

CHAPTER II

"Hullo, Bailey. Have you seen George Robey's show?"

"No; what's it like?"

"Hot stuff. Have you seen *Red Pepper*?"

"No; have you?"

"Rather. I went to Olympia this afternoon."

"I only came up from the country to-day."

"And last night Peggy and I danced at the Berkeley till two."

"Hullo, there's Lawrence just arrived."

"And at long leave I'm going to the Embassy."

"And Ockley and Featherstone."

"Hullo, Bailey; done any shows?"

"No; but Warburton has."

"Oh, we all know about Warburton. He's always seen everything."

"Well, I have—damned nearly."

"What, am I up to Daddy Long Legs again? Oh hell."

"Pretty sure; I've just had a squint at the list."

Another boy came up the stairs and joined the group in the passage.

"Hullo, Bailey."

"Hullo, Beckett."

"Done any shows?"

"No; I was yachting up till yesterday."

"Didn't know your father had a yacht; you must come to Cowes with us in August. There's old Featherstone. How are the girls, Ned?"

"Not too bad, my boy. Fed up to be back in this stinking hole again, I can tell you."

"We'll have a look round Windsor to-morrow and see what's doing."

"Hullo, Denis." A taller boy with dark brown hair came forward. "I didn't see you; what have you been doing?"

"Hullo, Robin. I am glad to see you. I haven't been doing much. Sailing mostly. I say, I'm up to that blasted Daddy Long Legs again, Featherstone says. It's the bloody limit."

"Tony's captain of the games, have you heard? Randall left mysteriously in the holidays."

"Randall's left? Then there'll be a vacancy in the library. By Jove, that means you may . . ."

"Oh, shut up. I haven't the faintest."

"How's the old *Cormorant*?" said Robin.

"Had some splendid sails. I wish you'd been there."

"I wish I had. Have you been to see m'tutor yet?"

"No; lets go down together, shall we?"

"I said I'd wait for Tony; but it doesn't matter; here he is." The new captain of the games was older than either of them. He was good looking in a foxy way, a bully, vain, a snob intellectually and socially, a good cricketer, and a fearless footballer. His father had failed in an attempt to revive a peerage. He took Robin by the arm and led him off towards the private side of the house. Denis followed. He hated Taunton and Taunton disliked him. When Robin walked with the captain of the games, he was Denis's superior in the social order of the house. But Mr. Wren himself, their housemaster, was a great commoner, where house distinctions were concerned. He stood by the piano in the drawing-room and shook hands with his boys as they came in.

Wren's at the moment was not a good house. It had won few school events in the last two years and was widely unpopular. But Wren was extraordinarily popular. His boys loved him. He was fond of music, painting and staying in country houses. He liked Denis and he liked his water-colour sketches, which were always a little less successful than his own. He took Denis sketching on Saturday evenings in the summer and they admired each other's work.

He was very shy in the presence of ladies and pretty shy with the boys in his own house.

"And Bailey," he said, "How are you? Brought any sketches back with you?"

"A few, sir. They're not much good."

"Good, good; we'll compare results later. And Warburton, how are you?" and the process of greeting his tutor was over. Denis drifted across to the fireplace and stood about for a little. He gazed at the solid silver frames, which successively displaced the photographs of Wren's departed favourites. Then he went upstairs again; there was nothing to do before supper. He stared at the end of last half's notices, pinned to a green baize board on the lower passage.

FINAL OF HOUSE FIVES

"Taunton and Manley *v.* Owen Jones and Warburton."

It had been a walk-over for the first pair; as Warburton had gone down with German measles.

BATH NIGHTS.—There was only one big bath in the house and it was allotted to upper boys on regular nights in the week. The rest of the house used the two shower baths, and Miss Fuller, the dame, had made a rule that everyone should have a bath once a day. As the big bath, except at night, was reserved for members of the library, the rule was not always kept. Damping a towel before the dame paid her evening inspection was the way out of the difficulty.

Another faded notice caught Denis's eye. FAG LIST. Casually he read last half's names. Freeman, the captain of the house, had four fags, who tidied his room, looked after his fire in the winter and got tea ready. Others had three, some two; and as there happened to be a good many lower boys at the moment, there was a long list of names with a single fag attached to them. Denis had one fag.

Bailey . . . Worming minor. He wondered who he would get this half, after the library had taken their pick, which reminded him about messing. Messing was having tea together. In the excitement of seeing everyone again he had forgotten, or rather he only realised now that Robin might not want to go on messing with him. Taunton had taken Robin up; there was a vacancy in the library, and he would almost certainly propose Robin. In that case they would probably mess together. Robin in the library. Denis stopped thinking.

The library in an Eton house was both a room and a society. As the latter, it comprised five or six of the older boys, of whom the captain of the house and the captain of the games were ex officio members. The others were elected by ballot from the debating society. The library at Wren's was a large room and comfortably furnished. There was a gramophone and plenty of papers. But the room was something of a mystery to the rest of the house. For the most part they saw it on rare and painful occasions, when they had neither the leisure nor the posture to examine it properly. The captain of the house and the captain of the games were both allowed to beat; and they did their beating in the library.

After the library came the debating society. There were about fourteen members, including the library. They were elected not so much as orators as for their popularity in the house. The official purpose of the debate was to discuss some controversial subject on Saturday nights. The most practical benefit was immunity from corporal punishment. Members of the debate paid a fine of half a crown instead. The fines were supposed to go to an East End mission; but more often they bought a record for the library gramophone. Denis and Robin had got into the debate at the same time.

Denis stared at the notices. They seemed far off and unreal. A tall figure came up behind him. "Excuse me, Bailey." He stepped aside. Freeman, the captain of the house, tore down some old notices, and secured a sheet of

paper with the drawing pins. When he had gone, Denis read the notice :

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

"Private Business will be held in the Library at 12.30 next Sunday.

" W. F. FREEMAN."

Till his election to the debate, Denis had associated Private Business, Agenda, In the Chair, and kindred phrases with the parochial activities of his father and mother, who talked local politics at every meal. He had gathered that these things called for tact, resource, extemporaneous speech, and keen argument, but usually ended in abortive abuse. He could not conceive that he himself would ever be mixed up in Private Business. And then he had got into the debate. At the first P.B. he had attended, Owen Jones had hurled a cushion at him. The captain of the games made some doubtful jokes at the expense of the ballot balls, while somebody wrote laboriously in a black volume marked "Debating Society" in gilt letters. He wrote : " Mr. Freeman proposed Mr. Lawrence, who was seconded by Mr. North. He received six black balls and was not elected. Mr. Randall proposed Mr. Harbord, who was seconded by Mr. Owen Jones. He received six black balls and was not elected." After this had gone on for some time, the gramophone was started up and the two rival parties conferred round the table. A few minutes later the librarian was able to write in his book : " Mr. Freeman proposed Mr. Holmes-Norton, who was seconded by Mr. North. He received no black balls and was consequently elected." The same honour was conferred on Lord Ockley. Mr. Freeman and his friends did not care much for Mr. Holmes-Norton, nor the Randall party for Lord Ockley. However, they had defeated each other's first choices, which was something. After the meeting, Denis felt that Private Business was not so terrifying after all. If he called everyone Mister, he could not go far wrong. And at Eton, by the way, the sons of barons

and viscounts were shown in the school list as "Mr.;" The Honourable would have led to too many bad jokes.

The library held their private business before the debate were called in. Denis could imagine the scene. Taunton would propose Robin, and Freeman second him. With a heavy pretence of secrecy Owen Jones would drop a black ball in the "No" compartment. One black ball was not enough, and Mr. Manley would consequently be declared elected. Robin would be in the library. He would read the papers and do his work there instead of ragging about in Denis's room in the evenings. If he wanted Robin, he would have to knock on the library door and whisper: "I say, is Manley in there?" It would mean. . . . But after all there were lots of other chaps to mess with. That was the best of the new half. Everyone was so friendly at the beginning of the half. He didn't say much to Warburton as a rule; or to Beckett, who had suddenly invited him to Cowes. As one after the other they staggered up the rickety wooden stairs of Wren's with suitcases, blue overcoats, bowler hats, and silver-knobbed canes, they seemed to have forgotten all the cliques and prejudices of the half before. For a moment it was enough that they were all back at Eton. Work again the next day. All sweating together. Once the bowler hats and silver knobs were hidden away, and the old top-hat reached down from its box on the bureau, things would be back where they were last half. But the half did not really start till the next day. Just now everyone was very friendly.

A tall, rather pale boy came up to the notice board. "Hullo, Bailey, how's yourself?" "Hullo, Ockley," said Denis. "Private Business on Sunday, I see. I wonder who'll get in."

"I don't know," said Denis. "Who are you messing with this half?"

"Harbord and Spencer-Mace, I suppose, as usual. Who are you?"

"I'm not certain yet. Manley will probably mess with Taunton if he gets into the library."

"Getting on, isn't he? Not that I blame him. Why don't you join us? I don't suppose the others will mind."

"If they don't object, I'd like to. It's very decent of you to ask me." He tried to hide his joy. "I'll go and ask them," said Ockley, and went off down the passage. Denis wanted to dance. By jove, everyone was nice this half. It was only his stupid imagination that made him think they were laughing at him. He should assert himself a bit more. Laugh at others. He remembered the days when he used to jam a chair under his door-knob and pray to God the ragging party would not force open his door. That was all over now. The new half was starting better. It always did. But now he saw himself with a group of new friends. He would damn well show Robin he did not care.

"I say, what can you raise?" said Ockley. "The others don't mind you joining us so long as you get some food. Harbord and Spencer-Mace usually get game sent in the winter, jam and cake otherwise. I get butter and eggs from home, when they arrive."

"I'll supply eggs," said Denis. "We've got hundreds of hens at home." He saw his father shrugging his shoulders, as Mrs. Bailey placed the last offering of their twenty odd Buff Orpingtons and Rhode Islands in a cardboard box and labelled it "c/o H. Wren, Esq., Eton College, Windsor." "Do you ever think of your mother, Denis?" But his mother would be glad to send him something really useful and inexpensive. She might feel proud that he was messing with the son of an earl. They were few and far between round Speenmouth. Anyhow, the summer was good for hens. Twenty hens, laying every other day, minus one dozen a week. . . . That sort of problem had been the cause, and soon would be again, of long brown bruises on the fleshy part of the forearm. But would a dozen a week be enough? He knew that Ockley alone had once eaten a dozen hard-boiled eggs for a bet, and had got off early school for two mornings owing to the drastic remedy prescribed by the dame. Which reminded him, "We've got

ten minutes before supper. Shall we go and see the dame ? ” he said.

The matron, commonly called the dame, more commonly when out of earshot, the hag, had a fair sized room in the private side of the house, which she liked to call her drawing-room. She invited fellow dames to tea in it. There were sofas, armchairs, and a signed photograph of a royal prince, who had once sat on them. But there the resemblance ended. In one corner there was a fierce-looking bureau, stuffed with books and books of tickets. There were house tickets for boys, who had to visit an outside master after lock up. Lock up varied from six to five p.m. in the winter, and eight-thirty in the summer. Then there were counter-foil books, in which she wrote orders for shirts, boots, caps, stockings, fives, squash rackets, and cricket bats for those boys, who were not on their own allowance. In another corner of the room was a tall medicine chest, full of bottles. But only two bottles had any real significance. The dreaded dark green iodine bottle, applied on all occasions as a form of insurance against the wrath of parents to come ; and the equally popular panacea, Cascara Sagrada. A dose, as the latter was called, automatically excused the patient from early school. Every evening after prayers a long queue of boys, who had not prepared their work for the next morning, formed up before the medicine cupboard, and put out their tongues for Miss Fuller’s inspection. The great game, of course, was to take the dose without swallowing it. But the dame was no fool. If she suspected any hanky panky as she called it, she prescribed a second dose “ to make sure.” The dame’s room was the real centre of Wren’s, and Miss Fuller was holding her first court of the half, when Denis came in.

Miss Fuller had silver hair and kind blue eyes. She was comfortably built and might have been simply a sweet old lady. As it was, her sweetness had been soured by boys, as she alone knew them. Very few boys ever came to Miss Fuller’s room without some ulterior motive. Miss Fuller’s weakness was bridge. Boys, whose presence in their own

rooms led to ragging and destruction, would seek sanctuary at the dame's bridge table, where, at least, they were safe. M'dame's friends were rather despised by the athletic section of the house. The rooms of the budding æsthetes were destroyed about once a half, and their silk pyjamas, gay cushion, and scented soap dealt with in the right way. Even the dame's protests had little effect.

Miss Fuller was talking to Spencer-Mace and Holmes-Norton, as Denis came in. "And I've a little piece," said Spencer-Mace, "that I've composed specially for you ma'am. I wrote it at Endleigh."

"How nice of you," said Miss Fuller; "You must play it on Sunday." She was rather flattered that a piece of music had been dedicated to her from one of the oldest seats in England. "And here's Bailey. How's your dear mother, Bailey? When is she coming to see us?"

"Don't know, ma'am. I say, you are looking awfully well. Have you been in Norfolk?" Denis liked the hag; and so did Mrs. Bailey. Miss Fuller thought Mrs. Bailey the perfect mother, as indeed she would have been had not Denis been her son.

"And I've brought back some gorgeous crêpe de Chine, ma'am," said Holmes-Norton. "Crushed raspberry shot with viridian. Can I have an order for Devereux to make it up into pyjamas?"

"I've brought you a sketch of the marshes, ma'am," said Denis.

"Shall I play my composition now, ma'am?" said Spencer-Mace.

"Hullo, m'dame. Glad to see you again." Taunton shouldered his way through the competition for the dame's ear. The others gave way before him.

"I must congratulate you, Taunton," said Miss Fuller. She disliked Taunton, because he persecuted her friends, and because Mrs. Taunton patronised her openly, when she came down for the day. The chatter ceased and Miss Fuller's smile slowly vanished as the captain of the games stood talking.

"Thanks, ma'am," said Taunton. "I'm going to make some of these drybob slackers sweat this half." He laughed at Denis. Denis smiled feebly. Miss Fuller's room was very hot. One after the other boys drifted in to shake hands, and departed more or less sheepishly according to their place in the hag's favour. There was a strong smell of tobacco smoke. The dame herself had an occasional cigarette in her bedroom, where she offered no temptation to the rest of the house. Miss Fuller sniffed the air. Spencer-Mace sniggered and Harbord pressed the stump of a cigarette against the fireplace. He won much admiration by such feats. Denis with the same hopes had once fired off his blank ammunition from the train window, when returning from a field-day. The same night he had been summoned to the library, told he was letting down the O.T.C. and the school, and given eight up, as hard as the senior member of the corps could lam in. There were degrees in ragging, and Denis could never get them right.

In the middle of the chatter and heat the supper bell rang. It was a doleful bell, waned relentlessly by a doleful person called Hodge. Hodge's other duties were to ruin the boys' shoe leather with coats of cheap blacking, and to answer the door at night. In the summer half he bowled, of his own initiative, at nets, and was altogether a bit of a character with old boys. He lived in the underworld of an outhouse and received stray half crowns at the end of each half and a standard ten shillings from leaving boys.

The doleful bell died away and the house trooped down to the dining-room. On the walls of the dining-room were heads of stags and photographs of winning football teams. There were two very long tables. People sat at the tables more or less according to school order; but there were minor adjustments to suit individual friendships. Boys, high up in the house, who might have sat near Wren at the top of the table, sometimes preferred to stay near their friends at the dame's end. Less often the reverse happened. On Wren's right and left sat the captain and second in the

house-order. It was their duty to prevent a lull in the conversation, in which some awkward witticism from lower down the table might drift up to their tutor's ears. It was a point of honour to keep Wren talking, and there were only three subjects on which he would converse with any fluency—painting, music, and motor cars. Freeman, although in sixth form, knew little of the first two, and heartily despised the latter. Like other country gentlemen, he believed that once he had read *The Times*, he could talk to anyone. But as Mr. Wren secretly read the *Daily Mirror* it was left to Viscount Swinley on his left to prepare leading questions on sparking plugs and such details.

Supper, unlike midday dinner, was an informal meal. Boys wandered in when they liked, so long as they were present for prayers. Wren did not appear till the last plate had been cleared away. He might not appear then; in which case a boy was sent to lure him from his port if a dinner party happened to be going on. On the first night of the half, Mr. Wren appeared when the bread and cheese were still in play. He sat and talked for a little; then glancing round the room, rose and began to read from a much thumbed prayer card. After a few verses he knelt down at the end of the table, his long weather-beaten nose dusting the crumbs on the cloth.

“O Lord, our Heavenly Father,” and the boys followed him, sentence by sentence, always a word or two in arrears. Some prayed louder, from zeal or from their position in the house. Denis followed inaudibly. He felt meek and disarmed. He thought of the unity of the kneeling room. And at that moment a score of other houses in Eton were on their knees. Surely public schools stood for something very real, and of all schools Eton was the finest. Denis would have liked to go on relaxing. He buried his head in his hands. But Mr. Wren finished his prayer. Someone sneezed over a previously laid trail of pepper. The unity of the house broke into thirty small parts, and with it went the meekness. Now they were thirty odd boys of independent body and mind under a common compulsion; and Denis

felt homesick. Just for a moment he saw the *Cormorant*, swinging at her moorings in the Speenmouth pool. He had had no time to feel alone since his return. Now he was fully conscious of the transition; what Maureen called the separate life. She was right. It was absurdly separate. It was so funny to wake up at home and go to bed at school. Then a harsh scraping of chairs recalled his thoughts. The house rose from their knees. Prayers were over. He forgot that he had woken up at Anglersmead. Another half at Eton had begun.