

# Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

## VI.—THE EPISODE OF THE LETTER WITH THE BASINGSTOKE POST-MARK.



HAVE a vast respect for my grandfather. He was a man of forethought. He left me a modest little income of seven hundred a year, well invested. Now, seven hundred a year is not exactly wealth; but it is an unobtrusive competence: it permits a bachelor to move about the world and choose at will his own profession. I chose medicine: but I was not wholly dependent upon it. So I honoured my grandfather's wise disposition of his worldly goods: though, oddly enough, my cousin Tom (to whom he left his watch and five hundred pounds) speaks *most* disrespectfully of his character and intellect.

Thanks to my grandfather's silken-sailed barque, therefore, when I found myself practically dismissed from Nathaniel's, I was not thrown on my beam-ends, as most young men in my position would have been: I had time and opportunity for the favourite pastime of looking about me. Of course, had I chosen, I might have fought the case to the bitter end against Sebastian: he could not dismiss me—that lay with the committee. But I hardly cared to fight. In the first place, though I had found him out as a man, I still respected him as a great teacher: and

in the second place (which is always more important), I wanted to find and follow Hilda.

To be sure, Hilda, in that enigmatic letter of hers, had implored me not to seek her out: but I think you will admit there is one request which no man can grant to the girl he loves—and that is the request to keep away from her. If Hilda did not want *me*, I wanted Hilda: and being a man, I meant to find her.

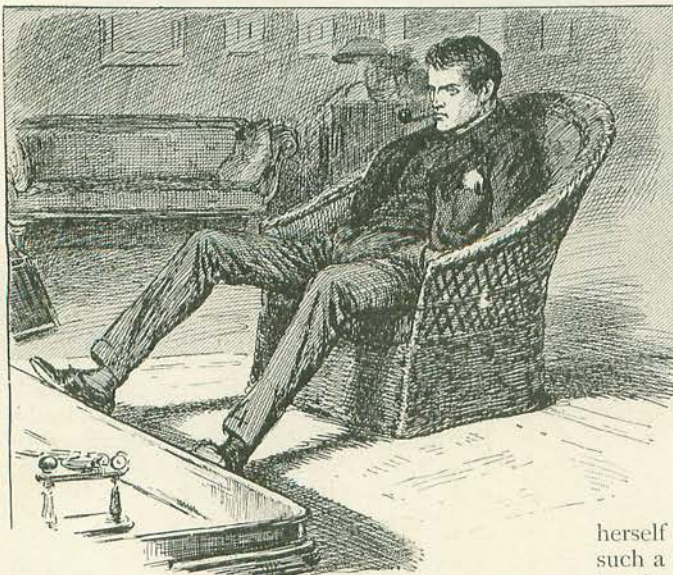
My chances of discovering her whereabouts, however, I had to confess to myself (when it came to the point) were extremely slender. She had vanished from my horizon, melted into space: my sole hint of a clue consisted in the fact that the letter she sent me had been posted at Basingstoke. Here then was my problem: given an envelope with the Basingstoke postmark, to find in what part of Europe, Asia, Africa, or America the writer of it might be discovered. It opened up a fine field for speculation.

When I set out to face this broad puzzle, my first idea was: "I must ask Hilda." In all circumstances of difficulty I had grown accustomed to submitting my doubts and surmises to her acute intelligence; and her instinct almost always supplied the right solution. But now Hilda was gone; it was

Hilda herself I wished to track through the labyrinth of the world; I could expect no assistance in tracking her from Hilda.

"Let me think," I said to myself, over a reflective pipe, with feet poised on the fender. "How would Hilda herself have approached this problem? Imagine I'm Hilda. I must try to strike a trail by applying her own methods to her own character. She would have attacked the question, no doubt"—here I eyed my pipe wisely—"from the psychological side: she would have asked

herself"—I stroked my chin—"what such a temperament as hers was likely to do under such-and-such circum-



"OVER A REFLECTIVE PIPE."

stances. And she would have answered it aright. But then"—I puffed away once or twice—"she is Hilda."

When I came to reconnoitre the matter in this light, I became at once aware how great a gulf separated the clumsy male intelligence from the immediate and almost unerring intuitions of a clever woman. I am considered no fool: in my own profession, I may venture to say, I was Sebastian's favourite pupil. Yet, though I asked myself over and over again where Hilda would be likely to go—Canada, China, Australia—as the outcome of her character, in these given conditions, I got no answer. I stared at the fire and reflected. I smoked two successive pipes, and shook out the ashes. "Let me consider how Hilda's temperament would work," I said, looking sagacious. I said it several times—but there I stuck. I went no further. The solution would not come. I felt that in order to play Hilda's part it was necessary first to have Hilda's head-piece. Not every man can bend the bow of Ulysses.

As I turned the problem over in my mind, however, one phrase at last came back to me—a phrase which Hilda herself had let fall when we were debating a very similar point about poor Hugo Le Geyt: "If I were in his place, what do you think I would do?—why, hide myself at once in the greenest recesses of our Carnarvonshire mountains."

She must have gone to Wales, then. I had her own authority for saying so. . . . And yet—Wales? Wales? I pulled myself up with a jerk: in that case, how did she come to be passing by Basingstoke?

Was the postmark a blind? Had she hired someone to take the letter somewhere for her, on purpose to put me off on a false track? I could hardly think so. Besides, the time was against it. I saw Hilda at Nathaniel's in the morning: the very same evening I received the envelope with the Basingstoke postmark.

"If I were in his place": yes, true; but, now I come to think on it, *were* the positions really parallel? Hilda was not flying for her life from justice: she was only endeavouring to escape Sebastian—and myself. The instances she had quoted of the mountaineer's curious homing instinct—the wild yearning he feels at moments of great straits to bury himself among the nooks of his native hills—were they not all instances of murderers pursued by the police? It was abject terror that drove these men to their burrows. But Hilda was not a murderer: she was not

dogged by remorse, despair, or the myrmidons of the law: it was murder she was avoiding, not the punishment of murder. That made, of course, an obvious difference. "Irrevocably far from London," she said. Wales is a suburb. I gave up the idea that it was likely to prove her place of refuge from the two men she was bent on escaping. Hong-Kong, after all, seemed more probable than Llanberis.

That first failure gave me a clue, however, as to the best way of applying Hilda's own methods. "What would such a person do under the circumstances?" that was her way of putting the question. Clearly, then, I must first decide what *were* the circumstances. Was Sebastian speaking the truth? Was Hilda Wade, or was she not, the daughter of the supposed murderer, Dr. Yorke-Bannerman?

I looked up as much of the case as I could, in unobtrusive ways, among the old law-reports, and found that the barrister who had had charge of the defence was my father's old friend, Mr. Horace Mayfield, a man of elegant tastes, and the means to gratify them.

I went to call on him on Sunday evening at his artistically luxurious house in Onslow Gardens. A sedate footman answered the bell. Fortunately, Mr. Mayfield was at home, and, what is rarer, disengaged. You do not always find a successful Q.C. at his ease among his books, beneath the electric light, ready to give up a vacant hour to friendly colloquy.

"Remember Yorke-Bannerman's case?" he said, a huge smile breaking slowly like a wave over his genial fat face—Horace Mayfield resembles a great good-humoured toad, with bland manners and a capacious double chin—"I should just say I *did*! Bless my soul—why, yes," he beamed, "I was Yorke-Bannerman's counsel. Excellent fellow, Yorke-Bannerman—most unfortunate end, though—precious clever chap, too! Had an astounding memory. Recollected every symptom of every patient he ever attended. And *such* an eye! Diagnosis? It was clairvoyance! A gift—no less. Knew what was the matter with you the moment he looked at you."

That sounded like Hilda. The same surprising power of recalling facts: the same keen faculty for interpreting character or the signs of feeling. "He poisoned somebody, I believe," I murmured, casually. "An uncle of his, or something."

Mayfield's great squat face wrinkled: the double chin, folding down on the neck,

became more ostentatiously double than ever. "Well, I can't admit that," he said, in his suave voice, twirling the string of his eye-glass. "I was Yorke-Bannerman's advocate, you see; and therefore I was paid not to admit it. Besides, he was a friend of mine, and I always liked him. But I *will* allow that the case *did* look a trifle black against him."

"Ha? Looked black, did it?" I faltered.

The judicious barrister shrugged his shoulders. A genial smile spread oilily once more over his smooth face. "None of my business to say so," he answered, puckering the corners of his eyes. "Still, it was a long time ago: and the circumstances certainly *were* suspicious. Perhaps on the whole, Hubert, it was just as well the poor fellow died before the trial came off: otherwise"—he pouted his lips—"I might have had my work cut out to save him." And he eyed the blue china gods on the mantelpiece affectionately.

"I believe the Crown urged money as the motive," I suggested.

Mayfield glanced inquiry at me. "Now, why do you want to know all this?" he asked, in a suspicious voice, coming back from his dragons. "It is irregular, very, to worm information out of an innocent barrister in his hours of ease about a former client. We are a guleless race, we lawyers: don't abuse our confidence."

He seemed an honest man, I thought, in spite of his mocking tone. I trusted him, and made a clean breast of it. "I believe," I answered, with an impressive little pause, "I want to marry Yorke-Bannerman's daughter."

He gave a quick start. "What, Maisie?" he exclaimed.

I shook my head. "No, no; that is not the name," I replied.

He hesitated a moment. "But there *is* no other," he hazarded cautiously at last. "I knew the family."

"I am not sure of it," I went on. "I have merely my suspicions. I am in love with a girl, and something about her makes me think she is probably a Yorke-Bannerman."

"But, my dear Hubert, if that is so," the great lawyer went on, waving me off with one fat hand, "it must be at once apparent to you that *I* am the last person on earth to whom you ought to apply for information. Remember my oath. The practice of our clan: the seal of secrecy!"

I was frank once more. "I do not know whether the lady I mean is or is not Yorke-

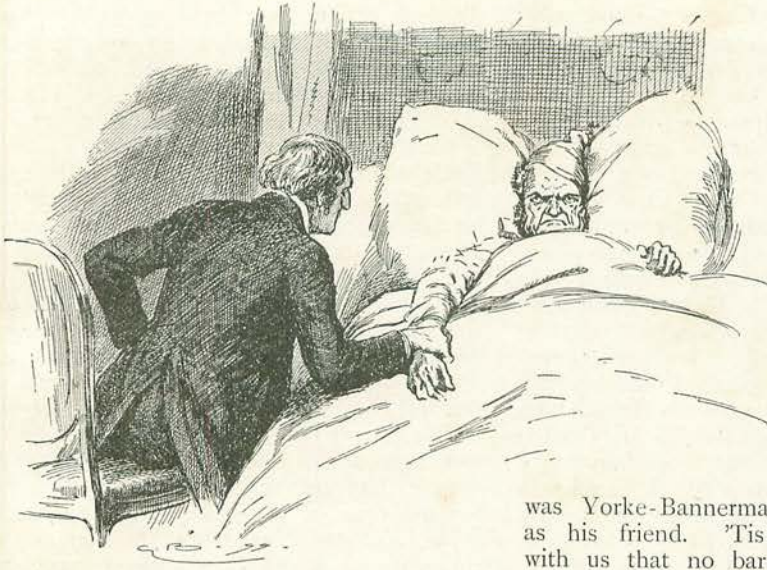
Bannerman's daughter," I persisted. "She may be, and she may not. She gives another name—that's certain. But whether she is or isn't, one thing I know—I mean to marry her. I believe in her: I trust her. I only seek to gain this information now because I don't know where she is—and I want to track her."

He crossed his big hands with an air of Christian resignation, and looked up at the panels of the coffered ceiling. "In that," he answered, "I may honestly say, I can't help you. Humbug apart, I have not known Mrs. Yorke-Bannerman's address—or Maisie's either—ever since my poor friend's death. Prudent woman, Mrs. Yorke-Bannerman! She went away, I believe, to somewhere in North Wales, and afterwards to Brittany. But she probably changed her name: and—she did not confide in me."

I went on to ask him a few questions about the case, premising that I did so in the most friendly spirit. "Oh, I can only tell you what is publicly known," he answered, beaming, with the usual professional pretence of the most sphinx-like reticence. "But the plain facts, as universally admitted, were these. I break no confidence. Yorke-Bannerman had a rich uncle from whom he had expectations—a certain Admiral Scott Prideaux. This uncle had lately made a will in Yorke-Bannerman's favour; but he was a cantankerous old chap—naval, you know—autocratic—crusty—given to changing his mind with each change of the wind, and easily offended by his relations—the sort of cheerful old party who makes a new will once every month, disinheriting the nephew he last dined with. Well, one day the Admiral was taken ill at his own house, and Yorke-Bannerman attended him. *Our* contention was—I speak now as my old friend's counsel—that Scott Prideaux, getting as tired of life as we were all tired of him, and weary of this recurrent worry of will-making, determined at last to clear out for good from a world where he was so little appreciated, and, therefore, tried to poison himself."

"With aconitine?" I suggested, eagerly.

"Unfortunately, yes: he made use of aconitine for that otherwise laudable purpose. Now, as ill luck would have it"—Mayfield's wrinkles deepened—"Yorke-Bannerman and Sebastian, then two rising doctors engaged in physiological researches together, had just been occupied in experimenting upon this very drug—testing the use of aconitine—indeed, you will no doubt remember"—he crossed his fat hands again comfortably—"it was these precise researches



"THE ADMIRAL WAS TAKEN ILL."

on a then little-known poison that first brought Sebastian prominently before the public. What was the consequence?" His smooth, persuasive voice flowed on as if I were a concentrated jury. "The Admiral grew rapidly worse, and insisted upon calling in a second opinion. No doubt he didn't like the aconitine when it came to the pinch—for it *does* pinch, I can tell you—and repented him of his evil. Yorke-Bannerman suggested Sebastian as the second opinion; the uncle acquiesced; Sebastian was called in, and, of course, being fresh from his researches, immediately recognised the symptoms of aconitine poisoning."

"What, Sebastian found it out?" I cried, starting.

"Oh, yes. Sebastian. He watched the case from that point to the end; and the oddest part of it all was this—that though he communicated with the police, and himself prepared every morsel of food that the poor old Admiral took from that moment forth, the symptoms continually increased in severity. The police contention was that Yorke-Bannerman somehow managed to put the stuff into the milk beforehand; my own theory was—as counsel for the accused—he blinked his fat eyes—"that old Prideaux had concealed a large quantity of aconitine in the bed, before his illness, and went on taking it from time to time—just to spite his nephew."

"And you *believe* that, Mr. Mayfield?"

The broad smile broke concentrically in

ripples over the great lawyer's face. His smile was Mayfield's main feature. He shrugged his shoulders and expanded his big hands wide open before him. "My dear Hubert," he said, with a most humorous expression of countenance, "you are a professional man yourself: therefore you know that every profession has its own little courtesies—its own small fictions. I

was Yorke-Bannerman's counsel as well as his friend. 'Tis a point of honour with us that no barrister will ever admit a doubt as to a client's innocence—is he not paid to maintain it?—and to my dying day I will constantly maintain that old Prideaux poisoned himself. Maintain it with that dogged and meaningless obstinacy with which we always cling to whatever is least provable. . . . Oh, yes. He poisoned himself. And Yorke-Bannerman was innocent. . . . But still, you know, it *was* the sort of case where an acute lawyer, with a reputation to make, would prefer to be for the Crown rather than for the prisoner."

"But it was never tried," I ejaculated.

"No, happily for us, it was never tried. Fortune favoured us. Yorke-Bannerman had a weak heart, a conveniently weak heart, which the inquest sorely affected; and besides, he was deeply angry at what he persisted in calling Sebastian's defection. He evidently thought Sebastian ought to have stood by him. His colleague preferred the claims of public duty—as he understood them, I mean—to those of private friendship. It was a very sad case—for Yorke-Bannerman was really a charming fellow. But I confess I *was* relieved when he died unexpectedly on the morning of his arrest. It took off my shoulders a most serious burden."

"You think, then, the case would have gone against him?"

"My dear Hubert," his whole face puckered with an indulgent smile. "Of course the case must have gone against us. Juries are fools, but they are not such fools as to swallow everything—like ostriches: to let me throw dust in their eyes about so plain an issue. Con-

sider the facts, consider them impartially: Yorke-Bannerman had easy access to aconitine, had whole ounces of it in his possession: he treated the uncle from whom he was to inherit: he was in temporary embarrassments—that came out at the inquest: it was known that the Admiral had just made a twenty-third will in his favour, and that the Admiral's wills were liable to alteration every time a nephew ventured upon an opinion in politics, religion, science, navigation, or the right card at whist, differing by a shade from that of the uncle. The Admiral died of aconitine poisoning: and Sebastian observed and detailed the symptoms. Could anything be plainer—I mean, could any combination of fortuitous circumstances”—he blinked pleasantly again—“be more adverse to an advocate sincerely convinced of his client's innocence—as a professional duty?” And he gazed at me comically.

The more he piled up the case against the man who I now felt sure was Hilda's father, the less did I believe him. A dark conspiracy seemed to loom up in the background. “Has it ever occurred to you,” I asked at last, in a very tentative tone, “that perhaps—I throw out the hint as the merest suggestion—perhaps it may have been Sebastian who—”

He smiled this time till I thought his smile would swallow him.

“If Yorke-Bannerman had *not* been my client,” he mused aloud, “I might have been inclined to suspect rather that Sebastian aided him to avoid justice by giving him something violent to take, if he wished it: something which might accelerate the inevitable action of the heart-disease from which he was suffering. Isn't *that* more likely?”

I saw there was nothing further to be got out of Mayfield. His opinion was fixed: he was a placid ruminant. But he had given me already much food for thought. I thanked him for his assistance, and returned on foot to my rooms at the hospital.

I was now, however, in a somewhat

different position for tracking Hilda from that which I occupied before my interview with the famous counsel. I felt certain by this time that Hilda Wade and Maisie Yorke-Bannerman were one and the same person. To be sure, it gave me a twinge to think that Hilda should be masquerading under an assumed name: but I waived that question for the moment, and awaited her explanations. The great point now was to find Hilda. She was flying from Sebastian to mature a new plan. But whither? I proceeded to argue it out on her own principles, oh, how lamely! The world is still so big! Mauritius, the Argentine, British Columbia, New Zealand!

The letter I had received bore the Basingstoke postmark. Now, a person may be passing Basingstoke on his way either to Southampton or Plymouth, both of which are ports of embarkation for various foreign countries. I attached importance to that clue. Something about the tone of Hilda's



“I THOUGHT HIS SMILE WOULD SWALLOW HIM.”

letter made me realize that she intended to put the sea between us. In concluding so much, I felt sure I was not

mistaken. Hilda had too big and too cosmopolitan a mind to speak of being “irrevocably far from London,” if she were only going to some town in England, or even to Normandy or the Channel Islands. “Irrevocably far” pointed rather to a destination outside Europe altogether—to India, Africa, America, not to Jersey, Dieppe, or Saint-Malo.

Was it Southampton or Plymouth to which she was first bound?—that was the next

question. I inclined to Southampton. For the sprawling lines (so different from her usual neat hand) were written hurriedly in a train, I could see: and on consulting Bradshaw, I found that the Plymouth expresses stop longest at Salisbury, where Hilda would therefore have been likely to post her note if she were going to the far west: while some of the Southampton trains stop at Basingstoke, which is indeed the most convenient point on that route for sending off a letter. This was mere blind guess-work, to be sure, compared with Hilda's immediate and unerring intuition: but it had some probability in its favour, at any rate. Try both: of the two, she was likeliest to be going to Southampton.

My next move was to consult the list of outgoing steamers. Hilda had left London on a Saturday morn-

ing. Now, on alternate Saturdays, the steamers of the Castle Line sail from Southampton, where they call to take up passengers and mails. Was this one of these alternate Saturdays? I looked at the list of dates: it was. That told further in favour of Southampton. But did any steamer of any passenger line sail from Plymouth on the same day? None, that I could find. Or from Southampton elsewhere? I looked them all up. The Royal Mail Company's boats start on Wednesdays: the North German Lloyd's on Wednesdays and Sundays. Those were the only likely vessels I could discover. Either, then, I concluded, Hilda meant to sail on Saturday by the Castle Line for South Africa, or else on Sunday by North German Lloyd for some part of America.

How I longed for one hour of Hilda to help me out with her almost infallible instinct. I realized how feeble and fallacious was my own groping in the dark. Her knowledge of temperament would have revealed to her at once what I was trying to discover, like the police she despised, by the clumsy "clues" which so roused her sarcasm.

However, I went to bed and slept on it. Next morning, I determined to set out for

Southampton on a tour of inquiry to all the steamboat agencies. If that failed, I could go on to Plymouth.

But, as chance would have it, the morning post brought me an unexpected letter, which helped me not a little in unravelling the problem. It was a crumpled letter, written on rather soiled paper, in an uneducated hand, and it bore, like Hilda's, the Basingstoke postmark.

"Charlotte Churtwood sends her duty to Dr.

Cumberledge," it said, with somewhat uncertain spelling, "and I am very sorry that I was not able to Post the letter to you in London, as the lady ast me, but after her train ad left has I was stepping into mine the Ingine started and I was knocked down and badly hurt and the lady give me a half-sovering to Post it in London has



"THE BASINGSTOKE POSTMARK."

soon as I got there but bein unable to do so I now return it dear sir not knowing the lady's name and adress she having trusted me through seeing me on the platform, and perhaps you can send it back to her, and was very sorry I could not Post it were she ast me, but time bein an object put it in the box in Basingstoke station and now inclose post office order for ten Shillings whitch dear sir kindly let the young lady have from your obedient servant, Charlotte Churtwood." In the corner was the address, "11, Chubb's Cottages, Basingstoke."

The happy accident of this letter advanced things for me greatly—though it also made me feel how dependent I was upon happy accidents, where Hilda would have guessed right at once by mere knowledge of character. Still, the letter explained many things which had hitherto puzzled me. I had felt not a little surprise that Hilda, wishing to withdraw from me and leave no traces, should have sent off her farewell letter from Basingstoke—so as to let me see at once in what direction she was travelling. Nay, I even wondered at times whether she had really posted it herself at Basingstoke, or given it to somebody who chanced to be going there to post for her as a blind. But I did not

think she would deliberately deceive me; and, in my opinion, to get a letter posted at Basingstoke would be deliberate deception, while to get it posted in London was mere vague precaution. I understood now that she had written it in the train, and then picked out a likely person as she passed to take it to Waterloo for her.

Of course I went straight down to Basingstoke, and called at once at Chubb's Cottages. It was a squalid little row on the outskirts of the town. I found Charlotte Churtwood herself exactly such a girl as Hilda, with her quick judgment of character, might have hit upon for such a purpose. She was a conspicuously honest and transparent country servant, of the lumpy type, on her way to London to take a place as housemaid. Her injuries were severe, but not dangerous. "The lady saw me on the platform," she said, "and beckoned to me to come to her. She ast me where I was going, and I says, 'To London, miss.' Says she, smiling kind-like, 'Could you post a letter for me, certain sure?' Says I, 'You can depend upon me.' An' then she give me the 'arf-sovering, an' says, says she, 'Mind, it's *very* partickler: if the gentleman don't get it, 'e'll fret 'is 'eart out.' An' through 'aving a young man o' my own, as is a groom at Andover, o' course I understood 'er, sir. An' then, feeling all full of it, as you may say, what with the arf-sovering, and what with one thing and what with another, an' all of a fluster with not being used to travelling, I run up, when the train for London come in, an' tried to scramble into it, afore it 'ad quite stopped moving. An' a guard, 'e rushes up, an' 'Stand back!' says 'e; 'wait till the train stops!' says 'e, an' waves his red flag at me. But afore I could stand back, with one foot on the step, the train sort of jumped away from me, and knocked me down like this: and they say it'll be a week now afore I'm well enough to go on to London. But I posted the letter all the same, at Basingstoke station, as they was carrying me off: an' I took down the address, so as to return the arf-sovering."

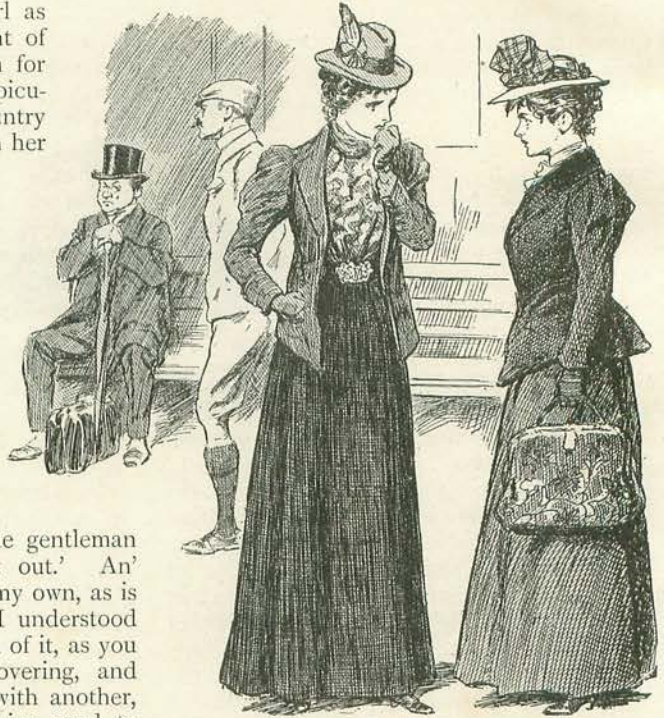
Hilda was right, as always. She had chosen instinctively the trustworthy person. Chosen her at first sight, and hit the bull's-eye.

"Do you know what train the lady was

in?" I asked, as she paused. "Where was it going, did you notice?"

"It was the Southampton train, sir. I saw the board on the carriage."

That settled the question. "You are a good and an honest girl," I said, pulling out my purse: "and you came to this misfortune through trying—too eagerly—to help the young lady. A ten-pound note is not over much as compensation for your accident. Take it, and get well. I should be sorry to



"SHE AST ME WHERE I WAS GOING."

think you lost a good place through your anxiety to help us."

The rest of my way was plain sailing now. I hurried on straight to Southampton. There, my first visit was to the office of the Castle Line. I went to the point at once. Was there a Miss Wade among the passengers by the *Dunottar Castle*?

No: nobody of that name on the list.

Had any lady taken a passage at the last moment?

The clerk perpended. Yes: a lady had come by the mail train from London, with no heavy baggage, and had gone on board direct, taking what cabin she could get. A young lady in grey. Quite unprepared. Gave no name. Called away in a hurry.

What sort of lady?

Youngish : good-looking : brown hair and eyes, the clerk thought : a sort of creamy skin : and a—well, a mesmeric kind of glance that seemed to go right through you.

"That will do," I answered, sure now of my quarry. "To which port did she book?"

"To Cape Town."

"Very well," I said, promptly. "You may reserve me a good berth in the next outgoing steamer."

It was just like Hilda's impulsive character to rush off in this way at a moment's notice. And just like mine to follow her. But it piqued me a little to think that but for the accident of an accident I might never have tracked her down. If the letter had been posted in London as she intended, and not at Basingstoke, I might have sought in vain for her from then till Doomsday.

Ten days later, I was afloat on the Channel, bound for South Africa.

I always admired Hilda's astonishing insight into character and motive : but I never admired it quite so profoundly as on the glorious day when we arrived at Cape Town. I was standing on deck, looking out for the first time in my life on that tremendous view—the steep and massive bulk of Table Mountain, a mere lump of rock, dropped loose from the sky, with the long white town spread gleaming at its base, and the silver-tree plantations that cling to its lower slopes and merge by degrees into gardens and vineyards—when a messenger from the shore came up to me tentatively.

"Dr. Cumberledge?" he said, in an inquiring tone.

I nodded. "That is my name."

"I have a letter for you, sir."

I took it, in great surprise. Who on earth in Cape Town could have known I was coming? I had not a friend to my knowledge in the colony. I glanced at the envelope. My wonder deepened. That prescient brain! It was in Hilda's handwriting.

I tore it open and read: "MY DEAR HUBERT,—I *know* you will come : I *know* you will follow me. So I am leaving this letter at Donald Currie and Co.'s office, giving their agent instructions to hand it to you as soon as you reach Cape Town. I am quite sure you will track me so far at least : I understand your temperament. But I beg you, I implore you, to go no further. You will ruin my plan if you do. And I still adhere to it. It is good of you to come so far : I cannot blame you for that. I know your motives. But do not try to find me

out. I warn you beforehand, it will be quite useless. I have made up my mind. I have an object in life, and dear as you are to me—*that* I will not pretend to deny—I can never allow even *you* to interfere with it. So be warned in time. Go back quietly by the next steamer.

"Your ever attached and grateful,

"HILDA."

I read it twice through with a little thrill of joy. Did any man ever court so strange a love? Her very strangeness drew me. But go back by the next steamer! I felt sure of one thing : Hilda was far too good a judge of character to believe that I was likely to obey that mandate.

I will not trouble you with the remaining stages of my quest. Except for the slowness of South African mail coaches, they were comparatively easy. It is not so hard to track strangers in Cape Town as strangers in London. I followed Hilda to her hotel, and from her hotel up country, stage after stage—jolted by rail, worse jolted by mule-waggon—inquiring, inquiring, inquiring—till I learned at last she was somewhere in Rhodesia.

That is a big address ; but it does not cover as many names as it covers square miles. In time, I found her. Still, it took time : and before we met, Hilda had had leisure to settle down quietly to her new existence. People in Rhodesia had noted her coming, as a new portent, because of one strange peculiarity. She was the only woman of means who had ever gone up of her own free will to Rhodesia. Other women had gone there to accompany their husbands, or to earn their livings : but that a lady should freely select that half-baked land as a place of residence—a lady of position with all the world before her where to choose—that puzzled the Rhodesians. So she was a marked person. Most people solved the vexed problem, indeed, by suggesting that she had designs against the stern celibacy of a leading South African politician. "Depend upon it," they said, "it's Rhodes she's after." The moment I arrived at Salisbury and stated my object in coming, all the world in the new town was ready to assist me. The lady was to be found (vaguely speaking) on a young farm to the north—a budding farm whose general direction was expansively indicated to me by a wave of the arm, with South African uncertainty.

I bought a pony at Salisbury—a pretty little seasoned sorrel mare—and set out to find Hilda. My way lay over a brand-new



road—or what passes for a road in South Africa—very soft and lumpy, like an English cart-track. I am a fair cross-country rider in our own Midlands, but I never rode a more tedious journey than that one. I had crawled several miles under a blazing sun along the shadeless new track, on my African pony, when to my surprise I saw, of all sights in the world, a bicycle coming towards me.

I could hardly believe my eyes. Civiliza-

the mere sight of a bicycle, bumping over the rubbly road, was a sufficient surprise: but my astonishment reached a climax when I saw as it drew near that it was ridden by a woman!

One moment later I had burst into a wild cry, and rode forward to her hurriedly. "Hilda!" I shouted aloud in my excitement, "Hilda!"

She stepped lightly from her pedals as if

it had been in the park: head erect and proud: eyes liquid, lustrous. I dismounted, trembling, and stood beside her. In the wild joy of the moment, for the first time in my life, I kissed her fervently. Hilda took the kiss, unrepining. She did not attempt to refuse me.

"So you have come at last!" she murmured, with a glow on her face, half nestling towards me, half withdrawing, as if two wills tore her

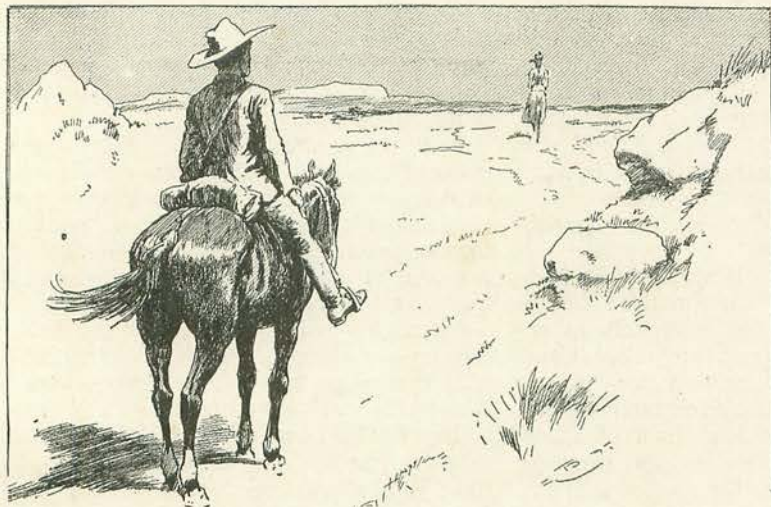
in different directions. "I have been expecting you for some days, and somehow, to-day, I was almost certain you were coming!"

"Then you are not angry with me?" I cried. "You remember, you forbid me!"

"Angry with you? Dear Hubert, could I ever be angry with you, especially for thus showing me your devotion and your trust? I am never angry with you. When one knows, one understands. I have thought of you so often: sometimes, alone here in this raw new land, I have longed for you to come. It is inconsistent of me, of course: but I am so solitary, so lonely!"

"And yet you begged me not to follow you!"

She looked up at me shyly—I was not accustomed to see Hilda shy. Her eyes gazed deep into mine beneath the long soft lashes. "I begged you not to follow me," she repeated, a strange gladness in her tone. "Yes, dear Hubert, I begged you—and I meant it. Cannot you understand that sometimes one hopes a thing may never happen—



"I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE MY EYES."

tion indeed! A bicycle in these remotest wilds of Africa!

I had been picking my way for some hours through a desolate plateau—the high veldt—about five thousand feet above the sea level, and entirely treeless. In places, to be sure, a few low bushes of prickly aspect rose in tangled clumps; but for the most part the arid table-land was covered by a thick growth of short brown grass, about nine inches high, burnt up in the sun, and most wearisome to look at. The distressing nakedness of a new country confronted me. Here and there a bald farm or two had been literally pegged out—the pegs were almost all one saw of them as yet: the fields were in the future. Here and there, again, a scattered range of low granite hills, known locally as kopjes—red, rocky prominences, flaunting in the sunshine—diversified the distance. But the road, itself, such as it was, lay all on the high plain, looking down now and again into gorges or kloofs, wooded on their slopes with scrubby trees, and comparatively well-watered. In the midst of all this crude, unfinished land

and is supremely happy because it happens in spite of one? I have a purpose in life for which I live: I live for it still: for its sake I told you you must not come to me. Yet you *have* come against my orders: and——” she paused and drew a deep sigh—“oh, Hubert, I thank you for daring to disobey me.”

I clasped her to my bosom. She allowed me, half resisting. “I am too weak,” she murmured. “Only this morning I made up my mind that when I saw you I would implore you to return at once. And now that you are here——” she laid her little hand confidently in mine—“see how foolish I am!—I cannot dismiss you.”

“Which means to say, Hilda, that after all you are still a woman!”

“A woman: oh, yes: very much a woman! Hubert, I love you: I half wish I did not.”

“Why, darling?” I drew her to me.

“Because—if I did not, I could send you away—so easily! As it is—I cannot let you stop—and . . . I cannot dismiss you.”

“Then divide it,” I cried gaily: “do neither: come away with me!”

“No, no: nor that either. I will not stultify my whole past life: I will not dishonour my dear father’s memory.”

I looked around for something to which to tether my horse. A bridle is in one’s way—when one has to discuss important business. There was really nothing about that seemed fit for the purpose. Hilda saw what I sought, and pointed mutely to a stunted bush beside a big granite boulder which rose abruptly from the dead level of the grass, affording a little shade from that sweltering sunlight. I tied my mare to the gnarled root—it was the only part big enough—and sat down by Hilda’s side under the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land. I realized at that moment the force and appropriateness of

the Psalmist’s simile. The sun beat fiercely on the seeding grasses. Away on the southern horizon we could faintly perceive the floating yellow haze of the prairie fires lit by the Mashonas.

“Then you knew I would come?” I began, as she seated herself on the burnt-up herbage, while my hand stole into hers to nestle there naturally.

She pressed it in return. “Oh, yes, I



“THEN YOU KNEW I WOULD COME?”

knew you would come,” she answered, with that strange ring of confidence in her voice. “Of course you got my letter at Cape Town?”

“I did, Hilda—and I wondered at you more than ever as I read it. But if you *knew* I would come, why write to prevent me?”

Her eyes had their mysterious far-away air. She looked out upon infinity. “Well, I wanted to do my best to turn you aside,” she said, slowly. “One must always do one’s best, even when one feels and believes it is useless. That surely is the first clause in a doctor’s or a nurse’s rubric.”

“But *why* didn’t you want me to come?” I persisted. “Why fight against your own heart? Hilda, I am sure—I *know* you love me.”

Her bosom rose and fell. Her eyes dilated. “Love you?” she cried, looking away over the bushy ridges, as if afraid to trust herself.

"Oh, yes, Hubert, I love you. It is not for *that* that I wish to avoid you. Or rather, it is just because of that. I cannot endure to spoil your life—by a fruitless affection."

"Why fruitless?" I asked, leaning forward.

She crossed her hands resignedly. "You know all by this time," she answered. "Sebastian would tell you, of course, when you went to announce that you were leaving Nathaniel's. He could not do otherwise: it is the outcome of his temperament—an integral part of his nature."

"Hilda," I cried, "you are a witch! How *could* you know that? I can't imagine."

She smiled her restrained Chaldean smile. "Because I *know* Sebastian," she answered, quietly. "I can read that man to the core. He is simple as a book. His composition is plain, straightforward, quite natural, uniform. There are no twists and turns in him. Once learn the key, and it discloses everything, like an *open sesame!* He has a gigantic intellect, a burning thirst for knowledge: one love, one hobby—science: and no moral instincts. He goes straight for his ends: and whatever comes in his way," she dug her little heel in the brown soil, "he tramples on it as ruthlessly as a child will trample on a worm or a beetle."

"And yet," I said, "he is so great."

"Yes, great I grant you, but the easiest character to unravel that I have ever met: it is calm, austere, unbending, yet not in the least degree complex. He has the impassioned temperament, pushed to its highest pitch: the temperament that runs deep, with irresistible force: but the passion that inspires him, that carries him away headlong, as love carries some men—is a rare and abstract one—the passion of science."

I gazed at her as she spoke, with a feeling akin to awe. "It must destroy the plot-interest of life for you, Hilda," I cried—out there in the vast void of that wild African plateau—"to foresee so well what each person will do—how each will act under such given circumstances."

She pulled a bent of grass and plucked off its dry spikelets one by one. "Perhaps so," she answered, after a meditative pause; "though, of course, all natures are not equally simple. Only with great souls can you be sure beforehand like that, for good or for evil. It is essential to anything worth calling character that one should be able to predict in what way it will act under given circumstances—to feel certain, 'This man will do nothing small or mean,' 'That one could never act dishonestly, or speak

deceitfully.' But smaller natures are more complex. They defy analysis, because their motives are not consistent."

"Most people think to be complex is to be great," I objected.

She shook her head. "That is quite a mistake," she answered. "Great natures are simple and relatively predictable, since their motives balance one another justly. Small natures are complex and hard to predict, because small passions, small jealousies, small discords and perturbations come in at all moments, and override for a time the permanent underlying factors of character. Great natures, good or bad, are equably poised: small natures let petty motives intervene to upset their balance."

"Then you knew I would come," I exclaimed, half pleased to find I belonged inferentially to her higher category.

Her eyes beamed on me with a beautiful light. "Knew you would come? Oh, yes. I begged you not to come: but I felt sure you were too deeply in earnest to obey me. I asked a friend in Cape Town to telegraph your arrival: and almost ever since the telegram reached me I have been expecting you and awaiting you."

"So you believed in me?"

"Implicitly—as you in me. That is the worst of it, Hubert. If you did *not* believe in me I could have told you all—and then, you would have left me. But, as it is, you *know* all—and yet, you want to cling to me."

"You know I know all—because Sebastian told me?"

"Yes: and I think I even know how you answered him."

"How?"

She paused. The calm smile lighted up her face once more. Then she drew out a pencil. "You think life must lack plot-interest for me," she began, slowly, "because, with certain natures, I can partially guess beforehand what is coming. But have you not observed that, in reading a novel, part of the pleasure you feel arises from your conscious anticipation of the end, and your satisfaction in seeing that you anticipated correctly? Or part, sometimes, from the occasional unexpectedness of the real *dénouement*? Well, life is like that. I enjoy observing my successes, and, in a way, my failures. Let me show you what I mean. I think I know what you said to Sebastian—not the words, of course, but the purport: and I will write it down now for you. Set down *your* version, too. And then we will compare them."

It was a crucial test. We both wrote for a minute or two. Somehow, in Hilda's presence, I forgot at once the strangeness of the scene, the weird oddity of the moment. That sombre plain disappeared for me. I was only aware that I was with Hilda once more—and therefore in Paradise. Pison and Gihon watered the desolate land. Whatever she did seemed to me supremely right. If she had proposed to me to begin a ponderous work on Medical Jurisprudence under the shadow of the big rock, I should have begun it incontinently.

She handed me her slip of paper; I took it and read, "Sebastian told you I was Dr. Yorke-Bannerman's daughter. And you answered, 'If so, Yorke-Bannerman was innocent, and *you* are the poisoner.' Is not that correct?"

I handed her in answer my own paper. She read it with a faint flush. When she came to the words, "Either she is not Yorke-Bannerman's daughter; or else, Yorke-Bannerman was not a poisoner, and someone else was—I might put a name to him," she rose to her feet with a great rush of long-suppressed feeling and clasped me passionately. "My Hubert," she cried, "I read you aright. I knew it! I was sure of you!"

I folded her in my arms, there on the rusty-red South African desert. "Then, Hilda dear," I murmured, "you will consent to marry me?"

The words brought her back to herself. She unfolded my arms with slow reluctance. "No, dearest," she said, earnestly, with a face where pride fought hard against love. "That is *why* above all things I did not want you to follow me. I love you; I trust you: you love me; you trust me. But I never will marry anyone till I have succeeded in clearing my father's memory. I *know* he did not do it: I *know* Sebastian did. But that is not enough. I must prove it, I must prove it!"

"I believe it already," I answered. "What need then to prove it?"

"To you, Hubert? Oh, no, not

to you. There, I am safe. But to the world that condemned him. Condemned him untried. I must vindicate him: I must clear him!"

I bent my face close to hers. "But may I not marry you first?" I asked—"and after that, I can help you to clear him."

She gazed at me fearlessly. "No, no," she cried, clasping her hands; "much as I love you, dear Hubert, I cannot consent to it. I am too proud, too proud! I will not allow the world to say—not even to say falsely"—her face flushed crimson; her voice dropped low—"I will not allow them to say those hateful words, 'He married a murderer's daughter.'"

I bowed my head. "As you will, my darling," I answered. "I am content to wait. I trust you in this too. Some day, we will prove it."

And all this time, preoccupied as I was with these deeper concerns, I had not even asked where Hilda lived or what she was doing!



"MY HUBERT."