

## CHAPTER XVIII

Eton went back on the twentieth, but those who had been to camp were allowed an extra day at the end of all three holidays. A week before the return, a south-west wind began to blow at Speenmouth, and although Denis battled against it with reefed lug and a loosely held sheet, the gale proved too strong for the *Cormorant*. More than once he narrowly missed disaster, when scudding in and out of the fishing boats at their moorings. Finally he took his father's advice, loosened the stay lacing, unshipped the mast and with the centreboard raised, paddled in to the hard. Mr. Bailey and York, the gardener, were waiting with a trolley. Denis helped them hoist the *Cormorant* on board and followed the cortège, as it bumped over the grass and down the lane to Anglersmead. For the next few days he was busy in the yard, scraping the seaweed from her bottom and washing the inside with the garden hose. With strips of sandpaper he rubbed the old varnish off her sides, ready for his father to give her a fresh coat during the winter months to come.

The dry-docking of the *Cormorant* was the end of the summer for Denis. There were plenty of tennis parties in Speenmouth and scarcely a leaf fell in the south-westerly gale. But the holiday spirit was gone. When he had stowed away the sails in the drying room and finished his scraping, he came each day to the outhouse and heaved back the sliding doors and looked at the *Cormorant's* bare shell. He was glad she was in the dark, except when he pushed open the doors. She must feel undignified, he thought, stripped of her mast and sails and ropes. The return from camp and his first row with Peter and his mother belonged already to another period. The holidays were over, but the winter

half had not yet started. He mooned round the garden, seeing rose beds and favourite fruit trees as strangers, that had already said good-bye. He went out to the tennis court to practise a few serves. But the tennis court, too, had become unfriendly. The brown patches on the service lines were evidence of past triumphs. He served half a dozen balls and hurried after them. He hit them back from the other side without interest. The place was lifeless. He wished for a moment he were already back in the noisy passages of Wren's.

Mrs. Bailey came through the garden door with a racket in her hand. "Would you like to serve to me, Denis?" she said. "I'll return them for you, if I can."

"All right, mum. I'll try." He went to the far corner and served. Double fault. He marched to the left hand corner and served again. Double fault.

"Try a little less hard," said his mother.

"I've got in much faster ones than that, mum."

Mrs. Bailey moved to the other court and waited. A ball whistled past her. A second nearly swept off her hat.

"Damn," said Denis. "I'll get one in in a moment, I swear." He served again, more fiercely than before, and his father appeared.

"Not so hard, Denis," he said kindly. "There is no use serving double faults, is there?"

Denis said nothing. He hit two more into the net.

"It's not much fun for your mother, is it?" said Mr. Bailey, more wearily.

"I don't mind, Hubert."

"Just as you like," said Mr. Bailey. He slammed the garden door behind him and returned to his potatoes. Denis threw the racket on the grass and sat down. "I'm sick of this bl—— of tennis. Get Joan to play with you, mum, if you want a game."

"I don't care if I play or not," said his mother. "I only thought you would like some practice."

"What's the use of practising when the holidays are over? You'd better get a football."

"Don't be rude, Denis. If you can't control your temper, I shall leave you."

"All right, do." Curse, damn, blast, he said aloud, when his mother had gone. He picked up his racket and banged it on the grass till the frame trembled. Thank God he was going back to Eton in two days. At least he was left alone at Eton when he felt rotten. He would like to hide in the middle of a thick wood and never come out. At the same time it would be rather fun hearing the shouts of his father and mother and Joan, and perhaps Maureen, beating through the thickets. That was the real reason, why suicide was so unsatisfactory. He could never see the faces and hear the voices of people standing round the body. "Poor old Denis. He was a decent fellow. I wonder why he did it? It was all our fault." But he would hear nothing, he supposed, and without an audience it was not worth it. He felt better now. There were still two days left before compulsory work and football began. He went indoors and read the *Cornhill* till lunch.

On the last day of the holidays Denis made his usual round of farewells. There was Mrs. Mallard, the cook, to be visited. Mrs. Mallard had made an iced cake for him to take back to Eton, and its presentation lent a cheerful note to the visit. Since both Denis and his family had tacitly agreed that the sooner he went back the better for everyone, there had been little pretence of sorrow on either side. It was like walking up Windsor Hill to the dentist's; a grim business in itself, but once in the waiting-room, he laughed and joked with fellow sufferers. It was bad form to allude seriously to the common fate; but if this rule were observed the awkward moment could be positively festive.

With the gardener and his wife, Denis exchanged sly jests of ancient standing and hints at the things he did at Eton.

"Glad to be going back, Master Denis?" said Mrs. York.

"Not half," said Denis.

IF

"I expect you young gentlemen have some rare old times together," said Mr. York.

"A good many more than you imagine, York. Eton's jolly good fun, I can tell you."

"It only seems like yesterday that the holidays began, don't it, Mr. York?"

"And Master Denis and his young friend arrived all dressed for the war, wasn't it, sir?"

"Damned good sport, camp," said Denis. Mrs. York shook her head at her husband. "We shan't be knowing Master Denis soon, what with sailing and soldiering, and now I hear your father is going to give you a motor bicycle for Christmas."

"If I get a scholarship at Cambridge."

"Ah, you'll soon be grown up now, sir," said York. Denis smiled knowingly and said good-bye. As he hurried away, he thought how dull it must be for the Yorks, living on in their cottage, doing the same things every day, and with no hope of growing up and doing grander things, as he was going to do. That was why they said good-bye so hurriedly to each other, lest such awkward truths should come to light.

Before dinner, Denis biked up to see Maureen. He was in excellent spirits and refused to be depressed by Mrs. Roxburgh's well-meant sympathy.

"No, I'm looking forward to this half like anything," he said. "I'm specialising in history and it ought to be fun."

"Your father tells me you are trying for a scholarship at Cambridge," said Mrs. Roxburgh.

"I'm having a shot. I don't know whether I shall get it."

"He said he thought you had a fair chance," said Maureen.

"There's a pretty stiff competition, but I've got over ten weeks to work for it, and I've got another chance if I fail anyhow."

"Oh, you won't fail," said Maureen. "You've simply got to get it; for your father's sake, and you will."

"Yes," said Denis. "I must be going now."

"I'll see you out," said Maureen. She followed him to the door. "I may be going to stay with the Harbords again some time."

"Good. Drop in to tea again, if you care. Always at home, you know."

"Would you like me to?"

"Of course, idiot. Just send a line when you're coming. I must get back to dinner now."

"The holidays seem to have gone so quickly; don't you think so?"

"Oh, I don't know. I shan't be sorry to be back."

"Do you really mean that, Denis?"

"I've enjoyed the holidays all right. But a fellow can have enough of anything. Besides, I want to see Peter and Oliver and all the chaps again."

"Yes, of course," said Maureen.

"Well, I must be going now, or I shall be ticked off for being late. Good-bye, Maureen." He held out his hand.

"And you don't mind if I invite myself to tea?"

"I told you so. Good-bye."

Maureen touched his hand. "Good-bye; and good luck in the scholarship if I don't see you before."

"Thanks." Denis jumped on his bike and urged it down the drive. He would be late if he didn't hurry.

Mrs. Bailey had bicycled the six miles into Barford that morning and the dining-room table was spread with all Denis's favourite dishes. Now he knew why Mrs. Mallard's farewells had been somewhat flustered. There had been a lobster salad lurking in the background of the kitchen. Hot roast chicken with French beans, and an orange trifle capped with tall peaks of whipped cream, completed the menu. By his place Denis found a ginger-beer bottle and an opener. The dinner went off fairly well.

"Just a moment before you go into the drawing-room, Denis, old man," said his father, when coffee had been finished. Coffee at Speenmouth usually meant visitors on the last night of the holidays. Mrs. Bailey hurried Joan from the room.

"I think we'd better go up to the study to give the servants a chance to clear away, eh, Denis?"

"Right, father." He followed him up the stairs. Mr. Bailey slammed the door and rubbed his hands. "There's only a few things I want to say. By the way, there's nothing you want to ask me, is there?"

"No, father," said Denis in surprise.

"I just thought there might be. Never mind; we'll come back to that later. Now about next half, I hope you will work as hard as you can and get this scholarship. I have asked Mr. Wren what your chances are, and he tells me that, if you set your mind on it, there is no reason why you should not succeed. What do you think yourself, Denis?"

"I'll do my best, I promise you."

"That's a good boy. I knew you would. Mr. Wren did not seem altogether satisfied with your work last term, but he pointed out that the school certificate examination was very unsettling and so on and so forth. So this term we shall see a fresh start, a real effort, eh?"

"Yes, father," said Denis, determined to make a real effort. With Raven he could do it, and would.

"Your whole future may depend on your work in the next few months, as we cannot afford to send you to Cambridge unless you get a scholarship, you understand?"

"Yes." Denis saw, and a cold chill trickled down his back at the thought of the responsibility.

"I hope you have enjoyed your holidays," went on his father. "We have certainly enjoyed having you and your friends."

"Yes, thanks, father. I've had a jolly good time."

"I think you have, on the whole. Yes, I think you have. Of course, you are a difficult fellow at times, and I don't profess to be able to make you out always." Mr. Bailey smiled and Denis thought he had better smile too.

"You don't like being told things, do you, old man?"

"Oh, I don't know, father."

"But, though you may not always realise it, your mother and I are only thinking of your happiness. You probably

think we are being hard on you at times, but we are trying to do our best for you. We want you to grow into a healthy, normal Englishman, which brings me back to where I was before." The clock on the mantelpiece struck nine in thin, effeminate strokes, and Denis compared it with his wrist-watch.

"You are certain you have nothing on your mind, Denis?"

"Nothing. I promise you."

Mr. Bailey seemed still dissatisfied. "You have been so very restless lately. I see you so often doing nothing. You should read more. When I was your age, I had read the whole of Dickens and Scott and Thackeray and most of Shakespeare."

"So has Robin," said Denis.

"Of course, Mr. Wren talked to you about the subject, when you were confirmed, and he reminded you about the sort of dangers and difficulties you might have to face."

"Oh, *that*, you mean."

"And I sincerely trust you realise the difficulties." Mr. Bailey filled his pipe. He pressed down stray ends of tobacco and patted the palm of his hand. Then he lit a match.

"When I was young, I was told next to nothing about the facts of life. I consider it only right you should know all there is to be known." He lit another match. Denis shifted his weight and said, "Yes, thanks, father; I think I know."

"I am glad to think that you don't worry much about women, anyhow," said Mr. Bailey, as if he suspected his son of every other worry in the world. "So I won't say any more on the subject. Whenever you have a problem you don't understand, bring it to me. I shall be waiting to help you. If you lead a clean life, where women are concerned, you will never have cause to regret it." He lit another match and picked up an envelope. "And here is a small present to take back with you. Think carefully and spend it on something you really want. I am sorry I cannot make it more. You must remember that other boys have richer parents." He laughed a little.

"Thanks, awfully, father." Denis took the envelope. His father's hands were quite moist.

"Come on; your mother will be wondering whatever has happened to us." He led the way down to the drawing-room. Mrs. Bailey was sitting on the sofa, finishing a pair of socks for Denis. She glanced at the clock, when they came in. An hour later Denis went to bed.

The next morning he was on Barford platform, grand and worldly in a lounge suit and bowler hat and praying that his mother would not make a scene when the train started. If only Dick Lett had not suggested that they should travel together. Dick's mother had very sensibly gone shopping. But there were no scenes. Mrs. Bailey just waved her hand. Joan said, "Have a good time," and the three non-corridor coaches of the Barford branch jolted forth on their seven mile journey to the junction.

"I say, doesn't the house seem empty with Freeman and Taunton and the others gone?" said Oliver.

"It is," said Peter. "We're the life and soul of the house, you seem to forget."

"I feel the hell of a chap," said Denis. "Thank God they've left."

"Same here."

"I shall get a fag," said Oliver.

"I pity him," said Peter.

"I wonder who will get into the library." No one answered. Spencer-Mace staggered up the stairs. His bowler hat had been knocked back on his forehead. "I've brought back the most glorious cakes from Endleigh," he said.

"Good," said Peter, looking at Denis. They needn't tell him till the next morning that they did not want to mess with him this half.

"Hullo, everyone. I've got a new story for you." Featherstone threw down his bag, shoved his hands in his pockets and caught sight of Robin coming up the stairs. "Another time." He winked and went off whistling.

"Hullo, everybody," said Robin. "I'm temporary captain of the house. Swinley's in sixth form and doesn't



get back till to-morrow. Isn't it priceless? He stood by the notice board for a moment. "I think I'll go and see the dame," he said. Denis and Peter followed him down the passage and a loud chatter broke out when they had gone. "And when I told her I was going back to Eton to-morrow," said Featherstone, "she roared with laughter and wouldn't believe me. I'm going to see her at long leave."

"You look out," said Warburton. "I know them all at the Thirty-Three and you are a fool if you . . ."

"Well, Peter," said the dame. "I hear you have been staying with Denis. What a splendid haunch of venison your father has sent your tutor."

"I got it myself, ma'am," said Peter. "Ten pointer."

"Well, well, and what about our new captain of the house?" said Miss Fuller.

"Very well, thanks," said Robin.

Holmes-Norton came into the room with a bundle under his arm. "I got it at a sale to-day, ma'am. It will make some beautiful cushions, if you would care for it."

"It is very kind of you, Holmes-Norton. You shouldn't bring your old dame such extravagant presents. It will do just right for my sofa." The supper bell rang, but they hesitated to follow Miss Fuller down to the dining-room. When the crowd in the dame's room had dispersed, they wandered down. A dozen chairs at the head of the table were unoccupied. At the bottom of the lower table five small round faces stared at them in wonder. Denis sat down next to Robin. It was lonely and a little awesome up there at the top of the table. Wren had not come in and Miss Fuller at the far end was lost behind the flowers and silver cups. Peter and Oliver laughed loudly together. The new boys gazed at Featherstone, who was telling stories.

After prayers, Robin stood by the library door. "Hurry up, everyone. Now hurry up. Come on, Lawrence, you can't really want a book from pupil room to-night." Denis herded up among the others. Robin's voice reminded him of Freeman's tired drawl. Robin spoke quickly as a rule

and with enthusiasm. "I'll come round in a moment," Robin called after him. The captain of the house might wander into other boys' rooms after prayers for a friendly chat or a pijaw to a lower boy. Denis walked more slowly up the second flight. Lower boys scuttled from his path. Already he had a dignity in the house. Good night, Peter." He rapped on his door and strolled along to his room.

"A lovely morning, sir," said the boy's maid. "Quite like summer, still." Denis got up and looked out. The elms were a little more yellow, than when he had left them for Tidworth Park, and leaves were floating down from the limes by college chapel. But as the boys' maid had said, it was just like summer still at Eton.

Football, however, was the game. The school stores were full of bright yellow bouncing balls and a man was blowing up bladders in the background. Footballs were soon on the house slab with "Viscount Ockley" or "The Hon. A. Warburton" on the label. Two lower boys, with footballs under their arms, went out of the house on their way to a first kick-about. There were neat creases in their grey flannel knickerbockers. The blue of their scug caps was deep and fresh and the stiff peaks had not yet been folded and crushed to a comfortable flatness in their pockets. Gane's, the bootmakers, was full of boys, who stretched their feet for measurement, or sat about and watched their friends. Fags flung down their masters' football boots to be re-soled and barred, while a small boy noted the names on labels.

Robin and Beckett passed Denis in the house passage. Long woollen scarves hung from their necks and flapped against their knees. They both wore Wren's house colours.

"Times next week, you slacker," said Beckett with a smile.

"Rather," said Denis. Every winter half he had regularly marked his Xs and —s on the times list, a X for football, a — for fives, squash rackets or a run. Four Xs or three Xs and two —s were the compulsory minimum each week. Denis had only once been caught marking up a time he

had never played, and he had been given four up from the captain of the games, which had not, however, made him change his methods. Every evening after supper the captain of the games came along to the notice board and wrote O in the blank square, which was galling if Denis really had played football or kicked about for the recognised hour that afternoon, and had forgotten to mark it down. Many a time he had crept out of his room, rubbed out the O and substituted an X. But now he was too high up in the house to worry about times. Of course, if he played for the house and got his "shorts," he would be excused them altogether ; but that was a doubtful prospect.

The new captain of the games lost no time in getting to work. Wren's had been knocked out of the first round of the house cup last year and Beckett was determined to do better this half. He arranged a house game for the next afternoon and showed by his example that civil warfare can be just as strenuous and painful as games against other houses. At the beginning of every winter half Denis was tried for "corner," a position, which demanded a quick eye and some speed. He was small and light and cut out for corner ; but he never held the place for long. "Post" was the most invidious position in Eton football. Supported by two "sideposts," with "back-up post" squeezing his stomach from behind, and the opposing bully jabbing their knees into his middle and hacking away at his shins, post had a thin time of it. Post was Denis's nightmare, and before the end of the half the dream always came true. Post was supposed to grip the ball between his feet, while the bully moved on like a Roman testudo. But if the opposite bully were heavier, his only thought was to shake off the embraces of his sideposts and back-up post and escape from the stifling odour of damp shirts and oiled hair. But at corner, in the first house game, he felt important. He hovered and skipped and dribbled cleverly for a few yards, till the ball was wrested from him. At corner he was somebody, and not a part of a heaving, stinking mass.

"Go on, Bailey ; shove. Do some work," shouted Beckett.

Denis threw himself on the bully and drew back, waiting for the ball to come out. When Oliver cooled it towards long, he made a great pretence of charging down the kick. But his legs had a curious low gear on these occasions. However fast he ran, he was never quite in the forefront of the loose, and thus avoided many a painful blow on the nose. His tactics, however, did not escape notice.

After the game, Beckett came up to him. "I say, Bailey, would you like to captain the second sine this half?"

Denis thought for a moment. "Thanks very much, Beckett. I'd love to."

"Good. You must do better than last year, when you only won two games, I believe." Beckett smiled. "I wish you luck." Hurrah, thought Denis. Captain of the second sine. He need never play post again. He would be "short" or "long" for the rest of his life; or occasionally "fly," if he felt sufficiently energetic. Of course the captainship of the second sine was purely an honorary position; it was offered to people high up in the house, who were not good enough for their "shorts." But that did not matter. To reign in hell was better than being post in the very dubious heaven of Wren's house side.

"Congratulations," said Peter, when he heard. "I shall be your right-hand man."

"If you don't play for the house."

"No fear."

"And we'll put Spencer-Mace post, if he tries to be offensive."

"And pray God there are some rouges scored against us."

"Only too likely," said Denis, "if it's anything like last year. But, Peter, the second sine has got to win this half; Beckett said so."

"Easy. If we arrange with the other captain, why shouldn't each side win, and everyone go home happy and tell their captain of the games? Nobody ever watches the second sine."

"That's an idea."

"Have you seen the fag list?" said Oliver, coming in to tea.

"Who have I got?"

"Redbridge, you lucky dog, Denis. And Peter, you've got a new boy, Towne Minor. He looks all right, too. I've got that bloody ass, Royds."

"Sheep face," said Peter. "Never mind, that's three fags between us for the mess. We shan't do too badly."

"Redbridge," said Denis. "He's a damned nice kid."

"Attractive little piece," said Oliver.

"Shut up, Oliver."

"Don't get sore. You don't own young Redbridge yet."

"I think he'll make an excellent fag," said Denis. Oliver and Peter smiled.

"I shan't get Towne for a week or so, if he's a new boy," said Peter. "Poor little devil; think of them having to go through that examination. Oliver, do you remember Hunter's house colours?"

"I shall never forget rose and viridian," said Oliver. All new boys had to pass an examination on the colours of the houses, football rules and other Eton peculiarities. Oliver had been given six chances to get Hunter's house colours right, and had suggested six combinations without striking a single correct colour.

"You were damned lucky to get three up only," said Peter. After tea, Redbridge and Royds were called into the room and told what was expected of them. Redbridge was a sleepy youth with a mole on one cheek. He had fair, sleek hair, which curled across his forehead.

"Yes, Bailey, I understand. All right. Yes, Bailey." His blue eyes were full of mild reproach. His collar was not very clean. Royds fell over the ottoman as he left the room and grinned at Oliver.

A new notice had been pinned to the board.

H. WREN, ESQ.'S, HOUSE DEBATING SOCIETY

"Private Business will be held in the Library at 12.45 p.m. to-morrow, Sunday.

"SWINLEY."

"I wonder who'll get in," said Peter. Oliver kicked his feet against the wall and whistled. "I wonder who is going to get into the library," he said.

"So do I," said Peter.

"I'm going up to my room," said Denis, and left them.

The election to the library was a protracted business. Swinley wanted Holmes-Norton and Beckett had vowed he would have Warburton. Featherstone, who was a certainty for his house colours, was agreed on by mutual consent, and Peter only received one black ball. When Swinley and Beckett reached a deadlock over Holmes-Norton and Warburton, they ceased to blackball Denis, and after three quarters of an hour Robin recorded in the book, "Mr. Manley put up Mr. Bailey. He received no black balls and was therefore elected."

The news soon spread. Oliver was the first to congratulate them. "Damned good, Denis. Don't be too hard on the rest of us, and don't forget your old friends." Denis laughed a little sneepishly. He was very proud of his election. Already he saw "Wren's House Library Rules," edged with coloured ribbon, and pinned to the walls of his room. His family would be glad. It might even convince his father that he was being a success. Reading the papers in the library at night and after breakfast. Using the special water-closet, set apart for the library. Doing his worst for Raven in the library at night. Poor old Oliver; but they would get him into the debate, anyhow.

Swinley was in the library, when Denis took his place. "You'd better have the last peg but one for your coat and things; and that drawer over there."

"Thanks," said Denis.

"And I hope you're a gramophone fan, or we shall have to fine the debate for some new records," said Beckett.

"I'll get some; rather," said Denis.

The election to the debate was surprisingly short. Oliver was elected with one black ball, which Denis attributed to Robin. Spencer-Mace scraped in by the minimum. With some embarrassment, Beckett rose to propose Worming

Major, and was much relieved, when Robin could only find two black balls in the ballot-box. The balls themselves, as Denis found later, were neither black nor white. They were worn rough to their natural wood, and two marbles and a round leaden bullet had been added to the collection. The fall of the bullet in the box always raised a laugh. The ballot reminded Denis of stretching his hand into the Anglersmead hen boxes; only he dropped a ball instead of drawing out an egg. Cases had been suspected where a hand had groped in the YES compartment and transferred a couple of votes to the NO. But the house ballot-box was much revered and was kept on top of the library bookcase when not in use.

Wren was most affable that evening. "I must congratulate you, Denis," he said. "I am delighted to have such a young and enthusiastic library. We all hope that Beckett will get his Field this half; at least they tell me he has a fair chance, and with Swinley in sixth form we have nothing to be ashamed of."

"We certainly haven't," said Denis. "And we have a chance of winning the house cup too."

"So they tell me," said Wren. "Excellent. Excellent. Now about this scholarship; your father has written me a letter. Of course you are young. But he thinks, and I agree, that if you work really hard this half, you have a very fair chance; and at least it will give you experience."

"I hope so, sir."

"That's right. How do you like being up to Mr. Raven?"

"Very much, sir. I like history."

"Good. Good. Ah, I've got some sketches for you. One masterpiece I did with Swinley's people in Ireland, and another with the Peritons. Glorious lights. I'll bring them along to-morrow. Well, good night." He stamped off down the passage, peering at the new names printed on the doors. A few uppers hid their cribs beneath the table. A lower boy, engaged in fitting a wire through a hole in the wall, stood to attention by the door. On the other side of the wall a boy waited impatiently for the wire. After lights out, they

were to exchange signals. Wren passed on without stopping. At the bathroom door he paused. "Who's there?" he called.

"Lawrence, sir?"

"I'll come round and see you later," said Wren. "Good night." He passed on into the private part of the house, whistling as he went. In his room Denis searched through his burry. Pens, rubber, a train key, two candle ends, piles of letters, drawing-pins, and in the bottom drawer, hidden beneath some note-paper, three copies of Mr. Kelly's classical works. He burnt some letters in the fireplace and made a pile of books and things to take down to the library next day. He closed the lid of the burry with a bang. The library rules would go nicely between Wren's last house group and the picture of his mother. He wondered if they would expect him to share the library bath next morning.