CHAPTER X

I ENLIST THE SERVICES OF A MINION

It would be interesting to know to what extent the work of authors is influenced by their private affairs. If life is flowing smoothly, are the novels they write in that period of content coloured with optimism? And if things are running crosswise, do they work off the resultant gloom on their faithful public? If, for instance, Mr. W. W. Jacobs had toothache, would he write like Hugh Walpole? If Maxim Gorky were invited to lunch by Trotsky, to meet Lenin, would he sit down and dash off a trifle in the vein of Stephen Leacock? Probably the eminent have the power of detaching their writing self from their living, work-a-day self; but, for my own part, the frame of mind in which I now found myself had a disastrous effect on my novel that was to be. I had designed it as a light comedy effort. Here and there a page or two to steady the reader and show him what I could do in the way of pathos if I cared to try; but in the main a thing of sunshine and laughter. But now great slabs of gloom began to work themselves into the scheme of it. A magnificent despondency became its keynote. It would not do. I felt that I must make a resolute effort to shake off my depression. More than ever the need of conciliating the professor was borne in upon me. Day and night I spurred my brain to think of some suitable means of engineering a reconciliation.

In the meantime I worked hard among the fowls, drove furiously on the

links, and swam about the harbour when the affairs of the farm did not require my attention.

Things were not going well on our model chicken farm. Little accidents marred the harmony of life in the fowl-run. On one occasion a hen--not Aunt Elizabeth, I am sorry to say,--fell into a pot of tar, and came out an unspeakable object. Ukridge put his spare pair of tennis shoes in the incubator to dry them, and permanently spoiled the future of half-a-dozen eggs which happened to have got there first. Chickens kept straying into the wrong coops, where they got badly pecked by the residents. Edwin slew a couple of Wyandottes, and was only saved from execution by the tears of Mrs. Ukridge.

In spite of these occurrences, however, his buoyant optimism never deserted Ukridge.

"After all," he said, "What's one bird more or less? Yes, I know I made a fuss when that beast of a cat lunched off those two, but that was simply the principle of the thing. I'm not going to pay large sums for chickens purely in order that a cat which I've never liked can lunch well. Still, we've plenty left, and the eggs are coming in better now, though we've still a deal of leeway to make up yet in that line. I got a letter from Whiteley's this morning asking when my first consignment was going to arrive. You know, these people make a mistake in hurrying a man. It annoys him. It irritates him. When we really get going, Garny, my boy, I shall drop Whiteley's. I shall cut them out of my list

and send my eggs to their trade rivals. They shall have a sharp lesson. It's a little hard. Here am I, worked to death looking after things down here, and these men have the impertinence to bother me about their wretched business. Come in and have a drink, laddie, and let's talk it over."

It was on the morning after this that I heard him calling me in a voice in which I detected agitation. I was strolling about the paddock, as was my habit after breakfast, thinking about Phyllis and trying to get my novel into shape. I had just framed a more than usually murky scene for use in the earlier part of the book, when Ukridge shouted to me from the fowl-run.

"Garny, come here. I want you to see the most astounding thing."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Blast if I know. Look at those chickens. They've been doing that for the last half-hour."

I inspected the chickens. There was certainly something the matter with them. They were yawning--broadly, as if we bored them. They stood about singly and in groups, opening and shutting their beaks. It was an uncanny spectacle.

"What's the matter with them?"

"Can a chicken get a fit of the blues?" I asked. "Because if so, that's what they've got. I never saw a more bored-looking lot of birds."

"Oh, do look at that poor little brown one by the coop," said Mrs. Ukridge sympathetically; "I'm sure it's not well. See, it's lying down. What can be the matter with it?"

"I tell you what we'll do," said Ukridge. "We'll ask Beale. He once lived with an aunt who kept fowls. He'll know all about it. Beale!"

No answer.

"Beale!!"

A sturdy form in shirt-sleeves appeared through the bushes, carrying a boot. We seemed to have interrupted him in the act of cleaning it.

"Beale, you know all about fowls. What's the matter with these chickens?"

The Hired Retainer examined the blase birds with a wooden expression on his face.

"Well?" said Ukridge.

"The 'ole thing 'ere," said the Hired Retainer, "is these 'ere fowls have been and got the roop."

I had never heard of the disease before, but it sounded bad.

"Is that what makes them yawn like that?" said Mrs. Ukridge.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Poor things!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And have they all got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What ought we to do?" asked Ukridge.

"Well, my aunt, sir, when 'er fowls 'ad the roop, she gave them snuff."

"Give them snuff, she did," he repeated, with relish, "every morning."

"Snuff!" said Mrs. Ukridge.

"Yes, ma'am. She give 'em snuff till their eyes bubbled."

Mrs. Ukridge uttered a faint squeak at this vivid piece of word-painting.

"And did it cure them?" asked Ukridge.

"No, sir," responded the expert soothingly.

"Oh, go away, Beale, and clean your beastly boots," said Ukridge. "You're no use. Wait a minute. Who would know about this infernal roop thing? One of those farmer chaps would, I suppose. Beale, go off to the nearest farmer, and give him my compliments, and ask him what he does when his fowls get the roop."

"Yes, sir."

"No, I'll go, Ukridge," I said. "I want some exercise."

I whistled to Bob, who was investigating a mole-heap in the paddock, and set off in the direction of the village of Up Lyme to consult Farmer Leigh on the matter. He had sold us some fowls shortly after our arrival, so might be expected to feel a kindly interest in their ailing families.

The path to Up Lyme lies across deep-grassed meadows. At intervals it passes over a stream by means of a footbridge. The stream curls through

the meadows like a snake.

And at the first of these bridges I met Phyllis.

I came upon her quite suddenly. The other end of the bridge was hidden from my view. I could hear somebody coming through the grass, but not till I was on the bridge did I see who it was. We reached the bridge simultaneously. She was alone. She carried a sketching-block. All nice girls sketch a little.

There was room for one alone on the footbridge, and I drew back to let her pass.

It being the privilege of woman to make the first sign of recognition, I said nothing. I merely lifted my hat in a non-committing fashion.

"Are you going to cut me, I wonder?" I said to myself. She answered the unspoken question as I hoped it would be answered.

"Mr. Garnet," she said, stopping at the end of the bridge. A pause.

"I couldn't tell you so before, but I am so sorry this has happened."

"Oh, thanks awfully," I said, realising as I said it the miserable inadequacy of the English language. At a crisis when I would have given a month's income to have said something neat, epigrammatic, suggestive,

yet withal courteous and respectful, I could only find a hackneyed, unenthusiastic phrase which I should have used in accepting an invitation from a bore to lunch with him at his club.

"Of course you understand my friends--must be my father's friends."

"Yes," I said gloomily, "I suppose so."

"So you must not think me rude if I--I----"

"Cut me," said I, with masculine coarseness.

"Don't seem to see you," said she, with feminine delicacy, "when I am with my father. You will understand?"

"I shall understand."

"You see,"--she smiled--"you are under arrest, as Tom says."

Tom!

"I see," I said.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

I watched her out of sight, and went on to interview Mr. Leigh.

We had a long and intensely uninteresting conversation about the maladies to which chickens are subject. He was verbose and reminiscent. He took me over his farm, pointing out as we went Dorkings with pasts, and Cochin Chinas which he had cured of diseases generally fatal on, as far as I could gather, Christian Science principles.

I left at last with instructions to paint the throats of the stricken birds with turpentine--a task imagination boggled at, and one which I proposed to leave exclusively to Ukridge and the Hired Retainer--and also a slight headache. A visit to the Cob would, I thought, do me good. I had missed my bathe that morning, and was in need of a breath of sea-air.

It was high-tide, and there was deep water on three sides of the Cob.

In a small boat in the offing Professor Derrick appeared, fishing. I had seen him engaged in this pursuit once or twice before. His only companion was a gigantic boatman, by name Harry Hawk, possibly a descendant of the gentleman of that name who went to Widdicombe Fair with Bill Brewer and old Uncle Tom Cobley and all on a certain memorable occasion, and assisted at the fatal accident to Tom Pearse's grey mare.

I sat on the seat at the end of the Cob and watched the professor. It was an instructive sight, an object-lesson to those who hold that optimism has died out of the race. I had never seen him catch a fish. He never looked to me as if he were at all likely to catch a fish. Yet he persevered.

There are few things more restful than to watch some one else busy under a warm sun. As I sat there, my pipe drawing nicely as the result of certain explorations conducted that morning with a straw, my mind ranged idly over large subjects and small. I thought of love and chicken-farming. I mused on the immortality of the soul and the deplorable speed at which two ounces of tobacco disappeared. In the end I always returned to the professor. Sitting, as I did, with my back to the beach, I could see nothing but his boat. It had the ocean to itself.

I began to ponder over the professor. I wondered dreamily if he were very hot. I tried to picture his boyhood. I speculated on his future, and the pleasure he extracted from life.

It was only when I heard him call out to Hawk to be careful, when a movement on the part of that oarsman set the boat rocking, that I began to weave romances round him in which I myself figured.

But, once started, I progressed rapidly. I imagined a sudden upset. Professor struggling in water. Myself (heroically): "Courage! I'm coming!" A few rapid strokes. Saved! Sequel, a subdued professor,

dripping salt water and tears of gratitude, urging me to become his son-in-law. That sort of thing happened in fiction. It was a shame that it should not happen in real life. In my hot youth I once had seven stories in seven weekly penny papers in the same month, all dealing with a situation of the kind. Only the details differed. In "Not really a Coward" Vincent Devereux had rescued the earl's daughter from a fire, whereas in "Hilda's Hero" it was the peppery old father whom Tom Slingsby saved. Singularly enough, from drowning. In other words, I, a very mediocre scribbler, had effected seven times in a single month what the Powers of the Universe could not manage once, even on the smallest scale.

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It was precisely three minutes to twelve--I had just consulted my watch--that the great idea surged into my brain. At four minutes to twelve I had been grumbling impotently at Providence. By two minutes to twelve I had determined upon a manly and independent course of action.

Briefly it was this. Providence had failed to give satisfaction. I would, therefore, cease any connection with it, and start a rival business on my own account. After all, if you want a thing done well, you must do it yourself.

In other words, since a dramatic accident and rescue would not happen of its own accord, I would arrange one for myself. Hawk looked to me

the sort of man who would do anything in a friendly way for a few shillings.

I had now to fight it out with Conscience. I quote the brief report which subsequently appeared in the Recording Angel:--

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Three-Round Contest: CONSCIENCE (Celestial B.C.) v. J. GARNET (Unattached).

Round One.--Conscience came to the scratch smiling and confident. Led off lightly with a statement that it would be bad for a man of the professor's age to get wet. Garnet countered heavily, alluding to the warmth of the weather and the fact that the professor habitually enjoyed a bathe every day. Much sparring, Conscience not quite so confident, and apparently afraid to come to close quarters with this man. Time called, with little damage done.

Round Two.--Conscience, much freshened by the half minute's rest, feinted with the charge of deceitfulness, and nearly got home heavily with "What would Phyllis say if she knew?" Garnet, however, side-stepped cleverly with "But she won't know," and followed up the advantage with a damaging, "Besides, it's all for the best." The round ended with a brisk rally on general principles, Garnet crowding in a lot of work. Conscience down twice, and only saved by the call of time.

Round Three (and last).--Conscience came up very weak, and with Garnet as strong as ever it was plain that the round would be a brief one. This proved to be the case. Early in the second minute Garnet cross-countered with "All's Fair in Love and War." Conscience down and out. The winner left the ring without a mark.

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I rose, feeling much refreshed.

That afternoon I interviewed Mr. Hawk in the bar-parlour of the Net and Mackerel.

"Hawk," I said to him darkly, over a mystic and conspirator-like pot of ale, "I want you, next time you take Professor Derrick out fishing"--here I glanced round, to make sure that we were not overheard--"to upset him."

His astonished face rose slowly from the pot of ale like a full moon.

"What 'ud I do that for?" he gasped.

"Five shillings, I hope," said I, "but I am prepared to go to ten."

He gurgled.

I encored his pot of ale.

He kept on gurgling.

I argued with the man.

I spoke splendidly. I was eloquent, but at the same time concise. My choice of words was superb. I crystallised my ideas into pithy sentences which a child could have understood.

And at the end of half-an-hour he had grasped the salient points of the scheme. Also he imagined that I wished the professor upset by way of a practical joke. He gave me to understand that this was the type of humour which was to be expected from a gentleman from London. I am afraid he must at one period in his career have lived at one of those watering-places at which trippers congregate. He did not seem to think highly of the Londoner.

I let it rest at that. I could not give my true reason, and this served as well as any.

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At the last moment he recollected that he, too, would get wet when the accident took place, and he raised the price to a sovereign.

A mercenary man. It is painful to see how rapidly the old simple spirit is dying out of our rural districts. Twenty years ago a fisherman would have been charmed to do a little job like that for a screw of tobacco.