

CHAPTER II

MR. AND MRS. S. F. UKRIDGE

I have often thought that Who's Who, though a bulky and well-meaning volume, omits too many of England's greatest men. It is not comprehensive enough. I am in it, nestling among the G's:--

"Garnet, Jeremy, o.s. of late Henry Garnet, vicar of Much Middlefold, Salop; author. Publications: 'The Outsider,' 'The Manoeuvres of Arthur.' Hobbies: Cricket, football, swimming, golf. Clubs: Arts."

But if you search among the U's for UKRIDGE, Stanley Featherstonehaugh, details of whose tempestuous career would make really interesting reading, you find no mention of him. It seems unfair, though I imagine Ukridge bears it with fortitude. That much-enduring man has had a lifetime's training in bearing things with fortitude.

He seemed in his customary jovial spirits now, as he dashed into the room, clinging on to the pince-nez which even ginger-beer wire rarely kept stable for two minutes together.

"My dear old man," he shouted, springing at me and seizing my hand in the grip like the bite of a horse. "How are you, old buck? This is good. By Jove, this is fine, what?"

He dashed to the door and looked out.

"Come on Millie! Pick up the waukeesis. Here's old Garnet, looking just the same as ever. Devilish handsome fellow! You'll be glad you came when you see him. Beats the Zoo hollow!"

There appeared round the corner of Ukridge a young woman. She paused in the doorway and smiled pleasantly.

"Garny, old horse," said Ukridge with some pride, "this is her! The pride of the home. Companion of joys and sorrows and all the rest of it. In fact," in a burst of confidence, "my wife."

I bowed awkwardly. The idea of Ukridge married was something too overpowering to be readily assimilated.

"Buck up, old horse," said Ukridge encouragingly. He had a painful habit of addressing all and sundry by that title. In his school-master days--at one period of his vivid career he and I had been colleagues on the staff of a private school--he had made use of it interviewing the parents of new pupils, and the latter had gone away, as a rule, with a feeling that this must be either the easy manner of Genius or due to alcohol, and hoping for the best. He also used it to perfect strangers in the streets, and on one occasion had been heard to address a bishop by that title, rendering that dignitary, as Mr. Baboo Jaberjee would put it, sotto voce with gratification. "Surprised to find me married,

what? Garny, old boy,"--sinking his voice to a whisper almost inaudible on the other side of the street--"take my tip. Go and jump off the dock yourself. You'll feel another man. Give up this bachelor business. It's a mug's game. I look on you bachelors as excrescences on the social system. I regard you, old man, purely and simply as a wart. Go and get married, laddie, go and get married. By gad, I've forgotten to pay the cabby. Lend me a couple of bob, Garny old chap."

He was out of the door and on his way downstairs before the echoes of his last remark had ceased to shake the window. I was left to entertain Mrs. Ukridge.

So far her share in the conversation had been confined to the pleasant smile which was apparently her chief form of expression. Nobody talked very much when Ukridge was present. She sat on the edge of the armchair, looking very small and quiet. I was conscious of feeling a benevolent pity for her. If I had been a girl, I would have preferred to marry a volcano. A little of Ukridge, as his former head master had once said in a moody, reflective voice, went a very long way. "You and Stanley have known each other a long time, haven't you?" said the object of my commiseration, breaking the silence.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Several years. We were masters at the same school."

Mrs. Ukridge leaned forward with round, shining eyes.

"Really? Oh, how nice!" she said ecstatically.

Not yet, to judge from her expression and the tone of her voice, had she found any disadvantages attached to the arduous position of being Mrs. Stanley Ukridge.

"He's a wonderfully versatile man," I said.

"I believe he could do anything."

"He'd have a jolly good try!"

"Have you ever kept fowls?" asked Mrs. Ukridge, with apparent irrelevance.

I had not. She looked disappointed.

"I was hoping you might have had some experience. Stanley, of course, can turn his hand to anything; but I think experience is rather a good thing, don't you?"

"Yes. But ..."

"I have bought a shilling book called 'Fowls and All About Them,' and this week's copy of C.A.C."

"C.A.C.?"

"Chiefly About Chickens. It's a paper, you know. But it's all rather hard to understand. You see, we ... but here is Stanley. He will explain the whole thing."

"Well, Garny, old horse," said Ukridge, re-entering the room after another energetic passage of the stairs. "Years since I saw you. Still buzzing along?"

"Still, so to speak, buzzing," I assented.

"I was reading your last book the other day."

"Yes?" I said, gratified. "How did you like it?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, laddie, I didn't get beyond the third page, because the scurvy knave at the bookstall said he wasn't running a free library, and in one way and another there was a certain amount of unpleasantness. Still, it seemed bright and interesting up to page three. But let's settle down and talk business. I've got a scheme for you, Garny old man. Yessir, the idea of a thousand years. Now listen to me for a moment. Let me get a word in edgeways."

He sat down on the table, and dragged up a chair as a leg-rest. Then he took off his pince-nez, wiped them, re-adjusted the ginger-beer wire

behind his ears, and, having hit a brown patch on the knee of his grey flannel trousers several times, in the apparent hope of removing it, resumed:

"About fowls."

The subject was beginning to interest me. It showed a curious tendency to creep into the conversation of the Ukridge family.

"I want you to give me your undivided attention for a moment. I was saying to my wife, as we came here, 'Garnet's the man! Clever devil, Garnet. Full of ideas.' Didn't I, Millie?"

"Yes, dear."

"Laddie," said Ukridge impressively, "we are going to keep fowls."

He shifted himself farther on to the table and upset the ink-pot.

"Never mind," he said, "it'll soak in. It's good for the texture. Or am I thinking of tobacco-ash on the carpet? Well, never mind. Listen to me! When I said that we were going to keep fowls, I didn't mean in a small, piffling sort of way--two cocks and a couple of hens and a golf-ball for a nest-egg. We are going to do it on a large scale. We are going to run a chicken farm!"

"A chicken farm," echoed Mrs. Ukridge with an affectionate and admiring glance at her husband.

"Ah," I said, feeling my responsibilities as chorus. "A chicken farm."

"I've thought it all over, laddie, and it's as clear as mud. No expenses, large profits, quick returns. Chickens, eggs, and the money streaming in faster than you can bank it. Winter and summer underclothing, my bonny boy, lined with crackling Bradbury's. It's the idea of a lifetime. Now listen to me for a moment. You get your hen--"

"One hen?"

"Call it one for the sake of argument. It makes my calculations clearer. Very well, then. Harriet the hen--you get her. Do you follow me so far?"

"Yes. You get a hen."

"I told you Garnet was a dashed bright fellow," said Ukridge approvingly to his attentive wife. "Notice the way he keeps right after one's ideas? Like a bloodhound. Well, where was I?"

"You'd just got a hen."

"Exactly. The hen. Pricilla the pullet. Well, it lays an egg every day

of the week. You sell the eggs, six for half a crown. Keep of hen costs nothing. Profit--at least a couple of bob on every dozen eggs. What do you think of that?"

"I think I'd like to overhaul the figures in case of error."

"Error!" shouted Ukridge, pounding the table till it groaned. "Error? Not a bit of it. Can't you follow a simple calculation like that? Oh, I forgot to say that you get--and here is the nub of the thing--you get your first hen on tick. Anybody will be glad to let you have the hen on tick. Well, then, you let this hen--this first, original hen, this on-tick-hen--you let it set and hatch chickens. Now follow me closely. Suppose you have a dozen hens. Very well, then. When each of the dozen has a dozen chickens, you send the old hens back to the chappies you borrowed them from, with thanks for kind loan; and there you are, starting business with a hundred and forty-four free chickens to your name. And after a bit, when the chickens grow up and begin to lay, all you have to do is to sit back in your chair and endorse the big cheques. Isn't that so, Millie?"

"Yes, dear."

"We've fixed it all up. Do you know Combe Regis, in Dorsetshire? On the borders of Devon. Bathing. Sea-air. Splendid scenery. Just the place for a chicken farm. A friend of Millie's--girl she knew at school--has lent us a topping old house, with large grounds. All we've got to do is

to get in the fowls. I've ordered the first lot. We shall find them waiting for us when we arrive."

"Well," I said, "I'm sure I wish you luck. Mind you let me know how you get on."

"Let you know!" roared Ukridge. "Why, my dear old horse, you're coming with us."

"Am I?" I said blankly.

"Certainly you are. We shall take no refusal. Will we, Millie?"

"No, dear."

"Of course not. No refusal of any sort. Pack up to-night and meet us at Waterloo to-morrow."

"It's awfully good of you ..."

"Not a bit of it--not a bit of it. This is pure business. I was saying to Millie as we came along that you were the very man for us. A man with your flow of ideas will be invaluable on a chicken farm. Absolutely invaluable. You see," proceeded Ukridge, "I'm one of those practical fellows. The hard-headed type. I go straight ahead, following my nose. What you want in a business of this sort is a touch of the

dreamer to help out the practical mind. We look to you for suggestions, laddie. Flashes of inspiration and all that sort of thing. Of course, you take your share of the profits. That's understood. Yes, yes, I must insist. Strict business between friends. Now, taking it that, at a conservative estimate, the net profits for the first fiscal year amount to--five thousand, no, better be on the safe side--say, four thousand five hundred pounds ... But we'll arrange all that end of it when we get down there. Millie will look after that. She's the secretary of the concern. She's been writing letters to people asking for hens. So you see it's a thoroughly organised business. How many hen-letters did you write last week, old girl?"

"Ten, dear."

Ukridge turned triumphantly to me.

"You hear? Ten. Ten letters asking for hens. That's the way to succeed. Push and enterprise."

"Six of them haven't answered, Stanley, dear, and the rest refused."

"Immaterial," said Ukridge with a grand gesture. "That doesn't matter. The point is that the letters were written. It shows we are solid and practical. Well now, can you get your things ready by to-morrow, Garny old horse?"

Strange how one reaches an epoch-making moment in one's life without recognising it. If I had refused that invitation, I would not have--at any rate, I would have missed a remarkable experience. It is not given to everyone to see Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge manage a chicken farm.

"I was thinking of going somewhere where I could get some golf," I said undecidedly.

"Combe Regis is just the place for you, then. Perfect hot-bed of golf. Full of the finest players. Can't throw a brick without hitting an amateur champion. Grand links at the top of the hill not half a mile from the farm. Bring your clubs. You'll be able to play in the afternoons. Get through serious work by lunch time."

"You know," I said, "I am absolutely inexperienced as regards fowls. I just know enough to help myself to bread sauce when I see one, but no more."

"Excellent! You're just the man. You will bring to the work a mind unclouded by theories. You will act solely by the light of your intelligence. And you've got lots of that. That novel of yours showed the most extraordinary intelligence--at least as far as that blighter at the bookstall would let me read. I wouldn't have a professional chicken farmer about the place if he paid to come. If he applied to me, I should simply send him away. Natural intelligence is what we want.

Then we can rely on you?"

"Very well," I said slowly. "It's very kind of you to ask me."

"Business, laddie, pure business. Very well, then. We shall catch the eleven-twenty at Waterloo. Don't miss it. Look out for me on the platform. If I see you first, I'll shout."