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The Firm of Girdlestone
BY A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued.)
The meeting just described took place upon a Tuesday, early in November. On the Saturday Ezra Girdlestone had fully made up his mind to turn his back upon the diggings and begin his homeward journey. He was pining for the pleasures of his old London life, and was weary of the perpetual glare of the South African sun. His task was done, too, and it would be well for him to be at a distance before the diggers discovered the manner in which they had been hoaxed. He began to pack his boxes, therefore, and to make every preparation for his departure.

He was busily engaged in this employment upon the Wednesday evening when there was a tap at the door and Farintosh walked in, accompanied by Burt and Williams. Girdlestone glanced up at them, and greeted them briefly. He was not surprised at their visit, for they had come together several times before to report progress or make arrangements. Farintosh bowed as he entered the room, Burt nodded, and Williams rubbed his hands together and looked amiably bilious.

"We looked in, Mr. Girdlestone," Farintosh began, "to learn if you had any commands for us."
"I told you before that I had not," Ezra said curtly. "I am going on Saturday. I have made a mistake in speculating on those diamonds. Prices are sinking lower and lower."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Farintosh, sympathetically. "Maybe the market will take a turn."

"Let us hope so," the merchant answered. "It doesn't look like it."

Quick as a flash Burt sprang upon him and struck him down with a life-preserver. With a gasping cry and a heavy thud Ezra fell face downwards upon the floor, a great gash in his head.

"Very neat—very pretty indeed!" cried the ex-parson, in a quiet tone of critical satisfaction, as a connoisseur might speak of a specimen which interested him. He was already busy at the door of the safe. "Well done, Mr. Burt, well done!" cried Williams in a quivering voice. "Here are the stones," said Farintosh, in the same quiet voice. "Here are some notes and gold. We may as well have them, too. Now, tie the bag carefully. That's the way. If we meet any one on the stairs, take it coolly. Turn that lamp out, Williams, so that if any one looks in he'll see nothing. Come along!" The guilty trio stole out of the room, bearing their plunder with them, and walked down the stairs of the hotel unobserved and unharmed.

The moon as it rose over the veldt that night shone on three horsemen spurring it along the Capetown road as though their very lives depended upon their speed. Its calm, clear rays streamed over the silent roofs of Kimberley and in through a particular window of the Oriental Hotel, throwing silver patches upon the carpet and casting strange shadows from the figure which lay as it had fallen huddled in an ungainly heap upon the floor.

CHAPTER IX.
Ezra was endowed with rare vitality, which enabled him not only to shake off the effects of his mishap, but to do so in an extraordinary short space of time. There was a groan from the prostrate figure, then a feeble movement, then another and a louder groan. Gradually raising himself upon his elbow, he looked around him in a bewildered way, and found his hand pressed to the wound at the back of his head, from which a few narrow little rivulets of blood were still meandering. His glance wandered vaguely over the table and the chairs and the walls, until it rested upon the safe. He could see in the moonlight that it was open, and empty. In a moment the whole circumstances of the case came back to him, and he staggered to the bell with a hoarse cry of rage and of despair.

Whatever Ezra's faults may have been, resolution or want of courage were not among them. In a moment he grasped the situation, and realized that it was absolutely essential that he should act, and at once. The stones must be recovered, or utter and irretrievable ruin stared him in the face. At his cries and ringing the landlord and several attendants, white and black, came rushing into the room.

"I've been robbed and assaulted," Ezra said, standing himself against the mantlepiece, for he was still weak and giddy. "Don't all start cackling, but do what I ask you. Light the lamp!"

The lamp was lit, and there was a murmur from the little knot of employees, reinforced by some late loungers at the bar, as they saw the disordered room and the great crimson patch upon the carpet.

"The thieves called at nine," said Ezra, talking rapidly, but collectedly. "Their names were Farintosh, Burt and Williams. It is now half-past ten, so they have no very great start. You, Jamieson, and you Van Muller, run out and find if three men have been seen getting away. Perhaps they took a buggy. Go up and down, and ask all you see. You, Jones, go as hard as you can to Inspector Ainslie. Tell him there has been robbery and attempted murder, and say that I want half a dozen of his best mounted men—not his best men, you understand, but his best horses. I shall see that he is no loser if he is smart. Where's my servant? Pete, get my horse saddled and bring her round. She ought to be able to catch anything in Griqualand."
As Ezra gave his orders the men hurried off in different directions to carry them out. He, himself, commenced to arrange his dress, and tied a handkerchief tightly round his head.

"Surely you are not going, sir?" the landlord said. "You are not fit."
"Fit or not, I am going," Ezra said resolutely. "If I have to be strapped to my horse I'll go."

A group of people had assembled by this time, attracted by the report of the robbery. The whole square in front of the hotel was crowded with diggers and storekeepers and innumerable Kaffirs, all pressing up to the portico in the hope of hearing some fresh details. There was a buzz of excitement among the crowd when Ezra appeared on the steps of the hotel, looking as white as a sheet, with a handkerchief bound round his head and his collar all crusted with blood. As he mounted his horse one of his emissaries rushed to him.

"If you please, sir," he said, "they have taken the Capetown road. A dozen people saw them. Their horses were not up to much, for I know the man they got them from. You are sure to catch them."

A smile played over Ezra's pale face, which boded little good for the fugitives. "Those police," he cried, "are they never going to come?"

"Here they are!" said the landlord, and sure enough, with a jingling of arms and a clatter of hoofs, half a dozen of the Cape Mounted police trotted through the crowd and drew up in front of the hotel. They were smart, active young fellows, armed with carbine and sabre, and their horses were tough brutes, uncomely to look at, but with wonderful staying power. Ezra noted the fact with satisfaction as he rode up to the grizzled sergeant in command.

"There's not a moment to be lost, sergeant," he said. "They have an hour and a half's start, but their cattle are not up to much. Come on! It's the Capetown road. A hundred pounds if we catch them!"

For the first few miles the party galloped in silence. The moon was still shining brilliantly, and they could see the white line of the road stretching out in front of them and winding away over the undulating veldt. To right and left spread a broad expanse of wiry grass stretching to the horizon, with low bushes and scrub scattered over it in patches.

Out once more upon the Capetown road it was a clear race between the pursuers and the pursued. The former knew that the fugitives, were it daytime, would possibly be within eight of them, and the thought gave them additional ardor. The sergeant having a fresh horse rode in front, his head down, and his body forward, getting every possible inch of pace out of the animal. At his heels came Ezra, on his gallant grey, the blood-stained handkerchief fluttering from his head. He was sitting very straight in his saddle, with a set, stern smile upon his lips. In his right hand he held a cocked revolver. A hundred yards or so behind them the two remaining troopers came toiling along upon their weary nags, working hard with whip and spur to stimulate them to further exertions. Away in the east a long rosy streak lay low upon the horizon, which showed that dawn was approaching, and a grey light stole over the landscape. Suddenly the sergeant pulled his horse up. "There's some one coming towards us," he cried.

Ezra and the troopers halted their panting steeds. Through the uncertain light they saw a solitary horseman riding down the road. At first they had thought that it might possibly be one of the fugitives who had turned; but as he came nearer they perceived that it was a stranger. His clothes were so dusty and his horse so foam-flecked and weary that it was evident that he had also left many a long mile of road behind him.

"Have you seen three men on horseback?" cried Ezra, as he approached.
"I spoke to them," the traveler answered. "They are about half a mile ahead."
"Come on! Come on!" Ezra shouted.
"I am bringing news from Jagersfontein," the man said.
"Come on!" Ezra interrupted, furiously, and the horses stretched their stiff limbs into a feeble, lumbering gallop. Ezra and the sergeant shot to the front, and the others followed as best they might. Suddenly in the stillness they heard far away a dull rattling sound like the clatter of distant castanets. "It's their horses' hoofs!" cried Ezra, and the troopers behind raised a cheer to show that they, too, understood the significance of the sound.

It was a wild, lonely spot, where the plain was bare even of the scanty foliage which usually covered it. Here and there great granite rocks protruded from the brown soil as though Nature's covering had in bygone days been rent until her giant bones protruded through the wound. As Ezra and the sergeant swept round a sharp turn in the road they saw some little way ahead of them the three fugitives, enveloped in a cloud of dust. Almost at the same moment they heard a shout and crash behind them, and, looking round, saw a confused heap upon the ground. The horse of the leading trooper had fallen from pure fatigue, and had rolled over upon its rider. The other trooper had dismounted, and was endeavoring to extricate his companion.

"Let us see if he is hurt," the sergeant cried.
"On! on!" shouted Ezra, whose passion was increased by the sight of the thieves. "Not a foot back!"

"He may have broken his neck," grumbled the sergeant, unslinging his carbine. "Have your pistol ready, sir. We shall be up with them in a few minutes, and they may show fight."

They were up with them rather sooner than the policeman expected. Farintosh, finding that speed was of no avail, and that the number of his pursuers was now reduced to two, had recourse to strategy. There was a sharp turn in the road a hundred yards ahead, and on reaching it the three flung themselves off their horses and lay down behind cover. As Ezra and the sergeant, the grey horse and the bay, came thundering round the curve, there was a fierce splutter of pistol shots from amongst the bushes, and the grey sank down upon its knees with a sobbing moan, struck mortally in the head. Ezra sprang to his feet, and rushed at the ambushers, while the sergeant, who had been grazed on the cheek by the first volley, jumped from his horse and followed him. Burt and Farintosh met them foot to foot with all the Saxon gallantry which underlies the Saxon quality. Burt stabbed at the sergeant and struck him through the muscles of the neck. Farintosh fired at the policeman, and was himself shot down by Ezra. Burt, seeing his companion fall, sprang past his two assailants with a

vicious side blow at the merchant, and throwing himself upon the sergeant's horse, regardless of a bullet from the latter's carbine, he galloped away and was speedily out of range. As to Williams, he had lain face downwards upon the ground, twisting his thin limbs about in an agony of fear, and howling for mercy.

"He's gone," Ezra said, ruefully, gazing after the fugitive. "We have nothing to go after him with."
"I'm well nigh gone myself," said the policeman, mopping up the blood from his stab, which was more painful than dangerous. "He has given me a nasty prod."
"Never mind, my friend, you shall not be the loser. Get up"—this to Williams, who was still writhing himself into the most extraordinary attitudes.

"Oh, please, Mr. Girdlestone," he cried, clutching at Ezra's boots with his long, thin fingers, "it wasn't me that hit you. It was Mr. Burt. I had nothing to do with robbing you, either. That was Mr. Farintosh. I wouldn't have gone with him only I knew that he was a clergyman, so I expected no harm. I am surprised at you, Mr. Farintosh, I really am. I'm very glad that Mr. Girdlestone has shot you."

The ex-parson was sitting with his back against a gnarled stump, which gave him some support. He had his hand to his chest, and as he breathed a ghastly whistling sound came from the wound, and spurts of blood rushed from his mouth. His glazed eyes were fixed upon the man who had shot him, and a curious smile played about his thin lips.

"Come here, Mr. Girdlestone," he croaked, "come here."
Ezra strode over to him with a face as inexorable as fate.
"You've done for me," said Farintosh faintly. "It's a queer end for the best man of his year at Trinity—master of arts, sir, and Jacksonian prizeman. Not much worth now, is it? Who'd have thought then that I should have died like a dog in this wilderness? What's the odds how a man dies, though? If I had kept myself straight I should have gone off a few years later in a feather bed as the Dean of St. Patrick's maybe. What will that matter? I've enjoyed myself—the dying man's eyes glistened at the thought of past dissipation. "If I had my time to do over again," he continued, "I'd enjoy myself the same way. I'm not penitent, sir. No deathbed musing about me, or short cuts into heaven. That's not what I wanted to say, though. I have a choking in the throat, but I dare say you can hear what I am driving at. You met a man driving towards Jagersfontein, did you not?"

Ezra nodded sullenly.
"You didn't speak to him? Too busy trying to catch yours truly, eh? Will you have your stones back, for they are in the bag by my side, but they'll not be very much good to you. The little spec won't come off this time. You don't know what the news was that the man was bringing?"

A vague feeling of impending misfortune stole over Ezra. He shook his head.
"His news was," said Farintosh, leaning up upon his hand, "that fresh diamond fields have been discovered at Jagersfontein, in the Orange Free State. So Russia or no Russia, stones will not rise. Ha! ha! will not rise. Look at his face! It's whiter than mine. Ha! ha! ha!" With the laugh upon his lips, a great flow of blood stopped the clergyman's utterance, and he rolled slowly over upon his side, a dead man.
(To be continued.)

ACCIDENT FAKERS.
Men Who Are Able to Swindle the Insurance Companies.
"Accident insurance companies are very suspicious of all accidents involving injury to the knee, for it is on his knee that the accident faker mainly relies."
The speaker, a surgeon, frowned and went on:
"There are men who make a living out of fake accidents. They travel from city to city; they insure in every company that issues accident policies; then, with a fake injury, they proceed to collect dues."
"An accident faker—for so we call these men—has usually a knee that he can slip out at will. He purposely stumbles over an open trap or some hard, sharp obstacle, puts his knee out deftly, raises a big holler so as to secure a lot of witnesses and then hobbles home."
"He doesn't notify his insurance companies until the next day. By then his knee is so swollen that an accurate examination of it is impossible. We cannot tell whether it is one of those fake, self-slipping knees or not. So we pay the man his money, and he seeks new pastures."
"There was one man—he is in jail now—who in nine years collected over \$11,000 in accident policies with the help of a knee that he could slip out as easily as I slip my hand out of my glove."—New Orleans Times-Democrat.

Love Is Deaf.
"And you mean to say that football player kissed you?" exclaimed the irate mother.
"Yes, ma," replied the blushing daughter.
"Why, the idea! Didn't I tell you if he tried to kiss you to yell 'Stop!' as loud as you could?"
"—I did, ma, but he had on his ear guards and couldn't hear me."

Proved Correct.
Miggles—There's more truth than poetry in that old saw, "Where there is smoke there is fire."
Wiggles—What do you know about it?
Miggles—It was against the rules to smoke in the office where I was employed. I lit a cigarette and was fired.

His Motto.
"My motto," said the obese passenger with the multi-colored tie, "is, 'There's always room at the top.'"
"What's your line?" asked the hardware drummer.
"I manufacture a hair tonic," explained the heavyweight.

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