

CHAPTER VI

MR. GARNET'S NARRATIVE--HAS TO DO WITH A REUNION

The day was Thursday, the date July the twenty-second. We had been chicken-farmers for a whole week, and things were beginning to settle down to a certain extent. The coops were finished. They were not masterpieces, and I have seen chickens pause before them in deep thought, as who should say, "Now what?" but they were coops within the meaning of the Act, and we induced hens to become tenants.

The hardest work had been the fixing of the wire-netting. This was the department of the Hired Man and myself, Ukridge holding himself proudly aloof. While Beale and I worked ourselves to a fever in the sun, the senior partner of the firm sat on a deck-chair in the shade, offering not unkindly criticism and advice and from time to time abusing his creditors, who were numerous. For we had hardly been in residence a day before he began to order in a vast supply of necessary and unnecessary things, all on credit. Some he got from the village, others from neighbouring towns. Axminster he laid heavily under contribution. He even went as far afield as Dorchester. He had a persuasive way with him, and the tradesmen seemed to treat him like a favourite son. The things began to pour in from all sides,--groceries, whisky, a piano, a gramophone, pictures. Also cigars in great profusion. He was not one of those men who want but little here below.

As regards the financial side of these transactions, his method was simple and masterly. If a tradesman suggested that a small cheque on account would not be taken amiss, as one or two sordid fellows did, he became pathetic.

"Confound it, sir," he would say with tears in his voice, laying a hand on the man's shoulders in a wounded way, "it's a trifle hard, when a gentleman comes to settle in your neighbourhood, that you should dun him for money before he has got the preliminary expenses about the house off his back." This sounded well, and suggested the disbursement of huge sums for rent. The fact that the house had been lent him rent free was kept with some care in the background. Having weakened the man with pathos, he would strike a sterner note. "A little more of this," he would go on, "and I'll close my account. Why, damme, in all my experience I've never heard anything like it!" Upon which the man would apologise, and go away, forgiven, with a large order for more goods.

By these statesmanlike methods he had certainly made the place very comfortable. I suppose we all realised that the things would have to be paid for some day, but the thought did not worry us.

"Pay?" bellowed Ukridge on the only occasion when I ventured to bring up the unpleasant topic, "of course we shall pay. Why not? I don't like to see this faint-hearted spirit in you, old horse. The money isn't coming in yet, I admit, but we must give it time. Soon we shall be turning over hundreds a week, hundreds! I'm in touch with all the big

places,--Whiteley's, Harrod's, all the nibs. Here I am, I said to them, with a large chicken farm with all the modern improvements. You want eggs, old horses, I said: I supply them. I will let you have so many hundred eggs a week, I said; what will you give for them? Well, I'll admit their terms did not come up to my expectations altogether, but we must not sneer at small prices at first.

"When we get a connection, we shall be able to name our terms. It stands to reason, laddie. Have you ever seen a man, woman, or child who wasn't eating an egg or just going to eat an egg or just coming away from eating an egg? I tell you, the good old egg is the foundation of daily life. Stop the first man you meet in the street and ask him which he'd sooner lose, his egg or his wife, and see what he says! We're on to a good thing, Garny, my boy. Pass the whisky!"

The upshot of it was that the firms mentioned supplied us with a quantity of goods, agreeing to receive phantom eggs in exchange. This satisfied Ukridge. He had a faith in the laying power of his hens which would have flattered them if they could have known it. It might also have stimulated their efforts in that direction, which up to date were feeble.

It was now, as I have said, Thursday, the twenty-second of July,--a glorious, sunny morning, of the kind which Providence sends occasionally, simply in order to allow the honest smoker to take his after-breakfast pipe under ideal conditions. These are the pipes to

which a man looks back in after years with a feeling of wistful reverence, pipes smoked in perfect tranquillity, mind and body alike at rest. It is over pipes like these that we dream our dreams, and fashion our masterpieces.

My pipe was behaving like the ideal pipe; and, as I strolled spaciously about the lawn, my novel was growing nobly. I had neglected my literary work for the past week, owing to the insistent claims of the fowls. I am not one of those men whose minds work in placid independence of the conditions of life. But I was making up for lost time now. With each blue cloud that left my lips and hung in the still air above me, striking scenes and freshets of sparkling dialogue rushed through my brain. Another uninterrupted half hour, and I have no doubt that I should have completed the framework of a novel which would have placed me in that select band of authors who have no christian names. Another half hour, and posterity would have known me as "Garnet."

But it was not to be.

"Stop her! Catch her, Garny, old horse!"

I had wandered into the paddock at the moment. I looked up. Coming towards me at her best pace was a small hen. I recognised her immediately. It was the disagreeable, sardonic-looking bird which Ukridge, on the strength of an alleged similarity of profile to his wife's nearest relative, had christened Aunt Elizabeth. A Bolshevik

hen, always at the bottom of any disturbance in the fowl-run, a bird which ate its head off daily at our expense and bit the hands which fed it by resolutely declining to lay a single egg. Behind this fowl ran Bob, doing, as usual, the thing that he ought not to have done. Bob's wrong-headedness in the matter of our hens was a constant source of inconvenience. From the first, he had seemed to regard the laying-in of our stock purely in the nature of a tribute to his sporting tastes. He had a fixed idea that he was a hunting dog and that, recognising this, we had very decently provided him with the material for the chase.

Behind Bob came Ukridge. But a glance was enough to tell me that he was a negligible factor in the pursuit. He was not built for speed. Already the pace had proved too much for him, and he had appointed me his deputy, with full powers to act.

"After her, Garny, old horse! Valuable bird! Mustn't be lost!"

When not in a catalepsy of literary composition, I am essentially the man of action. I laid aside my novel for future reference, and we passed out of the paddock in the following order. First, Aunt Elizabeth, as fresh as paint, going well. Next, Bob, panting and obviously doubtful of his powers of staying the distance. Lastly, myself, determined, but wishing I were five years younger.

After the first field Bob, like the dilettante and unstable dog he was, gave it up, and sauntered off to scratch at a rabbit-hole with an

insufferable air of suggesting that that was what he had come out for all the time. I continued to pound along doggedly. I was grimly resolute. I had caught Aunt Elizabeth's eye as she passed me, and the contempt in it had cut me to the quick. This bird despised me. I am not a violent or a quick-tempered man, but I have my self-respect. I will not be sneered at by hens. All the abstract desire for Fame which had filled my mind five minutes before was concentrated now on the task of capturing this supercilious bird.

We had been travelling down hill all this time, but at this point we crossed a road and the ground began to rise. I was in that painful condition which occurs when one has lost one's first wind and has not yet got one's second. I was hotter than I had ever been in my life.

Whether Aunt Elizabeth, too, was beginning to feel the effects of her run, or whether she did it out of the pure effrontery of her warped and unpleasant nature, I do not know; but she now slowed down to walk, and even began to peck in a tentative manner at the grass. Her behaviour infuriated me. I felt that I was being treated as a cipher. I vowed that this bird should realise yet, even if, as seemed probable, I burst in the process, that it was no light matter to be pursued by J. Garnet, author of "The Manoeuvres of Arthur," etc., a man of whose work so capable a judge as the Peebles Advertiser had said "Shows promise."

A judicious increase of pace brought me within a yard or two of my quarry. But Aunt Elizabeth, apparently distrait, had the situation well

in hand. She darted from me with an amused chuckle, and moved off rapidly again up the hill.

I followed, but there was that within me that told me I had shot my bolt. The sun blazed down, concentrating its rays on my back to the exclusion of the surrounding scenery. It seemed to follow me about like a limelight.

We had reached level ground. Aunt Elizabeth had again slowed to a walk, and I was capable of no better pace. Very gradually I closed in. There was a high boxwood hedge in front of us; and, just as I came close enough once more to stake my all on a single grab, Aunt Elizabeth, with another of her sardonic chuckles, dived in head-foremost and struggled through in the mysterious way in which birds do get through hedges. The sound of her faint spinster-like snigger came to me as I stood panting, and roused me like a bugle. The next moment I too had plunged into the hedge.

I was in the middle of it, very hot, tired, and dirty, when from the other side I heard a sudden shout of "Mark over! Bird to the right!" and the next moment I found myself emerging with a black face and tottering knees on the gravel path of a private garden. Beyond the path was a croquet lawn, and on this lawn I perceived, as through a glass darkly, three figures. The mist cleared from my eyes, and I recognised two of them.

One was the middle-aged Irishman who had travelled down with us in the train. The other was his blue-eyed daughter.

The third member of the party was a man, a stranger to me. By some miracle of adroitness he had captured Aunt Elizabeth, and was holding her in spite of her protests in a workmanlike manner behind the wings.