

## CH II ~ BREAKING THE ICE

*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*



The cottage from the window of which the Misses Williams had looked out stands, and has stood for many a year, in that pleasant suburban district which lies between Norwood, Anerley, and Forest Hill. Long before there had been a thought of a township there, when the Metropolis was still quite a distant thing, old Mr. Williams had inhabited "The Brambles," as the little house was called, and had owned all the fields about it. Six or eight such cottages scattered over a rolling country-side were all the houses to be found there in the days when the century was young. From afar, when the breeze came from the north, the dull, low roar of the great city might be heard, like the breaking of the tide of life, while along the horizon might be seen the dim curtain of smoke, the grim spray which that tide threw up. Gradually, however, as the years passed, the City had thrown out a long brick-feeler here and there, curving, extending, and coalescing, until at last the little cottages had been gripped round by these red tentacles, and had been absorbed to make room for the modern villa. Field by field the estate of old Mr. Williams had been sold to the speculative builder, and had borne rich crops of snug suburban dwellings, arranged in curving crescents and tree-lined avenues. The father had passed away before his cottage was entirely bricked round, but his two daughters, to whom the property had descended, lived to see the last vestige of country taken from them. For years they had clung to the one field which faced their windows, and it was only after much argument and many heartburnings, that they had at last consented that it should share the fate of the others. A broad road was driven through their quiet domain, the quarter was re-named "The Wilderness," and three square, staring, uncompromising villas began to sprout up on the other side. With sore hearts, the two shy little old maids watched their steady progress, and speculated as to what fashion of neighbors chance would bring into the little nook which had always been their own.

And at last they were all three finished. Wooden balconies and overhanging eaves had been added to them, so that, in the language of the advertisement, there were vacant three eligible Swiss-built villas, with sixteen rooms, no basement, electric

bells, hot and cold water, and every modern convenience, including a common tennis lawn, to be let at L100 a year, or L1,500 purchase. So tempting an offer did not long remain open. Within a few weeks the card had vanished from number one, and it was known that Admiral Hay Denver, V. C., C. B., with Mrs. Hay Denver and their only son, were about to move into it. The news brought peace to the hearts of the Williams sisters. They had lived with a settled conviction that some wild impossible colony, some shouting, singing family of madcaps, would break in upon their peace. This establishment at least was irreproachable. A reference to "Men of the Time" showed them that Admiral Hay Denver was a most distinguished officer, who had begun his active career at Bomarsund, and had ended it at Alexandria, having managed between these two episodes to see as much service as any man of his years. From the Taku Forts and the Shannon brigade, to dhow-harrying off Zanzibar, there was no variety of naval work which did not appear in his record; while the Victoria Cross, and the Albert Medal for saving life, vouched for it that in peace as in war his courage was still of the same true temper. Clearly a very eligible neighbor this, the more so as they had been confidentially assured by the estate agent that Mr. Harold Denver, the son, was a most quiet young gentleman, and that he was busy from morning to night on the Stock Exchange.

The Hay Denvers had hardly moved in before number two also struck its placard, and again the ladies found that they had no reason to be discontented with their neighbors. Doctor Balthazar Walker was a very well-known name in the medical world. Did not his qualifications, his membership, and the record of his writings fill a long half-column in the "Medical Directory," from his first little paper on the "Gouty Diathesis" in 1859 to his exhaustive treatise upon "Affections of the Vaso-Motor System" in 1884? A successful medical career which promised to end in a presidency of a college and a baronetcy, had been cut short by his sudden inheritance of a considerable sum from a grateful patient, which had rendered him independent for life, and had enabled him to turn his attention to the more scientific part of his profession, which had always had a greater charm for him than its more practical and commercial aspect. To this end he had given up his house in Weymouth Street, and had taken this opportunity of moving himself, his scientific instruments, and his two charming daughters (he had been a widower for some years) into the more peaceful atmosphere of Norwood.

There was thus but one villa unoccupied, and it was no wonder that the two maiden ladies watched with a keen interest, which deepened into a dire apprehension, the curious incidents which heralded the coming of the new tenants. They had already learned from the agent that the family consisted of two only, Mrs. Westmacott, a widow, and her nephew, Charles Westmacott. How simple and how select it had sounded! Who could have foreseen from it these fearful portents which seemed to threaten violence and discord among the dwellers in The Wilderness? Again the two old maids cried in heartfelt chorus that they wished they had not sold their field.

“Well, at least, Monica,” remarked Bertha, as they sat over their teacups that afternoon, “however strange these people may be, it is our duty to be as polite to them as to the others.”

“Most certainly,” acquiesced her sister.

“Since we have called upon Mrs. Hay Denver and upon the Misses Walker, we must call upon this Mrs. Westmacott also.”

“Certainly, dear. As long as they are living upon our land I feel as if they were in a sense our guests, and that it is our duty to welcome them.”

“Then we shall call to-morrow,” said Bertha, with decision.

“Yes, dear, we shall. But, oh, I wish it was over!”

At four o'clock on the next day, the two maiden ladies set off upon their hospitable errand. In their stiff, crackling dresses of black silk, with jet-bespangled jackets, and little rows of cylindrical grey curls drooping down on either side of their black bonnets, they looked like two old fashion plates which had wandered off into the wrong decade. Half curious and half fearful, they knocked at the door of number three, which was instantly opened by a red-headed page-boy.

Yes, Mrs. Westmacott was at home. He ushered them into the front room, furnished as a drawing-room, where in spite of the fine spring weather a large fire was burning in the grate. The boy took their cards, and then, as they sat down together upon a settee, he set their nerves in a thrill by darting behind a curtain with a shrill cry, and prodding at something with his foot. The bull pup which they had seen upon the day before bolted from its hiding-place, and scuttled snarling from the room.

“It wants to get at Eliza,” said the youth, in a confidential whisper. “Master says she would give him more’n he brought.” He smiled affably at the two little stiff black figures, and departed in search of his mistress.

“What—what did he say?” gasped Bertha.

“Something about a—— Oh, goodness gracious! Oh, help, help, help, help, help!” The two sisters had bounded on to the settee, and stood there with staring eyes and skirts gathered in, while they filled the whole house with their yells. Out of a high wicker-work basket which stood by the fire there had risen a flat diamond-shaped head with wicked green eyes which came flickering upwards, waving gently from side to side, until a foot or more of glossy scaly neck was visible. Slowly the vicious head came floating up, while at every oscillation a fresh burst of shrieks came from the settee.

“What in the name of mischief!” cried a voice, and there was the mistress of the house standing in the doorway. Her gaze at first had merely taken in the fact that two strangers were standing screaming upon her red plush sofa. A glance at the fireplace, however, showed her the cause of the terror, and she burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

“Charley,” she shouted, “here’s Eliza misbehaving again.”

“I’ll settle her,” answered a masculine voice, and the young man dashed into the room. He had a brown horse-cloth in his hand, which he threw over the basket, making it fast with a piece of twine so as to effectually imprison its inmate, while his aunt ran across to reassure her visitors.

"It is only a rock snake," she explained.

"Oh, Bertha!" "Oh, Monica!" gasped the poor exhausted gentlewomen.

"She's hatching out some eggs. That is why we have the fire. Eliza always does better when she is warm. She is a sweet, gentle creature, but no doubt she thought that you had designs upon her eggs. I suppose that you did not touch any of them?"

"Oh, let us get away, Bertha!" cried Monica, with her thin, black-gloved hands thrown forwards in abhorrence.

"Not away, but into the next room," said Mrs. Westmacott, with the air of one whose word was law. "This way, if you please! It is less warm here." She led the way into a very handsomely appointed library, with three great cases of books, and upon the fourth side a long yellow table littered over with papers and scientific instruments. "Sit here, and you, there," she continued. "That is right. Now let me see, which of you is Miss Williams, and which Miss Bertha Williams?"

"I am Miss Williams," said Monica, still palpitating, and glancing furtively about in dread of some new horror.

"And you live, as I understand, over at the pretty little cottage. It is very nice of you to call so early. I don't suppose that we shall get on, but still the intention is equally good." She crossed her legs and leaned her back against the marble mantelpiece.

"We thought that perhaps we might be of some assistance," said Bertha, timidly. "If there is anything which we could do to make you feel more at home——"

"Oh, thank you, I am too old a traveler to feel anything but at home wherever I go. I've just come back from a few months in the Marquesas Islands, where I had a very pleasant visit. That was where I got Eliza. In many respects the Marquesas Islands now lead the world."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Miss Williams. "In what respect?"

"In the relation of the sexes. They have worked out the great problem upon their own lines, and their isolated geographical position has helped them to come to a conclusion of their own. The woman there is, as she should be, in every way the absolute equal of the male. Come in, Charles, and sit down. Is Eliza all right?"

"All right, aunt."

"These are our neighbors, the Misses Williams. Perhaps they will have some stout. You might bring in a couple of bottles, Charles."

"No, no, thank you! None for us!" cried her two visitors, earnestly.

"No? I am sorry that I have no tea to offer you. I look upon the subserviency of woman as largely due to her abandoning nutritious drinks and invigorating exercises to the male. I do neither." She picked up a pair of fifteen-pound dumb-bells from beside the fireplace and swung them lightly about her head. "You see what may be done on stout," said she.

"But don't you think," the elder Miss Williams suggested timidly, "don't you think, Mrs. Westmascott, that woman has a mission of her own?"

The lady of the house dropped her dumb-bells with a crash upon the floor.

"The old cant!" she cried. "The old shibboleth! What is this mission which is reserved for woman? All that is humble, that is mean, that is soul-killing, that is so contemptible and so ill-paid that none other will touch it. All that is woman's mission. And who imposed these limitations upon her? Who cooped her up within this narrow sphere? Was it Providence? Was it nature? No, it was the arch enemy. It was man."

"Oh, I say, auntie!" drawled her nephew.

“It was man, Charles. It was you and your fellows I say that woman is a colossal monument to the selfishness of man. What is all this boasted chivalry—these fine words and vague phrases? Where is it when we wish to put it to the test? Man in the abstract will do anything to help a woman. Of course. How does it work when his pocket is touched? Where is his chivalry then? Will the doctors help her to qualify? will the lawyers help her to be called to the bar? will the clergy tolerate her in the Church? Oh, it is close your ranks then and refer poor woman to her mission! Her mission! To be thankful for coppers and not to interfere with the men while they grabble for gold, like swine round a trough, that is man’s reading of the mission of women. You may sit there and sneer, Charles, while you look upon your victim, but you know that it is truth, every word of it.”

Terrified as they were by this sudden torrent of words, the two gentlewomen could not but smile at the sight of the fiery, domineering victim and the big apologetic representative of mankind who sat meekly bearing all the sins of his sex. The lady struck a match, whipped a cigarette from a case upon the mantelpiece, and began to draw the smoke into her lungs.

“I find it very soothing when my nerves are at all ruffled,” she explained. “You don’t smoke? Ah, you miss one of the purest of pleasures—one of the few pleasures which are without a reaction.”

Miss Williams smoothed out her silken lap.

“It is a pleasure,” she said, with some approach to self-assertion, “which Bertha and I are rather too old-fashioned to enjoy.”

“No doubt, It would probably make you very ill if you attempted it. By the way, I hope that you will come to some of our Guild meetings. I shall see that tickets are sent you.”

“Your Guild?”

"It is not yet formed, but I shall lose no time in forming a committee. It is my habit to establish a branch of the Emancipation Guild wherever I go. There is a Mrs. Sanderson in Anerley who is already one of the emancipated, so that I have a nucleus. It is only by organized resistance, Miss Williams, that we can hope to hold our own against the selfish sex. Must you go, then?"

"Yes, we have one or two other visits to pay," said the elder sister. "You will, I am sure, excuse us. I hope that you will find Norwood a pleasant residence."

"All places are to me simply a battle-field," she answered, gripping first one and then the other with a grip which crumpled up their little thin fingers. "The days for work and healthful exercise, the evenings to Browning and high discourse, eh, Charles? Good-bye!" She came to the door with them, and as they glanced back they saw her still standing there with the yellow bull pup cuddled up under one forearm, and the thin blue reek of her cigarette ascending from her lips.

"Oh, what a dreadful, dreadful woman!" whispered sister Bertha, as they hurried down the street. "Thank goodness that it is over."

"But she'll return the visit," answered the other. "I think that we had better tell Mary that we are not at home."