

# LAUDER CAINE THE CONFESSOR.

BY PERCY ANDREÆ.\*

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Illustrated by ST. CLAIR SIMMONS.

## II.—THE CASE OF THE JEALOUS WIFE.



It has always been a matter of regret to me that, with one exception, to which I have already made allusion, circumstances have not permitted me to see the Confessor actually engaged in the pursuit of his interesting calling, that is to say to pass with him personally through the various phases of a difficult case, and watch his mind grappling with the intricacies of the problem presented to it. I once ventured to express this regret to him in the vague hope that he might be induced, should an occasion offer, to relax his stern principle of discretion in my favour. He received my hint with a smile.

"I can hardly conceive of a case," he said, "in the solv-

ing of which it would be possible for me to invite the co-operation, or even the mere companionship, of another. Still, if ever such a case should present itself to me, I will gladly bear your wish in mind. It is however scarcely necessary, I think, to be an actual participator in the solution of a problem in order to observe the method by

means of which it is arrived at. As an example in point I will relate to you one of my most recent experiences. You will probably smile at its simplicity, perhaps even think it trivial and commonplace, yet as an instance of human blindness it is not devoid of some interest, and moreover it will enable you to follow, at least by inference, the process of reasoning by which a very simple yet hidden truth may be elucidated."

Needless to say that I eagerly availed myself of this



"She was a brunette of about four-and-twenty."

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unlooked-for offer, and the Confessor began as follows :—

“It is now some three weeks ago since I received the following letter:—

“A lady, who has heard many favourable reports of the help afforded by Mr. Lauder Caine to those who have consulted him in their difficulties, would be glad if he would grant her an interview, as she is desirous of obtaining his advice in a matter which closely concerns her welfare and happiness. She is not able to disclose her name, but she is young, and of such rank and position as will enable her to compensate her adviser for any trouble he may be put to.’

“To this communication, to which was appended a London post-office address, I sent the following reply:—

“Mr. Lauder Caine will be happy to receive the lady who has done him the honour to apply to him, any afternoon after three o'clock during the current week. He thinks it well however to add that, unless the lady comes prepared, not only to disclose her name, but to repose unreserved confidence in him whose advice she seeks, she will waste both her time and his.’

“The following afternoon my correspondent was ushered into my room. She was a brunette of about four-and-twenty, remarkably pretty, with quick flashing eyes and a certain self-possessed, yet vivacious manner peculiar to those of her sex who not only move much in what is called society *par excellence*, but are accustomed to shine in it.

“After an interchange of the customary civilities my visitor began at once by referring to the concluding paragraph of my letter.

“‘I confess,’ she said with a graceful smile, ‘that it would have been more agreeable to me to have concealed my identity. But as you make it a condition that I should disclose it, I have no other alternative. I am Lady Gwendolyn Talbot.’

“‘The daughter of Lord Samherst?’

“‘No,’ she replied. ‘Talbot is my husband’s name.’

“‘Ah!’ I said bowing, ‘the wife of Lord Arthur Talbot of the 13th Hussars.’

“She blushed, and gave what appeared to be an affirmative nod.

“‘Of Eaton Square?’ I continued.

“‘Do you know him then?’ she exclaimed with a start.

“‘Pardon me, madam,’ I said, ‘but a question is not an answer.’

“‘I should really prefer —,’ she began in some confusion.

“‘To remain unknown,’ I said, concluding her sentence. ‘I appreciate your delicacy, madam, but you could have surely attained that object without assuming a name which is not yours.’

“‘Sir,’ she said rising, with a fine show of offended dignity, ‘you forget —’

“‘Not that I am speaking to a married woman,’ I broke in again. ‘Lord Arthur Talbot’s wife may be Lady Talbot, or Lady Arthur Talbot, but not Lady Gwendolyn Talbot. Besides,’ I added, ‘there are other indications which show that the name is borrowed.’

“‘Indeed?’ she said, forcing a smile. ‘I should be interested to learn them.’

“‘The expression of your face, for instance, and the tone of your voice; indeed many others which it would be superfluous to mention,’ I said. ‘But are we not wasting time? I have not yet learned the nature of your trouble, and it may prove such as to render the information you are so reluctant to give me unnecessary.’

“She looked at me with a curious expression of interest. It is strange how closely neighboured are doubt and belief, confidence and distrust, respect and contempt, in us human beings. This woman comes to me in the confident belief that I shall be able to solve difficulties which have totally baffled her own wisdom, and yet she still has so small an opinion of my discernment as to fancy me capable of being deceived by the most ordinary and palpable device in the world. It is an experience I make daily. We are composed of contraries. There is no such thing as an absolute sense of anything in our natures, whether it be faith, doubt, trust, love, honour, truth, or whatever other sense you may name. Unknown to ourselves, doubt dogs the footsteps of faith, deceit lurks in the path of truth, shame slinks at the heels of honour, and so on through the whole category.

“‘I was warned,’ my fair visitor said after a short pause, with remarkable coolness, ‘that it would be difficult to deceive you. I am sorry that I attempted to do so. When I have told you my story you will understand why I was anxious, if possible, to remain unknown. My real name then is Frances Hazeldean. I am the wife of Sir Thomas Hazeldean, of Brackenhurst in Surrey. When I married two years ago I was as happy as any wife can be who truly loves her husband and believes her love returned. Alas! I am no longer so, for I have strong reasons to suspect my husband’s fidelity. This, in



brief, is the trouble which is weighing upon my life and crushing it. I have as yet confided it to no one, not even to the person upon whose advice I have come here, and who fancies that my purpose in visiting you is merely to consult you on certain matters of conscience quite unconnected with my married life.'

"'If you possess proofs of your husband's unfaithfulness, madam,' I said, 'it seems to me that the proper course for you to pursue would be to consult a lawyer, not me.'

"'If I had such proofs as you allude to I should not be here,' she rejoined, somewhat petulantly. 'I possess proofs indeed, but only such as are convincing to myself. It is for this reason that I have sought your advice.'

"'Pray proceed then madam,' I said. 'If my advice can be of service to you I shall not withhold it.'

"'These last six weeks,' she commenced in a low voice, 'my husband's manner towards me has undergone a total change. In the place of passionate affection I now meet with coldness and reserve. He makes no effort to conceal his altered feelings. My society has become distasteful to him, and he shuns it. But worse than that, he who a few months ago would never have quitted my side for an hour without a tender farewell, now frequently absents himself from home for several days at a time, merely sending me a few formal words from his club or elsewhere announcing his sudden departure on a journey. I have the evidence of my own senses that these journeys are fictitious, for I have twice seen him myself in town when he had led me to suppose that he was absent in the North of England.'

"'Alone?'

"'Alone.'

"'And did you on those occasions tax him with having misled you?'

"'When he returned I did.'

"'With what result?'

"'I received the cold reply that he did not intend to have his liberty interfered with; that he left me free to please myself, and that he would do the same.'

"'He said that?'

"'Those were his words.'

"'And are these all the proofs you possess?'

"'By no means. I have reason to suspect that my husband carries on a secret correspondence.'

"'With a lady?'

"'You shall judge for yourself. I will

come to that later. Let me tell you when my fears were first aroused.'

"'Your method is excellent, madam,' I said. 'I can only sit and admire.'

"'There was a flash of gratified pride in her eyes.'

"'You admit that I understand how to make myself intelligible?' she said with a smile.

"'I see that a secret must lie deep indeed to escape your penetration. Unfortunately,' I added, 'the secrets most difficult for us to discover are those we hide away in our own breast.'

"'I am at least not the vain, empty-headed girl my husband thinks he has married—a doll used to be petted, and good enough to be toyed with for a while and then cast aside. Listen! I have a friend, a cousin. She is of my own age; some say she resembles me. My marriage, I know, was a disappointment to her for it was an open secret, before my engagement, that she had lost her heart to Sir Thomas Hazeldean, who in fact had paid her a good deal of attention. But she bore the blow well, and our friendship, which dates from our school-days, continued unbroken. She has since been a constant visitor in our house, both in town and in the country, seemingly as attached to me as ever—until six weeks ago, when by chance the truth was revealed to me.'

"'Her voice trembled a little, and she paused for a moment to recover her self-possession.'

"'You learned that she still loved the man who had become your husband?'

"'I discovered that there was a secret understanding between them. It was one of those accidents which occur sometimes as if designed by Providence. My husband had left home at noon on a visit to a friend out of town and was not expected back until the evening. My cousin and I had arranged to go in the afternoon to a garden party, and from there with friends to pass the evening at a well-known place of open-air entertainment in the West. But when the time came my cousin complained of a violent headache, and at her urgent desire—for she would not hear of my staying with her—I went alone. I had already arrived at the house where the garden party was to be given when it flashed across me that I had forgotten something in my boudoir, and I ordered the coachman to drive me back—a distance of about twenty minutes.'

"'It was a matter of some importance then?'





“At my entry both started back in great confusion.”



“‘Scarcely. But I am particular, and I preferred to rectify the omission. When I reached ——’

“‘Pardon my interrupting, but may I inquire the precise nature of this omission?’

“‘It has no bearing whatever upon my story.’

“‘Nevertheless,’ I persisted.

“‘She made a little gesture of fretful impatience.

“‘It was the merest trifle,’ she said. ‘I remembered that I had left the key in my jewel drawer, and though I had no distrust of my servants ——’

“‘You judged it kinder to put no temptation in their way. I understand. It was wise. Pray proceed.’

“‘My boudoir lies on the first floor at the back of the house. Being in a hurry I ran upstairs quickly and entering the room stood amazed to find my husband there alone with my cousin. In itself even that circumstance would have aroused no suspicion in my mind, for I believed in my husband implicitly. But there were other circumstances which did. The attitude of the two was unmistakable. He was holding her hand, while she, with a gesture of passionate entreaty, was endeavouring to free herself. At my entry both started back in great confusion. Laura turned pale as death, and I thought she would have swooned. My husband bit his lip and looked for a moment as if he would have annihilated me. But he has a marvellous gift of self-control, and before I had time to recover from the shock of what I had witnessed he said coldly—

“‘“Your cousin is not well, I think. You had better take her to her room.” Then seeing that I was about to speak he added in the same cold tone: “We can discuss afterwards whatever you may desire to discuss.”

“‘I saw at a glance that Laura was seriously overwhelmed, and that in her then state it was useless to press her for an explanation of her conduct. Besides, what had I to do with her? Whatever her fault might have been it was he who had sinned against me and owed me reparation. Without uttering a word therefore I controlled my indignation with a strong effort and led Laura away. As we passed out of the door, which my husband held open for us, I noticed that he fixed his eyes on my cousin with so significant a look that I could have struck him. But I was resolved to avoid a scene and passed on.

“‘I need not relate what took place between Laura and me when I found myself alone with her in her room. Whether she really

felt sincerely penitent or merely feigned distress in order to shield herself from blame and perhaps regain my confidence, I am unable to say. Her talk was for the most part incoherent and consisted mainly in the reiterated assurance that she would rather have died than do me an injury. I believed her then, and judging it best not to let her see that I had any serious suspicions I treated her as one does an over-excited and hysterical patient, and left her at last quietly sobbing.

“‘I found my husband downstairs in the morning-room, and having meanwhile had time to consider the matter from many sides, I waited for him to speak to me first. But he remained silent.

“‘“Have you nothing to say to me?” I asked at last.

“‘“Nothing whatever,” he replied.

“‘“Nothing in explanation of the scene I witnessed ten minutes ago?” I repeated, with difficulty restraining my wrath. “It was cleverly arranged, both on your side and on hers. But you surely do not think so meanly of my powers of perception as to believe you can still continue to deceive me?”

“‘Instead of replying he looked at me for an instant in silence, then shrugged his shoulders, turned on his heel with a laugh and left the room. I was so exasperated at this show of insolent indifference that I could hardly trust myself to speak, and before I had sufficiently collected myself to follow and detain him he had seized his hat and left the house.’

“‘Since that day my life has become unbearable to me. Laura returned home that evening and I have not seen her again. My husband treats me with cruel callousness, refusing either to speak or listen to me. Yet I am certain that he still corresponds with her and no doubt contrives to see her.’

“‘You have not told me what reasons you have for supposing that your husband carries on this secret correspondence,’ I said when she paused. ‘I presume that you see the letters that come to the house addressed to your husband?’

“‘I have tried every means to do so, but it is impossible for he is incessantly on the watch to prevent me,’ she answered, ‘and it is this which confirms my suspicion. Once indeed, when I thought him engaged, I managed to slip to the letter-box after the postman had knocked and intercept the letters before the butler could answer the knock, but I had hardly laid hands on them when my husband himself was at my side and snatched them rudely from me.





“He turned on his heel with a laugh, and left the room.”

Glancing rapidly through them he selected those that were for him, then coolly handed me those addressed to me, and left me standing without a word.’

“‘Are these all the facts so far as they are known to you?’ I asked, seeing that she had finished her story.

“‘All the material facts,’ she replied.

'There may be others, but none of any importance.'

"If you will permit me," I said, "I will put a few questions to you, which you will be good enough to answer carefully, even if they seem superfluous or alien to the matter you have at heart."

"She signified her readiness, and I began.

"When you returned home so unexpectedly to find your husband alone with your cousin in your own boudoir, you came with the intention of locking your jewel drawer. Did you do so?"

"I did."

"When?"

"Immediately after leaving my cousin in her room, before I descended to speak with my husband."

"And you found nothing missing?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you do not suspect that my cousin —"

"I suspect nothing, madam," I answered. "I merely ask if you found the contents of the jewel drawer intact."

"Absolutely."

"You are quite sure."

"Quite."

"May I ask how you can assert that so positively?"

"Because I examined the drawer thoroughly."

"On that very occasion? I mean before you followed your husband downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"The reason was obvious. There were jewels of considerable value in the drawer."

"Of greater value to you than your husband's love?"

"I do not understand you."

"I ask because I wish to make sure that you are not mistaken as to the exact moment when you examined the jewel drawer. Excited as you were, and engrossed with one paramount thought—that of your husband's supposed deceit—it would seem more plausible if you had examined the drawer at some later time. I wish you to be particularly exact on this point."

"You may rely upon what I have said. But I don't see —"

"On the contrary," I interrupted, "the question is more vital than you think. How long were you alone in the room, occupied with this investigation?"

"A minute or two. I was naturally anxious to get down to my husband."

"Of course. Could you state from

memory what the principal contents of the drawer were?"

"I am afraid it would be difficult."

"Would it take too long?"

"I should not be able to remember."

"Yet notwithstanding you were able to assure yourself, in the short space of two minutes, that nothing was missing from the drawer?"

"I have already said so."

"Speaking approximately, were there, say fifty different pieces of jewellery in the drawer?"

"Probably double that number. I have never counted them."

"And mostly, I presume, enclosed in separate cases?"

"Generally speaking, yes. But I think I can spare you any further questions on the subject. My cousin is very wealthy, and possesses far finer jewellery than I. Moreover her honesty is above so mean a suspicion."

"Frankly, madam, I fail to see that the suspicion of stealing a friend's husband is less degrading than that of stealing a friend's jewels. But I have no cause to doubt what you say. Your cousin is beautiful I presume?"

"There are many who admire her," she answered, with difficulty concealing her ill-humour at my somewhat blunt manner.

"Indeed she must be endowed with quite exceptional charms to rival a wife like you, madam, in her husband's affections."

"She flushed slightly."

"You believe then in my husband's innocence?" she said eagerly.

"I have not the pleasure of knowing him as I know you, madam," I replied. "Perhaps you will be good enough to describe him briefly. He is handsome?"

"Very."

"Reserved in manner?"

"To strangers, yes."

"But not to those who enjoy his confidence?"

"No."

"Nor easily moved to a display of outward passion?"

"On the contrary."

"Yet capable of passionate emotions—love, for instance?"

"I think so"—with a touch of embarrassment.

"Sensitively proud, even for one of his rank and station?"

"I should say very."

"With a strict sense of honour?"



“‘I have always thought so.’

“‘In fact an ideal aristocrat?’

“‘It depends upon what your ideal of an aristocrat is.’

“‘Precisely. Let us say then, the ideal you pictured to yourself six weeks ago.’

“‘I have never thought my husband otherwise than a true gentleman.’

“‘And until the day when you surprised him with your cousin he had never given you cause to doubt his love—had, in short, never shown you the slightest neglect?’

“‘I noticed nothing of the kind. But I have thought since —’

“‘Pardon me, madam, I am not asking you what you have thought since, but what you thought then. There are certain events in our lives which obstruct our view of the path we have traversed like pieces of stained glass, which lend their colour to everything we see behind them. You had then no cause to complain of your husband’s want of affection before that day.’

“‘Maybe I did not. No doubt he acted his part well.’

“‘Let us assume so. During the two years of your married life you have doubtless been much in society?’

“‘A great deal.’

“‘And your husband has shown pleasure in the part you have played in society. I mean he has never grudged you the homage naturally paid to one of your youth and attractions?’

“‘Never. Why should he? If these questions,’ she added with a bright little laugh, ‘mean that you fancy my husband may have objected to his wife being admired, I can set your mind at rest. No man is of a less jealous disposition. If I ever thought him so I have obtained conclusive proof of the contrary during the last six weeks.’

“‘Which I understand to mean that you have endeavoured to win back your husband’s affections by giving him cause to be jealous. Madam,’ I said earnestly, ‘thank heaven that you did not succeed! To stimulate love by means of jealousy is like physicking a dying man with an irritant poison.’

“‘But what can I do?’ she burst out with sudden passion. ‘My fate is too cruel to be endured.’

“‘I have one more question to ask,’ I replied. ‘It is the most important one. Have you told me everything that occurred on that day from which you date your trouble? Did nothing else of consequence happen to you either on that or the preceding day? Pray consider well before you answer.’

“‘There is no need for me to consider,’ she replied. ‘I have nothing to add to what I have said. I see,’ she continued, rising from her seat with an air of petulant disappointment, ‘that my story affords you no clue whatever, and that, if anything, you are inclined to believe that my husband is innocent.’

“‘Would it grieve you then if that were my conclusion?’

“‘Can you prove it? Can you?’ she exclaimed, turning upon me with an eager look.

“‘One moment’s patience, madam,’ I said, approaching the window and looking into the street below. There was a man stationed opposite the house gazing up at the windows. ‘You have come here unaccompanied, of course?’

“‘I came alone.’

“‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I think I may promise to obtain some light in this matter, provided you undertake to act as I shall direct. In the first place it will be necessary for you to absent yourself from home between the hours of two and six to-morrow afternoon. You will meanwhile receive a letter from me, directed to your town address, which you will be kind enough to give me. This letter will merely inform you of the time at which I desire to see you here again on the following day. Whatever that time may be you will understand it to mean exactly one hour later. Thus, if my letter appoints three o’clock, you will know that I mean four o’clock, and be careful not to be here a minute sooner. I cannot explain now why I make this apparently unnecessary stipulation. But it is essential, if I am to assist you successfully, that you should obey me to the letter. May I rely upon your doing so?’

“After some hesitation she gave me her assurance that she would do as I bade her, and having taken note of the requisite address, I bowed her out.

“From my window I watched her pass down the street, and, when she had disappeared from sight, saw the man I had observed before stationed opposite my house leave his post and follow swiftly in the same direction.

“The day after next I gave my servant the following instructions:—

“‘I have an appointment this afternoon, between three and half-past, with a gentleman whose name I do not know. While he is here a lady will call. Show her into the adjoining room and come and inform me immediately of her arrival.’



"It was nearly half-past three o'clock when my man opened my door and ushered in the first arrival with the words, 'Mr. Robertson, sir; by appointment.'

"The gentleman who entered was a fine figure of a man, about thirty-five years of age, with that air of dogged determination which we see sometimes in military men who have a long and honourable service behind them. Without a word of greeting, and scarcely waiting for the servant to close the door behind him, he advanced towards me with a threatening expression and said—

"'You have a lady here, sir. Where is she?'

"'I am sorry to disappoint you, Sir Thomas Hazeldean,' I replied, 'but I do not expect Lady Hazeldean until four o'clock. When I had the honour of communicating with you —'

"'What do you mean, sir?' he exclaimed, taken aback.

"'Ah! true,' I said, 'I did not use the ordinary method of communication, but I had good reason to assume that any letter I might address to Lady Hazeldean would first pass through her husband's hands, and your presence here at this moment confirms the correctness of my assumption. When you have heard my motives for so acting you will, I am sure, forgive the practice of a slight ruse which, however distasteful to you, may at least claim the merit of success.'

"'And by what right, sir, have you thus taken it upon yourself to interfere —'

"'I might reply, by the natural right of every human being to intervene when he sees a blind fellow-creature rushing headlong to the brink of a yawning precipice. But I have, if not a better right still, at least one that should commend itself to a man who is honestly desirous of learning the truth. I know that you suspect Lady Hazeldean, and I know that your suspicions are unjust.'

"'You will permit me to judge of that,' he said angrily, yet in a tone through which I could discern a note of bewilderment.

"'Certainly,' I rejoined. 'It is for the very purpose of affording you an opportunity of exercising your judgment that I have taken the liberty of making this appointment with you. In brief, Sir Thomas, Lady Hazeldean has done me the honour to consult me in her trouble, for I am, as you are presumably not aware, one of those humble mortals who now and then have occasion to prove useful to their fellow-beings in matters of doubt and difficulty. I know Lady Hazeldean's story. Yours I am only able to guess.

It is of course in your option to refuse to listen to me, or to afford me any assistance in clearing up a mystery which affects the happiness and the honour of one whose innocence, if I gauge you rightly, must be dearer to you than your own life. If you do refuse, the responsibility will rest with you, but as a man and a gentleman you will not.'

"I saw that my words had produced an effect, though he was loath to show it.

"'You may ask whatever questions you please,' he answered. 'Whether I shall think fit to reply to them is another matter.'

"'If you will permit me then,' I said, 'I will shortly recapitulate the incidents which have led to this unhappy estrangement between yourself and your wife. You will no doubt correct me where I am wrong, and add such particulars as I may be ignorant of.'

"He threw himself into a chair and waited in an attitude of ill-concealed curiosity.

"'Until the day when Lady Hazeldean unexpectedly disturbed your conference with her cousin in her ladyship's boudoir,' I began, 'I may take it that there had never been the vestige of a cloud in your married life. You returned home that afternoon sooner than you anticipated, and came unawares upon your wife's cousin, who had for some reason or other entered Lady Hazeldean's boudoir?'

"'As a matter of fact,' he said, 'I thought it was Lady Hazeldean herself, for I had let myself into the house with my key. But I really do not see why I should enter into —'

"'You will not regret it, I assure you, Sir Thomas, if you do. Would you object to tell me how you found this lady occupied?'

"'She was reading a letter, sir,' he said.

"'So I supposed. It was the letter Lady Hazeldean had returned home to lock away in her jewel-drawer, where you no doubt replaced it after your wife had left the room with her cousin. But what I am more interested to learn is how you yourself came to read this letter, Sir Thomas.'

"'I will even tell you that, sir,' he answered coldly. 'The girl had dropped it in her fright when I suddenly came up behind her, and picking it up, together with the envelope, I was about to hand them both back to her when the name on the envelope caught my eye, and I saw that it was addressed to Lady Hazeldean.'

"'Ah! exactly. I see, I see. And thinking now that you would forthwith proceed to



read the letter the foolish girl probably grew wildly agitated, imploring you to give it her back, telling you she would kill herself if you read it, and, in short, acting generally like a person distracted—all of which naturally excited your suspicions and brought about the very event she was so anxious to avert. Thus it was that you came to read that unfortunate letter, and the nature of its contents —’

“‘The nature of its contents, sir,’ he said, rising stiffly, ‘is my business, not yours. No doubt, should you feel curious on the point, Lady Hazeldean will be able to enlighten you.’

“‘Doubtless,’ I said, ‘and with your consent I propose that she shall do so presently in your own hearing.’

“‘He looked at me with a mingled expression of surprise and anger.

“‘Have you still the hardihood to maintain —’ he began.

“‘That your suspicions concerning Lady Hazeldean are unjust? I am more convinced of it than ever.’

“‘Then she has told you —’

“‘Touching the fact of the letter, nothing whatever—at least not to her knowledge. Fortunately however her answers to my questions permitted me to form my own conclusions. Ah! you see, if the people who come to seek my advice were capable of telling me the whole truth concerning themselves and their troubles they would be equally capable of telling it to themselves, and my occupation would be gone. It is the merest grain of falsehood or concealment which vitiates a whole mountain of truth, for ourselves as well as for others. To discover and eliminate it is usually the task I find set me in cases like these. And the most surprising thing about them is the invariably trivial reason which has led to the deception. As, for instance, in the case of Lady Hazeldean. I am of course telling you nothing new when I say that your wife is one of those bright and impulsive natures who love amusement—especially if accompanied by a certain danger—for the mere amusement’s sake. She is vain, as handsome women usually are, but proudly vain, slightly spoilt perhaps by an over-indulgent husband, and, like many with such attractions as hers, not entirely unsusceptible of flattery. Pray do not grow angry. It is my profession to be frank and outspoken, and you are at fault, Sir Thomas, gravely at fault, though you dare not admit it to yourself. You have known your wife such as she is for over two years, and loved and trusted her as such.

Yet now, because an infamous society black-guard insults her by writing her a letter tempting her to that of which she is incapable, you instantly cast your love and trust to the four winds, spurn the woman whose chief moral support you should be, spy on her actions, intercept her letters, and, to crown all, have her watched by detectives!’

“‘Sir,’ he exclaimed, springing to his feet with flashing eyes, ‘you do not know what you are talking about, or —’

“‘You would strike me for telling you the truth. Quite so. Even that would not astonish me, Sir Thomas Hazeldean. But you shall hear the truth notwithstanding.’

“‘Do you suppose,’ he said hoarsely, ‘that this infernal scoundrel would have dared to write to her as he did without having received some encouragement?’

“‘Do you believe he has received more encouragement from her than she has given to dozens of others, to your own knowledge, and before your own eyes? She was at fault perhaps. Thousands of women as pure and innocent as she is are similarly at fault, not for want of purity and innocence, but for lack of the knowledge that what—in spite of all their faults and frailties, their love of admiration and amusement, their thirst for unmeaning triumphs, their foibles and vanities—is pure and innocent to them, and may be so to honourable men like yourself, is liable to misinterpretation by those miserable pleasure-hunters, whose name is legion, who infest society of every class and grade, and arguing from the consciousness of their own depravity, that innocence and purity are but the mere lack of the opportunity to sin, look upon every woman without distinction as their lawful prey.’

“‘You are an eloquent advocate indeed,’ he rejoined with a sneer which was somewhat forced. ‘And pray, why did my wife not show me that letter?’

“‘Ah! there you ask a pertinent question—the only one to which the answer is still wanting. A woman as proud and sensitive to shame as Lady Hazeldean is naturally reluctant to confess that she has committed a mistake of this description. That was the reason she concealed the fact of the letter from me. But the same reason can scarcely apply in the case of her husband. Still I think the answer is evident. Do you happen, for instance, to have noted the date of this unfortunate letter?’

“‘I do. It bore the date of the day on which I read it.’



“Is it possible? And this fact conveys nothing to your mind?”

“Before he could answer my servant entered and handed me a card.

“‘Lady Hazeldean has arrived,’ I said. ‘Are you willing to hear from her own lips —’

“‘What, here?’ he exclaimed.

“No, I desire that whatever statement she may make shall be made in a manner that will carry conviction to your mind. I propose therefore to converse with Lady Hazeldean in the adjoining room. If you will remain at this door, through which I shall pass, and which I will leave ajar, you can follow the conversation between us as though you were present.’

“He acquiesced silently, but there was a look of intense anxiety in his face which told its own tale.

“‘The ordeal, if I am not much mistaken, will be brief, Sir Thomas,’ I said. ‘There is only one counsel I would fain give you, and I do so now as I may have no other opportunity. It is that you should never let your wife know that you have had her watched by detectives. Nay, do not think I speak at random. She was followed to my own door two days ago by one of the spies whom you have engaged to dog her footsteps and fasten upon her a guilt of which, in your secret heart you yearn to acquit her. Your jealousy she will doubtless overlook, but your having exposed her fair fame to the prying eyes of professional scandal-hunters she would never forgive.’

“He turned away with an impatient gesture, but I saw, notwithstanding, the ruddy glow of shame mount to his brow. The next moment I stood confronting his wife in the adjoining room.

“She rose as I entered with a look of anxious inquiry, but I motioned her gravely to retain her seat.

“‘Madam,’ I said, remaining erect at her side, ‘before we discuss the matter on which you have done me the honour to ask my advice I must acquaint you with a circumstance which affects your happiness even more closely. You have been followed to my house by the man who loves you.’

“‘What?’ she exclaimed, starting to her feet.

“‘And who insists upon learning your answer to a certain letter received by you six weeks ago.’

“She sank back into her chair aghast.

“It is presumably the letter you concealed in your jewel drawer, and which occasioned

your sudden return home on the day you discovered your husband’s understanding with your cousin. But such letters require an answer, madam, and it is usual that the answer should be conveyed through a man.’

“Does he dare to assert that he has not received such an answer?’ she cried.

“Through whom, madam? Not surely through your husband?’

“My husband? Had I then a husband?’ she exclaimed. ‘My God, at the very moment when I most needed him I found that he himself had raised an impassable barrier between us! But what is the meaning of this? Am I to understand —’

“‘Pray be calm,’ I broke in. ‘You received that letter I believe the very day of the incident between your husband and your cousin.’

“It came a few minutes after my husband had left the house.’

“And you locked it away in your jewel drawer —’

“For the purpose of placing it in my husband’s hands when he returned home.’

“It is unfortunate, madam, that you did not carry out this intention.’

“That is a matter of opinion,’ she replied haughtily. ‘After what had occurred I preferred to act differently.’

“You sent an answer —’

“I merely placed the letter in my brother’s hands for him to deal with.’

“Was your brother not surprised that you should have selected him for this task instead of your husband?’

“Possibly. I do not know. I told him I had reasons of my own for leaving the matter in his hands, and no doubt he was satisfied that they were good ones. But frankly this subject is distasteful to me. If you can give no information respecting my husband’s —’

“Your husband, madam, will doubtless answer for himself,’ I said with a bow, for at that moment the door opened and Sir Thomas Hazeldean stood on the threshold.

“She gave a little cry, partly of surprise and partly of fright. But I did not stop to witness what then occurred. Passing quickly into the next room I closed the door upon the two young people and left them to make their own explanations.

“That they were not entirely unsatisfactory,” the Confessor concluded, pointing to a superb vase of chased silver, “you may gather from that exquisite work of art over there. It came here a week afterwards with a card bearing Sir Thomas and Lady Hazeldean’s grateful compliments.”