

CHAPTER IX

DIES IRAE

Why is it, I wonder, that stories of Retribution calling at the wrong address strike us as funny instead of pathetic? I myself had been amused by them many a time. In a book which I had read only a few days before our cold-dinner party a shop-woman, annoyed with an omnibus conductor, had thrown a superannuated orange at him. It had found its billet not on him but on a perfectly inoffensive spectator. The missile, said the writer, "it a young copper full in the hyeball." I had enjoyed this when I read it, but now that Fate had arranged a precisely similar situation, with myself in the role of the young copper, the fun of the thing appealed to me not at all.

It was Ukridge who was to blame for the professor's regrettable explosion and departure, and he ought by all laws of justice to have suffered for it. As it was, I was the only person materially affected. It did not matter to Ukridge. He did not care twopence one way or the other. If the professor were friendly, he was willing to talk to him by the hour on any subject, pleasant or unpleasant. If, on the other hand, he wished to have nothing more to do with us, it did not worry him. He was content to let him go. Ukridge was a self-sufficing person.

But to me it was a serious matter. More than serious. If I have done my work as historian with an adequate degree of skill, the reader should

have gathered by this time the state of my feelings.

"I did not love as others do:

None ever did that I've heard tell of.

My passion was a by-word through

The town she was, of course, the belle of."

At least it was--fortunately--not quite that; but it was certainly genuine and most disturbing, and it grew with the days. Somebody with a taste for juggling with figures might write a very readable page or so of statistics in connection with the growth of love. In some cases it is, I believe, slow. In my own I can only say that Jack's beanstalk was a backward plant in comparison. It is true that we had not seen a great deal of one another, and that, when we had met, our interview had been brief and our conversation conventional; but it is the intervals between the meeting that do the real damage. Absence--I do not claim the thought as my own--makes the heart grow fonder. And now, thanks to Ukridge's amazing idiocy, a barrier had been thrust between us. Lord knows, the business of fishing for a girl's heart is sufficiently difficult and delicate without the addition of needless obstacles. To cut out the naval miscreant under equal conditions would have been a task ample enough for my modest needs. It was terrible to have to re-establish myself in the good graces of the professor before I could so much as begin to dream of Phyllis. Ukridge gave me no balm.

"Well, after all," he said, when I pointed out to him quietly but

plainly my opinion of his tactlessness, "what does it matter? Old Derrick isn't the only person in the world. If he doesn't want to know us, laddie, we just jolly well pull ourselves together and stagger along without him. It's quite possible to be happy without knowing old Derrick. Millions of people are going about the world at this moment, singing like larks out of pure light-heartedness, who don't even know of his existence. And, as a matter of fact, old horse, we haven't time to waste making friends and being the social pets. Too much to do on the farm. Strict business is the watchword, my boy. We must be the keen, tense men of affairs, or, before we know where we are, we shall find ourselves right in the gumbo.

"I've noticed, Garny, old horse, that you haven't been the whale for work lately that you might be. You must buckle to, laddie. There must be no slackness. We are at a critical stage. On our work now depends the success of the speculation. Look at those damned cocks. They're always fighting. Heave a stone at them, laddie, while you're up. What's the matter with you? You seem pipped. Can't get the novel off your chest, or what? You take my tip and give your brain a rest. Nothing like manual labour for clearing the brain. All the doctors say so. Those coops ought to be painted to-day or to-morrow. Mind you, I think old Derrick would be all right if one persevered--"

"--and didn't call him a fat little buffer and contradict everything he said and spoil all his stories by breaking in with chestnuts of your own in the middle," I interrupted with bitterness.

"My dear old son, he didn't mind being called a fat little buffer. You keep harping on that. It's no discredit to a man to be a fat little buffer. Some of the noblest men I have met have been fat little buffers. What was the matter with old Derrick was a touch of liver. I said to myself, when I saw him eating cheese, 'that fellow's going to have a nasty shooting pain sooner or later.' I say, laddie, just heave another rock or two at those cocks, will you. They'll slay each other."

I had hoped, fearing the while that there was not much chance of such a thing happening, that the professor might get over his feeling of injury during the night and be as friendly as ever next day. But he was evidently a man who had no objection whatever to letting the sun go down upon his wrath, for when I met him on the following morning on the beach, he cut me in the most uncompromising manner.

Phyllis was with him at the time, and also another girl, who was, I supposed, from the strong likeness between them, her sister. She had the same mass of soft brown hair. But to me she appeared almost commonplace in comparison.

It is never pleasant to be cut dead, even when you have done something to deserve it. It is like treading on nothing where one imagined a stair to be. In the present instance the pang was mitigated to a certain extent--not largely--by the fact that Phyllis looked at me. She did not move her head, and I could not have declared positively that

she moved her eyes; but nevertheless she certainly looked at me. It was something. She seemed to say that duty compelled her to follow her father's lead, and that the act must not be taken as evidence of any personal animus.

That, at least, was how I read off the message.

Two days later I met Mr. Chase in the village.

"Hullo, so you're back," I said.

"You've discovered my secret," he admitted; "will you have a cigar or a cocoanut?"

There was a pause.

"Trouble I hear, while I was away," he said.

I nodded.

"The man I live with, Ukridge, did what you warned me against. Touched on the Irish question."

"Home Rule?"

"He mentioned it among other things."

"And the professor went off?"

"Like a bomb."

"He would. So now you have parted brass rags. It's a pity."

I agreed. I am glad to say that I suppressed the desire to ask him to use his influence, if any, with Mr. Derrick to effect a reconciliation. I felt that I must play the game. To request one's rival to give one assistance in the struggle, to the end that he may be the more readily cut out, can hardly be considered cricket.

"I ought not to be speaking to you, you know," said Mr. Chase. "You're under arrest."

"He's still----?" I stopped for a word.

"Very much so. I'll do what I can."

"It's very good of you."

"But the time is not yet ripe. He may be said at present to be simmering down."

"I see. Thanks. Good-bye."

"So long."

And Mr. Chase walked on with long strides to the Cob.

The days passed slowly. I saw nothing more of Phyllis or her sister. The professor I met once or twice on the links. I had taken earnestly to golf in this time of stress. Golf is the game of disappointed lovers. On the other hand, it does not follow that because a man is a failure as a lover he will be any good at all on the links. My game was distinctly poor at first. But a round or two put me back into my proper form, which is fair.

The professor's demeanour at these accidental meetings on the links was a faithful reproduction of his attitude on the beach. Only by a studied imitation of the Absolute Stranger did he show that he had observed my presence.

Once or twice, after dinner, when Ukridge was smoking one of his special cigars while Mrs. Ukridge nursed Edwin (now moving in society once more, and in his right mind), I lit my pipe and walked out across the fields through the cool summer night till I came to the hedge that shut off the Derrick's grounds. Not the hedge through which I had made my first entrance, but another, lower, and nearer the house. Standing there under the shade of a tree I could see the lighted windows of the drawing-room. Generally there was music inside, and, the windows being

opened on account of the warmth of the night, I was able to make myself a little more miserable by hearing Phyllis sing. It deepened the feeling of banishment.

I shall never forget those furtive visits. The intense stillness of the night, broken by an occasional rustling in the grass or the hedge; the smell of the flowers in the garden beyond; the distant drone of the sea.

"God makes sech nights, all white and still,
Fur'z you to look and listen."

Another day had generally begun before I moved from my hiding-place, and started for home, surprised to find my limbs stiff and my clothes bathed with dew.