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The Firm of Girdlestone

BY A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

"Very well," the merchant said coldly. "If you insist on it, it must be done. But, of course, it would make a great difference in your salary."

"Eh?"

"You are at present getting fifteen pounds a month, and five per cent commission. These are exceptional terms in consideration of any risk that you may run. We shall dry dock the Black Eagle, and your salary is now ten pounds a month and two and a half commission."

"Belay, there, belay!" the sailor shouted. His coppery face was a shade darker than usual, and his bilious eyes had a venomous gleam in them. "Don't you beat me down!" he hissed, advancing to the table and leaning his hands upon it while he pushed his angry face forward until it was within a foot of that of the merchant. "Don't you try that game on me, for I am a freeborn British seaman, and I am under the thumb of no man. You'd reduce my salary, would ye?" roared Captain Hamilton, Migs, working himself into a fury. "Me that has worked for ye, and slaved for ye, and risked my life for ye. You try it on, guv'nor, just you try it on! Suppose I let out that little story of the painting out of the marks—where would the firm of Girdlestone be then? I guess you'd rather double my wage than have that yarn goin' about."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? You don't know what I mean, do you? Of course not. It wasn't you as set us out to go at night and paint out the government Pilmisall marks and paint 'em in again higher up, so as to be able to overload. That wasn't you, was it?"

"Do you mean to assert that it was?"

"In course I do," thundered the angry seaman.

The senior partner struck the gong which stood upon the table. "Gillray," he said quietly, "go out and bring in a policeman."

Captain Hamilton Migs seemed to be somewhat startled by this sudden move of his antagonist. "Steady your helm, governor," he said. "What are ye up to now?"

"I'm going to give you in charge."

"What for?"

"For intimidating and using threatening language, and endeavoring to extort money under false pretenses."

"There's no witnesses," the sailor said in a half-cringing, half-defiant manner.

"Oh, yes, there are," Ezra Girdlestone remarked, coming into the room. He had been standing between the two doors which led to the counting house, and had overheard the latter portion of the conversation. "Don't let me interrupt you. You were saying that you would blacken my father's character unless he increased your salary."

"I didn't mean no harm," said Captain Hamilton Migs, glancing nervously from the one to the other. He had been fairly well known to the law in his younger days, and had no desire to renew the acquaintance.

"Who painted out those Pilmisall marks?" asked the merchant.

"It was me."

"Did any one suggest it to you?"

"No."

"Shall I send in the policeman, sir?" asked Gillray, opening the door.

"Ask him to wait for a moment," Girdlestone answered. "And now, captain, to return to the original point, shall we dry dock the Black Eagle and reduce the salary, or do you see your way to going back in her on the same terms?"

"I'll go back," said the captain recklessly. "When d'ye want me to start?"

"When she's unloaded and loaded up again. Three weeks or a month yet. I expect that Spender will have come in with the Maid of Athens by that time."

"Unless some accident happens on the way," said Captain Hamilton Migs, with a leer. "He was at Sierra Leone when we came up the coast. I say," he continued, giving his employer a confidential nudge with his elbow, "suppose we'd go down in the bay this last time, you'd ha' been a bit out in your reckoning—eh, what?"

"Why so?"

"Well, we were over-insured on our outward passage. An accident then might ha' put thousands in your pocket I know. Coming back, though, the cargo was worth more than the insurance, I reckon. You'd ha' been out o' pocket if we'd foundered."

"We take our chance of these things," the merchant said with dignity.

"Well, good morning, guv'nor," Captain Hamilton Migs said brusquely.

As he passed out through the office, Ezra rejoined his father.

"He's a rum chap," he remarked, jerking his head in the direction which Migs had taken. "A useful servant, though."

"The fellow's half a savage himself," his father said. "He's in his element among them. That's why he gets on so well with them."

"He doesn't seem much the worse for the climate, either."

"His body does not, but his ideas are shockingly immoral! However, to return to business. I wish you to see the underwriters and pay the premium of the Black Eagle. If you see your way to it, increase the policy, but do it carefully, Ezra, and with tact. She will start about the time of the equinoctial gales! If anything should happen to her, it would be as well that the firm should have a margin on the right side."

CHAPTER III.

The residence of Major Tobias Clutterbuck was not known to any of his

friends. It is true that at times he alluded in a modest way to his "little place," and even went the length of remarking airily to new acquaintances that he hoped they would look him up any time they happened to be in his direction. As he carefully refrained, however, from ever giving the slightest indication of which direction that might be, his invitations never led to any practical results. Still, they had the effect of filling the recipient with a vague sense of professed hospitality, and occasionally led to more substantial kindness in return.

The gallant major's figure was a familiar one in the card room of the "Rag and Bobtail," or at the bow window of the Jeunesse Doree. Tall and pompous, with a portly frame and a puffly clean-shaven face which peered over an abnormally high collar and old-fashioned man cravat, he stood as a very type and emblem of staid middle-aged respectability. The major's hat was always of the glossiest, the major's coat was without a wrinkle, and, in short, from the summit of the major's bald head to his bulbous fingertips and his gaiter toes, there was not a flaw which the most severe critic of deportment could have detected. Let us add that the conversation of the major was as impeccable as his person—that he was a distinguished soldier and an accomplished traveler, with a retentive memory and a mind stuffed with the good things of a lifetime. Combine all these qualities, and one would naturally regard the major as a most desirable acquaintance.

Standing at the head of the broad stone steps which led up to the palatial edifice which its occupiers irreverently term the "Rag and Bobtail," he was explaining to a bull-necked, olive-complexioned young man, the series of marriages and inter-marriages which had culminated in the production of his own portly stiff-backed figure. His companion, who was none other than Ezra Girdlestone of the great African firm of that name, leaned against one of the pillars of the portico and listened gloomily to the major's family reminiscences, giving an occasional yawn which he made no attempt to conceal.

"It's as plain as the fingers of my hand," the old soldier said in a wheezy muffled brogue as if he were speaking from under a feather bed. "See here now, Girdlestone—this is Miss Letitia Snackles, of Snackleson, a cousin of old Sir Joseph." The major tapped his thumb with the silver head of his walking stick to represent the maiden Snackles. "She marries Crawford, of the Blues—one of the Warwickshire Crawfords; that's him"—here he elevated his stubby forefinger—and here's their three children, Jonima, Harold and John." Up went three other fingers. "Jonima Crawford goes up, and then Charley Clutterbuck runs away with her. This other thumb o' mine will stand for that young devil Charley, and then my fingers—"

"Oh, hang your fingers," Girdlestone exclaimed with emphasis. "It's very interesting, major, but it would be more intelligible if you wrote it out."

"And so I shall, me boy!" the major cried enthusiastically, by no means abashed at the sudden interruption. "I'll draw it up on a bit of foolscap paper. Let's see, Fenchurch street, eh? Address to the offices, of course. Though for that matter, 'Girdlestone, London,' would find you. I was spak'ing of ye to Sir Musgrave Moore, of the Rifles the other day, and he knew you at once. 'Girdlestone?' says he. 'The same,' says I. 'A merchant prince?' says he. 'The same,' says I. 'I'd be proud to meet him,' says he. 'And you shall, says I. He's the best blood of county Waterford.'"

"More blood than money, I suppose," the young man said. "I'm due in the city. The governor leaves at four. Good-by; shall I see you to-night?"

"Card room, as per usual," quoth the clean-shaven warrior. He looked after the retreating figure of his late companion with anything but a pleasant expression upon his face. The young man happened to glance round as he was half way down the street, on which the major smiled after him paternally, and gave a merry flourish with his stick.

At last he hailed a passing bus, into which he sprang. After a drive which brought him to the other side of the city, he got out in a broad, busy thoroughfare, lined with large shops. Down a somber avenue the major strutted with all his wonted pomposity, until about half way down he reached a tall grim-looking house, with many notices of "apartments" glazing from the windows. The major walked briskly up the stone steps, and pushing open the great spotted door, which bore upon it a brass plate indicating that the establishment was kept by a Mrs. Robins, he walked into the hall with the air of one who treads familiar ground. Up one flight of stairs, up two flights of stairs, and up three flights of stairs did he climb, until at the fourth landing he pushed open a door and found himself in a small room, which formed for the moment the "little place" about which he was wont at the club to make depreciatory allusions, so skillfully introduced that the listener was left in doubt as to whether the major was the happy possessor of a country house and grounds, or whether he merely owned a large suburban villa. Even this modest sanctum was not entirely the major's own as was shown by the presence of a ruddy-faced man with a long, tawny beard, who sat on one side of the empty fireplace. As the other entered, the man in the chair gave vent to aguttural grunt, and Major Clutterbuck returned the greeting with an off-handed nod. His next proceeding was to take off his glossy hat, and pack it away in a hat box. He then removed his coat, his collar, his tie and his gaiters with equal solicitude, and put them in a piece of safety. After which he donned a long purple dressing gown and a smoking cap, in which garb he performed the first steps of a mazurka as a sign of the additional ease which he experienced.

"Not much to dance about either, me boy," the old soldier said, sitting himself in a camp chair and putting his feet upon another one. "We're all on the verge. Unless luck takes a turn there's no saying what may become of us."

"We have been badder than this before now many a time," said the ruddy bearded man, in an accent which proclaimed him to be a German. "My money will come, or something will arrive to set all things right."

Sigismund von Baumser was a political refugee from the Fatherland who had managed to become foreign clerk in a small London firm, an occupation which just enabled him to keep body and soul

together. He and the major had lodged in different rooms in another establishment until some common leaven of Bohemianism had brought them together. When circumstances had driven them out of their former abode it had occurred to the major that by sharing his rooms with Von Baumser he would diminish his own expenses, and at the same time secure an agreeable companion, for the veteran was a sociable soul in his unofficial hours, and had all the Hibernal dislike to solitude. The arrangement commended itself to the German, for he had a profound admiration for the other's versatile talents and varied experiences, so he granted an acquiescence and the thing was done. When the major's luck was good there were brave times in the little fourth floor back. On the other hand, if any slice of good fortune came in the German's way, the major had a fair share of the prosperity. During the hard times which intervened between these gleams of opulence, the pair roughed it uncomplainingly as best they might.

"Have you had your letter?" the major asked. The German was expecting his quarterly remittance from his friends at home, and they were both anxiously awaiting it.

Von Baumser shook his head.

"They should have sent a wake ago."

"But you—how do you stand for money?"

Major Clutterbuck took ten sovereigns out of his trousers pocket and placed them upon the table. "You know me law," he said, "I never on any consideration break into these. You can't sit down in your purse, and if I was to change one they'd all go like a whiff o' smoke. Bar this money I've hardly a penny."

"Nor me," said Von Baumser, despondently.

"I say, Baumser, I can't stand that young fellow Girdlestone. I'll have to chuck him up. He's a cold-blooded, flinty-hearted, calculating sort of a chap."

"What for did you make him your friend, then?"

"Well," the old soldier confessed, "it seemed to me that if he wanted to fool his money away at cards, Tobias Clutterbuck might as well have the handling of it as any one else. He plays a safe game for low stakes, and never throws away a chance. I think I've been a loser in pocket by knowing him, while as to me character, I'm very sure I'm the worse there."

"What's the matter mit him?"

"What's not the matter with him? If he's agreeable he's not natural, and if he's natural he's not agreeable. I don't pretend to be a saint. I've seen some fun in my day, and hope to see some more before I die, but there are some things that I wouldn't do. If I live he cards it's all fair and above board. I never play anything but games o' skill, and I reckon on me skill bringing me out on the right side, taking one night with another through the year. Again, at billiards I may not always play me best, but that's generalship. You don't want a whole room to know to a point what your game is. I'm the last man to preach, but I don't like that chap, and I don't like that handsome brazen face of his. I've spent the greater part of my life reading folk's faces, and never very far out, either."

"What did you say his name was?" Von Baumser asked, suddenly.

"Girdlestone."

"Is his father a merchant? One who trades with the Afrikaaner?"

"The same."

Von Baumser took a bulky pocketbook from his inside pocket and scanned a long list of names therein. "Ah, it is the same," he cried at last triumphantly, shutting up the book and replacing it. "Girdlestone & Co., African merchants—Fenchurch street, City."

"Those are they."

"And you say they are rich?"

"Yes. Very rich."

"Very rich! Ho, ho! Very rich!" he laughed. "I know dem, not as friends, but I know dem and their affairs."

"What are you driving at? Let's have it. Out with it, man."

"I tell you," said the German, suddenly becoming supernaturally solemn and sawing his hand up and down in the air to emphasize his remarks, "in three or four months, or a year at the most, there will be no firm of Girdlestone. They are rotten, useless—whoo!" He blew an imaginary feather up into the air to demonstrate the extreme fragility of the house in question.

(To be continued.)

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