a brief summary of expenditure on the back pages, but he had given this up recently, except where some figure seemed of striking interest. Now he wrote in a small spiky hand :

“ Company parade morning. Sausages and mash dinner. Route march afternoon. V. steep hills. Back tea 5 o'clock. Got leave, and to Tidworth in evening with Peter, Oliver, Featherstone. Lift in lorry. Skittles Hotel. Had two ports in bar. Dinner, soup, salmon, meat, and cheese. 5s. 6d. Had one whisky. Back to bar and smoked cigar. Featherstone had six whiskies for bet. Mobbed Magnafieldians in road. Back to camp by last post. Featherstone v. sick. Fine and sunny.”

He buttoned up the diary in the breast pocket of his tunic and got out a pad of writing paper. He found a pencil and began a letter to his mother :

“ DEAR MUM,—I hope you are having better weather than we are here. It is drizzling and there is no parade. Breakfast was fat bacon again and it will be nice to get back to Anglersmead. How is the *Cormorant*? Peter says he is looking forward to a sail. We hope to arrive on Wednesday in time for lunch, but the trains are rotten from Tidworth. I will let you know exact time later. The cake you sent was splendid. I gave some to Peter and Oliver. I told you before it is very hilly here, which is a bore for operations and route marches. Last night I went into Tidworth with Oliver, Peter, and Featherstone, and on the way back we mobbed some Magnafieldians. The bugle has just gone for dinner, so I must stop.

“ Your loving son,
DENIS.”

The rest of the morning Denis spent making pencil sketches of the members of the tent. The rain had proved a minor blessing. After a rather better dinner than usual,

they were just settling down for an afternoon's idleness, when the sun came through the mist, and a few minutes later orders were brought round that they would parade in half an hour's time for a route march.

Taunton climbed into the tent. "Listen, you chaps. Y company is going to lead the column this afternoon, I've just heard. Apparently the C.O. liked our marching the other day. So we've damned well got to show him he's right, see?"

"Yes," said several voices.

"As for you, Feathers, I don't suppose you feel much like a walk this afternoon. But you've got to take one; so cheer up and march like hell everybody."

The same advice had been given to the other platoons of Y company. As soon as the column turned away from the tar and began to climb one of the endless chalk roads, that wind and dip across the plain, the leading files began to step out. The morning's rest seemed to have braced them against the steepest incline. Fainter and slower came the rhythm of the band, far back among the corps. The fifes, that had whistled so shrilly as they stamped through the park gates, now drifted birdlike on the wind. Only the deep throbbing of the drum came loud and strong from the column in the rear, and gradually even the drumbeats lost time with their step and thumped a distant syncopation of their own. Twice Y company was ordered to march slower, to give the others time to catch up. But as soon as the officer rode back on his horse to encourage the rear, they stepped out again all the faster. A steeper ascent reduced the band to silence, and Wren's section, infamous for its singing, struck up their usual song. It was a song, which every column of troops must have sung on every highway and byway of England. But its verses varied in number and in words, and the Eton version varied among houses. Wren's section led off with:

*Here's to good old porter, drink it down, drink it down.
Here's to good old porter, drink it down, drink it down.*

*Here's to good old porter,
The stuff to make you shorter,
Here's to good old porter, drink it down.
Rolling home, rolling home, rolling home, rolling home,
By the light of the sil-ver-y moo-oo-oo-oon, ah-ha ha ha ha
Ah ha ha ha ha. Here's to good old porter, drink it down.*

One after the other they led off a new verse with a new drink :

*Here's to good old gin,
The stuff to make you thin.*

or

*Here's to good old sherry,
The stuff to make you merry.*

Soon the drinks and their rhymes grew more spicy. Port, cider, beer, whisky, rum, fiz, brandy, and cherry brandy were toasted with wild enthusiasm, and the light of the sil-ver-y moon became louder and louder in its setting. One file in the middle of Y company took no notice of their singing. A packet of cigarettes had been handed round and small clouds of smoke floated away among the forest of rifles, that crossed and clattered against each other at every step.

Then Huntley's section started the tune of "The Church's One Foundation," and the chorus was quickly taken up. A shepherd on the hillside shaded his eyes as the column passed. The words came strange to him :

*We are the ragtime army,
The E.C.O.T.C.
We cannot shoot, we cannot march,
No bloody use are we.
But when we get to Berlin,
The Kaiser he will say,
Hoch, hoch, mein Gott, what a damn fine lot
Are the E.C.O.T.C.*

After fifty minutes marching an officer cantered up along the grass and the order was given to halt and fall out for ten minutes. When they fell in again, Y company had been displaced from the lead, and the rate of marching fell by half a mile an hour. Wren's section were just in front of the band, and Denis marched with unconscious rhythm. The single notes of cornet and flute sounded so clear and urgent that he forgot to listen to the melody itself. Each separate player seemed to compete for his ear. Deepest and most insistent of all came the measured reverberations of the big drum, blotting out of his memory the remainder of the band. Then, gradually, he became accustomed to each separate instrument and the melody rose clear from the general din ; but from a great distance.

After supper, Denis and Robin went off to the big marquee, where they had filled their palliasses on the first day of camp. The marquee was packed, but they stretched themselves in the straw and listened. Four boys in dark blue mess jackets were on the platform. Winchester, alone among the schools, wore special tunics when off parade and soft hats in the style of London street cleaners. The Winchester quartet made the only serious attempt to hold the interest of the audience without recourse to low humour.

Shine, shine, moon

sang the Wykehamists.

When you look at Dinah dear.

Shine, shine, moon . . .

Denis leaned back in the corner of the tent and listened with half closed eyes. The voices, well trained, yet unspoiled by professional tricks, gave him a thrill. On the top notes they hurt him with a weakening pain, that loosened all his muscles. He was angry, when a trio from another school got up and led off with the old camp favourite "The Old Dun Cow."

"I'm sick of this," said Robin. "Let's go."

"Wait a sec," said Denis. The trio was well away now.

*We used to gather at the Old Dun Cow.
The old Dun Cow
Is done for now.
There ain't no beer,
There ain't no gin.
Next week we're going to have the brokers in."*

One of the humorists made an incredibly funny face and Denis shouted out the rest of the chorus.

*So now we gather at the Fountain,
It's after half-past nine ;
So take a cup, and sup it up,
For sake of Auld Lang Syne.*

Only most of the tent sang " And it tastes of turpentine."

" Shall we go and hear Hepworth ? " said Robin. Hepworth was the camp chaplain and ran a mission in the East of London. He was very popular in camp.

" Dear old Hepers. Yes, I'll come. Do you go every night, Robin ? "

" Usually. He's a splendid fellow and it's always crowded. Look."

" You're right," said Denis. " It's like Windsor Hill was on Armistice Night."

As they climbed higher, Hepworth's small figure was lost below a sea of heads, that flowed across the hill. On the outskirts of the crowd the chaplain's final words could just be heard.

" Boys, I know it is difficult for you. I know your temptations. But you will all try ; make a special effort. Remember that your life is what you make it. Try to make it something beautiful ; something to be proud of, and not an unclean thing to be hidden away. I know you are all decent fellows at heart. And now on this wonderful evening God has given us, let us all sing together that splendid hymn ' For all the Saints. ' "

Denis and Robin looked over the shoulders of two Etonians, who had books.

*The golden sunset brightens in the west.
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest.*

Denis looked across the line of the hill, and as he looked it grew black against the glow of the sun. The chaplain gave them the blessing and the orange faded to yellow and green and a cold wind stirred the flags on the top of the marquee. In silence the crowd flowed down the hill to their tents. Denis and Robin said nothing.

"Coming to-morrow night?" said Robin, when they reached their lines.

"I'm not sure. I might."

"Hepworth always makes me feel better. He gets down to it somehow."

"Yes, but it's all very well up there on the hill with the sunset and the crowd. I was trying to remember what he was saying when we arrived."

"Come early to-morrow and you won't be sorry. Good night."

"Good night, Robin."

There was a buzz of conversation inside the tent.

"There you are Bailey," said Taunton, "you've been allotted the first guard to-night."

"What guard?"

"Magnafields are going to raid our lines, at least, that's the rumour; and we are not going to let them get away with it."

"Bloody swine," said Featherstone. He was beginning to remember the scene on the Tidworth road.

"Bailey," said Taunton. "You can keep watch for the first quarter of an hour after lights out and wake us up if you hear anything. Lawrence will relieve you. See?"

"Yes. Do the rest know?"

"Of course. We're going to give them hell if they come.

But they'll probably funk it. Only don't use anything but fists. Do you hear everyone, no weapons."

"Right," said Denis, feeling extremely doubtful of his duties. When the candle was put out, he took up his post at the entrance to the tent and cautiously put out his head. The sky had clouded over and a big drop of rain fell on his neck. In the stillness of the August night the drops fell more quickly and their patter on the canvas was lost in a steady tattoo. They'll be fools if they come out to-night, thought Denis. They'll be soaked to the skin in five minutes. He heard the sound of running feet and looked out again. A couple of figures raced from the direction of the trees, their coats over their heads. It must be wet in the latrines, which were nothing but wooden posts half covered with rough sacking. He kept his ear to the tent flap, while the tattoo beat louder and faster. He was getting bored with his job. Nobody in their senses would think of raiding the lines on a night like this. He was just going to wake up Lawrence, when he heard a whisper from the back, followed by a sharp screech. "Taunton, Featherstone, Ockley," he shouted, and shook them by the shoulders. Through a slit, four feet long, the rain poured through the roof. He threw open the tent flap and stumbled on to the soaking grass. A dozen figures rushed up the lines. "After them, quick. They're at the back."

The Etonians dashed between the tents, tripping up over ropes and pegs, and were just in time to see a boy slash his bayonet down the next tent in the line.

"Come on everyone," shouted Taunton, and they hurried after the retreating figures. Their work done, the raiders ran as fast as they could for their lines. Taunton caught up a small boy, seized him by the neck and twisted a bayonet from his hands. "You little swine, I'll teach you to use bayonets." He threw him on the ground and drove his fists into the boy's face. A comrade, returning to the rescue, took a flying kick at Taunton's bottom and ran away in the darkness, pulling his friend with him. The enemy had vanished. The group of Etonians stood about for a moment,

uncertain whether to launch a counter attack on the Magnafields' lines. But the rain fell in a steady sheet and decided the question for them. As they returned to their tents, a number of forms stole towards them.

"Who are you?" Taunton challenged them.

"Whiteley's. Just been for a stroll in the Magnafields' lines."

"They've just slashed our tents, damn them."

"All square then. We let down the ropes of half a dozen of theirs. You should have heard the language which came from inside. They won't have too good a night."

"Good work," said Taunton. But as far as his own tent was concerned the victory lay with Magnafields. Three palliasses, including his own, were drenched through, and the rain splashed on the tent boards and sprayed everyone in the tent. For the rest of the night eight boys huddled into the dry half and slept against each other. Towards four in the morning the rain stopped.

The night attack came without further scrapping between Eton and Magnafields. No official notice had been taken of the tent slashing business, but the authorities were fully aware of the rivalry between the two schools, and when the arrangements for night manœuvres were issued, it was found that there was very little chance of Eton coming to grips with Magnafields. The former were to defend the left flank of a wide hill, while the latter formed the extreme left wing of the attacking force.

A little after eleven the defenders, wearing white bands on their caps, took up their position on the forward slope of the hill. Each boy carried twenty rounds of blank and the N.C.O.s were provided with a small supply of flares and rockets. Freeman was acting as aide-de-camp to the C.O., and Taunton was in command of the platoon.

"Sort yourselves out and look as if you expected to be attacked. Bailey, you and Worming had better come out fifty yards in front as patrols."

"Right," said Denis.

“ Do you know what you’re supposed to do ? ”

“ No.”

“ Then why didn’t you ask ? You’ve got to keep in touch with the patrols on either side and report back to me or Owen Jones if you hear anything.”

“ I see.”

“ All right. Out you go.”

Denis and Worming moved off down the hill, tripping in rabbit scrapes and cursing in the dark.

“ Is this fifty yards ? ”

“ I should think so,” said Worming. They lay down by an anthill and peered in front of them. The edge of the hill fell away sharply in the shadow and they seemed to be lying on the verge of a great precipice. Behind they could hear noisy whispers and dull thuds, with occasional bursts of laughter.

“ What the devil are they doing ? ” said Denis.

“ God knows. Shall I go and see ? ”

“ Wait a minute. I’ll just creep along and find out what the next patrol is doing. You stay here.” Denis felt his way along the side of the hill, leaning inwards to his right. “ Are you there ? ” he whispered at intervals. But no one seemed to be there. Fearing he would lose Worming, he returned to the anthill.

“ There’s the hell of a noise been going on back there,” said Worming. “ It’s stopped now. Hadn’t we better go back and investigate ? ”

They started up the hill again, their eyes strained before them. No sound came from the Eton line. Suddenly Denis stumbled. A great clatter rang out on the hill and his hands broke his fall on something hard and rough. “ Look out, Worming, there’s some obstacle here.”

“ Shut up, you fool,” came a whisper from above. A hand gripped him. “ Come through here, you bloody ass. Do you want to give the whole show away ? ” Denis and Worming were hauled into the middle of Wren’s section, which lay stretched in a rough line, some of them smoking cigarettes, a few snoring gently.

“What the devil do you mean by kicking up that din?” said Taunton.

“Sorry,” said Denis. “But you sent us out as patrols and we heard an extraordinary noise going on; so I thought we ought to find out what it was.”

“I never told you to come back. As a matter of fact we’ve made a sort of barbed wire entanglement before our trenches. Sheets of corrugated iron to be exact, and if it works as well as it did with you, we shan’t be taken by surprise, anyhow.”

“Good idea,” said Worming.

“We’ve got sheets put all along the hill and so have Huntley’s. I found them in a shed back there.”

“Then you won’t want us any more?” said Denis.

“Yes, you’d better go out again for a bit, in case Sandymore comes along. I’ll send someone out to relieve you.”

When Major Sandymore paid a visit of inspection, he was surprised by the unusual silence. With his customary tact he ignored glowing pin points, which were quickly jammed in the ground.

“Patrols out, Taunton?”

“Yes, sir, Bailey and Worming Major.”

“Good, I shall be on the right of the company by a clump of trees in the rear, if you send a runner. And remember, no firing at close quarters.”

“Right, sir.” Major Sandymore passed on and cigarettes were relit.

For some time Denis and Worming remained silent. A quarter of an hour had nearly passed. They heard a few shots on the far right, but no general engagement seemed to have resulted. They moved a little further down the hill and stared in front of them. They could hear no sounds on the lower slopes. And then three shots rang out behind them and a green rocket soared into the sky. A terrific fusillade broke out on the summit of the hill and, simultaneously, a line of flashes stabbed the darkness a long way down on the right. Shouts came from behind and a few dull reports sounded nearer.

"We'd better get back," said Denis, after waiting a few minutes. They started to stumble up the hill again, crashing over the corrugated iron sheets. They reached the place where Wren's had been. A few cigarette papers gleamed in the darkness. Of Wren's themselves, there was no sign.

Meanwhile, on the right, the battle was becoming fiercer. The slopes of the hill were studded with flashes, which seemed to be spreading in a wide semi-circle. Denis and Worming wandered about in the dark. A file of figures ran quickly past them. The night attack was a mystery. Denis offered Worming a cigarette and they sat down to await the return of their section. The firing died down and a few shouts were heard on the right. A bugle sounded.

"Is that the cease fire or the last post?" said Worming. "I never know."

"Both, probably, by now," said Denis. The firing ceased. One shot rang out. Then silence.

"Hadn't we better try and discover what's happened?" said Worming. The quiet of the hill was alarming. There was a lot of dew and the night was none too warm.

"Come on then," said Denis and they started off. "Although he tried to keep to the crest of the hill Denis had a nasty feeling that they were moving round the rim of a crater and getting steadily further from the rest. He felt a great relief, when he stumbled into a group of boys, seated on a knoll.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Wren's," said Denis. "Where are the rest of m'tutor's?"

There was a laugh. "Wren's. Your company let the whole bloody show down."

"What happened?" said Worming.

"Ask your tutor's," said somebody. "You'll find them just over there."

Denis and Worming started off again and came on their own company just as it was about to fall in. No one spoke. Major Sandymore gave a command and the column moved off.

"What happened?" whispered Denis.

"Bloody Magnafieldians," said Peter. "They came up round the rear and took the whole lot of us prisoners."

"Good God."

"And then attacked the next company while the rest of them loosed off in front. The umpire said we were out-flanked and enfiladed and a few other things, and ordered the cease fire."

"Damned unfair."

"So Bullock said, it appears. But the umpire wouldn't have it."

"Didn't you hear them coming?" said Denis.

"Of course not. We were banking on the corrugated iron. A little beggar poked his gun into my stomach and said, 'Hands up or I fire.' I told him to take my rifle and carry it for the rest of camp if he liked."

"How about Feathers? Did he get his own back?"

"He told me he scuppered a few Magnafieldians, but he's been limping badly ever since. They did us in nicely."

"Damn'd funny, I must say," said Denis.

"Oh, priceless," said Peter. It was the first time Denis had known him really angry.

At dinner the next day Robin appeared with a second stripe.

"Congratters," said Denis, "so you're staying on then."

"Thanks. Yes for another year. I'm glad."

"So am I, though you won't be able to smoke for another year?" Robin laughed.

"Or when you come and stay I suppose?"

"No," said Robin. "When is it, by the way?"

"The twenty-fifth, and stay as long as you like after the dance. There's not much to do except sailing, as you know. And tennis with Joan."

The last night of camp was full of alarms and rumours. There was an old tradition that the lats should be destroyed if possible by fire, as a mark of gratitude, for the acutely uncomfortable moments spent here. A little before lights out a report spread that the tradition was being carried out. But the guard turned out and drove off the incendiaries

before they could get the fire started. Yet when Denis went into the trees early next morning he found a small crowd admiring the charred remnants of a row of wooden posts and the ashes of the canvas roofing.

"Gee, I'm glad we're leaving," said Oliver.

"Surely that doesn't worry you?" said Denis. "I thought you preferred woods."

"Not on the return journey, not much. I've got to get home by lunch. I shall see you at the dance if not before."

"And come on and stay with us after the Roxburghs if you can."

"Thanks."

"There'll be a Swedish boy, a friend of my sister's, staying. He talks French, I believe."

"Your father is nothing like Perrier if I float, is he?"

"He can't set poenas, anyhow," said Denis.

"I say, chaps," said Featherstone, "have you heard the good news?"

"Been made an officer?" said Oliver.

"X Company let down nearly the whole of Magnafields' tents last night. Bloody Magnafields," he threw his cap into the air. "Damn. Now how am I going to get it down again?"

"I'll chuck mine after it," said Denis. "You watch."

After three journeys, Denis's cap sailed among the branches and came to rest a few feet from Featherstone's.

"Look like a couple of birds' nests," said Oliver.

"What the devil are we going to do now?" said Featherstone. "Shall we ask Freeman to come and help? He's tall enough?"

"Can't I see Freeman jumping after a corps cap?" said Denis. "Beneath his dignity."

"Above, you mean," said Oliver.

Major Sandymore came along, slapping his riding breeches with his cane. "Morning, you fellows. Hullo, what's this? Birds' nesting?" They sprang to attention and saluted. "Just what I was saying, sir," said Oliver.

"I'll reach it," said Major Sandymore. He leaped with

his feet together and knocked down both caps with one blow of his cane.

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Denis and Featherstone.

"Enjoyed camp?" said Major Sandymore.

"Yes, sir."

"So have I. Hope you'll have a good holiday." He walked on.

"Sandymore's a first-rate guy," said Oliver.

"Bloody camp," said Featherstone.

"I'm not sorry it's over, either," said Denis. In four hours' time he would be sitting down to lunch in the cool dining-room of Anglersmead. A hot bath and decent food again. "We've had some good rags, all the same," he said.

"No more washing up," said Oliver.

"Or greasy bacon," said Featherstone.

"Or réveillés."

"Or lights out."

"Or lats, where mosquitoes bite you when you take your trousers down."

"I'm going to have a double whisky as soon as I get to Tidworth, and that's that," said Featherstone.

Within an hour, lines of tents lay like crashed balloons on the turf. Tent boards had been stacked in piles and the grass beneath them was long and yellow. Tidworth Station was alive with uniforms.