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**The Firm of Girdlestone**  
 BY A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)  
 "Now supposing," continued the senior partner, with a smile on his thin lips, "that such a report got about. Suppose, too, that we were at this time, when the market was in a depressed condition, to invest several thousand pounds in them. If those rumors of an alleged discovery turned out to be entirely unfounded, of course the value of the stones which we held would go up once more, and we might very well sell out for double or treble the sum that we invested. Don't you see the sequence of events?"  
 "There seems to me to be rather too much of the suppose in it," remarked Ezra. "How do we know that such rumors will get about; and if they do, how do we know that they will prove to be unfounded?"  
 "How are we to know?" the merchant cried, wriggling his long lank body with amusement. "Why, my lad, if we spread the rumor ourselves we shall have pretty good reason to believe that they are unfounded. Eh, Ezra! Ha! ha! You see there are some brains in the old man yet."  
 Ezra looked at his father in considerable surprise and some admiration. "Why," he exclaimed, "it's dishonest. I'm not sure that it's not actionable."  
 "Dishonest! Pooh!" The merchant snapped his fingers. "It's finesse, my boy, commercial finesse. Who's to trace it, I should like to know. I haven't worked out all the details—I want your cooperation over that—but here's a rough sketch of my plan. We send a man we can depend upon to some distant part of the world, Chimborazo, for example, or the Ural Mountains. It doesn't matter where, as long as it is out of the way. On arriving at this place our agent starts a report that he has discovered a diamond mine. We should even go the length, if he considers it necessary, of hiding a few rough stones in the earth, which he can dig up to give color to his story. Of course the local press would be full of this. He might present one of the diamonds to the editor of the nearest paper. In course of time a pretty colored description of the new diamond fields would find its way to London and thence to the Cape. I'll answer for it that the immediate effect is a great drop in the price of stones. We should have a second agent at the Cape diamond fields, and he would lay our money out by buying in all that he could while the panic lasted. Then, the original scare having proved to be all a mistake, the prices naturally go up once more, and we get a long figure for all that we hold. That's what I mean by 'making a corner in diamonds.' There is no room in it for any miscalculation."  
 "It sounds very nice," his son remarked, thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure about its working, though."  
 "It must work well. As far as human calculation can go there is no possibility of failure. Besides, my boy, never lose sight of the fact that we shall be speculating with other people's money. We ourselves have nothing to lose, absolutely nothing."  
 "I am not likely to lose sight of it," said Ezra angrily, his mind coming back to his grievance.  
 "I reckon that we can raise from forty to fifty thousand pounds without much difficulty. My name is, as you know, as good as that of any firm in the city. For nearly forty years it has been above stain or suspicion. If we carry on our plans at once, and lay this money out judiciously, all may come right."  
 "It's Hobson's choice," the young man remarked. "We must try some bold stroke of the sort. Have you chosen the right sort of men for agents? You should have men of some standing to set such reports going. They would have more weight then."  
 John Girdlestone shook his head dejectedly. "How am I to get a man of any standing to do such a piece of business?" he said.  
 "Nothing easier," answered Ezra with a cynical laugh. "I could pick out a score of impetuous fellows from the clubs who would be only too glad to earn a hundred or two in any way you can mention. I shall go myself to the diamond fields. As to our other agent, I have the very man, Major Tobias Clutterbuck. He is a shrewd, clever fellow, and he's always hard up. His social rank would be a great help to our plan. I'll answer for his jumping at the loka."  
 "Sound him on the subject, then."  
 "I will."  
 "I am glad," said the old merchant, "that you and I have had this conversation, Ezra. The fact of my having speculated without your knowledge, and deceived you by a false ledger, has often weighed heavily upon my conscience, I assure you. It is a relief to me to have told you all."  
 "Drop the subject, then," Ezra said, curtly. "I must put up with it, for I have no redress. The thing is done and nothing can undo it, but I consider that you have willfully wasted the money."  
 "Believe me, I have tried to act for the best. The good name of our firm is everything to me. I have spent my whole life in building it up, and if the day should come when it must go, I trust that I may have gone myself. There is nothing which I would not do to preserve it."  
 "I see they want our premiums," Ezra said, glancing at the open letter upon the table. "How is it that none of those ships go down? That would give us help."  
 "Hush! hush!" John Girdlestone cried, impudently. "Speak in a whisper when you talk of such things."  
 "I can't understand you," said Ezra, ostentatiously. "You persistently over-insure

your ships, year after year. Look at the ledger; it is put at more than twice what she was worth as new. And the Black Eagle, I dare say, is about the same. Yet you never have an accident with them, while your two new uninsured dippers run each other down."  
 "Well, what more can I do?" replied the merchant. "They are thoroughly rotten. I have done nothing for them for years. Sooner or later they must go. I cannot do any more."  
 "I'd make 'em go down quick enough," muttered Ezra with an oath. "Why don't you make old Miggs bore a hole in them, or put a light to a barrel of paraffin? The thing's done every day. What's the use of being milk-and-water about it?"  
 "No, no, Ezra!" cried his father. "Not that, not that. It's one thing letting matters take their course, and it is another thing giving positive orders to scuttle a ship. Besides, it would put us in Miggs' power. It would be too dangerous."  
 "Please yourself," said Ezra with a sneer. "You've got us into the mess and you must take us out again. If the worst comes to the worst I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll marry Kate Harston, wash my hands of the firm, leave you to settle matters with the creditors, and retire with the forty thousand pounds," with which threat the junior partner took up his hat and swaggered out of the office.  
 After his departure John Girdlestone spent an hour in anxious thought, arranging the details of the scheme which he had just submitted to his son. As he sat his eye chanced to fall upon the two letters lying on his desk, and it struck him that they had better be attended to. It did not suit his plans to fall back upon his credit just yet. It had been already shown that he was a man of ready resource. He rang the bell and summoned his senior clerk.  
 "Good morning, John," he said affably.  
 "Good morning, Mr. Girdlestone, good morning, sir," said wisened little John Gilray, rubbing his thin yellow hands together, as a sign of his gratification.  
 "I hear, John, that you have come into a legacy lately," Mr. Girdlestone said.  
 "Yes, sir. Fifteen hundred pounds, sir."  
 "What have you done with the money, John?"  
 "Banked it, sir, in the United Metropolitan."  
 "In the United Metropolitan, John? Let me see. Their present rate of interest is four and a half?"  
 "Four, sir," said John.  
 "Four! Dear me, John, that is poor interest, very poor indeed. It is most fortunate that I made those inquiries. I was on the point of drawing fourteen hundred pounds from one of my correspondents as a temporary convenience. For this I should pay him five per cent. I have no objection, John, as you are an old servant of the firm, to giving you the preference in this matter. I cannot take more than fourteen hundred—but I shall be happy to accommodate you up to that sum at the rate named."  
 John Gilray was overwhelmed by this thoughtful and considerate act. "It is really too generous and kind, sir," he said. "I don't know how to thank you."  
 "Don't mention it, John," the senior partner said grandly. "The firm is always glad to advance the interests of its employees in any reasonable manner. Have you your check book with you? Fill it up for fourteen hundred. No more, John, I cannot oblige you by taking any more."  
 John Girdlestone's private residence in Eccleston square was a large and substantial house in a district which the wave of fashion had passed over in its westward course. The building was stern and hard, and massive in its external appearance, but the interior was luxury in itself, for the old merchant had a due appreciation of the good things of this world. Indeed there was an oriental and almost barbarous splendor about the great rooms, where the richest furniture was interspersed with skins from the Gaboon, hand-worked ivory from Old Calabar, and the thousand other strange valuables which were presented by his agents to the African trader.  
 After the death of his friend, Girdlestone had been as good as his word. He had taken Kate Harston away from the desolate house at Fulham and brought her to live with him. From the garrets of that palatial edifice to the cellars she was at liberty to roam where she would, and do what she chose. No cares or responsibilities were imposed upon her. The domestic affairs were superintended by a stern housekeeper, who arranged every detail of house-keeping. The young girl had apparently only to exist and to be happy.  
 John Girdlestone had been by no means overjoyed upon the return of the Dimsdale from Edinburgh to learn that his ward had been thrown into the company of her young cousin. He received her coldly, and forbade her to visit Phillimore Gardens for some time to come. He even took the precaution of telling of a confidential footman to walk behind her on all occasions, and to act either as an escort or as a sentry.  
 It chanced, however, that one day, a few weeks after her return, Kate found an opportunity of recovering her freedom. The footman had been dispatched upon some other duty. So she betthought herself that a book was to be bought, and some lace to be matched, and several other important feminine duties to be fulfilled. It happened, however, that as she walked sedately down Warwick street her eyes fell upon a very tall and square-shouldered young man, who was lounging in her direction, tapping his stick listlessly against the railings, as is the habit of idle men. At this Kate forgot inconspicuously all about the book and the lace, while the tall youth ceased to tap the railings, and came striding towards her with long springy footsteps and a smiling face.  
 "Why, Cousin Tom, who would have thought of meeting you here?" she exclaimed, when the first greetings had been exchanged. "It is a most surprising thing." It is possible that the incident would not have struck her as so very astonishing after all, had she known that Tom had spent six hours a day for the last fortnight in blockading the entrances to Eccleston square.  
 "Most remarkable!" said the young hypocrite. "You see I haven't anything to do yet, so I walk about London a good deal. It was a lucky chance that sent me in this direction."  
 "And how is the doctor?" Kate asked eagerly. "And Mrs. Dimsdale, how is she?" You must give us 1000 to 2000 both."  
 "How is it that you have never been to see us?" Tom asked reproachfully.  
 "Mr. Girdlestone thinks that I have been too idle lately, and that I should stay at home. I am afraid it will be some little time before I can steal away to Kensington."  
 Tom consigned her guardian under his breath to a region warmer even than the scene of that gentleman's commercial speculations. "Which way are you going?" he asked.  
 "I was going to Victoria street to change my book, and then to Ford street."  
 "What a strange thing!" the young man exclaimed. "Was going in that direction too?" It seemed the more strange as he was walking in the opposite direction when she met him. Neither seemed inclined to make any comment upon the fact.  
 As they walked on, threading their way among the vehicles, Tom took his companion's hand in his, and they exchanged one firm grip, which each felt to be of the nature of a pledge. How sunny and bright the dull brick-lined streets seemed to those two young people that afternoon. They were both looking into a future which seemed to be one long vista of happiness. So light-hearted were these two lovers that it was not until they found themselves in Warwick street once more that they came down from the clouds, and realized that there were some commonplace details which must be dealt with in one way or another.  
 "Of course, I may tell my own people, dearest, about our engagement?" Tom said.  
 "I wonder what your mother will say?" answered Kate laughing merrily. "She will be awfully astonished."  
 "How about Girdlestone?" asked Tom.  
 The thought of the guardian had never occurred to either of them before. They stared at each other and Kate's face assumed such an expression of dismay that her companion burst out laughing.  
 "Don't be frightened, darling," he said. "If you like I'll go in and beard the lion in his den. There is no time like the present."  
 "No, no, dear Tom," she cried eagerly. "You must not do that." It was impossible for her to tell him how especially Girdlestone had cautioned her against him, but she felt that it would never do to allow the two to meet. "We must conceal our engagement from Mr. Girdlestone."  
 "Conceal our engagement!"  
 "Yes, Tom. He has warned me so often against anything of the sort, that really I don't know what he would do if he knew about it. He would certainly make it very uncomfortable for me to live with him. Remember I am nearly twenty now, so in a little more than a year I shall be entirely free. That is not very long."  
 "I don't know about that," Tom said, doubtfully. "However, if you will be more comfortable, of course, that settles the question. It seems rather hard, though, that we should have to conceal it, simply in order to pacify this old bear."  
 "It's only for a time, Tom; and you may tell them at home by all means. Now, good-by, dear, they will see you from the windows if you come nearer."  
 "Good-by, my darling." They shook hands and parted, he hurrying away with the glad tidings to Phillimore Gardens, she tripping back to her captivity with the lightest heart that she had felt for a weary time. Passers-by glanced back at the bright little face under the bright little bonnet, and Ezra Girdlestone looking down at her from the drawing room window, bethought him that if the diamond speculation should fail it would be no hardship to turn to his father's ward.  
 (To be continued.)

**Paper with Dual Opinions.**  
 The oddest newspaper in the world is one named the Wochenblatt, which is published in Grunlingen, a small town of some 1,200 inhabitants in the canton of Zurich, in Switzerland. It is the only newspaper in the place and is at one and the same time the organ of the Liberal Conservatives and of the Social Democrats. Pages 1 and 2 belong to the Liberals and pages 3 and 4 to the Socialists, and the two parties abuse one another heartily in its pages.  
**Charge It in the Bill.**  
 "Doctor," said a shrewd-looking man, "how many feet of gas does it take to kill a man?"  
 "That's a queer question," replied the doctor. "Why do you wish to know?"  
 "One of the guests in my hotel used enough of it to kill himself, and I want to send in a proper bill to his executors."—London Tit-Bits.  
**Hindoo Women Smuggled In.**  
 One hundred Hindoo laborers in the frontier towns of British Columbia have been discovered to be women dressed in men's clothing. They are expert woodcutters and the timekeepers say that the women are more painstaking and industrious than their husbands.  
**Broad Hint.**  
 "Yes," boasted Mrs. Newcomb, "when my husband returned from Europe he weighed just fifty pounds more than when he started."  
 "Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. De Style with a yawn. "Did the customs officers forget to search him?"  
**What It Leads To.**  
 Wife (reading)—A scientist claims that cryptococcusanthogenolacrus causes yellow fever.  
 Husband—Indeed! I always imagined it was something of that kind that caused lockjaw.  
**His One Secret.**  
 Singleton—Do you believe it possible for a man to keep secrets from his wife?  
 Wedderly—Yes, I guess so. Anyway I never let my wife know what I really think of her.  
**Slow Trains in Europe.**  
 In the matter of train speed Austria, Italy and Spain are at the bottom of the list.

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