

CHAPTER III

There was a knock on the door. Denis rolled over in his bed and rubbed his eyes. Why no sunlight ? Why no golden marshes with the tide glittering through the reeds ? No hot water can, swathed in a bath towel ? A sense of a great disappointment came over him as he realised where he was, and a shiver ran down his back. A whole half in front of him ; thirteen weeks ; ninety-odd days. Steam rose from his wash basin, into which the boys' maid had poured a few drops of hot water. The longer he watched the steam, the harder it would be to get out of bed, and the water would soon be cold. He threw off his bedclothes, jumped up and suddenly felt cheerful. The chestnut trees across the way were bursting with yellow green shoots. The shadows in the street were moist, pale, purple ones, really rather like the mauve shadows, that Wren put on so boldly with a wet brush ; but not so dark. It was a perfect spring morning and all the summer was before him.

On the ottoman was a brown paper parcel with a label " Denman & Goddard's, Tailors, High Street, Eton." His lounge suit of yesterday had already joined a score of other lounge suits on a wooden slab, down in the underworld of the house. Denis undid the brown paper parcel and took out his Eton clothes. Those black striped trousers were getting a bit short for him ; but he would keep his new pair for every third week. He had been late in growing and had only got into tails last half. Boys under five feet four wore Eton jackets and collars. Denis opened a drawer and found a handful of thin white ties. He cut a tie in half, bored a hole in its middle with a pair of nail scissors, and forced the tie through his stud beneath the ends of the collar. It was quicker than pushing the whole tie round under the

collar and far more economical. He got on to a chair and reached down a hatbox. His top-hat was ruffled and had a bad dent on one side. With an occasional ironing it should last till the Fourth of June, and, as a last resource, a few drops of hair oil would give it a nice shiny finish.

There was no early school on the first morning of the half. He put on his hat and went out to read his fate on the school notice board. A small crowd was by the notice board, peering at the long strips of names printed in groups of twenty or thirty according to their divisions. Denis found himself. Yes, he was up to Daddy Long Legs all right for maths; Wilson for science—that would be fun; Hunter for classics again; Perrier for French, and Raven for history. Not so bad as it might be. French and Stinks at least promised good sport, as both Wilson and Perrier produced the most unexpected explosions in their different ways.

He looked up one or two of his friends on the list and hurried back to breakfast. The dining-room was full. Several boys, who had arrived late after prayers last night, were quietly eating breakfast. It was war time, when Denis had first gone to Wren's, and breakfast was a question of who could get back first from early school. Six ounces of sugar per week was allowed to each boy, and the sugar was pooled in a common bowl. Denis's division room at early school had been a quarter of a mile distant, and he got very little sugar that half. Everyone grabbed far more than they could possibly eat—bread, margarine, marmalade, and a synthetic product called honey sugar. Those, who had grabbed, then defended their food hoards against late comers. But with the Armistice, breakfast, as other meals at Wren's, had improved, until there was no fault to find with its quantity, and very little with its rough but wholesome quality. Miss Fuller was a good caterer, and she had a good appetite herself. Porridge, eggs and bacon or fish, and as much toast and bread as they wanted; tea or coffee—it was reasonable value for their parents' £300 per annum.

After breakfast there was chapel. Chapel at Eton was compulsory for all but Roman Catholics, Jews, and infidels.

Roman Catholics went to Mass in Windsor on Sundays. Jews and infidels were confined to their rooms. The rest of the school went to chapel for twenty minutes on weekdays and attended two services on Sundays of roughly one hour each. On the first morning's service, the school sat in the same places as last half; new boys were excused chapel till Sunday. Denis and Robin had worked their way up the school with never more than a couple of places between them and they sat next to each other in chapel.

While the upper school crowded in through the two entrances of college chapel, Denis and Robin whispered in their pew.

"What do you think of the new boys?" said Denis.

"Shapeleigh looks a nice kid; I believe he's a good cricketer too; he comes from Prescott's."

"I wonder who'll have him for a fag."

"Tony, I think. He knows his people, and they asked him to keep an eye on him and all that."

Denis smiled. "Very nice for Shapeleigh."

"What do you mean? Don't be a bloody ass."

"But it is nice for him, fagging for the captain of the games."

"Shsh. That beak over there has got his eyes on us." They sat back and stared round the chapel. The May sunshine streaked down through the windows. The notes of the organ wandered deeper and now louder, as the chapel filled. All but the sixth form pews were nearly full.

"I say," whispered Denis suddenly, "I'm messing with Ockley this half; I meant to tell you."

"Are you? I'm messing with Tony and Freeman; so that's all right." Denis wanted to say it again in a different way. It sounded bald. But he could think of nothing. He stared before him. A few latecomers hurried up the aisle. Self-consciously they looked straight ahead. The organ swelled louder. And that was the end of that, thought Denis. No recriminations. They each knew that their friendship was over. His friendship with Robin had been the one bright thing in the darkness of his first three unhappy years at

Eton. Robin and he had been inseparable. Robin was better at games, and his friendship with Taunton had begun on the football field. But in work they were equal. They had entered into a partnership, whereby Robin and he alternately tackled difficult passages of construe and pooled the results. Once Wren had detected a striking likeness in their Latin verse copies, and tearing them into two halves, had exclaimed with a snort "Now, let's have two separate versions." The whole room had tittered ; Denis saw it now. But that was all over. No more walks with Robin by the crumbling banks of the Thames on still June evenings. No more strolls down town with Robin, shop window gazing, flinging insolent jests at passing traffic ; no more plots for the future, hatched so very seriously in their rooms at Wren's. The organ had ceased. Six hundred black forms straightened themselves clumsily, and a minute later sank limply on the hassocks. Denis prayed. He prayed for company. Religion with Denis, as with other boys, was the religion of the oppressed. God was an ally, a confidant in bad moments. Less often, God appeared in his mind, when he was thinking of nothing in particular. But religion did not constantly inspire him. God was a good friend in time of trouble. Perhaps Denis rather gloried in a little despair and oppression ; he almost fancied himself as a Christian martyr, and it was then that he enjoyed his prayers tremendously. God was certainly his friend, now Robin had ceased to be. As he came to make more friends he forgot about God.

"I'm sorry if I was bloody to you just now," said Robin, as they were leaving chapel.

"Not a bit, silly ass. I was only ragging about Taunton. I say, what about taking a whiff on the river this afternoon. There's nothing much to do." A whiff was a narrow rowing boat, which drybobs, who had passed the swimming test, were allowed to take out.

"No, I can't to-day. We're going up to Queen's Eyot ; but another time, I'd love to."

They got their books and wandered off to school. They were up to Hunter for classics. Not much work would be

done the first morning. Lists of additional books read out, which the wealthier boys bought, new and the poorer ones got second-hand for twopence or threepence at the school Pound.

“ Shivers ” Hunter was one of the gentlest and kindest of this world’s failures. His soul was full of poetry and his division room of hideous yellow benches and stupid cruel boys. He was a butt for every kind of practical joke. He set poenas right and left and was too absentminded to make a note of them. Each boy usually wrote out a hundred lines of Virgil at the beginning of the half and showed them up time after time as his poena. After school he removed them quietly from Shivers’ desk. The nickname Shivers came from a petulant way he had of thumping the desk in despair. “ Shiver my timbers,” someone had whispered and the name stuck. Most of the more popular masters had nicknames, of which they were often unaware and still may be. A few masters had no nickname and they were very much feared.

Denis was popular in his division because of the extravagant daring of his exploits. Once he had brought a couple of bricks into school. Simultaneously he had hurled one of them through the window and the other at Shivers’ desk. Amid the clatter of falling glass he had shouted “ Hooligans, sir, hooligans.” “ Hooligans,” the division chorused; “ We’ll chase the townscads for you, sir,” and a weak nod from Mr. Hunter had sent them rushing into the street after an imaginary quarry. It had wasted a good twenty minutes of school. It was also Denis who had invented the famous “ May I fetch a pocket handkerchief ” excuse. Having a perennial cold himself, Mr. Hunter could never refuse the request. Sometimes he would offer his own. “ Awfully good of you, sir, but I couldn’t dream of depriving you,” and the boy would loiter off to a sockshop for a plate of sausages and mash.

Denis liked Mr. Hunter and appreciated his gentlemanly methods. He ragged him and construed wrongly on purpose, to show the division how little he cared; for to be

considered a "sap" was a dreadful reputation. In French, he pronounced with a consciously English accent; speaking French like a Frenchman was affected and absurd. Denis did not see that his cruelty and bad work hurt poor old Shivers, who took a great pride in his boys—a rather pathetic pride in view of the fact that they always did twice as badly as they ought to in "trials" at the end of the half. Shivers sometimes asked him to tea on Sundays and then there was a shy reserve between them. Shivers was fully conscious of it, but could do nothing, except provide a large tea. They met on neutral ground in the home atmosphere of the private side of a master's house; but neither Denis nor Shivers could quite forget the daily battle waged in the division room. If Denis ever felt ashamed at tea, he hardened his heart and remembered that, after all, Shivers was a beak; and between beaks and boys there was a barrier. As boys grew older the barrier was lost sight of. Meanwhile, etiquette forbade that Denis should work his hardest or his best, or treat Shivers as Shivers eternally hoped boys would treat him—as a human being. Denis valued school conventions at their literal worth, and so he slacked in school and "floated" purposely in construe. Other boys, less impressionable, just pretended never to know the place, and put in a good deal of work in secret. That was the only way to work and remain popular. In his terror of being thought a "sap," Denis had already ruined his earlier reputation for work at Eton, and was becoming a sore problem to his division masters and to Wren himself.

It was an easy hour with Shivers. The new division let him off lightly. There was a smile on Shivers' face. He quoted several poets and became rather excited. He forgot as usual that a few raggars set an example and a standard to the most industrious of divisions; it is one of the minor drawbacks of the public school spirit. All the same, Shivers smiled. He seized Denis by the arm as he tried to slip past, "Hi, Bailey; glad to see you in my division again. Better work this half, 'z hope?"

"Yes, sir," said Denis.

"Put your back into it, and lets make the poets live again. You can do good work if you want to."

"Yes, sir, I'll do my best." Silly old fool, he said to himself as he got outside. Stupid old man.

"I say, Bailey," said Grainger from another house, "lets think out some new schemes for baiting Shivers this half."

"Rather; I've got some ideas already; there are too many 'saps' in this division for me. We can't have that sort of thing."

"We'll give him a few days rest till he feels safe, and then start. Are you coming to the school stores?"

"Yes, I might as well," said Denis with a prudent thought to his pocket. Damn it, but he was going to be popular this half. "Come on, Grainger; I've only ten minutes. Shivers let us out late and I'm up to Perrier next, miles away."

The school stores were crowded. Boys were standing by the counter or seated on a long bench, eating cakes, buns, ices, bars of chocolate, oranges, apples, bananas, turkish delight, and biscuits, and drinking iced coffee, lemonade, orangeade or ice-cream sodas.

"What will you have, Bailey?" said Grainger.

"No, let me sock you something. Banana mess? Two banana messes, Tom." Denis threw down a shilling. "Hullo, Ockley, I didn't see you."

"You don't often come here between schools," Ockley banged his books down on the counter and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"No," said Denis. "I don't usually; but I expect I shall this half. What are you going to have. Banana mess?"

"Thanks. Oh, don't pay," as Denis fumbled; "Put it down to me, Tom. That's all right, Bailey. I never pay. My father is very reasonable about the needs of the stomach, I must confess. We'd better order something for tea."

"I'll get some eggs if you like," said Denis.

"By the way, Harbord was a bit sticky about you coming in, Bailey, I ought to tell you. Said he'd probably shock you with his conversation."

“ Bloody idiot. What does he think I am ? ”

“ I haven't the faintest ; but you know I felt a little doubtful myself. I always thought you were a bit different ; had no idea you were one of us, so to speak.” Ockley jerked the last spoonful of banana and cream into his mouth. Denis picked up his books.

“ I must dash,” he said. “ I'm up to Perrier ; see you later.” He pushed his way out of the room, shoved his hands in his pockets and shuffled off to collect his French books for the last hour of the morning's work. “ One of us, so to speak,” what awful rot. He had been furious with Ockley for a moment ; then realised that he hadn't meant to be offensive. The trouble about Wren's was that half the house were related to each other, which made him feel an outsider. But he was going to show them this half. He'd go down town at the first moment and buy a packet of cigarettes, although smoking made him feel rather sick. Nothing produced such a good effect as a packet of Turkish, dropped by mistake on the floor. Revolvers, train keys, packs of cards, even salacious pamphlets—no contraband was quite so manly and effective as the odd packet of Turkish.

Boys were always being birched for smoking ; sometimes they were sacked. One headmaster had invented a most ingenious system. Whenever a boy was caught smoking, the members of the library in his house had each to write a Georgic—500 lines of Virgil—within a certain period. The library considered the punishment unfair and fagged the lower boys to write a hundred lines apiece. The blame was thus equally, if not so fairly, divided, and the original offender, unless he happened to be a lower boy, got off free. The library had very sensibly showed that the appeal to boys' honour is as senseless as it is dishonest.

The French lesson dragged. Denis could not keep his mind on the work. Monsieur Perrier's pat English proverbs exploded harmlessly above his head. Denis was excited over the great future, which opened before him. He wanted to get on with it without delay. “ Even thieves are without

honour . . . how do you say it ? ” quoted Perrier unhappily.

“ Allons, Bailey, traduisez.” Denis woke up with a start. “ Les trois enfants pénétrèrent dans le forêt obscur ; lisez d’abord.” Denis read. He read in slow painful accents. Perrier winced but said nothing. Denis began to translate, “ The three infants penetrated into the obscure forest ” ; he stopped. “ You call that translation ? Sit down. Prochain ; Clarkson ; vite.”

“ ‘The three infants penetrated into the obscure wood,’ sir ? ” Clarkson looked up for approval. Perrier had collapsed on his desk in a mock faint. Another boy droned further with the infants into the forest. “ I’ll ask Ockley to come down town after twelve and get some cigarettes,” thought Denis.