

# The Firm of Girdlestone

BY  
A. CONAN DOYLE

## CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

This last appeal of Kate's was in answer to an expression of incredulity and doubt which had passed over the face of the lady below. It was successful in its object, for the ring of truth with which she spoke and the look of anxiety and terror upon her face were too genuine to be mistaken. The lady drew her rein so as to bring the carriage as near the wall as was possible without losing sight of Kate's face.

"My dear," she said, "you may safely tell me everything. Whatever I can do to help you shall be done, and where I am powerless there are others who are my friends and may be of assistance. Scully is my name—Mrs. Lavinia Scully of London. Don't cry, my poor girl, but tell me all about it, and let us see how we can put matters right."

Thus encouraged, Kate wiped away the tears which had been brought to her eyes by the unwelcome sound of a friendly voice. Leaning forward as far as she could, and preventing herself from falling by passing her arm round a great branch which shot across the top of the shed, she gave in as few words as she could a detailed account of all that had befallen her. She described her guardian's anxiety that she should marry his son, her refusal, their sudden departure from London, her life at the Priory, the manner in which she was cut off from all human aid, and the reasons which made her believe that an attempt would be made upon her life. In conclusion, she narrated the scene which had occurred that very morning, when her guardian had tempted her to commit suicide. The only incident which she omitted from her story was that which had occurred the night before, for she felt that it might put too severe a tax upon Mrs. Scully's credulity. Indeed, looking back at it she almost persuaded herself that the sight which she had seen might be some phantom conjured up by her own imagination, weakened as she was in mind and in body.

Having concluded her narrative, she wound up by imploring her new-found friend to assist her by letting her friends in London know what had become of her and where she was. Mrs. Scully listened with a face which expressed alternately the most profound pity and the most burning indignation. When Kate had finished she sat silent for a minute or more entirely absorbed in her own thoughts. She switched her whip up and down viciously, and her usually placid countenance assumed an expression so fierce that Kate, looking down at her, feared that she had given her offense. When she looked up at last, however, she smiled so pleasantly that the poor girl was reassured, and felt instinctively that she had really found a true and effective friend at last.

"We must act promptly," she said, "for we don't know what they may be about, or what their plans are for the future. Who did you say your friends were?"

"Dr. Dimsdale, of Phillimore Gardens, Kensington."

"Hasn't he got a grown-up son?"

"Yes," said Kate, with a slight flush on her pale cheeks.

"Ah!" cried the good lady, with a very rough smile. "I see how the land lies. Of course, of course, why shouldn't it? I remember hearing about that young man. I have heard about the Girdlestons also. African merchants they were in the city. You see I know all about you."

"You know Tom?" Kate cried in astonishment.

"Oh, don't let us get talking of Tom," said Mrs. Scully, good-humoredly. "When girls get on a subject of that sort there's an end to everything. What I want to know is business. In the first place, I shall drive down to Bedworth and I shall send to London. But not to Phillimore Gardens. Hot-headed young men do foolish things under such circumstances as these. This is a case that wants careful management. I know a gentleman in London who is just the man, and who I know would be only too proud to help a lady in distress. He is a retired officer, and his name is Major Clutterbuck—Major Tobias Clutterbuck."

"Oh, I know him very well, and I have heard of you, too," said Kate with a smile. "I remember your name now in connection with his."

It was Mrs. Scully's turn to blush now. "Never mind that," she said. "I can trust the major, and I know he will be down here at a word from me. I shall let him have the facts, and he can tell the Dimsdales if he thinks it best. Good-by, dear, don't be unhappy any more, but remember that you have friends outside who will very quickly set all right. Good-by!" and waving her hand in encouragement, the good widow woke up the pony, which had fallen fast asleep, and rattled away down the lane in the direction from which she had come.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

At four o'clock Mr. Girdlestone stepped into the Bedworth telegraph office and wired his short message. It ran thus: "Case hopeless. Come on to-morrow with a doctor." On receipt of this he knew

by their agreement that his son would come down. There was nothing for it now but that his ward should die. If he delayed longer the crash might come before her money was available, and then how vain all regrets would be.

It seemed to him that there was very little risk in the matter. The girl had had no communication with any one. Even of those around her Mrs. Jorrocks was in her dotage, Rebecca Taylforth was staunch and true, and Stevens knew nothing. Every one on the country side had heard of the invalid young lady at the Priory. Who would be surprised to hear that she had passed away? He dare not call in any local medical man, but his inventive brain had overcome the difficulty, and had hit upon a device by which he might defy both doctors and coroner. If all went as he had planned it, it was difficult to see any chance of detection. In the case of a poorer man the fact that the girl's money reverted to him might arouse suspicion, but he rightly argued that with his great reputation no one would ever dream that such a consideration could have weight with him.

Having sent the telegram off and so taken a final step, John Girdlestone felt more at his ease. He was proud of his own energy and decision. As he walked very pompously and gravely down the village street his heart glowed within him at the thought of the long struggle which he had maintained against misfortune. He passed over in his mind all the successive borrowings and speculations and makeshifts and ruses which the firm had resorted to.

Yet in spite of every danger and difficulty it still held up its head with the best, and would weather the storm at last. He reflected proudly that there was no other man in the city who would have had the dogged tenacity and the grim resolution which he had displayed during the last twelve months. "If ever any one should put it all in a book," he said to himself, "there are few who would believe it possible. It is not by my own strength that I have done it."

When he was half way to the Priory he met a small pony carriage which was rattling towards Bedworth at a great pace, driven by a good-looking middle-aged lady with a small page by her side. The merchant encountered this equipage in a narrow country lane without a footpath, and as it approached him he could not help observing that the lady wore an indignant and gloomy look upon her features which was out of keeping with their general contour. Her forehead was contracted into a very decided frown, and her lips were gathered into what might be described as a negative smile. Girdlestone stood aside to let her pass, but the lady by a sudden twitch of her right hand rein brought the wheels across in so sudden a manner that they were within an ace of going over his toes. He only saved himself by springing back into a gap of the hedge. As it was, he found on looking down that his pearl-grey trousers were covered with flakes of wet mud. What made the incident more perplexing was that both the middle-aged lady and the page laughed very heartily as they rattled away to the village. The merchant proceeded on his way marveling in his heart at the uncharitableness and innate wickedness of unregenerated human nature.

Good Mrs. Scully little dreamed of the urgency of the case. Had she seen the telegram which John Girdlestone had just dispatched, it is conceivable that she might have read between the words, and by acting more promptly have prevented a terrible crime. As a matter of fact, with all her sympathy the worthy woman had taken a large part of Kate's story with the proverbial grain of salt. It seemed to her to be incredible and impossible that in this nineteenth century such a thing as deliberate and carefully planned murder should occur in Christian England. That these things occur in the abstract we are ready to admit, but we find it very difficult to realize that they may come within the horizon of our own experience. Hence Mrs. Scully set no importance upon Kate's fears for her life, and put them down to the excited state of the girl's imagination. She did consider it, however, to be a very iniquitous and unjustifiable thing that a young girl should be cooped up and separated from all the world in such a very dreary place of seclusion as the Priory. This consideration and nothing more serious had set that look of wrath upon her pleasant face, and had stirred her up to frustrate Girdlestone and to communicate with Kate's friends.

Her intention had been to telegraph to London, but as she drove to Bedworth she bethought her how impossible it would be for her within the limits of a telegram to explain to her satisfaction all that she wanted to express. A letter, she reflected, would, if posted now, reach the major by the first post on Saturday morning. It would simply mean a few hours' delay in the taking of steps to relieve Kate, and what difference could a few hours more or less make to the girl? She determined, therefore, that she would write to the major, explaining all the circumstances and leave it to him what course of action should be pursued.

Mrs. Scully was well known at the post-office, and they quickly accommodated her with the requisites for correspondence. Within a quarter of an hour she had written, sealed, stamped and posted the following epistle:

"Dearest Toby—Who do you think I have come across down here? No less a person than that Miss Harston who was Girdlestone's ward. You used to talk about her, I remember, and indeed you were a great admirer of hers. You would be surprised if you saw her now, so thin and worn and pale. Still her face is very sweet and pretty, so I won't deny your good taste—how could I after you have paid your addresses to me?"

"Her guardian has brought her down here and has locked her up in a great bleak house called the Priory. She has no one to speak to, and is not allowed to write letters. She seemed to be heart-

broken because none of her friends know where she is, and she fears that they may imagine that she has willingly deserted them. Of course, by her friends she means that curly-headed Mr. Dimsdale that you spoke of. The poor girl is in a very low, nervous state, and told me over the wall of the park that she feared her guardian had designs on her life. I can hardly believe that, but I do think that she is far from well, and that it is enough to drive her mad to coop her up like that. We must get her out somehow or another. I suppose that her guardian is within his rights, and that it is not a police matter. You must consider what must be done, and let young Dimsdale know if you think best. He will want to come down to see her, no doubt, and if Toby were to come, too, I should not be sorry."

"I should have telegraphed about it, but I could not explain myself sufficiently. I assure you that the poor girl is in a very bad way, and we can't be too energetic in what we do. It was very sad to hear the positive manner in which she declared that her guardian would murder her, though she did not attempt to give any reason why he should commit such a terrible crime. We saw a horrid one-eyed man at the gate who appeared to be on guard to prevent any one from coming out or in. On our way to Bedworth we met no less a person than the great Mr. Girdlestone himself, and we actually drove so clumsily that we splashed him all over with mud. Wasn't that a very sad and unaccountable thing? I fancy I see Toby smiling over that. Ever yours,

"LAVINIA SCULLY."

The major called a cab and rattled away to Phillimore Gardens and thence to the office, without being able to find the man of whom he was in search. He then rushed down the Strand as quickly as he could, intending to catch the next train and go alone, but on his way to Waterloo station he fell in with Tom Dimsdale, as recorded in a preceding chapter.

The letter was a thunderbolt to Tom. It was his worst dream he had never imagined anything so dark as this. He hurried back to the station at such a pace that the poor major was reduced to a most asthmatical and wheezy condition. He trotted along pluckily, however, and as he went heard the account of Tom's adventures in the morning, and of the departure of Ezra Girdlestone and his red-bearded companion. The major's face grew more anxious still when he heard of it. "Pray heaven we may not be too late!" he panted.

## CHAPTER XIX.

When Kate had made a clean breast of all her troubles to the Widow Scully, and had secured that good woman's co-operation, a great weight seemed to have been lifted from her heart, and she sprang from the shed a different woman. It would soon be like a dream, all these dreary weeks in the grim old house. Within a day she was sure that either Tom or the major would find means of communicating with her. The thought made her so happy that the color stole back into her cheeks, and she sang for very lightness of heart as she made her way back to the Priory.

Mrs. Jorrocks and Rebecca observed the change which had come over her, and marveled at it. Kate attempted to aid the former in her household work, but the old crone refused her assistance, and repulsed her harshly. Her maid, too, answered her curtly when she addressed her, and eyed her in anything but a friendly manner.

She amused herself that morning by reckoning up in her mind what the sequence of events would be in London, and how long it would be before she heard from her friends. If Mrs. Scully had telegraphed, news would have reached them last night. Probably she would write as well, giving all the particulars about her. The post came in about nine o'clock, she thought. Then some time would elapse before the major could find Tom. After that, no doubt they would have to consider what had best be done, and perhaps would go and consult with Dr. Dimsdale. That would occupy the morning and part of the afternoon. They could hardly reach the Priory before nightfall.

Ezra would be down by that time. On the Saturday before he had arrived between five and six. A great dread filled her soul at the thought of meeting the young merchant again. It was merely the natural instinct of a lady shrinking from whatever is rough and coarse and antagonistic. She had no conception of the impending danger, or of what his coming might mean to her.

Mr. Girdlestone was more gracious to her than usual that morning at breakfast. He seemed anxious to efface the remembrance of his fierce and threatening words the day before. Rebecca, who waited upon them, was astonished to hear the way in which he spoke. His whole manner was less heavy and ungainly than usual, for now that the time of action was at hand he felt braced and invigorated, as energetic men do.

"You should study botany while you are down here," he said, blandly. "Depend upon it, one cannot learn too many things in one's youth. Besides a knowledge of natural science teaches us the marvelous harmony which prevails throughout the universe, and so enlarges our mind."

"I should very much like to know something of it," answered Kate. "My only fear is that I should not be clever enough to learn it."

"The wood here is full of wonders. The tiniest mushroom is as extraordinary and as worthy of study as the largest oak. Your father was fond of plants and animals."

"Yes, I can remember that," said Kate, her face growing sad as her mind traveled back to years gone by. What would that same father have thought, she wondered, had he known how this man opposite to her had treated her? What did it matter now though, when she would so soon be out of his power?"

(To be continued.)

## Unnecessary.

"Yes," growled old Roxley, "Mabel's lover interviewed me last night. Stupid fellow; no sense at all."

"Ah!" exclaimed Ascum, "then you won't have him for a son-in-law?"

"I? What have I to do with it? The idea of his coming to ask me when the girl and her mother are satisfied. If he had any sense he'd know that settled it."—Philadelphia Press.

## Refined Torture.

"Lil, you just ought to have heard how Miss Capsicum talked the other day when she was real mad. You don't know what you missed."

"What did she say, Jen?"

"Gracious! You don't expect me to say the dreadful things she said, do you?"

## Entering a Demurrer.

"Talk about the superiority of mind over matter!" said the argumentative boarder. "It's just the other way. If you want to be sure not to forget a thing you don't trust it to your memory. You take a pencil and a slip of paper and make a memorandum of it."

## Foreign and Domestic.

His Wife (reading)—I see they had a bread riot in Spain recently.

Her Husband—Yes; and we'll have one at home soon if there isn't an improvement in your biscuits.

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I have used your S. S. S., spring and fall, for the past two years, with the result that it entirely relieved me of a form of Eczema which my doctor was unable to cure. My arms, lower limbs, and, in fact, the biggest portion of my whole body was affected, and when I first began S. S. S. the itching, etc., was worse, but I continued the remedy with the result that the dry, itching eruption entirely disappeared. I think a great deal of your medicine, and have recommended it to others with good results. It is the best blood medicine made, and I can conscientiously recommend it for the cure of all blood and skin affections. CHAS. HORSTMAN, Wheeling, W. Va.

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