

CHAPTER XXX

MR. JACKSON MAKES UP HIS MIND

Two years have elapsed and Mike is home again for the Easter holidays.

If Mike had been in time for breakfast that morning he might have gathered from the expression on his father's face, as Mr. Jackson opened the envelope containing his school report and read the contents, that the document in question was not exactly a paean of praise from beginning to end. But he was late, as usual. Mike always was late for breakfast in the holidays.

When he came down on this particular morning, the meal was nearly over. Mr. Jackson had disappeared, taking his correspondence with him; Mrs. Jackson had gone into the kitchen, and when Mike appeared the thing had resolved itself into a mere vulgar brawl between Phyllis and Ella for the jam, while Marjory, who had put her hair up a fortnight before, looked on in a detached sort of way, as if these juvenile gambols distressed her.

"Hullo, Mike," she said, jumping up as he entered; "here you are--I've been keeping everything hot for you."

"Have you? Thanks awfully. I say--" his eye wandered in mild surprise

round the table. "I'm a bit late."

Marjory was bustling about, fetching and carrying for Mike, as she always did. She had adopted him at an early age, and did the thing thoroughly. She was fond of her other brothers, especially when they made centuries in first-class cricket, but Mike was her favourite. She would field out in the deep as a natural thing when Mike was batting at the net in the paddock, though for the others, even for Joe, who had played in all five Test Matches in the previous summer, she would do it only as a favour.

Phyllis and Ella finished their dispute and went out. Marjory sat on the table and watched Mike eat.

"Your report came this morning, Mike," she said.

The kidneys failed to retain Mike's undivided attention. He looked up interested. "What did it say?"

"I didn't see--I only caught sight of the Wrykyn crest on the envelope. Father didn't say anything."

Mike seemed concerned. "I say, that looks rather rotten! I wonder if it was awfully bad. It's the first I've had from Appleby."

"It can't be any worse than the horrid ones Mr. Blake used to write

when you were in his form."

"No, that's a comfort," said Mike philosophically. "Think there's any more tea in that pot?"

"I call it a shame," said Marjory; "they ought to be jolly glad to have you at Wrykyn just for cricket, instead of writing beastly reports that make father angry and don't do any good to anybody."

"Last summer he said he'd take me away if I got another one."

"He didn't mean it really, I know he didn't! He couldn't! You're the best bat Wrykyn's ever had."

"What ho!" interpolated Mike.

"You are. Everybody says you are. Why, you got your first the very first term you were there--even Joe didn't do anything nearly so good as that. Saunders says you're simply bound to play for England in another year or two."

"Saunders is a jolly good chap. He bowled me a half-volley on the off the first ball I had in a school match. By the way, I wonder if he's out at the net now. Let's go and see."

Saunders was setting up the net when they arrived. Mike put on his

pads and went to the wickets, while Marjory and the dogs retired as usual to the far hedge to retrieve.

She was kept busy. Saunders was a good sound bowler of the M.C.C. minor match type, and there had been a time when he had worried Mike considerably, but Mike had been in the Wrykyn team for three seasons now, and each season he had advanced tremendously in his batting. He had filled out in three years. He had always had the style, and now he had the strength as well. Saunders's bowling on a true wicket seemed simple to him. It was early in the Easter holidays, but already he was beginning to find his form. Saunders, who looked on Mike as his own special invention, was delighted.

"If you don't be worried by being too anxious now that you're captain, Master Mike," he said, "you'll make a century every match next term."

"I wish I wasn't; it's a beastly responsibility."

Henfrey, the Wrykyn cricket captain of the previous season, was not returning next term, and Mike was to reign in his stead. He liked the prospect, but it certainly carried with it a rather awe-inspiring responsibility. At night sometimes he would lie awake, appalled by the fear of losing his form, or making a hash of things by choosing the wrong men to play for the school and leaving the right men out. It is no light thing to captain a public school at cricket.

As he was walking towards the house, Phyllis met him. "Oh, I've been hunting for you, Mike; father wants you."

"What for?"

"I don't know."

"Where?"

"He's in the study. He seems--" added Phyllis, throwing in the information by way of a make-weight, "in a beastly wax."

Mike's jaw fell slightly. "I hope the dickens it's nothing to do with that bally report," was his muttered exclamation.

Mike's dealings with his father were as a rule of a most pleasant nature. Mr. Jackson was an understanding sort of man, who treated his sons as companions. From time to time, however, breezes were apt to ruffle the placid sea of good-fellowship. Mike's end-of-term report was an unfailing wind-raiser; indeed, on the arrival of Mr. Blake's sarcastic résumé of Mike's short-comings at the end of the previous term, there had been something not unlike a typhoon. It was on this occasion that Mr. Jackson had solemnly declared his intention of removing Mike from Wrykyn unless the critics became more flattering; and Mr. Jackson was a man of his word.

It was with a certain amount of apprehension, therefore, that Jackson entered the study.

"Come in, Mike," said his father, kicking the waste-paper basket; "I want to speak to you."

Mike, skilled in omens, scented a row in the offing. Only in moments of emotion was Mr. Jackson in the habit of booting the basket.

There followed an awkward silence, which Mike broke by remarking that he had carted a half-volley from Saunders over the on-side hedge that morning.

"It was just a bit short and off the leg stump, so I stepped out--may I bag the paper-knife for a jiffy? I'll just show----"

"Never mind about cricket now," said Mr. Jackson; "I want you to listen to this report."

"Oh, is that my report, father?" said Mike, with a sort of sickly interest, much as a dog about to be washed might evince in his tub.

"It is," replied Mr. Jackson in measured tones, "your report; what is more, it is without exception the worst report you have ever had."

"Oh, I say!" groaned the record-breaker.

"His conduct," quoted Mr. Jackson, "has been unsatisfactory in the extreme, both in and out of school."

"It wasn't anything really. I only happened----"

Remembering suddenly that what he had happened to do was to drop a cannon-ball (the school weight) on the form-room floor, not once, but on several occasions, he paused.

"French bad; conduct disgraceful----"

"Everybody rags in French."

"Mathematics bad. Inattentive and idle."

"Nobody does much work in Math."

"Latin poor. Greek, very poor."

"We were doing Thucydides, Book Two, last term--all speeches and doubtful readings, and cruxes and things--beastly hard! Everybody says so."

"Here are Mr. Appleby's remarks: 'The boy has genuine ability, which he declines to use in the smallest degree.'"

Mike moaned a moan of righteous indignation.

"An abnormal proficiency at games has apparently destroyed all desire in him to realise the more serious issues of life.' There is more to the same effect."

Mr. Appleby was a master with very definite ideas as to what constituted a public-school master's duties. As a man he was distinctly pro-Mike. He understood cricket, and some of Mike's shots on the off gave him thrills of pure aesthetic joy; but as a master he always made it his habit to regard the manners and customs of the boys in his form with an unbiased eye, and to an unbiased eye Mike in a form-room was about as near the extreme edge as a boy could be, and Mr. Appleby said as much in a clear firm hand.

"You remember what I said to you about your report at Christmas, Mike?" said Mr. Jackson, folding the lethal document and replacing it in its envelope.

Mike said nothing; there was a sinking feeling in his interior.

"I shall abide by what I said."

Mike's heart thumped.

"You will not go back to Wrykyn next term."

Somewhere in the world the sun was shining, birds were twittering; somewhere in the world lambkins frisked and peasants sang blithely at their toil (flat, perhaps, but still blithely), but to Mike at that moment the sky was black, and an icy wind blew over the face of the earth.

The tragedy had happened, and there was an end of it. He made no attempt to appeal against the sentence. He knew it would be useless, his father, when he made up his mind, having all the unbending tenacity of the normally easy-going man.

Mr. Jackson was sorry for Mike. He understood him, and for that reason he said very little now.

"I am sending you to Sedleigh," was his next remark.

Sedleigh! Mike sat up with a jerk. He knew Sedleigh by name--one of those schools with about a hundred fellows which you never hear of except when they send up their gymnasium pair to Aldershot, or their Eight to Bisley. Mike's outlook on life was that of a cricketer, pure and simple. What had Sedleigh ever done? What were they ever likely to do? Whom did they play? What Old Sedleigh had ever done anything at cricket? Perhaps they didn't even play cricket!

"But it's an awful hole," he said blankly.

Mr. Jackson could read Mike's mind like a book. Mike's point of view was plain to him. He did not approve of it, but he knew that in Mike's place and at Mike's age he would have felt the same. He spoke drily to hide his sympathy.

"It is not a large school," he said, "and I don't suppose it could play Wrykyn at cricket, but it has one merit--boys work there. Young Barlitt won a Balliol scholarship from Sedleigh last year." Barlitt was the vicar's son, a silent, spectacled youth who did not enter very largely into Mike's world. They had met occasionally at tennis-parties, but not much conversation had ensued. Barlitt's mind was massive, but his topics of conversation were not Mike's.

"Mr. Barlitt speaks very highly of Sedleigh," added Mr. Jackson.

Mike said nothing, which was a good deal better than saying what he would have liked to have said.