

## CHAPTER II

### THE JOURNEY DOWN

The seeing off of Mike on the last day of the holidays was an imposing spectacle, a sort of pageant. Going to a public school, especially at the beginning of the summer term, is no great hardship, more particularly when the departing hero has a brother on the verge of the school eleven and three other brothers playing for counties; and Mike seemed in no way disturbed by the prospect. Mothers, however, to the end of time will foster a secret fear that their sons will be bullied at a big school, and Mrs. Jackson's anxious look lent a fine solemnity to the proceedings.

And as Marjory, Phyllis, and Ella invariably broke down when the time of separation arrived, and made no exception to their rule on the present occasion, a suitable gloom was the keynote of the gathering. Mr. Jackson seemed to bear the parting with fortitude, as did Mike's Uncle John (providentially roped in at the eleventh hour on his way to Scotland, in time to come down with a handsome tip). To their coarse-fibred minds there was nothing pathetic or tragic about the affair at all. (At the very moment when the train began to glide out of the station Uncle John was heard to remark that, in his opinion, these Bocks weren't a patch on the old shaped Larranaga.) Among others present might have been noticed Saunders, practising late cuts rather

coyly with a walking-stick in the background; the village idiot, who had rolled up on the chance of a dole; Gladys Maud Evangeline's nurse, smiling vaguely; and Gladys Maud Evangeline herself, frankly bored with the whole business.

The train gathered speed. The air was full of last messages. Uncle John said on second thoughts he wasn't sure these Bocks weren't half a bad smoke after all. Gladys Maud cried, because she had taken a sudden dislike to the village idiot; and Mike settled himself in the corner and opened a magazine.

He was alone in the carriage. Bob, who had been spending the last week of the holidays with an aunt further down the line, was to board the train at East Wobsley, and the brothers were to make a state entry into Wrykyn together. Meanwhile, Mike was left to his milk chocolate, his magazines, and his reflections.

The latter were not numerous, nor profound. He was excited. He had been petitioning the home authorities for the past year to be allowed to leave his private school and go to Wrykyn, and now the thing had come about. He wondered what sort of a house Wain's was, and whether they had any chance of the cricket cup. According to Bob they had no earthly; but then Bob only recognised one house, Donaldson's. He wondered if Bob would get his first eleven cap this year, and if he himself were likely to do anything at cricket. Marjory had faithfully reported every word Saunders had said on the subject, but Bob had been

so careful to point out his insignificance when compared with the humblest Wrykynian that the professional's glowing prophecies had not had much effect. It might be true that some day he would play for England, but just at present he felt he would exchange his place in the team for one in the Wrykyn third eleven. A sort of mist enveloped everything Wrykynian. It seemed almost hopeless to try and compete with these unknown experts. On the other hand, there was Bob. Bob, by all accounts, was on the verge of the first eleven, and he was nothing special.

While he was engaged on these reflections, the train drew up at a small station. Opposite the door of Mike's compartment was standing a boy of about Mike's size, though evidently some years older. He had a sharp face, with rather a prominent nose; and a pair of pince-nez gave him a supercilious look. He wore a bowler hat, and carried a small portmanteau.

He opened the door, and took the seat opposite to Mike, whom he scrutinised for a moment rather after the fashion of a naturalist examining some new and unpleasant variety of beetle. He seemed about to make some remark, but, instead, got up and looked through the open window.

"Where's that porter?" Mike heard him say.

The porter came skimming down the platform at that moment.

"Porter."

"Sir?"

"Are those frightful boxes of mine in all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because, you know, there'll be a frightful row if any of them get lost."

"No chance of that, sir."

"Here you are, then."

"Thank you, sir."

The youth drew his head and shoulders in, stared at Mike again, and finally sat down. Mike noticed that he had nothing to read, and wondered if he wanted anything; but he did not feel equal to offering him one of his magazines. He did not like the looks of him particularly. Judging by appearances, he seemed to carry enough side for three. If he wanted a magazine, thought Mike, let him ask for it.

The other made no overtures, and at the next stop got out. That

explained his magazineless condition. He was only travelling a short way.

"Good business," said Mike to himself. He had all the Englishman's love of a carriage to himself.

The train was just moving out of the station when his eye was suddenly caught by the stranger's bag, lying snugly in the rack.

And here, I regret to say, Mike acted from the best motives, which is always fatal.

He realised in an instant what had happened. The fellow had forgotten his bag.

Mike had not been greatly fascinated by the stranger's looks; but, after all, the most supercilious person on earth has a right to his own property. Besides, he might have been quite a nice fellow when you got to know him. Anyhow, the bag had better be returned at once. The train was already moving quite fast, and Mike's compartment was nearing the end of the platform.

He snatched the bag from the rack and hurled it out of the window. (Porter Robinson, who happened to be in the line of fire, escaped with a flesh wound.) Then he sat down again with the inward glow of satisfaction which comes to one when one has risen successfully to a

sudden emergency.

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The glow lasted till the next stoppage, which did not occur for a good many miles. Then it ceased abruptly, for the train had scarcely come to a standstill when the opening above the door was darkened by a head and shoulders. The head was surmounted by a bowler, and a pair of pince-nez gleamed from the shadow.

"Hullo, I say," said the stranger. "Have you changed carriages, or what?"

"No," said Mike.

"Then, dash it, where's my frightful bag?"

Life teems with embarrassing situations. This was one of them.

"The fact is," said Mike, "I chucked it out."

"Chucked it out! what do you mean? When?"

"At the last station."

The guard blew his whistle, and the other jumped into the carriage.

"I thought you'd got out there for good," explained Mike. "I'm awfully sorry."

"Where is the bag?"

"On the platform at the last station. It hit a porter."

Against his will, for he wished to treat the matter with fitting solemnity, Mike grinned at the recollection. The look on Porter Robinson's face as the bag took him in the small of the back had been funny, though not intentionally so.

The bereaved owner disapproved of this levity; and said as much.

"Don't grin, you little beast," he shouted. "There's nothing to laugh at. You go chucking bags that don't belong to you out of the window, and then you have the frightful cheek to grin about it."

"It wasn't that," said Mike hurriedly. "Only the porter looked awfully funny when it hit him."

"Dash the porter! What's going to happen about my bag? I can't get out for half a second to buy a magazine without your flinging my things about the platform. What you want is a frightful kicking."

The situation was becoming difficult. But fortunately at this moment the train stopped once again; and, looking out of the window, Mike saw a board with East Wobsley upon it in large letters. A moment later Bob's head appeared in the doorway.

"Hullo, there you are," said Bob.

His eye fell upon Mike's companion.

"Hullo, Gazeka!" he exclaimed. "Where did you spring from? Do you know my brother? He's coming to Wrykyn this term. By the way, rather lucky you've met. He's in your house. Firby-Smith's head of Wain's, Mike."

Mike gathered that Gazeka and Firby-Smith were one and the same person. He grinned again. Firby-Smith continued to look ruffled, though not aggressive.

"Oh, are you in Wain's?" he said.

"I say, Bob," said Mike, "I've made rather an ass of myself."

"Naturally."

"I mean, what happened was this. I chucked Firby-Smith's portmanteau out of the window, thinking he'd got out, only he hadn't really, and it's at a station miles back."

"You're a bit of a rotter, aren't you? Had it got your name and address on it, Gazeka?"

"Yes."

"Oh, then it's certain to be all right. It's bound to turn up some time. They'll send it on by the next train, and you'll get it either to-night or to-morrow."

"Frightful nuisance, all the same. Lots of things in it I wanted."

"Oh, never mind, it's all right. I say, what have you been doing in the holidays? I didn't know you lived on this line at all."

From this point onwards Mike was out of the conversation altogether. Bob and Firby-Smith talked of Wrykyn, discussing events of the previous term of which Mike had never heard. Names came into their conversation which were entirely new to him. He realised that school politics were being talked, and that contributions from him to the dialogue were not required. He took up his magazine again, listening the while. They were discussing Wain's now. The name Wyatt cropped up with some frequency. Wyatt was apparently something of a character. Mention was made of rows in which he had played a part in the past.

"It must be pretty rotten for him," said Bob. "He and Wain never get

on very well, and yet they have to be together, holidays as well as term. Pretty bad having a step-father at all--I shouldn't care to--and when your house-master and your step-father are the same man, it's a bit thick."

"Frightful," agreed Firby-Smith.

"I swear, if I were in Wyatt's place, I should rot about like anything. It isn't as if he'd anything to look forward to when he leaves. He told me last term that Wain had got a nomination for him in some beastly bank, and that he was going into it directly after the end of this term. Rather rough on a chap like Wyatt. Good cricketer and footballer, I mean, and all that sort of thing. It's just the sort of life he'll hate most. Hullo, here we are."

Mike looked out of the window. It was Wrykyn at last.