

CHAPTER VII

THE ENTENTE CORDIALE IS SEALED

There are moments and moments. The present one belonged to the more painful variety.

Even to my exhausted mind it was plain that there was a need here for explanations. An Irishman's croquet-lawn is his castle, and strangers cannot plunge in through hedges without inviting comment.

Unfortunately, speech was beyond me. I could have emptied a water-butt, laid down and gone to sleep, or melted ice with a touch of the finger, but I could not speak. The conversation was opened by the other man, in whose restraining hand Aunt Elizabeth now lay, outwardly resigned but inwardly, as I, who knew her haughty spirit, could guess, boiling with baffled resentment. I could see her looking out of the corner of her eye, trying to estimate the chances of getting in one good hard peck with her aquiline beak.

"Come right in," said the man pleasantly. "Don't knock."

I stood there, gasping. I was only too well aware that I presented a quaint appearance. I had removed my hat before entering the hedge, and my hair was full of twigs and other foreign substances. My face was moist and grimy. My mouth hung open. My legs felt as if they had ceased

to belong to me.

"I must apologise-- ..." I began, and ended the sentence with gulps.

The elderly gentleman looked at me with what seemed to be indignant surprise. His daughter appeared to my guilty conscience to be looking through me. Aunt Elizabeth sneered. The only friendly face was the man's. He regarded me with a kindly smile, as if I were some old friend who had dropped in unexpectedly.

"Take a long breath," he advised.

I took several, and felt better.

"I must apologise for this intrusion," I said successfully.

"Unwarrantable" would have rounded off the sentence neatly, but I would not risk it. It would have been mere bravado to attempt unnecessary words of five syllables. I took in more breath. "The fact is, I did--didn't know there was a private garden beyond the hedge. If you will give me my hen ..."

I stopped. Aunt Elizabeth was looking away, as if endeavouring to create an impression of having nothing to do with me. I am told by one who knows that hens cannot raise their eyebrows, not having any; but I am prepared to swear that at this moment Aunt Elizabeth raised hers. I will go further. She sniffed.

"Here you are," said the man. "Though it's hard to say good-bye."

He held out the hen to me, and at this point a hitch occurred. He did his part, the letting go, all right. It was in my department, the taking hold, that the thing was bungled. Aunt Elizabeth slipped from my grasp like an eel, stood for a moment eyeing me satirically with her head on one side, then fled and entrenched herself in some bushes at the end of the lawn.

There are times when the most resolute man feels that he can battle no longer with fate; when everything seems against him and the only course is a dignified retreat. But there is one thing essential to a dignified retreat. You must know the way out. It was the lack of that knowledge that kept me standing there, looking more foolish than anyone has ever looked since the world began. I could not retire by way of the hedge. If I could have leaped the hedge with a single debonair bound, that would have been satisfactory. But the hedge was high, and I did not feel capable at the moment of achieving a debonair bound over a footstool.

The man saved the situation. He seemed to possess that magnetic power over his fellows which marks the born leader. Under his command we became an organised army. The common object, the pursuit of the elusive Aunt Elizabeth, made us friends. In the first minute of the proceedings the Irishman was addressing me as "me dear boy," and the man, who had

introduced himself as Mr. Chase--a lieutenant, I learned later, in His Majesty's Navy--was shouting directions to me by name. I have never assisted at any ceremony at which formality was so completely dispensed with. The ice was not merely broken; it was shivered into a million fragments.

"Go in and drive her out, Garnet," shouted Mr. Chase. "In my direction if you can. Look out on the left, Phyllis."

Even in that disturbing moment I could not help noticing his use of the Christian name. It seemed to me more than sinister. I did not like the idea of dashing young lieutenants in the senior service calling a girl Phyllis whose eyes had haunted me since I had first seen them.

Nevertheless, I crawled into the bushes and administered to Aunt Elizabeth a prod in the lower ribs--if hens have lower ribs. The more I study hens, the more things they seem able to get along without--which abruptly disturbed her calm detachment. She shot out at the spot where Mr. Chase was waiting with his coat off, and was promptly enveloped in that garment and captured.

"The essence of strategy," observed Mr. Chase approvingly, "is surprise. A neat piece of work!"

I thanked him. He deprecated my thanks. He had, he said, only done his duty, as expected to by England. He then introduced me to the elderly

Irishman, who was, it seemed, a professor at Dublin University, by name, Derrick. Whatever it was that he professed, it was something that did not keep him for a great deal of his time at the University. He informed me that he always spent his summers at Combe Regis.

"I was surprised to see you at Combe Regis," I said. "When you got out at Yeovil, I thought I had seen the last of you."

I think I am gifted beyond other men as regards the unfortunate turning of sentences.

"I meant," I added, "I was afraid I had."

"Ah, of course," he said, "you were in our carriage coming down. I was confident I had seen you before. I never forget a face."

"It would be a kindness," said Mr. Chase, "if you would forget Garnet's as now exhibited. You seem to have collected a good deal of the scenery coming through that hedge."

"I was wondering----" I said. "A wash--if I might----"

"Of course, me boy, of course," said the professor. "Tom, take Mr. Garnet off to your room, and then we'll have lunch. You'll stay to lunch, Mr. Garnet?"

I thanked him, commented on possible inconvenience to his arrangements, was overruled, and went off with my friend the lieutenant to the house. We imprisoned Aunt Elizabeth in the stables, to her profound indignation, gave directions for lunch to be served to her, and made our way to Mr. Chase's room.

"So you've met the professor before?" he said, hospitably laying out a change of raiment for me--we were fortunately much of a height and build.

"I have never spoken to him," I said. "We travelled down from London in the same carriage."

"He's a dear old boy, if you rub him the right way. But--I'm telling you this for your good and guidance; a man wants a chart in a strange sea--he can cut up rough. And, when he does, he goes off like a four-point-seven and the population for miles round climbs trees. I think, if I were you, I shouldn't mention Sir Edward Carson at lunch."

I promised that I would try to avoid the temptation.

"In fact, you'd better keep off Ireland altogether. It's the safest plan. Any other subject you like. Chatty remarks on Bimetallism would meet with his earnest attention. A lecture on What to do with the Cold Mutton would be welcomed. But not Ireland. Shall we do down?"

We got to know each other at lunch.

"Do you hunt hens," asked Tom Chase, who was mixing the salad--he was one of those men who seemed to do everything a shade better than anyone else--"for amusement or by your doctor's orders? Many doctors, I believe, insist on it."

"Neither," I said, "and especially not for amusement. The fact is, I've been lured down here by a friend of mine who has started a chicken farm--"

I was interrupted. All three of them burst out laughing. Tom Chase allowed the vinegar to trickle on to the cloth, missing the salad-bowl by a clear two inches.

"You don't mean to tell us," he said, "that you really come from the one and only chicken farm? Why, you're the man we've all been praying to meet for days past. You're the talk of the town. If you can call Combe Regis a town. Everybody is discussing you. Your methods are new and original, aren't they?"

"Probably. Ukridge knows nothing about fowls. I know less. He considers it an advantage. He says our minds ought to be unbiassed."

"Ukridge!" said the professor. "That was the name old Dawlish, the grocer, said. I never forget a name. He is the gentleman who lectures

on the management of poultry? You do not?"

I hastened to disclaim any such feat. I had never really approved of these infernal talks on the art of chicken-farming which Ukridge had dropped into the habit of delivering when anybody visited our farm. I admit that it was a pleasing spectacle to see my managing director in a pink shirt without a collar and very dirty flannel trousers lecturing the intelligent native; but I had a feeling that the thing tended to expose our ignorance to men who had probably had to do with fowls from their cradle up.

"His lectures are very popular," said Phyllis Derrick with a little splutter of mirth.

"He enjoys them," I said.

"Look here, Garnet," said Tom Chase, "I hope you won't consider all these questions impertinent, but you've no notion of the thrilling interest we all take--at a distance--in your farm. We have been talking of nothing else for a week. I have dreamed of it three nights running. Is Mr. Ukridge doing this as a commercial speculation, or is he an eccentric millionaire?"

"He's not a millionaire yet, but I believe he intends to be one shortly, with the assistance of the fowls. But you mustn't look on me as in any way responsible for the arrangements at the farm. I am merely

a labourer. The brainwork of the business lies in Ukridge's department. As a matter of fact, I came down here principally in search of golf."

"Golf?" said Professor Derrick, with the benevolent approval of the enthusiast towards a brother. "I'm glad you play golf. We must have a round together."

"As soon as ever my professional duties will permit," I said gratefully.

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There was croquet after lunch,--a game of which I am a poor performer. Phyllis Derrick and I played the professor and Tom Chase. Chase was a little better than myself; the professor, by dint of extreme earnestness and care, managed to play a fair game; and Phyllis was an expert.

"I was reading a book," she said, as we stood together watching the professor shaping at his ball at the other end of the lawn, "by an author of the same surname as you, Mr. Garnet. Is he a relation of yours?"

"My name is Jeremy, Miss Derrick."

"Oh, you wrote it?" She turned a little pink. "Then you must have--oh, nothing."

"I couldn't help it, I'm afraid."

"Did you know what I was going to say?"

"I guessed. You were going to say that I must have heard your criticisms in the train. You were very lenient, I thought."

"I didn't like your heroine."

"No. What is a 'creature,' Miss Derrick?"

"Pamela in your book is a 'creature,'" she replied unsatisfactorily.

Shortly after this the game came somehow to an end. I do not understand the intricacies of croquet. But Phyllis did something brilliant and remarkable with the balls, and we adjourned for tea. The sun was setting as I left to return to the farm, with Aunt Elizabeth stored neatly in a basket in my hand. The air was deliciously cool, and full of that strange quiet which follows soothingly on the skirts of a broiling midsummer afternoon. Far away, seeming to come from another world, a sheep-bell tinkled, deepening the silence. Alone in a sky of the palest blue there gleamed a small, bright star.

I addressed this star.

"She was certainly very nice to me. Very nice indeed." The star said nothing.

"On the other hand, I take it that, having had a decent up-bringing, she would have been equally polite to any other man whom she had happened to meet at her father's house. Moreover, I don't feel altogether easy in my mind about that naval chap. I fear the worst."

The star winked.

"He calls her Phyllis," I said.

"Charawk!" chuckled Aunt Elizabeth from her basket, in that beastly cynical, satirical way which has made her so disliked by all right-thinking people.