

## CHAPTER 6

There had followed then a time of such happiness that Chips, remembering it long afterwards, hardly believed it could ever have happened before or since in the world. For his marriage was a triumphant success. Katherine conquered Brookfield as she had conquered Chips; she was immensely popular with boys and masters alike. Even the wives of the masters, tempted at first to be jealous of someone so young and lovely, could not long resist her charms.

But most remarkable of all was the change she made in Chips. Till his marriage he had been a dry and rather neutral sort of person; liked and thought well of by Brookfield in general, but not of the stuff that makes for great popularity or that stirs great affection. He had been at Brookfield for over a quarter of a century, long enough to have established himself as a decent fellow and a hard worker; but just too long for anyone to believe him capable of ever being much more. He had, in fact, already begun to sink into that creeping dry rot of pedagogy that is the worst and ultimate pitfall for the profession; giving the same lessons year after year had formed a groove into which the other affairs of his life adjusted themselves with insidious ease. He worked well; he was conscientious; he was a fixture that gave service, satisfaction, confidence, everything except inspiration.

And then came this astonishing girl-wife whom nobody had expected—least of all Chips himself. She made him, to all appearances, a new man; though most of the newness was really a warming to life of things that were old, imprisoned, and unguessed. His eyes gained sparkle; his mind, which was adequately if not brilliantly equipped, began to move more adventurously. The one thing he had always had, a sense of humour, blossomed into a sudden richness to which his years lent maturity. He began to feel a greater strength; his discipline improved to a point at which it could become, in a sense, less rigid; he became more popular. When he had first come to Brookfield he had aimed to be loved, honoured and obeyed – but obeyed, at any rate. Obedience he had secured, and honour had been granted him; but only now came love, the sudden love of boys for a man who was kind without being soft, who understood them well enough, but not too much, and whose private happiness linked him with their own. He began to make little jokes, the sort that school boys like – mnemonics and puns that raised laughs and at the same time imprinted something in the mind. There was one that never failed to please though it was only a sample of many others. Whenever his Roman History forms came to deal with the Lex Canuleia, the law that permitted patricians to marry plebeians, Chips used to add: “So that, you see, if Miss Plebs wanted Mr. Patrician to marry her, and he said he couldn’t, she probably replied: ‘Oh, yes, you can, you liar!’” Roars of laughter.

And Kathie broadened his views and opinions, also, giving him an outlook far beyond the roofs and turrets of Brookfield, so that he saw his country as something deep and gracious to which Brookfield was but one of many feeding streams. She had a cleverer brain than his, and he could not confute her ideas even if and when he disagreed with them; he remained, for instance, a Conservative in politics, despite all her radical socialist talk. But even where he did not accept, he absorbed; her young idealism worked upon his maturity to produce an amalgam- very gentle and wise.

Sometimes she persuaded him completely. Brookfield, for example, ran a mission in East London, to which boys and parents contributed generously with money but rarely with personal contact. It was Katherine who suggested that a team from the mission should come up to Brookfield and play one of the School's elevens at Soccer. The idea was so revolutionary that from anyone but Katherine it could not have survived its first frosty reception. To introduce a group of slum boys to the serene environment of better class youngsters seemed at first a wanton stirring of all kinds of things that had better be left untouched. The whole staff was against it, and the School, if its opinion could have been taken, was probably against it too. Everyone was certain that the East End lads would be hooligans, or else that they would be made to feel uncomfortable; anyhow, there would be "incidents," and everyone would be confused and upset. Yet Katherine persisted.

"Chips," she said, "they're wrong, you know, and I'm right. I'm looking ahead to the future, they and you are looking back to the past. England isn't always going to be divided into officers and other ranks. And those popular boys are just as important to England as Brookfield is. You've got to have them here, Chips. You can't satisfy your conscience by writing a cheque for a few guineas and keeping them at arm's length. Besides, they're proud of Brookfield - just as you are. Years hence, may be, boys of that sort will be coming here - a few of them, at any rate. Why not? Why ever not? Chips, dear, remember this is eighteen ninety seven - not sixty seven, when you were up at Cambridge. You got your ideas well stuck in those days, and good ideas they were too, a lot of them. But a few - just a few, Chips - want unsticking....."

Rather to her surprise he gave way and suddenly became a keen advocate of the proposal, and the *volte-face* was so complete that the authorities were taken unaware and found themselves consenting to the dangerous experiment. The boys from Poplar arrived at Brookfield one Saturday afternoon, played Soccer with the School's second team, were honourably defeated by seven goals to five, and later had high tea with the School team in the Dining Hall. They then met the Head and were shown over the School, and Chips saw them off at the railway station in the evening. Everything had passed without the slightest hitch of any kind, and it was clear that the visitors were taking away with them as fine an impression as they had left behind.

They took back with them also the memory of a charming woman who had met them and talked to them; for once, years later, during the War, a private stationed at a big military camp near Brookfield called on Chips and said he had been one of that first visiting team. Chips gave him tea and chatted with him, till at length, shaking hands, the man said: "And' ow's the missus, sir? I remember 'er very well."

"Do you?" Chips answered eagerly. "Do you remember her?"

"Rather. I should think anyone would."

And Chips replied: "They don't, you know. At least, not here. Boys come and go, new faces all the time, memories don't last, even masters don't stay for ever. Since last year – when old Gribble retired – he's – um – the School butler – there hasn't been anyone here who ever saw my wife. She died, you know, less than a year after your visit. In ninety-eight."

"I'm real sorry to 'ear that, sir. There's two or three o' my pals, anyhow, who remember 'er clear as anything, though we did only see 'er that wurst. Yes, we remember 'er all right."

"I'm very glad.... That was a grand day we all had – and a fine game, too."

"One o' the best days that I ever 'ad in me life. Wish it was then and not nah, straight, I do. I'm off to Frawncc to-morrer."

A month or so later Chips heard that he had been killed at Pssschendaele.

