

## CHAPTER 16

And now, fifteen years after that, he could look upon it all with a deep and sumptuous tranquility. He was not ill, of course – only a little tired at times, and bad with his breathing during the winter months. He would not go abroad – he had once tried it, but had chanced to strike the Riviera during one of its carefully unadvertised cold spells. “I prefer – um – to get my chills – umph – in my own country,” he used to say, after that. He had to take care of himself when there were east winds, but autumn and winter were not really so bad; there were warm fires, and books, and you could look forward to the summer. It was the summer that he liked best, of course; apart from the weather, which suited him, there were the continual visits of old boys. Every weekend some of them motored up to Brookfield and called at his house. Sometimes they tired him, if too many came at once; but he did not really mind; he could always rest and sleep afterwards. And he enjoyed their visits – more than anything else in the world that was still to be enjoyed, “Well, Gregson – umph – I remember you – umph – always late for everything – eh – eh? Perhaps you’ll be late in growing old – umph – like me – umph – eh?” And later, when he was alone again and Mrs. Wickett came in to clear away the things: “Mrs. Wickett, young Gregson called – umph you remember him, do you? Tall boy with spectacles. Always late. Umph. Got a job with the – umph – League of Nations – where – I suppose – his – um – dilatoriness – won’t be noticeable – eh?”

And sometimes, when the bell rang for call-over, he would go to the window and look across the road and over the School fence and see, in the distance, the thin line of boys filing past the bench. New times, new names.... but the old ones still remained.... Jefferson, Jennings, Jolyon, Jupp, Kingsley Primus, Kingsley Secundus, Kingsley Tertius, Kingston..... where are you all, where have you all gone to?..... Mrs. Wickett, bring me a cup of tea just before prep.... will you, please?

The post-war decade swept through with a clatter of change and maladjustments; Chips, as he lived through it, was profoundly disappointed when he looked abroad. The Ruhr, Chanak, Corfu; there was enough to be uneasy about in the world. But near him, at Brookfield, and even, in a wider sense, in England, there was something that charmed his heart because it was old – and had survived. More and more he saw the rest of the world as a vast disarrangement for which England had sacrificed enough – and perhaps too much. But he was satisfied with Brookfield. It was rooted in things that had stood the test of time and change and war. Curious, in the deeper sense, how little it had changed. Boys were a politer race; bullying was non-existent; there was more swearing and cheating. There was a more genuine friendliness between master and boy – less pomposity on the one side, less unctuousness on the other. One of the new masters, fresh from Oxford, even let the Sixth call him



by his Christian name. Chips didn't hold with that; indeed he was just a little bit shocked. "He might as well – umph – sign his terminal reports – umph – 'yours affectinately' – eh – eh?" he told somebody.

During the General Strike of 1926 Brookfield boys loaded motor-vans with foodstuffs. When it was all over Chips felt stirred emotionally as he had not been since the War. Something had happened, something whose ultimate significance had yet to be reckoned; but one thing was clear: England had burned her fire in her own grate again. And when, at a Speech Day function that year, an American visitor laid stress on the vast sums that the strike had cost the country, Chips answered: "Yes, but – umph – advertisement – always is costly."

"Advertisement"?

"Well, wasn't it – umph – advertisement – and very fine advertisement – too? A whole week of it – umph – and not a life lost – not a shot fired! Your country would have – umph – spilt more blood in – umph – raiding a single liquor saloon!"

Laughter.... Laughter.... wherever he went and whatever he said, there was laughter. He had earned the reputation of being a great jester, and jests were expected of him. Whenever he rose to speak at a meeting, or even when he talked across a table, people prepared their minds and faces for the joke. They listened in a mood to be amused and it was easy to satisfy them. They laughed sometimes before he came to the point. "Old Chips was in fine form," they would say, afterwards. "Marvellous the way he can always see the funny side of things...."

After 1929, Chips did not leave Brookfield – even for Old Boys' dinners in London. He was afraid of chills, and late nights began to tire him too much. He came across to the School, however, on fine days; and he still kept up a wide and continual hospitality in his room. His faculties were all unimpaired, and he had no personal worries of any kind. His income was more than he needed to spend, his small capital, invested in gilt-edged stocks, did not suffer when the slump set in. He gave a lot of his money away – to people who called on him with a hard-luck story, to various School funds, and also to the Brookfield mission. In 1930 he made his will. Except for legacies to the mission and to Mrs. Wickett, he left all he had to found an open entrance scholarship to the School.

1931..... 1932.....

"What do you think of Hoover, sir?"

"Do you think we shall ever go back to gold?"

"How d'you feel about things in general. Sir? See any break in the clouds?"

"When's the tide going to turn, Chips, old boy?"

You ought to know, with all your experience of things."



They all asked him questions, as if he were some kind of prophet and encyclopedia combined – more even than that, for they liked their answer dished up as a joke. He would say:

“Well, Henderson, when I was – umph – a much younger man – there used to be someone who – um – promised people ninepence for fourpence. I don’t know that anybody – umph – ever got it, but – umph – our present rulers seem – um – to have solved the problem of how to give – umph – fourpence for ninepence.”

Laughter.

Sometimes, when he was strolling about the School, small boys of the cheekier kind would ask him questions, merely for the fun of getting Chips’s “latest” to retail.

“Please, sir, what about the Five Year Plan?”

“Sir, do you think Germany wants to fight another war?”

“Have you been to the new cinema, sir? I went with my people the other day. Quite a grand affair for a small place like Brookfield. They’ve got a Wurlitzer.”

“And what – umph – on earth – is a Wurlitzer?”

“It’s an organ, sir --- a cinema organ.”

“Dear me... I’ve seen the name on the hoardings, but I always – umph – imagined – it must be some kind of – umph – sausage.....”

Laughter.... Oh, there’s a new Chips joke, you fellows, a perfectly lovely one. I was gassing to the old boy about the new cinema, and .....

