CHAPTER XVII

OF A SENTIMENTAL NATURE

She was wearing a panama, and she carried a sketching-block and camp-stool.

"Good evening," I said.

"Good evening," said she.

It is curious how different the same words can sound, when spoken by different people. My "good evening" might have been that of a man with a particularly guilty conscience caught in the act of doing something more than usually ignoble. She spoke like a rather offended angel.

"It's a lovely evening," I went on pluckily.

"Very."

"The sunset!"

"Yes."

"Er--"

She raised a pair of blue eyes, devoid of all expression save a faint suggestion of surprise, and gazed through me for a moment at some object a couple of thousand miles away, and lowered them again, leaving me with a vague feeling that there was something wrong with my personal appearance.

Very calmly she moved to the edge of the cliff, arranged her camp-stool, and sat down. Neither of us spoke a word. I watched her while she filled a little mug with water from a little bottle, opened her paint-box, selected a brush, and placed her sketching-block in position.

She began to paint.

Now, by all the laws of good taste, I should before this have made a dignified exit. It was plain that I was not to be regarded as an essential ornament of this portion of the Ware Cliff. By now, if I had been the Perfect Gentleman, I ought to have been a quarter of a mile away.

But there is a definite limit to what a man can do. I remained.

The sinking sun flung a carpet of gold across the sea. Phyllis' hair was tinged with it. Little waves tumbled lazily on the beach below. Except for the song of a distant blackbird, running through its repertoire before retiring for the night, everything was silent.

She sat there, dipping and painting and dipping again, with never a word for me--standing patiently and humbly behind her.

"Miss Derrick," I said.

She half turned her head.

"Yes."

"Why won't you speak to me?" I said.

"I don't understand you."

"Why won't you speak to me?"

"I think you know, Mr. Garnet."

"It is because of that boat accident?"

"Accident!"

"Episode," I amended.

She went on painting in silence. From where I stood I could see her profile. Her chin was tilted. Her expression was determined.

"Is it?" I said.

"Need we discuss it?"

"Not if you do not wish it."

I paused.

"But," I added, "I should have liked a chance to defend myself.... What glorious sunsets there have been these last few days. I believe we shall have this sort of weather for another month."

"I should not have thought that possible."

"The glass is going up," I said.

"I was not talking about the weather."

"It was dull of me to introduce such a worn-out topic."

"You said you could defend yourself."

"I said I should like the chance to do so."

"You have it."

"That's very kind of you. Thank you."

"Is there any reason for gratitude?"

"Every reason."

"Go on, Mr. Garnet. I can listen while I paint. But please sit down. I don't like being talked to from a height."

I sat down on the grass in front of her, feeling as I did so that the change of position in a manner clipped my wings. It is difficult to speak movingly while sitting on the ground. Instinctively I avoided eloquence. Standing up, I might have been pathetic and pleading. Sitting down, I was compelled to be matter-of-fact.

"You remember, of course, the night you and Professor Derrick dined with us? When I say dined, I use the word in a loose sense."

For a moment I thought she was going to smile. We were both thinking of Edwin. But it was only for a moment, and then her face grew cold once more, and the chin resumed its angle of determination.

"Yes," she said.

"You remember the unfortunate ending of the festivities?"

"Well?"

"If you recall that at all clearly, you will also remember that the fault was not mine, but Ukridge's."

"Well?"

"It was his behaviour that annoyed Professor Derrick. The position, then, was this, that I was to be cut off from the pleasantest friendship I had ever formed----"

I stopped for a moment. She bent a little lower over her easel, but remained silent.

"----Simply through the tactlessness of a prize idiot."

"I like Mr. Ukridge."

"I like him, too. But I can't pretend that he is anything but an idiot at times."

"Well?"

"I naturally wished to mend matters. It occurred to me that an excellent way would be by doing your father a service. It was seeing

him fishing that put the idea of a boat-accident into my head. I hoped for a genuine boat-accident. But those things only happen when one does not want them. So I determined to engineer one."

"You didn't think of the shock to my father."

"I did. It worried me very much."

"But you upset him all the same."

"Reluctantly."

She looked up, and our eyes met. I could detect no trace of forgiveness in hers.

"You behaved abominably," she said.

"I played a risky game, and I lost. And I shall now take the consequences. With luck I should have won. I did not have luck, and I am not going to grumble about it. But I am grateful to you for letting me explain. I should not have liked you to have gone on thinking that I played practical jokes on my friends. That is all I have to say. I think it was kind of you to listen. Good-bye, Miss Derrick."

I got up.

"Are you going?"

"Why not?"

"Please sit down again."

"But you wish to be alone----"

"Please sit down!"

There was a flush on the cheek turned towards me, and the chin was tilted higher.

I sat down.

To westward the sky had changed to the hue of a bruised cherry. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and the sea looked cold and leaden. The blackbird had long since flown.

"I am glad you told me, Mr. Garnet."

She dipped her brush in the water.

"Because I don't like to think badly of--people."

She bent her head over her painting.

"Though I still think you behaved very wrongly. And I am afraid my father will never forgive you for what you did."

Her father! As if he counted.

"But you do?" I said eagerly.

"I think you are less to blame than I thought you were at first."

"No more than that?"

"You can't expect to escape all consequences. You did a very stupid thing."

"I was tempted."

The sky was a dull grey now. It was growing dusk. The grass on which I sat was wet with dew.

I stood up.

"Isn't it getting a little dark for painting?" I said. "Are you sure you won't catch cold? It's very damp."

"Perhaps it is. And it is late, too."

She shut her paint-box, and emptied the little mug on to the grass.

"May I carry your things?" I said.

I think she hesitated, but only for a moment.

I possessed myself of the camp-stool, and we started on our homeward journey.

We were both silent. The spell of the quiet summer evening was on us.

"'And all the air a solemn stillness holds,'" she said softly. "I love this cliff, Mr. Garnet. It's the most soothing place in the world."

"I found it so this evening."

She glanced at me quickly.

"You're not looking well," she said. "Are you sure you are not overworking yourself?"

"No, it's not that."

Somehow we had stopped, as if by agreement, and were facing each other. There was a look in her eyes I had never seen there before. The

twilight hung like a curtain between us and the world. We were alone together in a world of our own.

"It is because I had offended you," I said.

She laughed a high, unnatural laugh.

"I have loved you ever since I first saw you," I said doggedly.