

CHAPTER III

MIKE FINDS A FRIENDLY NATIVE

Mike was surprised to find, on alighting, that the platform was entirely free from Wrykynians. In all the stories he had read the whole school came back by the same train, and, having smashed in one another's hats and chaffed the porters, made their way to the school buildings in a solid column. But here they were alone.

A remark of Bob's to Firby-Smith explained this. "Can't make out why none of the fellows came back by this train," he said. "Heaps of them must come by this line, and it's the only Christian train they run,"

"Don't want to get here before the last minute they can possibly manage. Silly idea. I suppose they think there'd be nothing to do."

"What shall we do?" said Bob. "Come and have some tea at Cook's?"

"All right."

Bob looked at Mike. There was no disguising the fact that he would be in the way; but how convey this fact delicately to him?

"Look here, Mike," he said, with a happy inspiration, "Firby-Smith and I are just going to get some tea. I think you'd better nip up to the school. Probably Wain will want to see you, and tell you all about things, which is your dorm. and so on. See you later," he concluded airily. "Any one'll tell you the way to the school. Go straight on. They'll send your luggage on later. So long." And his sole prop in this world of strangers departed, leaving him to find his way for himself.

There is no subject on which opinions differ so widely as this matter of finding the way to a place. To the man who knows, it is simplicity itself. Probably he really does imagine that he goes straight on, ignoring the fact that for him the choice of three roads, all more or less straight, has no perplexities. The man who does not know feels as if he were in a maze.

Mike started out boldly, and lost his way. Go in which direction he would, he always seemed to arrive at a square with a fountain and an equestrian statue in its centre. On the fourth repetition of this feat he stopped in a disheartened way, and looked about him. He was beginning to feel bitter towards Bob. The man might at least have shown him where to get some tea.

At this moment a ray of hope shone through the gloom. Crossing the square was a short, thick-set figure clad in grey flannel trousers, a blue blazer, and a straw hat with a coloured band. Plainly a

Wrykynian. Mike made for him.

"Can you tell me the way to the school, please," he said.

"Oh, you're going to the school," said the other. He had a pleasant, square-jawed face, reminiscent of a good-tempered bull-dog, and a pair of very deep-set grey eyes which somehow put Mike at his ease. There was something singularly cool and genial about them. He felt that they saw the humour in things, and that their owner was a person who liked most people and whom most people liked.

"You look rather lost," said the stranger. "Been hunting for it long?"

"Yes," said Mike.

"Which house do you want?"

"Wain's."

"Wain's? Then you've come to the right man this time. What I don't know about Wain's isn't worth knowing."

"Are you there, too?"

"Am I not! Term and holidays. There's no close season for me."

"Oh, are you Wyatt, then?" asked Mike.

"Hullo, this is fame. How did you know my name, as the ass in the detective story always says to the detective, who's seen it in the lining of his hat? Who's been talking about me?"

"I heard my brother saying something about you in the train."

"Who's your brother?"

"Jackson. He's in Donaldson's."

"I know. A stout fellow. So you're the newest make of Jackson, latest model, with all the modern improvements? Are there any more of you?"

"Not brothers," said Mike.

"Pity. You can't quite raise a team, then? Are you a sort of young Tyldesley, too?"

"I played a bit at my last school. Only a private school, you know," added Mike modestly.

"Make any runs? What was your best score?"

"Hundred and twenty-three," said Mike awkwardly. "It was only against

kids, you know." He was in terror lest he should seem to be bragging.

"That's pretty useful. Any more centuries?"

"Yes," said Mike, shuffling.

"How many?"

"Seven altogether. You know, it was really awfully rotten bowling. And I was a good bit bigger than most of the chaps there. And my pater always has a pro. down in the Easter holidays, which gave me a bit of an advantage."

"All the same, seven centuries isn't so dusty against any bowling. We shall want some batting in the house this term. Look here, I was just going to have some tea. You come along, too."

"Oh, thanks awfully," said Mike. "My brother and Firby-Smith have gone to a place called Cook's."

"The old Gazeka? I didn't know he lived in your part of the world. He's head of Wain's."

"Yes, I know," said Mike. "Why is he called Gazeka?" he asked after a pause.

"Don't you think he looks like one? What did you think of him?"

"I didn't speak to him much," said Mike cautiously. It is always delicate work answering a question like this unless one has some sort of an inkling as to the views of the questioner.

"He's all right," said Wyatt, answering for himself. "He's got a habit of talking to one as if he were a prince of the blood dropping a gracious word to one of the three Small-Heads at the Hippodrome, but that's his misfortune. We all have our troubles. That's his. Let's go in here. It's too far to sweat to Cook's."

It was about a mile from the tea-shop to the school. Mike's first impression on arriving at the school grounds was of his smallness and insignificance. Everything looked so big--the buildings, the grounds, everything. He felt out of the picture. He was glad that he had met Wyatt. To make his entrance into this strange land alone would have been more of an ordeal than he would have cared to face.

"That's Wain's," said Wyatt, pointing to one of half a dozen large houses which lined the road on the south side of the cricket field. Mike followed his finger, and took in the size of his new home.

"I say, it's jolly big," he said. "How many fellows are there in it?"

"Thirty-one this term, I believe."

"That's more than there were at King-Hall's."

"What's King-Hall's?"

"The private school I was at. At Emsworth."

Emsworth seemed very remote and unreal to him as he spoke.

They skirted the cricket field, walking along the path that divided the two terraces. The Wrykyn playing-fields were formed of a series of huge steps, cut out of the hill. At the top of the hill came the school. On the first terrace was a sort of informal practice ground, where, though no games were played on it, there was a good deal of punting and drop-kicking in the winter and fielding-practice in the summer. The next terrace was the biggest of all, and formed the first eleven cricket ground, a beautiful piece of turf, a shade too narrow for its length, bounded on the terrace side by a sharply sloping bank, some fifteen feet deep, and on the other by the precipice leading to the next terrace. At the far end of the ground stood the pavilion, and beside it a little ivy-covered rabbit-hutch for the scorers. Old Wrykynians always claimed that it was the prettiest school ground in England. It certainly had the finest view. From the verandah of the pavilion you could look over three counties.

Wain's house wore an empty and desolate appearance. There were signs

of activity, however, inside; and a smell of soap and warm water told of preparations recently completed.

Wyatt took Mike into the matron's room, a small room opening out of the main passage.

"This is Jackson," he said. "Which dormitory is he in, Miss Payne?"

The matron consulted a paper.

"He's in yours, Wyatt."

"Good business. Who's in the other bed? There are going to be three of us, aren't there?"

"Fereira was to have slept there, but we have just heard that he is not coming back this term. He has had to go on a sea-voyage for his health."

"Seems queer any one actually taking the trouble to keep Fereira in the world," said Wyatt. "I've often thought of giving him Rough On Rats myself. Come along, Jackson, and I'll show you the room."

They went along the passage, and up a flight of stairs.

"Here you are," said Wyatt.

It was a fair-sized room. The window, heavily barred, looked out over a large garden.

"I used to sleep here alone last term," said Wyatt, "but the house is so full now they've turned it into a dormitory."

"I say, I wish these bars weren't here. It would be rather a rag to get out of the window on to that wall at night, and hop down into the garden and explore," said Mike.

Wyatt looked at him curiously, and moved to the window.

"I'm not going to let you do it, of course," he said, "because you'd go getting caught, and dropped on, which isn't good for one in one's first term; but just to amuse you----"

He jerked at the middle bar, and the next moment he was standing with it in his hand, and the way to the garden was clear.

"By Jove!" said Mike.

"That's simply an object-lesson, you know," said Wyatt, replacing the bar, and pushing the screws back into their putty. "I get out at night myself because I think my health needs it. Besides, it's my last term, anyhow, so it doesn't matter what I do. But if I find you trying to

cut out in the small hours, there'll be trouble. See?"

"All right," said Mike, reluctantly. "But I wish you'd let me."

"Not if I know it. Promise you won't try it on."

"All right. But, I say, what do you do out there?"

"I shoot at cats with an air-pistol, the beauty of which is that even if you hit them it doesn't hurt--simply keeps them bright and interested in life; and if you miss you've had all the fun anyhow. Have you ever shot at a rocketing cat? Finest mark you can have. Society's latest craze. Buy a pistol and see life."

"I wish you'd let me come."

"I daresay you do. Not much, however. Now, if you like, I'll take you over the rest of the school. You'll have to see it sooner or later, so you may as well get it over at once."