

CH VIII ~ SHADOWS BEFORE

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



Mrs. Westmacott's great meeting for the enfranchisement of woman had passed over, and it had been a triumphant success. All the maids and matrons of the southern suburbs had rallied at her summons, there was an influential platform with Dr. Balthazar Walker in the chair, and Admiral Hay Denver among his more prominent supporters. One benighted male had come in from the outside darkness and had jeered from the further end of the hall, but he had been called to order by the chair, petrified by indignant glances from the unenfranchised around him, and finally escorted to the door by Charles Westmacott. Fiery resolutions were passed, to be forwarded to a large number of leading statesmen, and the meeting broke up with the conviction that a shrewd blow had been struck for the cause of woman.

But there was one woman at least to whom the meeting and all that was connected with it had brought anything but pleasure. Clara Walker watched with a heavy heart the friendship and close intimacy which had sprung up between her father and the widow. From week to week it had increased until no day ever passed without their being together. The coming meeting had been the excuse for these continual interviews, but now the meeting was over, and still the Doctor would refer every point which rose to the judgment of his neighbor. He would talk, too, to his two daughters of her strength of character, her decisive mind, and of the necessity of their cultivating her acquaintance and following her example, until at last it had become his most common topic of conversation.

All this might have passed as merely the natural pleasure which an elderly man might take in the society of an intelligent and handsome woman, but there were other points which seemed to Clara to give it a deeper meaning. She could not forget that when Charles Westmacott had spoken to her one night he had alluded to the possibility of his aunt marrying again. He must have known or noticed something before he would speak upon such a subject. And then again Mrs. Westmacott had herself said that she hoped to change her style of living shortly and take over com-

pletely new duties. What could that mean except that she expected to marry? And whom? She seemed to see few friends outside their own little circle. She must have alluded to her father. It was a hateful thought, and yet it must be faced.

One evening the Doctor had been rather late at his neighbor's. He used to go into the Admiral's after dinner, but now he turned more frequently in the other direction. When he returned Clara was sitting alone in the drawing-room reading a magazine. She sprang up as he entered, pushed forward his chair, and ran to fetch his slippers.

"You are looking a little pale, dear," he remarked.

"Oh, no, papa, I am very well."

"All well with Harold?"

"Yes. His partner, Mr. Pearson, is still away, and he is doing all the work."

"Well done. He is sure to succeed. Where is Ida?"

"In her room, I think."

"She was with Charles Westmacott on the lawn not very long ago. He seems very fond of her. He is not very bright, but I think he will make her a good husband."

"I am sure of it, papa. He is very manly and reliable."

"Yes, I should think that he is not the sort of man who goes wrong. There is nothing hidden about him. As to his brightness, it really does not matter, for his aunt, Mrs. Westmacott, is very rich, much richer than you would think from her style of living, and she has made him a handsome provision."

"I am glad of that."

"It is between ourselves. I am her trustee, and so I know something of her arrangements. And when are you going to marry, Clara?"

"Oh, papa, not for some time yet. We have not thought of a date."

"Well, really, I don't know that there is any reason for delay. He has a competence and it increases yearly. As long as you are quite certain that your mind is made up——"

"Oh, papa!"

"Well, then, I really do not know why there should be any delay. And Ida, too, must be married within the next few months. Now, what I want to know is what I am to do when my two little companions run away from me." He spoke lightly, but his eyes were grave as he looked questioningly at his daughter.

"Dear papa, you shall not be alone. It will be years before Harold and I think of marrying, and when we do you must come and live with us."

"No, no, dear. I know that you mean what you say, but I have seen something of the world, and I know that such arrangements never answer. There cannot be two masters in a house, and yet at my age my freedom is very necessary to me."

"But you would be completely free."

"No, dear, you cannot be that if you are a guest in another man's house. Can you suggest no other alternative?"

"That we remain with you."

"No, no. That is out of the question. Mrs. Westmacott herself says that a woman's first duty is to marry. Marriage, however, should be an equal partnership, as she points out. I should wish you both to marry, but still I should like a suggestion from you, Clara, as to what I should do."

"But there is no hurry, papa. Let us wait. I do not intend to marry yet."

Doctor Walker looked disappointed. "Well, Clara, if you can suggest nothing, I suppose that I must take the initiative myself," said he.

"Then what do you propose, papa?" She braced herself as one who sees the blow which is about to fall.

He looked at her and hesitated. "How like your poor dear mother you are, Clara!" he cried. "As I looked at you then it was as if she had come back from the grave." He stooped towards her and kissed her. "There, run away to your sister, my dear, and do not trouble yourself about me. Nothing is settled yet, but you will find that all will come right."

Clara went upstairs sad at heart, for she was sure now that what she had feared was indeed about to come to pass, and that her father was going to take Mrs. Westmacott to be his wife. In her pure and earnest mind her mother's memory was enshrined as that of a saint, and the thought that any one should take her place seemed a terrible desecration. Even worse, however, did this marriage appear when looked at from the point of view of her father's future. The widow might fascinate him by her knowledge of the world, her dash, her strength, her unconventionality—all these qualities Clara was willing to allow her—but she was convinced that she would be unendurable as a life companion. She had come to an age when habits are not lightly to be changed, nor was she a woman who was at all likely to attempt to change them. How would a sensitive man like her father stand the constant strain of such a wife, a woman who was all decision, with no softness, and nothing soothing in her nature? It passed as a mere eccentricity when they heard of her stout drinking, her cigarette smoking, her occasional whiffs at a long clay pipe, her horsewhipping of a drunken servant, and her companionship with the snake Eliza, whom she was in the habit of bearing about in her pocket. All this would become unendurable to her father when his first infatuation was past. For his own sake, then, as well as for her mother's memory, this match must be prevented. And yet how powerless she was to

prevent it! What could she do? Could Harold aid her? Perhaps. Or Ida? At least she would tell her sister and see what she could suggest.

Ida was in her boudoir, a tiny little tapestried room, as neat and dainty as herself, with low walls hung with Imari plaques and with pretty little Swiss brackets bearing blue Kaga ware, or the pure white Coalport china. In a low chair beneath a red shaded standing lamp sat Ida, in a diaphanous evening dress of mousseline de soie, the ruddy light tinging her sweet childlike face, and glowing on her golden curls. She sprang up as her sister entered, and threw her arms around her.

“Dear old Clara! Come and sit down here beside me. I have not had a chat for days. But, oh, what a troubled face! What is it then?” She put up her forefinger and smoothed her sister’s brow with it.

Clara pulled up a stool, and sitting down beside her sister, passed her arm round her waist. “I am so sorry to trouble you, dear Ida,” she said. “But I do not know what to do.

“There’s nothing the matter with Harold?”

“Oh, no, Ida.”

“Nor with my Charles?”

“No, no.”

Ida gave a sigh of relief. “You quite frightened me, dear,” said she. “You can’t think how solemn you look. What is it, then?”

“I believe that papa intends to ask Mrs. Westmacott to marry him.”

Ida burst out laughing. “What can have put such a notion into your head, Clara?”

"It is only too true, Ida. I suspected it before, and he himself almost told me as much with his own lips to-night. I don't think that it is a laughing matter."

"Really, I could not help it. If you had told me that those two dear old ladies opposite, the Misses Williams, were both engaged, you would not have surprised me more. It is really too funny."

"Funny, Ida! Think of any one taking the place of dear mother."

But her sister was of a more practical and less sentimental nature. "I am sure," said she, "that dear mother would like papa to do whatever would make him most happy. We shall both be away, and why should papa not please himself?"

"But think how unhappy he will be. You know how quiet he is in his ways, and how even a little thing will upset him. How could he live with a wife who would make his whole life a series of surprises? Fancy what a whirlwind she must be in a house. A man at his age cannot change his ways. I am sure he would be miserable."

Ida's face grew graver, and she pondered over the matter for a few minutes. "I really think that you are right as usual," said she at last. "I admire Charlie's aunt very much, you know, and I think that she is a very useful and good person, but I don't think she would do as a wife for poor quiet papa."

"But he will certainly ask her, and I really think that she intends to accept him. Then it would be too late to interfere. We have only a few days at the most. And what can we do? How can we hope to make him change his mind?"

Again Ida pondered. "He has never tried what it is to live with a strong-minded woman," said she. "If we could only get him to realize it in time. Oh, Clara, I have it; I have it! Such a lovely plan!" She leaned back in her chair and burst into a fit of laughter so natural and so hearty that Clara had to forget her troubles and to join in it.

"Oh, it is beautiful!" she gasped at last. "Poor papa! What a time he will have! But it's all for his own good, as he used to say when we had to be punished when we were little. Oh, Clara, I do hope your heart won't fail you."

"I would do anything to save him, dear."

"That's it. You must steel yourself by that thought."

"But what is your plan?"

"Oh, I am so proud of it. We will tire him for ever of the widow, and of all emancipated women. Let me see, what are Mrs. Westmacott's main ideas? You have listened to her more than I. Women should attend less to household duties. That is one, is it not?"

"Yes, if they feel they have capabilities for higher things. Then she thinks that every woman who has leisure should take up the study of some branch of science, and that, as far as possible, every woman should qualify herself for some trade or profession, choosing for preference those which have been hitherto monopolized by men. To enter the others would only be to intensify the present competition."

"Quite so. That is glorious!" Her blue eyes were dancing with mischief, and she clapped her hands in her delight. "What else? She thinks that whatever a man can do a woman should be allowed to do also— does she not?"

"She says so."

"And about dress? The short skirt, and the divided skirt are what she believes in?"

"Yes."

"We must get in some cloth."

"Why?"

"We must make ourselves a dress each. A brand-new, enfranchised, emancipated dress, dear. Don't you see my plan? We shall act up to all Mrs. Westmacott's views in every respect, and improve them when we can. Then papa will know what it is to live with a woman who claims all her rights. Oh, Clara, it will be splendid."

Her milder sister sat speechless before so daring a scheme. "But it would be wrong, Ida!" she cried at last.

"Not a bit. It is to save him."

"I should not dare."

"Oh, yes, you would. Harold will help. Besides, what other plan have you?"

"I have none."

"Then you must take mine."

"Yes. Perhaps you are right. Well, we do it for a good motive."

"You will do it?"

"I do not see any other way."

"You dear good Clara! Now I will show you what you are to do. We must not begin too suddenly. It might excite suspicion."

"What would you do, then?"

"To-morrow we must go to Mrs. Westmacott, and sit at her feet and learn all her views."

"What hypocrites we shall feel!"

“We shall be her newest and most enthusiastic converts. Oh, it will be such fun, Clara! Then we shall make our plans and send for what we want, and begin our new life.”

“I do hope that we shall not have to keep it up long. It seems so cruel to dear papa.”

“Cruel! To save him!”

“I wish I was sure that we were doing right. And yet what else can we do? Well, then, Ida, the die is cast, and we will call upon Mrs. Westmacott tomorrow.”