CHAPTER XVI

A CHANCE MEETING

I roamed the place in search of the varlet for the space of half-an-hour, and, after having drawn all his familiar haunts, found him at length leaning over the sea-wall near the church, gazing thoughtfully into the waters below.

I confronted him.

"Well," I said, "you're a beauty, aren't you?"

He eyed me owlishly. Even at this early hour, I was grieved to see, he showed signs of having looked on the bitter while it was brown. His eyes were filmy, and his manner aggressively solemn.

"Beauty?" he echoed.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Say f'self."

It was plain that he was engaged in pulling his faculties together by some laborious process known only to himself. At present my words conveyed no meaning to him. He was trying to identify me. He had seen

me before somewhere, he was certain, but he could not say where, or who I was.

"I want to know," I said, "what induced you to be such an abject idiot as to let our arrangement get known?"

I spoke quietly. I was not going to waste the choicer flowers of speech on a man who was incapable of understanding them. Later on, when he had awakened to a sense of his position, I would begin really to talk to him.

He continued to stare at me. Then a sudden flash of intelligence lit up his features.

"Mr. Garnick," he said at last.

"From ch--chicken farm," he continued, with the triumphant air of a cross-examining King's counsel who has at last got on the track.

"Yes," I said.

"Up top the hill," he proceeded, clinchingly. He stretched out a huge hand.

"How you?" he inquired with a friendly grin.

"I want to know," I said distinctly, "what you've got to say for yourself after letting our affair with the professor become public property?"

He paused awhile in thought.

"Dear sir," he said at last, as if he were dictating a letter, "dear sir, I owe you--ex--exp----"

He waved his hand, as who should say, "It's a stiff job, but I'm going to do it."

"Explashion," he said.

"You do," said I grimly. "I should like to hear it."

"Dear sir, listen me."

"Go on then."

"You came me. You said 'Hawk, Hawk, ol' fren', listen me. You tip this ol' bufflehead into watter,' you said, 'an' gormed if I don't give 'ee a poond note.' That's what you said me. Isn't that what you said me?"

I did not deny it.

"'Ve' well,' I said you. 'Right,' I said. I tipped the ol' soul into watter, and I got the poond note."

"Yes, you took care of that. All this is quite true, but it's beside the point. We are not disputing about what happened. What I want to know--for the third time--is what made you let the cat out of the bag? Why couldn't you keep quiet about it?"

He waved his hand.

"Dear sir," he replied, "this way. Listen me."

It was a tragic story that he unfolded. My wrath ebbed as I listened. After all the fellow was not so greatly to blame. I felt that in his place I should have acted as he had done. It was Fate's fault, and Fate's alone.

It appeared that he had not come well out of the matter of the accident. I had not looked at it hitherto from his point of view. While the rescue had left me the popular hero, it had had quite the opposite result for him. He had upset his boat and would have drowned his passenger, said public opinion, if the young hero from London--myself--had not plunged in, and at the risk of his life brought the professor ashore. Consequently, he was despised by all as an inefficient boatman. He became a laughing-stock. The local wags made laborious jests when he passed. They offered him fabulous sums to take

their worst enemies out for a row with him. They wanted to know when he was going to school to learn his business. In fact, they behaved as wags do and always have done at all times all the world over.

Now, all this, it seemed, Mr. Hawk would have borne cheerfully and patiently for my sake, or, at any rate for the sake of the crisp pound note I had given him. But a fresh factor appeared in the problem, complicating it grievously. To wit, Miss Jane Muspratt.

"She said to me," explained Mr. Hawk with pathos, "'Harry 'Awk,' she said, 'yeou'm a girt fule, an' I don't marry noone as is ain't to be trusted in a boat by hisself, and what has jokes made about him by that Tom Leigh!'"

"I punched Tom Leigh," observed Mr. Hawk parenthetically. "'So,' she said me, 'you can go away, an' I don't want to see yeou again!'"

This heartless conduct on the part of Miss Muspratt had had the natural result of making him confess in self-defence; and she had written to the professor the same night.

I forgave Mr. Hawk. I think he was hardly sober enough to understand, for he betrayed no emotion. "It is Fate, Hawk," I said, "simply Fate. There is a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will, and it's no good grumbling."

"Yiss," said Mr. Hawk, after chewing this sentiment for a while in silence, "so she said me, 'Hawk,' she said--like that--'you're a girt fule----'"

"That's all right," I replied. "I quite understand. As I say, it's simply Fate. Good-bye." And I left him.

As I was going back, I met the professor and Phyllis. They passed me without a look.

I wandered on in quite a fervour of self-pity. I was in one of those moods when life suddenly seems to become irksome, when the future stretches black and grey in front of one. I should have liked to have faded almost imperceptibly from the world, like Mr. Bardell, even if, as in his case, it had involved being knocked on the head with a pint pot in a public-house cellar.

In such a mood it is imperative that one should seek distraction. The shining example of Mr. Harry Hawk did not lure me. Taking to drink would be a nuisance. Work was what I wanted. I would toil like a navvy all day among the fowls, separating them when they fought, gathering in the eggs when they laid, chasing them across country when they got away, and even, if necessity arose, painting their throats with turpentine when they were stricken with roop. Then, after dinner, when the lamps were lit, and Mrs. Ukridge nursed Edwin and sewed, and Ukridge smoked cigars and incited the gramophone to murder "Mumbling

Mose," I would steal away to my bedroom and write--and write--and write. And go on writing till my fingers were numb and my eyes refused to do their duty. And, when time had passed, I might come to feel that it was all for the best. A man must go through the fire before he can write his masterpiece. We learn in suffering what we teach in song. What we lose on the swings we make up on the roundabouts. Jerry Garnet, the Man, might become a depressed, hopeless wreck, with the iron planted immovably in his soul; but Jeremy Garnet, the Author, should turn out such a novel of gloom, that strong critics would weep, and the public jostle for copies till Mudie's doorway became a shambles.

Thus might I some day feel that all this anguish was really a blessing--effectively disguised.

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But I doubted it.

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We were none of us very cheerful now at the farm. Even Ukridge's spirit was a little daunted by the bills which poured in by every post. It was as if the tradesmen of the neighbourhood had formed a league, and were working in concert. Or it may have been due to thought-waves. Little accounts came not in single spies but in battalions. The popular demand

for the sight of the colour of his money grew daily. Every morning at breakfast he would give us fresh bulletins of the state of mind of each of our creditors, and thrill us with the announcement that Whiteley's were getting cross, and Harrod's jumpy or that the bearings of Dawlish, the grocer, were becoming overheated. We lived in a continual atmosphere of worry. Chicken and nothing but chicken at meals, and chicken and nothing but chicken between meals had frayed our nerves. An air of defeat hung over the place. We were a beaten side, and we realised it. We had been playing an uphill game for nearly two months, and the strain was beginning to tell. Ukridge became uncannily silent. Mrs. Ukridge, though she did not understand, I fancy, the details of the matter, was worried because Ukridge was. Mrs. Beale had long since been turned into a soured cynic by the lack of chances vouchsafed her for the exercise of her art. And as for me, I have never since spent so profoundly miserably a week. I was not even permitted the anodyne of work. There seemed to be nothing to do on the farm. The chickens were quite happy, and only asked to be let alone and allowed to have their meals at regular intervals. And every day one or more of their number would vanish into the kitchen, Mrs. Beale would serve up the corpse in some cunning disguise, and we would try to delude ourselves into the idea that it was something altogether different.

There was one solitary gleam of variety in our menu. An editor sent me a cheque for a set of verses. We cashed that cheque and trooped round the town in a body, laying out the money. We bought a leg of mutton, and a tongue and sardines, and pine-apple chunks, and potted meat, and

many other noble things, and had a perfect banquet. Mrs. Beale, with the scenario of a smile on her face, the first that she had worn in these days of stress, brought in the joint, and uncovered it with an air.

"Thank God!" said Ukridge, as he began to carve.

It was the first time I had ever heard him say a grace, and if ever an occasion merited such a deviation from habit, this occasion did.

After that we relapsed into routine again.

Deprived of physical labour, with the exception of golf and bathing--trivial sports compared with work in the fowl-run at its hardest--I tried to make up for it by working at my novel.

It refused to materialise.

The only progress I achieved was with my villain.

I drew him from the professor, and made him a blackmailer. He had several other social defects, but that was his profession. That was the thing he did really well.

It was on one of the many occasions on which I had sat in my room, pen in hand, through the whole of a lovely afternoon, with no better result

than a slight headache, that I bethought me of that little paradise on the Ware Cliff, hung over the sea and backed by green woods. I had not been there for some time, owing principally to an entirely erroneous idea that I could do more solid work sitting in a straight hard chair at a table than lying on soft turf with the sea wind in my eyes.

But now the desire to visit that little clearing again drove me from my room. In the drawing-room below the gramophone was dealing brassily with "Mister Blackman." Outside the sun was just thinking of setting. The Ware Cliff was the best medicine for me. What does Kipling say?

"And soon you will find that the sun and the wind
And the Djinn of the Garden, too,
Have lightened the hump, Cameelious Hump,
The Hump that is black and blue."

His instructions include digging with a hoe and a shovel also, but I could omit that. The sun and the wind were what I needed.

I took the upper road. In certain moods I preferred it to the path along the cliff. I walked fast. The exercise was soothing.

To reach my favourite clearing I had to take to the fields on the left, and strike down hill in the direction of the sea. I hurried down the narrow path.

I broke into the clearing at a jog trot, and stood panting. And at the same moment, looking cool and beautiful in her white dress, Phyllis entered in from the other side. Phyllis--without the professor.