

## CHAPTER XXII

"Well, Denis, how do you think you did?" said Mr. Bailey, when the first greetings were over.

"I don't know, father. Pretty well on the whole. The essay was difficult, but the other papers were easier than I expected."

"Good. We'll go over the papers together this evening, shall we? Go in and see your mother now."

Mrs. Bailey was in her corner of the drawing-room sofa. She wore a brown sports tweed and looked slightly flushed. Joan stood by the fireplace.

"Why, you've grown again, Denis," said his mother.

"I'm five eight now. I say, what's the matter, mum? I know, you've a new suit on. You do look smart."

Mrs. Bailey smiled. "Your father gave it to me as a Christmas present in advance. I hope you approve."

"I think you look ripping, mum. Doesn't she, Joan?"

"Very elegant. I helped to choose it."

"You've done something to yourself also, Joan," said Denis. "What is it? Come on."

"You are getting sharp, Denis."

"I know what it is. You've got some rouge on your lips. Ha, ha. What does Maureen and the other Speenmouth girls think of that?"

"Joan, have you been putting that horrible stuff on your face again after what I told you?" said Mrs. Bailey.

"Sorry, mother. It's in honour of Denis."

"I think she looks ripping," said Denis. "Quite like Peter's sister, Lady Bridget Williams. You must meet her."

"Thanks for the compliment," said Joan.

Denis rocked himself on the arm of the sofa. "It's going

to be a good holidays, I know it. By the way, you haven't yet congratulated me on winning the house cup."

"Fat lot you did," said Joan.

"Never mind. We won it. And you seem to forget I'm in the library. You'd better look out or I shall get the captain of the house to beat you, Joan."

"He'd never beat *me*, surely?"

"I'm the hell of a chap now," said Denis.

"Denis," said his mother.

"All right, mother. I'm going to take up golf these holidays, I've decided."

"Can you afford it?"

"Oh, I expect so. I shall use father's golf balls. Peter plays with Lord Periton at week-ends and says it's not a bad game if you don't take it too seriously."

"It is scarcely worth while buying clubs and everything if you are not going to play properly, is it?"

"Oh, I'll be all right. There's lots of things I want to do these holidays."

Mrs. Bailey rang the bell for tea. "Maureen wants you to go to the Stetterley's dance next Tuesday, Denis."

"I'm going, too," said Joan.

"She told Phyllis that you two would be coming in her party, if that's all right," said Mrs. Bailey.

"Well, I'll see," said Denis. "I don't know. I've got to get some new stiff shirts and I doubt whether I can get them in Barford."

"But you don't want to wear a dinner-jacket for the Stetterley's dance," said his mother. "It's only a seven to eleven affair."

"Denis is so grand now, mother, you forget," said Joan.

"I'll try and get them in Barford," said Denis, "but the Stetterley's dances are pretty boring as a rule."

"Just as you like; but you must let Phyllis and Maureen know if you are not going. I told them you would be delighted."

"I wish the devil you wouldn't accept invitations without

telling me, mum. A fellow might be allowed to decide for himself." Mrs. Bailey said nothing. The parlourmaid brought in the tea and put a dish of toasted scones in the fireplace. "Go and call your father, will you, Denis," said his mother; but before he could get up, Mr. Bailey came in.

"Tea, Denis? That's right. I say, be a good chap and don't sit on the edge of that sofa. It's none too strong. Thanks." Denis chose a particularly stiff chair from a far corner and sat down in the middle of the room. Joan shrugged her shoulders and handed the scones.

"I've just pumped up your bicycle tyres," said Mr. Bailey.

"Thank you, father."

"I'm not sure that the front tyre will hold. I shouldn't be surprised if there's a slow puncture."

"It doesn't matter," said Denis. "I don't suppose I shall be using it much these holidays. Thank you, Joan, I think I'll have some bread and butter. You can have the last scone." He got up and took a slice.

"I don't know why not," said Mr. Bailey, munching a scone.

"How did the committee go off, Hubert?" said Mrs. Bailey.

"Another dog fight. That fellow Custard makes me sick. Give me another cup of tea, will you, Joan? He's got the sense of an owl. I told him as I've told him at least fifty times, that if he allowed the vicar to have Miss Pennywell on the committee, she would turn round and vote against Custard's own scheme."

"Then why doesn't Custard do as you are doing and threaten to resign?"

"Because that infernal Miss Pennywell has got at him as she gets at everyone in this village. Is there any more bread and butter left, Mary? It doesn't matter. Yes, I'll have one of those cakes. She's been flattering him and telling him he ought to assert himself because he's a confounded retired colonel. The sooner that woman leaves Speenmouth,

the better I shall be pleased." Denis got up. "I think I'll go and unpack my things, if you don't mind, mum."

"All right. I told Annie to take them upstairs."

"But that type never goes," said Mr. Bailey. "They stay till they force every decent man and woman to leave, and then get the newcomers under their thumb."

Mrs. Bailey put Denis's plate on the tea tray. "Yes, Hubert, I agree."

Denis walked down the drive. It was dark under the elm trees and the borders were soft and slippery. But in the centre of the drive freshly strewn gravel gleamed and crunched beneath his boots. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked round to the hencoops, full of Buff Orpingtons and Rhode Islands, scratching and moving about in their quarters. He kicked the back of a box and threw up the lid. "Shoooh." A broody hen got up in pain and dignity and stepped into the coop. A china egg shone in her place. Denis dropped the lid with a bang and went off round to the outhouse. The sliding doors were padlocked. He put his eye to a crack in the planking and lit a match, but could see nothing. Only the smell of fresh varnish came from the *Cormorant* inside. He kicked the door of the outhouse and walked over to the gardener's cottage.

"Good evening, Master Denis," said Mrs. York, coming to the door.

"Hullo, Mrs. York. How have you and Mr. York been keeping?"

"Fair to middling, Master Denis. Why, you've grown. I hardly recognised you when you came up the drive this afternoon." Mr. York put on his coat and appeared in the background. "What did I tell you, mother? We shouldn't be knowing Master Denis soon." Denis laughed. "And I've got a nice job which you'll like, sir," said the gardener.

"What is it?"

"Hoing up them weeds under the cherry tree in the back garden. I said to myself only last week, those weeds must go. And then I said to myself, I'd best wait till Master

Denis came home. He'd never forgive me if he heard I'd been hoeing up his precious weeds."

"Very kind of you, York," said Denis. It was a convention that had lingered from his boyhood that he enjoyed hoeing up weeds. Like favourite dishes, there was no escaping it.

"And how have you been doing at college?" said Mrs. York. "Have you brought any prizes home with you this time?" Denis smiled. "No, I haven't got any prizes. I'm in the library now, and I am captain of the second sine, but I'm afraid that won't mean much to you."

"Well, I'm sure it's very grand. Master Denis will soon be too much of a swell to come and see us, won't he, York? And I hear you are off on a visit to the earl of whatever next, Master Denis."

"Yes, I'm going up to stay with some friends of mine in London."

"Well, well," said Mrs. York.

"And don't forget them weeds, sir," said the gardener.

"All right, York. But don't bother to save them specially for me next time. I shan't be offended if you hoe them yourself."

York chuckled to himself and went inside.

Denis found his bicycle leaning near the porch. It was very clean and the handlebars smelt of polish. Denis looked at it for a moment; then he kicked the pedals and they hummed as they spun. A drop of oil fell on the ground. The front tyre was a little flat, as his father had said; but it would bear him. He got on and pedalled round the drive. The bike ran smoothly and he sat low and gripped the handlebars like a motor bike, leaning inwards at the corner and brushing the laurel bushes with his sleeve. "Don't be late for dinner, Master Denis," called Mrs. Mallard from the kitchen window. "I've got something you'll like."

"All right, Mrs. Mallard." He stood on the pedals and tore down the Speenmouth road. At the bend, Fergus and Jack Hood were leaning over a fence, as they had leaned

for many years, and staring out at the lights of shipping. It was not quite six o'clock.

Maureen came out of the house with Flox, as Denis pedalled up the drive. "Hullo, Denis, you did give me a surprise. When did you get back?"

"This afternoon. I thought you knew." He put his foot on the doorstep and steadied himself.

"I had forgotten," said Maureen. "Put your bike away and come in. Mother is in the drawing-room."

"No, I won't come in. I only just dropped in to see how you were getting on. Have you noticed anything?"

Maureen put her head on one side. "Something's different, but it's too dark here to see properly. Come inside and let's have a look." Denis laughed and pedalled round in a circle. He collapsed gracefully and left the pedals spinning in the air.

"Why, you've grown, of course," said Maureen. "I knew there was something the matter with you. You're about a foot taller than me now."

"Yes," said Denis. "I say, why didn't you come to tea with us last half? I'm in the library now."

"I didn't go away after all. I've been at Speenmouth all the time."

"I'm going to stay with the Peritons in London after Christmas. They're getting up a dance for Peter and me."

"How splendid."

"I say, Maureen, Cambridge is a perfect place. I wish you could see it. I stayed there four nights and had rooms in Gloucester."

"How did the scholarship go?"

"Pretty well, I think. I ought to hear in the next few days. Everybody has a car or a motor bike at Cambridge and spends the day tearing about the streets. I'm damned glad I'm going there."

"How many boys are there in your college?"

"Men, you mean. Oh, thousands. I have no idea. I say, mother told me something about a dance at the Stettleys. Apparently she accepted for me."

"You know. The usual thing. Seven to eleven with a gramophone. But we might as well go. I've been rude enough to Phyllis as it is."

Denis picked up his bicycle and spun the pedals. "I don't think I'll go," he said. "I don't see why I should, if I don't want to."

"Oh, yes, do come. Everyone will be there. Dick and Pat are coming. It looks so standoffish if you don't." Maureen lifted a pebble on her toe and kicked it across the gravel. "And do come in and see mother for a moment. I shall catch a cold if I stay out here any longer."

"No," said Denis. "I don't want to come and I shan't. After all, just because I've always been, that's no reason why I should go on. The Stetterley's dances bore me."

"I see. All right, I'll tell Phyllis."

"No, I'll tell her myself."

"Just as you like. By the way, I'm getting up a hockey match on Saturday. Will you play on my side?"

"I'm no good at hockey, you know."

"But you'll play? Norah tried to bag you for her team, but I said you were playing for me."

"All right; but I warn you I'm not going to dress up for the occasion like Dick and Pat."

"That's splendid," said Maureen.

"I must be going now. I've got to see Handsome in the village about a motor bike."

"Are you getting one? You never told me."

"I can't tell you everything, can I? So long." He pushed off from the doorstep and pedalled slowly down the drive. He hesitated for a moment, then turned to the left into the village. In the garage a light was burning. "That's a nice bike, Handsome," said Denis, "has it got a clutch?" The proprietor of the garage came forward. He was in grey flannels and a d.b. coat, and was the best-looking man in Speenmouth. Most of the women were in love with him, and few of the men seemed to like him any the less for it.

"Good evening, sir," said Handsome. "Back from college?"

"Yes, only got back this afternoon. Do you mind if I sit on it?"

"By all means, sir. Nice little machine that. Only had her in yesterday. The man wants to sell it quickly; but the engine is O.K."

"What does he want for it?" said Denis.

"£40, I believe; but he might take an offer. It's just been decarbonised."

"Tyres?"

"O.K."

"Spare tools?"

"Everything O.K. It's a bargain." Denis braced his knees against the rubber pads on the petrol tank and worked the gas and air levers. "I shouldn't be surprised if I had her," he remarked.

"Yes, she's a nice little bus," said Handsome. Denis got off reluctantly. "I'll come in again and see you," he said. He looked back once more. Yes, it had decent broad foot-rests, not like Dick's short bars, that were always getting bent up or down. He got on his bicycle and rode back to supper.

The next morning was cold and bright. Denis jumped up and looked out of the window. Neap tides were running and the tops of the rushes, unwashed by the sea, were white with frost. The river flowed black and deep-looking among the reed-beds. There would be snipe in the marshes, thought Denis, if the frost held. He had a quick bath and turned on the cold. "Bath ready, father."

"Right, thanks," came the reply. He put on his old tweed knickerbockers and coat and went downstairs. Mrs. Bailey was in the dining-room, standing by the window. He went up and kissed her.

"There's a letter for you on your plate," she said. Denis opened it.

"DEAR DENIS,—Peter tells me that I ought to write a proper letter to invite you to stay with us in London on the 7th of January. We are very much looking forward



to seeing you again and hope you will stay until the end of the week, if your mother can spare you. I have also written to your mother.

“ Yours very sincerely,  
“ WINIFRED PERITON.”

“ I say, I’ve had a letter from Lady Periton, mum,” said Denis. “ It’s only to ask me definitely for the seventh. You don’t mind my going, do you ? ”

Of course not. She wrote me a very nice letter as well. I hope you’ve got everything you want for your visit. Your father said he would gladly give you the money for a new suit if you wanted it.”

“ How ripping of him. No, I think I’ve got everything, really, mum. I could do with a new pair of hair brushes, perhaps.” Peter’s were ebony, with his initials on the back in silver letters.

Mr. Bailey came down to breakfast. He looked pink and well and was smiling. “ Fine morning, eh ? ” He unfolded *The Times* and turned over the pages. Denis went to the table and opened a dish. Kippers ; big juicy ones with fat bellies. “ Kippers, father, your favourite dish.” There was no reply from the window. Denis helped himself to a kipper and sat down.

“ Good morning, everyone,” said Joan. She went over to her place, and looked at the postmark. She slit open a letter. Mr. Bailey turned round. “ You’d better read this,” he said. Denis took the paper.

“ UNIVERSITY NEWS, CAMBRIDGE COLLEGE WARDS.

*Cambridge, Dec. 21.*

“ The result of the examinations for entrance scholarships and exhibitions at the following group of colleges was announced to-day :

“ *Gloucester College*, Scholarships, R. T. Bedworth, Ridgeley Grammar School, £90, History. C. P. Trice, King Henry’s High School, Rowborough, £80, Classics. L. de C. Battle. . . .”

Denis read down the list of names and colleges in the group. He handed the paper to his father.

"I suppose it means I've failed," he said, trying to be calm.

"I suppose it does," said his father, a little calmer. Mrs. Bailey poured out coffee. Her hand shook. "I've heard from Karl," said Joan. "He's been doing a lot of ski-ing, lucky brute." Mr. Bailey walked deliberately to the sideboard, opened the dish, sniffed, speared a kipper, put it on his plate, replaced the dish cover, walked back and sat down. Breakfast passed without further conversation.

By lunch-time the feeling had worn off. At first Denis had gone cold—very cold all the way down the spine. Then very hot in the stomach and upwards. Then he had felt a terrible disgrace, which had turned to anger and had passed away in the philosophic reflection that after all what did it matter? As he passed through Speenmouth, he ground his teeth and vowed he would never look at motor bicycles again. Richer or more industrious boys might have them. They were not for him. He might even sell his push bike and buy something for his father with the money. By the time he passed the garage on his return, he was angry with the world in general. It was the world's fault that all this unpleasantness should have happened. The motor bike in the garage window was a personal insult and he had a good mind to ask Handsome to take it away and hide it in the back somewhere. At lunch there was a certain gaiety, which coincided with his "after all, what did it matter" mood. His father talked loudly of village politics and produced a bottle of ginger-beer, remarking that it was the first day of the holidays. Joan contributed bright comments on the Speenmouth ladies, which made Denis laugh. His mother ate less than usual, but gave Denis most of the kidneys in the steak and kidney pie. By the evening he had forgotten all about it. *The Times* lay neatly folded on the desk in his father's study.

"Just come in here a moment, old man," said his father after tea. His mother was in the corner of the study sofa.

Her arms were folded and she looked at her lap. Mr. Bailey stationed himself before the fireplace. "Sit down, Denis," he said. Denis sat down. He felt cold again now.

"I can't say I'm altogether surprised at what I read in the papers this morning, or rather did not read," said his father. He filled his pipe and put it on the mantelpiece. "I have tried time after time to extract from you, Denis, some opinion of your work at Eton, and have, I must confess, failed. You are a difficult chap, aren't you? You make it hard to talk to you or help you in any way. You don't like advice, do you?"

"Must you, Hubert?" said Mrs. Bailey.

"Let me talk, if you don't mind, Mary."

Getting no answer, Mr. Bailey went on talking. Denis sat back in his armchair and tried to close his ears. One of the springs in the seat of the chair was broken, he thought.

"I have spoken to Mr. Wren on more than one occasion," said his father, "and for some reason Mr. Wren is also unable to give me a coherent picture of your work. His letters are neither pessimistic nor reassuring. They tell me next to nothing. I am left to judge purely by results, and they are scarcely satisfactory, you will admit." Mr. Bailey smiled and lit his pipe.

Denis tightened his lips and said nothing.

"I have been discussing the matter with your mother this afternoon." Mrs. Bailey looked at her toes. "I never imagined that I should have to discuss such a subject. I had hoped . . . but you have shown me that hoping where you are concerned is an unprofitable occupation." Mr. Bailey lit his pipe. "And now we come to the point. I have, as I say, discussed the matter with your mother, and she agrees with me. Entirely." Mrs. Bailey nodded her head ever so slightly. Mr. Bailey changed his tone. He spoke casually, as if the whole thing was boring and quite trivial. "By the way, I suppose you want to go to Cambridge, Denis? I quite forgot to ask you."

"Yes, father, of course."

"I rather thought you did. Yes, I thought so." Now he

spoke like himself again. "But, as I told you before, your only chance of getting to Cambridge is to win a scholarship. So far you have failed once. In the summer you have another chance. I can see very little good that you are doing at Eton. You appear to learn nothing. You do not appear even to be fond of games. In the next six months a good crammer's, whether you want to work or not, could make you safe for the scholarship examination. I have written this afternoon to Mr. Wren and told him that you will not be coming back next term." For the third time Mr. Bailey lit his pipe, put his hands in his pockets, blew out a cloud of smoke, and looked at the ceiling. "Anything to say, old chap?"

"Half, not term, father," Denis murmured. He was dazed. Before he could answer he must form pictures of everything that was involved. A picture began to form. "No, nothing, father," he said. "If you don't mind, I think I'll go now." He stood for a moment at the door. His mother looked at the carpet before her. His father stared at the ceiling. "May I go, please, father?"

"By all means." Denis went downstairs. His right hand gripped an envelope in his pocket. He went into the inner hall, shut the door, and sat down at the writing-table. He took out a sheet of notepaper and wrote,

"DEAR LADY PERITON,—Thank you very much indeed for your kind invitation to stay on January 7th. I am very sorry, but I shall not be able to come after all, as I am staying here these holidays. It was very kind of you to ask me.

"Yours sincerely,

"DENIS BAILEY.

"P.S. Will you please tell Peter I am writing to him some time."

He folded the letter, found a stamp in the box, and went out of the house. Outside it was cold and the sky was full of stars. He walked down the lane to the post-box and stood

with the letter in his hand. M'tutor must have been right after all, he thought. Wren was right. He posted the letter and walked slowly back to Anglersmead. In the hall he met Joan. She was standing on the stairs.

"Do you want anything, Joan?"

"No, only I've just come the whole way down here and left my book in my bedroom. I say, what's up? Have you been having a jaw?" She noticed his face. "I say . . ."

"I'll go and get your book," said Denis. "What's it called?"

"*The Dark Corridor*," said Joan. "It's a thin red book on the table; it doesn't matter. . . ." But Denis had already gone upstairs.

*Brighton, 1930.*