

## CHAPTER V

### BUCKLING TO

Sunshine, streaming into my bedroom through the open window, woke me next day as distant clocks were striking eight. It was a lovely morning, cool and fresh. The grass of the lawn, wet with dew, sparkled in the sun. A thrush, who knew all about early birds and their perquisites, was filling in the time before the arrival of the worm with a song or two, as he sat in the bushes. In the ivy a colony of sparrows were opening the day with brisk scuffling. On the gravel in front of the house lay the mongrel, Bob, blinking lazily.

The gleam of the sea through the trees turned my thoughts to bathing. I dressed quickly and went out. Bob rose to meet me, waving an absurdly long tail. The hatchet was definitely buried now. That little matter of the jug of water was forgotten.

A walk of five minutes down the hill brought me, accompanied by Bob, to the sleepy little town. I passed through the narrow street, and turned on to the beach, walking in the direction of the combination of pier and break-water which loomed up through the faint mist.

The tide was high, and, leaving my clothes to the care of Bob, who treated them as a handy bed, I dived into twelve feet of clear, cold water. As I swam, I compared it with the morning tub of London, and

felt that I had done well to come with Ukridge to this pleasant spot. Not that I could rely on unbroken calm during the whole of my visit. I knew nothing of chicken-farming, but I was certain that Ukridge knew less. There would be some strenuous moments before that farm became a profitable commercial speculation. At the thought of Ukridge toiling on a hot afternoon to manage an undisciplined mob of fowls, I laughed, and swallowed a generous mouthful of salt water; and, turning, swam back to Bob and my clothes.

On my return, I found Ukridge, in his shirt sleeves and minus a collar, assailing a large ham. Mrs. Ukridge, looking younger and more child-like than ever in brown holland, smiled at me over the tea-pot.

"Hullo, old horse," bellowed Ukridge, "where have you been? Bathing? Hope it's made you feel fit for work, because we've got to buckle to this morning."

"The fowls have arrived, Mr. Garnet," said Mrs. Ukridge, opening her eyes till she looked like an astonished kitten. "Such a lot of them. They're making such a noise."

To support her statement there floated in through the window a cackling which for volume and variety beat anything I had ever heard. Judging from the noise, it seemed as if England had been drained of fowls and the entire tribe of them dumped into the yard of Ukridge's farm.

"There seems to have been no stint," I said.

"Quite a goodish few, aren't there?" said Ukridge complacently. "But that's what we want. No good starting on a small scale. The more you have, the bigger the profits."

"What sorts have you got mostly?" I asked, showing a professional interest.

"Oh, all sorts. My theory, laddie, is this. It doesn't matter a bit what kind we get, because they'll all lay; and if we sell settings of eggs, which we will, we'll merely say it's an unfortunate accident if they turn out mixed when hatched. Bless you, people don't mind what breed a fowl is, so long as it's got two legs and a beak. These dealer chaps were so infernally particular. 'Any Dorkings?' they said. 'All right,' I said, 'bring on your Dorkings.' 'Or perhaps you will require a few Minorcas?' 'Very well,' I said, 'unleash the Minorcas.' They were going on--they'd have gone on for hours--but I stopped 'em. 'Look here, my dear old college chum,' I said kindly but firmly to the manager johnny--decent old buck, with the manners of a marquess,--'look here,' I said, 'life is short, and we're neither of us as young as we used to be. Don't let us waste the golden hours playing guessing games. I want fowls. You sell fowls. So give me some of all sorts. Mix 'em up, laddie,' I said, 'mix 'em up.' And he has, by jove. You go into the yard and look at 'em. Beale has turned them out of their crates. There must be one of every breed ever invented."

"Where are you going to put them?"

"That spot we chose by the paddock. That's the place. Plenty of mud for them to scratch about in, and they can go into the field when they feel like it, and pick up worms, or whatever they feed on. We must rig them up some sort of shanty, I suppose, this morning. We'll go and tell 'em to send up some wire-netting and stuff from the town."

"Then we shall want hen-coops. We shall have to make those."

"Of course. So we shall. Millie, didn't I tell you that old Garnet was the man to think of things. I forgot the coops. We can't buy some, I suppose? On tick, of course."

"Cheaper to make them. Suppose we get a lot of boxes. Sugar boxes are as good as any. It won't take long to knock up a few coops."

Ukridge thumped the table with enthusiasm, upsetting his cup.

"Garny, old horse, you're a marvel. You think of everything. We'll buckle to right away, and get the whole place fixed up the same as mother makes it. What an infernal noise those birds are making. I suppose they don't feel at home in the yard. Wait till they see the A1 compact residential mansions we're going to put up for them. Finished breakfast? Then let's go out. Come along, Millie."

The red-headed Beale, discovered leaning in an attitude of thought on the yard gate and observing the feathered mob below with much interest, was roused from his reflections and despatched to the town for the wire and sugar boxes. Ukridge, taking his place at the gate, gazed at the fowls with the affectionate air of a proprietor.

"Well, they have certainly taken you at your word," I said, "as far as variety is concerned."

The man with the manners of a marquess seemed to have been at great pains to send a really representative selection of fowls. There were blue ones, black ones, white, grey, yellow, brown, big, little, Dorkings, Minorcas, Cochin Chinas, Bantams, Wyandottes. It was an imposing spectacle.

The Hired Man returned towards the end of the morning, preceded by a cart containing the necessary wire and boxes; and Ukridge, whose enthusiasm brooked no delay, started immediately the task of fashioning the coops, while I, assisted by Beale, draped the wire-netting about the chosen spot next to the paddock. There were little unpleasantnesses--once a roar of anguish told that Ukridge's hammer had found the wrong billet, and on another occasion my flannel trousers suffered on the wire--but the work proceeded steadily. By the middle of the afternoon, things were in a sufficiently advanced state to suggest to Ukridge the advisability of a halt for refreshments.

"That's the way to do it," he said, beaming through misty pince-nez over a long glass. "That is the stuff to administer to 'em! At this rate we shall have the place in corking condition before bedtime. Quiet efficiency--that's the wheeze! What do you think of those for coops, Beale?"

The Hired Man examined them woodenly.

"I've seen worse, sir."

He continued his examination.

"But not many," he added. Beale's passion for the truth had made him unpopular in three regiments.

"They aren't so bad," I said, "but I'm glad I'm not a fowl."

"So you ought to be," said Ukridge, "considering the way you've put up that wire. You'll have them strangling themselves."

In spite of earnest labour the housing arrangements of the fowls were still in an incomplete state at the end of the day. The details of the evening's work are preserved in a letter which I wrote that night to my friend Lickford.

"... Have you ever played a game called Pigs in Clover? We have just finished a merry bout of it, with hens instead of marbles, which has lasted for an hour and a half. We are all dead tired, except the Hired Man, who seems to be made of india-rubber. He has just gone for a stroll on the beach. Wants some exercise, I suppose. Personally, I feel as if I should never move again. You have no conception of the difficulty of rounding up fowls and getting them safely to bed. Having no proper place to put them, we were obliged to stow some of them in the cube sugar-boxes and the rest in the basement. It has only just occurred to me that they ought to have had perches to roost on. It didn't strike me before. I shan't mention it to Ukridge, or that indomitable man will start making some, and drag me into it, too. After all, a hen can rough it for one night, and if I did a stroke more work I should collapse.

"My idea was to do the thing on the slow but sure principle. That is to say, take each bird singly and carry it to bed. It would have taken some time, but there would have been no confusion. But you can imagine that that sort of thing would not appeal to Stanley Featherstonehaugh! He likes his manoeuvres to be on a large, dashing, Napoleonic scale. He said, 'Open the yard gate and let the blighters come out into the open; then sail in and drive them in mass formation through the back door into the basement.' It was a great idea, but there was one fatal flaw in it. It didn't allow for the hens scattering. We opened the gate, and out they all came like an audience coming out of a theatre. Then we

closed in on them to bring off the big drive. For about thirty seconds it looked as if we might do it. Then Bob, the Hired Man's dog, an animal who likes to be in whatever's going on, rushed out of the house into the middle of them, barking. There was a perfect stampede, and Heaven only knows where some of those fowls are now. There was one in particular, a large yellow bird, which, I should imagine, is nearing London by this time. The last I saw of it, it was navigating at the rate of knots in that direction, with Bob after it, barking his hardest. The fowl was showing a rare turn of speed and gaining rapidly. Presently Bob came back, panting, having evidently given the thing up. We, in the meantime, were chasing the rest of the birds all over the garden. The affair had now resolved itself into the course of action I had suggested originally, except that instead of collecting them quietly and at our leisure, we had to run miles for each one we captured. After a time we introduced some sort of system into it. Mrs. Utridge stood at the door. We chased the hens and brought them in. Then, as we put each through into the basement, she shut the door on it. We also arranged Utridge's sugar-box coops in a row, and when we caught a fowl we put it in the coop and stuck a board in front of it. By these strenuous means we gathered in about two-thirds of the lot. The rest are all over England. A few may be still in Dorsetshire, but I should not like to bet on it.

"So you see things are being managed on the up-to-date chicken farm on good, sound Utridge principles. It is only the beginning. I look with confidence for further interesting events. I believe if Utridge kept



white mice he would manage to get feverish excitement out of it. He is at present lying on the sofa, smoking one of his infernal brand of cigars, drinking whisky and soda, and complaining with some bitterness because the whisky isn't as good as some he once tasted in Belfast. From the basement I can hear faintly the murmur of innumerable fowls."