

CHAPTER 14

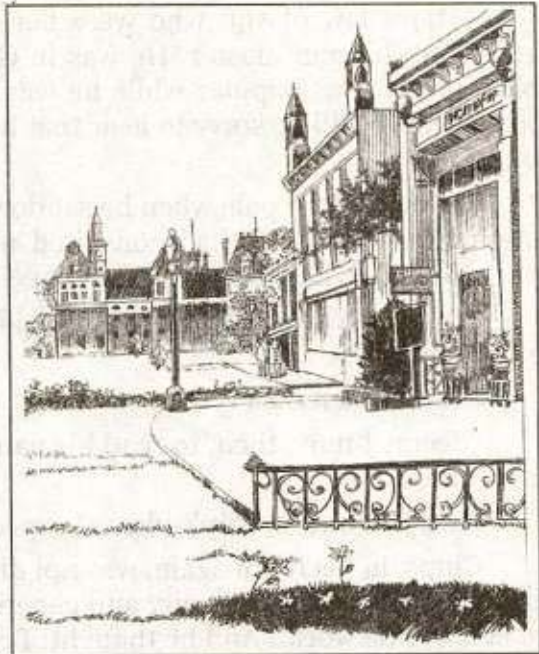
He still kept on his rooms with Mrs. Wickett; indeed, he still lived there; but every morning, about half-past ten, he put on his coat and muffler and crossed the road to the School. He felt very fit, and actual work was not taxing. Just a few forms in Latin and Roman History – the old lessons – even the old pronunciation. The same joke about *Lex Canuleia* – there was a new generation that had not heard it, and he was absurdly gratified by the success it achieved. He felt a little like a music-hall favourite returning to the boards after a positively last appearance.

They all said how marvellous it was that he knew every boy's name and face so quickly. They did not guess how closely he had kept in touch from across the road.

He was a grand success altogether. In some strange way he did, and they all knew and felt it, help things. For the first time in his life he felt necessary – and necessary to something that was nearest his heart. There is no sublimer feeling in the world, and it was his at last.

He made new jokes, too – about the O.T.C. and the food rationing system and the anti-air-raid blinds that had to be fitted on all the windows. There was a mysterious kind of rissole that began to appear on the School menus on Mondays, and Chips called it "*abhorrendum*" – "meat to be abhorred". The story went round – heard Chips's latest?

Chatteris fell ill during the winter of 1917, and again, for the second time in his life, Chips became Acting Head of Brookfield. Then in April, Chatteris died, and the Governors asked Chips if he would carry on "for the duration." He said he would, if they would refrain from appointing him officially. From that last honour, within his reach at last, he shrank instinctively, feeling himself in so many ways unequal to it. He said to Rivers: "You see, I'm not a young man and I don't want people to – um – expect a lot from me. I'm like all these new colonels and majors you see everywhere – just a war-time fluke. A ranker, that's all I am really."



1917. 1918. Chips lived through it all. He sat in the headmaster's study every morning, handling problems, dealing with complaints and requests. Out of vast experience had emerged a kindly, gentle confidence in himself. To keep a sense of proportion, that was the main thing. So much of the world was losing it: as well keep it where it had, or ought to have, a congenial home.

On Sundays in chapel it was he who now read out the tragic list, and sometimes it was seen and heard that he was in tears over it. Well, why not? The School said; he was an old man; they might have despised anyone else for the weakness.

One day he got a letter from Switzerland, from friends there; it was heavily censored, but conveyed some news. On the following Sunday, after the names and biographies of old boys, he paused a moment and then added:

"Those few of you who were here before the War will remember Max Staefel, the German master. He was in Germany, visiting his home, when war broke out. He was popular while he was here, and made many friends. Those who knew him will be sorry to hear that he was killed last week, on the Western Front."

He was a little pale when he sat down afterwards, aware that he had done something unusual. He had consulted nobody about it, anyhow no one else could be blamed. Later, outside the chapel, he heard an argument:

"On the Western Front, Chips said. Does that mean he was fighting for the Germans?"

"I suppose it does."

"Seems funny, then, to read his name out with all the others. After all, he was an enemy."

"Oh, just one of Chip's ideas, I expect. The old boy still has'em."

Chips, in his room again, was not displeased by the comment. Yes, he still had'em – those ideas of dignity and generosity that were becoming increasingly rare in a frantic world. And he thought: Brookfield will take them, too, from me, but it wouldn't from anyone else.

Once, asked for his opinion of bayonet-practice being carried on near the cricket pavilion, he answered with that lazy, slightly asthmatic intonation that had been so often and so extravagantly imitated: "It seems – to me – umph – a very vulgar way of killing people."

The yarn was passed, on and joyously appreciated – how Chips had told some big brass hat from the War Office that bayonet-fighting was vulgar. Just like Chips. And they found an adjective for him – an adjective just beginning to be used: he was "pre-war".