

CHAPTER V

On the following Tuesday Andrew met the president by appointment at the Marble Arch.

Until he had received his final instructions he was pledged not to begin, and he had passed these two intervening days staring at his empty fireplace.

They shook hands silently and passed into the Park. The president was always thoughtful in a crowd.

"In such a gathering as this," said Andrew, pointing an imaginary pistol at a lecturer on Socialism, "you could hardly go wrong to let fly."

"You must not speak like that," the president said gently, "or we shall soon lose you. Your remark, however, opens the way for what I have to say. You have never expressed any curiosity as to your possible fate. I hope this is not because you under-estimate the risks. If the authorities saw you 'letting fly' as you term it, promiscuously, or even at a given object, they would treat you as no better than a malefactor."

"I thought that all out yesterday," said Andrew, "and I am amazed at the society's success in escaping detection."

"I feared this," said the president. "You are mistaken. We don't always escape detection. Sometimes we are caught--"

"Caught?"

"Yes, and hanged."

"But if that is so, why does it not get into the papers?"

"The papers are full of it."

Andrew looked incredulous.

"In the present state of the law," said the president, "motive in a murder goes for nothing. However iniquitous this may be--and I do not attempt to defend it--we accept it as a fact. Your motives may have been unexceptionable, but they hang you all the same. Thus our members when apprehended preserve silence on this point, or say that they are Fenians. This is to save the society. The man who got fifteen years the other day for being found near St. Stephen's with six infernal machines in his pockets was really one of us. He was taking them to be repaired."

"And the other who got ten years the week before?"

"He was from America, but it was for one of our affairs that he was sentenced. He was quite innocent. You see the dynamiters, vulgarly so called, are playing into our hands. Suspicion naturally falls on them. He was our fifth."

"I had no idea of this," murmured Andrew.

"You see what a bad name does," said the president. "Let this be a warning to you, Andrew."

"But is this quite fair?"

"As for that, they like it--the leading spirits, I mean. It gives them a reputation. Besides, they hurt as well as help us. It was after their appearance that the authorities were taught to be distrustful. You have little idea of the precautions taken nowadays. There is Sir William Harcourt, for instance, who is attended by policemen everywhere. I used to go home from the House behind him nightly, but I could never get him alone. I have walked in the very shadow of that man, but always in a company."

"You were never arrested yourself?" asked Andrew.

"I was once, but we substituted a probationer."

"Then did he--was he--"

"Yes, poor fellow."

"Is that often done?"

"Sometimes. You perhaps remember the man who went over the Embankment the night we met? Well, if I had been charged with that, you would have had to be hanged."

Andrew took a seat to collect his thoughts.

"Was that why you seemed to take to me so much?" he asked, wistfully.

"It was only one reason," said the president, soothingly. "I liked you from the first."

"But I don't see," said Andrew, "why I should have suffered for your action."

For the moment, his veneration for this remarkable man hung in the balance.

"It would have been for the society's sake," said the president, simply; "probationers are hardly missed."

His face wore a pained look, but there was no reproach in his voice.

Andrew was touched.

He looked the apology, which, as a Scotchman, he could not go the length of uttering.

"Before I leave you to-day," said the president, turning to a pleasanter subject, "I shall give you some money. We do not, you understand, pay our probationers a fixed salary."

"It is more, is it not," said Andrew, "in nature of a scholarship?"

"Yes, a scholarship--for the endowment of research. You see we do not tie you down to any particular line of study. Still, I shall be happy to hear of any programme you may have drawn up."

Andrew hesitated. He did not know that, to the president, he was an open book.

"I dare say I can read your thoughts," said his companion. "There is an eminent person whom you would like to make your first?"

Andrew admitted that this was so.

"I do not ask any confidences of you," continued the president, "nor shall I discourage ambition. But I hope, Andrew, you have only in view the greatest good of the greatest number. At such a time, it is well for the probationer to ask himself two questions: Is it not self-glorification that prompts me to pick this man out from among so many? and, Am I actuated by any personal animosity? If you cannot answer both these questions in the negative, it is time to ask a third, Should I go on with this undertaking?"

"In this case," said Andrew, "I do not think it is self-glory, and I am sure it is not spite. He is a man I have a very high opinion of."

"A politician? Remember that we are above party considerations."

"He is a politician," said Andrew, reluctantly, "but it is his politics I admire."

"And you are sure his time has come? Then how do you propose to set about it?"

"I thought of calling at his house, and putting it to him."

The president's countenance fell.

"Well, well," he said, "that may answer. But there is no harm in bearing in mind that persuasion is not necessarily a passive force. Without going the length of removing him yourself, you know, you could put temptation in his way."

"If I know my man," said Andrew, "that will not be required."

The president had drunk life's disappointments to the dregs, but it was not in his heart to damp the youth's enthusiasm.

Experience he knew to be a commodity for which we pay a fancy price.

"After that," said Andrew, "I thought of Henry Irving."

"We don't kill actors," his companion said.

It was Andrew's countenance's turn to fall now.

"We don't have time for it," the president explained. "When the society was instituted, we took a few of them, but merely to get our hands in. We didn't want to bungle good cases, you see, and it did not matter so much for them."

"How did you do it?"

"We waited at the stage-door, and went off with the first person who came out, male or female."

"But I understood you did not take up women?"

"Nor do we. Theatrical people constitute a sex by themselves--like curates."

"Then can't I even do the man who stands at the theatre doors, all shirt-front and diamonds?"

The president shivered.

"If you happen to be passing, at any rate," he said.

"And surely some of the playwrights would be better dead. They must see that themselves."

"They have had their chance," said the president. Despite his nationality, Andrew had not heard the story, so the president told it him.

"Many years ago, when the drama was in its infancy, some young men from Stratford-on-Avon and elsewhere resolved to build a theatre in London.

"The times, however, were moral, and no one would imperil his soul so far as to give them a site.

"One night, they met in despair, when suddenly the room was illumined by lightning, and they saw the devil in the midst of them.

"He has always been a large proprietor in London, and he had come to strike a bargain with them. They could have as many sites as they chose, on one condition. Every year they must send him a dramatist.

"You see he was willing to take his chance of the players.

"The compact was made, and up to the present time it has been religiously kept. But this year, as the day drew near, found the managers very uneasy. They did what they could. They forwarded the best man they had."

"What happened?" asked Andrew, breathlessly.

"The devil sent him back," said the president.