"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.

Aren't we, Millie?"

"Yes, dear."

"You don't let me see the financial side of the thing enough," I complained. "Why don't you keep me thoroughly posted? I didn't know we were in such a bad way. The fowls look fit enough, and Edwin hasn't had one for a week."

"Edwin knows as well as possible when he's done wrong, Mr. Garnet," said Mrs. Ukridge. "He was so sorry after he had killed those other two."

"Yes," said Ukridge, "I saw to that."

"As far as I can see," I continued, "we're going strong. Chicken for breakfast, lunch, and dinner is a shade monotonous, perhaps, but look at the business we're doing. We sold a whole heap of eggs last week."

"But not enough, Garny old man. We aren't making our presence felt. England isn't ringing with our name. We sell a dozen eggs where we ought to be selling them by the hundred, carting them off in trucks for the London market and congesting the traffic. Harrod's and Whiteley's and the rest of them are beginning to get on their hind legs and talk. That's what they're doing. Devilish unpleasant they're making themselves. You see, laddie, there's no denying it--we did touch them

for the deuce of a lot of things on account, and they agreed to take it out in eggs. All they've done so far is to take it out in apologetic letters from Millie. Now, I don't suppose there's a woman alive who can write a better apologetic letter than her nibs, but, if you're broad-minded and can face facts, you can't help seeing that the juiciest apologetic letter is not an egg. I meant to say, look at it from their point of view. Harrod--or Whiteley--comes into his store in the morning, rubbing his hands expectantly. 'Well,' he says, 'how many eggs from Combe Regis to-day?' And instead of leading him off to a corner piled up with bursting crates, they show him a four-page letter telling him it'll all come right in the future. I've never run a store myself, but I should think that would jar a chap. Anyhow, the blighters seem to be getting tired of waiting."

"The last letter from Harrod's was quite pathetic," said Mrs. Ukridge sadly.

I had a vision of an eggless London. I seemed to see homes rendered desolate and lives embittered by the slump, and millionaires bidding against one another for the few rare specimens which Ukridge had actually managed to despatch to Brompton and Bayswater.

Ukridge, having induced himself to be broad-minded for five minutes, now began to slip back to his own personal point of view and became once more the man with a grievance. His fleeting sympathy with the wrongs of Mr. Harrod and Mr. Whiteley disappeared.

"What it all amounts to," he said complainingly, "is that they're infernally unreasonable. I've done everything possible to meet them. Nothing could have been more manly and straightforward than my attitude. I told them in my last letter but three that I proposed to let them have the eggs on the Times instalment system, and they said I was frivolous. They said that to send thirteen eggs as payment for goods supplied to the value of 25 pounds 1s. 8 1/2 d. was mere trifling. Trifling, I'll trouble you! That's the spirit in which they meet my suggestions. It was Harrod who did that. I've never met Harrod personally, but I'd like to, just to ask him if that's his idea of cementing amiable business relations. He knows just as well as anyone else that without credit commerce has no elasticity. It's an elementary rule. I'll bet he'd have been sick if chappies had refused to let him have tick when he was starting his store. Do you suppose Harrod, when he started in business, paid cash down on the nail for everything? Not a bit of it. He went about taking people by the coat-button and asking them to be good chaps and wait till Wednesday week. Trifling! Why, those thirteen eggs were absolutely all we had over after Mrs. Beale had taken what she wanted for the kitchen. As a matter of fact, if it's anybody's fault, it's Mrs. Beale's. That woman literally eats eggs."

"The habit is not confined to her," I said.

"Well, what I mean to say is, she seems to bathe in them."

"She says she needs so many for puddings, dear," said Mrs. Ukridge. "I spoke to her about it yesterday. And of course, we often have omelettes."

"She can't make omelettes without breaking eggs," I urged.

"She can't make them without breaking us, dammit," said Ukridge. "One or two more omelettes, and we're done for. No fortune on earth could stand it. We mustn't have any more omelettes, Millie. We must economise. Millions of people get on all right without omelettes. I suppose there are families where, if you suddenly produced an omelette, the whole strength of the company would get up and cheer, led by father. Cancel the omelettes, old girl, from now onward."

"Yes, dear. But--"

"Well?"

"I don't think Mrs. Beale would like that very much, dear. She has been complaining a good deal about chicken at every meal. She says that the omelettes are the only things that give her a chance. She says there are always possibilities in an omelette."

"In short," I said, "what you propose to do is deliberately to remove from this excellent lady's life the one remaining element of poetry. You mustn't do it. Give Mrs. Beale her omelettes, and let's hope for a

larger supply of eggs."

"Another thing," said Ukridge. "It isn't only that there's a shortage of eggs. That wouldn't matter so much if only we kept hatching out fresh squads of chickens. I'm not saying the hens aren't doing their best. I take off my hat to the hens. As nice a hard-working lot as I ever want to meet, full of vigour and earnestness. It's that damned incubator that's letting us down all the time. The rotten thing won't work. I don't know what's the matter with it. The long and the short of it is that it simply declines to incubate."

"Perhaps it's your dodge of letting down the temperature. You remember, you were telling me? I forget the details."

"My dear old boy," he said earnestly, "there's nothing wrong with my figures. It's a mathematical certainty. What's the good of mathematics if not to help you work out that sort of thing? No, there's something deuced wrong with the machine itself, and I shall probably make a complaint to the people I got it from. Where did we get the incubator, old girl?"

"Harrod's, I think, dear,--yes, it was Harrod's. It came down with the first lot of things."

"Then," said Ukridge, banging the table with his fist, while his glasses flashed triumph, "we've got 'em. The Lord has delivered

Harrod's into our hand. Write and answer that letter of theirs to-night, Millie. Sit on them."

"Yes, dear."

"Tell 'em that we'd have sent them their confounded eggs long ago, if only their rotten, twopenny-ha'penny incubator had worked with any approach to decency." He paused. "Or would you be sarcastic, Garny, old horse? No, better put it so that they'll understand. Say that I consider that the manufacturer of the thing ought to be in Colney Hatch--if he isn't there already--and that they are scoundrels for palming off a groggy machine of that sort on me."

"The ceremony of opening the morning's letters at Harrod's ought to be full of interest and excitement to-morrow," I said.

This dashing counter-stroke seemed to relieve Ukridge. His pessimism vanished. He seldom looked on the dark side of things for long at a time. He began now to speak hopefully of the future. He planned out ingenious improvements. Our fowls were to multiply so rapidly and consistently that within a short space of time Dorsetshire would be paved with them. Our eggs were to increase in size till they broke records and got three-line notices in the "Items of Interest" column in the Daily Mail. Briefly, each hen was to become a happy combination of rabbit and ostrich.

"There is certainly a good time coming," I said. "May it be soon. Meanwhile, what of the local tradesmen?"

Ukridge relapsed once more into gloom.

"They are the worst of the lot. I don't mind the London people so much. They only write, and a letter or two hurts nobody. But when it comes to butchers and bakers and grocers and fishmongers and fruiterers and what not coming up to one's house and dunning one in one's own garden,--well it's a little hard, what?"

"Oh, then those fellows I found you talking to yesterday were duns? I thought they were farmers, come to hear your views on the rearing of poultry."

"Which were they? Little chap with black whiskers and long, thin man with beard? That was Dawlish, the grocer, and Curtis, the fishmonger. The others had gone before you came."

It may be wondered why, before things came to such a crisis, I had not placed my balance at the bank at the disposal of the senior partner for use on behalf of the farm. The fact was that my balance was at the moment small. I have not yet in the course of this narrative gone into my pecuniary position, but I may state here that it was an inconvenient one. It was big with possibilities, but of ready cash there was but a meagre supply. My parents had been poor. But I had a wealthy uncle.

Uncles are notoriously careless of the comfort of their nephews. Mine was no exception. He had views. He was a great believer in matrimony, as, having married three wives--not simultaneously--he had every right to be. He was also of opinion that the less money the young bachelor possessed, the better. The consequence was that he announced his intention of giving me a handsome allowance from the day that I married, but not an instant before. Till that glad day I would have to shift for myself. And I am bound to admit that--for an uncle--it was a remarkably sensible idea. I am also of the opinion that it is greatly to my credit, and a proof of my pure and unmercenary nature, that I did not instantly put myself up to be raffled for, or rush out into the streets and propose marriage to the first lady I met. But I was making quite enough with my pen to support myself, and, be it never so humble, there is something pleasant in a bachelor existence, or so I had thought until very recently.

I had thus no great stake in Ukridge's chicken farm. I had contributed a modest five pounds to the preliminary expenses, and another five after the roop incident. But further I could not go with safety. When his income is dependent on the whims of editors and publishers, the prudent man keeps something up his sleeve against a sudden slump in his particular wares. I did not wish to have to make a hurried choice between matrimony and the workhouse.

Having exhausted the subject of finance--or, rather, when I began to feel that it was exhausting me--I took my clubs, and strolled up the

hill to the links to play off a match with a sportsman from the village. I had entered some days previously for a competition for a trophy (I quote the printed notice) presented by a local supporter of the game, in which up to the present I was getting on nicely. I had survived two rounds, and expected to beat my present opponent, which would bring me into the semi-final. Unless I had bad luck, I felt that I ought to get into the final, and win it. As far as I could gather from watching the play of my rivals, the professor was the best of them, and I was convinced that I should have no difficulty with him. But he had the most extraordinary luck at golf, though he never admitted it. He also exercised quite an uncanny influence on his opponent. I have seen men put completely off their stroke by his good fortune.

I disposed of my man without difficulty. We parted a little coldly. He had decapitated his brassy on the occasion of his striking Dorsetshire instead of his ball, and he was slow in recovering from the complex emotions which such an episode induces.

In the club-house I met the professor, whose demeanour was a welcome contrast to that of my late opponent. The professor had just routed his opponent, and so won through to the semi-final. He was warm, but jubilant.

I congratulated him, and left the place.

Phyllis was waiting outside. She often went round the course with him.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Have you been round with the professor?"

"Yes. We must have been in front of you. Father won his match."

"So he was telling me. I was very glad to hear it."

"Did you win, Mr. Garnet?"

"Yes. Pretty easily. My opponent had bad luck all through. Bunkers seemed to have a magnetic attraction for him."

"So you and father are both in the semi-final? I hope you will play very badly."

"Thank you," I said.

"Yes, it does sound rude, doesn't it? But father has set his heart on winning this year. Do you know that he has played in the final round two years running now?"

"Really?"

"Both times he was beaten by the same man."

"Who was that? Mr. Derrick plays a much better game than anybody I have seen on these links."

"It was nobody who is here now. It was a Colonel Jervis. He has not come to Combe Regis this year. That's why father is hopeful."

"Logically," I said, "he ought to be certain to win."

"Yes; but, you see, you were not playing last year, Mr. Garnet."

"Oh, the professor can make rings round me," I said.

"What did you go round in to-day?"

"We were playing match-play, and only did the first dozen holes; but my average round is somewhere in the late eighties."

"The best father has ever done is ninety, and that was only once. So you see, Mr. Garnet, there's going to be another tragedy this year."

"You make me feel a perfect brute. But it's more than likely, you must remember, that I shall fail miserably if I ever do play your father in the final. There are days when I play golf as badly as I play tennis. You'll hardly believe me."

She smiled reminiscently.

"Tom is much too good at tennis. His service is perfectly dreadful."

"It's a little terrifying on first acquaintance."

"But you're better at golf than at tennis, Mr. Garnet. I wish you were not."

"This is special pleading," I said. "It isn't fair to appeal to my better feelings, Miss Derrick."

"I didn't know golfers had any where golf was concerned. Do you really have your off-days?"

"Nearly always. There are days when I slice with my driver as if it were a bread-knife."

"Really?"

"And when I couldn't putt to hit a haystack."

"Then I hope it will be on one of those days that you play father."

"I hope so, too," I said.

"You hope so?"

"Yes."

"But don't you want to win?"

"I should prefer to please you."

"Really, how very unselfish of you, Mr. Garnet," she replied, with a laugh. "I had no idea that such chivalry existed. I thought a golfer would sacrifice anything to win a game."

"Most things."

"And trample on the feelings of anybody."

"Not everybody," I said.

At this point the professor joined us.