

CHAPTER IV

It was Saturday afternoon ; the first Saturday of the summer half, and the crack of cricket bats could be heard through the playing fields, and out on the plain of Agar's Plough and Dutchman's farm.

Denis and Harbord had been to see the cricket lists posted on the school notice board. Scrupulously they had searched for their names, starting in the fourth game of middle club and working conscientiously to the top of the first. They did not expect to find themselves in the first game, nor were they particularly disappointed on their apparent omission from even the fourth. They only wanted the certainty of the afternoon's leisure. Shirking cricket, if they were on the list, meant being reported to the captain of the games.

"I'm not surprised at being dropped," said Denis. He had an elegant batting style, that looked good for centuries if the bowling had been worse. "Winkworth's keeper of middle club and he hates me. I don't know why you aren't playing, though."

"Forgotten me, I suppose. I shall get a game later. Meanwhile, I vote we go on the river. We'll get Ockley to cox, if he hasn't gone out."

They found Ockley in grey flannels and zephyr, about to start off on a lonely expedition in a rigger, a precarious form of racing shell, which it was the privilege of wetbob uppers alone to upset. Without much difficulty they dissuaded Ockley from his conscientious outing in the rigger, and installed him as cox in the stern of a skiff.

"For God's sake, don't put your foot through the bottom," said Denis, as Harbord lurched amiably on board ; "I'll stroke."

"Are you ready ? one ; are you ready ? two," sang out

Ockley, in professional style, and the skiff rolled unevenly into mid river and rocked its way upstream. Cox tugged hard on his right rudder string to no avail. "Don't pull so hard, Oliver, or you'll have us in the bank." Denis redoubled his own efforts in an attempt to outrow Harbord, and the skiff headed for the opposite shore. "Easy, stroke," called Ockley, and Denis stopped rowing. The boat shot ahead. Bow dug his oar in slantwise, caught the most perfect crab, and vanished prone in the forepart of the boat.

Denis leaned on his oar in helpless laughter. Ockley lay back and gazed with indifference at the bank. There was a shout of "look ahead, skiff." Ockley seized the rudder strings. "Row you idiots, row." The rhythmic splash of oars came suddenly nearer. Denis glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of a junior house four bearing down on them. On the bank a master, megaphone in hand, urged his bicycle along the towpath. "Get to the side," he bawled through the megaphone, and Denis and Harbord struck frantically at the water. The house four passed a few feet clear, their faces set in painful effort. They were trying to remember to keep their backs straight, get their hands away quick, blades sharp out of the water, use their legs and do it all in time with the stupid-looking torso in front of each one of them. Denis could not help thinking of the Speenmouth fishermen, with their short choppy strokes and legs spread akimbo.

"I can't see what fun you wetbobs get out of that, Ockley," he said.

"It's not so bad as fielding point for four hours on end and being cursed for finking bloody catches. At least, you've got more freedom."

"Not in a house four," said Harbord. "The only fellows, who have the afternoon to themselves are the rotten slackers like Peter, here." Ockley laughed. "You see, you have to be very good, or very bad to be allowed to go rowing by yourself; it's really easier to be bad. Otherwise, of course, I should have my boats by now. Anyhow, I'm more likely

to get a colour on the river than you two are on dry-land."

"Granted," said Harbord. The house four had vanished round the bend by the racecourse. Denis and Harbord took up their oars and ploughed leisurely on, Ockley rocking the skiff by alternately pulling each rudder string, Harbord plotting sleuth-like evasions of the school rules. He read four yellow paper-backs a week, and his speech already had a slick underworld finish.

Denis watched the budding willows come and go. It was lovely on the Thames in springtime. His oar churned sand, as Ockley cut a fine corner, and he thought of the Speen, now vanished past reality in the distant reedbeds. The Thames had a very different charm; none of the moody strength of the tidal Speen. The Thames swam breathlessly along; it was always coming, but never returned. The Thames never bothered to slink up small creeks and floor in between the roots of the spear. The Thames had no time to lap up the slippery steps of the quay. Nor would it drain suddenly away to a hurrying rivulet, as if it had some other appointment to keep. The Thames despised such slipshod methods and slid away towards the sea, heedless of the drooping willows and feathery bushes, that nodded brief caresses from the bank. Denis was fond of the Thames. After the rain, when it turned little cartwheels in the joy of its fullness; or when it glided evenly over its gravel bed. In the winter a few optimists, muffled to shapeless lumps, dotted the banks with tin cans by their side and long bamboo rods jutting out above the current. He had never seen a catch, but always stopped and asked them if they had had any luck. In the summer the gilded prow of the *Windsor Belle* and other pleasure steamers threw up white bow waves; strains of music drifted across the water and the packed deck waved encouragement to the small fry, scuttling from their course. River steamers were a daring challenge to the schoolboy world, rocked in the troughs of their stern waves. Denis longed to go on a river steamer, and that was before he understood the charm of Bass and Guinness and all the create.

"Let's have an easy," said Harbord, shipping his oar in bank holiday style. "Say, Ockley, I've an idea."

"Don't spill it overboard, Oliver."

"No, listen. You know they've started a new dance club up near Devil's Island. My brother told me about it. Let's raid it one Saturday."

"By all means. Anything for a change of air," said Ockley.

"Can I come, too?" asked Denis.

"Sure; but we don't want a crowd. We must get a car, Peter."

"Oh, that's easy," said Ockley. "I'll get my sister to come down for the day. She's got a Lagonda Sports."

"Gee, that's great," said Harbord in his best American manner. "She can wait over the bridge and we'll slip up after absence in overcoats. We might even get someone to answer our names for us."

"It will be a bit awkward if we are down for a game that afternoon," said Denis.

"Taunton daren't do anything to me," said Oliver. "I caught him being sick in the rears last half. He'd been up to Windsor before lunch and had too many ports."

"Damned lucky Freeman didn't find him. Even if he is supposed to be his friend, he'd probably think it was his duty to tell Wren."

"Bloody hypocrite," said Harbord. "Just because his father is a bishop."

"I wonder if anyone really likes Freeman," said Ockley.

"He got me tanned," said Harbord, "for putting away his football things without drying them. Six up—and how."

"It was Freeman who told Waxmouth I was out on Armistice night," said Denis. "Manley and I got back to find Wren and the captain of the house waiting for us, and we got eight up on the spot."

"Eight up? by God; I never heard of that," said Ockley. "Tanned on Armistice day, that's a bit hard."

"We shirked supper," Denis went on excitedly, "and joined the torchlight procession in Windsor. It was a topping

rag. All the troops from the barracks and the townees waving torches about and fighting each other in the streets. You should have seen the mob on Windsor Hill. We got jammed in the crowd and carried right up to the Castle. We didn't get in till eleven."

"And they tanned you on the spot? Bloody swine."

"Some way of celebrating the peace," growled Harbord.

"Exactly what we thought. By God I'd like to boot Freeman up the bottom," said Denis. His memory of the last day of the war and the first day of the peace was not so good as it might have been. The Armistice had missed him out.

"Where does Taunton get his port?" asked Ockley.

"I don't know. Johnston's, probably. He's a bloody fool. He and Featherstone will get caught one of these days."

"It's rather foul," said Denis, "if it makes him sick."

"If it hadn't been for that guy Phillipps, we should still be able to get beer at Tap," said Harbord.

"Do you like beer?" asked Denis. He had smelt beer once and thought it filthy.

"Course I do," said Harbord, "though I think I'd rather have port."

"But it wasn't beer that Phillipps got tight on, was it?" asked Denis.

"No, the fool had some whisky in Windsor, and the dame found him staggering about the bathroom trying to disguise his breath with a tube of Kolynos. She reported him to Burrell, who asked where he got his drink, and the bloody ass said at Tap. Everybody knows that Tap beer wouldn't have hurt a flea. Result, no more beer for Eton College."

"I must say I think beer smells pretty foul," said Denis, after a pause.

"Don't be a prig," said Harbord. "Of course it's a cultivated taste."

"I say, what about turning," said Ockley. He had visions of a banana mess before absence. Denis backwatered skilfully. "Come on, we'll race: you give us the time, Ockley."

"Are you ready? One . . . two . . . The skiff bounded over the current, the rowlocks creaking under their jerks. To counteract Harbord's great sweeps, Denis plunged his blade in sharp short stabs. A wave foamed at the bow, and the boat zigzagged furiously across the river. Ockley laughed weakly in the stern, and at last called, "easy." Denis and Harbord leaned on their oars, and they floated down with the stream; past Athens, where the better swimmers bathed; past the entrance to Cuckoo Weir, a shady backwater, graded to all depths, where boys were able to walk before they could swim. Big drops of moisture plopped from the railway bridge as they drifted under. Denis listened in vain for the rumble and shudder of a train's approach. He loved trains and walked three miles on Sunday afternoons to see the West of England expresses pass. But no train was coming on the Windsor branch. Their blades fell into some sort of time as the school boat-house came in sight. Cox executed a magnificent sweep and shot them alongside the raft with the bow correctly facing upstream. They paid the boatmen and put on their coats. "Jolly good row," said Harbord, examining his blisters. "Of course, you're used to it, Bailey, if you live on the sea. Have you got a yacht?"

"Not exactly; but she sails pretty decently, and I'm having a centre-plate put in by next holidays."

"Sounds the goods," said Harbord.

"She's a nice little craft," said Denis. He might ask one of them to stay later, he thought.

They walked up through South Meadow. The grass was deep and full of buttercups and daisies. A piano sounded painfully in the music schools. Someone was sweating away at practising a piece.

"Coming to have a mess before absence?" said Ockley. Denis hesitated, and decided, "No, I'm going to look up Llewellyn, I think. I haven't seen him yet." He left them and dived down a tile-naved passage. Llewellyn was the drawing-master and a useful artist himself. He had theories about art and enforced them. But he interested boys in

their work, and, apart from his theories, he let them develop on their own lines, building on the best in their separate ways of seeing nature. Shadows had to be painted violet, and trees were never really green. Otherwise, boys could interpret as they wished. Denis looked forward to his drawing lessons more than any other hour at Eton, and Llewellyn was a friend far more than a master. He was not really like a master at all. He had never had a house of his own and he never went to Chambers, where the masters talked business every morning. Though his forefathers had come from Wales, he was perfectly straightforward. He treated boys as men and the boys liked him. They liked him rather more than the masters did.

Llewellyn was arranging sketches in a lumber room, which went by the name of studio. "Hullo, sir," said Denis.

"Ah!" Llewellyn dropped a canvas of a bearded yokel. "Glad you came in. Got some good news for you. Privately. Holiday prize. A very solid piece of composition. Congratulations."

"I say, really, sir?" Denis's eyes lit up. He had never imagined that his water-colour of Speenmouth Steps at low tide had a chance of winning the Holiday Sketch Prize. The sketch was slender, but the first wash had gone right, and he had left it. So often he tried to work on his sketches and spoilt the first effect. How pleased his mother would be. She was always urging him to paint more. Artists were well off at Eton, as they were allowed to submit one sketch, while the rest of the school sweated away during the holidays at Thackeray or Scott, and did a paper on the set book at the beginning of the half. Holiday tasks were intended to stimulate a taste for literature. But boys, who were fond of books, would probably read the set works in any case. The remainder skimmed through their holiday task in the train and, in future, shied at anything heavier than Edgar Wallace.

Llewellyn was delighted at Denis's success and insisted on him staying to tea in his garden. He very nearly made him

late for absence. As Denis dashed under the archway into school yard and plunged into the sea of blazers and coloured caps, the master, by the wall, called his name. A slight pause, and then again "Bailey?" Denis raised his cap and panted, "Here, sir," from the fringes of the crowd. Only just in time. Occasionally the unanswered names were read again when absence was over, and those, who arrived in time, escaped with a warning. Shirking absence altogether was as serious an offence as shirking Sunday chapel. Any number of Latin lines might result. London is barely half an hour by train from Eton, and less than an hour by car. So in the summer, absences were called at two-thirty and five or six, and they served their purpose.

Denis walked back to tea with Spencer-Mace, who came a little above him in the list. "I've got the most lovely new Mozart records at Dyson's," said Spencer-Mace. "I've been trying them with Holmes-Norton all the afternoon."

"We've been on the river," said Denis. "Harbord caught the most priceless crab."

"You paint a bit, don't you, Bailey? Come into my room before tea; I've got some rather sweet Japanese prints on approval."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about prints," said Denis.

"Oh, that doesn't matter; you'll love these. They're all soft, with heavenly pinks and blues. I say, I'm so glad you're messing with us this half."

"So am I. It was very decent of you to ask me."

"Because Harbord's really rather a philistine, don't you think, though, of course, I like him."

"I don't know," said Denis.

"Peter's a dear, and so is his mother, Lady Periton. You don't know her? Oh, she's quite charming. I think Peter's so attractive. M'dame doesn't agree. In fact, she was extraordinarily rude to me, when I asked her if she didn't think so. But she's got no taste, the poor old hag."

"Ockley's decent," agreed Denis. Spencer-Mace looked at him.

They found Ockley in his room hard at work on some lobster salad. Ockley's room had been commandeered for the mess as it was the largest of the four. When the iron bedstead was up against the wall, decently veiled by a curtain, there was plenty of room for the table and four chairs. An inkstained bureau, known as a "burry," a folding washstand and an ottoman, completed the standard furniture. In the ottoman were crumpled shirts, rowing zephyrs damp with sweat, and grey flannels; muddy stockings, fives shoes and old scug caps, the blue and black striped cap, which everyone without a colour wore, when in change. There were thick woollen sweaters, one or two golf balls, and, concealed at the bottom, a packet of Abdullas.

Ockley's room had six pictures; Wren's house group 1918, Wren's house group 1919, Lady Periton in court dress, Lord Periton in knickerbockers and Norfolk jacket, "Here they Come"—a highly coloured print, which showed bullet-like grouse hurtling towards their doom, and "Good Dawg," of the same series, in which a faithful retriever was about to deposit a pheasant at its master's feet.

The house groups at a casual glance were identical. Wren's arms were always crossed on his bony knees, his head held erect above the points of his stick-up collar, and alone in the group he looked the camera squarely in the lens. On each side of his boots were strewn the smallest boys in jackets and Eton collars. They sat Chinese fashion on their haunches, in attitudes of shy truculence or impudent youth. Watching over them sat the ten top boys in the house, their expressions twisted into brief dignity; and above them stood the rank and file of Wren's. There were spotty-faced boys and fat pimply boys and sallow lean boys. There were overgrown youths of sixteen and undergrown boys of seventeen or eighteen. Their shoulders rubbed and overlapped at every angle, and their mouths ill controlled inaudible petty jests and innuendos passed on the rest of the house.

On the grass before the house group was a table, on which were laid out the silver trophies, by which people judged whether or no the house was a good house. At the moment, Wręn's was not a good house, as there were few cups on the table. But underneath were printed the names with titles in full. It was rather an impressive house photo at the moment.

"Have some lobster," said Ockley, without looking up. "There's enough for everyone. You'd better be quick or Oliver will guzzle the lot."

"Harbord's at the bottom of the list, so he'll always be late in from absence," said Denis. Spencer-Mace undid a pot of Tiptree cherry and spread it on a layer of Ockley's butter. He was the richest of the four, but, somehow, his share of the food never turned up. He announced with an air that they were sending a special plum cake from Endleigh, and when it came, he divided it impressively into equal portions. But he disliked spending money for tea. What he liked was a plate of eggs and mashed potatoes by himself just before boy's dinner. He was always grumbling to the dame about the food at dinner.

For tea, boys were supplied with bread, butter, a pot of tea, and not quite enough milk for two cups each. They bought everything else themselves. During the war, rations had been reduced to a slice of potato bread and one pat of bright yellow margarine. The margarine smelt and tasted so strongly that they gave it to the boys' maids or threw it out of the window. Denis had thrown a pat of margarine on to Daddy Long Legs' topper one Sunday evening. But nothing had come of it. Eton was often hungry during the war; but remained greedy and highly critical of what it ate. And so the bright yellow margarine went out of the window.