CHAPTER III

WATERLOO STATION, SOME FELLOW-TRAVELLERS, AND A GIRL WITH BROWN HAIR

The austerity of Waterloo Station was lightened on the following morning at ten minutes to eleven, when I arrived to catch the train to Combe Regis, by several gleams of sunshine and a great deal of bustle and activity on the various platforms. A porter took my suitcase and golf-clubs, and arranged an assignation on Number 6 platform. I bought my ticket, and made my way to the bookstall, where, in the interests of trade, I inquired in a loud and penetrating voice if they had got Jeremy Garnet's "Manoeuvres of Arthur." Being informed that they had not, I clicked my tongue reproachfully, advised them to order in a supply, as the demand was likely to be large, and spent a couple of shillings on a magazine and some weekly papers. Then, with ten minutes to spare, I went off in search of Ukridge.

I found him on platform six. The eleven-twenty was already alongside, and presently I observed my porter cleaving a path towards me with the suit-case and golf-bag.

"Here you are!" shouted Ukridge vigorously. "Good for you. Thought you were going to miss it."

I shook hands with the smiling Mrs. Ukridge.

"I've got a carriage and collared two corner seats. Millie goes down in another. She doesn't like the smell of smoke when she's travelling. Hope we get the carriage to ourselves. Devil of a lot of people here this morning. Still, the more people there are in the world, the more eggs we shall sell. I can see with half an eye that all these blighters are confirmed egg-eaters. Get in, sonnie. I'll just see the missis into her carriage, and come back to you."

I entered the compartment, and stood at the door, looking out in the faint hope of thwarting an invasion of fellow-travellers. Then I withdrew my head suddenly and sat down. An elderly gentleman, accompanied by a pretty girl, was coming towards me. It was not this type of fellow traveller whom I had hoped to keep out. I had noticed the girl at the booking office. She had waited by the side of the queue while the elderly gentleman struggled gamely for the tickets, and I had had plenty of opportunity of observing her appearance. I had debated with myself whether her hair should rightly be described as brown or golden. I had finally decided on brown. Once only had I met her eyes, and then only for an instant. They might be blue. They might be grey. I could not be certain. Life is full of these problems.

"This seems to be tolerably empty, my dear Phyllis," said the elderly gentleman, coming to the door of the compartment and looking in. "You're sure you don't object to a smoking-carriage?"

"Oh no, father. Not a bit."

"Then I think ..." said the elderly gentleman, getting in.

The inflection of his voice suggested the Irishman. It was not a brogue. There were no strange words. But the general effect was Irish.

"That's good," he said, settling himself and pulling out a cigar case.

The bustle of the platform had increased momentarily, until now, when, from the snorting of the engine, it seemed likely that the train might start at any minute, the crowd's excitement was extreme. Shrill cries echoed down the platform. Lost sheep, singly and in companies, rushed to and fro, peering eagerly into carriages in search of seats. Piercing voices ordered unknown "Tommies" and "Ernies" to "keep by aunty, now." Just as Ukridge returned, that sauve qui peut of the railway crowd, the dreaded "Get in anywhere," began to be heard, and the next moment an avalanche of warm humanity poured into the carriage.

The newcomers consisted of a middle-aged lady, addressed as Aunty, very stout and clad in a grey alpaca dress, skin-tight; a youth called Albert, not, it was to appear, a sunny child; a niece of some twenty years, stolid and seemingly without interest in life, and one or two other camp-followers and retainers.

Ukridge slipped into his corner, adroitly foiling Albert, who had made

a dive in that direction. Albert regarded him fixedly and reproachfully for a space, then sank into the seat beside me and began to chew something that smelt of aniseed.

Aunty, meanwhile, was distributing her substantial weight evenly between the feet of the Irish gentleman and those of his daughter, as she leaned out of the window to converse with a lady friend in a straw hat and hair curlers, accompanied by three dirty and frivolous boys. It was, she stated, lucky that she had caught the train. I could not agree with her. The girl with the brown hair and the eyes that were neither blue or grey was bearing the infliction, I noticed, with angelic calm. She even smiled. This was when the train suddenly moved off with a jerk, and Aunty, staggering back, sat down on the bag of food which Albert had placed on the seat beside him.

"Clumsy!" observed Albert tersely.

"Albert, you mustn't speak to Aunty so!"

"Wodyer want to sit on my bag for then?" said Albert disagreeably.

They argued the point. Argument in no wise interfered with Albert's power of mastication. The odour of aniseed became more and more painful. Ukridge had lighted a cigar, and I understood why Mrs. Ukridge preferred to travel in another compartment, for

"In his hand he bore the brand
Which none but he might smoke."

I looked across the carriage stealthily to see how the girl was enduring this combination of evils, and noticed that she had begun to read. And as she put the book down to look out of the window, I saw with a thrill that trickled like warm water down my spine that her book was "The Manoeuvres of Arthur." I gasped. That a girl should look as pretty as that and at the same time have the rare intelligence to read Me ... well, it seemed an almost superhuman combination of the excellencies. And more devoutly than ever I cursed in my heart these intrusive outsiders who had charged in at the last moment and destroyed for ever my chance of making this wonderful girl's acquaintance. But for them, we might have become intimate in the first half hour. As it was, what were we? Ships that pass in the night! She would get out at some beastly wayside station, and vanish from my life without my ever having even spoken to her.

Aunty, meanwhile, having retired badly worsted from her encounter with Albert, who showed a skill in logomachy that marked him out as a future labour member, was consoling herself with meat sandwiches. The niece was demolishing sausage rolls. The atmosphere of the carriage was charged with a blend of odours, topping all Ukridge's cigar, now in full blast.

The train raced on towards the sea. It was a warm day, and a torpid

peace began to settle down upon the carriage. Ukridge had thrown away the stump of his cigar, and was now leaning back with his mouth open and his eyes shut. Aunty, still clutching a much-bitten section of a beef sandwich, was breathing heavily and swaying from side to side. Albert and the niece were dozing, Albert's jaws working automatically, even in sleep.

"What's your book, my dear?" asked the Irishman.

"'The Manoeuvres of Arthur,' father. By Jeremy Garnet."

I would not have believed without the evidence of my ears that my name could possibly have sounded so musical.

"Molly McEachern gave it to me when I left the Abbey. She keeps a shelf of books for her guests when they are going away. Books that she considers rubbish, and doesn't want, you know."

I hated Miss McEachern without further evidence.

"And what do you think of it?"

"I like it," said the girl decidedly. The carriage swam before my eyes. "I think it is very clever."

What did it matter after that that the ass in charge of the Waterloo

bookstall had never heard of "The Manoeuvres of Arthur," and that my publishers, whenever I slunk in to ask how it was selling, looked at me with a sort of grave, paternal pity and said that it had not really "begun to move?" Anybody can write one of those rotten popular novels which appeal to the unthinking public, but it takes a man of intellect and refinement and taste and all that sort of thing to turn out something that will be approved of by a girl like this.

"I wonder who Jeremy Garnet is," she said. "I've never heard of him before. I imagine him rather an old young man, probably with an eyeglass, and conceited. And I should think he didn't know many girls. At least if he thinks Pamela an ordinary sort of girl. She's a cr-r-eature," said Phyllis emphatically.

This was a blow to me. I had always looked on Pamela as a well-drawn character, and a very attractive, kittenish little thing at that. That scene between her and the curate in the conservatory ... And when she talks to Arthur at the meet of the Blankshires ... I was sorry she did not like Pamela. Somehow it lowered Pamela in my estimation.

"But I like Arthur," said the girl.

This was better. A good chap, Arthur,--a very complete and thoughtful study of myself. If she liked Arthur, why, then it followed ... but what was the use? I should never get a chance of speaking to her. We were divided by a great gulf of Aunties and Alberts and meat sandwiches.

The train was beginning to slow down. Signs of returning animation began to be noticeable among the sleepers. Aunty's eyes opened, stared vacantly round, closed, and reopened. The niece woke, and started instantly to attack a sausage roll. Albert and Ukridge slumbered on.

A whistle from the engine, and the train drew up at a station. Looking out, I saw that it was Yeovil. There was a general exodus. Aunty became instantly a thing of dash and electricity, collected parcels, shook Albert, replied to his thrusts with repartee, and finally heading a stampede out of the door.

The Irishman and his daughter also rose, and got out. I watched them leave stoically. It would have been too much to expect that they should be going any further.

"Where are we?" said Ukridge sleepily. "Yeovil? Not far now. I tell you what it is, old horse, I could do with a drink."

With that remark he closed his eyes again, and returned to his slumbers. And, as he did so, my eye, roving discontentedly over the carriage, was caught by something lying in the far corner. It was "The Manoeuvres of Arthur." The girl had left it behind.

I suppose what follows shows the vanity that obsesses young authors. It did not even present itself to me as a tenable theory that the book

might have been left behind on purpose, as being of no further use to the owner. It only occurred to me that, if I did not act swiftly, the poor girl would suffer a loss beside which the loss of a purse or vanity-case were trivial.

Five seconds later I was on the platform.

"Excuse me," I said, "I think...?"

"Oh, thank you so much," said the girl.

I made my way back to the carriage, and lit my pipe in a glow of emotion.

"They are blue," I said to my immortal soul. "A wonderful, deep, soft, heavenly blue, like the sea at noonday."