

CHAPTER VI

A GOOD START

At an early breakfast next morning Patsy announced the program for the day.

"Uncle John and I will drive over to the village," she said, "and perhaps we'll be gone all day. Don't worry if we're not back for luncheon. Louise and Mr. Watson are going in the phaeton to visit some of the near-by farmers. Take one road, dear, and follow it straight along, as far as it keeps within our legislative district, and visit every farm-house on the way."

"The farmers will all be busy in the fields," said Kenneth.

"Louise doesn't care about the farmers," retorted Patsy. "She's going to talk to their wives."

"Wives don't vote, Patsy."

"They tell their husbands how to vote, though," declared Louise, with a laugh. "Let me win the women and I'll win the men."

"What am I to do?" asked Beth.

"You're to stay at home and write several articles for the newspapers. There are seven important papers in our district, and five of them are Republican. Make a strong argument, Beth. You're our publicity department. Also get up copy for some hand-bills and circular letters. I want to get a circular letter to every voter in the district."

"All right," said Beth. "I know what you want."

There was an inspiring air of business about these preparations, and the girls were all eager to begin work. Scarcely was breakfast finished when the two equipages were at the door. Louise and Mr. Watson at once entered the phaeton and drove away, the girl delighted at the prospect of visiting the farmers' wives and winning them by her plausible speeches. Conversation was Louise's strong point. She loved to talk and argue, and her manner was so confiding and gracious that she seldom failed to interest her listeners.

Patsy and Uncle John drove away. In Kenneth's buggy to the town, and during the five-mile drive Patsy counseled gravely with her shrewd uncle in regard to "ways and means."

"This thing requires prompt action, Patsy," he said, "and if we're going to do things that count they've got to be done on a big scale."

"True," she admitted. "But oughtn't we to be a little careful about

spending Kenneth's money?"

"I'll be your temporary banker," said the old gentleman, "and keep track of the accounts. If we win we'll present Kenneth our bill, and if we fail I'll have the satisfaction of getting rid of some of that dreadful income that is swamping me."

This was always Uncle John's cry. His enormous fortune was a constant bugbear to him. He had been so interested in his business enterprises for many years that he had failed to realize how his fortune was growing, and it astounded him to wake up one day and find himself possessed of many millions. He had at once retired from active business and invested his millions in ways that would cause him the least annoyance; but the income on so large a sum was more than he could take care of, and even Major Doyle, who managed these affairs for his brother-in-law, was often puzzled to know what to do with the money that accumulated.

Doubtless no one will ever know how much good these two kindly men accomplished between them in their quiet, secretive way. Dozens of deserving young men were furnished capital to start them in business; dozens more were being educated at universities at Uncle John's expense. Managers of worthy charities were familiar with John Merrick's signature on checks, and yet the vast fortune grew with leaps and bounds. Mr. Merrick's life was so simple and unostentatious that his personal expenses, however erratic some of his actions, could not make much

headway against his interest account, and nothing delighted him more than to find a way to "get even with fate by reckless squandering," as he quaintly expressed it. He was far too shrewd to become the prey of designing people, but welcomed any legitimate channel in which to unload his surplus.

So Mr. Merrick had been revolving the possibilities of this unique political campaign in his mind, and had decided to do some things that would open the bucolic eyes of Kenneth's constituents in wonder. He did not confide all his schemes to Patsy, but having urged his nieces to attempt this conquest he had no intention of allowing them to suffer defeat if he could help it.

The little town of Elmwood was quiet and practically deserted when they drove into it. The farmers were too busy with the harvest to "come to town for trading" except on Saturdays, and the arrival and departure of the two daily trains did not cause more than a ripple of excitement in the village.

Patsy decided she would shop at each and every store in the place, and engage the store-keepers in conversation about the election.

"It's important to win these people," she declared, "because they are close to every farmer who comes to town to trade; and their own votes count, too."

"I'll run over to the bank," said Uncle John, "and get acquainted there."

So he tied the horses to a post and let Patsy proceed alone upon her mission, while he wandered over to a little brick building of neat appearance which bore the inscription "Bank" in gold letters on its plate-glass window.

"Mr. Warren in?" he asked the clerk at the window.

The banker, a dignified old gentleman of considerable ability, came out of his private office and greeted his visitor very cordially. He had known Uncle John when the millionaire visited Elmhurst two years before, and since then had learned more particulars concerning him. So there was no need of an introduction, and Mr. Warren was delighted at the prospect of business relations with this famous personage.

The bank, although small and only one story high, was the most modern and imposing building in the village; and it was fitted with modern conveniences, for Mr. Warren had been successful and prosperous. In his private office were local and long distance telephones, a direct connection with the telegraph operator at the station, and other facilities for accomplishing business promptly. Uncle John had remembered this fact, and it had a prominent place in his plans.

He followed the banker into his private office and told him briefly his

intention to forward the interests of his young friend Kenneth Forbes for Member of the Legislature.

The old gentleman shook his head, at first, predicting failure. Young Forbes was his most important customer, and he respected him highly; but this anti-sign issue bade fair to ruin all his chances.

"The idea is too progressive and advanced to be considered at this time," he stated, positively. "The encroachments of advertisers on personal property may lead to a revolt in the future, but it is still too early to direct popular opinion against them."

"Isn't Forbes a better man for the place than Hopkins?" asked Uncle John.

"Undoubtedly, sir. And I think Forbes would have won, had not Hopkins forced this unfortunate issue upon him. As it is, our young friend cannot avoid the consequences of his quixotic action."

"He doesn't wish to avoid them," was the quiet reply. "We're going to win on that issue or not at all."

"I'm afraid it's hopeless, sir."

"May I count on your assistance?"

"In every way."

"Thank you, Mr. Warren, I'm going to spend a lot of money. Put this draft for fifty thousand to my credit as a starter."

"Ah, I begin to understand. But--"

"You don't understand at all, yet. May I use your long distance telephone?"

"Of course, sir."

Uncle John had secured considerable information from Mr. Watson, and this enabled him to act comprehensively. The advertising sign business in this part of the state was controlled by two firms, who contracted directly with the advertisers and then had the signs painted upon spaces secured from the farmers by their wide-awake agents. These signs were contracted for by the year, but the firms controlling the spaces always inserted protective clauses that provided for the removal of any sign when certain conditions required such removal. In such cases a rebate was allowed to the advertiser. This protective clause was absolutely necessary in case of fire, alteration or removal of buildings or destruction of fences and sign-boards by weather or the requirements of the owners. It was this saving clause in the contracts of which Uncle John had decided to take advantage. The contracting sign painters were merely in the business to make money.

Mr. Merrick got the head of the concern in Cleveland over the telephone within half an hour. He talked with the man at length, and talked with the convincing effect that the mention of money has. When he hung up the receiver Uncle John was smiling. Then he called for the Chicago firm. With this second advertising company he met with more difficulties, and Mr. Warren had to come to the telephone and assure the man that Mr. Merrick was able to pay all he agreed to, and that the money was on deposit in his bank. That enabled Mr. Merrick to conclude his arrangements. He knew that he was being robbed, but the co-operation of the big Chicago firm was necessary to his plans.

Then, the telephone having served its purpose, Mr. Warren took Uncle John across the street to the newspaper office and introduced him to Charley Briggs, the editor.

Briggs was a man with one eye, a sallow complexion and sandy hair that stuck straight up from his head. He set type for his paper, besides editing it, and Uncle John found him wearing a much soiled apron, with his bare arms and fingers smeared with printer's ink.

"Mr. Merrick wants to see you on business, Charley," said the banker.

"Whatever he agrees to I will guarantee, to the full resources of my bank."

The editor pricked up his ears and dusted a chair for his visitor with

his apron. It wasn't easy to make a living running a paper in Elmwood, and if there was any business pending he was anxious to secure it.

Uncle John waited until Mr. Warren had left him alone with the newspaper man. Then he said:

"I understand your paper is Democratic, Mr. Briggs."

"That's a mistake, sir," replied the editor, evasively. "The Herald is really independent, but in political campaigns we adopt the side we consider the most deserving of support."

"You're supporting Hopkins just now."

"Only mildly; only mildly, sir."

"What is he paying you?"

"Why, 'Rast and I haven't come to a definite settlement yet. I ought to get a hundred dollars out of this campaign, but 'Rast thinks fifty is enough. You see, he plans on my support anyhow, and don't like to spend more than he's obliged to."

"Why does he plan on your support?"

"He's the only live one in the game, Mr. Merrick. 'Rast is one of

us--he's one of the people--and it's policy for me to support him instead of the icicle up at Elmhurst, who don't need the job and don't care whether he gets it or not."

"Is that true?"

"I think so. And there's another thing. Young Forbes is dead against advertising, and advertising is the life of a newspaper. Why, there isn't a paper in the district that's supporting Forbes this year."

"You've a wrong idea of the campaign, Mr. Briggs," said Uncle John. "It is because Mr. Forbes believes in newspaper advertising, and wants to protect it, that he's against these signs. That's one reason, anyhow. Can't you understand that every dollar spent for painting signs takes that much away from your newspapers?"

"Why, perhaps there's something in that, Mr. Merrick. I'd never looked at it that way before."

"Now, see here, Mr. Briggs. I'll make you a proposition. I'll give you two hundred and fifty to support Mr. Forbes in this campaign, and if he's elected I'll give you five hundred extra."

"Do you mean that, sir?" asked the editor, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his ears.

"I do. Draw up a contract and I'll sign it. And here's a check for your two-fifty in advance."

The editor drew up the agreement with a pen that trembled a little.

"And now," said Uncle John, "get busy and hustle for Kenneth Forbes."

"I will, sir," said Briggs, with unexpected energy. "I mean to win that extra five hundred!"