

Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

IX.—THE EPISODE OF THE LADY WHO WAS VERY EXCLUSIVE.



THE Matabele revolt gave Hilda a prejudice against Rhodesia. I will confess that I shared it. I may be hard to please: but it somehow sets one against a country when one comes home from a ride to find all the other occupants of the house one lives in massacred. So Hilda decided to leave South Africa. By an odd coincidence, I also decided on the same day to change my residence. Hilda's movements and mine, indeed, coincided curiously. The moment I learned she was going anywhere I discovered in a flash that I happened to be going there too. I commend this strange case of parallel thought and action to the consideration of the Society for Psychological Research.

So I sold my farm and had done with Rhodesia. A country with a future is very well in its way: but I am quite Ibsenish in my preference for a country with a past. Oddly enough, I had no difficulty in getting rid of my white elephant of a farm. People seemed to believe in Rhodesia none the less firmly because of this slight disturbance. They treated massacres as necessary incidents in the early history of a colony with a future. And I do not deny that native risings add picturesqueness. But I prefer to take them in a literary form.

"You will go home, of course?" I said to Hilda, when we came to talk it all over.

She shook her head. "To England? Oh, no. I must pursue my Plan. Sebastian will have gone home: he expects me to follow."

"And why don't you?"

"Because—he expects it. You see, he is a good judge of character; he will naturally infer from what he knows of my temperament that after this experience I shall want to get back to England and safety. So I should—if it were not that I know he will expect it. As it is, I must go elsewhere: I must draw him after me."

"Where?"

"Why do you ask, Hubert?"

"Because—I want to know where I am going myself. Wherever you go, I have reason to believe, I shall find that I happen to be going also."

She rested her little chin on her hand and reflected a minute. "Does it occur to you," she asked at last, "that people have tongues? If you go on following me like this, they will really begin to talk about us."

"Now, upon my word, Hilda," I cried, "that is the very first time I have ever known you show a woman's want of logic! I do not propose to follow you: I propose to happen to be travelling by the same steamer. I ask you to marry me: you won't: you admit you are fond of me: yet you tell me not to come with you. It is *I* who suggest a course which would prevent people from chattering—by the simple device of a wedding. It is *you* who refuse. And then you turn upon me like this! Admit that you are unreasonable."

"My dear Hubert, have I ever denied that I was a woman?"

"Besides," I went on, ignoring her delicious smile, "I don't intend to *follow* you. I expect, on the contrary, to find myself beside you. When I know where you are going, I shall accidentally turn up on the same steamer. Accidents *will* happen. Nobody can prevent coincidences from occurring. You may marry me or you may not; but if you don't marry me, you can't expect to curtail my liberty of action, can you? You had better know the worst at once: if you won't take me, you must count upon finding me at your elbow all the world over—till the moment comes when you choose to accept me."

"Dear Hubert, I am ruining your life!"

"An excellent reason, then, for taking my advice and marrying me instantly! But you wander from the question. Where are you going? That is the issue now before the house. You persist in evading it."

She smiled and came back to earth. "Oh, if you *must* know, to India, by the east coast, changing steamers at Aden."

"Extraordinary!" I cried. "Do you know, Hilda, as luck will have it, *I* also shall be on my way to Bombay by the very same steamer!"

"But you don't know what steamer it is?"

"No matter. That only makes the coincidence all the odder. Whatever the name of the ship may be, when you get on board I have a presentiment that you will be surprised to find me there."

She looked up at me with a gathering film in her eyes. "Hubert, you are irrepressible!"



"I HAVE A PRESENTIMENT THAT YOU WILL BE SURPRISED TO FIND ME THERE."

"I am, my dear child: so you may as well spare yourself the needless trouble of trying to repress me."

If you rub a piece of iron on a loadstone it becomes magnetic. So, I think, I must have begun to acquire some part of Hilda's own prophetic strain; for sure enough, a few weeks later, we both of us found ourselves on the German East African steamer *Kaiser Wilhelm*, on our way to Aden—exactly as I had predicted. Which goes to prove that there is really something after all in presentiments!

"Since you persist in accompanying me," Hilda said to me as we sat in our chairs on deck the first evening out, "I see what I must do. I must invent some plausible and ostensible reason for our travelling together."

"We are not travelling together," I answered. "We are travelling by the same steamer; that is all—exactly like the rest of our fellow-passengers. I decline to be dragged into this imaginary partnership."

"Now do be serious, Hubert! I am going to invent an object in life for us."

Vol. xviii.—63.

"What object?"

"How can I tell yet? I must wait and see what turns up. When we tranship at Aden, and find out what people are going on to Bombay with us, I shall probably discover some nice married lady to whom I can attach myself."

"And am I to attach myself to her, too?"

"My dear boy, I never asked you to come. You came unbidden. You must manage for yourself as best you may. But I leave much to the chapter of accidents. We never know what will turn up, till it turns up in the end. Everything comes at last, you know, to him that waits."

"And yet," I put in, with a meditative air, "I have never observed that waiters are so much better off than the rest of the community. They seem to me—"

"Don't talk nonsense. It is *you* who are wandering from the question now. Please return to it."

I returned at once. "So I am to depend on what turns up?"

"Yes. Leave that to me. When we see our fellow-passengers on the Bombay steamer, I shall soon discover some ostensible reason why we

two should be travelling through India with one of them."

"Well, you are a witch, Hilda," I answered: "I found that out long ago: but if you succeed between here and Bombay in inventing a Mission, I shall begin to believe you are even more of a witch than I ever thought you."

At Aden we changed into a P. and O. steamer. Our first evening out on our second cruise was a beautiful one: the bland Indian Ocean wore its sweetest smile for us. We sat on deck after dinner. A lady with a husband came up from the cabin while we sat and gazed at the placid sea. I was smoking a quiet digestive cigar: Hilda was seated in her deck chair next to me.

The lady with the husband looked about her for a vacant space on which to place the chair a steward was carrying for her. There was plenty of room on the quarter-deck: I could not imagine why she gazed about her with such obtrusive caution. She inspected the occupants of the various chairs around

with deliberate scrutiny through a long-handled tortoise-shell optical abomination. None of them seemed to satisfy her. After a minute's mental effort, during which she also muttered a few words very low to her husband, she selected an empty spot midway between our group and the most distant group on either side of us. In other words, she sat as far away from everybody present as the necessarily restricted area of the quarter-deck permitted.

Hilda glanced at me and smiled. I snatched a quick look at the lady again. She was dressed with an amount of care and a smartness of detail that seemed somewhat uncalled for on the Indian Ocean. A cruise on a P. and O. steamer is not a garden party. Her chair was most luxurious and had her name painted on it, back and front, in very large letters, with undue obtrusiveness. I read it from where I sat, "Lady Meadowcroft."

The owner of the chair was tolerably young, not bad looking, and most expensively attired. Her face had a certain vacant, languid, half *ennuyé* air which I have learned to associate with women of the *nouveau-riche* type—women with small brains and restless minds, habitually plunged in a vortex of gaiety, and miserable when left for a passing moment to their own resources.

Hilda rose from her chair and walked quietly forward towards the bow of the steamer. I rose, too, and accompanied her. "Well?" she said, with a faint touch of triumph in her voice when we had got out of earshot.

"Well, what?" I answered, unsuspecting. "I told you everything turned up at the end!" she said, confidently. "Look at that lady's nose!"

"It does turn up at the end—certainly," I answered, glancing back at her. "But I hardly see—"

"Hubert, you are growing dull! You were not so at Nathaniel's. . . . It is the lady herself who has turned up, not

her nose—though I grant you *that* turns up too—the lady I require for our tour in India: the not impossible chaperon."

"Her nose tells you that?"

"Her nose, in part: but her face as a whole, too, her dress, her chair, her mental attitude to things in general."

"My dear Hilda, you can't mean to tell me you have divined her whole nature at a glance, by magic!"

"Not wholly at a glance. I saw her come on board, you know—she transhipped from some other line at Aden as we did: and I have been watching her ever since. Yes, I think I have unravelled her."

"You have been astonishingly quick!" I cried.

"Perhaps—but then, you see, there is so little to unravel! Some books, we all know, you must 'chew and digest'; they can only be read slowly: but some you can glance at, skim, and skip; the mere turning of the pages tells you what little worth knowing there is in them."

"She doesn't *look* profound," I admitted, casting an eye at her meaningless small features as we paced up and down. "I incline to agree you might easily skim her."

"Skim her—and learn all. The table of contents is *so* short. . . . You see, in the



"'SHE DOESN'T LOOK PROFOUND,' I ADMITTED."

first place, she is extremely 'exclusive': she prides herself on that—bases herself on her 'exclusiveness': it, and her shoddy title, are probably all she has to pride herself upon: and she works them both hard. She is a sham great lady."

As Hilda spoke, Lady Meadowcroft raised a feebly querulous voice. "Steward! this won't do! I can smell the engine here. Move my chair. I must go on further."

"If you go on further that way, my lady," the steward answered, good-humouredly, but with a man-servant's deference for any sort of title, "you'll smell the galley, where they're cooking the dinner. I don't know which your ladyship would like best—the engine or the galley."

The languid figure leaned back in the chair with an air of resignation. "I'm sure I don't know why they cook the dinners up so high," she murmured, pettishly, to her husband. "Why can't they stick the kitchens underground—in the hold, I mean—instead of bothering us up here on deck with them?"

The husband was a big, burly, rough-and-ready Yorkshireman—stout, somewhat pompous, about forty, with hair wearing bald on the forehead: the personification of the successful business man. "My dear Emmie," he said, in a loud voice, with a North Country accent, "the cooks have got to live. They've got to live like the rest of us. I can never persuade you that the hands must always be humoured. If you don't humour 'em, they won't work for you. It's a poor tale when the hands won't work. Even with galleys on deck, the life of a sea-cook is not generally thowt an enviable position. Is not a happy one—not a happy one, as the fellah says in the opera. You must humour your cooks. If you stuck 'em in the hold you'd

get no dinner at all—that's the long and the short of it."

The languid lady turned away with a sickly, disappointed air. "Then they ought to have a conscription or something," she said, pouting her lips. "The Government ought to take it in hand and manage it somehow. It's bad enough having to go by these beastly steamers to India at all, without having one's breath poisoned by—" the rest of the sentence died away inaudibly in a general murmur of ineffective grumbling.

"Why do you think she is *exclusive*?" I asked Hilda, as we strolled on towards the stern, out of the spoilt child's hearing.

"Why, didn't you notice?—she looked about her when she came on deck to see whether there was anybody who *was* any-

body sitting there, whom she might put her chair near. But the Governor of Madras hadn't come up from his cabin yet; and the wife of the Chief Commissioner of Oude had three civilians hanging about her seat; and the daughters of the Commander-in-Chief drew their skirts away as she passed: so she did the next best thing—sat as far

apart as she could from the common herd, meaning all the rest of us. If you can't mingle at once with the Best

People, you can at least assert your exclusiveness negatively, by declining to associate with the mere multitude."

"Now, Hilda, that is the first time I have ever known you show any feminine ill-nature!"

"Ill-nature! Not at all. I am merely trying to arrive at the lady's character for my own guidance. I rather like her, poor little thing. Don't I tell you she will do? So far from objecting to her, I mean to go the round of India with her."



"THE DAUGHTERS OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF DREW THEIR SKIRTS AWAY AS SHE PASSED."

"You have decided quickly."

"Well, you see, if you insist upon accompanying me, I *must* have a chaperon: and Lady Meadowcroft will do as well as anybody else. In fact, being be-ladied, she will do a little better, from the point of view of Society, though *that* is a detail. The great matter is to fix upon a possible chaperon at once, and get her well in hand before we arrive at Bombay."

"But she seems so complaining!" I interposed. "I'm afraid, if you take her on, you'll get terribly bored with her."

"If *she* takes *me* on, you mean. She's not a lady's-maid, though I intend to go with her: and she may as well give in first as last, for I'm going. Now, see how nice I am to you, sir! I've provided you, too, with a post in her suite, as you *will* come with me. No, never mind asking me what it is, just yet: all things come to him who waits; and if you will only accept the post of waiter, I mean all things to come to you."

"All things, Hilda?" I asked, meaningly, with a little tremor of delight.

She looked at me with a sudden passing tenderness in her eyes. "Yes, all things, Hubert. All things. But we mustn't talk of that—though I begin to see my way clearer now. You shall be rewarded for your constancy at last, dear knight-errant. As to my chaperon, I'm not afraid of her boring me: she bores herself, poor lady: one can see that, just to look at her; but she will be much less bored if she has us two to travel with. What she needs is constant companionship, bright talk, excitement. She has come away from London, where she swims with the crowd; she has no resources of her own, no work, no head, no interests. Accustomed to a whirl of foolish gaieties, she wearies her small brain: thrown back upon herself, she bores herself at once, because she has nothing interesting to tell herself. She absolutely requires somebody else to interest her. She can't even amuse herself with a book for three minutes together: see, she has a yellow-backed French novel now, and she is only able to read five lines at a time; then she gets tired and glances about her listlessly. What she wants is someone gay, laid on, to divert her all the time from her own inanity."

"Hilda, how wonderfully quick you are at reading these things! I see you are right: but I could never have guessed so much myself from such small premises."

"Well, what can you expect, my dear boy? A girl like this, brought up in a country rectory—a girl of no intellect, busy at

home with the fowls, and the pastry, and the mothers' meetings—suddenly married offhand to a wealthy man, and deprived of the occupations which were her salvation in life, to be plunged into the whirl of a London season, and stranded at its end for want of the diversions which, by dint of use, have become necessities of life to her!"

"Now, Hilda, you are practising upon my credulity. You can't possibly tell from her look that she was brought up in a country rectory."

"Of course not. You forget. There, my memory comes in. I simply remember it."

"You remember it? How?"

"Why, just in the same way as I remembered your name and your mother's when I was first introduced to you. I saw a notice once in the births, deaths, and marriages—'At St. Alphege's, Millington, by the Rev. Hugh Clitheroe, M.A., father of the bride, Peter Gubbins, Esq., of The Laurels, Middleston, to Emilia Frances, third daughter of the Rev. Hugh Clitheroe, rector of Millington.'"

"Clitheroe—Gubbins: what on earth has that to do with it? That would be Mrs. Gubbins: this is Lady Meadowcroft."

"The same article, as the shopmen say—only under a different name. A year or two later, I read a notice in the *Times* that 'I, Ivor de Courcy Meadowcroft, of the Laurels, Middleston, Mayor-elect of the Borough of Middleston, hereby give notice, that I have this day discontinued the use of the name Peter Gubbins, by which I was formerly known, and have assumed in lieu thereof the style and title of Ivor de Courcy Meadowcroft, by which I desire in future to be known.'"

"A month or two later again I happened to light upon a notice in the *Telegraph* that the Prince of Wales had opened a new hospital for incurables at Middleston, and that the mayor, Mr. Ivor Meadowcroft, had received an intimation of Her Majesty's intention of conferring upon him the honour of knighthood. Now, what do you make of it?"

"Putting two and two together," I answered, with my eye on our subject, "and taking into consideration the lady's face and manner, I should incline to suspect that she was the daughter of a poor parson, with the usual large family in inverse proportion to his means: that she unexpectedly made a good match with a very wealthy manufacturer who had raised himself: and that she was puffed

up accordingly with a sense of self-importance."

"Exactly. He is a millionaire or something very like it: and being an ambitious girl, as she understands ambition, she got him to stand for the mayoralty, I don't doubt, in the year when the Prince of Wales was going to open the Royal Incurables, on purpose to secure him the chance of a knighthood. Then she said, very reasonably, 'I *won't* be Lady Gubbins—Sir Peter Gubbins!' There's an aristocratic name for you!—and, by a stroke of his pen, he straightway dis-Gubbinned himself, and emerged as Sir Ivor de Courcy Meadowcroft."



"I WON'T BE LADY GUBBINS."

"Really, Hilda, you know everything about everybody! And what do you suppose they're going to India for?"

"Now, you've asked me a hard one. I haven't the faintest notion. . . . And yet . . . let me think. . . . How is this for a conjecture?—Sir Ivor is interested in steel rails, I believe, and in railway plant generally. I'm almost sure I've seen his name in connection with steel rails in reports of public meetings. There's a new Government railway now being built on the Nepal frontier—one of these strategic railways I think they call them—it's mentioned in the papers we got at Aden. He *might* be going out for that. We can watch his conversation, and see what part of India he talks about."

"They don't seem inclined to give us much chance of talking," I objected.

"No: they are *very* exclusive. But I'm very exclusive too. And I mean to give them a touch of my exclusiveness. I venture to predict that, before we reach Bombay, they'll be going down on their knees and imploring us to travel with them."

At table, as it happened, from next morning's breakfast, the Meadowcrofts sat next to us. Hilda was on one side of me: Lady Meadowcroft on the other: and beyond her again, bluff Yorkshire Sir Ivor, with his cold, hard, honest blue North Country eyes, and his dignified, pompous English, breaking down at times into a North Country colloquialism. They talked chiefly to one another.

Acting on Hilda's instructions, I took care not to engage in conversation with our "exclusive" neighbour, except so far as the absolute necessities of the table compelled me. I "troubled her for the salt" in the most frigid voice: "May I pass you the potato-salad?" became on my lips a barrier of separation. Lady Meadowcroft marked and wondered. People of her sort are so anxious to ingratiate themselves with "all the Best People" that if they find you are wholly unconcerned about the privilege of conversation with a "titled person" they instantly judge you to be a distinguished character. As the days rolled on, Lady Meadowcroft's voice began to melt by degrees. Once, she asked me quite civilly to send round the ice: she even saluted me on the third day out with a polite "Good morning, doctor."

Still, I maintained (by Hilda's advice) my dignified reserve, and took my seat severely with a cold "Good morning." I behaved like a high-class consultant, who expects to be made Physician in Ordinary to Her Majesty.

At lunch that day Hilda played her first card with delicious unconsciousness—apparent unconsciousness: for, when she chose, she was a consummate actress. She played it at a moment when Lady Meadowcroft, who by this time was burning with curiosity on our account, had paused from her talk with her husband to listen to us. I happened to say something about some Oriental curios belonging to an aunt of mine in London. Hilda seized the opportunity. "What did you say was her name?" she asked, blandly.

"Why, Lady Tepping," I answered, in perfect innocence. "She has a fancy for these things, you know. She brought a lot of them home with her from Burma."

As a matter of fact, as I have already explained, my poor dear aunt is an extremely common-place old Army widow, whose husband happened to get knighted among the New Year's honours for some brush with the natives on the Shan frontier. But Lady Meadowcroft was at the stage where a title is a title: and the discovery that I was the nephew of a "titled person" evidently interested her. I could feel rather than see that she glanced significantly aside at Sir Ivor, and that Sir Ivor in return made a little movement of his shoulders equivalent to "I told you so."

Now, Hilda knew perfectly well that the aunt of whom I spoke *was* Lady Tepping; so I felt sure that she had played this card of malice prepense, to pique Lady Meadowcroft.

But Lady Meadowcroft herself seized the occasion with inartistic avidity. She had hardly addressed us as yet: at the sound of the magic passport, she pricked up her ears, and turned to me suddenly. "Burma?" she said, as if to conceal the true reason for her change of front. "Burma? I had a cousin there once. He was in the Gloucestershire Regiment."

"Indeed?" I answered. My tone was one of utter unconcern in her cousin's history. "Miss Wade, will you take Bombay ducks with your curry?" In public, I thought it wise under the circumstances to abstain from calling her Hilda. It might lead to misconceptions: people might suppose we were more than fellow-travellers.

"You have had relations in Burma?" Lady Meadowcroft persisted.

I manifested a desire to discontinue the conversation. "Yes," I answered, coldly, "my uncle commanded there."

"Commanded there! Really! Ivor, do you hear? Dr. Cumberledge's uncle commanded in Burma." A faint intonation on the word *commanded* drew unobtrusive attention to its social importance. "May I ask what was his name?—my cousin was there, you see." An insipid smile. "We may have friends in common."

"He was a certain Sir Malcolm Tepping," I blurted out, staring hard at my plate.

"Tepping! I think I have heard Dick speak of him, Ivor."

"Your cousin," Sir Ivor answered, with emphatic dignity, "is certain to have

mixed with nobbut the highest officials in Burma."

"Yes, I'm sure Dick used to speak of a certain Sir Malcolm. My cousin's name, Dr. Cumberledge, was Maltby—Captain Richard Maltby."

"Indeed," I answered, with an icy stare. "I cannot pretend to the pleasure of having met him."

Be exclusive to the exclusive, and they burn to know you. From that moment forth Lady Meadowcroft pestered us with her endeavours to scrape acquaintance. Instead of trying how far she could place her chair from us, she set it down as near us as politeness permitted. She entered into conversation whenever an opening afforded itself, and we two stood off haughtily. She even ventured to question me about our relation to one another: "Miss Wade is your cousin, I suppose?" she suggested.

"Oh, dear, no," I answered, with a glassy smile. "We are not connected in any way."

"But, you are travelling together!"

"Merely as you and I are travelling together—fellow-passengers on the same steamer."

"Still, you have met before."

"Yes, certainly. Miss Wade was a nurse at St. Nathaniel's in London, where I was one of the house doctors. When I came on board at Cape Town, after some months in South Africa, I found she was going by the same steamer to India." Which was literally true: to have explained the rest would have been impossible, at least to anyone who did not know the whole of Hilda's history.

"And what are you both going to do when you get to India?"

"Really, Lady Meadowcroft," I said severely, "I have not asked Miss Wade what she is going to do. If you inquire of her point-blank, as you have inquired of me, I dare say she will tell you. For myself, I am just a globe-trotter, amusing myself. I only want to have a look round at India."

"Then you are not going out to take up an appointment?"

"By George, Emmie," the burly Yorkshireman put in, with an air of annoyance, "you are cross-questioning Dr. Cumberledge, now less than cross-questioning him!"

I waited a second. "No," I answered, slowly. "I have not been practising of late. I am looking about me. I travel for enjoyment."

That made her think better of me. She was of the kind, indeed, who think better of a man if they believe him to be idle.

She dawdled about all day on deck chairs, herself, seldom even reading: and she was eager now to drag Hilda into conversation. But Hilda resisted: she had found a volume in the library which immensely interested her.

"What *are* you reading, Miss Wade?"



"MISS WADE IS YOUR COUSIN, I SUPPOSE?"

Lady Meadowcroft cried at last, quite savagely: it made her angry to see anybody else pleased and occupied when she herself was listless.

"A delightful book!" Hilda answered. "'The Buddhist Praying Wheel,' by William Simpson."

Lady Meadowcroft took it from her and turned the pages over with a languid air. "Looks awfully dull!" she observed, with a faint smile, at last, returning it.

"It's charming," Hilda retorted, glancing at one of the illustrations. "It explains so much. It shows one why one turns round one's chair at cards for luck: and why, when a church is consecrated, the bishop walks three times about it sunwise."

"Our Bishop is a dreadfully prosy old gentleman," Lady Meadowcroft answered, gliding off at a tangent on a personality, as is the wont of her kind: "he had, oh, such a dreadful quarrel with my father over the rules of the St. Alphege Schools at Millington."

"Indeed," Hilda answered, turning once more to her book. Lady Meadowcroft looked annoyed. It would never have

occurred to her that within a few weeks she was to owe her life to that very abstruse work, and what Hilda had read in it.

That afternoon, as we watched the flying fish from the ship's side, Hilda said to me abruptly, "My chaperon is an extremely nervous woman."

"Nervous about what?"

"About disease, chiefly. She has the temperament that dreads infection — and therefore catches it."

"Why do you think so?"

"Haven't you noticed that she often doubles her thumb under her fingers — folds her fist across it — especially when anybody talks about anything alarming? If the conversation happens to turn on

jungle fever, or any subject like that, down goes her thumb instantly, and she clasps her fist over it with a convulsive squeeze. At the same time, too, her face twitches. I know what that trick means. She's horribly afraid of tropical diseases, though she never says so."

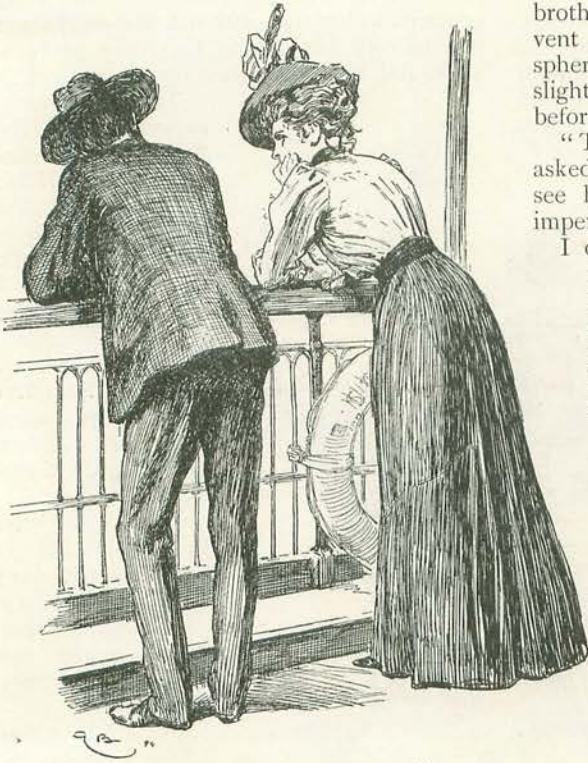
"And you attach importance to her fear?"

"Of course. I count upon it as probably our chief means of catching and fixing her."

"As how?"

She shook her head and quizzed me. "Wait and see. You are a doctor; I, a trained nurse. Before twenty-four hours, I foresee she will ask us. She is sure to ask us now she has learned that you are Lady Tepping's nephew, and that I am acquainted with several of the Best People."

That evening, about ten o'clock, Sir Ivor strolled up to me in the smoking-room with affected unconcern. He laid his hand on my arm and drew me aside mysteriously. The ship's doctor was there, playing a quiet game of poker with a few of the passengers. "I beg your pardon, Dr. Cumberledge," he began, in an undertone, "could you come outside with me a minute? Lady



"I FORESEE SHE WILL ASK US."

Meadowcroft has sent me up to you with a message."

I followed him on to the open deck. "It is quite impossible, my dear sir," I said, shaking my head austerely, for I divined his errand. "I can't go to see Lady Meadowcroft. Medical etiquette, you know: the constant and salutary rule of the profession!"

"Why not?" he asked, astonished.

"The ship carries a surgeon," I replied, in my most precise tone. "He is a duly qualified gentleman, very able at his profession, and he ought to inspire your wife with confidence. I regard this vessel as Dr. Boyell's practice, and all on board it as virtually his patients."

Sir Ivor's face fell. "But Lady Meadowcroft is not at all well," he answered, looking piteous; "and—she can't endure the ship's doctor. Such a common man, you know! His loud voice disturbs her. You *must* have noticed that my wife is a lady of exceptionally delicate nervous organization." He hesitated, beamed on me, and played his trump card. "She dislikes being attended by owt but a *gentleman*."

"If a gentleman is also a medical man," I answered, "his sense of duty towards his

brother practitioners would, of course, prevent him from interfering in their proper sphere, or putting upon them the unmerited slight of letting them see him preferred before them."

"Then you positively refuse?" he asked, wistfully, drawing back. I could see he stood in a certain dread of that imperious little woman.

I conceded a point. "I will go down in twenty minutes," I admitted, looking grave; "not just now, lest I annoy my colleague—and I will glance at Lady Meadowcroft in an unprofessional way. If I think her case demands treatment I will tell Dr. Boyell." And I returned to the smoking-room and took up a novel.

Twenty minutes later I knocked at the door of the lady's private cabin, with my best bedside manner in full play. As I suspected, she was nervous—nothing more—my mere smile reassured her. I observed that she held her thumb fast, doubled under in her fist, all the time I was questioning her, as Hilda had said; and I also noticed that the fingers closed over it convulsively at first, but gradually relaxed as my voice restored confidence. She thanked me profusely, and was really grateful.

On deck next day she was very communicative. They were going to make the regular tour first, she said, but were to go on to the Tibetan frontier at the end, where Sir Ivor had a contract to construct a railway, in a very wild region. Tigers? Natives? Oh, she didn't mind either of *them*: but she was told that that district—what did they call it? the Terai, or something—was terribly unwholesome. Fever was what-you-may-call-it there—yes, "endemic"—that was the word: "oh, thank you, Dr. Cumberledge." She hated the very name of fever. "Now you, Miss Wade, I suppose," with an awestruck smile, "are not in the least afraid of it?"

Hilda looked up at her calmly. "Not in the least," she answered. "I have nursed hundreds of cases."

"Oh, my, how dreadful! And never caught it?"

"Never. I am not afraid, you see."

"I wish I wasn't! Hundreds of cases! It makes one ill to think of it! . . . And all successfully?"

"Almost all of them."

"You don't tell your patients stories when they're ill about your other cases who died, do you?" Lady Meadowcroft went on with a quick little shudder.

Hilda's face by this time was genuinely sympathetic. "Oh, never!" she answered, with truth. "That would be very bad nursing! One's object in treating a case is to make one's patient well; so one naturally avoids any sort of subject that might distress or alarm them."

"You really mean it?" Her face was pleading.

"Why, of course. I try to make my patients my friends: I talk to them cheerfully: I amuse them and distract them: I get them away, as far as I can, from themselves and their symptoms."

"Oh, what a lovely person to have about one when one's ill!" the languid lady exclaimed, ecstatically. "I *should* like to send for you if I wanted nursing! But there—it's always so, of course, with a real lady; common nurses frighten one so. I wish I could always have a lady to nurse me!"

"A person who sympathizes—that is the really important thing," Hilda answered, in her quiet voice. "One must find out first one's patient's temperament. *You* are nervous, I can see." She laid one hand on her new friend's arm: "You need to be kept amused and engaged when you are ill: what *you* require most is—insight—and sympathy."

The little fist doubled up again: the vacant face grew positively sweet. "That's just it! You have hit it! How clever you are! I want all that, I suppose, Miss Wade, *you* never go out for private nursing?"

"Never," Hilda answered. "You see, Lady Meadowcroft, I don't nurse for a livelihood. I have means of my own: I took up this work as an occupation and a sphere in life. I haven't done anything yet but hospital nursing."

Lady Meadowcroft drew a slight sigh. "What a pity!" she murmured, slowly. "It does seem hard that your sympathies should all be thrown away, so to speak, on a horrid lot of wretched poor people, instead of being spent on your own equals—who would so greatly appreciate them."

"I think I can venture to say the poor appreciate them, too," Hilda answered, bridling up a little—for there was nothing she hated so much as class-prejudices. "Besides, they need sympathy more: they have fewer

comforts. I should not care to give up attending my poor people for the sake of the idle rich."

The set phraseology of the country rectory recurred to Lady Meadowcroft—"our poorer brethren," and so forth. "Oh, of course," she answered, with the mechanical acquiescence such women always give to moral platitudes. "One must do one's best for the poor, I know—for conscience' sake and all that: it's our duty, and we all try hard to do it. But they're so terribly ungrateful! Don't you think so? Do you know, Miss Wade, in my father's parish——"

Hilda cut her short with a sunny smile—half contemptuous toleration, half genuine pity. "We are all ungrateful," she said, "but the poor, I think, the least so. I'm sure the gratitude I've often had from my poor women at St. Nathaniel's has made me sometimes feel really ashamed of myself. I had done so little—and they thanked me so much for it."

"Which only shows," Lady Meadowcroft broke in, "that one ought always to have a *lady* to nurse one."

"*Ça marche!*" Hilda said to me, with a quiet smile, a few minutes after, when her ladyship had disappeared in her fluffy robe down the companion-ladder.

"Yes, *ça marche*," I answered. "In an hour or two you will have succeeded in landing your chaperon. And what is most amusing, landed her, too, Hilda, just by being yourself—letting her see frankly the actual truth of what you think and feel about her and about everyone!"

"I could not do otherwise," Hilda answered, growing grave. "I must be myself, or die for it. My method of angling consists in showing myself just as I am. You call me an actress, but I am not really one: I am only a woman who can use her personality for her own purposes. If I go with Lady Meadowcroft, it will be a mutual advantage: I shall really sympathize with her, for I can see the poor thing is devoured with nervousness."

"But do you think you will be able to stand her?" I asked.

"Oh, dear, yes. She's not a bad little thing, *au fond*, when you get to know her. It is society that has spoiled her. She would have made a nice, helpful, motherly body if she'd married the curate."

As we neared Bombay conversation grew gradually more and more Indian; it always does under similar circumstances. A sea voyage is half retrospect, half prospect:

it has no personal identity. You leave Liverpool for New York at the English standpoint, and are full of what you did in London or Manchester: half-way over you begin to discuss American Custom-houses and New York hotels: by the time you reach Sandy Hook, the talk is all of quick trains west and the shortest route from Philadelphia to New Orleans. You grow by slow stages into the new attitude: at Malta you are still regretting Europe: after Aden, your mind dwells most on the hire of punkah-wallahs and the proverbial toughness of the dak-bungalow chicken.

"How's the plague at Bombay now?" an inquisitive passenger inquired of the captain at dinner our last night out. "Getting any better?"

Lady Meadowcroft's thumb dived between her fingers again. "What, is there plague in Bombay?" she asked, innocently, in her nervous fashion.

"Plague in Bombay!" the captain burst out, his burly voice resounding down the saloon. "Why, bless your soul, ma'am, where else would you expect it? Plague in Bombay! It's been there these five years. Better? Not quite. Going ahead like mad. They're dying by thousands."

"A microbe, I believe, Dr. Boyell," the inquisitive passenger observed deferentially, with due respect for medical science.

"Yes," the ship's doctor answered, helping himself to an olive. "Forty million microbes to each square inch of the Bombay atmosphere."

"And we are going to Bombay!" Lady Meadowcroft exclaimed, aghast.

"You must have known there was plague there, my dear," Sir Ivor put in, soothingly, with a deprecating glance. "It's been in all the papers. But only the natives get it."

The thumb uncovered itself a little. "Oh, only the natives!" Lady Meadowcroft echoed, relieved, as if a few thousand Hindus more or less would hardly be missed among the blessings of British rule in India. "You know, Ivor, I never read those *dreadful* things in the papers.

I read the Society news, and Our Social Diary, and columns that are headed 'Mainly About People.' I don't care for anything but the *Morning Post* and the *World* and *Truth*. I hate horrors. . . . But it's a blessing to think it's only the natives."

"Plenty of Europeans, too, bless your heart," the captain thundered out, unfeelingly. "Why, last time I was in port, a nurse died at the hospital."

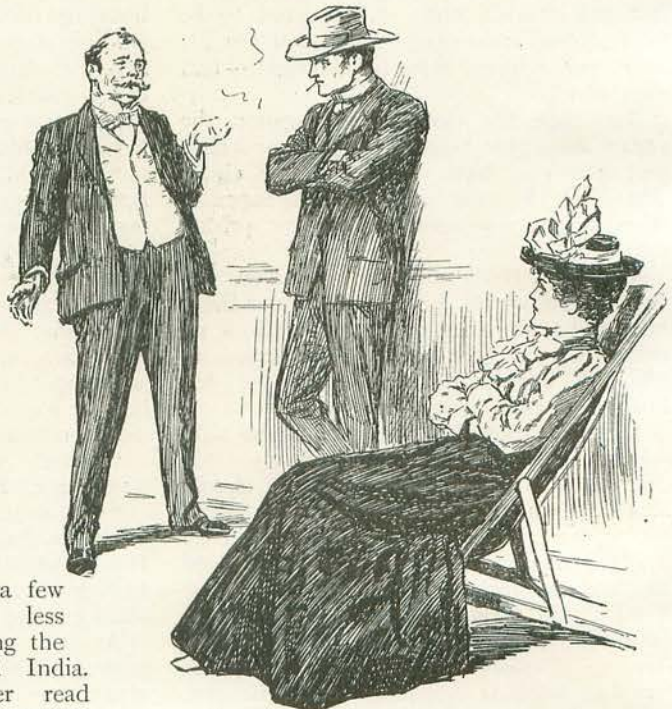
"Oh, only a nurse——" Lady Meadowcroft began, and then coloured up deeply with a side glance at Hilda.

"And lots beside nurses," the captain continued, positively delighted at the terror he was inspiring. "Puckka Englishmen and Englishwomen. Bad business, this plague, Dr. Cumberledge! Catches particularly those who are most afraid of it."

"But it's only in Bombay?" Lady Meadowcroft cried, clutching at the last straw. I could see she was registering a mental determination to go straight up country the moment she landed.

"Not a bit of it!" the captain answered, with provoking cheerfulness. "Rampaging about like a roaring lion all over India!"

Lady Meadowcroft's thumb must have



"MY WIFE HAS DELIVERED HER ULTIMATUM."

suffered severely. The nails dug into it as if it were someone else's.

Half an hour later, as we were on deck in the cool of the evening, the thing was settled. "My wife," Sir Ivor said, coming up to us with a serious face, "has delivered her ultimatum. Positively her ultimatum. I've had a mort o' trouble with her, and now she's settled. *Either*, she goes back from Bombay by the return steamer; *or else*—you and Miss Wade must name your own terms to accompany us on our tour in case of emergencies." He glanced wistfully at Hilda. "Do you think you can help us?"

Hilda made no hypocritical pretence of hanging back. Her nature was transparent. "If you wish it, yes," she answered, shaking hands upon the bargain. "I only want to go about and see India; I can see it quite as well with Lady Meadowcroft as without her—and even better. It is unpleasant for a woman to travel unattached. I require a chaperon, and am glad to find one. I will join your party, paying my own hotel and travelling expenses, and considering myself as engaged in case your wife should need my services. For that, you can pay me, if you like, some nominal retaining fee—five pounds or anything. The money is immaterial to me: I like to be useful, and I sympathize with nerves; but it may make your wife feel she is really keeping a hold over me if we put the arrangement on a business basis. As a matter of fact, whatever sum she chooses to pay, I shall hand it over at once to the Bombay Plague Hospital."

Sir Ivor looked relieved. "Thank you ever so much," he said, wringing her hand warmly. "I thowt you were a brick, and now I know it. My wife says your face inspires confidence, and your voice sympathy. She *must* have you with her. And you, Dr. Cumberledge?"

"I follow Miss Wade's lead," I answered, in my most solemn tone, with an *impressive* bow. "I too am travelling for instruction and amusement only: and if it would give Lady Meadowcroft a greater sense of security to have a duly qualified practitioner in her suite, I shall be glad on the same terms to swell your party. I will pay my own way: and I will allow you to name any nominal sum you please for your claim on my medical attendance, if necessary. I hope and believe, however, that our presence will so far reassure our prospective patient as to make our post in both cases a sinecure."

Three minutes later Lady Meadowcroft



"LADY MEADOWCROFT RUSHED ON DECK."

rushed on deck and flung her arms impulsively round Hilda. "You dear, good girl," she cried; "how sweet and kind of you! I really *couldn't* have landed if you hadn't promised to come with us. And Dr. Cumberledge, too! So nice and friendly of you both. But there, it *is* so much pleasanter to deal with ladies and gentlemen!"

So Hilda won her point, and what was best, won it fairly.