

CHAPTER 11

And then the row with Ralston. Funny thing, Chips had never liked him; he was efficient, ruthless, ambitious, but not, somehow, very likeable. He had, admittedly, raised the status of Brookfield as a school, and for the first time in memory there was a longish waiting-list. Ralston was a live wire; a fine power-transmitter, but you had to beware of him.

Chips had never bothered to beware of him; he was not attracted by the man, but he served him willingly enough and quite loyally. Or rather, he served Brookfield. He knew that Ralston did not like him, either; but that didn't seem to matter. He felt himself sufficiently protected by age and seniority from the fate of other masters whom Ralston had failed to like.

Then suddenly, in 1908 when he had just turned sixty, came Ralston's urbane ultimatum. "Mr. Chipping, have you ever thought, you would like to retire?"

Chips stared about him in that book-lined study, startled by the question, wondering why Ralston should have asked it. He said, at length: "no - umph - I can't say - that - umph - I have thought much about it - umph - yet."

"Well, Mr. chipping, the suggestion is there for you to consider. The Governors would, of course, agree to your being adequately pensioned."

Abruptly Chips flamed up. "But - umph - I don't want - to retire. I don't - umph - need to consider it."

"Nevertheless, I suggest that you do."

"But - umph - I don't see - why - I should!"

"In that case, things are going to be a little difficult."

"Difficult? Why - difficult."

And then they set, Ralston getting cooler and harder, Chips getting warmer and more passionate, till at last Ralston said, icily: "Since you force me to use plain words, Mr. Chipping, you shall have them. For some time past, you haven't been pulling your weight here. Your methods of teaching are slack and old-fashioned; your personal habits are slovenly; and you ignore my instructions in a way which, in a younger man, I should regard as rank insubordination. It won't do, Mr. Chipping, and you must ascribe it to my forbearance that I have put up with it so long."

"But - " Chips began, in sheer bewilderment; and then he took up isolated words out of that extraordinary indictment. "Slovenly - umph - you said?"

"Yes, look at the gown you're wearing. I happen to know that gown of yours is a subject of continual amusement throughout the School."

Chips knew it, too, but it had never seemed to him a very regrettable matter.

He went on: "And – you also said – umph – something about insubordination?"

"No, I didn't. I said that in a younger man I should have regarded it as that. In your case it's probably a mixture of slackness and obstinacy. This question of Latin pronunciation, for instance – I think I told you years ago that I wanted the new style used throughout the School. The other masters obeyed me; you prefer to stick to your old methods, and the result is simply chaos and inefficiency."

At last Chips had something tangible that he could tackle. "Oh, that?" he answered scornfully. "Well, I – umph – I admit that I don't agree with the new pronunciation. I never did. Umph – a lot of nonsense, in my opinion. Making boys say 'Kickero' at school when – umph for the rest of their lives they'll say 'Cicero' – if they ever – umph – say it at all. And instead of 'vicissim' – God bless my soul – you'd make them say – 'We kiss 'im! Umph – umph!" And he chuckled momentarily, forgetting that he was in Ralston's study and not in his own friendly room.

"Well, there you are, Mr. Chipping – that's just an example of what I complain of. You hold one opinion and I hold another, and since you decline to give way, there can't very well be any alternative. I aim to make Brookfield a thoroughly up-to-date school. I'm a science man myself, but for all that, I have no objection to the classics – provided that they are taught efficiently. Because they are dead languages is no reason why they should be dealt with in a dead educational technique. I understand, Mr. Chipping, that your Latin and Greek lessons are exactly the same as they were when I began here ten years ago?"

Chips answered, slowly and with pride: "For that matter – umph – they are the same as when your predecessor – Mr. Meldrum – came here, and that – umph – was thirty-eight years ago. We began here, Mr. Meldrum and I, in – umph – 1870. And it was – um – Mr. Meldrum's predecessor, Mr. Wetherby, who first approved my syllabus, 'You'll take the Cicero for the fourth,' he said to me. Cicero, too – not Kickero!"

"Very interesting, Mr. Chipping, but once again it proves my point – you live too much in the past, and not enough in the present and future. Times are changing, whether you realize it or not. Modern parents are beginning to demand something more for their three years school-fees than a few scraps of languages that nobody speaks. Besides, your boys don't learn even what they're supposed to learn. None of them last year got through the Lower Certificate."

And suddenly, in a torrent of thoughts too pressing to be put into words, Chips made answer to himself. These examinations and certificates and so on – what did they matter? And all this efficiency and up-to-dateness – what did that

matter, either? Ralston was trying to run Brookfield like a factory – a factory for turning out a snob-culture based on money and machines. The old gentlemanly traditions of family and broad acres were changing, as doubtless they were bound to; but instead of widening them to form a genuine inclusive democracy of duke and dustman, Ralston was narrowing them upon the single issue of a fat banking account. There never had been so many rich men's sons at Brookfield. The Speech Day Garden Party was like Ascot. Ralston met these wealthy fellows in London clubs and persuaded them that Brookfield was the coming school, and since they couldn't buy their way into Eton or Harrow, they greedily swallowed the bait. Awful fellows, some of them – though others were decent enough. Financiers, company promoters, pill-manufacturers. One of them gave his son five pounds a week pocket-money. Vulgar.... Ostentatious.... All the hectic rotten ripeness of the age.... No sense of proportion. And it was a sense of proportion, above all things that Brookfield ought to teach – not so much Latin or Greek or Chemistry or Mechanics. And you couldn't expect to test that sense of proportion by setting papers and granting certificates.....

All this flashed through his mind in an instant of protest and indignation, but he did not say a word of it. He merely gathered his tattered gown together and with an "umph – umph" walked a few paces away. He had had enough of the argument. At the door he turned and said: "I don't – umph – intend to resign – and you can – umph – do what you like about it!"

Looking back upon that scene in the calm perspective of a quarter of a century, Chips could find it in his heart to feel a little sorry for Ralston. Particularly when, as it happened, Ralston had been in such complete ignorance of the forces he was dealing with. So, for that matter, had Chips himself. Neither had correctly estimated the toughness of Brookfield tradition, and its readiness to defend itself and its defenders. For it had so chanced that a small boy, waiting to see Ralston that morning, had been listening outside the door during the whole of the interview; he had been thrilled by it, naturally, and had told his friends. Some of these, in a surprisingly short time, had told their parents; so that very soon it was common knowledge that Ralston had insulted Chips and had demanded his resignation. The amazing result was a spontaneous outburst of sympathy and partisanship such as Chips, in his wildest dreams, had never envisaged. He found, rather to his astonishment, that Ralston was thoroughly unpopular; he was, feared and respected, but not liked; and in this issue of Chips the dislike rose to a point where it conquered fear and demolished even respect. There was talk of having some kind of public riot in the School if Ralston succeeded in banishing Chips. The masters, many of them young men who agreed that Chips was hopelessly old-fashioned, rallied round him nevertheless because they hated Ralston's slave driving and saw in the old veteran a likely champion. And one day the Chairman of the Governors, Sir John Rivers, visited Brookfield, ignored Ralston, and went direct to Chips. "A fine fellow, Rivers," Chips would say, telling the story to Mrs. Wickett for the

dozenth time. "Not – umph – a very brilliant boy in class – I remember he could never – umph – master his verbs. And now – umph – I see in the papers – they've made him – umph – a baronet. It just shows you – umph – it just shows you."

Sir John had said, on that morning in 1908, taking Chips by the arm as they walked round the deserted cricket pitches: "Chips, old boy, I hear you've been having the deuce of a row with Ralston. Sorry to hear about it, for your sake – but I want you to know that the Governors are with you to a man. We don't like the fellow a great deal. Very clever and all that, but a bit too clever, if you ask me. Claims to have doubled the School's endowment funds by some monkeying on the Stock Exchange – daresay he has, but a chap like that wants watching. So if he starts chucking his weight about with you, tell him very politely he can go to the devil. The Governors don't want you to resign. Brookfield wouldn't be the same without you, and they know it. We all know it. You can stay here till you're a hundred if you feel like it – indeed it's our hope that you will."

And at that – both then and often when he recounted it afterwards – Chips broke down.