

The Firm of Girdlestone

BY
A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER XX.—(Continued.)

"Of course. What could be more delightfully simple? Friend Burt here does his work; we carry her through the garden gate, and lay her on the darkest part of the rails. Then we miss her at the house. There is an alarm and a search. The gate is found open. We naturally go through with lanterns, and find her on the line. I don't think we need fear the conductor, or any one else, then?"

"He's a sharp 'un, is the gov'nor," cried Burt, slapping his thigh enthusiastically. "It's the downiest lay I have heard this many a day."

"Mr. Burt can do his part of the business out of doors. We can entice her out upon some excuse. There is no reason why any one should have a suspicion of the truth."

"But they know that she is not mad."

"They will think that she did it on purpose. The secret will be locked up in our three breasts. After one night's work our friend here goes to the colonies as a prosperous man, and the firm of Girdlestone holds up its head once more, stainless and irreproachable."

"Speak low!" said Ezra, in a whisper. "I hear her coming downstairs." They listened to her light springy footstep as it passed the door. "Come here, Burt," he said, after a pause. "She is at work on the lawn. Come and have a look at her."

They all went over to the window and looked out. It was then that Kate, glancing up, saw the three cruel faces surveying her.

"She's a rare, well-built 'un," said Burt, as he stepped back from the window. "It is the ugliest job as ever I was on."

"But we can rely upon you?" Girdlestone asked, looking at him with puckered eyes.

"You bet—as long as you pay me," the navvy answered phlegmatically.

CHAPTER XXI.

The grey winter evening was beginning to steal in before the details had all been arranged by the conspirators. It had grown so chill that Kate had abandoned her attempt at gardening, and had gone back to her room. Ezra left his father and Burt by the fire and came out to the open hall door. The grim old trees looked gaunt and eerie as they waved their naked arms about in the cutting wind. A slight fog had come up from the sea and lay in light wreaths over the upper branches like a thin veil of gauze. Ezra was shivering as he surveyed the dreary scene, felt a hand on his arm, and looking round saw that the maid Rebecca was standing beside him.

"Haven't you got one word for me?" she said sadly, looking up into his face. "It's but once a week, and then never a word of greeting."

"I didn't see you, my lass," Ezra answered. "How does the Priory suit you?"

"One place is the same as another to me," she said drearily. "You asked me to come here and I have come. You said once that you would let me know how I could serve you down here. When am I to know?"

"Why, there's no secret about that. You do serve me when you look after my father as you have done these weeks back. That old woman isn't fit to manage the whole place by herself."

"That wasn't what you meant, though," said the girl, looking at him with questioning eyes. "I remember your face now as you spoke the words. You had something on your mind, and have now, only you keep it to yourself. Why won't you trust me with it?"

"I have a great deal to worry me in business matters. Much good it would do telling you about them."

"It's more than that," said Rebecca, doggedly. "Who is that man who has come down?"

"A business man from London. He has come to consult my father about money matters. Any more questions you would like to ask?"

"I should like to know how long we are to be kept down here, and what the meaning of it all may be."

"We are going back before the end of the winter, and the meaning of it is that Miss Harston was not well and needed a change of air. Now, are you satisfied?" He was determined to allay as far as possible any suspicions that the girl might have previously formed.

"And what brings you down here?" she asked with the same searching look. "You don't come down into this hole without some good reason. I did think at first that you might come down in order to see me, but you soon showed me that it wasn't that. There was a time when you was fond of me."

"So I am now, lass."

"Aye, very fond! Not a word nor a look from you last time you came. You must have some reason, though, that brings you here."

"There's nothing wonderful in a man coming to see his own father."

"Much you cared for him in London," she cried with a shrill laugh. "If he was

under the sod you would not be the sadder. It's my belief as you come down after that doll-faced missy upstairs."

As the light faded and the grey of evening deepened into darkness Kate sat patiently in her bare little room. A coal fire sputtered and sparkled in the rusty grate, and there was a tin bucket full of coals beside the fender from which to replenish it. She was very cold, so she drew her single chair up to the blaze and held her hands over it. It was a lonesome and melancholy vigil, while the wind whistled through the branches of the trees and moaned drearily in the cracks and crannies of the old house. When were her friends coming? Perhaps something had occurred to detain them to-day. This morning such a thing would have appeared to her to be an impossibility, but now that the time had come when she had expected them, it appeared probable enough that something might have delayed them. To-morrow at latest they could not fail to come. She wondered what they would do if they did arrive. Would they come boldly up the avenue and claim her from the Girdlestons, or would they endeavor to communicate with her first? Whatever they decided upon would be sure to be for the best.

She went to the window once and looked out. It promised to be a wild night. Far away in the southwest lay a great cumulus of rugged clouds from which dark streamers radiated over the sky, like the advance guard of an army. Here and there a pale star twinkled dimly out through the rifts, but the greater part of the heavens was black and threatening. It was so dark that she could no longer see the sea, but the crashing, booming sound of the great waves filled the air and the salt spray came driving in through the open window. She shut it and resumed her seat by the fire, shivering partly from cold and partly from some vague presentiment of evil.

An hour or more had passed when she heard a step upon the stairs and a knock came to her door. It was Rebecca, with a cup of tea upon a tray and some bread and butter. Kate was grateful at this attention, for it saved her from having to go down to the dining room and face Ezra and his unpleasant-looking companion. Rebecca laid down the tray, and then to her mistress' surprise turned back and shut the door. The girl's face was very pale, and her manner was mild and excited.

"Here's a note for you," she said. "It was given Mrs. Jorrocks to give you, but I am better at climbing stairs than she is, so I brought it up." She handed Kate a little slip of paper as she spoke.

A note for her! Could it be that her friends had arrived and had managed to send a message to her? It must be so. She took it from the maid. As she did so she noticed that her hands were shaking as though she had the ague.

"You are not well, Rebecca," said Kate, kindly.

"Oh, yes, I am. You read your note and don't mind me," the girl answered in her usual surly fashion. Instead of leaving the room she was bustling about the bed as though putting things in order. Kate's impatience was too great to allow her to wait, so she untwisted the paper, which had no seal or fastening. She had hoped in her heart to see the name of her lover at the end of it. Instead of that her eye fell upon the signature of Ezra Girdlestone. What could he have to say to her? She moved the solitary candle on to the mantelpiece, and read the following note roughly scribbled upon a coarse piece of paper:

"My Dear Miss Harston—I am afraid your confinement here has been very irksome to you. I have repeatedly requested my father to alleviate or modify it, but he has invariably refused. As he still persists in his refusal, I wish to offer you my aid, and to show you that I am your sincere friend in spite of all that has passed, if you could slip out to-night at nine o'clock and meet me by the withered oak at the head of the avenue. I shall see you safe to Bedworth, and you can, if you wish, go on to Portsmouth by the next train. I shall manage so that you may find the door open by that time. I shall not, of course, go to Portsmouth with you, but shall return here after dropping you at the station. I do this small thing to show you that, hopeless as it may be, the affection which I bear you is still as deep as ever. Yours, E. Girdlestone."

Our heroine was so surprised at this epistle that she sat for some time dangling the slip of paper between her fingers and lost in thought. When she glanced round, Rebecca had left the room. She rolled the paper up and threw it into the fire. Ezra, then, was not so hard-hearted as she had thought him. He had used his influence to soften his father. Should she accept this chance of escape, or should she await some word from her friends? Perhaps they were already in Bedworth, but did not know how to communicate with her. If so, this offer of Ezra's was just what was needed. In any case, she could go on to Portsmouth and telegraph from there to the Dimsdales. It was too good an offer to be refused. She made up her mind that she would accept it. It was past eight now and nine was the hour. She stood up with the intention of putting on her cloak and bonnet.

CHAPTER XXII.

Ezra and his father had composed the letter together, and the former handed it to Mrs. Jorrocks, with a request that she should deliver it. It chanced, however, that Rebecca, keenly alive to any attempt at communication between the young merchant and mistress, saw the crone hobbling down the passage with the note in her hand.

"What's that, mother?" she asked. "It's a letter for her," wheezed the old woman, nodding her tremulous head in the direction of Kate's room.

"I'll take it up," said Rebecca eagerly. "I am just going up there with her tea."

"Thank ye. Them stairs tries my rheumatix something cruel."

The maid took the note and carried it

upstairs. Instead of taking it straight to her mistress she slipped into her own room and read every word of it. It appeared to confirm her worst suspicions. Here was Ezra asking an interview with the woman whom he had assured her that he hated. It was true that the request was made in measured words and on a plausible pretext. No doubt that was merely to deceive any other eye which might rest upon it. There was an understanding between them, and this was an assignation. The girl walked swiftly up and down the room like a caged tigress, striking her head with her clenched hands in her anger, and biting her lip until blood came. It was some time before she could overcome her agitation sufficiently to deliver the note, and when she did so her mistress, as we have seen, noticed that her manner was nervous and wild. She little dreamed of the struggle which was going on in the dark-eyed girl's mind against the impulse which urged her to seize her imagined rival by the white throat and choke the life out of her.

"It's eight o'clock now," Ezra was saying downstairs. "I wonder whether she will come?"

"She is sure to come," his father said briefly.

"Suppose she didn't?"

"In that case we should find other means to bring her out. We have not gone so far to break down over a trifle at the last moment."

"I feel as cold as ice and as nervous as a cat. I can't understand how you look so unconcerned. If you were going to sign an invoice or audit an account or anything else in the way of business you could not take it more calmly. I wish the time would come. This waiting is terrible."

Ezra, leaning back in his chair with the firelight flickering over his haggard but still handsome face, looked across at his father with a puzzled expression. He had never yet been able to determine whether the old man was a consummate hypocrite or a religious monomaniac. Burt lay with his feet in the light of the fire and his head sunk back across the arm of the chair, fast asleep and snoring loudly.

"Isn't it time to wake him up?" Ezra asked, interrupting the reading.

"Yes, I think it is," his father answered.

Ezra took up the candle and held it over the sleeping man. "What a brute he looks!" he said. "Did ever you see such an animal in your life?"

The navy was certainly not a pretty sight. His muscular arms and legs were all a-sprawl, and his head hung back at a strange angle to his body, so that his fiery red beard pointed upwards, exposing all the thick sinewy throat beneath it. His eyes were half open and looked bleared and unhealthy, while his thick lips puffed out with a whistling sound at every expiration. His dirty brown coat was thrown open, and out of one of the pockets protruded a short thick cudgel with a leaden head. John Girdlestone picked it out and tried it in the air.

"I think I could kill an ox with this," he said.

"Don't wave it about my head," cried Ezra. "As you stand in the firelight brandishing that stick in your long arms you are less attractive than usual."

John Girdlestone smiled and replaced the cudgel in the sleeper's pocket. "Wake up, Burt," he cried, shaking him by the arm. "It's half-past eight."

The navy started to his feet and then fell back into his chair, staring round him vacantly, at a loss as to where he might be.

"I've been asleep, gov'nor," he said hoarsely. "Did you say it was time for the job?"

"We have made arrangements by which she will be out by the withered oak at nine o'clock."

"Come on, then," said the navy. "Who is a-comin' with me?"

"We shall both come," answered John Girdlestone, firmly. "You will need help to carry her to the railway line."

"Surely Burt can do that himself," Ezra remarked. "She's not so very heavy."

Girdlestone drew his son aside. "Don't be so foolish, Ezra," he said. "It must be done with the greatest carelessness and precision, and no traces left. Our old business watchword was to overlook everything ourselves, and we shall certainly do so now."

"It's a horrible affair!" Ezra said, with a shudder. "I wish I was out of it."

"You won't think that to-morrow morning when you realize that the firm is saved and no one the wiser. He has gone on. Don't lose sight of him."

They both hurried out, and found Burt standing in front of the door. It was blowing half a gale now, and the wind was bitterly cold. There came a melancholy rasping and rustling from the leafless wood, and every now and again a sharp crackling sound would announce that some rotten branch had come crashing down. The clouds drove across the face of the moon, so that at times the cold, clear light silvered the dark wood and the old monastery, while at others all was plunged in darkness. From the open door a broad golden bar was shot across the lawn from the lamp in the hall. The three figures with their long fantastic shadows looked eerie and unnatural in the yellow glare.

"What if she fails to come?"

From the spot where they stood they had a view of the whole of the Priory. Kate could not come out without being seen. Above the door was a long narrow window which opened upon the staircase. On this Girdlestone and his son fixed their eyes, for they knew that on her way down she would be visible at it. As they looked, the dim light which shone through it was obscured and then reappeared.

"She has passed!"

"Hush!"

(To be continued.)

Telegraph wires last four times as long on the coast as inland.

AMERICA IS RICHEST AMONG THE NATIONS

William E. Curtis Says Croesus Was Pauper Beside Our Uncle Sam.

FIGURES SHOW BIG GROWTH.

Per Capita Wealth in 1870 Was \$779.83; in 1907 It Was \$1,310.11.

As a rule, the average newspaper reader does not like statistics, but here are some figures that everybody should read, because they mean so much. They measure our greatness as a nation and our prosperity as a people, and although they are so stupendous that the human mind almost refuses to comprehend them, they carry a lesson that every citizen and every school boy should learn. Uncle Sam is richer than any other nation that exists or ever has existed. Croesus, King of Lydia, whose name has been a synonym for wealth for ages, was a pauper compared to him.

From the reports of the bureau of statistics, the census bureau, the Treasury and Agricultural Department William E. Curtis, the Washington correspondent, has compiled a few significant figures showing the material development of the United States within the last thirty-seven years. He has selected the year 1870 as a basis of comparison, because that was the beginning of a new era in American commerce and industry that followed the Civil War. Although the panic of '73 arrested the growth of the country for a time, the present period of development began then.

The population of the country in 1870 was 38,558,371, or 12.74 to the square mile; the population on the 30th of June, 1907, according to the estimates of the census bureau, was 85,503,303, or 28.28 per square mile.

The tangible wealth of the country, the true valuation of real and personal property, according to the census of 1870, was \$30,008,518,000, while in 1907 it is estimated at more than three times that amount, or \$107,104,211,917.

As far back as 1850 the per capita wealth of the United States was estimated at \$907.09. In 1870 it had more than doubled and was estimated at \$779.83. In 1907 it had almost doubled again, and has reached the sum of \$1,310.11 per capita, which proves that we are the richest people that ever existed. In other words, if the real and personal property belonging to the inhabitants of the United States could be equally distributed among them, each man, woman and child living on the 30th of June last would have been entitled to \$1,310.11.

In 1870 the deposits in national banks for the whole United States amounted to \$542,261,563, while on the 30th of September last they were \$4,322,880,141.

In 1870 the deposits in savings banks were \$549,874,358, while on the 30th of September, 1907, they were \$3,600,078,945.

Taking the two together and including all the banks—national, State, private and savings—the deposits have increased eightfold during the last thirty-seven years—from \$1,092,135,921 in 1870 to \$8,923,288,886 in 1907.

The bank clearings for the entire country are not given for 1870. The earliest available figures are for 1890, when the total for the United States was \$58,845,279,545, which has increased to \$157,749,328,913 for the last fiscal year.

The national bank circulation in 1870 was \$288,648,081, while on Dec. 14 last it was \$675,231,305.

In 1870 we had only \$25,000,000 silver and gold coin. To-day we have \$1,233,705,849, of which \$756,665,869 is gold and the remainder silver.

The interest-bearing debt of the United States has been reduced from \$2,046,455,722, or \$90.46 per capita of population, in 1870 to \$809,003,010, or \$10.26 per capita, in 1907. The annual interest charges on the public debt have been reduced from \$118,784,960, or \$3 per capita of population, to \$21,628,914, or 25 cents per capita of population.

Notwithstanding the reductions in war taxes since 1870, the ordinary revenues of the government have increased from \$305,950,834 in that year to \$963,140,434 in 1907, and the ordinary expenditures have increased from \$164,421,507 to \$554,422,589. This does not include the receipts or expenses of the postal service, which is almost self-sustaining. Last year the receipts from postage were \$183,585,005 and the expenses \$191,214,387, leaving a deficit of \$7,629,382 to be paid out of the treasury.

The total revenues of the government in 1907 were \$846,725,339 and the total expenses \$819,840,150.

The increase in the pension roll has been enormous. The total in 1870 was \$28,340,202, and in 1907 it is \$139,309,514. The cost of the army in 1870 was \$57,596,675, and in 1907 \$122,576,465. The cost of the navy during the same period has increased from \$21,780,230 to \$67,128,469.

The imports of merchandise in 1870 amounted to \$435,958,408, and our exports were \$392,771,708 that year, while in 1907 the imports were \$1,434,421,425

and the exports \$1,880,851,078. In 1870 the exports per capita of population were \$9.77, and notwithstanding the enormous increase in population, the per capita in 1907 was \$21.66.

The foreign commerce of the United States for the calendar year of 1907 has been larger than in any previous year in the history of the country, both in imports and exports, and our trade with every grand division of the world is in excess of any previous year. The imports during the eleven months ending Nov. 30 exceeded \$1,330,000,000, while the exports were worth \$1,710,000,000. If the increase has continued during December the total of exports will reach nearly two billions of dollars. The exports for November were the largest for any single month on record and reached \$204,444,000, which was nearly seven millions a day. Our exports to Europe were \$40,000,000 more than in 1906, when they were larger than for any other year. Our exports to North American countries also gained \$40,000,000. Our exports to South America gained \$7,000,000, to Asia \$11,000,000 and to Porto Rico, the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines more than ten millions.

In 1850 there were only 251,354 depositors in the savings banks of the United States; in 1870 this number had increased to 1,630,846. One person in every thirty of the population was depositing his or her savings where they would draw interest. To-day 8,588,811 persons, or almost exactly 10 per cent of the entire population of the country, have accounts in savings banks—an average of one in every ten men, women and children in the United States.

The internal commerce for the year was greater than ever before. On the Great Lakes and on the railroads the movement of natural products was beyond all comparison. There was a gain of 15 per cent in the amount of iron ore shipped, a gain of 25 per cent in coal and a similar gain in corn, wheat, live stock and every other important article, while the freight charges averaged lower than for any previous year.

The increase in exports occurs chiefly in manufactured articles. The figures of agricultural exports remain about the same as in 1906, when they were the largest on record.

The government treasury was never in better shape. The report of the United States treasurer for June 30, 1870, showed an available cash balance of \$150,006,000 in the treasury at Washington; the report for December 14, 1907, shows an available cash balance of \$259,762,300, without counting \$246,284,455 deposited in national banks and subject to the call of the department. This makes a total available balance of \$506,046,754.

Secretary Wilson in his recent annual report showed us that the crops of the farmers of the United States for the year 1907 was beyond all comparison and had a farm value of \$7,412,000,000—an increase of 57 per cent in eight years.

In 1870 the value of the farm animals in the United States was \$1,554,990,149; in 1907 they are worth \$4,423,697,853.

In 1870 our farmers had 25,484,100 neat cattle; in 1907 they have 72,533,696.

In 1870 they had 8,248,800 horses; in 1907 they have 19,746,583.

In 1870 the wool clip was 152,000,000 pounds; in 1907 it was 298,915,130 pounds.

The wheat crop in 1870 was 235,884,700 bushels; in 1907 it was 735,290,970 bushels.

The corn crop in 1870 was 1,064,255,000 bushels; in 1907 it was 2,927,416,091 bushels.

In 1870 the cotton crop was 3,114,952 bales; in 1907 it was 13,510,982 bales.

The cotton mills of the United States consumed 857,000 bales of cotton in 1870 and 4,627,000 bales in 1907.

In 1870 we exported 958,558,523 pounds of cotton; in 1907 we exported 4,518,217,220 pounds.

The production of gold in 1870 was \$36,000,000; in 1907 it was \$96,000,000.

In 1870 the production of silver was \$16,334,000; in 1907 it was \$37,642,900.

In 1870 we produced 220,951,290 tons of coal; in 1907 we produced 5,312,745,312 tons.

In 1870 we produced 1,655,179 tons of pig iron; in 1907 we produced 25,307,191 tons.

In 1870 our furnaces had an output of only 68,750 tons of steel; in 1907 the output was 20,023,947 tons.

In 1870 we operated 52,922 miles of railroad; in 1907 we had 222,635 miles in operation, and carried 815,774,118 passengers and 216,656,795,696 tons of freight. The statistics for freight and passenger traffic do not go back of 1890, when the railroads of the country carried 520,439,082 passengers and 79,192,985,125 tons of freight.

The average freight rate per mile in 1890 was 93 cents and in 1907 it was 77 cents per ton.

There were 684,704 tons of shipping on the great lakes in 1870, which has increased to 2,439,741 tons in 1907. The amount of freight passing through the Sault Ste. Marie canal in 1870 was 690,826 tons; in 1907 the total was 41,008,324 tons.

In 1870 we had 28,492 postoffices in the country; in 1900 we had 76,688. Since that time, by the introduction of rural free delivery, the number has been reduced to 62,659.

There is no better thermometer of commercial and industrial activity than the Postoffice Department, for people do not write letters when they have no business to write about. The receipts of the department in 1870 for postage stamps amounted to \$19,722,222; in 1907 they had increased to \$167,932,783.

In 1880 there were 4,829 money order offices in the United States. In 1907 there were 37,500. In 1880 7,240,537 domestic money orders were issued; in 1907 the number was 62,009,783. Those issued in 1880 represented a value of \$100,352,818; those issued in 1907 represented a value of \$479,650,342.