

The Firm of Girdlestone

BY
A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)
"I am sorry to be late, mother," the lad said, kissing the old lady. "I have been down at the docks all day, and have been busy and worried."

Mrs. Dimsdale was sitting in her chair beside the fire knitting when her son came in. At the sound of his voice she glanced anxiously up at his face, with all her motherly instincts on the alert.

"What is it, my boy?" she said. "You don't look yourself. Something has gone wrong with you. Surely you're not keeping anything secret from your old mother."

"Don't be so foolish as that, my boy," said the doctor earnestly. "If you have anything on your mind, out with it. There's nothing so far wrong but that it can be set right, I'll be bound."

Thus pressed, their son told them all that had happened, the rumor which he had heard from Von Baumer at the Cook and Cowslip, and the subsequent visit to Eccleston square. "I can hardly realize it all yet," he said in conclusion. "My head seems to be in a whirl, and I can't reason about it."

The old couple listened very attentively to his narrative, and were silent some little time after he had finished. His mother first broke the silence. "I was always sure," she said, "that we were wrong to stop our correspondence at the request of Mr. Girdlestone."

"It's easy enough to say that now," said Tom ruefully. "At the time it seemed as if we had no alternative."

"There's no use crying over spilt milk," remarked the old physician, who had been very grave during his son's narrative. "We must set to work and get things right again. There is one thing very certain, Tom, and that is that Kate Harston is a girl who never did or could do a dishonorable thing. If she said that she would wait for you, my boy, you may feel perfectly safe; and if you doubt her for one moment you ought to be deuced well ashamed of yourself."

"Well said, governor!" cried Tom, with beaming face. "Now that is exactly my own feeling, but there is so much to be explained. Why have they left London, and where have they gone to?"

"No doubt that old scoundrel Girdlestone thought that your patience would soon come to an end, so he got the start of you by carrying the girl off into the country."

"And if he has done this, what can I do?"

"Nothing. It is entirely within his right to do it."

"And have her stowed away in some little cottage in the country, with that brute Ezra Girdlestone hanging round her all the time. It is the thought of that that drives me wild."

"You trust in her, my boy," said the old doctor. "We'll try our best in the meantime to find out where she has gone to. If she is unhappy or needs a friend you may be sure that she will write to your mother."

"Yes, there is always that hope," exclaimed Tom, in a more cheerful voice. "To-morrow I may learn something at the office."

"Don't make the mistake of quarreling with the Girdlestons. After all they are within their rights in doing what they appear to have done."

"They may be within their legal rights," Tom cried indignantly, "but the old man made a deliberate compact with me, which he has broken."

"Never mind. Don't give them an advantage by losing your temper." The doctor chatted away over the matter for some time, and his words, together with those of his mother, cheered the young fellow's heart. Nevertheless, after they had retired to their rooms, Dr. Dimsdale continued to be very thoughtful and very grave. "I don't like it," he said, more than once. "I don't like the idea of the poor girl being left entirely in the hands of that pair of beauties."

CHAPTER XIV.

John Girdlestone and his ward were at Waterloo station. He gave orders to the guard that the luggage should be stamped, but took care that she should not hear the name of their destination. Hurrying her rapidly down the platform amid the confused heaps of luggage and currents of eager passengers, he pushed her into a first-class carriage, and sprang after her just as the bell rang and the wheels began to revolve.

They were alone. Kate crouched up into the corner among the cushions and wrapped her rug round her, for it was bitterly cold. The merchant pulled a note book from his pocket, and proceeded by the light of the lamp above him to add up columns of figures. He sat very upright in his seat, and appeared to be as absorbed in his work as though he were among his papers in Fenchurch street. He neither glanced at his companion nor made any inquiry as to her comfort.

As she sat opposite to him she could not keep her eyes from his hard, angular face, every rugged feature of which was exaggerated by the flickering yellow light

above him. Those deep-set eyes and sunken cheeks had been familiar to her for years. How was it that they now, for the first time, struck her as being terrible? Was it that new expression which had appeared upon them, that hard, inexorable set about the mouth, which gave a more sinister character to his whole face? As she gazed at him an ineffable loathing and dread rose in her soul, and she could have shrieked out of pure terror. She put her hand up to her throat with a gasp to keep down the sudden inclination to cry out. As she did so her guardian glanced over the top of the note book with his piercing light grey eyes.

"Don't get hysterical!" he cried. "You have given us trouble enough without that."

"Oh, why are you so harsh?" she cried, throwing out her arms towards him in eloquent entreaty, while the tears coursed down her cheeks. "What have I done that is so dreadful? I could not love your son, and I do love another. I am so grieved to have offended you. You used to be kind and like a father to me."

"And a nice return you have made me. I have to blame myself to some extent for having allowed you to go on that most pernicious trip to Scotland, where you were thrown into the company of this young adventurer by his scheming old father."

"You may say what you like of me," she said bitterly. "I suppose that is one of your privileges as my guardian. You have no right, however, to speak evil of my friends."

"You are becoming impertinent," he answered, and resumed his calculations in his note book. Kate covered back into her corner again, while the train thundered and screeched and rattled through the darkness. Looking through the steamy window nothing was to be seen save the twinkle here and there of the lights of the scattered country cottages. Occasionally a red signal lamp would glare down upon her like the bloodshot eye of some demon who presided over this kingdom of iron and steam. Far behind a lurid trail of smoke marked the way that they had come. To Kate's mind it was all as weird and gloomy and cheerless even as the thoughts within her.

And they were gloomy enough. Where was she going? How long was she going for? What was she to do when there? On all these points she was absolutely ignorant. What was the object of this sudden flight from London? Her guardian could have separated her from the Dimsdales in many less elaborate ways than this. Could it be that he intended some system of pressure and terrorism by which she should be forced to accept Ezra as a suitor? She clenched her little white teeth as she thought of it, and registered a vow that nothing in this world would ever bring her to give in upon that point. There was only one bright spot in her outlook. When she reached her destination she would at once write to Mrs. Dimsdale, tell her where she was, and ask her frankly for an explanation of their sudden silence. How much wiser if she had done so before. Only a foolish pride had withheld her from it.

The train had already stopped at one large junction. Looking out through the window she saw by the lamps that it was Intelford. After another interminable interval of clattering and tossing and plunging through the darkness, they came to a second station of importance, Petersfield. "We are nearing our destination," Girdlestone remarked, shutting up his book.

This proved to be a small wayside station, illuminated by a single lamp, which gave no information as to the name. They were the only passengers who alighted, and the train rolled on for Portsmouth, leaving them with their trunks upon the dark and narrow platform. It was a dark night with a bitter wind which carried with it a suspicion of dampness, which might have been rain, or might have been the drift of the neighboring ocean. Kate was numb with the cold, and even her gaunt companion stamped his feet and shivered as he looked about him.

"I telegraphed for a trap," said he to the guard. "Is there not one waiting?"

"Yes, sir, if you be Mister Girdlestone. Here, Carker, here's your gentleman."

At this summons a rough-looking ostler emerged into the circle of light thrown by the single lamp, and touching his hat, announced in a surly voice that he was the individual in question. The guard and he then proceeded to drag the trunks to the vehicle. It was a small wagonette, with a high seat for the driver in front.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver, when the travelers had taken their seats.

"To Hampton Priory. Do you know where that is?"

"Better'n two mile from here, and close to the railway line," said the man. "There hain't been no one livin' there for two year at the least."

"We are expected and all will be ready for us," said Girdlestone. "Go as fast as you can, for we are cold." The driver cracked his whip, and the horse started at a brisk trot down the dark country road.

Looking round her Kate saw that they were passing through a large country village, consisting of a broad main street, with a few insignificant offshoots branching away on either side. A church stood on one side, and on the other the village inn. The door was open and the light shining through the red curtains of the bar parlor looked warm and cosy. The murmur of cheerful voices sounded from within. Kate as she looked across felt doubly cheerless and lonely by the contrast. Girdlestone looked, too, but with different emotions.

The road was lined on either side by high hedges, which threw a dense shadow over everything. The feeble lamps of the wagonette bored two little yellow tunnels of light on either side. The man let the reins lie loose upon the horse's back, and the animal picked out the roadway for itself. As they swung round from the narrow lane on to a broader road Kate broke out into a little cry of pleasure.

"There's the sea," she exclaimed joyfully. The moon had broken from behind the clouds, and glittered on the vast silvery expanse.

"Yes, that's the sea," the driver said, "and them lights down yonder is at Lea Claxton, where the fisher folk live; and over there," pointing with his whip to a long dark shadow on the waters, "is the 'Oilywoite.'"

"The what?"

"The Isle of Wight, he means," said Girdlestone.

The driver looked at him reproachfully. "Of course," said he, "if you Lunnon folks knows more about it than we who are born and bred in the place, it's no matter o' use our tryin' to teach you." With this sarcastic comment he withdrew into himself, and refused to utter another word until the end of their journey.

It was not long before this was attained. Passing down a deeply rutted lane they came to a high stone wall which extended for a couple of hundred yards. It had a crumbling, decaying appearance, as far as could be judged in the uncertain light. This wall was broken by a single iron gate, flanked by two high pillars, each of which was surmounted by some weather-beaten heraldic device. Passing through they turned up a winding avenue, with lines of trees on either side, which shot their branches so thickly above them that they might have been driving through some somber tunnel. This avenue terminated in an open space, in the midst of which towered a great irregular white-washed building, which was the old Priory. All below it was swathed in darkness, but the upper windows caught the glint of the moon, and emitted a pallid and sickly glimmer. The whole effect was so weird and gloomy that Kate felt her heart sink within her. The wagonette pulled up in front of the door, and Girdlestone assisted her to alight.

There had been no lights or any symptoms of welcome, but as they pulled down the trunks the door opened and a little old woman appeared with a candle in her hand, which she carefully shaded from the wind while she peered out into the darkness.

"Is that Mr. Girdlestone?" she cried. "Of course it is," the merchant said impatiently. "Did I not telegraph and tell you that I was coming?"

"Yes, yes," she answered, hobbling forward with the light. "And this is the young lady? Come in, my dear; come in. We have not got things very smart yet, but they will soon come right."

She led the way through a lofty hall into a large sitting room, which, no doubt, had been the monkish refectory in bygone days. It looked very bleak and cold now, although a small fire sputtered and sparkled in the corner of the great iron grate. There was a pan upon the fire, and the deal table in the center of the room was laid out roughly as for a meal. The candle, which the old woman had carried in, was the only light, though the flickering fire cast strange fantastic shadows in the further corners and among the great oak rafters which formed the ceiling.

"Come up to the fire, my dear," said the old woman. "Take off your cloak and warm yourself." She held her own shriveled arms towards the blaze, as though her short exposure to the night air had chilled her. Glancing at her, Kate saw that her face was sharp-featured and cunning, with a loose lower lip which exposed a line of yellow teeth, and a chin which bristled with a tuft of long grey hairs.

From without there came the crunching of gravel as the wagonette turned and rattled down the avenue. Kate listened to the sound of the wheels until they died away in the distance. They seemed somehow to be the last link which bound her to the human race. Her heart failed her completely, and she burst into tears.

"What's the matter then?" the old woman asked, looking up at her. "What are ye crying about?"

"Oh, I am so miserable and so lonely," she cried. "What have I done that I should be so unhappy? Why should I be taken to this horrible, horrible place?"

"What's the matter with the place?" asked her withered companion. "I don't see nought amiss with it. Here's Mr. Girdlestone a-comin'. He don't grumble at the place, I warrant."

The merchant was not in the best of tempers, for he had had an altercation with the driver about the fare, and was cold into the bargain. "At it again," he said roughly, as he entered. "It is I who ought to weep. I think, who have been put to all this trouble and inconvenience by your disobedience and weakness of mind."

Kate did not answer, but sat upon a coarse deal chair beside the fire, and buried her face in her hands. All manner of vague fears and fancies filled her mind. What was Tom doing now? How quickly he would fly to her rescue did he but know how strangely she was situated. She determined that her very first action next morning should be to write to Mrs. Dimsdale, and to tell her, not only where she was, but all that had occurred. The reflection that she could do this cheered her heart, and she managed to eat a little of the supper which the old woman had now placed upon the table. It was a rough stew of some sort, but the long journey had given an edge to their appetites, and the merchant, though usually epicurean in his tastes, ate a hearty meal.

(To be continued.)

Long Reach.

Gunner—Many of our singers go over to Europe to reach the high C's.
Guyer—Well, what do the European singers come over here for?
Gunner—Oh, they come over here to reach the X's and V's.

Willing to Elope.

Said She—If we appear together so much people will talk about us.
Said He—Well, suppose we disappear together

Circumstantial Evidence.
Sir A. Conan Doyle, at the Authors' Club Christmas dinner in London, related that in America some colored people were keeping the festival of Christmas and they were told to hang up their stockings at night. One poor fellow had no stockings, and so he hung up his trousers. In the morning he was asked what he had got. He replied: "I guess I got a man, for my pants are gone."

Woman Railway Workers.
In the South of France one may see, at the little wayside stations, women attending to the signals of the half dozen daily trains; while the companies regularly economize at the level crossings by employing female labor. The husband can be seen at work at his vines upon the hillside, while the wife waves the green flag and keeps the children quiet.—Detroit News-Tribune.

When Mrs. Carrie she became she didn't quite forget;
She took her low, sweet voice along, and has it even yet.
But if 'hubby's just a little slow 'o answer to her call
She can jar him with a voice that cracks the paper on the wall.
—Chicago Tribune.

Too Plain.
"Norah," said her mistress, "I don't mind it if the policeman on the beat drops into the kitchen once in a while of an evening, but I object to your entertaining such shabby and disreputable looking fellows as the one who was there last night."
"He's all r-right, m'm," said Norah. "He's me plain clothes p'leecem'n."

Lightning in South Africa.
In South Africa, where thunderstorms are terrific, lightning often strikes the beds of Ironstone, and blue flames, sometimes firing buildings, are alleged to play about such ironstone outcroppings two or three hours after a storm.

Terrible Woman.
"My wife," growled Kadley, "is the most forgetful woman."
"Yes!" mildly inquired the polite visitor.
"Yes, she can never remember in the morning where I left my pipe the night before."—Philadelphia Press.

A Slow Process.
"Wigs went out this morning to clean off the snow."
"Yes."
"Every two minutes he'd run in the house to warm up."
"Did he clean off the snow?"
"He finally cleaned off the little that he hadn't carried into the house on his feet."

In the Long Ago.
Cardinal Wolsey had fallen.
"I was trying to dodge an automobile," he explained, "and a roller skater ran into me."
The historians, however, with singular obtuseness, have persisted in placing the blame on Henry VIII.—Chicago Tribune.

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"Wrong again," rejoined the contrary person. "A word to the wise is unnecessary."

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Uncle Allen.
"Some men," muttered Uncle Allen Sparks after the tiresome speaker had sat down, "remind me of an old water mill that's running with empty hoppers. Their wheels keep on going, but they don't turn out any grit."

Closing the Incident.
The famous ball player was looking through the sporting columns of the newspapers.
"I see they've quit mentioning me," he said. "I may as well sign."
Upon doing which he secured one more mention in the newspapers.

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