

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Wren came in from early school. He took up a pile of letters from the hall table and ran his eye through them. There were no obvious bookmakers' circulars or packages of indecent postcards with a French postmark. He threw the letters on the slab by the boys' dining-room and went back to his breakfast.

"There's one for you, Bailey," said Spencer-Mace. He was standing by the slab, examining the writing and postmark of his friends' letters.

"Oh, is there? Thanks." Denis put the envelope in his breast pocket. When the remains of his porridge lumps had been taken away, he opened the letter. It ran :

"DEAR DENIS,—Thanks for writing. I haven't done any sailing since you left. The *Cormorant* has been scrubbed and your father has been varnishing it. I couldn't let you know before. I was coming to stay, as I didn't know if mother would let me go. Couldn't you come over to tea with us one Sunday, mother says, as I don't suppose I shall be allowed to have tea in your room. I am very interested to hear about your *secret*. I am sure it is very important, or you would tell me. I had a letter from Joan, who says Geneva is quite gay in the summer with lots of tennis, bathing, and dancing. She has made friends with a Swedish boy called Karl Swensen or something like that. She may ask him to stay in the hols. Now I must stop, as the luncheon gong has just gone. Flox sends his love.

"Yours,

"MAUREEN."

Flox was Maureen's fox terrier and Joan was Denis's sister. She was nearly eighteen and had been to a mixed school in Geneva for the last twelve months.

Denis stuffed the envelope in his trouser pocket and started on a haddock. Maureen didn't say much, and what damned rot about not being able to come to tea. She would come if she wanted to ; and she didn't say anything about wanting to meet his new friends. Perhaps she was shy of Ockley. He was a fool to have added the postscript about the Earl of Periton. He hoped she didn't think him a snob. But she would have felt a pretty good fool, if she hadn't known till afterwards she was having tea with the son of an earl, and she would have been furious with him for not telling her. Anyhow, girls could never enter into the spirit of things like other chaps, though he had always thought of Maureen as a bit different from other girls. It only showed. He finished his haddock and Ockley said :

"Well, how's your lady friend?" Denis blushed. "Sorry, but I couldn't help seeing the envelope. It's just how my sister used to write before she came out."

"She says she won't be allowed to come to tea," said Denis.

"Good Lord, what's she afraid of? Of course, Spencer-Mace will ask about corsets, but nobody listens to him. And Oliver will probably fall in love with her and send her his photograph. Otherwise, I can't see anything to be alarmed at."

"I'm going to write and tell her not to be a bloody fool," said Denis. "I'll ask her for Saturday week. There's cricket, but I don't suppose I shall have a game. Will that suit you?"

"Fine."

"I think you'll like her," if only she doesn't wear the blue tam-o'-shanter, thought Denis.

A few days later he found a pale violet envelope on the dining-room slab. Maureen had accepted. There were certain conditions and restrictions, but she was coming, and seemed glad to be coming. Denis spent several chapels and

French hours in forming pictures of her arrival, and the tea party in the house. When Saturday came, he had a clear picture in his mind, and he had ready a long list of things he wanted to say, and would say, when Maureen arrived.

The cousins left her at the door of Wren's. They seemed glad that Denis was there to meet her and at the same time a little anxious of leaving her in his company. "We'll call for you in an hour, Maureen," said the feminine cousin, and went away with her husband to look at the Eton War Memorial.

Denis took Maureen's hand and led her down a dark, stone-flagged passage. "Up here, Maureen; go on," he pushed her ahead of him. She went slowly up the staircase, looking backward over her shoulder. Denis saw with relief that she was wearing a rather nice low-brimmed hat and a brown coat and skirt that were surely new. She had a parcel in her hand. She was shy, but looked ripping. Boys stared after her when she had passed. Lower boys shrank back into shadows, but a few uppers stood their ground on the lower passage and appraised her frankly. Featherstone, leaning against the notice board with his hands in his pockets, looked her in the eyes and turned away with a spicy comment, when she had gone.

"No, another flight," said Denis. "Just along here. It's Ockley's room. You'll like Ockley, and the others are quite decent." He opened the door and pushed her forward. "Here she is," he said, and stood in the doorway. Ockley was doling out lobster mayonnaise in equal proportions. Spencer-Mace, his hair beautifully oiled, leaned against the mantelpiece. "This is Ockley, Maureen. Spencer-Mace." She stretched out a bewildered hand; "and that's Harbord over there." Harbord upset half the milk jug as he came forward, but remembered in time to murmur, "Pleased to meet yer," then busied himself with the milk. Denis stood in the doorway.

"Do sit down, Miss Roxburgh," said Ockley. "Let me take your coat." He hung it with slow motion gravity on the door peg. "I hope you can eat lobster?"

"Rather. It's one of my favourite things." Maureen looked round her and slowly took in the extent of the feast, prepared in her honour. And her cousins dined at half-past seven. "I say, that's for you, Denis, while I remember. It's only some toffee I made."

"How ripping of you. Toffee, hurrah. May I open it now?" He tore the box open and spread it on the table. Harbord looked at the toffee and Spencer-Mace became interested. Maureen gazed a trifle wistfully at her handiwork. It was the third of three efforts, the first two having burnt.

"How very clever of you to make toffee," said Spencer-Mace. "I used to make cocoanut-ice at Endleigh. Can you do French omelettes?"

"I don't think I've ever tried."

"It's perfectly simple. The great thing is not to beat up the eggs too much, and add just the tiniest drop of water, and shake the frying pan, *and* not cook them too long. You see a French omelette must be wet."

"It sounds very complicated."

"We all know Spencer-Mace's omelettes. They're like leather, Miss Roxburgh, only don't taste as good." Spencer-Mace glared at Ockley and looked across at Maureen. She had started on a lobster claw, which engaged her whole attention.

"Jolly decent of you to bring us the toffee," said Harbord. "The food at Wren's is muck."

"From what I've seen, I think you're all frightfully spoilt. I've never had such a tea."

"We don't get much of this from m'tutor," said Denis. "Only bread and butter and tea. The rest we have to get ourselves."

"Yes, of course," said Maureen. She coughed violently. A piece of lobster had gone the wrong way.

"What do you think of the new fashions?" said Spencer-Mace. "I think they're rather chic." Maureen had thought very little about them. The ebb and flow of the Speenmouth tide had a negligible effect on fashions. "I like short

frocks, as I can move quicker at tennis, of course. I don't know about the evening."

"Yes, but what do you think of the lower waist line?"

"Well, you've got to have the right figure," said Maureen. "It all depends." She looked at Denis, who was frowning and rolling bread pellets on the table cloth.

"Have some more tea, Miss Roxburgh," said Ockley. "And you must have some of Spencer-Mace's extra special cake, made at Endleigh for the occasion." Harbord tittered.

"It looks jolly good," said Maureen, "but I don't know if I could."

"Oh come on, Maureen, you've eaten nothing. Try a little." Denis had hardly spoken. He had eaten rapidly, glancing furiously at Spencer-Mace, who, he considered, was letting down the mess, Wren's, and Eton in her eyes, and more covertly at Maureen to see what she thought of his friends. Ockley ate slowly, but with purpose, as if a long journey lay ahead of him. There was a distended benevolence about his expression. Harbord munched away in the corner, his eyes lifting from lobster to Maureen and from Maureen to chocolate cake.

Maureen gave up the idea of dinner that night and took a slice of chocolate cake. "Very good," she said, between mouthfuls. The cake went the round. All four surpassed themselves to set her a good example. Ockley was pouring out some more tea, when a scuffle outside the door ended in a red face being propelled into the room. Big eyes popped out of the face, "Sorry, I didn't know." The face withdrew as suddenly. A minute later another head looked in and withdrew as if a corpse lay within. Maureen smiled. "They seem to be rather frightened of something. Is it me?"

"They're jealous of us," said Ockley.

"That's it," said Denis. No more faces appeared, the rumour having gone round that Ockley had someone to tea. Barging in on other boys' people was very bad form. Denis had once hid himself in the bathroom, when Robin Manley's mother and father came up the stairs and stayed there till Robin hauled him out to go and talk to them.

There was a double knock on the door. "Come in," called Ockley, and the dame's genial face looked in.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ockley. I didn't know you were having a tea party," though Denis had told her of Maureen's visit. She stood, waiting to be introduced and radiating a homely charm, that would have induced any parent to put her son down for Wren's.

"And what do you think of tea in a boy's room, Miss Roxburgh? I don't suppose you've eaten a meal like this before."

"No, indeed I haven't," said Maureen. "I shall never be able to eat anything more, I feel." Miss Fuller laughed a contented laugh. "And how do you think our Denis looks? Not exactly starved, does he?" She poked Denis playfully in the ribs.

"Jolly well, I think. Do they all have such good teas?"

"Well, Lord Ockley is very lucky, aren't you, Peter? As his charming mother sends him things from home, and so is our little Spencer-Mace here." Spencer-Mace glared at her. "So you live near Denis, do you? It's a lovely part of the country, though I've never been there myself. You must come and pay us another visit, Miss Roxburgh, now you know the way. Get Mrs. Bailey to bring you. We're old friends, Denis's mother and me, aren't we, Denis?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Denis.

"That's right," said Miss Fuller. She stood a moment in the doorway and withdrew with a nod of approval to all but Harbord, to whom she gave an admonitory frown. She had caught him hiding a Cascara behind his tongue last night, and had not yet forgiven him.

Denis opened the door to see if she had really gone. He shut it behind him. "Bloody old hag."

"She's only showing off," said Ockley.

"She's not such an ogre as you made out, Denis. I think she's rather a sweet old thing."

"You wouldn't really, if you knew her better, Miss Roxburgh," said Harbord. "She made me swallow a double

dose last night, because she wouldn't believe my word." He stopped, fearing he had gone a bit far for ladies.

"Did she, really?" said Maureen, without much idea of what a double dose might amount to. "Anyhow, it was very nice of her to ask me again."

"She says that to everyone," said Spencer-Mace.

"I wish you would, Miss Roxburgh," said Harbord. "I'm sure Bailey, I mean Denis, will ask you."

"Of course, you must come again, Maureen, whenever you stay near here." He looked at his watch. "I suppose your cousins will be here by now." He wanted to get her alone for a moment and tell her all the things he had thought out in chapel and French hours.

"Yes, I really ought to be going. It's been awfully nice of you all to have me—and I won't forget about the omelettes." She smiled at Spencer-Mace.

"Yes, a drop of water, and don't whip them up," said Spencer-Mace. Ockley helped her on with her coat. "We'll all come down and see you off," said Harbord. "What the devil . . ." He looked at Peter. Someone had kicked him smartly on the shins. "Good-bye then, Miss Roxburgh." Maureen shook hands all round and followed Denis into the passage.

"Perhaps you'd like to see my room?" Denis piloted her along the top passage. A boy in flannels, with pads and cricket bat under his arm, ran out of a cul-de-sac and almost knocked her down. "I'm awfully sorry." He pulled off his cap and shuffled off again.

"What a nice room," said Maureen.

"Not bad. How did you like tea?"

"I enjoyed it tremendously. Peter Ockley is very nice."

"He's a decent fellow."

"And Harbord's a dear old thing."

"He's not too bad."

"Spencer-Mace is a bit of a freak, isn't he? More like a girl than a boy."

"He's a bloody ass."

"It's so funny you all calling each other Ockley and

Harbord and Spencer-Mace. Don't you ever call each other by your Christian names ? ”

“ Sometimes. It depends. ”

“ Are you going to ask any of them to stay next holidays ? ”

“ Dunno. Dunno if they'd come. I say, I think we ought to be going down. ” He shut the door of his room and led her off along the passage. He was trying furiously to think.

“ It would be rather fun. For the yacht club dance. I'm so sick of the same old Barford crew. ”

“ Would it ? If you're so keen about it, why don't you ask them yourself ? ”

“ Don't be so silly. ”

“ No, I mean it, why don't you ? ”

“ What's the matter, Denis ? Aren't you glad I came ? ”

“ Of course I am ; only you seem to like my friends more than me. ” He kicked the banisters of the staircase. There were so many things he wanted to say, but they were all lost, and other stupid things came forward in their place.

They reached the gloom of Wren's ground-floor passage and halted. “ Oh, Denis, you've never told me what your great secret is ? ”

“ Secret ? What secret ? Oh, that. ”

“ Do tell me. ”

“ It's nothing really. I'll tell you one day. ”

“ Why not now ? ”

“ It wouldn't interest you ; besides there are your cousins over there waiting patiently. They must have had a cheerful time. ”

Two weary looking figures crossed the street towards them. They shook hands with Denis and thanked him without much conviction for giving Maureen tea. Then they bundled her into the car. Denis stood on the pavement and watched till the car trembled into movement. Maureen sat with her cousins in the back. The car moved off, the chauffeur sounded the horn and they vanished past the chapel wall,

Denis went indoors and climbed the stairs one at a time. He climbed the second flight more slowly. Lobster mayonnaise, chocolate cake, cherry jam, all had been in vain. What a senseless entertainment, and he had thought of nothing else for a whole week. Something must have gone wrong. It was the hag's fault for butting in. Curse the hag. Curse and blast her. He entered Ockley's room; a little guiltily. Harbord said, "Damned nice girl, I congratulate you, Bailey."

"A very successful tea-party, I think," said Ockley, leaning back in his chair.

"If only you wouldn't try and make a fool of me in front of girls," said Spencer-Mace.

"No need, my dear."

"It's you that make a bloody fool of yourself, showing off your stupid little knowledge about clothes," said Harbord. "If she hadn't been a damned good sort, she'd have told you what she thought of you. A hopeless little bum."

"Keep your hair on," said Spencer-Mace. "You needn't get so excited just because she doesn't love you." He prepared to fly the moment Harbord lost his temper.

"You dirty little squit. What's it got to do with you, who she likes? She's a damned nice girl."

"All right, I never said she wasn't. I'm sure she's charming."

"I don't care what you think," said Denis, eager to vent his hopeless rage on someone. "She told me just now she thought you were more like a girl than a boy."

"Good for her," said Harbord. "So you are." Ockley laughed.

"Now, Bailey, don't *you* get excited. You weren't such a brilliant success at tea as you might have been." Spencer-Mace glanced at the door. "By God, I'll boot your bottom for you," said Denis.

"Come on, let's mob him," shouted Harbord. But Spencer-Mace was too quick for them. He leaped for the door and scuttled down the passage, glancing over his

shoulder. Harbord tripped heavily over the ottoman, and by the time they had reached his room, a wooden chair had been firmly jammed beneath the door handle.

Denis and Harbord stood outside in the passage. Suddenly, from two holes in the door, a stream of cold water fell on their heads. The holes were for extra ventilation, said the dame ; to see if they were reading by candle after lights, said the boys.

Denis and Harbord wiped the water from their hair and retreated a few yards. There was silence in Spencer-Mace's room. Spencer-Mace was just wondering whether he had not better apologise and make peace, when a terrific allied attack was launched against his defences. The heavy door creaked and groaned but the chair wedged it firm. The pair retreated, and while a group of lower boys watched the fun, hurled themselves again at the door. The brass door-handle on the other side flew off with a snap, the chair collapsed and Denis and Harbord arrived in a heap on the floor. "Get his arms," said Harbord ; the victim writhed, eel-like, in their grip. "I've got him," said Denis, "Give him hell." Harbord seized a silver knobbed malacca stick, of which Spencer-Mace was very proud, and gave him hell.

"Ow. Damn you. Shut up. Bullies, brutes, two to one. Help," he screamed. Harbord handed the stick to Denis. "Go on ; your turn." Denis was just adding his quota of whacks, when he heard a tired, supercilious voice behind him. "Whatever do you think you are you doing, you three ?"

They released Spencer-Mace and turned round. Freeman, the captain of the house, was standing in the door. "I don't know what this is all about, but I think you'd better all three come to the library after prayers." Freeman strolled away with his hands in his pockets. The three boys looked at each other.

"Now you've gone and done it, you pair of geniuses, and I shall tell Freeman exactly whose fault it was," said Spencer-Mace.

"I'm sure you will," said Harbord. "But he can't tan you, Bailey. You're in the debate."

"I don't know; if he asks m'tutor, he can and probably will. He hates me. It was rotten luck Freeman being in the house at this time of the day."

They left Spencer-Mace and went back to Ockley's room, talking loudly on the way. A few lower boys grinned at them. The prospect of one of the debate being tanned was most encouraging.

Ockley had just finished the chocolate cake. "Hard luck," he said, when he heard the news. "But Freeman's been very out of form lately, so I heard one of the lower boys say. I should pad all the same."

"No, I'm damned if I will," said Denis. He could not bear the indignity of being caught with a sweater inside his trousers and Robin looking on.

"I shall, anyhow," said Harbord.

"Come along on the way up and tell me what you get." Though seldom beaten himself, Ockley's interest in tannings was highly technical.

Supper that evening was a cold-blooded business. Denis and Harbord talked ceaselessly without listening to what they were saying. Spencer-Mace, who had drifted into a place lower down the table, was apeing the hero with some of the smaller boys. They took a lot of cold scraggy mutton and left it on their plates. Denis speared great slabs of beetroot, which he normally hated, and drank a good deal of water. Wren made things worse by arriving ten minutes late for prayers. Finally the house trooped upstairs, and the three boys, who had hung about in the dining-room passage, knocked on the library door.

Freeman was standing with his back to the fireplace. Taunton was drawing patterns on the library blotter. Manley and the others sprawled in decrepit wicker arm-chairs, a dutifully bored expression on their faces.

The captain of the house began his harangue. He decided the punishment first, but he had a strong sense of fair play and liked to talk a little before putting it into practice.

"When you get to a certain position in the house," he said, "you are expected to set some kind of an example to the younger boys. As far as I can see, you three are merely a laughing stock. I don't know who was to blame in the first instance."

"It wasn't my fault," said Spencer-Mace; "they attacked me."

"Probably all three. In any case I am going to beat you all." He paused for effect, and catching Denis's unvoiced protest, "Yes, I know you are in the debating society, Bailey. But you should learn to behave in a manner worthy of the debate. I do not consider it fair in this case that you should escape with a fine, while the others are beaten. Have you anything to say?" He seemed very tired of the whole business and scarcely expected an answer. He picked up some long, whippy canes and bent back their ends on the palm of his hand.

"They were bullying me," said Spencer-Mace. Harbord gave him a pitying look. He and Denis stood slightly apart. Denis stared at his feet. He wasn't going to say anything before Robin.

"I don't care," said Freeman. "I can't go into all that now. It was in your room, anyhow."

"But I swear . . ." Freeman held up his hand. He put on his tired, supercilious voice. "Bailey and Spencer-Mace, will you be so good as to go outside and wait till I call you? Thank you. Harbord, I think you'd better bend over there." He pointed to a wooden chair at the end of the library. Harbord knelt down and gripped the back of the chair.

"Tighter, if you please," said Freeman. He stepped back a couple of paces. The dutiful boredom faded from the library's faces. They sat upright in their armchairs and a look of professional criticism took its place. A muffled whack. The figure on the wooden chair shook slightly. Another whack, which sounded even stranger. Freeman went up to the chair. "Are you padded, Harbord?" He answered his question by a touch. "Take it out," he said, in a dreadfully calm voice. A couple of woollen vests were produced.

"Now tighter, please. That will do." A crisp echoing whack this time. Again and again. Harbord grunted heavily and shifted ten degrees. To no avail. The curling end of the cane followed him round with a final flip on the soft fleshy part of the right thigh. Freeman was a useful fives player and had a very pretty wrist. Despite rumours to the contrary, he was in fine form this evening and landed every cut on the same line. Like the peels of the chapel bell, the pain had never time to die away before a fresh cut renewed it. After the seventh stroke Harbord half got up. "Bend over," said Freeman. He took a short-run and gave him a final cut low down across the legs. "Now you can go." He was almost out of breath.

Spencer-Mace was called in and given four up. There was some trouble about arranging him to satisfaction on the chair, as at first he sagged awkwardly in the fundamental spot, then shot himself obligingly towards Freeman at such an angle that the tender part of the thighs was nicely covered. He creaked like a ship in travail and drew in his breath sharply after each stroke; but he got off lightly compared with Harbord.

"Any padding, Bailey?" asked Freeman sarcastically, as Denis took his place on the chair.

"No." Denis gripped the chair as if he were at the Windsor dentist's, and knelt waiting. He waited for two blind seconds. Then the cut. He got six up and they hurt like hell. But he made no sound and hurried from the library when it was over.

Freeman called him back. "And remember, Bailey, that the members of the debate have a certain example to set. Thank you." Denis closed the library door behind him. "Bloody swine," he muttered, and stumbled upstairs. Peeping heads questioned him as he passed their doors. "Six up, damned hard," he whispered. The dame, passing on her evening rounds, looked at him with interest. Wren, emerging from a dark corner, avoided his eyes. "Oh, I'm coming round to see you, Denis, a little later."

Inside his room Denis cursed everyone from Maureen

to Freeman, not excluding the dame. He then felt better and examined his wounds. Six hefty weals, crossed on one another, red and already swollen like the mountain ridges on Raven's bas relief map. Red, blue, yellow, brown, they would last through their various stages for a good fortnight. He would soon be rather proud of his marks, and perhaps show them in the bath and forget about their pain. But the picture of Robin, reposing judiciously in the library armchair, would not fade. Why need Robin have been there?

There was a tap on the door, and Wren's long nose was poked in. "Ah, er, good evening Denis."

"Good evening, sir," said Denis, hitching up his trousers into a conversational position. Wren looked more than usually ill at ease. He hummed to himself and inspected Denis's pictures with microscopic attention. He picked up a glass paper-weight and held it up to the light. Denis stood expectantly, holding up his trousers with one hand.

"Ah, yes, er, that's a good picture of your mother up there," said Wren.

"Yes, sir, it's not too bad."

"Yes, er, er, ah by the way, Denis, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yes, sir?" He felt really rather sorry for his tutor and wished he could help him out with the business.

"Ah yes, I'm rather afraid you saw Freeman this evening? Yes, I thought so; but what I wanted to say, Denis, you see one must grow up. One lives and learns, and if one doesn't learn, life can be very, er, painful at times." He smiled at his joke and went on quickly. "It's nothing to do with me what you do among yourselves. I never interfere in the house unless I can help it, but in this case the captain of the house came to me and asked . . . well Denis, I'm sure you understand, and talking about pictures, what about a shot at Windsor Bridge from the cobbler one evening? I've discovered some new paper for water-colour, that carries the wettest wash. We might try next week, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir, I'd like to very much," said Denis.

"Good, good, and don't forget, we live and learn," and

before the theme could blossom further, Mr. Wren had gone. Denis stood thinking for a moment. Then he let down his trousers and twisted his neck. The red smears were already tinged with blue, as if the paint had run. Good old Wren, thought Denis. He rubbed some cold cream gently on the weals and got into bed. When the boy's maid came next morning, he was lying asleep on his stomach.