

CHAPTER IX

"Tie this muffler round your neck."

It was the president who spoke. Andrew held his thesis in his hand.

"But the rooms are so close," he said.

"That has nothing to do with it," said the president. The blood rushed to his head, and then left him pale.

"But why?" asked Andrew.

"For God's sake, do as I bid you," said his companion, pulling himself by a great effort to the other side of the room.

"You have done it?" he asked, carefully avoiding Andrew's face.

"Yes, but--"

"Then we can go in to the others. Remember what I told you about omitting the first seven pages. The society won't stand introductory remarks in a thesis."

The committee were assembled in the next room.

When the young Scotchman entered with the president, they looked him full in the neck.

"He is suffering from cold," the president said.

No one replied, but angry eyes were turned on the speaker. He somewhat nervously placed his young friend in a bad light, with a table between him and his hearers.

Then Andrew began.

"The Society for Doing Without," he read, "has been tried and found wanting. It has now been in existence for some years, and its members have worked zealously, though unostentatiously.

"I am far from saying a word against them. They are patriots as true as ever petitioned against the Channel Tunnel."

"No compliments," whispered the president, warningly. Andrew hastily turned a page, and continued:

"But what have they done? Removed an individual here and there. That is the extent of it.

"You have been pursuing a half-hearted policy. You might go on for centuries at this rate before you made any perceptible difference in the streets.

"Have you ever seen a farmer thinning turnips? Gentlemen, there is an example for you. My proposal is that everybody should have to die on reaching the age of forty-five years.

"It has been the wish of this society to avoid the prejudices engendered of party strife. But though you are a social rather than a political organisation, you cannot escape politics. You do not call yourselves Radicals, but you work for Radicalism. What is Radicalism? It is a desire to get a chance. This is an aspiration inherent in the human breast. It is felt most keenly by the poor.

"Make the poor rich, and the hovels, the misery, the immorality, and the crime of the East End disappear. It is infamous, say the Socialists, that this is not done at once. Yes, but how is it to be done? Not, as they hold, by making the classes and the masses change places. Not on the lines on which the society has hitherto worked. There is only one way, and I make it my text to-night. Fortunately, it presents no considerable difficulties.

"It is well known in medicine that the simplest--in other words, the most natural--remedies may be the most efficacious.

"So it is in the social life. What shall we do, Society asks, with our boys? I reply. Kill off the parents.

"There can be little doubt that forty-five years is long enough for a man to live. Parents must see that. Youth is the time to have your fling.

"Let us see how this plan would revolutionise the world. It would make statesmen hurry up. At present, they are nearly fifty before you hear of them. How can we expect the country to be properly governed by men in their dotage?

"Again, take the world of letters. Why does the literary aspirant have such a struggle? Simply because the profession is over-stocked with seniors. I would like to know what Tennyson's age is, and Ruskin's, and Browning's. Every one of them is over seventy, and all writing away yet as lively as you like. It is a crying scandal.

"Things are the same in medicine, art, divinity, law--in short, in every profession and in every trade.

"Young ladies cry out that this is not a marrying age. How can it be a marrying age, with grey-headed parents everywhere? Give young men their chance, and they will marry younger than ever, if only to see their children grown up before they die.

"A word in conclusion. Looking around me, I cannot but see that most, if not all, of my hearers have passed what should plainly be the allotted span of life to man. You would have to go.

"But, gentlemen, you would do so feeling that you were setting a noble example. Younger, and--may I say?--more energetic men would fill your places and carry on your work. You would hardly be missed."

Andrew rolled up his thesis blandly, and strode into the next room to await the committee's decision. It cannot be said that he felt the slightest uneasiness.

The president followed, shutting the door behind him.

"You have just two minutes," he said.

Andrew could not understand it.

His hat was crushed on to his head, his coat flung at him; he was pushed out at a window, squeezed through a grating and tumbled into a passage.

"What is the matter?" he asked, as the president dragged him down a back street.

The president pointed to the window they had just left.

Half a dozen infuriated men were climbing from it in pursuit. Their faces, drunk with rage, awoke Andrew to a sense of his danger.

"They were drawing lots for you when I left the room," said the president.

"But what have I done?" gasped Andrew.

"They didn't like your thesis. At least, they make that their excuse."

"Excuse?"

"Yes; it was really your neck that did it."

By this time they were in a cab, rattling into Gray's Inn Road.

"They are a poor lot," said Andrew fiercely, "if they couldn't keep their heads over my neck."

"They are only human," retorted the president. "For Heaven's sake, pull up the collar of your coat."

His fingers were itching, but Andrew did not notice it.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To King's Cross. The midnight express leaves in twenty minutes. It is your last chance."

Andrew was in a daze. When the president had taken his ticket for Glasgow he was still groping.

The railway officials probably thought him on his honeymoon.

They sauntered along the platform beyond the lights.

Andrew, who was very hot, unloosened his greatcoat.

In a moment a great change came over his companion. All the humanity went from his face, his whole figure shook, and it was only by a tremendous effort that he chained his hands to his side.

"Your neck," he cried; "cover it up."

Andrew did not understand. He looked about him for the committee.

"There are none of them here," he said feebly.

The president had tried to warn him.

Now he gave way.

The devil that was in him leapt at Andrew's throat.

The young Scotchman was knocked into a goods waggon, with the president twisted round him.

At that moment there was heard the whistle of the Scotch express.

"Your blood be on your own head," cried the president, yielding completely to temptation.

His fingers met round the young man's neck.

"My God!" he murmured, in a delirious ecstasy, "what a neck, what a neck!"

Just then his foot slipped.

He fell. Andrew jumped up and kicked him as hard as he could three times.

Then he leapt to the platform, and, flinging himself into the moving train, fell exhausted on the seat.

Andrew never thought so much of the president again. You cannot respect a man and kick him.