Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

XI.—THE EPISODE OF THE OFFICER WHO UNDERSTOOD PERFECTLY.

AFTER our fortunate escape from the clutches of our too-admiring Tibetan hosts, we wound our way slowly back through the Maharajah's territory towards Sir Ivor's head-quarters. On the third day out from the lamasery we camped in a romantic Himalayan valley—a narrow, green glen, with a brawling stream running in white cataracts and rapids down its midst. We were able to breathe freely now: we could enjoy the great tapering deodars that rose in ranks on the hillsides, the snow-clad needles of ramping rock that bounded the view to north and south, the feathery bamboo-jungle that fringed and half-obscured the mountain torrent, whose cool music—alas, fallaciously cool—was borne to us through the dense screen of waving foliage. Lady Meadowcroft was so delighted at having got clear away from those murderous and saintly Tibetans that for a while she almost forgot to grumble. She even condescended to admire the deep-cleft ravine in which we bivouacked for the night, and to admit that the orchids which hung from the tall trees were as fine as any at her florist's in Piccadilly. "Though how they can have got them out here already, in this outlandish place—the most fashionable kinds—when we in England have to grow them with such care in expensive hot-houses," she said, "really passes my comprehension."

She seemed to think that orchids originated in Covent Garden.

Early next morning I was engaged with one of my native men in lighting the fire to boil our kettle—for in spite of all misfortunes we still made tea with creditable punctuality—when a tall and good-looking Nepaulese approached us from the hills, with cat-like tread, and stood before me in an attitude of profound supplication. He was a well-dressed young man, like a superior native servant: his face was broad and flat, but kindly and good-humoured. He salaamed many times, but still said nothing.

"Ask him what he wants," I cried, turning to our fair-weather friend, the cook.

The deferential Nepaulese did not wait to be asked. "Salaam, sahib," he said, bowing again very low till his forehead almost touched the ground. "You are Eulopean doctor, sahib?"

"I am," I answered, taken aback at being thus recognised in the forests of Nepaul. "But how in wonder did you come to know it?"

"You camp near here when you pass dis way before, and you doctor little native girl, who got sore eyes. All de country here tell you is very great physician. So I come and to see if you will turn aside to my village to help us."

"Where did you learn English?" I exclaimed, more and more astonished.

"I is servant one time at British Lesident's at de Maharajah's city. Pick up English dere. Also pick up plenty lupee. Velly good business at British Lesident's. Now gone back home to my own village, letired gentleman." And he drew himself up with conscious dignity.

I surveyed the retired gentleman from head to foot. He had an air of distinction, which not even his bare toes could altogether mar. He was evidently a person of local importance. "And what did you want me to visit your village for?" I inquired, dubiously.

"White traveller sahib ill dere, sir. Vely ill: got plague. Great first-class sahib, all same like Governor. Ill fit to die: send me out all times to try find Eulopean doctor."

"Plague?" I repeated, startled. He nodded.

"Yes, plague: all same like dem hab him so bad down Bombay way."

"Do you know his name?" I asked; for though one does not like to desert a fellow-creature in distress, I did not care to turn aside from my road on such an errand, with Hilda and Lady Meadowcroft, unless for some amply sufficient reason.

The retired gentleman shook his head in

the most emphatic fashion. "How me know?" he answered, opening the palms of his hands as if to show he had nothing concealed in them. "Forget Eulopean name all times so easily. And traveller sahib name very hard to lemember. Not got English name. Him Eulopean foleigner."

"A European foreigner!" I repeated. "And you say he is seriously ill? Plague is no trifle. Well, wait a minute: I'll see what the ladies say about it. How far off is your village?"

He pointed with his hand, somewhat vaguely, to the hillside. "Two hours' walk," he answered, with the mountaineer's habit of reckoning distance by time, which extends, under the like circumstances, the whole world over.

I went back to the tents, and consulted Hilda and Lady Meadowcroft. Our spoilt child pouted, and was utterly averse to any détour of any sort. "Let's get back straight to Ivor," she said, petulantly. "I've had enough of camping out. It's all very well in its way for a week: but when they begin to talk about cutting your throat and all that, it ceases to be a joke and becomes a wee bit uncomfortable. I want my feather bed. I object to their villages."

"But consider, dear," Hilda said, gently. "This traveller is ill, all alone in a strange land. How can Hubert desert him? It is a doctor's duty to do what he can to alleviate pain and to cure the sick. What would we have thought ourselves, when we were at the lamasery, if a body of European travellers had known we were there, imprisoned and in danger of our lives, and had passed by on the other side without attempting to rescue us?"

Lady Meadowcroft knit her forehead. "That was Us," she said, with an impatient nod, after a pause—"and this is another person. You can't turn aside for everybody who's ill in all Nepaul. And plague, too!—so horrid! Besides, how do we know this isn't another plant of these hateful people to lead us into danger?"

"Lady Meadowcroft is quite right," I said, hastily. "I never thought about that. There may be no plague, no patient at all. I will go up with this man alone, Hilda, and find out the truth. It will only take me five hours at most. By noon I shall be back with you."

"What? And leave us here unprotected among the wild beasts and the savages?" Lady Meadowcroft cried, horrified. "In the midst of the forest! Dr. Cumberledge, how can you?"

"You are *not* unprotected," I answered, soothing her. "You have Hilda with you. She is worth ten men. And besides, our Nepaulese are fairly trustworthy."

Hilda bore me out in my resolve. She was too much of a nurse, and had imbibed too much of the true medical sentiment, to let me desert a man in peril of his life among tropical jungle. So, in spite of Lady Meadowcroft, I was soon winding my way up a steep mountain track, overgrown with creeping Indian weeds, on my road to the still problematical village graced by the residence of the retired gentleman.

After two hours' hard climbing we reached it at last. The retired gentleman led the way to a house in a street of the little wooden hamlet. The door was low: I had to stoop to enter it. I saw in a moment this was indeed no trick. On a native bed, in a corner of the one room, a man lay desperately ill: a European, with white hair and with a skin well bronzed by exposure to the tropics. Ominous dark spots beneath the epidermis showed the nature of the disease. He tossed restlessly as he lay, but did not raise his fevered head or look at my conductor. "Well, any news of Ram Das?" he asked at last, in a parched and feeble voice. Parched and feeble as it was, I recognised it instantly. The man on the bed was Sebastian—no other!

"No, no news of Lam Das," the retired gentleman replied, with an unexpected display of womanly tenderness. "Lam Das clean gone: not come any more. But I bling you back Eulopean doctor, sahib."

Sebastian did not look up from his bed even then. I could see he was more anxious about a message from his scout than about his own condition. "The rascal!" he moaned, with his eyes closed tight. "The rascal! he has betrayed me." And he tossed uneasily.

I looked at him and said nothing. Then I seated myself on a low stool by the bedside and took his hand in mine to feel his pulse. The wrist was thin and wasted. The face, too, I noticed, had fallen away greatly. It was clear that the malignant fever which accompanies the disease had wreaked its worst on him. So weak and ill was he, indeed, that he let me hold his hand, with my fingers on his pulse, for half a minute or more without ever opening his eyes or displaying the slightest curiosity at my presence. One might have thought that European doctors abounded in Nepaul, and that I had been attending him for a

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week, with "the mixture as before" at every visit.

"Your pulse is weak and very rapid," I said, slowly, in a professional tone. "You seem to me to have fallen into a perilous condition."

At the sound of my voice he gave a sudden start. Yet even so, for a second, he did not open his eyes. The revelation of my presence seemed to come upon him as in a dream. "Like Cumberledge's," he muttered to himself, gasping. "Exactly like Cumberledge's. . . . But Cumberledge is dead . . . I must be delirious. . . . If I didn't *know* to the contrary, I could have sworn it was Cumberledge's!"

I spoke again, bending over him. "How long have the glandular swellings been present, Professor?" I asked, with quiet deliberativeness.

This time he opened his eyes sharply, and looked up in my face. He swallowed a great gulp of surprise. His breath came and went. He raised himself on his elbows and stared at me with a fixed stare. "Cumberledge!" he cried: "Cumberledge! Come back to life, then! They told me you were dead! And here you are, Cumberledge!"

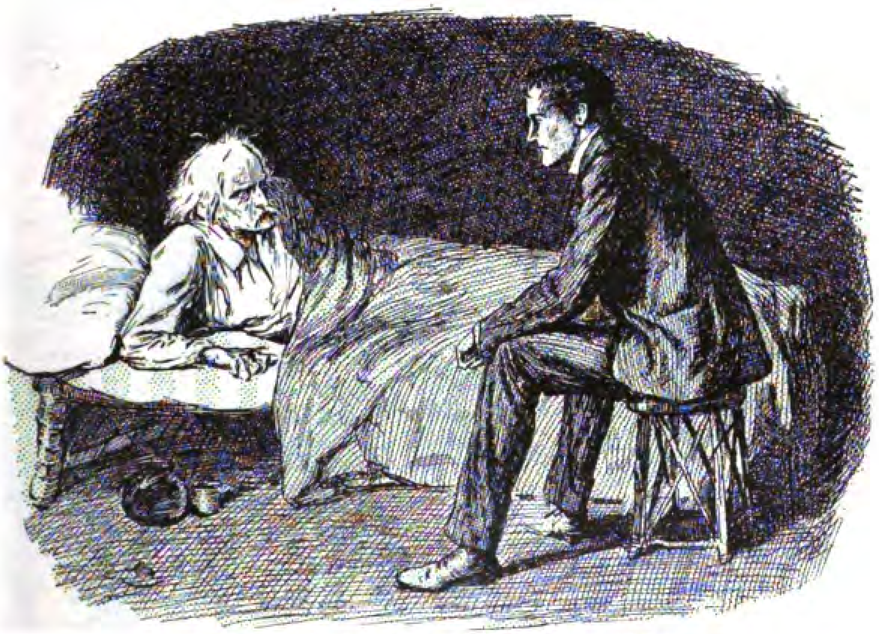
"*Who* told you I was dead?" I asked, sternly.

He stared at me, still in a dazed way. He was more than half comatose. "Your guide, Ram Das," he answered at last, half incoherently. "He came back by himself. Came back, without you. He swore to me he had seen all your throats cut in Tibet. He alone had escaped. The Buddhists had massacred you."

"He told you a lie," I said, shortly.

"I thought so. I thought so. And I sent him back for confirmatory evidence. But the rogue has never brought it." He let his head drop on his rude pillow heavily. "Never, never brought it!"

I gazed at him, full of horror: the man was too ill to hear me, too ill to reason, too ill to recognise the meaning of his own words, almost. Otherwise, perhaps, he would hardly have expressed himself quite so frankly. Though to be sure he had said nothing to criminate himself in any way: his action might have been due to anxiety for our safety.



"CUMBERLEDGE! COME BACK TO LIFE, THEN!"

I fixed my glance on him long and dubiously. What ought I to do next? As for Sebastian, he lay with his eyes closed, half oblivious of my presence. The fever had gripped him hard. He shivered, and looked helpless as a child. In such circumstances, the instincts of my profession rose imperative within me. I could not nurse a case properly in this wretched hut. The one thing to be done was to carry the patient down to our camp in the valley. There, at least, we had air and pure running water.

I asked a few questions from the retired gentleman as to the possibility of obtaining sufficient bearers in the village. As I supposed, any number were forthcoming immediately. Your Nepaulese is by nature a

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beast of burden: he can carry anything up and down the mountains, and spends his life in the act of carrying.

I pulled out my pencil, tore a leaf from my note-book, and scribbled a hasty note to Hilda: "The invalid is—whom do you think?—Sebastian! He is dangerously ill with some malignant fever: I am bringing him down into camp to nurse: get everything ready for him." Then I handed it over to a messenger, found for me by the retired gentleman, to carry to Hilda. My host himself I could not spare, as he was my only interpreter.

In a couple of hours we had improvised a rough, woven grass hammock as an ambulance couch, had engaged our bearers, and had got Sebastian under way for the camp by the river.

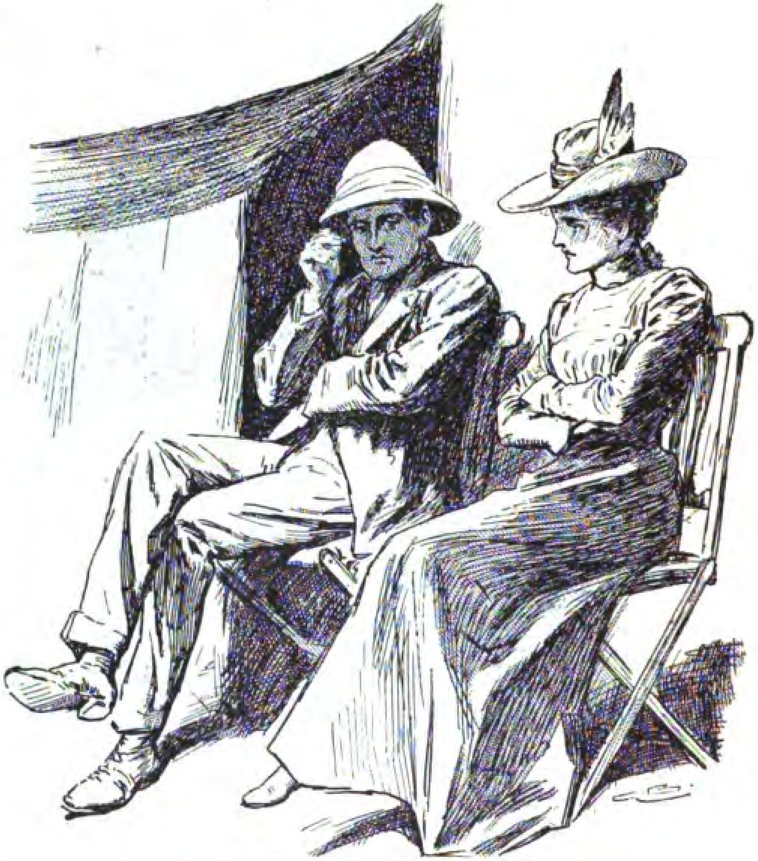
When I arrived at our tents I found Hilda had prepared everything for our patient with her usual cleverness. Not only had she got a bed ready for Sebastian, who was now almost insensible, but she had even cooked some arrowroot from our stores beforehand, so that he might have a little food, with a dash of brandy in it, to recover him after the fatigue of the journey down the mountain. By the time we had laid him out on a mattress in a cool tent, with the fresh air blowing about him, and had made him eat the meal prepared for him, he really began to look comparatively comfortable.

Lady Meadowcroft was now our chief trouble: we did not dare to tell her it was really plague; but she had got near enough back to civilization to have recovered her faculty for profuse grumbling; and the idea of the delay that Sebastian would cause us drove her wild with annoyance. "Only two days off from Ivor," she cried, "and that comfortable bungalow! And now to think we must stop here in the woods a week or ten days for this horrid old Professor! Why can't he get worse at once and die like a gentleman? But, there! with *you* to nurse him, Hilda, he'll never get worse: he couldn't die if he tried: he'll linger on and on for weeks and weeks through a beastly convalescence!"

"Hubert," Hilda said to me, when we were alone once more, "we mustn't keep her here. She will be a hindrance, not a help. One way or another, we must manage to get rid of her."

"How can we?" I asked. "We can't turn her loose upon the mountain roads with a Nepaulese escort. She isn't fit for it. She would be frantic with terror."

"I've thought of that, and I see only one thing possible. I must go on with her myself as fast as we can push to Sir Ivor's place, and then return to help you nurse the Professor."


"WE MUST MANAGE TO GET RID OF HER."

I saw she was right: it was the sole plan open to us. And I had no fear of letting Hilda go off alone with Lady Meadowcroft and the bearers. She was a host in herself, and could manage a party of native servants at least as well as I could.

So Hilda went, and came back again: meanwhile, I took charge of the nursing of Sebastian. Fortunately, I had brought with me a good stock of jungle-medicines in my little travelling case, including plenty of quinine; and under my careful treatment the Professor passed the crisis and began to mend slowly. The first question he asked me when he felt himself able to talk once more was, "Nurse Wade—what has become of her?"—for he had not yet seen her. I feared the shock for him.

"She is here with me," I answered, in a very measured voice. "She is waiting to be allowed to come and help me in taking care of you."

He shuddered and turned away. His face buried itself in the pillow. I could see some twinge of remorse had seized upon him. At last he spoke. "Cumberledge," he said, in a very low and almost frightened tone, "don't let her come near me! I can't bear it: I can't bear it."

Ill as he was, I did not mean to let him think I was ignorant of his motive. "You can't bear a woman, whose life you have attempted," I said, in my coldest and most deliberate way, "to have a hand in nursing you. You can't bear to let her heap coals of fire on your head. In that, you are right. But, remember, you have attempted *my* life too; you have twice done your best to get me murdered."

He did not pretend to deny it. He was too weak for subterfuges. He only writhed as he lay. "You are a man," he said, shortly, "and she is a woman. That is all the difference." Then he paused for a minute or two. "Don't let her come near me," he moaned once more, in a piteous voice: "don't let her come near me!"

"I will not," I answered. "She shall not come near you. I spare you that. But you will have to eat the food she prepares: and you know *she* will not poison you. You will have to be tended by the servants she chooses: and you know *they* will not murder you. She can heap coals of fire on your head without coming into your tent. Consider that you sought to take her life—and she seeks to save yours! She is as anxious to keep you alive as you are anxious to kill her."

He lay as in a reverie. His long, white hair made his clear-cut, thin face look more unearthly than ever, with the hectic flush of fever upon it. At last he turned to me. "We each work for our own ends," he said, in a weary way. "We pursue our own objects. It suits *me* to get rid of *her*: it suits *her* to keep *me* alive. I am no good to her dead; living, she expects to wring a confession out of me. But she shall not have it. Tenacity of purpose is the one thing I admire in life. She has the tenacity of purpose—and so have I. Cumberledge, don't you see it is a mere duel of endurance between us?"

"And may the just side win," I answered, solemnly.

It was several days later before he spoke to me of it again. Hilda had brought some food to the door of the tent and passed it in to me for our patient. "How is he now?" she whispered.

Sebastian overheard her voice, and, cowering within himself, still managed to answer: "Better, getting better. I shall soon be well now. You have carried your point. You have cured your enemy."

"Thank God for that!" Hilda said, and glided away silently.

Sebastian ate his cup of arrowroot in silence; then he looked at me with wistful, musing eyes. "Cumberledge," he murmured at last, "after all, I can't help admiring that woman. She is the only person who has ever checkmated me. She checkmates me every time. Steadfastness is what I love. Her steadfastness of purpose and her determination move me."

"I wish they would move you to tell the truth," I answered.

He mused again. "To tell the truth!" he muttered, moving his head up and down. "I have lived for science: shall I wreck all now? There are truths which it is better to hide than to proclaim. Uncomfortable truths—truths that never should have been—truths which help to make greater truths incredible. But all the same, I cannot help admiring that woman. She has Yorke-Bannerman's intellect, with a great deal more than Yorke-Bannerman's force of will. Such firmness! such energy! such resolute patience! She is a wonderful creature. I can't help admiring her!"

I said no more to him just then. I thought it better to let nascent remorse and nascent admiration work out their own natural effects unimpeded. For I could see our enemy was beginning to feel some sting of remorse. Some men are below it: Sebastian thought himself above it: I felt sure he was mistaken.

Yet even in the midst of these personal preoccupations I saw that our great teacher was still, as ever, the pure man of science. He noted every symptom and every change of the disease with professional accuracy. He observed his own case, whenever his mind was clear enough, as impartially as he would have observed any outside patient's. "This is a rare chance, Cumberledge," he

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whispered to me once, in an interval of delirium. "So few Europeans have ever had the complaint, and probably none who were competent to describe the specific subjective and psychological symptoms. The delusions one gets, as one sinks into the coma, for example, are of quite a peculiar type—delusions of wealth and of absolute power, most exhilarating and magnificent. I think myself a millionaire or a Prime Minister. Be sure you make a note of that—in case I die. If I recover, of course, I can write an exhaustive monograph on the whole history of the disease in the *British Medical Journal.* But if I die, the task of chronicling these interesting observations will devolve upon you. A most exceptional chance! You are much to be congratulated."

"You *must* not die, Professor," I cried, thinking more, I will confess, of Hilda Wade than of himself: "you must live. . . . . to report this case for science." I used what I thought the strongest lever I knew for him.

He closed his eyes dreamily. "For science! Yes, for science! There you strike the right chord! What have I not dared and done for science? But, in case I die, Cumberledge, be sure you collect the notes I took as I was sickening—they are most important for the history and etiology of the disease. I made them hourly. And don't forget the main points to be observed as I am dying. You know what they are: this is a rare, rare chance! I congratulate you on being the man who has the first opportunity ever afforded us of questioning an intelligent European case, a case where the patient is fully capable of describing with accuracy his symptoms and his sensations in medical phraseology."

He did not die, however. In about another week he was well enough to move. We carried him down to Mozufferpoor, the first large town in the plains thereabouts, and handed him over for the stage of convalescence to the care of the able and efficient station doctor, to whom my thanks are due for much courteous assistance.

"And now, what do you mean to do?" I asked Hilda, when our patient was placed in other hands, and all was over.

She answered me without one second's hesitation: "Go straight to Bombay, and wait there till Sebastian takes a passage for England."

"He will go home, you think, as soon as he is well enough?"

"Undoubtedly. He has now nothing more to stop in India for."

"Why not as much as ever?"

She looked at me curiously. "It is so hard to explain," she replied, after a moment's pause, during which she had been drumming her little forefinger on the table. "I feel it rather than reason it. But don't you see that a certain change has lately come over Sebastian's attitude? He no longer desires to follow me: he wants to avoid me. That is why I wish more than ever to dog his steps. I feel the beginning of the end has come. I am gaining my point. Sebastian is wavering."

"Then, when he engages a berth, you propose to go by the same steamer?"

"Yes. It makes all the difference. When he tries to follow me, he is dangerous: when he tries to avoid me, it becomes my work in life to follow him. I must keep him in sight every minute now. I must quicken his conscience. I must make him *feel* his own desperate wickedness. He is afraid to face me: that means remorse. The more I compel him to face me, the more the remorse is sure to deepen."

I saw she was right. We took the train to Bombay. I found rooms at the hospitable club, by a member's invitation, while Hilda went to stop with some friends of Lady Meadowcroft's on the Malabar Hill. We waited for Sebastian to come down from the interior and take his passage. Hilda felt sure he would come, with her intuitive certainty.

A steamer, two steamers, three steamers, sailed, and still no Sebastian. I began to think he must have made up his mind to go back some other way. But Hilda was confident, so I waited patiently. At last one morning I dropped in, as I had often done before, at the office of one of the chief steamship companies. It was the very morning when a packet was to sail. "Can I see the list of passengers on the *Vindhya?*" I asked of the clerk, a sandy-haired Englishman, tall, thin, and sallow.

The clerk produced it.

I scanned it in haste. To my surprise and delight, a pencilled entry half-way down the list gave the name, "Professor Sebastian."

"Oh, Sebastian is going by this steamer?" I murmured, looking up.

The sandy-haired clerk hummed and hesitated. "Well, I believe he's going, sir," he answered at last; "but it's a bit uncertain. He's a fidgety man, the Professor. He came down here this morning and asked to see the list, the same as you have done: then he engaged a berth provisionally—'mind, provisionally,' he said—that's why

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his name is only put in on the list in pencil. I take it he's waiting to know whether a party of friends he wishes to meet are going also."

"Or wishes to avoid," I thought to myself, inwardly; but I did not say so. I asked instead, "Is he coming again?"

"Yes, I think so: at 5.30."

"And she sails at seven?"

"At seven, punctually. Passengers must be aboard by half-past six at latest."

"Very good," I answered, making my mind up promptly. "I only called to know the Professor's movements. Don't mention to him that I came. I may look in again myself an hour or two later."

"You don't want a passage, sir? You may be the friend he's expecting."

"No, I don't want a passage—not at present certainly." Then I ventured on a bold stroke. "Look here," I said, leaning across towards him, and assuming a confidential tone, "I am a private detective"—which was perfectly true in essence—"and I'm dogging the Professor, who, for all his eminence, is gravely suspected of a great crime. If you will help me, I will make it worth your while. Let us understand one another. I offer you a five-pound note to say nothing of all this to him."

The sallow clerk's fishy eye glistened. "You can depend upon me," he answered, with an acquiescent nod. I judged that he did not often get the chance of earning some eighty rupees so easily.

I scribbled a hasty note and sent it round to Hilda: "Pack your boxes at once, and hold yourself in readiness to embark on the *Vindhya* at six o'clock precisely." Then I put my own things straight, and waited at the club till a quarter to six. At that time I strolled unconcernedly into the office: a cab outside held Hilda and our luggage. I had arranged it all meanwhile by letter.

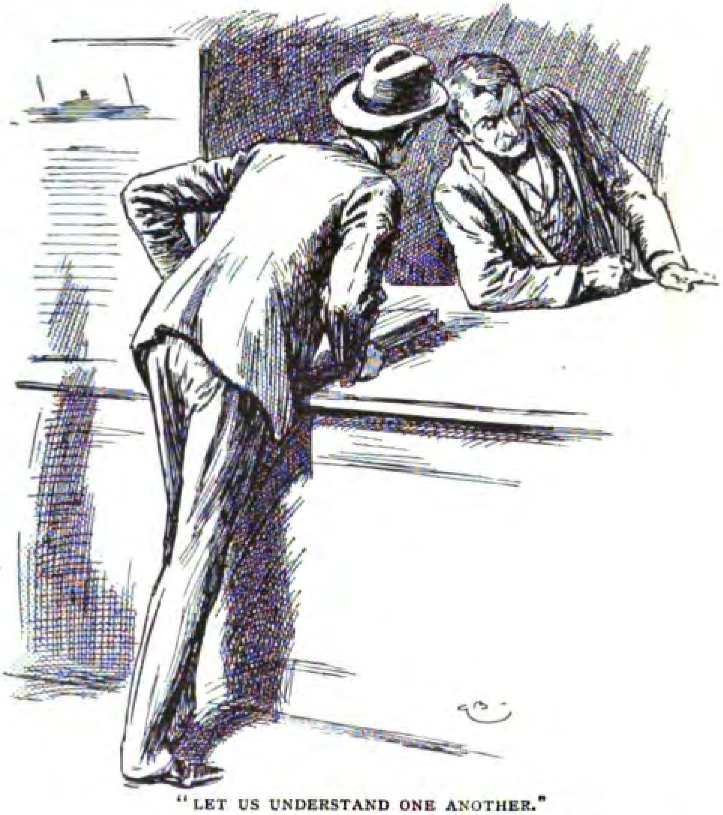
"Professor Sebastian been here again?" I asked.

"Yes, sir; he's been here; and he looked over the list again: and he's taken his passage. But he muttered something about eavesdroppers, and said that if he wasn't satisfied when he got on board, he would return at once and ask for a cabin in exchange by the next steamer."

"That will do," I answered, slipping the promised five-pound note into the clerk's open palm, which closed over it convulsively. "Talked about eavesdroppers, did he? Then he knows he's being shadowed. It may console you to learn that you are instrumental in furthering the aims of justice and unmasking a cruel and wicked conspiracy. Now, the next thing is this: I want two berths at once by this very steamer: one for myself—name of Cumberledge; one for a lady—name of Wade: and look sharp about it."

The sandy-haired man did look sharp; and within three minutes we were driving off with our tickets to Prince's Dock landing-stage.

We slipped on board unobtrusively, and instantly took refuge in our respective staterooms, till the steamer was well under way, and fairly out of sight of Kolaba Island.



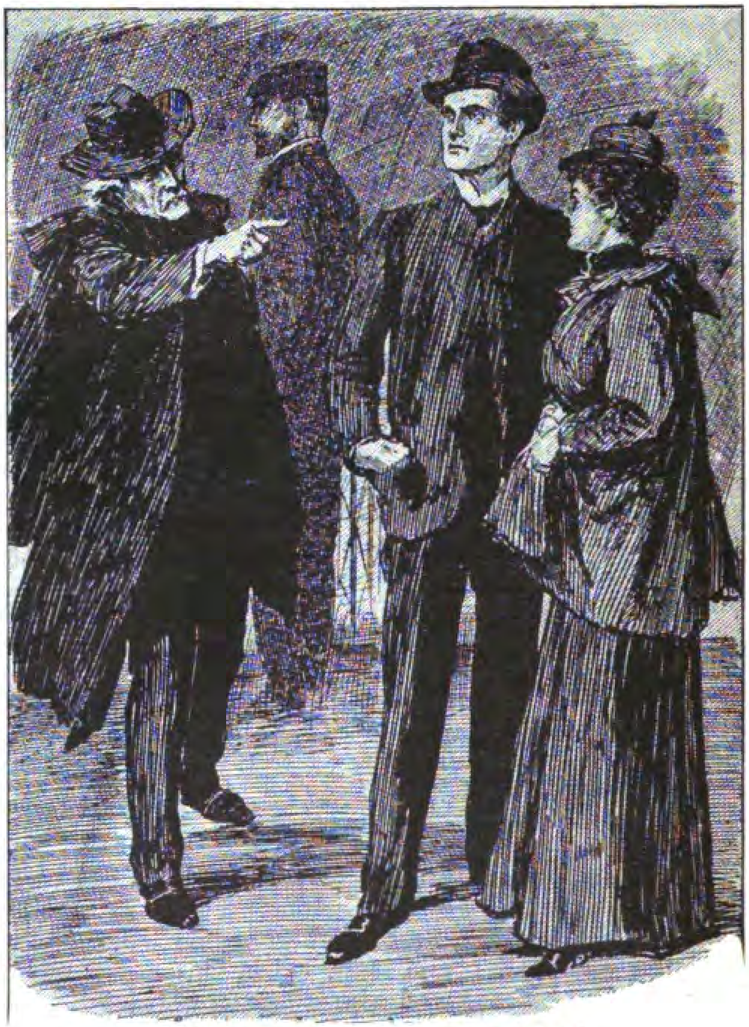
"LET US UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER."

Only after all chance of Sebastian's avoiding us was gone for ever did we venture up on deck, on purpose to confront him.

It was one of those delicious balmy evenings which one gets only at sea and in the warmer latitudes. The sky was alive with myriads of twinkling and palpitating stars, which seemed to come and go, like sparks on a fire-back, as one gazed upward into the vast depths and tried to place them. They played hide-and-seek with one another and with the innumerable meteors which shot recklessly every now and again across the field of the firmament, leaving momentary furrows of light behind them. Beneath, the sea sparkled almost like the sky, for every turn of the screw churned up the scintillating phosphorescence in the water, so that countless little jets of living fire seemed to flash and die away at the summit of every wavelet. A tall, spare man in a picturesque cloak, and with long, lank, white hair, leant over the taffrail, gazing at the numberless flashing lights of the surface. As he gazed, he talked on in his clear, rapt voice to a stranger by his side. The voice and the ring of enthusiasm were unmistakable. "Oh, no," he was saying, as we stole up behind him, "that hypothesis, I venture to assert, is no longer tenable by the light of recent researches. Death and decay have nothing to do directly with the phosphorescence of the sea, though they have a little indirectly. The light is due in the main to numerous minute living organisms, most of them bacilli, on which I once made several close observations and crucial experiments. They possess organs which may be regarded as miniature bull's-eye lanterns: and these organs——"

"What a lovely evening, Hubert!" Hilda said to me, in an apparently unconcerned voice, as the Professor reached this point in his exposition.

Sebastian's voice quavered and stammered for a moment. He tried just at first to continue and complete his sentence: "And these organs," he went on, aimlessly, "these bull's-eyes that I spoke about, are so arranged—so arranged—I was speaking on the subject of crustaceans, I think—crustaceans so arranged——" then he broke down utterly and turned sharply round to me. He did not look at Hilda—I think he did not dare; but he faced me with his head down and his long, thin neck protruded, eyeing me from under those overhanging, pent-house brows of his. "You sneak!" he cried, passionately. "You sneak! You have dogged me by false pretences. You have lied to bring this about! You have come aboard under a false name—you and your accomplice!"



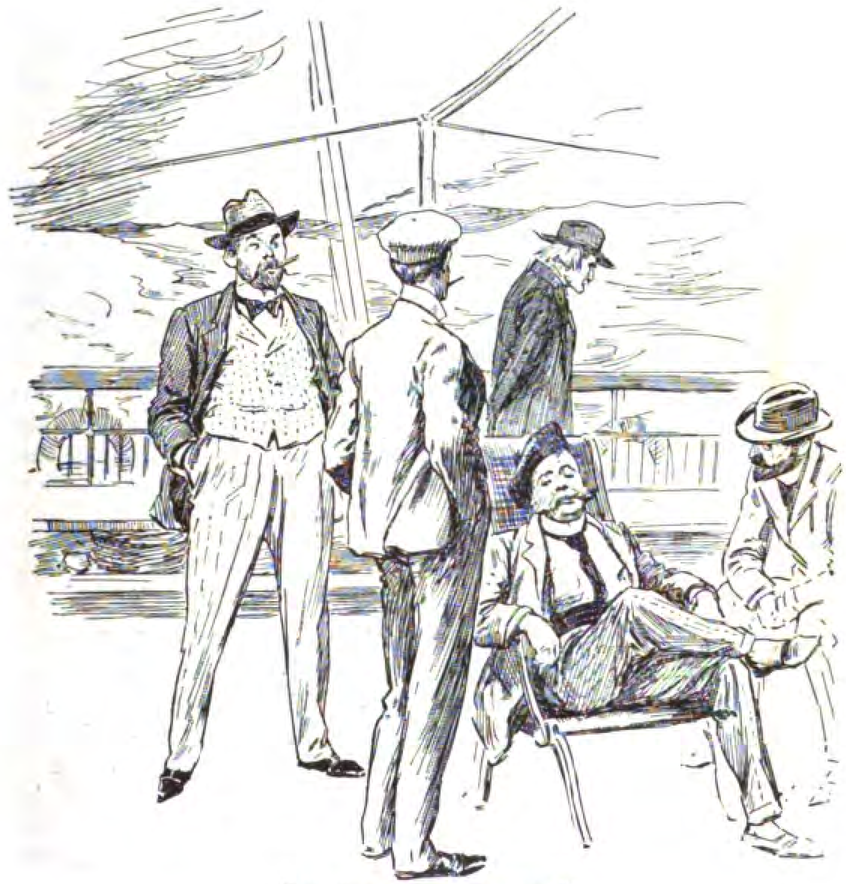
"'YOU SNEAK!' HE CRIED, PASSIONATELY."

I faced him in turn, erect and unflinching. "Professor Sebastian," I answered, in my coldest and calmest tone, "you say what is not true. If you consult the list of passengers by the *Vindhya*, now posted near the companion-ladder, you will find the names of Hilda Wade and Hubert Cumberledge duly entered. We took our passage *after* you inspected the list at the office to see whether our names were there—in order to avoid us. But you cannot avoid us. We do not mean that you shall avoid us. We will dog you now through life—not by lies or subterfuges, as you say, but openly and honestly. It is *you* who need to slink and cower, not we. The prosecutor need not descend to the sordid shifts of the criminal."

The other passenger had sidled away quietly the moment he saw our conversation was likely to be private; and I spoke in a low voice, though clearly and impressively, because I did not wish for a scene: I was only endeavouring to keep alive the slow, smouldering fire of remorse in the man's bosom. And I saw I had touched him on a spot that hurt. Sebastian drew himself up and answered nothing. For a minute or two he stood erect, with folded arms, gazing moodily before him. Then he said, as if to himself, "I owe the man my life. He nursed me through the plague. If it had not been for that—if he had not tended me so carefully in that valley in Nepaul—I would throw him overboard now — catch him in my arms and throw him overboard! I would — and be hanged for it!"

He walked past us as if he saw us not, silent, erect, moody. Hilda stepped aside and let him pass. He never even looked at her. I knew why: he dared not. Every day now, remorse for the evil part he had played in her life, respect for the woman who had unmasked and outwitted him, made it more and more impossible for Sebastian to face her. During the whole of that voyage, though he dined in the same saloon and paced the same deck, he never spoke to her, he never so much as looked at her. Once or twice their eyes met by accident, and Hilda stared him down: Sebastian's eyelids dropped, and he stole away uneasily. In public, we gave no overt sign of our differences: but it was understood on board that relations were strained: that Professor Sebastian and Dr. Cumberledge had been working at the same hospital in London together; and that owing to some disagreement between them Dr. Cumberledge had resigned—which made it most awkward for them to be travelling together by the same steamer.

We passed through the Suez Canal and down the Mediterranean. All the time, Sebastian never again spoke to us. The passengers, indeed, held aloof from the solitary, gloomy old man, who strode along the quarter-deck with his long, slow stride, absorbed in his own thoughts, and intent only on avoiding Hilda and myself. His mood was unsociable. As for Hilda, her helpful, winning ways made her a favourite with all the women, as her pretty face did with all the men. For the first time in his life, Sebastian seemed to be aware that he was shunned. He retired more and more within himself for company: his keen eye began to lose in some degree its extraordinary fire, his expression to forget its magnetic attractiveness. Indeed, it was only young men of scientific tastes that Sebastian could ever attract: among them, his eager zeal, his single-minded devotion to the cause of



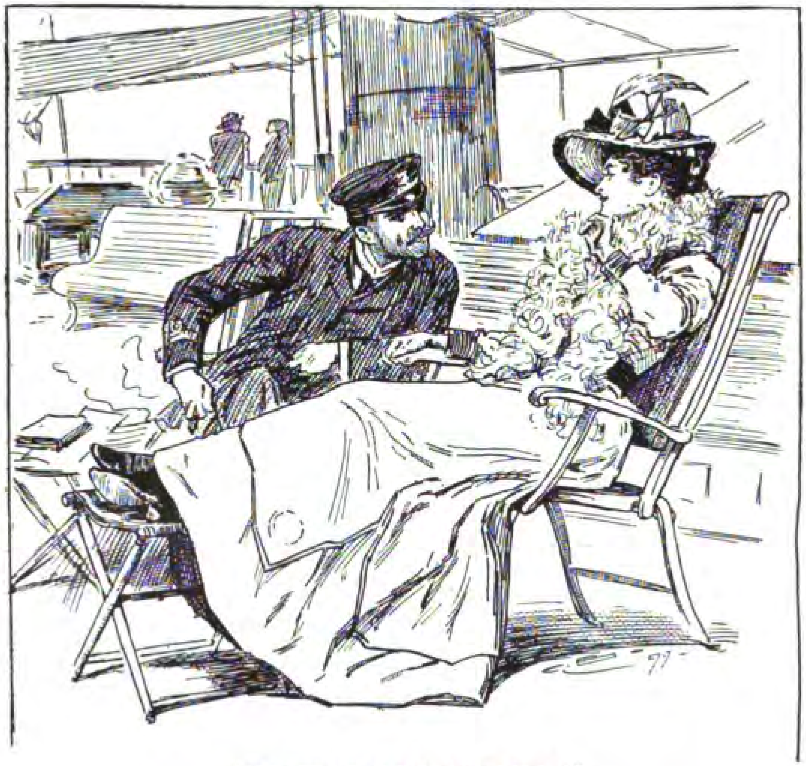
"HIS MOOD WAS UNSOCIABLE."

science, awoke always a responsive chord which vibrated powerfully.

Day after day passed, and we steamed through the Straits and neared the Channel. Our thoughts began to assume a home complexion. Everybody was full of schemes as to what he would do when he reached England. Old Bradshaws were overhauled and trains looked out, on the supposition that we would get in by such an hour on Tuesday. We were steaming along the French coast, off the western promontory of Brittany. The evening was fine, and though, of course, less warm than we had all experienced of late, yet pleasant and summer-like. We watched the distant cliffs of the Finistère mainland and the numerous little islands that lie off the shore, all basking in the unreal glow of a deep red sunset. The first officer was in charge, a very cock-sure and careless young man, handsome and dark-haired: the sort of young man who thought more of creating an impression upon the minds of the lady passengers than of the duties of his position.

"Aren't you going down to your berth?" I asked of Hilda, about half-past ten that night; "the air is so much colder here than you have been feeling it of late, and I'm afraid of your chilling yourself."

She looked up at me with a smile, and drew her little fluffy, white woollen wrap closer about her shoulders. "Am I so very valuable to you, then?" she asked—for I suppose my glance had been a trifle too tender for a mere acquaintance's. "No, thank you, Hubert; I don't think I'll go down, and, if you're wise, you won't go down either. I distrust this first officer. He's a careless navigator, and to-night his head's too full of that pretty Mrs. Ogilvy. He has been flirting with her desperately ever since we left Bombay, and to-morrow he knows he will lose her for ever. His mind isn't occupied with the navigation at all; what *he* is thinking of is how soon his watch will be over, so that he may come down off the bridge on to the quarter-deck to talk to her. Don't you see she's lurking over yonder, looking up at the stars and waiting for him by the compass? Poor child, she has a bad husband, and now she has let herself get too much entangled with this empty young fellow: I shall be glad for her sake to see her safely landed and out of the man's clutches."



"FLIRTING WITH HER DESPERATELY."

As she spoke, the first officer glanced down towards Mrs. Ogilvy, and held out his chronometer with an encouraging smile which seemed to say, "Only an hour and a half more now! At twelve, I shall be with you!"

"Perhaps you're right, Hilda," I answered, taking a seat beside her and throwing away my cigar. "This is one of the worst bits on the French coast that we're approaching. We're not far off Ushant. I wish the captain were on the bridge instead of this helter-skelter, self-conceited young fellow. He's too cock-sure. He knows so much about seamanship that he could take a ship through any rocks on his course, blindfold—in his own opinion. I always doubt a man who is so much at home in his subject that he never has to think about it. Most things in this world are done by thinking."

"We can't see the Ushant light," Hilda remarked, looking ahead.

"No: there's a little haze about on the horizon, I fancy. See, the stars are fading away. It begins to feel damp. Sea mist in the Channel."

Hilda sat uneasily in her deck-chair. "That's bad," she answered; "for the first officer is taking no more heed of Ushant than of his latter end. He has forgotten the existence of the Breton coast. His head is just stuffed with Mrs. Ogilvy's eyelashes. Very pretty, long eyelashes, too: I don't deny it: but they won't help him to get through the narrow channel. They say it's dangerous."

"Dangerous!" I answered. "Not a bit of it—with reasonable care. Nothing at sea is dangerous—except the inexplicable recklessness of navigators. There's always plenty of sea-room—if they care to take it. Collisions and icebergs, to be sure, are dangers that can't be avoided at times, especially if there's fog about: but I've been enough at sea in my time to know this much at least — that no coast in the world is dangerous except by dint of reckless corner-cutting. Captains of great ships behave exactly like two hansom-drivers in the streets of London: they think they can just shave past without grazing; and they *do* shave past nine times out of ten. The tenth time, they run on the rocks, through sheer recklessness, and lose their vessel: and then, the newspapers always ask the same solemn question—in childish good faith—how did so experienced and able a navigator come to make such a mistake in his reckoning? He made *no* mistake: he simply tried to cut it fine, and cut it too fine for once, with the result that he usually loses his own life and his passengers'. That's all. We who have been at sea understand that perfectly."

Just at that moment another passenger strolled up and joined us—a Bengal Civil servant. He drew his chair over by Hilda's, and began discussing Mrs. Ogilvy's eyes and the first officer's flirtations. Hilda hated gossip, and took refuge in generalities. In three minutes the talk had wandered off to Ibsen's influence on the English drama, and we had forgotten the very existence of the Isle of Ushant.

"The English public will never understand Ibsen," the new-comer said, reflectively, with the omniscient air of the Indian civilian. "He is too purely Scandinavian. He represents that part of the Continental mind which is farthest removed from the English temperament. To him, respectability—our god—is not only no fetish, it is the unspeakable thing, the Moabitish abomination. He will not bow down to the golden image which our British Nebuchadnezzar, King Demos, has made, and which he asks us to worship. And the British Nebuchâdnezzar will never get beyond the worship of his Vishnu, respectability, the deity of the pure and blameless ratepayer. So Ibsen must always remain a sealed book to the vast majority of the English people."

"That is true," Hilda answered: "as to his direct influence; but don't you think, indirectly, he is leavening England? A man so wholly out of tune with the prevailing note of English life could only affect it, of course, by means of disciples and popularizers—often even popularizers who but dimly and distantly apprehend his meaning. He must be interpreted to the English by English intermediaries, half Philistine themselves, who speak his language ill, and who miss the greater part of his message. Yet only by such half-hints——Why, what was that? I think I saw something!"

Even as she uttered the words, a terrible jar ran fiercely through the ship from stem to stern. A jar that made one clench one's teeth, and hold one's jaws tight. The jar of a prow that shattered against a rock. I took it all in at a glance. We had forgotten Ushant, but Ushant had not forgotten us: it had revenged itself upon us by revealing its existence.

In a moment all was turmoil and confusion on deck. I cannot describe the scene that followed. Sailors rushed to and fro, unfastening ropes and lowering boats, with admirable discipline. Women shrieked and cried aloud in helpless terror. The voice of the first officer could be heard above the din, endeavouring to atone by courage and coolness in the actual disaster for his recklessness in causing it. Passengers rushed on

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deck half clad, and waited for their turn to take places in the boats. It was a time of terror, turmoil, and hubbub. But, in the midst of it all, Hilda turned to me with infinite calm in her voice. "Where is Sebastian?" she asked, in a perfectly collected tone. "Whatever happens, we must not lose sight of him."

"I am here," another voice, equally calm, responded beside her. "You are a brave woman. Whether I sink or swim, I admire your courage, your steadfastness of purpose." It was the only time he had addressed a word to her during the entire voyage.

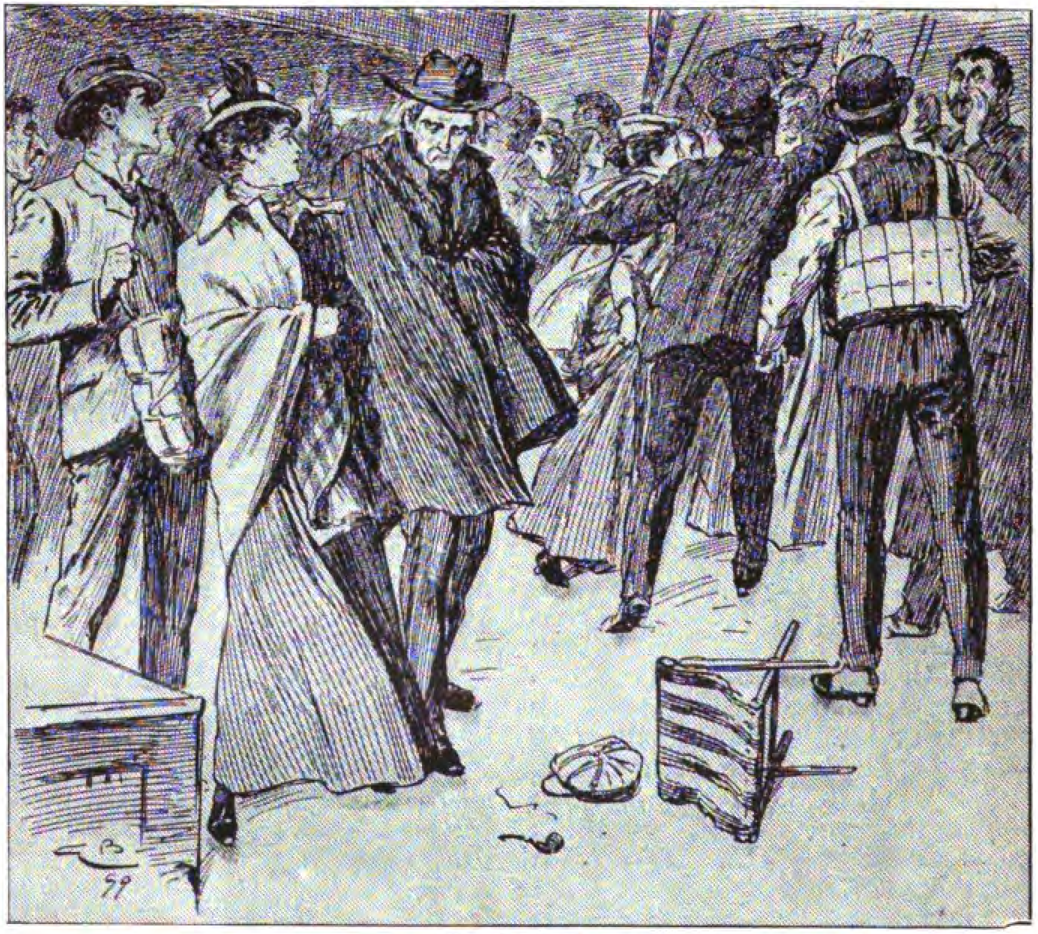
They put the women and children into the first boats lowered. Mothers and little ones went first: single women and widows after. "Now, Miss Wade," the first officer said, taking her gently by the shoulders when her turn arrived. "Make haste: don't keep us waiting!"

But Hilda held back. "No, no," she said, firmly. "I won't go yet. I am waiting for the men's boat: I must not leave Professor Sebastian."

The first officer shrugged his shoulders. There was no time for protest. "Next, then," he said, quickly. "Miss Martin—Miss Weatherly!"

Sebastian took her hand and tried to force her in. "You *must* go," he said, in a low, persuasive tone. "You must not wait for me!"

He hated to see her, I knew: but I imagined in his voice—for I noted it even then—there rang some undertone of genuine desire to save her.


"I AM HERE."

Hilda loosened his grasp resolutely. "No, no," she answered, "I cannot fly. I shall never leave you."

"Not even if I promise——"

She shook her head and closed her lips hard. "Certainly not," she said again, after a pause. "I cannot trust you. Besides, I must stop by your side and do my best to save you. Your life is all in all to me: I dare not risk it."

His gaze was now pure admiration. "As you will," he answered. "For he that loseth his life shall gain it."

"If ever we land alive," Hilda answered, glowing red in spite of the danger, "I shall remind you of that word: I shall call upon you to fulfil it."

The boat was lowered, and still Hilda stood by my side. One second later, another shock shook us. The *Vindhya* parted amidships, and we found ourselves struggling and choking in the cold sea water.

It was a miracle that every soul of us was not drowned that moment, as many of us were. The swirling eddy which followed as the *Vindhya* sank swamped two of the boats, and carried down not a few of those who were standing on the deck with us. The last I saw of the first officer was a writhing form whirled about in the water; before he sank, he shouted aloud, with a seaman's frank courage, "Say it was all my fault: I accept the responsibility. I ran her too close. I am the only one to blame for it." Then he disappeared in the whirlpool caused by the sinking ship, and we were left still struggling.

One of the life-rafts, hastily rigged by the sailors, floated our way. Hilda struck out a stroke or two and caught it. She dragged herself on to it, and beckoned me to follow. I could see she was grasping something tightly in her hand. I struck out in turn and reached the raft, which was composed of two seats, fastened together in haste at the first note of danger. I hauled myself up by Hilda's side. "Help me to pull him aboard!" she cried, in an agonized voice. "I am afraid he has lost consciousness!" Then I looked at the object she was clutching in her hands. It was Sebastian's white head, apparently quite lifeless.

I pulled him up with her and laid him out on the raft. A very faint breeze from the south-west had sprung up: that and a strong seaward current that sets round the rocks were carrying us straight out from the Breton coast and all chance of rescue, towards the open Channel.

But Hilda thought nothing of such physical danger. "We have saved him, Hubert!" she cried, clasping her hands. "We have saved him! But do you think he is alive? For unless he is, *my* chance, *our* chance, is gone for ever!"

I bent over and felt his pulse. As far as I could make out, it still beat feebly.