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The Firm of Girdlestone
 BY A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER X.

During the months which Ezra Girdlestone had spent in Africa the affairs of the firm in Fenchurch street had been exceedingly prosperous. Trade upon the coast had been brisker than usual, and three of the company's ships had come in at short intervals with excellent cargoes. Among these was the Black Eagle, which, to the astonishment of Captain Hamilton Miggs and the disgust of his employer, had weathered a severe gale in the Channel, and had arrived safe and sound once more. This run of luck, supplemented by the business capacity of the old merchant and the indomitable energy of young Dimsdale, made the concern look so flourishing that the former felt more than ever convinced that if he could but stave off the immediate danger things would soon right themselves. Hence he read with delight the letters from Africa, in which his son narrated the success of the conspiracy and the manner in which the miners had been hoodwinked. The old man's figure grew straighter and his step more firm as the conviction grew upon him that the company would soon return once again to its former condition of affluence.

"It may be imagined, therefore, that when the rumors of a bona fide diamond find in the Orange Free State came to his ears John Girdlestone was much agitated and distressed. On the same day that he saw the announcement in the papers he received a letter from his son announcing the failure of their enterprise. After narrating the robbery, the pursuit, the death of Farintosh and the announcement of the new discovery, it gave an account of his subsequent movements.

"As to our speculation," the letter said, "it is, of course, all up. Even when the Russian business proves to be a hoax, the price of stones will remain very low on account of these new fields. It is possible that we may sell our lot at some small profit, but it won't be the royal road to a fortune that you prophesied, nor will it help the firm out of the rut into which you have shoved it. My only regret in leaving Africa like this is that Williams will have no one to prosecute him."

This letter was a rude shock to the African merchant. Within a week of the receipt of it his son Ezra, gloomy and travel stained, walked into the sanctum at Fenchurch street and confirmed all the evil tidings by word of mouth. The old man was of too tough a fiber to break down completely, but his bony hands closed convulsively upon the arms of the chair, and a cold perspiration broke out upon his wrinkled forehead as he listened to such details as his son vouchsafed to afford him.

"You have your stones all safe, 'hough?" he stammered out at last.
 "They are in my box at home," said Ezra, gloomy and morose, leaning against the white marble mantelpiece. "We'll be lucky if we clear as much as they cost and a margin for my expenses and Lane-worthly's. A broken head is all that I have got from your fine scheme."
 "Who could foresee such a thing?" the old man said, plaintively. "The fall in prices is sure to be permanent."
 "It will last for some years, anyway," Ezra answered. "The Jagersfontein gravel is very rich, and there seems to be plenty of it."

"And within a few months we must repay both capital and interest. We are ruined!" The old merchant spoke in a broken voice, and his head sank upon his breast. "When that day comes," he continued, "the firm which has been for thirty years above reproach, and a model to the whole city, will be proclaimed as a bankrupt concern. Worse still, it will be shown to have been kept afloat for years by means which will be deemed fraudulent. I tell you, my dear son, that if any means could be devised which would avert this—any means—I should not hesitate to adopt them. I am a frail old man, and I feel that the short balance of my life would be a small thing for me to give in return for the assurance that the work which I have built up should not be altogether thrown away."

"Your life cannot affect the matter one way or the other unless it were more heavily insured than it is," Ezra said, callously, though somewhat moved by his father's intensity of manner. "Perhaps there is some way out of the wood yet," he added, in a more cheerful tone.
 "It's so paying, so prosperous—that's what goes to my heart. If it had ruined itself it would be easier to bear it, but it is sacrificed to outside speculations—my wretched, wretched speculations. That is what makes it so hard." He touched the bell, and Gilray answered the summons. "Listen to this, Ezra. What was our turn over last month, Gilray?"
 "Fifteen thousand pounds, sir," said the little clerk, bobbing up and down like a buoy in a gale in his delight at seeing the junior partner once again.
 "And the expenses?"
 "Nine thousand three hundred. Uncommon brown you look, Mr. Ezra, to be sure, uncommon brown and well. I hope as you enjoyed yourself in Africa, sir, and was too much for them Hottentots and Boars." With this profound ethnological remark Mr. Gilray bobbed himself out of the room and went back radiantly to his ink-stained desk.

"Look at that," the old man said, when the click of the outer door showed that the clerk was out of earshot. "Over five thousand profit in a month. Is it not terrible that such a business should go to ruin? What a fortune it would have been for you!"
 "It must be saved!" cried Ezra with meditative brows and hands plunged deep in his trouser pockets. "There is that

girl's money, should we not get the temporary use of it?"
 "Impossible!" his father answered with a sigh. "It is tied up in the will that she cannot cash it away herself until she comes of age. There is no way of touching it except by her marriage—or by her death."
 "Then we must have it by the only means open to us."
 "And that is?"
 "I must marry her."
 "You will?"
 "I shall. Here is my hand on it."
 "Then we are saved," cried the old man, throwing up his trembling hands. "Girdlestone & Son will weather the storm yet."

One day, as Thomas Dimsdale was making his way cityward at a rather earlier hour than was customary with him, he missed the usual apparition at the window. Looking round blankly in search of some explanation of this absence, he perceived in the garden a pretty white bonnet which glistened among the leaves, and on crossed inspection a pair of bright eyes, which surveyed him merrily from underneath it. The gate was open. It may be imagined that he was somewhat late at the office that morning and on many subsequent mornings, until the clerks began to think that their new employer was losing the enthusiasm for business which had possessed him.

It chanced that one morning the interview between the lovers had lasted rather longer than usual, and had been concluded by Kate's returning to the house, while Tom remained sitting upon the garden seat lost in such a reverie as affects men in his position. While thus pleasantly employed, his thoughts were suddenly recalled to earth by the appearance of a dark shadow on the gravel in front of him, and looking up he saw the senior partner standing a short distance away and regarding him with anything but an amiable expression upon his face. He had himself been having a morning stroll in the garden, and had overseen the whole of the recent interview without the pre-occupied lovers being aware of his presence.

"Are you coming to the office?" he asked sternly. "If so, we can go together."
 Tom rose and followed him out of the garden without a word. He knew from the other's expression that all was known to him, and in his heart he was not sorry. His only fear was that the old man's anger might fall upon his ward, and this he determined to prevent. They walked side by side as far as the station in complete silence, but on reaching Fenchurch street Girdlestone asked his young partner to step into his private sanctum.
 "Now, sir," he said, as he closed the door behind him, "I think that I have a right to inquire what the meaning may be of the scene of which I was an involuntary witness this morning?"
 "It means," Tom answered firmly but gently, "that I am engaged to Miss Harston, and have been for some time."

"Oh, indeed," Girdlestone answered coldly, sitting down at his desk and turning over the pile of letters.
 During the long silent walk the merchant had been revolving in his mind what course he should pursue, and he had come to the conclusion that it was more easy to guide this impetuous stream of youth than to attempt to stem it. He did not realize the strength of the tie that bound these two young people together, and imagined that with judgment and patience it might yet be snapped. It was, therefore, with as good an imitation of gentility as his angular visage would permit of that he answered his companion's confession.

"You can hardly wonder at my being surprised," he said. "Such a thing never entered my mind for a moment. You would have done better to have confided in me before."
 "I must ask your pardon for not having done so."
 "As far as you are concerned," said John Girdlestone affably, "I believe you to be hardworking and right principled. Your conduct since you joined the firm has been everything that I could desire."

Tom bowed his acknowledgments, much pleased by the preamble.
 "With regard to my ward," continued the senior partner, speaking very slowly and evidently weighing his words, "I could not wish for her to have a better husband. In considering such a question I have, however, as you may imagine, to consult above everything else the wishes of my dead friend, Mr. John Harston, the father of the young lady to whom you say you are engaged. A trust has been reposed in me, and that trust must, of course, be fulfilled to the letter."
 "Certainly," said Tom, wondering in his own mind how he could ever have brought himself for one moment to think evil of this kindly old man.
 "It was one of Mr. Harston's most clearly expressed wishes that no words or even thoughts of such matters should be allowed to come in his daughter's way until she had attained maturity, by which he meant the age of one-and-twenty."
 "But he could not foresee the circumstances," Tom pleaded. "I am sure that a year or so will make no difference in her sentiments in this matter."
 "My duty is to carry out his instructions to the letter. I won't say, however," continued Mr. Girdlestone, "that circumstances might not arise which might induce me to shorten this probationary period. If my further acquaintance with you confirms the high impression which I now have of your commercial ability, that of course would have weight with me; and again, if I find that Miss Harston's mind is made up upon the point, that also would influence my judgment."

"And what are we to do in the meantime?" asked the junior partner anxiously.
 "In the meantime neither you nor your people must write to her, or speak to her, or hold any communication with her whatever. If I find you or them doing so, I shall be compelled, in justice to Mr. Harston's last request, to send her to some establishment abroad where she shall be entirely out of your way. My mind is irrevocably made up upon that point. It is not a matter of personal inclination, but of conscience."
 "And how long is this to last?" cried Tom.
 "As long as it takes," said Girdlestone.

"It will depend upon yourselves. If you prove yourself to be a man of honor in this matter I may be inclined to suggestion your addresses. In the meantime, you must give me your word to let it rest, and neither to attempt to speak to Miss Harston nor to see her, nor to allow your parents to communicate with her. The last condition may seem to you to be hard, but, in my eyes, it is a very important one. Unless you can bring yourself to promise all this, my duty will compel me to remove my ward entirely out of your reach, a course which would be painful to her and inconvenient to myself."
 "But I must let her know of this arrangement. I must tell her that you hold out hopes to us on condition that we keep apart for a time."
 "It would be cruel not to allow you to do that," Girdlestone answered. "You may send her one letter, but, remember, there shall be no reply to it."
 "Thank you, sir; thank you!" Tom cried, fervently. "I have something to live for now. This separation will but make our hearts grow fonder. What change can time make in either of us?"
 "Quite so," said John Girdlestone, with a smile. "Remember, there must be no more walking through the square. You must remain absolutely apart if you wish to gain my consent."

"It is hard, very, very hard. But I will promise to do it. What would I not promise which would lead to our earlier union?"
 "That is settled then. In the meantime, I should be obliged if you would go down to the docks and look after the loading of the transferable corrugated iron houses for New Calabar."

"All right, sir, and thank you for your kindness," said Tom, bowing himself out. He hardly knew whether to be pleased or grieved over the result of his interview; but on the whole, satisfaction prevailed, since at the worst it was but to wait for a year or so, while there seemed to be some hopes of gaining the guardian's consent before that. On the other hand, he had pledged himself to separate from Kate, but that would, he reflected, only make their reunion the sweeter.

When the hour of luncheon arrived no thought of food was in the lad's head, but, hurrying himself in the back parlor of a little Blackwall public house, he called for pen, ink and paper, and proceeded to indite a letter to his sweetheart. Never was so much love and comfort and advice and hope compressed into the limits of four sheets of paper or contained in the narrow boundary of a single envelope. Tom read it over after he had finished, and felt that it feebly expressed his thoughts; but then, what lover ever yet did succeed in getting his thoughts satisfactorily represented upon paper. Having posted this effusion, in which he had carefully explained the conditions imposed upon him, Tom felt considerably more light-hearted, and returned with renewed vigor to the loading of the corrugated iron. He would hardly have felt so satisfied had he seen John Girdlestone receiving that same letter from the hands of the footman, and reading it afterwards in the privacy of his bedroom with a sad smile upon his face. Still less contented would he have been had he beheld the merchant tearing it into small fragments and making a bonfire of it in his capacious grate. Next morning Kate looked in vain out of the accustomed window, and was sore at heart when no tall figure appeared in sight, and no friendly hand waved a morning salutation.
 (To be continued.)

HOW TO WIN BATTLES.

Men Who Hit What They Shoot at the Determining Factor in War.

Other things being equal, good shooting is the determining factor in war. Poorly drilled and hastily organized bodies of men can give a good account of themselves if they know how to shoot and hit what they shoot at.
 In our war for independence, says Army and Navy Life, the colonists were woodsmen. They carried and used their arms to supply their homes with food and to protect them from the savage. As marksmen they vastly out-classed the British, and that more than anything else gave Washington the final victory.
 Again, in our great Civil War mark the effect of a general knowledge of firearms. In the South were sporting people. They were fond of riding and hunting. Shooting at target and at game entered into their sports and pastimes. The North was commercial. Its men knew little or nothing of firearms save the flintlocks of their grandfathers, objects of curiosity in their shops or homes, except in the far West, where the life of 1776 was still being lived. The result was that in the East the southern troops were generally victorious for a couple of years until the northern troops learned to shoot. What little success the North had was in the West, where they were little better than a standoff.

Had Reformed.

Askitt—What kind of a man is Hyker?
 Noltt—Oh, I guess he's all right now, but he was engaged in a shady business a few years ago.
 Askitt—What was the nature of the business?
 Noltt—He manufactured awnings.
 Helpful Suggestion.
 Miss May Dupp—I just can't bear to walk out in the wind; it roughens my complexion so.
 Miss Pert—Mabe your complexion's too thick; if you'd put it on thinner you might not do that.

If They Did.

'Twould be a blessing without price The lesson thus to teach, If all the folks who give advice Would practice what they preach. —Cleveland Plain Dealer.
 Pa's Classification.
 Little Willie—Say, pa, is it proper to refer to an airship as an aerial greyhound?
 Pa—No, my son; the airship is in the sky-tregler class.

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