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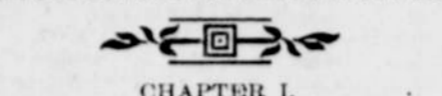
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Next to Vienna Cafe BANDON

**The Firm of Girdlestone**

BY  
A. CONAN DOYLE



CHAPTER I.

The approach to the offices of Girdlestone & Co. was not a very dignified one. A narrow doorway opens into a long white-washed passage. On one side of this is a brass plate with the inscription, "Girdlestone & Co., African Merchants," and above it a curious hieroglyphic supposed to represent a human hand in the act of pointing. Following the guidance of this emblem, the wayfarer finds himself in a small square yard surrounded by doors, upon one of which the name of the firm reappears in large white letters, with the word "push" printed beneath it. If he follows this laconic invitation he will make his way into a long, low apartment, which is the counting-house of the African traders.

On the afternoon of which we speak things were quiet at the offices. Misty London light shone hazily through the glazed windows and cast dark shadows in the corners. On a high perch in the background a weary-faced, elderly man, with muttering lips and tapping fingers, cast up endless lines of figures. Beneath him, in front of two long shining mahogany desks, half a score of young men appeared to be riding furiously, neck and neck, in the race of life. Any habitue of a London office might have deduced from their relentless energy and incorruptible diligence that they were under the eyes of some member of the firm.

The member in question leaned against the marble mantelpiece, turning over the pages of an almanac, and taking from time to time a stealthy peep over the top of it at the toilers around him. Command was imparted in every line of his strong, square-set face and erect, powerful frame. There was something classical in the regular olive-tinted features and black, crisp, curling hair fitting tightly to the well-rounded head. Yet, though classical, there was an absence of spirituality. It was rather the profile of one of those Roman emperors, splendid in its animal strength, but lacking those subtle softnesses of eye and mouth which speak of an inner life. Such was Ezra, the only child of John Girdlestone, and the heir to the whole of his vast business.

The junior partner was silent, and the clerks were working uneasily. Their fears were terminated by the sharp sound of a table-gong and the appearance of a boy with the announcement that Mr. Girdlestone would like a moment's conversation with Mr. Ezra.

The sanctum of Mr. John Girdlestone was approached by two doors, one of oak with groundless panels, and the other covered with green baize. The room itself was small, but lofty, and the walls were ornamented by numerous sections of ships stuck upon long flat boards, very much as the remains of fossil fish are exhibited in museums. There were also several photographs of the various vessels belonging to the firm, together with maps, charts and lists of sailings innumerable. Above the fireplace was a large water-color painting of the barque *Belinda* as she appeared when on a reef to the north of Cape Palmas. An inscription beneath this work of art announced that it had been painted by the second officer and presented by him to the head of the firm. It was generally rumored that the merchants had lost heavily over this disaster, and there were some who quoted it as an instance of Girdlestone's habitual strength of mind that he should decorate his wall with so melancholy a souvenir.

John Girdlestone, as he sat at his square office table waiting for his son, was undeniably a remarkable looking man. For good or for evil no weak character lay beneath that hard angular face, with the strongly marked features and deep-set eyes.

He was known to be a fanatic in religion, a purist in morals, and a man of the strictest commercial integrity. Yet there were some few who looked askance at him, and none, save one, who could apply the word friend to him.

He rose and stood with his back to the fire as his son entered. He was so tall that he towered above the younger man, but the latter's square and compact frame made him, apart from the difference of age, the stronger man.

"There's news of the Black Eagle," he said. "She is reported from Madeira."

"Ah!" cried the junior partner eagerly. "What luck?"

"She is full, or nearly so, according to Captain Hamilton Miggs' report."

"I wonder Miggs was able to send a report at all, and I wonder still more that you should put any faith in it," his son said impatiently. "The fellow is never sober."

"Miggs is a good seaman, and popular on the coast. He may indulge at times, but we all have our failings. Here is the list vouchered for by our agent. 'Six hundred barrels of palm oil!'"

"Oil is down to-day," the other interrupted.

"It will rise before the Black Eagle arrives," the merchant rejoined confidently. "Then he has palm nuts in bulk, gum, ebony, skins, cochineal, and ivory. Ivory is at a fancy figure. We are sorely in need of a few good voyages, for things have been very slack of late. It is not upon this matter that I wanted to speak to you," Girdlestone continued. "It has, however, always been my practice to prefer matters of business to private affairs, however pressing. John Harston is said to be dying, and he has sent a message to me saying that he wishes to see me. It is inconvenient for me to leave the office just now, but I feel that it is my Christian duty to obey such a summons. I wish you, therefore, to look after things until I return."

"I can hardly believe that the news is true," Ezra said, in astonishment. "There

must be some mistake. Why, I spoke to him on 'Change last Monday."

"It is very sudden," his father answered, taking his broad-brimmed hat from a peg. "There is no doubt about the fact, however. The doctor says that there is very little hope that he will survive until evening. It is a case of malignant typhoid fever."

"You are very old friends?" Ezra remarked, looking thoughtfully at his father.

"I have known him since we were boys together," the other replied. "Our mother, Ezra, died upon the very day that Harston's wife gave birth to this daughter of his seventeen years ago. Mrs. Harston only survived a few days."

"How will the money go if the doctors are right?" Ezra asked keenly.

"Every penny to the girl," the merchant answered. "She will be an heiress. There are no other relatives that I know of, except the Dimsdales, and they have a fair fortune of their own. But I must go."

The African merchant hailed a hansom and drove out to his friend's house at Fulham. He and Harston had been charity school boys together, had roughed it together, risen together, and prospered together. Harston, by incessant attention to business and extreme parsimony, had succeeded in founding an export trading concern. In this he had followed the example of his friend. There was no fear of their interests ever coming into collision, as his operations were confined to the Mediterranean. The firm grew and prospered, until Harston began to be looked upon as a warm man in the City circles. His only child was Kate, a girl of seventeen. There were no other near relatives, save Dr. Dimsdale, a prosperous West End physician.

Girdlestone pushed open the iron gate and strode down the gravel walk which led to his friend's house. A bright summer sun shined out of a cloudless heaven bathed the green lawn and the many-colored flower beds in its golden light. The air, the leaves, the birds, all spoke of life. It was hard to think that death was closing its grip upon him who owned them all. A plump little gentleman in black was just descending the steps.

"Well, doctor," the merchant asked, "how is your patient?"

"You've not come with the intention of seeing him, have you?" the doctor asked, glancing up with some curiosity at the grey face and overhanging eyebrows of the merchant. "It is a most virulent case of typhoid. He may die in an hour or he may live until nightfall, but nothing can save him. He will hardly recognize you, I fear, and you can do him no good. It is most infectious, and you are incurring a needless danger. I should strongly recommend you not to go."

"Why, you've only just come down from him yourself, doctor," John Girdlestone remarked.

"Ah, I'm there in the way of duty."

"So am I," said the visitor decisively, and passing up the stone steps of the entrance strode into the hall. There was a large sitting room upon the ground floor, through the open door of which the visitor saw a sight which arrested him for a moment. A young girl was sitting in a recess near the window, with her little, supple figure bent forward, and her hands clasped at the back of her head, while the elbows rested upon a small table in front of her. Her superb brown hair fell in a thick wave on either side over her white round arms. The doctor had just broken his sad tidings to her, and she was still in the first paroxysm of her grief—a grief too acute, as was evident even to the un sentimental mind of the merchant, to allow of any attempt at consolation. The merchant paused irresolutely for a moment, and then ascending the broad staircase he pushed open the door of Harston's room and entered.

The blinds were drawn down and the chamber was very dark. A pungent whiff of disinfectants issued from it, mingled with the dank, heavy smell of disease. The bed was in a far corner. Without seeing him, Girdlestone could hear the fast labored breathing of the invalid. A trimly dressed nurse who had been sitting by the bedside rose, and recognizing the visitor, whispered a few words to him and left the room. He pulled the cord of the Venetian blind so as to admit a few rays of daylight. The great chamber looked dreary and bare, as carpets and hangings had been removed to lessen the chance of future infection. John Girdlestone stepped softly across to the bedside, and sat down by his dying friend. The latter turned his restless head round, and a gleam of recognition and gratitude came into his eyes.

"I knew you would come," he said.

"Yes, I came the moment I got your message."

"I am glad that you are here," the sufferer continued with a sign of relief. "I wish to speak to you. I am very weak. I have been making my will, John. Stoop your head and you will hear me better. I have less than fifty thousand. I should have done better had I retired years ago."

"I told you so," the other broke in gruffly.

"You did—you did. But I seted for the best. Forty thousand I leave to my daughter Kate."

A look of interest came over Girdlestone's face. "How about the balance?" he asked.

"I leave that to be equally divided among the various London institutions for educating the poor. We were both poor boys ourselves, John, and we know the value of such schools."

Girdlestone looked perhaps a trifle disappointed. The sick man went on very slowly and painfully:

"My daughter will have forty thousand pounds. But it is so tied up that she can neither touch it herself nor enable anyone else to do so until she is of age. She has no friends, John, and no relations, save only my cousin, Dr. George Dimsdale. Never was a girl left more lonely and unprotected. Take her, I beg of you, and bring her up under your own eye. Treat her as though she were your child. Guard her above all from those who would wreck her young life in order to share her fortune. Do this, old friend, and make me happy on my death-bed."

The merchant made no answer. His heavy eyebrows were drawn down, and his forehead all puckered with thought.

"You are the one man," continued the sufferer, "whom I know to be just and upright. Give me the water, for my mouth is dry. Should my dear girl perish before she marries, then, old friend, her fortune revert to you, for there is none who

will use it so well. Those are the terms of the will. But you will guard her and care for her, as I would myself. She is a tender plant, John, too weak to grow alone. Promise me that you will do right by her—promise it?"

"I do promise it," John Girdlestone answered in a deep voice. He was standing up now, and leaning over to catch the words of the dying man.

The sick man's head fell back exhausted upon his pillow. "Thank heaven," he muttered, "now I can die in peace."

"Turn your mind away from the vanities and dross of this world," John Girdlestone said sternly, "and fix it upon that which is eternal, and can never die."

"Are you going?" the invalid asked sadly, for he had taken up his and asked.

"Yes, I must go! I have an appointment in the city at six, which I must not miss. I shall send up the nurse as I go down," Girdlestone said. "Good-bye!"

"Good-by! Heaven bless you, John."

The firm, strong hand of the hale man enclosed for a moment the feeble burning one of the sufferer. Then John Girdlestone plodded heavily down the stair, and these friends of forty years' standing had said their last adieu.

The African merchant kept his appointment in the city, but long before he reached it John Harston had gone also to keep that last terrible appointment of which the messenger is death.

CHAPTER II.

"Come in," said Mr. Girdlestone. "Why, captain, I am glad to see you back safe and well."

"Glad to see ye, sir—glad to see ye."

The voice was thick and husky, and there was an indecision about his gait as though he had been drinking heavily. "I came in sort of cautious," the owner continued, "cause I didn't know who might be about. When you and me speaks together we likes to speak alone, you bet?"

The merchant raised his bushy eyebrows a little, as though he did not relish the idea of mutual confidences suggested by his companion's remark. "Hadin't you better take a seat?" he said. "I must congratulate you on your cargo, and wish you the same luck for your next voyage," the merchant continued.

"Ivory, an' gold dust, an' skins, an' resin, an' cochineal, an' gums, an' ebony, an' rice, an' tobacco, an' fruits, an' nuts in bulk. If there's a better cargo about I'd like to see it," the sailor said defiantly. "Say, now, weren't you surprised to see us come back—eh? Straight now, between man and man?"

"The old ship hangs together well, and has lots of work in her yet," the merchant answered.

"Lots of work! I thought she was gone in the bay! We'd a dirty night with a gale from the west-south-west, an' had been goin' by dead reckonin' for three days, so we weren't over and above sure o' ourselves. She wasn't much of a sea-going craft when we left England, but the sun had fried all the pitch out o' her seams, and you might ha' put your fingers through some of 'em. Two days an' a night we were at the pumps, for she leaked like a sieve. We lost the fore topsail, blown clean out o' the ringbolts. I never thought to see Lunnon again."

"If she could weather a gale like that she could make another voyage."

"She could start on another," the sailor said gloomily, "but as like as not she'd never see the end o' it."

"Come, come, you're not quite yourself this morning, Miggs. We value you as a dashing, fearless fellow—let me fill your glass again—who doesn't fear a little risk where there's something to be gained. You'll lose your good name if you go on like that."

"She's in a terrible bad way," the captain insisted. "You'll have to do something before she can go."

"What shall we have to do?"

"Dry dock her and give her a thorough overhaul. She might sink before she got out o' the Channel if she went as she is just now."

(To be continued.)

**Refined Cruelty of a Boy.**

"For genuine cruelty the average 5-year-old boy has got a Hottentot cannibal licked to a frazzle," said the proud father of a young hopeful the other day at a Philadelphia Record man. "The latest trick of my kid is a winner, but was sort of rough on the victim, which was our pet cat. About three weeks ago we noticed that pussy suddenly stopped eating and drinking. All the choice bits of meat and dishes of milk were left untouched.

"For several days we explained it by supposing that the cat was getting more than the ordinary number of mice and eating them to the exclusion of our offerings, but we soon noticed that she was becoming thin and gaunt and did not seem inclined to move about and purr as she used to. One day, after two weeks of this, I picked up the now skeleton cat and began to stroke its neck.

"What do you think I found? A thin rubber band stretched tightly around the throat, concealed by the long fur. It just permitted the cat to breathe, but she could not eat. I removed it and now she is getting along all right. When I asked the boy about it he said he just wanted to see if kitty would strangle. If it had been anything else but a cat it would have been dead in no time."

**Holds Nothing.**

"A spendthrift," remarked the home-grown philosopher, "is a good deal like a tub with the bottom knocked out."

"What's the answer?" queried the very young man.

"He takes all that comes, but is able to hold nothing," explained the philosophy dispenser.

**He Took the Blame.**

Muggins—Behold in me a self-made man.

Diggins—I congratulate you because of your charitableness.

Muggins—I beg pardon?

Diggins—You are certainly charitable in taking the blame on yourself.

**Not in Stock.**

Customer (in book store)—Have you the Century Magazine?

New Clerk—No, sir; we have no copy but monthly magazines.

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NOSLER & MORRISON, Props.

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