

## CHAPTER 17

He sat in his front parlour at Mrs. Wickett's on a November afternoon in thirty-three. It was cold and foggy, and he dared not go out. He had not felt too well since Armistice Day; he fancied he might have caught a slight chill during the chapel service. Marivale had been that morning for his usual fortnightly chat. "Everything all right? Feeling hearty? That's the style – keep indoors this weather – there's a lot of flu about. Wish I could have your life for a day or two."

His life.... and what a life it had been! The whole pageant of it swung before him as he sat by the fire that afternoon. The things he had done and seen; Cambridge in the sixties, Great Gable on an August morning; Brookfield at all times and seasons throughout the years. And, for that matter, the things he had not done, and would never do now that he had left them too late – he had never travelled for instance, and he had never been to a talky show. So that he was both more and less experienced than the youngest boy at the School might well be; and that, that paradox of age and youth, was what the world called progress.

Mrs. Wickett had gone out, visiting relatives in a neighbouring village; she had left the tea-things ready on the table, with bread and butter and extra cups laid out in case anybody called. On such a day, however, visitors were not very likely; with the fog thickening hourly outside, he would probably be alone.

But no. About a quarter to four a ring came and Chips, answering the front door himself (which he oughtn't to have done), encountered a rather small boy wearing a Brookfield cap and an expression of anxious timidity. "Please, sir," he began, "does Mr. Chips live here?"

"Umph – you'd better come inside," Chips answered. And in his room a moment later he added: "I am – umph – the person you want. Now what can I – umph – do for you?"

"I was told you wanted me, sir."

Chips smiled. An old joke – and old leg-pull, and he, of all people, having made so many old jokes in his time, ought not to complain. And it amused him to cap the joke, as it were, with one of his own; to let them see that he could keep his end up, even yet. So he said, with eyes twinkling: "Quite right, my boy, I wanted you to take tea with me. Will you – umph – sit down by the fire? Umph – I don't think I have seen your face before. How is that?"

"I've only just come out of the sanatorium, sir – I've been there since the beginning of term with measles."

"Ah, that accounts for it."

Chips began his usual ritualistic blending of tea from the different caddies; luckily there was half a walnut cake with pink icing in the cupboard. He

found out that the boy's name was Linford, that he lived in Shropshire, and that he was the first of his family at Brookfield.

"You know – umph – Linford – you'll like Brookfield – when you get used to it. It's not half such an awful place – as you imagine. You're a bit afraid of it – um, yes – eh? So was I, my dear boy – at first. But that was – um – a long time ago. Sixty-three years ago – umph – to be precise. When I – um – first went into Big Hall and – um – I saw all those boys – I tell you – I was quite scared. Indeed – umph – I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life. Not even when – umph – the Germans bombed us – during the war. But – umph – it didn't last long – the scared feeling, I mean. I soon made myself – um – at home."

"Were there a lot of other new boys that term, sir?" Linford asked shyly.

"Eh? But – God bless my soul – I wasn't a boy at all – I was a man – a young man of twenty-two! And the next time you see a young man – a new master – taking his first prep. in Big Hall – umph – just think – what he feels like!"

"But if you were twenty-two then, sir – "

"Yes? Eh?"

"You must be – very old – now, sir."

Chips laughed quietly and steadily to himself. It was a good joke.

"Well – umph – I'm certainly – umph – no chicken."

He laughed quietly to himself for a long time.

Then he talked of other matters, of Shropshire, of schools and school life in general, of the news in that day's papers. "You're growing up into – umph – a very cross sort of world, Linford. Maybe it will have got over some of its – umph – crossness – by the time you're ready for it. Let's hope so – umph – at any rate.... Well..." And with a glance at the clock he delivered himself of his old familiar formula. "I'm – umph – sorry – you can't stay...."

At the front door he shook hands.

"Good-bye, my boy."

And the answer came, in a shrill treble: "Good-bye, Mr. Chips...."

Chips sat by the fire again, with those words echoing along the corridors of his mind. "Good-bye. Mr. Chips...." An old leg-pull, to make new boys think that his name was really Chips; the joke was almost traditional. He did not mind. "Good-bye, Mr. Chips...." He remembered that on the eve of his wedding day Kathie had used that same phrase, mocking him gently for the seriousness he had had in those days. He thought, nobody would call me serious to-day, that's very certain.....

Suddenly the tears began to roll down his cheeks – an old man's failing; silly, perhaps, but he couldn't help it. He felt very tired; talking to Linford like that had quite exhausted him. But he was glad he had met Linford. Nice boy. Would do well.

Over the fog-laden air came the bell for call-over, tremulous and muffled. Chips looked at the window, graying into twilight; it was time to light up. But as soon as he began to move he felt that he couldn't, he was too tired; and anyhow, it didn't matter. He leaned back in his chair. No chicken – eh, well – that was true enough. And it had been amusing about Linford. A neat score off the jokers who had sent the boy over. Good-bye, Mr. Chips.... odd, though, he should have said it just like that.....

