Ch III ~ Dwellers in the Wilderness

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

How deeply are our destinies influenced by the most trifling causes! Had the unknown builder who erected and owned these new villas contented himself by simply building each within its own grounds, it is probable that these three small groups of people would have remained hardly conscious of each other's existence, and that there would have been no opportunity for that action and reaction which is here set forth. But there was a common link to bind them together. To single himself out from all other Norwood builders the landlord had devised and laid out a common lawn tennis ground, which stretched behind the houses with taut- stretched net, green close-cropped sward, and widespread whitewashed lines. Hither in search of that hard exercise which is as necessary as air or food to the English temperament, came young Hay Denver when released from the toil of the City; hither, too, came Dr. Walker and his two fair daughters, Clara and Ida, and hither also, champions of the lawn, came the short-skirted, muscular widow and her athletic nephew. Ere the summer was gone they knew each other in this quiet nook as they might not have done after years of a stiffer and more formal acquaintance.

And especially to the Admiral and the Doctor were this closer intimacy and companionship of value. Each had a void in his life, as every man must have who with unexhausted strength steps out of the great race, but each by his society might help to fill up that of his neighbor. It is true that they had not much in common, but that is sometimes an aid rather than a bar to friendship. Each had been an enthusiast in his profession, and had retained all his interest in it. The Doctor still read from cover to cover his Lancet and his Medical Journal, attended all professional gatherings, worked himself into an alternate state of exaltation and depression over the results of the election of officers, and reserved for himself a den of his own, in which before rows of little round bottles full of glycerine, Canadian balsam, and staining agents, he still cut sections with a microtome, and peeped through his long, brass, old-fashioned microscope at the arcana of nature. With his typical face, clean shaven on lip and chin, with a firm mouth, a strong jaw, a steady eye, and two little white fluffs of

whiskers, he could never be taken for anything but what he was, a high-class British medical consultant of the age of fifty, or perhaps just a year or two older.

The Doctor, in his hey-day, had been cool over great things, but now, in his retirement, he was fussy over trifles. The man who had operated without the quiver of a finger, when not only his patient's life but his own reputation and future were at stake, was now shaken to the soul by a mislaid book or a careless maid. He remarked it himself, and knew the reason. "When Mary was alive," he would say, "she stood between me and the little troubles. I could brace myself for the big ones. My girls are as good as girls can be, but who can know a man as his wife knows him?" Then his memory would conjure up a tuft of brown hair and a single white, thin hand over a coverlet, and he would feel, as we have all felt, that if we do not live and know each other after death, then indeed we are tricked and betrayed by all the highest hopes and subtlest intuitions of our nature.

The Doctor had his compensations to make up for his loss. The great scales of Fate had been held on a level for him; for where in all great London could one find two sweeter girls, more loving, more intelligent, and more sympathetic than Clara and Ida Walker? So bright were they, so quick, so interested in all which interested him, that if it were possible for a man to be compensated for the loss of a good wife then Balthazar Walker might claim to be so.

Clara was tall and thin and supple, with a graceful, womanly figure. There was something stately and distinguished in her carriage, "queenly" her friends called her, while her critics described her as reserved and distant.

Such as it was, however, it was part and parcel of herself, for she was, and had always from her childhood been, different from any one around her. There was nothing gregarious in her nature. She thought with her own mind, saw with her own eyes, acted from her own impulse. Her face was pale, striking rather than pretty, but with two great dark eyes, so earnestly questioning, so quick in their transitions from joy to pathos, so swift in their comment upon every word and deed around her, that those eyes alone were to many more attractive than all the beauty of her younger sister. Hers was a strong, quiet soul, and it was her firm hand which had taken over

the duties of her mother, had ordered the house, restrained the servants, comforted her father, and upheld her weaker sister, from the day of that great misfortune.

Ida Walker was a hand's breadth smaller than Clara, but was a little fuller in the face and plumper in the figure. She had light yellow hair, mischievous blue eyes with the light of humor ever twinkling in their depths, and a large, perfectly formed mouth, with that slight upward curve of the corners which goes with a keen appreciation of fun, suggesting even in repose that a latent smile is ever lurking at the edges of the lips. She was modern to the soles of her dainty little high-heeled shoes, frankly fond of dress and of pleasure, devoted to tennis and to comic opera, delighted with a dance, which came her way only too seldom, longing ever for some new excitement, and yet behind all this lighter side of her character a thoroughly good, healthy-minded English girl, the life and soul of the house, and the idol of her sister and her father. Such was the family at number two. A peep into the remaining villa and our introductions are complete.

Admiral Hay Denver did not belong to the florid, white-haired, hearty school of sea-dogs which is more common in works of fiction than in the Navy List. On the contrary, he was the representative of a much more common type which is the antithesis of the conventional sailor. He was a thin, hard-featured man, with an ascetic, acquiline cast of face, grizzled and hollow-cheeked, clean-shaven with the exception of the tiniest curved promontory of ash-colored whisker. An observer, accustomed to classify men, might have put him down as a canon of the church with a taste for lay costume and a country life, or as the master of a large public school, who joined his scholars in their outdoor sports. His lips were firm, his chin prominent, he had a hard, dry eye, and his manner was precise and formal. Forty years of stern discipline had made him reserved and silent. Yet, when at his ease with an equal, he could readily assume a less quarter-deck style, and he had a fund of little, dry stories of the world and its ways which were of interest from one who had seen so many phases of life. Dry and spare, as lean as a jockey and as tough as whipcord, he might be seen any day swinging his silver-headed Malacca cane, and pacing along the suburban roads with the same measured gait with which he had been wont to tread the poop of his flagship. He wore a good service stripe upon his cheek, for on one side it was pitted and scarred where a spurt of gravel knocked up by a round- shot had struck

him thirty years before, when he served in the Lancaster gun-battery. Yet he was hale and sound, and though he was fifteen years senior to his friend the Doctor, he might have passed as the younger man.

Mrs. Hay Denver's life had been a very broken one, and her record upon land represented a greater amount of endurance and self-sacrifice than his upon the sea. They had been together for four months after their marriage, and then had come a hiatus of four years, during which he was flitting about between St. Helena and the Oil Rivers in a gunboat. Then came a blessed year of peace and domesticity, to be followed by nine years, with only a three months' break, five upon the Pacific station, and four on the East Indian. After that was a respite in the shape of five years in the Channel squadron, with periodical runs home, and then again he was off to the Mediterranean for three years and to Halifax for four. Now, at last, however, this old married couple, who were still almost strangers to one another, had come together in Norwood, where, if their short day had been chequered and broken, the evening at least promised to be sweet and mellow. In person Mrs. Hay Denver was tall and stout, with a bright, round, ruddy-cheeked face still pretty, with a gracious, matronly comeliness. Her whole life was a round of devotion and of love, which was divided between her husband and her only son, Harold.

This son it was who kept them in the neighborhood of London, for the Admiral was as fond of ships and of salt water as ever, and was as happy in the sheets of a two-ton yacht as on the bridge of his sixteen-knot monitor. Had he been untied, the Devonshire or Hampshire coast would certainly have been his choice. There was Harold, however, and Harold's interests were their chief care. Harold was four-and-twenty now. Three years before he had been taken in hand by an acquaintance of his father's, the head of a considerable firm of stock-brokers, and fairly launched upon 'Change. His three hundred guinea entrance fee paid, his three sureties of five hundred pounds each found, his name approved by the Committee, and all other formalities complied with, he found himself whirling round, an insignificant unit, in the vortex of the money market of the world. There, under the guidance of his father's friend, he was instructed in the mysteries of bulling and of bearing, in the strange usages of 'Change in the intricacies of carrying over and of transferring. He learned to know where to place his clients' money, which of the jobbers would make

a price in New Zealands, and which would touch nothing but American rails, which might be trusted and which shunned. All this, and much more, he mastered, and to such purpose that he soon began to prosper, to retain the clients who had been recommended to him, and to attract fresh ones. But the work was never congenial. He had inherited from his father his love of the air of heaven, his affection for a manly and natural existence. To act as middleman between the pursuer of wealth, and the wealth which he pursued, or to stand as a human barometer, registering the rise and fall of the great mammon pressure in the markets, was not the work for which Providence had placed those broad shoulders and strong limbs upon his well knit frame. His dark open face, too, with his straight Grecian nose, well opened brown eyes, and round black-curled head, were all those of a man who was fashioned for active physical work. Meanwhile he was popular with his fellow brokers, respected by his clients, and beloved at home, but his spirit was restless within him and his mind chafed unceasingly against his surroundings.

"Do you know, Willy," said Mrs. Hay Denver one evening as she stood behind her husband's chair, with her hand upon his shoulder, "I think sometimes that Harold is not quite happy."

"He looks happy, the young rascal," answered the Admiral, pointing with his cigar. It was after dinner, and through the open French window of the dining-room a clear view was to be had of the tennis court and the players. A set had just been finished, and young Charles Westmacott was hitting up the balls as high as he could send them in the middle of the ground. Doctor Walker and Mrs. Westmacott were pacing up and down the lawn, the lady waving her racket as she emphasized her remarks, and the Doctor listening with slanting head and little nods of agreement. Against the rails at the near end Harold was leaning in his flannels talking to the two sisters, who stood listening to him with their long dark shadows streaming down the lawn behind them. The girls were dressed alike in dark skirts, with light pink tennis blouses and pink bands on their straw hats, so that as they stood with the soft red of the setting sun tinging their faces, Clara, demure and quiet, Ida, mischievous and daring, it was a group which might have pleased the eye of a more exacting critic than the old sailor.

"Yes, he looks happy, mother," he repeated, with a chuckle. "It is not so long ago since it was you and I who were standing like that, and I don't remember that we were very unhappy either. It was croquet in our time, and the ladies had not reefed in their skirts quite so taut. What year would it be? Just before the commission of the Penelope."

Mrs. Hay Denver ran her fingers through his grizzled hair. "It was when you came back in the Antelope, just before you got your step."

"Ah, the old Antelope! What a clipper she was! She could sail two points nearer the wind than anything of her tonnage in the service. You remember her, mother. You saw her come into Plymouth Bay. Wasn't she a beauty?"

"She was indeed, dear. But when I say that I think that Harold is not happy I mean in his daily life. Has it never struck you how thoughtful, he is at times, and how absent-minded?"

"In love perhaps, the young dog. He seems to have found snug moorings now at any rate."

"I think that it is very likely that you are right, Willy," answered the mother seriously. "But with which of them?"

"I cannot tell."

"Well, they are very charming girls, both of them. But as long as he hangs in the wind between the two it cannot be serious. After all, the boy is four-and-twenty, and he made five hundred pounds last year. He is better able to marry than I was when I was lieutenant."

"I think that we can see which it is now," remarked the observant mother. Charles Westmacott had ceased to knock the tennis balls about, and was chatting with Clara Walker, while Ida and Harold Denver were still talking by the railing with little out-

bursts of laughter. Presently a fresh set was formed, and Doctor Walker, the odd man out, came through the wicket gate and strolled up the garden walk.

"Good evening, Mrs. Hay Denver," said he, raising his broad straw hat. "May I come in?"

"Good evening, Doctor! Pray do!"

"Try one of these," said the Admiral, holding out his cigar-case. "They are not bad. I got them on the Mosquito Coast. I was thinking of signaling to you, but you seemed so very happy out there."

"Mrs. Westmacott is a very clever woman," said the Doctor, lighting the cigar. "By the way, you spoke about the Mosquito Coast just now. Did you see much of the Hyla when you were out there?"

"No such name on the list," answered the seaman, with decision. "There's the Hydra, a harbor defense turret-ship, but she never leaves the home waters."

The Doctor laughed. "We live in two separate worlds," said he. "The Hyla is the little green tree frog, and Beale has founded some of his views on protoplasm upon the appearancer, of its nerve cells. It is a subject in which I take an interest."

"There were vermin of all sorts in the woods. When I have been on river service I have heard it at night like the engine-room when you are on the measured mile. You can't sleep for the piping, and croaking, and chirping. Great Scott! what a woman that is! She was across the lawn in three jumps. She would have made a captain of the foretop in the old days."

"She is a very remarkable woman."

"A very cranky one."

"A very sensible one in some things," remarked Mrs. Hay Denver.

"Look at that now!" cried the Admiral, with a lunge of his forefinger at the Doctor. "You mark my words, Walker, if we don't look out that woman will raise a mutiny with her preaching. Here's my wife disaffected already, and your girls will be no better. We must combine, man, or there's an end of all discipline."

"No doubt she is a little excessive in her views." said the Doctor, "but in the main I think as she does."

"Bravo, Doctor!" cried the lady.

"What, turned traitor to your sex! We'll court-martial you as a deserter."

"She is quite right. The professions are not sufficiently open to women. They are still far too much circumscribed in their employments. They are a feeble folk, the women who have to work for their bread— poor, unorganized, timid, taking as a favor what they might demand as a right. That is why their case is not more constantly before the public, for if their cry for redress was as great as their grievance it would fill the world to the exclusion of all others. It is all very well for us to be courteous to the rich, the refined, those to whom life is already made easy. It is a mere form, a trick of manner. If we are truly courteous, we shall stoop to lift up struggling womanhood when she really needs our help—when it is life and death to her whether she has it or not. And then to cant about it being unwomanly to work in the higher professions. It is womanly enough to starve, but unwomanly to use the brains which God has given them. Is it not a monstrous contention?"

The Admiral chuckled. "You are like one of these phonographs, Walker," said he; "you have had all this talked into you, and now you are reeling it off again. It's rank mutiny, every word of it, for man has his duties and woman has hers, but they are as separate as their natures are. I suppose that we shall have a woman hoisting her pennant on the flagship presently, and taking command of the Channel Squadron."

"Well, you have a woman on the throne taking command of the whole nation," remarked his wife; "and everybody is agreed that she does it better than any of the men."

The Admiral was somewhat staggered by this home-thrust. "That's quite another thing," said he.

"You should come to their next meeting. I am to take the chair. I have just promised Mrs. Westmacott that I will do so. But it has turned chilly, and it is time that the girls were indoors. Good night! I shall look out for you after breakfast for our constitutional, Admiral."

The old sailor looked after his friend with a twinkle in his eyes.

"How old is he, mother?"

"About fifty, I think."

"And Mrs. Westmacott?"

"I heard that she was forty-three."

The Admiral rubbed his hands, and shook with amusement. "We'll find one of these days that three and two make one," said he. "I'll bet you a new bonnet on it, mother."