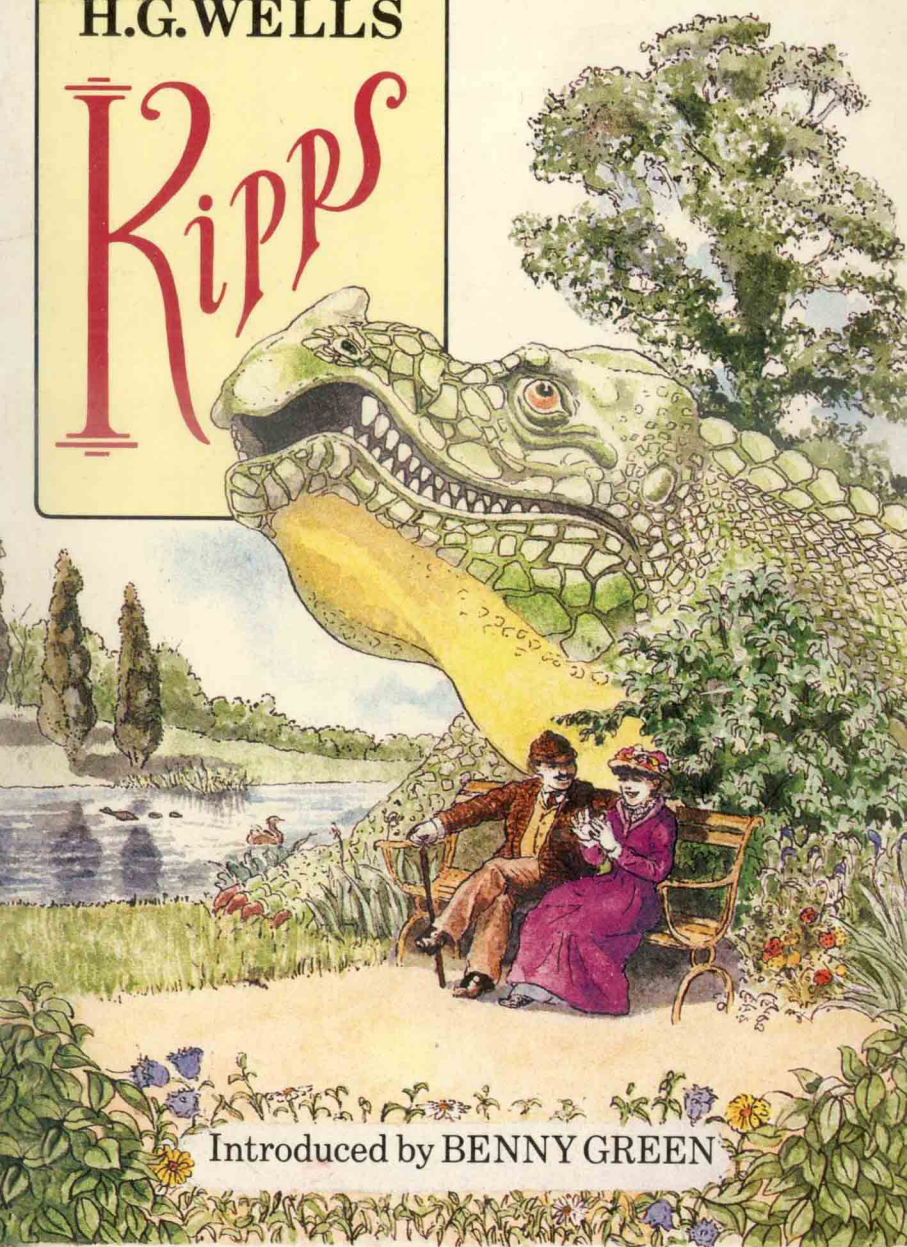


H.G. WELLS

# Kipps



Introduced by BENNY GREEN

H. G. WELLS

*Kipps*



*Introduced by*  
BENNY GREEN

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**'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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# INTRODUCTION

BY BENNY GREEN

Between 1896 and 1910 H. G. Wells, drawing on the counterhand experiences of his youth, published three great comedies of haberdashery, of which *Kipps* stands second in the line of succession but unquestionably first in order of precedence, the central panel in a hilarious yet deeply affecting triptych of harassed, inarticulate young drapers who eventually find themselves. In 1879 the thirteen-year-old Wells had been apprenticed to Messrs Rodgers and Denyer, Haberdashers, of Windsor, and had soon found himself buried under enormities of cretonne and tulle and bombazine; only his lack of refinement saved him. A fight with the junior porter, and an unwarranted reputation as a pilferer, brought about by honest incompetence as a bookkeeper, combined to deprive him of that veneer of genteel subservience without which no draper could ever hope to prosper. But two years later, thanks to the persistence of a solicitous but hopelessly misguided mother, Wells found himself flung back among the bales of bombazine, this time at the Southsea Drapery Emporium. He lasted two years, at which point he cut and ran for it, later describing his behaviour as that of 'a hunted rabbit which turns and bites'. One morning Wells simply packed up and walked the seventeen miles back to mother to announce the end of his haberdashing exploits, an episode described exactly as it had occurred in the second chapter of *Tono Bungay*. Within two years of his revolt Wells was working as an assistant schoolteacher, within three he was studying under Thomas Huxley in London.

Only his genius had saved him, from which point in his life he was greatly exercised by the problem of how his own young self might have escaped without the benefit of literary gifts beyond the ordinary. The first of his projected selves, Mr Hoopdriver in *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), never does escape, but at least reaches the final conclusion that there is such a thing as escape, and that a bold spirit might one day achieve it through the nebulous processes of education. The last of his drapers, Mr Polly (1910), simply realizes one day that there is nothing to stop him walking out of his own life, which he does. But it is with the figure of the second draper-hero, Artie Kipps, that Wells spends the most time, and on whom he lavishes the most artistic care in order to render the liberation convincing. By the time of *Kipps* (1905), Hoopdriver's fond dreams of self-help have shrunk to

the farce of the fretwork class, and the only way that Wells can contrive to release his lovable but commonplace young hero from the stultifying effect of haberdashery is to endow him with that creaking Dickensian standby, the mysterious legacy. How this legacy hits Kipps smack in the face one day due to an outrageous succession of coincidences centring around the flamboyant figure of the drifting thespian Chitterlow; how a romance with the reformed Miss Walshingham sucks him into the maw of empty pretension and very nearly brings him to shipwreck and the loss of his fortune; how a combination of true love and a stroke of prodigious good luck, again via Chitterlow, rescues him from his own folly—all is told with such pace and unexpectedness that it is no wonder that almost the last words to come from the mouth of Kipps are to the effect that 'what a Rum Go everything is'.

That in describing the working life of his hero, Wells was drawing on his own experiences there can be no question. Much of the informed detail in the chapter of Book I entitled 'The Emporium' can be ticked off against Wells's account in *Experiment in Autobiography* of his labours at Southsea, where he says:

You cannot imagine how maliciously a folded piece of sateen can get askew, how difficult it is to roll huckaback, how unruly a fat blanket is to pack up and how heavy and unwieldy pieces of cretonne can be when you have to carry a score or so of them up narrow folding steps and adjust them neatly on a rising pile.

Again in the chapter on the emporium Wells is careful to break down Kipps's day into its component duties. The inventory bears a striking resemblance to the duties of young Wells at Southsea:

We apprentices were roused from our beds at seven, peremptorily, by one of the assistants . . . We flung on old suits, tucking our nightgowns into our trousers, and were down in the shop in a quarter of an hour, to clean windows, unwrap goods and fixtures, dust generally, before eight. At eight we raced upstairs to get first go at the wash basins, dressed for the day and at half past eight partook of a bread and butter breakfast before descending again.

As for the barked commands which are forever calling Kipps to order, Wells heard their echo to the end of his days, wafting down the corridors of his life from their roots at Southsea: 'Wells?', 'What is Wells doing?', 'Where on earth is that boy now?', 'Get on with it, Wells', 'Wells forward', 'Has anyone seen Wells?', 'But you haven't shown the lady the gingham at six-three!'

It has been said by some that in contriving the good fortune of Artie Kipps, Wells was going a little too far in the matter of fortuitous circumstances, barefaced coincidence and that general manipulation of the plot which so fulsomely favours our hero. After all, how often does a young nobody find himself blessed with a relation he never knew, and who showers him with wealth undreamed of? And what were the odds against an out-of-work dramatist like Chitterlow using the one name from the one newspaper which happens to carry one of those 'he will hear something to his advantage' advertisements, and then bumping into the owner of that name? In defence of such subterfuge, it might be asked what the odds are against the son of a housekeeper and a part-time cricketer rising from the drapery emporium of a seaside town to the arm of Thomas Huxley within three years, starting to write *The Time Machine* within five, and completing his doctoral thesis, 'On the Quality of Illusion in the Continuity of the Individual Life in the Higher Metazoa, with particular reference to the Species *Homo Sapiens*', exactly sixty years after first attending Huxley's lectures.

From its first appearance *Kipps* swept aside all opposition. Wells's close friend Arnold Bennett had a few untypically ungenerous reservations, but not even Henry James could resist the book's gusto and tenderness:

I am lost in amazement at the diversity of your genius . . . what am I to say about Kipps, but that he is not so much a masterpiece as a mere born gem—you having, I know not how, taken a header straight down into mysterious depths and observation and knowledge . . . it is of such a brilliancy of TRUE truth.

James's exasperated, bewildered acknowledgement of the richness of texture of *Kipps* is a comical exposition of the irresistible appeal of the book; even James the spinsterish stickler for good form—that is to say perfect form—in the novel was obliged by his own sense of aesthetic honesty and fair play to forgive any structural solecisms and bow to sheer effervescence of spirit, density of texture, vividness of portrayal. *Kipps* is one of the outstanding English novels of its time, and like other efficacious works of the imagination, it stimulates the imagination of the reader too, to so unusual a degree that long after putting the book aside we find ourselves still concerned about the eventual fate of its protagonists. Did Kipps flourish in his little bookshop? Did Chitterlow ever contrive a worthy successor to 'The Pestered Butterfly'? Or did he perhaps end up under the Pacific sunlight, coeval with the Arthur Treachers and Eric Blores of the



studio system, portraying an endless line of English worthies for the edification of Oshkosh and Carson City? Was Kipps, like his creator, old enough to be spared the obscenities of Flanders fields? And what of his son, that cherished infant who may yet be alive to read these words, a sophisticated octogenarian whose spiritual father predicted with such alarming prescience most of the bugaboos of contemporary existence? There is no answer to any of these questions, but in the very act of asking them we salute the enormous vitality of the work which inspires them. Like several of his literary godfathers, and Dickens in particular, Wells was able when at his best—say in the first decade of the century—to tell a story in such a way as to imply a vast unspoken subtext, to hint at long pedigrees in even the most transitory characters, to rattle undisclosed skeletons in unopened closets, to evoke, as it were, a life before and after the life of the story.

In this regard there is something more to say. I first read *Kipps* when I was seventeen, and will never forget the two vague, unformulated questions which persisted in qualifying my stupefied admiration of and deep affection for the book. The first was to do with the spectral Waddy, that invisible benefactor used by Wells with such shameless aplomb to rescue Kipps from the neatly folded coils of haberdashery, a *deus ex machina* wheeled on to the stage with shameless ingenuity. Waddy has such a profound effect on everything, that I felt I wanted to examine him at leisure, or at the very least catch a glimpse of him. His non-appearance was the shortcoming of an absentee landlord who affects the lives of all his tenants without vouchsafing so much as a hint of his own. The other missing element which surprised me by its absence was not a character but an incident, one so beautifully suited to Wells's mastery of the comic that I could not understand how he had come to resist it. This is the moment (in Book I, Chapter Six, 'The Unexpected', between the end of section two and the opening of section three) where Kipps repairs to the offices of Messrs Watson and Bean in order to hear of that something to his advantage which so irrevocably alters the course of his existence. At one moment, there he is lying on one of the proprietor's inhospitable beds wondering if in responding to the advertisement he has done something foolish; a few lines later we find him already installed in the marble halls of Waddy's legacy, wandering about Folkestone in beatific contemplation of his own prodigious good fortune. But what happened in between? That confrontation featuring the counterhand and the solicitor is surely one of the great unwritten episodes in the annals of English comic fiction, and it never failed to astonish me that Wells of all writers should have omitted it from his plan.

Now in the pursuit of literature there are few delights more exquisite than the unexpected discovery that what we took for the closed system of an imagined world possesses, after all, further dimensions equally accessible, that that spectral subtext which so exercises our minds once we have read the book possesses corporeal form after all. This yearning to enjoy a much-loved world from a newly discovered window has sometimes tempted men to the rashest of stratagems: witness the tidal wave of mock-Sherlockian detective stories composed by those unable to live with the truth that the canon is only so large and no larger; also the temptation to which Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch succumbed to complete the novel *St. Ives*, left unfinished by Robert Louis Stevenson, and which Sir Arthur finished so well that nobody has ever read it since. Then again there was the experience of Neville Cardus, who, noticing one day that Galsworthy had inexplicably forgotten to give Jolyon Forsyte an afternoon at the cricket, wrote the chapter himself, called it 'A Sentimental Journey', and actually improved on the original. In the case to hand, Wells did the job himself, for it appears that the story of *Kipps* as we know it, so far from being the Genesis and Exodus of the matter, is only the final, trimmed-down version of a vast original groundplan from which several component parts were excised. *Kipps* was published in 1905, but existed in something more than embryonic form as early as 1898, which means that in the Wellsian succession he predates Mr Lewisham, usually acknowledged as the first hero of the major social comedies. In 1925 Wells reminisced to the following effect:

'*Kipps*' was written in 1903-4. It is only a fragment of a much larger and more ambitious design. The original title was 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy' . . . it was put aside, and I'm afraid destroyed. I seem to remember it as a quite amusing story, but my utmost efforts have failed to unearth the manuscript of those abandoned chapters.

However, authors are never as ingenious as their followers when it comes to the unearthing of lost manuscripts, and the text of 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy', so far from being destroyed, eventually turned up in the Wells Archive of the University of Illinois, which in 1969 showed admirable dedication to the cause by publishing the work as a separate entity. 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy', consisting of fifteen more or less completed chapters and twenty sketched-in further chapters, was to be Wells's 'great novel on the Dickens plan'; it was to be 'the finest thing I ever wrote'; in the opinion of its creator it is 'quite unlike any other stuff I have done and I am writing at times with loud

guffaws. The attempt to get comic relief into "Love and Mr Lewisham" certainly failed. This book so far is solid comic relief'.

Comic relief or not, Wells could interest nobody in its commercial possibilities. There are few more pathetic episodes in his career as a novelist than this attempt to get a publisher's advance large enough to subsidize the completion of the enterprise. In January 1899 he is asking his agent, J. B. Pinker, to request £1,000 for the serial rights; before the end of the month he has cut his expectations to £800; by March he is ready to close for £750. But 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy' was destined never to be sold, never to be completed. Instead Wells developed the story of one of its characters, Art Kipps, and ended up with the novel we know instead of the grand Dickensian design:

A whole introductory book was written before Kipps himself came upon the scene . . . But it became clear to the writer by the time he had brought Kipps and Chitterlow together that he had planned his task upon too colossal a scale. There was no way of serializing so vast a book as he had in hand and no way of publishing it that held out any hope of fair payment for the work that remained for him to do. Now books are meant to be read, and there is no interest in writing them unless you believe they will get to readers. So 'Kipps' was clipped off short to the dimensions of a practicable book.

Wells wrote that explanation in 1925; today the reader can contemplate the vastness of 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy', had it ever been completed, with a little more equanimity. Not even Wells, with his wonderful powers of precognition and his larkish sense of the absurd, could have conceived of an age in which best-selling fiction would be manufactured, packaged and marketed like so much cheese; but at any rate, a novel of, say, 250,000 words—twice as many as the eventual version of *Kipps*—would strike very few readers today as 'too colossal'.

But enough of the original work remains, and has been preserved by scholars connected with the University of Southern Illinois, for us to see old friends from unexpected and occasionally very curious perspectives. As Wells reminds us, in the original plan Kipps does not take over the proceedings until Chapter Seven. What, then, could have been the subject of the first six chapters? In a word, Waddy, who not only agrees to make an appearance but towers over all the other characters, bullying and swearing and blaspheming his way to a premature grave, winning his place as one of the most spectacular misanthropes in the modern English novel. Confined to

his wheelchair by an accident and then endowed with wealth, he can never quite reconcile himself to the irony of the one coming, as it were, wrapped in the other, and vents his spleen on a universe cruel enough to have perpetrated the joke. In *Kipps* his reasons for making our hero rich are a blend of penitence and consanguinity. In 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy' they stem from a moment's impulsive gratitude; for Kipps, who is unrelated to the old boy, just happens to be on hand to save his life when the old curmudgeon's wheelchair seems certain to fly over the cliff-edge at Folkestone and crash down on to the rocks below. Waddy is so astonished that a perfect stranger should take the trouble to save him, and thereby undermine all his cherished convictions regarding the congenital selfishness of the human race, that in a fit of uncharacteristic generosity he leaves every penny to his rescuer, luxuriating as he does so in the realization that one of the subtler pleasures of amending a last will and testament is that even in the act of writing someone into opulence you are writing others out of it. And there is very little that Mr Waddy enjoys more than writing others out of it.

Who are these others who give him such a divine pain in the neck? None other than our old friends Mr and Mrs Chitterlow. Yes, *Mrs* Chitterlow, for it is another of the bonuses incorporated in the text of the original work that Muriel, who in *Kipps* is a shadowy essence characterized by nothing much more substantial than her husband's proud claim that she possesses 'the finest completely untrained contralto voice in England', is a major figure in the saga of Waddy, if not a particularly savoury one. As to that, her husband too suffers a downgrading in the assessment of human behaviour, for if it is Muriel who, with a kind of calculated unreceptivity to rebuff, tries to insinuate herself into Waddy's affections by attempting to nurse him, it is Chitterlow who tries, just as deviously, to insinuate himself into Muriel's because he sees her as a conduit through which the old man's riches will one day flow. Indeed it is one of the most striking contrasts between *Kipps* and 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy' that Chitterlow, who in the eventual book is nothing more reprehensible than a lovable rogue with immensely winning ways, started out in life as a sinister and ruthless intriguer whose great moment comes when, with old Waddy lying dead in the next room, he rifles the desk and burns those editions of the will which he considers incompatible with his ambitions.

But in the purely literary sense it is Muriel who is the more revealing character of the two, for she is one of those ladies who is hopelessly addicted to the blowzy resonances of romantic fiction, and

who can never believe anything to be true unless it has first happened in a book. Through her vapid personality Wells is thereby able to express all his bitter contempt for the Mrs Henry Woods, Charlotte Yonges, Edna Lyalls, Marie Corellis and Sydney Owensons of the threepenny libraries. In the two years immediately preceding the composition of 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy', Wells had been reviewing fiction for *The Saturday Review*, an experience so chastening that in formulating the rhetorical question, 'What do the illiterate read?', he had answered himself with:

In the sale lists of the booksellers we read the names of Hocking, Caine, Du Maurier, Maclaren, Crockett and Corelli; after each name, certain appalling numerals. As we read them, we bow our heads.

This vitriolic contempt for literary pot-boiling Wells bequeaths to Waddy, who, maddened to irascibility by Muriel's sloppy literary sensibilities, snorts: 'Girl! She's no girl. She's the Frankenstein monster of all the women scribblers in the world, she's a circulating library on the bust'—a foolish creature who confirms each event in reality by nominating its fictional parallel.

In fact, the most striking difference in mood between the book which Wells began in 1898 and the book he realized he had completed in 1904 is the benignity which has invaded the project. The Chitterlows are two examples of characters whose venalities are either neutralized or excised altogether in the later version; even snobbish Helen Walshingham is less invidious a prig in her eventual manifestation than in her beginnings. Two other characters whose identity is obliged to undergo a seachange because of Kipps's altered connection with Waddy are his aunt and uncle, who in 'Waddy' are his parents, and whose humble absurdity in *Kipps* is a considerable improvement on the tight-lipped viciousness of the vendetta they conduct against their neighbours the Pornicks in the earlier book. In such ways does the sunlight of whimsical benevolence permeate the texture of *Kipps* to mitigate the acidulous relationships of 'The Wealth of Mr Waddy', a title, incidentally, which sounds very much as though its origins lie in a Spooner-esque inversion of sounds in the phrase, 'The Wad of Mr Wealthy'.

To return to the lacuna in Book I, Chapter Six: Wells had originally made a spectacular scene out of the confrontation between Kipps and the solicitors and then, for no discernible reason, omitted it from the eventual manuscript. Except that Watson and Bean appear as Grimflack, Weston and Grimflack, the episode could be inserted into

the narrative of *Kipps* without so much as a single stitch of the seam showing, from the moment that our hero nervously tells two youthful clerks, 'I 'ad a—Letter, saying, or at least arsting me—to come round 'ere', to the end of his interview when, having learned that he is to be given his fortune provided none of it is passed on to Chitterlow, he observes, 'It's 'ard on Chitterlow. But I don't see 'ow it's 'ard on me'. There are some rich effects and some priceless exchanges, none more so than the passing of the vital information from functionary to beneficiary:

'His last will was executed five days ago.'

'After the accident?', said Mr Kipps breathlessly.

'After the accident. And by this will—'

Mr Kipps felt the oddest feeling inside, and his hands tightened on his knees. The effort to maintain an expression of innocent interest was considerable.

'By this will, and subject to certain not very difficult conditions, he leaves the whole of his property, which after the settlement of all claims and outgoing charges, amounts to about five and twenty thousand pounds—'

Mr Kipps's face manifested a temporary cholera.

'—to you. The conditions—'

'Stop a minute', said Mr Kipps, with an agitated grey face, a waving hand and a tone of quiet remonstrance. 'Will you just say that over again, please?'

'What over again?'

'What you've just said.'

Mr Grimflack patiently repeats himself, and then does what he can to dispel any suspicions of a hitch.

Kipps looked at Mr Grimflack with sudden suspicion.

'This isn't any joke?', he asked. 'You're sure of what you're telling me?'

'The will is here,' said Mr Grimflack and raised the paperweight.

Kipps took the document and examined it earnestly upside down—his mind paralysed—then he turned it right way up and attempted to read. But the letters kept running about.

'But whad he go and do this for?'

'He leaves it to you,' said Mr Grimflack in a tone of severe disapproval, 'because he says you are the only person to do him a disinterested service in the last twenty years. He said *that*. He made me write that down. He says that you had no time to think, but he

chooses to overlook that. On account of his position. And so—the property is yours.’

And yet, for all the interconnections, *Kipps* is after all a different work from ‘*The Wealth of Mr Waddy*’, because of one profound change wrought by Wells when he synthesized his confusion of Dickensian themes into the slimmer, leaner book which the reader now holds in his hands, and which, it would be unwise to overlook, is subtitled ‘*The Story of a Simple Soul*’. No tincture of irony adheres to the choice of adjective. In describing Artie Kipps as *simple*, Wells is bestowing upon him the highest accolade; in the context of the story ‘*simple*’ means undeviating, honest, loyal, sane, sincere, decent, and all the other virtues which, by the time he has done with the book, the reader is ready to recognize in Kipps’s modest being. And if fumbling, silly Artie is the male image of incorruptibility, the identical virtues feminized are apparent in Ann Pornick, who in ‘*Waddy*’ is no more than a skeletal rumour flitting through the gaping interstices of the scaffolding for the later, unwritten chapters. That simplicity which Wells nominates is never more perfectly exemplified than in the concluding sentence of the fourth section of Book II, Chapter Six, ‘*Discords*’. In this moment, which in a romantic sense represents the apex of all Kipps’s fortunes and the sudden resolution of all his cares—although he does not for the moment realize it—Wells is reminding us of one of the prime virtues of his realistic novels, a virtue of which Henry James knew less than nothing, and which most novelists have apparently either never experienced or have chosen to expunge, if not from their memory, then certainly from their art. Wells in 1904 could still remember all the tremulous sensations of young love, and, remembering them, was not inhibited from describing them. He jettisoned much promising material in the seven years between the start of ‘*The Wealth of Mr Waddy*’ and the end of *Kipps*. He flung Waddy and Muriel out of the window, he swamped Chitterlow in the milk of human kindness, he killed off Kipps’s parents, and introduced the somewhat extraneous figure of the tubercular Socialist pioneer Masterman. But most important of all, he provided his hero with a soul mate and was explicit as to the nature of their romance. For which reason ‘*The Story of a Simple Soul*’ is the perfect annotation to one of the tenderest and most perceptive novels ever written of the English lower orders.

# BOOK I

## THE MAKING OF KIPPS

### CHAPTER THE FIRST

#### THE LITTLE SHOP AT ROMNEY

##### § 1

UNTIL he was nearly arrived at manhood, it did not become clear to Kipps how it was that he had come into the care of an aunt and uncle instead of having a father and mother like other little boys. He had vague memories of a somewhere else, 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 upon it, and a girdle of straight-ribbed white ribbon about the waist. Linked with this, he knew not how, were clouded half-obliterated 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 window of railway trains in the company of these two people.

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 daguerrotype 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 mortarboards 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 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 be made, under propitious gods, 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