

## CHAPTER V

The chapel bell was tolling. It clanged impatiently as if anxious to get on with the real business of Sunday morning. The echo of the bell could never quite die before a new clang picked it up and hurried it further towards the hour of eleven.

On the top passage of Wren's, Denis heard the bell and ran along to Ockley's room. Where the devil had he put his topper yesterday? Through Ockley's window the clanging came faster now and more confused. Single peals could scarcely be heard in the crescendo of din. It was the last minute before the bell ceased ringing and he suddenly saw his top-hat lying, where it had rolled, under a chair. Denis jumped down the stairs two or three at a time and raced across the street, brushing his hat on the sleeve of his arm. As he reached the top of the chapel steps the bell gave a few sharp peals and died away. The organ grumbled mightily. He shoved his way down the pew to his new place, and the marker ticked his name. The end boy in each pew had a small book with the names printed inside. He wrote the absentees' names on a slip, and during the service a boy walked gravely down the gangways, collected the slips and handed them to the master on duty, who checked them from his vantage point in the stalls. There was little use in shielding an absentee by not marking him out, as the master counted the boys in the pew and compared them with the printed list.

As the quick notes of the bell died away a group of boys had sprung to life in the ante chapel. The sixth form "ram" was about to make its entrance. In double file the twenty top boys in the school fell into slow step and advanced up the aisle. Ten of them were scholars and branched off to

the right to their places among the seventy members of College, who wore white surplices in chapel. The oppidan half of the ram forged onwards, followed by the choir. The captain of the oppidans came last in the ram. He wore a coloured waistcoat and a buttonhole, being an *ex-officio* member of Pop, the Eton society. The rest of sixth form wore stick-up collars and butterfly ties. The leader of the ram had only just got into sixth form and was nervous. He held his head high and fixed his eyes on the altar far up at the end of the aisle. He saw nothing at all clearly and unconsciously quickened his step. The school smiled as the gap widened between him and the rest of the ram, whose slow goose-step never faltered. When the leader turned off to the left, a good two yards separated him from the rest of oppidan sixth form. On Monday mornings, when the O.T.C. paraded, the ram consisted of two or three conscientious objectors or invalids, who stamped up the aisle in lonely splendour ; but normally it was most impressive and Americans came from London specially to see it.

College chapel choir, except for a few masters, was composed of professionals. There were professional men, who never seemed to grow older or to sing less loudly. There was Thunder Guts, whose bass solos in the anthems were so bass that it was hard to tell his higher from his lower notes. Even beaks smiled, when Thunder Guts was singing, though he sang very well. There were also professional boys in the choir, who were always changing as their voices cracked. They were usually fair-haired boys and they oiled and brushed back their hair like the school, seated round them. Sometimes they made friends among the school.

Before the frescoes were discovered on the walls of Eton chapel, there were high stalls of heavily carved wood, and in the stalls sat the masters, their friends, and old boys, and if there was any room, a few Americans. But there were few places to spare, and even old boys had to jingle half crowns before the verger in the ante-chapel to be sure of a seat.

Denis liked chapel. He had time to think and he could sing without anyone minding. Masters had been known to

walk down the gangway and tap a boy on the shoulder. But Denis seldom bawled. He sang out of tune, but quietly. During the sermon he wrote his diary with a fountain pen. In Lower Chapel he and another boy had once brought in a skin filled with lemonade and a length of rubber tubing. The skin had been hidden in his overcoat and the tubing fastened to the mouth and passed down the pew during the litany. The skin was dry long before the litany was half finished. Another time he had been playing tennis on Sunday afternoon with some friends near Slough and had not had time to get back to Wren's before chapel. He shoved the handle of his racket down one trouser leg and buttoned his waistcoat over the head. Kneeling down proved too painful, and so two boys covered him while he took out the racket and laid it under the pew. Afterwards he buttoned it up again without being caught.

There were a good many jokes, which turned up regularly in chapel. Denis realised they were due for one of them when the second hymn was read out. No. 260. "Hark my soul, it is the Lord." When they reached the second verse he looked at Robin. But Robin held his hymn-book before him and sang steadily as if the headmaster's eye was upon him.

*Can a mother's tender care  
Cease towards the child she bare?*

Surely Robin would turn to him and smile. Denis and a few others sang with special emphasis "The child *she* bear"; but Robin sang on quietly. Of course it wasn't much of a joke, but they had always laughed at it.

After the service he looked for Robin. The ante chapel was full of boys diving and reaching for their hats. Toppers were piled on high shelves or strewn about on the stone floor one on the other. The ante chapel was like the hall of a London house at the end of a dance in summer. Denis kicked a hat or two out of his way and came upon the initials D. A. B. in gilt letters. He grabbed his hat and

pushed his way down the steps. Robin must have gone on.

Ockley joined him in the street. "I can't say I was surprised, were you?"

"What do you mean?" said Denis.

"About Manley. I suppose Owen Jones voted against him."

"Good lord, have they had the election? I never knew. So Robin's in the library." Ockley looked at him. "They had it after breakfast," he said.

"I see," said Denis, "I might have guessed."

When the debate were called into the library at half-past twelve, Robin was seated in an armchair by the further bookcase. He received his congratulations with a smile. "I am glad," said Denis; "good old Robin."

"I never thought I had a chance, I must confess."

Private business was dull and did not last long. "Coming for a walk?" said Ockley, as they crowded out of the library.

"No; I've got some letters to write. This afternoon, if you like." Denis went upstairs to his room. He drew up his chair to the table and sat down. He took out a letter from his mother and unfolded it. He had meant to answer it before.

"My dear Denis," it began. "I trust you are well installed again by now. The weather here has been warm and sunny and we had our first asparagus last night. A strange vessel has just entered the river and anchored near Spider Creek." Denis looked up from the letter. The sun reflected from a passing car had caught his eye. The chestnuts across the way were beginning to blossom. A couple of lower boys were throwing a cricket ball against the building opposite and catching it on the rebound. He was really very glad Robin had got into the library. It was splendid. He wasn't a bit jealous, and if Harbord or anyone started running down Robin or setting the lower boys against him, he would damned well give them a piece of his mind. It would be awkward, of course, at times with Robin in the

library ; but he would do his best not to cause him embarrassment in the house. He felt wonderfully passive. There was a sort of weakness in the pit of his stomach. One of the lower boys in the street caught the cricket ball and put it in his pocket, and they both went away toward the playing fields. Denis read further in his mother's letter.

“ Please remember me to Miss Fuller and, of course, to Mr. Wren. I suppose you are still ‘messaging’ with Robin. Write and tell me all your news and who are your masters this ‘half,’ and how you are doing at cricket. I hope to finish your socks by to-morrow and will post them to you as soon as possible. Maureen called yesterday with some wonderful bluebells she had got in Roach's Wood. She tells me she is going to stay shortly with some friends near Windsor. No time for more now as I have to do the shopping.

“ Your affect. mother,

“ A. M. B.”

“ P.S.—You might have sent us a line to say you reached Eton safely. Work hard and play hard. H. E. B.”

Not much of a letter, thought Denis. Anyone might have written it. And it didn't tell him very much either, except about Maureen coming to stay near Windsor ; why couldn't she have told him herself? He took up his pen and started to write. He usually wrote home on Sundays, and with the regularity of the event he had evolved a certain formula of his own. He wrote :

“ DEAR MUM,—Thank you for your nice letter. I have had no time to write before. You will be glad to hear that I won the Holiday Sketch Prize. Llewellyn is very pleased with that sketch I did of Speenmouth Steps. M'dame is quite well. I am up to Hunter for classics again, Raven for history, Perrier for French, Wilson for science and Ellison for maths. Do you think you could send me some eggs each week as I am messaging with

Ockley, Harbord, and Spencer-Mace, and they get game, butter, and lots of things sent from home. A dozen would do, though there are four of us. Yesterday I went on the river with Ockley and Harbord as there was no game, and was nearly run down by a house four. The headmaster preached in chapel this morning on 'He that putteth his hand to the plough and looks back.' No time for more now, as the dinner gong has just gone.

"Your loving son,  
"DENIS,"

Depis read through his letter and tore it off the block. It was of white slippery paper with the Eton arms engraved in pale blue on the top. He took up his pen again and wrote:

"DEAR MAUREEN,—I said I would write to you and I have kept my promise. It's an awful bore being back again, and I wish I was at Speenmouth in the good old *Cormorant*. Have you done any more sailing? I'm up to that swine Daddy Long Legs again, but if he tries pinching me this half, I'm going to boot his — [Denis paused for a literary word] shins for him. Mother tells me you are coming to stay near Windsor. You might have let me know. You must come over to Eton and have tea in our room. I mess with Ockley, Harbord, and rather an ass called Spencer-Mace. Tell me when you are coming and we'll have a good tea for you. Robin is in the library, so I shan't see much of him now. I like him just as much, if not better. I hear you gave mother some bluebells the other day. Whatever for? Well, you can't say I haven't written to you now, anyway. Ockley and I and Harbord are going to have a colossal rag up the river soon. Its a *secret*; don't tell mother, for heavens sake.

"Yours ever,  
"DENIS."

"By the way, Ockley's father is the Earl of Periton, in case you want to know."

The gong had not yet sounded, so he read through his letter to Maureen, underlined the words "if not better," and stuck it up. For a moment he thought of adding the news about Robin to his mother's letter; but he decided against it. He opened the door and went out into the passage. Some lower boys were leaning against the wall. They hurried away. "I say, Shalfont," Denis called after them. "Take these letters down and put them in the box, will you?"

"All right, Bailey." The boy grinned and ran off down the stairs.

Evening chapel was over by six, though boys in Lower Chapel got out rather earlier. Denis found groups of lower boys nudged round the gas rings and standing about by the notice board. They straightened themselves and stared at old notices or busied themselves with their fagmasters' tea, as he passed. A few uppers joined them.

Ockley came into his room. He threw his hat in the corner. "Shapeleigh has left," he said, and sat down to his tea.

"Shapeleigh? Why?" said Denis.

"You'll know soon enough. No, don't put it on my plate, idiot. Stick it over there." The fag put down the teapot and withdrew. Harbord rushed into the room. "You've heard, I suppose?"

"Yes; he's left," said Ockley. Spencer-Mace came in. "Who sneaked?" he said.

"Nobody, fool," said Harbord. "Dirty little brute wrote home to his people."

"I wonder what he said. I'd give anything to know," said Spencer-Mace.

"This is what he said, if you really want to know. 'Dear Poppa, I thought this house was to be a house of prayer, but actually it's a den of thieves; and how. Your virtuous son, Charles.' And pass the cake, thanks very much."

"Is his name Charles?" said Denis, still mystified.

"Bailey, you make me tired; but are you sure he has left, Peter?" said Harbord.

"Heard m'tutor tell m'dame that he was to be let off chapel. His people were having tea with Wren."

"I wonder if he told Wren who it was," said Spencer-Mace.

"We shall soon see," said Ockley. "But if Featherstone packs up his trunk within the next twenty-four hours, I shouldn't be surprised. He's a bloody fool."

"Why Featherstone? Are you sure?"

"No; but everyone doesn't blurt out all over the house what they're going to do."

"I think he's a swine," said Denis; he cut himself a piece of cake.

"What did he tell you?" said Spencer-Mace.

"For God's sake don't spread this. It's nothing to do with me what Featherstone does in his spare time."

"Go on, Peter."

"Do you remember how many new boys there were last winter?"

"Five or six."

"Well, the first night of the half he went into every one of their rooms after lights."

"What luck?" said Harbord. Ockley laughed. "He didn't tell me. He was only boasting he was going to do the same this half."

"Shows what a bloody ass he is."

"But the point is," continued Ockley, more serious now, "that Featherstone obviously started last winter's row."

"Do you think someone sneaked then?" said Spencer-Mace.

"And Featherstone was damned lucky not to be sacked. Probably the new kid didn't know who he was," added Ockley.

"I'd be in too much of a funk to sneak," said Denis.

"It's pretty mean," said Ockley.

"I bet m'tutor knows who it is," said Harbord. He shoved his hands in his pockets and tilted back his chair. "Featherstones' for it, sure thing."

"And nobody will be sorry," said Denis.



"Oh, he's not so bad," said Ockley. "Feathers's a decent enough fellow when you get to know him."

"I rather like him," said Spencer-Mace, who had waited to hear what Ockley would say.

"But he's a fool to meddle with new boys, and I told him so. It's nothing to do with me what chaps do ; but I rather draw the line at new kids."

"I'm all for their making up their minds for themselves," said Harbord.

"But we can't all have your attraction, can we, Oliver ?"

"Oh can it, Peter. I'm going out." Harbord stretched himself and reached for his hat.

"I say, Ockley, would you mind if I had someone to tea ?" said Denis.

"Only too glad ; ask the rest."

"He, she, or it ?" said Harbord.

"She ; a girl, who lives near us at home. She's quite decent."

"Bring her along. Oh boy, I haven't seen a girl for three days, unless you count the hag."

"Thanks awfully ; then I'll ask her." Denis was a little afraid they might think Maureen countryfied. He prayed she would wear her smartest things and not that sailory looking suit and blue tam o'shanter. She looked ripping in it, of course ; but he was sure Ockley's sister did not wear a tam o'shanter in her sports Lagonda. As a matter of fact, she wore a blue beret.

"Tell me when she's coming," said Ockley, "and I'll get some lobster mayonaise. I suppose she eats lobster."

"And I'll ask them to send a chocolate cake from Endleigh," said Spencer-Mace. "I'll get something," said Harbord. The tea party would be rather fun, thought Denis.

The door opened suddenly. "Hullo, chaps, how's the world ?" said Featherstone. He was tall, with long oiled hair and a rather broad mouth.

"Fair," said Ockley. "How are you finding it ?"

"Good," said Featherstone. "Come outside a moment ; I've something to tell you."

At supper that night Denis learnt that Shapeleigh had not left after all. Wren had apparently talked his people round and had been very decent about it. A few curious glances were thrown in Featherstone's direction. He sat between Ockley and Warburton. He was eating heartily and telling some pretty good stories.