

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ARRIVAL

From Axminster to Combe Regis the line runs through country as attractive as any that can be found in the island, and the train, as if in appreciation of this fact, does not hurry over the journey. It was late afternoon by the time we reached our destination.

The arrangements for the carrying of luggage at Combe Regis border on the primitive. Boxes are left on the platform, and later, when he thinks of it, a carrier looks in and conveys them into the valley and up the hill on the opposite side to the address written on the labels. The owner walks. Combe Regis is not a place for the halt and maimed.

Ukridge led us in the direction of the farm, which lay across the valley, looking through woods to the sea. The place was visible from the station, from which, indeed, standing as it did on the top of a hill, the view was extensive.

Half-way up the slope on the other side of the valley we left the road and made our way across a spongy field, Ukridge explaining that this was a short cut. We climbed through a hedge, crossed a stream and another field, and after negotiating a difficult bank, topped with barbed wire, found ourselves in a garden.

Ukridge mopped his forehead, and restored his pince-nez to their original position from which the passage of the barbed wire had dislodged them.

"This is the place," he said. "We've come in by the back way. Saves time. Tired, Millie?"

"A little, dear. I should like some tea."

"Same here," I agreed.

"That'll be all right," said Ukridge. "A most competent man of the name of Beale and his wife are in charge at present. I wrote to them telling them that we were coming to-day. They will be ready for us. That's the way to do things, Garry old horse. Quiet efficiency. Perfect organisation."

We were at the front door by this time. Ukridge rang the bell. The noise echoed through the house, but there was no answering footsteps. He rang again. There is no mistaking the note of a bell in an empty house. It was plain that the competent man and his wife were out.

"Now what?" I said.

Mrs. Ukridge looked at her husband with calm confidence.

"This," said Ukridge, leaning against the door and endeavouring to button his collar at the back, "reminds me of an afternoon in the Argentine. Two other cheery sportsmen and myself tried for three-quarters of an hour to get into an empty house where there looked as if there might be something to drink, and we'd just got the door open when the owner turned up from behind a tree with a shot-gun. It was a little difficult to explain. As a matter of fact, we never did what you might call really thresh the matter out thoroughly in all its aspects, and you'd be surprised what a devil of a time it takes to pick buck-shot out of a fellow. There was a dog, too."

He broke off, musing dreamily on the happy past, and at this moment history partially repeated itself. From the other side of the door came a dissatisfied whine, followed by a short bark.

"Hullo," said Ukridge, "Beale has a dog." He frowned, annoyed. "What right," he added in an aggrieved tone, "has a beastly mongrel, belonging to a man I employ, to keep me out of my own house? It's a little hard. Here am I, slaving day and night to support Beale, and when I try to get into my own house his infernal dog barks at me. Upon my Sam it's hard!" He brooded for a moment on the injustice of things. "Here, let me get to the keyhole. I'll reason with the brute."

He put his mouth to the keyhole and roared "Goo' dog!" through it. Instantly the door shook as some heavy object hurled itself against it. The barking rang through the house.

"Come round to the back," said Ukridge, giving up the idea of conciliation, "we'll get in through the kitchen window."

The kitchen window proved to be insecurely latched. Ukridge threw it open and we climbed in. The dog, hearing the noise, raced back along the passage and flung himself at the door, scratching at the panels. Ukridge listened with growing indignation.

"Millie, you know how to light a fire. Garnet and I will be collecting cups and things. When that scoundrel Beale arrives I shall tear him limb from limb. Deserting us like this! The man must be a thorough fraud. He told me he was an old soldier. If that's the sort of discipline they used to keep in his regiment, thank God, we've got a Navy! Damn, I've broken a plate. How's the fire getting on, Millie? I'll chop Beale into little bits. What's that you've got there, Garny old horse? Tea? Good. Where's the bread? There goes another plate. Where's Mrs. Beale, too? By Jove, that woman wants killing as much as her blackguard of a husband. Whoever heard of a cook deliberately leaving her post on the day when her master and mistress were expected back? The abandoned woman. Look here, I'll give that dog three minutes, and if it doesn't stop scratching that door by then, I'll take a rolling pin and go out and have a heart-to-heart talk with it. It's a little hard. My own house, and the first thing I find when I arrive is somebody else's beastly dog scratching holes in the doors and ruining the expensive paint. Stop it, you brute!"

The dog's reply was to continue his operations with immense vigour.

Ukridge's eyes gleamed behind their glasses.

"Give me a good large jug, laddie," he said with ominous calm.

He took the largest of the jugs from the dresser and strode with it into the scullery, whence came a sound of running water. He returned carrying the jug with both hands, his mien that of a general who sees his way to a masterstroke of strategy.

"Garny, old horse," he said, "freeze onto the handle of the door, and, when I give the word, fling wide the gates. Then watch that animal get the surprise of a lifetime."

I attached myself to the handle as directed. Ukridge gave the word. We had a momentary vision of an excited dog of the mongrel class framed in the open doorway, all eyes and teeth; then the passage was occupied by a spreading pool, and indignant barks from the distance told that the enemy was thinking the thing over in some safe retreat.

"Settled his hash," said Ukridge complacently. "Nothing like resource, Garny my boy. Some men would have gone on letting a good door be ruined."

"And spoiled the dog for a ha'porth of water," I said.

At this moment Mrs. Ukridge announced that the kettle was boiling. Over a cup of tea Ukridge became the man of business.

"I wonder when those fowls are going to arrive. They should have been here to-day. It's a little hard. Here am I, all eagerness and anxiety, waiting to start an up-to-date chicken farm, and no fowls! I can't run a chicken farm without fowls. If they don't come to-morrow, I shall get after those people with a hatchet. There must be no slackness. They must bustle about. After tea I'll show you the garden, and we'll choose a place for a fowl-run. To-morrow we must buckle to. Serious work will begin immediately after breakfast."

"Suppose," I said, "the fowls arrive before we're ready for them?"

"Why, then they must wait."

"But you can't keep fowls cooped up indefinitely in a crate."

"Oh, that'll be all right. There's a basement to this house. We'll let 'em run about there till we're ready for them. There's always a way of doing things if you look for it. Organisation, my boy. That's the watchword. Quiet efficiency."

"I hope you are going to let the hens hatch some of the eggs, dear,"

said Mrs. Ukridge. "I should love to have some little chickens."

"Of course. By all means. My idea," said Ukridge, "was this. These people will send us fifty fowls of sorts. That means--call it forty-five eggs a day. Let 'em ... Well, I'm hanged! There's that dog again. Where's the jug?"

But this time an unforeseen interruption prevented the manoeuvre being the success it had been before. I had turned the handle and was about to pull the door open, while Ukridge, looking like some modern and dilapidated version of the Discobolus, stood beside me with his jug poised, when a voice spoke from the window.

"Stand still!" said the voice, "or I'll corpse you!"

I dropped the handle. Ukridge dropped the jug. Mrs. Ukridge dropped her tea-cup. At the window, with a double-barrelled gun in his hands, stood a short, square, red-headed man. The muzzle of his gun, which rested on the sill, was pointing in a straight line at the third button of my waistcoat.

Ukridge emitted a roar like that of a hungry lion.

"Beale! You scoundrelly, unprincipled, demon! What the devil are you doing with that gun? Why were you out? What have you been doing? Why did you shout like that? Look what you've made me do."

He pointed to the floor. The very old pair of tennis shoes which he wore were by this time generously soaked with the spilled water.

"Lor, Mr. Utridge, sir, is that you?" said the red-headed man calmly.

"I thought you was burglars."

A short bark from the other side of the kitchen door, followed by a renewal of the scratching, drew Mr. Beale's attention to his faithful hound.

"That's Bob," he said.

"I don't know what you call the brute," said Utridge. "Come in and tie him up. And mind what you're doing with that gun. After you've finished with the dog, I should like a brief chat with you, laddie, if you can spare the time and have no other engagements."

Mr. Beale, having carefully deposited the gun against the wall and dropped a pair of very limp rabbits on the floor, proceeded to climb in through the window. This operation concluded, he stood to one side while the besieged garrison passed out by the same route.

"You will find me in the garden," said Utridge coldly. "I've one or two little things to say to you."



Mr. Beale grinned affably. He seemed to be a man of equable temperament.

The cool air of the garden was grateful after the warmth of the kitchen. It was a pretty garden, or would have been if it had not been so neglected. I seemed to see myself sitting in a deck-chair on the lawn, smoking and looking through the trees at the harbour below. It was a spot, I felt, in which it would be an easy and a pleasant task to shape the plot of my novel. I was glad I had come. About now, outside my lodgings in town, a particularly foul barrel-organ would be settling down to work.

"Oh, there you are, Beale," said Ukridge, as the servitor appeared.

"Now then, what have you to say?"

The hired man looked thoughtful for a moment, then said that it was a fine evening.

"Fine evening?" shouted Ukridge. "What on earth has that got to do with it? I want to know why you and Mrs. Beale were out when we arrived."

"The missus went to Axminster, Mr. Ukridge, sir."

"She had no right to go to Axminster. It isn't part of her duties to go gadding about to Axminster. I don't pay her enormous sums to go to Axminster. You knew I was coming this evening."

"No, sir."

"What!"

"No, sir."

"Beale," said Ukridge with studied calm, the strong man repressing himself. "One of us two is a fool."

"Yes, sir."

"Let us sift this matter to the bottom. You got my letter?"

"No, sir."

"My letter saying that I should arrive to-day. You didn't get it?"

"No, sir."

"Now, look here, Beale, this is absurd. I am certain that that letter was posted. I remember placing it in my pocket for that purpose. It is not there now. See. These are all the contents of my--well, I'm hanged."

He stood looking at the envelope which he had produced from his breast-pocket. A soft smile played over Mr. Beale's wooden face. He coughed.

"Beale," said Ukridge, "you--er--there seems to have been a mistake."

"Yes, sir."

"You are not so much to blame as I thought."

"No, sir."

There was a silence.

"Anyhow," said Ukridge in inspired tones, "I'll go and slay that infernal dog. I'll teach him to tear my door to pieces. Where's your gun, Beale?"

But better counsels prevailed, and the proceedings closed with a cold but pleasant little dinner, at which the spared mongrel came out unexpectedly strong with ingenious and diverting tricks.