

CHAPTER IV

KENNETH TAKES A BOLD STEP

"This man Hopkins gets on my nerves," said Mr. Watson, a week or two after the eventful meeting in the school-house. He was at the breakfast table opposite Kenneth, and held up a big, glaring post-card which was in his mail.

"What is it now?" asked the boy, rousing himself from a fit of abstraction.

"An announcement offering himself for renomination at the primaries. It's like a circus advertisement. Isn't it a shame to think that modern politics has descended to such a level in our free and enlightened republic?"

Kenneth nodded, stirring his coffee thoughtfully. He had lost his spirit and enthusiasm since the meeting, and was fast relapsing into his old state of apathy and boredom. It grieved Mr. Watson to note this.

"Hopkins isn't fit to be the Representative for this district," observed the old gentleman, with sudden energy.

The boy looked at him.

"Who is Hopkins?" he asked.

"His mother once kept a stationery shop in town, and he was stable boy at the hotel. But he was shrewd and prospered, and when he grew up became a county-clerk or tax-collector; then an assessor, and finally he ran last term for State Representative from this district and was elected by a mighty small majority."

"Why small?" asked Kenneth.

"Because he's a Democrat, and the district is strongly Republican. But Thompson ran against him on the Republican ticket and couldn't win his party vote."

"Who's Thompson?"

"The general store keeper. He has a reputation for short weights and measures."

The boy sipped his coffee thoughtfully.

"Tell me, sir; how did you happen to know all this?" he asked.

"I've been looking up Hopkins's record. I have disliked the man ever since he treated us so shabbily on the night of the meeting."

"Never mind him. We've done with him."

Mr. Watson shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I wonder if we have?" he said.

"Why not, sir?"

"Well, Kenneth, we have to reside at Elmhurst, which is Hopkins's district. Also I believe Elmhurst to be the most important estate in the district, and you to be the largest taxpayer. This man wishes to go to the State Legislature and make laws for you to obey."

"Well?"

"Well, it's our duty to watch him. If he isn't a fit man it's our duty to prevent him from representing us."

The young man nodded somewhat dreamily.

"Some of these country yokels must represent us," he observed. "It doesn't matter much whether it's Hopkins or someone else."

"Except that you, being a prominent man, owe it to the community to protect its interests," added the lawyer.

"Do you want me to mix in these petty politics?" asked the boy, irritably.

"Oh, do as you like, my boy. If you can shirk your duties with a clear conscience, I've nothing to say."

For a time the young man was silent. Finally he asked:

"Why isn't Hopkins a good Representative?"

"He's what is called a 'grafter'; a term signifying that he is willing to vote for any measure that he is paid to vote for, whether it benefits his constituents or not."

"Oh. Is he singular in this?"

"By no means. The 'grafter' is all too common in politics."

Again the boy fell into a thoughtful mood.

"Mr. Watson, am I a Democrat or a Republican?"

The old gentleman laughed outright.

"Don't you know, Ken?"

"No, sir, I haven't asked myself before."

"Then I advise you to be a Republican."

"Why?"

"Because Hopkins is a Democrat, and we may then fight him openly."

"What is the difference, sir, between the two parties?"

"There is no difference of importance. All Americans are loyal citizens, whichever side they adopt in politics. But the two parties are the positive and negative poles that provide the current of electricity for our nation, and keep it going properly. Also they safeguard our interests by watching one another."

"What is your preference, sir?"

"I've always been a Republican, whenever I dabbled in politics, which hasn't been often."

"Then I will be a Republican."

"Very good."

"I am sorry to say that I know nothing about politics and have no convictions on the subject. Who is to oppose the Honorable Erastus on the--on our side?"

"I don't know yet. The primaries for the nomination are not to be held for two weeks, and the Republican candidates seem shy about coming forward."

"Didn't you say the district was Republican?"

"Yes; but since Hopkins defeated them last term they seem to be terrified, and no one likes to offer himself as a possible sacrifice."

"That feeling will probably elect Mr. Hopkins," declared Kenneth, with conviction.

"Unless--"

"Unless what, sir?"

"Unless we come to the rescue of the Republicans and take a hand in local politics ourselves, my lad."

Kenneth pushed back his chair and rose from the table. He walked to the window and stood there whistling for a few moments, and then left the room without a word.

For a time Mr. Watson sat silently musing.

"Perhaps I'm inviting trouble," he murmured; "but I am sure I am doing right. The boy needs a good shaking up and more knowledge of his fellow-men. If I can get Kenneth interested, this plan of mine will be of great benefit to him."

Then he, too, left the breakfast table, and wandering into the garden saw Kenneth busy at his easel in a shady corner.

For a day or so the subject was not resumed, and then Mr. Watson casually introduced it.

"A law could be passed in the State Legislature forbidding the display of all advertising signs in public places in this county," he suggested.

The boy looked at him eagerly.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I am positive," was the answer. "It is merely a question of privilege."

"And you think we might hire Hopkins to pass such a law?"

"No; we couldn't trust him."

"Then what do you propose?"

"I'll think it over, my lad, and let you know."

Then he walked away, leaving Kenneth much pleased with the idea he had advanced. Indeed, he was so much interested in the suggestion that he himself referred to the subject at the first opportunity.

"I don't like to be beaten, sir, once I've undertaken to do a thing," he said. "So if such a law can be passed I'll do all I can to elect the man who will pass it."

"I thought as much," the old lawyer replied, smiling. "But there's only one man who could go to the legislature with enough influence to win the votes to carry such a unique measure through."

"And who is that, sir?"

"Kenneth Forbes, the owner of Elmhurst, and the largest taxpayer in the county."

"Me, sir?"

"You're the man."

"A State Representative?"

"It's an honorable office. It's an important office, properly filled.

You might not only beautify your district by having those objectionable signs prohibited, but do many other things to better the condition of the farmers. And that isn't all."

"What's the rest, Mr. Watson?"

"You owe something to yourself, lad. All your young life you've been too self-contained and exclusive in your habits. 'The noblest study of mankind is man.' It would broaden you to go into politics for a time, and do much to develop your character and relieve the monotony of your existence."

Kenneth frowned.

"It won't be easy, you know. It'll be a fight, and a hard one, for Hopkins won't give up his job if he can help it."

The boy brightened again.

"I like a good fight," he said, wistfully. "If I thought--if I believed I could fill the position with credit--I might undertake it."

"I'll answer for that," retorted the old man, highly pleased with his

easy victory. "You win the fight, Ken, and I'll guarantee you'll outclass the majority of your fellow Representatives. It's a good state, too."

So the thing was undertaken, and both the young man and the old threw themselves into the contest with energy and determination.

Mr. Watson rode in his buggy all over their district during the next fortnight, and interviewed the farmers and townsmen of the legislative district. When it became noised about that the young owner of Elmhurst, now barely twenty-one, had determined to enter politics, and asked for the nomination of Representative, no other Republican ventured to oppose him.

It was understood to mean a hard fight, and even the most sturdy Republican was inclined to fear that the present incumbent of the office would be elected to succeed himself.

So the primaries were held and Kenneth attended and made a speech, and was warmly applauded. His nomination was a matter of course, and he went home the unanimous choice of his party, because none of the older and more discreet politicians ventured to risk defeat.

The Hon. Erastus Hopkins well knew this feeling, and smiled in his pompous and most sardonic manner when he learned who was his opponent. Having conquered an old and tried Republican warrior in the last

campaign, he had no fears in regard to this mere boy, who could know little of political intrigue.

"He won't put up enough of a fight to make it interesting, I'm afraid," Mr. Hopkins confided to his cronies.

But he didn't intend to take chances, so he began the campaign with his usual vigor.

It was now the middle of September, and the election was to be early in November.