

CHAPTER XXI

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

"Beale," I said, "are you drunk?"

"Wish I was, sir," said the Hired Man.

"Then what on earth do you mean? Gone? Where have they gone to?"

"Don't know, sir. London, I expect."

"London? Why?"

"Don't know, sir."

"When did they go? Oh, you told me that. Didn't they say why they were going?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't you ask! When you saw them packing up and going to the station, didn't you do anything?"

"No, sir."

"Why on earth not?"

"I didn't see them, sir. I only found out as they'd gone after they'd been and went, sir. Walking down by the Net and Mackerel, met one of them coastguards. 'Oh,' says he, 'so you're moving?' 'Who's a-moving?' I says to him. 'Well,' he says to me, 'I seen your Mr. Ukridge and his missus get into the three o'clock train for Axminster. I thought as you was all a-moving.' 'Ho,' I says, 'Ho,' wondering, and I goes on. When I gets back, I asks the missus did she see them packing their boxes, and she says, No, she says, they didn't pack no boxes as she knowed of. And blowed if they had, Mr. Garnet, sir."

"What! They didn't pack!"

"No, sir."

We looked at one another.

"Beale," I said.

"Sir?"

"Do you know what I think?"

"Yes, sir."

"They've bolted."

"So I says to the missus, sir. It struck me right off, in a manner of speaking."

"This is awful," I said.

"Yes, sir."

His face betrayed no emotion, but he was one of those men whose expression never varies. It's a way they have in the Army.

"This wants thinking out, Beale," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"You'd better ask Mrs. Beale to give me some dinner, and then I'll think it over."

"Yes, sir."

I was in an unpleasant position. Ukridge by his defection had left me in charge of the farm. I could dissolve the concern, I supposed, if I wished, and return to London, but I particularly desired to remain in Combe Regis. To complete the victory I had won on the links, it was necessary for me to continue as I had begun. I was in the position of a

general who has conquered a hostile country, and is obliged to soothe the feelings of the conquered people before his labours can be considered at an end. I had rushed the professor. It must now be my aim to keep him from regretting that he had been rushed. I must, therefore, stick to my post with the tenacity of an able-bodied leech. There would be trouble. Of that I was certain. As soon as the news got about that Utridge had gone, the deluge would begin. His creditors would abandon their passive tactics, and take active steps. There was a chance that aggressive measures would be confined to the enemy at our gates, the tradesmen of Combe Regis. But the probability was that the news would spread, and the injured merchants of Dorchester and Axminster rush to the scene of hostilities.

I summoned Beale after dinner and held a council of war. It was no time for airy persiflage. I said, "Beale, we're in the cart."

"Sir?"

"Mr. Utridge going away like this has left me in a most unpleasant position. I would like to talk it over with you. I daresay you know that we--that Mr. Utridge owes a considerable amount of money round about here to tradesmen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, when they find out that he has--er----"

"Shot the moon, sir," suggested the Hired Retainer helpfully.

"Gone up to town," I amended. "When they find out that he has gone up to town, they are likely to come bothering us a good deal."

"Yes, sir."

"I fancy that we shall have them all round here to-morrow. News of this sort always spreads quickly. The point is, then, what are we to do?"

He propounded no scheme, but stood in an easy attitude of attention, waiting for me to continue.

I continued.

"Let's see exactly how we stand," I said. "My point is that I particularly wish to go on living down here for at least another fortnight. Of course, my position is simple. I am Mr. Ukridge's guest. I shall go on living as I have been doing up to the present. He asked me down here to help him look after the fowls, so I shall go on looking after them. Complications set in when we come to consider you and Mrs. Beale. I suppose you won't care to stop on after this?"

The Hired Retainer scratched his chin and glanced out of the window. The moon was up, and the garden looked cool and mysterious in the dim

light.

"It's a pretty place, Mr. Garnet, sir," he said.

"It is," I said, "but about other considerations? There's the matter of wages. Are yours in arrears?"

"Yes, sir. A month."

"And Mrs. Beale's the same, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. A month."

"H'm. Well, it seems to me, Beale, you can't lose anything by stopping on."

"I can't be paid any less than I have bin, sir," he agreed.

"Exactly. And, as you say, it's a pretty place. You might just as well stop on, and help me in the fowl-run. What do you think?"

"Very well, sir."

"And Mrs. Beale will do the same?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's excellent. You're a hero, Beale. I shan't forget you. There's a cheque coming to me from a magazine in another week for a short story. When it arrives, I'll look into that matter of back wages. Tell Mrs. Beale I'm much obliged to her, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Having concluded that delicate business, I lit my pipe, and strolled out into the garden with Bob. I cursed Ukridge as I walked. It was abominable of him to desert me in this way. Even if I had not been his friend, it would have been bad. The fact that we had known each other for years made it doubly discreditable. He might at least have warned me, and given me the option of leaving the sinking ship with him.

But, I reflected, I ought not to be surprised. His whole career, as long as I had known him, had been dotted with little eccentricities of a type which an unfeeling world generally stigmatises as shady. They were small things, it was true; but they ought to have warned me. We are most of us wise after the event. When the wind has blown, we can generally discover a multitude of straws which should have shown us which way it was blowing.

Once, I remembered, in our schoolmaster days, when guineas, though regular, were few, he had had occasion to increase his wardrobe. If I recollect rightly, he thought he had a chance of a good position in the

tutoring line, and only needed good clothes to make it his. He took four pounds of his salary in advance,--he was in the habit of doing this: he never had any salary left by the end of term, it having vanished in advance loans beforehand. With this he was to buy two suits, a hat, new boots, and collars. When it came to making the purchases, he found, what he had overlooked previously in his optimistic way, that four pounds did not go very far. At the time, I remember, I thought his method of grappling with the situation humorous. He bought a hat for three-and-sixpence, and got the suits and the boots on the instalment system, paying a small sum in advance, as earnest of more to come. He then pawned one suit to pay for the first few instalments, and finally departed, to be known no more. His address he had given--with a false name--at an empty house, and when the tailor arrived with his minions of the law, all he found was an annoyed caretaker, and a pile of letters written by himself, containing his bill in its various stages of evolution.

Or again. There was a bicycle and photograph shop near the school. He went into this one day, and his roving eye fell on a tandem bicycle. He did not want a tandem bicycle, but that influenced him not at all. He ordered it provisionally. He also ordered an enlarging camera, a kodak, and a magic lantern. The order was booked, and the goods were to be delivered when he had made up his mind concerning them. After a week the shopman sent round to ask if there were any further particulars which Mr. Ukridge would like to learn before definitely ordering them. Mr. Ukridge sent back word that he was considering the matter, and that

in the meantime would he be so good as to let him have that little clockwork man in his window, which walked when wound up? Having got this, and not paid for it, Ukridge thought that he had done handsomely by the bicycle and photograph man, and that things were square between them. The latter met him a few days afterwards, and expostulated plaintively. Ukridge explained. "My good man," he said, "you know, I really think we need say no more about the matter. Really, you're come out of it very well. Now, look here, which would you rather be owed for? A clockwork man--which is broken, and you can have it back--or a tandem bicycle, an enlarging camera, a kodak, and a magic-lantern? What?" His reasoning was too subtle for the uneducated mind. The man retired, puzzled, and unpaid, and Ukridge kept the clockwork toy.