

The Firm of Girdlestone

BY
A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER XI.

This episode had occurred about a fortnight before Ezra's return from Africa, and was duly related to him by his father.

"You need not be discouraged by that," he said. "I can always keep them apart, and if he is absent and you are present—especially as she has no idea of the cause of his absence—she will end by feeling slighted and preferring you."

"I cannot understand how you ever came to let the matter go so far," his son answered sullenly. "The girl belongs to us. She was given to you to look after, and a nice job you seem to have made of it."

"Never mind, my boy," replied the merchant. "I'll answer for keeping them apart if you will only push the matter on your own account."

"I've said that I would do so, and I will," Ezra returned, and events soon showed that he was as good as his word.

Before his African excursion the relations between young Girdlestone and his father's ward had never been cordial. Kate's nature, however, was so sweet and forgiving that it was impossible for her to harbor any animosity, and she greeted Ezra kindly on his return from his travels. Within a few days she became conscious that a remarkable change had come over him—a change, as it seemed to her, very much for the better. In the past weeks had frequently elapsed without his addressing her, but now he went out of his way to make himself agreeable. Sometimes he would sit for a whole evening describing to her all that he had seen in Africa, and really interesting her by his account of men and things. She, poor lass, hailed this new departure with delight, and did all in her power to encourage his better nature, and to show that she appreciated the alteration in his bearing. At the same time, she was rather puzzled in her mind, for an occasional flash of coarseness or ferocity showed her that the real nature of the man was unaltered, and that he was putting an unnatural restraint upon himself.

As the days went on and no word or sign came from Tom, a great fear and perplexity arose within the girl's mind. She had heard nothing of the interview at Fenchurch street nor had she any clue at all which could explain the mystery. Could it be that Tom had informed her guardian of their engagement, and had received such a rebuff that he had abandoned her in despair? That was surely impossible; yet why was it that he had ceased to walk through the square? She knew that he was not ill, because she heard her two companions talking of him in connection with business. What could be the matter then? Her little heart was torn by a thousand conflicting doubts and fears.

In the meantime Ezra gave fresh manifestations of the improvement which travel had wrought upon him. She had remarked one day that she was fond of moss roses. On coming down to breakfast next morning she found a beautiful moss rose upon her plate, and every morning afterwards a fresh flower appeared in the same place. This pretty little piece of courtesy, which she knew could only come from Ezra, surprised and pleased her, for delicacy was the last quality which she would have given him credit for.

On another occasion she had expressed a desire to read Thackeray's works, the books in the library being for the most part somewhat ancient. On entering her room that same evening she found, to her astonishment, a handsomely bound edition of the novels in question standing on the center of her table. For a moment a wild, unreasoning hope awoke in her that perhaps this was Tom's doing—that he had taken this means of showing that she was still dear to him. She soon saw, however, that the books could only have come from the same source as the flowers, and she marvelled more than ever at this fresh proof of the good will of her companion.

One day her guardian took the girl aside. "Your life must be rather dull," he said. "I have taken a box for you to-night at the opera. I do not care about such spectacles myself, but I have made arrangements for your escort. A change will do you good."

Poor Kate was too sad at heart to be inclined for amusement. She endeavored, however, to look pleased and grateful.

"My good friend, Mrs. Wilkinson, is coming for you," the merchant said, "and Ezra is going, too. He has a great liking for music."

Kate could not help smiling at this last remark, as she thought how very successfully the young man had concealed his taste during the years that she had known him.

She was ready, however, at the appointed hour, and Mrs. Wilkinson, a prim old gentleman, who had chaperoned Kate on the rare occasions when she went out, having arrived, the three drove off together.

The opera happened to be "Faust," and the magnificent scenery and dresses astonished Kate, who had hardly ever before been within the walls of a theater. She

saw as if entranced, with a bright tinge of color upon her cheeks, which, with her sparkling eyes, made her look surpassingly beautiful. So thought Ezra Girdlestone as he sat in the recesses of the box and watched the varied expressions which flitted across her mobile features. "She is well worth having, money or no," he muttered to himself, and redoubled his attentions to her during the evening.

An incident occurred between the acts that night which would have pleased the old merchant had he witnessed it. Kate had been looking down from the box, which was upon the third tier, at the sea of heads beneath them. Suddenly she gave a start, and her face grew a trifle paler.

"Isn't that Mr. Dimsdale down there?" she asked of her companion.

"Where?" asked Ezra, craning his neck. "Oh, yes, there he is in the second row of the stalls."

"Do you know who the young lady is that he is talking to?" Kate asked.

"I don't know," said Ezra. "I have seen him about with her a good deal lately." The latter was a deliberate falsehood, but Ezra saw his chance of prejudicing his rival and took prompt advantage of it. "She is very good looking," he added presently, keeping his eyes upon his companion.

"Oh, indeed," said Kate, and turned with some commonplace remark to Mrs. Wilkinson. Her heart was sore nevertheless, and she derived little pleasure from the remainder of the performance. As to Ezra, in spite of his great love for music, he dozed peacefully in a corner of the box during the whole of the last act. None of them were sorry when Faust was duly consigned to the nether regions and Marguerite was apotheosized upon a couple of wooden clouds. Ezra narrated the incident of the recognition in the stalls to his father on his return, and the old gentleman rubbed his hands over it.

"Most fortunate!" he exclaimed gleefully. "By working on that idea we might produce great effects. Who was the girl, do you know?"

"Some poor relation, I believe, whom he trots out at times."

"We will find out her name and all about her. Capital! capital!" cried John Girdlestone, and the two worthies departed to their rooms much pleased at this new card which chance had put into their hands.

During the weary weeks while Tom Dimsdale, in accordance with his promise, avoided Eccleston square and everything which could remind Kate of his existence, Ezra continued to leave no stone unturned in his endeavors to steal his way into her affections. Poor Tom's sole comfort was the recollection of that last passionate letter which he had written in the Blackwall public house, and which had, as he imagined, enlightened her as to the reasons of his absence, and had prevented her from feeling any uneasiness or surprise. Had he known the fate that had befallen that epistle he would hardly have been able to continue his office duties so patiently, or to wait with so much resignation for Mr. Girdlestone's sanction to his engagement.

As the days passed and still brought no news, Kate's face grew paler and her heart more weary and desponding. That the young man was well was beyond dispute, since she had seen him with her own eyes at the opera. What explanation could there be, then, for his conduct? Was it possible that he had told Mr. Girdlestone of their engagement, and that her guardian had found some means of dissuading him from continuing his suit—found some appeal to his interest, perhaps, which was too strong for his love? All that she knew of Tom's nature contradicted such a supposition. Again, if Girdlestone had learned anything of their engagement, surely he would have reproached her with it. His manner of late had been kinder rather than harsher. On the other hand, could it have chanced that Tom had met this lady of the opera, and that her charms had proved too much for his constancy? When she thought of the honest grey eyes which had looked down into hers at that last meeting in the garden she found it hard to imagine the possibility of such things, and yet there was a fact which had to be explained. The more she thought of it the more incomprehensible it grew, but still the pale face grew paler and the sad heart more heavy.

Soon, however, her doubts and fears began to resolve themselves into something more substantial than vague conjecture. The conversation of the Girdlestons used to turn upon their business colleague, and always in the same strain. There were stray remarks about his doings; hints from the father and laughter from the son. "Not much work to be got out of him now," the old man would say. "When a man's in love he's not over fond of a ledger."

"A nice looking girl, too," said Ezra in answer to some such remark. "I thought something would come of it. We saw them together at the opera, didn't we, Kate?"

So they would gossip together, and every word a stab to the poor girl. She strove to conceal her feelings, and, indeed, her anger and her pride were stronger even than her grief, for she felt that she had been cruelly used. One day she found Girdlestone alone and unaccompanied himself to him.

"Is it really true," she asked with a quick pant and a catch of her breath, "that Mr. Dimsdale is engaged to be married?"

"I believe so, my dear," her guardian answered. "It is commonly reported so. When a young lady and gentleman correspond it is usually a sign of something of the sort."

"Oh, they correspond?"

"Yes, they certainly correspond. Her letters are sent to him at the office. I don't know that I altogether like that arrangement. It looks as if he were deceiving his parents." All this was an

unmitigated lie, but Girdlestone had gone too far now to stick at trifles.

"Who is the lady?" asked Kate, with a calm set face, but a quivering lip.

"A cousin of his, Miss Ossary is her name, I believe. I am not sorry, for it may be a sign that he has sown all his wild oats. Do you know at one time, Kate, I feared that he might take a fancy to you. He has a specious way with him, and I felt my responsibility in the matter."

"You need not be afraid on that score," Kate said bitterly. "I think I can gauge Mr. Dimsdale's specious manner at its proper value." With this valiant speech she marched off, head in air, to her room, and there wept as though her very heart would break.

CHAPTER XII.

Tom Dimsdale's duties were far from light. Not only was he expected to supervise the clerk's accounts and to treat with the wholesale dealers, but he was also supposed to spend a great part of his time in the docks, overlooking the loading of the outgoing ships and checking the cargo of the incoming ones. This latter portion of his work was welcome as taking him some hours a day from the close counting house, and allowing him to get a sniff of the sea air. There was a pleasing life and bustle, too, in the broad, brown river, with its never-ending panorama of vessels of every size and shape which ebb and flow in the great artery of national life.

All day Tom stood at the hatchway of the Black Eagle, checking the cargo as it was hoisted out of her, while McPherson and his motley assistants, dock laborers, seamen and Black Kroomen from the coast, worked and toiled in the depths below. The engine rattled and snorted, and the great chain clanked as it was lowered into the hold. At one o'clock there was a break of an hour for dinner, and then the work went on until six, when all hands struck and went off to their homes or to the public house, according to inclination. Tom and the mate, both fairly tired by their day's work, prepared to accept the captain's invitation, and to beat him up in his quarters. The mate dived down into his cabin, and soon reappeared with his face shining and his long hair combed into some sort of order.

"I've been performing my ablutions," he said, rolling out the last word with great emphasis and pomposity, for, like many Scotchmen, he had the greatest possible reverence for a sonorous polysyllable. "The captain," he continued, "has been far from salubrious this voyage. He's aye complainin' o' his bodily infirmities."

The two had threaded their way through the intricate lanes which lead up from the water side to the outskirts of Stepney. It was quite dark by the time that they reached a long thoroughfare, lined by numerous shops, with great gas flares outside them. Many of these belonged to dealers in marine stores, and the numerous suits of oilskin, hung up for exhibition, swung to and fro in the uncertain light, like rows of attenuated pirates. At every corner was a great public house with glittering windows, and a crowd of slatternly women and jersey-clad men elbowing each other at the door. At the largest and most imposing of these the mate and Dimsdale now pulled up.

"Captain Miggs in?" asked McPherson of a rubeicund, white-aproned personage.

"Yes, sir. He's in his room, sir, and expectin' you. There's a gent with him, sir, but he told me to send you up. This way, sir," and they were soon ushered into the captain's room.

That worthy was leaning back in a rocking chair with his feet perched upon the mantelpiece. Opposite him, in a similar chair, was no less an individual than our old acquaintance, Von Baumser. As a mercantile clerk in the London office of a Hamburg firm the German was thrown into contact with the shippers of the African fleet, and had contracted a special alliance with Miggs.

"Come in, my hearties, come in!" he cried, huskily. "Take a seat, Mr. Dimsdale. And you, Sandy, can't you bring yourself to your berth without being asked? You should know your moorings by this time. This is my friend, Mr. Von Baumser from Eckermann's office."

"And this, I think, is Mr. Dimsdale," said the German, shaking hands with Tom. "I have heard my very good friend, Major Clutterbuck, speak of your name, sir."

"Ah, the old major," Tom answered. "Of course, I remember him well." "He is not so very old, either," said Von Baumser, in a somewhat surly voice. "He has been took by a very charming and entirely pleasant woman, and they are about to be married before three months, the one to the other. Let me tell you, sir, I, who have lived with him so long, that I have met no man for whom I have greater respect than for the major."

"A couple of days ago we hardly hoped ever to be yarning here," said Miggs. "A nasty sea on, Mr. Dimsdale, sir, and the old ship so full o' water that she could not rise to it. They were makin' a clean breach over us, and we lost nigh everything we could lose."

"I suppose you'll have her thoroughly repaired now?" Tom remarked.

Both the skipper and the mate laughed heartily at the observation. "That wouldn't do, Sandy, would it?" said Miggs, shaking his head. "We couldn't afford to have our salary cut down like that."

(To be continued.)

He Was It.

"Really; don't y'know," said Cholly Braneliss, "she's such an odd girl. When I was introduced to her she burst out laughing."

"Yes," said Miss Peppy, "she's hysterical."

"Aw, weally?"

"Yes; she frequently laughs at nothing."—Philadelphia Press.

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Out of the Dim Past.

Alexander the Great had just subdued Bucephalus.

"Anybody can bust a broncho," he said, "but it takes a man to put the snaffles on a big four-legged devil like this one."

Being shrewd, politic fellows, the cowboys of that age allowed the impression to go out that they were afraid to try to ride the savage beast, and the subservient historians hastened to confirm that impression.

Not a Cheerful Brand.

"Haven't you any milk that is more cheerful than this?" queried the new boarder as he poured some of the liquid into his coffee.

"Why, what do you mean by that?" queried the landlady.

"Oh, nothing," rejoined the n. b.; "only this milk seems to have the blues."

An English newspaper had this death notice the other day: "At Stratford-on-Avon, age seventy-five, William Shakespeare. At rest."

Taking in the Solt.

The automobile was going fifty miles an hour.

"We are now passing through a beautiful part of the country," shouted the chauffeur in the front seat.

The tourist swallowed another pint of grit and dust.

"H'm!" he ejaculated between coughs, "it seems as though the country is passing through me."

Getting It All In.

The prosecuting witness in the damage suit against the city was giving in his testimony.

"Now, then, Mr. Bleedem," said his lawyer, "you will please tell the jury where you were injured."

"On my knee, in my feelings, and right in front of the city hall," rapidly answered the witness, fearing an objection on the part of the other attorney.—Chicago Tribune.

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