

CHAPTER XIII

TEA AND TENNIS

"Met the professor's late boatman on the Cob," said Mr. Chase, dissecting a chocolate cake.

"Clumsy man," said Phyllis. "I hope he was ashamed of himself. I shall never forgive him for trying to drown papa."

My heart bled for Mr. Henry Hawk, that modern martyr.

"When I met him," said Tom Chase, "he looked as if he had been trying to drown his sorrow as well."

"I knew he drank," said Phyllis severely, "the very first time I saw him."

"You might have warned the professor," murmured Mr. Chase.

"He couldn't have upset the boat if he had been sober."

"You never know. He may have done it on purpose."

"Tom, how absurd."

"Rather rough on the man, aren't you?" I said.

"Merely a suggestion," continued Mr. Chase airily. "I've been reading sensational novels lately, and it seems to me that Mr. Hawk's cut out to be a minion. Probably some secret foe of the professor's bribed him."

My heart stood still. Did he know, I wondered, and was this all a roundabout way of telling me he knew?

"The professor may be a member of an Anarchist League, or something, and this is his punishment for refusing to assassinate some sportsman."

"Have another cup of tea, Tom, and stop talking nonsense."

Mr. Chase handed in his cup.

"What gave me the idea that the upset was done on purpose was this. I saw the whole thing from the Ware Cliff. The spill looked to me just like dozens I had seen at Malta."

"Why do they upset themselves on purpose at Malta particularly?" inquired Phyllis.

"Listen carefully, my dear, and you'll know more about the ways of the Navy that guards your coasts than you did before. When men are allowed on shore at Malta, the owner has a fancy to see them snugly on board

again at a certain reasonable hour. After that hour any Maltese policeman who brings them aboard gets one sovereign, cash. But he has to do all the bringing part of it on his own. Consequence is, you see boats rowing out to the ship, carrying men who have overstayed their leave; and when they get near enough, the able-bodied gentleman in custody jumps to his feet, upsets the boat, and swims for the gangway. The policemen, if they aren't drowned--they sometimes are--race him, and whichever gets there first wins. If it's the policeman, he gets his sovereign. If it's the sailor, he is considered to have arrived not in a state of custody and gets off easier. What a judicious remark that was of the governor of North Carolina to the governor of South Carolina, respecting the length of time between drinks. Just one more cup, please, Phyllis."

"But how does all that apply?" I asked, dry-mouthed.

"Mr. Hawk upset the professor just as those Maltese were upset. There's a patent way of doing it. Furthermore, by judicious questioning, I found that Hawk was once in the Navy, and stationed at Malta. Now, who's going to drag in Sherlock Holmes?"

"You don't really think--?" I said, feeling like a criminal in the dock when the case is going against him.

"I think friend Hawk has been re-enacting the joys of his vanished youth, so to speak."

"He ought to be prosecuted," said Phyllis, blazing with indignation.

Alas, poor Hawk!

"Nobody's safe with a man of that sort, hiring out a boat." Oh, miserable Hawk!

"But why on earth should he play a trick like that on Professor Derrick, Chase?"

"Pure animal spirits, probably. Or he may, as I say, be a minion."

I was hot all over.

"I shall tell father that," said Phyllis in her most decided voice, "and see what he says. I don't wonder at the man taking to drink after doing such a thing."

"I--I think you're making a mistake," I said.

"I never make mistakes," Mr. Chase replied. "I am called Archibald the All-Right, for I am infallible. I propose to keep a reflective eye upon the jovial Hawk."

He helped himself to another section of the chocolate cake.

"Haven't you finished yet, Tom?" inquired Phyllis. "I'm sure Mr. Garnet's getting tired of sitting talking here," she said.

I shot out a polite negative. Mr. Chase explained with his mouth full that he had by no means finished. Chocolate cake, it appeared, was the dream of his life. When at sea he was accustomed to lie awake o' nights thinking of it.

"You don't seem to realise," he said, "that I have just come from a cruise on a torpedo-boat. There was such a sea on as a rule that cooking operations were entirely suspended, and we lived on ham and sardines--without bread."

"How horrible!"

"On the other hand," added Mr. Chase philosophically, "it didn't matter much, because we were all ill most of the time."

"Don't be nasty, Tom."

"I was merely defending myself. I hope Mr. Hawk will be able to do as well when his turn comes. My aim, my dear Phyllis, is to show you in a series of impressionist pictures the sort of thing I have to go through when I'm not here. Then perhaps you won't rend me so savagely over a matter of five minutes' lateness for breakfast."

"Five minutes! It was three-quarters of an hour, and everything was simply frozen."

"Quite right too in weather like this. You're a slave to convention, Phyllis. You think breakfast ought to be hot, so you always have it hot. On occasion I prefer mine cold. Mine is the truer wisdom. You can give the cook my compliments, Phyllis, and tell her--gently, for I don't wish the glad news to overwhelm her--that I enjoyed that cake. Say that I shall be glad to hear from her again. Care for a game of tennis, Garnet?"

"What a pity Norah isn't here," said Phyllis. "We could have had a four."

"But she is at present wasting her sweetness on the desert air of Yeovil. You had better sit down and watch us, Phyllis. Tennis in this sort of weather is no job for the delicately-nurtured feminine. I will explain the finer points of my play as we go on. Look out particularly for the Tilden Back-Handed Slosh. A winner every time."

We proceeded to the tennis court. I played with the sun in my eyes. I might, if I chose, emphasise that fact, and attribute my subsequent rout to it, adding, by way of solidifying the excuse, that I was playing in a strange court with a borrowed racquet, and that my mind was preoccupied--firstly, with l'affaire Hawk, secondly, and chiefly,

with the gloomy thought that Phyllis and my opponent seemed to be on friendly terms with each other. Their manner at tea had been almost that of an engaged couple. There was a thorough understanding between them. I will not, however, take refuge behind excuses. I admit, without qualifying the statement, that Mr. Chase was too good for me. I had always been under the impression that lieutenants in the Royal Navy were not brilliant at tennis. I had met them at various houses, but they had never shone conspicuously. They had played an earnest, unobtrusive game, and generally seemed glad when it was over. Mr. Chase was not of this sort. His service was bottled lightning. His returns behaved like jumping crackers. He won the first game in precisely six strokes. He served. Only once did I take the service with the full face of the racquet, and then I seemed to be stopping a bullet. I returned it into the net. The last of the series struck the wooden edge of my racquet, and soared over the back net into the shrubbery, after the manner of a snick to long slip off a fast bowler.

"Game," said Mr. Chase, "we'll look for that afterwards."

I felt a worm and no man. Phyllis, I thought, would probably judge my entire character from this exhibition. A man, she would reflect, who could be so feeble and miserable a failure at tennis, could not be good for much in any department of life. She would compare me instinctively with my opponent, and contrast his dash and brilliance with my own inefficiency. Somehow the massacre was beginning to have a bad effect on my character. All my self-respect was ebbing. A little more of this,

and I should become crushed,--a mere human jelly. It was my turn to serve. Service is my strong point at tennis. I am inaccurate, but vigorous, and occasionally send in a quite unplayable shot. One or two of these, even at the expense of a fault or so, and I might be permitted to retain at least a portion of my self-respect.

I opened with a couple of faults. The sight of Phyllis, sitting calm and cool in her chair under the cedar, unnerved me. I served another fault. And yet another.

"Here, I say, Garnet," observed Mr. Chase plaintively, "do put me out of this hideous suspense. I'm becoming a mere bundle of quivering ganglions."

I loathe facetiousness in moments of stress.

I frowned austere, made no reply, and served another fault, my fifth.

Matters had reached a crisis. Even if I had to lob it underhand, I must send the ball over the net with the next stroke.

I restrained myself this time, eschewing the careless vigour which had marked my previous efforts. The ball flew in a slow semicircle, and pitched inside the correct court. At least, I told myself, I had not served a fault.

What happened then I cannot exactly say. I saw my opponent spring forward like a panther and whirl his racquet. The next moment the back net was shaking violently, and the ball was rolling swiftly along the ground on a return journey to the other court.

"Love-forty," said Mr. Chase. "Phyllis!"

"Yes?"

"That was the Tilden Slosh."

"I thought it must be," said Phyllis.

In the third game I managed to score fifteen. By the merest chance I returned one of his red-hot serves, and--probably through surprise--he failed to send it back again.

In the fourth and fifth games I omitted to score. Phyllis had left the cedar now, and was picking flowers from the beds behind the court.

We began the sixth game. And now for some reason I played really well. I struck a little vein of brilliance. I was serving, and this time a proportion of my serves went over the net instead of trying to get through. The score went from fifteen all to forty-fifteen. Hope began to surge through my veins. If I could keep this up, I might win yet.

The Tilden Slosh diminished my lead by fifteen. Then I got in a really fine serve, which beat him. 'Vantage In. Another Slosh. Deuce. Another Slam. 'Vantage out. It was an awesome moment. There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken by the flood--I served. Fault. I served again,--a beauty. He returned it like a flash into the corner of the court. With a supreme effort I got to it. We rallied. I was playing like a professor. Then whizz--!

The Slosh had beaten me on the post.

"Game and--," said Mr. Chase, tossing his racquet into the air and catching it by the handle. "Good game that last one."

I turned to see what Phyllis thought of it.

At the eleventh hour I had shown her of what stuff I was made.

She had disappeared.

"Looking for Miss Derrick?" said Chase, jumping the net, and joining me in my court, "she's gone into the house."

"When did she go?"

"At the end of the fifth game," said Chase.

"Gone to dress for dinner, I suppose," he continued. "It must be getting late. I think I ought to be going, too, if you don't mind. The professor gets a little restive if I keep him waiting for his daily bread. Great Scott, that watch can't be right! What do you make of it? Yes, so do I. I really think I must run. You won't mind. Good-night, then. See you to-morrow, I hope."

I walked slowly out across the fields. That same star, in which I had confided on a former occasion, was at its post. It looked placid and cheerful. It never got beaten by six games to love under the very eyes of a lady-star. It was never cut out ignominiously by infernally capable lieutenants in His Majesty's Navy. No wonder it was cheerful.

CHAPTER XIV

A COUNCIL OF WAR

"The fact is," said Ukridge, "if things go on as they are now, my lad, we shall be in the cart. This business wants bucking up. We don't seem to be making headway. Why it is, I don't know, but we are not making headway. Of course, what we want is time. If only these scoundrels of tradesmen would leave us alone for a spell we could get things going properly. But we're hampered and rattled and worried all the time.