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The Firm of Girdlestone
 BY
 A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER VI.
 The revelation of the real state of the firm's finances was a terrible blow to Ezra Girdlestone. To a man of his overbearing temperamental disposition failure and poverty were bitter things to face. All his life he had reckoned, as a matter of course, that when his father passed away he would be left almost a millionaire. A single half-hour's conversation had shattered this delusion, and left him face to face with ruin.

He proceeded to qualify himself as a dealer in diamonds. It happened that he was acquainted with one of the partners of the firm of Fugger & Stoltz, who did the largest import trade in precious stones. Through his kindness he received practical instructions in the variety and value of diamonds, and learned to detect all those little flaws and peculiarities which are only visible to the eye of an expert, and yet are of the highest importance in determining the price of a stone. With such opportunities Ezra made rapid progress, and within a few weeks there were few dealers in the trade who had a better grasp of the subject.

Early one April afternoon the major was strutting down St. James street, frock coated and kid gloved, with protuberant chest and glittering shoes which peeped out from beneath the daintiest of gaiters. Young Girdlestone, who had been on the lookout from a club window, ran across and intercepted him.

"How are you, my dear major?" he cried, advancing upon him with outstretched hand and as much show of geniality as his nature permitted.

"How d'ye do? How d'ye do?" said the other somewhat pompously. He had made up his mind that nothing was to be done with the young man, and yet he was reluctant to break entirely with one whose purse was well lined.

"I've been wishing to speak with you for some days, major," said Ezra. "I wish to speak to you quietly on a matter of business. Can you meet me at Nelson's Cafe at four o'clock? I know the manager, and he'll let us have a private room."

"I'd ask you round to me own little place," the major said, "but it's rather too far. Nelson's at four. Right you are!" It was clear to him that some service or other was expected of him, and it was obviously his game therefore to hang back and not appear to be too eager to enter into young Girdlestone's views. When he presented himself at the entrance of Nelson's Cafe the young merchant had been fuming and chafing in the sitting room for five and twenty minutes.

"I'll tell you why I wanted to have a chat with you, major," Ezra said, having first opened the door suddenly and glanced out as a precaution against eavesdroppers. "I have to be cautious because what I have to say affects the interest of the firm. I wouldn't for the world have anyone know about it except yourself. We have a difficult enterprise on which we are about to embark," Ezra said. "It is one which will need great skill and tact, though it may be made to pay well if properly managed. For this enterprise we require an agent to perform one of the principal parts. This agent must possess great ability, and, at the same time, be a man on whom we can thoroughly rely. You are prepared to put yourself at our orders on condition that you are well paid for it?"

"Not so fast, my young friend, not so fast!" said the major. "Let's hear what it is that you want me to do, and then I'm ready to say what I'll agree to."

"Thus encouraged, Ezra proceeded to unfold the plan upon which the House of Girdlestone depended. Not a word did he say of ruin or danger, or the reasons which had induced this speculation. On the contrary he depicted the affairs of the firm as being in a most flourishing condition, and this venture as simply a small, insignificant offshoot from their business, undertaken as much for amusement as for any serious purpose. Still, he laid stress upon the fact that though the sum in question was a small one to the firm, yet it was a very large one in other men's eyes. As to the morality of the scheme, that was a point which Ezra omitted entirely to touch upon. Any comment upon that would, he felt, be superfluous when dealing with such a man as his companion.

"That is to say, if you think it worth your while." "Quite so. If I think it worth my while, I am then to pretend to discover certain diamond mines, and am to give weight to me story by the fact that I am known to be a man of good birth, and also by exhibiting some rough stones which you wish me to take out with me from England."

"Quite right, major," Ezra said encouragingly. "I am then to telegraph or write this lie to England and get it inserted in the papers?"

"That's an ugly word," Ezra remonstrated. "This report we will say. A report may be either true or false, you know."

"And by this report then," the major continued, "you reckon that the market will be so affected that your father and you will be able to buy and sell in a manner that will be profitable to you, but by which you will do other people out of their money?"

"You have an unpleasant way of putting it," said Ezra with a forced laugh; "but you have the idea right."

"I have another idea as well," roared the old soldier, flushing purple with passion. "I've an idea that if I was twenty years younger I'd see whether you'd fit through that window, Master Girdlestone. I'd have taught you to propose such a scheme to a man with blue blood in his veins, you scoundrel!"

Ezra fell back in his chair. He was outwardly composed, but there was a dangerous glitter in his eye, and his face had turned from a healthy olive to a dull yellow tint.

"Do it! Do it!" he gasped. "Do it! Do it!" he gasped. "Do it! Do it!" he gasped. "Do it! Do it!" he gasped. "Do it! Do it!" he gasped.

"I struck the waiters at Nelson's well-known restaurant as a somewhat curious thing that their two customers should walk out with such very grave faces and in so unsober a manner."

CHAPTER VII.
 There were rejoicings in Phillimore Gardens over Tom's engagement, for the two old people were both heartily fond of Kate—"Our Kate," as they were wont proudly to call her. The physician chafed at first over the idea of keeping the matter a secret from Girdlestone. A little reflection served to show him, however, that there was nothing to be gained by informing him, while Kate's life, during the time that she was forced to remain under his roof, would be more tolerable as long as he was kept in ignorance of it.

After breakfast one morning, the doctor asked his son to step with him into the library. "You must do something to keep you from mischief, my boy," he said at last, brusquely.

"I'm ready for anything," replied Tom, "but I don't quite see what I am fitted for."

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