

CHAPTER XI

THE BRAVE PRESERVER

I could have wished, during the next few days, that Mr. Harry Hawk's attitude towards myself had not been so unctuously confidential and mysterious. It was unnecessary, in my opinion, for him to grin meaningly when he met me in the street. His sly wink when we passed each other on the Cob struck me as in indifferent taste. The thing had been definitely arranged (ten shillings down and ten when it was over), and there was no need for any cloak and dark-lantern effects. I objected strongly to being treated as the villain of a melodrama. I was merely an ordinary well-meaning man, forced by circumstances into doing the work of Providence. Mr. Hawk's demeanour seemed to say, "We are two reckless scoundrels, but bless you, I won't give away your guilty secret." The climax came one morning as I was going along the street towards the beach. I was passing a dark doorway, when out shimmered Mr. Hawk as if he had been a spectre instead of the most substantial man within a radius of ten miles.

"St!" He whispered.

"Now look here, Hawk," I said wrathfully, for the start he had given me had made me bite my tongue, "this has got to stop. I refuse to be haunted in this way. What is it now?"

"Mr. Derrick goes out this morning, zur."

"Thank goodness for that," I said. "Get it over this morning, then, without fail. I couldn't stand another day of it."

I went on to the Cob, where I sat down. I was excited. Deeds of great import must shortly be done. I felt a little nervous. It would never do to bungle the thing. Suppose by some accident I were to drown the professor! Or suppose that, after all, he contented himself with a mere formal expression of thanks, and refused to let bygones be bygones. These things did not bear thinking of.

I got up and began to pace restlessly to and fro.

Presently from the farther end of the harbour there put off Mr. Hawk's boat, bearing its precious cargo. My mouth became dry with excitement.

Very slowly Mr. Hawk pulled round the end of the Cob, coming to a standstill some dozen yards from where I was performing my beat. It was evidently here that the scene of the gallant rescue had been fixed.

My eyes were glued upon Mr. Hawk's broad back. Only when going in to bat at cricket have I experienced a similar feeling of suspense. The boat lay almost motionless on the water. I had never seen the sea smoother. Little ripples plashed against the side of the Cob.

It seemed as if this perfect calm might continue for ever. Mr. Hawk made no movement. Then suddenly the whole scene changed to one of vast activity. I heard Mr. Hawk utter a hoarse cry, and saw him plunge violently in his seat. The professor turned half round, and I caught sight of his indignant face, pink with emotion. Then the scene changed again with the rapidity of a dissolving view. I saw Mr. Hawk give another plunge, and the next moment the boat was upside down in the water, and I was shooting headforemost to the bottom, oppressed with the indescribably clammy sensation which comes when one's clothes are thoroughly wet.

I rose to the surface close to the upturned boat. The first sight I saw was the spluttering face of Mr. Hawk. I ignored him, and swam to where the professor's head bobbed on the waters.

"Keep cool," I said. A silly remark in the circumstances.

He was swimming energetically but unskilfully. He appeared to be one of those men who can look after themselves in the water only when they are in bathing costume. In his shore clothes it would have taken him a week to struggle to land, if he had got there at all, which was unlikely.

I know all about saving people from drowning. We used to practise it with a dummy in the swimming-bath at school. I attacked him from the rear, and got a good grip of him by the shoulders. I then swam on my back in the direction of land, and beached him with much eclat at the

feet of an admiring crowd. I had thought of putting him under once or twice just to show him he was being rescued, but decided against such a course as needlessly realistic. As it was, I fancy he had swallowed of sea-water two or three hearty draughts.

The crowd was enthusiastic.

"Brave young feller," said somebody.

I blushed. This was Fame.

"Jumped in, he did, sure enough, an' saved the gentleman!"

"Be the old soul drowned?"

"That girt fule, 'Arry 'Awk!"

I was sorry for Mr. Hawk. Popular opinion was against him. What the professor said of him, when he recovered his breath, I cannot repeat,--not because I do not remember it, but because there is a line, and one must draw it. Let it be sufficient to say that on the subject of Mr. Hawk he saw eye to eye with the citizen who had described him as a "girt fule." I could not help thinking that my fellow conspirator did well to keep out of it all. He was now sitting in the boat, which he had restored to its normal position, baling pensively with an old tin can. To satire from the shore he paid no attention.

The professor stood up, and stretched out his hand. I grasped it.

"Mr. Garnet," he said, for all the world as if he had been the father of the heroine of "Hilda's Hero," "we parted recently in anger. Let me thank you for your gallant conduct and hope that bygones will be bygones."

I came out strong. I continued to hold his hand. The crowd raised a sympathetic cheer.

I said, "Professor, the fault was mine. Show that you have forgiven me by coming up to the farm and putting on something dry."

"An excellent idea, me boy; I am a little wet."

"A little," I agreed.

We walked briskly up the hill to the farm.

Ukridge met us at the gate.

He diagnosed the situation rapidly.

"You're all wet," he said. I admitted it.

"Professor Derrick has had an unfortunate boating accident," I explained.

"And Mr. Garnet heroically dived in, in all his clothes, and saved me life," broke in the professor. "A hero, sir. A--choo!"

"You're catching cold, old horse," said Ukridge, all friendliness and concern, his little differences with the professor having vanished like thawed snow. "This'll never do. Come upstairs and get into something of Garnet's. My own toggery wouldn't fit. What? Come along, come along, I'll get you some hot water. Mrs. Beale--Mrs. Beale! We want a large can of hot water. At once. What? Yes, immediately. What? Very well then, as soon as you can. Now then, Garny, my boy, out with the duds. What do you think of this, now, professor? A sweetly pretty thing in grey flannel. Here's a shirt. Get out of that wet toggery, and Mrs. Beale shall dry it. Don't attempt to tell me about it till you're changed. Socks! Socks forward. Show socks. Here you are. Coat? Try this blazer. That's right--that's right."

He bustled about till the professor was clothed, then marched him downstairs, and gave him a cigar.

"Now, what's all this? What happened?"

The professor explained. He was severe in his narration upon the unlucky Mr. Hawk.

"I was fishing, Mr. Ukridge, with me back turned, when I felt the boat rock violently from one side to the other to such an extent that I nearly lost me equilibrium, and then the boat upset. The man's a fool, sir. I could not see what had happened, my back being turned, as I say."

"Garnet must have seen. What happened, old horse?"

"It was very sudden," I said. "It seemed to me as if the man had got an attack of cramp. That would account for it. He has the reputation of being a most sober and trustworthy fellow."

"Never trust that sort of man," said Ukridge. "They are always the worst. It's plain to me that this man was beastly drunk, and upset the boat while trying to do a dance."

"A great curse, drink," said the professor. "Why, yes, Mr. Ukridge, I think I will. Thank you. Thank you. That will be enough. Not all the soda, if you please. Ah! this tastes pleasanter than salt water, Mr. Garnet. Eh? Eh? Ha--Ha!"

He was in the best of tempers, and I worked strenuously to keep him so. My scheme had been so successful that its iniquity did not worry me. I have noticed that this is usually the case in matters of this kind. It is the bungled crime that brings remorse.

"We must go round the links together one of these days, Mr. Garnet," said the professor. "I have noticed you there on several occasions, playing a strong game. I have lately taken to using a wooden putter. It is wonderful what a difference it makes."

Golf is a great bond of union. We wandered about the grounds discussing the game, the entente cordiale growing more firmly established every moment.

"We must certainly arrange a meeting," concluded the professor. "I shall be interested to see how we stand with regard to one another. I have improved my game considerably since I have been down here. Considerably."

"My only feat worthy of mention since I started the game," I said, "has been to halve a round with Angus M'Lurkin at St. Andrews."

"The M'Lurkin?" asked the professor, impressed.

"Yes. But it was one of his very off days, I fancy. He must have had gout or something. And I have certainly never played so well since."

"Still----," said the professor. "Yes, we must really arrange to meet."

With Ukridge, who was in one of his less tactless moods, he became very friendly.

Ukridge's ready agreement with his strictures on the erring Hawk had a great deal to do with this. When a man has a grievance, he feels drawn to those who will hear him patiently and sympathise. Ukridge was all sympathy.

"The man is an unprincipled scoundrel," he said, "and should be torn limb from limb. Take my advice, and don't go out with him again. Show him that you are not a man to be trifled with. The spilt child dreads the water, what? Human life isn't safe with such men as Hawk roaming about."

"You are perfectly right, sir. The man can have no defence. I shall not employ him again."

I felt more than a little guilty while listening to this duet on the subject of the man whom I had lured from the straight and narrow path. But the professor would listen to no defence. My attempts at excusing him were ill received. Indeed, the professor shewed such signs of becoming heated that I abandoned my fellow-conspirator to his fate with extreme promptness. After all, an addition to the stipulated reward--one of these days--would compensate him for any loss which he might sustain from the withdrawal of the professor's custom. Mr. Harry Hawk was in good enough case. I would see that he did not suffer.

Filled with these philanthropic feelings, I turned once more to talk

with the professor of niblicks and approach shots and holes done in three without a brassy. We were a merry party at lunch--a lunch fortunately in Mrs. Beale's best vein, consisting of a roast chicken and sweets. Chicken had figured somewhat frequently of late on our daily bill of fare.

We saw the professor off the premises in his dried clothes, and I turned back to put the fowls to bed in a happier frame of mind than I had known for a long time. I whistled rag-time airs as I worked.

"Rum old buffer," said Ukridge meditatively, pouring himself out another whisky and soda. "My goodness, I should have liked to have seen him in the water. Why do I miss these good things?"