

LAUDER CAINE THE CONFESSOR.

By PERCY ANDREÆ.*


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

Illustrated by ST. CLAIR SIMMONS.

THE CASE OF THE LEAGUE OF THE AIGRETTE.—(Continued.)

CHAPTER IV.

Further continuation of Walter Davidson's Memoir
—A midnight tribunal—Lauder Caine for the
defence.

 I was some minutes before ten when I reached the place of meeting, and I had leisure to take stock of the spot and its surroundings.

The street was quiet, but far from deserted, and from the distance I could distinctly hear the muffled noise of the still busy traffic in the City Road. But the house to which I was bidden had a lone and desolate appearance, and I could see without difficulty that, although apparently a dwelling-house, like most of the houses in the street, it was not inhabited.

"To my surprise I observed no one enter while I stood concealed in a doorway near by, watching with beating heart for some sign of him upon whose support my fate that night depended. I had imagined, I know not why, that we should meet at the door and make our entrance together. But this was not to be; and when the clock of the neighbouring church tolled out the hour of ten I dared not tarry any longer, and approaching the door, knocked as boldly as my trembling fingers permitted.

"The door was opened instantly, and stepping inside I found myself in total darkness. A hand was laid on my shoulder, and a voice challenged me to give the password, which I did. The same voice then whispered to me to mask myself and pass on. A few moments elapsed before I had fumbled in my pocket and found the mask which had been left with me by my mysterious visitors three nights before, and which I had been careful to bring with me. When I had donned it I obeyed my unknown conductor and moved forward. Whoever it was he

remained at my side guiding me, as it seemed, through a long and tortuous passage to the back of the building. Presently we stopped, and I heard him give a peculiar double rap at a door on my right hand. The next moment it was slowly opened, letting out a faint light into the passage. My guide stepped back, another hand from within seized my arm and drew me forward, and I found myself in a large-sized apartment, dimly illumined by a single red-shaded lamp suspended from the middle of the ceiling.

"This apartment had three windows, which were closely curtained and apparently gave on to the street from which I had just entered. An oblong table occupied the whole width, being drawn across the room at a right angle with the farthest window. Behind it were seated three masked figures, whilst opposite these, in rows of six or seven, reaching almost to where I stood, there sat some eighteen or nineteen men, all masked in similar fashion. From the total silence which reigned, and the motionless attitude of those present, one might have imagined them to be an array of wax statues. I stopped near the threshold, hesitating whether to advance or remain where I was. But no one stirred nor appeared to bestow any notice upon me, and the stillness remained unbroken. A sense of oppression seized me which I could not shake off, and I looked around me for a vacant seat, fearing, if I remained standing, that I should swoon or fall from sheer giddiness and exhaustion.

"At this moment I felt myself most opportunely drawn down into an unoccupied chair by some friendly hand behind me, and turning my head I was about to whisper a word of acknowledgment to my unknown neighbour when the pressure of his hand on my arm tightened, as if warning me to utter no sound. I felt my heart leap within me as the thought shot across my mind that it might be the Confessor himself beside

* Copyright, 1896, by Percy Andrea, in the United States of America.

whom I was now seated. If it was, however, he gave me no sign of recognition, but remained, like the rest of the strange company, totally silent and motionless.

"Presently the church clock I had heard strike before chimed out the first quarter, and with the last note the middle of the three figures seated behind the oblong table rose, and the proceedings, such as they were, commenced.

"To describe them minutely would be impossible. My head was swimming, and I caught but the smallest part of what was said. My name, or rather the name I had usurped, struck upon my ear several times, but it seemed to be pronounced in different parts of the room, and by different voices, all low and toneless, as if formal questions and answers were passing, the drift of which I failed to grasp.

"After a while this species of cross-fire ceased and the middle figure behind the table spoke in clear tones as follows:—

"'Is the council satisfied that it is properly constituted?'

"A low affirmative murmur came from the assembly.

"'Is the council satisfied that the accused

member, Henry Milton, has been duly summoned to plead his defence?'

"The murmur was repeated.

"'Then I declare,' the voice continued, 'that Henry Milton stands arraigned before this council of twenty on the following counts: firstly, that, having been duly

selected for a certain mission, known only to the centre, he has betrayed his trust and defied the authority to which he has sworn obedience; secondly, that by thus violating his oath of membership he has constituted himself a traitor to the league, and as such deserves to be judged. Let those in support of the indictment rise and make the usual declaration.'

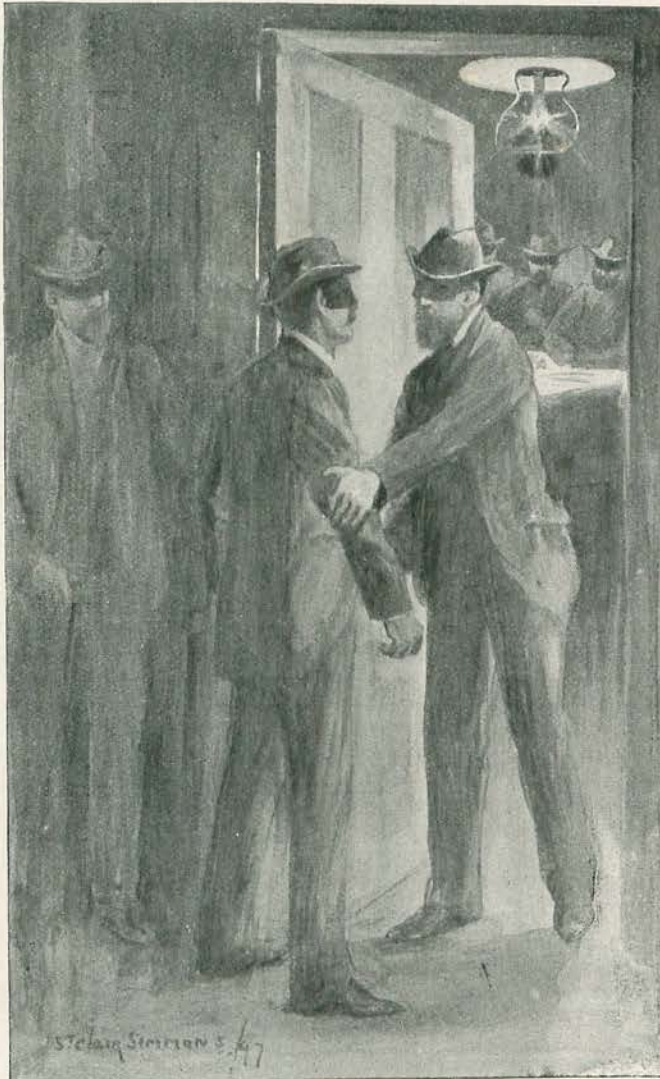
"The president resumed his seat, and one by one four of those present rose from their chairs and spoke these words with uplifted right hand:—

"'I declare the indictment to be just and true,

on my own knowledge of the facts, and I demand the punishment of the offender.'

"When the last had sat down again a short pause ensued, after which the president resumed once more:—

"'The council has heard the accusation. Who controverts the facts?'



"Another hand from within seized my arm and drew me forward."

"An ominous silence followed the question, and I held my breath in a terror of expectation. Would he who had promised so much fail me after all? And if so, what would happen? How should I act?"

"Even while this terrible thought was crossing my mind I became conscious of a movement at my side, and turning saw the figure next to me rise up slowly and deliberately. My heart beat madly, so madly that it appeared to me to be beating in every part of my body at once. It seemed an eternity before the stillness was broken once more. But it passed at last, and then in that calm clear voice, whose subtle power no pen of mine can describe, I heard the words ring forth—

"I controvert the facts!"

"For the first time since I had entered the room a flutter of excited curiosity passed through the assembly. It was evident that the incident was novel and unexpected.

"The president was quickly on his feet again.

"Are you the accused?" he asked.

"I am not."

"Upon what grounds, then, do you speak for the accused?"

"I speak as his friend and adviser."

"The fourth statute of the league provides that no member shall know, or be known to, the other."

"It may be so."

"As a member of the league, then——"

"*I am not a member of the league.*"

"The effect of these words was extraordinary and baffles all description. In one instant everyone was upon his feet, and uproar and confusion reigned supreme. The door was barred and bolted. Cries of 'Traitor!' 'Spy!' 'We are betrayed!' resounded on all sides, and for a moment it looked as if an immediate assault were going to be made upon the bold speaker.

"Amid all this tumult he alone stood calm and unmoved, his left hand resting upon the chair in front of him and his right inserted between the flaps of his tightly-buttoned coat.

"At last, when the noise had somewhat subsided, the president's voice was heard again.

"You stand self-confessed a stranger to the league and a spy upon its council. Rash man, on your own head be the consequences of your insolent temerity!"

"I saw two of the masks, at a sign from the table, pass quietly behind the chair of the person addressed, and remain standing

there in an attitude of ominous readiness. Their intentions were evident. Yet he, who must have seen himself thus threatened, still maintained his position of calm and lofty unconcern, and when he spoke his voice sounded firm and steady, like that of a commander issuing his orders to his men.

"None so rash as they that threaten whom they know not," he said. "I am one man. You are twenty. Think you I had ventured thus to confront you were I not sure that you dare lay no finger on me? nay, that I am as safe in your midst as he whom you all obey, though you know him not?"

"A momentary silence fell upon the assembly at this speech, but it was followed immediately by a low angry murmur which seemed to bode little good.

"Your bold speech will avail you nothing," the president said. "The knowledge you give evidence of possessing makes it doubly imperative that we should silence the lips that proclaim it. Tear off his mask, someone. We will at least see the features of him who thus beards us."

"A dozen men rushed forward at once to obey the order. But before a hand could be raised to execute it the Confessor himself had removed the mask that concealed his features, and without bestowing a glance upon those who surrounded him in an angry throng, he spoke in the same quiet tone as before—

"Let no man advance a step. There are those here who have met me face to face before. To them I need no introduction. For the rest, the name I bear will prove me to be neither madman nor idle boaster. I am Lauder Caine the Confessor."

"When I contrast the simplicity of the tone in which these words were uttered with the thrilling effect they produced on the men who heard them, I still now experience the same sense of utter bewilderment which overcame me at that moment. I have since heard many astounding stories of the boldness, the ingenuity, and the extraordinary achievements of this man, and have learned to regard everything as possible to his commanding genius. But nothing will convince me that the knowledge which those before him evidently possessed of his power and influence could alone have produced that instantaneous effect which followed upon this simple announcement of his mere name and character. It was that subtle, indefinable something in his presence, that magnetic, half-soothing, half-enthraling quality of his

voice, that indescribable power of the eye, in short, the whole extraordinary being of the man, that held these twenty men as if under some irresistible spell, and I verily believe that, had he been as unknown to them as the humble individual who, thanks to him, has lived to pen these pages, the effect of his words would have been just the same.

"It was a moment I shall ever remember. But I doubt whether I can convey even the very faintest conception of its real impressiveness to those who may read this poor description. For the space of several seconds not a sound was heard, and every eye was fixed with an expression of intense expectation upon the countenance of the man who had spoken. That he was fully conscious of the impression he had created it would be absurd to doubt. Yet not a muscle in his face betrayed the pride or the triumph this tacit homage to his personality must have awakened in his breast. He could, I believe, have prolonged at will the spell he had cast over his listeners. But his purpose, if such it had been, was achieved, and he presently proceeded as follows:—

"Let us then measure our weapons before we proceed to discuss the matter that has brought me here. As for myself, my body is in your hands. That is of small account. It is my mind, not my body, you and yours have cause to fear. Destroy my life and you know I make no empty boast when I say that I shall leave that behind me which will suffice to bring destruction, not only upon you my destroyers, but upon those who are even more powerful than yourselves, and whose safety, not mine, you now blindly threaten. My business now is not with you and your evil-doings. The day may come, indeed, when I shall confront you with even more potent weapons than those I wield to-day, an enemy upon whose annihilation your existence will depend. It may then be worth your while to risk that which you now dare not risk by crossing swords with me. I have spoken. It is for you to answer."

"A short pause ensued, during which a hurried consultation passed between the three figures seated behind the table. When it was concluded the president rose again.

"Proceed," he said, speaking slowly, and with a certain hesitation. "We have no cause of quarrel with Lauder Caine. But think not that the league will brook the interference of living man, whoever he be, in so grave a matter as the treason of a perjured member. We sentence traitors as we sentence spies, and once the fatal

judgment spoken, not even Lauder Caine shall avert its execution."

"So be it," the Confessor replied. "Judge, then, whom you have a right to judge. This man is neither spy nor traitor. I stand here to prove it."

"He has been false to his oath."

"No man can be false to an oath he has never taken."

"Explain your meaning," the president exclaimed in a tone of startled surprise.

"It is simple. The man you are judging is innocent of the crime you impute to him, for he is neither servant nor member of your league."

"Again a wave of wild excitement passed over the assembled men, and there was a general movement of dismay and consternation.

"This grows more serious still," the president said. "If what you say be true——"

"That I have said it is proof abundant of its truth."

"He came among us wearing the secret sign of the league."

"That he did so was his misfortune not his fault."

"He adopted the name of him whom we expected, and made use of his credentials."

"There began his folly, perhaps his crime; but for that he has suffered."

"He has gained knowledge of our secrets."

"If he had he would have done so through your fault, not his. But you are mistaken. Until this morning he knew not even the name of the league whose schemes he had unwittingly frustrated."

"But the sign—he possessed and wore it. How was it obtained?"

"The question fell upon me like a heavy weight that crushed me, and I held my breath in an agony of suspense. How would my defender meet it?"

"He paused for one solemn moment. Then he answered gravely, in a slow deliberate tone—

"You ask that which you least of all have cause to wish revealed. The sign comes from a grave which holds a secret you may well tremble to see disclosed. Beware, therefore, and let it rest buried."

"Was this man inspired, or had he some power unknown to common humanity which enabled him to read men's souls like a book and penetrate to their most hidden depths? I alone could know by what means that fatal sign had come into my possession. Yet those words of his revealed a truth to me to

which until that moment I had been totally blind, and the revelation fell upon me with a suddenness that almost stunned me.

"Those who may read my strange tale—sadly incoherent as I feel it to be—will conceive something of my utter consternation when I tell them that until that memorable night four months ago, when the mysterious packet of letters was placed in my hands, I had never heard the name of Henry Milton, for whom I had been so strangely mistaken. Nor indeed was my ignorance regarding this unknown personage lessened even now. Yet notwithstanding, I repeat that those few words of Lauder Caine's threw so startling a light upon a certain past event in my life that I was struck dumb with a wondering awe.

"A glance at the masked crowd surrounding me sufficed to show me that I was not the only one in that room upon whom the words had fallen with so startling an effect. The death-like stillness that followed their utterance gave striking evidence of the strong impression they had created upon the men to whom they were addressed, and when, after a fresh hurriedly whispered conference between the presiding mask and his two assessors, the former spoke once more, I knew instinctively that the Confessor's warning, whatever it meant, had struck home, and that my worst danger was over.

"'What guarantee do we possess,' he said, now pointedly ignoring the question upon which, a moment before, my fate had appeared to hang, 'that one who has so insolently intruded upon our secrecy will be silent about that which he has seen and heard? Little though it may be, it is perhaps enough to render his existence a menace to our safety.'

"'Your surest guarantee, if guarantee were needed,' the Confessor replied, 'is his knowledge of your power to wreak vengeance upon him should he attempt the disclosure you fear. But your apprehensions on this score come too late. You forget that I already share such knowledge as he possesses, and rest assured that neither promises will buy nor threats enforce the silence of Lauder Caine. Ponder that well ere we part.'

"'By heaven!' the president exclaimed, stung by the audacity of this speech, which indeed fairly made me gasp with amazement, 'you presume too much upon our forbearance. It is dangerous to carry boldness beyond the bounds of endurance. What prevents us, indeed——'

"'Nay,' interrupted Lauder Caine suavely, 'let us not waste our time with idle words.

We know each other. What further need to parley? The day has not yet come when you can speak of terms with Lauder Caine. When it arrives it will see the end of him or you—perhaps of both. But let that pass. These things, I see, have come upon you somewhat unawares, and such experience may well be new to you. Take time, then, for thought and counsel, and meanwhile let him whose fate you have met to determine go hence with me unhindered. The sign he holds shall be placed in my hands. If you claim it before another sun has set it shall be proof to me that he is safe. If not—but pshaw! I know you to be no fools, and need not argue the alternative. The hour is late. Are we agreed?'

"There was a note almost of impatience in his voice as he uttered these last words. But I was beyond the stage of wonderment, and scarcely felt more than a passing sense of curiosity to note their effect upon my persecutors. I knew now that there could be but one issue to the extraordinary scene I had witnessed, and when, after a moment's deliberation with those around him, the president rose once more to reply, it needed no words of his to tell me that that issue had come.

"'Be it so,' he said. 'But mark, we give no pledge that we shall forego our rights in this or any other matter. We shall decide as we are bound, by our oath and by our statutes, not otherwise. Of that rest assured.'

"I saw a smile pass over the countenance of Lauder Caine as he inclined his head gravely in token that he had understood and appreciated the meaning this speech conveyed. The next moment he was striding, calm and self-possessed, through the throng of masks who stood between him and the door by which I had entered. I followed, with head bent, mechanically. Yet I could see as we passed along the row of gleaming eyes peering eagerly from behind their masks into the face of him who went before me, as if the sight were one too rare and curious to be missed.

"What then occurred, and how we issued forth from that dreadful room, I cannot say. I moved like one in a dream. I have a confused recollection as of a sudden transition from light to darkness, then of passing again, guided by some strange unseen hand, through the long dark passage I had traversed before, of a door opening and closing, of a sudden rush of keen night air, which bathed my face, acting like a soothing balm to my fever-heated temples, and I knew I was once more in the open street. I looked up with a sigh

of intense relief. Beside me stood Lauder Caine.

“‘Come!’ he said briefly. ‘We have still further business before us. May it end no worse than that which we leave behind us.’”

“I would have dearly liked to question him, but he gave me no time. Hastening

CHAPTER V.

Walter Davidson's Memoir concluded—The death of young Evan Llewellyn, and the strange history of a cap.

“THE drive occupied nearly an hour, and it was past one o'clock in the morning when we at last reached our destination. Silently



“‘As sure as there is justice in heaven,’ I cried, ‘you are mistaken.’”

towards the City Road he there hailed a passing cab, bade me enter with him, and a minute later we were driving rapidly westward towards his own house. He spoke not a word the whole way, and, partly awed by his silence, partly engrossed with my own reflections, I sat beside him, mute like himself.

as we had come we passed into the house. There all was light and bright and smiling. In spite of the lateness of the hour every room and passage was lighted up and breathed grateful warmth and comfort.

“What a contrast with the dark and dreary place we had come from. And yet

my heart misgave me strangely. I know not why, but I felt as if the ordeal I had just passed through were but the preliminary of one still more fierce and fearful which was now awaiting me. I yearned to pour forth my thanks to my deliverer, but there was that in his manner which chilled me and stemmed, as it were, the tide of grateful eloquence that surged within me.

"At last, motioning me gravely to a seat in the room he had conducted me to, he broke the silence abruptly with these words—

"Now, Walter Davidson, tell me what has become of him from whom you obtained the sign of the aigrette."

"Had I expected the question? I can scarcely say. But the manner in which it was put sent a thrill of fear through me, and it was some little while before I could reply.

"He is dead," I said, endeavouring to speak calmly. "What more would you know of him?"

"I would know," he replied shortly, "how you came to murder him."

"I started up.

"As sure as there is justice in heaven," I cried, "you are mistaken. I committed no murder."

"Yet Evan Llewellyn," he continued, unmoved, "died by your hand. Your face betrays it."

"Evan Llewellyn?" I stammered. "How can you know —"

"I got no further. The look he fixed upon me while I spoke seemed to penetrate my very brain and left me no power to withhold what even then still I would have given all I possessed to have withheld from him. I bowed my head acquiescently.

"I do not deny it, then," I said. "I took Evan Llewellyn's life. Still, by all I hold sacred I swear to you that in doing so I was innocent of crime."

"Then why," he asked, "did you conceal the deed from those who had a right to know of it? There is justice on earth as there is justice in heaven. He who flies from his earthly judges proves surely that he has reason to fear them."

"And what if I had such reason?" I said. "I could produce no proof of my innocence; nay, I knew that the very lips which alone could prove me free of guilt would testify against me if I dared to reveal the truth. I had no other alternative but silence. If you knew my story —"

"It is to learn it that I have brought you here," he broke in gently. "Speak freely, and conceal nothing from me. Truth has

its own voice, and I have learned to detect it under many strange disguises."

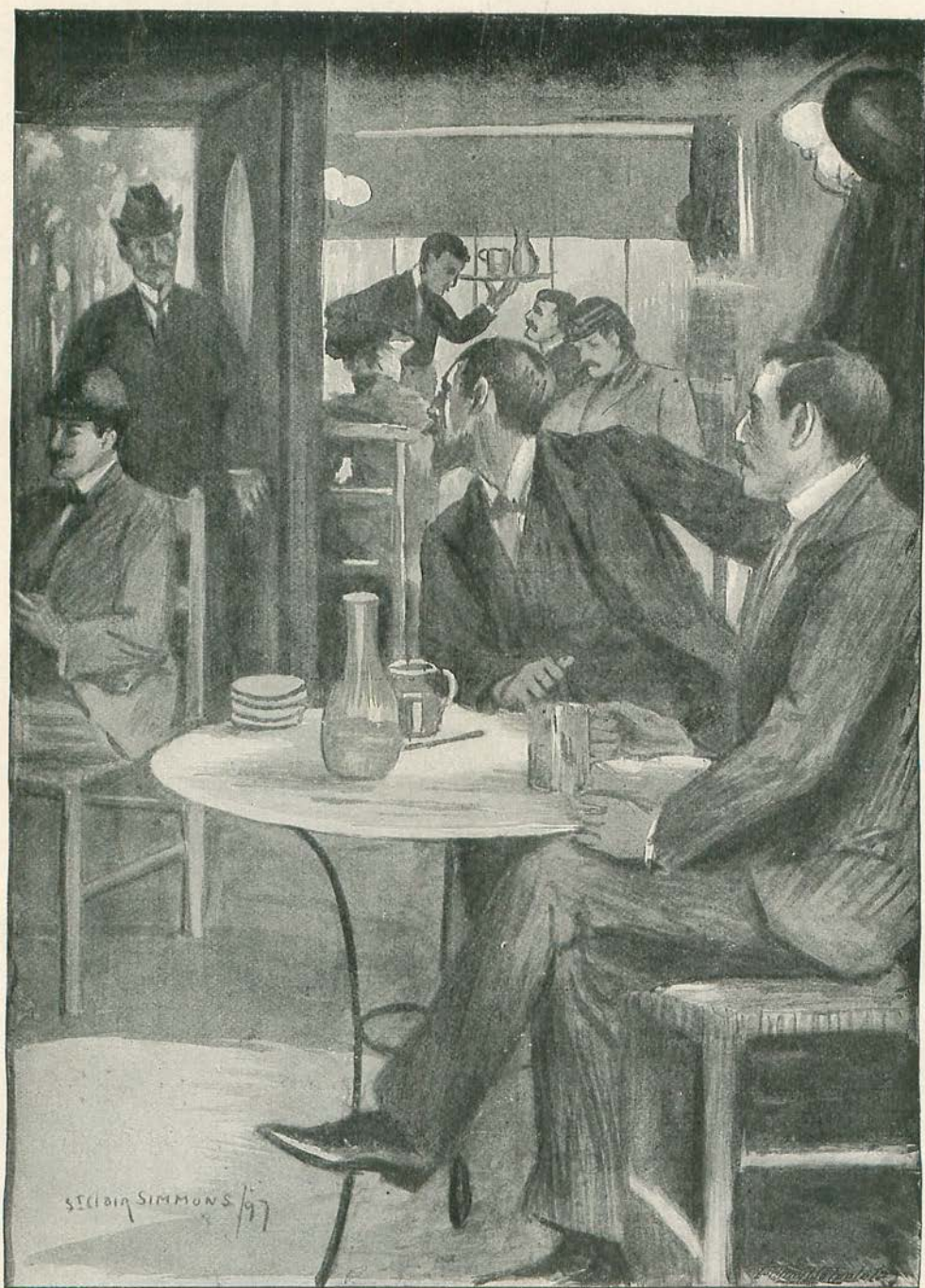
"Truly it is a wondrous gift, the gift to inspire confidence with a word, a look. There is no man on earth to whom I would have dared confide what I now confided to Lauder Caine the Confessor.

"He had drawn a chair to the fireside as he spoke, and invited me with a kindly gesture to take the seat opposite him. I did so, and collecting my scattered thoughts with a strong effort, began my tale.

"You call him Evan Llewellyn," I said. "I had never known him by that name, though a chance once revealed to me that it was his real one. To me, and to those in whose society I met him during my roamings on the Continent, he was known as Edwin Warrington. Why he chose to discard his true patronymic and sail under false colours I never stopped to inquire. He was a wild, adventurous young fellow, dashing, reckless, and unscrupulous, yet a veritable boon companion in the widest sense of the term. As such I had learned to appreciate him, though with a vague sense of distrust which prevented anything in the nature of an intimacy from springing up between us.

"I had lost sight of him for months, when I suddenly ran against him in the streets of Paris towards the end of my last stay there. We then merely exchanged a hurried greeting, as he had an appointment to keep and was late. He was leaving Paris that evening, he told me, and regretted that he would be unable to see me again.

"I did meet him in Paris again, however, and under circumstances of a very strange nature. Having nearly reached the end of my means I now used to take my dinner in a quaint and unfashionable eating-house in the Latin quarter, where my only acquaintance was an eccentric old Austrian of the name of Falkenberg, whose favour I had gained by delivering him one night from the somewhat violent attentions of a couple of drunken students. Under ordinary conditions the society of such a man would have possessed little attraction for me. But I had a selfish reason for cultivating it. In a fit of confidence, inspired by his evident attachment to me, I had made my desperate circumstances known to him, and the result had been an offer on his part, which was as unexpected as it seemed generous—at least, so I then thought. He proposed that I should accept his hospitality until I found means of mending my tattered fortunes. He lived, he said, in a small but comfortable house in



"Following his gaze, I saw that a new-comer had entered."

a certain suburb of Paris, had neither relatives nor friends, and would be grateful for the society of a companion in his loneliness. This proposal, gratifying as it was in my poor circumstances, took me somewhat aback, and I asked for time to consider it.

“Not many days afterwards I was sitting with my would-be patron in the eating-house where we now used regularly to meet and dine together. As usual the subject of our conversation was the plan he had suggested, as he assured me, for our mutual benefit, and he was just pressing me warmly, as he often did, to waive what he thought my delicate scruples, and close at once with the offer he had made me, when he suddenly broke off in the middle of his speech with a suppressed exclamation of dismay, and stared with a strange expression of terror in the direction of the glass door leading from the restaurant into the street. Following his gaze, I saw that a new-comer had entered, in whom, to my surprise, I recognised the man I knew as Edwin Warrington. Before I had time to connect the two occurrences my companion rose quickly to his feet, and without a word of excuse or apology left the table and hurried out of the place.

“As he passed by Warrington I saw him avert his face with the obvious desire of escaping his notice. But Warrington must have recognised him, for he gave a visible start, and I noticed a look of pleased triumph settle in his face. The next instant he too turned swiftly on his heel, and hurriedly followed the Austrian out of the place.

“What all this meant I had no idea. But it struck me as curious that Warrington, whom I had only met in the streets of Paris a couple of days before, should have then led me to believe that he was quitting Paris immediately. That he must have had some object in thus misleading me as to his movements was obvious.

“Towards six o'clock that same afternoon, upon returning home to my lodging after a stroll on the boulevards, I found a note awaiting me. It merely contained the following words:—

““I regret that our plan must be abandoned. Circumstances oblige me to leave Paris without delay.

FALKENBERG.”

“This sudden change, following upon the curious incident I had witnessed a few hours previously, exercised my mind considerably. It was unpleasantly mysterious, and moreover it upset all my calculations, for in my

secret heart I had already determined, as soon as my means were quite at an end, to avail myself of my Austrian friend's proposal, and accept his hospitality.

“After pondering over the matter for some while, I decided to seek out my friend once more, before I lost sight of him altogether, really with the view of ascertaining if my companionship, which he had appeared so eager to secure, might not perhaps still be welcome to him even under the circumstances he mentioned. As for myself, I was now in such straits that I would have been prepared to do anything, or go anywhere, for the sake of a living.

“With this object I took an omnibus to the suburb where Falkenberg lived, and having there inquired my way to the address he had given me, proceeded thither on foot. It was a lonely, though apparently respectable, neighbourhood, and the house, when I found it, proved to be a fair-sized residence, built in country style, and surrounded by quite a considerable bit of garden.

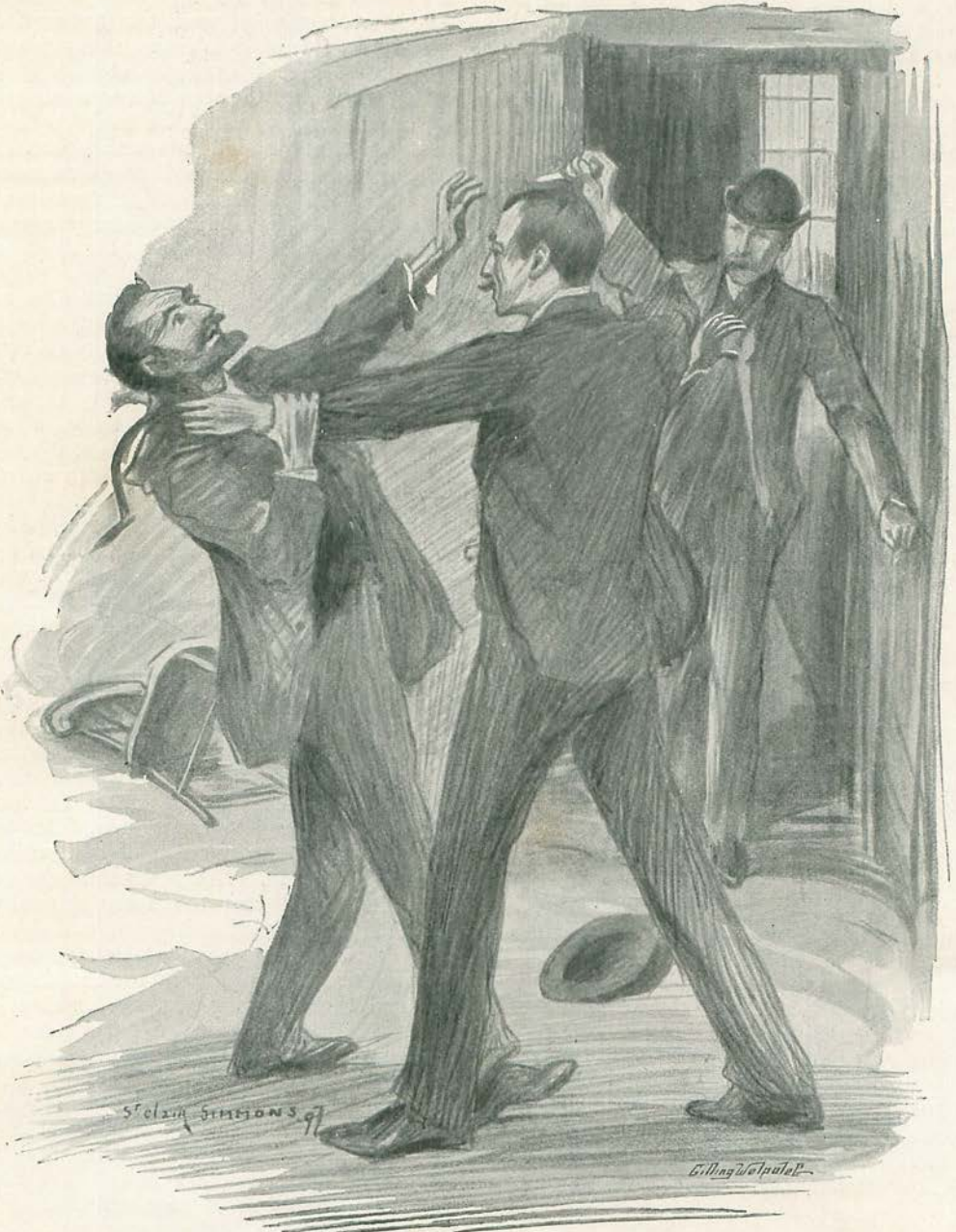
“Night had long set in when I reached it, and passing through the wicket gate and up the garden path to the entrance door, I was about to pull the bell when I was startled by a loud crash as of falling glass, followed by a succession of cries for help. To endeavour to gain entrance by the front door would, under the circumstances, I thought, have been useless. I therefore ran round the house in the direction whence the shouts, as it seemed to me, proceeded, with the view of effecting an entrance by one of the low windows giving on to the garden. But to my surprise I found no sign of light whatever to guide me. Every window seemed closely shuttered and the house generally barred and barricaded as if to resist a siege. Indeed, but for the cries which still came from within, accompanied by the scuffling of feet and the slamming of doors, as though someone were being pursued from room to room, I should have concluded that the place was entirely deserted.

“At last the faint glimmer of a light caught my eye as I passed a window at the back of the house, and quickly raising myself on to the outer ledge I found that the shutters here had been removed, and the window broken in, by someone who had evidently gained forcible entrance to the house.

“Without a moment's hesitation therefore I availed myself of the breach, swung myself into the room, which appeared to be full of old lumber, and seeing that the light

issued from a half-open door leading apparently either to a passage or an inner apartment, I rushed through it at top speed.

great disorder, and at last burst in upon a scene the sight of which for a moment completely staggered me.



"Two men were engaged in a life and death struggle.

Guided by the cries, which now appeared to have become stationary and were growing ominously feebler, I sped through several rooms, in all of which there were signs of

"Two men were engaged in a life and death struggle, the issue of which scarcely admitted of a doubt. One of these men was my Austrian friend Falkenberg; in the second I

recognised no other than Edwin Warrington. A glance sufficed to show me that the latter was the assailing party, for in his uplifted right hand gleamed a dagger, while, with his left firmly gripped round the old man's throat, he was endeavouring to free his right arm from the convulsive grasp of his intended victim.

"Had I tarried a moment longer than I did he would have succeeded, for Falkenberg was already totally exhausted, and even as I gazed, his assailant, with a quick wrench, had extricated himself from the grip of the wretched man and raised his arm to strike the fatal blow. But before he could execute his purpose I sprang forward with a bound, caught his arm as it descended with my left hand, and with my right wrenched the dagger from his grasp.

"The Austrian, thus opportunely delivered from his peril, now fell back, and sinking into a chair with a groan of relief, lapsed into a state of complete apathy.

"But the wrath of the man whose design I had thus foiled now turned against me. Uttering a furious oath, he sprang upon me with a bound like a tiger, and before I could recover from the shock I felt his two hands tightly pressed against my throat with the evident intention of strangling me. My position was terrible. Both my arms were free, but though I used my utmost force to shake my assailant off, striking blow after blow at his face and head, his hold upon my throat never relaxed one whit, and his fingers buried themselves deeper and deeper into my flesh until I felt my eyes starting from my head and struggled in vain for breath.

"An agonising terror overcame me. I saw death, certain death before me, unless, to save myself, I made use of the weapon I had wrested from him, and which I still held in my hand. There was no time to reflect or consider. My senses were failing me, my head swam, a roaring as of many waters sounded in my ears; in short, I was undergoing all the horrible sensations of suffocation.

"In this desperate plight I swung back my right arm, and using all the power still left me, I plunged the dagger deep into my antagonist's breast.

"Slowly—ah, how slowly!—I felt the grip of the fingers round my throat relax, heard a long horrid gurgle—and then I knew no more until I found myself lying on the bare floor with the old Austrian kneeling at my side chafing my temples, and using such

means as he could to restore me to consciousness.

"It was some time before I could utter a word. When at last I found my speech again, I inquired after Warrington.

"You have killed him," Falkenberg answered simply with a grim smile. "Look where he lies! He will do no more harm."

"The shock did more towards restoring me to animation than all my companion's efforts, and I raised myself quickly to ascertain if he had spoken the truth.

"Alas! one glimpse at the body that lay within a few inches of me was enough to convince me that Edwin Warrington was dead. Although I had taken his life in self-defence, indeed in the very extremity of my own peril, still I could not repress a shudder as I now looked upon the youthful form struck down in the spring of life by my own hand.

"But the necessity of thinking about my own safety soon drove all other thoughts out of my mind, and turning to Falkenberg I requested him to accompany me at once to the nearest police bureau in order that the facts concerning this tragic occurrence should be communicated to the proper authorities without delay, otherwise I might find myself under suspicion of having committed deliberate murder.

"The effect of this request upon the Austrian was extraordinary. He started back as if I had dealt him a blow.

"Are you mad?" he exclaimed. "Would you place the hangman's rope round your neck with your own hands?"

"I have nothing to fear," I replied. "I killed this unfortunate man in just and lawful self-defence. There will be no difficulty in proving the fact. Come, there is no time to lose."

"Stay!" he cried, seizing my arm with a violence that caused me actual pain. "Reflect before you commit a folly you are sure to regret. This man died by your hand. What proof have you that it was you and not he who acted in just and lawful self-defence?"

"What proof?" I stammered, aghast at such a question coming from him. "Why, the evidence of your own eyes. You saw him attack and endeavour to murder me. Indeed, but for my prompt intervention you would now be lying where he lies, stiff and stark. I saved your life in saving mine. You are a witness of my innocence."

"The expression in his face as I spoke these words made me recoil shuddering.

““And what if I remain silent?” he said slowly and deliberately. “What if I refuse to give the testimony which alone can save you from a felon’s death? Nay, listen,” he continued, tightening his grip on my arm as I started up amazed and indignant. “I swear to you that if a word escapes your lips of what has occurred here to-night, I will bear witness, not for you, but against you. This man”—pointing to the corpse—“and I must disappear together. It is my only safety, and my safety, believe me, is yours.”

““Imagine my situation. In vain I expostulated, implored and threatened. He adhered firmly to his cruel and ungrateful resolution, the reason for which I was totally at a loss to explain. All he would vouchsafe to tell me was that his life depended upon the secret of that night’s occurrence never penetrating beyond those four walls, and he reiterated again and again his strange assertion that he and the dead man must disappear together.

““Under such circumstances what was left me to do? No one, I knew, would believe my story without this man’s corroboration, and if he not only refused to corroborate it, but actually gave contradictory testimony, as he threatened, my doom was certain.

““At last, having exhausted all my powers of argument and persuasion, I did what sheer necessity compelled me to do, and assisted him to carry the body of Edwin Warrington to the cellar of the house, where we dug a grave beneath the flagstones, and buried the remains.

““The gruesome task lasted several hours, and it was near midnight when I at last took leave of my companion and returned on foot to Paris. Seeing that I intended to comply with his wishes, Falkenberg once more adopted his old friendly tone towards me. He assured me of his sense of gratitude for the service I had rendered him, and would have even pressed a considerable sum of money upon my acceptance to enable me to leave Paris and make a fresh start in life. But this I refused. I would have none of his wealth, nor anything to remind me of an acquaintance which had ended in so terrible a manner.

““I little dreamed at that moment what a fatal memento of that night I already carried on my person; nor was it until I had nearly reached my lodging in Paris that I became aware of it. This memento was the cap which Warrington had worn that night. It had fallen from his head during his struggle

with me, and picking it up at Falkenberg’s desire when we lifted the body, I had stuffed it hastily into one of the pockets of my great-coat, intending of course to bury it with the remains of its owner. But by the time the grave was dug I no longer remembered it, and so it had been forgotten.

““At first, on discovering that it was still in my possession, I thought I would burn it. But I gave up the idea for various reasons, chief among which was the fact that the cap was ornamented with a peculiar aigrette, composed principally of metal, which I feared might resist destruction by fire, and so afford a clue to the prying minds of the French police officials. Then I resolved to wait and get rid of it on my way from Paris to Calais, by throwing it out of the window of the train when we passed some solitary spot. But here again, when the time came, my fears conjured up in my mind all sorts of dangerous possibilities, and at last I decided that, as long as the cap remained in my own hands, it would be harmless, and so I kept it.

““In London, as you know, I fell upon evil times. My terrible adventure in Paris, which had never troubled my conscience, soon ceased to cause me serious apprehensions, and I became gradually so used to the possession of this strange cap that, when my wardrobe had dwindled down to the narrowest proportions compatible with decency, I had no scruples in actually wearing it—with what result you already know.

““‘This, then, is the true story of Evan Llewellyn’s death,’ I concluded. ‘Credit it or not, as you will. I am in your hands. Had I only guessed that night when my subsequent strange adventures began, that this accursed cap was the source of the misunderstanding which led to them I would have cut off my right hand rather than do what I did.’

““The Confessor rose when I had finished and paced the room for a while in silence. Presently he turned to me and said—

““‘I have no reason to doubt your story. It explains, indeed, more than I had expected.’

““‘Yet,’ I rejoined, ‘it seems you had already divined that this man Warrington, or Llewellyn, as he called himself, was the Henry Milton whom I personated.’

““‘How I came to know of the existence of Evan Llewellyn,’ he said, ‘is of small account. What I had learned of him, however, was enough to convince me, firstly, that he was a worthless and desperate character, and secondly, that he depended for his livelihood upon a secret association whose objects were

criminal. That he and no other was the Henry Milton to whom the execution of the scheme had been entrusted—which your folly happily thwarted—your own story told me. The rest followed as a natural consequence.

“‘Yet how could you know that he was dead?’

“‘His cap in your possession afforded alone a strong presumption of his death. His non-appearance during the four months you personated him proved it conclusively. That he had met his death at your hands —’

“‘Ah, surely,’ I broke in, ‘I never told you that.’

“‘He raised his great penetrating eyes slowly to my face and let them rest there for a moment.

“‘If words were our only means of speech, Walter Davidson,’ he said, ‘and hearing our only channel of understanding, I could have been of as little use to you in your trouble as you were of use to yourself. You would have kept from me the true source of all your trouble, perhaps successfully, had I not known what I knew. But your attempted concealment of it, whether voluntary or involuntary, afforded me the key to the mystery you yourself had failed to solve. That Evan Llewellyn’s mission to Paris had been one of murder I had strong reason to suspect —’

“‘His mission?’ I ejaculated. ‘Then you believe he was sent —’

“‘To remove the Austrian Falkenberg, a renegade member of the very league to whose vengeance you yourself were in peril of falling a victim, assuredly. Hence that wretched man’s insistence that the fact of his would-be murderer’s death should never be known. Had it been divulged a fresh executioner would have been on Falkenberg’s track within a few hours, for the league allows no victim to escape it. Blind as you have been, your folly has unwittingly been the means of frustrating two crimes as daring as human boldness can well conceive. From the vengeance of those whom you have foiled I have been able to save you. As for the rest, I leave you to the judgment of your own conscience.’

“‘I have no more to add. That night was the turning point in my life. Of the league I had so strangely become acquainted with I heard no more. True, for months thereafter my footsteps were dogged wherever I went, and at this very day still I know that I am carefully watched and that my sayings and doings are made known by secret spies to

those with whose criminal plans I once foolishly interfered. But no harm has ever befallen me.

“‘The Confessor I never saw again after that eventful night, and the only direct communication that has ever reached me from him since came a day later in the shape of a note containing these few words—

“‘You are now safe, Walter Davidson. May the lesson your folly has taught you bear good fruit. Remember there is only one road to merit—work—and only one thing truly worth striving for—self-respect. Follow the one and seek the other and you shall never lack a friend in Lauder Caine.’

“‘And he has been true to his word. In obedience to his express injunction I never set foot again within the Foreign Office. But I have reason to know that the morning following the strange scene in Verrinder Street the Confessor was closeted for some considerable while with her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Epsom, and that immediately after that interview the Hon. John Courtney was relieved of his duties as private secretary to his lordship. Whether my honourable friend had been in any way implicated in what had occurred I am unable to say. From the fact, however, that he has since entered Parliament, where his duty merely consists in recording his vote for his party whenever the occasion offers, I gather that his dismissal can have been caused by no graver fault than that of incompetence and gullibility.

“‘To me work and employment now came from quarters where I had least expected them, and I may say to-day without presumption that by dint of untiring push and industry I have risen to a position in the calling I adopted such as not many would in so short a space of time have attained, beginning as I did.

“‘To whom I owed my start in this profession, and whose was the unseen hand which, during the first months of my new struggles, sustained and upheld me on many an occasion of doubt and hesitation, need I say? There are many I know who have cause to bless Lauder Caine the Confessor, but assuredly none more than I.”

* * * * *

Here the memoir of Walter Davidson ends. Little remains for me to add to it. The adventure with the cap, and its strange sequel at the house in Verrinder Street, will probably meet with incredulity on the part of some readers. Be it so. As for myself, I have long ceased to doubt or marvel at

anything, however strange and incredible it may appear, in which Lauder Caine is concerned.

There is only one thing I regret. My curiosity to fathom the knowledge the Confessor undoubtedly possesses of the aims and doings of the formidable league in whose meshes my dead friend Davidson became involved has hitherto not been gratified. Once only have I ventured to interrogate Lauder Caine himself on the subject. I was in a measure compelled to do so, since circumstances obviously rendered it necessary for me to consult his wishes before proceeding to publish the foregoing facts to the world. But beyond remarking upon what he termed the curious coincidence which had enabled him to enlighten old Llewellyn as to the fate of his precious son, he vouchsafed me no information whatever, and indeed studiously avoided all reference to the league whose history, more particularly in connection with himself, I was so anxious to learn.

On one point however I did obtain a certain interesting light from him. The cipher despatch, to gain possession of which such elaborate preparation had been made, proved to be a document of vast political importance, and the consequences that might have resulted, had the scheme for its abstraction succeeded, would have been incalculable, involving a possible breach in the friendly relations of two of the great European Powers. For what purposes however, and at whose instance the copy was to have been made, remains a mystery.

"On such apparently trifling circumstances," Lauder Caine said, when he gave me this startling piece of intelligence, "does the fate of nations sometimes hang."

And indeed what could illustrate this truth more forcibly than the story here told? That the extremes of life often meet is a fact perhaps too frequently dwelt upon to be worth repeating. Yet, truism or not, who has ever chanced upon one of those tiny subtle threads which run through the knotted chain of human events, connecting the pettiest with the most momentous, without experiencing anew that sense of marvel with which all revelations of nature fill us?

One more remark of a personal character, and I have done. When I sought Lauder Caine's consent to the publication of Walter Davidson's memoir, I half expected to meet with a stern veto. This was not so, however. In fact the Confessor smiled at the notion that, so far as he himself was concerned, there could be any objection to the intended publication. At the same time he reminded me that the step I contemplated taking might possibly be fraught with unpleasant consequences to myself.

Possibly this may be so. I am indeed not insensible to the fact that by making Davidson's adventures known I am perhaps running a certain personal danger. But after all, better men than I have staked greater interests on a smaller cause, and so I venture it. If the reader is pleased I will cheerfully bear whatever risk I may have incurred in pleasing him.

