

CHAPTER IX

OL' WILL ROGERS

Beth had her folding table out in the rose garden where Kenneth was working at his easel, and while the boy painted she wrote her campaign letters and "editorials."

At first Ken had resented the management of his campaign by his three girl friends; but soon he was grateful for their assistance and proud of their talents. It was at their own request that he refrained from any active work himself, merely appearing at the meetings they planned, where he made his speeches and impressed his hearers with his earnestness. He was really an excellent speaker, and his youth and enthusiasm counted much in his favor.

He protested mildly when Louise invited the Women's Political Club to meet at Elmhurst on Thursday afternoon, but Mr. Watson assured him that this was an important play for popularity, so he promised to meet them. Tables were to be spread upon the lawn, for the late October weather was mild and delightful, and Louise planned to feed the women in a way that they would long remember.

Patsy had charge of the towns and Louise of the country districts, but Beth often aided Louise, who had a great deal of territory to cover.

The automobiles Uncle John had ordered sent down were a great assistance to the girls, and enabled them to cover twice as much territory in a day as would have been done with horses.

But, although they worked so tirelessly and earnestly, it was not all plain sailing with the girl campaigners. Yet though they met with many rebuffs, they met very little downright impertinence. Twice Louise was asked to leave a house where she had attempted to make a proselyte, and once a dog was set upon Beth by an irate farmer, who resented her automobile as much as he did her mission. As for Patsy, she was often told in the towns that "a young girl ought to be in better business than mixing up in politics," and she was sensitive enough once or twice to cry over these reproaches when alone in her chamber. But she maintained a cheerful front; and, in truth, all the girls enjoyed their work immensely.

While Beth and Kenneth were in the garden this sunny afternoon James came to say that a man wanted to see "one of the politics young ladies."

"Shall we send him about his business, Beth?" asked the boy.

"Oh, no; we can't afford to lose a single vote. Bring him here, James, please," said the girl.

So presently a wizened little man in worn and threadbare garments, his

hat in his hand, came slowly into the garden. His sunken cheeks were covered with stubby gray whiskers, his shoulders were stooped and bent from hard work, and his hands bore evidences of a life of toil. Yet the eyes he turned upon Beth, as she faced him had a wistful and pleading look that affected her strangely.

"Afternoon, miss," he said, in a hesitating voice. "I--I'm Rogers, miss; ol' Will Rogers. I--I s'pose you hain't heerd o' me before."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Rogers," replied the girl in her pleasant voice. "Have you come to see me about the election?"

"It's--it's sump'n 'bout the 'lection, an' then agin it ain't. But I run the chanct o' seein' ye, because we're in desprit straits, an' Nell advised that I hev a talk with ye. 'Frank an' outright,' says Nell. 'Don't beat about the bush,' says she. 'Go right to th' point an' they'll say yes or no.'"

Beth laughed merrily, and the boy smiled as he wielded his brush with delicate strokes.

"Ye mustn't mind me, miss," said Will Rogers, in a deprecating tone.

"I'm--I'm sommut broke up an' discouraged, an' ain't th' man I used to be. Nell knows that, an' she orter came herself; but it jes' made her cry to think o' it, an' so I says I'll come an' do the best I kin."

Beth was really interested now.

"Sit down on this bench, Mr. Rogers," she said, "and I'll listen to whatever you have to say."

He sat down willingly, bent forward as he rested upon the garden bench, and twirled his hat slowly in his hands.

"Taint easy, ye know, miss, to say some things, an' this is one o' the hardest," he began.

"Go on," said Beth, encouragingly, for old Will had suddenly stopped short and seemed unable to proceed.

"They say, miss, as you folks is a-spendin' uv a lot o' money on this election, a-gittin' votes, an' sich like," he said, in an altered tone.

"It costs a little to run a political campaign," acknowledged Beth.

"They say money's bein' poured out liken water--to git votes," he persisted.

"Well, Mr. Rogers?"

"Well, that's how it started, ye see. We're so agonizin' poor, Nell thought we orter git some o' the money while it's goin'."

The girl was much amused. Such frankness was both unusual and refreshing.

"Have you a vote to sell?" she asked.

He did not answer at once, but sat slowly twirling his hat.

"That's jet' what Nell thought ye'd ask," he said, finally, "an' she knew if ye did it was all up with our plan. Guess I'll be goin', miss."

He rose slowly from his seat, but the girl did not intend to lose any of the fun this queer individual might yet furnish.

"Sit down, Mr. Rogers," she said, "and tell me why you can't answer my questions?"

"I guess I'll hev to speak out an' tell all," said he, his voice trembling a little, "although I thought fer a minnit I could see my way without. I can't sell my vote, miss, 'cause I've been plannin' t'vote fer Mr. Forbes anyhow. But we wanted some uv th' money that's being wasted, an' we wanted it mighty bad."

"Why?"

"Thet's the hard part uv it, miss; but I'm goin' to tell you. Did ye

ever hear o' Lucy?"

"No, Mr. Rogers."

"Lucy's our girl--the on'y chick er child we ever had. She's a pretty girl, is Lucy; a good deal liken her mother; wi' the same high spirits my Nell had afore she broke down. Mostly Nell cries, nowadays."

"Yes. Go on."

"Lucy had a schoolin', an' we worked hard to give it her, fer my land ain't much account, nohow. An' when she grew up she had more boys comin' to see her than any gal this side o' Fairview, an' one o' 'em caught Lucy's fancy. But she was too young to marry, an' she wanted to be earnin' money; so she got a job workin' fer Doc Squiers, over to Elmwood. He's the dentist there, an' Lucy helped with the housework an' kept the office slicked up, an' earned ev'ry penny she got."

He stopped here, and looked vacantly around.

Beth tried to help the old man.

"And then?" she asked, softly.

"Then come the trouble, miss. One day ol' Mis' Squiers, the Doc's mother, missed a di'mon' ring. She laid it on the mantel an' it was

gone, an' she said as Lucy took it. Lucy didn't take it, an' after they'd tried to make my gal confess as she was a thief they give 'er three days to hand up the ring or the money it was worth, or else they'd hev her arrested and sent t' jail. Lucy didn't take it, ye know. She jes' couldn't do sech a thing, natcherly."

"I know," said Beth, sympathetically.

"So she comes home, heartbroken, an' told us about it, an' we didn't hev th' money nuther. It were sixty dollars they wanted, or th' ring; an' we didn't hev neither of 'em."

"Of course not."

"Well, Tom come over thet night to see Lucy, hearin' she was home, an'--"

"Who is Tom?"

"Thet's Tom Gates, him thet--but I'm comin' to thet, miss. Tom always loved Lucy, an' wanted to marry her; but his folks is as poor as we are, so the young 'uns had to wait. Tom worked at the mill over t' Fairview--the big saw-mill where they make the lumber an' things."

"I know."

"He was the bookkeeper, fer Tom had schoolin', too; an' he took private lessons in bookkeepin' from ol' Cheeseman. So he had got hired at the mill, an' had a likely job, an' was doin' well. An' when Tom heerd about Lucy's trouble, an' thet she had only two days left before goin' to jail, he up an' says: 'I'll get the money, Lucy: don' you worry a bit.' 'Oh, Tom!' says she, 'hev you got sixty dollars saved already?' 'I've got it, Lucy,' says he, 'an' I'll go over tomorrow an' pay Doc Squiers. Don' you worry any more. Forget all about it.' Well o' course, miss, that helped a lot. Nell an' Lucy both felt the disgrace of the thing, but it wouldn't be a public disgrace, like goin' to jail; so we was all mighty glad Tom had that sixty dollars."

"It was very fortunate," said Beth, filling in another pause.

"The nex' day Tom were as good as his word. He paid Doc Squiers an' got a receipt an' giv it to Lucy. Then we thought th' trouble was over, but it had on'y just begun. Monday mornin' Tom was arrested over t' the mill fer passin' a forged check an' gettin' sixty dollars on it. Lucy was near frantic with grief. She walked all the way to Fairview, an' they let her see Tom in the jail. He tol' her it was true he forged th' check, but he did it to save her. He was a man an' it wouldn't hurt fer him to go to jail so much as it would a girl. He said he was glad he did it, an' didn't mind servin' a sentence in prison. I think, miss, as Tom meant thet--ev'ry word uv it. But Lucy broke down under the thing an' raved an' cried, an' nuther Nell ner I could do anything with her. She said she'd ruined Tom's life an' all thet, an' she didn't want to live

herself. Then she took sick, an' Nell an' I nursed her as careful as we could. How'n the wurld she ever got away we can't make out, nohow."

"Did she get away?" asked the girl, noting that the old man's eyes were full of tears and his lips trembling.

"Yes, miss. She's bin gone over ten days, now, an' we don't even know where to look fer her; our girl--our poor Lucy. She ain't right in her head, ye know, or she'd never a done it. She'd never a left us like this in th' world. 'Taint like our Lucy."

Kenneth had turned around on his stool and was regarding old Will Rogers earnestly, brush and pallet alike forgotten. Beth was trying to keep the tears out of her own eyes, for the old man's voice was even more pathetic than his words.

"Ten days ago!" said Kenneth. "And she hasn't been found yet?"

"We can't trace her anywhere, an' Nell has broke down at las', an' don't do much but cry. It's hard, sir--I can't bear to see Nell cry. She'd sich high sperrits, onct."

"Where's the boy Tom?" asked Kenneth, somewhat gruffly.

"He's in the jail yet, waitin' to be tried. Court don't set till next week, they say."

"And where do you live, Rogers?"

"Five miles up the Fairview road. 'Taint much of a place--Nell says I've always bin a shif'les lot, an' I guess it's true. Yesterday your hired men painted all the front o' my fence--painted it white--not only where th' signs was, but th' whole length of it. We didn't ask it done, but they jes' done it. I watched 'em, an' Nell says if we on'y had th' money thet was wasted on thet paint an' labor, we might find our Lucy. 'It's a shame,' says Nell, 'all thet 'lection money bein' thrown away on paint when it might save our poor crazy child.' I hope it ain't wrong, sir; but thet's what I thought, too. So we laid plans fer me to come here today. Ef I kin get a-hold o' any o' thet money honest, I want to do it."

"Have you got a horse?" asked Kenneth.

"Not now. I owned one las' year, but he died on me an' I can't get another nohow."

"Did you walk here?" asked Beth.

"Yes, miss; o' course. I've walked the hull county over a-tryin' to find Lucy. I don' mind the walking much."

There was another pause, while old Will Rogers looked anxiously at the

boy and the girl, and they looked at each other. Then Beth took out her purse.

"I want to hire your services to help us in the election," she said, briskly. "I'll furnish you a horse and buggy and you can drive around and talk with people and try to find Lucy at the same time. This twenty dollars is to help you pay expenses. You needn't account for it; just help us as much as you can."

The old man straightened up and his eyes filled again.

"Nell said if it was a matter o' charity I mustn't take a cent," he observed, in a low voice.

"It isn't charity. It's business. And now that we know your story we mean to help you find your girl. Anyone would do that, you know. Tell me, what is Lucy like?"

"She's like Nell used to be."

"But we don't know your wife. Describe Lucy as well as you can. Is she tall?"

"Middlin', miss."

"Light or dark?"

"Heh?"

"Is her hair light or dark colored?"

"Middlin'; jes' middlin', miss."

"Well, is she stout or thin?"

"I should say sorter betwixt an' between, miss."

"How old is Lucy?"

"Jes' turned eighteen, miss."

"Never mind, Beth," interrupted the boy; "you won't learn much from old Will's description. But we'll see what can be done tomorrow. Call James and have him sent home in the rig he's going to use. It seems to me you're disposing rather freely of my horses and carts."

"Yes, Ken. You've nothing to say about your belongings just now. But if you object to this plan--"

"I don't. The girl must be found, and her father is more likely to find her than a dozen other searchers. He shall have the rig and welcome."

So it was that Will Rogers drove back to his heartbroken wife in a smart top-buggy, with twenty dollars in his pocket and a heart full of wonder and thanksgiving.