

# LAUDER CAINE THE CONFESSOR.

BY PERCY ANDREÆ.\*

(Author of "Stanhope of Chester," "The Vanished Emperor," etc.)

Illustrated by J. BARNARD DAVIS.

## I.—HIS FIRST CASE.



THE circumstances under which I came to learn of the following strange episode in Lauder Caine's life, which I have perhaps somewhat inconsistently entitled "His First Case," were these:—

As the reader will recollect, I had once heard it whispered that the Confessor in his younger days had been admitted into the Order of the Jesuits. I had never really attached any credit to the rumour, and had, indeed, known Lauder Caine for some considerable time before any suspicion as to the possibility of its truth arose in my mind. One day, however, a chance remark which fell from the Confessor himself caused it to flash across me, and I determined to verify the matter on the spot.

It was a somewhat delicate task, and I have no doubt that my question, when I ventured it, had a very nervous ring about it. To my relief, however, the Confessor not only received it with great forbearance, but appeared to be stirred by it in an unusual manner. I little imagined, notwithstanding, that it was to give rise to one of those rare occasions when he would be prompted to expatiate at length upon his own adventures, and disclose to me something of his inner self. But so it proved.

"The rumour is perfectly true," he replied simply, with a sad smile. "My parentage, as I have once told you, is unknown to me. My earliest remembrances are sorrowful and sombre, and I would rather be spared the pain of reciting them. All I need tell you for your purposes is that at the age of fourteen I was placed under the care of the Jesuit Fathers in Belgium, where I in due course became an initiate and member of the Order. I left it at the age of twenty-five."

"From conscientious motives?" I ventured to ask, emboldened by the readiness with which he had responded to my inquiry.

He looked at me curiously for a moment, rose from his chair, paced once or twice up and down the room, then resumed his seat again, and said—

"Listen, and I will tell you of an experience which you will be surprised to hear from the lips of a man whom you have been accustomed to see deal with the stern realities of life. Although it was not the immediate cause of my retirement from an Order to which my heart had never belonged, it was so nearly connected with it that I have almost come to look upon it as such."

He motioned me to a seat at his side, and after a pause began as follows:—

"Twenty years have now rolled by. I was a passenger on a steamer bound for Australia. My mission was a secret one, and in no way connected with the strange event I am about to relate. The purposes for which I was sent made it necessary that I should doff the priestly garb and travel as a private gentleman. Among my fellow-passengers were none to whom I felt particularly attracted. I took little part, and still less interest, in the sports and games with which it is usual to while away the time on these long sea voyages, and beyond the captain, to whom I had a warm letter of recommendation, and one of the officers, to whom chance had enabled me to render a service soon after the ship started, there was no one on board with whom I exchanged more than the ordinary civilities customary between fellow-prisoners on the ocean.

"The days I found tedious, but the nights were my great solace. Towards ten or half-past, when the deck had become tolerably clear, I would saunter up and down for hours watching the star-lit heaven and drinking in the refreshing night-breeze. I was young then, my friend, and stormy thoughts used to haunt me in those lonely hours, as they had haunted me many a time in the loneliness of my cell in the college in Belgium. A yearning seized me, passionate and feverish, to cast off bonds which I loathed, though I was fain to admit that

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without them I should not have been what I was. I looked at my past, and shuddered at its dreary uniformity, at the incompleteness of an existence which had no identity in itself, but was merely a kind of pulse beating among thousands of other pulses in one great insensate body, as a living part of it, indeed, but a part without a will—without separate life or purpose, hope or desire. I thought of the future and its promise of

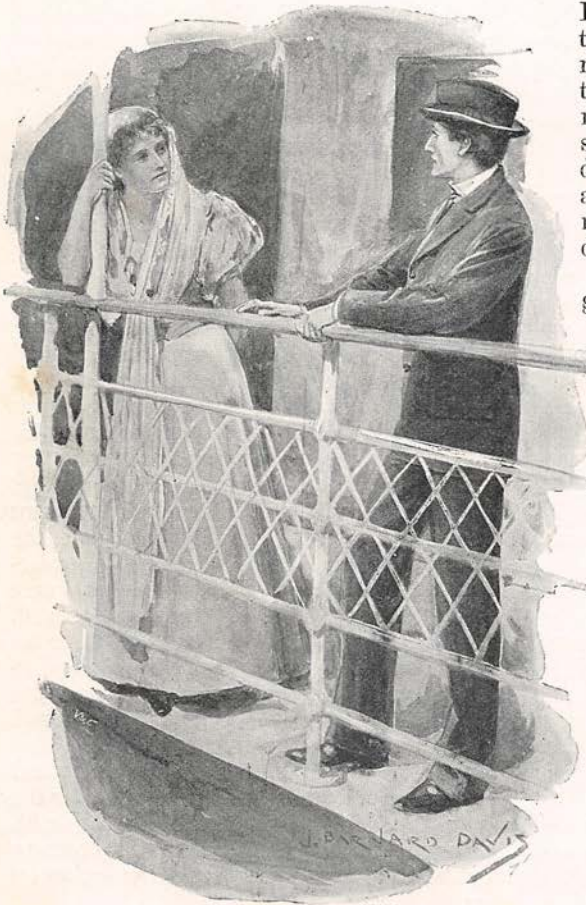
with ease where grey heads before me had ignominiously failed. But again—to what end? Had I ever seen one human eye glisten with pleasure at my success? Had I ever earned that sweetest meed of praise, dearer to a soul like mine than rank and power and glory, the silent gratitude of one individual human heart consoled, of one individual troubled mind restored to peace and hope? Oh, for the possibility of applying those gifts and that knowledge which I devoted to a cause inanimate, soulless, to the service of my individual fellow-men! How my breast would swell at this golden vision of freedom and usefulness floating before my eyes in those solitary nights like some soul-inspiring dream which recurs to us again and again, until, waking, we confound it with reality, and know not that we have dreamed.

“In such mood I stood one night gazing out from the ship’s side over the wide starlit ocean. There were a few people still on deck, but they were mostly grouped in sheltered nooks, dozing, musing, or conversing in whispers. Otherwise all was still. Suddenly I felt conscious of a presence near me, and turning swiftly beheld a young girl, dressed in a rich white costume, leaning against the ship’s railing beside me. A glance sufficed to show me, firstly, that hers was a face that I had not yet seen on board, and secondly, that it was one of exceptional loveliness.

“We had left port already five days, and, so far as I knew, every passenger, with one exception, had regularly appeared on deck and among the general company at meals. The exception, about whom I had by chance heard some talk, was a young lady, well known in London society, who had been ordered on a voyage to Australia for her health. Unfortunately, so it was said, an accident had occurred to

her on boarding the ship, the effects of which prevented her from leaving her cabin. Beyond this I knew nothing about her, but I had little doubt that she and my beautiful neighbour were one and the same.

“There is a curious power of silent speech in the human eye. My first impulse, on discovering that I was no longer alone, was to move away and choose some other spot for my musings. But in the eye that gazed into mine, as I glanced at the graceful



“I ventured to warn her politely of the risk she ran.”

power; for I knew my worth, and foresaw, as others foresaw, that I should rise in my Order until, perhaps, I could rise no more. But to what end? Alas, I thought of the mission now before me! It was work that wearied me, work I hated, not for its secrecy and its cunning, but for its want of pure individual human interest. To me, young as I was, the most difficult tasks, the most intricate of problems had already been entrusted, and I had succeeded in solving them



figure beside me, there was that which arrested me, and caused me to stay.

"Although we were already pretty far south, the night air was slightly chill, and noticing the scant covering of my fair companion, who had merely a light gauze-like shawl thrown over her shoulders, I ventured to warn her politely of the risk she ran by thus exposing herself so recklessly to the treacherous night air of those climes.

"She had only been waiting for me to address her, and my words loosened her own speech. Laughing with a bright, silvery laugh, she dismissed my warning lightly, and we fell into conversation—such conversation, I may assure you, as I had never heard, far less taken part in, before. An older man than I might have lost his head in it, and a graver his wisdom. I was young, and felt my pulses quicken; I was gay of heart, and felt my senses quiver; and once again I would have turned away, forewarned of the danger lurking in those witching smiles, and in the silent laughter of those tempting eyes; for, young and warm-blooded though I was, I held my vows sacred above all things else. But once more something stronger than all this detained and held me.

"Is it a gift not all men possess? I know not. But to me it is given to hear the wail of despair in the voice that laughs, to detect the note of passionate appeal in the voice that defies; and I heard it here—and soon I heard nought else.

"Were I to recount all that passed between me and my fair companion, not on this occasion alone, but night after night for many a week, as we paced the silent deck together, holding strange communion, it would fill volumes. After that first meeting she never failed me, though for days the weather was stormy, and, but for us two, the deck deserted. Why she came, I knew not, nor inquired. To mock, perhaps, and flaunt her empty folly, her disdain of all else but vain, senseless pleasure in the face of one whom she would fain have deceived, but could not; for, through it all I heard still that far-off, deep, plaintive note that told of trouble unexpressed, as of a soul groping in darkness and seeking light.

"Yet she must have felt some attraction to bring her thus to my side some delight in listening to that which she declared again and again with petulant derision was alien to her fancy, ay, at best a pious fraud conceived to cheat human beings of their only paradise—earthly pleasure.

"'Ah,' she would cry, with a mocking laugh, when I spoke of the emptiness of a life devoted solely to selfish, frivolous enjoyment, which passes like a dream, leaving nothing behind it; when I dwelt upon the need all human creatures feel to escape from the narrow circle of self and its weary, dreary monotony, to create a world for themselves, outside themselves, in others, to know that, as the Creator himself is the centre towards which every soul tends, so each soul in itself should become the centre, not of itself alone, but of other fellow-souls, in whose life it feels its own life pulsate—'ah,' she would cry, 'how my sister would delight to hear you! So she, too, will talk at times until I grow weary of listening, and laugh her out of the mood. Indeed, you would make a pair, you and she.'

"Her sister, as I had now gathered, and not she, was the sick girl who was confined to her cabin, and whom, so I understood, she tended by day, while the nurse, whom I sometimes saw on deck during the morning hours, took her place by the sick-bed through the night.

"This sister interested me strangely. I could see from the fretful voice and the impatient gestures of my companion, whenever her name was mentioned, how antagonistic these two natures must be. The sister thoughtful, melancholy perhaps, yearning for something to fill the emptiness of an existence concentrated in itself alone, and chafing angrily at the fate which had yoked her with a nature so different.

"There were moments, though, when my companion would fall into another strain, and discourse at some length of what she termed the silly whims of a brain-sick girl. She confided them to me unasked, and yet, as it seemed to me, unwillingly, as if some impulse compelled her over which she possessed no control; and though I felt loath to pry, as it were, into secrets which she had no right to disclose, I responded, as if prompted by some strange influence stronger than my will.

"Have you ever experienced the power of magnetism, that inexplicable communion of mind with mind? It was something of the sensation I have felt when exercising that power, of which men know so little, that overcame me then. Yet I was not conscious of the mysterious emanation of force which is characteristic of this sensation, but rather of some influence from without working upon my own senses and governing them.



Whence it came, I knew not. But surely, I thought, not from this strange, shallow being, whose beauty, dazzling as it appeared, was of the flesh alone, vain and spiritless? Could there be any affinity between us? The thought almost angered me.

"Why," I asked her once, suddenly, 'do you take pleasure in these nightly rambles with one whose views of life are so foreign to a heart like yours? Although you treat them with scorn and derision, you never weary of listening to them.'

"She looked at me for a moment with a curious side-glance which sent a thrill through my heart.

"You talk well,' she replied in a low tone, 'and besides,' she laughed again, 'you have a way of speaking truths which amuses me; and it is so difficult to find new amusements.'

"And this one,' I said sadly, 'is new to you?'

"As long as it lasts.'

"She was silent for a while, and then returned once more to the subject which seemed to possess so curious a fascination for her: her sick sister.

"Did she love her? Did she hate her? I asked myself the question again and again, but could find no satisfactory answer. She turned off all my inquiries with a laugh or a taunt.

"You think wonders of her because she hangs her head, and mopes, and sighs,' she exclaimed. 'Yet, what folly is mine that she does not share? What pleasures have I that in her secret heart she does not covet, though she affects to disdain them? She sours every cup of joy that I raise to my lips, and wears me out with her fretful tyranny. She would rid herself of my companionship if she dared. But she cannot live without me, and where I go she goes.'

"She is ill,' I replied. 'You should bear with her.'

"Bear with her?' she rejoined, with fine scorn. 'What is she to me that I should bear with her? She, who is jealous of every ray of sunshine that warms my quicker blood? She, who shuns what I love and loathes what I cherish? Without her my life would be one dream of intoxicating delight, with no shadow to darken it. What are the world and its miseries to me that she should plague me with her doleful fancies? Was I born to toil because others idle, to mend what others neglect, to weep because others suffer? Must I renounce the sweets of life because there are some who have the

bitters? Bear with her?' she exclaimed again, passionately. 'If my companionship is a curse to her, think you her companionship is not as great a curse to me?'

"Yet it seems you cherish it,' I said. 'Are you, then, bound to her?'

"Bound to her?' she said, in a puzzled tone. 'You ask strange questions. We saw the light together. I have no choice. Ah, but for her—'

"She broke off abruptly, and darted a look at me so full of pregnant meaning that I felt a shiver pass through me as I caught it. The next moment, bursting into a light laugh, she plunged once more into the vapid, aimless talk with which she delighted to taunt me. Ah, and how fair she was, how lovely! A creature perfect but for one thing missing—the divine soul. Yet I could have sworn it was there, confined perhaps in some dark prison, stunted, starved, and repressed, yet there.

"A warning voice within me urged me, for my own sake, to refrain from continuing these meetings, and the next day and the day following I determined to avoid the deck after nightfall. But a strange spirit of unrest would come over me towards evening, leaving me no peace, and long before the usual hour when my fair companion appeared I found myself, in spite of all my resolutions, on deck waiting impatiently for her to join me.

"And so my life went on, becoming day by day more completely wrapped up in this strange, perverse being, whom I saw only when the day was over, and whose choice of me for a companion was a mystery which grew deeper to me the longer our companionship lasted; for, in truth, she showed me neither favour, respect, nor goodwill; on the contrary, her manner was at times almost fiercely antagonistic, and her bursts of anger at my persistent refusal to believe that she was truly happy and content in her heartlessness and frivolity were often alarming.

"We were now nearing the tropical zones, and the deck during the nights was crowded with those seeking relief from the stifling atmosphere of the cabins and saloons below. Hence, although we kept ourselves as much as possible aloof from the general throng, it stood to reason that our nightly meetings could no longer escape the observation of the many curious eyes on board. Yet—strangely enough, as I remember commenting to myself at the time—no one appeared to bestow any particular notice upon us, or to evince any surprise at what must have



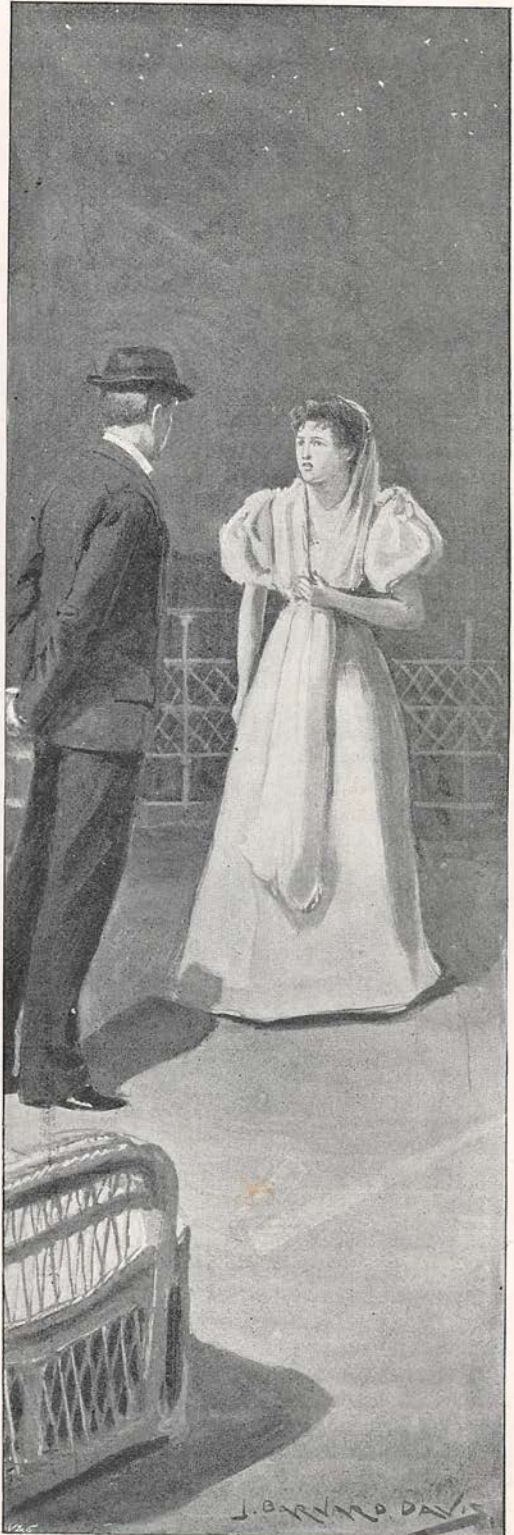
seemed a significant intimacy between a young girl of such surpassing beauty as my companion and a man of my years. Acquaintances would greet me with a friendly nod as we passed them, without so much as casting a furtive glance at the vision of loveliness at my side. Nor did she, too, whose whole being I knew to be concentrated in the one desire to attract and enjoy the flattery of admiring eyes, appear to miss the homage to which she must have been accustomed. I attributed this indifference on her part, however, to physical causes; for, though unaltered in spirits, she had struck me for some time as being less robust in health than she had at first appeared, and there was a kind of bodily languor about her which increased from night to night, and caused me at last to express my anxiety lest her strength might be suffering from the strain of her constant attendance on her sister. Although she professed no love for the sick girl, indeed declared she loved no one but herself, I knew from her own lips that she devoted every minute of her time to her during the day, even to the extent of refraining from setting foot above stairs before the sun went down, when the nurse took her place beside the invalid.

"But she treated my cautions lightly and with a certain fretful petulance which for the time silenced me. Still, from day to day my anxiety increased, for it seemed to me as if I saw her gradually wasting away before my eyes, and I entreated her at last to consult advice, to nurse herself and take rest.

"One night, when I again pressed her thus, telling her I was determined not to countenance these nightly meetings any longer, she turned upon me with a little flush as of pent-up anger.

"Do you imagine then,' she cried, 'that I come here of my own free will? Do you think it pleases me so greatly to be rated and chidden and held up before my own eyes as an example and a warning as I am by you? You know so much, and pride yourself so mightily upon it, and in a way perhaps it interests me. But I hate your truths—I hate them—I hate them,' she ended, stamping her foot on the deck in an access of childish rage—'and I hate you as I never knew being could hate being!'

"And before I could stop her she had thrown herself down upon a coil of rope lying on the deck, and burying her face in her hands burst into a convulsive fit of sobbing.



"I hate you as I never knew being could hate being!"



"Ah, my friend, I have never suffered such temptation as I suffered then! To clasp this fair, soulless creature in my arms and breathe—if heaven so willed—something of that spirit into her of which she knew and yet knew not, which she pined for and yet derided; the spirit of that love, not of ourselves, but of our kind, in the exercise of which we find alone an abiding happiness; it was a desire so overpowering that truly a better man than I might have succumbed to it.

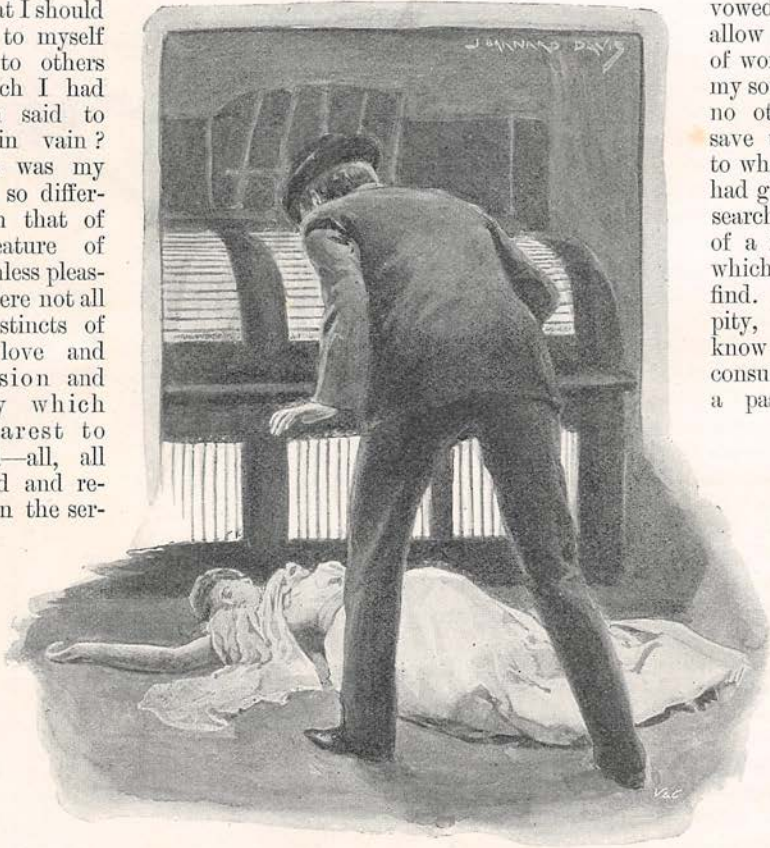
"And yet what was I that I should arrogate to myself to say to others that which I had so often said to myself in vain? In what was my own life so different from that of this creature of vain, aimless pleasure? Were not all those instincts of human love and compassion and sympathy which were dearest to my soul—all, all silenced and repressed in the ser-

lips, and she said, as she had said once before—

"Ah, what a pair you would make, you and she! And she pines for such as you, as fool pines for fool."

"With which words, as if suddenly changing her mind, she turned on her heel and left me.

"All that night and all through the next day I pondered over those words, which kept ringing in my ears and played havoc with my senses. I, who had vowed never to allow the thought of woman to enter my soul, now knew no other thought save that of her to whom my heart had gone forth, in search, as it were, of a fellow heart, which it could not find. Was it love, pity, desire? I know not. But it consumed me, like a passion eating



"I stood for a while spellbound."

vice of a cause as soulless, as intangible, ay, and in a purely human sense as selfish, as the pleasures she coveted?

"As I sat beside her, pouring words of advice and comfort—alas! into heedless ears—it was myself whom I was addressing as well as her. She answered not a word, nor gave sign that she listened to me. But presently she rose, laid a trembling hand on my arm, and bade me cease and leave her a while, as she felt faint and weary.

"The mocking laugh was still on her

into my very soul; and when that next night came I had measured and conceived for the first time the awful distance between the deepest depth of human despair and the highest height of human bliss.

"But that night I waited for her in vain. Ah, what fears assailed me! I recalled her weary, haggard looks, the growing lassitude she had displayed in these last few nights, and trembled at the thought that she might be stricken with sickness—stricken before I had reached and touched that chord in her



which some indefinable instinct told me was waiting for the hand that would find it and make it give forth long-hidden sound and melody. Again and again those last words of hers sounded ominously in my ears. What did they mean? Had I been cruel, rough, unfeeling? True, I had laid her soul bare in all its hollow, meaningless frivolity; yet surely not with ungentle hand.

"As the hours passed and all grew still on deck and yet she did not come, I gave myself up to a sense of despair; indeed, at last I called out aloud as if to invoke the presence my heart yearned for.

"And that call was answered. A short, quick, silvery laugh, though sounding far away, told me that she had come at last, and, turning, I saw her slender form emerge slowly from the gloom of the night and advance towards me.

"But, great heaven! when I beheld her face I started back and shuddered. If ever human visage was marked with the stamp of death, it was hers; if ever human features were contorted with a thousand baffled evil passions, they were hers. As she advanced her eyes grew brighter and larger, and glared upon me with a hatred so fierce that I raised my hand involuntarily to my face to shut out the sight. The next moment I heard her gasp for breath, then, looking up, saw her totter as if about to fall, and I sprang forward to support her. But she waved me off.

"It is over," she whispered, in a voice so low that I could hardly catch what she said. "Take her, then, and let her rue her folly as she will."

"Before I had time to take in these strange words and consider their meaning she sank down at my feet stiff and lifeless.

"What I then did I know not. There are moments when the strongest of us lose their strength, and become helpless as children. Doubt, fear, horror, and senseless grief seized me at sight of that inanimate form, yet withal a shrinking dread to approach and touch it, and I stood for a while spell-bound, gazing, as a murderer may gaze upon his ruthless handiwork. Then, rousing myself with a strong effort, I rushed away in search of help.

"It was past midnight, and save for the officer on the bridge, to whom I dared not call, the upper deck seemed entirely deserted. At last, however, I chanced upon the sailor on watch-duty, and telling him in as few words as possible what had occurred, bade him follow and help me carry the senseless girl to her cabin.

"But when we reached the spot where I had left her, no trace of her was to be seen. She had vanished!

"At first I stood like one dazed. To suppose that in the short interval which had elapsed since I saw her lying there, pale and inanimate, she could have recovered and returned, alone and unsupported, to her cabin, was impossible. And yet, how else was her strange disappearance to be explained? I searched every spot and corner near by, in the vague hope of finding her, but in vain.

"The sturdy seaman, who had heard my excited tale, now gave me a look of humorous but significant inquiry. I read what was in his thoughts, and, taking a piece of silver from my pocket, gave it him, with the injunction to keep his counsel regarding what he had witnessed, which he promised to do, and I then dismissed him.

"But I dared not seek my cabin or leave the deck, and during the remaining hours of the night I paced to and fro in a fever of excitement, trying in vain to find an explanation for the strange events I had passed through.

"Ah, there were stranger things yet to come!

"Meeting the ship's doctor in the course of the next morning, I ventured to inquire, with as casual an air as I could assume, if anyone had been taken ill in the night. He was evidently preoccupied, and answered hurriedly that nothing of the sort had occurred to his knowledge—"excepting," he added, "the usual business in Cabin 15;" with which enigmatical words he left me before I could question him any further on the subject.

"Cabin 15, I knew, was the state-room in which the sick sister of my beautiful companion lay. But what was the 'usual business' to which the doctor referred? Was he aware, perhaps, of our nightly wanderings? The idea disturbed me.

"A quarter of an hour later, noticing a certain excitement among the crowds on deck, and especially among a large group of passengers who had gathered round some object of attraction just below the captain's bridge, I approached the spot to ascertain the cause of the unusual commotion.

"Imagine my feelings when I saw in the centre of the group, reclining on an invalid chair and propped up with numerous cushions, the object of all my thoughts—the fair companion of my nightly rambles on deck.

"Her face showed traces of illness, but of illness overcome. Her eyes were bright and



lively, and her look, as she chatted with the friends and acquaintances who were thronging around her, or bestowed a smile of recognition on some newcomer, was so full of cheerful content that I could scarcely believe that what I saw was real.

"My blank stare attracted her notice, and her eyes rested upon me for an instant. But she gave me not the faintest sign of recognition, and I turned away with a feeling of sickness at heart which I cannot define.

"Asking a fellow-passenger who the object of all this attention was, he replied, with ill-concealed contempt at my ignorance, that she was the celebrated society beauty who, to the regret of the whole company on board, had been taken seriously ill immediately after embarking, and had been confined to her cabin ever since.

"He observed my look of bewilderment, and, misinterpreting it, volunteered a good deal more information, which it would be superfluous to relate here, but which left me no doubt that the girl I now saw on deck and my nightly companion were one and the same, and that the story of a sister was a fable which had been deliberately invented by her, though for what purpose I was at a loss to conceive. Indeed, it was all a profound mystery to me. But I was determined at least to hear from her own lips whether she intended to disavow my acquaintance altogether or not, and, after waiting an opportunity when the throng around her had to some extent dispersed, I approached her and, lifting my hat, said—

"May I inquire if your sister has recovered from the effects of her accident last night?"

"She looked at me with a puzzled expression, which could not have been feigned, and replied—

"You must be making a mistake, sir. I have no sister."

"The words were spoken with perfect courtesy. But she turned her head away at once, and, addressing a remark to the nurse who stood beside her, gave me very clearly to understand that both the subject and he who had introduced it were dismissed.

"I withdrew with as much dignity as the circumstances permitted, and resolved to think no more about the matter. But there are cases when resolutions prove futile, and mine was such a case. I could not escape the thoughts I would have banished, and dwelt during the next few days upon nothing but the memory of my mysterious adventure. I saw her now often on deck, where she

soon moved about like any ordinary passenger.

"It was this which baffled me completely. Had she then feigned illness? And if so, for what reason? When I first saw her leaning over the ship-rail at my side, soon after we sailed, she was the picture of health and vigour. Yet, if report was true, it was just at that time that her condition had given her attendants cause for the gravest anxiety. She had reported to me every night with scarcely disguised ill-humour that her sister—hence, she herself, as I now knew—was speedily recovering strength and health. Yet had I not seen her, the very being of whom she spoke, decline from day to day before my own eyes, until at last, that night, she seemed to fall into the very clutches of death itself? And to crown the mystery, she had appeared on deck the following morning with the bloom of returning health on her cheeks, placid, radiant, almost the same indeed as I had seen her on that first memorable night when our strange companionship commenced.

"I knew that I could not have been the mere plaything of her mad folly. Her passion, her struggles, her wrath, and her despair, and then her fierce antagonism to the sister, who was she herself, and yet not she—no human being could have counterfeited all this.

"Sometimes the inclination seized me to approach her once more, and tax her outspokenly with the deception she had practised upon me. But some inner instinct held me back. Her manner was as natural and easy as manner can be, and I felt that so far as she was concerned we were as complete strangers as if we had never exchanged a word with one another. Only on certain occasions, such as at meals, which she now took part in with the general company, her eyes would now and again wander in my direction, and rest upon me with a curiously vacant expression which puzzled me. It seemed as if she were trying to recall some association in her own mind, and failed.

"At last I determined to interrogate the doctor, and ascertain if he could throw any light on the mystery which continued to occupy my thoughts in spite of myself.

"The opportunity came when I least expected it, and it was preceded by an incident stranger than any I had theretofore experienced.

"We were now nearing the end of our voyage, and I saw the morning on which we were to arrive at Melbourne dawn at last





"You must be making a mistake, sir. I have no sister."



with a feeling of intense relief. About two hours before we entered the harbour I was standing at the port-hole of my cabin, with my hand resting on the railing which ran beneath it. My thoughts, as usual, were roaming back over the events of the last five weeks, and as they roamed that curious sense as of a presence near me suddenly stole over me as it had done on the night when she first interrupted my solitary musings on deck.

"Turning round quickly I saw her standing beside me, in the same white dress in which I had seen her that night. As my eyes met hers, she bent her head slowly, almost unconsciously it seemed to me, and the next moment I felt the pressure of her

'do you object to answer me a few questions?'

"'Certainly not,' he replied, 'provided they are not too delicate.'

"'I understand you have been attending this girl.'

"'I have,' he said.

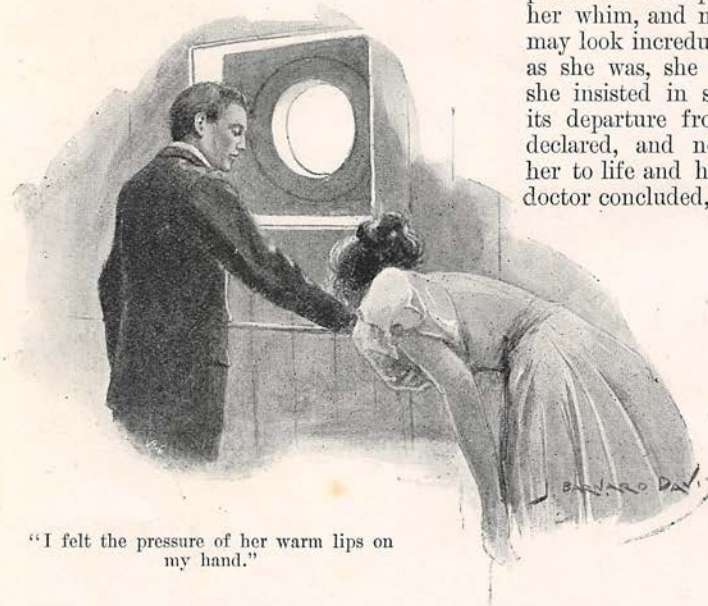
"'Is it a fact that she has been too ill to set foot on deck until five days ago?'

"'That is so,' he replied. 'Indeed, she is one of the most remarkable instances of the magic effects of a sea-voyage that our medical annals have to record. That girl, sir,' he went on, impressively, 'came on board this ship in a condition in which, under ordinary circumstances, no physician would have dared to expose her to the comparative hardships of a voyage. But it was her whim, and none could gainsay it. You may look incredulous, but it is a fact that, ill as she was, she designated the very vessel she insisted in sailing in, and the date of its departure from port. The voyage, she declared, and nothing else, would restore her to life and health. And, by Jove!' the doctor concluded, 'so it has proved.'

"'But,' I stammered, amazed, 'can you absolutely vouch for the fact that the girl has never left her cabin during the whole period of her illness and convalescence?'

"The doctor regarded me as if he thought me slightly distraught.

"'Left her cabin?' he cried. 'Bless you, sir, she was wasted to a shadow—not a muscle left to move her, even



"I felt the pressure of her warm lips on my hand."

warm lips on my hand which grasped the rail.

"It all occurred in an instant, and before I had recovered from the thrill of astonishment which passed through me she had glided out of the room and was gone. I rushed to the door in time to see her lithe form pass down the passage, and was still gazing after her when I heard the doctor's cheery voice accosting me.

"'Beauty-struck, eh?' he said, touching me on the shoulder. 'And well you may be, sir. No wonder she's turned half the male heads in London, and sent them crazy, with a face like that.'

"'Doctor,' I exclaimed, seizing him by the arm and dragging him into my cabin,

had she felt the desire. Set your mind at rest on that point. I have been in constant attendance upon her ever since we left England, and can speak pretty positively. Indeed, between you and me, she has cost me my best three hours' sleep every night since we weighed anchor until a week ago.'

"He probably mistook my look of startled surprise, for he continued—

"'Ah, my dear sir, I don't regret it, for cases of this rare description don't often fall within the actual experience of a physician like myself!'

"'I understood she had merely met with an accident soon after coming on board,' I said.

"'An accident? Why, yes, we thought



it best to set that report afloat. The fact is, hers has been a case of acute hysteria, but accompanied by symptoms of a very extraordinary kind. You have heard, perhaps, of what is technically termed suspended animation ?

"I said I had.

"Well," he went on, "for nearly five weeks I have been occupied night after night, from about ten o'clock till often past one, in endeavouring to restore animation to that girl. In ordinary cases of catalepsy, or trance, as you are perhaps aware, the attacks, though intermittent, occur at irregular intervals. The extraordinary feature of this case was the regularity in the period of the attacks, which invariably commenced at the stroke of ten at night, lasting sometimes two hours, sometimes three, during which time the patient lay to all appearances dead. What has puzzled me most, however, is that, whereas the after effects of cataleptic seizures generally manifest themselves in extreme exhaustion, in this case their effect appears to have been actually beneficial to the patient. When she was carried on board the poor girl was in the last stage of nervous prostration, and practically at death's door. After her first attack she seemed to rally, and every subsequent attack wrought so remarkable a change in her general health that if there had not happened to be two crack physicians among the passengers, whom I promptly called in to watch the case with me, I have no doubt the report of it which I have prepared for the Medical Society would be scouted by the big-wigs of the profession as the product of a scientific imagination run wild."

"The worthy doctor was too engrossed with the scientific aspects of the case to notice the impression his story produced upon me. He was so proud of his experience that, even had I been capable of such a profanity, I would not have capped his relation of it with that of my own out of pure consideration for his feelings.

"To what," I asked, after I had somewhat recovered myself, "do you attribute the strange ailment you have been describing? Every disease has some cause, I presume, and hysteria, as you call it—"

"Ah, there you ask a pertinent question indeed!" the doctor broke in gravely. "Who shall say? The affection is only too common among women of the class to which this handsome creature belongs. The wild whirl of social enjoyments, unrelieved by graver moments, does not maintain its charm for all

alike. There are some whom its monotony sickens. Satiety breeds disease. Our nature is productive as well as receptive, and the want of an outlet for our productive powers—the craving, often unconscious as it is, for some sphere of individual usefulness—makes itself felt more or less in every human being. Men rarely fail to gratify it. In the case of women the conditions are different—not, perhaps, because women are weaker, but because their means are more limited, and, without necessity for an ally, they find no escape from the groove into which fate—or, as fools would say, fortune—has cast them. But pray let this go no further," he broke off, with a laugh. "I am talking rank treason. Hysteria is a true disease, distinct and well defined, though difficult to treat."

"You know of a remedy, then?" I said.

"The remedy, sir," he rejoined, "is one which no physician—least of all a fashionable one—would dare to prescribe; nor, probably, if he ventured to do so, would the patient adopt it. Indeed, here is the crux; for to make it truly operative it would be necessary first to convince the patient of the true nature of her disease, and it is just this which is most difficult, if not impossible, of accomplishment."

"But the remedy?"

"Is work, sir; some pursuit, some interest, some duty, outside the narrow circle of the individual self. How many of these poor, afflicted minds are but worn and torn in the conflict raging between their double selves, sickened by the indulgence of desires which do not satisfy, and wasted by the instinctive craving for that wider, richer life, the path to which they cannot find? Well, well," he added, rising to go, "pride ourselves as we may on our so-called mastery of the science of Nature, when all is said and done we still stand dumb and unintelligent before the one great mystery with the solution of which perhaps the dawn of true knowledge will only commence—the relation of mind and body."

"The Confessor paused a moment. Then he resumed—

"I may leave you to picture to yourself with what thoughts I listened to these solemn words of my worthy companion. He little dreamed what a vivid ray of light they shed into the darkness reigning in my mind.

"Two hours later I had landed in Melbourne, where I accomplished my mission, the last I was to be entrusted with by my superiors, for, three weeks after my return to Belgium, I left the Order and became what you now see me."



"But the girl!" I exclaimed, in a tone of disappointment, as the Confessor thus brought his strange narrative to an abrupt conclusion. "Did you never see her again?"

He smiled.

"Alas!" he said, "facts are not so accommodating as fiction. My experience might no doubt be worked into a romance to please the fastidious taste of your readers; and yet I doubt if even invention could improve on the truth. Curiously enough, we have never met face to face again. I say curiously, and you will understand why when you hear the name of her with whom I became so strangely acquainted."

And he whispered a name in my ear which made me start back. It was a name which is at this moment known and revered wherever the English tongue is spoken—nay, wherever the virtues of Christian love and charity are recognised as the noblest mankind can aspire to. I remembered having

heard that this remarkable woman had in her early youth played a great figure in society, from which she had withdrawn quite unexpectedly, after a severe illness, in order to devote herself to the philanthropic works which have since made her name so famous.

The Confessor observed the almost awed look in my face as I pondered on all these things, and rising said, with that impressiveness which has so often thrilled those who know him—

"You may well look thoughtful, my friend. Nature has more secrets than we blind mortals wot of. I have told you a strange story, if story it can be called. Let me not, like the doctors, who cover their ignorance and satisfy their vanity by inventing unintelligible names for unintelligible diseases, endeavour to explain in words what words will never explain. If my story does not convey its own explanation to your mind, nothing I can add to it will do so."

