

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 & Stolze, 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 protruberant 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 my 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.

"And now, major," he concluded, "provided you lend us your name and your talents to help us in our speculation the firm are prepared to meet you in a most liberal spirit in the matter of remuneration. Of course, your voyage and your expenses will be handsomely paid. You will have to travel by steamer to St. Petersburg, provided that we choose the Ural Mountains as the scene of our imaginary find. I hear that there is high play going on aboard those boats, and with your well-known skill you will no doubt be able to make the voyage a remunerative one. We calculate that at the most you will be in Russia about three months. Now, the firm thought that it would be very fair if they were to guarantee you two hundred and fifty pounds, which they would increase to five hundred in case of success; of course, by that we mean complete success such as would be likely to attend your exertions."

When the young man had finished, the major stood up with his face to the empty fireplace, his legs far apart, his chest inflated, and his body rocking ponderously backwards and forwards.

"Let me be quite sure that I understand you," he said. "You wish me to go to Russia? You have the goodness to suggest that on my way I should look me fellow-passengers in the boat?"

"That is to say, if you think it worth your while."

"Quite so. If I think it worth me 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.

"You won't do it?" he gasped. "Do it! I'd like to think a man who's worn Her Majesty's scarlet jacket for twenty years would dirty his hands with such a trick? I tell you, I wouldn't do it for all the money that ever was coined. Look here, Girdlestone, I know you, but you don't know me!"

The young merchant sat silently in his chair, with the same livid color upon his face and savage expression in his eyes. Major Tobias Clutterbuck stood at the end of the table, stooping forward so as to lean his hands upon it, with his eyes protruberant and his scanty grey fringe in a bristle with indignation.

"What right had you to come to me with such a proposal? I don't set up for being a saint, but I've some morals, such as they are, and I mean to stick to them. One of my rules of life has been never to know a blackguard, and so, my young friend, from this day forth you and I go on our own roads. I'm not particular, but you must draw the line somewhere. I draw it at you."

It 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 unsocial 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."

"First of all, what do you think of this?" the doctor asked abruptly, handing a letter over to his son, who opened it, and read as follows:

"Dear Sir—It has come to my knowledge through my son that your boy has abandoned the study of medicine, and that you are still uncertain as to his future career. I have long had the intention of seeking a young man who might join in our business, and relieve my old shoulders of some of the burden. Ezra urges me to write and propose that your son should become one of us. If he has any taste for business we shall be happy to advance his interest in every way. He would, of course, have to purchase a share in the concern, which would amount to seven thousand pounds, on which he would be paid interest at the rate of five per cent. By allowing this interest to accumulate, and investing also his share of the profits, he might in time absorb a large portion of the business. In case he joined us upon this footing we should have no objection to his name appearing as one of the firm.

"With kind regards to your family, and hoping that they enjoy the great blessing of health, I remain, sincerely yours,
"JOHN GIRDLESTONE."

"What d'ye think of that?" the doctor asked when his son had finished reading it.

"I hardly know," said Tom. "I should like a little time to think it over."

"Seven thousand pounds is a good round sum. It is more than half the total capital which I have invested for you. On the other hand, I have heard those who ought to know say there is not a sounder or better managed concern in London. There's no time like the present, Tom. Get your hat, and we'll go down to Fenchurch street together and look into it."

It was a proud day for the ex-medical student when he first entered the counting house of the African firm and realized that he was one of the governing powers in that busy establishment. Tom Dimsdale's mind was an intensely practical one, and although he had fondly the study of science an irksome matter, he was able to throw himself into business with uncommon energy and devotion. The clerks soon found that the sunburned, athletic looking young man intended to be anything but a sleeping partner, and both they and old Gilray respected him accordingly.

Girdlestone called him into the office one day, and congratulated him upon the progress which he was making. "My dear young man," he said to him in his patriarchal way, "I am delighted to hear of the way in which you identify yourself with the interests of the firm. If at first you find work allotted to you which may appear to you to be rather menial, you must understand that that is simply due

to our desire that you should master the whole business from its very foundations."

"There is nothing I desire better," said Tom.

"In addition to the routine of office work, and the superintendence of the clerks, I should wish you to have a thorough grasp of all the details of the shipping, land of the loading and unloading of our vessels, as well as of the storage of goods when landed. When any of our ships are in, I should wish you to go down to the docks and to overlook everything which is done."

In one respect Tom Dimsdale was immeasurably the gainer by his connection with the firm, for without that it is difficult to say how he could have found opportunities for breaking through the barrier which separated him from Kate. The surveillance of the merchant had become stricter of late, and all invitations from Mrs. Dimsdale or other friends who pitied the loneliness of the girl were repulsed by Girdlestone with the curt intimation that his ward's health was not such as to justify him in allowing her to incur any risk of catching a chill. She was practically a prisoner in the great stone cage in Eccleston square, and even on her walks a warder in the shape of a footman was, as we have seen, told off to guard her. Whatever John Girdlestone's reasons may have been, he had evidently come to the conclusion that it was of the highest importance that she should be kept secluded.

As it was, Tom, thanks to his position as one of the firm, was able occasionally, in spite of every precaution, to penetrate through the old man's defensive works. If a question of importance arose at Fenchurch street during the absence of the senior partner, what more natural than that Mr. Dimsdale should volunteer to walk round to Eccleston square in order to acquaint him with the fact. And if it happened that the gentleman was not to be found there, how very natural that the young man should wait half an hour for him, and that Miss Harston should take the opportunity of a chat with an old friend? Precious, precious interviews those, the more so for their rarity. They brightened the dull routine of Kate's weary life, and sent Tom back to the office full of spirit and hope. The days were at hand when the memory of them was to shine out like little rifts of light in the dark cloud of existence.

And now the time was coming when it was to be decided whether, by a last bold stroke, the credit of the house of Girdlestone was to be saved, or whether the attempt was to plunge them into deeper and more hopeless ruin. An unscrupulous agent named Langworthy had been dispatched to Russia well primed with instructions as to what to do and how to do it. He had been in the employ of an English corn merchant at Odessa, and had some knowledge of the Russian language which would be invaluable to him in his undertaking. In the character of an English gentleman of scientific tastes he was to establish himself in some convenient village among the Ural Mountains. There he was to remain some little time, so as to arouse confidence in the people before making his pretended discovery. He was then to carry his rough diamonds to Tobolsk, as the nearest large town, and to exhibit them there, backing up his assertion by the evidence of villagers who had seen him dig them up. The Girdlestons knew that that alone would be sufficient when telegraphed to England to produce a panic in the sensitive diamond market. Before any systematic inquiry could be made, Langworthy would have disappeared, and their little speculation would have come off. After that the sooner people realized that it was a hoax the better for the conspirators. In any case, there seemed to be no possibility that the origin of the rumor could be traced. Meanwhile Ezra Girdlestone had secured his passage in the Cape mail steamer Cyprina. On the night that he left he sat up some time in the library at Eccleston square talking over the matter for the last time with his father.

He Grasped the Idea.

"Harmony in costumes is the thing now," remarked Mrs. De Style, "the idea being that a woman of fashion should clearly express her personality in her attire."

"Well, my dear," rejoined her husband, "that being the case, you couldn't possibly improve on your present costumes."

"They are certainly elaborate," said her ladyship, "but do they fully express my character?"

"Sure thing," answered the mere man. "Any one can readily see that you haven't a single thought beyond them."

Stirred Him Up.

"Cheer up, old man," said the invalid's friend, "you're not going to die yet."

"You bet I ain't!" declared the invalid with a new determination.

"That's the way to talk."

"Yes, I heard the doctors quarrelling about which one of them should perform the autopsy, so I'm just going to fool 'em."—Philadelphia Press.

To Be Encouraged.

"Bliggins is always repeating the things his children say."

"Well," answered Miss Cayenne, "he ought to be encouraged. I have no doubt they are much less wearisome than his original remarks would be."—Washington Star.

Philosophical.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," said the butler, "but your son has just eloped with the parlor maid."

"Oh, that isn't so bad," rejoined Mrs. Uppson. "He might have eloped with the cook—and I never could have replaced her."

A Picture to Admire.

Artist—What kind of picture do you admire most?

Friend—Rare engravings. I particularly admire the landscapes on the back of a \$100 bill.

Give It Up.

Mother—Raymond, that hole wasn't in your stocking this morning.

Raymond—Where was it, then?



The Cat Under the Ban.

According to the report of the State Game Commission of Pennsylvania for 1907, song and insectivorous birds in that state are increasing and game birds becoming scarcer. Bear and deer are rapidly increasing.

Bears are now protected in Pennsylvania by a legal close season during the spring and summer months. During the season of 1907 there were killed in the state 230 deer.

Dr. Joseph Kalbfus, chief game protector of the state, recommends the placing of a bounty on the scalps of the domestic cat as well as on those of the wildcat.

"There is no greater destroyer of bird life," he declares, "than the house cat."

The legislative appropriation for bounties on noxious animals and birds was insufficient to meet the demands upon it last year. A much larger appropriation is called for, and the addition of the great horned owl and the goshawk to the outlawed class is requested.

Starting Seeds Indoors.

Any one who intends to start seeds indoors needs a knowledge of various facts concerning each variety—the length of time needed for germination, the time required for the plant to reach the blooming or fruitage stage, and whether it can be transplanted to the open ground with safety in early spring, or not until considerably later. For instance, says Suburban Life, chrysanthemum seeds will germinate in from five to ten days, but the plants require a very long season of growth before flowering, and the person who gets ahead of Jack Frost must sow the seeds not later than March 1—and earlier, if possible. With varieties which germinate quickly, grow rapidly and bloom early, the sowing should be delayed at least a month, to avoid the trouble of repeated transplantings, to prevent the seedling plants from getting "leggy" and weak.

America Has the Healthiest Cattle.

Secretary of Agriculture Wilson says the United States has the healthiest cattle of any nation on the face of the earth. This is owing to our rigid system of inspection and our prompt measures to eradicate diseases. In Europe 40 per cent of the cattle are infected with tuberculosis, and in the United States only 10 per cent, and we will soon have it entirely eradicated. We have inspectors in Europe, and not one animal infected in any way is permitted to be shipped to this country.

Holsteins Preferred.

The Iowa State board of control will soon have 1,000 Holstein cows at its different institutions. Different breeds have been used heretofore, but it has been decided to have only one breed and Holstein was selected because of its milk-giving qualities. Last year the cows at the Iowa institution gave nearly a quarter of a million gallons of milk and this amount will be increased.

Measuring Hay in Stacks.

To find the number of tons in long, square stacks, multiply the length in yards by the width in yards, and that by half the altitude in yards. Then divide that by fifteen. For circular stacks multiply the square of the circumference of the stack in yards by four times the altitude in yards and divide by two. The quotient will be the number of cubic yards. Divide by fifteen for the number of tons.

Fence Posts.

Wyoming experiments in preserving fence posts show that when the posts were dipped in crude petroleum and burned off so that the char comes above the ground when posts are set, they will keep indefinitely.

Process Butter.

The government inspection of renovated butter last year showed a total production of 63,000,000 pounds of such butter, an increase of 15 per cent over the preceding year.

Farm Facts and Fancies.

Hogs need clean, pure water as much as the rest of the stock. See that they get it.

Perhaps you do not realize it, but the dearest animal on your farm is the cheap scrub.

Which do you keep? The cow that makes more than she eats or the cow that eats more than she makes?

It is impossible to plant an orchard or a windbreak in the winter time, but it is possible and profitable to plan one or both.

Fungous diseases and insect pests can be kept from taking the profits of the orchard this next season by faithful, judicious spraying.

The five to eight quarts of milk a day cow will never return the farmer an adequate profit, unless the percentage of butter fat is high.

An argument in favor of the open head in fruit trees is that the fruit on such trees does not rot so badly as that on trees with dense heads.

First the framework, then the trimmings. So with stock-raising. Feed to get the biggest kind of growth, then lay on the fat as fast as possible.

A dairy cow must be given more feed than just enough for her own support if she is to be relied upon to give anything for the support of her owner.

SPELLING NAMES.

There Was No Doubt About Hannah When the English Lady Finished.

A bygone generation witnessed an acrimonious controversy in the Irish family of O'Connor in County Roscommon as to the right of any branch of the ancient race to spell the name thus—with one "n." That right, it was maintained, was held only by the O'Connor Don as head of the house. So prolonged was the contest between the partisans of the O'Connor and O'Connor titles that it was called the "N-less" (standing for "endless") correspondence. Finally the question was referred to Sir J. Bernard Burke, the Ulster king of arms. His decision coincided with a decision in a certain other matter—namely, that much might be said on either side. The two disputing families had a common origin, a king of Connaught, and could with propriety and in accordance with tradition spell the name one way or the other. Fortified by this "award," the two families have continued to spell their name with one "n" up to the present hour.

Equally firm on the question as to how his name should be spelled was the witness in a case tried in the king's bench a few years ago. Asked his name, his prompt reply was "John 'Awkins." "Do you," queried counsel, "spell your name with or without an H?" The emphatic answer was, "J-o-h-n." As a rule, however, as we have said, variety in the spelling of the names of people, as in that of the names of places, owes its origin to people not being so clear as was our friend regarding how a name should be spelled.

Two stories in illustration of this occur to us. In the first Mrs. Quiverful was having christened her latest baby. The old minister was a little deaf. "What name did you say?" he queried. "I said," replied the mother, with some asperity, "Hannah." "Do you," said the other, "mean Anna or Hannah?" "Look 'ere," exclaimed the now thoroughly exasperated lady, "I won't be hexamined in this way. I mean 'Haitch-hay-hen-hen-hay-haitch'—Hannah!"

The second incident to which we refer is this. Here also there was "a lady in the case." She was on an errand, and she had to deal with the name of another party. In brief, she had bought a pair of sleeve links for her dance when the shopman asked, "Any initials, miss?" The rest may be stated thus:

She—Oh yes; I forgot. Engrave a "U" upon them for his first name.

Shopman—Pardon me, is it Uria or Ulysses? Names with "U" are rare, you know.

She (proudly)—His name is Eugene.—London Globe.

Crop Well Worth Raising.

A crop that will produce \$15,400 to the acre has been discovered in Brazil, according to a report to the department of commerce and labor from United States Consul General George E. Anderson at Rio de Janeiro. It is the Brazilian linen and several experimental plantations are making an effort to put it into practical use.

According to the consul general's report the plant grows twelve to eighteen feet high and somewhat resembles hemp. It matures so rapidly that a field will produce three crops a year. The fiber has strength, firmness, flexibility and adaptability for bleaching and dyeing.

It may revolutionize the linen industry of the world and become an important competitor of cotton. An acre will produce seventy-seven tons and the product includes not only the various grades of fiber for fine or coarse linen but stems and roots can be used for making paper.

The suggestion is made that the agricultural department should investigate this wonderful plant and see if it can be produced in the portions of the United States that are free from frost. The plant is said to be "absolutely hard, resisting alike the dry or rainy season, bearing equally well on dry or wet soil and not a prey to insects or mildew."

My Choice.

I'd rather be happy than sad.

I'd rather be good than bad.

I'd rather rejoice, yes, this is my choice.

Than brood over the troubles I've had.

I'd rather be modest than proud.

I'd rather be quiet than loud.

I'd rather look up, to the sky's golden cup.

Than walk with my head always bowed.

I'd rather be healthy than sick.

I'd rather be certain than quick.

I'd rather be broke than have it be spoke.

I grew rich by an underhand trick.

I'd rather be sober than tight.

I'd rather be kindly than fight.

Unless, it were true, only fighting would do.

The work to establish the right.

I'd rather be free than a slave.

I'd rather be noble than brave.

I'd rather be me, with my babe on my knee.

Than the richest old man near the grave.

I'd rather be lavish than mean.

I'd rather my wife than a queen.

And I'd rather my home than the splendors of Rome.

Or the castles that Europe has seen.

—Detroit Free Press.

Pride and Fried.

"Biffers gets his new car out several times a day. Matter of pride, I suppose?"

"Yep. Fried it out of a mudhole three times last Monday."—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

The more children a woman has, the fewer theories she has.