

The Firm of Girdlestone

BY
A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER I.

The approach to the offices of Girdlestone & Co. was not a very dignified one. A narrow doorway opens into a long white-washed passage. On one side of this is a brass plate with the inscription, "Girdlestone & Co., African Merchants," and above it a curious hieroglyphic supposed to represent a human hand in the act of pointing. Following the guidance of this emblem, the wayfarer finds himself in a small square yard surrounded by doors, upon one of which the name of the firm reappears in large white letters, with the word "push" printed beneath it. If he follows this laconic invitation he will make his way into a long, low apartment, which is the counting house of the African traders.

On the afternoon of which we speak things were quiet at the offices. Misty London light shone hazily through the glazed windows and cast dark shadows in the corners. On a high perch in the background a weary-faced, elderly man, with muttering lips and tapping fingers, cast up endless lines of figures. Beneath him, in front of two long shining mahogany desks, half a score of young men appeared to be riding furiously, neck and neck, in the race of life. Any habitue of a London office might have deduced from their relentless energy and incorruptible diligence that they were under the eyes of some member of the firm.

The member in question leaned against the marble mantelpiece, turning over the pages of an almanac, and taking from time to time a stealthy peep over the top of it at the toilers around him. Command was imprinted in every line of his strong, square-set face and erect, powerful frame. There was something classical in the regular olive-tinted features and black, crisp, curling hair fitting tightly to the well-rounded head. Yet, though classical, there was an absence of spirituality. It was rather the profile of one of those Roman emperors, splendid in its animal strength, but lacking those subtle softnesses of eye and mouth which speak of an inner life. Such was Ezra, the only child of John Girdlestone, and the heir to the whole of his vast business.

The junior partner was silent, and the clerks were working uneasily. Their fears were terminated by the sharp sound of a table-gong and the appearance of a boy with the announcement that Mr. Girdlestone would like a moment's conversation with Mr. Ezra.

The sanctum of Mr. John Girdlestone was approached by two doors, one of oak with groundless panels, and the other covered with green baize. The room itself was small, but lofty, and the walls were ornamented by numerous sections of ships stuck upon long flat boards, very much as the remains of fossil fish are exhibited in museums. There were also several photographs of the various vessels belonging to the firm, together with maps, charts and lists of sailings innumerable. Above the fireplace was a large water-color painting of the barque *Belinda* as she appeared when on a reef to the north of Cape Palmas. An inscription beneath this work of art announced that it had been painted by the second officer and presented by him to the head of the firm. It was generally rumored that the merchants had lost heavily over this disaster, and there were some who quoted it as an instance of Girdlestone's habitual strength of mind that he should decorate his wall with so melancholy a souvenir.

John Girdlestone, as he sat at his square office table waiting for his son, was undeniably a remarkable looking man. For good or for evil no weak character lay beneath that hard angular face, with the strongly marked features and deep-set eyes.

He was known to be a fanatic in religion, a purist in morals, and a man of the strictest commercial integrity. Yet there were some few who looked askance at him, and none, save one, who could apply the word friend to him.

He rose and stood with his back to the fire as his son entered. He was so tall that he towered above the younger man, but the latter's square and compact frame made him, apart from the difference of age, the stronger man.

"There's news of the *Black Eagle*," he said. "She is reported from Madeira."

"Ah!" cried the junior partner eagerly. "What luck?"

"She is full, or nearly so, according to Captain Hamilton Miggs' report."

"I wonder Miggs was able to send a report at all, and I wonder still more that you should put any faith in it," his son said impatiently. "The fellow is never sober."

"Miggs is a good seaman, and popular on the coast. He may indulge at times, but we all have our failings. Here is the list vouchered for by our agent. 'Six hundred barrels of palm oil'—"

"Oil is down to-day," the other interrupted.

"It will rise before the *Black Eagle* arrives," the merchant rejoined confidently. "Then he has palm nuts in bulk, gum, ebony, skins, cochineal, and ivory. Ivory is at a fancy figure. We are sorely in need of a few good voyages, for things

have been very slack of late. It is not upon this matter that I wanted to speak to you," Girdlestone continued. "It has, however, always been my practice to prefer matters of business to private affairs, however pressing. John Harston is said to be dying, and he has sent a message to me saying that he wishes to see me. It is inconvenient for me to leave the office just now, but I feel that it is my Christian duty to obey such a summons. I wish you, therefore, to look after things until I return."

"I can hardly believe that the news is true," Ezra said, in astonishment. "There must be some mistake. Why, I spoke to him on 'Change last Monday.'"

"It is very sudden," his father answered, taking his broad-brimmed hat from a peg. "There is no doubt about the fact, however. The doctor says that there is very little hope that he will survive until evening. It is a case of malignant typhoid fever."

"You are very old friends?" Ezra remarked, looking thoughtfully at his father.

"I have known him since we were boys together," the other replied. "Four months ago, Ezra, died upon the very day that Harston's wife gave birth to this daughter of his seventeen years ago. Mrs. Harston only survived a few days."

"How will the money go if the doctors are right?" Ezra asked keenly.

"Every penny to the girl," the merchant answered. "She will be an heiress. There are no other relatives that I know of, except the Dimsdales, and they have a fair fortune of their own. But I must go."

The African merchant hailed a hansom and drove out to his friend's house at Fulham. He and Harston had been charity school boys together, had roughed it together, risen together, and prospered together. Harston, by incessant attention to business and extreme parsimony, had succeeded in founding an export trading concern. In this he had followed the example of his friend. There was no fear of their interests ever coming into collision, as his operations were confined to the Mediterranean. The firm grew and prospered, until Harston began to be looked upon as a warm man in the City circles. His only child was Kate, a girl of seventeen. There were no other near relatives, save Dr. Dimsdale, a prosperous West End physician.

Girdlestone pushed open the iron gate and strode down the gravel walk which led to his friend's house. A bright summer sun shining out of a cloudless heaven bathed the green lawn and the many-colored flower beds in its golden light. The air, the leaves, the birds, all spoke of life. It was hard to think that death was closing its grip upon him who owned them all. A plump little gentleman in black was just descending the steps.

"Well, doctor," the merchant asked, "how is your patient?"

"You've not come with the intention of seeing him, have you?" the doctor asked, glancing up with some curiosity at the grey face and overhanging eyebrows of the merchant. "It is a most virulent case of typhoid. He may die in an hour or he may live until nightfall, but nothing can save him. He will hardly recognize you, I fear, and you can do him no good. It is most infectious, and you are incurring a needless danger. I should strongly recommend you not to go."

"Why, you've only just come down from him yourself, doctor," John Girdlestone remarked.

"Ah, I'm there in the way of duty."

"So am I," said the visitor decisively, and passing up the stone steps of the entrance strode into the hall. There was a large sitting room upon the ground floor, through the open door of which the visitor saw a sight which arrested him for a moment. A young girl was sitting in a recess near the window, with her little, supple figure bent forward, and her hands clasped at the back of her head, while the elbows rested upon a small table in front of her. Her superb brown hair fell in a thick wave on either side over her white round arms. The doctor had just broken his sad tidings to her, and she was still in the first paroxysm of her grief—a grief too acute, as was evident even to the unsentimental mind of the merchant, to allow of any attempt at consolation. The merchant paused irresolutely for a moment, and then ascending the broad staircase he pushed open the door of Harston's room and entered.

The blinds were drawn down and the chamber was very dark. A pungent whiff of disinfectants issued from it, mingled with the dank, heavy smell of disease. The bed was in a far corner. Without seeing him, Girdlestone could hear the fast labored breathing of the invalid. A trimly dressed nurse who had been sitting by the bedside rose, and recognizing the visitor, whispered a few words to him and left the room. He pulled the cord of the Venetian blind so as to admit a few rays of daylight. The great chamber looked dreary and bare, as carpets and hangings had been removed to lessen the chance of future infection. John Girdlestone stepped softly across to the bedside, and sat down by his dying friend. The latter turned his restless head round, and a gleam of recognition and gratitude came into his eyes.

"I knew you would come," he said.

"Yes, I came the moment I got your message."

"I am glad that you are here," the sufferer continued with a sign of relief. "I wish to speak to you. I am very weak. I have been making my will, John. Stoop your head and you will hear me better. I have less than fifty thousand. I should have done better had I retired years ago."

"I told you so," the other broke in gruffly.

"You did—you did. But I acted for the best. Forty thousand I leave to my daughter Kate."

A look of interest came over Girdlestone's face. "How about the balance?" he asked.

"I leave that to be equally divided

among the various London institutions for educating the poor. We were both poor boys ourselves, John, and we know the value of such schools."

Girdlestone looked perhaps a trifle disappointed. The sick man went on very slowly and painfully:

"My daughter will have forty thousand pounds. But it is so tied up that she can neither touch it herself nor enable anyone else to do so until she is of age. She has no friends, John, and no relations, save only my cousin, Dr. George Dimsdale. Never was a girl left more lonely and unprotected. Take her, I beg of you, and bring her up under your own eye. Treat her as though she were your child. Guard her above all from those who would wreck her young life in order to share her fortune. Do this, old friend, and make me happy on my death-bed."

The merchant made no answer. His heavy eyebrows were drawn down, and his forehead all puckered with thought.

"You are the one man," continued the sufferer, "whom I know to be just and upright. Give me the water, for my mouth is dry. Should my dear girl perish before she marries, then, old friend, her fortune reverts to you, for there is none who will use it so well. Those are the terms of the will. But you will guard her and care for her, as I would myself. She is a tender plant, John, too weak to grow alone. Promise me that you will do right by her—promise it?"

"I do promise it," John Girdlestone answered in a deep voice. He was standing up now, and leaning over to catch the words of the dying man.

The sick man's head fell back exhausted upon his pillow. "Thank heaven," he muttered, "now I can die in peace."

"Turn your mind away from the vanities and dross of this world," John Girdlestone said sternly, "and fix it upon that which is eternal, and can never die."

"Are you going?" the invalid asked sadly, for he had taken up his stick.

"Yes, I must go; I have an appointment in the city at six, which I must not miss. I shall send up the nurse as I go down," Girdlestone said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye! Heaven bless you, John."

The firm, strong hand of the hale man enclosed for a moment the feeble burning one of the sufferer. Then John Girdlestone plodded heavily down the stairs, and these friends of forty years' standing had said their last adieu.

The African merchant kept his appointment in the city, but long before he reached it John Harston had gone also to keep that last terrible appointment of which the messenger is death.

CHAPTER II.

"Come in," said Mr. Girdlestone. "Why, captain, I am glad to see you back safe and well."

"Glad to see you, sir—glad to see you."

The voice was thick and husky, and there was an indecision about his gait as though he had been drinking heavily. "I came in sort o' cautious," the owner continued, "because I didn't know who might be about. When you and me speaks together we likes to speak alone, you bet."

The merchant raised his bushy eyebrows a little, as though he did not relish the idea of mutual confidences suggested by his companion's remark. "Haddin' you better take a seat?" he said. "I must congratulate you on your cargo, and wish you the same luck for your next voyage," the merchant continued.

"Ivory, an' gold dust, an' skins, an' resin, an' cochineal, an' gums, an' ebony, an' rice, an' tobacco, an' fruits, an' nuts in bulk. If there's a better cargo about I'd like to see it," the sailor said defiantly. "Say, now, weren't you surprised to see us come back—eh? Straight now, between man and man?"

"The old ship hangs together well, and has lots of work in her yet," the merchant answered.

"Lots of work! I thought she was gone in the bay! We'd a dirty night with a gale from the west-south-west, an' had been goin' by dead reckonin' for three days, so we weren't over and above sure o' ourselves. She wasn't much of a sea-going craft when we left England, but the sun had fried all the pitch out o' her seams, and you might ha' put your finger through some of them. Two days an' a night we were at the pumps, for she leaked like a sieve. We lost the fore topsail, blown clean out o' the ringbolts. I never thought to see Lunnon again."

"If she could weather a gale like that she could make another voyage."

"She could start on another," the sailor said gloomily, "but as like as not she'd never see the end o' it."

"Come, come, you're not quite yourself this morning, Miggs. We value you as a dashing, fearless fellow—let me fill your glass again—who doesn't fear a little risk where there's something to be gained. You'll lose your good name if you go on like that."

"She's in a terrible bad way," the captain insisted. "You'll have to do something before she can go."

"What shall we have to do?"

"Dry dock her and give her a thorough overhaul. She might sink before she got out o' the Channel if she went as she is just now."

(To be continued.)

Holds Nothing.

"A spendthrift," remarked the home-grown philosopher, "is a good deal like a tub with the bottom knocked out."

"What's the answer?" queried the very young man.

"He takes all that comes, but is able to hold nothing," explained the philosophy dispenser.

He Took the Blame.

Muggins—Behold in me a self-made man.

Diggins—I congratulate you because of your charitylessness.

Muggins—I beg pardon?

Diggins—You are certainly charitable in taking the blame on yourself.



Washington is bounded on the east by the Capitol and on the west by the White House. Between them flows a restless stream of sightseers. There may be other districts of the national capital worth seeing, but only a Washingtonian knows it. The tourist has time and strength only to hit the high places. In New York there are probably as many tourists as in Washington, but with this difference, the New Yorker does not mind mixing with the tourist class. In fact, if the tourist has money and a fondness for Broadway and contiguous resorts, the New Yorker is more than willing, so Mr. Tourist emerges his identity with the New York "push." Washingtonians never let you forget you are a tourist. Resident women slightly raise their skirts with an indescribable yet eloquent air when they happen to rub elbows with a mere tourist of the same sex in a hotel or department store elevator. A Washingtonian looks straight ahead at nothing; the tourist is known by the angle at which he crooks her neck.

Congressman Hobson of Alabama, famous as the hero of Santiago and later of several kissing campaigns, is said to favor the establishment by the government of an official weekly newspaper for free distribution, for which he wishes Congress to appropriate \$350,000. This periodical would contain a summary of the work of Congress and all departments of the government, so far as it might interest the public. He says the journal is intended to form a connecting link between the government and the people, and that the project grew out of his having ascertained that a vast amount of valuable material did not reach the people for whom it was intended. He thinks the publication of such a paper will remove distrust and suspicion and create a renewed interest and confidence among the masses in governmental affairs.

Pennies left in the boxes by rural route patrons for the purchase of stamps from the carriers will be let alone if the recommendations of Fourth Assistant Postmaster General De Graw and Superintendent Spillman of the rural delivery service is adopted. In cold weather it has always been a painful duty of the carriers, this hunting around in the ice-cold bottom of a metal mail box with bare hands. It has been said that sometimes fingers of carriers get so cold and stiff that they are unable to write out money order receipts. The recommendation of the two officials is that patrons place a small wooden box in the mail box, and therein put all the pennies with which they wish to buy stamps or anything else. The carrier could then, without removing his gloves, empty the contents and go on his way rejoicing, folling the attack of Jack Frost. If the pennies are not in the box the carrier will not be required to look for them.

Cy. Sulloway, of New Hampshire, still retains his place as the biggest man in the House of Representatives, and so far no one has appeared that may claim honor to second place ahead of Oille James, of Kentucky. Sulloway is something more than six and a half feet tall and weighs but a pound less than 350. His breadth is proportionate with his height, and he towers above his colleague, Frank D. Currier, as he does above most all the members of the House. He is one of the members who does not exercise his prerogative of taking his luncheon on that side of the House restaurant where the sign proclaims "for members only," but each day partakes of a sparing lunch on the public side of the room, where the motto is that anybody's money is good.

The application of George M. Austin, of New York for a restraining order against Secretary Cortelyou, preventing him from allotting \$21,500,000 of Panama Canal bonds to certain national banks, has been denied by Judge Gould of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. Austin charged that the secretary had violated the law in rejecting his bid for \$3,000,000 of bonds and allotting the bonds to national banks and others at a lower figure.

Postmaster General Meyer's order in regard to the disposition of souvenir postal cards which reach the dead letter office is a source of happiness to thousands of unfortunate children. The cards, instead of being destroyed, are now sent to the orphan asylums and children's homes and hospitals in Washington, where they give a delight which even the intended recipient might not have felt.

Women Worry

More than men, says Dr. McComb, and one reason is that their nervous organizations are more delicate. True, and Hood's Sarsaparilla is just the nerve-builder, appetite-giver, and blood-purifier they need.

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It Surprised Her.

"When my husband was in Spain last year," said Mrs. Swellman, "he succeeded in buying in quite a lot of the king's wines."

"Well, well," exclaimed Mrs. Nutt, "the idea of buyin' second-hand wines!"—Philadelphia Press.

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Racing Dope.

"Charles, dear," said young Mrs. Torkins, "why do you call racing calculations 'dope'? I thought that was a slang name for a drug."

"You're quite right," was the answer.

"They call it that because all it generally gets you is a pleasant dream and a rude awakening."—Washington Star.

Frostroom Horror.

"Well, what do you want?" the proof-reader asked.

"As he eyed the intruder with doubt. 'I'm just a loafer,'" answered the hyphen.

And the proofreader hustled him out. —Chicago Tribune.

Stung!

A tired feeling once
Came over the busy bee.
'Twas when a budding poet
Rhymed it with *via-via*.

Good Judges

Americans as judges are keenly discriminating. They measure everything by the success it attains, which method, considered in the light of the common experience of mankind, is certainly not a bad one. The high standard of intelligence and discernment in this country, where education is the rule and not the exception, renders it difficult and surprising to find a general national success not based on actual worth. Hence it was that with the presentation of St. Jacobs Oil they correctly judged it at once, and decided that rare intrinsic worth only could be the source of its success. The decision with them was equivalent to an adoption; and it is a rare thing to find a family without St. Jacobs Oil in the house.

Not the Same.

"I suppose you have been pinched by penury?"

"No, mum; the cop's name was O'Brien; he's Irish."

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