CHAPTER XII

SOME EMOTIONS AND YELLOW LUPIN

The fame which came to me through that gallant rescue was a little embarrassing. I was a marked man. Did I walk through the village, heads emerged from windows, and eyes followed me out of sight. Did I sit on the beach, groups formed behind me and watched in silent admiration. I was the man of the moment.

"If we'd wanted an advertisement for the farm," said Ukridge on one of these occasions, "we couldn't have had a better one than you, Garny, my boy. You have brought us three distinct orders for eggs during the last week. And I'll tell you what it is, we need all the orders we can get that'll bring us in ready money. The farm is in a critical condition. The coffers are low, deuced low. And I'll tell you another thing. I'm getting precious tired of living on nothing but chicken and eggs. So's Millie, though she doesn't say so."

"So am I," I said, "and I don't feel like imitating your wife's proud reserve. I never want to see a chicken again. As for eggs, they are far too much for us."

For the last week monotony had been the keynote of our commissariat. We had had cold chicken and eggs for breakfast, boiled chicken and eggs for lunch, and roast chicken and eggs for dinner. Meals became a

nuisance, and Mrs. Beale complained bitterly that we did not give her a chance. She was a cook who would have graced an alderman's house and served up noble dinners for gourmets, and here she was in this remote corner of the world ringing the changes on boiled chicken and roast chicken and boiled eggs and poached eggs. Mr. Whistler, set to paint sign-boards for public-houses, might have felt the same restless discontent. As for her husband, the Hired Retainer, he took life as tranquilly as ever, and seemed to regard the whole thing as the most exhilarating farce he had ever been in. I think he looked on Ukridge as an amiable lunatic, and was content to rough it a little in order to enjoy the privilege of observing his movements. He made no complaints of the food. When a man has supported life for a number of years on incessant Army beef, the monotony of daily chicken and eggs scarcely strikes him.

"The fact is," said Ukridge, "these tradesmen round here seem to be a sordid, suspicious lot. They clamour for money."

He mentioned a few examples. Vickers, the butcher, had been the first to strike, with the remark that he would like to see the colour of Mr. Ukridge's money before supplying further joints. Dawlish, the grocer, had expressed almost exactly similar sentiments two days later; and the ranks of these passive resisters had been receiving fresh recruits ever since. To a man the tradesmen of Combe Regis seemed as deficient in Simple Faith as they were in Norman Blood.

"Can't you pay some of them a little on account?" I suggested. "It would set them going again."

"My dear old man," said Ukridge impressively, "we need every penny of ready money we can raise for the farm. The place simply eats money. That infernal roop let us in for I don't know what."

That insidious epidemic had indeed proved costly. We had painted the throats of the chickens with the best turpentine--at least Ukridge and Beale had,--but in spite of their efforts, dozens had died, and we had been obliged to sink much more money than was pleasant in restocking the run. The battle which took place on the first day after the election of the new members was a sight to remember. The results of it were still noticeable in the depressed aspect of certain of the recently enrolled.

"No," said Ukridge, summing up, "these men must wait. We can't help their troubles. Why, good gracious, it isn't as if they'd been waiting for the money long. We've not been down here much over a month. I never heard of such a scandalous thing. 'Pon my word, I've a good mind to go round, and have a straight talk with one or two of them. I come and settle down here, and stimulate trade, and give them large orders, and they worry me with bills when they know I'm up to my eyes in work, looking after the fowls. One can't attend to everything. The business is just now at its most crucial point. It would be fatal to pay any attention to anything else with things as they are. These scoundrels

will get paid all in good time."

It is a peculiarity of situations of this kind that the ideas of debtor and creditor as to what constitutes a good time never coincide.

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I am afraid that, despite the urgent need for strict attention to business, I was inclined to neglect my duties about this time. I had got into the habit of wandering off, either to the links, where I generally found the professor, sometimes Phyllis, or on long walks by myself. There was one particular walk along the cliffs, through some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever set eyes on, which more than any other suited my mood. I would work my way through the woods till I came to a small clearing on the very edge of the cliff. There I would sit and smoke by the hour. If ever I am stricken with smoker's heart, or staggers, or tobacco amblyopia, or any other of the cheery things which doctors predict for the devotee of the weed, I shall feel that I sowed the seeds of it that summer in that little clearing overlooking the sea. A man in love needs much tobacco. A man thinking out a novel needs much tobacco. I was in the grip of both maladies. Somehow I found that my ideas flowed more readily in that spot than in any other.

I had not been inside the professor's grounds since the occasion when I had gone in through the box-wood hedge. But on the afternoon following my financial conversation with Ukridge I made my way thither, after a

toilet which, from its length, should have produced better results than it did. Not for four whole days had I caught so much as a glimpse of Phyllis. I had been to the links three times, and had met the professor twice, but on both occasions she had been absent. I had not had the courage to ask after her. I had an absurd idea that my voice or my manner would betray me in some way. I felt that I should have put the question with such an exaggerated show of indifference that all would have been discovered.

The professor was not at home. Nor was Mr. Chase. Nor was Miss Norah Derrick, the lady I had met on the beach with the professor. Miss Phyllis, said the maid, was in the garden.

I went into the garden. She was sitting under the cedar by the tennis-lawn, reading. She looked up as I approached.

I said it was a lovely afternoon. After which there was a lull in the conversation. I was filled with a horrid fear that I was boring her. I had probably arrived at the very moment when she was most interested in her book. She must, I thought, even now be regarding me as a nuisance, and was probably rehearsing bitter things to say to the maid for not having had the sense to explain that she was out.

"I--er--called in the hope of seeing Professor Derrick," I said.

"You would find him on the links," she replied. It seemed to me that

she spoke wistfully.

"Oh, it--it doesn't matter," I said. "It wasn't anything important."

This was true. If the professor had appeared then and there, I should have found it difficult to think of anything to say to him which would have accounted to any extent for my anxiety to see him.

"How are the chickens, Mr. Garnet?" said she.

The situation was saved. Conversationally, I am like a clockwork toy. I have to be set going. On the affairs of the farm I could speak fluently. I sketched for her the progress we had made since her visit. I was humorous concerning roop, epigrammatic on the subject of the Hired Retainer and Edwin.

"Then the cat did come down from the chimney?" said Phyllis.

We both laughed, and--I can answer for myself--I felt the better for it.

"He came down next day," I said, "and made an excellent lunch of one of our best fowls. He also killed another, and only just escaped death himself at the hands of Ukridge."

"Mr. Ukridge doesn't like him, does he?"

"If he does, he dissembles his love. Edwin is Mrs. Ukridge's pet. He is the only subject on which they disagree. Edwin is certainly in the way on a chicken farm. He has got over his fear of Bob, and is now perfectly lawless. We have to keep a steady eye on him."

"And have you had any success with the incubator? I love incubators. I have always wanted to have one of my own, but we have never kept fowls."

"The incubator has not done all that it should have done," I said. "Ukridge looks after it, and I fancy his methods are not the right methods. I don't know if I have got the figures absolutely correct, but Ukridge reasons on these lines. He says you are supposed to keep the temperature up to a hundred and five degrees. I think he said a hundred and five. Then the eggs are supposed to hatch out in a week or so. He argues that you may just as well keep the temperature at seventy-two, and wait a fortnight for your chickens. I am certain there's a fallacy in the system somewhere, because we never seem to get as far as the chickens. But Ukridge says his theory is mathematically sound, and he sticks to it."

"Are you quite sure that the way you are doing it is the best way to manage a chicken farm?"

"I should very much doubt it. I am a child in these matters. I had only seen a chicken in its wild state once or twice before we came down here. I had never dreamed of being an active assistant on a real farm.

The whole thing began like Mr. George Ade's fable of the Author. An Author--myself--was sitting at his desk trying to turn out any old thing that could be converted into breakfast-food when a friend came in and sat down on the table, and told him to go right on and not mind him."

"Did Mr. Ukridge do that?"

"Very nearly that. He called at my rooms one beautiful morning when I was feeling desperately tired of London and overworked and dying for a holiday, and suggested that I should come to Combe Regis with him and help him farm chickens. I have not regretted it."

"It is a lovely place, isn't it?"

"The loveliest I have ever seen. How charming your garden is."

"Shall we go and look at it? You have not seen the whole of it."

As she rose, I saw her book, which she had laid face downwards on the grass beside her. It was the same much-enduring copy of the "Manoeuvres of Arthur." I was thrilled. This patient perseverance must surely mean something. She saw me looking at it.

"Did you draw Pamela from anybody?" she asked suddenly.

I was glad now that I had not done so. The wretched Pamela, once my pride, was for some reason unpopular with the only critic about whose opinion I cared, and had fallen accordingly from her pedestal.

As we wandered down from the garden paths, she gave me her opinion of the book. In the main it was appreciative. I shall always associate the scent of yellow lupin with the higher criticism.

"Of course, I don't know anything about writing books," she said.

"Yes?" my tone implied, or I hope it did, that she was an expert on books, and that if she was not it didn't matter.

"But I don't think you do your heroines well. I have just got 'The Outsider--'" (My other novel. Bastable & Kirby, 6s. Satirical. All about Society--of which I know less than I know about chicken-farming. Slated by Times and Spectator. Well received by London Mail and Winning Post)--"and," continued Phyllis, "Lady Maud is exactly the same as Pamela in the 'Manoeuvres of Arthur.' I thought you must have drawn both characters from some one you knew."

"No," I said. "No. Purely imaginary."

"I am so glad," said Phyllis.

And then neither of us seemed to have anything to say. My knees began

to tremble. I realised that the moment had arrived when my fate must be put to the touch; and I feared that the moment was premature. We cannot arrange these things to suit ourselves. I knew that the time was not yet ripe; but the magic scent of the yellow lupin was too much for me.

"Miss Derrick," I said hoarsely.

Phyllis was looking with more intentness than the attractions of the flower justified at a rose she held in her hand. The bee hummed in the lupin.

"Miss Derrick," I said, and stopped again.

"I say, you people," said a cheerful voice, "tea is ready. Hullo, Garnet, how are you? That medal arrived yet from the Humane Society?"

I spun round. Mr. Tom Chase was standing at the end of the path. The only word that could deal adequately with the situation slapped against my front teeth. I grinned a sickly grin.

"Well, Tom," said Phyllis.

And there was, I thought, just the faintest tinkle of annoyance in her voice.

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"I've been bathing," said Mr. Chase, a propos des bottes.

"Oh," I replied. "And I wish," I added, "that you'd drowned yourself."

But I added it silently to myself.