

CHAPTER VI

It was one Sunday forenoon, on such a sunny day as slovenly men seize upon to wash their feet and have it over, that Andrew set out to call on Mr. Labouchere.

The leaves in the squares were green, and the twittering of the birds among the boughs was almost gay enough to charm him out of the severity of countenance which a Scotchman wears on a Sunday with his blacks.

Andrew could not help regarding the mother-of-pearl sky as a favourable omen. Several times he caught himself becoming light-hearted.

He got the great Radical on the door-step, just setting out for church.

The two men had not met before, but Andrew was a disciple in the school in which the other taught.

Between man and man formal introductions are humbug.

Andrew explained in a few words the nature of his visit, and received a cordial welcome.

"But I could call again," he said, observing the hymn-book in the other's hand.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Labouchere heartily; "it must be business before pleasure. Mind the step."

So saying, he led his visitor into a cheerful snuggerly at the back of the house. It was furnished with a careful contempt for taste, and the first thing that caught Andrew's eye was a pot of apple jam on a side table.

"I have no gum," Mr. Labouchere explained hastily.

A handsomely framed picture, representing Truth lying drowned at the bottom of a well, stood on the mantel-piece; indeed, there were many things in the room that, on another occasion, Andrew would have been interested to hear the history of.

He could not but know, however, that at present he was to some extent an intruder, and until he had fully explained his somewhat delicate business he would not feel at ease.

Though argumentative, Andrew was essentially a shy, proud man.

It was very like Mr. Labouchere to leave him to tell his story in his own way, only now and then, at the outset, interjecting a humorous remark, which we here omit.

"I hope," said Andrew earnestly, "that you will not think it fulsome on my part to say how much I like you. In your public utterances you have let it be known what value you set on pretty phrases; but I speak the blunt truth, as you have taught it. I am only a young man, perhaps awkward and unpolished--"

Here Andrew paused, but as Mr. Labouchere did not say anything he resumed.

"That as it may be, I should like you to know that your political speeches have become part of my life. When I was a student it seemed to me that the Radicalism of so called advanced thinkers was a half-hearted sham; I had no interest in politics at all until I read your attack--one of them--on the House of Lords. That day marked an epoch in my life. I used to read the University library copy of 'Truth' from cover to cover. Sometimes I carried it into the class-room. That was not allowed. I took it up my waistcoat. In those days I said that if I wrote a book I would dedicate it to you without permission, and London, when I came to it, was to me the town where you lived."

There was a great deal of truth in this; indeed, Mr. Labouchere's single-hearted enthusiasm--be his politics right or wrong--is well calculated to fascinate young men.

If it was slightly over-charged, the temptation was great. Andrew was keenly desirous of carrying his point, and he wanted his host to see that he was only thinking of his good.

"Well, but what is it you would have me do?" asked Mr. Labouchere, who often had claimants on his bounty and his autographs.

"I want you," said Andrew eagerly, "to die."

The two men looked hard at each other. There was not even a clock in the room to break the silence. At last the statesman spoke.

"Why?" he asked.

His visitor sank back in his chair relieved. He had put all his hopes in the other's common-sense.

It had never failed Mr. Labouchere, and now it promised not to fail Andrew.

"I am anxious to explain that," the young man said glibly. "If you can look at yourself with the same eyes with which you see other people, it won't take long. Make a looking-glass of me, and it is done.

"You have now reached a high position in the worlds of politics and literature, to which you have cut your way unaided.

"You are a great satirist, combining instruction with amusement, a sort of comic Carlyle.

"You hate shams so much that if man had been constructed for it I dare say you would kick at yourself.

"You have your enemies, but the very persons who blunt their weapons on you do you the honour of sharpening them on 'Truth.' In short, you have reached the summit of your fame, and you are too keen a man of the world not to know that fame is a touch-and-go thing."

Andrew paused.

"Go on," said Mr. Labouchere.

"Well, you have now got fame, honour, everything for which it is legitimate in man to strive.

"So far back as I can remember, you have had the world laughing with you. But you know what human nature is.

"There comes a morning to all wits, when their public wakes to find them bores. The fault may not be the wit's, but what of that? The result is the same.

"Wits are like theatres: they may have a glorious youth and prime, but their old age is dismal. To the outsider, like myself, signs are not wanting--to continue the figure of speech--that you have put on your last successful piece.

"Can you say candidly that your last Christmas number was more than a reflection of its predecessors, or that your remarks this year on the Derby day took as they did the year before?"

"Surely the most incisive of our satirists will not let himself degenerate into an illustration of Mr. Herbert Spencer's theory that man repeats himself, like history.

"Mr. Labouchere, sir, to those of us who have grown up in your inspiration it would indeed be pitiful if this were so."

Andrew's host turned nervously in his chair.

Probably he wished that he had gone to church now.

"You need not be alarmed," he said, with a forced smile.

"You will die," cried Andrew, "before they send you to the House of Lords?"

"In which case the gain would be all to those left behind."

"No," said Andrew, who now felt that he had as good as gained the day;
"there could not be a greater mistake.

"Suppose it happened to-night, or even put it off to the end of the week; see what would follow.

"The ground you have lost so far is infinitesimal. It would be forgotten in the general regret.

"Think of the newspaper placards next morning, some of them perhaps edged with black; the leaders in every London paper and in all the prominent provincial ones; the six columns obituary in the 'Times'; the paragraphs in the 'World'; the motion by Mr. Gladstone or Mr. Healy for the adjournment of the House; the magazine articles; the promised memoirs; the publication of posthumous papers; the resolution in the Northampton Town Council; the statue in Hyde Park! With such a recompense where would be the sacrifice?"

Mr. Labouchere rose and paced the room in great mental agitation.

"Now look at the other side of the picture," said Andrew, rising and following him: "'Truth' reduced to threepence, and then to a penny; yourself confused with Tracy Turnerelli or Martin Tupper; your friends running when you looked like jesting; the House emptying, the reporters shutting their notebooks as you rose to speak; the great name of Labouchere become a synonym for bore!"

They presented a strange picture in that room, its owner's face now a greyish white, his supplicant shaking with a passion that came out in perspiration.

With trembling hand Mr. Labouchere flung open the window. The room was stifling.

There was a smell of new-mown hay in the air, a gentle breeze tipped the well-trimmed hedge with life, and the walks crackled in the heat.

But a stone's throw distant the sun was bathing in the dimpled Thames.

There was a cawing of rooks among the tall trees, and a church-bell tinkled in the ivy far away across the river.

Mr. Labouchere was far away too.

He was a round-cheeked boy again, smothering his kitten in his pinafore, prattling of Red Riding Hood by his school-mistress's knee, and guddling in the brook for minnows.

And now--and now!

It was a beautiful world, and, ah, life is sweet!

He pressed his fingers to his forehead.

"Leave me," he said hoarsely.

Andrew put his hand upon the shoulder of the man he loved so well.

"Be brave," he said; "do it in whatever way you prefer. A moment's suffering, and all will be over."

He spoke gently. There is always something infinitely pathetic in the sight of a strong man in pain.

Mr. Labouchere turned upon him.

"Go," he cried, "or I will call the servants."

"You forget," said Andrew, "that I am your guest."

But his host only pointed to the door.

Andrew felt a great sinking at his heart. They prate who say it is success that tries a man. He flung himself at Mr. Labouchere's feet.

"Think of the public funeral," he cried.

His host seized the bell-rope and pulled it violently.

"If you will do it," said Andrew solemnly, "I promise to lay flowers on your grave every day till I die."

"John," said Mr. Labouchere, "show this gentleman out."

Andrew rose.

"You refuse?" he asked.

"I do."

"You won't think it over? If I call again, say on Thursday--"

"John!" said Mr. Labouchere.

Andrew took up his hat. His host thought he had gone. But in the hall his reflection in a looking-glass reminded the visitor of something. He put his head in at the doorway again.

"Would you mind telling me," he said, "whether you see anything peculiar about my neck?"

"It seems a good neck to twist," Mr. Labouchere answered, a little savagely.

Andrew then withdrew.