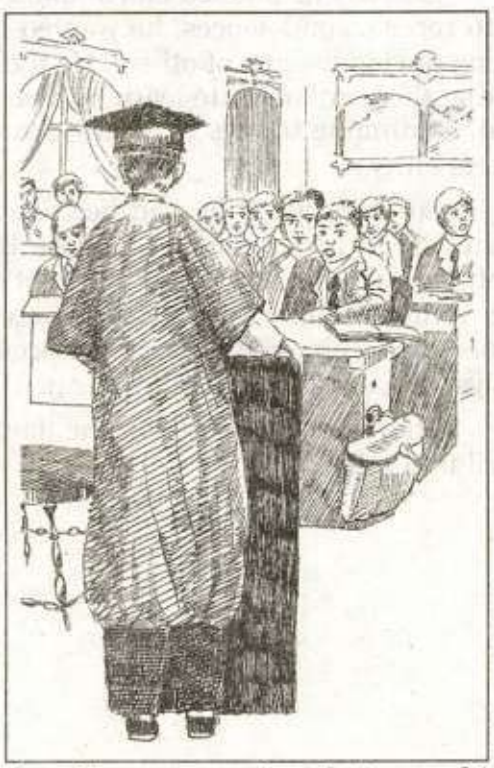
CHAPTER 9

Chips changed his more commodious apartment in School House for his old original bachelor quarter. He thought at first he would give up his house mastership, but the Head persuaded him otherwise; and later he was glad. The work gave him something to do, filled up an emptiness in his mind and heart. He was different; everyone noticed it. Just as marriage had added something, so did bereavement, after the first stupor of grief he became suddenly the kind of man whom boys, at any rate, unhesitatingly classed as "old." It was not that he was less active – he could still knock up a half-century on the cricket-field; nor was it that he had lost any interest or keenness in his work. Actually, too, his hair had been greying for years; yet now, for the first time, people seemed to notice it. He was fifty. Once, after some energetic fives, during which he had played as well as many a fellow half his age, he overheard a boy saying: "Not half bad for an old chap like him."

Chips, when he was over eighty, used to recount that incident with many chuckles. "Old at fifty, eh? Umph – it was Naylor who said that, and Naylor can't be far short of fifty himself by now! I wonder if he still thinks that fifty's such an age? Last I heard of him he was lawyering, and lawyers live long –– look at Halsbury–umph – Chancellor at eighty-two, and died at ninety-nine. There's an–umph–age for you! Too old at fifty - why, fellows like that are too young at fifty.... I was myself .... a mere infant.....".



And there was a sense in which it was true. For with the new century there settled upon Chips a mellowness that gathered all his developing mannerisms and his oft-repeated jokes into a single harmony. No longer did he have those slight and occasional disciplinary troubles, or feel diffident about his own work and worth. He found that his pride in Brookfield reflected back, giving him cause for pride in himself and his position. It was a service that gave him freedom to be supremely and completely himself. He had won, by seniority and ripeness, an uncharted no-man's-land of privilege; he had acquired the right to those gentle eccentricities that so often attack schoolmasters and parsons. He

wore his gown till it was almost too tattered to hold together; and when he stood on the wooden bench by Big Hall steps to take call-over, it was with an air of mystic abandonment to ritual. He held the School-list, a long sheet curling over a board; and each boy, as he passed, spoke his own name for Chips to verify and then tick off on the list. That verifying glance was an easy and favourite subject of mimicry throughout the School––steel–rimmed spectacles slipping down the nose, eyebrows lifted, one a little higher than other, a gaze half rapt, half quizzical. And on windy days with gown and white hair and School-list fluttering in uproarious confusion, the whole thing became a comic turn sandwiched between afternoon games and the return to classes.

Some of those names, in little snatches of a chorus, recurred to him ever afterwards without any effort of memory. "..... Ainsworth, Attwood, Avonmore, Babcock, Baggs, Barnard, Bassenthwaite, Battersby, Beccles, Bedford, Marshall, Bentley, Best....."

Another one:

"..... Unsley, Vailes, Wadham, Wagstaff, Wallington, Waters Primus, Waters Secundus, Watling, Waveney, Webb....."

And yet another that comprised, as he used to tell his fourth form Latinists, an excellent example of a hexameter:

"..... Lancaster, Latton, Lemare, Lytton, Bosworth, MacGonigall Mansfield....."

Where had they all gone to, he often pondered; those threads he had once held together, how far had they scattered, some to break, others to weave into unknown patterns? The strange randomness of the world beguiled him, that randomness which never would, so long as the world lasted, give meaning to those choruses again.

And behind Brookfield, as one may glimpse a mountain behind another mountain when the mist clears, he saw the world of change and conflict; and he saw it, more than he realized, with the remembered eyes of Kathie. She had not been able to bequeath him all her mind, still less the brilliance of it; but she had left him with a calmness and a poise that accorded well with his own inward emotions. It was typical of him that he did not share the general jingo bitterness against the Boers. Not that he was a pro-Boer–he was far too traditional for that, and he disliked the kind of people who were pro-Boers; but still, it did cross his mind at times that the Boers were engaged in a struggle that had a curious similarity to those of certain English history book heroes–Hereward the Wake, for instance, or Caractacus. He once tried to shock his fifth form by suggesting this, but they only thought it was one of his little jokes.

However heretical he might be about the Boers, he was orthodox about Mr. Lloyd George and the famous Budget. He did not care for either of them. And when, years later, L.G. came as the guest of honour to a Brookfield Speech

Day, Chips said, on being presented to him: "Mr. Lloyd George, I am nearly old enough–umph–umph–to remember you as a young man, and – umph – I confess that you seem to me–umph–to have improved–umph – a great deal." The Head, standing with them, was rather aghast; but L.G. laughed heartily and talked to Chips more than to anyone else during the ceremonial that followed.

"Just like Chips," was commented afterwards. "He gets away with it. I suppose at that age anything you say to anybody is all right...."