CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH MIKE IS DISCUSSED

Trevor and Clowes, of Donaldson's, were sitting in their study a week after the gramophone incident, preparatory to going on the river. At least Trevor was in the study, getting tea ready. Clowes was on the window-sill, one leg in the room, the other outside, hanging over space. He loved to sit in this attitude, watching some one else work, and giving his views on life to whoever would listen to them. Clowes was tall, and looked sad, which he was not. Trevor was shorter, and very much in earnest over all that he did. On the present occasion he was measuring out tea with a concentration worthy of a general planning a campaign.

"One for the pot," said Clowes.

"All right," breathed Trevor. "Come and help, you slacker."

"Too busy."

"You aren't doing a stroke."

"My lad, I'm thinking of Life. That's a thing you couldn't do. I often say to people, 'Good chap, Trevor, but can't think of Life. Give him a

tea-pot and half a pound of butter to mess about with,' I say, 'and he's all right. But when it comes to deep thought, where is he? Among the also-rans.' That's what I say."

"Silly ass," said Trevor, slicing bread. "What particular rot were you thinking about just then? What fun it was sitting back and watching other fellows work, I should think."

"My mind at the moment," said Clowes, "was tensely occupied with the problem of brothers at school. Have you got any brothers, Trevor?"

"One. Couple of years younger than me. I say, we shall want some more jam to-morrow. Better order it to-day."

"See it done, Tigellinus, as our old pal Nero used to remark. Where is he? Your brother, I mean."

"Marlborough."

"That shows your sense. I have always had a high opinion of your sense, Trevor. If you'd been a silly ass, you'd have let your people send him here."

"Why not? Shouldn't have minded."

"I withdraw what I said about your sense. Consider it unsaid. I have a

brother myself. Aged fifteen. Not a bad chap in his way. Like the heroes of the school stories. 'Big blue eyes literally bubbling over with fun.' At least, I suppose it's fun to him. Cheek's what I call it. My people wanted to send him here. I lodged a protest. I said, 'One Clowes is ample for any public school.'"

"You were right there," said Trevor.

"I said, 'One Clowes is luxury, two excess.' I pointed out that I was just on the verge of becoming rather a blood at Wrykyn, and that I didn't want the work of years spoiled by a brother who would think it a rag to tell fellows who respected and admired me----"

"Such as who?"

"----Anecdotes of a chequered infancy. There are stories about me which only my brother knows. Did I want them spread about the school? No, laddie, I did not. Hence, we see my brother two terms ago, packing up his little box, and tooling off to Rugby. And here am I at Wrykyn, with an unstained reputation, loved by all who know me, revered by all who don't; courted by boys, fawned upon by masters. People's faces brighten when I throw them a nod. If I frown----"

"Oh, come on," said Trevor.

Bread and jam and cake monopolised Clowes's attention for the next

quarter of an hour. At the end of that period, however, he returned to his subject.

"After the serious business of the meal was concluded, and a simple hymn had been sung by those present," he said, "Mr. Clowes resumed his very interesting remarks. We were on the subject of brothers at school. Now, take the melancholy case of Jackson Brothers. My heart bleeds for Bob."

"Jackson's all right. What's wrong with him? Besides, naturally, young Jackson came to Wrykyn when all his brothers had been here."

"What a rotten argument. It's just the one used by chaps' people, too. They think how nice it will be for all the sons to have been at the same school. It may be all right after they're left, but while they're there, it's the limit. You say Jackson's all right. At present, perhaps, he is. But the term's hardly started yet."

"Well?"

"Look here, what's at the bottom of this sending young brothers to the same school as elder brothers?"

"Elder brother can keep an eye on him, I suppose."

"That's just it. For once in your life you've touched the spot. In

other words, Bob Jackson is practically responsible for the kid. That's where the whole rotten trouble starts."

"Why?"

"Well, what happens? He either lets the kid rip, in which case he may find himself any morning in the pleasant position of having to explain to his people exactly why it is that little Willie has just received the boot, and why he didn't look after him better: or he spends all his spare time shadowing him to see that he doesn't get into trouble. He feels that his reputation hangs on the kid's conduct, so he broods over him like a policeman, which is pretty rotten for him and maddens the kid, who looks on him as no sportsman. Bob seems to be trying the first way, which is what I should do myself. It's all right, so far, but, as I said, the term's only just started."

"Young Jackson seems all right. What's wrong with him? He doesn't stick on side any way, which he might easily do, considering his cricket."

"There's nothing wrong with him in that way. I've talked to him several times at the nets, and he's very decent. But his getting into trouble hasn't anything to do with us. It's the masters you've got to consider."

"What's up? Does he rag?"

"From what I gather from fellows in his form he's got a genius for ragging. Thinks of things that don't occur to anybody else, and does them, too."

"He never seems to be in extra. One always sees him about on half-holidays."

"That's always the way with that sort of chap. He keeps on wriggling out of small rows till he thinks he can do anything he likes without being dropped on, and then all of a sudden he finds himself up to the eyebrows in a record smash. I don't say young Jackson will land himself like that. All I say is that he's just the sort who does. He's asking for trouble. Besides, who do you see him about with all the time?"

"He's generally with Wyatt when I meet him."

"Yes. Well, then!"

"What's wrong with Wyatt? He's one of the decentest men in the school."

"I know. But he's working up for a tremendous row one of these days, unless he leaves before it comes off. The odds are, if Jackson's so thick with him, that he'll be roped into it too. Wyatt wouldn't land

him if he could help it, but he probably wouldn't realise what he was letting the kid in for. For instance, I happen to know that Wyatt breaks out of his dorm. every other night. I don't know if he takes Jackson with him. I shouldn't think so. But there's nothing to prevent Jackson following him on his own. And if you're caught at that game, it's the boot every time."

Trevor looked disturbed.

"Somebody ought to speak to Bob."

"What's the good? Why worry him? Bob couldn't do anything. You'd only make him do the policeman business, which he hasn't time for, and which is bound to make rows between them. Better leave him alone."

"I don't know. It would be a beastly thing for Bob if the kid did get into a really bad row."

"If you must tell anybody, tell the Gazeka. He's head of Wain's, and has got far more chance of keeping an eye on Jackson than Bob has."

"The Gazeka is a fool."

"All front teeth and side. Still, he's on the spot. But what's the good of worrying. It's nothing to do with us, anyhow. Let's stagger out, shall we?"

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Trevor's conscientious nature, however, made it impossible for him to drop the matter. It disturbed him all the time that he and Clowes were on the river; and, walking back to the house, he resolved to see Bob about it during preparation.

He found him in his study, oiling a bat.

"I say, Bob," he said, "look here. Are you busy?"

"No. Why?"

"It's this way. Clowes and I were talking----"

"If Clowes was there he was probably talking. Well?"

"About your brother."

"Oh, by Jove," said Bob, sitting up. "That reminds me. I forgot to get the evening paper. Did he get his century all right?"

"Who?" asked Trevor, bewildered.

"My brother, J. W. He'd made sixty-three not out against Kent in this

morning's paper. What happened?"

"I didn't get a paper either. I didn't mean that brother. I meant the one here."

"Oh, Mike? What's Mike been up to?"

"Nothing as yet, that I know of; but, I say, you know, he seems a great pal of Wyatt's."

"I know. I spoke to him about it."

"Oh, you did? That's all right, then."

"Not that there's anything wrong with Wyatt."

"Not a bit. Only he is rather mucking about this term, I hear. It's his last, so I suppose he wants to have a rag."

"Don't blame him."

"Nor do I. Rather rot, though, if he lugged your brother into a row by accident."

"I should get blamed. I think I'll speak to him again."

"I should, I think."

"I hope he isn't idiot enough to go out at night with Wyatt. If Wyatt likes to risk it, all right. That's his look out. But it won't do for Mike to go playing the goat too."

"Clowes suggested putting Firby-Smith on to him. He'd have more chance, being in the same house, of seeing that he didn't come a mucker than you would."

"I've done that. Smith said he'd speak to him."

"That's all right then. Is that a new bat?"

"Got it to-day. Smashed my other yesterday--against the school house."

Donaldson's had played a friendly with the school house during the last two days, and had beaten them.

"I thought I heard it go. You were rather in form."

"Better than at the beginning of the term, anyhow. I simply couldn't do a thing then. But my last three innings have been 33 not out, 18, and 51.

"I should think you're bound to get your first all right."

"Hope so. I see Mike's playing for the second against the O.W.s."

"Yes. Pretty good for his first term. You have a pro. to coach you in the holidays, don't you?"

"Yes. I didn't go to him much this last time. I was away a lot. But Mike fairly lived inside the net."

"Well, it's not been chucked away. I suppose he'll get his first next year. There'll be a big clearing-out of colours at the end of this term. Nearly all the first are leaving. Henfrey'll be captain, I expect."

"Saunders, the pro. at home, always says that Mike's going to be the star cricketer of the family. Better than J. W. even, he thinks. I asked him what he thought of me, and he said, 'You'll be making a lot of runs some day, Mr. Bob.' There's a subtle difference, isn't there? I shall have Mike cutting me out before I leave school if I'm not careful."

"Sort of infant prodigy," said Trevor. "Don't think he's quite up to it yet, though."

He went back to his study, and Bob, having finished his oiling and washed his hands, started on his Thucydides. And, in the stress of

wrestling with the speech of an apparently delirious Athenian general, whose remarks seemed to contain nothing even remotely resembling sense and coherence, he allowed the question of Mike's welfare to fade from his mind like a dissolving view.