

CHAPTER 13

The War years.

The first shock, and then the first optimism. The Battle of the Marne, the Russian stream-roller, Kitchener.

“Do you think it will last long, sir?”

Chips, questioned as he watched the first trial games of the season, gave quite a cheery answer. He was, like thousands of others, hopelessly wrong; but unlike thousands of others, he did not afterwards conceal the fact. “We ought to have – um – finished it – um – by Christmas. The Germans are already beaten. But why? Are you thinking of – um – joining up, Forrester?”

Joke – because Forrester was the smallest new boy Brookfield had ever had – about four feet high above his muddy football boots. (But not so much a joke, when you came to think of it afterwards; for he was killed in 1918 – shot down in flames over Cambrai.) But one didn’t guess what lay ahead. It seemed tragically sensational when the first Old Brookfieldian was killed in action – in September. Chips thought, when that news came, a hundred years ago boys from this school were fighting against the French. Strange, in a way, that the sacrifices of one generation should so cancel out those of another. He tried to express this to Blades, the Head of School House; but Blades, eighteen years old and already in training for a cadetship, only laughed. What had all that history stuff to do with it, anyhow? Just old Chips with one of his queer ideas, that’s all.

1915. Armies clenched in deadlock from the sea to Switzerland. The Dardanelles. Gallipoli. Military camps springing up quite near Brookfield; soldiers using the playing-fields for sports and training; swift development of Brookfield O.T.C. Most of the younger masters gone or in uniform. Every Sunday night, in the chapel after evening service, Chatteris read out the names of old boys killed, together with short biographies. Very moving, but Chips, in the back pew under the gallery, thought: They are only names to him, he doesn’t see their faces as I do.....

1916. The Somme Battle. Twenty-three names read out one Sunday evening.

Towards the close of that catastrophic July, Chatteris talked to Chips one afternoon at Mrs. Wickett’s. He was over-worked and over-worried and looked very ill. “To tell you the truth, Chipping, I’m not having too easy a time here. I’m thirty nine, you know, and unmarried, and lots of people seem to think they know what I ought to do. Also, I happen to be diabetic, and couldn’t pass the blindest M.O., but I don’t see why I should pin a medical certificate on my front-door.”

Chips hadn't known anything about this; it was a shock to him, for he liked Chatteris.

The latter continued: "You see how it is – Ralston filled the place up with young men, all very good, of course – but now most of them have joined up and the substitutes are pretty dreadful, on the whole. They poured ink down a man's neck in prep. one night last week – silly fool – got hysterical. I have to take classes myself, take prep. for fools like that, work till mid-night every night, and get cold shouldered as a slacker on top of everything. I can't stand it much longer. If things don't improve next term I shall have a breakdown."

"I do sympathise with you," Chips said.

"I hoped you would. And that brings me to what I came here to ask you. Briefly, my suggestion is that – if you felt equal to it and would care to – how about coming back here for a while? You look pretty fit, and, of course, you know all the ropes. I don't mean a lot of hard work for you – you needn't take anything strenuously – just a few odd jobs here and there, as you choose. What I'd like you for more than anything else is not for the actual work you'd do, though that, naturally, would be very valuable – but for your help in other ways – in just belonging here. There's nobody ever been more popular than you were, and are still – you'd help to hold things together if there were any danger of them flying to bits. And perhaps there is that danger....."

Chips answered, breathlessly and with a holy joy in his heart: "I'll come....."