

## CHAPTER II

Andrew reached King's Cross on the following Wednesday morning.

It was the first time he had set foot in England, and he naturally thought of Bannockburn.

He left his box in the cloak-room, and, finding his way into Bloomsbury, took a bed-room at the top of a house in Bernard Street.

Then he returned for his box, carried it on his back to his lodgings, and went out to buy a straw hat. It had not struck him to be lonely.

He bought two pork pies in an eating-house in Gray's Inn Road, and set out for Harley Street, looking at London on the way.

Mr. Gladstone was at home, but all his private secretaryships were already filled.

Andrew was not greatly disappointed, though he was too polite to say so. In politics he was a granite-headed Radical; and on several questions, such as the Church and Free Education, the two men were hopelessly at variance.

Mr. Chamberlain was the man with whom, on the whole, he believed it would be best to work. But Mr. Chamberlain could not even see him.

Looking back to this time, it is impossible not to speculate upon how things might have turned out had the Radical party taken Andrew to them in his day of devotion to their cause.

This is the saddest spectacle in life, a brave young man's first meeting with the world. How rapidly the milk turns to gall! For the cruellest of his acts the vivisectionist has not even the excuse that science benefits.

Here was a young Scotchman, able, pure, of noble ambition, and a first medallist in metaphysics. Genius was written on his brow. He may have written it himself, but it was there.

He offered to take a pound a week less than any other secretary in London. Not a Cabinet Minister would have him. Lord Randolph Churchill would not speak to him. He had fifty-eight testimonials with him. They would neither read nor listen to them.

He could not fasten a quarrel on London, for it never recognised his existence. What a commentary on our vaunted political life!

Andrew tried the Press.

He sent one of the finest things that was ever written on the Ontology of Being to paper after paper, and it was never used. He threatened the "Times" with legal proceedings if it did not return the manuscript.

The "Standard" sent him somebody else's manuscript, and seemed to think it would do as well.

In a fortnight his enthusiasm had been bled to death.

His testimonials were his comfort and his curse. He would have committed suicide without them, but they kept him out of situations.

He had the fifty-eight by heart, and went over them to himself all day. He fell asleep with them, and they were there when he woke.

The moment he found himself in a great man's presence he began:

"From the Rev. Peter Mackay, D. D., author of 'The Disruption Divines,' Minister of Free St. King's, Dundee.--I have much pleasure in stating that I have known Mr. Andrew Gordon Cummings Riach for many years, and have been led to form a high opinion of his ability. In the summer of 18-- Mr. Riach had entire charge of a class in my Sabbath school, when I had ample opportunity of testing his efficiency, unwearied patience, exceptional power of illustration and high Christian character," and so on.

Or he might begin at the beginning:

"Testimonials in favour of Andrew G. C. Riach, M.A. (Edin.), applicant for the post of Private Secretary to any one of her Majesty's Cabinet Ministers, 6 Candlish Street, Wheens, N. B.--I, Andrew G. C. Riach, beg to offer myself as a candidate for the post of private secretary, and submit the following testimonials in my favour for your consideration. I am twenty-five years of age, a Master of Arts of the University of Edinburgh, and a member of the Free Church of Scotland. At the University I succeeded in carrying a bursary of 14 l. 10 s. per annum, tenable for four years. I was first medallist in the class of Logic and Metaphysics, thirteenth prizeman in Mathematics, and had a certificate of merit in the class of Natural Philosophy, as will be seen from my testimonials."

However, he seldom got as far as this.

It was when alone that these testimonials were his truest solace. Had you met him in the Strand conning them over, you might have taken him for an

actor. He had a yearning to stop strangers in the streets and try a testimonial's effect on them.

Every young man is not equally unfortunate.

Riach's appearance was against him.

There was a suggestion of latent strength about him that made strangers uncomfortable. Even the friends who thought they understood him liked him to go away.

Lord Rosebery made several jokes to him, and Andrew only looked at him in response. The general feeling was that he was sneering at you somewhere in his inside.

Let us do no one an injustice.

As it turned out, the Cabinet and Press were but being used in this case as the means to an end.

A grand work lay ready for Andrew's hand when he was fit to perform it, but he had to learn Naked Truth first. It was ordained that they should teach it him. Providence sometimes makes use of strange instruments.

Riach had two pounds with him when he came to London, and in a month they had almost gone.

Now and again he made an odd five shillings.

Do you know how men in his position live in London?

He could not afford the profession of not having any.

At one time he was a phrasemonger for politicians, especially for the Irish members, who were the only ones that paid.

Some of his phrases have become Parliamentary. Thus "Buckshot" was his. "Mend them--End them," "Grand Old Man," and "Legislation by Picnic" may all be traced to the struggling young man from Wheens.[1]

He supplied the material for obituary notices.

When the newspaper placards announced the serious illness of a distinguished man, he made up characteristic anecdotes about his childhood, his reputation at school, his first love, and sent them as the reminiscences of a friend to the great London dailies. These were the only things of his they used. As often as not the invalid got better, and then Andrew went without a dinner.

Once he offered his services to a Conservative statesman; at another time he shot himself in the coat in Northumberland Street, Strand, to oblige an evening paper (five shillings).

He fainted in the pit of a theatre to the bribe of an emotional tragedian (a guinea).

He assaulted a young lady and her aunt with a view to robbery, in a quiet thoroughfare, by arrangement with a young gentleman, who rescued them and made him run (ten shillings).

It got into the papers that he had fled from the wax policeman at Tussaud's (half-a-crown).

More than once he sold his body in advance to the doctors, and was never able to buy it out.[2]

It would be a labour, thankless as impossible, to recover now all the devices by which Andrew disgraced his manhood during these weeks rather than die. As well count the "drinks" an actor has in a day.

It is not our part to climb down into the depths after him. He re-appeared eventually, or this record would never have been written.

During this period of gloom, Clarrie wrote him frequently long and tender epistles.

More strictly, the minister wrote them, for he had the gift of beautiful sentiment in letters, which had been denied to her.

She copied them, however, and signed them, and they were a great consolation.

The love of a good girl is a priceless possession, or rather, in this case, of a good minister.

So long as you do not know which, it does not make much difference.

At times Andrew's reason may have been unhinged, less on account of his reverses than because no one spoke to him.

There were days and nights when he rushed all over London.

In the principal streets the stolid-faced Scotchman in a straw hat became a familiar figure.

Strange fancies held him. He stood for an hour at a time looking at his face in a shop-window.

The boot-blacks pointed at him and he disappeared down passages.

He shook his fist at the 'bus-conductors, who would not leave him alone.

In the yellow night policemen drew back scared, as he hurried past them on his way to nowhere.

In the day-time Oxford Street was his favourite thoroughfare. He was very irritable at this time, and could not leave his fellow wayfarers alone.

More than once he poked his walking-stick through the eyeglass of a brave younggentleman.

He would turn swiftly round to catch people looking at him.

When a small boy came in his way, he took him by the neck and planted him on the curb-stone.

If a man approached simpering, Andrew stopped and gazed at him. The smile went from the stranger's face; he blushed or looked fierce. When he turned round, Andrew still had his eye on him. Sometimes he came bouncing back.

"What are you so confoundedly happy about?" Andrew asked.

When he found a crowd gazing in at a "while you wait" shop-window, or entranced over the paving of a street--

"Splendid, isn't it?" he said to the person nearest him.

He dropped a penny, which he could ill spare, into the hat of an exquisite who annoyed him by his way of lifting it to a lady.

When he saw a man crossing the street too daintily, he ran after him and hit him over the legs.

Even on his worst days his reasoning powers never left him. Once a mother let her child slip from her arms to the pavement.

She gave a shriek.

"My good woman," said Andrew, testily, "what difference can one infant in the world more or less make?"

We come now to an eccentricity, engendered of loneliness, that altered the whole course of his life. Want had battered down his door. Truth had been evolved from despair. He was at last to have a flash into salvation.

To give an object to his walks abroad he would fasten upon a wayfarer and follow him till he ran him to his destination. Chance led to his selecting one quarry rather than another. He would dog a man's footsteps, struck by the glossiness of his boots, or to discover what he was in such a hurry about, or merely because he had a good back to follow. Probably he seldom knew what attracted him, and sometimes when he realised the pursuit he gave it up.

On these occasions there was one person only who really interested him. This was a man, somewhat over middle age, of singularly noble and distinguished bearing. His brow was furrowed with lines, but they spoke of cares of the past. Benevolence had settled on his face. It was as if, after a weary struggle, the sun had broken through the heavy clouds. He was attired in the ordinary dress of an English gentleman; but once, when he raised his head to see if it rained, Andrew noticed that he only wore a woollen shirt, without a necktie. As a rule, his well-trimmed, venerable beard hid this from view.

He seemed a man of unostentatious means. Andrew lost him in Drury Lane and found him again in Piccadilly. He was generally alone, never twice with the same person. His business was scattered, or it was his pleasure that kept him busy. He struck the observer as always being on the outlook for someone who did not come.

Why attempt to account for the nameless fascination he exercised over the young Scotchman? We speak lightly of mesmeric influence, but, after all, there is only one mesmerist for youth--a good woman or a good man. Depend upon it, that is why so many "mesmerists" have mistaken their vocation. Andrew took to prowling about the streets looking for this man, like a dog that has lost its master.

The day came when they met.

Andrew was returning from the Crystal Palace, which he had been viewing from the outside. He had walked both ways. Just as he rounded the upper end of Chancery Lane, a man walking rapidly struck against him, whirled him aside, and hurried on.

The day was done, but as yet the lamps only dimmed the streets.

Andrew had been dreaming, and the jerk woke him to the roar of London.

It was as if he had taken his fingers from his ears.

He staggered, dazed, against a 'bus-horse, but the next moment he was in pursuit of the stranger. It was but a continuation of his dream. He felt that something was about to happen. He had never seen this man disturbed before.

Chancery Lane swarmed with lawyers, but if they had not made way Andrew would have walked over them.

He clove his way between those walking abreast, and struck down an arm extended to point out the Law Courts. When he neared the stranger, he slightly slackened his pace, but it was a stampede even then.

Suddenly the pursued came to a dead stop and gazed for twenty minutes in at a pastry-cook's window. Andrew waited for him. Then they started off again, much more leisurely.

They turned Chancery Lane almost together. All this time Andrew had failed to catch sight of the other's face.

He stopped twice in the Strand for a few minutes.

At Charing Cross he seemed for a moment at a loss. Then he sprang across the street, and went back the way he came.

It was now for the first time that a strange notion illumined Andrew's brain. It bewildered him, and left him in darkness the next moment. But his blood was running hot now, and his eyes were glassy.

They turned down Arundel Street.

It was getting dark. There were not a dozen people in the narrow thoroughfare.

His former thought leapt back into Andrew's mind--not a fancy now, but a fact. The stranger was following someone too.

For what purpose? His own?

Andrew did not put the question to himself.

There were not twenty yards between the three of them.

What Riach saw in front was a short stout man proceeding cheerfully down the street. He delayed in a doorway to light a cigar, and the stranger stopped as if turned to stone.

Andrew stopped too.

They were like the wheels of a watch. The first wheel moved on, and set the others going again.

For a hundred yards or more they walked in procession in a westerly direction without meeting a human being. At last the first of the trio half turned on his heel and leant over the Embankment.

Riach drew back into the shade, just before the stranger took a lightning glance behind him.

The young man saw his face now. It was never fuller of noble purpose; yet why did Andrew cry out?

The next moment the stranger had darted forward, slipped his arms round the little man's legs, and toppled him into the river.

There was a splash but no shriek.

Andrew bounded forward, but the stranger held him by one hand. His clear blue eyes looked down a little wistfully upon the young Scotchman, who never felt the fascination of a master-mind more than at that moment. As if feeling his power, the elder man relaxed his hold and pointed to the spot where his victim had disappeared.

"He was a good man," he said, more to himself than to Andrew, "and the world has lost a great philanthropist; but he is better as he is."

Then he lifted a paving-stone, and peered long and earnestly into the waters.

The short stout man, however, did not rise again.

[1] Some time afterwards Lord Rosebery convulsed an audience by a story about a friend of his who complained that you get "no forrarder" on claret. Andrew was that friend.

[2] He had fine ideas, but no money to work them out. One was to start a serious "Spectator," on the lines of the present one, but not so flippant and frivolous.