

CH XVII ~ IN PORT AT LAST

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



Day had broken before the several denizens of the Wilderness had all returned to their homes, the police finished their inquiries, and all come back to its normal quiet. Mrs. Westmacott had been left sleeping peacefully with a small chloral draught to steady her nerves and a handkerchief soaked in arnica bound round her head. It was with some surprise, therefore, that the Admiral received a note from her about ten o'clock, asking him to be good enough to step in to her. He hurried in, fearing that she might have taken some turn for the worse, but he was reassured to find her sitting up in her bed, with Clara and Ida Walker in attendance upon her. She had removed the handkerchief, and had put on a little cap with pink ribbons, and a maroon dressing-jacket, daintily fulled at the neck and sleeves.

"My dear friend," said she as he entered, "I wish to make a last few remarks to you. No, no," she continued, laughing, as she saw a look of dismay upon his face. "I shall not dream of dying for at least another thirty years. A woman should be ashamed to die before she is seventy. I wish, Clara, that you would ask your father to step up. And you, Ida, just pass me my cigarettes, and open me a bottle of stout."

"Now then," she continued, as the doctor joined their party. "I don't quite know what I ought to say to you, Admiral. You want some very plain speaking to."

"Pon my word, ma'am, I don't know what you are talking about."

"The idea of you at your age talking of going to sea, and leaving that dear, patient little wife of yours at home, who has seen nothing of you all her life! It's all very well for you. You have the life, and the change, and the excitement, but you don't think of her eating her heart out in a dreary London lodging. You men are all the same."

"Well, ma'am, since you know so much, you probably know also that I have sold my pension. How am I to live if I do not turn my hand to work?"

Mrs. Westmacott produced a large registered envelope from beneath the sheets and tossed it over to the old seaman.

“That excuse won’t do. There are your pension papers. Just see if they are right.”

He broke the seal, and out tumbled the very papers which he had made over to McAdam two days before.

“But what am I to do with these now?” he cried in bewilderment.

“You will put them in a safe place, or get a friend to do so, and, if you do your duty, you will go to your wife and beg her pardon for having even for an instant thought of leaving her.”

The Admiral passed his hand over his rugged forehead. “This is very good of you, ma’am” said he, “very good and kind, and I know that you are a staunch friend, but for all that these papers mean money, and though we may have been in broken water lately, we are not quite in such straits as to have to signal to our friends. When we do, ma’am, there’s no one we would look to sooner than to you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” said the widow. “You know nothing whatever about it, and yet you stand there laying down the law. I’ll have my way in the matter, and you shall take the papers, for it is no favor that I am doing you, but simply a restoration of stolen property.”

“How’s that, ma’am?”

“I am just going to explain, though you might take a lady’s word for it without asking any questions. Now, what I am going to say is just between you four, and must go no farther. I have my own reasons for wishing to keep it from the police. Who do you think it was who struck me last night, Admiral?”

“Some villain, ma’am. I don’t know his name.”

“But I do. It was the same man who ruined or tried to ruin your son. It was my only brother, Jeremiah.”

“Ah!”

“I will tell you about him—or a little about him, for he has done much which I would not care to talk of, nor you to listen to. He was always a villain, smooth-spoken and plausible, but a dangerous, subtle villain all the same. If I have some hard thoughts about mankind I can trace them back to the childhood which I spent with my brother. He is my only living relative, for my other brother, Charles’s father, was killed in the Indian mutiny.

“Our father was rich, and when he died he made a good provision both for Jeremiah and for me. He knew Jeremiah and he mistrusted him, however; so instead of giving him all that he meant him to have he handed me over a part of it, telling me, with what was almost his dying breath, to hold it in trust for my brother, and to use it in his behalf when he should have squandered or lost all that he had. This arrangement was meant to be a secret between my father and myself, but unfortunately his words were overheard by the nurse, and she repeated them afterwards to my brother, so that he came to know that I held some money in trust for him. I suppose tobacco will not harm my head, Doctor? Thank you, then I shall trouble you for the matches, Ida.” She lit a cigarette, and leaned back upon the pillow, with the blue wreaths curling from her lips.

“I cannot tell you how often he has attempted to get that money from me. He has bullied, cajoled, threatened, coaxed, done all that a man could do. I still held it with the presentiment that a need for it would come. When I heard of this villainous business, his flight, and his leaving his partner to face the storm, above all that my old friend had been driven to surrender his income in order to make up for my brother’s defalcations, I felt that now indeed I had a need for it. I sent in Charles yesterday to Mr. McAdam, and his client, upon hearing the facts of the case, very graciously consented to give back the papers, and to take the money which he had advanced. Not

a word of thanks to me, Admiral. I tell you that it was very cheap benevolence, for it was all done with his own money, and how could I use it better?

“I thought that I should probably hear from him soon, and I did. Last evening there was handed in a note of the usual whining, cringing tone. He had come back from abroad at the risk of his life and liberty, just in order that he might say good-bye to the only sister he ever had, and to entreat my forgiveness for any pain which he had caused me. He would never trouble me again, and he begged only that I would hand over to him the sum which I held in trust for him. That, with what he had already, would be enough to start him as an honest man in the new world, when he would ever remember and pray for the dear sister who had been his savior. That was the style of the letter, and it ended by imploring me to leave the window-latch open, and to be in the front room at three in the morning, when he would come to receive my last kiss and to bid me farewell.

“Bad as he was, I could not, when he trusted me, betray him. I said nothing, but I was there at the hour. He entered through the window, and implored me to give him the money. He was terribly changed; gaunt, wolfish, and spoke like a madman. I told him that I had spent the money. He gnashed his teeth at me, and swore it was his money. I told him that I had spent it on him. He asked me how. I said in trying to make him an honest man, and in repairing the results of his villainy. He shrieked out a curse, and pulling something out of the breast of his coat—a loaded stick, I think—he struck me with it, and I remembered nothing more.”

“The blackguard!” cried the Doctor, “but the police must be hot upon his track.”

“I fancy not,” Mrs. Westmacott answered calmly. “As my brother is a particularly tall, thin man, and as the police are looking for a short, fat one, I do not think that it is very probable that they will catch him. It is best, I think, that these little family matters should be adjusted in private.”

“My dear ma’am,” said the Admiral, “if it is indeed this man’s money that has bought back my pension, then I can have no scruples about taking it. You have brought sunshine upon us, ma’am, when the clouds were at their darkest, for here is my boy who

insists upon returning the money which I got. He can keep it now to pay his debts. For what you have done I can only ask God to bless you, ma'am, and as to thanking you I can't even——"

"Then pray don't try," said the widow. "Now run away, Admiral, and make your peace with Mrs. Denver. I am sure if I were she it would be a long time before I should forgive you. As for me, I am going to America when Charles goes. You'll take me so far, won't you, Ida? There is a college being built in Denver which is to equip the woman of the future for the struggle of life, and especially for her battle against man. Some months ago the committee offered me a responsible situation upon the staff, and I have decided now to accept it, for Charles's marriage removes the last tie which binds me to England. You will write to me sometimes, my friends, and you will address your letters to Professor Westmacott, Emancipation College, Denver. From there I shall watch how the glorious struggle goes in conservative old England, and if I am needed you will find me here again fighting in the forefront of the fray. Good-bye—but not you, girls; I have still a word I wish to say to you.

"Give me your hand, Ida, and yours, Clara," said she when they were alone. "Oh, you naughty little pussies, aren't you ashamed to look me in the face? Did you think—did you really think that I was so very blind, and could not see your little plot? You did it very well, I must say that, and really I think that I like you better as you are. But you had all your pains for nothing, you little conspirators, for I give you my word that I had quite made up my mind not to have him."

And so within a few weeks our little ladies from their observatory saw a mighty bustle in the Wilderness, when two-horse carriages came, and coachmen with favors, to bear away the twos who were destined to come back one. And they themselves in their crackling silk dresses went across, as invited, to the big double wedding breakfast which was held in the house of Doctor Walker. Then there was health-drinking, and laughter, and changing of dresses, and rice-throwing when the carriages drove up again, and two more couples started on that journey which ends only with life itself.

Charles Westmacott is now a flourishing ranchman in the western part of Texas, where he and his sweet little wife are the two most popular persons in all that county. Of their aunt they see little, but from time to time they see notices in the papers that there is a focus of light in Denver, where mighty thunderbolts are being forged which will one day bring the dominant sex upon their knees. The Admiral and his wife still live at number one, while Harold and Clara have taken number two, where Doctor Walker continues to reside. As to the business, it had been reconstructed, and the energy and ability of the junior partner had soon made up for all the ill that had been done by his senior. Yet with his sweet and refined home atmosphere he is able to realize his wish, and to keep himself free from the sordid aims and base ambitions which drag down the man whose business lies too exclusively in the money market of the vast Babylon. As he goes back every evening from the crowds of Throgmorton Street to the tree-lined peaceful avenues of Norwood, so he has found it possible in spirit also to do one's duties amidst the babel of the City, and yet to live beyond it.