

LAUDER CAINE THE CONFESSOR.

BY PERCY ANDREÆ.*

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Illustrated by ST. CLAIR SIMMONS.

THE CASE OF THE LEAGUE OF THE AIGRETTE.

CHAPTER I.

The Disappearance of young Evan Llewellyn.



AMONG the large number of those whom trouble or difficulty in some shape or other has brought into immediate contact with Lauder Caine, I have, in the course of my

long researches, never met but one who, in recounting to me his individual reminiscences, has not spoken of the Confessor in terms of the deepest gratitude and veneration.

This one exception was a Welshman of the name of Llewellyn, a man well stricken in years, reserved and thoughtful, and with a certain air of subdued melancholy that enhanced the interest with which his rumoured acquaintance with Lauder Caine invested him in my eyes.

It was a long while before I succeeded in gaining his confidence. At last, I think, his irritation at my unconcealed enthusiasm for the subject of my researches, rather than my own persistency in questioning him, overcame his reluctance, and he told me his story.

It was short, and I give it in his own words, without comment. To me it showed the Confessor in so new and unexpected a light that I was considerably puzzled how to reconcile it with everything else I knew of his life and principles. Indeed my attempts to elucidate the puzzle caused me subsequently untold thought and labour lasting many months, and I had already begun to despair altogether of success when chance, which sometimes shows strange favours, brought me the solution of the mystery in a

manner that was remarkable in more senses than one. But of this hereafter.

"Your much-vaunted Confessor," the old man began, when, in pursuance of his invitation, I found myself sitting opposite him at his own fireside in the comfortable flat he occupied near Westminster, "your much-vaunted Confessor may be a paragon of cleverness, and, indeed, no one has less reason for disputing the fact than I, but as for his sense of morality, all your fine stories will not convince me that it is not totally perverted. Ay, if justice in this country were anything but the mockery it is, nothing should have hindered me from setting the machinery of the law in motion against him in order to force him to disclose that knowledge which, in the arrogance of his self-conceit, he has thought fit to withhold from me. You look astonished. Hear the facts, and then judge of them.

"Seven years ago I suffered a grievous blow. Grievous, did I say? Alas! it struck at the very roots of my life and made me the miserable broken being you now see me. I had a son, as fine and promising a young fellow as you will not come across among thousands. He was somewhat headstrong, it is true, and impatient of control; but what lad of five-and-twenty, with talent and spirit, is not? My difficulty was to get him to settle in some definite career. I had taxed myself to the utmost extent of my means in providing him with a first-class university education, but though he had done every credit to his tutors, he preferred the rough enjoyments of a roving life to the brilliant position which his knowledge and his talents would easily have secured him at home. It was in this regard alone that he gave me any cause for anxiety, for I was but moderately wealthy, and his taste for travel was costly. Not that he drew more heavily upon my resources than I was prepared to meet, but I was sharp-sighted enough to perceive that what I allowed him could not possibly suffice to cover his lavish

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expenditure, and I consequently concluded that he was rapidly encumbering himself with debts.

"Whether this suspicion of mine was correct I never learned. I merely mention it in order to prove to you that if I have steadfastly refused to believe my own son capable of criminal or dishonourable actions, I was by no means blind to his actual failings and weaknesses. But you will understand my meaning presently.

"At last, to my infinite satisfaction and relief, my boy communicated to me the glad news that he had definitely accepted an important offer of employment in London. Its nature, he said, he was bound for the present to keep secret, but I might rest assured that it was one of great honour and promise. This delightful news reached me from Vienna, where he had been passing the winter. He was then on the eve, he wrote, of his departure thence to Paris, where he had business of a very serious nature to transact. When this was accomplished he intended to proceed to London without further delay.

"That letter," Mr. Llewellyn continued in a low voice, "was the last I ever received from my poor boy, nor did I ever see him alive again. I wrote several letters to the post-office address he had given me in Paris, but they brought forth no answer. At length, when weeks had gone by, and still no tidings of him reached me, I was seized with a panic of alarm, and communicated with the police. But, alas! in spite of the most diligent search and the most strenuous efforts both of the English and the French detectives whom I engaged to track him, no trace of my son, not the faintest clue as to his whereabouts could be discovered.

"He had left Vienna immediately after posting me the letter I have mentioned, and had apparently proceeded to Paris in accordance with his plans. That was all that could be elicited. Whether he had ever reached his destination, and what had become of him there, no one could discover.

"You may imagine my despair. When every other means had failed, and the police had frankly avowed their inability to afford me further assistance in the matter, I was induced by an old friend to place my case before Lauder Caine the Confessor, and seek his advice.

"It was the first time I had ever heard of this man, and my faith in the marvels that were related of him was not great. Still, I

grasped at the faint hope held out to me, and went to him.

"I need not detail what passed between us at that interview. It may be summed up in one sentence. I told him my story, and he refused to aid me. He did not do so unkindly, I admit. He even listened with wrapt attention to what I had to say, and put many questions to me, the drift of which I did not understand then, though their meaning was brought home to me afterwards in a manner which I shall never cease to resent. But he declared simply that my case was one in which he could not be of any service or assistance to me. It was essentially a matter for the police, he said, and if, with all the facts he had elicited from me before them, they had failed to elucidate the mystery, he could certainly not hope to be more successful. 'Perhaps, however,' he added, 'our conversation may have recalled to your mind certain facts concerning your missing son which you have considered too insignificant to mention to the expert detectives engaged in the case. If so, I should advise you to rectify the omission at once, for the knowledge of those facts may afford them the very clue which they have hitherto failed to detect.'

"With these words he dismissed me, and though I was disappointed at the result of the interview, I experienced a sense of relief when it was over. To feel, as I did, as if I were made of pure crystal glass, through whose clear transparency the slightest spot or flaw in my inner self were discernible to those large inquisitive eyes of his, was an ordeal I never wish to undergo again. Not that I had any reason to fear such inspection; it rendered me uncomfortable, and I thought it needless, that is all.

"With the Confessor's refusal to assist me my last hope of ever ascertaining the fate of my boy vanished, and I resigned myself gradually to the conviction that the veil overhanging it would never be lifted.

"Would heaven it had never been! or that he who after all did lift it had not withheld from me the means he alone possessed of tracking and bringing to justice the miscreant villain to whose wiles my unhappy boy had fallen a victim.

"Ay," he went on, his tone growing fiercely eloquent as he proceeded, "I say it deliberately, if ever a man deserved to be arraigned before the tribunals of his country for condoning crime and protecting the criminal Lauder Caine the Confessor is that

man, and I defy you or anyone else to gainsay the truth of what I state."

The old man sprang up from his chair and paced the apartment in great excitement. I held it wisest to offer no remark, and waited in silence until he grew more composed and at last resumed his seat.

"It was fully six months since I had yielded up all hope of solving this fearful mystery," he then continued in a calmer tone, "and I had almost forgotten the existence of the Confessor when a communication reached me from him which came upon me like a thunderbolt. It merely told me that further search for my boy was useless; that he had died a violent death after leaving Vienna; and that the Confessor was in possession of such particulars as would enable me, if I so desired, to claim and identify the body.

"Needless to say that I rushed off in wild haste to see and question my strange informant. Judge, however, of my indignation when I found that all the information he deigned to impart to me was to the effect that my son's body would be found buried in the cellar of a small house in an obscure suburb of Paris. Under what circumstances he had met his death the Confessor bluntly declined to divulge, not only for my sake, he said, but for another's.

"I was too much prostrated at that time by the melancholy fate of my boy, and too anxious, moreover, to verify without delay the extraordinary statement concerning the whereabouts of his remains, to give more than a passing vent to my rightful sense of wrath at the treatment I was receiving at this man's hands. That he knew the murderer of my son there could be no reasonable doubt. Else whence could he have obtained the knowledge he possessed. Indeed he never attempted to deny it. But he remained obdurate against all my entreaties, and met my threats to obtain redress by means of the law with calm disdain; nay, worse than all, he insinuated, in attempted palliation of his unwarrantable conduct, that the victim had brought his death upon himself, and that no good either to me or to anyone else would come of an inquiry into facts the knowledge of which a kind providence had withheld from me.

"In short, all my arguments and threats proved unavailing to move him, and I went to Paris at last, my mind tossed between doubts as to the possibility of the Confessor's strange indications proving correct, and helpless rage at my inability, should they indeed

prove so, to bring the murderer of my dead boy to justice.

"In Paris, after many difficulties, and only by dint of powerful influence brought to bear upon the authorities, I at last induced the police to institute a search in the cellar of the house, the address of which Lauder Caine had supplied me with. It had been inhabited for about six months by a small tradesman, of whose respectability there was no doubt, and who indignantly resented the idea that his cellar contained the body of a murdered man. At length all obstacles were overcome and the gruesome investigation began—alas! with only too successful a result.

"Beneath the flagstones of the cellar the corpse of a young man was found, by whose clothing and the papers buried with it—for the features were quite unrecognisable—I was able to identify my poor lost son. A dagger was found at his side, with which, as the evidence of the experts proved, the murder had been accomplished. The papers buried with him were retained by the Paris police authorities. They contained nothing of interest to me, and were, indeed, for the most part as unintelligible to me as they appeared to be to the French officials themselves. The latter, I will own, made every endeavour to trace the author of the crime, the victim of which they had so strangely unearthed. But their efforts were fruitless. All they ascertained was that the house where the body was found had been tenanted, prior to its possession by the present occupier, by an elderly man of quiet and retiring habits, who had lived there for a few months only, and had suddenly disappeared without leaving a trace behind him. He was believed to have been an Austrian, but beyond his name nothing whatever was known of him, either by the neighbours or the landlord from whom the house was rented. He had always paid his bail, or rent, in advance, had dwelt alone, without a companion or even a servant, and had kept the house bolted and barricaded as if he went in constant fear of some attack.

"What could I do under these circumstances? The only means I had of avenging the cruel fate of my boy was to force Lauder Caine to disclose what he knew of the mystery in which it was shrouded, and, after providing for the decent interment of the dear remains in the cemetery of Père la Chaise, I returned to London, resolved to exert every means in my power to compel him to divulge what he knew.

"Vain resolve. I failed. What need I dilate on all the measures I adopted to gain

my end. None availed. That man is a demon of obstinacy. I prayed, I stormed, I threatened, I even engaged the most eminent firm of solicitors in London to commence proceedings at law against him. They promised to make short work of him. Pshaw! After one interview with the man they altered their tone, shrugged their shoulders, and assured me that I had 'no case.'

"There is your Confessor, sir," the old man concluded, rising again wrathfully, "and there, too, is our boasted English justice. The one is worthy of the other. I need say no more, for when I have said that I have said the worst I possibly can about either."

I find it difficult to describe the impression produced upon me by this story. Although I felt persuaded that the Confessor, in acting as he had done, must have been prompted by some laudable motive, I could not help sympathising with the natural feelings of a father who saw himself thus thwarted in his just desire to avenge his own blood.

But above everything else, the sense of curiosity to learn the true history of this strange discovery, and how Lauder Caine had chanced to make it, was keen within me, and when I left Mr. Llewellyn I immediately cast about me for some means of fathoming the mystery. My prospects of success were extremely remote, it is true. To apply to the Confessor himself would, I knew, be utterly useless. All I could hope for in that direction was that, if I succeeded in finding the pieces of the puzzle, Lauder Caine might not refuse me his aid in fitting them together.

Yet I persevered for months and months, leaving, I fear, many an interesting case which came in my way uninvestigated, in the pursuit of this one matter on the elucidation of which I had set my heart. At last, concluding regretfully that it was madness to pursue a quest which only the merest chance in the world could render successful, I was on the point of appealing, as a last resource, to Lauder Caine himself, when chance indeed, and chance of a most extraordinary kind, came unexpectedly to my aid, and gave me the key to the riddle.

CHAPTER II.

The Memoir of Walter Davidson, Journalist: a mistaken identity and its strange consequences.

It happened thus:

At a certain well-known London club, which is much frequented by men of my profession, I had for some years met a young

journalist of the name of Davidson. He was a man of recognised ability and considerable promise, pleasant in manner, and generally liked by all who knew him. Although he did not number among my more intimate acquaintances I always welcomed his company, rather perhaps on account of the great interest he used to display in my stories of the Confessor—a subject which my enthusiasm at that time often led me to discourse upon at length to my friends and acquaintances—than by reason of his agreeable personality. He had never given me cause, however, to suspect that he himself knew more of Lauder Caine than the mere fact of his existence and fame; and indeed, had not death prematurely put a term to his promising career, it is highly improbable that I should ever have been enlightened on the subject.

Davidson died under peculiarly pathetic circumstances, which excited a good deal of public sympathy, but which I need not enter into here since they have no bearing on the matter of this particular history. Suffice it to say that among the papers left by him a sealed packet was found, with directions that it was to be forwarded to me in the event of his death. This packet contained a letter dated three years back, and about half a dozen sheets of closely-written manuscript.

The letter ran as follows:—

"DEAR FRASER,—It is as likely as not that this letter and the accompanying memoir will never come into your hands, for I am in good health and see no reason to anticipate that I shall join the majority before you. In the event of my doing so, however, I desire to bring to your knowledge a certain experience of mine which will at once explain to you the deep interest I have always manifested in your accounts of Lauder Caine's life and work, and add one more to the rich store of interesting facts concerning this truly extraordinary man which you have been at such pains to accumulate.

"You are at liberty to make whatever use you please of the enclosed memoir. My reasons for not communicating it to you while I am alive are obvious.—Yours sincerely,
WALTER DAVIDSON."

The curiosity with which I immediately plunged into a perusal of the memoir so strangely placed in my hands will easily be conceived. I little dreamed that it was to bring me, what I had so long sought in vain, the solution of the Llewellyn mystery. It ran thus:—

THE MEMOIR.

"It is now some years since I was the subject of a series of adventures which at least equal in strangeness any I have ever heard or read of. Another than myself might perhaps have issued from them unscathed in body and soul. I did not. Nor, probably, should I be here now to tell the tale had it not been for Lauder Caine the Confessor.

"In recording how I came to place myself in his hands, and in what manner he saved me from the consequences of my folly, I will proceed on the same lines that I adopted when I confided my trouble to him, and unfold my tale as I then unfolded it to his ears.

"My earliest life is of little account. It will be sufficient to say that I began it with vast hopes and burning ambition. Left by my parents at a comparatively early age, with means just sufficient to complete an education which had been liberal in every sense of the word, I awaited but the day when I should be independent of all control to start off and seek my fortune abroad. That day came at last, but although I spent my money I did not find the fortune I sought. Perhaps such fortune as came in my way did not satisfy me, or I thought myself destined for greater things. At all events in a very short time I found myself with only a couple of hundred pounds left of my patrimony, and with no prospect of that brilliant preferment of which I had so long dreamed golden dreams.

"Then I did what I thought a very characteristic thing. I had seen and lived in most of the great continental capitals, but there was one to which I always returned with renewed pleasure, and I repaired thither now, to have a final fling with the scanty means left to me.

"The consequence was obvious. A month later I found myself in London, rich in experience indeed, but possessing only a few pounds to maintain myself with until I should meet with the long-sought-for work that was to make me rich and famous. It is true my belief that I should find such work had been rudely shaken in the interval. But what matter? I was reckless at that time, reckless of the present and reckless of the future, perhaps not without good reason, perhaps—but of that hereafter.

"In a few days my last penny had gone. Then I sold my available clothes and whatever other sundry goods and chattels I possessed to obtain the wherewithal to exist, and soon I had nothing left save the gar-

ments I wore and a few odd shillings, the solitary proceeds of my once extensive wardrobe.

"My position now was desperate in the extreme. Friends I had few, and those I had, and might have applied to for help, were not in London. The prospect of my finding employment, on the other hand, seemed farther off than ever. Under the circumstances I did once more what I usually did when matters came to the worst pinch with me, I decided to make a night of it and reflect upon the future the next morning.

"With this object in view I sallied forth from my lodging late one afternoon and made my way as light-heartedly as I was able towards the Strand, where I intended to while away the earlier hours of the evening at some playhouse, prior to seeking other more doubtful haunts of pleasure when the night had advanced.

"My course lay through a rough and disreputable neighbourhood, in fact through the purlieus of the Seven Dials, and I hastened my steps to escape thence into the more savoury quarter for which I was bound. However, I was not destined to reach that quarter without an adventure—the first in the strange series that now befell me—which all but made an end of the pleasant plans I had conceived for my entertainment that night.

"On nearing the corner of a street leading to St. Martin's church I noticed a crowd of loafers gathered round a drunken man lying in the road beside the pavement. The spectacle was not an uncommon one, and had there been nothing beyond it to attract my attention I should have pursued my way without troubling myself further about the matter. But as I was just brushing past the spot, a loud guffaw which burst from the throng of roughs assembled there caused me to halt and investigate matters a little more closely.

"What I then beheld set my blood a-boiling. The drunken fellow, an old man of fairly respectable exterior, was accompanied by a young girl, whose vain efforts to raise him from the ground were being purposely hampered by the dirty ruffians who had surrounded the couple. One of these had hustled her in such a manner as to cause her to fall, and it was this feat which had provoked the outburst of mirth that had arrested me. Seeing the evident distress of the girl, whose mien bespoke something rather better than she appeared, and without reflecting upon the inevitable

consequences of my act, I pushed my way through to her and sent her assailant sprawling.

"This of course proved the signal for a general attack upon myself, the issue of which, though I was no infant, and struck out right and left with good effect, could not be doubtful. Recognising the critical position my impetuosity had led me into, I stood at bay, resolving inwardly to sell my skin as dearly as I could. Bareheaded, for the light cap I wore had been knocked off my head at the first onset, and glowing with excitement, I parried for some time with tolerable success the blows and kicks that rained in upon me from every quarter. But no man, be he ever so skilled, can defend himself on all sides or against overwhelming numbers, and in a remarkably short time my head began to grow dizzy and I felt that I could hold out no longer.

"It was at this moment that an incident occurred, the singular nature of which I only fully realised some time afterwards. Exactly how it came about I know not to this very day. All I remember is hearing a loud exclamation of surprise from someone and the next moment seeing my assailants suddenly fall back pell-mell, routed, as it seemed to me in my somewhat dazed condition, by some sturdy new-comer who had unexpectedly sprung to my assistance. When I was able to look closer however I noted with considerable bewilderment that my unknown defender was no other than the biggest member of the gang itself, against whom, calculating that he was in all probability its ringleader, my first blow had been directed. That my calculation had not been mistaken indeed was now proved by the remarkably effective way in which he proceeded to deal with one or two refractory spirits among the band who appeared disinclined to submit tamely to his dictation. Seeing that they showed signs of recommencing hostilities he planted his big burly body squarely in front of me, and gathering them, so to speak, in his powerful embrace as they rushed forward, hurled them back into the midst of their comrades as if they had been a couple of light feather beds.

"While I was still rubbing my eyes with astonishment at what I saw my strange protector, having thus effectually quelled his followers, approached me, and handing me my cap, which he had apparently picked up from the ground, whispered these mysterious words in my ear—

"No offence, mister; only just clapped

eyes on your colours. You'll be all right now.'

"Confused as I was I was far too shrewd to evince any surprise either at what the man said or at the tone of deference in which he said it. Nor did he wait to be questioned, but turning at once to the girl, who had stood by meanwhile in dumb terror, addressed her cheerily as follows:—

"Come along, Missy. We'll soon have the old gent on his pins again. Whoa—steady!'

"The last exclamation was addressed to the drunkard himself, whom he had lifted up out of the gutter like a bundle of rags while he spoke, and who of course promptly showed an inclination to resume his former recumbent position.

"But the girl had now clutched the old man's arm tightly in hers, and half supporting and half dragging him along, she hurried away with him to escape further attention.

"I watched the progress of the ill-assorted couple for a few moments while the knot of roughts stood around me at a distance, regarding me with looks of undisguised fear and respect. The situation puzzled me completely. But seeing that the girl was able to manage her charge, and indeed was apparently not unaccustomed to the task, I thought it time for me to move away also, and nodding condescendingly to my strange helpmate, I resumed my way as nonchalantly as I could towards the Strand.

"I had not proceeded beyond fifty yards however when I felt a hand placed on my shoulder from behind, and heard the same voice that had spoken to me before whisper in my ear—

"You're being waited for at the Adelphi, sir; pit or gallery.'

"Waited for?' I said as I turned and recognised my friend of a minute ago. 'What do you mean?'

"That's more than I can say, mister,' he replied. 'My orders were only to look out for you and give the message. Good-night, sir.' And before I could detain and question him further he was gone.

"More mystified than ever I walked on. It was apparent to me now that I had been mistaken for another, and I felt curious to see whether the resemblance which I evidently bore to that other, and which had just served me in such good stead, would continue to prove so effective.

"I had not had any particular theatre in my mind when I started from my lodging,

but had intended to study the playbills at the entrances as I sauntered along, and select whichever appeared to me most attractive. Needless to say, however, that the curiosity aroused in me by this mysterious communication had the effect of determining my choice at once, and that one of the last half-crowns I possessed went in defraying my entrance to the pit of the Adelphi theatre that night.

"The house was crammed, and as I stood penned up with some hundreds of others in the dimly-lighted space at the back of the great house, the possibility of my being detected there by the person, whoever he was, that was said to be expecting me, appeared very remote. Indeed, as the performance proceeded, and my attention became absorbed in the scenic events passing on the stage, the matter gradually slipped from my memory altogether, and only recurred to me later again when the curtain fell for the last time. Then I smiled inwardly at my own credulity. It had been a harmless credulity it is true, for after all it had cost me nothing. I had passed a fairly pleasant evening, and all I now had to think of was how to prolong it. But I was mistaken if I thought my strange experiences were to end there.

"As I was passing with the general stream of playgoers out of the house by the pit entrance I felt a sharp tug at my sleeve, and turning round saw behind me a gentleman who had apparently joined the outgoing stream from another quarter of the house, for he was in evening dress, wore a single eyeglass, and looked the elegant society dandy from top to toe.

"Answering my glance of surprised inquiry—for I knew it must have been he who had touched me—he merely gave me a quick nod of intelligence, and the next moment, drawing his arm through mine, elbowed his way at my side through the crowd collected round

the pit door into the open air. I was too surprised to offer any remonstrance, and followed his lead without question. We passed along swiftly and in silence. But after a few moments he slackened his pace and turning up a side-street halted in the doorway of one of the first houses.

"My time is brief," he said hurriedly. "There was such an infernal crush that I

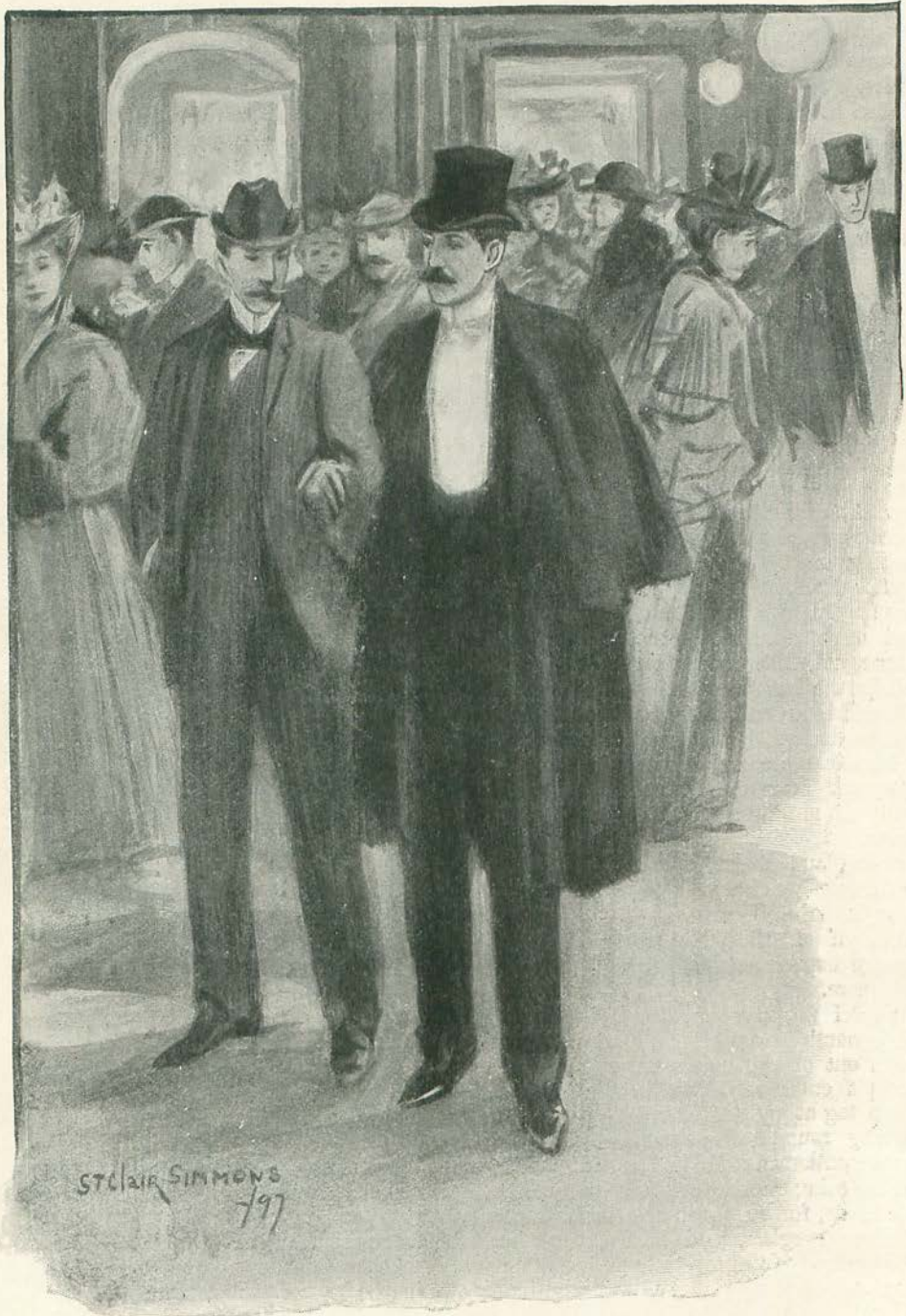


"I felt a hand placed on my shoulder."

could not get to you before. Here are your papers. Your account has been opened at the London and Westminster Bank with £200 to start with. You will find the necessary document for your identification in the packet. That and your signature is all the bank will require."

"Almost mechanically I received the packet which he pressed into my hand. The whole thing took my breath away.

"But tell me," I began, grasping his arm,



"Drawing his arm through mine, he elbowed his way at my side through the crowd."

for I saw that he was about to move off, 'what is the meaning —'

"But he stopped me at once.

"'I can answer no questions,' he said, somewhat irritably. 'It's against the statutes, as you know as well as I do. For any further instructions you must apply through the usual channel to headquarters. But no time is to be lost. You've kept us waiting long enough, in all conscience. Good-night.'

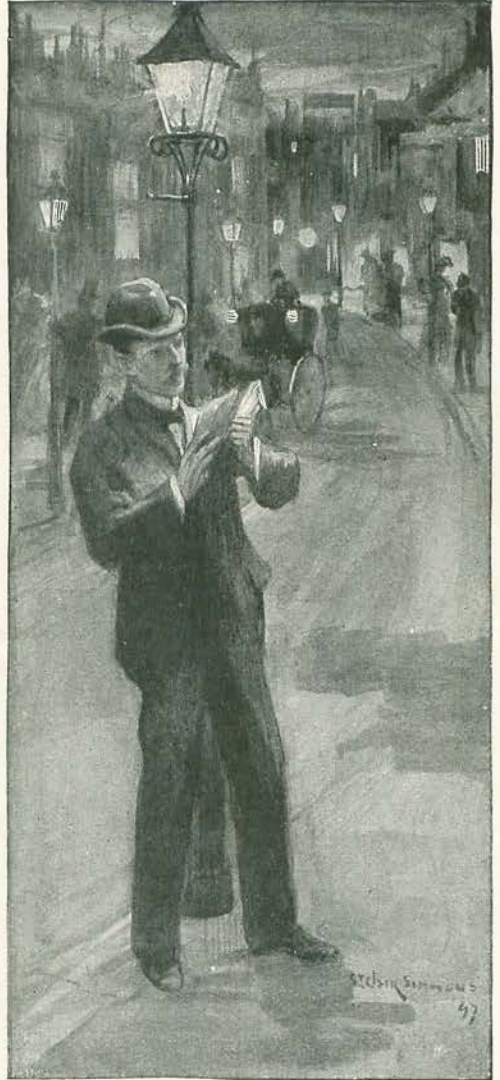
"With these words he left me, and passing quickly in the direction whence we had come was soon out of my sight round the corner of the street close by.

"I stood for fully a minute gazing after him open-mouthed. Then I rubbed my eyes and looked at the packet in my hand. What did it contain? There was one sentence I had just heard which kept ringing like some pleasant music in my ears. 'Your account has been opened at the London and Westminster Bank with £200 to start with.' The very notion of such a thing as a banker's balance caused my heart to palpitate with excitement.

"Stepping under a street lamp near by I tore open the packet and examined its contents. The first thing my eyes fell upon was a sealed letter with the following address written in a foreign hand: 'The Right Honourable Lord Epsom, Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, The Foreign Office, London.' In the left hand corner were written these words, 'To introduce Mr. Henry Milton.' Three further letters, all addressed to well-known members of the English aristocracy, were tied in a separate bundle, to which a slip of paper was attached bearing the words in type, 'For use if required.' These letters were open and contained, as I soon ascertained, merely a few formal sentences commending the bearer, Mr. Henry Milton, to the social favour of the addressees. Each bore a different signature, one of which I recognised as that of a foreign nobleman whose name is as well known in this country as it is in his own.

"Full of wonder I replaced these letters in the bundle and examined the remaining document, which proved to be the paper referred to as necessary for the purposes of identification at the bank. From its contents I learned that an account had indeed been opened in the name of Henry Milton, who was requested in the letter of advice to provide the bank with the usual copy of his signature.

"Until this moment it had never occurred to me to regard my adventure otherwise than as a curious experience in which I could only play a passive part. Now a temptation beset me which, albeit I must record it with shame, was to a man in my desperate circumstances



"Stepping under a street lamp I tore open the packet."

perhaps not altogether unnatural. I was penniless, he it remembered, and though the destitution which stared me in the face was of my own causing, still it was there, stern and real, and it had to be met. Here, then, I suddenly saw a chance of meeting it, perhaps even of ultimately realising the

dream of prosperity I had so long vainly indulged in.

"I will make no attempt to describe the inner struggles through which I passed during the next few hours. As likely as not no one would believe me. Suffice it to say that I walked about the streets the greater part of that night in a state of excitement bordering on actual madness, and when the day broke I had made up my mind to cast my honour to the four winds and risk everything on the possibility of the fortune I saw before me. Not that I put it to myself in that way then. Dear no. It was the mystery surrounding the whole thing that attracted me, and I persuaded myself that my intentions in acting as I did were of the very purest.

"The following morning at half-past ten o'clock I presented myself at the Foreign Office, and handing in the mysterious letter demanded to see Lord Epsom. I was not kept long in suspense. After being shown into a kind of waiting-room I was presently conducted through a long corridor into a spacious apartment, richly carpeted and furnished, in which sat an aristocratic-looking gentleman at a large mahogany writing-table. He rose as I entered, and shaking hands with me as if we were old acquaintances, requested me to be seated.

"To give an intelligible account of the conversation that ensued would be impossible for I was in such a state of nervous trepidation that I only heard half of what was said, and as to what I answered I have retained but the very faintest recollection. This, however, I gathered, that the gentleman was not Lord Epsom, but his nephew and one of his private secretaries; that the particular branch of work he was engaged in was that connected with the diplomatic service; that his duties necessitated the aid of an assistant thoroughly versed in foreign languages; that it was desirable that such assistant should not be chosen from the permanent staff, nor, for reasons which were left unexplained, from among the usual candidates for such posts; and, in short, that upon the influential recommendation of a certain personage with whom I was supposed, and of course duly pretended, to be acquainted, I had been selected for the position.

"To all this I listened with as composed an air as I could simulate. My informant was a frank, pleasant young fellow, who scarcely made a secret of the fact that his post was one which he was entirely incompetent to fill, and which he owed to his family connections alone. It would be my duty, he

intimated, to convert it into a sinecure for him, for which service I might reckon upon such rapid promotion in my career as only the favour of those in power can bestow.

"'There's just one thing which it's as well I should impress upon you, Mr. Milton,' he said when our interview drew to a close. 'Our notions here are rather more strict than you may have been accustomed to among those foreign Johnnies, and you'll have to keep a careful tongue. The chief is easy enough to get on with on the whole. But there's one fault he never overlooks—indiscretion. I merely mention this for your guidance. Otherwise, I think, there is nothing further to discuss. I will have your formal appointment ready to-morrow morning, and we can start work at once.'

"Therewith he shook hands with me again and I retired. When I found myself once more in the open air I knew not whether to laugh or cry. The folly of what I had done now burst upon my consciousness all at once, and had I been able I think I should have still withdrawn at the eleventh hour and never again gone near the place I had just left. But my only other alternative was starvation, and my choice was forced upon me.

CHAPTER III.

Walter Davidson's Memoir continued—A fool in a fix, and an interview with Lauder Caine the Confessor.

"How I got through the following days I don't remember. All I know is that I lived in constant expectation of the appearance of the real Henry Milton and the detection of my impudent fraud. But dangers that are always before one gradually cease to affect one's mind, and finding that my knowledge and acquirements were more than sufficient to enable me to fill with credit the post that had so strangely fallen to me, I soon forgot my worst fears, and in time even imagined that I enjoyed by right what I had obtained by means of the grossest possible imposition.

"In some measure, no doubt, it was owing to the Hon. John Courtney himself, as whose secretary I now acted, if my mind grew thus easy. It was of course impossible for me to conceal from him that I had no friends in London. At first he seemed a trifle surprised on learning the fact, but I soon perceived that he was not altogether displeased to find that I was a stranger to the circles in which he moved. Indeed I had a shrewd suspicion that, were the worst to come to the worst, I should find my honourable friend not a little

anxious to avoid a scandal which, if it ruined me, would at the same time certainly present him in a somewhat doubtful light to his friends and acquaintances. This conviction grew the stronger in me the more firmly I took my footing in my new position, for I felt that, reprehensible as my conduct might be, the Hon. John Courtney was in a manner as complete a fraud as myself.

"As day after day passed and my fear of exposure diminished, my spirit grew bolder, and I soon even had the hardihood to deliver in person the three open letters of introduction which formed part of the contents of the mysterious packet. The result was that I shortly afterwards found myself launched in the whirl of London society as a young man of recognised position and with a future of considerable promise before him.

"It is remarkable how, under such circumstances of necessity as those I now lived in, one learns to acquire information while appearing to impart it. Thus I gathered incidentally from various sources that I was the last of the West Derbyshire Miltons, a once influential county family, whose estates had been forfeited, owing partly to the reckless improvidence of a line of spendthrift ancestors, partly to vicissitudes of fortune which are not likely to interest the reader of my memoir any more than they did myself.

"The knowledge that I was safe from the embarrassing attentions of loving relatives tended to lull to rest such apprehensions as I was still occasionally assailed with, and the further fact that I felt not only fully competent to fill the post I occupied, but really exerted all my faculties to deserve the confidence reposed in me, acted in a way as an opiate to my conscience, rendering me gradually all but oblivious of the means by which I had obtained my advancement.

"I lived in this way for fully four months, when certain events befell which startled me at last out of my sense of happy tranquillity, and opened my eyes with terrible suddenness to the yawning abyss to the brink of which my reckless folly had led me.

"The first of these events came in the shape of a mysterious communication addressed to me at the London and Westminster Bank. It was type-written, and ran as follows: 'Cipher despatch, marked 42 B, leaves St. Petersburg by Queen's messenger to-morrow, and will reach Foreign Office within three days. To be carefully copied, and copy delivered in a sealed envelope to the person who will accost you at the Countess Jagdberg's reception with the

words, "What news from Siberia?" You will reply, "Cold and dreary," and the rest will follow.' Below these words was some strange hieroglyphic sign which conveyed no meaning to me.

"My consternation on reading this communication was complete. Blind, perhaps wilfully blind as I had been up to this moment, the inference to be drawn from this communication was unmistakable. I was then a mere creature in the hands of others, a tool employed in the contemplated perpetration of heaven knows what villainy; nothing could be clearer. Who those others were, and by what strange mistake they had come to commit their business to my hands, I knew not, nor did I stop to reflect. The question which forced itself upon me above all others was, how should I act in this fatal dilemma? My position had been acquired by a fraud, and by a fraud to which I had been a willing party. To do, then, what under any other circumstances I should have done, that is to say, place this mysterious missive in the hands of the Foreign Secretary, would have been not only to expose my own trickery but to lay myself open to the vengeance of those whom I had befooled. On the other hand, to obey the instructions so mysteriously conveyed to me, though I could have done so easily, and with little fear of detection, for the cipher despatch in question would in due course pass through my hands, this, reckless as I was, I felt incapable of doing. Those who are cynically inclined may smile incredulously at this. But so be it. I merely mention the fact; I don't claim any credit for it.

"I spent the next few days in cudgelling my brains to devise some means of escape from the consequences of my mad folly. But all to no purpose. Not the faintest shadow of a plan suggested itself to my harassed mind. In fact I found myself between the devil and the deep sea in the fullest sense of the term, and at last, seeing no other alternative but to shut my eyes and await the result, I gave up cogitating and resigned myself to endure whatever fate might have in store for me.

"In accordance with this policy of passivity I did not present myself at the Countess Jagdberg's reception, nor indeed did I frequent any kind of society from that day forward. I lived like a hermit, avoiding public places of every description, and acting generally after the fashion of the ostrich, which buries its head in the sand of the desert and thus thinks itself safe from its



“Do not stir, Henry Milton,” he said in a low toneless voice.”

pursuers. Notwithstanding, my fears all this time were intense. It was the mystery surrounding me which made my position so intolerable. I expected daily some fresh communication, probably conveying threats or demanding explanations, but none came.

"At last, about the fifteenth day after receipt of the document that had thrown me into such a state of consternation, another event occurred of so startling a character that it might well have unnerved a stronger man than I was.

"Incredible as it may sound I woke up in the dead of night to find my bedroom lighted up by a profusion of candles, and three men wearing masks seated in a semicircle round my bed.

"At first I thought I was dreaming, and sitting up in bed stared vacantly at the silent figures. But there was no doubt about their reality, though how they had found entrance to my room without waking the people of the house or even myself was incomprehensible to me.

"As I started to leap out of bed the middle figure rose and motioned me imperiously to retain my position.

"'Do not stir, Henry Milton,' he said in a low toneless voice, which, in spite of the speaker's evident attempt to disguise it, struck me as strangely familiar; 'and utter no sound until you have heard us.'

"'My name is not Henry Milton,' I said, disregarding his injunction and speaking with a kind of desperation. 'If you have come for the cipher despatch you have come in vain. I have committed follies enough, and will commit no more.'

"'We have no concern with any despatch,' the voice replied, 'nor do we know to what follies you allude. Our mission is to warn you that you have been denounced as a renegade to your oath, and to summon you to appear in three days and answer the accusation before the council of twenty.'

"'And if I refuse to appear?' I asked doggedly.

"'You will do so at your peril. You know the statutes to which you have sworn obedience. Beware! the vengeance of the league is swift and sure.'

"'I have sworn to no statutes,' I exclaimed passionately, forgetting all prudence in my excitement; 'and I know nothing of your league. It has all been a mistake—at least,' I stammered, suddenly reflecting that my admission might involve me in greater trouble than ever—'I mean that I may be able to explain —'

"'The opportunity will be given you. The league condemns no man unheard, excepting the spy.'

"My heart jumped into my mouth. To be judged as a spy seemed indeed the thing most likely to befall me.

"'I will obey the summons then,' I said, hardly knowing what I spoke. 'But how shall I know the hour and the place of the meeting?'

"'The council assembles at ten o'clock on Monday night,' was the reply. 'The password is, "Let traitors beware!" For the rest you must seek instruction here. Our knowledge goes no farther.'

"And the speaker placed what seemed to be a somewhat bulky packet on the table beside my bed.

"'Our mission is accomplished,' he then said rising. 'You are warned.'

"He beckoned to his two coadjutors, who had sat perfectly mute throughout this strange interview, and who now retired as silently as they had come. At the door the spokesman halted and let the two others pass out first. When they were outside he hesitated a moment on the threshold, then recrossed the room swiftly, as if moved by a sudden impulse, and bending over me whispered these words in my ear—

"'Foolish young man, be warned in time. If you have failed in your duty through a momentary weakness appear and confess it frankly. There are those among your judges who are disposed to leniency in cases like yours. But renounce all hope of avoiding the consequences of your oath. Once the fatal sentence is passed no escape is possible. You are lost. Farewell.'

"Before I could detain him he had vanished. I heard the soft tread of feet as my mysterious visitors passed along the passage, heard the street door open and close, then all was silent again.

"With one bound I now sprang out of bed at last and paced my chamber in a state of agitation that baffles description. The voice that had spoken to me still rang familiarly in my ears. I could have sworn that I had heard it before, but I tried in vain to recall when or where. I had made many friends during these last four months, and I felt sure that this man must have been among the number. This fact, proving to me as it did that I had been living unawares under constant surveillance, filled me with an overwhelming sense of the helplessness of my position.

"What was I to do? Although I had

never yet had actual experience of a secret society I had read and heard enough on the subject to be aware that my situation was precarious in the extreme. If I failed to appear before this self-appointed tribunal it was pretty clear that I should be adjudged a traitor *in contumaciam*, as it were, and pay—what penalty? I shuddered to think of it. Yet if I did appear, what should I say, how should I act? Confess my imposture? The probability would be that I should never leave the place alive if I did. Pretend to have succumbed to a passing fit of faint-heartedness, as my evidently well-meaning friend had suggested, and promise to make amends in the future? That would merely be postponing the evil day, for in time the discovery of my deception was inevitable.

"In my agitation I had forgotten to examine the packet my visitors had left behind them. I now cut the string with which it was fastened and opened it with trembling fingers. It contained a mask, of the same size and shape as those I had seen worn that night, only it was not black, as they had been, but curiously striped in brown and green. Pinned to the lower margin was a card on which were printed the words, '52 Verrinder Street, City Road,' and below them was the hieroglyphic sign I had seen on the communication I had received a fortnight before.

"Amid all this mystery it was almost a relief to me to see something so prosaically tangible as an ordinary London address. But the feeling did not last long. My dilemma remained unaltered, and it grew more terrible the more I revolved it in my mind.

"When the morning dawned I dressed and went out. I thought the air and the daylight would calm my bewildered senses and restore me to a more tranquil frame of mind. But I could not shake off the nightmare that oppressed me. Work under the circumstances was impossible to me, and as soon as nine o'clock arrived, the time when my secretarial duties necessitated my attendance at the Foreign Office, I sent a note to the Hon. John Courtney pleading illness as an excuse for my non-appearance. The excuse, indeed, was true to the letter, for by the time the evening came again I was in a state of actual bodily fever.

"It would be to little purpose for me to describe at length all the mad schemes for ensuring my safety which suggested themselves to me in the course of that day and

the following Sunday. At last, urged rather by the burning desire to confide my trouble to some living soul than by any hope of receiving material help or comfort, I resolved to seek the counsel of Lauder Caine.

"It was by the merest chance in the world that my choice fell upon this man. Of his position and personality I knew nothing. It was his name alone, mentioned under circumstances of a startling nature in a State despatch which had passed through my hands a couple of weeks before, that had attracted my attention to him. These circumstances were so extraordinary that I had been led to remark upon them to the Hon. John Courtney, and ask for some information regarding the strange personage to whom they related.

"His answer, though somewhat laconic, like most of his utterances, had impressed me strangely.

"'Lauder Caine,' he said, 'is a man whose wits begin where other people's wits end, and he devotes them mostly, I believe, to cheating the devil of his due.'

"Whether this man, of whom rumour spoke as one to whose judgment statesmen deferred, would listen to the comparatively petty troubles of a humble individual like myself appeared to me extremely doubtful. But I had nothing to lose by venturing to approach him, and at an early hour in the morning of that fearful Monday on which my fate was to be decided, I presented myself at his house, resolved, if he would let me, to make a full confession to him of my guilt and folly.

"I shall never forget the sensations I underwent during the first few minutes of that to me so memorable interview. Perhaps I am—or was then—more of a moral coward than the average run of my kind. I don't know. What I do know is that I had hardly entered that man's presence when my courage broke down entirely, and stammering out some incoherent excuses for trespassing upon his time, I would have beaten a retreat without communicating to him a syllable of the real matter which had brought me there. But retreat was impossible. He listened to all I said with a grave, yet gentle smile, without once removing his eyes from mine, and let me speak on until I found myself too utterly entangled in my own net of inventions to proceed any farther. Then only did he speak.

"'What you have told me,' he said, 'is not true, nor is it well invented. Now collect your thoughts and tell me your real

story. You are in trouble, and fear to face it. Remember, no man is beyond help who honestly seeks it.'

"He motioned me kindly to a seat at his side, and half mechanically, half impelled by an influence which I could not resist, I told him my story, slowly and carefully, as I have written it down here. He followed the recital of all these strange incidents without evincing the faintest surprise either by word or gesture, nor did he interrupt me with a single question until I had concluded.

"When I paused at last and scanned his face eagerly in the expectation of seeing some indication there of the impression my narrative had produced upon him, he remained silent so long that my heart sank within me, and I exclaimed in a tone of despair—

"Alas! you have no counsel for me. You see no possibility of escape?"

"My words seemed to awake him from his reverie, and he flashed a look upon me so peculiarly penetrating that I winced beneath it.

"Escape from what?" he asked abruptly.

"From the result of my madness," I stammered. "From the vengeance of this terrible league, whose very name is unknown to me."

"Again his eyes flashed upon me with that same piercing look as before.

"To those who are aware of its existence," he said, "it is known as 'The League of the Aigrette.'" You look startled, and well you may. Were what you have told me your whole story I might hope to save you from the consequences of your guilty folly; but you have left me to guess what is of more serious importance than all that which you have related to me."

"I do not understand," I faltered. "If I have left anything unsaid —"

"You have begun your story in the middle instead of at the commencement, that is all," he said; "perhaps unintentionally; I know not. Yet you cannot have supposed that such adventures as you have related could be the result of a mere chance misunderstanding. Known or unknown to yourself, you possessed and wore the secret sign of the league on the day when these strange things befell you. That sign," he continued, reading every emotion that displayed itself in my face as he spoke, "is a tiny aigrette of quaint and curious workmanship, which I need not describe to you. To account for the manner in which it came into your possession is your gravest difficulty,

Whether this difficulty is insuperable or not you alone can say."

"I felt the blood rush tinglingly to my cheeks. I had more than once, indeed, vaguely suspected the true origin of all this terrible mystery. The lapel of the cap I had worn on that fateful night four months ago, when all my trouble began, was fastened with just such an aigrette as the Confessor described. It was not my property, but it had come into my possession under circumstances which I dared not disclose even to this man upon whose assistance, as I instinctively felt, my future safety depended.

"The sudden knowledge that a new terror had been added to those which already invested me instilled a kind of desperate courage into me, and I spoke now with a calmness which astonished even myself.

"Unfortunately," I said, "the difficulty you speak of is indeed insuperable. I do possess such an aigrette as you have mentioned, but, whether you believe me or not, until this moment I was unaware of its true significance. If you make your aid conditional on my disclosing the history attaching to my possession of it —"

"You mistake me," he said simply. "Had I any doubts regarding the nature of the history you allude to, all difficulty, so far as I am concerned, would be removed, for I should leave you to meet the fate your own guilt had richly deserved."

"I swear to you," I cried, stirred by something in his tone, I knew not what, "that whatever punishment I may have merited for the crime I have confessed to you, my conscience reproaches me with nothing beyond that crime. If you knew all —"

"Stay," he interrupted me again. "I invite no confidence that is not freely given. I know all I need know to enable me to help you—so far. Whether my help will ultimately avail you the future will show. But such as it is you shall have it."

"Thank heaven!" I ejaculated in a tone of relief. It seemed to me as if his promise of help alone had already placed me beyond danger.

"Listen!" he went on unmoved, "and learn above all the full extent of the peril into which you have blindly ventured. This league, whose vengeance you have to fear, is of no ordinary kind. Its ramifications extend over the whole of the civilised globe, yet no one knows how it came into existence, nor whose is the master spirit that guides and controls it. Indeed so perfect is the

organisation that characterises it that no human ingenuity has hitherto succeeded in unravelling it or discovering the hidden connection between its multifarious branches. Its members, though they number by thousands, are as such unknown to each other, nor is there one whose knowledge of its secret constitution extends beyond that of the particular branch to which he belongs. Nevertheless each branch defers to, and is controlled from, one unknown centre, whence all mandates concerning vital questions of policy, of life and death, of reward and punishment are issued. Such is the League of the Aigrette, before which even governments have learned to tremble, and, alas! from which they have in some instances stooped to seek assistance.'

"'But what,' I asked, deeply interested, 'are the objects of this mysterious association?'

"'The objects of the association, or of its unrevealed founder and arbiter—who shall say? Wealth and power probably, and the vain delight of possessing the one and wielding the other unknown to his fellow-men. The object of each individual member is the gratification of his own individual desires, in return for which he pledges himself body and soul to serve the general purposes of the league. To exhaust the catalogue of these would take me too long, for it embraces every interest known to man—political, social, commercial, ay, with shame I say it, even religious. If ever the day should come, as come it may, when this gigantic organisation is laid bare to the light, society will stand appalled at the revelation, and men will thenceforward regard each other askance, no one daring to trust his fellow.'

"There was that in his tone as he spoke these last words which lent them a significance I was not slow to grasp, and I felt a renewed thrill of hope pass through me as I listened.

"'The picture you present is fearful indeed,' I said. 'What, then, do you counsel me to do?'

"'Wait and see,' he answered shortly.

"'But the summons?' I asked. 'Dare I disregard it?'

"'By no means.'

"'Yet if I appear before this strange tribunal, how shall I act? What defence can I make?'

"'None. Remain silent. I will answer on your behalf.'

"'You?' I exclaimed.

"'I shall be there,' he replied.

"'But consider,' I said. 'These men are desperate characters.'

"'I am well aware of it.'

"'And there will be twenty of them.'

"'With me twenty-one.'

"'They know you then?'

"'Even better perhaps than I know them. Therein lies my safety. It is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that I cross their path. For the rest, think not of me, and take heed that you do not open your lips nor stir, either on my behalf or yours, whatever you may see or hear.'

"'You may rely on my obedience,' I murmured. 'Only pardon me if I ask one thing. How comes it that, with such knowledge as you appear to possess of this terrible league, you permit it to pursue its evil course? For evil it is, surely.'

"'You speak in ignorance,' he replied. 'Were my knowledge of the nature you suppose, either the league or I would long have ceased to exist. But enough. Fortunately for you I possess such weapons as these men, and those more powerful than they, have learned to fear and respect on more than one occasion. The issue leave to me. Now go, for my time is brief, and I have much to prepare. We meet again to-night.'

"There were innumerable questions I would have desired to ask him. But his tone was imperative, and I withdrew without demur.

"How shall I describe the feelings with which I left his presence, or the manner in which I passed the remainder of that day? My state of mind was one prolonged alternation of feverish hope and black despair, and by the time the night came and the hour of the ordeal I had to pass through drew near I felt that, even were I to be condemned and executed that same night it would be preferable to a continuance of the awful suspense in which I had been living for so long.

(The extraordinary conclusion of this story, which is too lengthy to allow of continuation in this issue, will appear in the WINDSOR for May.)