

CHAPTER III

Lost in reverie, the stranger stood motionless on the Embankment. The racket of the city was behind him. At his feet lay a drowned world, its lights choking in the Thames. It was London, as it will be on the last day.

With an effort he roused himself and took Andrew's arm.

"The body will soon be recovered," he said, in a voice of great dejection, "and people will talk. Let us go."

They retraced their steps up Arundel Street.

"Now," said Andrew's companion, "tell me who you are."

Andrew would have preferred to hear who the stranger was. In the circumstances he felt that he had almost a right to know. But this was not a man to brook interference.

"If you will answer me one question," the young Scotchman said humbly, "I shall tell you everything."

His reveries had made Andrew quick-witted, and he had the judicial mind which prevents one's judging another rashly. Besides, his hankering after this man had already suggested an exculpation for him.

"You are a Radical?" he asked eagerly.

The stranger's brows contracted. "Young man," he said, "though all the Radicals, and Liberals, and Conservatives who ever addressed the House of Commons were in ----, I would not stoop to pick them up, though I could gather them by the gross."

He said this without an Irish accent, and Andrew felt that he had better begin his story at once.

He told everything.

As his tale neared its conclusion his companion scanned him narrowly.

If the stranger's magnanimous countenance did not beam down in sympathy upon the speaker, it was because surprise and gratification filled it.

Only once an ugly look came into his eyes. That was when Andrew had reached the middle of his second testimonial.

The young man saw the look, and at the same time felt the hold on his arm become a grip.

His heart came into his mouth. He gulped it down, and, with what was perhaps a judicious sacrifice, jumped the remainder of his testimonials.

When the stranger heard how he had been tracked through the streets, he put his head to the side to think.

It was a remarkable compliment to his abstraction that Andrew paused involuntarily in his story and waited.

He felt that his future was in the balance. Those sons of peers may faintly realise his position whose parents have hesitated whether to make statesmen or cattle-dealers of them.

"I don't mind telling you," the stranger said at last, "that your case has been under consideration. When we left the Embankment my intention was to dispose of you in a doorway. But your story moves me strangely. Could I be certain that you felt the sacredness of human life--as I fear no boy can feel it--I should be tempted to ask you instead to become one of us."

There was something in this remark about the sacredness of human life that was not what Andrew expected, and his answer died unspoken.

"Youth," continued the stranger, "is enthusiasm, but not enthusiasm in a straight line. We are impotent in directing it, like a boy with a toy engine. How carefully the child sets it off, how soon it goes off the rails! So youth is wrecked. The slightest obstacle sends it off at a tangent. The vital force expended in a wrong direction does evil instead of good. You know the story of Atalanta. It has always been misread. She was the type not of woman but of youth, and Hippomenes personated age. He was the slower runner, but he won the race; and yet how beautiful, even where it run to riot, must enthusiasm be in such a cause as ours!"

"If Atalanta had been Scotch," said Andrew "she would not have lost that race for a pound of apples."

The stranger regarded him longingly, like a father only prevented by state reasons from embracing his son.

He murmured something that Andrew hardly caught.

It sounded like:

"Atalanta would have been better dead."

"Your nationality is in your favour," he said, "and you have served your apprenticeship to our calling. You have been tending towards us ever since you came to London. You are an apple ripe for plucking, and if you are not plucked now you will fall. I would fain take you by the hand, and yet--"

"And yet?"

"And yet I hesitate. You seem a youth of the fairest promise; but how often have I let these impulses deceive me! You talk of logic, but is it more than talk? Man, they say, is a reasonable being. They are wrong. He is only a being capable of reason."

"Try me," said Andrew.

The stranger resumed in a lower key:

"You do not understand what you ask as yet," he said; "still less what we would ask in return of you."

"I have seen something to-day," said Andrew.

"But you are mistaken in its application. You think I followed the man lately deceased as pertinaciously as you followed me. You are wrong. When you met me in Chancery Lane I was in pursuit of a gentleman to whose case I have devoted myself for several days. It has interested me much. There is no reason why I should conceal his name. It is one honoured in this country, Sir Wilfrid Lawson. He looked in on his man of business, which delayed me at the shop-window of which you have spoken. I waited for him, and I thought I had him this time. But you see I lost him in the Strand, after all."

"But the other, then," Andrew asked, "who was he?"

"Oh, I picked him up at Charing Cross. He was better dead."

"I think," said Andrew, hopefully, "that my estimate of the sacredness of human life is sufficiently high for your purpose. If that is the only point--"

"Ah, they all say that until they join. I remember an excellent young man who came among us for a time. He seemed discreet beyond his years, and we expected great things of him. But it was the old story. For young men the cause is as demoralizing as boarding schools are for girls."

"What did he do?"

"It went to his head. He took a bedroom in Pall Mall and sat at the window with an electric rifle picking them off on the door-steps of the clubs. It was

a noble idea, but of course it imperilled the very existence of the society. He was a curate."

"What became of him?" asked Andrew.

"He is better dead," said the stranger, softly.

"And the Society you speak of, what is it?"

"The S. D. W. S. P."

"The S. D. W. S. P.?"

"Yes, the Society for Doing Without Some People."

They were in Holborn, but turned up Southampton Row for quiet.

"You have told me," said the stranger, now speaking rapidly, "that at times you have felt tempted to take your life, that life for which you will one day have to account. Suicide is the coward's refuge. You are miserable? When a young man knows that, he is happy. Misery is but preparing for an old age of delightful reminiscence. You say that London has no work for you, that the functions to which you looked forward are everywhere discharged by another. That need not drive you to despair. If it proves that someone should die, does it necessarily follow that the someone is you?"

"But is not the other's life as sacred as mine?"

"That is his concern."

"Then you would have me--"

"Certainly not. You are a boxer without employment, whom I am showing what to hit. In such a case as yours the Society would be represented by a third party, whose decision would be final. As an interested person you would have to stand aside."

"I don't understand."

"The arbitrator would settle if you should go."

Andrew looked blank.

"Go?" herepeated.

"It is a euphemism for die," said his companion a little impatiently. "This is a trivial matter, and hardly worth going into at any length. It shows our process, however, and the process reveals the true character of the

organization. As I have already mentioned, the Society takes for its first principle the sanctity of human life. Everyone who has mixed much among his fellow-creatures must be aware that this is adulterated, so to speak, by numbers of spurious existences. Many of these are a nuisance to themselves. Others may at an earlier period have been lives of great promise and fulfilment. In the case of the latter, how sad to think that they should be dragged out into worthlessness or dishonour, all for want of a friendly hand to snap them short! In the lower form of life the process of preying upon animals whose work is accomplished--that is, of weeding--goes on continually. Man must, of course, be more cautious. The grand function of the Society is to find out the persons who have a claim on it, and in the interests of humanity to lay their condition before them. After that it is in the majority of cases for themselves to decide whether they will go or stay on."

"But," said Andrew, "had the gentleman in the Thames consented to go?"

"No, that was a case where assistance had to be given. He had been sounded, though."

"And do you find," asked Andrew, "that many of them are--agreeable?"

"I admit," said the stranger, "that so far that has been our chief difficulty. Even the men we looked upon as certainties have fallen short of our expectations. There is Mallock, now, who said that life was not worth living. I called on him only last week, fully expecting him to meet me half-way."

"And he didn't?"

"Mallock was a great disappointment," said the stranger, with genuine pain in his voice.

He liked Mallock.

"However," he added, brightening, "his case comes up for hearing at the next meeting. If I have two-thirds of the vote we proceed with it."

"But how do the authorities take it?" asked Andrew.

"Pooh!" said the stranger.

Andrew, however, could not think so.

"It is against the law, you know," he said.

"The law winks at it," the stranger said. "Law has its feelings as well as we. We have two London magistrates and a minister on the executive, and the Lord Chief Justice is an honorary member."

Andrew raised his eyes.

"This, of course, is private," continued the stranger. "These men join on the understanding that if anything comes out they deny all connection with us. But they have the thing at heart. I have here a very kind letter from Gladstone--"

He felt in his pockets.

"I seem to have left it at home. However, its purport was that he hoped we would not admit Lord Salisbury an honorary member."

"Why not?"

"Well, the Society has power to take from its numbers, so far as ordinary members are concerned, but it is considered discourteous to reduce the honorarylist."

"Then why have honorary members?" asked Andrew in a burst of enthusiasm.

"It is a necessary precaution. They subscribe largely too. Indeed, the association is now established on a sound commercial basis. We are paying six per cent."

"None of these American preachers who come over to this country are honorary members?" asked Andrew, anxiously.

"No; one of them made overtures to us, but we would not listen to him. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Andrew.

"To do the honorary list justice," said his companion, "it gave us one fine fellow in our honorary president. He is dead now."

Andrew looked up.

"No, we had nothing to do with it. It was Thomas Carlyle."

Andrew raised his hat.

"Though he was over eighty years of age," continued the stranger. "Carlyle would hardly rest content with merely giving us his countenance. He

wanted to be a working member. It was he who mentioned Froude's name to us."

"For honorary membership?"

"Not at all. Froude would hardly have completed the 'Reminiscences' had it not been that we could never make up our minds between him and Freeman."

Youth is subject to sudden fits of despondency. Its hopes go up and down like a bucket in a draw-well.

"They'll never let me join," cried Andrew, sorrowfully.

His companion pressed his hand.

"Three black balls exclude," he said, "but you have the president on your side. With my introduction you will be admitted a probationer, and after that everything depends on yourself."

"I thought you must be the president from the first," said Andrew, reverently.

He had not felt so humble since the first day he went to the University and walked past and repast it, frightened to go in.

"How long," he asked, "does the period of probation last?"

"Three months. Then you send in a thesis, and if it is considered satisfactory you become a member."

"And if it isn't?"

The president did not say.

"A thesis," he said, "is generally a paper with a statement of the line of action you propose to adopt, subject to the Society's approval. Each member has his specialty--as law, art, divinity, literature, and the like."

"Does the probationer devote himself exclusively during these three months to his thesis?"

"On the contrary, he never has so much liberty as at this period. He is expected to be practising."

"Practising?"

"Well, experimenting, getting his hand in, so to speak. The member acts under instructions only, but the probationer just does what he thinks best."

"There is a man on my stair," said Andrew, after a moment's consideration, "who asks his friends in every Friday night, and recites to them with his door open. I think I should like to begin with him."

"As a society we do not recognise these private cases. The public gain is so infinitesimal. We had one probationer who constructed a very ingenious water-butt for boys. Another had a scheme for clearing the streets of the people who get in the way. He got into trouble about some perambulators. Let me see your hands."

They stopped at a lamp-post.

"They are large, which is an advantage," said the president, fingering Andrew's palms; "but are they supple?"

Andrew had thought very little about it, and he did not quite comprehend.

"The hands," explained the president, "are perhaps the best natural weapon; but, of course, there are different ways of doing it."

The young Scotchman's brain, however, could not keep pace with his companion's words, and the president looked about him for an illustration.

They stopped at Gower Street station and glanced at the people coming out.

None of them was of much importance, but the president left them alone.

Andrew saw what he meant now, and could not but admire his forbearance.

They turned away, but just as they emerged into the blaze of Tottenham Court Road they ran into two men, warmly shaking hands with each other before they parted. One of them wore an eye-glass.

"Chamberlain!" exclaimed the president, rushing after him.

"Did you recognise the other?" said Andrew, panting at his heels.

"No! who was it?"

"Stead, of the 'Pall Mall Gazette.'"

"Great God," cried the president, "two at a time!"

He turned and ran back. Then he stopped irresolutely. He could not follow the one for thought of the other.