

CH XV ~ STILL AMONG SHOALS

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



Next day brought the Admiral a cheque for L5,000 from Mr. McAdam, and a stamped agreement by which he made over his pension papers to the speculative investor. It was not until he had signed and sent it off that the full significance of all that he had done broke upon him. He had sacrificed everything. His pension was gone. He had nothing save only what he could earn. But the stout old heart never quailed. He waited eagerly for a letter from the Saint Lawrence Shipping Company, and in the meanwhile he gave his landlord a quarter's notice. Hundred pound a year houses would in future be a luxury which he could not aspire to. A small lodging in some inexpensive part of London must be the substitute for his breezy Norwood villa. So be it, then! Better that a thousand fold than that his name should be associated with failure and disgrace.

On that morning Harold Denver was to meet the creditors of the firm, and to explain the situation to them. It was a hateful task, a degrading task, but he set himself to do it with quiet resolution. At home they waited in intense anxiety to learn the result of the meeting. It was late before he returned, haggard pale, like a man who has done and suffered much.

"What's this board in front of the house?" he asked.

"We are going to try a little change of scene," said the Admiral. "This place is neither town nor country. But never mind that, boy. Tell us what happened in the City."

"God help me! My wretched business driving you out of house and home!" cried Harold, broken down by this fresh evidence of the effects of his misfortunes. "It is easier for me to meet my creditors than to see you two suffering so patiently for my sake."

"Tut, tut!" cried the Admiral. "There's no suffering in the matter. Mother would rather be near the theaters. That's at the bottom of it, isn't it, mother? You come and sit down here between us and tell us all about it."

Harold sat down with a loving hand in each of his.

"It's not so bad as we thought," said he, "and yet it is bad enough. I have about ten days to find the money, but I don't know which way to turn for it. Pearson, however, lied, as usual, when he spoke of L13,000. The amount is not quite L7,000."

The Admiral clapped his hands. "I knew we should weather it after all! Hurrah my boy! Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!"

Harold gazed at him in surprise, while the old seaman waved his arm above his head and bellowed out three stentorian cheers. "Where am I to get seven thousand pounds from, dad?" he asked.

"Never mind. You spin your yarn."

"Well, they were very good and very kind, but of course they must have either their money or their money's worth. They passed a vote of sympathy with me, and agreed to wait ten days before they took any proceedings. Three of them, whose claim came to L3,500, told me that if I would give them my personal I.O.U., and pay interest at the rate of five per cent, their amounts might stand over as long as I wished. That would be a charge of L175 upon my income, but with economy I could meet it, and it diminishes the debt by one-half."

Again the Admiral burst out cheering.

"There remains, therefore, about L3,200 which has to be found within ten days. No man shall lose by me. I gave them my word in the room that if I worked my soul out of my body every one of them should be paid. I shall not spend a penny upon myself until it is done. But some of them can't wait. They are poor men themselves, and

must have their money. They have issued a warrant for Pearson's arrest. But they think that he has got away the States."

"These men shall have their money," said the Admiral.

"Dad!"

"Yes, my boy, you don't know the resources of the family. One never does know until one tries. What have you yourself now?"

"I have about a thousand pounds invested."

"All right. And I have about as much more. There's a good start. Now, mother, it is your turn. What is that little bit of paper of yours?"

Mrs. Denver unfolded it, and placed it upon Harold's knee.

"Five thousand pounds!" he gasped.

"Ah, but mother is not the only rich one. Look at this!" And the Admiral unfolded his cheque, and placed it upon the other knee.

Harold gazed from one to the other in bewilderment. "Ten thousand pounds!" he cried. "Good heavens! where did these come from?"

"You will not worry any longer, dear," murmured his mother, slipping her arm round him.

But his quick eye had caught the signature upon one of the cheques. "Doctor Walker!" he cried, flushing. "This is Clara's doing. Oh, dad, we cannot take this money. It would not be right nor honorable."

"No, boy, I am glad you think so. It is something, however, to have proved one's friend, for a real good friend he is. It was he who brought it in, though Clara sent him. But this other money will be enough to cover everything, and it is all my own."

"Your own? Where did you get it, dad?"

"Tut, tut! See what it is to have a City man to deal with. It is my own, and fairly earned, and that is enough."

"Dear old dad!" Harold squeezed his gnarled hand. "And you, mother! You have lifted the trouble from my heart. I feel another man. You have saved my honor, my good name, everything. I cannot owe you more, for I owe you everything already."

So while the autumn sunset shone ruddily through the broad window these three sat together hand in hand, with hearts which were too full to speak. Suddenly the soft thudding of tennis balls was heard, and Mrs. Westmacott bounded into view upon the lawn with brandished racket and short skirts fluttering in the breeze. The sight came as a relief to their strained nerves, and they burst all three into a hearty fit of laughter.

"She is playing with her nephew," said Harold at last. "The Walkers have not come out yet. I think that it would be well if you were to give me that cheque, mother, and I were to return it in person."

"Certainly, Harold. I think it would be very nice."

He went in through the garden. Clara and the Doctor were sitting together in the dining-room. She sprang to her feet at the sight of him.

"Oh, Harold, I have been waiting for you so impatiently," she cried; "I saw you pass the front windows half an hour ago. I would have come in if I dared. Do tell us what has happened."

"I have come in to thank you both. How can I repay you for your kindness? Here is your cheque, Doctor. I have not needed it. I find that I can lay my hands on enough to pay my creditors."

"Thank God!" said Clara fervently.

"The sum is less than I thought, and our resources considerably more. We have been able to do it with ease."

"With ease!" The Doctor's brow clouded and his manner grew cold. "I think, Harold, that you would do better to take this money of mine, than to use that which seems to you to be gained with ease."

"Thank you, sir. If I borrowed from any one it would be from you. But my father has this very sum, five thousand pounds, and, as I tell him, I owe him so much that I have no compunction about owing him more."

"No compunction! Surely there are some sacrifices which a son should not allow his parents to make."

"Sacrifices! What do you mean?"

"Is it possible that you do not know how this money has been obtained?"

"I give you my word, Doctor Walker, that I have no idea. I asked my father, but he refused to tell me."

"I thought not," said the Doctor, the gloom clearing from his brow. "I was sure that you were not a man who, to clear yourself from a little money difficulty, would sacrifice the happiness of your mother and the health of your father."

"Good gracious! what do you mean?"

"It is only right that you should know. That money represents the commutation of your father's pension. He has reduced himself to poverty, and intends to go to sea again to earn a living."

"To sea again! Impossible!"

"It is the truth. Charles Westmacott has told Ida. He was with him in the City when he took his poor pension about from dealer to dealer trying to sell it. He succeeded at last, and hence the money."

"He has sold his pension!" cried Harold, with his hands to his face. "My dear old dad has sold his pension!" He rushed from the room, and burst wildly into the presence of his parents once more. "I cannot take it, father," he cried. "Better bankruptcy than that. Oh, if I had only known your plan! We must have back the pension. Oh, mother, mother, how could you think me capable of such selfishness? Give me the cheque, dad, and I will see this man to-night, for I would sooner die like a dog in the ditch than touch a penny of this money."