

CH XI ~ A BLOT FROM THE BLUE

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



So by the cleverness of two girls a dark cloud was thinned away and turned into sunshine. Over one of them, alas, another cloud was gathering, which could not be so easily dispersed. Of these three households which fate had thrown together, two had already been united by ties of love. It was destined, however, that a bond of another sort should connect the Westmacotts with the Hay Denvers.

Between the Admiral and the widow a very cordial feeling had existed since the day when the old seaman had hauled down his flag and changed his opinions; granting to the yachts-woman all that he had refused to the reformer. His own frank and downright nature respected the same qualities in his neighbor, and a friendship sprang up between them which was more like that which exists between two men, founded upon esteem and a community of tastes.

“By the way, Admiral,” said Mrs. Westmacott one morning, as they walked together down to the station, “I understand that this boy of yours in the intervals of paying his devotions to Miss Walker is doing something upon ‘Change.’”

“Yes, ma’am, and there is no man of his age who is doing so well. He’s drawing ahead, I can tell you, ma’am. Some of those that started with him are hull down astarn now. He touched his five hundred last year, and before he’s thirty he’ll be making the four figures.”

“The reason I asked is that I have small investments to make myself from time to time, and my present broker is a rascal. I should be very glad to do it through your son.”

“It is very kind of you, ma’am. His partner is away on a holiday, and Harold would like to push on a bit and show what he can do. You know the poop isn’t big enough to hold the lieutenant when the skipper’s on shore.”

"I suppose he charges the usual half per cent?"

"Don't know, I'm sure, ma'am. I'll swear that he does what is right and proper."

"That is what I usually pay—ten shillings in the hundred pounds. If you see him before I do just ask him to get me five thousand in New Zealand. It is at four just now, and I fancy it may rise."

"Five thousand!" exclaimed the Admiral, reckoning it in his own mind. "Lemme see! That's twenty-five pounds commission. A nice day's work, upon my word. It is a very handsome order, ma'am."

"Well, I must pay some one, and why not him?"

"I'll tell him, and I'm sure he'll lose no time."

"Oh, there is no great hurry. By the way, I understand from what you said just now that he has a partner."

"Yes, my boy is the junior partner. Pearson is the senior. I was introduced to him years ago, and he offered Harold the opening. Of course we had a pretty stiff premium to pay."

Mrs. Westmacott had stopped, and was standing very stiffly with her Red Indian face even grimmer than usual.

"Pearson?" said she. "Jeremiah Pearson?"

"The same."

"Then it's all off," she cried. "You need not carry out that investment."

"Very well, ma'am."

They walked on together side by side, she brooding over some thought of her own, and he a little crossed and disappointed at her caprice and the lost commission for Harold.

“I tell you what, Admiral,” she exclaimed suddenly, “if I were you I should get your boy out of this partnership.”

“But why, madam?”

“Because he is tied to one of the deepest, slyest foxes in the whole city of London.”

“Jeremiah Pearson, ma’am? What can you know of him? He bears a good name.”

“No one in this world knows Jeremiah Pearson as I know him, Admiral. I warn you because I have a friendly feeling both for you and for your son. The man is a rogue and you had best avoid him.”

“But these are only words, ma’am. Do you tell me that you know him better than the brokers and jobbers in the City?”

“Man,” cried Mrs. Westmacott, “will you allow that I know him when I tell you that my maiden name was Ada Pearson, and that Jeremiah is my only brother?”

The Admiral whistled. “Whew!” cried he. “Now that I think of it, there is a likeness.”

“He is a man of iron, Admiral—a man without a heart. I should shock you if I were to tell you what I have endured from my brother. My father’s wealth was divided equally between us. His own share he ran through in five years, and he has tried since then by every trick of a cunning, low-minded man, by base cajolery, by legal quibbles, by brutal intimidation, to juggle me out of my share as well. There is no villainy of which the man is not capable. Oh, I know my brother Jeremiah. I know him and I am prepared for him.”

"This is all new to me, ma'am. 'Pon my word, I hardly know what to say to it. I thank you for having spoken so plainly. From what you say, this is a poor sort of consort for a man to sail with. Perhaps Harold would do well to cut himself adrift."

"Without losing a day."

"Well, we shall talk it over. You may be sure of that. But here we are at the station, so I will just see you into your carriage and then home to see what my wife says to the matter."

As he trudged homewards, thoughtful and perplexed, he was surprised to hear a shout behind him, and to see Harold running down the road after him.

"Why, dad," he cried, "I have just come from town, and the first thing I saw was your back as you marched away. But you are such a quick walker that I had to run to catch you."

The Admiral's smile of pleasure had broken his stern face into a thousand wrinkles. "You are early to-day," said he.

"Yes, I wanted to consult you."

"Nothing wrong?"

"Oh no, only an inconvenience."

"What is it, then?"

"How much have we in our private account?"

"Pretty fair. Some eight hundred, I think."

"Oh, half that will be ample. It was rather thoughtless of Pearson."

“What then?”

“Well, you see, dad, when he went away upon this little holiday to Havre he left me to pay accounts and so on. He told me that there was enough at the bank for all claims. I had occasion on Tuesday to pay away two cheques, one for L80, and the other for L120, and here they are returned with a bank notice that we have already overdrawn to the extent of some hundreds.”

The Admiral looked very grave. “What’s the meaning of that, then?” he asked.

“Oh, it can easily be set right. You see Pearson invests all the spare capital and keeps as small a margin as possible at the bank. Still it was too bad for him to allow me even to run a risk of having a cheque returned. I have written to him and demanded his authority to sell out some stock, and I have written an explanation to these people. In the meantime, however, I have had to issue several cheques; so I had better transfer part of our private account to meet them.”

“Quite so, my boy. All that’s mine is yours. But who do you think this Pearson is? He is Mrs. Westmacott’s brother.”

“Really. What a singular thing! Well, I can see a likeness now that you mention it. They have both the same hard type of face.”

“She has been warning me against him—says he is the rankest pirate in London. I hope that it is all right, boy, and that we may not find ourselves in broken water.”

Harold had turned a little pale as he heard Mrs. Westmacott’s opinion of his senior partner. It gave shape and substance to certain vague fears and suspicions of his own which had been pushed back as often as they obtruded themselves as being too monstrous and fantastic for belief.

“He is a well-known man in the City, dad,” said he.

“Of course he is—of course he is. That is what I told her. They would have found him out there if anything had been amiss with him. Bless you, there’s nothing so bitter as a family quarrel. Still it is just as well that you have written about this affair, for we may as well have all fair and aboveboard.”

But Harold’s letter to his partner was crossed by a letter from his partner to Harold. It lay awaiting him upon the breakfast table next morning, and it sent the heart into his mouth as he read it, and caused him to spring up from his chair with a white face and staring eyes.

“My boy! My boy!”

“I am ruined, mother—ruined!” He stood gazing wildly in front of him, while the sheet of paper fluttered down on the carpet. Then he dropped back into the chair, and sank his face into his hands. His mother had her arms round him in an instant, while the Admiral, with shaking fingers, picked up the letter from the floor and adjusted his glasses to read it.

“My DEAR DENVER,” it ran. “By the time that this reaches you I shall be out of the reach of yourself or of any one else who may desire an interview. You need not search for me, for I assure you that this letter is posted by a friend, and that you will have your trouble in vain if you try to find me. I am sorry to leave you in such a tight place, but one or other of us must be squeezed, and on the whole I prefer that it should be you. You’ll find nothing in the bank, and about L13,000 unaccounted for. I’m not sure that the best thing you can do is not to realize what you can, and imitate your senior’s example. If you act at once you may get clean away. If not, it’s not only that you must put up your shutters, but I am afraid that this missing money could hardly be included as an ordinary debt, and of course you are legally responsible for it just as much as I am. Take a friend’s advice and get to America. A young man with brains can always do something out there, and you can live down this little mischance. It will be a cheap lesson if it teaches you to take nothing upon trust in business, and to insist upon knowing exactly what your partner is doing, however senior he may be to you.

"Yours faithfully,

"JEREMIAH PEARSON."

"Great Heavens!" groaned the Admiral, "he has absconded."

"And left me both a bankrupt and a thief."

"No, no, Harold," sobbed his mother. "All will be right. What matter about money!"

"Money, mother! It is my honor."

"The boy is right. It is his honor, and my honor, for his is mine. This is a sore trouble, mother, when we thought our life's troubles were all behind us, but we will bear it as we have borne others." He held out his stringy hand, and the two old folk sat with bowed grey heads, their fingers intertwined, strong in each other's love and sympathy.

"We were too happy," she sighed.

"But it is God's will, mother."

"Yes, John, it is God's will."

"And yet it is bitter to bear. I could have lost all, the house, money, rank—I could have borne it. But at my age—my honor—the honor of an admiral of the fleet."

"No honor can be lost, John, where no dishonor has been done. What have you done? What has Harold done? There is no question of honor."

The old man shook his head, but Harold had already called together his clear practical sense, which for an instant in the presence of this frightful blow had deserted him.

"The mater is right, dad," said he. "It is bad enough, Heaven knows, but we must not take too dark a view of it. After all, this insolent letter is in itself evidence that I had nothing to do with the schemes of the base villain who wrote it."

"They may think it prearranged."

"They could not. My whole life cries out against the thought. They could not look me in the face and entertain it."

"No, boy, not if they have eyes in their heads," cried the Admiral, plucking up courage at the sight of the flashing eyes and brave, defiant face. "We have the letter, and we have your character. We'll weather it yet between them. It's my fault from the beginning for choosing such a land-shark for your consort. God help me, I thought I was finding such an opening for you."

"Dear dad! How could you possibly know? As he says in his letter, it has given me a lesson. But he was so much older and so much more experienced, that it was hard for me to ask to examine his books. But we must waste no time. I must go to the City."

"What will you do?"

"What an honest man should do. I will write to all our clients and creditors, assemble them, lay the whole matter before them, read them the letter and put myself absolutely in their hands."

"That's it, boy—yard-arm to yard-arm, and have it over."

"I must go at once." He put on his top-coat and his hat. "But I have ten minutes yet before I can catch a train. There is one little thing which I must do before I start."

He had caught sight through the long glass folding door of the gleam of a white blouse and a straw hat in the tennis ground. Clara used often to meet him there of a morning to say a few words before he hurried away into the City. He walked out

now with the quick, firm step of a man who has taken a momentous resolution, but his face was haggard and his lips pale.

“Clara,” said he, as she came towards him with words of greeting, “I am sorry to bring ill news to you, but things have gone wrong in the City, and—and I think that I ought to release you from your engagement.”

Clara stared at him with her great questioning dark eyes, and her face became as pale as his.

“How can the City affect you and me, Harold?”

“It is dishonor. I cannot ask you to share it.”

“Dishonor! The loss of some miserable gold and silver coins!”

“Oh, Clara, if it were only that! We could be far happier together in a little cottage in the country than with all the riches of the City. Poverty could not cut me to the heart, as I have been cut this morning. Why, it is but twenty minutes since I had the letter, Clara, and it seems to me to be some old, old thing which happened far away in my past life, some horrid black cloud which shut out all the freshness and the peace from it.”

“But what is it, then? What do you fear worse than poverty?”

“To have debts that I cannot meet. To be hammered upon ‘Change and declared a bankrupt. To know that others have a just claim upon me and to feel that I dare not meet their eyes. Is not that worse than poverty?”

“Yes, Harold, a thousand fold worse! But all this may be got over. Is there nothing more?”

“My partner has fled and left me responsible for heavy debts, and in such a position that I may be required by the law to produce some at least of this missing money. It

has been confided to him to invest, and he has embezzled it. I, as his partner, am liable for it. I have brought misery on all whom I love—my father, my mother. But you at least shall not be under the shadow. You are free, Clara. There is no tie between us.”

“It takes two to make such a tie, Harold,” said she, smiling and putting her hand inside his arm. “It takes two to make it, dear, and also two to break it. Is that the way they do business in the City, sir, that a man can always at his own sweet will tear up his engagement?”

“You hold me to it, Clara?”

“No creditor so remorseless as I, Harold. Never, never shall you get from that bond.”

“But I am ruined. My whole life is blasted.”

“And so you wish to ruin me, and blast my life also. No indeed, sir, you shall not get away so lightly. But seriously now, Harold, you would hurt me if it were not so absurd. Do you think that a woman’s love is like this sunshade which I carry in my hand, a thing only fitted for the sunshine, and of no use when the winds blow and the clouds gather?”

“I would not drag you down, Clara.”

“Should I not be dragged down indeed if I left your side at such a time? It is only now that I can be of use to you, help you, sustain you. You have always been so strong, so above me. You are strong still, but then two will be stronger. Besides, sir, you have no idea what a woman of business I am. Papa says so, and he knows.”

Harold tried to speak, but his heart was too full. He could only press the white hand which curled round his sleeve. She walked up and down by his side, prattling merrily, and sending little gleams of cheeriness through the gloom which girt him in. To

listen to her he might have thought that it was Ida, and not her staid and demure sister, who was chatting to him.

“It will soon be cleared up,” she said, “and then we shall feel quite dull. Of course all business men have these little ups and downs. Why, I suppose of all the men you meet upon ‘Change, there is not one who has not some such story to tell. If everything was always smooth, you know, then of course every one would turn stockbroker, and you would have to hold your meetings in Hyde Park. How much is it that you need?”

“More than I can ever get. Not less than thirteen thousand pounds.”

Clara’s face fell as she heard the amount. “What do you purpose doing?”

“I shall go to the City now, and I shall ask all our creditors to meet me to-morrow. I shall read them Pearson’s letter, and put myself into their hands.”

“And they, what will they do?”

“What can they do? They will serve writs for their money, and the firm will be declared bankrupt.”

“And the meeting will be to-morrow, you say. Will you take my advice?”

“What is it, Clara?”

“To ask them for a few days of delay. Who knows what new turn matters may take?”

“What turn can they take? I have no means of raising the money.”

“Let us have a few days.”

“Oh, we should have that in the ordinary course of business. The legal formalities would take them some little time. But I must go, Clara, I must not seem to shirk. My place now must be at my offices.”

“Yes, dear, you are right. God bless you and guard you! I shall be here in The Wilderness, but all day I shall be by your office table at Throgmorton Street in spirit, and if ever you should be sad you will hear my little whisper in your ear, and know that there is one client whom you will never be able to get rid of—never as long as we both live, dear.”