

CHAPTER XX

Peter and Denis ran down Common Lane. The rest of the second sine had changed before absence and had gone on down to the field. The ground lay along the Great Western Railway, and the turf was rough and dipped sharply. The side-lines were cut in trenches, which were deep and broad, or mere scrapes in the harder places. The ground was only used by pick-ups and second sines.

"We shall be late again," said Denis, as they thudded over Jordan Bridge. The stream was brown and full and the turf was soggy. Peter ran with his hands in his pockets and his hips wobbled like a city typist after her train. Denis panted beside him. He had been doing Sandow in his room to get big muscles in the biceps ; but the exercise had not improved his wind. They passed the Pumping Station and thundered under the railway bridge.

"Here you are at last," said the captain of Cherry's second sine.

"Sorry I'm late," said Denis. They tossed and Denis won. Playing "short," he moved backwards and forwards behind the bully, his hands on his hips. He hopped and feinted dangerously, when the ball was dribbled towards him. "Get back bully ; get back," he shouted, when he was passed. "Well played, m'tutor's," when fly raced back and tackled the enemy almost on the line. "Do you ever try and get the ball, Spencer-Mace?" he said wearily. "All you think of is getting out of the bully as soon as you can."

"I can't help it ; they're heavier than we are," said Spencer-Mace.

"Do try, anyhow, for God's sake. Shove, bully, all together. Go on, m'tutor's. Well played. Well played,

Lawrence. Keep it close ; back him up, Ockley." Lawrence was on the line, moving crabwise with the ball between his legs. Peter supported him closely with the side of his boot. The captain of Hunter's darted in and out, pretending to kick away the ball. The rest of his side backed away in a queue towards their goal. Lawrence edged along the line. A wild kick caught him on the ankle. "Don't slick, curse you." Another kick grazed across his boot. Then the captain of Cherry's hurled himself on Lawrence and barged him off his balance. A fierce bully formed. The ball shot out sideways and rolled over the line. Peter and one of Cherry's fell in a heap. "Rouge," shouted Wren's. Peter raised a dirty face.

"Smedwick touched it down first," said the captain of Cherry's. Each captain acted as umpire against his own side.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I touched it," said Peter.

"Liar, you didn't, I did," said Smedwick. Denis came up. "I must say it looked like a rouge to me."

"You couldn't possibly see, anyhow," said someone from Cherry's.

"Oh, what does it matter, if they can't play decently," said Peter.

"What about a bully?" suggested the other captain. They formed up for a bully and Peter put the ball in. Wren's sideposts lashed out with their boots at their opposite numbers. Spencer-Mace gave a squeak. "Some swine's pulling my hair."

"Your fault for wearing it so long. He's a bloody girl."

"All together, m'tutor's," shouted Denis. "Over the line." Heran in and threw his back against the bully. Slowly Wren's carried the ball over the line and somebody fell on it. "How's that this time?" said Denis. Boys disentangled themselves and stood up dazed. The last figure rose painfully. "Someone has been hacking my shins, damn them." Spencer-Mace limped round in a circle.

"I suppose they'll say *that* isn't a rouge," said Peter to no one in particular.

"Rouge," called the captain of Cherry's in a matter-of-fact way, as if he had been giving rouges all the afternoon. The score was five one against Wren's. The rouge was converted, which made it five two.

"Did you win to-day?" said Beckett from his bath.

"No," said Denis. "We had a good game, but we just lost. Cherry's are a dirty side to play against. They refused to give anything."

"Bad luck," said Beckett. Their opponents never would give anything, so it seemed. It was the second sine's only failing.

The house side had been doing well. They had won all but one of their friendly matches and got through first ties of the house cup by the big margin of seventeen to three. Swinley had been given his house colours and had acquired an additional respect in the house. Beckett played regularly for the school and was considered a certainty for his Field. Colours were only given on the ground if the match was won or drawn. If defeated, the keeper of the Field paid a call in the evening and presented the cap. A few Saturdays later Eton beat a strong visiting side of Old Etonians by three to one, and a double line of boys formed up for the two teams. The keeper of the Field walked slowly to his peg on the wall, chatting to the rival captain. The others followed through the lane, muddy and steaming, and the two lines closed in a surging semi-circle. The players took down their scarves and sweaters and put on their caps. The crowd held their breath. Then a pale blue and scarlet cap rose for a moment above the heads. Beckett put it on and the crowd clapped wildly and followed the players from the field. The keeper walked bareheaded. Beckett, arm in arm, wore the faded blue and scarlet, the most coveted cap in Eton.

"Congratulations," said the library, when Beckett came in.

"Thanks. I didn't expect it." He called a boy. "I say, Shalfont, take this cap round to the keeper of the Field with my compliments." The fag rushed upstairs to show off the cap before starting, and a group of lower boys pressed

round him. The passages were noisy. From the bathroom came whistling and singing. Small knots of boys buzzed with gossip, some in muddy flannels, others in black with clean pink faces. Someone beat a frying-pan on the gas-ring. Fags whistled as they folded their fagmasters' clothes and put them to dry or laid them in the ottoman. They held sheets of newspaper before the fireplace. No boys' maid had ever laid a fire that would burn of its own accord. Lock up was now at five and fagmasters would be shouting for their tea in a few minutes. "I've burnt the toast again," said Towne Minor. "What shall I do?"

"That's all right," said Redbridge. "Bailey is in damned good form, I saw him just now. Beckett's got his Field, hurrah." They straightened their faces and knocked on Peter's door.

The library table was littered with letters. Beckett had been sorting the replies of the old boys to his invitation card.

"H. Wren, Esq.'s, Old Boy Match will be held on Saturday, November the 12th. I very much hope you will be able to attend.

"R.S.V.P. A. C. Beckett, Pollards, Eton College, Windsor."

The more athletic of the old boys were invited to play instead of attend, and some fifteen or sixteen had already accepted. Altogether over a score of old boys were expected, and Miss Fuller was making big scale plans.

"Taunton's coming," said Beckett, "and probably Freeman. Denis looked at Peter. "Good old Taunton," said Robin. "I wonder if he'll be in uniform."

"Freeman can't be, anyhow," said Peter. "Missionaries haven't got one, have they?"

"For God's sake be decent to them," said Robin.

"Why ever shouldn't I?" said Peter.

Of the old boys who accepted, only three had left before Denis came to Eton. Charlie Page, the veteran old boy, was so old that no one remembered him. He had a black

moustache, wore a black overcoat and ran faster than anyone on the field. When he reached the ball he kicked it hard in front of him and ran round in a wide circle, when long or short returned it to mid-field. It was an old joke that Charlie Page had never played Eton football till he became an old boy. Peter suggested that he was an old boy all right, but from another school. Even Wren was silent on his history. But he was easily the keenest of the players and never failed to turn up for the match.

Denis was sitting alone in the library, when Freeman and Taunton appeared. "Well, how's the library?" said Taunton. "Anyone been tanned lately? Any debates?" Freeman warmed his hands by the fire.

"We've had the debate on the modern and classical education, and seven beatings so far," said Denis.

"Not bad. I hear Beckett's got his Field. Very hot."

"Tony, shall we go and see Wren?" said Freeman, still warming his hands.

"And the house side isn't so dusty this half," said Denis. "We ought to get into the final, with luck. Do you like Sandhurst, Taunton?"

"They make you sweat all right, and there are some pretty good swine there; but you get used to it."

"Shall we visit m'tutor, Tony?"

"Wait a second, can't you?" said Taunton. "Just hearing about the house." Freeman picked up a cane and flicked his calves. "I suppose the work is pretty hard," said Denis. How nice Taunton had become, he thought.

"Oh, I don't know. There's more freedom, you know. I keep a motor bike in Camberley and pop up to a show in London, whenever I want to. How are you, Swinley? And Robin? Have you started smoking yet, Robin, my boy?" The library was suddenly full of old boys, who piled their things in the corner and slapped each other on the back. "I saw you in Throgmorton Street yesterday, but you cut me, George. Got a big deal on your mind?"

"Never saw you, Dick. Come and play squash one evening."

"Rotten about old Jim. He's gone abroad, I hear."

"I never liked Muriel. Tried to tell him so. Tactfully, you know."

"Bit difficult to tell Jim anything."

"Rio Ritas will slump; depend on it."

"Yes, we go to Aldershot next month. Rest cure after London."

"Poor devils. There's Charlie Page come in."

"Hullo, everyone. Who's going to win to-day? Yes, I'm feeling fine." Charlie Page spoke in short jerky sentences and instantly became the centre of a group.

"That's Charlie Page over there," said Peter, in a whisper. "He's bought a new O.E. tie for the occasion."

"Bend over. I'll tan you, Charlie," said an officer in the Guards. Charlie Page lifted his coat and tightened his bottom invitingly. "Confound you. You hit me deuced hard, you know." He rubbed his trousers, while the library laughed.

"Are you going to beat us to-day, young man?"

"I don't know, sir," said Denis. "I don't play for the house myself."

"Would you like to change here or in my room?" said Beckett, doing the honours.

"I'm going upstairs," said Peter. "There's such a bloody crowd." He and Denis found Oliver in his room, leaning out of the window. "Say, some Rolls down there," said Oliver.

"Belongs to Charlie Page, said Denis. "Just been talking to him."

"Taunton's improved, and Freeman's got a new suit at last," said Peter. A two-seater drew up with a shriek.

"Owen Jones and North. They've come from Oxford, I suppose. Christ, North is wearing grey suede shoes."

"Is that Taunton's Zenith over there? Is Randall coming down?"

"Wasn't asked," said Peter. "He's been forbidden to come inside the house."

"There goes the gong," said Denis. "Come on, Oliver."

In the dining-room Denis found himself half-way down the table. Wren was talking excitedly. Never before had so many old boys turned up for the match. On his right sat Charlie Page ; on his left the Earl of Wanstead, who was to captain the old boys. He wore a dark suit and talked politics in a grave way. His father had died the month before.

"You'd better change, Bailey," said Swinley after dinner. "The old boys may be one or two short." Denis got on his things and waited in the library. More cars arrived, and the possibility that he might have to play post against his tutor's house side, vanished. More than twenty old boys were down and a keen competition had started to avoid the last few places.

"I haven't played for two years," said Hurlingham, an Oxford undergraduate, in grey flannels and a pale mauve jumper.

"I shall sit in the rears till they've all gone out," said Farrar, his friend. Neither of them had been in the library, when at Wren's. Wanstead came into the room with a list. "I think we're full now. We'd better go out."

Peter and Denis hung back in the library. "What's Oxford like?" said Peter.

"Petty boring," said Hurlingham. "But better than this." He lit a cigarette.

"I say, if m'dame smells that," said Denis.

"We can sav it's the old boys. It's a good chance for a fag ourselves." Peter went to his drawer and fished out a packet of Abdullas. "Have one?"

"Thanks," said Farrar. "I think I'll smoke a cigar, if you don't mind." He lit a small Corona and picked up the *Tatler*.

"I'm going up to Cambridge in a couple of weeks to try for a scholarship," said Denis. "Though I don't suppose I shall get it."

"A scholarship? Good God."

"Even if I fail in the scholarship, I get off matric, I believe, so it's worth doing."

"Where are you going?" said Farrar, reading the *Tatler*.

"Gloucester, I think."

"It's the only place in Cambridge; but you'd much better come to Oxford. Cambridge is full of hearties and Philistines."

"Is it?" said Denis.

Hurlingham sprawled in a new armchair. "You make yourselves pretty comfortable in here nowadays. What about a record?" Peter put on a foxtrot.

"I wish I was at the Varsity," said Denis. "Is there much work to do?"

"None, unless you want to."

"What do you do in the evenings?"

"Get drunk."

"By God, what a rag. I wish I was coming to Oxford with you, Peter."

"Change your mind then," said Peter.

"Can't. My father was at Cambridge. Besides there's this scholarship he wants me to have a shot at, anyhow. Can you do what you like at night, Hurlingham?"

"Provided you are in college by twelve. Unless you climb in, of course."

"Are there . . . tarts?" said Denis.

Hurlingham threw his cigarette into the fire. Farrar turned over a page of the *Tatler*. "Not that they interest me, particularly," said Denis.

"Oh, yes," said Hurlingham. "I suppose there are women in the Cowley Road, aren't there, Francis?"

"Hundreds, I expect." They both laughed.

"I suppose we'd better go out and have a look at the match," said Farrar. He put on a light tweed overcoat. "We can take you two in the car, if you don't mind a bit of a squeeze." Denis and Peter piled into a Morris Oxford coupé and were driven at forty miles an hour down the Slough road. They bumped over the turf and came to rest under the trees by Dutchman's Farm. Old Eoy matches were going on all round them. The faded shirts of Wren's

old house colours were forming up in the nearest goal-mouth.

"Now then, house," shouted Wren. "Put it through."

"Are you ready? Left. Right. Left right, leftright," Warburton led the house ram with his bullet head aimed at North's middle.

"Wren's. Wre-e-en's," shouted lower boys on the line.

"Come on, old boys. Shove like the devil. Keep them out. Come on, you others. Lend a hand." Charlie Page's bottom protruded from the bully, as he butted and heaved against the weight of the house ram. A few old boys in lounge suits threw themselves on the mass. Farrar put down his brown hat and leaned against the bully.

"That's right; all together," shouted Wanstead. "We're pushing them. Well played, old boys." Charlie Page shot out an arm, gripped Farrar round the waist and drew him into the bully. Steam rose from the goal mouth, the house was forced back slowly and the ball rolled out, unnoticed. Hurlingham, standing on the line, saw it and took a flying kick. The ball glanced off his pointed shoe and curled back across the line. Beckett ran in and touched it down. Wren blew his whistle. "Rouge for the house."

"You damned idiot," said Wanstead. "Why couldn't you leave it alone?"

"Sorry," said Hurlingham. Farrar put on his hat and dusted his coat. His grey flannels were torn and creased and his shoes were heavy with mud and bits of grass. Twenty minutes later Wren blew the whistle for time. The house had beaten the old boys, by a goal and three unforced rouges (six points) to one forced rouge (two points).

Miss Fuller smiled round the dining-room. "Have some more sausage and mash. You've eaten nothing, Owen Jones."

"My dear dame, I've had three helpings of eggs and about forty sausages already."

"Never mind; I like to see you eat. North, I'm sure you're hungry after your game."

"Another egg and bacon, sir?" said the maid.

"Thanks," said Peter. He and Denis, being in the library, were invited by courtesy to the old boys' tea, and Peter had eaten a great deal more than any player. Hurlingham pushed his plate away. "I've forgotten how to eat, ma'am." Miss Fuller smiled, as she smiled at everyone. The sausage dish went round again, and bread and butter and scones and cake were passed up and down.

"Best tea I've had since this time last year," said Charlie Page. He blew out his cheeks and patted his stomach. The clatter of cups died away. Beckett was on his feet. He held a piece of paper in his hand. "I think you'd all like to know first how the house did last year." "Hear, hear," said Charlie Page.

"We haven't been so successful in school events as we hope to be in the future. In the football cup this time last year we were knocked out in the first round. In the lower boy we had a good side, but were unlucky to meet the winners in the second round. Lawrence and Humphreys got through three rounds of the junior fives, and in school house fives, Taunton and myself were lucky enough to reach the ante-final."

"Hear, hear," said Charlie Page, thumping a fork on the table.

"Owen Jones finished fifty-fourth in the school steeplechase." Loud laughter. Owen Jones had saved all his strength for an attempt to clear the water jump at the end of the course. He had landed on the further bank, but had slipped head over heels backward into the stream.

"In the summer half, the junior house four rowed well, but went down four places." Subdued laughter, and glances at Wren. Charlie Page looked grave.

"Manley was awarded his Lower Boats."

"Hear, hear," said Charlie Page.

"In the house cricket we drew Macfarlane's in the second round, who subsequently reached the final. The junior house cricket did better and might have played in the final if our only two bowlers, Royds and Lawrence, had not

caught measles in the middle of the half." Wren smiled to himself. "Hard luck," said Charlie Page.

"In this half, so far," continued Beckett, "the lower boy was knocked out in the second round; but the house side has got through one tie and we are considered to have a fair chance of reaching the final." Charlie Page thumped vigorously with his fork. "I was lucky enough to be given my Field last Saturday." Loud cheers from the whole room, while Beckett bowed his head. "The second sine has played numerous games with other houses," concluded Beckett without a smile. Charlie Page looked puzzled. The speech ended in a vote of thanks to the dame for tea, to the old boys for coming down, and to Mr. Wren for being their tutor. Beckett sat down and Wanstead replied on behalf of the old boys. Swinley said a few things as captain of the house.

"Charlie Page," called someone from lower down the table.

"Charlie Page," repeated several voices.

"Well, Charlie?" said Wren.

"Every time I come down for the Old Boy," said Charlie Page, "I feel ten years younger. Without working it out, I must be at least minus one hundred and fifty years old by now. But I find that I am not the only one who grows younger by association with the old school. M'dame"—he bowed towards her—"is, I am prepared to swear, twenty years younger than when I first saw her. As for m'tutor, he flourishes like a green bay tree." Loud cheers. Miss Fuller blushed scarlet. Wren frowned slightly. "Before sitting down, I should like to say how glad I am to see, that if m'tutor's have not gained any school cups in the last year, at least we have not lost any." Charlie Page waited for applause, which did not come. Oliver kicked Denis under the table. "I only hope we shall have the pleasure of licking the house next year." Charlie Page looked round, straightened his tie and sat down.

Wren got up and said how glad he was to see such a large attendance. "Hodge," said an old boy. The cry was taken up.

"*Mister Hodge*," a voice corrected. The odd man, sportsman, appeared instantly in the doorway. "Sir?"

"Hodge, I think they want you to make a speech," said Wren.

"Me, sir? A speech? Good gracious." He passed a hand across his brow and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, ahem."

"Hear, hear," said Charlie Page.

"Good old Hodge; go it."

"*Mister Hodge*, you mean." The odd man touched his forelock. "I am moved and overcome, gentlemen, by this unexpected occasion. If anyone had said to me, 'Mr. Hodge, you will be asked for a speech this afternoon,' I should have said, impossible; quite impossible; and here I am."

"Hear, hear," said several old boys, who had forgotten how the odd man had ruined their shoes, grumbled at their leaving tips, threatened to report them for being late for lock-up and blackmailed them in other ways. "Before I sit down," said Hodge, "I should like to say that I have been with Mr. Wren all these years, and a warm and generous nature he has. Fair and just Mr. Wren has always been to me, and I have no doubt whatsoever, always will be. As for Miss Fuller, may the Lord bless her kind heart. All I can add is that a finer lot of young gentlemen I never did see. When I looks down this table and sees the row of silver cups I says to myself: 'I'm proud to be at Eton College. But I'm prouder to be with Mr. Wren.' Good afternoon, gentlemen." The odd man touched his forelock and vanished through the door to receive the congratulations of the listening servants. He had composed his speech before the war, and had forgotten very little of it.

After more chatter, the party broke up. Old boys gossiped with Wren in his study or with Miss Fuller upstairs, or stood about in the library.

"Good old Hodge was in fine form," said Charlie Page.

"He's a real Eton character, that fellow."

"He likes his annual speech," said Swinley.

"He makes me feel quite sentimental, you know. You'll

feel the same, when you leave and come back to the old school."

"Bloody hypocrite," said Peter to Denis. "How Hodge has the face ; but he gets away with it every time."

"He's not such a bad old boy really," said Denis.

"He's as bad as can be. Whatever else I do I swear I'll never be taken in by Hodge, if I come down for the old boys."

"Don't be an ass, Peter. Wait till you leave." Denis joined a group of old boys and listened to their conversation. He felt bigger, and proud of Eton and tremendously proud of Wren's. If only he had a colour himself. By God, Cambridge would be fun ; if it wasn't for this scholarship.