

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORM BREAKS

Rather to my surprise, the next morning passed off uneventfully. Our knocker advertised no dun. Our lawn remained untrodden by hob-nailed boots. By lunch-time I had come to the conclusion that the expected Trouble would not occur that day, and I felt that I might well leave my post for the afternoon, while I went to the professor's to pay my respects. The professor was out when I arrived. Phyllis was in, and it was not till the evening that I started for the farm again.

As I approached, the sound of voices smote my ears.

I stopped. I could hear Beale speaking. Then came the rich notes of Vickers, the butcher. Then Beale again. Then Dawlish the grocer. Then a chorus.

The storm had burst, and in my absence.

I blushed for myself. I was in command, and I had deserted the fort in time of need. What must the faithful Hired Man be thinking of me? Probably he placed me, as he had placed Ukridge, in the ragged ranks of those who have Shot the Moon.

Fortunately, having just come from the professor's I was in the costume

which of all my wardrobe was most calculated to impress. To a casual observer I should probably suggest wealth and respectability. I stopped for a moment to cool myself, for, as is my habit when pleased with life, I had been walking fast; then opened the gate and strode in, trying to look as opulent as possible.

It was an animated scene that met my eyes. In the middle of the lawn stood the devoted Beale, a little more flushed than I had seen him hitherto, parleying with a burly and excited young man without a coat. Grouped round the pair were some dozen men, young, middle-aged, and old, all talking their hardest. I could distinguish nothing of what they were saying. I noticed that Beale's left cheekbone was a little discoloured, and there was a hard, dogged expression on his face. He, too, was in his shirt-sleeves.

My entry created no sensation. Nobody, apparently, had heard the latch click, and nobody had caught sight of me. Their eyes were fixed on the young man and Beale. I stood at the gate, and watched them.

There seemed to have been trouble already. Looking more closely, I perceived sitting on the grass apart a second young man. His face was obscured by a dirty pocket handkerchief, with which he dabbed tenderly at his features. Every now and then the shirt-sleeved young man flung his hand towards him with an indignant gesture, talking hard the while. It did not need a preternaturally keen observer to deduce what had happened. Beale must have fallen out with the young man who was sitting

on the grass and smitten him; and now his friend had taken up the quarrel.

"Now this," I said to myself, "is rather interesting. Here, in this one farm, we have the only three known methods of dealing with duns. Beale is evidently an exponent of the violent method. Utridge is an apostle of Evasion. I shall try Conciliation. I wonder which of us will be the most successful."

Meanwhile, not to spoil Beale's efforts by allowing him too little scope for experiment, I refrained from making my presence known, and continued to stand by the gate, an interested spectator.

Things were evidently moving now. The young man's gestures became more vigorous. The dogged look on Beale's face deepened. The comments of the Ring increased in point and pungency.

"What did you hit him for, then?"

The question was put, always the same words and with the same air of quiet triumph, at intervals of thirty seconds by a little man in a snuff-coloured suit with a purple tie. Nobody ever answered him, or appeared to listen to him, but he seemed each time to think that he had clinched the matter and cornered his opponent.

Other voices chimed in.

"You hit him, Charlie. Go on. You hit him."

"We'll have the law."

"Go on, Charlie."

Flushed with the favour of the many-headed, Charlie now proceeded from threats to action. His right fist swung round suddenly. But Beale was on the alert. He ducked sharply, and the next moment Charlie was sitting on the ground beside his fallen friend. A hush fell on the Ring, and the little man in the purple tie was left repeating his formula without support.

I advanced. It seemed to me that the time had come to be conciliatory. Charlie was struggling to his feet, obviously anxious for a second round, and Beale was getting into position once more. In another five minutes conciliation would be out of the question.

"What's all this?" I said.

I may mention here that I do not propose to inflict dialect upon the reader. If he had borne with my narrative thus far, I look on him as a friend, and feel that he deserves consideration. I may not have brought out the fact with sufficient emphasis in the foregoing pages, but nevertheless I protest that I have a conscience. Not so much as a

"thickey" shall he find.

My advent caused a stir. Excited men left Beale, and rallied round me. Charlie, rising to his feet, found himself dethroned from his position of Man of the Moment, and stood blinking at the setting sun and opening and shutting his mouth. There was a buzz of conversation.

"Don't all speak at once, please," I said. "I can't possibly follow what you say. Perhaps you will tell me what you want?"

I singled out a short, stout man in grey. He wore the largest whiskers ever seen on human face.

"It's like this, sir. We all of us want to know where we are."

"I can tell you that," I said, "you're on our lawn, and I should be much obliged if you would stop digging your heels into it."

This was not, I suppose, Conciliation in the strictest and best sense of the word; but the thing had to be said. It is the duty of every good citizen to do his best to score off men with whiskers.

"You don't understand me, sir," he said excitedly. "When I said we didn't know where we were, it was a manner of speaking. We want to know how we stand."

"On your heels," I replied gently, "as I pointed out before."

"I am Brass, sir, of Axminster. My account with Mr. Ukridge is ten pounds eight shillings and fourpence. I want to know----"

The whole strength of the company now joined in.

"You know me, Mr. Garnet. Appleby, in the High----" (Voice lost in the general roar).

"...and eightpence."

"My account with Mr. Uk..."

"...settle..."

"I represent Bodger ..."

A diversion occurred at this point. Charlie, who had long been eyeing Beale sourly, dashed at him with swinging fists, and was knocked down again. The whole trend of the meeting altered once more, Conciliation became a drug. Violence was what the public wanted. Beale had three fights in rapid succession. I was helpless. Instinct prompted me to join the fray; but prudence told me that such a course would be fatal.

At last, in a lull, I managed to catch the Hired Retainer by the arm,

as he drew back from the prostrate form of his latest victim. "Drop it, Beale," I whispered hotly, "drop it. We shall never manage these people if you knock them about. Go indoors, and stay there while I talk to them."

"Mr. Garnet, sir," said he, the light of battle dying out of his eyes, "it's 'ard. It's cruel 'ard. I ain't 'ad a turn-up, not to call a turn-up, since I've been a time-expired man. I ain't hitting of 'em, Mr. Garnet, sir, not hard I ain't. That there first one of 'em he played me dirty, hittin' at me when I wasn't looking. They can't say as I started it."

"That's all right, Beale," I said soothingly. "I know it wasn't your fault, and I know it's hard on you to have to stop, but I wish you would go indoors. I must talk to these men, and we shan't have a moment's peace while you're here. Cut along."

"Very well, sir. But it's 'ard. Mayn't I 'ave just one go at that Charlie, Mr. Garnet?" he asked wistfully.

"No, no. Go in."

"And if they goes for you, sir, and tries to wipe the face off you?"

"They won't, they won't. If they do, I'll shout for you."

He went reluctantly into the house, and I turned again to my audience.

"If you will kindly be quiet for a moment--" I said.

"I am Appleby, Mr. Garnet, in the High Street. Mr. Ukridge--"

"Eighteen pounds fourteen shillings--"

"Kindly glance--"

I waved my hands wildly above my head.

"Stop! stop! stop!" I shouted.

The babble continued, but diminished gradually in volume. Through the trees, as I waited, I caught a glimpse of the sea. I wished I was out on the Cob, where beyond these voices there was peace. My head was beginning to ache, and I felt faint for want of food.

"Gentlemen," I cried, as the noise died away.

The latch of the gate clicked. I looked up, and saw a tall thin young man in a frock coat and silk hat enter the garden. It was the first time I had seen the costume in the country.

He approached me.

"Mr. Ukridge, sir?" he said.

"My name is Garnet. Mr. Ukridge is away at the moment."

"I come from Whiteley's, Mr. Garnet. Our Mr. Blenkinsop having written on several occasions to Mr. Ukridge calling his attention to the fact that his account has been allowed to mount to a considerable figure, and having received no satisfactory reply, desired me to visit him. I am sorry that he is not at home."

"So am I," I said with feeling.

"Do you expect him to return shortly?"

"No," I said, "I do not."

He was looking curiously at the expectant band of duns. I forestalled his question.

"Those are some of Mr. Ukridge's creditors," I said. "I am just about to address them. Perhaps you will take a seat. The grass is quite dry. My remarks will embrace you as well as them."

Comprehension came into his eyes, and the natural man in him peeped through the polish.

"Great Scott, has he done a bunk?" he cried.

"To the best of my knowledge, yes," I said.

He whistled.

I turned again to the local talent.

"Gentlemen," I shouted.

"Hear, hear," said some idiot.

"Gentlemen, I intend to be quite frank with you. We must decide just how matters stand between us. (A voice: Where's Ukridge?) Mr. Ukridge left for London suddenly (bitter laughter) yesterday afternoon. Personally I think he will come back very shortly."

Hoots of derision greeted this prophecy. I resumed.

"I fail to see your object in coming here. I have nothing for you. I couldn't pay your bills if I wanted to."

It began to be borne upon me that I was becoming unpopular.

"I am here simply as Mr. Ukridge's guest," I proceeded. After all, why

should I spare the man? "I have nothing whatever to do with his business affairs. I refuse absolutely to be regarded as in any way indebted to you. I am sorry for you. You have my sympathy. That is all I can give you, sympathy--and good advice."

Dissatisfaction. I was getting myself disliked. And I had meant to be so conciliatory, to speak to these unfortunates words of cheer which should be as olive oil poured into a wound. For I really did sympathise with them. I considered that Ukridge had used them disgracefully. But I was irritated. My head ached abominably.

"Then am I to tell our Mr. Blenkinsop," asked the frock-coated one, "that the money is not and will not be forthcoming?"

"When next you smoke a quiet cigar with your Mr. Blenkinsop," I replied courteously, "and find conversation flagging, I rather think I should say something of the sort."

"We shall, of course, instruct our solicitors at once to institute legal proceedings against your Mr. Ukridge."

"Don't call him my Mr. Ukridge. You can do whatever you please."

"That is your last word on the subject?"

"I hope so. But I fear not."

"Where's our money?" demanded a discontented voice from the crowd.

An idea struck me.

"Beale!" I shouted.

Out came the Hired Retainer at the double. I fancy he thought that his help was needed to save me from my friends.

He slowed down, seeing me as yet unassaulted.

"Sir?" he said.

"Isn't there a case of that whisky left somewhere, Beale?"

I had struck the right note. There was a hush of pleased anticipation among the audience.

"Yes, sir. One."

"Then bring it out here and open it."

Beale looked pained.

"For them, sir!" he ejaculated.

"Yes. Hurry up."

He hesitated, then without a word went into the house. A hearty cheer went up as he reappeared with the case. I proceeded indoors in search of glasses and water.

Coming out, I realised my folly in having left Beale alone with our visitors even for a minute. A brisk battle was raging between him and a man whom I did not remember to have seen before. The frock-coated young man was looking on with pale fear stamped upon his face; but the rest of the crowd were shouting advice and encouragement was being given to Beale. How I wondered, had he pacified the mob?

I soon discovered. As I ran up as quickly as I could, hampered as I was by the jugs and glasses, Beale knocked his man out with the clean precision of the experienced boxer; and the crowd explained in chorus that it was the pot-boy, from the Net and Mackerel. Like everything else, the whisky had not been paid for and the pot-boy, arriving just as the case was being opened, had made a gallant effort to save it from being distributed free to his fellow-citizens. By the time he came to, the glasses were circulating merrily; and, on observing this, he accepted the situation philosophically enough, and took his turn and turn about with the others.

Everybody was now in excellent fettle. The only malcontents were Beale,

whose heart plainly bled at the waste of good Scotch whisky, and the frock-coated young man, who was still pallid.

I was just congratulating myself, as I eyed the revellers, on having achieved a masterstroke of strategy, when that demon Charlie, his defeat, I suppose, still rankling, made a suggestion. From his point of view a timely and ingenious suggestion.

"We can't see the colour of our money," he said pithily, "but we can have our own back."

That settled it. The battle was over. The most skilful general must sometime recognise defeat. I recognised it then, and threw up my hand. I could do nothing further with them. I had done my best for the farm. I could do no more.

I lit my pipe, and strolled into the paddock.

Chaos followed. Indoors and out-of-doors they raged without check. Even Beale gave the thing up. He knocked Charlie into a flower-bed, and then disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

It was growing dusk. From inside the house came faint sounds of bibulous mirth, as the sacking party emptied the rooms of their contents. In the fowl-run a hen was crooning sleepily in its coop. It was a very soft, liquid, soothing sound.

Presently out came the invaders with their loot, one with a picture, another with a vase, another bearing the gramophone upside down. They were singing in many keys and times.

Then I heard somebody--Charlie again, it seemed to me--propose a raid on the fowl-run.

The fowls had had their moments of unrest since they had been our property, but what they had gone through with us was peace compared with what befell them then. Not even on the second evening of our visit, when we had run unmeasured miles in pursuit of them, had there been such confusion. Roused abruptly from their beauty-sleep they fled in all directions. Their pursuers, roaring with laughter, staggered after them. They tumbled over one another. The summer evening was made hideous with the noise of them.

"Disgraceful, sir. Is it not disgraceful!" said a voice in my ear.

The young man from Whiteley's stood beside me. He did not look happy. His forehead was damp. Somebody seemed to have stepped on his hat, and his coat was smeared with mould.

I was turning to answer him when from the dusk in the direction of the house came a sudden roar. A passionate appeal to the world in general to tell the speaker what all this meant.

There was only one man of my acquaintance with a voice like that.

I walked without hurry towards him.

"Good evening, Ukridge," I said.