

CHAPTER 10

In 1900 old Meldrum, who had succeeded Wetherby as Head and had held office for three decades, died suddenly from pneumonia; and in the interval before the appointment of a successor, Chips became Acting Head of Brookfield. There was just the faintest chance that the Governors might make the appointment a permanent one; but Chips was not really disappointed when they brought in a mere youngster of thirty-seven, glittering with Firsts and Blues and with the kind of personality that could reduce Big Hall to silence by the mere lifting of an eyebrow. Chips was not in the running with that kind of person; he never had been and never would be, and he knew it. He was an altogether milder and less ferocious animal.

Those years before his retirement in 1913 were studded with sharply remembered pictures.

A May morning; the clang of the School bell at an unaccustomed time; everyone summoned to assemble in Big Hall. Ralston, the new Head, very pontifical and aware of himself, fixing the multitude with a cold presaging severity. "You will all be deeply grieved to hear that His Majesty King Edward the Seventh died this morning.... There will be no school this afternoon, but a service will be held in the Chapel at four-thirty."

A summer morning on the railway line near Brookfield. The railway men were on strike, soldiers were driving the engines, stones had been thrown at trains. Brookfield boys were patrolling the line, thinking the whole business great fun. Chips, who was in charge, stood a little way off, talking to a man at the gate of a cottage. Young Cricklade approached. "Please, sir, what shall we do if we meet any strikers?"

"Would you like to meet one?"

"I - I don't know, sir."

God bless the boy--he talked of them as if they were queer animals out of a Zoo! "Well, here you are then--umph--you can meet Mr. Jones--he's a striker. When he's on duty he has charge of the signal box at the station. You've put your life in his hands many a time."

Afterwards the story went round the School: There was Chips, talking to a striker. Talking to a striker. Might have been quite friendly, the way they were talking together.

Chips, thinking it over a good many times, always added to himself that Kathie would have approved, and would also have been amused.

Because always, whatever happened and however the avenues of politics twisted and curved, he had faith in England, in English flesh and blood, and in Brookfield as a place whose ultimate worth depended on whether she fitted

herself into the English scene with dignity and without disproportion. He had been left a vision that grew clearer with each year—of an England for whom days of ease were nearly over, of a nation steering into channels where a hair's breadth of error might be catastrophic. He remembered the Diamond Jubilee; there had been a whole holiday at Brookfield, and he had taken Kathie to London to see the procession. That old and legendary lady, sitting in her carriage like some crumbling wooden doll, had symbolized impressively so many things that, like herself, were nearing an end. Was it only the century, or was it an epoch?

And then that frenzied Edwardian decade, like an electric lamp that goes brighter and whiter just before it burns itself out.

Strikes and lock-outs, champagne suppers and unemployed marchers, Chinese labour, tariff reform, H.M.S. Dreadnought, Marconi, Home Rule for Ireland, Doctor Crippen, suffragettes, the lines of Chatalja.... And April evening, windy and rainy; the fourth form construing Virgil, not very intelligently, for there was exciting news in the papers; young Grayson, in particular was careless and preoccupied. A quiet, nervous boy.

"Grayson, stay behind—umph—after the rest."

Then: "Grayson, I don't want to be—umph—severe, because you are generally pretty good — umph — in your work, but to-day — you don't seem — umph — to have been trying at all. Is anything the matter?"

"N — no, sir."

"Well — umph — we'll say no more about it — but — umph — I shall expect better things next time."

Next morning it was noised around the School that Grayson's father had sailed on the Titanic, and that no news had yet come through, as to his fate.

Grayson was excused lessons; for a whole day the School centred emotionally upon his anxieties. Then came news that his father had been among those rescued.

Chips shook hands with the boy. "Well, umph — I'm delighted, Grayson. A happy ending. You must be feeling pretty pleased with life."

"Y — yes, sir."

A quiet, nervous boy. And it was Grayson Senior, not junior with whom Chips was destined later to condole.