

CHAPTER XIX

ASKING PAPA

Reviewing the matter later, I could see that I made one or two blunders in my conduct of the campaign to win over Professor Derrick. In the first place, I made a bad choice of time and place. At the moment this did not strike me. It is a simple matter, I reflected, for a man to pass another by haughtily and without recognition, when they meet on dry land; but, when the said man, being it should be remembered, an indifferent swimmer, is accosted in the water and out of his depth, the feat becomes a hard one. It seemed to me that I should have a better chance with the professor in the water than out of it.

My second mistake--and this was brought home to me almost immediately--was in bringing Ukridge along. Not that I really brought him along; it was rather a case of being unable to shake him off. When he met me on the gravel outside the house at a quarter to eight on the following morning, clad in a dingy mackintosh which, swinging open, revealed a purple bathing-suit, I confess that my heart sank.

Unfortunately, all my efforts to dissuade him from accompanying me were attributed by him to a pardonable nervousness--or, as he put it, to the needle.

"Buck up, laddie!" he roared encouragingly. "I had anticipated this. Something seemed to tell me that your nerve would go when it came to

the point. You're deuced lucky, old horse, to have a man like me at your side. Why, if you were alone, you wouldn't have a word to say for yourself. You'd just gape at the man and yammer. But I'm with you laddie, I'm with you. If your flow of conversation dries up, count on me to keep the thing going."

And so it came about that, having reached the Cob and spying in the distance the grey head of the professor bobbing about on the face of the waters, we dived in and swam rapidly towards him.

His face was turned in the opposite direction when we came up with him. He was floating peacefully on his back, and it was plain that he had not observed our approach. For when, treading water easily in his rear, I wished him good morning in my most conciliatory tone, he stood not upon the order of his sinking, but went under like so much pig-iron.

I waited courteously until he rose to the surface again, when I repeated my remark.

He expelled the last remnant of water from his mouth with a wrathful splutter, and cleared his eyes with the back of his hand. I confess to a slight feeling of apprehension as I met his gaze. Nor was my uneasiness diminished by the spectacle of Utridge splashing tactfully in the background like a large seal. Utridge so far had made no remarks. He had dived in very flat, and I imagine that his breath had not yet returned to him. He had the air of one who intends to get used

to his surroundings before trusting himself to speech.

"The water is delightfully warm," I said.

"Oh, it's you!" said the professor; and I could not cheat myself into the belief that he spoke cordially. Utridge snorted loudly in the offing. The professor turned sharply, as if anxious to observe this marine phenomenon; and the annoyed gurgle which he gave showed that he was not approving of Utridge either. I did not approve of Utridge myself. I wished he had not come. Utridge, in the water, lacks dignity. I felt that he prejudiced my case.

"You are swimming splendidly this morning," I went on perseveringly, feeling that an ounce of flattery is worth a pound of rhetoric. "If," I added, "you will allow me to say so."

"I will not!" he snapped. "I--" here a small wave, noticing that his mouth was open, stepped in. "I wish," he resumed warmly, "as I said in me letter, to have nothing to do with you. I consider that ye've behaved in a manner that can only be described as abominable, and I will thank you to leave me alone."

"But allow me--"

"I will not allow ye, sir. I will allow ye nothing. Is it not enough to make me the laughing-stock, the butt, sir, of this town, without

pursuing me in this way when I wish to enjoy a quiet swim?"

"Now, laddie, laddie," said Ukridge, placing a large hand on his shoulder, "these are harsh words! Be reasonable! Think before you speak. You little know ..."

"Go to the devil!" said the professor. "I wish to have nothing to do with either of you. I should be glad if you would cease this persecution. Persecution, sir!"

His remarks, which I have placed on paper as if they were continuous and uninterrupted, were punctuated in reality by a series of gasps and puffings, as he received and rejected the successors of the wave he had swallowed at the beginning of our little chat. The art of conducting conversation while in the water is not given to every swimmer. This he seemed to realise, for, as if to close the interview, he proceeded to make his way as quickly as he could to the shore. Unfortunately, his first dash brought him squarely up against Ukridge, who, not having expected the collision, clutched wildly at him and took him below the surface again. They came up a moment later on the worst terms.

"Are you trying to drown me, sir?" barked the professor.

"My dear old horse," said Ukridge complainingly, "it's a little hard. You might look where you're going."

"You grappled with me!"

"You took me by surprise, laddie. Rid yourself of the impression that you're playing water-polo."

"But, professor," I said, joining the group and treading water, "one moment."

I was growing annoyed with the man. I could have ducked him, but for the reflection that my prospects of obtaining his consent to my engagement would scarcely have been enhanced thereby.

"But, professor," I said, "one moment."

"Go away, sir! I have nothing to say to you."

"But he has lots to say to you," said Ukridge. "Now's the time, old horse," he added encouragingly to me. "Spill the news!"

Without preamble I gave out the text of my address.

"I love your daughter, Phyllis, Mr. Derrick. She loves me. In fact, we are engaged."

"Devilish well put, laddie," said Ukridge approvingly.

The professor went under as if he had been seized with cramp. It was a little trying having to argue with a man, of whom one could not predict with certainty that at any given moment he would not be under water. It tended to spoil the flow of one's eloquence. The best of arguments is useless if the listener suddenly disappears in the middle of it.

"Stick to it, old horse," said Ukridge. "I think you're going to bring it off."

I stuck to it.

"Mr. Derrick," I said, as his head emerged, "you are naturally surprised."

"You would be," said Ukridge. "We don't blame you," he added handsomely.

"You--you--you--" So far from cooling the professor, liberal doses of water seemed to make him more heated. "You impudent scoundrel!"

My reply was more gentlemanly, more courteous, on a higher plane altogether.

I said, winningly: "Cannot we let bygones be bygones?"

From his remarks I gathered that we could not. I continued. I was under the unfortunate necessity of having to condense my speech. I was not

able to let myself go as I could have wished, for time was an important consideration. Ere long, swallowing water at his present rate, the professor must inevitably become waterlogged.

"I have loved your daughter," I said rapidly, "ever since I first saw her ..."

"And he's a capital chap," interjected Ukridge. "One of the best. Known him for years. You'll like him."

"I learned last night that she loved me. But she will not marry me without your consent. Stretch your arms out straight from the shoulders and fill your lungs well and you can't sink. So I have come this morning to ask for your consent."

"Give it!" advised Ukridge. "Couldn't do better. A very sound fellow. Pots of money, too. At least he will have when he marries."

"I know we have not been on the best of terms lately. For Heaven's sake don't try to talk, or you'll sink. The fault," I said, generously, "was mine ..."

"Well put," said Ukridge.

"But when you have heard my explanation, I am sure you will forgive me. There, I told you so."

He reappeared some few feet to the left. I swam up, and resumed.

"When you left us so abruptly after our little dinner-party----"

"Come again some night," said Ukridge cordially. "Any time you're passing."

"...you put me in a very awkward position. I was desperately in love with your daughter, and as long as you were in the frame of mind in which you left I could not hope to find an opportunity of revealing my feelings to her."

"Revealing feelings is good," said Ukridge approvingly. "Neat."

"You see what a fix I was in, don't you? Keep your arms well out. I thought for hours and hours, to try and find some means of bringing about a reconciliation. You wouldn't believe how hard I thought."

"Got as thin as a corkscrew," said Ukridge.

"At last, seeing you fishing one morning when I was on the Cob, it struck me all of a sudden ..."

"You know how it is," said Ukridge.

"...all of a sudden that the very best way would be to arrange a little boating accident. I was confident that I could rescue you all right."

Here I paused, and he seized the opportunity to curse me--briefly, with a wary eye on an incoming wavelet.

"If it hadn't been for the inscrutable workings of Providence, which has a mania for upsetting everything, all would have been well. In fact, all was well till you found out."

"Always the way," said Ukridge sadly. "Always the way."

"You young blackguard!"

He managed to slip past me, and made for the shore.

"Look at the thing from the standpoint of a philosopher, old horse," urged Ukridge, splashing after him. "The fact that the rescue was arranged oughtn't to matter. I mean to say, you didn't know it at the time, so, relatively, it was not, and you were genuinely saved from a watery grave and all that sort of thing."

I had not imagined Ukridge capable of such an excursion into metaphysics. I saw the truth of his line of argument so clearly that it seemed to me impossible for anyone else to get confused over it. I had certainly pulled the professor out of the water, and the fact that I

had first caused him to be pushed in had nothing to do with the case. Either a man is a gallant rescuer or he is not a gallant rescuer. There is no middle course. I had saved his life--for he would certainly have drowned if left to himself--and I was entitled to his gratitude. That was all there was to be said about it.

These things both Ukridge and I tried to make plain as we swam along. But whether it was that the salt water he had swallowed had dulled the professor's normally keen intelligence or that our power of stating a case was too weak, the fact remains that he reached the beach an unconvinced man.

"Then may I consider," I said, "that your objections are removed? I have your consent?"

He stamped angrily, and his bare foot came down on a small, sharp pebble. With a brief exclamation he seized his foot in one hand and hopped up the beach. While hopping, he delivered his ultimatum. Probably the only instance on record of a father adopting this attitude in dismissing a suitor.

"You may not!" he cried. "You may consider no such thing. My objections were never more absolute. You detain me in the water, sir, till I am blue, sir, blue with cold, in order to listen to the most preposterous and impudent nonsense I ever heard."

This was unjust. If he had listened attentively from the first and avoided interruptions and had not behaved like a submarine we should have got through the business in half the time.

I said so.

"Don't talk to me, sir," he replied, hobbling off to his dressing-tent.

"I will not listen to you. I will have nothing to do with you. I consider you impudent, sir."

"I assure you it was unintentional."

"Isch!" he said--being the first occasion and the last on which I have ever heard that remarkable monosyllable proceed from the mouth of a man. And he vanished into his tent.

"Laddie," said Ukridge solemnly, "do you know what I think?"

"Well?"

"You haven't clicked, old horse!" said Ukridge.