CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER THE STORM

A yell of welcome drowned the tumult of the looters.

"Is that you, Garny, old horse? What's up? What's the matter? Has everyone gone mad? Who are those infernal scoundrels in the fowl-run? What are they doing? What's been happening?"

"I have been entertaining a little meeting of your creditors," I said. "And now they are entertaining themselves."

"But what did you let them do it for?"

"What is one amongst so many?"

"Well, 'pon my Sam," moaned Ukridge, as, her sardonic calm laid aside, that sinister hen which we called Aunt Elizabeth flashed past us pursued by the whiskered criminal, "it's a little hard! I can't go away for a day--"

"You certainly can't! You're right there. You can't go away without a word--"

"Without a word? What do you mean? Garny, old boy, pull yourself

together. You're over-excited. Do you mean to tell me you didn't get my note?"

"What note?"

"The one I left on the dining-room table."

"There was no note there."

"What!"

I was reminded of the scene that had taken place on the first day of our visit.

"Feel in your pockets," I said.

"Why, damme, here it is!" he said in amazement.

"Of course. Where did you expect it would be? Was it important?"

"Why, it explained the whole thing."

"Then," I said, "I wish you would let me read it. A note like that ought to be worth reading."

"It was telling you to sit tight and not worry about us going away--"

"That's good about worrying. You're a thoughtful chap, Ukridge."

"--because we should be back immediately."

"And what sent you up to town?"

"Why, we went to touch Millie's Aunt Elizabeth."

"Oh!" I said, a light shining on the darkness of my understanding.

"You remember Aunt Elizabeth? The old girl who wrote that letter."

"I know. She called you a gaby."

"And a guffin."

"Yes. I remember thinking her a shrewd and discriminating old lady, with a great gift for character delineation. So you went to touch her?"

"That's it. We had to have more money. So I naturally thought of her. Aunt Elizabeth isn't what you might call an admirer of mine--"

"Bless her for that."

"--but she's very fond of Millie, and would do anything if she's

allowed to chuck about a few home-truths before doing it. So we went off together, looked her up at her house, stated our case, and collected the stuff. Millie and I shared the work. She did the asking, while I inquired after the rheumatism. She mentioned the figure that would clear us; I patted the dog. Little beast! Got after me when I wasn't looking and chewed my ankle!"

"Thank Heaven!"

"In the end Millie got the money, and I got the home-truths."

"Did she call you a gaby?"

"Twice. And a guffin three times."

"Your Aunt Elizabeth is beginning to fascinate me. She seems just the sort of woman I would like. Well, you got the money?"

"Rather! And I'll tell you another thing, old horse. I scored heavily at the end of the visit. She'd got to the quoting-proverbs stage by that time. 'Ah, my dear,' she said to Millie. 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure.' Millie stood up to her like a little brick. 'I'm afraid that proverb doesn't apply to me, Aunt Elizabeth,' she said, 'because I haven't repented!' What do you think of that, Laddie?"

"Of course, she hasn't had much leisure lately," I agreed.

Ukridge's jaw dropped slightly. But he rallied swiftly.

"Idiot! That wasn't what she meant. Millie's an angel!"

"Of course she is," I said cordially. "She's a precious sight too good for you, you old rotter. You bear that fact steadily in mind, and we'll make something of you yet."

At this point Mrs. Ukridge joined us. She had been exploring the house, and noting the damage done. Her eyes were open to their fullest extent.

"Oh, Mr. Garnet, couldn't you have stopped them?"

I felt a worm. Had I done as much as I might have done to stem the tide?

"I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Ukridge," I said humbly. "I really don't think I could have done much more. We tried every method. Beale had seven fights, and I made a speech on the lawn, but it was all no good. Directly they had finished the whisky--"

Ukridge's cry was like that of a lost spirit.

"They didn't get hold of the whisky!"

"They did! It seemed to me that it would smooth things down a little if

I served it out. The mob had begun to get a trifle out of hand."

"I thought those horrid men were making a lot of noise," said Mrs. Ukridge.

Ukridge preserved a gloomy silence. Of all the disasters of that stricken field, I think the one that came home most poignantly to him was the loss of the whisky. It seemed to strike him like a blow.

"Isn't it about time to collect these men and explain things?" I suggested. "I don't believe any of them know you've come back."

"They will!" said Ukridge grimly, coming out of his trance. "They soon will! Where's Beale! Beale!"

The Hired Retainer came running out at the sound of the well-remembered voice.

"Lumme, Mr. Ukridge, sir!" he gasped.

It was the first time Beale had ever betrayed any real emotion in my presence. To him, I suppose, the return of Ukridge was as sensational and astonishing an event as a re-appearance from the tomb. He was not accustomed to find those who had shot the moon revisiting their ancient haunts.

"Beale, go round the place and tell those scoundrels that I've come back, and would like a word with them on the lawn. And, if you find any of them stealing the fowls, knock them down!"

"I 'ave knocked down one or two," said Beale, with approval. "That Charlie--"

"Beale," said Ukridge, much moved, "you're an excellent fellow! One of the very best. I will pay you your back wages before I go to bed."

"These fellars, sir," said Beale, having expressed his gratification, "they've bin and scattered most of them birds already, sir. They've bin chasin' of them this half-hour back."

Ukridge groaned.

"Scoundrels! Demons!"

Beale went off.

"Millie, old girl," said Ukridge, adjusting the ginger-beer wire behind his ears and hoisting up his grey flannel-trousers, which showed an inclination to sag, "you'd better go indoors. I propose to speak pretty chattily to these blighters, and in the heat of the moment one or two expressions might occur to me which you would not like. It would hamper me, your being here."

Mrs. Ukridge went into the house, and the vanguard of the audience began to come on to the lawn. Several of them looked flushed and dishevelled. I have a suspicion that Beale had shaken sobriety into them. Charlie, I noticed, had a black eye.

They assembled on the lawn in the moonlight, and Ukridge, with his cap well over his eyes and his mackintosh hanging round him like a Roman toga, surveyed them sternly, and began his speech.

"You--you--you--you scoundrels! You blighters! You worms! You weeds!"

I always like to think of Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge as I saw him at that moment. There have been times during a friendship of many years when his conduct did not recommend itself to me. It has sometimes happened that I have seen flaws in him. But on this occasion he was at his best. He was eloquent. He dominated his audience. Long before he had finished I was feeling relieved that he had thought of sending Mrs. Ukridge indoors when he did, and Beale was hanging on his words with a look in his eyes which I had never seen there before,--a look of reverence, almost of awe, the look of a disciple who listens to a master.

He poured scorn upon his hearers, and they quailed. He flung invective at them, and they wilted. Strange oaths, learned among strange men on cattle-ships or gleaned on the waterfronts of Buenos Ayres and San

Francisco, slid into the stream of his speech. It was hard, he said in part, it was, upon his Sam, a little hard that a gentleman--a gentleman, moreover, who had done so much to stimulate local trade with large orders and what not--could not run up to London for five minutes on business without having his private grounds turned upside down by a gang of cattle-ship adjectived San Francisco substantives who behaved as if the whole of the Buenos Ayres phrased place belonged to them. He had intended to do well by them. He had meant to continue putting business in their way, expanding their trade. But would he after what had occurred? Not by a jugful! As soon as ever the sun had risen and another day begun, their miserable accounts should be paid in full, and their connection with him cut off. Afterwards it was probable that he would institute legal proceedings against them in the matter of trespass and wholesale damage to property, and if they didn't all end their infernal days in some dashed prison they might consider themselves uncommonly lucky, and if they didn't make themselves scarce in considerably under two ticks, he proposed to see what could be done with Beale's shot-gun. (Beale here withdrew with a pleased expression to fetch the weapon.) He was sick of them. They were blighters. Creatures that it would be fulsome flattery to describe as human beings. He would call them skunks, only he did not see what the skunks had done to be compared with them. And now they might go--quick!

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We were quiet at the farm that night. Ukridge sat like Marius among the

ruins of Carthage, and refused to speak. Eventually he took Bob with him and went for a walk.

Half an hour later I, too, wearied of the scene of desolation. My errant steps took me in the direction of the sea. As I approached, I was aware of a figure standing in the moonlight, gazing silently out over the waters. Beside the figure was a dog.

The dark moments of optimistic minds are sacred, and I would no more have ventured to break in on Ukridge's thoughts at that moment than, if I had been a general in the Grand Army, I would have opened conversation with Napoleon during the retreat from Moscow. I was withdrawing as softly as I could, when my foot grated on the shingle. Ukridge turned.

"Hullo, Garny."

"Hullo, old man." I murmured in a death-bedside voice.

He came towards me, Bob trotting at his heels: and, as he came, I saw with astonishment that his mien was calm, even cheerful. I should have known my Ukridge better than to be astonished. You cannot keep a good man down, and already Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge was himself again. His eyes sparkled buoyantly behind their pince-nez.

"Garny, old horse, I've been thinking, laddie! I've got an idea! The

idea of a lifetime. The best ever, 'pon my Sam! I'm going to start a duck farm!"

"A duck farm?"

"A duck farm, laddie! And run it without water. My theory is, you see, that ducks get thin by taking exercise and swimming about all over the place, so that, if you kept them always on land, they'd get jolly fat in about half the time--and no trouble and expense. See? What? Not a flaw in it, old horse! I've thought the whole thing out." He took my arm affectionately. "Now, listen. We'll say that the profits of the first year at a conservative estimate..."

THE END