

CH V ~ A NAVAL CONQUEST

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



It was the habit of the Doctor and the Admiral to accompany each other upon a morning ramble between breakfast and lunch. The dwellers in those quiet tree-lined roads were accustomed to see the two figures, the long, thin, austere seaman, and the short, bustling, tweed-clad physician, pass and repass with such regularity that a stopped clock has been reset by them. The Admiral took two steps to his companion's three, but the younger man was the quicker, and both were equal to a good four and a half miles an hour.

It was a lovely summer day which followed the events which have been described. The sky was of the deepest blue, with a few white, fleecy clouds drifting lazily across it, and the air was filled with the low drone of insects or with a sudden sharper note as bee or bluefly shot past with its quivering, long-drawn hum, like an insect tuning-fork. As the friends topped each rise which leads up to the Crystal Palace, they could see the dun clouds of London stretching along the northern skyline, with spire or dome breaking through the low-lying haze. The Admiral was in high spirits, for the morning post had brought good news to his son.

"It is wonderful, Walker," he was saying, "positively wonderful, the way that boy of mine has gone ahead during the last three years. We heard from Pearson to-day. Pearson is the senior partner, you know, and my boy the junior—Pearson and Denver the firm. Cunning old dog is Pearson, as cute and as greedy as a Rio shark. Yet he goes off for a fortnight's leave, and puts my boy in full charge, with all that immense business in his hands, and a freehand to do what he likes with it. How's that for confidence, and he only three years upon 'Change?"

"Any one would confide in him. His face is a surety," said the Doctor.

"Go on, Walker!" The Admiral dug his elbow at him. "You know my weak side. Still it's truth all the same. I've been blessed with a good wife and a good son, and maybe

I relish them the more for having been cut off from them so long. I have much to be thankful for!"

"And so have I. The best two girls that ever stepped. There's Clara, who has learned up as much medicine as would give her the L.S.A., simply in order that she may sympathize with me in my work. But hullo, what is this coming along?"

"All drawing and the wind astern!" cried the Admiral. "Fourteen knots if it's one. Why, by George, it is that woman!"

A rolling cloud of yellow dust had streamed round the curve of the road, and from the heart of it had emerged a high tandem tricycle flying along at a breakneck pace. In front sat Mrs. Westmacott clad in a heather tweed pea-jacket, a skirt which just passed her knees and a pair of thick gaiters of the same material. She had a great bundle of red papers under her arm, while Charles, who sat behind her clad in Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, bore a similar roll protruding from either pocket. Even as they watched, the pair eased up, the lady sprang off, impaled one of her bills upon the garden railing of an empty house, and then jumping on to her seat again was about to hurry onwards when her nephew drew her attention to the two gentlemen upon the footpath.

"Oh, now, really I didn't notice you," said she, taking a few turns of the treadle and steering the machine across to them. "Is it not a beautiful morning?"

"Lovely," answered the Doctor. "You seem to be very busy."

"I am very busy." She pointed to the colored paper which still fluttered from the railing. "We have been pushing our propaganda, you see. Charles and I have been at it since seven o'clock. It is about our meeting. I wish it to be a great success. See!" She smoothed out one of the bills, and the Doctor read his own name in great black letters across the bottom.

"We don't forget our chairman, you see. Everybody is coming. Those two dear little old maids opposite, the Williamses, held out for some time; but I have their promise now. Admiral, I am sure that you wish us well."

"Hum! I wish you no harm, ma'am."

"You will come on the platform?"

"I'll be——No, I don't think I can do that."

"To our meeting, then?"

"No, ma'am; I don't go out after dinner."

"Oh yes, you will come. I will call in if I may, and chat it over with you when you come home. We have not breakfasted yet. Goodbye!" There was a whir of wheels, and the yellow cloud rolled away down the road again. By some legerdemain the Admiral found that he was clutching in his right hand one of the obnoxious bills. He crumpled it up, and threw it into the roadway.

"I'll be hanged if I go, Walker," said he, as he resumed his walk. "I've never been hustled into doing a thing yet, whether by woman or man."

"I am not a betting man," answered the Doctor, "but I rather think that the odds are in favor of your going."

The Admiral had hardly got home, and had just seated himself in his dining-room, when the attack upon him was renewed. He was slowly and lovingly unfolding the Times preparatory to the long read which led up to luncheon, and had even got so far as to fasten his golden pince-nez on to his thin, high-bridged nose, when he heard a crunching of gravel, and, looking over the top of his paper, saw Mrs. Westmacott coming up the garden walk. She was still dressed in the singular costume which offended the sailor's old-fashioned notions of propriety, but he could not deny, as he looked at her, that she was a very fine woman. In many climes he had looked upon

women of all shades and ages, but never upon a more clearcut, handsome face, nor a more erect, supple, and womanly figure. He ceased to glower as he gazed upon her, and the frown smoothed away from his rugged brow.

"May I come in?" said she, framing herself in the open window, with a background of green sward and blue sky. "I feel like an invader deep in an enemy's country."

"It is a very welcome invasion, ma'am," said he, clearing his throat and pulling at his high collar. "Try this garden chair. What is there that I can do for you? Shall I ring and let Mrs. Denver know that you are here?"

"Pray do not trouble, Admiral. I only looked in with reference to our little chat this morning. I wish that you would give us your powerful support at our coming meeting for the improvement of the condition of woman."

"No, ma'am, I can't do that." He pursed up his lips and shook his grizzled head.

"And why not?"

"Against my principles, ma'am."

"But why?"

"Because woman has her duties and man has his. I may be old-fashioned, but that is my view. Why, what is the world coming to? I was saying to Dr. Walker only last night that we shall have a woman wanting to command the Channel Fleet next."

"That is one of the few professions which cannot be improved," said Mrs. Westmaccott, with her sweetest smile. "Poor woman must still look to man for protection."

"I don't like these new-fangled ideas, ma'am. I tell you honestly that I don't. I like discipline, and I think every one is the better for it. Women have got a great deal which they had not in the days of our fathers. They have universities all for them-

selves, I am told, and there are women doctors, I hear. Surely they should rest contented. What more can they want?"

"You are a sailor, and sailors are always chivalrous. If you could see how things really are, you would change your opinion. What are the poor things to do? There are so many of them and so few things to which they can turn their hands. Governesses? But there are hardly any situations. Music and drawing? There is not one in fifty who has any special talent in that direction. Medicine? It is still surrounded with difficulties for women, and it takes many years and a small fortune to qualify. Nursing? It is hard work ill paid, and none but the strongest can stand it. What would you have them do then, Admiral? Sit down and starve?"

"Tut, tut! It is not so bad as that."

"The pressure is terrible. Advertise for a lady companion at ten shillings a week, which is less than a cook's wage, and see how many answers you get. There is no hope, no outlook, for these struggling thousands. Life is a dull, sordid struggle, leading down to a cheerless old age. Yet when we try to bring some little ray of hope, some chance, however distant, of something better, we are told by chivalrous gentlemen that it is against their principles to help."

The Admiral winced, but shook his head in dissent.

"There is banking, the law, veterinary surgery, government offices, the civil service, all these at least should be thrown freely open to women, if they have brains enough to compete successfully for them. Then if woman were unsuccessful it would be her own fault, and the majority of the population of this country could no longer complain that they live under a different law to the minority, and that they are held down in poverty and serfdom, with every road to independence sealed to them."

"What would you propose to do, ma'am?"

"To set the more obvious injustices right, and so to pave the way for a reform. Now look at that man digging in the field. I know him. He can neither read nor write, he

is steeped in whisky, and he has as much intelligence as the potatoes that he is digging. Yet the man has a vote, can possibly turn the scale of an election, and may help to decide the policy of this empire. Now, to take the nearest example, here am I, a woman who have had some education, who have traveled, and who have seen and studied the institutions of many countries. I hold considerable property, and I pay more in imperial taxes than that man spends in whisky, which is saying a great deal, and yet I have no more direct influence upon the disposal of the money which I pay than that fly which creeps along the wall. Is that right? Is it fair?"

The Admiral moved uneasily in his chair. "Yours is an exceptional case," said he.

"But no woman has a voice. Consider that the women are a majority in the nation. Yet if there was a question of legislation upon which all women were agreed upon one side and all the men upon the other, it would appear that the matter was settled unanimously when more than half the population were opposed to it. Is that right?"

Again the Admiral wriggled. It was very awkward for the gallant seaman to have a handsome woman opposite to him, bombarding him with questions to none of which he could find an answer. "Couldn't even get the tompions out of his guns," as he explained the matter to the Doctor that evening.

"Now those are really the points that we shall lay stress upon at the meeting. The free and complete opening of the professions, the final abolition of the zenana I call it, and the franchise to all women who pay Queen's taxes above a certain sum. Surely there is nothing unreasonable in that. Nothing which could offend your principles. We shall have medicine, law, and the church all rallying that night for the protection of woman. Is the navy to be the one profession absent?"

The Admiral jumped out of his chair with an evil word in his throat. "There, there, ma'am," he cried. "Drop it for a time. I have heard enough. You've turned me a point or two. I won't deny it. But let it stand at that. I will think it over."

“Certainly, Admiral. We would not hurry you in your decision. But we still hope to see you on our platform.” She rose and moved about in her lounging masculine fashion from one picture to another, for the walls were thickly covered with reminiscences of the Admiral’s voyages.

“Hullo!” said she. “Surely this ship would have furled all her lower canvas and reefed her topsails if she found herself on a lee shore with the wind on her quarter.”

“Of course she would. The artist was never past Gravesend, I swear. It’s the Penelope as she was on the 14th of June, 1857, in the throat of the Straits of Banca, with the Island of Banca on the starboard bow, and Sumatra on the port. He painted it from description, but of course, as you very sensibly say, all was snug below and she carried storm sails and double-reefed topsails, for it was blowing a cyclone from the sou’east. I compliment you, ma’am, I do indeed!”

“Oh, I have done a little sailing myself—as much as a woman can aspire to, you know. This is the Bay of Funchal. What a lovely frigate!”

“Lovely, you say! Ah, she was lovely! That is the *Andromeda*. I was a mate aboard of her—sub-lieutenant they call it now, though I like the old name best.”

“What a lovely rake her masts have, and what a curve to her bows! She must have been a clipper.”

The old sailor rubbed his hands and his eyes glistened. His old ships bordered close upon his wife and his son in his affections.

“I know Funchal,” said the lady carelessly. “A couple of years ago I had a seven-ton cutter-rigged yacht, the *Banshee*, and we ran over to Madeira from Falmouth.”

“You ma’am, in a seven-tonner?”

“With a couple of Cornish lads for a crew. Oh, it was glorious! A fortnight right out in the open, with no worries, no letters, no callers, no petty thoughts, nothing but

the grand works of God, the tossing sea and the great silent sky. They talk of riding, indeed, I am fond of horses, too, but what is there to compare with the swoop of a little craft as she pitches down the long steep side of a wave, and then the quiver and spring as she is tossed upwards again? Oh, if our souls could transmigrate I'd be a seamew above all birds that fly! But I keep you, Admiral. Adieu!"

The old sailor was too transported with sympathy to say a word. He could only shake her broad muscular hand. She was half-way down the garden path before she heard him calling her, and saw his grizzled head and weather-stained face looking out from behind the curtains.

"You may put me down for the platform," he cried, and vanished abashed behind the curtain of his Times, where his wife found him at lunch time.

"I hear that you have had quite a long chat with Mrs. Westmacott," said she.

"Yes, and I think that she is one of the most sensible women that I ever knew."

"Except on the woman's rights question, of course."

"Oh, I don't know. She had a good deal to say for herself on that also. In fact, mother, I have taken a platform ticket for her meeting."