

CHAPTER IX

"I'm bored with this half," said Oliver. He took a pull from a tankard of cider. Denis and Peter were munching bridge rolls.

"When's Lord's?" said Peter.

"Not till July the eleventh. More than four bloody weeks."

"They ought to arrange something for us between the Fourth, and Lord's. I call it most unenterprising on the part of the head usher."

• "If I get another order card like my last from Hunter, I shall be complained of," said Denis. In despair, Mr. Hunter had written "nineteen out of twenty-two. Makes not the slightest effort." Wren had snorted at the card. "Better than that, eh, Bailey, or we shall have to consider a complaint." Denis had never been complained of to the headmaster and he saw the impossibility of explaining away a birching to his father. It was quite an honour to be tanned; but swiping in the eyes of the world was something of a disgrace.

"M'tutor will never complain of you," said Peter. "Ask him about his latest water-colour theory and he will forget all about it."

"I tried that last time," said Denis, "and he said he hadn't got one. He was just like Raven when some ass goes too far and puts his back up."

"Do you remember when Burrell caught Featherstone out of bounds and told him to report himself to m'tutor and Wren remarked 'Good. Good. Keep it up next week,' and went on signing order cards?"

"I don't believe m'tutor is nearly as vague as he makes out," said Denis.

"I vote we do it next week," said Oliver. "Thursday would be a good day."

"Do what?"

"Devil's Island, of course. Write to your sister, Peter, and ask her to be just over Windsor Bridge by six o'clock. Down that turning to the right at the back of the theatre. We'll take caps and ties in our pockets."

"Might as well change completely while we are about it," said Peter.

"Yes, but how? All our suits are at the tailor's."

"Easy. I'll get my sister to bring down three old suits of mine. We can change in the car."

"I hope the devil we're not caught," said Denis. "It will be the last straw for me."

Oliver laughed. "Don't be a funk. Besides, it's safe. Of course, you needn't come if you don't want to."

"I'm coming all right. I hope you've got a suit to fit me, Peter."

"Expect so. I can't promise you the latest fashions. One of you will have to wear a grey check."

"That's me," said Oliver. "All the best crooks wear checks."

"That's settled," said Peter. "Mr. Hendren, three more bridge rolls and some cider, please. I'll write to my sister to-night."

"Why shouldn't we all stay for dinner?" said Oliver.

"M'dame would spot us at supper," said Denis.

"That's true. Never mind. I've an idea. I told you I'd thought of a new way into m'tutors. Let's go to Devil's Island at night instead."

"Too much of a risk," said Peter.

"Not my way, Peter. It isn't really. Getting out is easy enough. The moment prayers are over, we slip into pupil room and wait till the house has gone to bed. If m'tutor comes along we can pretend to be looking for a book."

"Or hide in the rears," said Denis.

"Then we get out between the bars of pupil room window," said Oliver.

"But don't forget the night hag locks up pupil room when she arrives at ten o'clock," said Peter.

"I know, the night hag's a bore. And she sits in the library when she's not padding round the passages in search of sin. We can't climb in there either. That's where my fire escape comes in."

"I haven't got to climb up that bloody fire escape, have I, Oliver?"

"I'm afraid so. It's easy; sure. Before supper I'll fasten the rope under my curtain, so that it can't be seen from inside."

"And either m'dame or m'tutor will come round and find we're not in our rooms, if we go out directly after supper. You're a genius, Oliver."

"Damn, I'd forgotten that."

"We'll have to wait till they've been round," said Denis.

"Yes, and then you can all creep along to my room and down the rope we go. It's perfectly simple. There are pegs for your feet and the rope can't be seen from the street, as my window is in an angle. We land in the drive."

"By God, it will be the hell of a rag," said Denis.

"Can anyone in the house see the rope hanging there, Oliver?"

"I don't think so. No, I'm sure they can't. Say, boys, are you on?"

"What time shall I tell my sister to be there?" said Peter.

"Ten o'clock. Better say along the Slough road, just beyond Lyons's house. It's safer than going right through Windsor."

"What time shall we get back?" said Denis. Already he felt a slight chill in the stomach, not entirely due to his digestion of the bridge rolls.

"Devil's Island goes on till after one, I believe," said Oliver. "The later we get back the safer."

"So long as no one sees your rope, Oliver."

"Impossible."

"By God, I'm looking forward to it," said Denis.

"Shsh. Freeman and Manley are in there. I heard Freeman's bloody voice. We mustn't whisper a word to anyone. That was a damned fine catch of yours at point yesterday," said Oliver loudly.

"It wasn't so hard as it looked," said Denis. "Ridgeway always gets caught at point. How's the house four doing, Peter?"

"Superbly. We shall go down four places with the greatest ease."

"Come on, let's get out of here," said Oliver. "I'm going to burst at any moment."

Lady Bridget Williams sat at the wheel of her Sports saloon. The lights were dimmed. The engine thumped unevenly. Not a light showed in the high front of Lyons's house. The elm clumps in the playing fields flooded the road with blackness. It was rather fun to be gripping the wheel of her car in the shadow of an Eton house, thought Lady Bridget. It was the first time she had ever helped prisoners to escape. Besides, her husband knew nothing of the expedition, which made it all the more exciting. Alec was in the Guards and his code of etiquette led him to draw the most sudden and bewildering lines. He might have drawn one about taking Eton boys to Devil's Island if he had been consulted.

A policeman passed and flashed his torch into the car. Bobbies were so impertinent and unpleasantly socialistic at night. Lady Bridget glanced at her wrist-watch. She looked over her shoulder and saw three shadows skirt the railings of New Yard. "Jump in, Peter, anywhere." Nervously she roared the engine before slipping into top, and they shot away down the Slough road.

"Fool," said Peter. "You'll wake the whole school up, Bridget. This is Denis Bailey behind you. You know Oliver. Where are the clothes?"

"In this parcel. Did you get out all right?"

"Sure," said Oliver. "You should have seen Peter dangling in mid-air and cursing the old fire escape." Denis smiled at the picture. He was used to climbing ropes

and had slipped down easily, scarcely touching the wooden pegs with his shoes. The difficulty had been to stop laughing.

Oliver had kicked himself into a grey check of Peter's. He pulled down a cap over one eye. "Five Ace Joe, what?" The slim coat wrinkled at the waist and gave a rakish appearance. It had been ordered in the days of low cut, one link coats and had a strong Harrovian flavour about it. Denis looked very young in a dark blue serge. He shoved his hands deep in the trouser pockets and imagined himself a most sinister type. Lady Bridget showed the boys how she could drive and in a quarter of an hour they were churning the gravel of the club entrance.

Devil's Island was a blaze of coloured lights. A negro band was playing and in the warm June night a few couples shuffled lazily on a parquet under the trees. Inside, the club was full of eating and drinking and loud chatter. One large party were in evening dress. The girls were fat and suburban; the men pink and prosperous. In the middle of their table was a cut glass carafe, swimming with cherries and strawberries and bits of cucumber, all swollen beyond their limits in some amber tippie. In the alcoves of the dining-room, men in grey flannel suits were saying things to blonde river girls, who laughed and looked away.

The three boys left their caps in the cloakroom, straightened their coats, screwed up their lower lips, frowned fiercely and faced the ballroom, while Peter's sister signed them in. The superior attendant smiled a little, as she wrote "Charles Smith, George Johnson, Robert Jones." Lady Bridget had never been very imaginative.

"We'd better sit in one of the alcoves, Bridget," said Peter, "in case a beak comes in. Over there, what do you think?"

Denis followed them across the floor. It was the first time he had been in a dance club. He was dazed by the brilliant tone of the lighting, softened by no shadow, and the high pitch of the voices, that chattered and buzzed and paused only to laugh in shrill cackles. And beyond and through the

din of voices and the clatter of plates came the steady pulsing of the susaphone, thumping out the time. There was an odd smell of nothing in particular. A blend of scented women and food and Turkish cigarettes and heat. It was a smell of hot luxury and it clouded the senses. They sat down at a table and Denis tried to focus his sight and hearing.

"Have you got your enclosure tickets?" said a woman next door. "Yes, haven't you, dear?" "No. No, Charles; be good," and a weak little laugh. "This hottle's corked." "It's you that's corked, old man," and a loud guffaw.

The tune had ended and the dancers returned to their tables. Denis looked at the glass-smooth strip of parquet. He stretched out a foot and found it was slippery 'as ice. The parquet seemed as sacred as the altar steps of college chapel.

Lady Bridget was enjoying her company. Everybody looked at the boys and afterwards at their chaperone. She half closed her eyes and stared back. "Now then, Peter, what do you want to eat?" Peter seized the menu. "Salmon mayonnaise and strawberries and cream for me. What about you two?"

They read the menu slowly and seriously and in the end agreed with Peter. Lady Bridget ordered some chicken. "Drinks? Champagne, cider cup, iced coffee, orangeade? What do you drink at Eton?" She looked at Denis. He wondered what she expected him to say. "I think iced coffee would be very nice. What do you think, Peter?"

"Oliver, you choose."

"Would you mind if we had cider cup, Lady Bridget? We are allowed cider at Tap you know."

"Of course. Have what you want. Waiter," and a carafe of swimming fruit appeared.

Peter speared a distended strawberry. "Dance, Bridget?" Gravely he piloted her round the room. His steps were limited; and he leaned forward in the Etonian fashion. But he had a nice sense of time and made his sister follow. Denis marvelled at the ease with which Peter did everything. Threw his hat to the cloakroom attendant,

slouched across the floor, chose food, danced. His own dancing was of the pump handle, steam tug description. He put down his head and butted his partners like a tug pushing round the bow of a liner, and pumped away with his left arm till their wrists were numbed of feeling.

Oliver had finished his glass and looked red and excited. "Some joint this, isn't it? Gee, if Wren could see us now."

"I think Peter's sister is awfully decent," said Denis.

"She's the prettiest girl in the room," said Oliver. Denis had a glance round him. A mixed party of four looked at them with interested smiles from a far corner. Peter steered his sister to the table and handed her to her chair. "Do you dance?" she asked Denis.

"Very badly. If you don't mind . . ."

"Come on." She swung him on to the floor, taking long strides and firmly resisting his pump handle rhythm. Her shoulder blocked his view, so she steered herself, glancing backwards among the dancers.

"That's all right. You only want practice. You're getting along fine."

"It's awfully decent of you to take us here," said Denis.

"It's some place."

"Not so bad. What happens if you get caught?"

"Oh, nothing much. I really don't know. Anyhow, we're as safe as anything. Only I wish you'd seen Peter hanging on the rope. I thought he was going to put his foot through pupil room window." "Who are those people over there?" said Lady Bridget. "They seem very interested in us. Don't stare at them. We'll just dance past. Now."

"Good God, they're beaks." Denis's feet forgot to dance and he trod hard on Lady Bridget's toe.

"I think we'd better sit down a moment," she said.

"I say, Peter," said Denis. "Have you seen Rawson over there? He's got that new stinks beak with him. What are we going to do?"

"Curse all beaks," said Oliver. "Lady Bridget, here's your jolly good health."

"Did they see you?" said Peter.

"I don't know. I don't think Rawson knows my name."

"He bloody well knows mine," said Oliver. "He gave me a yellow ticket last half for cribbing."

"Hadn't we better bunk?" said Denis. Oliver craned his neck round the alcove. "Oh, ho!" he whistled. "If Rawson sneaks on us, I shall tell the head beak who I saw him with. That isn't his wife with the yellow hair."

"They don't look like anybody's wives, either of them," said Lady Bridget. "But what are we going to do?"

"Stay here, I vote," said Denis.

"Same here," said Oliver. "And if Rawson or the other bloke says anything, tell him we are going to report him for taking out tarts. Sorry, Lady Bridget." She laughed and filled up their glasses. A pile of sodden fruit lay in the empty carafe.

Denis was no longer self-conscious. The strip of parquet now seemed a very common piece of planking like the decks of the Speenmouth yachts. The chatter had quite vanished and he heard only the melody of the band. The niggers were inspired. One of them cocked a silver painted bowler over his trumpet and blared out a cracked sequence of oom-wah, oom-wahs. His thick red lips slapped on the mouthpiece and the muted notes croaked like an animal in pain. Denis asked Lady Bridget to dance again. He was getting into it now. His feet flowed loosely to the rhythm. He looked the beaks squarely in the face and he looked at the women with them. The new stinks beak turned his head away and said something to his companion. Oliver remained in the alcove, as he knew Rawson only too well. Peter had broken all Devil's Island records for strawberries and cream. Lady Bridget produced a cigarette case.

"Thanks," said Oliver. "We'll show the beaks what we think of them." All three lit up and drew short, quick puffs. Denis poised his cigarette between his first and second fingers like a débutante holding the stem of her first wine glass. His lips popped and kissed the ivory tip. He coughed and blew his nose. Lady Bridget inhaled through a long jade holder.

The night was cooler now and the dancers drifted in from the parquet under the trees. A party in river clothes strolled up from their electric canoe and ordered champagne. Cars were arriving from London. The theatres were over. The room was suddenly dark. A nigger rolled his drum and a fluffy white ball spun on to her toes in a circle of light. A second ray of blue picked out her bounding partner.

"Cabaret," said Oliver. Denis held his breath. He was just beginning to see life. Up till now he had been dead. His toes curled and pressed down against the soles of his shoes as the man threw up the ball of fluff, caught her heels and jerked her to his shoulder. The band had broken off in suspense. Peter puffed away at his cigarette and Oliver's glass strayed to his mouth. The dancers' antics grew wilder and more vigorous. In a smiling frenzy the man wrenched his partner to his chest and threw her brutally from him with her lips parted in a smile of adoration. Then the fluffy ball was spun round and round and round with faster and faster slaps, like a porter bowling a milk churn, till the niggers in the band reached a crazy pinnacle of noise. Down on her heels again, bows to the audience, wild applause, and Denis's toes uncurled again within his shoes. He clapped madly. Never had he seen such a show. They must be world famous. How wonderfully trusting the girl had been and how she adored her partner for all his brutal methods. They must be engaged if they were not married.

"That's the third time I've seen those two this week," said Lady Bridget. "I'm sick of acrobatics. If they'd only dance for a change."

"Not a bad looker, the girl," said Oliver. He had not seen her quite as clearly as he would have liked. But she had fine tapering legs. He had spotted that.

"I suppose you ought to be getting back soon," said Lady Bridget. She remembered, when the lights went on again, that the evening had a serious side to it. For the first time she felt a little responsible. "Have you all had enough? Oliver? Denis? Is it wrong to call you Denis?"

"Thanks awfully, please do," said Denis,

"Peter, what do you think about going?"

"Yes, we ought to get back. Hullo, wake up Oliver. Oliver." His eyes had closed. "Come on, pull yourself together. We're going. M'tutors. Eton."

"Yes," said Oliver. "Good old tutor. I'm all right."

"I wonder where the beaks have got to," said Denis.

"Wait a minute. I'll go and see if the coast is clear," said Lady Bridget. "Here's some money for the bill, Peter." She drew out five notes. "You can tip the waiter and keep the change for yourself." She crossed the floor and went to the entrance. The two masters were examining the pages of the guest book. They looked up at her, but said nothing. She watched them crowd into a small saloon and drive off.

Peter threw down a shilling on the cloakroom table. "That will do for all three of us." They waited a few minutes to give the beaks time to get clear, and packed themselves into the Lagonda. Lady Bridget drove some way and turned into a dark lane. The boys jumped out and took off their suits. Denis stepped out of his blue serge and shivered a little. He felt cold and afraid out here under the threatening hedgerows after the heat and glare of the club. On each side of the headlights black, gruesome shapes nodded in the rising air. The beam of white only deepened the mystery of the darkness round them. Denis wondered if the beaks lay hidden behind the hedge shapes, ready to follow them back to their tutors. The evening had ceased to be a rag. He knew there would be no laughter about the return to the house. He saw the tell-tale rope dangling between him and the safe comfort of his bed.

Lady Bridget stopped the car and dimmed the lights in the outskirts of Eton. They thanked her quickly and slipped away in the shadows. The streets were very quiet and dark. The street lamps threw pale circles on the pavement. They started and stood motionless, while the school clock banged out the four quarters and gave one final stroke. One o'clock. The harshness of the strokes sounded brutal across the delicate stillness of the night. Denis held his breath. How

could the clock crash tactlessly on through the silence? He wanted to answer back with a great shout.

As they entered Wren's front drive, a car roared through Eton. Long after its tail lamp had vanished, the echoes dropped from the walls of chapel. Oliver took the rope in his hands and began to climb. In the silence the noise of his scrambling was absurdly loud, thought Denis. He expected every window to be flung up and a dozen heads thrust out. He wanted to laugh. It was so hopeless that they should not be heard, that he gripped the rope and climbed quickly, hand over hand, without caring what noise he made. Oliver had disappeared through the window, and now Peter was about to start. "Hush," said a voice, as Denis half fell into the room. People were breathing in the darkness. Curses and creakings from below, and Peter's silhouette was raised against the window. He rolled over the sill on to the floor. "Speak in a whisper," said a voice. "Is that all of you, Bailey?"

"Yes."

"And Ockley?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Manley. I saw your rope, Harbord, from Taunton's window. I've asked him to say nothing about it. But he insisted that it should be taken in, in case anyone saw. So I pulled it in and lowered it when I saw you coming across from Cannon Yard. You are bloody little fools, you know."

"I don't see what it's got to do with Taunton," said Peter.

"Hush. Don't talk so loud or you'll wake up the whole house. Taunton's been very decent about it. He might have told Freeman."

"I don't mind being tanned."

"You'll be lucky if you get off with a tanning; but we can't go into that now. Get to your rooms as quietly as you can. Where have you been, by the way?"

"I'm afraid that's our secret," said Peter.

"I don't care. Now get to bed, and don't let the night hag catch you. She's down stairs at the moment."

Denis crept along the passage and twisted the handle of his door. His room seemed a stranger to him. The iron bedstead, burry, washstand, ottoman, table, all stood aloof, reserved and superior. He was afraid of the furniture and he hurried into bed. In the reflected light of a street lamp he feared to find a look of pained disapproval on the face of his furniture. He turned away his head towards the interminable wall patterns and closed his eyes. But he could not sleep. He had to go over the experiences of the evening and live them again to ease his mind. He saw himself in the dance club. Sights and sounds and that odd smell of hot luxury returned sharp. The strip of polished parquet swam smoothly past its carpet banks. "Oom-wah," croaked the nigger's trumpet. A shaft of light was suddenly in the darkness and a fluffy white ball in the centre of the light. Mournfully the grisly hedge shapes nodded in the air. Thunder rolled down from the railway arch as the car roared through. The school clock clanged on the unresisting night. He could remember little more. Tumbling into Oliver's room and Robin's whispered remarks had come as an anti-climax and he had barely taken them in. It had been a wonderful evening, but so tiring. He fell asleep with the nigger grinning above his silver bowler. "Oom-wah," brayed the trumpet through his dreams.

Denis got up early the next morning. He dressed quickly, collected his books for early school and went down to the dining-room. He wanted to talk to somebody and hear other people talking.

"The first time I've ever seen you eat early breakfast," said Spencer-Mace. "Try some of m'dame's special coffee."

"Tea for me," said Denis. "What a glorious day. I couldn't stay in bed. It must be decent at your place in the summer."

"You must come and see Endleigh one day," said Spencer-Mace. "There's a beautiful lake and the most gorgeous walks in the pinewoods."

"I'd like to," said Denis. He rather liked Spencer-Mace

this morning. He was sympathetic, if he was a bit of a fool. He picked up his books. "Are you coming my way?"

"No, I'm up to Tiny. See you at breakfast."

Denis waited in the dining-room till three minutes before seven, but neither Peter nor Oliver came down. At the door he met Featherstone and Warburton, who were going in his direction. He walked with them for some way without listening to their conversation.

"Now we shall know," said Peter, at the beginning of eleven o'clock school.

"I bet you a strawberry mess that nothing happens," said Oliver.

"I shan't be sorry when the morning's school is over all the same," said Denis. It was a stroke of luck that it was French, when they were all three up to the same master.

The hour dragged slowly. Nobody knew their construe and Perrier was getting short-tempered.

"That is the third time, Sanders. Come 'ere. 'Old out your 'and." Sanders held out his hand, grinning. Then pulled it away quickly. Monsieur Perrier's ruler struck the table.

"Now, Sanders." The boy grinned and took his hand away in time to miss a second stroke from Perrier. It was a good game, this, and the division enjoyed it. But Perrier had become serious. He was white in the face. "Sanders, you better take care." The boy looked up and realised it was no longer a game.

"Sorry, sir, but I didn't mean . . ."

"*Asseyez vous*," said Monsieur Perrier. "I see you afterwards." Sanders went back to his desk. The division bent over their books and Perrier sat staring at the table before him.

A double knock sounded. Denis watched the door. The knock was repeated.

"Com' een." A top-hat and an arm appeared round the door.

"Is Harbord in this division?"

"Ye-es," said Perrier.

“ He’s to go to the headmaster at a quarter to twelve.” The door slammed. Through the partition the sixth form praepostor could be heard gabbling a message to the next division.

“ Stop laughing,” said Perrier. “ Eh bien, mon Harbord, vous allez visiter le ’ead. Je vous souhaite de la bonne chance.” Perrier smiled and the division laughed. It was a joke that all but Oliver could appreciate.

Denis and Peter went with Oliver to the school office.

“ It’s that swine Rawson, I suppose,” said Oliver.

“ It’s always the young beaks,” said Denis.

“ What are you going to do ? ” said Peter. “ Tell the head usher he was out with tarts ? ”

“ I don’t know. Just because a beak sneaks, I don’t know why we should. It only shows what a cad the man must be.”

“ I expect the head usher will ask for our names, too, if he doesn’t know them already,” said Denis.

“ Well, he won’t get them.” Oliver straightened his tie and walked into the headmaster’s room, as the praepostor called his name. Denis and Peter scanned the notice board till he came out. He was red in the face, and hurried them round the corner. “ The head usher said he might have to sack me. He knew all about it ; but he might reconsider his decision if I told him who the others were.” Oliver laughed. “ Then he said he should ask Lady Bridget Williams to give him their names, and, in any case, he thought he could guess who one of the others was.”

“ It’s that fool Bridget, signing her own name,” said Peter.

“ It may only be bluff,” said Denis.

“ If he knows that Bridget is my sister, presumably he can guess that I’m her brother.”

“ I told him, of course,” said Oliver, “ that I was sorry I couldn’t tell him and he threatened a bit more and finally said that he had not yet been able to see m’tutor about it. That will be all this morning, thanks very much.”

“ Strawberry messes all round,” said Peter. “ Then we’ll talk it over.”

Denis felt bolder with a strawberry mess in front of him. He was beginning to enjoy the conspiracy. "I suppose he'll see m'tutor sometime to-day and ask for our names," he said.

"I don't see what m'tutor can do, Denis, if you keep your mouth shut," said Oliver. "The head usher won't sack me. Eight up at the most."

Peter finished his strawberries. "Taunton and Manley are the trouble. I think you'd better see Manley, Denis. You know him best, and explain the situation to him."

"All right, I'll try." But as the day wore on, Denis found it no easy matter to get hold of Robin. It was a whole school day and they were up to different masters in the afternoon. After last school, Robin had gone on the river and had not returned till lock up.

When supper came, nothing had been done. Peter and Denis talked in whispers and assured each other that nothing would happen. But Denis felt almost relieved when Wren checked them in the dining-room passage after prayers.

"Ah, Bailey, and Ockley; and Harbord, there you are. I want to see you three a moment. I shan't be long."

They waited in the hall, while Wren discussed a few matters with the captain of the house. He asked Freeman a lot of questions and seemed in no hurry to finish. Then he led the way into his study and closed the door. He stood by the piano and looked at his past favourites, smug-faced and with arms crossed in their solid silver frames. They had never been to Devil's Island, thought Denis.

"The headmaster asked for your names," said Wren. He took out his toothpick and prodded at a recess.

"Yes, sir," said Peter.

"Yes, sir," said Denis.

"Of course, he knew about you already, Harbord."

"Yes, sir." Wren removed the trouble and put his toothpick in his waistcoat pocket.

"A silly thing to go to dance clubs and drink and smoke, eh, Bailey, after what I was saying to you the other night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, I thought you'd agree. Well, I've seen the head about you three." Wren picked up a silver frame and studied the smug countenance within. He polished a corner of the frame with an enormous silk handkerchief. "And I'm glad to say he does not consider your case calls for expulsion." The three boys released their breath and waited.

"He has been good enough to offer you the choice of a swishing or having your leave stopped. I must say I think the head has acted very fairly and you should count yourselves extremely fortunate." Wren took off his pince-nez and gave them a vigorous polish. Then he stowed away as much of the handkerchief that would go in his breast coat pocket. "Well, Ockley?"

"I'd rather be swished, sir."

"Bailey?"

"So would I, sir."

"And Harbord?"

"Swished." Denis and Peter looked sharply at him. Oliver was smiling, but not at the thought of a swiping.

"Well, that's settled, then," said Wren, much relieved. If their Lord's leave had been stopped, either he or the dame would have had to stay at Eton to look after them.

"And no more dance clubs, eh? Or you may not be so lucky."

"No, sir," said the boys and filed out of the room. They hurried quietly along the passage. The lower part of the house was silent. "By God, I'm going to find out who told," said Oliver. "The bloody swine."

"It may not have been anybody," said Denis.

"You wait. I'll find out." Oliver slammed his door behind him.

Denis lay awake thinking. He was not thinking so much of the swiping, or of the effect it would have on his father. He was thinking of what Oliver had said, Who the devil had told? Lady Bridget was out of the question. Robin could not have sneaked. That was obvious. And he had said that Taunton would keep his mouth shut. Wren must have

asked Freeman for the names and Freeman did not know, unless someone had told him. It was all horribly confusing, and through all was the shame of being treated like a silly lower boy by Robin. He remembered now what Robin had said. "You're bloody little fools. Now get to bed and don't let the night hag catch you." It had been such a grand evening at Devil's Island. He wished his mother could have seen him dancing with Lady Bridget. She would have been proud. And the cigarettes and the cider cup and the car. And then to be ticked off by Robin as if they had done something small and contemptible. Denis determined he would never mention the evening before Robin. He would be simple and natural with Robin, as he had tried to be before. He would certainly never ask him who told Wren. It was lovely to relax every limb and lie there in the darkness.

The praepostor's entry next morning and the visit to the headmaster were something of an anti-climax. Swipings usually followed a long harangue in which the shame and folly of his misdoings had been heaped heavy on the victim's head. But Denis and Peter and Oliver had all had time to digest the folly of their exploit and regain their courage. In sullen boredom they listened to the headmaster's exposition of the Eton school rules. Their penitence had already crystallised into the need for greater care and more thoughtful planning on the next occasion. They only wanted to get it over.

"Bailey," said the headmaster at the top of the stairs. The others waited outside. Fusee, a school servant of traditional title, took charge of Denis. He loosed his braces and hurried down his trousers, while the praepostor held out the birch with shy reverence. Denis knelt on the block and Fusee held his shirt and coat tails in position. Denis suddenly wanted to laugh. It was so ridiculous to be praying there on the block with a bare behind. Fusee's grip was unnecessarily firm. He had no intention of escape.

Praepostor handed the birch. The headmaster passed its sharp twigs across the palm of his hand. He drew back a

pace and Denis waited. A breeze from the open window made him shiver. He heard voices and laughter in School Yard. Then the blood rushed to his cheeks, as the birch fell. The force of the first few strokes was heavier than the pain. His whole body seemed to tremble. But as the sharp twigs broke the flesh, he bit his lip to restrain a sound. Fusce pressed tighter against the involuntary recoil. Denis counted six. Gradually in the heat and damp of his clothes, rucked up from the waist, he felt detached from the deadening pain below. Far away, another stroke fell. Praepostor had pretended to look out of the window in pain and dignity. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the birch, now ragged at its fringe, make the final sweep. The headmaster drew back. Denis was hustled bleeding into his trousers. "That's all right, sir," whispered Fusce. "You stood it like an 'ero," and he got out of the room. It hurt damnably, with a dull throbbing pain, quite unlike the stinging cuts of Freeman's house cane, which at the time had hurt a great deal more.

Thank heavens there was nobody by the school notice board. No curious glances to detect signs of suffering. Denis waited till the others came out. Oliver had got ten, either because he looked more robust, or because the head usher was enjoying himself, as Peter suggested. They walked stiffly back to Wren's.

"It was bloody well worth it," said Oliver. "My father was never swiped, anyhow."

"And mine will say that I've disgraced the family name, if he hears of it," thought Denis.

"My father will laugh when he sees seven and six for a birch on my bill," said Peter. "The head usher, who invented the custom, had humour."