

# Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

[We cannot allow the concluding chapter of this story to go to press without an expression of our deep regret at Mr. Grant Allen's lamented death—a regret in which none will join more sincerely than the readers of this Magazine, whom he did so much to entertain. A man of wide and cultured knowledge and of the most charming personality, a writer who, treating of a wide variety of subjects, touched nothing which he did not beautify, he filled a place which no man living can exactly occupy. The following chapter had been roughly sketched before his final illness, and his anxiety, when debarred from work, to see it finished was relieved by the considerate kindness of his friend and neighbour, Dr. Conan Doyle, who, hearing of his trouble, talked it over with him, gathered his ideas, and finally wrote it out for him in the form in which it now appears—a beautiful and pathetic act of friendship which it is a pleasure to record.]

## XII.—THE EPISODE OF THE DEAD MAN WHO SPOKE.

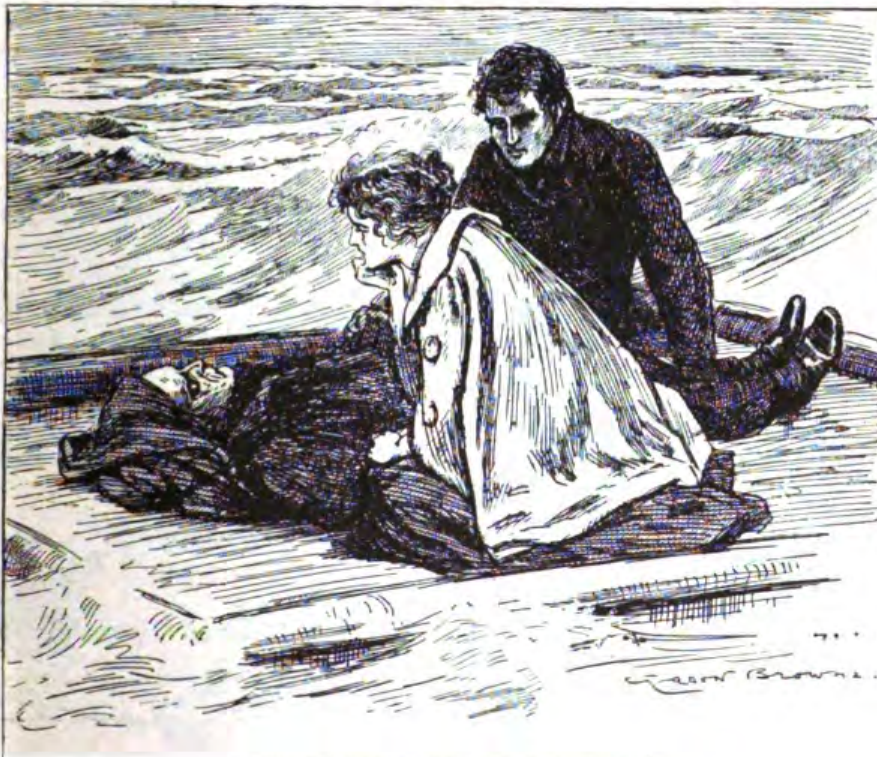


WILL not trouble you with details of those three terrible days and nights when we drifted helplessly about at the mercy of the currents on our improvised life-raft up and down the English Channel. The first night was the worst: slowly after that we grew used to the danger, the cold, the hunger, and the thirst; our senses were numbed: we passed whole hours together in a sort of torpor, just vaguely wondering whether a ship would come in sight to save us, obeying the merciful law that those who are utterly exhausted are incapable of acute fear, and acquiescing in the probability of our own extinction. But however slender the chance—and as the hours stole on it seemed slender enough—Hilda still kept her hopes fixed mainly on Sebastian.

No daughter could have watched the father she loved more eagerly and closely than Hilda watched her life-long enemy—the man who had wrought such evil upon her and hers. To save our own lives without him would be useless. At all hazards, she must keep him alive, on the bare chance of a rescue. If he died, there died with him the last hope of justice and redress.

As for Sebastian, after the first half-hour, during which he lay white and unconscious, he opened his eyes faintly, as we could see by the moonlight, and gazed around him with a strange, puzzled stare of inquiry. Then his senses returned to him by degrees. "What! you, Cumberledge?" he murmured, measuring me with his eye: "and you, Nurse Wade? Well, I thought you would manage it." There was a tone almost of

amusement in his voice, a half-ironical tone which had been familiar to us in the old hospital days. He raised himself on one arm and gazed at the water all round. Then he was silent for some minutes. At last he spoke again. "Do you know what I ought to do if I were consistent?" he asked, with a tinge of pathos in his words. "Jump off this raft, and deprive you of your last chance of triumph—the triumph which you have worked for so hard. You want to save my life for your own ends, not



"HILDA WATCHED HER LIFE-LONG ENEMY."

for mine. Why should I help you to my own undoing?"

Hilda's voice was tenderer and softer than usual as she answered, "No, not for my own ends alone, and not for your undoing, but to give you one last chance of unburdening your conscience. Some men are too small to be capable of remorse: their little souls have no room for such a feeling. You are great enough to feel it and to try to crush it down. But you *cannot* crush it down: it crops up in spite of you. You have tried to bury it in your soul, and you have failed. It is your remorse that has driven you to make so many attempts against the only living souls who knew and understood. If ever we get safely to land once more—and God knows it is not likely—I give you still the chance of repairing the mischief you have done, and of clearing my father's memory from the cruel stain which you and only you can wipe away."

Sebastian lay long, silent once more, gazing up at her fixedly, with the foggy, white moonlight shining upon his bright, inscrutable eyes. "You are a brave woman, Maisie Yorke-Bannerman," he said, at last, slowly: "a very brave woman. I will try to live—I too—for a purpose of my own. I say it again: he that loseth his life shall gain it."

Incredible as it may sound, in half an hour more he was lying fast asleep on that wave-tossed raft, and Hilda and I were watching him tenderly. And it seemed to us as we watched him that a change had come over those stern and impassive features. They had softened and melted until his face was that of a gentler and better type. It was as if some inward change of soul was moulding the fierce old Professor into a nobler and more venerable man. Day after day we drifted on, without food

or water. The agony was terrible: I will not attempt to describe it, for to do so is to bring it back too clearly to my memory. Hilda and I, being younger and stronger, bore up against it well; but Sebastian, old and worn, and still weak from the plague, grew daily weaker. His pulse just beat, and sometimes I could hardly feel it thrill under my finger. He became delirious, and murmured much about Yorke-Bannerman's daughter. Sometimes he forgot all, and spoke to me in the friendly terms of our old acquaintance at Nathaniel's, giving me directions and advice about imaginary operations. Hour after hour we watched for a sail, and no sail appeared. One could hardly believe we could toss about so long in the main highway of traffic without seeing a ship or spying more than the smoke-trail of some passing steamer.

As far as I could judge, during those days and nights, the wind veered from south-west to south-east, and carried us steadily and surely towards the open Atlantic. On the third evening out, about five o'clock, I saw a dark object on the horizon. Was it moving towards us? We strained our eyes in breathless suspense. A minute passed, and then another. Yes, there could be no doubt. It grew larger and larger: it was a ship—a steamer. We made all the signs of distress we could manage. I stood up and waved Hilda's white shawl frantically in the air.



"I STOOD UP AND WAVED HILDA'S WHITE SHAWL."

There was half an hour of suspense, and our hearts sank as we thought that they were about to pass us. Then the steamer hove to a little and seemed to notice us. Next instant we dropped upon our knees, for we saw they were lowering a boat. They were coming to our aid. They would be in time to save us.

Hilda watched our rescuers with parted lips and agonized eyes. Then she felt Sebastian's pulse. "Thank Heaven," she cried, "he still lives! They will be here before he is quite past confession."

Sebastian opened his eyes dreamily. "A boat?" he asked.

"Yes, a boat!"

"Then you have gained your point, child. I am able to collect myself. Give me a few hours more life, and what I can do to make amends to you shall be done."

I don't know why, but it seemed longer between the time when the boat was lowered and the moment when it reached us than it had seemed during the three days and nights we lay tossing about helplessly on the open Atlantic. There were times when we could hardly believe that it was really moving. At last, however, it reached us, and we saw the kindly faces and outstretched hands of our rescuers. Hilda clung to Sebastian with a wild clasp as the men reached out for her.

"No, take *him* first!" she cried, when the sailors, after the custom of men, tried to help her into the gig before attempting to save us: "his life is worth more to me than my own. Take him—and for God's sake lift him gently, for he is nearly gone!"

They took him aboard, and laid him down in the stern. Then, and then only, Hilda stepped into the boat, and I staggered after her. The officer in charge, a kind young Irishman, had had the foresight to bring brandy and a little beef essence. We ate and drank what we dared as they rowed us back to the steamer. Sebastian lay back, with his white eyelashes closed over the lids, and the livid hue of death upon his emaciated cheeks; but he drank a teaspoonful or two of brandy, and swallowed the beef essence with which Hilda fed him.

"Your father is the most exhausted of the party," the officer said, in a low undertone. "Poor fellow, he is too old for such adventures. He seems to have hardly a spark of life left in him."

Hilda shuddered with evident horror. "He is not my father—thank Heaven!" she cried, leaning over him and supporting his

drooping head, in spite of her own fatigue and the cold that chilled our very bones. "But I think he will live. I mean him to live. He is my best friend now—and my bitterest enemy!"

The officer looked at her in surprise, and then touched his forehead, inquiringly, with a quick glance at me. He evidently thought cold and hunger had affected her reason. I shook my head. "It is a peculiar case," I whispered. "What the lady says is right. Everything depends for us upon our keeping him alive till we reach England."

They rowed us to the steamer, and we were handed tenderly up the side. There, the ship's surgeon and everybody else on board did their best to restore us after our terrible experience. The ship was the *Don*, of the Royal Mail Steamship Company's West Indian line; and nothing could exceed the kindness with which we were treated by every soul on board, from the captain to the stewardess and the junior cabin-boy. Sebastian's great name carried weight even here. As soon as it was generally understood on board that we had brought with us the famous physiologist and pathologist, the man whose name was famous throughout Europe, we might have asked for anything that the ship contained without fear of a refusal. But, indeed, Hilda's sweet face was enough in itself to win the interest and sympathy of all who saw it.

By eleven next morning we were off Plymouth Sound: and by midday we had landed at the Mill Bay Docks, and were on our way to a comfortable hotel in the neighbourhood.

Hilda was too good a nurse to bother Sebastian at once about his implied promise. She had him put to bed, and kept him there carefully.

"What do you think of his condition?" she asked me, after the second day was over. I could see by her own grave face that she had already formed her own conclusions.

"He cannot recover," I answered. "His constitution, shattered by the plague and by his incessant exertions, has received too severe a shock in this shipwreck. He is doomed."

"So I think. The change is but temporary. He will not last out three days more, I fancy."

"He has rallied wonderfully to-day," I said; "but 'tis a passing rally; a flicker: no more. If you wish to do anything, now is the moment. If you delay, you will be too late."

"I will go in and see him," Hilda answered. "I have said nothing more to him, but I think he is moved: I think he means to keep his promise. He has shown a strange tenderness to me these last few days. I almost believe he is at last remorseful, and ready to undo the evil which he has done."



"I ALMOST BELIEVE HE IS AT LAST REMORSEFUL."

She stole softly into the sick room: I followed her on tip-toe, and stood near the door behind the screen which shut off the draught from the patient. Sebastian stretched his arms out to her. "Ah, Maisie, my child," he cried, addressing her by the name she had borne in her childhood, "don't leave me any more. Stay with me always, Maisie! I can't get on without you."

"But you hated once to see me!"

"Because I have so wronged you."

"And now? Will you do nothing to repair the wrong?"

"My child, I can never undo that wrong. It is irreparable, for the past can never be recalled; but I will try my best to minimize it. Call Cumberledge in. I am quite sensible now, quite conscious. You will be my witness, Cumberledge, that my pulse is normal and that my brain is clear. I will confess it all. Maisie, your constancy and your firmness have conquered me. And your devotion to your father. If only I had had a daughter like you, my girl, one whom I could have loved and trusted, I might have been a better

man: I might even have done better work for science—though on that side at least I have little with which to reproach myself."

Hilda bent over him. "Hubert and I are here," she said, slowly, in a strangely calm voice: "but that is not enough. I want a public, an attested, confession. It must be given before witnesses, and signed and sworn to. Somebody might throw doubt upon my word and Hubert's."

Sebastian shrank back. "Given before witnesses, and signed and sworn to! Maisie, is this humiliation necessary: do you exact it?"

Hilda was inexorable. "You know yourself how you are situated. You have only a day or two to live," she said, in an impressive voice. "You must do it at once, or never. You have postponed it all your life. Now, at this last moment, you must make up for it. Will you die with an act of injustice unconfessed on your conscience?"

He paused and struggled. "I could—if it were not for you," he answered.

"Then do it for me," Hilda cried. "Do it for me! I ask it of you, not as a favour, but as

a right. I *demand* it!" She stood, white, stern, inexorable, by his couch, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

He paused once more; then he murmured feebly, in a querulous tone, "What witnesses? Whom do you wish to be present?"

Hilda spoke clearly and distinctly. She had thought it all out with herself beforehand. "Such witnesses as will carry absolute conviction to the mind of all the world: irrefragable, disinterested witnesses: official witnesses. In the first place, a commissioner of oaths. Then a Plymouth doctor, to show that you are in a fit state of mind to make a confession. Next, Mr. Horace Mayfield, who defended my father. Lastly, Dr. Blake Crawford, who watched the case on your behalf at the trial."

"But, Hilda," I interposed, "we may possibly find that they cannot come away from London just now. They are busy men, and likely to be engaged."

"They will come if I pay their fees. I do not mind how much this costs me. What is money compared to this one great object of my life?"

"And then—the delay! Suppose that we are too late?"

"He will live some days yet. I can telegraph up at once. I want no hole-and-corner confession, which may afterwards be useless, but an open avowal before the most approved witnesses. If he will make it, well and good: if not, my life-work will have failed; but I had rather it failed than draw back one inch from the course which I have laid down for myself."

I looked at the worn face of Sebastian. He nodded his head slowly. "She has conquered," he answered, turning upon the pillow. "Let her have her own way. I hid it for years, for science sake. That was my motive; Cumberlandge, and I am too near death to lie. Science has now nothing more to gain or lose by me. I have served her well, but I am worn out in her service. Maisie may do as she will. I accept her ultimatum."

We telegraphed up, at once. Fortunately, both men were disengaged, and both keenly interested in the case. By that evening Horace Mayfield was talking it all over with me in the hotel at Southampton. "Well, Hubert, my boy," he said, "a woman, we know, can do a great deal"; he smiled his familiar smile, like a genial fat toad; "but if your Yorke-Bannerman succeeds in getting a confession out of Sebastian, she'll extort my admiration." He paused a moment, then he added, as an afterthought, "I say that she'll extort my admiration: but, mind you, I don't know that I shall feel inclined to believe it. The facts have always appeared to me—strictly between ourselves, you know—to admit of only the one explanation."

"Wait and see," I answered. "You think it more likely that Miss Wade will have persuaded Sebastian to confess to things

that never happened, than that he will convince you of Yorke-Bannerman's innocence?"

The great Q.C. fingered his cigarette-holder affectionately. "You hit it first time," he answered. "That is precisely my attitude. The evidence against our poor friend was so peculiarly black. It would take a great deal to make me disbelieve it."

"But surely a confession——!"

"Ah, well, let me hear the confession, and then I shall be better able to judge."

Even as he spoke Hilda had entered the room.

"There will be no difficulty about that, Mr. Mayfield. You shall hear it, and I trust that it will make you repent for taking so black a view of the case of your own client."

"Without prejudice, Miss Bannerman, without prejudice," said the lawyer, with some confusion. "Our conversation is entirely between ourselves, and to the world I have always upheld that your father was an innocent man."

But such distinctions are too subtle for a loving woman.

"He *was* an innocent man," said she, angrily. "It was your business not only to



"HE WAS AN INNOCENT MAN," SAID SHE, ANGRILY.

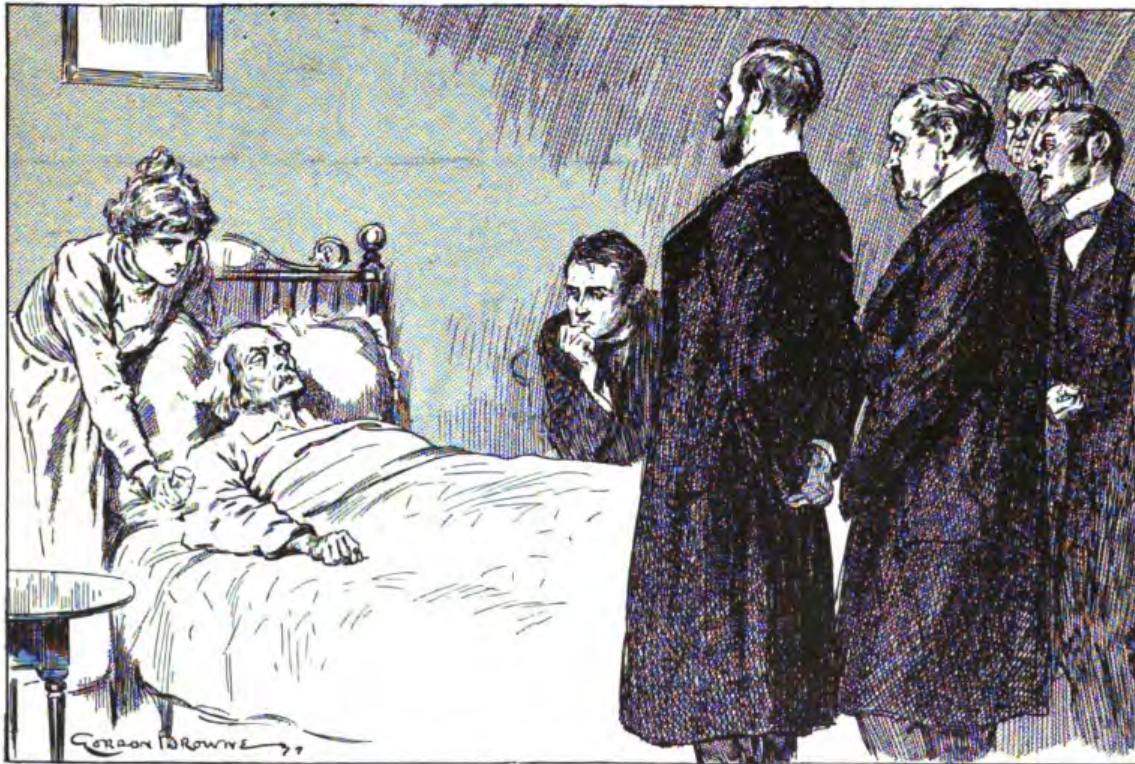
believe it, but to prove it. You have neither believed it nor proved it; but if you will come upstairs with me, I will show you that I have done both."

Mayfield glanced at me and shrugged his fat shoulders. Hilda had led the way, and we both followed her. In the room of the sick man our other witnesses were waiting: a tall, dark, austere man, who was introduced to me as Dr. Blake Crawford, whose name I had heard as having watched the case for Sebastian at the time of the investigation. There were present also a commissioner of oaths, and Dr. Mayby, a small local practitioner, whose attitude towards the great scientist upon the couch was almost absurdly reverential. The three men were grouped at the foot of the bed, and Mayfield and I joined them. Hilda stood beside the dying man, and rearranged the pillow against which

met any to match it—but I do not mind admitting that, for firmness and tenacity, this lady is my equal. She was anxious that I should adopt one course of action. I was determined to adopt another. Your presence here is a proof that she has prevailed."

He paused for breath, and she gave him another small sip of the brandy.

"I execute her will ungrudgingly and with the conviction that it is the right and proper course for me to take," he continued. "You will forgive me some of the ill which I have done you, Maisie, when I tell you that I really died this morning—all unknown to Cumberledge and you—and that nothing but my will force has sufficed to keep spirit and body together until I should carry out your will in the manner which you suggested. I shall be glad when I have finished, for the effort is a painful one, and I long for the



"'A REMARKABLE WOMAN, GENTLEMEN,' SAID HE."

he was propped. Then she held some brandy to his lips. "Now!" said she.

The stimulant brought a shade of colour into his ghastly cheeks, and the old quick, intelligent gleam came back into his deep-sunk eyes.

"A remarkable woman, gentlemen," said he, "a very noteworthy woman. I had prided myself that my will-power was the most powerful in the country—I had never

peace of dissolution. It is now a quarter to seven. I have every hope that I may be able to leave before eight."

It was strange to hear the perfect coolness with which he discussed his own approaching dissolution. Calm, pale, and impassive, his manner was that of a professor addressing his class. I had seen him speak so to a ring of dressers in the old days at Nathaniel's.

"The circumstances which led up to the

death of Admiral Scott Prideaux, and the suspicions which caused the arrest of Doctor Yorke-Bannerman, have never yet been fully explained, although they were by no means so profound that they might not have been unravelled at the time had a man of intellect concentrated his attention upon them. The police, however, were incompetent and the legal advisers of Dr. Bannerman hardly less so, and a woman only has had the wit to see that a gross injustice has been done. The true facts I will now lay before you."

Mayfield's broad face had reddened with indignation, but now his curiosity drove out every other emotion, and he leaned forward with the rest of us to hear the old man's story.

"In the first place, I must tell you that both Dr. Bannerman and myself were engaged at the time in an investigation upon the nature and properties of the vegetable alkaloids, and especially of aconitine. We hoped for the very greatest results from this drug, and we were both equally enthusiastic in our research. Especially, we had reason to believe that it might have a most successful action in the case of a certain rare but deadly disease, into the nature of which I need not enter. Reasoning by analogy, we were convinced that we had a certain cure for this particular ailment.

"Our investigation, however, was somewhat hampered by the fact that the condition in question is rare out of tropical countries, and that in our hospital wards we had not, at that time, any example of it. So serious was this obstacle that it seemed that we must leave other men more favourably situated to reap the benefit of our work and enjoy the credit of our discovery, but a curious chance gave us exactly what we were in search of, at the instant when we were about to despair. It was Yorke-Bannerman who came to me in my laboratory one day to tell me that he had in his private practice the very condition of which we were in search.

"The patient,' said he, 'is my uncle, Admiral Scott Prideaux.'

"Your uncle!' I cried, in amazement. 'But how came he to develop such a condition?'

"His last commission in the Navy was spent upon the Malabar Coast, where the disease is endemic. There can be no doubt that it has been latent in his system ever since, and that the irritability of temper and indecision of character, of which his family have so often had to complain, were really among the symptoms of his complaint.'

"I examined the Admiral in consultation

with my colleague, and I confirmed his diagnosis. But, to my surprise, Yorke-Bannerman showed the most invincible and reprehensible objection to experiment upon his relative. In vain I assured him that he must place his duty to science high above all other considerations. It was only after great pressure that I could persuade him to add an infinitesimal portion of aconitine to his prescriptions. The drug was a deadly one, he said, and the toxic dose was still to be determined. He could not push it in the case of a relative who trusted himself to his care. I tried to shake him in what I regarded as his absurd squeamishness—but in vain.

"But I had another resource. Bannerman's prescriptions were made up by a fellow named Barclay, who had been dispenser at Nathaniel's and afterwards set up as a chemist in Sackville Street. This man was absolutely in my power. I had discovered him at Nathaniel's in dishonest practices, and I held evidence which would have sent him to gaol. I held this over him now, and I made him, unknown to Bannerman, increase the doses of aconitine in the medicine until they were sufficient for my experimental purposes. I will not enter into figures, but suffice it that Bannerman was giving more than ten times what he imagined.

"You know the sequel. I was called in, and suddenly found that I had Bannerman in my power. There had been a very keen rivalry between us in science. He was the only man in England whose career might impinge upon mine. I had this supreme chance of putting him out of my way. He could not deny that he had been giving his uncle aconitine. I could prove that his uncle had died of aconitine. He could not himself account for the facts—he was absolutely in my power. I did not wish him to be condemned, Maisie. I only hoped that he would leave the court discredited and ruined. I give you my word that my evidence would have saved him from the scaffold."

Hilda was listening, with a set, white face.

"Proceed!" said she, and held out the brandy once more.

"I did not give the Admiral any more aconitine after I had taken over the case. But what was already in his system was enough. It was evident that we had seriously under-estimated the lethal dose. As to your father, Maisie, you have done me an injustice. You have always thought that I killed him."

"Proceed!" said she.

"I speak now from the brink of the grave, and I tell you that I did not. His heart was always weak, and it broke down under the strain. Indirectly I was the cause—I do not seek to excuse anything; but it was the sorrow and the shame that killed him. As to Barclay, the chemist, that is another matter. I will not deny that I was concerned in that mysterious disappearance, which was a seven days' wonder in the Press. I could not permit my scientific calm to be interrupted by the blackmailing visits of so insignificant a person. And then after many years you came, Maisie. You also got between me and that work which was life to me. You also showed that you would rake up this old matter and bring dishonour upon a name which has stood for something in science. You also—but you will forgive me. I have held on to life for your sake as an atonement for my sins. Now, I go! Cumberledge—your notebook. Subjective sensations, swimming in the head, light flashes before the eyes, soothing torpor, some touch of coldness, constriction of the temples, humming in the ears, a sense of sinking—sinking—sinking!"

It was an hour later, and Hilda and I were alone in the chamber of death. As Sebastian lay there, a marble figure, with his keen eyes closed and his pinched, thin face whiter and serener than ever, I could not help gazing at him with some pangs of

recollection. I could not avoid recalling the time when his very name was to me a word of power, and when the thought of him roused on my cheek a red flush of enthusiasm. As I looked I murmured two lines from Browning's "Grammarians' Funeral":—

This is our Master, famous, calm, and dead,  
Borne on our shoulders.

Hilda Wade, standing beside me, with an awestruck air, added a stanza from the same great poem:—

Lofty designs must close in like effects:

Loftily lying,

Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,  
Living and dying.

I gazed at her with admiration. "And it is *you*, Hilda, who pay him this generous tribute!" I cried. "*You*, of all women!"

"Yes, it is I," she answered. "He was a great man, after all, Hubert. Not good, but great. And greatness by itself extorts our unwilling homage."

"Hilda," I cried, "you are a great woman. And a good woman, too. It makes me proud to think you will soon be my wife. For there is now no longer any just cause or impediment."

Beside the dead master, she laid her hand solemnly and calmly in mine. "No impediment," she answered. "I have vindicated and cleared my father's memory. And now, I can live. 'Actual life comes next.' We have much to do, Hubert."



"'NO IMPEDIMENT,' SHE ANSWERED."