

The Firm of Girdlestone

BY
A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER XV.

When supper was over the crone, who was addressed by Girdlestone as Jorrocks, led the way upstairs and showed Kate to her room. If the furniture of the dining room had been Spartan in its simplicity, this was even more so, for there was nothing in it save a small iron bedstead, much rusted from want of use, and a high wooden box on which stood the simplest toilet requisites. In spite of the poverty of the apartment Kate had never been more glad to enter her luxurious chamber at home. The little carpetless room was a haven of rest where she would be left, for one night at least, to her own thoughts. As she lay in bed, however, she could hear far away the subdued murmur of Girdlestone's voice and the shrill tones of the old woman. They were in deep and animated converse. Though they were too far distant for her to distinguish a word, something told her that their talk was about herself, and the same instinct assured her that it boded her little good.

When Kate awoke in the morning it was some little time before she could realize where she was, or recall the events which had made such a sudden change in her life. The small window of her apartment was covered by a dirty muslin blind. She rose, and, drawing it aside, looked eagerly out. From what she had seen the night before she had hoped that this prison to which she had been conveyed might make amends for its loneliness by some degree of natural beauty. The scene which now met her eyes soon dispelled any expectations of the sort. The avenue with its trees lay on the other side of the house. From her window nothing was visible but a dreary expanse of bogland and mudbanks, stretching down to the sea. At high tide this enormous waste of dreariness and filth was covered by the water, but at present it lay before her in all its naked hideousness, the very type of dullness and of desolation. Here and there a few scattered reeds, or an unhealthy greenish scum upon the mud, gave a touch of color to the scene, but for the most part the great plain was all of the same somber mud tint, with its monotonous broken only by the white flecks where the swarms of gulls and kittiwakes had settled in the hope of picking up whatever had been left by the receding tide. Away across the broad surface a line of sparkling foam marked the fringe of the ocean, which stretched away to the horizon.

A mile or two to the eastward of her Kate saw some sign of houses, and a blue smoke which flickered up into the air. This she guessed to be the fishing village of Lea Claxton, which the driver had mentioned the night before. She felt as she gazed at the little hamlet, and the masts of the boats in front of it, that she was not alone in the world, and that even in this strange and desolate place there were honest hearts to whom as a last resource she could appeal.

She was still standing at the window when there came a knocking at the door, and she heard the voice of the old woman asking if she were awake. "Breakfast is ready," she said, "and the master is wondering why you bein' down."

On this summons Kate hastened her toilet and made her way down the old winding stair to the room in which they had supped the night before. Surely Girdlestone must have had a heart of flint not to be melted by the sight of that fair, fresh face. His features set as hard as adamant as she entered the room, and he looked at her with eyes which were puckered and angry.

"You are late," he said coldly. "You must remember that you are not in Eccleston square. You are here to be disciplined, and disciplined you shall be."

"I am sorry," she answered. "I think I must have been tired by our journey." The vast room looked even more comfortable and bleak than on the preceding evening. On the table was a plate of ham and eggs. John Girdlestone served out a portion, and pushed it in her direction. She sat down on one of the rough wooden chairs and ate listlessly, wondering how all this was going to end.

After breakfast Girdlestone ordered the old woman out of the room, and standing in front of the fire with his long legs apart and his hands behind his back, he told her in harsh concise language what his intentions were.

"I had long determined," he said, "that if you ran counter to my wishes, and persisted in your infatuated affection for that scapegrace, I should remove you to some secluded spot where you might reconsider your conduct and form better resolutions for the future. This country house answered the purpose admirably, and as an old servant of mine, Mrs. Jorrocks, chanced to reside in the neighborhood, I had warned her that at any time I might come down and should expect to find things ready. Your rash and heartless conduct has, however, precipitated matters, and we have arrived before her preparations were complete. Our future arrangements will therefore be less primitive than they are at present. Here you shall remain, young lady, until you show signs of re-

pentance, and of a willingness to undo the harm you have done."

"If you mean until I consent to marry your son, then I shall live and die here," the girl said bravely.

"That rests with yourself. As I said before, you are under discipline here, and you may not find existence such a bed of roses as it was in Eccleston square."

"Can I have my maid?" Kate asked. "I can hardly stay here with no one but the old woman in the house."

"Rebecca is coming down. I had a telegram from Ezra to that effect, and he will himself join us for a day or two in each week."

"Ezra here!" Kate cried in horror. Her chief consolation through all her troubles had been that there seemed to be some chance of getting rid of her terrible visitor.

"And why not?" the old man asked angrily. "Are you so bitter against the lad as to grudge him the society of his own father?"

Kate was saved from further reproaches by the entrance of the old woman to clean the table. The last item of intelligence, however, had given her a terrible shock, and at the same time had filled her with astonishment. What could the fast-living, comfort-seeking man about town want in this dreary abode? She knew Ezra well, and was sure that he was not a man to alter his ways of life or suffer discomfort of any kind without some very definite object. It seemed to her that this was a new mesh in the net which was being drawn round her.

When her guardian had left the room Kate asked Mrs. Jorrocks for a sheet of paper. The crone shook her head and wagged her pendulous lip in derision.

"Mister Girdlestone thought as you would be after that," she said. "There ain't no paper here, nor pens, neither, nor ink, neither."

"What, none! Dear Mrs. Jorrocks, do have pity on me, and get me a sheet, however old and soiled. See, here is some silver! You are very welcome to it if you will give me the materials for writing one letter."

Mrs. Jorrocks looked longingly with her beamed eyes at the few shillings which the girl held out to her, but she shook her head. "I dursn't do it," she said. "It's as much as my place is worth."

"Then I shall walk down to Bedsworth myself," said Kate angrily. "I have no doubt that the people in the postoffice will let me sit there and write it."

The old hag laughed hoarsely to herself until the scraggy sinews of her withered neck stood out like whipcord. She was still chuckling and coughing when the merchant came back into the room.

"What then?" he asked sternly, looking from one to the other. He was himself constitutionally averse to merriment, and he was irritated by it in others. "Why are you laughing, Mrs. Jorrocks?"

"I was a-laughing at her," the woman wheezed, pointing with tremulous fingers. "She was askin' me for paper, and sayin' as she would go and write a letter at the Bedsworth postoffice."

"You must understand once for all," Girdlestone roared, turning savagely upon the girl, "that you are cut off entirely from the outer world. I shall give you no loophole which you may utilize to continue your intimacy with undesirable people. I have given orders that you should not be provided with either paper or ink."

Poor Kate's last hope seemed to be fading away. Her heart sank within her, but she kept a brave face, for she did not wish him to see how his words had stricken her. She had a desperate plan in her head, which would be more likely to be successful could she but put him off his guard.

She spent the morning in her own little room. About one o'clock she heard the clatter of hoofs and the sound of wheels on the drive. Going down she found that it was a cart which had come from Bedsworth with furniture. There were carpets, a chest of drawers, tables, and several other articles, which the driver proceeded to carry upstairs, helped by John Girdlestone. The old woman was in the upper room. It seemed to Kate that she might never again have such an opportunity of carrying out the resolve which she had formed. She put on her bonnet and began to stroll listlessly about in front of the door, picking a few straggling leaves from the neglected lawn. Gradually she sauntered away in this manner to the head of the avenue, and then taking one swift, timid glance around, she slipped in among the trees, and made the best of her way, half-walking, half-running, down the dark winding drive.

Oh, the joy of the moment when the great white house which had already become so hateful to her was obscured among the trees behind her! She had some idea of the road which she had traversed the night before. Behind her were all her troubles. In front the avenue gate, Bedsworth and freedom. She would send both a telegram and a letter to Dr. Dimsdale, and explain to him her exact situation. If the kind-hearted and energetic physician once knew of it, he would take care that no harm befell her. She could return then, and face with a light heart the worst which her guardian could do to her. Here was the avenue entrance now, the high lichen-eaten stone pillars, with the battered date upon the top. The iron gate between was open. With a glad cry she quickened her pace, and in another moment would have been in the high road, when—

"Now then, where are you a-comin' to?" cried a gruff voice from among the bushes which flanked the gate.

The girl stopped all in a tremble. In the shadow of the trees there was a camp stool, and on the camp stool sat a savage-looking man, dressed in a dark corduroy suit, with a blackened clay pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth. His weather-beaten mahogany face was plentifully covered with smallpox marks, and one of his eyes was sightless and white from the effects of the same disease. He rose now, and interposed himself between her and the gate.

"My good man," she said in a trembling voice, for his appearance was far from reassuring. "I wish to go past and to get to Bedsworth. Here is a shilling, and I beg that you will not detain me."

Her companion stretched on a very dirty hand, took the coin, spun it up in the air, caught it, bit it, and finally plunged it into the depths of his trouser pockets. "No road this way, missy," he said. "I've given my word to the gov'nor, and I can't go back from it."

"You have no right to detain me," Kate cried angrily. "I have good friends in London who will make you suffer for this."

She was only a dozen yards from the lane which led to freedom, so she made a quick little feminine rush in the hope of avoiding this dreadful sentinel which barred her passage. He caught her round the waist, however, and hurled her back with such violence that she staggered across the path and would have fallen had she not struck violently against a tree.

Kate turned and retraced her steps slowly and sadly up the avenue. As she glanced back she saw a gaunt, hard-featured woman trudging up the lane with a tin can in her hand. Lonely and forlorn, but not yet quite destitute of hope, she turned to the right among the trees, and pushed her way through bushes and brambles to the boundary of the Priory grounds. It was a lofty wall, at least nine feet in height, with a coping that bristled with jagged pieces of glass. Kate walked along the base of it, her fair skin all torn and bleeding with scratches from the briars, until she satisfied herself that there was no break in it. There was one small wooden door on the side which was skirted by the railway line, but it was locked and impassable. The only opening through which a human being could pass was that which was guarded in the manner she had seen. The sickening conviction took possession of her mind that without wings it was an utter impossibility either to get away or to give the least information to any one in the world as to where she was or what might befall her.

When she came back to the house, tired and disheveled after her journey of exploration, Girdlestone was standing by the door to receive her with a sardonic smile upon his thin lips. "How do you like the grounds, then?" he asked, with the nearest approach to hilarity which she had ever heard from him. "And the ornamental fencing? and the lodge keeper? How did you like them all?" Kate tried for a moment to make some brave retort, but it was a useless attempt. Her lips trembled, her eyes filled, and with a cry of grief and despair which might have moved a wild beast, she fled to her room, and, throwing herself upon her bed, burst into such scalding tears as few women are ever called upon to shed.

CHAPTER XVI.

It would be impossible to describe the suspense in which Tom Dimsdale lived during these weeks. In vain he tried in every manner to find some way of tracing the fugitives. He wandered aimlessly about London from one inquiry office to another, telling his story and appealing for assistance. He advertised in papers and cross-questioned every one who might know anything of the matter. There were none, however, who could help him, or throw any light upon the mystery. No one at the office knew anything of the movements of the senior partner. To all inquiries Ezra replied that he had been ordered by the doctors to seek complete repose in the country.

His father became seriously anxious about the young fellow's health. He ate nothing, and his sleep was much broken. Both the old people tried to inculcate patience and moderation.

"That fellow, Ezra Girdlestone, knows where they are," Tom would cry, striding wildly up and down the room with unkempt hair and clenched hands. "I will have his secret, if I have to tear it out of him."

"Steady, lad, steady!" the doctor replied to one of these outbursts. "There is nothing to be gained by violence. They are on the right side of the law at present and you will be on the wrong if you do anything rash. The girl could have written if she were uncomfortable."

"Ah, so she could. She must have for gotten us. How could she, after all that has passed?"

"Let us hope for the best, let us hope for the best," the doctor would say soothingly. Yet it must be confessed that he was considerably staggered by the turn which things had taken. He had seen so much of the world in his professional capacity that he had become a very reliable judge of character. All his instincts told him that Kate Hartson was a true-hearted and well-principled girl. It was not in her nature to leave London and never to send a single line to her friends to tell them where or why she had gone. There must, he was sure, be some good reason for her silence, and this reason resolved itself into one of two things—either she was ill and unable to hold a pen, or she had lost her freedom and was restrained from writing to them. The last supposition seemed to the doctor to be the more serious of the two.

Had he known the instability of the Girdlestone firm, and the necessity they were under of getting ready money, he would at once have held the key to the enigma. He had no idea of that, but in spite of his ignorance he was deeply distrustful of both father and son. He knew and had often deplored the clause in John Hartson's will by which the ward's money reverted to the guardian. Forty thousand pounds was a bait which might tempt even a wealthy man into crooked paths.

Logic.

"Did you take your girl's mother to the game with you?"

"No; we left her at home. What is home without a mother?"—Yale Revue.

The Page Between.

A New Orleans woman, well known for her work for charity, recently accepted an invitation to speak at an anti-tuberculosis meeting. On the platform she found herself seated between a bishop and a rabbi, and the tone of the meeting seemed to be rendered extremely solemn by the combination.

In order to lighten the solemnity, she said, turning to the rabbi: "Do you know, I feel as if I were a leaf between the Old and the New Testaments."

The rabbi turned a sad-eyed gaze upon her.

"Yes, madam," he said, "and, if you will recall, that page is usually a blank one."

Sam Weller.

It was Sam Weller who made Dickens famous. "Pickwick Papers" were a complete failure financially until this unique character was introduced. The press was all but unanimous in praising Samival as an entirely original character whom none but a great genius could have created. Dickens received over \$16,000 for "Pickwick Papers," and at the age of twenty-six he was incomparably the most popular author of his day.—London Standard.

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The Real Thing.

"Do you think that unconscious spell which Miss Sharp had at the ball was a swoon?"

"No; I am sure it was a feint."

"What do you mean?"

"She had declared her intention of making a sensation at the ball, and I think she was like her intention—she wanted to be carried out."

The Old Flame.

Eva—Yes, she used to keep his love letters under her pillow.

Edna—And now?

Eva—Oh, she keeps them over her pillow now.

Edna—Over?

Eva—Yes, she uses them as curl papers.

No Opening.

"Why don't you go to work?" asked the prosperous citizen sharply.

"Gwan," retorted the mendicant, "youse fellows that have all the soft snaps have a nerve."—Philadelphia Ledger.

Not Mere Fancy.

"When I saw him last he was getting to be a regular grouch. He imagined everybody disliked him."

"Oh, all that's changed."

"Yes?"

"Yes, he knows it now."—Philadelphia Press.

A Chance to Get Rich.

A fortune awaits the tailor who can invent a secret pocket in a coat where a man may carry his cigars without exposing them to the many friends who help themselves.—Detroit Free Press.

My Hair is Scraggly

Do you like it? Then why be contented with it? Have to be? Oh, no! Just put on Ayer's Hair Vigor and have long, thick hair; soft, even hair; beautiful hair, without a single gray line in it. Have a little pride. Keep young just as long as you can.

"I am fifty-seven years old, and until recently my hair was very gray. But in a few weeks Ayer's Hair Vigor restored the natural color to my hair so now there is not a gray hair to be seen."—J. W. HANSON, Boulder Creek, Cal.

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The Best Part.

"Tommy, did you give your brother the best part of the apple, as I told you to?"

"Yessum. I gave him the seeds. He can plant them and have a whole orchard."

Mothers will find Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup the best remedy to use for their children during the teething period.

A Dreadful Secret.

Wife—Have you any secrets you keep from me, dearest?

Husband—None, darling.

Wife—Then I am determined I will have none from you, either.

Husband—Have you secrets, then?

Wife—Only one, and I am resolved to make a clean breast of it.

Husband (hoarsely)—Go on!

Wife—For several days I have had a secret—a secret longing for a new dress, with hat to match, for my birthday.

That fetched him.—Tatler.

Extremes.

"Pardon me," said the dowager with the mole on her chin, "but there is hardly room for two of us here if you are going to keep that thing on your head."

"O, I guess there's room enough, madam," answered the sharp-featured young woman with the umbrageous hat, who occupied the adjoining seat. "I'm not making any kick about the space your feet take up."—Chicago Tribune.

Knocked Out.

The pugilist a moment dropped his guard. A stiff right hander laid him on the floor. And sent him into dreamland. When he woke

His dream of immortality was o'er.

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