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CHAPTER I

MARLBOROUGH

1895

FIFTY YEARS AGO the Bath road was an almost deserted highway. The coaches had been superseded by the railways. The owners of turnpike stock had lost their money, and the internal combustion engine had not been invented. The Great Western Railway had gone north of the Wiltshire Downs to Swindon and south of them to Devizes, but the road still followed its old route, climbing up steadily from the Almshouses at Froxfield till it passed the gate into Savernake Forest. In those days no one thought it odd to find the main road from London closed by a gate to prevent the deer from straying. After the gate, the road climbed more steeply. The less vigorous bicyclist would dismount and push his machine up through a couple of miles of parkland dotted with clumps of beech and alive with rabbits. Then the trees clustered closer. On the left was the gateway of the great avenue that led to Tottenham House, one of the noblest beech avenues you could wish to see, with the branches meeting overhead and the white boles ranged like the columns of an unending nave. Farther on there was a glimpse of a cricket ground and a hospital, and then a prospect that made you catch your breath, however well you knew it. For as the road swung suddenly to the left, there came into sight a wide sweep of rolling chalk downs crowned with isolated

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clumps, or ringed with prehistoric camps. The road dropped steeply down to the valley of the Kennet, and at the bottom lay a line of red-roofed houses with a grey church tower at either end. A little to the right was the site of the Roman post of Cunetio, and it was not difficult for the long-sighted to follow the grassy bank that still showed the highway by which the legions marched to Cirencester.

It was exhilarating in those days for the bicyclist to coast down the empty hill and turn up into the High Street of Marlborough. Even today, cluttered as it is with motor cars and omnibuses, it is a noble street. Then it was quiet and spacious. It was wide enough for an O.T.C. to march past a saluting base in column of half companies, and long enough to oblige a master, who lived at its eastern end, to rise betimes if he was not to be late for early school. As the town is built along the slope of the down, but well below the crest, the houses on the northern side stood considerably higher than those on the south. Many were of red brick with roofs of mellow tiles. There still remained some of the great inns of coaching days, restored to prosperity by parents who came to visit their sons. Along the upper side for half its length there ran in front of the shops a penthouse, not wide enough to be of much use as a shelter but picturesque and old fashioned. And at the eastern end of the High Street two steep roads led up to the Common, known in old days as 'the Thorns'. Herd Street and Blowhorn Street they were called, for it was by them that the cattle of the burgesses used to make their way to their pasturage above and back to their byres.

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The instructor in carpentry at the college was a Mr Hornblower, and it was felt to be regrettable that he had never rented a house in Blowhorn Street. Marlborough in those days was remote, for a branch line from Savernake Junction had an infrequent service of slow trains. A Frenchman, instructed by his Government to visit and report on some English schools, commented with pity on the lot of the staff, condemned to a life of almost monastic isolation in a lonely countryside. But the pity was undeserved. Marlborough was not only beautiful; it was friendly. Its bigger houses then were not guest houses or private hotels, but the homes of hospitable folk: and perhaps men stuck closer to their work, when there was no temptation to take out the car. There was not only the little town, but the country round it. And what country it was! On the south stretched the Forest, brilliant with the vivid green of its beeches in spring and ablaze with gold and red in autumn. Westward lay the steep escarpment above the Pewsey Valley, stretching from Martinsell with its prehistoric pit village along the line of Wansdyke to Tan Hill. Northward were the gallops of the Manton stables, reaching right away to Four-Mile Clump and Barbary Camp, where you could gaze past Swindon to the far off Cotswold. Eastward a horse could carry you over Liddington Camp to the Berkshire Downs and the Vale of White Horse. In the Kennet Valley and in the hollows of the hills were delectable villages, Chilton Foliat, where in the churchyard were the graves of the Pophams who had died, as the legend said, under the curse that hung over the owner of Littlecote, Aldbourne with its primitive chair factory and

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its lathe driven in Homeric fashion by a single pine tree, Ramsbury where in early summer you could lean on the bridge in the Chase and watch the trout gobbling the May fly. For the archaeologist there was Stonehenge, not so accessible in the era before the motor car, but still spared the indignity of a barbed-wire fence. It was a twenty-mile ride to Stonehenge. For the last mile or two the shortest route was on a grassy track, where if the journey were made in the evening, it was quite possible to miss the way. If you were fortunate, you might be guided by a gleam of moonlight falling on the great, lonely stones. Within an easy bicycle ride were the Kennet Long Barrow and Seven Barrows Hill, and then the wonder of the great sanctuary at Silbury and Avebury. It was a country to be enjoyed on foot or in the saddle; every way there was firm, close turf and the open sky and the wind that blows over the Downs.

At its west end the High Street parted to right and left to enclose in its embrace St Peter's Church, and then after a sharp right-handed turn and another to the left, it became the road again and led on to Beckhampton and Chippenham and Bath. At the first turning there was a glimpse through iron gates of tall elms and a great red house, and from there to the second turning stretched the old stables and coach houses that in former days served its inmates.

Marlborough had her sufferings in the Civil War. She was a Roundhead town and lay on the road between the Parliamentary stronghold in London and the west. The King with his forces lay north at Oxford, and once

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Rupert's troopers rode over the Downs from 'the Thorns' and burst into the High Street through the yard of one of the inns, with the shout of 'A town for King Charles!' After that came a more dreadful enemy, fire, and many of the houses were destroyed.

When the troubles were over and men had leisure to repair the damage that had been done, Lord Seymour built a great house near the vast Mound, after Silbury Hill, the biggest barrow in England. Of the castle that stood there, no trace remains, except a part of the old moat and the name (perhaps) of the neighbouring parish of Preshute, said to be derived from 'près château'. There was no question of building another castle. Inigo Jones had shown the way, and Lord Seymour's architect designed for his patron the noble house, which is now the nucleus of the college. Serene and mellow after nearly three centuries it looks out on its broad lawn and the wych elms that surround the narrow enclosure, still pointed out as the Duelling Ground.

Here for a hundred years lived, in true eighteenth-century fashion, persons of quality. The Mound was tamed with shrubberies and winding walks. In the peace of the garden Thomson watched the changes of the year and wrote *The Seasons*.

As the century drew on, Nash had made Bath a centre for the fashionable world. The great road was alive with post-chaises and mail coaches, and Lord Seymour's house, transmuted into the Castle Inn, entertained many famous travellers, notably the Great Commoner, whose gout detained him there for weeks. A century later there still

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lingered the legend of a phantom coach, that drove silently up to the portico and set down at the old inn door its unsubstantial freight.

But another change was to come. The Great Western Railway was built. The coaches ceased to run. The road was deserted, and the Castle Inn closed its doors. The time was ripe for its next metamorphosis. The Victorian age was beginning, with its diffusion of wealth and its zeal for the education at least of the better nourished classes. Dr Arnold had shown how an old grammar school could be transformed; and new schools sprang up to meet the demand the older schools could not meet. Twenty years saw the foundation of Cheltenham, Marlborough, Wellington, Clifton, Haileybury, Radley, Brighton, Lancing, Bradfield, and Rossall. The new provision was not made by legislation. Parliament did not deal with elementary education till 1870 nor with secondary education till 1902. Cheltenham was founded by 'Proprietors', who were sanguine enough to hope for dividends. Wellington was a memorial. Most often the initiative came from the Church. It was churchmen who in 1843 decided to buy the forlorn old inn at Marlborough and to convert it into a school. Half the council of governors was to be in Holy Orders, with the Bishop of Salisbury as president. The scholars on the Foundation were to be sons of clergymen, and it was rightly anticipated that many boys, who were not on the Foundation, would also come from parsonages. The first adaptations of the buildings were simple. The bedrooms of the inn became dormitories and the stables class rooms. The masters dined in the old

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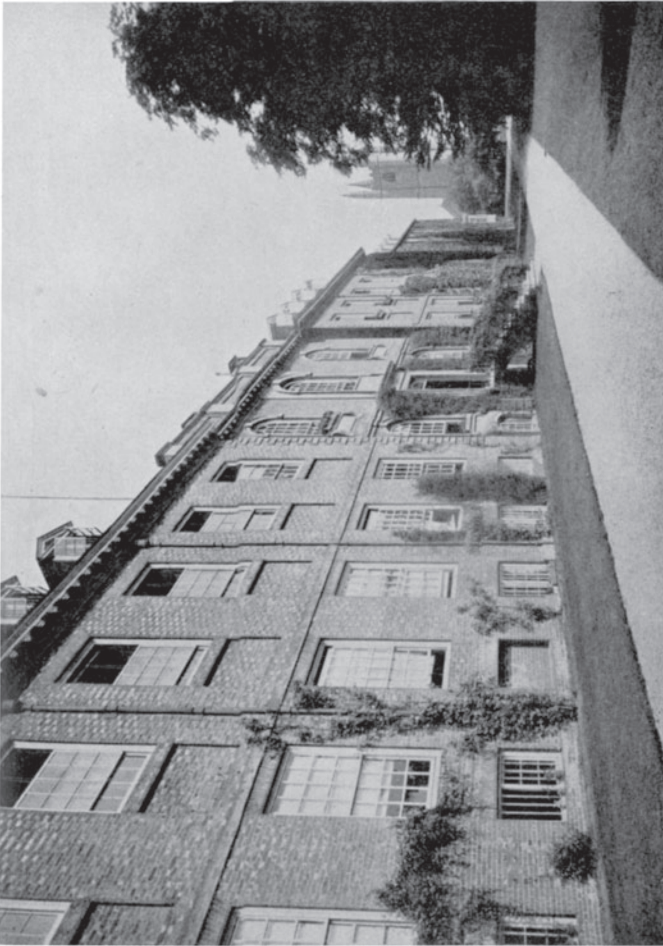

'C' House, Marlborough College

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coffee room, adorned with a surprising overmantel in oak, depicting Moses in the act of striking the rock. The bar was bereft of its casks and bottles and equipped with hat-pegs and wash basins. Two rooms looking over the garden were combined to form a library called after the Adderley who gave his name to the principal street in Cape Town. From this library the Master, but no one else, might borrow books; and fifty years after the opening of the school indignant members of the staff still told the story of how the Chairman of the Committee of the Council, which drew up the library regulations, had dismissed their claim to share the Master's privilege by damning all assistant masters.

There are still persons who persist in reciting the old calumny that parsons' sons turn out ill. No man who has taught at Marlborough can hear that calumny without impatience. For many years the rectories and vicarages, particularly of the west of England, sent their sons there, and good stuff they were. They enjoyed many advantages, some of them denied to their less fortunate successors. Generally they had brothers and sisters. They did not grow up like the poor, lonely children of today, thinking themselves the centre of their little world. They had learnt that others had claims besides themselves; and had realised that to be insistent in season and out of season in asserting their own claims was to run the risk of having their heads punched. They had enjoyed a little wholesome neglect, and had learnt to fend for themselves without the constant assistance of nurses and governesses. They had perforce to be content with simple pleasures (for parsons

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have never been wealthy folk) and could play games well, and enjoy them, without the lavish expenditure on plant and millinery to which the astute propaganda of tradesmen has accustomed their successors. They had never had much pocket money, and they made a little go a long way. The simplicity of the early days—and something of the injustice too—are illustrated by a story which the great Bursar, J. S. Thomas, used to tell of his experience as a boy. There was then no organisation of games by masters and no equipment provided by the school. Thomas persuaded some of his friends to subscribe sixpence each for the purchase of stumps and a cricket ball, and the names of the subscribers were duly recorded in a book. The book unfortunately was mislaid and came into the hands of the first Master, the unhappy Mr Wilkinson. Without enquiry he assumed that the book was a betting book and confined within gates for the rest of the term all the boys whose names were included. And in those days a term lasted for half a year. It is not surprising that his reign was not a long one. The nascent community needed a stronger hand; they poached the deer in the Forest for want of any better occupation on a half-holiday, and finally broke out into a rebellion which convinced the Council that their choice of a Master had not been wise.

But the parsonages, with their narrow means, bred boys who were not only simple in their pleasures, but intelligent, industrious and ambitious. They had no agreeable prospect of succeeding to the family estate or the control of the family business. Their future depended on their

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