

## CHAPTER 15

And once, on a night of full moonlight, the air-raid warning was given while Chips was taking his lower-fourth in Latin. The guns began almost instantly, and as there was plenty of shrapnel falling about outside, it seemed to Chips that they might just as well stay where they were, on the ground floor of School House. It was pretty solidly built and made as good a dug-out as Brookfield could offer; and as for a direct hit, well, they could not expect to survive that, wherever they were.

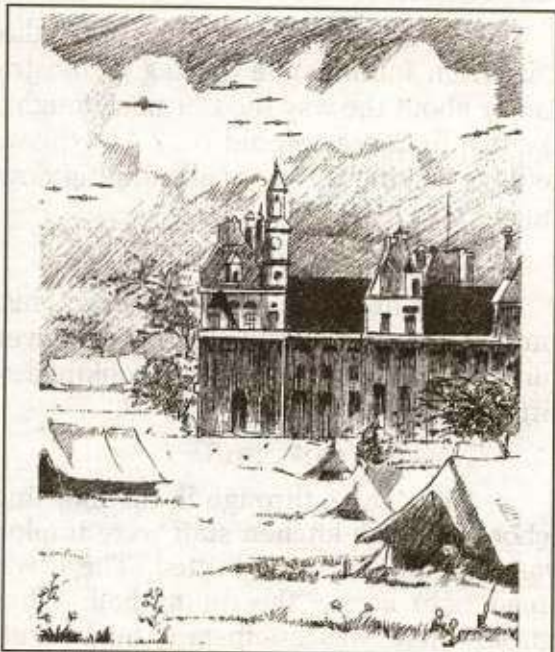
So he went on with his Latin, speaking a little louder amidst the reverberating crashes of the guns and the shrill whine of anti-aircraft shells. Some of the boys were nervous; few were able to be attentive. He said gently: "It may possibly seem to you, Robertson - at this particular moment in the world's history - umph - that the affairs of Caesar in Gaul some two thousand years ago - are - umph - of some what secondary importance - and that - umph - the irregular conjugation of the verb 'tollo' is - umph - even less important still. But believe me - umph - my dear Robertson - that is not really the case."

Just then there came a particularly loud explosion - quite near. "You cannot - umph - judge the importance of things - umph - by the noise they make. Oh, dear me, no." A little chuckle. "And these things - umph - that have mattered - for thousands of years - are not going to be - snuffed out - because some stink-merchant - in his laboratory - invents a new kind of mischief." Titters of nervous laughter; for Burrow, the pale, lean, and medically unfit science master, was nicknamed the Stink-Merchant. Another explosion - nearer still. "Let us - um - resume our work. If it is fate that we are soon to be - umph - interrupted, let us be found employing ourselves in something - umph - really appropriate. Is there any one who will volunteer to construe?"

Maynard, chubby, dauntless, clever, and impudent, said: "I will, sir."

"Very good. Turn to page forty and begin at the bottom line."

The explosions still continued deafeningly; the whole building shook as if it were being lifted off its foundations. Maynard found the page, which was some way ahead, and began shrilly:





*"Genus hoc erat pugna"* – this was the kind of fight – *"quo se Germani exercuerant"* – in which the Germans busied themselves – Oh, sir, that's good – that's really very funny indeed, sir – one of your very best – "

Laughing began, and Chips added: "Well – umph – you can see – now – that these dead languages – umph – can come to life again – sometimes – eh? Eh?"

Afterwards they learned that five bombs had fallen in and around Brookfield, the nearest of them just outside the School grounds. Nine persons had been killed.

The story was told, retold, embellished. "The dear old boy never turned a hair. Even found some old tag to illustrate what was going on. Something in Caesar about the way the Germans fought. You wouldn't think there were things like that in Caesar, would you? And the way Chips laughed.... you know the way he does laugh... the tears all running down his face.... never seen him laugh so much....."

He was a legend.

With his old and tattered gown, his walk that was just beginning to break into a stumble, his mild eyes peering over the steel-rimmed spectacles, and his quaintly humorous sayings, Brookfield would not have had an atom of him different.

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918.

News came through in the morning; a whole holiday was decreed for the School, and the kitchen staff were implored to provide as cheerful a spread as war-time rationing permitted. There was much cheering and singing and a bread fight across the dining-hall. When Chips entered in the midst of the uproar there was an instant hush, and then wave upon wave of cheering; everyone gazed on him with eager, shining eyes, as on a symbol of victory. He walked to the dais, seeming as if he wished to speak; they made silence for him, but he shook his head after a moment, smiled, and walked away again.

It had been a damp, foggy day, and the walk across the quadrangle to the dining-hall had given him a chill. The next day he was in bed with bronchitis, and stayed there till after Christmas. But already, on night of November 11<sup>th</sup>, after his visit to the dining-hall, he had sent in his resignation to the Board of Governors.

When school reassembled after the holidays he was back at Mrs. Wickett's. At his own request there were no more farewells or presentations, nothing but a handshake with his successor and the word "acting" crossed out on official stationery. The "duration" was over.