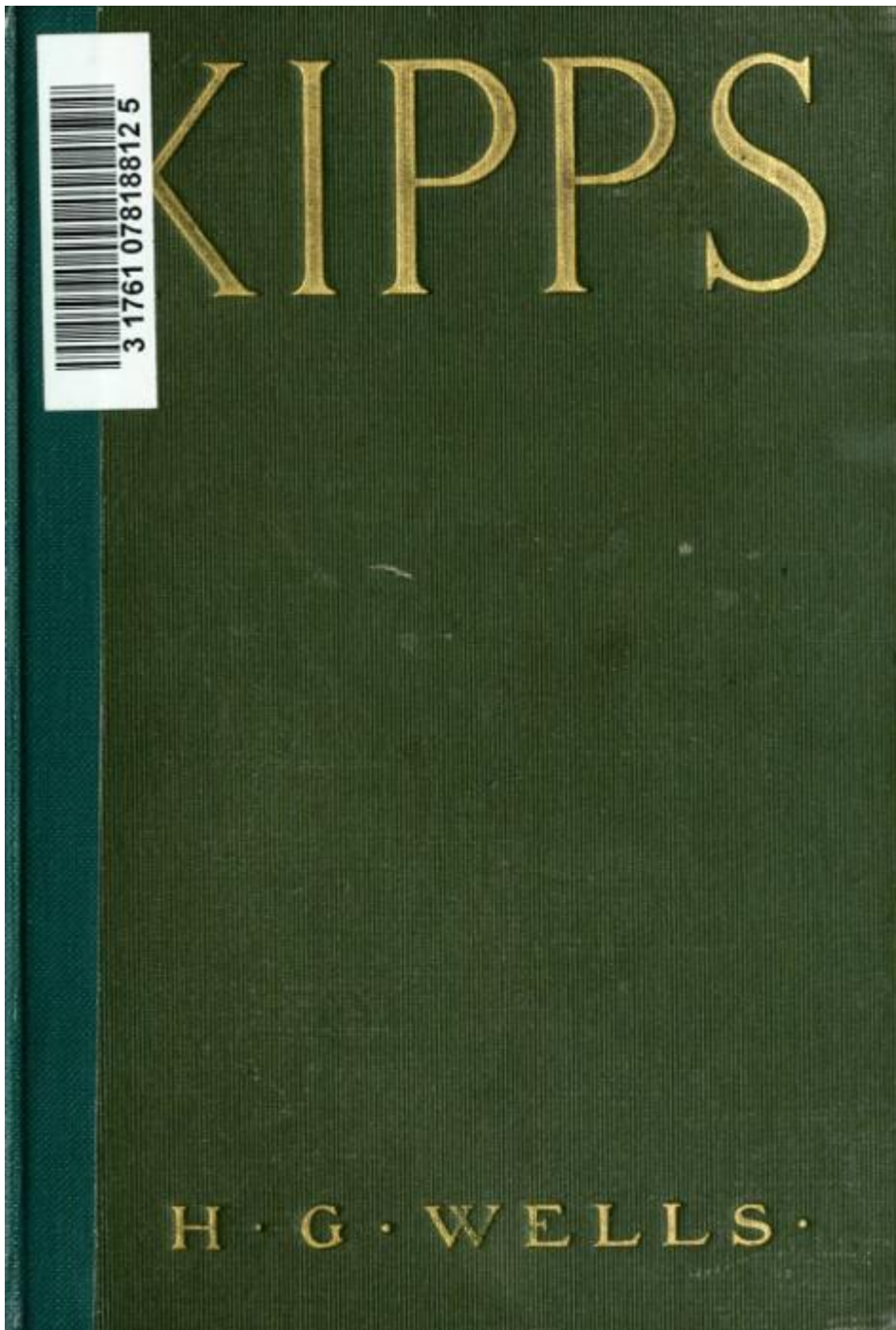


KIPPS THE STORY OF A SIMPLE SOUL



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KIPPS

THE STORY OF A SIMPLE SOUL

BY H. G. WELLS

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1906

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Published, 1906

"Those individuals who have led secluded or isolated lives, or have hitherto moved in other spheres than those wherein well-bred people move, will gather all the information necessary from these pages to render them thoroughly conversant with the manners and amenities of society."

Manners and Rules of Good Society

By a Member of the Aristocracy

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[Pg 1]

BOOK I THE MAKING OF KIPPS

[Pg 3]

CHAPTER I THE LITTLE SHOP AT NEW ROMNEY

Until he was nearly arrived at adolescence it did not become clear to Kipps how it was that he was under the care of an aunt and uncle instead of having a father and mother like other boys. Yet he had vague memories of a somewhere else that was not New Romney—of a dim room, a window looking down on white buildings—and of a some one else who talked to forgotten people, and who was his mother. He could not recall her features very distinctly, but he remembered with extreme definition a white dress she wore, with a pattern of little sprigs of flowers and little bows of ribbon upon it, and a girdle of straight-ribbed white ribbon about the waist. Linked with this, he knew not how, were clouded half-obiterated recollections of scenes in which there was weeping, weeping in which he was inscrutably moved to join. Some terrible tall man with a loud voice played a part in these scenes, and either before or after them there were impressions of looking for interminable periods out of the windows of railway trains in the company of these two people....

[Pg 4]

He knew, though he could not remember that he had ever been told, that a certain faded, wistful face, that looked at him from a plush and gilt framed daguerreotype above the mantel of the "sitting-room," was the face of his mother. But that knowledge did not touch his dim memories with any elucidation. In that photograph she was a girlish figure, leaning against a photographer's stile, and with all the self-conscious shrinking natural to that position. She had curly hair and a face far younger and prettier than any other mother in his experience. She swung a Dolly Varden hat by the string, and looked with obedient respectful eyes on the photographer-gentleman who had commanded the pose. She was very slight and pretty. But the phantom mother that haunted his memory so elusively was not like that, though he could not remember how she differed. Perhaps she was older, or a little less shrinking, or, it may be, only dressed in a different way....

It is clear she handed him over to his aunt and uncle at New Romney with explicit directions and a certain endowment. One gathers she had something of that fine sense of social distinctions that subsequently played so large a part in Kipps' career. He was not to go to a "common" school, she provided, but to a certain seminary in Hastings that was not only a "middle-class academy," with mortar boards and every evidence of a higher social tone, but also remarkably cheap. She seems to have been animated by the desire to do her best for Kipps, even at a [Pg 5]certain sacrifice of herself, as though Kipps were in some way a superior

sort of person. She sent pocket-money to him from time to time for a year or more after Hastings had begun for him, but her face he never saw in the days of his lucid memory.

His aunt and uncle were already high on the hill of life when first he came to them. They had married for comfort in the evening or at any rate in the late afternoon of their days. They were at first no more than vague figures in the background of proximate realities, such realities as familiar chairs and tables, quiet to ride and drive, the newel of the staircase, kitchen furniture, pieces of firewood, the boiler tap, old newspapers, the cat, the High Street, the back yard and the flat fields that are always so near in that little town. He knew all the stones in the yard individually, the creeper in the corner, the dustbin and the mossy wall, better than many men know the faces of their wives. There was a corner under the ironing-board which by means of a shawl could, under propitious gods, be made a very decent cubby-house, a corner that served him for several years as the indisputable hub of the world; and the stringy places in the carpet, the knots upon the dresser, and the several corners of the rag hearthrug his uncle had made, became essential parts of his mental foundations. The shop he did not know so thoroughly—it was a forbidden region to him; yet somehow he managed to know it very well.

His aunt and uncle were, as it were, the immediate [Pg 6] gods of this world; and, like the gods of the world of old, occasionally descended right into it, with arbitrary injunctions and disproportionate punishments. And, unhappily, one rose to their Olympian level at meals. Then one had to say one's "grace," hold one's spoon and fork in mad, unnatural ways called "properly," and refrain from eating even nice sweet things "too fast." If he "gobbled" there was trouble, and at the slightest *abandon* with knife, fork, and spoon, his aunt rapped his knuckles, albeit his uncle always finished up his gravy with his knife. Sometimes, moreover, his uncle would come, pipe in hand, out of a sedentary remoteness in the most disconcerting way, when a little boy was doing the most natural and attractive things, with "Drat and drabbit that young rascal! What's he a-doing of now?" And his aunt would appear at door or window to interrupt interesting conversation with children who were upon unknown grounds considered "low" and undesirable, and call him in. The pleasantest little noises, however softly you did them,—drumming on tea-trays, trumpeting your fists, whistling on keys, ringing chimes with a couple of pails, or playing tunes on the window-panes,—brought down the gods in anger. Yet what noise is fainter than your finger on the window—gently done? Sometimes, however, these gods gave him broken toys out of the

shop, and then one loved them better—for the shop they kept was, among other things, a toy shop. (The other things included books to read and books to give away and[Pg 7] local photographs; it had some pretensions also to be a china shop, and the fascia spoke of glass; it was also a stationer's shop with a touch of haberdashery about it, and in the windows and odd corners were mats and terracotta dishes, and milking-stools for painting; and there was a hint of picture-frames, and fire-screens, and fishing tackle, and air-guns, and bathing suits, and tents: various things, indeed, but all cruelly attractive to a small boy's fingers.) Once his aunt gave him a trumpet if he would *promise* faithfully not to blow it, and afterwards took it away again. And his aunt made him say his Catechism and something she certainly called the "Colic for the Day" every Sunday in the year.

As the two grew old while he grew up, and as his impression of them modified insensibly from year to year, it seemed to him at last that they had always been as they were when, in his adolescent days, his impression of things grew fixed. His aunt he thought of as always lean, rather worried-looking, and prone to a certain obliquity of cap, and his uncle massive, many-chinned, and careless about his buttons. They neither visited nor received visitors. They were always very suspicious about their neighbours and other people generally; they feared the "low" and they hated and despised the "stuck-up," and so they "kept themselves to themselves," according to the English ideal. Consequently little Kipps had no playmates, except through the sin of disobedience. By inherent nature he had a sociable disposition. When he was[Pg 8] in the High Street he made a point of saying "Hello!" to passing cyclists, and he would put his tongue out at the Quodling children whenever their nursemaid was not looking. And he began a friendship with Sid Pornick, the son of the haberdasher next door, that, with wide intermissions, was destined to last his lifetime through.

Pornick, the haberdasher, I may say at once, was, according to old Kipps, a "blaring jackass"; he was a teetotaller, a "nyar, nyar, 'im-singing Methodis'," and altogether distasteful and detrimental, he and his together, to true Kipps ideals, so far as little Kipps could gather them. This Pornick certainly possessed an enormous voice, and he annoyed old Kipps greatly by calling, "You—Arn" and "Siddee," up and down his house. He annoyed old Kipps by private choral services on Sunday, all his family "nyar, nyar-ing"; and by mushroom culture; by behaving as though the pilaster between the two shops was common property; by making a noise of hammering in the afternoon, when old Kipps wanted to be quiet after his midday meal; by going up and down uncarpeted stairs in his boots; by having a black beard; by attempting to be friendly; and by—all that sort of thing. In fact, he

annoyed old Kipps. He annoyed him especially with his shop doormat. Old Kipps never beat his mat, preferring to let sleeping dust lie; and, seeking a motive for a foolish proceeding, he held that Pornick waited until there was a suitable wind in order that the dust disengaged in that operation might defile his[Pg 9] neighbour's shop. These issues would frequently develop into loud and vehement quarrels, and on one occasion came so near to violence as to be subsequently described by Pornick (who read his newspaper) as a "Disgraceful Frackass." On that occasion he certainly went into his own shop with extreme celerity.

But it was through one of these quarrels that the friendship of little Kipps and Sid Pornick came about. The two small boys found themselves one day looking through the gate at the doctor's goats together; they exchanged a few contradictions about which goat could fight which, and then young Kipps was moved to remark that Sid's father was a "blaring jackass." Sid said he wasn't, and Kipps repeated that he was, and quoted his authority. Then Sid, flying off at a tangent rather alarmingly, said he could fight young Kipps with one hand, an assertion young Kipps with a secret want of confidence denied. There were some vain repetitions, and the incident might have ended there, but happily a sporting butcher boy chanced on the controversy at this stage, and insisted upon seeing fair play.

The two small boys under his pressing encouragement did at last button up their jackets, square and fight an edifying drawn battle, until it seemed good to the butcher boy to go on with Mrs. Holyer's mutton. Then, according to his directions and under his experienced stage management, they shook hands and made it up. Subsequently, a little tear-stained perhaps, but flushed with the butcher boy's approval[Pg 10] ("tough little kids"), and with cold stones down their necks as he advised, they sat side by side on the doctor's gate, projecting very much behind, staunching an honourable bloodshed, and expressing respect for one another. Each had a bloody nose and a black eye—three days later they matched to a shade—neither had given in, and, though this was tacit, neither wanted any more.

It was an excellent beginning. After this first encounter the attributes of their parents and their own relative value in battle never rose between them, and if anything was wanted to complete the warmth of their regard it was found in a joint dislike of the eldest Quodling. The eldest Quodling lisped, had a silly sort of straw hat and a large pink face (all covered over with self-satisfaction), and he went to the National School with a green baize bag—a contemptible thing to do. They called him names and threw stones at him, and when he replied by

threatenings ("Look 'ere, young Art Kipth, you better *thtoppit!*") they were moved to attack and put him to flight.

And after that they broke the head of Ann Pornick's doll, so that she went home weeping loudly—a wicked and endearing proceeding. Sid was whacked, but, as he explained, he wore a newspaper tactically adjusted during the transaction, and really it didn't hurt him at all.... And Mrs. Pornick put her head out of the shop door suddenly, and threatened Kipps as he passed.

[Pg 11]

§2

"Cavendish Academy," the school that had won the limited choice of Kipps' vanished mother, was established in a battered private house in the part of Hastings remotest from the sea; it was called an Academy for Young Gentlemen, and many of the young gentlemen had parents in "India," and other unverifiable places. Others were the sons of credulous widows, anxious, as Kipps' mother had been, to get something a little "superior" to a board school education as cheaply as possible; and others again were sent to demonstrate the dignity of their parents and guardians. And of course there were boys from France.

Its "principal" was a lean, long creature of indifferent digestion and temper, who proclaimed himself on a gilt-lettered board in his front garden George Garden Woodrow, F.S.Sc., letters indicating that he had paid certain guineas for a bogus diploma. A bleak white-washed outhouse constituted his schoolroom, and the scholastic quality of its carved and worn desks and forms was enhanced by a slippery blackboard and two large yellow out-of-date maps, one of Africa and the other of Wiltshire, that he had picked up cheap at a sale. There were other maps and globes in his study, where he interviewed inquiring parents, but these his pupils never saw. And in a glass cupboard in the passage was several shillingworth of test tubes and chemicals, a tripod, a glass retort, and a damaged [Pg 12] Bunsen burner, manifesting that the "Scientific laboratory" mentioned in the prospectus was no idle boast.

This prospectus, which was in dignified but incorrect English, laid particular stress on the sound preparation for a commercial career given in the Academy, but the army, navy and civil service were glanced at in an ambiguous sentence. There was something vague in the prospectus about "examinational successes"—though Woodrow, of course, disapproved of "cram"—and a declaration that the curriculum included "art," "modern foreign languages" and "a

sound technical and scientific training." Then came insistence upon the "moral well-being" of the pupils, and an emphatic boast of the excellence of the religious instruction, "so often neglected nowadays even in schools of wide repute." "That's bound to fetch 'em," Mr. Woodrow had remarked when he drew up the prospectus. And in conjunction with the mortarboards it certainly did. Attention was directed to the "motherly" care of Mrs. Woodrow—in reality a small partially effaced woman with a plaintive face and a mind above cookery; and the prospectus concluded with a phrase intentionally vague, "Fare unrestricted, and our own milk and produce."

The memories Kipps carried from that school into after life were set in an atmosphere of stuffiness and mental muddle; and included countless pictures of sitting on creaking forms bored and idle, of blot licking and the taste of ink, of torn books with covers that set one's teeth on edge, of the slimy surface of the [Pg 13] laboured slates, of furtive marble-playing, whispered story-telling, and of pinches, blows, and a thousand such petty annoyances being perpetually "passed on" according to the custom of the place, of standing up in class and being hit suddenly and unreasonably for imaginary misbehaviour, of Mr. Woodrow's raving days, when a scarcely sane injustice prevailed, of the cold vacuity of the hour of preparation before the bread-and-butter breakfast, and of horrible headaches and queer, unprecedented, internal feelings resulting from Mrs. Woodrow's motherly rather than intelligent cookery. There were dreary walks, when the boys marched two by two, all dressed in the mortarboard caps that so impressed the widowed mothers; there were dismal half-holidays when the weather was wet and the spirit of evil temper and evil imagination had the pent boys to work its will on; there were unfair, dishonourable fights and miserable defeats and victories, there was bullying and being bullied. A coward boy Kipps particularly afflicted, until at last he was goaded to revolt by incessant persecution, and smote Kipps to tolerance with whirling fists. There were memories of sleeping three in a bed, of the dense leathery smell of the schoolroom when one returned thither after ten minutes' play, of a playground of mud and incidental sharp flints. And there was much furtive foul language.

"Our Sundays are our happiest days," was one of Woodrow's formulæ with the inquiring parent, but Kipps was not called in evidence. They were to him [Pg 14] terrible gaps of inanity—no work, no play, a drear expanse of time with the mystery of church twice and plum duff once in the middle. The afternoon was given up to furtive relaxations, among which "Torture Chamber" games with the less agreeable, weaker boys figured. It was from the difference between this day

and common days that Kipps derived his first definite conceptions of the nature of God and heaven. His instinct was to evade any closer acquaintance as long as he could.

The school work varied, according to the prevailing mood of Mr. Woodrow. Sometimes that was a despondent lethargy; copy-books were distributed or sums were "set," or the great mystery of bookkeeping was declared in being, and beneath these superficial activities lengthy conversations and interminable guessing games with marbles went on while Mr. Woodrow sat inanimate at his desk heedless of school affairs, staring in front of him at unseen things. At times his face was utterly inane, at times it had an expression of stagnant amazement, as if he saw before his eyes with pitiless clearness the dishonour and mischief of his being....

At other times the F.S.Sc. roused himself to action, and would stand up a wavering class and teach it, goading it with bitter mockery and blows through a chapter of Ann's "First French Course," or "France and the French," or a Dialogue about a traveller's washing, or the parts of an opera-house. His own knowledge of French had been obtained years ago in [Pg 15] another English private school, and he had refreshed it by occasional weeks of loafing and mean adventure in Dieppe. He would sometimes in their lessons hit upon some reminiscence of these brighter days, and then he would laugh inexplicably and repeat French phrases of an unfamiliar type.

Among the commoner exercises he prescribed the learning of long passages of poetry from a "Poetry Book," which he would delegate an elder boy to "hear," and there was reading aloud from the Holy Bible, verse by verse—it was none of your "godless" schools!—so that you counted the verses up to your turn and then gave yourself to conversation—and sometimes one read from a cheap History of this land. They did, as Kipps reported, "loads of catechism." Also there was much learning of geographical names and lists, and sometimes Woodrow in an outbreak of energy would see these names were actually found on a map. And once, just once, there was a chemistry lesson—a lesson of indescribable excitement—glass things of the strangest shape, a smell like bad eggs, something bubbling in something, a smash and stench, and Mr. Woodrow saying quite distinctly—they thrashed it out in the dormitory afterwards—"Damn!" followed by the whole school being kept in, with extraordinary severities, for an hour....

But interspersed with the memories of this grey routine were certain patches of brilliant colour—the holidays, his holidays, which in spite of the feud between

their seniors, he spent as much as possible with [Pg 16] Sid Pornick, the son of the irascible black-bearded haberdasher next door. They seemed to be memories of a different world. There were glorious days of "mucking about" along the beach, the siege of unresisting Martello towers, the incessant interest of the mystery and motion of windmills, the windy excursions with boarded feet over the yielding shingle to Dungeness lighthouse—Sid Pornick and he far adrift from reality, smugglers and armed men from the moment they left Great Stone behind them—wanderings in the hedgeless reedy marsh, long excursions reaching even to Hythe, where the machine guns of the Empire are forever whirling and tapping, and to Rye and Winchelsea, perched like dream-cities on their little hills. The sky in these memories was the blazing hemisphere of the marsh heavens in summer, or its wintry tumult of sky and sea; and there were wrecks, real wrecks, in it (near Dymchurch pitched high and blackened and rotting were the ribs of a fishing smack flung aside like an empty basket when the sea had devoured its crew); and there was bathing all naked in the sea, bathing to one's armpits and even trying to swim in the warm sea-water (spite of his aunt's prohibition), and (with her indulgence) the rare eating of dinner from a paper parcel miles away from home. Toke and cold ground rice pudding with plums it used to be—there is no better food at all. And for the background, in the place of Woodrow's mean, fretting rule, were his aunt's spare but frequently quite amiable figure—for though she insisted [Pg 17] on his repeating the English Church Catechism every Sunday, she had an easy way over dinners that one wanted to take abroad—and his uncle, corpulent and irascible, but sedentary and easily escaped. And freedom!

The holidays were indeed very different from school. They were free, they were spacious, and though he never knew it in these words—they had an element of beauty. In his memory of his boyhood they shone like strips of stained glass window in a dreary waste of scholastic wall, they grew brighter and brighter as they grew remoter. There came a time at last and moods when he could look back to them with a feeling akin to tears.

The last of these windows was the brightest, and instead of the kaleidoscopic effects of its predecessors its glory was a single figure. For in the last of his holidays, before the Moloch of Retail Trade got hold of him, Kipps made his first tentative essays at the mysterious shrine of Love. Very tentative they were, for he had become a boy of subdued passions, and potential rather than actual affectionateness.

And the objects of these first stirrings of the great desire was no other than Ann Pornick, the head of whose doll he and Sid had broken long ago, and rejoiced over long ago, in the days when he had yet to learn the meaning of a heart.

[Pg 18]

§3

Negotiations were already on foot to make Kipps into a draper before he discovered the lights that lurked in Ann Pornick's eyes. School was over, absolutely over, and it was chiefly present to him that he was never to go to school again. It was high summer. The "breaking up" of school had been hilarious; and the excellent maxim, "Last Day's Pay Day," had been observed by him with a scrupulous attention to his honour. He had punched the heads of all his enemies, wrung wrists and kicked shins; he had distributed all his unfinished copybooks, all his school books, his collection of marbles and his mortarboard cap among such as loved him; and he had secretly written in obscure pages of their books, "remember Art Kipps." He had also split the anæmic Woodrow's cane, carved his own name deeply in several places about the premises, and broken the scullery window. He had told everybody so often that he was to learn to be a sea captain that he had come almost to believe the thing himself. And now he was home, and school was at an end for him for evermore.

He was up before six on the day of his return, and out in the hot sunlight of the yard. He set himself to whistle a peculiarly penetrating arrangement of three notes supposed by the boys of the Hastings Academy and himself and Sid Pornick, for no earthly reason whatever, to be the original Huron war-cry. As he did this he feigned not to be doing it, because [Pg 19] of the hatred between his uncle and the Pornicks, but to be examining with respect and admiration a new wing of the dustbin recently erected by his uncle—a pretence that would not have deceived a nestling tomtit.

Presently there came a familiar echo from the Pornick hunting-ground. Then Kipps began to sing, "Ar pars eight tra-la, in the lane be'ind the church." To which an unseen person answered, "Ar pars eight it is, in the lane be'ind the church." The "tra-la" was considered to render this sentence incomprehensible to the uninitiated. In order to conceal their operations still more securely, both parties to this duet then gave vent to a vocalisation of the Huron war-cry again, and after a lingering repetition of the last and shrillest note, dispersed severally, as became boys in the enjoyment of holidays, to light the house fires for the day.

Half-past eight found Kipps sitting on the sunlit gate at the top of the long lane that runs towards the sea, clashing his boots in a slow rhythm, and whistling with great violence all that he knew of an excruciatingly pathetic air. There appeared along by the churchyard wall a girl in a short frock, brown-haired, quick-coloured, and with dark blue eyes. She had grown so that she was a little taller than Kipps, and her colour had improved. He scarcely remembered her, so changed was she since last holidays—if indeed he had seen her last holidays, a thing he could not clearly remember. Some vague emotion arose at the [Pg 20] sight of her. He stopped whistling and regarded her, oddly tongue-tied.

"He can't come," said Ann, advancing boldly. "Not yet."

"What—not Sid?"

"No. Father's made him dust all his boxes again."

"What for?"

"I dunno. Father's in a stew 'smorning."

"Oh!"

Pause. Kipps looked at her, and then was unable to look at her again. She regarded him with interest. "You left school?" she remarked after a pause.

"Yes."

"So's Sid."

The conversation languished. Ann put her hands on the top of the gate, and began a stationary hopping, a sort of ineffectual gymnastic experiment.

"Can you run?" she said presently.

"Run you any day," said Kipps.

"Gimme a start?"

"Where for?" said Kipps.

Ann considered, and indicated a tree. She walked towards it, and turned. "Gimme to here?" she called.

Kipps, standing now and touching the gate, smiled to express conscious superiority. "Further!" he said.

"Here?"

"Bit more!" said Kipps, and then, repenting of his magnanimity, said "Orf!" suddenly, and so recovered his lost concession.

[Pg 21]

They arrived abreast at the tree, flushed and out of breath.

"Tie!" said Ann, throwing her hair back from her face with her hand.

"I won," panted Kipps.

They disputed firmly but quite politely.

"Run it again, then," said Kipps. "I don't mind."

They returned towards the gate.

"You don't run bad," said Kipps, temperately expressing sincere admiration. "I'm pretty good, you know."

Ann sent her hair back by an expert toss of the head. "You give me a start," she allowed.

They became aware of Sid approaching them.

"You better look out, young Ann," said Sid, with that irreverent want of sympathy usual in brothers. "You been out nearly 'arf-hour. Nothing ain't been done upstairs. Father said he didn't know where you was, but when he did he'd warm y'r young ear."

Ann prepared to go.

"How about that race?" asked Kipps.

"Lor!" cried Sid, quite shocked. "You ain't been racing *her!*"

Ann swung herself round the end of the gate with her eyes on Kipps, and then turned away suddenly and ran off down the lane.

Kipps' eyes tried to go after her, and came back to Sid's.

"I give her a lot of start," said Kipps apologetically. "It wasn't a proper race." And so the subject [Pg 22] was dismissed. But Kipps was *distract* for some seconds, perhaps, and the mischief had begun in him.

They proceeded to the question of how two accomplished Hurons might most satisfactorily spend the morning. Manifestly their line lay straight along the lane to the sea.

"There's a new wreck," said Sid, "and my!—don't it smell just!"

"Smell?"

"Fair make you sick. It's rotten wheat."

They fell to talking of wrecks, and so came to ironclads and wars and suchlike manly matters.

Half-way to the wreck Kipps made a casual irrelevant remark. "Your sister ain't a bad sort," he said off-handedly.

"I clout her a lot," said Sidney modestly, and after a pause the talk reverted to more suitable topics.

The new wreck was full of rotting grain, and smelt abominably, even as Sid had said. This was excellent. They had it all to themselves. They took possession of it in force, at Sid's suggestion, and had speedily to defend it against enormous numbers of imaginary "natives," who were at last driven off by loud shouts of *bang, bang*, and vigorous thrusting and shoving of sticks. Then, also at Sid's direction, they sailed with it into the midst of a combined French, German and Russian fleet, demolishing the [Pg 23]combination unassisted, and having descended to the beach, clambered up the side and cut out their own vessel in brilliant style, they underwent a magnificent shipwreck (with vocalised thunder) and floated "waterlogged"—so Sid insisted—upon an exhausted sea.

These things drove Ann out of mind for a time. But at last, as they drifted without food or water upon a stagnant ocean, haggard-eyed, chins between their hands, looking in vain for a sail, she came to mind again abruptly.

"It's rather nice 'aving sisters," remarked one perishing mariner.

Sid turned round and regarded him thoughtfully. "Not it!" he said.

"No?"

"Not a bit of it." He grinned confidentially. "Know too much," he said; and afterwards, "Get out of things."

He resumed his gloomy scrutiny of the hopeless horizon. Presently he fell to spitting jerkily between his teeth, as he had read was the way with such ripe manhood as chews its quid.

"Sisters," he said, "is rot. That's what sisters are. Girls if you like, but sisters—no!"

"But ain't sisters girls?"

"*N-eaow!*" said Sid, with unspeakable scorn.

And Kipps answered, "Of course. I didn't mean—— I wasn't thinking of that."

"You got a girl?" asked Sid, spitting very cleverly again.

[Pg 24]

Kipps admitted his deficiency. He felt compunction.

"You don't know who *my* girl is, Art Kipps—I bet."

"Who is, then?" asked Kipps, still chiefly occupied by his own poverty.

"Ah!"

Kipps let a moment elapse before he did his duty. "Tell us!"

Sid eyed him and hesitated. "Secret?" he said.

"Secret."

"Dying solemn?"

"Dying solemn!" Kipps' self-concentration passed into curiosity.

Sid administered a terrible oath. Even after that precaution he adhered lovingly to his facts. "It begins with a Nem," he said, doling them out parsimoniously. "M A U D," he spelt, with a stern eye on Kipps, "C H A R T E R I S."

Now, Maud Charteris was a young person of eighteen and the daughter of the vicar of St. Bavon's,—besides which she had a bicycle,—so that as her name unfolded the face of Kipps lengthened with respect. "Get out!" he gasped incredulously. "She ain't your girl, Sid Pornick."

"She is!" answered Sid, stoutly.

"What—truth?"

"*Truth.*"

Kipps scrutinised his face. "Reely?"

Sid touched wood, whistled, and repeated a binding doggerel with great solemnity.

[Pg 25]

Kipps still struggled with the amazing new light on the world about him. "D'you mean—she knows?"

Sid flushed deeply, and his aspect became stern and gloomy. He resumed his wistful scrutiny of the sunlit sea. "I'd die for that girl, Art Kipps," he said presently, and Kipps did not press a question he felt to be ill timed. "I'd do anything she asked me to do," said Sid—"just anything. If she was to ask me to chuck myself into the sea." He met Kipps' eye. "I *would*," he said.

They were pensive for a space, and then Sid began to discourse in fragments of Love, a theme upon which Kipps had already in a furtive way meditated a little, but which, apart from badinage, he had never yet heard talked about in the light of day. Of course many and various aspects of life had come to light in the muffled exchange of knowledge that went on under the shadow of Woodrow, but this of Sentimental Love was not among them. Sid, who was a boy with an imagination, having once broached this topic, opened his heart, or at any rate a new wing of his heart, to Kipps, and found no fault with Kipps for a lack of return. He produced a thumb-novelette that had played a part in his sentimental awakening; he proffered it to Kipps, and confessed there was a character in it, a baronet, singularly like himself. This baronet was a person of volcanic passions which he concealed beneath a demeanour of "icy cynicism." The utmost expression he permitted himself was to grit his teeth; and now his attention was called to it, [Pg 26] Kipps remarked that Sid also had a habit of gritting his teeth—and indeed had had all the morning. They read for a time, and presently Sid talked again. The conception of love Sid made evident was compact of devotion and much spirited fighting and a touch of mystery; but through all that cloud of talk there floated before Kipps a face that was flushed and hair that was tossed aside.

So they budded, sitting on the blackening old wreck in which men had lived and died, looking out to sea, talking of that other sea upon which they must presently embark....

They ceased to talk, and Sid read; but Kipps falling behind with the reading and not wishing to admit that he read slower than Sid, whose education was of the inferior elementary school brand, lapsed into meditation.

"I *would* like to 'ave a girl," said Kipps. "I mean just to talk to and all that...."

A floating object distracted them at last from this obscure topic. They abandoned the wreck and followed the new interest a mile along the beach, bombarding it with stones until it came to land. They had inclined to a view that it would contain romantic mysteries, but it was simply an ill-preserved kitten—too much even for them. And at last they were drawn dinnerward and went home hungry and pensive side by side.

[Pg 27]

§5

But Kipps' imagination had been warmed by that talk of love, and in the afternoon, when he saw Ann Pornick in the High Street and said "Hello!" it was a different "hello" from that of their previous intercourse. And when they had passed they both looked back and caught each other doing so. Yes, he *did* want a girl badly....

Afterwards he was distracted by a traction engine going through the town, and his aunt had got some sprats for supper. When he was in bed, however, sentiment came upon him again in a torrent quite abruptly and abundantly, and he put his head under the pillow and whispered very softly, "I love Ann Pornick," as a sort of supplementary devotion.

In his subsequent dreams he ran races with Ann, and they lived in a wreck together, and always her face was flushed and her hair about her face. They just lived in a wreck and ran races, and were very, very fond of one another. And their favourite food was rock-chocolate, dates, such as one buys off barrows, and sprats—fried sprats....

In the morning he could hear Ann singing in the scullery next door. He listened to her for some time, and it was clear to him that he must put things before her.

Towards dusk that evening they chanced on one another at the gate by the church; but though there was much in his mind, it stopped there with a resolute [Pg 28] shyness until he and Ann were out of breath catching cockchafers, and were sitting on that gate of theirs again. Ann sat up upon the gate, dark against vast masses of flaming crimson and darkling purple, and her eyes looked at Kipps from a shadowed face. There came a stillness between them, and quite abruptly he was moved to tell his love.

"Ann," he said, "I *do* like you. I wish you was my girl.... I say, Ann: will you *be* my girl?"

Ann made no pretence of astonishment. She weighed the proposal for a moment with her eyes on Kipps. "If you like, Artie," she said lightly. "I don't mind if I am."

"All right," said Kipps, breathless with excitement, "then you are."

"All right," said Ann.

Something seemed to fall between them, and they no longer looked openly at one another. "Lor'!" cried Ann suddenly, "see that one!" and jumped down and darted after a cockchafer that had boomed within a yard of her face. And with that they were girl and boy again....

They avoided their new relationship painfully.

They did not recur to it for several days, though they met twice. Both felt that there remained something before this great experience was complete, but there was an infinite diffidence about the next step. Kipps talked in fragments of all sorts of matters, telling particularly of the great things that were being done to make a man and a draper of him, how he had [Pg 29] two new pairs of trousers and a black coat and four new shirts. And all the while his imagination was urging him to that unknown next step, and when he was alone and in the dark he became even an enterprising wooer. It became evident to him that it would be nice to take Ann by the hand; even the decorous novelettes Sid affected egged him on to that greater nearness of intimacy.

Then a great idea came to him, in a paragraph called "Lovers' Tokens" that he read in a torn fragment of *Tit Bits*. It fell in to the measure of his courage—a divided sixpence! He secured his aunt's best scissors, fished a sixpence out of his jejune tin money-box, and jabbed his finger in a varied series of attempts to get it in half. When they met again the sixpence was still undivided. He had not intended to mention the matter to her at that stage, but it came up spontaneously. He endeavoured to explain the theory of broken sixpences and his unexpected failure to break one.

"But what you break it for?" said Ann. "It's no good if it's broke."

"It's a Token," said Kipps.

"Like...?"

"Oh, you keep half and I keep half, and when we're sep'rated you look at your half and I look at mine—see! Then we think of each other."

"Oh!" said Ann, and appeared to assimilate this information.

"Only / can't get it in 'arf nohow," said Kipps.

[Pg 30]

They discussed this difficulty for some time without illumination. Then Ann had a happy thought. "Tell you what," she said, starting away from him abruptly and laying a hand on his arm, "you let *me* 'ave it, Artie. I know where father keeps his file."

Kipps handed her the sixpence, and they came upon a pause.

"I'll easy do it," said Ann.

In considering the sixpence side by side, his head had come near her cheek. Quite abruptly he was moved to take his next step into the unknown mysteries of love.

"Ann," he said, and gulped at his temerity, "I *do* love you. Straight. I'd do anything for you, Ann. Reely—I would."

He paused for breath. She answered nothing, but she was no doubt enjoying herself. He came yet closer to her—his shoulder touched hers. "Ann, I wish you'd——"

He stopped.

"What?" said Ann.

"Ann—lemme kiss you."

Things seemed to hang for a space; his tone, the drop of his courage, made the thing incredible as he spoke. Kipps was not of that bold order of wooers who impose conditions.

Ann perceived that she was not prepared for kissing after all. Kissing, she said, was silly, and when Kipps would have displayed a belated enterprise, she flung away from him. He essayed argument. He [Pg 31] stood afar off, as it were—the better part of a yard—and said she *might* let him kiss her, and then that he didn't see what good it was for her to be his girl if he couldn't kiss her.

She repeated that kissing was silly. A certain estrangement took them homeward. They arrived in the dusky High Street not exactly together, and not exactly apart, but struggling. They had not kissed, but all the guilt of kissing was between them. When Kipps saw the portly contours of his uncle standing dimly in the shop doorway, his footsteps faltered, and the space between our young couple

increased. Above, the window over Pornick's shop was open, and Mrs. Pornick was visible, taking the air. Kipps assumed an expression of extreme innocence. He found himself face to face with his uncle's advanced outposts of waistcoat buttons.

"Where ye bin, my boy?"

"Bin for a walk, uncle."

"Not along of that brat of Pornick's?"

"Along of who?"

"That gell"—indicating Ann with his pipe.

"Oh, no, uncle!"—very faintly.

"Run in, my boy."

Old Kipps stood aside, with an oblique glance upward, and his nephew brushed clumsily by him and vanished out of sight of the street, into the vague obscurity of the little shop. The door closed behind old Kipps with a nervous jangle of its bell, and he set himself to light the single oil lamp that illuminated [Pg 32] his shop at nights. It was an operation requiring care and watching, or else it flared and "smelt." Often it smelt after all. Kipps for some reason found the dusky living-room with his aunt in it too populous for his feelings, and went upstairs.

"That brat of Pornick's!" It seemed to him that a horrible catastrophe had occurred. He felt he had identified himself inextricably with his uncle, and cut himself off from her for ever by saying "Oh, no!" At supper he was so visibly depressed that his aunt asked him if he wasn't feeling well. Under this imminent threat of medicine he assumed an unnatural cheerfulness.

He lay awake for nearly half an hour that night, groaning because things had all gone wrong—because Ann wouldn't let him kiss her, and because his uncle had called her a brat. It seemed to Kipps almost as though he himself had called her a brat....

There came an interval during which Ann was altogether inaccessible. One, two, three days passed, and he did not see her. Sid he met several times; they went fishing, and twice they bathed; but though Sid lent and received back two further love stories, they talked no more of love. They kept themselves in accord, however, agreeing that the most flagrantly sentimental story was "proper." Kipps was always wanting to speak of Ann, but never daring to do so. He saw her on

Sunday evening going off to chapel. She was more beautiful than ever in her Sunday clothes, but she pretended not to see him because her [Pg 33] mother was with her. But he thought she pretended not to see him because she had given him up for ever. Brat!—who could be expected ever to forgive that? He abandoned himself to despair, he ceased even to haunt the places where she might be found.

§6

With paralysing unexpectedness came the end.

Mr. Shalford, the draper at Folkestone to whom he was to be bound apprentice, had expressed a wish to "shape the lad a bit" before the autumn sale. Kipps became aware that his box was being packed, and gathered the full truth of things on the evening before his departure. He became feverishly eager to see Ann just once more. He made silly and needless excuses to go out into the yard, he walked three times across the street without any excuse at all, to look up at the Pornick windows. Still she was hidden. He grew desperate. It was within half an hour of his departure that he came on Sid.

"Hello!" he said; "I'm orf!"

"Business?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"I say, Sid. You going 'ome?"

"Straight now."

"D'you mind? Ask Ann about that."

"About what?"

"She'll know."

[Pg 34]

And Sid said he would. But even that, it seemed, failed to evoke Ann.

At last the Folkestone bus rumbled up, and he ascended. His aunt stood in the doorway to see him off. His uncle assisted with the box and portmanteau. Only furtively could he glance up at the Pornick windows, and still it seemed Ann hardened her heart against him. "Get up!" said the driver, and the hoofs began to clatter. No—she would not come out even to see him off. The bus was in motion,

and old Kipps was going back into his shop. Kipps stared in front of him, assuring himself that he did not care.

He heard a door slam, and instantly craned out his neck to look back. He knew that slam so well. Behold! out of the haberdasher's door a small, untidy figure in homely pink print had shot resolutely into the road, and was sprinting in pursuit. In a dozen seconds she was abreast of the bus. At the sight of her Kipps' heart began to beat very quickly, but he made no immediate motion of recognition.

"Artie!" she cried breathlessly, "Artie! Artie! You know! I got *that!*"

The bus was already quickening its pace, and leaving her behind again, when Kipps realized what "that" meant. He became animated, he gasped, and gathered his courage together, and mumbled an incoherent request to the driver to "stop jest a jiff for sunthin'!" The driver grunted, as the disparity of their years demanded, and then the bus had pulled up, and Ann was below.

[Pg 35]

She leapt up upon the wheel. Kipps looked down into Ann's face, and it was foreshortened and resolute. He met her eyes just for one second as their hands touched. He was not a reader of eyes. Something passed quickly from hand to hand, something that the driver, alert at the corner of his eye, was not allowed to see. Kipps hadn't a word to say, and all she said was, "I done it, 'smorning." It was like a blank space in which something pregnant should have been written and wasn't. Then she dropped down, and the bus moved forward.

After the lapse of about ten seconds it occurred to him to stand and wave his new bowler hat at her over the corner of the bus top, and to shout hoarsely, "Goo-bye, Ann! Don' forget me—while I'm away!"

She stood in the road looking after him, and presently she waved her hand.

He remained standing unstably, his bright, flushed face looking back at her, and his hair fluffing in the wind, and he waved his hat until at last the bend of the road hid her from his eyes. Then he turned about and sat down, and presently he began to put the half sixpence he held clenched in his hand into his trouser pocket. He looked sideways at the driver, to judge how much he had seen.

Then he fell a-thinking. He resolved that, come what might, when he came back to New Romney at Christmas, he would by hook or by crook kiss Ann.

Then everything would be perfect and right, and he would be perfectly happy.

[Pg 36]

CHAPTER II THE EMPORIUM

§1

When Kipps left New Romney, with a small yellow tin box, a still smaller portmanteau, a new umbrella, and a keepsake half-sixpence, to become a draper, he was a youngster of fourteen, thin, with whimsical drakes' tails at the poll of his head, smallish features, and eyes that were sometimes very light and sometimes very dark, gifts those of his birth; and by the nature of his training he was indistinct in his speech, confused in his mind, and retreating in his manners. Inexorable fate had appointed him to serve his country in commerce, and the same national bias towards private enterprise and leaving bad alone, which entrusted his general education to Mr. Woodrow, now indentured him firmly into the hands of Mr. Shalford, of the Folkestone Drapery Bazaar. Apprenticeship is still the recognised English way to the distributing branch of the social service. If Mr. Kipps had been so unfortunate as to have been born a German he might have been educated in an elaborate and costly special school ("over-educated—crammed up"—Old Kipps) to fit him for his end [Pg 37]—such being their pedagogic way. He might.... But why make unpatriotic reflections in a novel? There was nothing pedagogic about Mr. Shalford.

He was an irascible, energetic little man, with hairy hands, for the most part under his coat tails, a long, shiny, bald head, a pointed, aquiline nose a little askew, and a neatly trimmed beard. He walked lightly and with a confident jerk, and he was given to humming. He had added to exceptional business "push," bankruptcy under the old dispensation, and judicious matrimony. His establishment was now one of the most considerable in Folkestone, and he insisted on every inch of frontage by alternate stripes of green and yellow down the houses over the shops. His shops were numbered 3, 5 and 7 on the street, and on his billheads 3 to 7. He encountered the abashed and awestricken Kipps with the praises of his system and himself. He spread himself out behind his desk with a grip on the lapel of his coat and made Kipps a sort of speech. "We expect y'r to work, y'r know, and we expect y'r to study our interests," explained Mr. Shalford in the regal and commercial plural. "Our system here is the best system y'r could have. I made it, and I ought to know. I began at the very bottom of the ladder when I was fourteen, and there isn't a step in it I don't know. Not a step. Mr. Booch in the desk will give y'r the card of rules and fines. Jest wait a minute." He pretended to

be busy with some dusty memoranda under a paper-weight, while Kipps stood in a sort of paralysis of awe regarding his new[Pg 38] master's oval baldness. "Two thous'n three forty-seven pounds," whispered Mr. Shalford audibly, feigning forgetfulness of Kipps. Clearly a place of great transactions!

Mr. Shalford rose, and handing Kipps a blotting-pad and an inkpot to carry—mere symbols of servitude, for he made no use of them—emerged into a counting-house where three clerks had been feverishly busy ever since his door handle had turned. "Booch," said Mr. Shalford, "'ave y'r copy of the rules?" and a down-trodden, shabby little old man with a ruler in one hand and a quill pen in his mouth, silently held out a small book with green and yellow covers, mainly devoted, as Kipps presently discovered, to a voracious system of fines. He became acutely aware that his hands were full, and that everybody was staring at him. He hesitated a moment before putting the inkpot down to free a hand.

"Mustn't fumble like *that*," said Mr. Shalford as Kipps pocketed the rules. "Won't do here. Come along, come along," and he cocked his coat tails high, as a lady might hold up her dress, and led the way into the shop.

A vast interminable place it seemed to Kipps, with unending shining counters and innumerable faultlessly dressed young men and presently Hourli-like young women staring at him. Here there was a long vista of gloves dangling from overhead rods, there ribbons and baby-linen. A short young lady in black mittens was making out the account of a customer,[Pg 39] and was clearly confused in her addition by Shalford's eagle eye.

A thickset young man with a bald head and a round, very wise face, who was profoundly absorbed in adjusting all the empty chairs down the counter to absolutely equal distances, awoke out of his preoccupation and answered respectfully to a few Napoleonic and quite unnecessary remarks from his employer. Kipps was told that this young man's name was Mr. Buggins, and that he was to do whatever Mr. Buggins told him to do.

They came round a corner into a new smell, which was destined to be the smell of Kipps' life for many years, the vague, distinctive smell of Manchester goods. A fat man with a large nose jumped—actually jumped—at their appearance, and began to fold a pattern of damask in front of him exactly like an automaton that is suddenly set going.

"Carshot, see to this boy to-morrow," said the master. "See he don't fumble. Smart'n 'im up."

"Yussir," said Carshot fatly, glanced at Kipps, and resumed his pattern-folding with extreme zeal.

"Whatever Mr. Carshot says y'r to do, ye *do*," said Mr. Shalford, trotting onward; and Carshot blew out his face with an appearance of relief.

They crossed a large room full of the strangest things Kipps had ever seen. Ladylike figures, surmounted by black wooden knobs in the place of the refined heads one might have reasonably expected, stood about with a lifelike air of conscious fashion.

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"Costume room," said Shalford.

Two voices engaged in some sort of argument—"I can assure you, Miss Mergle, you are entirely mistaken—entirely, in supposing I should do anything so unwomanly,"—sank abruptly, and they discovered two young ladies, taller and fairer than any of the other young ladies, and with black trains to their dresses, who were engaged in writing at a little table. Whatever they told him to do, Kipps gathered he was to do. He was also, he understood, to do whatever Carshot and Booch told him to do. And there were also Buggins and Mr. Shalford. And not to forget or fumble!

They descended into a cellar called "The Warehouse," and Kipps had an optical illusion of errand boys fighting. Some aerial voice said, "Teddy!" and the illusion passed. He looked again, and saw quite clearly that they were packing parcels and always would be, and that the last thing in the world that they would or could possibly do was to fight. Yet he gathered from the remarks Mr. Shalford addressed to their busy backs that they had been fighting—no doubt at some past period of their lives.

Emerging in the shop again among a litter of toys and what are called "fancy articles," Shalford withdrew a hand from beneath his coat tails to indicate an overhead change-carrier. He entered into elaborate calculations to show how many minutes in one year were saved thereby, and lost himself among the figures. "Seven tums eight seven nine—was it? Or [Pg 41] seven eight nine? Now, *now!* Why, when I was a boy your age I c'd do a sum like that as soon as hear it. We'll soon get y'r into better shape than that. Make you Fishent. Well, y'r must take my word, it comes to pounds and pounds saved in the year—pounds and pounds. System! System everywhere. Fishency." He went on murmuring "Fishency" and "System" at intervals for some time.

They passed into a yard, and Mr. Shalford waved his hand to his three delivery vans all striped green and yellow—"uniform—green, yell'r—System." All over the premises were pinned absurd little cards. "This door locked after 7:30.—By order, Edwin Shalford," and the like.

Mr. Shalford always wrote "By order," though it conveyed no earthly meaning to him. He was one of those people who collect technicalities upon them as the Reduvius bug collects dirt. He was the sort of man who is not only ignorant, but absolutely incapable of English. When he wanted to say he had a sixpenny-ha'penny longcloth to sell, he put it thus to startled customers: "Can DO you one, six half if y' like." He always omitted pronouns and articles and so forth; it seemed to him the very essence of the efficiently businesslike. His only preposition was "as" or the compound "as per." He abbreviated every word he could; he would have considered himself the laughing-stock of Wood Street if he had chanced to spell *socks* in any way but "sox." But, on the other hand, if he saved words here, he wasted[Pg 42] them there: he never acknowledged an order that was not an esteemed favour, nor sent a pattern without begging to submit it. He never stipulated for so many months' credit, but bought in November "as Jan." It was not only words he abbreviated in his London communications. In paying his wholesalers his "System" admitted of a constant error in the discount of a penny or twopence, and it "facilitated business," he alleged, to ignore odd pence in the cheques he wrote. His ledger clerk was so struck with the beauty of this part of the System, that he started a private one on his own account with the stamp box, that never came to Shalford's knowledge.

This admirable British merchant would glow with a particular pride of intellect when writing his London orders.

"Ah! do y'r think *you'll* ever be able to write London orders?" he would say with honest pride to Kipps, waiting impatiently long after closing time to take these triumphs of commercial efficiency to post, and so end the interminable day.

Kipps shook his head, anxious for Mr. Shalford to get on.

"Now, here, f' example, I've written—see?—'1 piece 1 in. cott. blk, elas. 1/ or! What do I mean by that *or*, eh?—d'ye know?"

Kipps promptly hadn't the faintest idea.

"And then, '2 ea. silk net as per patts herewith': *ea.*, eh?"

"Dunno, sir."

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It was not Mr. Shalford's way to explain things. "Dear, dear! Pity you couldn't get some c'mercial education at your school. 'Stid of all this lit'ry stuff. Well, my boy, if y' don't 'ussel a bit y'll never write London orders, *that's* pretty plain. Jest stick stamps on all those letters, and mind y'r stick 'em right way up, and try and profit a little more by the opportunities your aunt and uncle have provided ye. Can't say *what'll* happen t'ye if ye don't."

And Kipps, tired, hungry, and belated, set about stamping with vigour and despatch.

"Lick the *envelope*," said Mr. Shalford, "lick the *envelope*," as though he grudged the youngster the postage-stamp gum. "It's the little things mount up," he would say; and, indeed, that was his philosophy of life—to bustle and save, always to bustle and save. His political creed linked Reform, which meant nothing, with Efficiency which meant a sweated service, and Economy which meant a sweated expenditure, and his conception of a satisfactory municipal life was to "keep down the rates." Even his religion was to save his soul, and to preach a similar cheese-paring to the world.

§2

The indentures that bound Kipps to Mr. Shalford were antique and complex: they insisted on the latter gentleman's parental privileges; they forbade Kipps to dice and game; they made him over body and soul to [Pg 44] Mr. Shalford for seven long years, the crucial years of his life. In return there were vague stipulations about teaching the whole art and mystery of the trade to him; but as there was no penalty attached to negligence, Mr. Shalford, being a sound, practical business man, considered this a mere rhetorical flourish, and set himself assiduously to get as much out of Kipps and to put as little into him as he could in the seven years of their intercourse.

What he put into Kipps was chiefly bread and margarine, infusions of chicory and tea-dust, colonial meat by contract at threepence a pound, potatoes by the sack, and watered beer. If, however, Kipps chose to buy any supplementary material for growth, Mr. Shalford had the generosity to place his kitchen resources at his disposal free—if the fire chanced to be going. He was also allowed to share a bedroom with eight other young Englishmen, and to sleep in a bed which, except in very severe weather, could be made with the help of his overcoat and private underlinen, not to mention newspapers, quite sufficiently warm for any

reasonable soul. In addition Kipps was taught the list of fines; and how to tie up parcels; to know where goods were kept in Mr. Shalford's systematised shop; to hold his hands extended upon the counter and to repeat such phrases as "What can I have the pleasure...?" "No trouble, I 'ssure you," and the like; to block, fold, and measure materials of all sorts; to lift his hat from his head when he passed Mr. Shalford abroad, and to practise a [Pg 45] servile obedience to a large number of people. But he was not, of course, taught the "cost" mark of the goods he sold, nor anything of the method of buying such goods. Nor was his attention directed to the unfamiliar social habits and fashions to which his trade ministered. The use of half the goods he saw sold and was presently to assist in selling he did not understand; materials for hangings, cretonnes, chintzes, and the like, serviettes and all the bright, hard white wear of a well-ordered house, pleasant dress materials, linings, stiffenings—they were to him from first to last no more than things heavy and difficult to handle in bulk, that one folded up, unfolded, cut in lengths, and saw dwindle and pass away out into that mysterious happy world in which the customer dwells. Kipps hurried from piling linen table-cloths, that were collectively as heavy as lead, to eat off oil-cloth in a gas-lit dining-room underground; and he dreamt of combing endless blankets beneath his overcoat, spare undershirt, and three newspapers. So he had at least the chance of learning the beginnings of philosophy.

In return for these benefits he worked so that he commonly went to bed exhausted and footsore. His round began at half-past six in the morning, when he would descend unwashed and shirtless, in old clothes and a scarf, and dust boxes and yawn, and take down wrappers and clean the windows until eight. Then in half an hour he would complete his toilet and take an austere breakfast of bread and margarine and what only an Imperial Englishman would admit to be [Pg 46] coffee, after which refreshment he ascended to the shop for the labours of the day. Commonly these began with a mighty running to and fro with planks and boxes and goods for Carshot, the window-dresser, who, whether he worked well or ill, nagged persistently by reason of a chronic indigestion, until the window was done. Sometimes the costume window had to be dressed, and then Kipps staggered down the whole length of the shop from the costume room with one after another of those ladylike shapes grasped firmly, but shamefully, each about her single ankle of wood. Such days as there was no window-dressing, there was a mighty carrying and lifting of blocks and bales of goods into piles and stacks. After this there were terrible exercises, at first almost despairfully difficult: certain sorts of goods that came in folded had to be rolled upon rollers, and for

the most part refused absolutely to be rolled, at any rate by Kipps; and certain other sorts of goods that came from the wholesalers rolled had to be measured and folded, which folding makes young apprentices wish they were dead. All of it, too, quite avoidable trouble, you know, that is not avoided because of the cheapness of the genteeler sorts of labour and the dearness of forethought in the world. And then consignments of new goods had to be marked off and packed into proper parcels; and Carshot packed like conjuring tricks, and Kipps packed like a boy with tastes in some other direction—not ascertained. And always Carshot nagged.

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He had a curious formula of appeal to his visceral œconomy, had Carshot, that the refinement of the times and the earnest entreaties of my friends induce me to render by an anæmic paraphrase.

"My heart and lungs! I never see such a boy," so I present Carshot's refrain; and even when he was within a foot or so of the customer's face the disciplined ear of Kipps would still at times develop a featureless, intercalary murmur into—well, "my heart and lungs!"

There came a blessed interval when Kipps was sent abroad "matching." This consisted chiefly in supplying unexpected defects in buttons, ribbon, lining, and so forth in the dressmaking department. He was given a written paper of orders with patterns pinned thereto, and discharged into the sunshine and interest of the street. Then, until he thought it wise to return and stand the racket of his delay, he was a free man, clear of all reproach.

He made remarkable discoveries in topography, as for example that the most convenient way from the establishment of Mr. Adolphus Davis to the establishment of Messrs. Plummer, Roddis & Tyrrel, two of his principal places of call, is not as is generally supposed down the Sandgate Road, but up the Sandgate Road, round by West Terrace, and along the Leas to the lift, watch the lift up and down *twice*, but not longer, because that wouldn't do, back along the Leas, watch the Harbour for a short time, and then round by the churchyard, and so (hurrying) into [Pg 48] Church Street and Rendezvous Street. But on some exceptionally fine days the route lay through Radnor Park to the pond where the little boys sail ships and there are interesting swans.

He would return to find the shop settling down to the business of serving customers. And now he had to stand by to furnish any help that was necessary to

the seniors who served, to carry parcels and bills about the shop, to clear away "stuff" after each engagement, to hold up curtains until his arms ached, and what was more difficult than all, to do nothing, and not stare disconcertingly at customers when there was nothing for him to do. He plumbed an abyss of boredom, or stood a mere carcass, with his mind far away, fighting the enemies of the Empire, or steering a dream ship perilously into unknown seas. To be recalled sharply to our higher civilisation by some bustling senior's "Nar then, Kipps. *Look* alive! Ketch 'old. (My heart and lungs!)"

At half-past seven o'clock—except on late nights—a feverish activity of "straightening up" began, and when the last shutter was up outside, Kipps with the speed of an arrow leaving a bow would start hanging wrappers over the fixtures and over the piles of wares upon the counters, preparatory to a vigorous scattering of wet sawdust and the sweeping out of the shop.

Sometimes people would stay long after the shop was closed—"They don't mind a bit at Shalford's," these ladies used to say—it is always ladies do this sort of thing—and while they loitered it was [Pg 49]forbidden to touch a wrapper, or take any measures to conclude the day until the doors closed behind them.

Mr. Kipps would watch these later customers from the shadow of a stack of goods, and death and disfigurement was the least he wished for them. Rarely much later than nine, a supper of bread and cheese and watered beer awaited him upstairs, and, that consumed, the rest of the day was entirely at his disposal for reading, recreation, and the improvement of his mind....

The front door was locked at half-past ten, and the gas in the dormitory extinguished at eleven.

§3

On Sundays he was obliged to go to church once, and commonly he went twice, for there was nothing else to do. He sat in the free seats at the back; he was too shy to sing, and not always clever enough to keep his place in the prayer-book, and he rarely listened to the sermon. But he had developed a sort of idea that going to church had a tendency to alleviate life. His aunt wanted to have him confirmed, but he evaded this ceremony for some years.

In the intervals between services he walked about Folkestone with an air of looking for something. Folkestone was not so interesting on Sundays as on week-days, because the shops were shut; but on the other hand there was a sort of confusing brilliance along the front of the Leas in the afternoon. [Pg

50]Sometimes the apprentice next above him would condescend to go with him; but when the apprentice next but one above him condescended to go with the apprentice next above him, then Kipps, being habited as yet in ready-made clothes without tails, and unsuitable therefore to appear in such company, went alone.

Sometimes he would strike out into the country—still as if looking for something he missed—but the rope of meal-times haled him home again; and sometimes he would invest the major portion of the weekly allowance of a shilling that old Booch handed out to him, in a sacred concert on the pier. He would sometimes walk up and down the Leas between twenty and thirty times after supper, desiring much the courage to speak to some other person in the multitude similarly employed. Almost invariably he ended his Sunday footsore.

He never read a book; there were none for him to read, and besides, in spite of Mr. Woodrow's guidance through a cheap and cheaply annotated edition of the *Tempest* (English Literature) he had no taste that way; he never read any newspapers, except occasionally *Tit-Bits* or a ha'penny "comic." His chief intellectual stimulus was an occasional argey-bargey that sprang up between Carshot and Buggins at dinner. Kipps listened as if to unparalleled wisdom and wit, and treasured all the gems of repartee in his heart against the time when he, too, should be a Buggins and have the chance and courage for speech.

At times there came breaks in this routine—sale[Pg 51] times, darkened by extra toil and work past midnight, but brightened by a sprat supper and some shillings in the way of 'premiums.' And every year—not now and then, but every year—Mr. Shalford, with parenthetic admiration of his own generosity and glancing comparisons with the austerer days when *he* was apprenticed, conceded Kipps no less than ten days' holiday—ten whole days every year! Many a poor soul at Portland might well envy the fortunate Kipps. Insatiable heart of man! but how those days were grudged and counted as they snatched themselves away from him one after another!

Once a year came stock-taking, and at intervals gusts of "marking off" goods newly arrived. Then the splendours of Mr. Shalford's being shone with oppressive brilliancy. "System!" he would say, "system. Come! 'ussel!" and issue sharp, confusing, contradictory orders very quickly. Carshot trotted about, confused, perspiring, his big nose up in the air, his little eye on Mr. Shalford, his forehead crinkled, his lips always going to the formula "Oh, my heart and lungs!" The smart junior and the second apprentice vied with one another in obsequious alacrity.

The smart junior aspired to Carshot's position, and that made him almost violently subservient to Shalford. They all snapped at Kipps. Kipps held the blotting-pad and the safety inkpot and a box of tickets, and ran and fetched things. If he put the ink down before he went to fetch things Mr. Shalford usually knocked it over, and if he took it away Mr. Shalford [Pg 52] wanted it before he returned. "You make my tooth ache, Kipps," Mr. Shalford would say. "You gimme n'ralgia. You got no more System in you than a bad potato." And at the times when Kipps carried off the inkpot Mr. Shalford would become purple in the face and jab round with his dry pen at imaginary inkpots and swear, and Carshot would stand and vociferate, and the smart junior would run to the corner of the department and vociferate, and the second apprentice would pursue Kipps, vociferating, "Look Alive, Kipps! Look Alive! Ink, Man! Ink!"

A vague self-disgust, that shaped itself as an intense hate of Shalford and all his fellow-creatures, filled the soul of Kipps during these periods of storm and stress. He felt that the whole business was unjust and idiotic, but the why and the wherefore was too much for his unfortunate brain. His mind was a welter. One desire, the desire to dodge some at least of a pelting storm of disagreeable comment, guided him through a fumbling performance of his duties. His disgust was infinite! It was not decreased by the inflamed ankles and sore feet that form a normal incident in the business of making an English draper; and the senior apprentice, Minton, a gaunt, sullen-faced youngster with close-cropped, wiry, black hair, a loose, ugly mouth, and a moustache like a smudge of ink, directed his attention to deeper aspects of the question and sealed his misery.

"When you get too old to work they chuck you away," said Minton. "Lor! you find old drapers [Pg 53] everywhere—tramps, beggars, dock labourers, 'bus conductors—Quod. Anywhere but in a crib."

"Don't they get shops of their own?"

"Lord! 'Ow are they to get shops of their own? They 'aven't any capital! How's a draper's shopman to save up five hundred pounds even? I tell you it can't be done. You got to stick to cribs until it's over. I tell you we're in a blessed drainpipe, and we've got to crawl along it till we die."

The idea that fermented perpetually in the mind of Minton was to "hit the little beggar slap in the eye"—the little beggar being Mr. Shalford—"and see how his blessed System met that."

The threat filled Kipps with splendid anticipations whenever Shalford went marking off in Minton's department. He would look at Minton and look at Shalford, and decide where he would best like Shalford hit.... But for reasons known to himself Shalford never pished and tushed with Minton, as he did at the harmless Carshot, and this interesting experiment upon the System was never attempted.

§4

There were times when Kipps would lie awake, all others in the dormitory asleep and snoring, and think dismally of the outlook Minton pictured. Dimly he perceived the thing that had happened to him—how the great, stupid machine of retail trade had caught his life into its wheels, a vast, irresistible force[Pg 54] which he had neither strength of will nor knowledge to escape. This was to be his life until his days should end. No adventures, no glory, no change, no freedom. Neither—though the force of that came home to him later—might he dream of effectual love and marriage. And there was a terrible something called the "swap," or "the key of the street," and "crib hunting," of which the talk was scanty but sufficient. Night after night he would resolve to enlist, to run away to sea, to set fire to the warehouse, or drown himself; and morning after morning he rose up and hurried downstairs in fear of a sixpenny fine. He would compare his dismal round of servile drudgery with those windy, sunlit days at Littlestone, those windows of happiness shining ever brighter as they receded. The little figure of Ann seemed in all these windows now.

She, too, had happened on evil things. When Kipps went home for the first Christmas after he was bound, that great suspended resolve of his to kiss her flared up to hot determination, and he hurried out and whistled in the yard. There was a still silence, and then old Kipps appeared behind him.

"It's no good your whistling there, my boy," said Old Kipps in a loud, clear tone, designed to be audible over the wall. "They've cleared out all you 'ad any truck with. *She's* gone as help to Ashford, my boy. *Help!* Slavey is what we used to call 'em, but times are changed. Wonder they didn't say lady-'elp while they was about it. It 'ud be like 'em."

[Pg 55]

And Sid? Sid had gone, too. "Arrand boy or somethink," said Old Kipps. "To one of these here brasted cicycle shops."

"Has 'e!" said Kipps, with a feeling that he had been gripped about the chest, and he turned quickly and went indoors.

Old Kipps, still supposing him present, went on to further observations of an anti-Pornick hue....

When Kipps got upstairs safe in his own bedroom, he sat down on the bed and stared at nothing. They were caught—they were all caught. All life took on the hue of one perpetual, dismal Monday morning. The Hurons were scattered, the wrecks and the beach had passed away from him, the sun of those warm evenings at Littlestone had set for evermore....

The only pleasure left for the brief remainder of his holiday after that was to think he was not in the shop. Even that was transient. Two more days—one more day—half a day. When he went back there were one or two very dismal nights indeed. He went so far as to write home some vague intimation of his feelings about business and his prospects, quoting Minton. But Mrs. Kipps answered him, "Did he want the Pornicks to say he wasn't good enough to be a draper?" This dreadful possibility was of course conclusive in the matter. "No," he resolved they should not say he failed at that.

He derived much help from a "manly" sermon delivered in an enormous voice by a large, fat, sun-red clergyman, just home from a colonial bishopric he had [Pg 56] resigned on the plea of ill-health, exhorting him that whatever his hand found to do, he was to do with all his might; and the revision of his Catechism preparatory to his confirmation reminded him that it behooved him "to do his duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call him...."

After a time the sorrows of Kipps grew less acute, and save for a miracle the brief tragedy of his life was over. He subdued himself to his position even as his Church required of him, seeing moreover no way out of it.

The earliest mitigation of his lot was that his soles and ankles became indurated to the perpetual standing. The next was an unexpected weekly whiff of freedom that came every Thursday. Mr. Shalford, after a brave stand for what he called "Innyvishal lib'ty" and the "Idea of my System," a stand which he explained he made chiefly on patriotic grounds, was at last, under pressure of certain of his customers, compelled to fall in line with the rest of the local Early Closing Association, and Mr. Kipps could emerge in daylight and go where he listed for long, long hours. Moreover Minton, the pessimist, reached the end of his appointed time and left—to enlist in a cavalry regiment and go about this planet

leading an insubordinate but interesting life, that ended at last in an intimate, vivid and really you know by no means painful or tragic night grapple in the Terah Valley. In a little while Kipps cleaned windows no longer; he was serving customers (of the less important sort)[Pg 57] and taking goods out on approval; and presently he was third apprentice, and his moustache was visible, and there were three apprentices whom he might legally snub and cuff. But one was (most dishonestly) too big to cuff in spite of his greener years.

§5

There came still other distractions, the natural distractions of adolescence, to take his mind off the inevitable. His costume, for example, began to interest him more; he began to realise himself as a visible object, to find an interest in the costume-room mirrors and the eyes of the girl apprentices.

In this he was helped by counsel and example. Pierce, his immediate senior, was by way of being what was called a Masher, and preached his cult. During slack times grave discussions about collars, ties, the cut of trouser legs, and the proper shape of a boot-toe, were held in the Manchester department. In due course Kipps went to a tailor, and his short jacket was replaced by a morning coat with tails. Stirred by this, he purchased at his own expense three stand-up collars to replace his former turn-down ones. They were nearly three inches high, higher than those Pierce wore, and they made his neck quite sore and left a red mark under his ears.... So equipped, he found himself fit company even for this fashionable apprentice, who had now succeeded Minton in his seniority.

Most potent help of all in the business of [Pg 58]forgetting his cosmic disaster was this, that so soon as he was in tail coats the young ladies of the establishment began to discover that he was no longer a "horrid little boy." Hitherto they had tossed heads at him and kept him in his place. Now they discovered that he was a "nice boy," which is next door at least to being a "feller," and in some ways even preferable. It is painful to record that his fidelity to Ann failed at their first onset. I am fully sensible how entirely better this story would be from a sentimental point of view if he had remained true to that early love. Only then it would have been a different story altogether. And at least Kipps was thus far true, that with none of these later loves was there any of that particular quality that linked Ann's flushed face and warmth and the inner things of life so inseparably together. Though they were not without emotions of various sorts.

It was one of the young ladies in the costume-room who first showed by her manner that he was a visible object and capable of exciting interest. She talked to

him, she encouraged him to talk to her, she lent him a book she possessed, and darned a sock for him, and said she would be his elder sister. She allowed him to escort her to church with a great air of having induced him to go. Then she investigated his eternal welfare, overcame a certain affectation of virile indifference to religion, and extorted a promise that he would undergo "confirmation." This excited the other young lady in the costumes, her natural rival, and she[Pg 59] set herself with great charm and subtlety to the capture of the ripening heart of Kipps. She took a more worldly line. She went for a walk with him to the pier on Sunday afternoon, and explained to him how a gentleman must always walk "outside" a lady on a pavement, and how all gentlemen wore, or at least carried gloves, and generally the broad beginnings of the British social ideal. Afterwards the ladies exchanged "words," upon Sabbatical grounds. In this way was the *toga virilis* bestowed on Kipps, and he became recognised as a suitable object for that Platonic Eros whose blunted darts devastate even the very highest-class establishments. In this way, too, did that pervading ambition of the British young man to be, if not a "gentleman," at least mistakably like one, take root in his heart.

He took to these new interests with quite natural and personal zest. He became initiated into the mysteries of "flirting," and—at a slightly later stage, and with some leading hints from Pierce, who was of a communicative disposition in these matters—of the milder forms of "spooning." Very soon he was engaged. Before two years were out he had been engaged six times, and was beginning to be rather a desperate fellow, so far as he could make out. Desperate, but quite gentlemanly, be it understood, and without let or hindrance to the fact that he was, in four brief lessons, "prepared" by a distant-mannered and gloomy young curate, and "confirmed" a member of the Established Church.

[Pg 60]

The engagements in drapery establishments do not necessarily involve a subsequent marriage. They are essentially more refined, less coarsely practical, and altogether less binding than the engagements of the vulgar rich. These young ladies do not like not to be engaged—it is so unnatural; and Mr. Kipps was as easy to get engaged to as one could wish. There are, from the young lady's point of view, many conveniences in being engaged. You get an escort for church and walks and so forth. It is not quite the thing to walk abroad with a "feller," much more to "spoon" with him, when he is neither one's *fiancé* nor an adopted brother; it is considered either a little *fast*, or else as savouring of the "walking-out" habits of the servant girls. Now, such is the sweetness of human charity, that the shop

young lady in England has just the same horror of doing anything that savours of the servant girl as the lady journalist, let us say, has of anything savouring of the shop girl, or the really quite nice young lady has of anything savouring of any sort of girl who has gone down into the economic battlefield to earn herself a living.... But the very deepest of these affairs was still among the shallow places of love; at best it was paddling where it is decreed that men must sink or swim. Of the deep and dangerous places, and of the huge buoyant lift of its waves, he tasted nothing. Affairs of clothes and vanities they were, jealousies about a thing said, flatteries and mutual boastings, climaxes in the answering grasp of hands, the temerarious use of Christian [Pg 61] names, culminations in a walk, or a near confidence, or a little pressure more or less. Close-sitting on a seat after twilight, with some little fondling, was indeed the boldest of a lover's adventures, the utmost limit of his enterprises in the service of that stark Great Lady, who is daughter of Uranus and the sea. The "young ladies" who reigned in his heart came and went like people in an omnibus: there was the vehicle, so to speak, upon the road, and they entered and left it without any cataclysm of emotion. For all that, this development of the sex interest was continuously very interesting to Kipps, and kept him going as much as anything through all these servile years.

§6

For a tailpiece to this chapter one may vignette one of those little affairs.

It is a bright Sunday afternoon; the scene is a secluded little seat half-way down the front of the Leas, and Kipps is four years older than when he parted from Ann. There is a quite perceptible down upon his upper lip, and his costume is just as tremendous a "mash" as lies within his means. His collar is so high that it scars his inaggressive jawbone, and his hat has a curly brim, his tie shows taste, his trousers are modestly brilliant, and his boots have light cloth uppers and button at the side. He jabs at the gravel before him with a cheap cane, and glances sideways at Flo Bates, the young lady from the cash desk. [Pg 62] She is wearing a brilliant blouse and a gaily trimmed hat. There is an air of fashion about her that might disappear under the analysis of a woman of the world, but which is quite sufficient to make Kipps very proud to be distinguished as her particular "feller," and to be allowed at temperate intervals to use her Christian name.

The conversation is light and gay in the modern style, and Flo keeps on smiling, good temper being her special charm.

"Ye see, you don' mean what / mean," he is saying.

"Well, what do *you* mean?"

"Not what you mean!"

"Well, tell me."

"*Ah!* That's another story."

Pause. They look meaningfully at one another.

"You *are* a one for being roundabout," says the lady.

"Well, you're not so plain, you know."

"Not plain?"

"No."

"You don't mean to say I'm roundabout?"

"No. I mean to say ... though——"

Pause.

"Well?"

"You're not a bit plain—you're" (his voice jumps up to a squeak) "pretty. See?"

"Oh, get *out!*" her voice lifts also—with pleasure.

She strikes at him with her glove, then glances suddenly at a ring upon her finger. Her smile [Pg 63]disappears momentarily. Another pause. Eyes meet and the smile returns.

"I wish I knew——" says Kipps.

"Knew——?"

"Where you got that ring."

She lifts the hand with the ring until her eyes just show (very prettily) over it.

"You'd just *like* to know," she says slowly, and smiles still more brightly with the sense of successful effect.

"I dessay I could guess."

"I dessay you couldn't."

"Couldn't I?"

"No!"

"Guess it in three."

"Not the name."

"Ah!"

"Ah!"

"Well, anyhow lemme look at it."

He looks at it. Pause. Giggles, slight struggle, and a slap on Kipps' coatsleeve. A passerby appears down the path, and she hastily withdraws her hand.

She glances at the face of the approaching man. They maintain a bashful silence until he has passed.

[Pg 64]

CHAPTER III THE WOOD-CARVING CLASS

§1

Though these services to Venus Epipontia, the seaside Venus, and these studies in the art of dress, did much to distract his thoughts and mitigate his earlier miseries, it would be mere optimism to present Kipps as altogether happy. A vague dissatisfaction with life drifted about him and every now and again enveloped him like a sea fog. During these periods it was greyly evident that there was something, something vital in life, lacking. For no earthly reason that Kipps could discover, he was haunted by a suspicion that life was going wrong or had already gone wrong in some irrevocable way. The ripening self-consciousness of adolescence developed this into a clearly felt insufficiency. It was all very well to carry gloves, open doors, never say "Miss" to a girl, and walk "outside," but were there not other things, conceivably even deeper things, before the complete thing was attained? For example, certain matters of knowledge. He perceived great bogs of ignorance about him, fumbling traps, where other people, it was alleged, *real* gentlemen and ladies, for example, and [Pg 65] the clergy, had knowledge and assurance, bogs which it was sometimes difficult to elude. A girl arrived in the millinery department who could, she said, *speak* French and German. She snubbed certain advances, and a realisation of inferiority blistered

Kipps. But he tried to pass the thing off as a joke by saying, "Parlez-vous Francey," whenever he met her, and inducing the junior apprentice to say the same.

He even made some dim half-secret experiments towards remedying the deficiencies he suspected. He spent five shillings on five serial numbers of a Home Educator, and bought (and even thought of reading) a Shakespeare and a Bacon's "Advancement of Learning" and the poems of Herrick from a chap who was hard up. He battled with Shakespeare all one Sunday afternoon, and found the "English Literature" with which Mr. Woodrow had equipped him had vanished down some crack in his mind. He had no doubt it was very splendid stuff, but he couldn't quite make out what it was all about. There was an occult meaning, he knew, in literature, and he had forgotten it. Moreover, he discovered one day, while taunting the junior apprentice with ignorance, that his "rivers of England" had also slipped his memory, and he laboriously restored that fabric of rote learning: "Ty Wear Tees 'Umber..."

I suppose some such phase of discontent is a normal thing in every adolescence. The ripening mind seeks something upon which its will may crystallise, upon which its discursive emotions, growing more [Pg 66]abundant with each year of life, may concentrate. For many, though not for all, it takes a religious direction, but in those particular years the mental atmosphere of Folkestone was exceptionally free from any revivalistic disturbance that might have reached Kipps' mental being. Sometimes they fall in love. I have known this uneasiness end in different cases in a vow to read one book (not a novel) every week, to read the Bible through in a year, to pass in the Honours division of the London Matriculation examination, to become an accomplished chemist, and never more to tell a lie. It led Kipps finally into Technical Education as we understand it in the south of England.

It was in the last year of his apprenticeship that he had pursued his researches after that missing qualification into the Folkestone Young Men's Association, where Mr. Chester Coote prevailed. Mr. Chester Coote was a young man of semi-independent means who inherited a share in a house agency, read Mrs. Humphry Ward, and took an interest in social work. He was a whitish-faced young man with a prominent nose, pale blue eyes, and a quivering quality in his voice. He was very active upon committees; he was very prominent and useful on all social occasions, in evidence upon platforms and upon all those semi-public occasions when the Great descend. He lived with an only sister. To Kipps and his kind in the Young Men's Association he read a stimulating paper on "Self-Help." He said it was the noblest of all our[Pg 67] distinctive English characteristics, and he was

very much down upon the "over-educated" Germans. At the close a young German hairdresser made a few commendatory remarks which developed somehow into an oration on Hanoverian politics. As he became excited he became guttural and obscure; the meeting sniggered cheerfully at such ridiculous English, and Kipps was so much amused that he forgot a private project to ask this Chester Coote how he might set about a little self-help on his own private account in such narrow margins of time as the System of Mr. Shalford spared him. But afterwards in the night-time it came to him again.

It was a few months later, and after his apprenticeship was over and Mr. Shalford had with depreciatory observations taken him on as an improver at twenty pounds a year, that this question was revived by a casual article on Technical Education in a morning paper that a commercial traveller had left behind him. It played the *rôle* of the word in season. Something in the nature of conversion, a faint sort of concentration of purpose, really occurred in him then. The article was written with penetrating vehemence, and it stimulated him to the pitch of inquiring about the local Science and Art Classes, and after he had told everybody in the shop about it and taken the advice of all who supported his desperate resolution, he joined. At first he attended the class in Freehand, that being the subject taught on early closing night; and he had already made some progress in that [Pg 68]extraordinary routine of reproducing freehand "copies" which for two generations had passed with English people for instruction in art, when the dates of the classes were changed. Thereby just as the March winds were blowing he was precipitated into the wood-carving class, and his mind diverted first to this useful and broadening pursuit, and then to its teacher.

§2

The class in wood-carving was an extremely select class, conducted at that time by a young lady named Walshingham, and as this young lady was destined by fortune to teach Kipps a great deal more than wood carving, it will be well if the reader gets the picture of her correctly in mind. She was only a year or so older than he was; she had a pale, intellectual face, dark grey eyes, and black hair, which she wore over her forehead in an original and striking way that she had adopted from a picture by Rossetti in the South Kensington Museum. She was slender, so that without ungainliness she had an effect of being tall, and her hands were shapely and white when they came into contrast with hands much exercised in rolling and blocking. She dressed in those loose and pleasant forms and those soft and tempered shades that arose in England in the socialistic-æsthetic epoch and remain to this day among us as the badge of those who read

Turgenev's novels, scorn current fiction, and think on higher planes. I think she was as beautiful[Pg 69] as most beautiful people, and to Kipps she was altogether beautiful. She had, Kipps learnt, matriculated at London University, an astounding feat to his imagination; and the masterly way in which she demonstrated how to prod and worry honest pieces of wood into useless and unedifying patterns in relief extorted his utmost admiration.

At first, when Kipps had learnt he was to be taught by a "girl," he was inclined to resent it, the more so as Buggins had recently been very strong on the gross injustice of feminine employment.

"We have to keep wives," said Buggins (though as a matter of fact he did not keep even one), "and how are we to do it with a lot of girls coming in to take the work out of our mouths?"

Afterwards Kipps, in conjunction with Pierce, looked at it from another point of view, and thought it would be rather a "lark." Finally, when he saw her, and saw her teaching, and coming nearer to him with an impressive deliberation, he was breathless with awe and the quality of her dark, slender femininity.

The class consisted of two girls and a maiden lady of riper years, friends of Miss Walshingham's, and anxious rather to support her in an interesting experiment than to become really expert wood-carvers; an oldish young man with spectacles and a black beard, who never spoke to any one, and who was evidently too short-sighted to see his work as a whole; a small boy who was understood to have a "gift" for wood-carving; and a lodging-house keeper who "took[Pg 70] classes" every winter, she told Mr. Kipps, as though they were a tonic, and "found they did her good." And occasionally Mr. Chester Coote—refined and gentlemanly—would come into the class, with or without papers, ostensibly on committee business, but in reality to talk to the less attractive one of the two girl students; and sometimes a brother of Miss Walshingham's, a slender, dark young man with a pale face, and fluctuating resemblances to the young Napoleon, would arrive just at the end of the class-time to see his sister home.

All these personages impressed Kipps with a sense of inferiority that in the case of Miss Walshingham became positively abysmal. The ideas and knowledge they appeared to have, their personal capacity and freedom, opened a new world to his imagination. These people came and went, with a sense of absolute assurance, against an overwhelming background of plaster casts, diagrams and tables, benches and a blackboard—a background that seemed to him to be saturated with recondite knowledge and the occult and jealously guarded tips

and secrets that constitute Art and the Higher Life. They went home, he imagined, to homes where the piano was played with distinction and freedom, and books littered the tables, and foreign languages were habitually used. They had complicated meals, no doubt—with serviettes. They "knew etiquette," and how to avoid all the errors for which Kipps bought penny manuals, "What to Avoid," "Common Errors in Speaking," [Pg 71] and the like. He knew nothing about it all—nothing whatever; he was a creature of the outer darkness blinking in an unsuspected light.

He heard them speak easily and freely to one another of examinations, of books and paintings, of "last year's Academy"—a little contemptuously; and once, just at the end of the class-time, Mr. Chester Coote and young Walshingham and the two girls argued about something or other called, he fancied, "Vagner" or "Vargner"—they seemed to say it both ways—and which presently shaped itself more definitely as the name of a man who made up music. (Carshot and Buggins weren't in it with them.) Young Walshingham, it appeared, said something or other that was an "epigram," and they all applauded him. Kipps, I say, felt himself a creature of outer darkness, an inexcusable intruder in an altitudinous world. When the epigram happened, he first of all smiled, to pretend he understood, and instantly suppressed the smile to show he did not listen. Then he became extremely hot and uncomfortable, though nobody had noticed either phase.

It was clear his only chance of concealing his bottomless baseness was to hold his tongue, and meanwhile he chipped with earnest care, and abased his soul before the very shadow of Miss Walshingham. She used to come and direct and advise him, with, he felt, an effort to conceal the scorn she had for him; and, indeed, it is true that at first she thought of him chiefly as the clumsy young man with the red ears.

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And as soon as he emerged from the first effect of pure and awestricken humility—he was greatly helped to emerge from that condition to a perception of human equality by the need the lodging-house keeper was under to talk while she worked, and as she didn't like Miss Walshingham and her friends very much, and the young man with spectacles was deaf, she naturally talked to Kipps—he perceived that he was in a state of adoration for Miss Walshingham that it seemed almost a blasphemous familiarity to speak of us being in love.

This state, you must understand, had nothing to do with "flirting" or "spooning" and that superficial passion that flashes from eye to eye upon the leas and pier—

absolutely nothing. That he knew from the first. Her rather pallid, intelligent young face, beneath those sombre clouds of hair, put her in a class apart; towards her the thought of "attentions" paled and vanished. To approach such a being, to perform sacrifices and to perish obviously for her, seemed the limit he might aspire to, he or any man. For if his love was abasement, at any rate it had this much of manliness, that it covered all his sex. It had not yet come to Kipps to acknowledge any man as his better in his heart of hearts. When one does that the game is played and one grows old indeed.

The rest of his sentimental interests vanished altogether in this great illumination. He meditated about her when he was blocking cretonne; her image was before his eyes at tea-time, and blotted out the more[Pg 73] immediate faces, and made him silent and preoccupied, and so careless in his bearing that the junior apprentice, sitting beside him, mocked at and parodied his enormous bites of bread and butter unreprieved. He became conspicuously less popular on the "fancy" side, the "costumes" was chilly with him and the "millinery" cutting. But he did not care. An intermittent correspondent with Flo Bates, that had gone on since she left Mr. Shalford's desk for a position at Tunbridge "nearer home," and which had roused Kipps in its earlier stages to unparalleled heights of epistolatory effort, died out altogether by reason of his neglect. He heard with scarcely a pang that, as a consequence perhaps of his neglect, Flo was "carrying on with a chap who managed a farm."

Every Thursday he jabbed and gouged at his wood, jabbing and gouging intersecting circles and diamond tracteries, and that laboured inane which our mad world calls ornament, and he watched Miss Walshingham furtively whenever she turned away. The circles in consequence were jabbed crooked; and his panels, losing their symmetry, became comparatively pleasing to the untrained eye—and once he jabbed his finger. He would cheerfully have jabbed all his fingers if he could have found some means of using the opening to express himself of the vague emotions that possessed him. But he shirked conversation just as earnestly as he desired it; he feared that profound general ignorance of his might appear.

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§3

There came a time when she could not open one of the class-room windows. The man with the black beard pored over his chipping heedlessly....

It did not take Kipps a moment to grasp his opportunity. He dropped his gouge and stepped forward. "Lem *me*," he said....

He could not open the window either!

"Oh, please don't trouble," she said.

"Sno trouble," he gasped.

Still the sash stuck. He felt his manhood was at stake. He gathered himself together for a tremendous effort, and the pane broke with a snap, and he thrust his hand into the void beyond.

"*There!*" said Miss Walshingham, and the glass fell ringing into the courtyard below.

Then Kipps made to bring his hand back, and felt the keen touch of the edge of the broken glass at his wrist. He turned dolefully. "I'm tremendously sorry," he said in answer to the accusation in Miss Walshingham's eyes. "I didn't think it would break like that,"—as if he had expected it to break in some quite different and entirely more satisfactory manner. The boy with the gift of wood-carving having stared at Kipps' face for a moment, became involved in a Laocoon struggle with a giggle.

"You've cut your wrist," said one of the girl friends, standing up and pointing. She was a pleasant-faced, greatly freckled girl, with a helpful [Pg 75]disposition, and she said "You've cut your wrist," as brightly as if she had been a trained nurse.

Kipps looked down, and saw a swift line of scarlet rush down his hand. He perceived the other man student regarding this with magnified eyes.

"You *have* cut your wrist," said Miss Walshingham, and Kipps regarded his damage with greater interest.

"He's cut his wrist," said the maiden lady to the lodging-house keeper, and seemed in doubt what a lady should do. "It's——" she hesitated at the word "bleeding," and nodded to the lodging-house keeper instead.

"Dreadfully," said the maiden lady, and tried to look and tried not to look at the same time.

"Of *course* he's cut his wrist," said the lodging-house keeper, momentarily quite annoyed at Kipps; and the other young lady, who thought Kipps rather common, went on quietly with her wood-cutting with an air of its being the proper thing to do—though nobody else seemed to know it.

"You must tie it up," said Miss Walshingham.

"We must tie it up," said the freckled girl.

"I 'adn't the slightest idea that window was going to break like that," said Kipps, with candour. "Nort the slightest."

He glanced again at the blood on his wrist, and it seemed to him that it was on the very point of dropping on the floor of that cultured class-room. So he very neatly licked it off, feeling at the same time for [Pg 76] his handkerchief. "Oh, *don't!*" said Miss Walshingham as he did so, and the girl with the freckles made a movement of horror. The giggle got the better of the boy with the gift, and celebrated its triumph by unseemly noises; in spite of which it seemed to Kipps at the moment that the act that had made Miss Walshingham say "Oh, *don't!*" was rather a desperate and manly treatment of what was after all a creditable injury.

"It ought to be tied up," said the lodging-house keeper, holding her chisel upright in her hand. "It's a bad cut to bleed like that."

"We must tie it up," said the freckled girl, and hesitated in front of Kipps. "Have you got a handkerchief?" she said.

"I dunno 'ow I managed *not* to bring one," said Kipps. "I—— Not 'aving a cold I suppose some'ow I didn't think——"

He checked a further flow of blood.

The girl with the freckles caught Miss Walshingham's eye, and held it for a moment. Both glanced at Kipps' injury. The boy with the gift, who had reappeared with a chastened expression from some noisy pursuit beneath his desk, made the neglected motions of one who proffers shyly. Miss Walshingham under the spell of the freckled girl's eye produced a handkerchief. The voice of the maiden lady could be heard in the background. "I've been through all the technical education ambulance classes twice, and I know you go so if it's a vein, and so if it's an [Pg 77] artery—at least you go so for one and so for the other, whichever it may be; but...."

"If you will give me your hand," said the freckled girl, and proceeded with Miss Walshingham's assistance to bandage Kipps in a most businesslike way. Yes, they actually bandaged Kipps. They pulled up his cuffs—happily they were not a very frayed pair—and held his wrist, and wrapped the soft handkerchief round it, and tightened the knot together. And Miss Walshingham's face, the face of that almost divine Over-human, came close to the face of Kipps.

"We're not hurting you, are we?" she said.

"Not a bit," said Kipps, as he would have said if they had been sawing his arm off.

"We're not experts, you know," said the freckled girl.

"I'm sure it's a dreadful cut," said Miss Walshingham.

"It ain't much reely," said Kipps; "and you're taking a lot of trouble. I'm sorry I broke that window. I can't think what I could have been doing."

"It isn't so much the cut at the time, it's the poisoning afterwards," came the voice of the maiden lady.

"Of course I'm quite willing to pay for the window," panted Kipps opulently.

"We must make it just as tight as possible, to stop the bleeding," said the freckled girl.

"I don't think it's much reely," said Kipps. "I'm awful sorry I broke that window, though."

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"Put your finger on the knot, dear," said the freckled girl.

"Eh?" said Kipps; "I mean——"

Both the young ladies became very intent on the knot, and Mr. Kipps was very red and very intent upon the two young ladies.

"Mortified, and had to be sawn off," said the maiden lady.

"Sawn off?" said the lodging-house keeper.

"Sawn *right* off," said the maiden lady, and jabbed at her mangled design.

"*There*," said the freckled girl, "I think that ought to do. You're sure it's not too tight?"

"Not a bit," said Kipps.

He met Miss Walshingham's eye, and smiled to show how little he cared for wounds and pain. "It's only a little cut," he added.

The maiden lady appeared as an addition to their group. "You should have washed the wound, dear," she said. "I was just telling Miss Collis." She peered through her glasses at the bandage. "That doesn't look *quite* right," she remarked critically.

"You should have taken the ambulance classes. But I suppose it will have to do. Are you hurting?"

"Not a bit," said Kipps, and he smiled at them all with the air of a brave soldier in hospital.

"I'm sure it *must* hurt," said Miss Walshingham.

"Anyhow, you're a very good patient," said the girl with the freckles.

Mr. Kipps became quite pink. "I'm only sorry I[Pg 79] broke the window—that's all," he said. "But who would have thought it was going to break like that?"

Pause.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to go on carving to-night," said Miss Walshingham.

"I'll try," said Kipps. "It reelly doesn't hurt—not anything to matter."

Presently Miss Walshingham came to him as he carved heroically with his hand bandaged in her handkerchief. There was a touch of a novel interest in her eyes. "I'm afraid you're not getting on very fast," she said.

The freckled girl looked up and regarded Miss Walshingham.

"I'm doing a little, anyhow," said Kipps. "I don't want to waste any time. A feller like me hasn't much time to spare."

It struck the girls that there was a quality of modest disavowal about that "feller like me." It gave them a light into this obscure person, and Miss Walshingham ventured to commend his work as "promising" and to ask whether he meant to follow it up. Kipps didn't "altogether know"—"things depended on so much," but if he was in Folkestone next winter he certainly should. It did not occur to Miss Walshingham at the time to ask why his progress in art depended upon his presence in Folkestone. There was some more questions and answers—they continued to talk to him for a little time, even when Mr. Chester Coote had come into the room—and when at[Pg 80] last the conversation had died out it dawned upon Kipps just how much his cut wrist had done for him....

He went to sleep that night revising that conversation for the twentieth time, treasuring this and expanding that, and inserting things he might have said to Miss Walshingham, things he might still say about himself—in relation more or less explicit to her. He wasn't quite sure if he wouldn't like his arm to mortify a bit,

which would make him interesting, or to heal up absolutely, which would show the exceptional purity of his blood.

§4

The affair of the broken window happened late in April, and the class came to an end in May. In that interval there were several small incidents and great developments of emotion. I have done Kipps no justice if I have made it seem that his face was unsightly. It was, as the freckled girl pointed out to Helen Walshingham, an "interesting" face, and that aspect of him which presented chiefly erratic hair and glowing ears ceased to prevail.

They talked him over, and the freckled girl discovered there was something "wistful" in his manner. They detected a "natural delicacy," and the freckled girl set herself to draw him out from that time forth. The freckled girl was nineteen, and very wise and motherly and benevolent, and really she greatly [Pg 81]preferred drawing out Kipps to wood-carving. It was quite evident to her that Kipps was in love with Helen Walshingham, and it struck her as a queer and romantic and pathetic and extremely interesting phenomenon. And as at that time she regarded Helen as "simply lovely," it seemed only right and proper that she should assist Kipps in his modest efforts to place himself in a state of absolute *abandon* upon her altar.

Under her sympathetic management the position of Kipps was presently defined quite clearly. He was unhappy in his position—misunderstood. He told her he "didn't seem to get on like" with customers, and she translated this for him as "too sensitive." The discontent with his fate in life, the dreadful feeling that education was slipping by him, troubles that time and usage were glazing over a little, revived to their old acuteness but not to their old hopelessness. As a basis for sympathy indeed they were even a source of pleasure.

And one day at dinner it happened that Carshot and Buggins fell talking of "these here writers," and how Dickens had been a labeller of blacking and Thackeray "an artist who couldn't sell a drawing," and how Samuel Johnson had walked to London without any boots, having thrown away his only pair "out of pride." "It's luck," said Buggins, "to a very large extent. They just happen to hit on something that catches on, and there you are!"

"Nice easy life they have of it, too," said Miss [Pg 82] Mergle. "Write just an hour or so, and done for the day! Almost like gentlefolks."

"There's more work in it than you'd think," said Carshot, stooping to a mouthful.

"I wouldn't mind changing, for all that," said Buggins. "I'd like to see one of these here authors marking off with Jimmy."

"I think they copy from each other a good deal," said Miss Mergle.

"Even then (chup, chup, chup)," said Carshot, "there's writing it out in their own hands."

They proceeded to enlarge upon the literary life, on its ease and dignity, on the social recognition accorded to those who led it, and on the ample gratifications their vanity achieved. "Pictures everywhere—never get a new suit without being photographed—almost like Royalty," said Miss Mergle.

And all this talk impressed the imagination of Kipps very greatly. Here was a class that seemed to bridge the gulf. On the one hand essentially Low, but by factitious circumstances capable of entering upon those levels of social superiority to which all true Englishmen aspire, those levels from which one may tip a butler, scorn a tailor, and even commune with those who lead "men" into battle. "Almost like gentlefolks"—that was it! He brooded over these things in the afternoon, until they blossomed into daydreams. Suppose, for example, he had chanced to write a book, a well-known book, under an assumed name, and yet kept on being a draper all the time....[Pg 83] Impossible, of course, but *suppose*—it made quite a long dream.

And at the next wood-carving class he let it be drawn from him that his real choice in life was to be a Nawther—"only one doesn't get a chance."

After that there were times when Kipps had that pleasant sense that comes of attracting interest. He was a mute, inglorious Dickens, or at any rate something of that sort, and they were all taking him at that. The discovery of this indefinable "something in" him, the development of which was now painfully restricted and impossible, did much to bridge the gulf between himself and Miss Walshingham. He was unfortunate, he was futile, but he was not "common." Even now with help...? The two girls, and the freckled girl in particular, tried to "stir him up" to some effort to do his imputed potentialities justice. They were still young enough to believe that to nice and niceish members of the male sex—more especially when under the stimulus of feminine encouragement—nothing is finally impossible.

The freckled girl was, I say, the stage manager of this affair, but Miss Walshingham was the presiding divinity. A touch of proprietorship came in her

eyes at times when she looked at him. He was hers—unconditionally—and she knew it.

To her directly Kipps scarcely ever made a speech. The enterprising things that he was continually devising to say to her, he usually did not say, or he said them in a suitably modified form to the girl with the [Pg 84] freckles. And one day the girl with the freckles smote him to the heart. She said to him, with the faintest indication of her head across the class-room to where her friend reached a cast from the shelf, "I do think Helen Walshingham is sometimes the most lovely person in the world. Look at her now!"

Kipps gasped for a moment. The moment lengthened, and she regarded him as an intelligent young surgeon might regard an operation without anæsthetics.

"You're right," he said, and then looked at her with an entire abandonment of visage.

She coloured under his glare of silent avowal, and he blushed brightly.

"I think so, too," he said hoarsely, cleared his throat, and after a meditative moment proceeded sacramentally with his wood-carving.

"You *are* wonderful," said the freckled girl to Miss Walshingham, apropos of nothing, as they went on their way home together. "He simply adores you."

"But, my dear, what have I done?" said Helen.

"That's just it," said the freckled girl. "What *have* you done?"

And then with a terrible swiftness came the last class of the course, to terminate this relationship altogether. Kipps was careless of dates, and the thing came upon him with an effect of abrupt surprise. Just as his petals were expanding so hopefully, "Finis," and the thing was at an end. But Kipps did not fully [Pg 85] appreciate that the end was indeed and really and truly the end, until he was back in the Emporium after the end was over.

The end began practically in the middle of the last class, when the freckled girl broached the topic of terminations. She developed the question of just how he was going on after the class ended. She hoped he would stick to certain resolutions of self-improvement he had breathed. She said quite honestly that he owed it to himself to develop his possibilities. He expressed firm resolve, but dwelt on difficulties. He had no books. She instructed him how to get books from the public library. He was to get a form of application for a ticket signed by a

ratepayer; and he said "of course," when she said Mr. Shalford would do that, though all the time he knew perfectly well it would "never do" to ask Mr. Shalford for anything of the sort. She explained that she was going to North Wales for the summer, information he received without immediate regret. At intervals he expressed his intention of going on with wood-carving when the summer was over, and once he added "If——"

She considered herself extremely delicate not to press for the completion of that "if——"

After that talk there was an interval of languid wood-carving and watching Miss Walshingham.

Then presently there came a bustle of packing, a great ceremony of hand-shaking all round by Miss Collis and the maiden lady of ripe years, and then[Pg 86] Kipps found himself outside the class-room, on the landing with his two friends. It seemed to him he had only just learnt that this was the last class of all. There came a little pause, and the freckled girl suddenly went back into the class-room, and left Kipps and Miss Walshingham alone together for the first time. Kipps was instantly breathless. She looked at his face with a glance that mingled sympathy and curiosity, and held out her white hand.

"Well, good-bye, Mr. Kipps," she said.

He took her hand and held it. "I'd do anything," said Kipps, and had not the temerity to add, "for you." He stopped awkwardly. He shook her hand and said, "Good-bye."

There was a little pause.

"I hope you will have a pleasant holiday," she said.

"I shall come back to the class next year, anyhow," said Kipps valiantly, and turned abruptly to the stairs.

"I hope you will," said Miss Walshingham.

He turned back towards her. "Reelly?" he said.

"I hope everybody will come back."

"I will—anyhow," said Kipps. "You may count on that," and he tried to make his tones significant.

They looked at one another through a little pause.

"Good-bye," she said.

Kipps lifted his hat. She turned towards the class-room.

"Well?" said the freckled girl, coming back towards her.

"Nothing," said Helen. "At least—presently." [Pg 87] And she became very energetic about some scattered tools on a desk.

The freckled girl went out and stood for a moment at the head of the stairs. When she came back she looked very hard at her friend. The incident struck her as important—wonderfully important. It was unassimilable, of course, and absurd, but there it was, the thing that is so cardinal to a girl, the emotion, the subservience, the crowning triumph of her sex. She could not help feeling that Helen took it, on the whole, a little too hardly.

[Pg 88]

CHAPTER IV CHITTERLOW

§1

The hour of the class on the following Thursday found Kipps in a state of nearly incredible despondency. He was sitting with his eyes on the reading room clock, his chin resting on his fists and his elbows on the accumulated comic papers that were comic alas! in vain! He paid no heed to the little man in spectacles glaring opposite to him, famishing for *Fun*. In this place it was he had sat night after night, each night more blissful than the last, waiting until it should be time to go to Her! And then—bliss! And now the hour had come and there was no class! There would be no class now until next October; it might be there would never be a class so far as he was concerned again.

It might be there would never be a class again, for Shalford, taking exception at a certain absent-mindedness that led to mistakes and more particularly to the ticketing of several articles in Kipps' Manchester window upside down, had been "on to" him for the past few days in an exceedingly onerous manner....

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He sighed profoundly, pushed the comic papers back—they were rent away from him instantly by the little man in spectacles—and tried the old engravings of Folkestone in the past, that hang about the room. But these, too, failed to

minister to his bruised heart. He wandered about the corridors for a time and watched the library indicator for awhile. Wonderful thing that! But it did not hold him for long. People came and laughed near him and that jarred with him dreadfully. He went out of the building and a beastly cheerful barrel organ mocked him in the street. He was moved to a desperate resolve to go down to the beach. There it might be he would be alone. The sea might be rough—and attuned to him. It would certainly be dark.

"If I 'ad a penny I'm blest if I wouldn't go and chuck myself off the end of the pier.... *She'd* never miss me...." He followed a deepening vein of thought.

"Penny though! It's tuppence," he said after a space.

He went down Dover Street in a state of profound melancholia—at the pace and mood as it were of his own funeral procession—and he crossed at the corner of Tontine Street heedless of all mundane things. And there it was that Fortune came upon him, in disguise and with a loud shout, the shout of a person endowed with an unusually rich, full voice, followed immediately by a violent blow in the back.

His hat was over his eyes and an enormous weight [Pg 90] rested on his shoulders and something kicked him in the back of his calf.

Then he was on all fours in some mud that Fortune, in conjunction with the Folkestone corporation and in the pursuit of equally mysterious ends, had heaped together even lavishly for his reception.

He remained in that position for some seconds awaiting further developments and believing almost anything broken before his heart. Gathering at last that this temporary violence of things in general was over, and being perhaps assisted by a clutching hand, he arose, and found himself confronting a figure holding a bicycle and thrusting forward a dark face in anxious scrutiny.

"You aren't hurt, Matey?" gasped the figure.

"Was that *you* 'it me?" said Kipps.

"It's these handles, you know," said the figure with an air of being a fellow sufferer. "They're too *low*. And when I go to turn, if I don't remember, Bif!—and I'm *in* to something."

"Well—you give me a oner in the back—anyhow," said Kipps, taking stock of his damages.

"I was coming down hill, you know," explained the bicyclist. "These little Folkestone hills are a Fair Treat. It isn't as though I'd been on the level. I came rather a whop."

"You did *that*," said Kipps.

"I was back pedalling for all I was worth anyhow," said the bicyclist. "Not that I *am* worth much back pedalling."

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He glanced round and made a sudden movement almost as if to mount his machine. Then he turned as rapidly to Kipps again, who was now stooping down, pursuing the tale of his injuries.

"Here's the back of my trouser leg all tore down," said Kipps, "and I believe I'm bleeding. You reely ought to be more careful——"

The stranger investigated the damage with a rapid movement. "Holy Smoke, so you are!" He laid a friendly hand on Kipps' arm. "I say—look here! Come up to my diggings and sew it up. I'm——. Of course I'm to blame, and I say——" his voice sank to a confidential friendliness. "Here's a slop. Don't let on I ran you down. Haven't a lamp, you know. Might be a bit awkward, for *me*."

Kipps looked up towards the advancing policeman. The appeal to his generosity was not misplaced. He immediately took sides with his assailant. He stood up as the representative of the law drew nearer. He assumed an air which he considered highly suggestive of an accident not having happened.

"All right," he said, "go on!"

"Right you are," said the cyclist promptly, and led the way, and then, apparently with some idea of deception, called over his shoulder, "I'm tremendous glad to have met you, old chap.

"It really isn't a hundred yards," he said after they had passed the policeman, "it's just round the corner."

"Of course," said Kipps, limping slightly. "I don't[Pg 92] want to get a chap into trouble. Accidents *will* happen. Still——"

"Oh! *rather!* I believe you. Accidents *will* happen. Especially when you get *me* on a bicycle." He laughed. "You aren't the first I've run down not by any manner of means! I don't think you can be hurt much either. It isn't as though I was

scorching. You didn't see me coming. I was back pedalling like anything. Only naturally it seems to you I must have been coming fast. And I did all I could to ease off the bump as I hit you. It was just the treadle I think came against your calf. But it was All Right of you about that policeman, you know. That was a Fair Bit of All Right. Under the Circs, if you'd told him I was riding it might have been forty bob! Forty bob! I'd have had to tell 'em Time is Money. Just now for Mr. H. C.

"I shouldn't have blamed you either, you know. Most men after a bump like that might have been spiteful. The least I can do is to stand you a needle and thread. And a clothes brush. It isn't everyone who'd have taken it like you.

"Scorching! Why if I'd been scorching you'd have—coming as we did—you'd have been knocked silly.

"But I tell you, the way you caught on about that slop was something worth seeing. When I asked you, I didn't half expect it. Bif! Right off. Cool as a cucumber. Had your line at once. I tell you that there isn't many men would have acted as you have[Pg 93] done, I *will* say that. You acted like a gentleman over that slop."

Kipps' first sense of injury disappeared. He limped along a pace or so behind, making depreciatory noises in response to these flattering remarks and taking stock of the very appreciative person who uttered them.

As they passed the lamps he was visible as a figure with a slight anterior plumpness, progressing buoyantly on knickerbockered legs, with quite enormous calves, legs that, contrasting with Kipps' own narrow practice, were even exuberantly turned out at the knees and toes. A cycling cap was worn very much on one side, and from beneath it protruded carelessly straight wisps of dark red hair, and ever and again an ample nose came into momentary view round the corner. The muscular cheeks of this person and a certain generosity of chin he possessed were blue shaven and he had no moustache. His carriage was spacious and confident, his gestures up and down the narrow deserted back street they traversed, were irresistibly suggestive of ownership; a suggestion of broadly gesticulating shadows were born squatting on his feet and grew and took possession of the road and reunited at last with the shadows of the infinite, as lamp after lamp was passed. Kipps saw by the flickering light of one of them that they were in Little Fenchurch Street, and then they came round a corner sharply into a dark court and stopped at the door of a particularly ramshackle looking little house, held up[Pg 94] between two larger ones, like a drunken man between policemen.

The cyclist propped his machine carefully against the window, produced a key and blew down it sharply. "The lock's a bit tricky," he said, and devoted himself for some moments to the task of opening the door. Some mechanical catastrophe ensued and the door was open.

"You'd better wait here a bit while I get the lamp," he remarked to Kipps; "very likely it isn't filled," and vanished into the blackness of the passage. "Thank God for matches!" he said, and Kipps had an impression of a passage in the transitory pink flare and the bicyclist disappearing into a further room. Kipps was so much interested by these things that for the time he forgot his injuries altogether.

An interval and Kipps was dazzled by a pink shaded kerosene lamp. "You go in," said the red-haired man, "and I'll bring in the bike," and for a moment Kipps was alone in the lamp-lit room. He took in rather vaguely the shabby ensemble of the little apartment, the round table covered with a torn, red, glass-stained cover on which the lamp stood, a mottled looking-glass over the fireplace reflecting this, a disused gas bracket, an extinct fire, a number of dusty postcards and memoranda stuck round the glass, a dusty, crowded paper rack on the mantel with a number of cabinet photographs, a table littered with papers and cigarette ash and a syphon of soda water. Then the cyclist reappeared and Kipps saw his [Pg 95]blue-shaved, rather animated face and bright-reddish, brown eyes for the first time. He was a man perhaps ten years older than Kipps, but his beardless face made them in a way contemporary.

"You behaved all right about that policeman—anyhow," he repeated as he came forward.

"I don't see 'ow else I could 'ave done," said Kipps quite modestly. The cyclist scanned his guest for the first time and decided upon hospitable details.

"We'd better let that mud dry a bit before we brush it. Whiskey there is, good old Methusaleh, Canadian Rye, and there's some brandy that's all right. Which'll you have?"

"I dunno," said Kipps, taken by surprise, and then seeing no other course but acceptance, "well—whiskey, then."

"Right you are, old boy, and if you'll take my advice you'll take it neat. I may not be a particular judge of this sort of thing, but I do know old Methusaleh pretty well. Old Methusaleh—four stars. That's me! Good old Harry Chitterlow and good old Methusaleh. Leave 'em together. Bif! He's gone!"

He laughed loudly, looked about him, hesitated and retired, leaving Kipps in possession of the room and free to make a more precise examination of its contents.

§2

He particularly remarked the photographs that adorned the apartment. They were chiefly [Pg 96]photographs of ladies, in one case in tights, which Kipps thought a "bit 'ot," but one represented the bicyclist in the costume of some remote epoch. It did not take Kipps long to infer that the others were probably actresses and that his host was an actor, and the presence of the half of a large, coloured playbill seemed to confirm this. A note framed in an Oxford frame that was a little too large for it, he presently demeaned himself to read. "Dear Mr. Chitterlow," it ran its brief course, "if after all you will send the play you spoke of I will endeavour to read it," followed by a stylish but absolutely illegible signature, and across this was written in pencil, "What price, Harry, now?" And in the shadow by the window was a rough and rather able sketch of the bicyclist in chalk on brown paper, calling particular attention to the curvature of the forward lines of his hull and calves and the jaunty carriage of his nose, and labelled unmistakably "Chitterlow." Kipps thought it "rather a take-off." The papers on the table by the syphon were in manuscript. Kipps observed manuscript of a particularly convulsive and blottesque sort and running obliquely across the page.

Presently he heard the metallic clamour as if of a series of irreparable breakages with which the lock of the front door discharged its function, and then Chitterlow reappeared, a little out of breath as if from running and with a starry labelled bottle in his large, freckled hand.

"Sit down, old chap," he said, "sit down. I had to[Pg 97] go out for it after all. Wasn't a solitary bottle left. However, it's all right now we're here. No, don't sit on that chair, there's sheets of my play on that. That's the one—with the broken arm. I think this glass is clean, but anyhow wash it out with a squizz of syphon and shy it in the fireplace. Here! I'll do it! Lend it here!"

As he spoke Mr. Chitterlow produced a corkscrew from a table drawer, attached and overcame good old Methusaleh's cork in a style a bartender might envy, washed out two tumblers in his simple, effectual manner, and poured a couple of inches of the ancient fluid into each. Kipps took his tumbler, said "Thanks" in an off-hand way, and after a momentary hesitation whether he should say "here's to you!" or not, put it to his lips without that ceremony. For a space fire in his throat occupied his attention to the exclusion of other matters, and then he discovered

Mr. Chitterlow with an intensely bulldog pipe alight, seated on the opposite side of the empty fireplace and pouring himself out a second dose of whiskey.

"After all," said Mr. Chitterlow, with his eye on the bottle and a little smile wandering to hide amidst his larger features, "this accident might have been worse. I wanted someone to talk to a bit, and I didn't want to go to a pub, leastways not a Folkestone pub, because as a matter of fact I'd promised Mrs. Chitterlow, who's away, not to, for various reasons, though of course if I'd wanted to I'm just that sort[Pg 98] I should have all the same, and here we are! It's curious how one runs up against people out bicycling!"

"Isn't it!" said Kipps, feeling that the time had come for him to say something.

"Here we are, sitting and talking like old friends, and half an hour ago we didn't know we existed. Leastways we didn't know each other existed. I might have passed you in the street perhaps and you might have passed me, and how was I to tell that, put to the test, you would have behaved as decently as you have behaved. Only it happened otherwise, that's all. You're not smoking!" he said. "Have a cigarette?"

Kipps made a confused reply that took the form of not minding if he did, and drank another sip of old Methusaleh in his confusion. He was able to follow the subsequent course of that sip for quite a long way. It was as though the old gentleman was brandishing a burning torch through his vitals, lighting him here and lighting him there until at last his whole being was in a glow. Chitterlow produced a tobacco pouch and cigarette papers and with an interesting parenthesis that was a little difficult to follow about some lady named Kitty something or other who had taught him the art when he was as yet only what you might call a nice boy, made Kipps a cigarette, and with a consideration that won Kipps' gratitude suggested that after all he might find a little soda water an improvement with the whiskey. "Some people like it[Pg 99] that way," said Chitterlow, and then with voluminous emphasis, "*I don't.*"

Emboldened by the weakened state of his enemy Kipps promptly swallowed the rest of him and had his glass at once hospitably replenished. He began to feel he was of a firmer consistency than he commonly believed, and turned his mind to what Chitterlow was saying with the resolve to play a larger part in the conversation than he had hitherto done. Also he smoked through his nose quite successfully, an art he had only very recently acquired.

Meanwhile Chitterlow explained that he was a playwright, and the tongue of Kipps was unloosened to respond that he knew a chap, or rather one of their fellows knew a chap, or at least to be perfectly correct this fellow's brother did, who had written a play. In response to Chitterlow's enquiries he could not recall the title of the play, nor where it had appeared nor the name of the manager who produced it, though he thought the title was something about "Love's Ransom" or something like that.

"He made five 'undred pounds by it, though," said Kipps. "I know that."

"That's nothing," said Chitterlow, with an air of experience that was extremely convincing. "Nothing. May seem a big sum to *you*, but *I* can assure you it's just what one gets any day. There's any amount of money, an-ny amount, in a good play."

"I dessay," said Kipps, drinking.

"Any amount of money!"

[Pg 100]

Chitterlow began a series of illustrative instances. He was clearly a person of quite unequalled gift for monologue. It was as though some conversational dam had burst upon Kipps, and in a little while he was drifting along upon a copious rapid of talk about all sorts of theatrical things by one who knows all about them, and quite incapable of anticipating whither that rapid meant to carry him. Presently somehow they had got to anecdotes about well-known theatrical managers, little Teddy Bletherskite, artful old Chumps, and the magnificent Behemoth, "petted to death, you know, fair sickened, by all these society women." Chitterlow described various personal encounters with these personages, always with modest self-depreciation, and gave Kipps a very amusing imitation of old Chumps in a state of intoxication. Then he took two more stiff doses of old Methusaleh in rapid succession.

Kipps reduced the hither end of his cigarette to a pulp as he sat "dessaying" and "quite believing" Chitterlow in the sagest manner and admiring the easy way in which he was getting on with this very novel and entertaining personage. He had another cigarette made for him, and then Chitterlow, assuming by insensible degrees more and more of the manner of a rich and successful playwright being interviewed by a young admirer, set himself to answer questions which sometimes Kipps asked and sometimes Chitterlow, about the particulars and methods of his career. He undertook this self-imposed task with great [Pg

101]earnestness and vigour, treating the matter indeed with such fulness that at times it seemed lost altogether under a thicket of parentheses, footnotes and episodes that branched and budded from its stem. But it always emerged again, usually by way of illustration to its own degressions. Practically it was a mass of material for the biography of a man who had been everywhere and done everything (including the Hon. Thomas Norgate, which was a Record), and in particular had acted with great distinction and profit (he dated various anecdotes, "when I was getting thirty, or forty or fifty, dollars a week") throughout America and the entire civilised world.

And as he talked on and on in that full, rich, satisfying voice he had, and as old Methusaleh, indisputably a most drunken old reprobate of a whiskey, busied himself throughout Kipps, lighting lamp after lamp until the entire framework of the little draper was illuminated and glowing like some public building on a festival, behold Chitterlow and Kipps with him and the room in which they sat, were transfigured! Chitterlow became in very truth that ripe, full man of infinite experience and humour and genius, fellow of Shakespeare and Ibsen and Maeterlinck (three names he placed together quite modestly far above his own) and no longer ambiguously dressed in a sort of yachting costume with cycling knickerbockers, but elegantly if unconventionally attired, and the room ceased to be a small and shabby room in a Folkestone slum, and grew larger and more richly furnished, and the [Pg 102]fly-blown photographs were curious old pictures, and the rubbish on the walls the most rare and costly bric-à-brac, and the indisputable paraffin lamp, a soft and splendid light. A certain youthful heat that to many minds might have weakened old Methusaleh's starry claim to a ripe antiquity, vanished in that glamour, two burnt holes and a claimant darn in the table cloth, moreover, became no more than the pleasing contradictions natural in the house of genius, and as for Kipps!—Kipps was a bright young man of promise, distinguished by recent quick, courageous proceedings not too definitely insisted upon, and he had been rewarded by admission to a sanctum and confidences, for which the common prosperous, for which "society women" even, were notoriously sighing in vain. "Don't *want* them, my boy; they'd simply play old Harry with the work, you know! Chaps outside, bank clerks and university fellows, think the life's all *that* sort of thing. Don't you believe 'em. Don't you believe 'em."

And then——!

"Boom.... Boom.... Boom.... Boom.... right in the middle of a most entertaining digression on flats who join touring companies under the impression that they are actors, Kipps much amused at their flatness as exposed by Chitterlow.

"Lor'!" said Kipps like one who awakens, "that's not eleven!"

"Must be," said Chitterlow. "It was nearly ten when I got that whiskey. It's early yet——"

[Pg 103]

"All the same I must be going," said Kipps, and stood up. "Even now—maybe. Fact is—I 'ad *no* idea. The 'ouse door shuts at 'arf past ten, you know. I ought to 'ave thought before."

"Well, if you *must* go! I tell you what. I'll come, too.... Why! There's your leg, old man! Clean forgot it! You can't go through the streets like that. I'll sew up the tear. And meanwhile have another whiskey."

"I ought to be getting on *now*," protested Kipps feebly, and then Chitterlow was showing him how to kneel on a chair in order that the rent trouser leg should be attainable and old Methusaleh on his third round was busy repairing the temporary eclipse of Kipps' arterial glow. Then suddenly Chitterlow was seized with laughter and had to leave off sewing to tell Kipps that the scene wouldn't make a bad bit of business in a farcical comedy, and then he began to sketch out the farcical comedy and that led him to a digression about another farcical comedy of which he had written a ripping opening scene which wouldn't take ten minutes to read. It had something in it that had never been done on the stage before, and was yet perfectly legitimate, namely, a man with a live beetle down the back of his neck trying to seem at his ease in a roomful of people....

"*They* won't lock you out," he said, in a singularly reassuring tone, and began to read and act what he explained to be (not because he had written it, but simply because he knew it was so on account of his[Pg 104] exceptional experience of the stage) and what Kipps also quite clearly saw to be, one of the best opening scenes that had ever been written.

When it was over Kipps, who rarely swore, was inspired to say the scene was "damned fine" about six times over, whereupon as if by way of recognition, Chitterlow took a simply enormous portion of the inspiring antediluvian, declaring at the same time that he had rarely met a "finer" intelligence than Kipps' (stronger there might be, *that* he couldn't say with certainty as yet, seeing

how little after all they had seen of each other, but a finer *never*); that it was a shame such a gallant and discriminating intelligence should be nightly either locked up or locked out at ten—well, ten thirty then—and that he had half a mind to recommend old somebody or other (apparently the editor of a London daily paper) to put on Kipps forthwith as a dramatic critic in the place of the current incapable.

"I don't think I've ever made up anything for print," said Kipps; "——ever. I'd have a thundering good try, though, if ever I got a chance. I would that! I've written window tickets often enough. Made 'em up and everything. But that's different."

"You'd come to it all the fresher for not having done it before. And the way you picked up every point in that scene, my boy, was a Fair Treat! I tell you, you'd knock William Archer into fits. Not so literary, of course, you'd be, but I don't believe in literary critics any more than in literary playwrights.[Pg 105] Plays *aren't* literature—that's just the point they miss. Plays are plays. No! That won't hamper you anyhow. You're wasted down here, I tell you. Just as I was, before I took to acting. I'm hanged if I wouldn't like your opinion on these first two acts of that tragedy I'm on to. I haven't told you about that. It wouldn't take me more than an hour to read...."