

CH IV ~ A SISTER'S SECRET

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



"Tell me, Miss Walker! You know how things should be. What would you say was a good profession for a young man of twenty-six who has had no education worth speaking about, and who is not very quick by nature?" The speaker was Charles Westmacott, and the time this same summer evening in the tennis ground, though the shadows had fallen now and the game been abandoned.

The girl glanced up at him, amused and surprised.

"Do you mean yourself?"

"Precisely."

"But how could I tell?"

"I have no one to advise me. I believe that you could do it better than any one. I feel confidence in your opinion."

"It is very flattering." She glanced up again at his earnest, questioning face, with its Saxon eyes and drooping flaxen mustache, in some doubt as to whether he might be joking. On the contrary, all his attention seemed to be concentrated upon her answer.

"It depends so much upon what you can do, you know. I do not know you sufficiently to be able to say what natural gifts you have." They were walking slowly across the lawn in the direction of the house.

"I have none. That is to say none worth mentioning. I have no memory and I am very slow."

"But you are very strong."

"Oh, if that goes for anything. I can put up a hundred-pound bar till further orders; but what sort of a calling is that?"

Some little joke about being called to the bar flickered up in Miss Walker's mind, but her companion was in such obvious earnest that she stifled down her inclination to laugh.

"I can do a mile on the cinder-track in 4:50 and across-country in 5:20, but how is that to help me? I might be a cricket professional, but it is not a very dignified position. Not that I care a straw about dignity, you know, but I should not like to hurt the old lady's feelings.

"Your aunt's?"

"Yes, my aunt's. My parents were killed in the Mutiny, you know, when I was a baby, and she has looked after me ever since. She has been very good to me. I'm sorry to leave her."

"But why should you leave her?" They had reached the garden gate, and the girl leaned her racket upon the top of it, looking up with grave interest at her big white-flanneled companion.

"It's, Browning," said he.

"What!"

"Don't tell my aunt that I said it"—he sank his voice to a whisper—"I hate Browning."

Clara Walker rippled off into such a merry peal of laughter that he forgot the evil things which he had suffered from the poet, and burst out laughing too.

"I can't make him out," said he. "I try, but he is one too many. No doubt it is very stupid of me; I don't deny it. But as long as I cannot there is no use pretending that I can. And then of course she feels hurt, for she is very fond of him, and likes to read him aloud in the evenings. She is reading a piece now 'Pippa Passes,' and I assure you, Miss Walker, that I don't even know what the title means. You must think me a dreadful fool."

"But surely he is not so incomprehensible as all that?" she said, as an attempt at encouragement.

"He is very bad. There are some things, you know, which are fine. That ride of the three Dutchmen, and Herve Riel and others, they are all right. But there was a piece we read last week. The first line stumped my aunt, and it takes a good deal to do that, for she rides very straight. 'Setebos and Setebos and Setebos.' That was the line."

"It sounds like a charm."

"No, it is a gentleman's name. Three gentlemen, I thought, at first, but my aunt says one. Then he goes on, 'Thinketh he dwelleth in the light of the moon.' It was a very trying piece."

Clara Walker laughed again.

"You must not think of leaving your aunt," she said. "Think how lonely she would be without you."

"Well, yes, I have thought of that. But you must remember that my aunt is to all intents hardly middle-aged, and a very eligible person. I don't think that her dislike to mankind extends to individuals. She might form new ties, and then I should be a third wheel in the coach. It was all very well as long as I was only a boy, when her first husband was alive."

"But, good gracious, you don't mean that Mrs. Westmacott is going to marry again?" gasped Clara.

The young man glanced down at her with a question in his eyes. "Oh, it is only a remote, possibility, you know," said he. "Still, of course, it might happen, and I should like to know what I ought to turn my hand to."

"I wish I could help you," said Clara. "But I really know very little about such things. However, I could talk to my father, who knows a very great deal of the world."

"I wish you would. I should be so glad if you would."

"Then I certainly will. And now I must say good-night, Mr. Westmacott, for papa will be wondering where I am."

"Good night, Miss Walker." He pulled off his flannel cap, and stalked away through the gathering darkness.

Clara had imagined that they had been the last on the lawn, but, looking back from the steps which led up to the French windows, she saw two dark figures moving across towards the house. As they came nearer she could distinguish that they were Harold Denver and her sister Ida. The murmur of their voices rose up to her ears, and then the musical little child-like laugh which she knew so well. "I am so delighted," she heard her sister say. "So pleased and proud. I had no idea of it. Your words were such a surprise and a joy to me. Oh, I am so glad."

"Is that you, Ida?"

"Oh, there is Clara. I must go in, Mr. Denver. Good-night!"

There were a few whispered words, a laugh from Ida, and a "Good-night, Miss Walker," out of the darkness. Clara took her sister's hand, and they passed together through the long folding window. The Doctor had gone into his study, and the dining-room was empty. A single small red lamp upon the sideboard was reflected tenfold by the plate about it and the mahogany beneath it, though its single wick cast but a feeble light into the large, dimly shadowed room. Ida danced off to the big

central lamp, but Clara put her hand upon her arm. "I rather like this quiet light," said she. "Why should we not have a chat?" She sat in the Doctor's large red plush chair, and her sister cuddled down upon the footstool at her feet, glancing up at her elder with a smile upon her lips and a mischievous gleam in her eyes. There was a shade of anxiety in Clara's face, which cleared away as she gazed into her sister's frank blue eyes.

"Have you anything to tell me, dear?" she asked.

Ida gave a little pout and shrug to her shoulder. "The Solicitor-General then opened the case for the prosecution," said she. "You are going to cross-examine me, Clara, so don't deny it. I do wish you would have that grey satin foulard of yours done up. With a little trimming and a new white vest it would look as good as new, and it is really very dowdy."

"You were quite late upon the lawn," said the inexorable Clara.

"Yes, I was rather. So were you. Have you anything to tell me?" She broke away into her merry musical laugh.

"I was chatting with Mr. Westmacott."

"And I was chatting with Mr. Denver. By the way, Clara, now tell me truly, what do you think of Mr. Denver? Do you like him? Honestly now!"

"I like him very much indeed. I think that he is one of the most gentlemanly, modest, manly young men that I have ever known. So now, dear, have you nothing to tell me?" Clara smoothed down her sister's golden hair with a motherly gesture, and stooped her face to catch the expected confidence. She could wish nothing better than that Ida should be the wife of Harold Denver, and from the words which she had overheard as they left the lawn that evening, she could not doubt that there was some understanding between them.

But there came no confession from Ida. Only the same mischievous smile and amused gleam in her deep blue eyes.

“That grey foulard dress——” she began.

“Oh, you little tease! Come now, I will ask you what you have just asked me. Do you like Harold Denver?”

“Oh, he’s a darling!”

“Ida!”

“Well, you asked me. That’s what I think of him. And now, you dear old inquisitive, you will get nothing more out of me; so you must wait and not be too curious. I’m going off to see what papa is doing.” She sprang to her feet, threw her arms round her sister’s neck, gave her a final squeeze, and was gone. A chorus from Olivette, sung in her clear contralto, grew fainter and fainter until it ended in the slam of a distant door.

But Clara Walker still sat in the dim-lit room with her chin upon her hands, and her dreamy eyes looking out into the gathering gloom. It was the duty of her, a maiden, to play the part of a mother—to guide another in paths which her own steps had not yet trodden. Since her mother died not a thought had been given to herself, all was for her father and her sister. In her own eyes she was herself very plain, and she knew that her manner was often ungracious when she would most wish to be gracious. She saw her face as the glass reflected it, but she did not see the changing play of expression which gave it its charm—the infinite pity, the sympathy, the sweet womanliness which drew towards her all who were in doubt and in trouble, even as poor slow-moving Charles Westmacott had been drawn to her that night. She was herself, she thought, outside the pale of love. But it was very different with Ida, merry, little, quick-witted, bright-faced Ida. She was born for love. It was her inheritance. But she was young and innocent. She must not be allowed to venture too far without help in those dangerous waters. Some understanding there was between her and Harold Denver. In her heart of hearts Clara, like every good woman, was a

match-maker, and already she had chosen Denver of all men as the one to whom she could most safely confide Ida. He had talked to her more than once on the serious topics of life, on his aspirations, on what a man could do to leave the world better for his presence. She knew that he was a man of a noble nature, high-minded and earnest. And yet she did not like this secrecy, this disinclination upon the part of one so frank and honest as Ida to tell her what was passing. She would wait, and if she got the opportunity next day she would lead Harold Denver himself on to this topic. It was possible that she might learn from him what her sister had refused to tell her.