

## CHAPTER XV

### THE ARRIVAL OF NEMESIS

Some people do not believe in presentiments. They attribute that curious feeling that something unpleasant is going to happen to such mundane causes as liver, or a chill, or the weather. For my own part, I think there is more in the matter than the casual observer might imagine.

I awoke three days after my meeting with the professor at the club-house, filled with a dull foreboding. Somehow I seemed to know that that day was going to turn out badly for me. It may have been liver or a chill, but it was certainly not the weather. The morning was perfect,--the most glorious of a glorious summer. There was a haze over the valley and out to sea which suggested a warm noon, when the sun should have begun the serious duties of the day. The birds were singing in the trees and breakfasting on the lawn, while Edwin, seated on one of the flower-beds, watched them with the eye of a connoisseur. Occasionally, when a sparrow hopped in his direction, he would make a sudden spring, and the bird would fly away to the other side of the lawn. I had never seen Edwin catch a sparrow. I believe they looked on him as a bit of a crank, and humoured him by coming within springing distance, just to keep him amused. Dashing young cock-sparrows would show off before their particular hen-sparrows, and earn a cheap reputation for dare-devilry by going within so many years of Edwin's

lair, and then darting away. Bob was in his favourite place on the gravel. I took him with me down to the Cob to watch me bathe.

"What's the matter with me to-day, Robert, old son?" I asked him, as I dried myself.

He blinked lazily, but contributed no suggestion.

"It's no good looking bored," I went on, "because I'm going to talk about myself, however much it bores you. Here am I, as fit as a prize-fighter, living in the open air for I don't know how long, eating good plain food--bathing every morning--sea-bathing, mind you--and yet what's the result? I feel beastly."

Bob yawned, and gave a little whine.

"Yes," I said, "I know I'm in love. But that can't be it, because I was in love just as much a week ago, and I felt all right then. But isn't she an angel, Bob? Eh? Isn't she? And didn't you feel bucked when she patted you? Of course you did. Anybody would. But how about Tom Chase? Don't you think he's a dangerous man? He calls her by her Christian name, you know, and behaves generally as if she belonged to him. And then he sees her every day, while I have to trust to meeting her at odd times, and then I generally feel such a fool I can't think of anything to talk about except golf and the weather. He probably sings duets with her after dinner, and you know what comes of duets after dinner."

Here Bob, who had been trying for some time to find a decent excuse for getting away, pretended to see something of importance at the other end of the Cob, and trotted off to investigate it, leaving me to finish dressing by myself.

"Of course," I said to myself, "It may be merely hunger. I may be all right after breakfast. But at present I seem to be working up for a really fine fit of the blues. I feel bad."

I whistled to Bob, and started for home. On the beach I saw the professor some little distance away, and waved my towel in a friendly manner. He made no reply.

Of course, it was possible that he had not seen me; but for some reason his attitude struck me as ominous. As far as I could see, he was looking straight at me, and he was not a short-sighted man. I could think of no reason why he should cut me. We had met on the links on the previous morning, and he had been friendliness itself. He had called me "me dear boy," supplied me with a gin and gingerbeer at the clubhouse, and generally behaved as if he had been David and I Jonathan. Yet in certain moods we are inclined to make mountains out of molehills, and I went on my way, puzzled and uneasy, with a distinct impression that I had received the cut direct.

I felt hurt. What had I done that Providence should make things so

unpleasant for me? It would be a little hard, as Ukridge would have said, if, after all my trouble, the professor had discovered some fresh grievance against me. Perhaps Ukridge had been irritating him again. I wished he would not identify me so completely with Ukridge. I could not be expected to control the man. Then I reflected that they could hardly have met in the few hours between my parting from the professor at the club-house and my meeting with him on the beach. Ukridge rarely left the farm. When he was not working among the fowls, he was lying on his back in the paddock, resting his massive mind.

I came to the conclusion that after all the professor had not seen me.

"I'm an idiot, Bob," I said, as we turned in at the farm gate, "and I let my imagination run away with me."

Bob wagged his tail in approval of the sentiment.

Breakfast was ready when I got in. There was a cold chicken on the sideboard, devilled chicken on the table, a trio of boiled eggs, and a dish of scrambled eggs. As regarded quantity Mrs. Beale never failed us.

Ukridge was sorting the letters.

"Morning, Garny," he said. "One for you, Millie."

"It's from Aunt Elizabeth," said Mrs. Ukridge, looking at the envelope.

I had only heard casual mention of this relative hitherto, but I had built up a mental picture of her partly from remarks which Utridge had let fall, but principally from the fact that he had named the most malignant hen in our fowl-run after her. A severe lady, I imagined with a cold eye.

"Wish she'd enclose a cheque," said Utridge. "She could spare it. You've no idea, Garny, old man, how disgustingly and indecently rich that woman is. She lives in Kensington on an income which would do her well in Park Lane. But as a touching proposition she had proved almost negligible. She steadfastly refuses to part."

"I think she would, dear, if she knew how much we needed it. But I don't like to ask her. She's so curious, and says such horrid things."

"She does," agreed Utridge, gloomily. He spoke as one who had had experience. "Two for you, Garny. All the rest for me. Ten of them, and all bills."

He spread the envelopes out on the table, and drew one at a venture.

"Whiteley's," he said. "Getting jumpy. Are in receipt of my favour of the 7th inst. and are at a loss to understand. It's rummy about these blighters, but they never seem able to understand a damn thing. It's hard! You put things in words of one syllable for them, and they just

goggle and wonder what it all means. They want something on account. Upon my Sam, I'm disappointed with Whiteley's. I'd been thinking in rather a kindly spirit of them, and feeling that they were a more intelligent lot than Harrod's. I'd had half a mind to give Harrod's the miss-in-baulk and hand my whole trade over to these fellows. But not now, dash it! Whiteley's have disappointed me. From the way they write, you'd think they thought I was doing it for fun. How can I let them have their infernal money when there isn't any? Here's one from Dorchester. Smith, the chap we got the gramophone from. Wants to know when I'm going to settle up for sixteen records."

"Sordid brute!"

I wanted to get on with my own correspondence, but Ukridge held me with a glittering eye.

"The chicken-men, the dealer people, you know, want me to pay for the first lot of hens. Considering that they all died of roop, and that I was going to send them back anyhow after I'd got them to hatch out a few chickens, I call that cool. I mean to say, business is business. That's what these fellows don't seem to understand. I can't afford to pay enormous sums for birds which die off quicker than I can get them in."

"I shall never speak to Aunt Elizabeth again," said Mrs. Ukridge suddenly.

She had dropped the letter she had been reading, and was staring indignantly in front of her. There were two little red spots on her cheeks.

"What's the matter, old chap?" inquired Ukridge affectionately, glancing up from his pile of bills and forgetting his own troubles in an instant. "Buck up! Aunt Elizabeth been getting on your nerves again? What's she been saying this time?"

Mrs. Ukridge left the room with a sob. Ukridge sprang at the letter.

"If that demon doesn't stop writing her infernal letters and upsetting Millie, I shall strangle her with my bare hands, regardless of her age and sex." He turned over the pages of the letter till he came to the passage which had caused the trouble. "Well, upon my Sam! Listen to this, Garny, old horse. 'You tell me nothing regarding the success of this chicken farm of yours, and I confess that I find your silence ominous. You know my opinion of your husband. He is perfectly helpless in any matter requiring the exercise of a little common-sense and business capability.'" He stared at me, amazed. "I like that! 'Pon my soul, that is really rich! I could have believed almost anything of that blighted female, but I did think she had a reasonable amount of intelligence. Why, you know that it's just in matters requiring common-sense and business capability that I come out really strong."

"Of course, old man," I replied dutifully. "The woman's a fool."

"That's what she calls me two lines further on. No wonder Millie was upset. Why can't these cats leave people alone?"

"Oh, woman, woman!" I threw in helpfully.

"Always interfering--"

"Rotten!"

"And backbiting--"

"Awful!"

"I shan't stand it."

"I shouldn't!"

"Look here! On the next page she calls me a gaby!"

"It's time you took a strong line."

"And in the very next sentence refers to me as a perfect guffin. What's a guffin, Garry, old boy?"



I considered the point.

"Broadly speaking, I should say, one who guffs."

"I believe it's actionable."

"I shouldn't wonder."

Ukridge rushed to the door.

"Millie!"

He slammed the door, and I heard him dashing upstairs.

I turned to my letters. One was from Lickford, with a Cornish postmark.

I glanced through it and laid it aside for a more exhaustive perusal.

The other was in a strange handwriting. I looked at the signature.

"Patrick Derrick." This was queer. What had the professor to say to me?

The next moment my heart seemed to spring to my throat.

"Sir," the letter began.

A pleasant cheery opening!

Then it got off the mark, so to speak, like lightning. There was no sparring for an opening, no dignified parade of set phrases, leading up to the main point. It was the letter of a man who was almost too furious to write. It gave me the impression that, if he had not written it, he would have been obliged to have taken some very violent form of exercise by way of relief to his soul.

"You will be good enough to look on our acquaintance as closed. I have no wish to associate with persons of your stamp. If we should happen to meet, you will be good enough to treat me as a total stranger, as I shall treat you. And, if I may be allowed to give you a word of advice, I should recommend you in future, when you wish to exercise your humour, to do so in some less practical manner than by bribing boatmen to upset your--(friends crossed out thickly, and acquaintances substituted.) If you require further enlightenment in this matter, the enclosed letter may be of service to you."

With which he remained mine faithfully, Patrick Derrick.

The enclosed letter was from one Jane Muspratt. It was bright and interesting.

"DEAR SIR,--My Harry, Mr. Hawk, sas to me how it was him upsetting the

boat and you, not because he is not steady in a boat which he is no man more so in Combe Regis, but because one of the gentlemen what keeps chikkens up the hill, the little one, Mr. Garnick his name is, says to him, Hawk, I'll give you a sovryn to upset Mr. Derick in your boat, and my Harry being esily led was took in and did, but he's sory now and wishes he hadn't, and he sas he'll niver do a prackticle joke again for anyone even for a banknote.--Yours obedly.,

JANE MUSPRATT."

Oh, woman, woman!

At the bottom of everything! History is full of tragedies caused by the lethal sex. Who lost Mark Antony the world? A woman. Who let Samson in so atrociously? Woman again. Why did Bill Bailey leave home? Once more, because of a woman. And here was I, Jerry Garnet, harmless, well-meaning writer of minor novels, going through the same old mill.

I cursed Jane Muspratt. What chance had I with Phyllis now? Could I hope to win over the professor again? I cursed Jane Muspratt for the second time.

My thoughts wandered to Mr. Harry Hawk. The villain! The scoundrel! What business had he to betray me? ... Well, I could settle with him. The man who lays a hand upon a woman, save in the way of kindness, is

justly disliked by Society; so the woman Muspratt, culpable as she was, was safe from me. But what of the man Hawk? There no such considerations swayed me. I would interview the man Hawk. I would give him the most hectic ten minutes of his career. I would say things to him the recollection of which would make him start up shrieking in his bed in the small hours of the night. I would arise, and be a man, and slay him; take him grossly, full of bread, with all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May, at gaming, swearing, or about some act that had no relish of salvation in it.

The Demon!

My life--ruined. My future--grey and black. My heart--shattered. And why? Because of the scoundrel, Hawk.

Phyllis would meet me in the village, on the Cob, on the links, and pass by as if I were the Invisible Man. And why? Because of the reptile, Hawk. The worm, Hawk. The dastard and varlet, Hawk.

I crammed my hat on, and hurried out of the house towards the village.