

CH VI ~ AN OLD STORY

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



But this was not to be the only eventful conversation which Mrs. Westmacott held that day, nor was the Admiral the only person in the Wilderness who was destined to find his opinions considerably changed. Two neighboring families, the Winslows from Anerley, and the Cumberbatches from Gipsy Hill, had been invited to tennis by Mrs. Westmacott, and the lawn was gay in the evening with the blazers of the young men and the bright dresses of the girls. To the older people, sitting round in their wicker-work garden chairs, the darting, stooping, springing white figures, the sweep of skirts, and twinkle of canvas shoes, the click of the rackets and sharp whiz of the balls, with the continual “fifteen love—fifteen all!” of the marker, made up a merry and exhilarating scene. To see their sons and daughters so flushed and healthy and happy, gave them also a reflected glow, and it was hard to say who had most pleasure from the game, those who played or those who watched.

Mrs. Westmacott had just finished a set when she caught a glimpse of Clara Walker sitting alone at the farther end of the ground. She ran down the court, cleared the net to the amazement of the visitors, and seated herself beside her. Clara’s reserved and refined nature shrank somewhat from the boisterous frankness and strange manners of the widow, and yet her feminine instinct told her that beneath all her peculiarities there lay much that was good and noble. She smiled up at her, therefore, and nodded a greeting.

“Why aren’t you playing, then? Don’t, for goodness’ sake, begin to be languid and young ladyish! When you give up active sports you give up youth.”

“I have played a set, Mrs. Westmacott.”

“That’s right, my dear.” She sat down beside her, and tapped her upon the arm with her tennis racket. “I like you, my dear, and I am going to call you Clara. You are not as aggressive as I should wish, Clara, but still I like you very much. Self-sacrifice

is all very well, you know, but we have had rather too much of it on our side, and should like to see a little on the other. What do you think of my nephew Charles?"

The question was so sudden and unexpected that Clara gave quite a jump in her chair. "I—I—I hardly ever have thought of your nephew Charles."

"No? Oh, you must think him well over, for I want to speak to you about him."

"To me? But why?"

"It seemed to me most delicate. You see, Clara, the matter stands in this way. It is quite possible that I may soon find myself in a completely new sphere of life, which will involve fresh duties and make it impossible for me to keep up a household which Charles can share."

Clara stared. Did this mean that she was about to marry again? What else could it point to?

"Therefore Charles must have a household of his own. That is obvious. Now, I don't approve of bachelor establishments. Do you?"

"Really, Mrs. Westmacott, I have never thought of the matter."

"Oh, you little sly puss! Was there ever a girl who never thought of the matter? I think that a young man of six-and-twenty ought to be married."

Clara felt very uncomfortable. The awful thought had come upon her that this ambassador had come to her as a proxy with a proposal of marriage. But how could that be? She had not spoken more than three or four times with her nephew, and knew nothing more of him than he had told her on the evening before. It was impossible, then. And yet what could his aunt mean by this discussion of his private affairs?

"Do you not think yourself," she persisted, "that a young man of six- and-twenty is better married?"

"I should think that he is old enough to decide for himself."

"Yes, yes. He has done so. But Charles is just a little shy, just a little slow in expressing himself. I thought that I would pave the way for him. Two women can arrange these things so much better. Men sometimes have a difficulty in making themselves clear."

"I really hardly follow you, Mrs. Westmacott," cried Clara in despair.

"He has no profession. But he has nice tastes. He reads Browning every night. And he is most amazingly strong. When he was younger we used to put on the gloves together, but I cannot persuade him to now, for he says he cannot play light enough. I should allow him five hundred, which should be enough at first."

"My dear Mrs. Westmacott," cried Clara, "I assure you that I have not the least idea what it is that you are talking of."

"Do you think your sister Ida would have my nephew Charles?"

Her sister Ida? Quite a little thrill of relief and of pleasure ran through her at the thought. Ida and Charles Westmacott. She had never thought of it. And yet they had been a good deal together. They had played tennis. They had shared the tandem tricycle. Again came the thrill of joy, and close at its heels the cold questionings of conscience. Why this joy? What was the real source of it? Was it that deep down, somewhere pushed back in the black recesses of the soul, there was the thought lurking that if Charles prospered in his wooing then Harold Denver would still be free? How mean, how unmaidenly, how unsisterly the thought! She crushed it down and thrust it aside, but still it would push up its wicked little head. She crimsoned with shame at her own baseness, as she turned once more to her companion.

"I really do not know," she said.

"She is not engaged?"

"Not that I know of."

"You speak hesitatingly."

"Because I am not sure. But he may ask. She cannot but be flattered."

"Quite so. I tell him that it is the most practical compliment which a man can pay to a woman. He is a little shy, but when he sets himself to do it he will do it. He is very much in love with her, I assure you. These little lively people always do attract the slow and heavy ones, which is nature's device for the neutralizing of bores. But they are all going in. I think if you will allow me that I will just take the opportunity to tell him that, as far as you know, there is no positive obstacle in the way."

"As far as I know," Clara repeated, as the widow moved away to where the players were grouped round the net, or sauntering slowly towards the house. She rose to follow her, but her head was in a whirl with new thoughts, and she sat down again. Which would be best for Ida, Harold or Charles? She thought it over with as much solicitude as a mother who plans for her only child. Harold had seemed to her to be in many ways the noblest and the best young man whom she had known. If ever she was to love a man it would be such a man as that. But she must not think of herself. She had reason to believe that both these men loved her sister. Which would be the best for her? But perhaps the matter was already decided. She could not forget the scrap of conversation which she had heard the night before, nor the secret which her sister had refused to confide to her. If Ida would not tell her, there was but one person who could. She raised her eyes and there was Harold Denver standing before her.

"You were lost in your thoughts," said he, smiling. "I hope that they were pleasant ones."

"Oh, I was planning," said she, rising. "It seems rather a waste of time as a rule, for things have a way of working themselves out just as you least expect."

"What were you planning, then?"

"The future."

"Whose?"

"Oh, my own and Ida's."

"And was I included in your joint futures?"

"I hope all our friends were included."

"Don't go in," said he, as she began to move slowly towards the house. "I wanted to have a word. Let us stroll up and down the lawn. Perhaps you are cold. If you are, I could bring you out a shawl."

"Oh, no, I am not cold."

"I was speaking to your sister Ida last night." She noticed that there was a slight quiver in his voice, and, glancing up at his dark, clearcut face, she saw that he was very grave. She felt that it was settled, that he had come to ask her for her sister's hand.

"She is a charming girl," said he, after a pause.

"Indeed she is," cried Clara warmly. "And no one who has not lived with her and known her intimately can tell how charming and good she is. She is like a sunbeam in the house."

"No one who was not good could be so absolutely happy as she seems to be. Heaven's last gift, I think, is a mind so pure and a spirit so high that it is unable even to

see what is impure and evil in the world around us. For as long as we can see it, how can we be truly happy?"

"She has a deeper side also. She does not turn it to the world, and it is not natural that she should, for she is very young. But she thinks, and has aspirations of her own."

"You cannot admire her more than I do. Indeed, Miss Walker, I only ask to be brought into nearer relationship with her, and to feel that there is a permanent bond between us."

It had come at last. For a moment her heart was numbed within her, and then a flood of sisterly love carried all before it. Down with that dark thought which would still try to raise its unhallowed head! She turned to Harold with sparkling eyes and words of pleasure upon her lips.

"I should wish to be near and dear to both of you," said he, as he took her hand. "I should wish Ida to be my sister, and you my wife."

She said nothing. She only stood looking at him with parted lips and great, dark, questioning eyes. The lawn had vanished away, the sloping gardens, the brick villas, the darkening sky with half a pale moon beginning to show over the chimney-tops. All was gone, and she was only conscious of a dark, earnest, pleading face, and of a voice, far away, disconnected from herself, the voice of a man telling a woman how he loved her. He was unhappy, said the voice, his life was a void; there was but one thing that could save him; he had come to the parting of the ways, here lay happiness and honor, and all that was high and noble; there lay the soul-killing round, the lonely life, the base pursuit of money, the sordid, selfish aims. He needed but the hand of the woman that he loved to lead him into the better path. And how he loved her his life would show. He loved her for her sweetness, for her womanliness, for her strength. He had need of her. Would she not come to him? And then of a sudden as she listened it came home to her that the man was Harold Denver, and that she was the woman, and that all God's work was very beautiful—the green sward beneath her feet, the rustling leaves, the long orange slashes in the western sky. She spoke;

she scarce knew what the broken words were, but she saw the light of joy shine out on his face, and her hand was still in his as they wandered amid the twilight. They said no more now, but only wandered and felt each other's presence. All was fresh around them, familiar and yet new, tinged with the beauty of their new-found happiness.

"Did you not know it before?" he asked. "I did not dare to think it."

"What a mask of ice I must wear! How could a man feel as I have done without showing it? Your sister at least knew."

"Ida!"

"It was last night. She began to praise you, I said what I felt, and then in an instant it was all out."

"But what could you—what could you see in me? Oh, I do pray that you may not repent it!" The gentle heart was ruffled amid its joy by the thought of its own unworthiness.

"Repent it! I feel that I am a saved man. You do not know how degrading this city life is, how debasing, and yet how absorbing. Money for ever clinks in your ear. You can think of nothing else. From the bottom of my heart I hate it, and yet how can I draw back without bringing grief to my dear old father? There was but one way in which I could defy the taint, and that was by having a home influence so pure and so high that it may brace me up against all that draws me down. I have felt that influence already. I know that when I am talking to you I am a better man. It is you who, must go with me through life, or I must walk for ever alone."

"Oh, Harold, I am so happy!" Still they wandered amid the darkening shadows, while one by one the stars peeped out in the blue black sky above them. At last a chill night wind blew up from the east, and brought them back to the realities of life.

"You must go in. You will be cold."

"My father will wonder where I am. Shall I say anything to him?"

"If you like, my darling. Or I will in the morning. I must tell my mother to-night. I know how delighted she will be."

"I do hope so."

"Let me take you up the garden path. It is so dark. Your lamp is not lit yet. There is the window. Till to-morrow, then, dearest."

"Till to-morrow, Harold."

"My own darling!" He stooped, and their lips met for the first time. Then, as she pushed open the folding windows she heard his quick, firm step as it passed down the graveled path. A lamp was lit as she entered the room, and there was Ida, dancing about like a mischievous little fairy in front of her.

"And have you anything to tell me?" she asked, with a solemn face. Then, suddenly throwing her arms round her sister's neck, "Oh, you dear, dear old Clara! I am so pleased. I am so pleased."