

CHAPTER 7

And so it stood, a warm and vivid patch in his life, casting a radiance that glowed in a thousand recollections. Twilight at Mrs. Wickett's, when the school bell clanged for call-over, brought them, back to him in a cloud -- Katherine scampering along the stone corridors, laughing beside him at some "howler" in an essay he was marking, taking the 'cello part in a Mozart trio for the School concert - her creamy arm sweeping over the brown sheen of the instrument. She had been a good player and a fine musician. And Katherine furred and muffed for the December house-matches, Katherine at the garden party that followed Speech Day Prize-giving, Katherine tendering her advice in any little problem that arose. Good advice, too - which he did not always take, but which always influenced him.

"Chips, dear, I'd let them off if I were you. After all, it's nothing very serious."

"I know. I'd like to let them off, but if I do I'm afraid they'll do it again."

"Try telling them that, frankly, and give them the chance."

"I might."

And there were other things, occasionally, that were serious.

"You know, Chips, having all these hundreds of boys cooped up here is really an unnatural arrangement, when you come to think about it. So that when anything does occur that oughtn't to, don't you think it's a bit unfair to come down on them as if it were their own fault for being here?"

"Don't know about that, Kathie, but I do know that, for everybody's sake, we have to be pretty strict about this sort of thing. One black sheep can contaminate others".

"After he himself has been contaminated to begin with. After all, that's what probably did happen, isn't it?"

"May be. We can't help it. Anyhow, I believe Brookfield is better than a lot of other schools. All the more reason to keep it so."

"But this boy, Chips..... You're going to sack him?"

"The Head probably will, when I tell him."

"And you're going to tell the Head?"

"It's a duty, I'm afraid."

"Couldn't you think about it a bit Talk to the boy again Find out how it began After all - apart from this business - isn't he rather a nice boy?"

"Oh, he's all right."

“Then, Chips dear, don’t you think there ought to be some other way....”

And so on. About once in ten times he was adamant and wouldn’t be persuaded. In about half of these exceptional cases he afterwards rather wished he had taken her advice. And years later, whenever he had trouble with a boy, he was always at the mercy of a softening wave of reminiscence; the boy would stand there, waiting to be told his punishment, and would see, if he were observant, the brown eyes twinkle into a shine that told him all was well. But he did not guess that at such a moment Chips was remembering something that had happened long before he was born, that Chips was thinking. Young ruffian, I’m hanged if I can think of any reason to let him off, but I’ll bet she would have done!

But she had not always pleaded for leniency. On rather rare occasions she urged severity where Chips was inclined to be forgiving. “I don’t like his type, Chips. He’s too cocksure of himself. If he’s looking for trouble I should certainly let him have it.”

What a host of little incidents, all deep-buried in the past – problems that had once been urgent, arguments that had once been keen, anecdotes that were funny only because one remembered the fun. Did any emotion really matter when the last trace of it had vanished from human memory; and if that were so, what a crowd of emotions clung to him as to their last home before annihilation! He must be kind to them, must treasure them in his mind before their long sleep. That affairs of Archer’s resignation, for instance – a queer business, that was. And that affair about the rat that Dunster put in the organ-loft while old Ogilvie was taking choir-practice. Ogilvie was dead and Dunster drowned at Jutland; of others who had witnessed or heard of the incident, probably most had forgotten. And it had been like that, with other incidents, for centuries. He had a sudden vision of thousands and thousands of boys, from the age of Elizabeth onwards; dynasty upon dynasty of masters; long epochs of Brookfield history that had left not even a ghostly record. Who knew why the old fifth-form room was called “the Pit”? There was probably a reason, to begin with; but it had since been lost – lost like the lost books for Livy. And what happened at Brookfield when Cromwell fought at Naseby, near by? How did Brookfield react to the great scare of the forty-five? Was there a whole holiday when news came of Waterloo? And so on, up to the earliest time that he himself could remember – 1870, and Wetherby saying, by way of small talk after their first and only interview: “looks as if we shall have to settle with the Prussians ourselves one of these fine days, eh?”

When Chips remembered things like this he often felt that he would write them down and make a book of them; and during his years at Mrs. Wickett’s he sometimes went even so far as to make desultory notes in an exercise-book. But he was soon brought up against difficulties – the chief one being that writing tired him, both mentally and physically. Somehow, too, his recollections lost

much of their flavour when they were written down; that story about Rushton and the sack of potatoes for instance – it would seem quite tame in print, but, Lord, how funny it had been, at the time! It was funny, too, to remember it; though, perhaps, if you didn't remember Rushton.... and who would, anyway, after all those years?.... it was such a long time ago.... Mrs. Wickett, did you ever know a fellow named Rushton; Before your time, I daresay.... Went to Burma in some Government job..... or was it Borneo..... very funny fellow, Rushton.....

And there he was, dreaming again before the fire, dreaming of times and incidents in which he alone could take secret interest. Funny and sad, comic and tragic, they all mixed up in his mind, and some day, however hard it proved, he would sort them out and make a book of them.....