

## Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

### V.—THE EPISODE OF THE NEEDLE THAT DID NOT MATCH.

“SEBASTIAN is a great man,” I said to Hilda Wade, as I sat one afternoon over a cup of tea she had brewed for me in her own little sitting-room: it is one of the alleviations of an hospital doctor's lot that he may drink tea now and again with the Sister of his ward. “Whatever else you choose to think of him, you must at least admit he is a very great man.”

I admired our famous Professor, and I admired Hilda Wade: 'twas a matter of regret to me that my two admirations did not seem in return sufficiently to admire one another.

“Oh, yes,” Hilda answered, pouring out my second cup. “He is a very great man. I never denied that. The greatest man, on the whole, I think, that I have ever come across.”

“And he has done splendid work for humanity,” I went on, growing enthusiastic.

“Splendid work! Yes. Splendid! (Two lumps, I believe?) He has done more, I admit, for medical science than any other man I ever met.”

I gazed at her with a curious glance. “Then why, dear lady, do you keep telling me he is cruel?” I inquired, toasting my feet on the fender. “It seems contradictory.”

She passed me the muffins, and smiled her restrained smile.

“Does the desire to do good to humanity in itself imply a benevolent disposition?” she answered, obliquely.

“Now you are talking paradox. Surely if a man works all his life long for the good of mankind, that shows he is devoured by sympathy for his species.”

“And when your friend Mr. Bates works all his life long at observing and classifying lady-birds, I suppose that shows

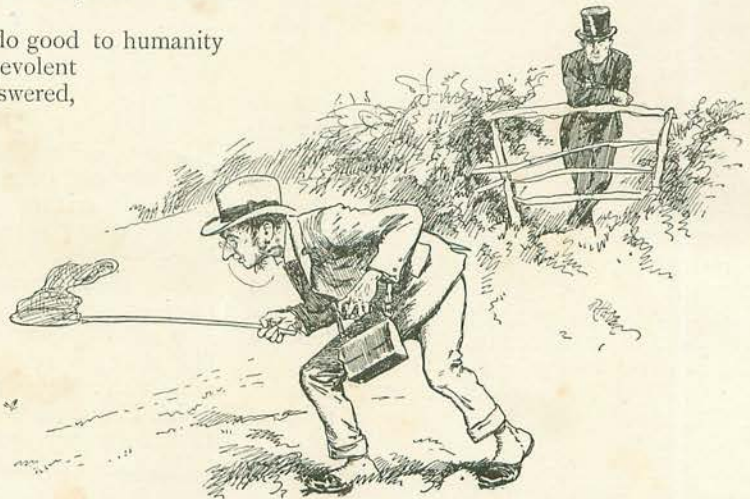
he is devoured by sympathy for the race of beetles!”

I laughed at her comical face, she looked at me so quizzically. “But then,” I objected, “the cases are not parallel. Bates kills and collects his lady-birds: Sebastian cures and benefits humanity.”

Hilda smiled her wise smile once more and fingered her apron. “Are the cases so different as you suppose?” she went on, with her quick glance. “Is it not partly accident? A man of science, you see, early in life takes up, half by chance, this, that, or the other particular form of study. But what the study is in itself, I fancy, does not greatly matter: do not mere circumstances as often as not determine it? Surely it is the temperament, on the whole, that tells: the temperament that is or is not scientific.”

“How do you mean? You *are* so enigmatic!”

“Well, in a family of the scientific temperament, it seems to me, one brother may happen to go in for butterflies—may he not?—and another for geology or for submarine telegraphs. Now, the man who happens to take up butterflies does not make a fortune out of his hobby—there is no money in butterflies: so we say, accordingly, he is an unpractical person, who cares nothing for business, and who is only happy when he is out in the fields with a net, chasing emperors and tortoiseshells. But



“AN UNPRACTICAL PERSON.”



the man who happens to fancy submarine telegraphy most likely invents a lot of new improvements, takes out dozens of patents, finds money flow in upon him as he sits in his study, and becomes at last a peer and a millionaire: so then we say, what a splendid business head he has got, to be sure, and how immensely he differs from his poor wool-gathering brother, the entomologist, who can only invent new ways of hatching out wire-worms. Yet all may really depend on the first chance direction which led one brother as a boy to buy a butterfly-net, and sent the other into the school laboratory to dabble with an electric wheel and a cheap battery."

"Then you mean to say it is chance that has made Sebastian?"

Hilda shook her pretty head. "By no means. Don't be so stupid. We both know Sebastian has a wonderful brain. Whatever was the work he undertook with that brain in science, he would carry it out consummately. He is a born thinker. It is like this, don't you know." She tried to arrange her thoughts. "The particular branch of science to which Mr. Hiram Maxim's mind happens to have been directed was the making of machine-guns—and he slays his thousands. The particular branch to which Sebastian's mind happens to have been directed was medicine—and he cures as many as Mr. Maxim kills. It is a turn of the hand that makes all the difference."

"I see," I said. "The aim of medicine happens to be a benevolent one."

"Quite so; that's just what I mean. The aim is benevolent: and Sebastian pursues that aim with the single-minded energy of a lofty, gifted, and devoted nature—but not a good one."

"Not good?"

"Oh, no. To be quite frank, he seems to me to pursue it ruthlessly, cruelly, unscrupulously. He is a man of high ideals, but without principle. In that respect he reminds one of the great spirits of the Italian Renaissance—Benvenuto Cellini and so forth—men who could pore for hours with conscientious artistic care over the detail of a hem in a sculptured robe, yet could steal out in the midst of their disinterested toil, to plunge a knife in the back of a rival."

"Sebastian would not do that," I cried. "He is wholly free from the mean spirit of jealousy."

"No, Sebastian would not do that. You are quite right there: there is no tinge of meanness in the man's nature. He likes to

be first in the field: but he would acclaim with delight another man's scientific triumph—if another anticipated him—for would it not mean a triumph for universal science?—and is not the advancement of science Sebastian's religion? But . . . he would do almost as much—or more. He would stab a man without remorse, if he thought that by stabbing him he could advance knowledge."

I recognised at once the truth of her diagnosis. "Nurse Wade," I cried, "you are a wonderful woman! I believe you are right; but—how did you come to think of it?"

A cloud passed over her brow. "I have reason to know it," she answered, slowly. Then her voice changed. "Take another muffin!"

I helped myself and paused. I laid down my cup and gazed at her. What a beautiful, tender, sympathetic face! And yet, how able! She stirred the fire uneasily. I looked and hesitated. I had often wondered why I never dared ask Hilda Wade one question that was nearest my heart. I think it must have been because I respected her so profoundly. The deeper your admiration and respect for a woman, the harder you find it in the end to ask her. At last I almost made up my mind. "I cannot think," I began, "what can have induced a girl like you, with means and friends, with brains and"—I drew back, then I plumped it out—"beauty, to take to such a life as this—a life which seems, in many ways, so unworthy of you!"

She stirred the fire more pensively than ever, and re-arranged the muffin-dish on the little wrought-iron stand in front of the grate. "And yet," she murmured, looking down, "what life can be better than the service of one's kind? You think it a great life, for Sebastian!"

"Sebastian! He is a man. That is different, quite different. But a woman! especially *you*, dear lady, for whom one feels that nothing is quite high enough, quite pure enough, quite good enough: I cannot imagine how—"

She checked me with one wave of her gracious hand. Her movements were always slow and dignified. "I have a Plan in my life," she answered earnestly, her eyes meeting mine with a sincere, frank gaze; "a Plan to which I have resolved to sacrifice everything. It absorbs my being. Till that Plan is fulfilled—" I saw the tears were gathering fast on her lashes. She suppressed them with an effort. "Say no more," she added,



faltering. "Infirm of purpose, I *will* not listen."

I leant forward eagerly, pressing my advantage. The air was electric. Waves of emotion passed to and fro. "But surely," I cried, "you do not mean to say——"

She waved me aside once more. "I will not put my hand to the plough, and then look back," she answered firmly. "Dr. Cumberlandge, spare me. I came to Nathaniel's for a purpose. I told you at the time what that purpose was—in part: to be near Sebastian. I want to be near him . . . for an object I have at heart. Do not ask me to reveal it: do not ask me to forego it. I am a woman, therefore weak. But I need your aid. Help me, instead of hindering me."

"Hilda," I cried, leaning forward, with quiverings of my heart, "I will help you in whatever way you will allow me. But let me at any rate help you with the feeling that I am helping one who means in time——"

At that moment, as unkindly fate would have it, the door opened, and Sebastian entered.

"Nurse Wade," he began, in his iron voice, glancing about him with stern eyes,

"where are those needles I ordered for that operation? We must be ready in time before Nielsen comes. . . . Cumberlandge, I shall want you."

The golden opportunity had come and gone. It was long before I found a similar occasion for speaking to Hilda.

Every day after that the feeling deepened upon me that Hilda was there to watch Sebastian. *Why*, I did not know: but it was growing certain that a life-long duel was in progress between those two—a duel of some strange and mysterious import.

The first approach to a solution of the problem which I obtained came a week or two later. Sebastian was engaged in observing a case where certain unusual symptoms had suddenly supervened: it was a case of some obscure affection of the heart: I will not trouble you here with the particular details: we all suspected a tendency to aneurism. Hilda Wade was in attendance, as she always was on Sebastian's observation cases. We crowded round, watching. The Professor himself leaned over the cot with some medicine for external application in a basin. He gave it to Hilda to hold. I

noticed that as she held it her fingers trembled, and that her eyes were fixed harder than ever upon Sebastian. He turned round to his students. "Now, this," he began in a very unconcerned voice, as if the patient were a toad, "is a most unwonted turn for the disease to take. It occurs very seldom. In point of fact, I have only observed the symptom once before; and then it was fatal. The patient in that instance" — he paused dramatically — "was the notorious poisoner, Dr. Yorke-Bannerman."

As he uttered the words, Hilda Wade's hands



"THE DOOR OPENED, AND SEBASTIAN ENTERED."



trembled more than ever, and with a little scream she let the basin fall, breaking it into fragments.

Sebastian's keen eyes had transfixed her in a second. "How did you manage to do

the tendency before: and that case was the notorious"—he kept his glittering eyes fixed harder on Hilda than ever—"the notorious Dr. Yorke-Bannerman."

*I was watching Hilda, too.* At the words,



"WITH A LITTLE SCREAM SHE LET THE BASIN FALL."

that?" he asked, with quiet sarcasm, but in a tone full of meaning.

"The basin was heavy," Hilda faltered. "My hands were trembling—and it somehow slipped through them. I am not . . . quite myself . . . not quite well this afternoon. I ought not to have attempted it."

The Professor's deep-set eyes peered out like gleaming lights from beneath their overhanging brows. "No, you ought not to have attempted it," he answered, withering her with his glance. "You might have let the thing fall on the patient and killed him. As it is, can't you see you have agitated him with the flurry? Don't stand there holding your breath, woman: repair your mischief: get a cloth and wipe it up, and give *me* the bottle."

With skilful haste he administered a little sal volatile and nux vomica to the swooning patient; while Hilda set about remedying the damage. "That's better," Sebastian said, in a mollified tone, when she had brought another basin. There was a singular note of cloaked triumph in his voice. "Now, we'll begin again. . . . I was just saying, gentlemen, before this accident, that I had seen only *one* case of this peculiar form of

she trembled violently all over once more, but with an effort restrained herself. Their looks met in a searching glance. Hilda's air was proud and fearless: in Sebastian's, I fancied I detected after a second just a tinge of wavering.

"You remember Yorke-Bannerman's case," he went on. "He committed a murder—"

"Let *me* take the basin!" I cried, for I saw Hilda's hands giving way a second time, and I was anxious to spare her.

"No, thank you," she answered low, but in a voice that was full of suppressed defiance. "I will wait and hear this out. I *prefer* to stop here."

As for Sebastian, he seemed now not to notice her, though I was aware all the time of a side-long glance of his eye, parrot-wise, in her direction. "He committed a murder," he went on, "by means of aconitine—then an almost unknown poison; and after committing it, his heart being already weak, he was taken himself with symptoms of aneurism in a curious form, essentially similar to these; so that he died before the trial—a lucky escape for him."

He paused rhetorically once more; then



he added in the same tone, "Mental agitation and the terror of detection no doubt accelerated the fatal result in that instance. He died at once from the shock of the arrest. It was a natural conclusion. Here, we may hope for a more successful issue."

He spoke to the students, of course, but I could see for all that that he was keeping his falcon eye fixed hard on Hilda's face. I glanced aside at her. She never flinched for a second. Neither said anything directly to the other: still, by their eyes and mouths, I knew some strange passage of arms had taken place between them. Sebastian's tone was one of provocation, of defiance, I might almost say of challenge: Hilda's air I took rather for the air of calm and resolute, but assured, resistance. He expected her to answer; she said nothing. Instead of that, she went on holding the basin now with fingers that *would* not tremble. Every muscle was strained. Every tendon was strung. I could see she held herself in with a will of iron.

The rest of the episode passed off quietly. Sebastian, having delivered his bolt, began to think less of Hilda and more of the patient. He went on with his demonstration. As for Hilda, she gradually relaxed her muscles, and, with a deep-drawn breath, resumed her natural attitude. The tension was over. They had had their little skirmish, whatever it might mean, and had it out: now, they called a truce over the patient's body.

When the case had been disposed of, and the students dismissed, I went straight into the laboratory to get a few surgical instruments I had chanced to leave there. For a minute or two I mislaid my clinical thermometer, and began hunting for it behind a wooden partition in the corner of the room by the place for washing test-tubes. As I stooped down, turning over the various objects about the tap in my search, Sebastian's voice came to me. He had paused outside the door, and was speaking in his calm, clear tone, very low, to Hilda. "So *now* we understand one another, Nurse Wade," he said, with a significant sneer. "I know whom I have to deal with!"

"And I know too," Hilda answered, in a voice of placid confidence.

"Yet you are not afraid?"

"It is not I who have cause for fear. The accused may tremble, not the prosecutor."

"What? You threaten?"

"No; I do not threaten. Not in words, I mean. My presence here is in itself a threat, but I make no other. You know now, un-

fortunately, *why* I have come. That makes my task harder. But I will *not* give it up. I will wait and conquer."

Sebastian answered nothing. He strode into the laboratory alone, tall, grim, unbending, and let himself sink into his easy chair, looking up with a singular and somewhat sinister smile at his bottles of microbes. After a minute he stirred the fire, and bent his head forward, brooding. He held it between his hands, with his elbows on his knees, and gazed moodily straight before him into the glowing caves of white-hot coal in the fire-place. That sinister smile still played lambent round the corners of his grizzled moustaches.

I moved noiselessly towards the door, trying to pass behind him unnoticed. But, alert as ever, his quick ears detected me. With a sudden start, he raised his head and glanced round. "What! you here?" he cried, taken aback. For a second he appeared almost to lose his self-possession.

"I came for my clinical," I answered, with an unconcerned air. "I have somehow managed to mislay it in the laboratory."

My carefully casual tone seemed to reassure him. He peered about him with knit brows. "Cumberledge," he asked at last, in a suspicious voice, "did you hear that woman?"

"The woman in 93? Delirious?"

"No, no: Nurse Wade?"

"Hear her?" I echoed, I must candidly admit with intent to deceive. "When she broke the basin?"

His forehead relaxed. "Oh, it is nothing," he muttered, hastily. "A mere point of discipline. She spoke to me just now, and I thought her tone unbecoming in a subordinate. . . . Like Korah and his crew, she takes too much upon her. . . . We must get rid of her, Cumberledge: we must get rid of her. She is a dangerous woman!"

"She is the most intelligent nurse we have ever had in the place, sir," I objected, stoutly.

He nodded his head twice. "Intelligent—*je vous l'accorde*; but dangerous—dangerous!"

Then he turned to his papers, sorting them out one by one with a preoccupied face and twitching fingers. I recognised that he desired to be left alone, so I quitted the laboratory.

I cannot quite say *why*, but ever since Hilda Wade first came to Nathaniel's, my enthusiasm for Sebastian had been cooling continuously. Admiring his greatness still, I had doubts as to his goodness. That day I felt I positively mistrusted him. I wondered





"BUT DANGEROUS—DANGEROUS!"

impoverished state of the contained bodies, which Sebastian, with his eager zeal for science, desired his students to see and identify. He said it was likely to throw much light on other ill-understood conditions of the brain and nervous system, as well as on the peculiar faint odour of the insane, now so well recognised in all large asylums. In order to compare this abnormal state with the aspect of the healthy circulating medium, he proposed to examine a little good living

what his passage of arms with Hilda might mean. Yet, somehow, I was shy of alluding to it before her.

One thing, however, was clear to me now—this great campaign that was being waged between the nurse and the Professor had reference to the case of Dr. Yorke-Bannerman.

For a time, nothing came of it: the routine of the hospital went on as usual. The patient with the suspected predisposition to aneurism kept fairly well for a week or two, and then took a sudden turn for the worse, presenting at times most unwonted symptoms. He died unexpectedly. Sebastian, who had watched him every hour, regarded the matter as of prime importance. "I'm glad it happened here," he said, rubbing his hands. "A grand opportunity. I wanted to catch an instance like this before that fellow in Paris had time to anticipate me. They're all on the look-out. Von Strahlendorff, of Vienna, has been waiting for just such a patient for years. So have I. Now, fortune has favoured me. Lucky for us he died! We shall find out everything."

We held a post-mortem, of course, the condition of the blood being what we most wished to observe; and the autopsy revealed some unexpected details. One remarkable feature consisted in a certain undescribed and

blood side by side with the morbid specimen under the microscope. Nurse Wade was in attendance in the laboratory as usual. The Professor, standing by the instrument, with one hand on the brass screw, had got the diseased drop ready arranged for our inspection beforehand, and was gloating over it himself with scientific enthusiasm. "Grey corpuscles, you will observe," he said, "almost entirely deficient. Red, poor in number, and irregular in outline. Plasma, thin. Nuclei, feeble. A state of body which tells severely against the due rebuilding of the wasted tissues. Now, compare with typical normal specimen." He removed his eye from the microscope, and wiped a glass slide with a clean cloth as he spoke. "Nurse Wade, we know of old the purity and vigour of your circulating fluid. You shall have the honour of advancing science once more. Hold up your finger."

Hilda held up her forefinger unhesitatingly. She was used to such requests: and, indeed, Sebastian had acquired by long experience the faculty of pinching the finger-tip so hard, and pressing the point of a needle so dexterously into a minor vessel, that he could draw at once a small drop of blood without the subject even feeling it.

The Professor nipped the last joint between his finger and thumb for a moment till it



was black at the end : then he turned to the saucer at his side, which Hilda herself had placed there, and chose from it, cat-like, with great deliberation and selective care, a particular needle. Hilda's eyes followed his every movement as closely and as fearlessly as ever. Sebastian's hand was raised, and he was just about to pierce the delicate white skin, when, with a sudden, quick scream of terror, she snatched her hand away hastily.

The Professor let the needle drop in his astonishment. "What did you do that for?" he cried, with an angry dart of the keen eyes. "This is not the first time I have drawn your blood. You *knew* I would not hurt you."

Hilda's face had grown strangely pale. But that was not all. I believe I was the only person present who noticed one unobtrusive piece of sleight-of-hand which she hurriedly and skilfully executed. When the needle slipped from Sebastian's hand, she leant forward even as she screamed, and caught it, unobserved, in the folds of her apron. Then her nimble fingers closed over it as if by magic, and conveyed it with a rapid movement at once to her pocket. I do not think even Sebastian himself noticed the quick forward jerk of her eager hands, which would have done honour to a conjurer. He was too much taken aback by her unexpected behaviour to observe the needle.

Just as she caught it Hilda answered his question in a somewhat flurried voice. "I—I was afraid," she broke out, gasping. "One gets these little accesses of terror now and again. I—I feel rather weak. I don't think I will volunteer to supply any more normal blood this morning."

Sebastian's acute eyes read her through, as so often. With a trenchant dart he glanced from her to me. I could see he began to suspect a confederacy. "That will do," he went on, with slow deliberateness. "Better so. Nurse Wade, I don't know what's beginning to come over you. You are losing your nerve—which is fatal in a nurse. Only the other day you let fall and broke a basin at a most critical moment; and now, you scream aloud on a trifling apprehension." He paused and glanced around him. "Mr. Callaghan," he said, turning to our tall, red-haired Irish student, "*your* blood is good normal: and *you* are not hysterical." He selected another needle with studious care. "Give me your finger."

As he picked out the needle, I saw Hilda lean forward again, alert and watchful, eyeing him with a piercing glance; but, after a

second's consideration, she seemed to satisfy herself, and fell back without a word. I gathered that she was ready to interfere, had occasion demanded. But occasion did not demand: and she held her peace quietly.

The rest of the examination proceeded without a hitch. For a minute or two, it is true, I fancied that Sebastian betrayed a certain suppressed agitation—a trifling lack of his accustomed perspicuity and his luminous exposition. But after meandering for a while through a few vague sentences, he soon recovered his wonted calm; and as he went on with his demonstration, throwing himself eagerly into the case, his usual scientific enthusiasm came back to him undiminished. He waxed eloquent (after his fashion) over the "beautiful" contrast between Callaghan's wholesome blood, "rich in the vivifying architectonic grey corpuscles which rebuild worn tissues," and the effete, impoverished, unvitalized fluid which stagnated in the sluggish veins of the dead patient. The carriers of oxygen had neglected their proper task: the granules whose duty it was to bring elaborated food-stuffs to supply the waste of brain and nerve and muscle had forgotten their cunning. The bricklayers of the bodily fabric had gone out on strike: the weary scavengers had declined to remove the useless by-products. His vivid tongue, his picturesque fancy, ran away with him. I had never heard him talk better or more incisively before; one could feel sure as he spoke that the arteries of his own acute and teeming brain at that moment of exaltation were by no means deficient in those energetic and highly vital globules on whose reparative worth he so eloquently descanted. "Sure, the Professor makes annywan see right inside wan's own vascular system," Callaghan whispered aside to me, in unfeigned admiration.

The demonstration ended in impressive silence. As we streamed out of the laboratory, aglow with his electric fire, Sebastian held me back with a bent motion of his shrivelled forefinger. I stayed behind unwillingly. "Yes, sir?" I said, in an interrogative voice.

The Professor's eyes were fixed intently on the ceiling. His look was one of rapt inspiration. I stood and waited. "Cumberledge," he said at last, coming back to earth with a start, "I see it more plainly each day that goes. We must get rid of that woman."

"Of Nurse Wade?" I asked, catching my breath.

He roped the grizzled moustache and blinked the sunken eyes. "She has lost



nerve," he went on. "Lost nerve entirely. I shall suggest that she be dismissed. Her sudden failures of stamina are most embarrassing at critical junctures."

"Very well, sir," I answered, swallowing a lump in my throat. To say the truth, I was beginning to be afraid on Hilda's account. That morning's events had thoroughly disquieted me.

He seemed relieved at my unquestioning acquiescence. "She is a dangerous edged-tool, that's the truth of it," he went on, still twirling his moustache with a preoccupied air, and turning over his stock of needles. "When she's clothed and in her right mind, she is a valuable accessory—sharp and trenchant like a clean, bright lancet: but when she allows one of these causeless hysterical fits to override her tone, she plays one false at once—like a lancet that slips, or grows dull and rusty." He polished one of the needles on a soft square of new chamois-leather while he spoke, as if to give point and illustration to his simile.

I went out from him, much perturbed. The Sebastian I had once admired and worshipped was beginning to pass from me: in his place I found a very complex and inferior creation. My idol had feet of clay. I was loth to acknowledge it.

I stalked along the corridor moodily towards my own room. As I passed Hilda Wade's door I saw it half ajar. She stood a little within and beckoned me to enter.

I passed in and closed the door behind me. Hilda looked at me with trustful eyes. Resolute still, her face was yet that of a hunted creature. "Thank Heaven I have *one* friend here at least," she said, slowly, seating herself. "You saw me catch and conceal the needle?"

"Yes, I saw you."

She drew it forth from her purse, carefully but loosely wrapped up in a small tag of tissue-paper. "Here it is!" she said, displaying it. "Now, I want you to test it."

"In a culture?" I asked, for I guessed her meaning.

She nodded. "Yes, to see what that man has done to it."

"What do you suspect?"

She shrugged her graceful shoulders half imperceptibly. "How should I know? Anything!"

I gazed at the needle close. "What made you distrust it?" I inquired at last, still eyeing it.

She opened a drawer and took out several others. "See here," she said, handing me one: "*these* are the needles I keep in anti-septic wool—the needles with which I always supply the Professor. You observe their shape—the common surgical patterns. Now, look at *this* needle with which the Professor was just going to prick my finger! You can see for yourself at once it is of bluer steel and of a different manufacture."

"That is quite true," I answered, examining it with my pocket lens, which I always carry. "I see the difference. But how did you detect it?"

"From his face, partly, but partly, too, from the needle itself. I had my suspicions, and I was watching him close. Just as he raised the thing in his hand, half concealing it, so, and showing only the point, I caught the blue gleam of the steel as the light glanced off it. It was not the kind I knew. Then I withdrew my hand at once, feeling sure he meant mischief."

"That was wonderfully quick of you!"

"Quick? Well, yes. Thank Heaven, my mind works fast: my perceptions are rapid.



"I HAD MY SUSPICIONS."



Otherwise——” she looked grave. “One second more, and it would have been too late. The man might have killed me.”

“You think it is poisoned, then?”

Hilda shook her head with confident dissent. “Poisoned? Oh, no. He is wiser now. Fifteen years ago, he used poison. But science has made gigantic strides since then. He would not needlessly expose himself to-day to the risks of the poisoner.”

“Fifteen years ago he used poison!”

She nodded with the air of one who knows. “I am not speaking at random,” she answered. “I say what I know. Some day I will explain. For the present, it is enough to tell you, I know it.”

“And what do you suspect now?” I asked, the weird sense of her strange power deepening on me every second.

She held up the incriminated needle again. “Do you see this groove?” she asked, pointing to it with the tip of another.

I examined it once more at the light with the lens. A longitudinal groove, apparently ground into one side of the needle, lengthwise, by means of a small grinding-stone and emery powder, ran for a quarter of an inch above the point. This groove seemed to me to have been produced by an amateur, though he must have been one accustomed to delicate microscopic manipulation: for the edges under the lens showed slightly rough, like the surface of a file on a small scale, not smooth and polished as a needle-maker would have left them. I said so to Hilda.

“You are quite right,” she answered. “That is just what it shows. I feel sure Sebastian made that groove himself. He could have bought grooved needles, it is true, such as they sometimes use for retaining small quantities of lymphs and medicines, but we had none in stock, and to buy them would be to manufacture evidence against himself, in case of detection. Besides, the rough jagged edge would hold the material he wished to inject all the better, while its saw-like points would tear the flesh, imperceptibly but minutely, and so serve his purpose.”

“Which was?”

“Try the needle, and judge for yourself. I prefer you should find out. You can tell me to-morrow.”

“It was quick of you to detect it!” I cried, still turning the suspicious object over. “The difference is so slight.”

“Yes; but you tell me my eyes are as

sharp as the needle. Besides, I had reason to doubt, and Sebastian himself gave me the clue by selecting his instrument with too great deliberation. He had put it there with the rest, but it lay a little apart: and as he picked it up, gingerly, I began to doubt. When I saw the blue gleam, my doubt was at once converted into certainty. Then his eyes, too, had the look which I know means victory. Benign or baleful, it goes with his triumphs. I have seen that look before, and when once it lurks scintillating in the luminous depths of his gleaming eyeballs, I recognise at once that, whatever his aim, he has succeeded in it.”

“Still, Hilda, I am loth——”

She waved her hand impatiently. “Waste no time,” she cried, in an authoritative voice. “If you happen to let that needle rub carelessly against the sleeve of your coat, you may destroy the evidence. Take it at once to your room, plunge it into a culture, and lock it up safe at a proper temperature where Sebastian cannot get at it—till the consequences develop.”

I did as she bid me. By this time, I was not wholly unprepared for the result she anticipated. My belief in Sebastian had sunk to zero, and was rapidly reaching a negative quantity.

At nine the next morning, I tested one drop of the culture under the microscope. Clear and limpid to the naked eye, it was alive with small objects of a most suspicious nature, when properly magnified. I knew those hungry forms. Still, I would not decide off-hand on my own authority in a matter of such moment. Sebastian’s character was at stake—the character of the man who led the profession. I called in Callaghan, who happened to be in the ward, and asked him to put his eye to the instrument for a moment. He was a splendid fellow for the use of high powers, and I had magnified the culture 300 diameters. “What do you call those?” I asked, breathless.

He scanned them carefully with his experienced eye. “Is it the microbes ye mean?” he answered. “An’ what ’ud they be, then, if it wasn’t the bacillus of pyæmia?”

“Blood-poisoning!” I ejaculated, horror-struck.

“Aye: blood-poisoning: that’s the English of it.”

I assumed an air of indifference. “I made them that myself,” I rejoined, as if they were mere ordinary experimental germs: “but I wanted confirmation of my own opinion. You’re sure of the bacillus?”



"An' haven't I been keeping swarms of those very same bacteria under close observation for Sebastian for seven weeks past? Why, I know them as well as I know me own mother."

"Thank you," I said. "That will do."



"I KNOW THEM AS WELL AS I KNOW ME OWN MOTHER."

And I carried off the microscope, bacilli and all, into Hilda Wade's sitting-room. "Look yourself!" I cried to her.

She stared at them through the instrument with an unmoved face. "I thought so," she answered shortly. "The bacillus of pyæmia. A most virulent type. Exactly what I expected."

"You anticipated that result?"

"Absolutely. You see, blood-poisoning matures quick, and kills almost to a certainty. Delirium supervenes so soon that the patient has no chance of explaining suspicions. Besides, it would all seem so very natural! Everybody would say, 'She got some slight wound, which microbes from some case she was attending contaminated.' You may be sure Sebastian thought out all that. He plans with consummate skill. He had designed everything."

I gazed at her, uncertain. "And what will you do?" I asked. "Expose him?"

She opened both her palms with a blank gesture of helplessness. "It is useless," she answered. "Nobody would believe me. Consider the situation. You know the needle I gave you was the one Sebastian meant to use—the one he dropped and I caught—because you are a friend of mine, and because you have learned to trust me. But who else would credit it? I have only my word against his—an unknown nurse's against the great Professor's. Everybody would say I was malicious or hysterical. Hysteria is always an easy stone to fling at an injured woman who asks for justice. They would declare I had trumped up the case to forestall my dismissal. They would set it down to spite. We can do nothing against him. Remember, on his part, the utter absence of overt motive."

"And you mean to stop on here, in close attendance on a man who has attempted your life?" I cried, really alarmed for her safety.

"I am not sure about that," she answered. "I must take time to think. My presence at Nathaniel's was necessary to my Plan. The Plan fails for the present. I have now to look round and reconsider my position."

"But you are not safe here now," I urged, growing warm. "If Sebastian really wishes to get rid of you, and is as unscrupulous as you suppose, with his gigantic brain he can soon compass his end. What he plans he executes. You ought not to remain within the Professor's reach one hour longer."

"I have thought of that too," she replied, with an almost unearthly calm. "But there are difficulties either way. At any rate, I am glad he did not succeed this time. For to have killed me now would have frustrated my Plan. And my Plan"—she clasped her hands—"my Plan is ten thousand times dearer than life to me."

"Dear lady," I cried, drawing a deep breath, "I implore you in this strait, listen to



what I urge. Why fight your battle alone? Why refuse assistance? I have admired you so long—I am so eager to help you. If only you will allow me to call you——”

Her eyes brightened and softened. Her whole bosom heaved. I felt in a flash she was not wholly indifferent to me. Strange tremors in the air seemed to play about us. But she waved me aside once more. “Don’t press me,” she said, in a very low voice. “Let me go my own way. It is hard enough

it. I must think this thing out, undisturbed. It is a very great crisis.”

That afternoon and evening, by some unhappy chance, I was fully engaged in work at the hospital. Late at night, a letter arrived for me. I glanced at it in dismay. It bore the Basingstoke post-mark. But to my alarm and surprise, it was in Hilda’s hand. What could this change portend? I opened it, all tremulous.

“DEAR HUBERT——” I gave a sigh of relief. It was no longer “Dear Dr. Cumberledge” now, but “Hubert.” That was something gained, at any rate. I read on with a beating heart. What had Hilda to say to me?

“DEAR HUBERT,—By the time this reaches you, I shall be far away, irrevocably far, from London. With deep regret, with fierce searchings of spirit, I have come to the conclusion that, for the Purpose I have in view, it would be better for me at once to leave Nathaniel’s. Where I go or what I mean to do, I do not wish to tell you. Of your charity, I pray, refrain from asking me. I am aware that your kindness and generosity deserve better recognition. But, like Sebastian himself, I am the slave of my Purpose. I have lived for it all these years, and it is still very dear to me. To tell you my plans would interfere with that end. Do not, therefore, suppose I am insensible to your goodness . . . . Dear Hubert,

spare me—I dare not say more, lest I say too much. I dare not trust myself. But one thing I *must* say. I am flying from *you* quite as much as from Sebastian. Flying from my own heart quite as much as from my enemy. Some day, perhaps, if I accomplish my object, I may tell you all. Meanwhile I can only beg of you of your kindness to trust me. We shall not meet again, I fear, for years. But I shall never forget you—you, the kind counsellor, who have half turned me aside from my life’s purpose. One word more and I should falter.—In very great haste and amid much disturbance, yours ever affectionately and gratefully,

“HILDA.”

It was a hurried scrawl in pencil, as if written in a train. I felt utterly dejected. Was Hilda then leaving England?



“DON’T PRESS ME,” SHE SAID.”

already, this task I have undertaken, without *your* making it harder. . . . Dear friend, dear friend, you don’t quite understand. There are *two* men at Nathaniel’s whom I desire to escape—because they both alike stand in the way of my purpose.” She took my hand in hers. “Each in a different way,” she murmured once more. “But each I must avoid. One is Sebastian. The other——” she let my hand drop again and broke off suddenly. “Dear Hubert,” she cried, with a catch, “I cannot help it: forgive me!”

It was the first time she had ever called me by my Christian name. The mere sound of the word made me unspeakably happy.

Yet she waved me away. “Must I go?” I asked, quivering.

“Yes, yes, you must go. I cannot stand



Rousing myself after some minutes, I went straight to Sebastian's rooms, and told him in brief terms that Nurse Wade had disappeared at a moment's notice, and had sent a note to tell me so.

He looked up from his work and scanned me hard, as was his wont. "That is well," he said at last, his eyes glowing deep: "she was getting too great a hold on you, that young woman!"

"She retains that hold upon me, sir," I answered, curtly.

"You are making a grave mistake in life, my dear Cumberledge," he went on, in his old genial tone, which I had almost forgotten. "Before you go further and entangle yourself more deeply, I think it is only right that I should undeceive you as to this girl's true position. She is passing under a false name, and she comes of a tainted stock. . . . Nurse Wade, as she chooses to call herself, is a daughter of the notorious murderer, Yorke-Bannerman."

My mind leapt back to the incident of the broken basin. Yorke-Bannerman's name had profoundly moved her. Then I thought of Hilda's face. Murderers, I said to myself, do not beget such daughters as that. Not even accidental murderers like my poor friend Le Geyt. I saw at once the *prima facie*

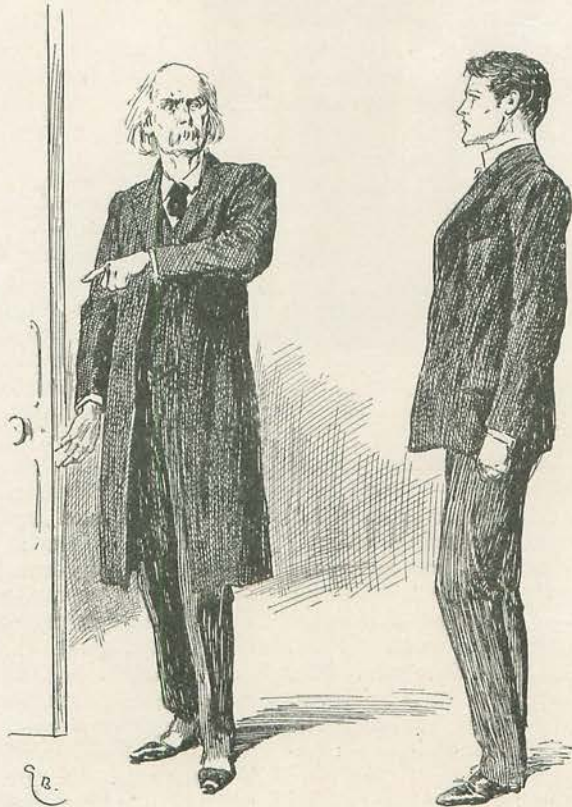
evidence was strongly against her. But I had faith in her still. I drew myself up firmly and stared him back full in the face. "I do not believe it," I answered, shortly.

"You do not believe it? I tell you it is so. The girl herself as good as acknowledged it to me."

I spoke slowly and distinctly. "Dr. Sebastian," I said, confronting him, "let us be quite clear with one another. I have found you out. I know how you tried to poison that lady. To poison her with bacilli which I detected. I cannot trust your word: I cannot trust your inferences. Either she is not Yorke-Bannerman's daughter at all, or else . . . . Yorke-Bannerman was *not* a murderer. . . ." I watched his face close. Conviction leaped upon me. "And someone else was," I went on. "I might put a name to him."

With a stern white face, he rose and opened the door. He pointed to it slowly. "This hospital is not big enough for you and me abreast," he said with cold politeness. "One or other of us must go. Which, I leave it to your good sense to determine."

Even at that moment of detection and disgrace, in one man's eyes at least, Sebastian retained his full measure of dignity.



"THIS HOSPITAL IS NOT BIG ENOUGH FOR YOU AND ME ABREAST."