

CH IX ~ A FAMILY PLOT

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



Little did poor Doctor Walker imagine as he sat at his breakfast-table next morning that the two sweet girls who sat on either side of him were deep in a conspiracy, and that he, munching innocently at his muffins, was the victim against whom their wiles were planned. Patiently they waited until at last their opening came.

“It is a beautiful day,” he remarked. “It will do for Mrs. Westmacott. She was thinking of having a spin upon the tricycle.”

“Then we must call early. We both intended to see her after breakfast.”

“Oh, indeed!” The Doctor looked pleased.

“You know, pa,” said Ida, “it seems to us that we really have a very great advantage in having Mrs. Westmacott living so near.”

“Why so, dear?”

“Well, because she is so advanced, you know. If we only study her ways we may advance ourselves also.”

“I think I have heard you say, papa,” Clara remarked, “that she is the type of the woman of the future.”

“I am very pleased to hear you speak so sensibly, my dears. I certainly think that she is a woman whom you may very well take as your model. The more intimate you are with her the better pleased I shall be.”

“Then that is settled,” said Clara demurely, and the talk drifted to other matters.

All the morning the two girls sat extracting from Mrs. Westmacott her most extreme view as to the duty of the one sex and the tyranny of the other. Absolute equality, even in details, was her ideal. Enough of the parrot cry of unwomanly and unmaidenly. It had been invented by man to scare woman away when she poached too nearly upon his precious preserves. Every woman should be independent. Every woman should learn a trade. It was their duty to push in where they were least welcome. Then they were martyrs to the cause, and pioneers to their weaker sisters. Why should the wash-tub, the needle, and the housekeeper's book be eternally theirs? Might they not reach higher, to the consulting-room, to the bench, and even to the pulpit? Mrs. Westmacott sacrificed her tricycle ride in her eagerness over her pet subject, and her two fair disciples drank in every word, and noted every suggestion for future use. That afternoon they went shopping in London, and before evening strange packages began to be handed in at the Doctor's door. The plot was ripe for execution, and one of the conspirators was merry and jubilant, while the other was very nervous and troubled.

When the Doctor came down to the dining-room next morning, he was surprised to find that his daughters had already been up some time. Ida was installed at one end of the table with a spirit-lamp, a curved glass flask, and several bottles in front of her. The contents of the flask were boiling furiously, while a villainous smell filled the room. Clara lounged in an arm-chair with her feet upon a second one, a blue-covered book in her hand, and a huge map of the British Islands spread across her lap. "Hullo!" cried the Doctor, blinking and sniffing, "where's the breakfast?"

"Oh, didn't you order it?" asked Ida.

"I! No; why should I?" He rang the bell. "Why have you not laid the breakfast, Jane?"

"If you please, sir, Miss Ida was a workin' at the table."

"Oh, of course, Jane," said the young lady calmly. "I am so sorry. I shall be ready to move in a few minutes."

"But what on earth are you doing, Ida?" asked the Doctor. "The smell is most offensive. And, good gracious, look at the mess which you have made upon the cloth! Why, you have burned a hole right through."

"Oh, that is the acid," Ida answered contentedly. "Mrs. Westmacott said that it would burn holes."

"You might have taken her word for it without trying," said her father dryly.

"But look here, pa! See what the book says: 'The scientific mind takes nothing upon trust. Prove all things!' I have proved that."

"You certainly have. Well, until breakfast is ready I'll glance over the Times. Have you seen it?"

"The Times? Oh, dear me, this is it which I have under my spirit-lamp. I am afraid there is some acid upon that too, and it is rather damp and torn. Here it is."

The Doctor took the bedraggled paper with a rueful face. "Everything seems to be wrong to-day," he remarked. "What is this sudden enthusiasm about chemistry, Ida?"

"Oh, I am trying to live up to Mrs. Westmacott's teaching."

"Quite right! quite right!" said he, though perhaps with less heartiness than he had shown the day before. "Ah, here is breakfast at last!"

But nothing was comfortable that morning. There were eggs without egg- spoons, toast which was leathery from being kept, dried-up rashers, and grounds in the coffee. Above all, there was that dreadful smell which pervaded everything and gave a horrible twang to every mouthful.

"I don't wish to put a damper upon your studies, Ida," said the Doctor, as he pushed back his chair. "But I do think it would be better if you did your chemical experiments a little later in the day."

"But Mrs. Westmacott says that women should rise early, and do their work before breakfast."

"Then they should choose some other room besides the breakfast-room." The Doctor was becoming just a little ruffled. A turn in the open air would soothe him, he thought. "Where are my boots?" he asked.

But they were not in their accustomed corner by his chair. Up and down he searched, while the three servants took up the quest, stooping and peeping under book-cases and drawers. Ida had returned to her studies, and Clara to her blue-covered volume, sitting absorbed and disinterested amid the bustle and the racket. At last a general buzz of congratulation announced that the cook had discovered the boots hung up among the hats in the hall. The Doctor, very red and flustered, drew them on, and stamped off to join the Admiral in his morning walk.

As the door slammed Ida burst into a shout of laughter. "You see, Clara," she cried, "the charm works already. He has gone to number one instead of to number three. Oh, we shall win a great victory. You've been very good, dear; I could see that you were on thorns to help him when he was looking for his boots."

"Poor papa! It is so cruel. And yet what are we to do?"

"Oh, he will enjoy being comfortable all the more if we give him a little discomfort now. What horrible work this chemistry is! Look at my frock! It is ruined. And this dreadful smell!" She threw open the window, and thrust her little golden-curved head out of it. Charles Westmacott was hoeing at the other side of the garden fence.

"Good morning, sir," said Ida.

"Good morning!" The big man leaned upon his hoe and looked up at her.

"Have you any cigarettes, Charles?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Throw me up two."

"Here is my case. Can you catch!"

A seal-skin case came with a soft thud on to the floor. Ida opened it. It was full.

"What are these?" she asked.

"Egyptians."

"What are some other brands?"

"Oh, Richmond Gems, and Turkish, and Cambridge. But why?"

"Never mind!" She nodded to him and closed the window. "We must remember all those, Clara," said she. "We must learn to talk about such things. Mrs. Westmacott knows all about the brands of cigarettes. Has your rum come?"

"Yes, dear. It is here."

"And I have my stout. Come along up to my room now. This smell is too abominable. But we must be ready for him when he comes back. If we sit at the window we shall see him coming down the road."

The fresh morning air, and the genial company of the Admiral had caused the Doctor to forget his troubles, and he came back about midday in an excellent humor. As he opened the hall door the vile smell of chemicals which had spoilt his breakfast met him with a redoubled virulence. He threw open the hall window, entered the dining-room, and stood aghast at the sight which met his eyes.

Ida was still sitting among her bottles, with a lit cigarette in her left hand and a glass of stout on the table beside her. Clara, with another cigarette, was lounging in the easy chair with several maps spread out upon the floor around. Her feet were stuck up on the coal scuttle, and she had a tumblerful of some reddish-brown composition on the smoking table close at her elbow. The Doctor gazed from one to the other of them through the thin grey haze of smoke, but his eyes rested finally in a settled stare of astonishment upon his elder and more serious daughter.

“Clara!” he gasped, “I could not have believed it!”

“What is it, papa?”

“You are smoking!”

“Trying to, papa. I find it a little difficult, for I have not been used to it.”

“But why, in the name of goodness—”

“Mrs. Westmacott recommends it.”

“Oh, a lady of mature years may do many things which a young girl must avoid.”

“Oh, no,” cried Ida, “Mrs. Westmacott says that there should be one law for all. Have a cigarette, pa?”

“No, thank you. I never smoke in the morning.”

“No? Perhaps you don’t care for the brand. What are these, Clara?”

“Egyptians.”

“Ah, we must have some Richmond Gems or Turkish. I wish, pa, when you go into town, you would get me some Turkish.”

"I will do nothing of the kind. I do not at all think that it is a fitting habit for young ladies. I do not agree with Mrs. Westmacott upon the point."

"Really, pa! It was you who advised us to imitate her."

"But with discrimination. What is it that you are drinking, Clara?"

"Rum, papa."

"Rum? In the morning?" He sat down and rubbed his eyes as one who tries to shake off some evil dream. "Did you say rum?"

"Yes, pa. They all drink it in the profession which I am going to take up."

"Profession, Clara?"

"Mrs. Westmacott says that every woman should follow a calling, and that we ought to choose those which women have always avoided."

"Quite so."

"Well, I am going to act upon her advice. I am going to be a pilot."

"My dear Clara! A pilot! This is too much."

"This is a beautiful book, papa. 'The Lights, Beacons, Buoys, Channels, and Landmarks of Great Britain.' Here is another, 'The Master Mariner's Handbook.' You can't imagine how interesting it is."

"You are joking, Clara. You must be joking!"

“Not at all, pa. You can’t think what a lot I have learned already. I’m to carry a green light to starboard and a red to port, with a white light at the mast-head, and a flare-up every fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, won’t it look pretty at night!” cried her sister.

“And I know the fog-signals. One blast means that a ship steers to starboard, two to port, three astern, four that it is unmanageable. But this man asks such dreadful questions at the end of each chapter. Listen to this: ‘You see a red light. The ship is on the port tack and the wind at north; what course is that ship steering to a point?’”

The Doctor rose with a gesture of despair. “I can’t imagine what has come over you both,” said he.

“My dear papa, we are trying hard to live up to Mrs. Westmacott’s standard.”

“Well, I must say that I do not admire the result. Your chemistry, Ida, may perhaps do no harm; but your scheme, Clara, is out of the question. How a girl of your sense could ever entertain such a notion is more than I can imagine. But I must absolutely forbid you to go further with it.”

“But, pa,” asked Ida, with an air of innocent inquiry in her big blue eyes, “what are we to do when your commands and Mrs. Westmacott’s advice are opposed? You told us to obey her. She says that when women try to throw off their shackles, their fathers, brothers and husbands are the very first to try to rivet them on again, and that in such a matter no man has any authority.”

“Does Mrs. Westmacott teach you that I am not the head of my own house?” The Doctor flushed, and his grizzled hair bristled in his anger.

“Certainly. She says that all heads of houses are relics of the dark ages.”

The Doctor muttered something and stamped his foot upon the carpet. Then without a word he passed out into the garden and his daughters could see him striding furiously up and down, cutting off the heads of the flowers with a switch.

“Oh, you darling! You played your part so splendidly!” cried Ida.

“But how cruel it is! When I saw the sorrow and surprise in his eyes I very nearly put my arms about him and told him all. Don’t you think we have done enough?”

“No, no, no. Not nearly enough. You must not turn weak now, Clara. It is so funny that I should be leading you. It is quite a new experience. But I know I am right. If we go on as we are doing, we shall be able to say all our lives that we have saved him. And if we don’t, oh, Clara, we should never forgive ourselves.”