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 Bandon Oregon

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

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)  
 "Cut down! You don't mean to say you are paid in proportion to the rottenness of the ships?"  
 "There ain't no use makin' a secret of it among friends," said Miggs. "That's just how the land lies with us. A voyage or two back I spoke to Mr. Girdlestone, and I says to him, says I, 'Give the ship an overhauling,' says I. 'Well and good,' says he, 'but it will mean so much of your wage,' says he, 'and the mate's wage as well.' I put it to him straight and strong, but he stuck at that. So Sandy and me, we put our heads together, and we agreed it was better to take fifteen pounds and the risk, then come down to twelve pounds and safety."

"It is scandalous!" cried Tom Dimsdale hotly. "I could not have believed it."  
 "It's done every day, and will be while there is insurance money to be gained," said Miggs. "It's an easy thing to turn a few thousands a year while there are old ships to be bought, and offices which will insure them above their value. There was 'Arcey Campbell, of the Silvertown—what a trade that man did! He was smart! Collisions was his line, and he worked 'em well. There warn't a skipper out of Liverpool as could get run down as natural as he could."

"Get run down?"  
 "Aye, he'd go lolling about in the Channel if there was any fog on, steering for the lights of any steamers or headin' round for all the fog whistles if it was too thick to see. Sooner or later, as sure as fate, he'd get cut down to the water's edge. It was a fine game! Half a yard o' print about his noble conduct in the newspapers, and maybe a leader about the British tar and unexpected emergencies. It once went the length of a subscription. Ha! ha!" Miggs laughed until he choked.

"And what became of this British star?" asked the German.  
 "He's still about. He's in the passenger trade now."  
 "There's many a way that it done, sir," the mate added. "There's loadin' a crummy vessel w' grain in bulk without usin' partition boards. If you get a little water in, as you are bound to do with a ship of that kind, the grain will swell and swell until it bursts the seams open, and down ye go. Then there's lightin' of coal gas aboard o' steamers. That's a safe game, for nobody can deny it. And there are accidents to propellers. If the shaft o' a propeller breaks in heavy weather it's a bad lookout. I've known ships leave the docks with their propellers half sawn through all round. There's no end o' the tricks o' the trade."

"I cannot believe, however," said Tom stoutly, "that Mr. Girdlestone connives at such things."  
 "He's on the waitin' lay," the seaman answered. "He doesn't send 'em down, but he just hangs on, and keeps his insurance up. He's had some good hauls that way, though not o' late. There was the Belinda at Cape Palmas. That was five thousand clear, if it was a penny. And the Scottoo—that was a bad business! She was never heard of, nor her crew. Went down at sea, and left no trace."

"The crew, too!" Tom cried, with horror. "But how about yourselves, if what you say is true?"  
 "We are paid for the risk," said both the seamen, shrugging their shoulders.  
 "But there are government inspectors?"  
 "Ha! ha! I darsay you've seen the way some of them do their work," said Miggs.

Tom's mind was filled with consternation at what he had heard. If the African merchant were capable of this, what might he not be capable of? Was his word to be depended on under any circumstances? And what sort of firm must this be, which turned so fair a side to the world and in which he had embarked his fortune. All these thoughts flashed through his mind as he listened to the gossip of the garrulous old sea dogs. A greater shock still, however, was in store for him.

Tom Baumer had been listening to the conversation with an amused look upon his good-humored face. "Ah!" said he, suddenly striking in. "I will tell you something of your own firm which perhaps you do not know. Have you heard that Mr. Ezra Girdlestone is about to be married?"  
 "To be married!"  
 "Oh, yes; I have heard it this morning at Eckermann's office. I think it is the talk of the city."

"Who's the gal?" Miggs asked, with languid interest.  
 "I disremember her name," Von Baumer answered. "It is a girl the major has met—the young lady who has lived in the same house, and is what they call a warder."

"Not—not his warder?" cried Tom, springing to his feet and turning as white as a sheet. "Not Miss Harston? You don't tell me that he is going to marry Miss Harston?"  
 "That is the name. Miss Harston it is, sure enough."  
 "It is a lie—an infamous lie!" Tom cried, hotly.  
 "So it may be," Von Baumer answered serenely. "I do but say what I have heard, and heard more than once on good authority."

"If it is true there is villainy in it," cried Tom, with wild eyes, "the blackest villainy that ever was done upon earth. I'll go—I'll see him to-night. I shall know the truth!" He rushed furiously downstairs and through the bar. There was a cab near the door. "Drive into London!" he cried. "69 Eccleston square. I am on fire to be there!" The cabman

sprang on the box, and they rattled away as fast as the horse would go. Long before reaching No. 69 he had opened the door and was standing upon the step. The instant that the cab pulled up he sprang off, and rang loudly at the great brass bell which flanked the heavy door.  
 "Is Mr. Girdlestone in?" he asked, as a maid appeared at the door.  
 "No, sir."  
 "Miss Harston, is she at home?" he said excitedly.  
 "No, sir. They have both gone away."  
 "Gone away?"  
 "Yes. Gone into the country, sir. And Mr. Ezra, too, sir."

"And when are they coming back?" he asked, in bewilderment.  
 "They are not coming back."  
 "Impossible!" Tom cried in despair. "What is their address then?"  
 "They have left no address. I am sorry I can't help you. Good-night, sir."  
 Tom Dimsdale stood upon the doorstep looking blankly into the night. He felt dazed and bewildered. What fresh villainy was this? Was it a confirmation of the German's report, or was it a contradiction of it? Cold beads stood upon his forehead as he thought of the possibility of such a thing. "I must find her," he cried, with clenched hands, and turned away heart sick into the turmoil and bustle of the London streets.

CHAPTER XIII.  
 Rebecca, the fresh-complexioned waiting maid, was still standing behind the ponderous hall door, listening, with a smile upon her face, to young Dimsdale's retreating footsteps, when another and a brisker tread caught her ear coming from the opposite direction. The smile died away as she heard it, and her features assumed a peculiar expression, in which it would be hard to say whether fear or pleasure predominated. She passed her hands up over her face and smoothed her hair with a quick, nervous gesture, glancing down at the same time at her snowy apron and the bright ribbons which set it off. Whatever her intentions may have been, she had no time to improve upon her toilet before a key turned in the door and Ezra Girdlestone stepped into the hall. As he saw her shadowy figure, for the gas was low, he uttered a hoarse cry of surprise and fear, and staggered backwards against the door post.

"Don't be afraid, Mister Ezra," she said in a whisper; "it's only me."  
 "What makes you stand about like that? You gave me quite a turn."  
 "I didn't mean for to do it. I've only just been answering of the door. Why, surely you've come in before now and found me in the hall without making much account of it."

"Ah, lass," answered Ezra, "my nerves have had a shake of late. I've felt queer all day. Look how my hand shakes."  
 "Well, I'm blessed!" said the girl with a glitter, turning up the gas. "I never thought to see you afraid of anything. Why, you looks as white as a sheet!"  
 "There, that's enough!" he answered roughly. "Well, are they gone?"  
 "Yes, they are gone," she answered, standing by the side of the couch on which he had thrown himself. "Your father came about three with a cab, and took her away."

"She didn't make a fuss?"  
 "There's a fuss! No, why should she? There's fuss enough made about her, in all conscience. Oh, Ezra, before she got between us you was kind to me at times. I could stand harsh words from you six days a week, if there was a chance of a kind one on the seventh. But now—now what notice do you take of me?" She began to whimper and to wipe her eyes with a little discolored pocket handkerchief.

"Drop it, woman, drop it!" cried her companion testily. "I want information, not sniveling. She seemed reconciled to go."  
 "Yes, she went quiet enough," the girl said with a furtive sob.  
 "Did you hear my father say anything as to where they were going?"  
 "I heard him tell the cabman to drive to Waterloo station."  
 "Nothing more?"  
 "No."  
 "Well, if he won't tell you, I will. They have gone down to Hampshire, my lass. Bedsworth is the name of the place, and it is a pleasant little corner near the sea. I want you to go down there as well to-morrow."

"Want me to go?"  
 "Yes, they need some one who is smart and handy to keep house for them. There is some old woman already, I believe, but she is old and useless. I want you wouldn't take long getting things shipshape. My father intends to stay down there some little time with Miss Harston."  
 "And how about you?" the girl asked, with a quick flash of suspicion in her dark eyes.

"Don't trouble about me. I shall stay behind and mind the business. Some one must be on the spot. I think Cook and Jane and William ought to be able to look after me among them."  
 "And I won't see you at all?" the girl cried, with a quiver in her voice.  
 "Oh, yes, you shall. I'll be down from Saturday to Monday every week, and perhaps oftener. If business goes well I may come down and stay for some time. Whether I do or not may depend upon you."

Rebecca Taylorforth started and uttered an exclamation of surprise. "How can it depend upon me?" she asked eagerly.  
 "Well," said Ezra, in a hesitating way, "it may depend upon whether you are a good girl, and do what you are told or not. I am sure that you would do anything at all to serve me, would you not?"  
 "You know very well that I would, Mister Ezra. When you want anything done you remember it, but if you have no use for me then there is never a kind look on your face or a kind word from your lips. I could stand your harshness, I could stand the blow you gave me, and forgive you for it, from my heart, but oh! it cut me to the very soul to be standing by and watching while you were making up to another woman. It was more than I can bear."

"Never mind, my girl," said Ezra in a soothing voice. "That's all over and done with! See what I've brought you." He rummaged in his pocket and produced a little parcel of tissue-paper, which he handed to her.  
 It was only a small silver anchor, with Scotch pebbles inlaid in it. The woman's eyes, however, flashed as she looked at it, and she raised it to her lips and kissed it passionately.

"What am I to do down at Bedsworth?" she asked.  
 "I want you to be Miss Harston's companion. She'll be lonely, and will need some other woman in the house to look after her."

"You are still thinking of her, then? She must have this; she must have that! Everything else is as dirt before her. I'll not serve her—so there! You can knock me down if you like."  
 "Rebecca," said Ezra slowly, "do you hate Kate Harston?"  
 "From the bottom of my soul," she answered.  
 "Well, if you hate her, I tell you that I hate her a thousand times more. You thought that I was fond of her. All that is over now, and you may set your mind at ease."

"Why do you want her so well cared for then?" asked the girl suspiciously.  
 "I want some one who feels towards her as I do to be by her side. If she were never to come back from Bedsworth it would be nothing to me."  
 "What makes you look at me so strangely?" she said, shrinking away from his intense gaze.  
 "Never mind. You go. You will understand many things in time which seem strange to you now. At present if you will do what I ask you will oblige me greatly. Will you go?"  
 "Yes, I will go."

"There's a good lass. Give us a kiss, my girl. You have the right spirit in you. I'll let you know when the train goes to-morrow, and I will write to my father to expect you. Now, off with you, or you'll have them gossiping downstairs. Good-night!"  
 "Good-night, Mister Ezra," said the girl, with her hand upon the handle of the library door. "You've made my heart glad this night. I live in hope—ever in hope."

"I wonder what she hopes about," the young merchant said to himself as she closed the door behind her. "Hopes I'll marry her, I suppose. She must be of a very ganguine disposition. A girl like that might be invaluable down at Bedsworth. If we had no other need for her, she would be an excellent spy." He lay for some little time on the couch with bent brow and pursed lips, musing over the possibilities of the future.

While this dialogue had been going on in the library of Eccleston square, Tom Dimsdale was still wending his way home with a feeling of weight in his mind and a presentiment of misfortune which overshadowed his whole soul. In vain he assured himself that this disappearance of Kate's was but temporary, and that the rumor of an engagement between her and Ezra was too ridiculous to be believed for a moment. Argue it as he would, the same dead, horrible feeling of impending trouble weighed upon him. Impossible as it was to imagine that Kate was false to him, it was strange that on the very day that this rumor reached his ears she should disappear from London. How bitterly he regretted now that he had allowed himself to be persuaded by John Girdlestone into ceasing to communicate with her. He began to realize that he had been duped, and that all these specious promises as to a future consent to their union had been so many baits to amuse him while the valuable present was slipping away. What could he do now to repair the past? His only course was to wait for the morrow, and see whether the senior partner would appear at the offices. If he did so, the young man was determined to have an understanding with him.

So downcast was Tom that, on arriving at Phillimore Gardens he would have slipped off to his room at once had he not met his burly father upon the stairs. "Bed!" roared the old man upon hearing his son's proposition. "Nothing of the sort, sir. Come down into the parlor. Your mother has been waiting for you all the evening."  
 (To be continued.)

No Flattery Necessary.  
 "You needn't begin jollyin' me," said the gruff man to the man who had land to sell. "I'm not a man that can be affected by flattery. When I—"  
 "That's just what I said to my boss," interrupted the agent. "I told him, when he suggested your name to me, that it was a relief to call on a man who did not expect to be praised and flattered to his face all the time. I tell you, Mr. Grump, this city has mighty few men such as you. Nine men out of ten are simply dying to have some one tell them how great they are, but you are above such weakness. Any one can see that at a glance. I'm glad of it. It's helpful to me to meet a man who rises superior to the petty tactics of the average solicitor. It's a real and lasting benefit, and an instructive experience."

Ten minutes later, after a few more such comments on the part of the agent, the man who could not be flattered into signing the contract was asking which line his name should be written upon.—Success Magazine.

Best He Could Do.  
 "Sir," said the irate parent as he unexpectedly entered the parlor, "what do you mean by kissing my daughter?"  
 "Excuse me," replied the poor but otherwise honest young man, "but I desired to show my appreciation of your daughter's loveliness, and kisses are the only things I can afford to give her at the present stage of the game."

Hard to Open.  
 "Rich, isn't he?"  
 "Fabulously."  
 "Where did he get it?"  
 "He's the man who applied the car-window principle to doors of safes and safety deposit vaults, making them absolutely burglar proof."—Houston Post.

Pa's Experience.  
 Little Willie—Say, pa, what is a scheme?  
 Pa—A scheme, my son, is something that usually fails through shortly after you invest money in it.

Quick Returns.  
 Tomson—Was Dr. Puff's treatment of your rich uncle satisfactory?  
 Johnson—Quite so. I came into the fortune recently.

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