

CHAPTER XII

BETH MEETS A REBUFF

The campaign was now growing warm. Mr. Hopkins had come to realize that he had "the fight of his life" on his hands, and that defeat meant his political ruin. Close-fisted and miserly as he was, no one knew so well as the Honorable Erastus how valuable this position of Representative was to him in a financial way, and that by winning re-election he could find means to reimburse himself for all he had expended in the fight. So, to the surprise of the Democratic Committee and all his friends, Mr. Hopkins announced that he would oppose Forbes's aggressive campaign with an equal aggressiveness, and spend as many dollars in doing so as might be necessary.

He did not laugh at his opponents any longer. To himself he admitted their shrewdness and activity and acknowledged that an experienced head was managing their affairs.

One of Mr. Hopkins's first tasks after calling his faithful henchmen around him was to make a careful canvass of the voters of his district, to see what was still to be accomplished.

This canvass was quite satisfactory, for final report showed only about a hundred majority for Forbes. The district was naturally Republican by

six hundred majority, and Hopkins had previously been elected by a plurality of eighty-three; so that all the electioneering of the glib politicians, and the expenditure of vast sums of money in painting fences and barns, buying newspapers and flaunting Forbes banners in the breezes, had not cut into the Hopkins following to any serious extent.

But, to offset this cheering condition, the Democratic agents who made the canvass reported that there was an air of uncertainty throughout the district, and that many of those who declared for Hopkins were lukewarm and faint-hearted, and might easily be induced to change their votes. This was what must be prevented. The "weak-kneed" contingency must be strengthened and fortified, and a couple of hundred votes in one way or another secured from the opposition.

The Democratic Committee figured out a way to do this. Monroe County, where both Forbes and Hopkins resided, was one of the Democratic strongholds of the State. The portions of Washington and Jefferson Counties included in the Eighth District were as strongly Republican, and being more populous gave to the district its natural Republican majority. On the same ticket that was to elect a Representative to the State Legislature was the candidate for Sheriff of Monroe County. A man named Cummings was the Republican and Seth Reynolds, the liveryman, the Democratic nominee. Under ordinary conditions Reynolds was sure to be elected, but the Committee proposed to sacrifice him in order to elect Hopkins. The Democrats would bargain with the Republicans to vote for the Republican Sheriff if the Republicans would vote for the Democratic

Representative. This "trading votes," which was often done, was considered by the politicians quite legitimate. The only thing necessary was to "fix" Seth Reynolds, and this Hopkins arranged personally. The office of Sheriff would pay about two thousand a year, and this sum Hopkins agreed to pay the liveryman and so relieve him of all the annoyance of earning it.

Reynolds saw the political necessity of this sacrifice, and consented readily to the arrangement. Mr. Cummings, who was to profit by the deal, was called to a private consultation and agreed to slaughter Kenneth Forbes to secure votes for himself. It was thought that this clever arrangement would easily win the fight for Hopkins.

But the Honorable Erastus had no intention of "taking chances," or "monkeying with fate," as he tersely expressed it. Every scheme known to politicians must be worked, and none knew the intricate game better than Hopkins. This was why he held several long conferences with his friend Marshall, the manager at the mill. And this was why Kenneth and Beth discovered him conversing with the young woman in the buggy. Mr. Hopkins had picked her up from the path leading from the rear gate of the Elmhurst grounds, and she had given him accurate information concerning the movements of the girl campaigners. The description she gave of the coming reception to the Woman's Political League was so humorous and diverting that they were both laughing heartily over the thing when the young people passed them, and thus Mr. Hopkins failed to notice who the occupants of the other vehicle were.

He talked for an hour with the girl, gave her explicit instructions, thrust some money into her hand, and then drove her back to the bend in the path whence she quickly made her way up to the great house.

Louise was making great preparations to entertain the Woman's Political League, an organization she had herself founded, the members of which were wives of farmers in the district. These women were flattered by the attention of the young lady and had promised to assist in electing Mr. Forbes. Louise hoped for excellent results from this organization and wished the entertainment to be so effective in winning their good-will that they would work earnestly for the cause in which they were enlisted.

Patsy and Beth supported their cousin loyally and assisted in the preparations. The Fairview band was engaged to discourse as much harmony as it could produce, and the resources of the great house were taxed to entertain the guests. Tables were spread on the lawn and a dainty but substantial repast was to be served.

The day of the entertainment was as sunny and mild as heart could desire.

By ten o'clock the farm wagons began to drive up, loaded with women and children, for all were invited except the grown men. This was the first occasion within a generation when such an entertainment had been given

at Elmhurst, and the only one within the memory of man where the neighbors and country people had been invited guests. So all were eager to attend and enjoy the novel event.

The gardens and grounds were gaily decorated with Chinese and Japanese lanterns, streamers and Forbes banners. There were great tanks of lemonade, and tables covered with candies and fruits for the children, and maids and other servants distributed the things and looked after the comfort of the guests. The band played briskly, and before noon the scene was one of great animation. A speakers' stand, profusely decorated, had been erected on the lawn, and hundreds of folding chairs provided for seats. The attendance was unexpectedly large, and the girls were delighted, foreseeing great success for their fête.

"We ought to have more attendants, Beth," said Louise, approaching her cousin. "Won't you run into the house and see if Martha can't spare one or two more maids?"

Beth went at once, and found the housekeeper in her little room. Martha was old and somewhat feeble in body, but her mind was still active and her long years of experience in directing the household at Elmhurst made her a very useful and important personage. She was very fond of the young ladies, whom she had known when Aunt Jane was the mistress here, and Beth was her especial favorite.

So she greeted the girl cordially, and said:

"Maids? My dear, I haven't another one to give you, and my legs are too tottering to be of any use. I counted on Eliza Parsons, the new girl I hired for the linen room and to do mending; but Eliza said she had a headache this morning and couldn't stand the sun, So I let her off. But she didn't seem very sick to me."

"Perhaps she is better and will help us until after the luncheon is served," said Beth. "Where is she, Martha? I'll go and ask her."

"I'd better show you the way, miss. She's in her own room."

The housekeeper led the way and Beth followed. When she rapped upon the door, a sweet, quiet voice said:

"Come in."

The girl entered, and gave an involuntary cry of surprise. Standing before her was the young girl she had seen riding with Mr. Hopkins--the girl she had declared to be the missing daughter of Mrs. Rogers.

For a moment Beth stood staring, while the new maid regarded her with composure and a slight smile upon her beautiful face. She was dressed in the regulation costume of the maids at Elmhurst, a plain black gown with white apron and cap.

"I--I beg your pardon," said Beth, with a slight gasp; for the likeness to Mrs. Rogers was something amazing. "Aren't you Lucy Rogers?"

The maid raised her eyebrows with a gesture of genuine surprise. Then she gave a little laugh, and replied:

"No, Miss Beth. I'm Elizabeth Parsons."

"But it can't be," protested the girl. "How do you know my name, and why haven't I seen you here before?"

"I'm not a very important person at Elmhurst," replied Eliza, in a pleasant, even tone. "I obtained the situation only a few days ago. I attend to the household mending, you know, and care for the linen. But one can't be here without knowing the names of the young ladies, so I recognize you as Miss Beth, one of Mr. Forbes's cousins."

"You speak like an educated person," said Beth, wonderingly. "Where is your home?"

For the first time the maid seemed a little confused, and her gaze wandered from the face of her visitor.

"Will you excuse my answering that question?" she asked.

"It is very simple and natural," persisted Beth. "Why cannot you answer

it?"

"Excuse me, please. I--I am not well today. I have a headache."

She sat down in a rocking chair, and clasping her hands in her lap, rocked slowly back and forth.

"I'm sorry," said Beth. "I hoped you would be able to assist me on the lawn. There are so many people that we can't give them proper attention."

Eliza Parsons shook her head.

"I am not able," she declared. "I abhor crowds. They--they excite me, in some way, and I--I can't bear them. You must excuse me."

Beth looked at the strange girl without taking the hint to retire. Somehow, she could not rid herself of the impression that whether or not she was mistaken in supposing Eliza to be the missing Lucy, she had stumbled upon a sphinx whose riddle was well worth solving.

But Eliza bore the scrutiny with quiet unconcern. She even seemed mildly amused at the attention she attracted. Beth was a beautiful girl--the handsomest of the three cousins, by far; yet Eliza surpassed her in natural charm, and seemed well aware of the fact. Her manner was neither independent nor assertive, but rather one of well-bred composure and

calm reliance. Beth felt that she was intruding and knew that she ought to go; yet some fascination held her to the spot. Her eyes wandered to the maid's hands. However her features and form might repress any evidence of nervousness, these hands told a different story. The thin fingers clasped and unclasped in little spasmodic jerks and belied the quiet smile upon the face above them.

"I wish," said Beth, slowly, "I knew you."

A sudden wave of scarlet swept over Eliza's face. She rose quickly to her feet, with an impetuous gesture that made her visitor catch her breath.

"I wish I knew myself," she cried, fiercely. "Why do you annoy me in this manner? What am I to you? Will you leave me alone in my own room, or must I go away to escape you?"

"I will go," said Beth, a little frightened at the passionate appeal.

Eliza closed the door behind her with a decided slam, and a key clicked in the lock. The sound made Beth indignant, and she hurried back to where her cousins were busy with the laughing, chattering throng of visitors.