

Major Wilbraham

by Hugh Walpole

Extraordinary Story of the Great Secret the World Was Unwilling to Hear

I AM quite aware that in giving you this story just as I was told it I shall incur the charge of downright and deliberate lying.

Especially I shall be told this by anyone who knew Wilbraham personally. Wilbraham was not, of course, a real name, but I think that there are certain people who will recognize him from this description of him. I do not know that it matters very much if they do. Wilbraham himself would certainly not mind if he knew. (Does he know?) It was the thing above all that he wanted those last hours before he died that I should pass on my conviction of the truth of what he told me to others. What he did not know was that I was not convinced. How could I be? But when the whole comfort of his last hours hung on the simple fact that I was, of course I pretended to the best of my poor ability. I would have done more than that to make him happy.

It is precisely the people who knew him well who will declare at once that my little story is impossible. But they did not know him well? Does anyone know anyone else well? Aren't we all as lonely and removed from one another as mariners on separate desert islands? In any case I did not know him well and perhaps for that very reason was not so greatly surprised at his amazing revelations—surprised at the revelations themselves, of course, but not at his telling them. There was always in him—and I have known him here and there, loosely, in club and London fashion, for nearly 30 years—something romantic and something sentimental. I knew that because it was precisely these two attributes that he drew out of me.

Most men are conscious at some time in their lives of having felt for a member of their own sex an emotion that is something more than simple companionship. It is a queer feeling quite unlike anything else, distinctly romantic and the more that perhaps for having no sex feeling in it.

Like the love of women, it is felt generally at eight, but unlike that love, it is, I think, a supremely unselfish emotion, not acquisitive, nor possessive, nor jealous, and exists best perhaps when it is not urged too severely, but is allowed to linger in the background of life, giving real happiness and security and trust, standing out, indeed, as something curiously real just because it is so little passionate. This emotion has an odd place in our English life because the men who feel it, they have been to public school and university, have served a long training in repressing every sign or expression of sentiment towards any other man; nevertheless it persists, romantically and deeply, and the war of 1914 offered many curious examples of it.

Wilbraham roused just that feeling in me. I remember with the utmost distinctness my first meeting with him. It was just after the Boer war and old Johnny Beamister gave a dinner party to some men pals of his at the Phoenix.

Johnny was not so old then—none of us were; it was a short time after the death of that old harpy, the Duchess of Wrex, and some said that the dinner was in celebration of that happy occasion. Johnny was not so ungracious as that, but he gave us a very merry evening and he did undoubtedly feel a kind of lightness in the general air.

There were about 15 of us and Wilbraham was the only man present I'd never seen before. He was only a captain then and neither so red faced nor so stout as he afterwards became. He was pretty bulky, though, even then, and with his sandy hair cropped close, his staring blue eyes, his toothbrush mustache and sharp, alert movements, looked the typical traditional British officer.

There was nothing at all to distinguish him from a thousand other officers of his kind, and yet from that moment I saw him I had some special and personal feeling about him. He was not in type at all the man to whom at that time I should have felt drawn. My first book had just been published and, although as I now perceive, its publication had not caused the slightest ripple upon any water, the congratulations of my friends and relations, who felt compelled, poor things, to say something, because "they had received copies from the author," had made me feel that the literary world was all burning at my ears. I could see it at a glance that Kipling was probably the only "decent" author about whom Wilbraham knew anything, and the fragments of his conversation that I caught did not promise anything intellectually exciting from his acquaintance.

The fact remains that I wanted to know him more than any other man in the room and although I only exchanged a few words with him that night, I thought of him for quite a long time afterwards.

It did not follow from this as it ought to have done that we became great friends. That we never were, although it was myself whom he sent for three days before his death to tell me his queer little story. It was then at the very last that he confided to me that he, too, had felt something at our first meeting "different" to what one generally feels, that he had always wanted to turn our acquaintance into friendship and had been too shy. I also was shy—and so we missed one another, as I suppose in this funny, constrained, traditional country of ours thousands of people miss one another every day.

But although I did not see him very often and was in no way intimate with him, I kept my ears open for any account of his doings. From one point of view, the club window overlook he was a very usual figure, one of those stout, rubicund, jolly men, a good polo player, a good man in a house party, genial-natured, and none too brilliantly brainned, whom every-

one liked and no one thought about. All this he was on one side of the report, but on the other, there were certain stories that were something more than the ordinary.

Wilbraham was obviously a sentimentalist and an enthusiast; there was the extraordinary case shortly after I first met him of his championship of X, a man who had been caught in an especially heinous kind of crime and received a year's imprisonment for it. On X leaving prison Wilbraham championed and defended him, put him up for months in his rooms in Duke street, walked as often as possible in his company down Piccadilly, and took him over to Paris. It was a great deal for Wilbraham's accepted normality and his general popularity that this championship of X did him no harm. It was so obvious that he himself was the last man in the world to be afflicted with X's peculiar habits. Some men, it is true, did murmur something about "birds of a feather," one or two kind friends warned Wilbraham in the way kind friends have, and to them he simply said: "If a fellow's a pal, he's a pal."

All this might in the end have done Wilbraham harm had not X most happily committed suicide in Paris in 1905.

There followed a year or two later the much more celebrated business of Lady C. I need not go into all that now, but here again Wilbraham constituted himself her defender, although she robbed, cheated and maltreated everyone who was good to her. It was quite obvious that he was not in love with her; the obviousness of it was one of the things in him that annoyed her.

He simply felt apparently that she had been badly treated (the very last thing that she had been), gave her any money he had, put his rooms at the disposal of herself and her friends, and, as I have said, championed her everywhere. This affair did very nearly finish him socially and in his regiment. It was not so much that they minded his caring for Lady C.—after all, any man can be fooled by any woman—but it was Lady C's friends who made the whole thing so impossible. Such a crew! Such a horrible crew! And it was a queer thing to see Wilbraham with his straight blue eyes and innocent mouth and general air of amiable simplicity in the company of men like Colonel B. and young Kenneth Parr. (There is no harm, considering the later publicity of his case, in mentioning his name.) Well, that affair luckily came to an end just in time. Lady C. disappeared to Berlin and was no more seen.

There were other cases into which I need not go when Wilbraham was seen in strange company, always championing somebody who was not worth the championing. He had no "social tact" and for them at any rate no moral sense. In himself he was the ordinary normal man about town, no prude, but straight as a man can be in his debts, his love affairs, his friendships and his sports. Then came the war. He did brilliantly at Mons, was wounded twice, went out to Gallipoli, had a touch of Palestine and returned to France again to share in Poch's final triumph.

No man can possibly have had more of the war than he had, and it is my own belief that he had just a little more of it than any other man.

He had been always perhaps a little "queer," as we are most of us "queer" somewhere, and the horrors of that horrible war undoubtedly affected him. Finally he lost just a week before the armistice, one of his best friends, Ross McLean, a loss from which he never recovered.

I have now, I think, brought to throw any kind of light upon the final scene.

In the middle of 1919 he retired from the army and it was from this time to his death that I saw something of him. He went back to his old home at Horton's in Duke street, and as I was living at that time in Marlborough Chambers in Jermyn street, we were in easy reach of one another. The early part of 1920 was a "queer time." People had become, I imagine, pretty well accustomed to realizing that those two wonderful hours of armistice day had not ushered in the millennium any more than those first marvellous moments of the Russian revolution produced it.

Everyone has always hoped for the millennium, but the trouble since the days of Adam and Eve has always been that people have such different ideas as to what exactly that millennium shall be. The plain facts of the matter simply were that during 1919 and 1920 the world changed from a war of nations to a war of classes, that inevitable change that history has always shown follows on great wars.

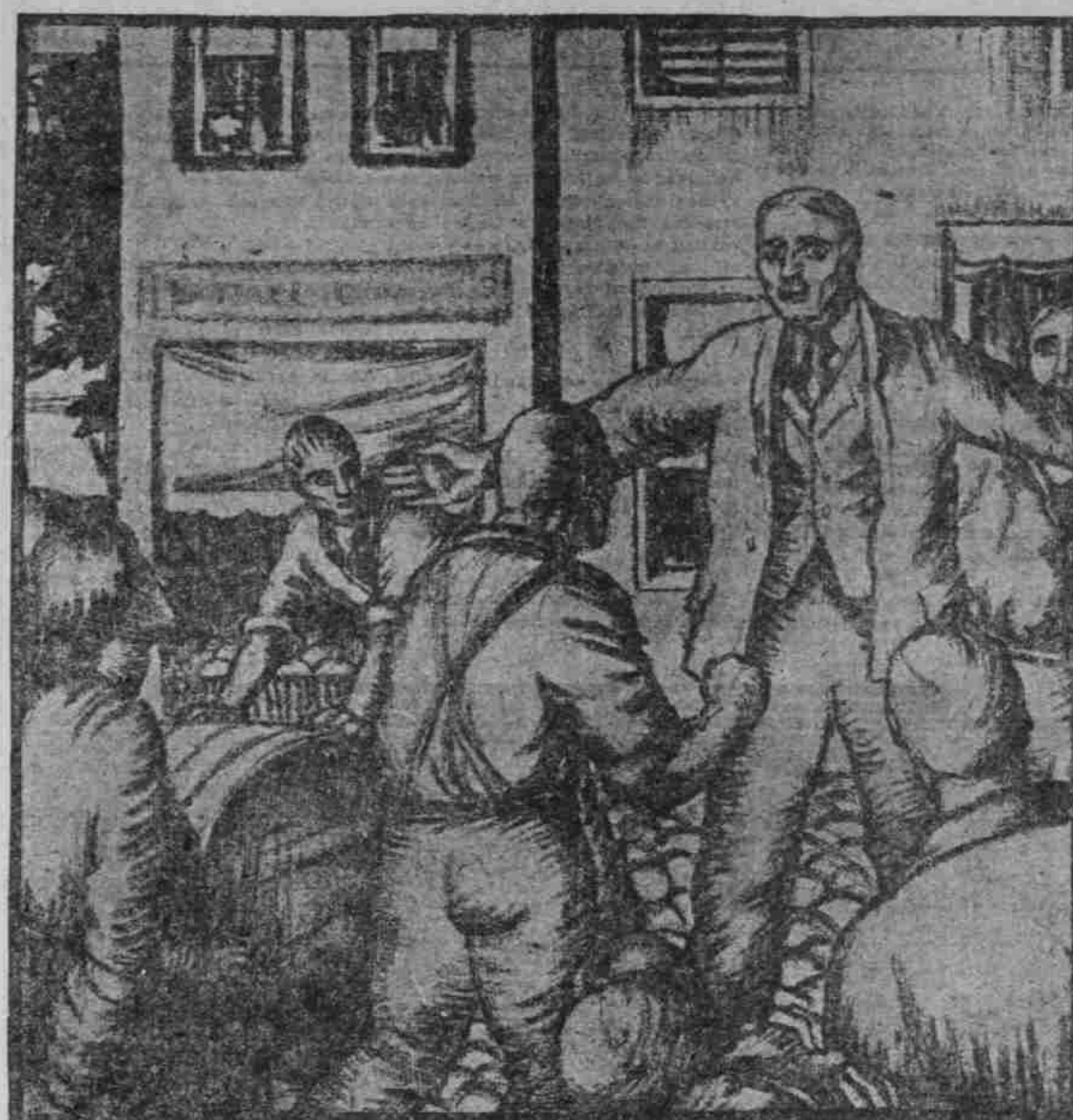
As no one ever reads history, it was natural enough that there should be a great deal of disappointment and a great deal of disillusionment. Men at the head of affairs who ought to have known better cried aloud, "How ungrateful these people are, after all we've done for them!" and the people underneath shouted that everything they would have done much better had they been at the head of affairs, an assertion for which there was no sort of justification.

Wilbraham, being a sentimentalist and an idealist, suffered more from this general disappointment than most people. He had had wonderful relations with the men under him throughout the war. He had never tired of recounting how marvellously they had behaved, what heroes they were, and that it was they who would pull the country together.

At the same time he had a naïf horror of bolshevism, and anything unconventional and he watched the transformation of his "brave lads" into discontented and idle workmen with dismay and deep distress. He used sometimes to come around to my rooms and talk to me; he had the bewildered air of a man walking in his sleep.

He made the fatal mistake of reading all the papers, and he took in the Daily Herald in order that he might see "what it was these fellows had to say for themselves."

The Herald upset him terribly. Its bland assumption that Russians and Sinn Féiners could do no wrong, but that the slightest sign of assertion of authority on the part of the government was "wicked tyranny," shocked his very soul. I remember that he wrote a long, most earnest letter to



"IT'S TRUE! IT'S TRUE! STOP JUST A MINUTE—YOU MUST HEAR ME!"

Lansbury pointing out to him that if he subverted all authority and constitutional government his own party would in its turn be subverted when it came to govern. Of course, he received no answer.

During these months I came to love him. The attraction that I had felt for him from the very first deeply underlay all my relation to him, but as I saw more of him I found many very positive reasons for my liking. He was the simplest, bravest, purest, most loyal and most unselfish soul alive. He seemed to me to have no faults at all unless it were a certain softness towards the wishes of those whom he loved. He could not bear to hurt anybody, but he never hesitated if some principle in which he believed was called in question.

He had not, of course, a subtle mind—he was no analyst of character—but that did not make him uninteresting. I never heard anyone call him dull company, although men laughed at him for his good nature and unselfishness and traded on him all the time. He was the best human being I have ever known or am ever likely to know.

Well, the crisis arrived with astonishing suddenness. About the 25 or 26 of August I went down to stay with some friends at the little fishing village of Rafel in Galeshire. I saw him just before I left London, and he told me that he was going to stay in London for the first half of August, that he liked London in August, even though his club would be closed and nothing delivered over to the painters.

I heard nothing about him for a fortnight, and then I received a most extraordinary letter from Box Hill, a fellow clubman of mine and Wilbraham's. Had I heard, he asked, that poor old Wilbraham had gone right off his "knocker"? Nobody knew exactly what had happened, but suddenly one day at lunch time Wilbraham had turned up at Grey's (the club to which our own club was a visitor during its cleaning), had harangued everyone about religion in the most extraordinary way, had burst out from there and started shouting in Piccadilly, had after collecting a crowd, disappeared and not been seen until the next morning, when he had been found, nearly killed, after a hand-to-hand fight with the market men in Covent Garden.

It may be imagined how deeply this disturbed me, especially as I felt that I was myself to blame. I had noticed that Wilbraham was ill when I had seen him in London, and I should either have persuaded him to come with me to Galeshire or stayed with him in London. I was just about to pack up and go to town when I received a letter from a doctor in a nursing home in South Audley street saying that a certain Major Wilbraham was in the home dying and asking persistently for myself. I took a motor to Drymouth and was in London by 5 o'clock.

I found the South Audley street nursing home and was at once surrounded with the hush the shaded rooms, the scents of medicine and flowers, and some undefinable cleanliness that belongs to those places.

I waited in a little room, the walls decorated with sporting prints, the green baize table gloomily laden with volumes of Punch and the Tatler. Wilbraham's doctor came in to see me, a dapper, smart little man, efficient and impersonal. He told me that Wilbraham had at most only 24 hours to live, that his brain was quite clear, and that he was suffering very little pain, that he had been brutally kicked in the stomach by some man in the Covent Garden crowd and had there received the internal injuries from which he was now dying.

"His brain is quite clear," the doctor said. "Let him talk. It can do him no harm. Nothing can save him. His head is full of queer fancies; he wants everyone to listen to him. He's worrying because there's some message he wants to send."

When I saw Wilbraham he was so little changed that I felt no shock. Indeed, the most striking change in

him was the almost exultant happiness in his voice and eyes.

It is true that after talking to him a little I knew that he was dying. He had that strange peace and tranquillity of mind that one saw so often with dying men in the war.

I will try to give an exact account of Wilbraham's narrative; nothing else is of importance in this little story but that narrative; I can make no comment. I have no wish to do so. I only want to pass it on as he begged me to do.

"If you don't believe me," he said, "give other people the chance of doing so. I know that I am dying. I want as many men and women to have a chance of judging this as is humanly possible. I swear to you that I am telling the truth and the exact truth in every detail."

I began my account by saying that I was not convinced.

How could I be convinced? At the same time I have none of those explanations with which people are so generously forthcoming on these occasions. I can only say that I do not think Wilbraham was insane, nor drunk, nor asleep. Nor do I believe that someone played a practical joke.

Whether Wilbraham was insane between the hours when his visitor left him and his entrance into the nursing home I must leave to my readers. I myself think he was not.

After all, everything depends upon the relative importance that we place upon ambitions, possessions, emotions—ideas.

Something suddenly became of so desperate an importance to Wilbraham that nothing else at all mattered. He wanted everyone to see the importance of it as he did. That is all.

It had been a hot and oppressive day; London had seemed torrid and uncomfortable. The mere fact that Oxford street was "up" annoyed him. After a slight meal in his flat he went to the Promenade concert at Queen's hall. It was the second night of the season—Monday night, Wagner night.

He bought himself a five shilling ticket and sat in the middle of the balcony overlooking the floor. He was annoyed again when he discovered that he had been given a ticket for the "non-smoking" section of the balcony.

He had heard no Wagner since August, 1914, and was anxious to discover the effect that hearing it again would have upon him. The effect was disappointing. The music neither caught nor held him.

The Meistersinger had always been a gem opera for him. The third act music that Sir Henry Wood gave to him didn't touch him anywhere. He also discovered that six years' abstinence had not enervated him any more deeply with the rushing fiddles in the "Tannhäuser" overture, nor with the spinning music in the "Flying Dutchman." Then came suddenly the prelude to the third act of "Tristan." That caught him; the peace and tranquillity that he needed lapped him round; he was fully satisfied and could have listened for another hour.

He walked home down Regent street, the quiet melancholy of the shepherd's pipe accompanying him, pleasing him and tranquillizing him. As he reached his flat ten o'clock struck from St. James' church. He asked the porter whether anyone had wanted him during his absence, whether anyone was waiting for him now (some friend had told him that he might come up and use his spare room one night that week). No, no one had been. There was no one there waiting.

Great was his surprise, therefore, when, opening the door of his flat, he found someone standing there, one hand resting on the table, his face turned towards the open door. Stronger, however, than Wilbraham's surprise was his immediate conviction that he knew his visitor well, and this was curious, because the face was undoubtedly strange to him.

"I beg your pardon," Wilbraham said, hesitatingly.

"I wanted to see you," the stranger said, smiling.

When Wilbraham was telling me this part of his story he seemed to be enveloped—"enveloped" is the word that best conveys my own experience of him—by some quite radiant happiness. He smiled at me confidentially as though he were telling me something that I had experienced with him and that must give me the same happiness that it gave to him.

"Ought I to have expected? Ought I to have known?" he stammered. "No, you couldn't have known," the stranger answered. "You're not late. I knew when you would come."

Wilbraham told me that during these moments he was surrendering himself to an emotion and intimacy and companionship that was the most wonderful thing that he had ever known. It was that intimacy and companionship, he told me, for which all his days he had been searching. It was the one thing that life never seemed to give; even in the greatest love, the deepest friendship, there was that sense of loneliness hidden. He had never found it in man or woman.

Now it was so wonderful that the first thing he said was: "And now you're going to stay, aren't you? You won't go away at once?"

"Of course I'll stay," he answered. "If you want me."

His visitor was dressed in some dark suit; there was nothing about him in any way odd or unusual. His face was thin and pale, his smile kindly.

His English was without accent. His voice was soft and very melodious.

But Wilbraham could notice nothing but his eyes; they were the most beautiful, tender, gentle eyes that he had ever seen in any human being.

They sat down. Wilbraham's overwhelming fear was lest his guest should leave him. They began to talk and Wilbraham took it at once as accepted that his friend knew all about him—everything.

He found himself eagerly plunging into details of scenes, episodes that he had long put behind him—but behind him for shame perhaps or for regret or for sorrow. He knew at once that there was nothing that he need veil nor hide—nothing that he no sense that he must consider susceptibility nor avoid self-confession that was humiliating.

He did find, as he talked on, a sense of shame from another side creep towards him and begin to envelope him. Shame at the smallness, meanness, emptiness of the things he had declared.

He had had always behind his mistakes and sins a sense that he was a rather unusually interesting person; if only his friends knew everything about him they would be surprised at the remarkable man that he really was. Now it was exactly the opposite sense that came over him. By the gold-rimmed mirror that was over his mantelpiece he saw himself diminishing, diminishing, diminishing. . . . First himself, large, red-faced, smiling, rotund, lying back in his chair; then the face shriveling, the limbs shortening, then the face small and peaked, the hands and legs little and mean, then the chair enormous and around the little trembling animal cowering against the cushion.

He sprang up. "No, no. . . . I can't tell you any more—and you've known it all so long. I am mean, small, nothing—I have not even great ambition—nothing."

His guest stood up and put his hand on his shoulder. They talked, standing side by side, and he said some things that belonged to Wilbraham alone, that he would not tell me.

Wilbraham asked him why he had come—and to him.

"I will come now to a few of my friends," he said. "First one and then another. Many people have forgotten me behind my words. They have built up such a mountain over me with the doctrines they have attributed to me, the things that they say that I do, that I am not really," he said, laughing, his hand on Wilbraham's shoulder, "so tall and gloomy and melancholy as they have made me. I loved life—I loved men; I loved

laughter and games and the open air—I liked jokes and good food and exercise. All things that they have forgotten. So from now I shall come back to one or two. . . . I am lonely when they see me so solemnly."

Another thing he said. "They are making life complicated now. To lead a good life, to be happy, to manage the world only the simplest things are needed—love, unselfishness, tolerance."

"Can I go with you and be with you always?" Wilbraham asked. "Do you really want that?" he said. "Yes," said Wilbraham, bowing his head.

"Then you shall come and never leave me again. In three days from now."

Then he kissed Wilbraham on the forehead and went away. I think that Wilbraham himself became conscious as he told me this part of his story of the difference between the seen and remembered figure and the foolish, inadequate reported words. Even now as I repeat a little of what Wilbraham said I feel the virtue and power slipping away.

And so it goes on. As the figure recedes the words become colder and colder and the air that surrounds them has in it less and less power. But on that day when I sat beside Wilbraham's bed the conviction in his voice and eyes held me so that although my reason kept telling me that he was dead, he had been in contact with some power that was a stronger force than anything that I myself had ever known.

But I have determined to make no personal comment on this story. I am here simply as a narrator of fact.

Wilbraham told me that after his visitor left him he sat there for some time in a dream. Then he sat up startled, as though some voice, calling, had wakened him, with an impulse that was like a fire suddenly blazing up and lighting the dark places of his brain. I imagine that all Wilbraham's impulses in the past, chivalric, idealistic, foolish, had been of that kind—sudden, of an almost ferocious energy and determination blind to all consequences. He must go out at once and tell everyone of what had happened to him.

I often read a story somewhere about some town that was expecting a great visitor. Everything was ready, the banners hanging, the music prepared, the crowds waiting in the street.

A man who had once been for some years at the court of the expected visitor saw him enter the city, somberly clad, on foot. Meanwhile his chamberlain entered the town in full panoply with the trumpets blowing and many riders in attendance. The man who knew the real thing ran to everyone telling the truth, but they laughed at him and refused to listen. And the real king departed quietly as he had come.

It was, I suppose, an influence of this kind that drove Wilbraham now. Suddenly something was of so great an importance to him that nothing else, mockery, hostility, scorn, counted. After all, simply a supreme example of the other impulses that had swayed him throughout his life.

What followed might I think have been to some extent averted had his appearance been different. London is a home of madmen and casually permits any lunacy so that public peace is not endangered; had poor Wilbraham looked a fanatic with pale face, long hair, ragged clothes, much would have been forgiven him, but for a stout, middle-aged gentleman, well dressed, well groomed, . . . What could be supposed but insanity and insanity of a very ludicrous kind?

He put on his coat and went out. From this moment his account was confused. His mind, as he spoke to me, kept returning to that visitor.

What happened after his friend's departure was vague and uncertain to him, largely because it was unimportant. He does not know what time it was when he went out, but I gather that it must have been about midnight. There were still people in Piccadilly.

Somewhere near the Berkeley hotel he stopped a gentleman and a lady. He spoke, I am sure, so politely that the man he addressed must have supposed that he was asking for a match, or an address, or something of the kind. Wilbraham told me that very quietly he asked the gentleman whether he might speak to him for a

moment, that he had something very important to say. That he would not, as a rule, dream of interfering in any man's private affairs, but that the importance of his communication outweighed all ordinary conventions; that he expected that the gentleman had hitherto, as had been his own case, felt much doubt about religious questions, but that now all doubt was once and forever, over, that

I expect that at that fatal word "religion" the gentleman started as though he had been stung by a snake, felt that this mid-looking man was a dangerous lunatic and tried to move away. It was the lady with him, so far as I can discover, who cried out: "Oh, poor man, he's ill!" and wanted at once to do something for him. By this time a crowd was beginning to collect and as the crowd closed around the central figures more people gathered upon the outskirts, and peering through, wondered what had happened, whether there were an accident, whether it were a "drunk," whether there had been a quarrel, and so on.

Wilbraham, I fancy, began to address them all, telling them his great news, begging them with desperate urgency to believe him. Some laughed, some stared in wide-eyed wonder, the crowd was increasing and then, of course, the inevitable policeman with his "move on, please," appeared.

How deeply I regret that Wilbraham was not, there and then, arrested. He would be alive and with us now if that had been done. But the policeman hesitated, I suppose, to arrest anyone as obviously a gentleman as Wilbraham, a man, too, as he soon perceived, who was perfectly sober, even though he was not in his right mind.

Wilbraham was surprised at the policeman's interference. He said that the last thing he wished to do was to create a disturbance, but that he could not bear to let all these people go to their beds without giving them a chance of realizing first that everything was now altered, that he had the most wonderful news. . . .

The crowd was dispersed and Wilbraham found himself walking alone with the policeman beside the Green park.

He must have been a very nice policeman, because before Wilbraham's death he called at the Nursing home and was very anxious to know how the poor gentleman was getting on.

He allowed Wilbraham to talk to him and then did all he could to persuade him to walk home and go to bed. He offered to get him a taxi. Wilbraham thanked him, said he would do so, and bade him good night, and the policeman, seeing that Wilbraham was perfectly composed and sober, left him.

After that the narrative is more confused. Wilbraham apparently walked down Knightsbridge and arrived at last somewhere near the Albert hall. He must have spoken to a number of different people. One man, a politician apparently, was with him for a considerable time, but only because he was so anxious to emphasize his own views about the coalition government and the wickedness of Lloyd George. Another was a journalist, who continued with him for a while because he wanted a story for his newspaper. Some people may remember that there was a garbled paragraph about a "religious army officer" in the Daily Record. One lady thought that Wilbraham wanted to go home with her and was both angry and relieved when she found that it was not so.

He stayed at a cabman's shelter for a time and drank a cup of coffee and told the "little gathering there his news. They took it very calmly. They had met so many queer things in their time that nothing seemed odd to them.

His account becomes clearer again when he found himself a little before dawn in the park and in the company of a woman and a broken down pugilist. I saw both these persons afterwards and had some talk with them. The pugilist had only the vaguest sense of what had happened. Wilbraham was a "proper old bird" and had given him half a crown to get his breakfast with. They had all slept together under a tree and he had made some rather voluble protests because the other two would talk so continuously and prevented his sleeping. It was a warm night and the sun had come up behind the trees sur-

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