

CHAPTER VIII

THE HONORABLE ERASTUS IS ASTONISHED

The Honorable Erastus Hopkins had been absent at the state capital for several days, looking after various matters of business; for he was a thrifty man, and watched his investments carefully.

Whenever his acquaintances asked about his chances for re-election, the Honorable Erastus Hopkins winked, laughed and declared, "it's a regular walk-over."

"Who is opposing you?" once asked a gray-haired Senator of much political experience, who had met Mr. Hopkins at luncheon.

"Young feller named Forbes--a boy, sir--with no notion about the game at all. He was pledged to an unpopular issue, so I was mighty glad to have him run against me."

"What issue is he pledged to?" asked the Senator.

"Oh, he's agin putting advertising signs on fences and barns, and wants to have them prohibited, like the infernal fool he is."

"Indeed. Then he's a progressive fellow. And you say his issue is

unpopular?"

"That's what it is. It'll kill his chances--if he ever had any."

"Strange," mused the Senator. "That issue has been a winning one usually."

"What do you mean?" asked the astonished Hopkins.

"Why, the anti-sign fight has won in several places throughout the country, and local laws have been passed prohibiting them. Didn't you know that?"

"No!" said Hopkins.

"Well, it's true. Of course I do not know the temper of your people, but in a country district such as yours I would think an issue of that sort very hard to combat."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the Honorable Erastus. "Ev'ry man Jack's agin the fool notion."

"Then perhaps the people don't understand it."

"Forbes has given up already," continued Hopkins, laughing at the recollection. "He's gone back into his shell like a turtle, an' won't

come out to fight. I tell you, Senator, he's the worst licked candidate that ever ran for office."

Nevertheless, the suggestion that the anti-sign issue had been successful in other localities made Mr. Hopkins a trifle uneasy, and he decided to return home and keep the fight going until after election, whether young Forbes came out of his shell or not.

He arrived at Hilldale on the early morning train and went to his house for breakfast. To his amazement he found two great banners strung across the village streets bearing the words: "Vote for Forbes--the People's Champion!"

"Who in thunder could 'a' done that?" murmured Mr. Hopkins, staring open-mouthed at the great banners. Then he scratched his head with a puzzled air and went home.

Mrs. Hopkins, a tired-looking woman in a bedraggled morning wrapper, was getting the breakfast. She did not participate largely in the prosperity of her husband, and often declared she was "worked to death," although there were no children to care for.

"When did those Forbes banners go up?" asked Mr. Hopkins, irritably.

"I dunno, 'Rast. I don't keep track o' such things. But all the town was out to the girls' meetin' last night, an' I went along to watch the

fun."

"What girls' meeting?"

"The girls thet air workin' fer to elect Mr. Forbes. It was in the town hall, an' all three of the girls made speeches."

"What about?"

"About Mr. Forbes, and how he orter be elected. He wants to beautify the farm places by doin' away with signs, an' he wants better roads, an' three new school-houses, 'cause the ones we've got now ain't big enough. An--"

"You blamed idiot! What are you talking about?" roared the exasperated Hopkins.

"Oh, you needn't rave at me, 'Rast Hopkins, just 'cause you're gettin' licked. I thought your goose was cooked the minnit these girls got to work."

Mr. Hopkins stared at her with a dazed expression.

"Be sensible, Mary, and tell me who these girls are. I haven't heard of 'em."

"Why, they're cousins o' Kenneth Forbes, it seems, an' come from New York to git him elected."

"What are they like?"

"They're swell dressers, 'Rast, an' nice appearin' girls, and mighty sharp with their tongues. They had a good meetin' last night and there'll be another at the town hall next week."

"Pah! Girls! Forbes oughter be ashamed of himself, to send a bunch o' girls out electioneerin'. I never heard of such an irregular thing. What do the boys say?"

"Folks don't say much to me, 'Rast. They wouldn't, you know. But I guess your game is up."

He made no reply. Here, indeed, was information of a startling character. And it came upon him like thunder out of a clear sky. Yet the thing might not be so important as Mrs. Hopkins feared.

Very thoughtfully he unfolded the morning paper, and the next moment uttered a roar of wrath and vexation. Briggs was one of his stand-bys, and the Herald heretofore had always supported him; yet here across the first page were big black letters saying: "Vote for Forbes!" And the columns were full of articles and paragraphs praising Forbes and declaring that he could and would do more for the district than Hopkins.

"I must see Briggs," muttered the Honorable Erastus. "He's tryin' to make me put up that hundred--an' I guess I'll have to do it."

He looked over the other newspapers which were heaped upon his desk in the sitting-room, and was disgusted to find all but one of the seven papers in the district supporting Forbes. Really, the thing began to look serious. And he had only been absent a week!

He had not much appetite for breakfast when Mrs. Hopkins set it before him. But the Honorable Erastus was a born fighter, and his discovery had only dismayed him for a brief time. Already he was revolving ways of contesting this new activity in the enemy's camp, and decided that he must talk with "the boys" at once.

So he hurried away from the breakfast table and walked down-town. Latham was first on his route and he entered the drug store.

"Hullo, Jim."

"Good morning, Mr. Hopkins. Anything I can do for you?" asked the polite druggist.

"Yes, a lot. Tell me what these fool girls are up to, that are plugging for Forbes. I've been away for a week, you know."

"Can't say, Mr. Hopkins, I'm sure. Business is pretty lively these days, and it keeps me hustling. I've no time for politics."

"But we've got to wake up, Jim, we Democrats, or they'll give us a run for our money."

"Oh, this is a Republican district, sir. We can't hope to win it often, and especially in a case like this."

"Why not?"

"Looks to me as if you'd bungled things, Hopkins. But I'm not interested in this campaign. Excuse me; if there's nothing you want, I've got a prescription to fill."

Mr. Hopkins walked out moodily. It was very evident that Latham had changed front. But they had never been very staunch friends; and he could find a way to even scores with the little druggist later.

Thompson was behind his desk at the general store when Hopkins walked in.

"Look here," said the Honorable Representative, angrily, "what's been going on in Elmwood? What's all this plugging for Forbes mean?"

Thompson gave him a sour look over the top of his desk.

"Addressin' them remarks to me, 'Rast?"

"Yes--to you! You've been loafing on your job, old man, and it won't do--it won't do at all. You should have put a stop to these things. What right have these girls to interfere in a game like this?"

"Oh, shut up, 'Rast."

"Thompson! By crickey, I won't stand this from you. Goin' back on me, eh?"

"I'm a Republication, 'Rast."

"So you are," said Mr. Hopkins slowly, his temper at white heat "And that mortgage is two months overdue."

"Go over to the bank and get your money, then. It's waiting for you, Hopkins--interest and all. Go and get it and let me alone. I'm busy."

Perhaps the politician had never been so surprised in his life. Anger gave way to sudden fear, and he scrutinized the averted countenance of Thompson carefully.

"Where'd you raise the money, Thompson?"

"None of your business. I raised it."

"Forbes, eh? Forbes has bought you up, I see. Grateful fellow, ain't you--when I loaned you money to keep you from bankruptcy!"

"You did, Hopkins. You made me your slave, and threatened me every minute, unless I did all your dirty work. Grateful? You've led me a dog's life. But I'm through with you now--for good and all."

Hopkins turned and walked out without another word. In the dentist's office Dr. Squiers was sharpening and polishing his instruments.

"Hello, Archie."

"Hello, 'Rast. 'Bout time you was getting back, old man. We're having a big fight on our hands, I can tell you."

"Tell me more," said Mr. Hopkins, taking a chair with a sigh of relief at finding one faithful friend. "What's up, Archie?"

"An invasion of girls, mostly. They took us by surprise, the other day, and started a campaign worthy of old political war-horses. There's some shrewd politician behind them, I know, or they wouldn't have nailed us up in our coffins with such business-like celerity."

"Talk sense, Archie. What have they done? What can they do? Pah!

Girls!"

"Don't make a mistake, 'Rast. That's what I did, before I understood. When I heard that three girls were electioneering for Forbes I just laughed. Then I made a discovery. They're young and rich, and evidently ladies. They're pretty, too, and the men give in at the first attack. They don't try to roast you. That's their cleverness. They tell what Forbes can do, with all his money, if he's Representative, and they swear he'll do it."

"Never mind," said Hopkins, easily. "We'll win the men back again."

"But these girls are riding all over the country, talking to farmers' wives, and they're organizing a woman's political club. The club is to meet at Elmhurst and to be fed on the fat of the land; so every woman wants to belong. They've got two expensive automobiles down from the city, with men to make them go, and they're spending money right and left."

"That's bad," said Hopkins, shifting uneasily, "for I haven't much to spend, myself. But most money is fooled away in politics. When I spend a cent it counts, I can tell you."

"You'll have to spend some, 'Rast, to keep your end up. I'm glad you're back, for we Democrats have been getting demoralized. Some of the boys are out for Forbes already."

Hopkins nodded, busy with his thoughts.

"I've talked with Latham. But he didn't count. And they've bought up Thompson. What else they've done I can't tell yet. But one thing's certain, Doc; we'll win out in a canter. I'm too old a rat to be caught in a trap like this. I've got resources they don't suspect."

"I believe you, 'Rast. They've caught on to the outside fakes to win votes; but they don't know the inside deals yet."

"You're right. But I must make a bluff to offset their daylight campaign, so as not to lose ground with the farmers. They're the ones that count, after all; not the town people. See here, Doc, I had an idea something might happen, and so I arranged with my breakfast food company to let me paint a hundred signs in this neighborhood. A hundred, mind you! and that means a big laugh on Forbes, and the good will of the farmers who sell their spaces, and not a cent out of my pocket. How's that for a checkmate?"

"That's fine," replied Dr. Squiers. "There's been considerable talk about this sign business, and I'm told that at the meeting last night one of the girls made a speech about it, and said the farmers were being converted, and were now standing out for clean fences and barns."

"That's all humbug!"

"I think so, myself. These people are like a flock of sheep. Get them started a certain way and you can't head them off," observed the dentist.

"Then we must start them our way," declared Hopkins. "I've got the order for these signs in my pocket, and I'll have 'em painted all over the district in a week. Keep your eyes open, Doc. If we've got to fight we won't shirk it; but I don't look for much trouble from a parcel of girls."

Mr. Hopkins was quite cheerful by this time, for he had thought out the situation and his "fighting blood was up," as he expressed it.

He walked away whistling softly to himself and decided that he would go over to the livery stable, get a horse and buggy, drive out into the country, and spend the day talking with the farmers.

But when he turned the corner into the side street where the livery was located he was astonished to find a row of horses and wagons lining each side of the street, and in each vehicle two men in white jumpers and overalls. The men were in charge of huge cans of paints, assorted brushes, ladders, scaffolds and other paraphernalia.

There must have been twenty vehicles, altogether, and some of the rigs were already starting out and driving briskly away in different

directions.

Mr. Hopkins was puzzled. He approached one of the white-overalled men who was loading cans of paint into a wagon and inquired:

"Who are you fellows?"

"Sign painters," answered the man, with an amused look.

"Who do you work for?"

"The Carson Advertising Sign Company of Cleveland."

"Oh, I see," replied Hopkins. "Got a big job in this neighborhood?"

"Pretty big, sir."

"Who's your foreman?"

"Smith. He's in the livery office."

Then the man climbed into his wagon and drove away, and Hopkins turned into the livery office. A thin-faced man with sharp eyes was talking with the proprietor.

"Is this Mr. Smith?" asked Hopkins.

"Yes."

"Of the Carson Advertising Sign Company?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've got a big job for you. My name's Hopkins. I want a hundred big signs painted mighty quick."

"Sorry, sir; we've got all we can handle here for two or three weeks."

"It's got to be done quick or not at all. Can't you send for more men?"

"We've got thirty-eight on this job, and can't get any more for love or money. Had to send to Chicago for some of these."

"Rush job?"

"Yes, sir. You'll have to excuse me. I've got to get started. This is only our second day and we're pretty busy."

"Wait a minute," called the bewildered Hopkins, following Smith to his buggy. "What concern is your firm doing all this painting for?"

"A man named Merrick."

Then the foreman drove away, and Mr. Hopkins was left greatly puzzled.

"Merrick--Merrick!" he repeated. "I don't remember any big advertiser by that name. It must be some new concern. Anyhow, it all helps in my fight against Forbes."

He again returned to the livery office and asked for a rig.

"Everything out, Mr. Hopkins. I've hired everything to be had in town for this sign-painting gang."

But Mr. Hopkins was not to be balked. As long as these sign-painters were doing missionary work for his cause among the farmers, he decided to drive over to Fairview and see the party leaders in that important town. So he went back to Dr. Squiers's house and borrowed the Doctor's horse and buggy.

He drove along the turnpike for a time in silence. Then it struck him that there was a peculiar air of neatness about the places he passed. The barns and fences all seemed newly painted, and he remembered that he hadn't seen an advertising sign since he left town.

A mile farther on he came upon a gang of the sign painters, who with their huge brushes were rapidly painting the entire length of a weather-worn fence with white paint.

Mr. Hopkins reined in and watched them for a few moments.

"You sign-painters don't seem to be getting any signs started," he observed.

"No," replied one of the men, laughing. "This is a peculiar job for our firm to tackle. We've made a contract to paint out every sign in the district."

"Paint 'em out!"

"Yes, cover them up with new paint, and get rid of them."

"But how about the advertisers? Don't they own the spaces now?"

"They did; but they've all been bought up. John Merrick owns the spaces now, and we're working for John Merrick."

"Who's he?"

"Some friend of Mr. Forbes, up at Elmhurst."

Mr. Hopkins was not a profane man, but he said a naughty word. And then he cut his horse so fiercely with the whip that the poor beast gave a neigh of terror, and started down the road at a gallop.