

## CHAPTER 5

When Chips, dreaming through the hours at Mrs. Wickett's, recollected those days, he used to look down at his feet and wonder which one of it was that had performed so signal a service. That, the trivial cause of so many momentous happenings, was the one thing of which details evaded him. But he re-saw the glorious hump of the Gable (he had never visited the Lake District since), and the mouse grey depths of Wastwater under the Screes; he could re-smell the washed air after heavy rain, and re-follow the ribbon of the pass across to Sty Head. So clearly it lingered, that time of dizzy happiness, those evening strolls by the waterside, her cool voice and her gay laughter. She had been a very happy person, always. They had both been so eager, planning a future together; but he had been rather serious about it, even a little awed. It would be all right, of course, her coming to Brookfield; other housemasters were married. And she liked boys, she told him, and would enjoy living amongst them. "Oh, Chips, I'm so glad you are what you are. I was afraid you were a solicitor or a stockbroker or a dentist or a man with a big cotton business in Manchester, when I first met you, I mean. School mastering's so different, so important, don't you think? To be influencing those who are going to grow up and matter to the world...."

Chips said he hadn't thought of it like that – or, at least, not often. He did his best; that was all anyone could do in any job.

"Yes, of course, Chips. I do love you for saying simple things like that."

And one morning – another memory, gem-clear, when he turned to it – he had for some reason been afflicted with an acute desire to depreciate himself and all his attainments. He had told her of his only mediocre degree; of his occasional difficulties of discipline, of the certainty that he would never get a promotion, and of his complete ineligibility to marry a young and ambitious girl. And at the end of it all she had laughed in answer.



She had no parents and was married from the house of an aunt in Ealing. On the night before the wedding, when Chips left the house to return to his hotel, she said, with mock gravity: "This is an occasion, you know – this last farewell of ours. I feel rather like a new boy beginning his first term with you. Not scared, mind you – but just, for once, in a thoroughly respectful mood. Shall I call you 'sir' – or would 'Mr. Chips' be the right thing? 'Mr. Chips,' I think. Good-bye, then – Good-bye, Mr. Chips ....."

(A hansom clop-clopping in the roadway; green pale gas lamps flickering on a wet pavement; newsboys shouting something about South Africa; Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street)

"Good-bye, Mr. Chips....."

