

Артур Конан Дойл

Beyond The City



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In 'Beyond the City', the desire for money and romance drives the characters beyond the typical boundaries of their middle class Victorian lives. Lust, deceit, and financial scandals rock their placid world. The girl next door is much more than ordinary in this surprising domestic romance by Arthur Conan Doyle. A remarkable departure from his famous detective stories, 'Beyond the City' explores the relationships between the residents of three adjoining homes.

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Beyond the City

by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter I. The new-comers

"If you please, mum," said the voice of a domestic from somewhere round the angle of the door, "number three is moving in.

Two little old ladies, who were sitting at either side of a table, sprang to their feet with ejaculations of interest, and rushed to the window of the sitting-room.

"Take care, Monica dear," said one, shrouding herself in the lace curtain; "don't let them see us.

"No, no, Bertha. We must not give them reason to say that their neighbors are inquisitive. But I think that we are safe if we stand like this."

The open window looked out upon a sloping lawn, well trimmed and pleasant, with fuzzy rosebushes and a star-shaped bed of sweet-william. It was bounded by a low wooden fence, which screened it off from a broad, modern, new metaled road. At the other side of this road were three large detached deep-bodied villas with peaky eaves and small wooden balconies, each standing in its own little square of grass and of flowers. All three were equally new, but numbers one and two were curtained and sedate, with a human, sociable look to them; while number three, with yawning door and unkempt garden, had apparently only just received its furniture and made itself ready for its occupants. A four-wheeler had driven up to the gate, and it was at this that the old ladies, peeping out bird-like from behind their curtains, directed an eager and questioning gaze.

The cabman had descended, and the passengers within were handing out the articles which they desired him to carry up to the house. He stood red-faced and blinking, with his crooked arms outstretched, while a male hand, protruding from the window, kept piling up upon him a series of articles the sight of which filled the curious old ladies with bewilderment.

"My goodness me!" cried Monica, the smaller, the drier, and the more wizened of the pair. "What do you call that, Bertha? It looks to me like four batter puddings."

"Those are what young men box each other with," said Bertha, with a conscious air of superior worldly knowledge.

"And those?"

Two great bottle-shaped pieces of yellow shining wood had been heaped upon the cabman.

"Oh, I don't know what those are," confessed Bertha. Indian clubs had never before obtruded themselves upon her peaceful and very feminine existence.

These mysterious articles were followed, however, by others which were more within their range of comprehension – by a pair of dumb-bells, a purple cricket-bag, a set of golf clubs, and a tennis racket. Finally, when the cabman, all top-heavy and bristling, had staggered off up the garden path, there emerged in a very leisurely way from the cab a big, powerfully built young man, with a bull pup under one arm and a pink sporting paper in his hand. The paper he crammed into the pocket of his light yellow dust-coat, and extended his hand as if to assist some one else from the vehicle. To the surprise of the two old ladies, however, the only thing which his open palm received was a violent slap, and a tall lady bounded unassisted out of the cab. With a regal wave she motioned the young man towards the door, and then with one hand upon her hip she stood in a careless, lounging attitude by the gate, kicking her toe against the wall and listlessly awaiting the return of the driver.

As she turned slowly round, and the sunshine struck upon her face, the two watchers were amazed to see that this very active and energetic lady was far from being in her first youth, so far that she had certainly come of age again since she first passed that landmark in life's journey. Her finely chiseled, clean-cut face, with something red Indian about the firm mouth and strongly marked

cheek bones, showed even at that distance traces of the friction of the passing years. And yet she was very handsome. Her features were as firm in repose as those of a Greek bust, and her great dark eyes were arched over by two brows so black, so thick, and so delicately curved, that the eye turned away from the harsher details of the face to marvel at their grace and strength. Her figure, too, was straight as a dart, a little portly, perhaps, but curving into magnificent outlines, which were half accentuated by the strange costume which she wore. Her hair, black but plentifully shot with grey, was brushed plainly back from her high forehead, and was gathered under a small round felt hat, like that of a man, with one sprig of feather in the band as a concession to her sex. A double-breasted jacket of some dark frieze-like material fitted closely to her figure, while her straight blue skirt, untrimmed and ungathered, was cut so short that the lower curve of her finely-turned legs was plainly visible beneath it, terminating in a pair of broad, flat, low-heeled and square-toed shoes. Such was the lady who lounged at the gate of number three, under the curious eyes of her two opposite neighbors.

But if her conduct and appearance had already somewhat jarred upon their limited and precise sense of the fitness of things, what were they to think of the next little act in this tableau vivant? The cabman, red and heavy-jowled, had come back from his labors, and held out his hand for his fare. The lady passed him a coin, there was a moment of mumbling and gesticulating, and suddenly she had him with both hands by the red cravat which girt his neck, and was shaking him as a terrier would a rat. Right across the pavement she thrust him, and, pushing him up against the wheel, she banged his head three several times against the side of his own vehicle.

"Can I be of any use to you, aunt?" asked the large youth, framing himself in the open doorway.

"Not the slightest," panted the enraged lady. "There, you low blackguard, that will teach you to be impertinent to a lady."

The cabman looked helplessly about him with a bewildered, questioning gaze, as one to whom alone of all men this unheard-of and extraordinary thing had happened. Then, rubbing his head, he mounted slowly on to the box and drove away with an uptossed hand appealing to the universe. The lady smoothed down her dress, pushed back her hair under her little felt hat, and strode in through the hall-door, which was closed behind her. As with a whisk her short skirts vanished into the darkness, the two spectators – Miss Bertha and Miss Monica Williams – sat looking at each other in speechless amazement. For fifty years they had peeped through that little window and across that trim garden, but never yet had such a sight as this come to confound them.

"I wish," said Monica at last, "that we had kept the field."

"I am sure I wish we had," answered her sister.

Chapter II. Breaking the ice

The cottage from the window of which the Misses Williams had looked out stands, and has stood for many a year, in that pleasant suburban district which lies between Norwood, Anerley, and Forest Hill. Long before there had been a thought of a township there, when the Metropolis was still quite a distant thing, old Mr. Williams had inhabited "The Brambles," as the little house was called, and had owned all the fields about it. Six or eight such cottages scattered over a rolling country-side were all the houses to be found there in the days when the century was young. From afar, when the breeze came from the north, the dull, low roar of the great city might be heard, like the breaking of the tide of life, while along the horizon might be seen the dim curtain of smoke, the grim spray which that tide threw up. Gradually, however, as the years passed, the City had thrown out a long brick-feeler here and there, curving, extending, and coalescing, until at last the little cottages had been gripped round by these red tentacles, and had been absorbed to make room for the modern villa. Field by field the estate of old Mr. Williams had been sold to the speculative builder, and had borne rich crops of snug suburban dwellings, arranged in curving crescents and tree-lined avenues. The father had passed away before his cottage was entirely bricked round, but his two daughters, to whom the property had descended, lived to see the last vestige of country taken from them. For years they had clung to the one field which faced their windows, and it was only after much argument and many heart burnings, that they had at last consented that it should share the fate of the others. A broad road was driven through their quiet domain, the quarter was re-named "The Wilderness," and three square, staring, uncompromising villas began to sprout up on the other side. With sore hearts, the two shy little old maids watched their steady progress, and speculated as to what fashion of neighbors chance would bring into the little nook which had always been their own.

And at last they were all three finished. Wooden balconies and over hanging eaves had been added to them, so that, in the language of the advertisement, there were vacant three eligible Swiss-built villas, with sixteen rooms, no basement, electric bells, hot and cold water, and every modern convenience, including a common tennis lawn, to be let at £100 a year, or £1,500 purchase. So tempting an offer did not long remain open. With in a few weeks the card had vanished from number one, and it was known that Admiral Hay Denver, V.C., C.B., with Mrs. Hay Denver and their only son, were about to move in to it. The news brought peace to the heart soft he Williams sisters. They had lived with a settled conviction that some wild impossible colony, some shouting, singing family of madcaps, would break in upon their peace. This establishment at least was irreproachable. A reference to "Men of the Time" showed them that Admiral Hay Denver was a most distinguished officer, who had begun his active career at Bomarsund, and had ended it at Alexandria, having managed between these two episodes to see as much service as any man of his years. From the Taku Forts and the *Shannon* brigade, to dhow-harrying off Zanzibar, there was no variety of naval work which did not appear in his record; while the Victoria Cross, and the Albert Medal for saving life, vouched for it that in peace as in war his courage was still of the same true temper. Clearly a very eligible neighbor this, the more so as they had been confidentially assured by the estate agent that Mr. Harold Denver, the son, was a most quiet young gentleman, and that he was busy from morning to night on the Stock Exchange.

The Hay Denvers had hardly moved in before number two also struck its placard, and again the ladies found that they had no reason to be discontented with their neighbors. Doctor Balthazar Walker was a very well-known name in the medical world. Did not his qualifications, his membership, and the record of his writings fill a long half-column in the "Medical Directory," from his first little paper on the "Gouty Diathesis" in 1859 to his exhaustive treatise upon "Affections of the Vaso-Motor System" in 1884? A successful medical career which promised to end in a presidentship of a college and a baronetcy, had been cut short by his sudden inheritance of a considerable sum from a grateful

patient, which had rendered him independent for life, and had enabled him to turn his attention to the more scientific part of his profession, which had always had a greater charm for him than its more practical and commercial aspect. To this end he had given up his house in Weymouth Street, and had taken this opportunity of moving himself, his scientific instruments, and his two charming daughters (he had been a widower for some years) into the more peaceful atmosphere of Norwood.

There was thus but one villa unoccupied, and it was no wonder that the two maiden ladies watched with a keen interest, which deepened into a dire apprehension, the curious incidents which heralded the coming of the new tenants. They had already learned from the agent that the family consisted of two only, Mrs. Westmacott, a widow, and her nephew, Charles Westmacott. How simple and how select it had sounded! Who could have foreseen from it these fearful portents which seemed to threaten violence and discord among the dwellers in The Wilderness? Again the two old maids cried in heartfelt chorus that they wished they had not sold their field.

"Well, at least, Monica," remarked Bertha, as they sat over their teacups that afternoon, "however strange these people may be, it is our duty to be as polite to them as to the others."

"Most certainly," acquiesced her sister.

"Since we have called upon Mrs. Hay Denver and upon the Misses Walker, we must call upon this Mrs. Westmacott also."

"Certainly, dear. As long as they are living upon our land I feel as if they were in a sense our guests, and that it is our duty to welcome them."

"Then we shall call to-morrow," said Bertha, with decision.

"Yes, dear, we shall. But, oh, I wish it was over!"

At four o'clock on the next day, the two maiden ladies set off upon their hospitable errand. In their stiff, crackling dresses of black silk, with jet-bespangled jackets, and little rows of cylindrical grey curls drooping down on either side of their black bonnets, they looked like two old fashion plates which had wandered off into the wrong decade. Half curious and half fearful, they knocked at the door of number three, which was instantly opened by a red-headed page-boy.

Yes, Mrs. Westmacott was at home. He ushered them into the front room, furnished as a drawing-room, where in spite of the fine spring weather a large fire was burning in the grate. The boy took their cards, and then, as they sat down together upon a settee, he set their nerves in a thrill by darting behind a curtain with a shrill cry, and prodding at something with his foot. The bull pup which they had seen upon the day before bolted from its hiding-place, and scuttled snarling from the room.

"It wants to get at Eliza," said the youth, in a confidential whisper. "Master says she would give him more'n he brought." He smiled affably at the two little stiff black figures, and departed in search of his mistress.

"What – what did he say?" gasped Bertha.

"Something about a – Oh, goodness gracious! Oh, help, help, help, help, help!" The two sisters had bounded on to the settee, and stood there with staring eyes and skirts gathered in, while they filled the whole house with their yells. Out of a high wicker-work basket which stood by the fire there had risen a flat diamond-shaped head with wicked green eyes which came flickering upwards, waving gently from side to side, until a foot or more of glossy scaly neck was visible. Slowly the vicious head came floating up, while at every oscillation a fresh burst of shrieks came from the settee.

"What in the name of mischief!" cried a voice, and there was the mistress of the house standing in the doorway. Her gaze at first had merely taken in the fact that two strangers were standing screaming upon her red plush sofa. A glance at the fireplace, however, showed her the cause of the terror, and she burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

"Charley," she shouted, "here's Eliza misbehaving again."

"I'll settle her," answered a masculine voice, and the young man dashed into the room. He had a brown horse-cloth in his hand, which he threw over the basket, making it fast with a piece of twine so as to effectually imprison its inmate, while his aunt ran across to reassure her visitors.

"It is only a rock snake, " she explained.

"Oh, Bertha!" "Oh, Monica!" gasped the poor exhausted gentlewomen.

"She's hatching out some eggs. That is why we have the fire. Eliza always does better when she is warm. She is a sweet, gentle creature, but no doubt she thought that you had designs upon her eggs. I suppose that you did not touch any of them?"

"Oh, let us get away, Bertha!" cried Monica, with her thin, black-gloved hands thrown forwards in abhorrence.

"Not away, but into the next room," said Mrs. Westmacott, with the air of one whose word was law. "This way, if you please! It is less warm here." She led the way into a very handsomely appointed library, with three great cases of books, and upon the fourth side a long yellow table littered over with papers and scientific instruments. "Sit here, and you, there," she continued. "That is right. Now let me see, which of you is Miss Williams, and which Miss Bertha Williams?"

"I am Miss Williams," said Monica, still palpitating, and glancing furtively about in dread of some new horror.

"And you live, as I understand, over at the pretty little cottage. It is very nice of you to call so early. I don't suppose that we shall get on, but still the intention is equally good." She crossed her legs and leaned her back against the marble mantelpiece.

"We thought that perhaps we might be of some assistance," said Bertha, timidly. "If there is anything which we could do to make you feel more at home – "

"Oh, thank you, I am too old a traveler to feel anything but at home wherever I go. I've just come back from a few months in the Marquesas Islands, where I had a very pleasant visit. That was where I got Eliza. In many respects the Marquesas Islands now lead the world."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Miss Williams. "In what respect?"

"In the relation of the sexes. They have worked out the great problem upon their own lines, and their isolated geographical position has helped them to come to a conclusion of their own. The woman there is, as she should be, in every way the absolute equal of the male. Come in, Charles, and sit down. Is Eliza all right?"

"All right, aunt."

"These are our neighbors, the Misses Williams. Perhaps they will have some stout. You might bring in a couple of bottles, Charles."

"No, no, thank you! None for us!" cried her two visitors, earnestly.

"No? I am sorry that I have no tea to offer you. I look upon the subserviency of woman as largely due to her abandoning nutritious drinks and invigorating exercises to the male. I do neither." She picked up a pair of fifteen-pound dumb-bells from beside the fireplace and swung them lightly about her head. "You see what may be done on stout," said she.

"But don't you think," the elder Miss Williams suggested timidly, "don't you think, Mrs. Westmascott, that woman has a mission of her own?"

The lady of the house dropped her dumb-bells with a crash upon the floor.

"The old cant!" she cried. "The old shibboleth! What is this mission which is reserved for woman? All that is humble, that is mean, that is soul-killing, that is so contemptible and so ill-paid that none other will touch it. All that is woman's mission. And who imposed these limitations upon her? Who cooped her up within this narrow sphere? Was it Providence? Was it nature? No, it was the arch enemy. It was man."

"Oh, I say, auntie!" drawled her nephew.

"It was man, Charles. It was you and your fellows I say that woman is a colossal monument to the selfishness of man. What is all this boasted chivalry – these fine words and vague phrases? Where is it when we wish to put it to the test? Man in the abstract will do anything to help a woman. Of course. How does it work when his pocket is touched? Where is his chivalry then? Will the doctors help her to qualify? will the lawyers help her to be called to the bar? will the clergy tolerate her in the

Church? Oh, it is close your ranks then and refer poor woman to her mission! Her mission! To be thankful for coppers and not to interfere with the men while they grabble for gold, like swine round a trough, that is man's reading of the mission of women. You may sit there and sneer, Charles, while you look upon your victim, but you know that it is truth, every word of it.

Terrified as they were by this sudden torrent of words, the two gentlewomen could not but smile at the sight of the fiery, domineering victim and the big apologetic representative of mankind who sat meekly bearing all the sins of his sex. The lady struck a match, whipped a cigarette from a case upon the mantelpiece, and began to draw the smoke into her lungs.

"I find it very soothing when my nerves are at all ruffled," she explained. "You don't smoke? Ah, you miss one of the purest of pleasures – one of the few pleasures which are without a reaction."

Miss Williams smoothed out her silken lap.

"It is a pleasure," she said, with some approach to self-assertion, "which Bertha and I are rather too old-fashioned to enjoy."

"No doubt, It would probably make you very ill if you attempted it. By the way, I hope that you will come to some of our Guild meetings. I shall see that tickets are sent you."

"Your Guild?"

"It is not yet formed, but I shall lose no time in forming a committee. It is my habit to establish a branch of the Emancipation Guild wherever I go. There is a Mrs. Sanderson in Anerley who is already one of the emancipated, so that I have a nucleus. It is only by organized resistance, Miss Williams, that we can hope to hold our own against the selfish sex. Must you go, then?"

"Yes, we have one or two other visits to pay," said the elder sister. "You will, I am sure, excuse us. I hope that you will find Norwood a pleasant residence."

"All places are to me simply a battle-field," she answered, gripping first one and then the other with a grip which crumpled up their little thin fingers. "The days for work and healthful exercise, the evenings to Browning and high discourse, eh, Charles? Good-bye!" She came to the door with them, and as they glanced back they saw her still standing there with the yellow bull pup cuddled up under one forearm, and the thin blue reek of her cigarette ascending from her lips.

"Oh, what a dreadful, dreadful woman!" whispered sister Bertha, as they hurried down the street. "Thank goodness that it is over."

"But she'll return the visit," answered the other. "I think that we had better tell Mary that we are not at home."

Chapter III. Dwellers in the wilderness

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, aquiline 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 Zealand, 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-curling 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 outbursts 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."

Chapter IV. A sister's secret

"Tell me, Miss Walker! You know how things should be. What would you say was a good profession for a young man of twenty-six who has had no education worth speaking about, and who is not very quick by nature?" The speaker was Charles Westmacott, and the time this same summer evening in the tennis ground, though the shadows had fallen now and the game been abandoned.

The girl glanced up at him, amused and surprised.

"Do you mean yourself?"

"Precisely."

"But how could I tell?"

"I have no one to advise me. I believe that you could do it better than any one. I feel confidence in your opinion."

"It is very flattering." She glanced up again at his earnest, questioning face, with its Saxon eyes and drooping flaxen mustache, in some doubt as to whether he might be joking. On the contrary, all his attention seemed to be concentrated upon her answer.

"It depends so much upon what you can do, you know. I do not know you sufficiently to be able to say what natural gifts you have." They were walking slowly across the lawn in the direction of the house.

"I have none. That is to say none worth mentioning. I have no memory and I am very slow."

"But you are very strong."

"Oh, if that goes for anything. I can put up a hundred-pound bar till further orders; but what sort of a calling is that?"

Some little joke about being called to the bar flickered up in Miss Walker's mind, but her companion was in such obvious earnest that she stifled down her inclination to laugh.

"I can do a mile on the cinder-track in 4:50 and across-country in 5:20, but how is that to help me? I might be a cricket professional, but it is not a very dignified position. Not that I care a straw about dignity, you know, but I should not like to hurt the old lady's feelings."

"Your aunt's?"

"Yes, my aunt's. My parents were killed in the Mutiny, you know, when I was a baby, and she has looked after me ever since. She has been very good to me. I'm sorry to leave her."

"But why should you leave her?" They had reached the garden gate, and the girl leaned her racket upon the top of it, looking up with grave interest at her big white-flannelled companion.

"It's, Browning," said he.

"What!"

"Don't tell my aunt that I said it" – he sank his voice to a whisper – "I hate Browning."

Clara Walker rippled off into such a merry peal of laughter that he forgot the evil things which he had suffered from the poet, and burst out laughing too.

"I can't make him out," said he. "I try, but he is one too many. No doubt it is very stupid of me; I don't deny it. But as long as I cannot there is no use pretending that I can. And then of course she feels hurt, for she is very fond of him, and likes to read him aloud in the evenings. She is reading a piece now 'Pippa Passes,' and I assure you, Miss Walker, that I don't even know what the title means. You must think me a dreadful fool."

"But surely he is not so incomprehensible as all that?" she said, as an attempt at encouragement.

"He is very bad. There are some things, you know, which are fine. That ride of the three Dutchmen, and Herve Riel and others, they are all right. But there was a piece we read last week. The first line stumped my aunt, and it takes a good deal to do that, for she rides very straight. 'Setebos and Setebos and Setebos.' That was the line."

"It sounds like a charm."

"No, it is a gentleman's name. Three gentlemen, I thought, at first, but my aunt says one. Then he goes on, 'Thinketh he dwelleth in the light of the moon.' It was a very trying piece."

Clara Walker laughed again.

"You must not think of leaving your aunt," she said. "Think how lonely she would be without you."

"Well, yes, I have thought of that. But you must remember that my aunt is to all intents hardly middle-aged, and a very eligible person. I don't think that her dislike to mankind extends to individuals. She might form new ties, and then I should be a third wheel in the coach. It was all very well as long as I was only a boy, when her first husband was alive."

"But, good gracious, you don't mean that Mrs. Westmacott is going to marry again?" gasped Clara.

The young man glanced down at her with a question in his eyes "Oh, it is only a remote, possibility, you know," said he. "Still, of course, it might happen, and I should like to know what I ought to turn my hand to."

"I wish I could help you," said Clara. "But I really know very little about such things. However, I could talk to my father, who knows a very great deal of the world."

"I wish you would. I should be so glad if you would."

"Then I certainly will. And now I must say good-night, Mr. Westmacott, for papa will be wondering where I am."

"Good night, Miss Walker." He pulled off his flannel cap, and stalked away through the gathering darkness.

Clara had imagined that they had been the last on the lawn, but, looking back from the steps which led up to the French windows, she saw two dark figures moving across towards the house. As they came nearer she could distinguish that they were Harold Denver and her sister Ida. The murmur of their voices rose up to her ears, and then the musical little child-like laugh which she knew so well. "I am so delighted," she heard her sister say. "So pleased and proud. I had no idea of it. Your words were such a surprise and a joy to me. Oh, I am so glad."

"Is that you, Ida?"

"Oh, there is Clara. I must go in, Mr. Denver. Good-night!"

There were a few whispered words, a laugh from Ida, and a "Good-night, Miss Walker," out of the darkness. Clara took her sister's hand, and they passed together through the long folding window. The Doctor had gone into his study, and the dining-room was empty. A single small red lamp upon the sideboard was reflected tenfold by the plate about it and the mahogany beneath it, though its single wick cast but a feeble light into the large, dimly shadowed room. Ida danced off to the big central lamp, but Clara put her hand upon her arm. "I rather like this quiet light," said she. "Why should we not have a chat?" She sat in the Doctor's large red plush chair, and her sister cuddled down upon the footstool at her feet, glancing up at her elder with a smile upon her lips and a mischievous gleam in her eyes. There was a shade of anxiety in Clara's face, which cleared away as she gazed into her sister's frank blue eyes.

"Have you anything to tell me, dear?" she asked.

Ida gave a little pout and shrug to her shoulder. "The Solicitor-General then opened the case for the prosecution," said she. "You are going to cross-examine me, Clara, so don't deny it. I do wish you would have that grey satin foulard of yours done up. With a little trimming and a new white vest it would look as good as new, and it is really very dowdy."

"You were quite late upon the lawn," said the inexorable Clara.

"Yes, I was rather. So were you. Have you anything to tell me?" She broke away into her merry musical laugh.

"I was chatting with Mr. Westmacott."

"And I was chatting with Mr. Denver. By the way, Clara, now tell me truly, what do you think of Mr. Denver? Do you like him? Honestly now!"

"I like him very much indeed. I think that he is one of the most gentlemanly, modest, manly young men that I have ever known. So now, dear, have you nothing to tell me?" Clara smoothed down her sister's golden hair with a motherly gesture, and stooped her face to catch the expected confidence. She could wish nothing better than that Ida should be the wife of Harold Denver, and from the words which she had overheard as they left the lawn that evening, she could not doubt that there was some understanding between them.

But there came no confession from Ida. Only the same mischievous smile and amused gleam in her deep blue eyes.

"That grey foulard dress – " she began.

"Oh, you little tease! Come now, I will ask you what you have just asked me. Do you like Harold Denver?"

"Oh, he's a darling!"

"Ida!"

"Well, you asked me. That's what I think of him. And now, you dear old inquisitive, you will get nothing more out of me; so you must wait and not be too curious. I'm going off to see what papa is doing." She sprang to her feet, threw her arms round her sister's neck, gave her a final squeeze, and was gone. A chorus from Olivette, sung in her clear contralto, grew fainter and fainter until it ended in the slam of a distant door.

But Clara Walker still sat in the dim-lit room with her chin upon her hands, and her dreamy eyes looking out into the gathering gloom. It was the duty of her, a maiden, to play the part of a mother – to guide another in paths which her own steps had not yet trodden. Since her mother died not a thought had been given to herself, all was for her father and her sister. In her own eyes she was herself very plain, and she knew that her manner was often ungracious when she would most wish to be gracious. She saw her face as the glass reflected it, but she did not see the changing play of expression which gave it its charm – the infinite pity, the sympathy, the sweet womanliness which drew towards her all who were in doubt and in trouble, even as poor slow-moving Charles Westmacott had been drawn to her that night. She was herself, she thought, outside the pale of love. But it was very different with Ida, merry, little, quick-witted, bright-faced Ida. She was born for love. It was her inheritance. But she was young and innocent. She must not be allowed to venture too far without help in those dangerous waters. Some understanding there was between her and Harold Denver. In her heart of hearts Clara, like every good woman, was a match-maker, and already she had chosen Denver of all men as the one to whom she could most safely confide Ida. He had talked to her more than once on the serious topics of life, on his aspirations, on what a man could do to leave the world better for his presence. She knew that he was a man of a noble nature, high-minded and earnest. And yet she did not like this secrecy, this disinclination upon the part of one so frank and honest as Ida to tell her what was passing. She would wait, and if she got the opportunity next day she would lead Harold Denver himself on to this topic. It was possible that she might learn from him what her sister had refused to tell her.

Chapter V. A naval conquest

It was the habit of the Doctor and the Admiral to accompany each other upon a morning ramble between breakfast and lunch. The dwellers in those quiet tree-lined roads were accustomed to see the two figures, the long, thin, austere seaman, and the short, bustling, tweed-clad physician, pass and repass with such regularity that a stopped clock has been reset by them. The Admiral took two steps to his companion's three, but the younger man was the quicker, and both were equal to a good four and a half miles an hour.

It was a lovely summer day which followed the events which have been described. The sky was of the deepest blue, with a few white, fleecy clouds drifting lazily across it, and the air was filled with the low drone of insects or with a sudden sharper note as bee or bluefly shot past with its quivering, long-drawn hum, like an insect tuning-fork. As the friends topped each rise which leads up to the Crystal Palace, they could see the dun clouds of London stretching along the northern sky-line, with spire or dome breaking through the low-lying haze. The Admiral was in high spirits, for the morning post had brought good news to his son.

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