

CHAPTER IV

The London cabman's occupation consists in dodging thoroughfares under repair.

Numbers of dingy streets have been flung about to help him. There is one of these in Bloomsbury, which was originally discovered by a student while looking for the British Museum. It runs a hundred yards in a straight line, then stops, like a stranger who has lost his way, and hurries by another route out of the neighbourhood.

The houses are dull, except one, just where it doubles, which is gloomy.

This house is divided into sets of chambers and has a new frontage, but it no longer lets well. A few years ago there were two funerals from it within a fortnight, and soon afterward another of the tenants was found at the foot of the stair with his neck broken. These fatalities gave the house a bad name, as such things do in London.

It was here that Andrew's patron, the president, lived.

To the outcast from work to get an object in life is to be born again. Andrew bustled to the president's chambers on the Saturday night following the events already described, with his chest well set.

His springy step echoed of wages in the hearts of the unemployed. Envious eyes, following his swaggering staff, could not see that but a few days before he had been as the thirteenth person at a dinner-party.

Such a change does society bring about when it empties a chair for the superfluous man.

It may be wondered that he felt so sure of himself, for the night had still to decide his claims.

Andrew, however, had thought it all out in his solitary lodgings, and had put fear from him. He felt his failings and allowed for every one of them, but he knew his merits too, and his testimonials were in his pocket. Strength of purpose was his weak point, and, though the good of humanity was his loadstar, it did not make him quite forget self.

It may not be possible to serve both God and mammon, but since Adam the world has been at it. We ought to know by this time.

The Society for Doing Without was as immoral as it certainly was illegal. The president's motives were not more disinterested than his actions were defensible. He even deserved punishment.

All these things may be. The great social question is not to be solved in a day. It never will be solved if those who take it by the beard are not given an unbiassed hearing.

Those were the young Scotchman's views when the president opened the door to him, and what he saw and heard that night strengthened them.

It was characteristic of Andrew's host that at such a time he could put himself in the young man's place.

He took his hand and looked him in the face more like a physician than a mere acquaintance. Then he drew him aside into an empty room.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you," he said; "you are admitted."

Andrew took a long breath, and the president considerately turned away his head until the young probationer had regained his composure. Then he proceeded:

"The society only asks from its probationers the faith which it has in them. They take no oath. We speak in deeds. The Brotherhood do not recognise the possibility of treachery; but they are prepared to cope with it if it comes. Better far, Andrew Riach, to be in your grave, dead and rotten and forgotten, than a traitor to the cause."

The president's voice trembled with solemnity.

He stretched forth his hands, slowly repeating the words, "dead and rotten and forgotten," until his wandering eyes came to rest on the young man's neck.

Andrew drew back a step and bowed silently, as he had seen many a father do at a christening in the kirk at Wheens.

"You will shortly," continued the president, with a return to his ordinary manner, "hear an address on female suffrage from one of the noblest women in the land. It will be your part to listen. To-night you will both hear and see strange things. Say nothing. Evince no surprise. Some members are irritable. Come!"

Once more he took Andrew by the hand, and led him into the meeting-room; and still his eyes were fixed on the probationer's neck. There seemed to be something about it that he liked.

It was not then, with the committee all around him, but long afterwards at Wheens, that Andrew was struck by the bareness of the chambers.

Without the president's presence they had no character.

The trifles were absent that are to a room what expression is to the face.

The tenant might have been a medical student who knew that it was not worth while to unpack his boxes.

The only ornament on the walls was an elaborate sketch by a member, showing the arrangement of the cellars beneath the premises of the Young Men's Christian Association.

There were a dozen men in the room, including the president of the Birmingham branch association and two members who had just returned from a visit to Edinburgh. These latter had already submitted their report.

The president introduced Andrew to the committee, but not the committee to him. Several of them he recognized from the portraits in the shop windows.

They stood or sat in groups looking over a probationer's thesis. It consisted of diagrams of machinery.

Andrew did not see the sketches, though they were handed round separately for inspection, but he listened eagerly to the president's explanations.

"The first," said the president, "is a beautiful little instrument worked by steam. Having placed his head on the velvet cushion D, the subject can confidently await results.

"No. 2 is the same model on a larger scale.

"As yet 3 can be of little use to us. It includes a room 13 feet by 11. X is the windows and other apertures; and these being closed up and the subjects admitted, all that remains to be done is to lock the door from the outside and turn on the gas. E, F, and K are couches, and L is a square inch of glass through which results may be noted.

"The speciality of 4, which is called the 'water cure,' is that it is only workable on water. It is generally admitted that release by drowning is the

pleasantest of all deaths; and, indeed, 4, speaking roughly, is a boat with a hole in the bottom. It is so simple that a child could work it. C is the plug.

"No. 5 is an intricate instrument. The advantage claimed for it is that it enables a large number of persons to leave together."

While the thesis was under discussion, the attendance was increased by a few members specially interested in the question of female suffrage. Andrew observed that several of these wrote something on a piece of paper which lay on the table with a pencil beside it, before taking their seats.

He stretched himself in the direction of this paper, but subsided as he caught the eyes of two of the company riveted on his neck.

From that time until he left the rooms one member or other was staring at his neck. Andrew looked anxiously in the glass over the mantelpiece but could see nothing wrong.

The paper on the table merely contained such jottings as these:--

"Robert Buchanan has written another play."

"Schnadhörst is in town."

"Ashmead Bartlett walks in Temple Gardens 3 to 4."

"Clement Scott(?)"

"Query: Is there a dark passage near Hyndman's (Socialist's) house?"

"Talmage. Address, Midland Hotel."

"Andrew Lang (?)"

Andrew was a good deal interested in woman's suffrage, and the debate on this question in the students' society at Edinburgh, when he spoke for an hour and five minutes, is still remembered by the janitor who had to keep the door until the meeting closed.

Debating societies, like the company of reporters, engender a familiarity of reference to eminent persons, and Andrew had in his time struck down the champions of woman's rights as a boy plays with his ninepins.

To be brought face to face with a lady whose name is a household word wheresoever a few Scotchmen can meet and resolve themselves into an argument was another matter.

It was with no ordinary mingling of respect with curiosity that he stood up with the others to greet Mrs. Fawcett as the president led her into the room. The young man's face, as he looked upon her for the first time, was the best book this remarkable woman ever wrote.

The proceedings were necessarily quiet, and the president had introduced their guest to the meeting without Andrew's hearing a word.

He was far away in a snow-swept University quadrangle on a windy night, when Mrs. Fawcett rose to her feet.

Some one flung open the window, for the place was close, and immediately the skirl of a bagpiper broke the silence.

It might have been the devil that rushed into the room.

Still Andrew dreamed on.

The guest paused.

The members looked at each other, and the president nodded to one of them.

He left the room, and about two minutes afterwards the music suddenly ceased.

Andrew woke with a start in time to see him return, write two words in the members' book, and resume his seat. Mrs. Fawcett then began.

"I have before me," she said, turning over the leaves of a bulky manuscript, "a great deal of matter bearing on the question of woman's rights, which at such a meeting as this may be considered read. It is mainly historical, and while I am prepared to meet with hostile criticism from the society, I assume that the progress our agitation has made, with its disappointments, its trials, and its triumphs, has been followed more or less carefully by you all.

"Nor shall I, after the manner of speakers on such an occasion, pay you the doubtful compliment of fulsomely extolling your aims before your face.

"I come at once to the question of woman's rights in so far as the society can affect them, and I ask of you a consideration of my case with as little prejudice as men can be expected to approach it.

"In the constitution of the society, as it has been explained to me, I notice chiefly two things which would have filled me with indignation twenty years ago, but only remind me how far we are from the goal of our ambition now.

"The first is a sin of omission, the second one of commission, and the latter is the more to be deprecated in that you made it with your eyes open, after full discussion, while the other came about as a matter of course.

"I believe I am right in saying that the membership of this society is exclusively male, and also that no absolute veto has been placed on female candidature.

"As a matter of fact, it never struck the founders that such a veto in black and white was necessary. When they drew up the rules of membership the other sex never fell like a black shadow on the paper; it was forgotten. We owe our eligibility to many other offices (generally disputed at law) to the same accident. In short, the unwritten law of the argumentum ad crinolinam puts us to the side."

Having paid the society the compliment of believing that, however much it differed from her views, it would not dismiss them with a laugh, Mrs. Fawcett turned to the question of woman's alleged physical limitations.

She said much on this point that Andrew saw could not be easily refuted, but, interesting though she made it, we need not follow her over beaten ground.

So far the members had given her the courteous non-attention which thoughtful introductory remarks can always claim. It was when she reached her second head that they fastened upon her words.

Then Andrew had seen no sharper audience since he was one of a Scotch congregation on the scent of a heretic.

"At a full meeting of committee," said Mrs. Fawcett, with a ring of bitterness in her voice, "you passed a law that women should not enjoy the advantages of the association. Be they ever so eminent, their sex deprives them of your care. You take up the case of a petty maker of books because his tea-leaf solutions weary you, and you put a stop to him with an enthusiasm worthy of a nobler object.

"But the woman is left to decay.

"This society at its noblest was instituted for taking strong means to prevent men's slipping down the ladder it has been such a toil to them to mount, but the women who have climbed as high as they can fall from rung to rung.

"There are female nuisances as well as male; I presume no one here will gainsay me that. But you do not know them officially. The politicians who joke about three acres and a cow, the writers who are comic about mothers-

in-law, the very boot-blacks have your solicitude, but you ignore their complements in the softer sex.

"Yet you call yourselves a society for suppressing excrescences! Your president tells me you are at present inquiring for the address of the man who signs himself 'Paterfamilias' in the 'Times'; but the letters from 'A British Matron' are of no account.

"I do not need to be told how Dr. Smith, the fashionable physician, was precipitated down that area the other day; but what I do ask is, why should he be taken and all the lady doctors left?

"Their degrees are as good as his. You are too 'manly,' you say, to arrest their course. Is injustice manliness? We have another name for it. We say you want the pluck.

"I suppose every one of you has been reading a very able address recently delivered at the meeting of the Social Science Congress. I refer to my friend Mrs. Kendal's paper on the moral aspect of the drama in this country.

"It is a powerful indictment of the rank and file other professional brothers and sisters, and nowhere sadder, more impressive, or more unanswerable than where she speaks of the involuntary fall of the actor into social snobbishness and professional clap-trap.

"I do not know how the paper affected you. But since reading it I have asked in despair, how can this gifted lady continue to pick her way between the snares with which the stage is beset?

"Is it possible that the time may come when she will advertise by photographs and beg from reporters the 'pars' she now so scathingly criticises? Nay, when I look upon the drop scene at the St. James's Theatre, I ask myself if the deterioration has not already set in.

"Gentlemen, is this a matter of indifference to you? But why do I ask? Has not Mrs. Lynn Linton another article in the new 'Nineteenth Century' that makes her worthy your attention? They are women, and the sex is outside your sphere."

It was nearly twelve o'clock when Mrs. Fawcett finished her address, and the society had adopted the good old rule of getting to bed betimes. Thus it was afterwards that Andrew learned how long and carefully the society had already considered the advisability of giving women equal rights with men.

As he was leaving the chambers the president slipped something into his hand. He held it there until he reached his room.

On the way a man struck against him, scanned him piercingly, and then shuffled off. He was muffled up, but Andrew wondered if he had not seen him at the meeting.

The young Scotchman had an uneasy feeling that his footsteps were dodged.

As soon as he reached home he unfolded the scrap of paper that had been pushed into his hand. It merely contained these words--

"Cover up your neck."