

CHAPTER VIII

A LITTLE DINNER AT UKRIDGE'S

"Edwin comes to-day," said Mrs. Ukridge.

"And the Derricks," said Ukridge, sawing at the bread in his energetic way. "Don't forget the Derricks, Millie."

"No, dear. Mrs. Beale is going to give us a very nice dinner. We talked it over yesterday."

"Who is Edwin?" I asked.

We were finishing breakfast on the second morning after my visit to the Derricks. I had related my adventures to the staff of the farm on my return, laying stress on the merits of our neighbours and their interest in our doings, and the Hired Retainer had been sent off next morning with a note from Mrs. Ukridge inviting them to look over the farm and stay to dinner.

"Edwin?" said Ukridge. "Oh, beast of a cat."

"Oh, Stanley!" said Mrs. Ukridge plaintively. "He's not. He's such a dear, Mr. Garnet. A beautiful, pure-bred Persian. He has taken prizes."

"He's always taking something. That's why he didn't come down with us."

"A great, horrid, beast of a dog bit him, Mr. Garnet. And poor Edwin had to go to a cats' hospital."

"And I hope," said Ukridge, "the experience will do him good. Sneaked a dog's dinner, Garnet, under his very nose, if you please. Naturally the dog lodged a protest."

"I'm so afraid that he will be frightened of Bob. He will be very timid, and Bob's so boisterous. Isn't he, Mr. Garnet?"

"That's all right," said Ukridge. "Bob won't hurt him, unless he tries to steal his dinner. In that case we will have Edwin made into a rug."

"Stanley doesn't like Edwin," said Mrs. Ukridge, sadly.

Edwin arrived early in the afternoon, and was shut into the kitchen. He struck me as a handsome cat, but nervous.

The Derricks followed two hours later. Mr. Chase was not of the party.

"Tom had to go to London," explained the professor, "or he would have been delighted to come. It was a disappointment to the boy, for he wanted to see the farm."

"He must come some other time," said Ukridge. "We invite inspection. Look here," he broke off suddenly--we were nearing the fowl-run now, Mrs. Ukridge walking in front with Phyllis Derrick--"were you ever at Bristol?"

"Never, sir," said the professor.

"Because I knew just such another fat little buffer there a few years ago. Gay old bird, he was. He--"

"This is the fowl-run, professor," I broke in, with a moist, tingling feeling across my forehead and up my spine. I saw the professor stiffen as he walked, while his face deepened in colour. Ukridge's breezy way of expressing himself is apt to electrify the stranger.

"You will notice the able way--ha! ha!--in which the wire-netting is arranged," I continued feverishly. "Took some doing, that. By Jove, yes. It was hot work. Nice lot of fowls, aren't they? Rather a mixed lot, of course. Ha! ha! That's the dealer's fault though. We are getting quite a number of eggs now. Hens wouldn't lay at first. Couldn't make them."

I babbled on, till from the corner of my eye I saw the flush fade from the professor's face and his back gradually relax its poker-like attitude. The situation was saved for the moment but there was no knowing what further excesses Ukridge might indulge in. I managed to

draw him aside as we went through the fowl-run, and expostulated.

"For goodness sake, be careful," I whispered. "You've no notion how touchy he is."

"But I said nothing," he replied, amazed.

"Hang it, you know, nobody likes to be called a fat little buffer to his face."

"What! My dear old man, nobody minds a little thing like that. We can't be stilted and formal. It's ever so much more friendly to relax and be chummy."

Here we rejoined the others, and I was left with a leaden foreboding of gruesome things in store. I knew what manner of man Ukridge was when he relaxed and became chummy. Friendships of years' standing had failed to survive the test.

For the time being, however, all went well. In his role of lecturer he offended no one, and Phyllis and her father behaved admirably. They received his strangest theories without a twitch of the mouth.

"Ah," the professor would say, "now is that really so? Very interesting indeed."

Only once, when Ukridge was describing some more than usually original device for the furthering of the interests of his fowls, did a slight spasm disturb Phyllis's look of attentive reverence.

"And you have really had no previous experience in chicken-farming?" she said.

"None," said Ukridge, beaming through his glasses. "Not an atom. But I can turn my hand to anything, you know. Things seem to come naturally to me somehow."

"I see," said Phyllis.

It was while matters were progressing with this beautiful smoothness that I observed the square form of the Hired Retainer approaching us. Somehow--I cannot say why--I had a feeling that he came with bad news. Perhaps it was his air of quiet satisfaction which struck me as ominous.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Ukridge, sir."

Ukridge was in the middle of a very eloquent excursus on the feeding of fowls, a subject on which he held views of his own as ingenious as they were novel. The interruption annoyed him.

"Well, Beale," he said, "what is it?"

"That there cat, sir, what came to-day."

"Oh, Beale," cried Mrs. Ukridge in agitation, "what has happened?"

"Having something to say to the missis--"

"What has happened? Oh, Beale, don't say that Edwin has been hurt?
Where is he? Oh, poor Edwin!"

"Having something to say to the missis--"

"If Bob has bitten him I hope he had his nose well scratched," said
Mrs. Ukridge vindictively.

"Having something to say to the missis," resumed the Hired Retainer
tranquilly, "I went into the kitchen ten minutes back. The cat was
sitting on the mat."

Beale's narrative style closely resembled that of a certain book I had
read in my infancy. I wish I could remember its title. It was a
well-written book.

"Yes, Beale, yes?" said Mrs. Ukridge. "Oh, do go on."

"'Hullo, puss,' I says to him, 'and 'ow are you, sir?' 'Be careful,'
says the missis. 'E's that timid,' she says, 'you wouldn't believe,'

she says. 'E's only just settled down, as you may say,' she says. 'Ho, don't you fret,' I says to her, 'im and me understands each other. 'Im and me,' I says, 'is old friends. 'E's my dear old pal, Corporal Banks.' She grinned at that, ma'am, Corporal Banks being a man we'd 'ad many a 'earty laugh at in the old days. 'E was, in a manner of speaking, a joke between us."

"Oh, do--go--on, Beale. What has happened to Edwin?"

The Hired Retainer proceeded in calm, even tones.

"We was talking there, ma'am, when Bob, what had followed me unknown, trotted in. When the cat ketched sight of 'im sniffing about, there was such a spitting and swearing as you never 'eard; and blowed," said Mr. Beale amusedly, "blowed if the old cat didn't give one jump, and move in quick time up the chimney, where 'e now remains, paying no 'eed to the missis' attempts to get him down again."

Sensation, as they say in the reports.

"But he'll be cooked," cried Phyllis, open-eyed.

"No, he won't. Nor will our dinner. Mrs. Beale always lets the kitchen fire out during the afternoon. And how she's going to light it with that----"

There was a pause while one might count three. It was plain that the speaker was struggling with himself.

"--that cat," he concluded safely, "up the chimney? It's a cold dinner we'll get to-night, if that cat doesn't come down."

The professor's face fell. I had remarked on the occasion when I had lunched with him his evident fondness for the pleasures of the table. Cold impromptu dinners were plainly not to his taste.

We went to the kitchen in a body. Mrs. Beale was standing in front of the empty grate, making seductive cat-noises up the chimney.

"What's all this, Mrs. Beale?" said Ukridge.

"He won't come down, sir, not while he thinks Bob's about. And how I'm to cook dinner for five with him up the chimney I don't see, sir."

"Prod at him with a broom handle, Mrs. Beale," said Ukridge.

"Oh, don't hurt poor Edwin," said Mrs. Ukridge.

"I 'ave tried that, sir, but I can't reach him, and I'm only bin and drove 'im further up. What must be," added Mrs. Beale philosophically, "must be. He may come down of his own accord in the night. Bein' 'ungry."

"Then what we must do," said Ukridge in a jovial manner, which to me at least seemed out of place, "is to have a regular, jolly picnic-dinner, what? Whack up whatever we have in the larder, and eat that."

"A regular, jolly picnic-dinner," repeated the professor gloomily. I could read what was passing in his mind,--remorse for having come at all, and a faint hope that it might not be too late to back out of it.

"That will be splendid," said Phyllis.

"Er, I think, my dear sir," said her father, "it would be hardly fair for us to give any further trouble to Mrs. Ukridge and yourself. If you will allow me, therefore, I will----"

Ukridge became gushingly hospitable. He refused to think of allowing his guests to go empty away. He would be able to whack up something, he said. There was quite a good deal of the ham left. He was sure. He appealed to me to endorse his view that there was a tin of sardines and part of a cold fowl and plenty of bread and cheese.

"And after all," he said, speaking for the whole company in the generous, comprehensive way enthusiasts have, "what more do we want in weather like this? A nice, light, cold, dinner is ever so much better for us than a lot of hot things."

We strolled out again into the garden, but somehow things seemed to drag. Conversation was fitful, except on the part of Ukridge, who continued to talk easily on all subjects, unconscious of the fact that the party was depressed and at least one of his guests rapidly becoming irritable. I watched the professor furtively as Ukridge talked on, and that ominous phrase of Mr. Chase's concerning four-point-seven guns kept coming into my mind. If Ukridge were to tread on any of his pet corns, as he might at any minute, there would be an explosion. The snatching of the dinner from his very mouth, as it were, and the substitution of a bread-and-cheese and sardines menu had brought him to the frame of mind when men turn and rend their nearest and dearest.

The sight of the table, when at length we filed into the dining room, sent a chill through me. It was a meal for the very young or the very hungry. The uncompromising coldness and solidity of the viands was enough to appall a man conscious that his digestion needed humouring. A huge cheese faced us in almost a swashbuckling way. I do not know how else to describe it. It wore a blatant, rakish, nemo-me-impune-lacessit air, and I noticed that the professor shivered slightly as he saw it. Sardines, looking more oily and uninviting than anything I had ever seen, appeared in their native tin beyond the loaf of bread. There was a ham, in its third quarter, and a chicken which had suffered heavily during a previous visit to the table. Finally, a black bottle of whisky stood grimly beside Ukridge's plate. The professor looked the sort of man who drank claret of a special year, or nothing.

We got through the meal somehow, and did our best to delude ourselves into the idea that it was all great fun; but it was a shallow pretence. The professor was very silent by the time we had finished. Utridge had been terrible. The professor had forced himself to be genial. He had tried to talk. He had told stories. And when he began one--his stories would have been the better for a little more briskness and condensation--Utridge almost invariably interrupted him, before he had got half way through, without a word of apology, and started on some anecdote of his own. He furthermore disagreed with nearly every opinion the professor expressed. It is true that he did it all in such a perfectly friendly way, and was obviously so innocent of any intention of giving offence, that another man--or the same man at a better meal--might have overlooked the matter. But the professor, robbed of his good dinner, was at the stage when he had to attack somebody. Every moment I had been expecting the storm to burst.

It burst after dinner.

We were strolling in the garden, when some demon urged Utridge, apropos of the professor's mention of Dublin, to start upon the Irish question. I had been expecting it momentarily, but my heart seemed to stand still when it actually arrived.

Utridge probably knew less about the Irish question than any male adult in the kingdom, but he had boomed forth some very positive opinions of

his own on the subject before I could get near enough to him to whisper a warning. When I did, I suppose I must have whispered louder than I had intended, for the professor heard me, and my words acted as the match to the powder.

"He's touchy about Ireland, is he?" he thundered. "Drop it, is it? And why? Why, sir? I'm one of the best tempered men that ever came from Dublin, let me tell you, and I will not stay here to be insulted by the insinuation that I cannot discuss Ireland as calmly as any one in this company or out of it. Touchy about Ireland, is it? Touchy--?"

"But, professor--"

"Take your hand off my arm, Mr. Garnet. I will not be treated like a child. I am as competent to discuss the affairs of Ireland without heat as any man, let me tell you."

"Father--"

"And let me tell you, Mr. Ukridge, that I consider your opinions poisonous. Poisonous, sir. And you know nothing whatever about the subject, sir. Every word you say betrays your profound ignorance. I don't wish to see you or to speak to you again. Understand that, sir. Our acquaintance began to-day, and it will cease to-day. Good-night to you, sir. Come, Phyllis, me dear. Mrs. Ukridge, good-night."