

CH X ~ WOMEN OF THE FUTURE

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



From that day the Doctor's peace was gone. Never was a quiet and orderly household transformed so suddenly into a bear garden, or a happy man turned into such a completely miserable one. He had never realized before how entirely his daughters had shielded him from all the friction of life. Now that they had not only ceased to protect him, but had themselves become a source of trouble to him, he began to understand how great the blessing was which he had enjoyed, and to sigh for the happy days before his girls had come under the influence of his neighbor.

"You don't look happy," Mrs. Westmacott had remarked to him one morning. "You are pale and a little off color. You should come with me for a ten mile spin upon the tandem."

"I am troubled about my girls." They were walking up and down in the garden. From time to time there sounded from the house behind them the long, sad wail of a French horn.

"That is Ida," said he. "She has taken to practicing on that dreadful instrument in the intervals of her chemistry. And Clara is quite as bad. I declare it is getting quite unendurable."

"Ah, Doctor, Doctor!" she cried, shaking her forefinger, with a gleam of her white teeth. "You must live up to your principles—you must give your daughters the same liberty as you advocate for other women."

"Liberty, madam, certainly! But this approaches to license."

"The same law for all, my friend." She tapped him reprovingly on the arm with her sunshade. "When you were twenty your father did not, I presume, object to your

learning chemistry or playing a musical instrument. You would have thought it tyranny if he had."

"But there is such a sudden change in them both."

"Yes, I have noticed that they have been very enthusiastic lately in the cause of liberty. Of all my disciples I think that they promise to be the most devoted and consistent, which is the more natural since their father is one of our most trusted champions."

The Doctor gave a twitch of impatience. "I seem to have lost all authority," he cried.

"No, no, my dear friend. They are a little exuberant at having broken the trammels of custom. That is all."

"You cannot think what I have had to put up with, madam. It has been a dreadful experience. Last night, after I had extinguished the candle in my bedroom, I placed my foot upon something smooth and hard, which scuttled from under me. Imagine my horror! I lit the gas, and came upon a well-grown tortoise which Clara has thought fit to introduce into the house. I call it a filthy custom to have such pets."

Mrs. Westmacott dropped him a little courtesy. "Thank you, sir," said she. "That is a nice little side hit at my poor Eliza."

"I give you my word that I had forgotten about her," cried the Doctor, flushing. "One such pet may no doubt be endured, but two are more than I can bear. Ida has a monkey which lives on the curtain rod. It is a most dreadful creature. It will remain absolutely motionless until it sees that you have forgotten its presence, and then it will suddenly bound from picture to picture all round the walls, and end by swinging down on the bell-rope and jumping on to the top of your head. At breakfast it stole a poached egg and daubed it all over the door handle. Ida calls these outrages amusing tricks."

"Oh, all will come right," said the widow reassuringly.

“And Clara is as bad, Clara who used to be so good and sweet, the very image of her poor mother. She insists upon this preposterous scheme of being a pilot, and will talk of nothing but revolving lights and hidden rocks, and codes of signals, and nonsense of the kind.”

“But why preposterous?” asked his companion. “What nobler occupation can there be than that of stimulating commerce, and aiding the mariner to steer safely into port? I should think your daughter admirably adapted for such duties.”

“Then I must beg to differ from you, madam.”

“Still, you are inconsistent.”

“Excuse me, madam, I do not see the matter in the same light. And I should be obliged to you if you would use your influence with my daughter to dissuade her.”

“You wish to make me inconsistent too.”

“Then you refuse?”

“I am afraid that I cannot interfere.”

The Doctor was very angry. “Very well, madam,” said he. “In that case I can only say that I have the honor to wish you a very good morning.” He raised his broad straw hat and strode away up the gravel path, while the widow looked after him with twinkling eyes. She was surprised herself to find that she liked the Doctor better the more masculine and aggressive he became. It was unreasonable and against all principle, and yet so it was and no argument could mend the matter.

Very hot and angry, the Doctor retired into his room and sat down to read his paper. Ida had retired, and the distant wails of the bugle showed that she was upstairs in her boudoir. Clara sat opposite to him with her exasperating charts and her blue

book. The Doctor glanced at her and his eyes remained fixed in astonishment upon the front of her skirt.

“My dear Clara,” he cried, “you have torn your skirt!”

His daughter laughed and smoothed out her frock. To his horror he saw the red plush of the chair where the dress ought to have been. “It is all torn!” he cried. “What have you done?”

“My dear papa!” said she, “what do you know about the mysteries of ladies’ dress? This is a divided skirt.”

Then he saw that it was indeed so arranged, and that his daughter was clad in a sort of loose, extremely long knickerbockers.

“It will be so convenient for my sea-boots,” she explained.

Her father shook his head sadly. “Your dear mother would not have liked it, Clara,” said he.

For a moment the conspiracy was upon the point of collapsing. There was something in the gentleness of his rebuke, and in his appeal to her mother, which brought the tears to her eyes, and in another instant she would have been kneeling beside him with everything confessed, when the door flew open and her sister Ida came bounding into the room. She wore a short grey skirt, like that of Mrs. Westmacott, and she held it up in each hand and danced about among the furniture.

“I feel quite the Gaiety girl!” she cried. “How delicious it must be to be upon the stage! You can’t think how nice this dress is, papa. One feels so free in it. And isn’t Clara charming?”

“Go to your room this instant and take it off!” thundered the Doctor. “I call it highly improper, and no daughter of mine shall wear it.”

“Papa! Improper! Why, it is the exact model of Mrs. Westmacott’s.”

“I say it is improper. And yours also, Clara! Your conduct is really outrageous. You drive me out of the house. I am going to my club in town. I have no comfort or peace of mind in my own house. I will stand it no longer. I may be late to-night—I shall go to the British Medical meeting. But when I return I shall hope to find that you have reconsidered your conduct, and that you have shaken yourself clear of the pernicious influences which have recently made such an alteration in your conduct.” He seized his hat, slammed the dining-room door, and a few minutes later they heard the crash of the big front gate.

“Victory, Clara, victory!” cried Ida, still pirouetting around the furniture. “Did you hear what he said? Pernicious influences! Don’t you understand, Clara? Why do you sit there so pale and glum? Why don’t you get up and dance?”

“Oh, I shall be so glad when it is over, Ida. I do hate to give him pain. Surely he has learned now that it is very unpleasant to spend one’s life with reformers.”

“He has almost learned it, Clara. Just one more little lesson. We must not risk all at this last moment.”

“What would you do, Ida? Oh, don’t do anything too dreadful. I feel that we have gone too far already.”

“Oh, we can do it very nicely. You see we are both engaged and that makes it very easy. Harold will do what you ask him, especially as you have told him the reason why, and my Charles will do it without even wanting to know the reason. Now you know what Mrs. Westmacott thinks about the reserve of young ladies. Mere prudery, affectation, and a relic of the dark ages of the Zenana. Those were her words, were they not?”

“What then?”

“Well, now we must put it in practice. We are reducing all her other views to practice, and we must not shirk this one.

“But what would you do? Oh, don’t look so wicked, Ida! You look like some evil little fairy, with your golden hair and dancing, mischievous eyes. I know that you are going to propose something dreadful!”

“We must give a little supper to-night.”

“We? A supper!”

“Why not? Young gentlemen give suppers. Why not young ladies?”

“But whom shall we invite?”

“Why, Harold and Charles of course.”

“And the Admiral and Mrs. Hay Denver?”

“Oh, no. That would be very old-fashioned. We must keep up with the times, Clara.”

“But what can we give them for supper?”

“Oh, something with a nice, fast, rollicking, late-at-night-kind of flavor to it. Let me see! Champagne, of course—and oysters. Oysters will do. In the novels, all the naughty people take champagne and oysters. Besides, they won’t need any cooking. How is your pocket- money, Clara?”

“I have three pounds.”

“And I have one. Four pounds. I have no idea how much champagne costs. Have you?”

"Not the slightest."

"How many oysters does a man eat?"

"I can't imagine."

"I'll write and ask Charles. No, I won't. I'll ask Jane. Ring for her, Clara. She has been a cook, and is sure to know."

Jane, on being cross-questioned, refused to commit herself beyond the statement that it depended upon the gentleman, and also upon the oysters. The united experience of the kitchen, however, testified that three dozen was a fair provision.

"Then we shall have eight dozen altogether," said Ida, jotting down all her requirements upon a sheet of paper. "And two pints of champagne. And some brown bread, and vinegar, and pepper. That's all, I think. It is not so very difficult to give a supper after all, is it, Clara?"

"I don't like it, Ida. It seems to me to be so very indelicate."

"But it is needed to clinch the matter. No, no, there is no drawing back now, Clara, or we shall ruin everything. Papa is sure to come back by the 9:45. He will reach the door at 10. We must have everything ready for him. Now, just sit down at once, and ask Harold to come at nine o'clock, and I shall do the same to Charles."

The two invitations were dispatched, received and accepted. Harold was already a confidant, and he understood that this was some further development of the plot. As to Charles, he was so accustomed to feminine eccentricity, in the person of his aunt, that the only thing which could surprise him would be a rigid observance of etiquette. At nine o'clock they entered the dining-room of Number 2, to find the master of the house absent, a red-shaded lamp, a snowy cloth, a pleasant little feast, and the two whom they would have chosen, as their companions. A merrier party never met, and the house rang with their laughter and their chatter.

"It is three minutes to ten," cried Clara, suddenly, glancing at the clock.

"Good gracious! So it is! Now for our little tableau!" Ida pushed the champagne bottles obtrusively forward, in the direction of the door, and scattered oyster shells over the cloth.

"Have you your pipe, Charles?"

"My pipe! Yes."

"Then please smoke it. Now don't argue about it, but do it, for you will ruin the effect otherwise."

The large man drew out a red case, and extracted a great yellow meerschaum, out of which, a moment later, he was puffing thick wreaths of smoke. Harold had lit a cigar, and both the girls had cigarettes.

"That looks very nice and emancipated," said Ida, glancing round. "Now I shall lie on this sofa. So! Now, Charles, just sit here, and throw your arm carelessly over the back of the sofa. No, don't stop smoking. I like it. Clara, dear, put your feet upon the coal-scuttle, and do try to look a little dissipated. I wish we could crown ourselves with flowers. There are some lettuces on the sideboard. Oh dear, here he is! I hear his key." She began to sing in her high, fresh voice a little snatch from a French song, with a swinging tra la-la chorus.

The Doctor had walked home from the station in a peaceable and relenting frame of mind, feeling that, perhaps, he had said too much in the morning, that his daughters had for years been models in every way, and that, if there had been any change of late, it was, as they said themselves, on account of their anxiety to follow his advice and to imitate Mrs. Westmacott. He could see clearly enough now that that advice was unwise, and that a world peopled with Mrs. Westmacotts would not be a happy or a soothing one. It was he who was, himself, to blame, and he was grieved by the thought that perhaps his hot words had troubled and saddened his two girls.

This fear, however, was soon dissipated. As he entered his hall he heard the voice of Ida uplifted in a rollicking ditty, and a very strong smell of tobacco was borne to his nostrils. He threw open the dining-room door, and stood aghast at the scene which met his eyes.

The room was full of the blue wreaths of smoke, and the lamp-light shone through the thin haze upon gold-topped bottles, plates, napkins, and a litter of oyster shells and cigarettes. Ida, flushed and excited, was reclining upon the settee, a wine-glass at her elbow, and a cigarette between her fingers, while Charles Westmacott sat beside her, with his arm thrown over the head of the sofa, with the suggestion of a caress. On the other side of the room, Clara was lounging in an arm-chair, with Harold beside her, both smoking, and both with wine-glasses beside them. The Doctor stood speechless in the doorway, staring at the Bacchanalian scene.

“Come in, papa! Do!” cried Ida. “Won’t you have a glass of champagne?”

“Pray excuse me,” said her father, coldly, “I feel that I am intruding. I did not know that you were entertaining. Perhaps you will kindly let me know when you have finished. You will find me in my study.” He ignored the two young men completely, and, closing the door, retired, deeply hurt and mortified, to his room. A quarter of an hour afterwards he heard the door slam, and his two daughters came to announce that the guests were gone.

“Guests! Whose guests?” he cried angrily. “What is the meaning of this exhibition?”

“We have been giving a little supper, papa. They were our guests.”

“Oh, indeed!” The Doctor laughed sarcastically. “You think it right, then, to entertain young bachelors late at night, to smoke and drink with them, to—— Oh, that I should ever have lived to blush for my own daughters! I thank God that your dear mother never saw the day.”

"Dearest papa," cried Clara, throwing her arms about him. "Do not be angry with us. If you understood all, you would see that there is no harm in it."

"No harm, miss! Who is the best judge of that?"

"Mrs. Westmacott," suggested Ida, slyly.

The Doctor sprang from his chair. "Confound Mrs. Westmacott!" he cried, striking frenziedly into the air with his hands. "Am I to hear of nothing but this woman? Is she to confront me at every turn? I will endure it no longer."

"But it was your wish, papa."

"Then I will tell you now what my second and wiser wish is, and we shall see if you will obey it as you have the first."

"Of course we will, papa."

"Then my wish is, that you should forget these odious notions which you have imbibed, that you should dress and act as you used to do, before ever you saw this woman, and that, in future, you confine your intercourse with her to such civilities as are necessary between neighbors."

"We are to give up Mrs. Westmacott?"

"Or give up me."

"Oh, dear dad, how can you say anything so cruel?" cried Ida, burrowing her towsy golden hair into her father's shirt front, while Clara pressed her cheek against his whisker. "Of course we shall give her up, if you prefer it."

"Of course we shall, papa."

The Doctor patted the two caressing heads. "These are my own two girls again," he cried. "It has been my fault as much as yours. I have been astray, and you have followed me in my error. It was only by seeing your mistake that I have become conscious of my own. Let us set it aside, and neither say nor think anything more about it."