

CHAPTER III

DON QUIXOTE

When Kenneth got home he told Mr. Watson of his discovery and asked the old gentleman to write to the sign painter and find out what could be done. The lawyer laughed heartily at his young friend's whim, but agreed to help him.

"If you are going to try to prevent rural advertising," he remarked, "you'll find your hands full."

Kenneth looked up smiling.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For finding me something to do. I'm sick of this inaction."

Again the lawyer laughed.

"What is your idea?" he asked.

"To remove such eyesores as advertising signs from the neighborhood of

Elmhurst."

"It's a Titan's task, Ken."

"So much the better."

The lawyer grew thoughtful.

"I believe it's impossible," he ventured.

"Better yet. I don't say I'll succeed, but I promise to try. I want something to occupy myself--something really difficult, so that I may test my own powers."

"But, my dear boy! This foolish proposition isn't worthy your effort. If you want to be up and doing we'll find something else to occupy your mind."

"No, Mr. Watson; I'm set on this. It's a crime to allow these signs to flaunt themselves in our prettiest scenes. My instinct revolts at the desecration. Besides, no one else seems to have undertaken the task of exterminating them."

"True enough. If you're serious, Ken, I'll frankly say the thing can't be done. You may, perhaps, buy the privilege of maintaining the rocks of the glen free from advertising; but the advertisers will paint more

signs on all the approaches, and you won't have gained much."

"I'll drive every advertising sign out of this country."

"Impossible. The great corporations who control these industries make their fortunes by this style of advertising. The rural districts are their strongholds. And they must advertise or they can't sell their products."

"Let them advertise in decent ways, then. What right has any soap maker to flaunt his wares in my face, whether I'm interested in them or not?"

"The right of custom. People have submitted to these things so long that the manufacturers consider themselves justified in covering every barn, rock and fence with their signs. I see no way to stop them."

"Nor I, at present. But there must be a way."

"Drive out one, and another will take his place. They pay liberally for locations--"

"Pshaw! Ten dollars a year for a rock as big as a barn!"

"But they rent thousands of such positions, and in the aggregate our farmers get large sums from them."

"And ruin the appearance of their homes and farms."

Mr. Watson smiled.

"They're not artists, Ken. They can't realize on appearances, but they can use the money the signs bring them."

"They need to be educated, that's all. These farmers seem very honest, decent fellows."

"They are, Ken. I wish you knew them better."

"So do I, Mr. Watson. This campaign ought to bring us closer together, for I mean to get them to help me."

"You'll have to buy them, I'm afraid."

"Not all of them. There must be some refinement among them."

But the lawyer was not convinced. However, it was not his desire to stifle this new-born enthusiasm of Kenneth's, even though he believed it misdirected. He wanted the young man to rouse himself and take an interest in life, and if his antagonism to advertising signs would effect this, the futile fight against them was to be welcomed. It would cost the boy something, but he would gain his money's worth in experience.

After a few days the sign painter answered the letter. He would relinquish the three signs in the glen for a payment of fifty dollars each, with the understanding that no other competing signs were to take their place. Kenneth promptly mailed a check for the amount demanded and early next morning started for the glen with what he called his "eliminators."

These "eliminators" consisted of two men with cans of turpentine and gasoline and an equipment of scrubbing brushes. Parsons, the farmer, came over to watch this novel proceeding, happy in the possession of three crisp five-dollar notes given in accordance with the agreement made with him. All day the two men scrubbed the rocks faithfully, assisted at odd times by their impatient employer; but the thick splashes of paint clung desperately to the rugged surface of the rock, and the task was a hard one. When evening came the letters had almost disappeared when viewed closely; but when Kenneth rode to the mouth of the glen on his way home and paused to look back, he could see the injunction "Take Smith's Liver Pills" staring at him, in grim defiance of the scrubbing brushes.

But his energy was not exhausted. No one ever knew what it cost in labor and material to erase those three signs; but after ten days they had vanished completely, and the boy heaved a sigh of satisfaction and turned his attention to extending the campaign.

On the farm nearest to Elmhurst at the north, which belonged to a man named Webb, was a barn, facing the road, that displayed on its side a tobacco sign. Kenneth interviewed Mr. Webb and found that he received no money for the sign; but the man contended that the paint preserved his barn from the weather on that side. So Kenneth agreed to repaint the entire barn for him, and actually had the work done. As it took many coats of paint to blot out the sign it was rather a expensive operation.

By this time the campaign of the youthful proprietor of Elmhurst against advertising signs began to be talked of throughout the county, and was the subject of much merriment among the farmers. Some of them were intelligent enough to admire the young Quixote, and acknowledged frankly that it was a pity to decorate their premises with signs of patent medicines and questionable soaps.

But the majority of them sneered at the champion, and many refused point-blank to consider any proposition to discard the advertisements. Indeed, some were proud of them, and believed it a mark of distinction to have their fences and sheds announce an eye-remedy or several varieties of pickles.

Mr. Watson, at first an amused observer of the campaign, soon became indignant at the way that Kenneth was ridiculed and reviled; and he took a hand in the fight himself. He decided to call a meeting of the neighboring farmers at the district school-house on Saturday night, where Kenneth could address them with logical arguments and endeavor to

win them over to his way of thinking.

The invitation was promptly accepted by the rural population; not so much because they were interested in the novel ideas of the young artist as because they expected to be amused by hearing the boyish master of Elmhurst "lecture at 'em." So they filled the little room to overflowing, and to add to the dignity of the proceedings the Hon. Erastus Hopkins, State Representative for the district, lent his presence to the assemblage.

Not that the Honorable Erastus cared a fig about this foolish talk of exterminating advertising signs. He was himself a large stockholder in a breakfast-food factory, which painted signs wherever it could secure space. These signs were not works of art, but they were distinctly helpful to business, and only a fool, in the opinion of the Honorable Erastus, would protest against the inevitable.

What brought the legislator to the meeting was the fact that he was coming forward for re-election in November, and believed that this afforded a good chance to meet some of his constituents and make a favorable impression. So he came early and shook hands with everyone that arrived, and afterward took as prominent a seat as possible.

Indeed, the gathering had at first the appearance of being a political one, so entirely did the Representative dominate it. But Mr. Watson took the platform and shyly introduced the speaker of the evening.

The farmers all knew Mr. Watson, and liked him; so when Kenneth rose they prepared to listen in respectful silence.

Usually a young man making his maiden speech is somewhat diffident; but young Forbes was so thoroughly in earnest and so indignant at the opposition that his plans had encountered that he forgot that it was his first public speech and thought only of impressing his hearers with his views, exulting in the fact that on this occasion they could not "talk back," as they usually did in private when he tried to argue with them. So he exhorted them earnestly to keep their homes beautiful and free from the degradation of advertising, and never to permit glaring commercialism to mar the scenery around them. He told them what he had been able to accomplish by himself, in a short time; how he had redeemed the glen from its disgraceful condition and restored it to its former beauty. He asked them to observe Webb's pretty homestead, no longer marred by the unsightly sign upon the barn. And then he appealed to them to help him in driving all the advertising signs out of the community.

When he ended they applauded his speech mildly; but it was chiefly for the reason that he had spoken so forcibly and well.

Then the Honorable Erastus Hopkins, quick to catch the lack of sympathy in the audience, stood up and begged leave to reply to young Forbes.

He said the objection to advertising signs was only a rich man's

aristocratic hobby, and that it could not be indulged in a democratic community of honest people. His own firm, he said, bought thousands of bushels of oats from the farmers and converted them into the celebrated Eagle-Eye Breakfast Food, three packages for a quarter. They sold this breakfast food to thousands of farmers, to give them health and strength to harvest another crop of oats. Thus he "benefited the community going and coming." What! Should he not advertise this mutual-benefit commodity wherever he pleased, and especially among the farmers? What aristocratic notion could prevent him? It was a mighty good thing for the farmers to be reminded, by means of the signs on their barns and fences, of the things they needed in daily life.

If the young man at Elmhurst would like to be of public service he might find some better way to do so than by advancing such crazy ideas. But this, continued the Representative, was a subject of small importance. What he wished especially to call their attention to was the fact that he had served the district faithfully as Representative, and deserved their suffrages for renomination. And then he began to discuss political questions in general and his own merits in particular, so that Kenneth and Mr. Watson, disgusted at the way in which the Honorable Erastus had captured the meeting, left the school-house and indignantly returned to Elmhurst.

"This man Hopkins," said Mr. Watson, angrily, "is not a gentleman. He's an impertinent meddler."

"He ruined any good effect my speech might have created," said Kenneth, gloomily.

"Give it up, my boy," advised the elder man, laying a kindly hand on the youth's shoulder. "It really isn't worth the struggle."

"But I can't give it up and acknowledge myself beaten," protested Kenneth, almost ready to weep with disappointment.

"Well, well, let's think it over, Ken, and see what can be done. Perhaps that rascally Hopkins was right when he advised you to find some other way to serve the community."

"I can't do better than to make it clean--to do away with these disreputable signs," said the boy, stubbornly.

"You made a fine speech," declared Mr. Watson, gravely puffing his pipe.

"I am very proud of you, my lad."

Kenneth flushed red. He was by nature shy and retiring to a degree. Only his pent-up enthusiasm had carried him through the ordeal, and now that it was over he was chagrined to think that the speech had been so ineffective. He was modest enough to believe that another speaker might have done better.