

CHAPTER XV

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

"If she is really Lucy Rogers, she'll be missing tomorrow morning," said Beth when she had told her cousins of the encounter in the corridor.

But Eliza Parsons was still at Elmhurst the next day, calmly pursuing her duties, and evidently having forgotten or decided to ignore the young man who had so curiously mistaken her for another. Beth took occasion to watch her movements, so far as she could, and came to the conclusion that the girl was not acting a part. She laughed naturally and was too light-hearted and gay to harbor a care of any sort in her frivolous mind.

But there was a mystery about her; that could not be denied. Even if she were but a paid spy of Erastus Hopkins there was a story in this girl's life, brief as it had been.

Beth was full of curiosity to know this story.

As for Tom Gates, he had been so horrified by his mistake that he tried to avoid meeting Eliza again. This was not difficult because the girl kept pretty closely to the linen room, and Tom was chiefly occupied in the library.

Kenneth had little chance to test his secretary's abilities just then, because the girls pounced upon the new recruit and used his services in a variety of ways. Tom Gates's anxiety to give satisfaction made him willing to do anything, but they refrained from sending him often to town because he was sensitive to the averted looks and evident repulsion of those who knew he had recently been a "jail-bird." But there was plenty for him to do at Elmhurst, where they were all as busy as bees; and whatever the young man undertook he accomplished in a satisfactory manner.

Saturday forenoon the three girls, with Kenneth, Mr. Watson and Uncle John, rode over to Fairview to prepare for the debate that was to take place in the afternoon, leaving only Tom Gates at home. As Mr. Hopkins had thrust upon his opponent the task of naming the place and time, the Republican candidate was obliged to make all the arrangements, and pay all the costs. But whatever the girl managers undertook they did well. So the Opera House had been in the hands of a special committee for two days, the orchestra had been hired, and the news of the joint debate had spread far and wide.

The party from Elmhurst lunched at the Fairview Hotel, and then the girls hurried to the Opera House while Kenneth remained to attend a conference of the Republican Committee. These gentlemen were much worried over the discovery of a scheme to trade votes that had been sprung, and that Forbes and Reynolds were being sacrificed for Hopkins

and Cummings. Mr. Cummings was called into the meeting, and he denied that the trading was being done with his consent, but defiantly refused to make a public announcement to that effect.

The matter was really serious, because every vote lost in that way counted as two for the other side, and Hopkins's rabid hand-bills had influenced many of the more ignorant voters and created endless disputes that were not of benefit to the Republican party.

"As nearly as we can figure from our recent canvass," said Mr. Cunningham, the chairman, "we are fast losing ground, and our chances of success are smaller than if no interest in the election had been aroused. Hopkins has cut our majority down to nothing, and it will be a hard struggle to carry our ticket through to success. This is the more discouraging because Mr. Forbes has spent so much money, while Hopkins's expenses have been very little."

"I do not mind that," said Kenneth, quietly. "It was my desire that the voters should fully understand the issues of the campaign. Then, if they vote against me, it is because they are not worthy of honest representation in the Legislature, and I shall in the future leave them to their own devices."

The committee adjourned a little before two o'clock with rather grave faces, and prepared to attend the debate at the Opera House. Mr. Cunningham feared this debate would prove a mistake, as it would give

Hopkins a chance to ridicule and brow-beat his opponent in public, and his greatest talent as a speaker lay in that direction.

As Kenneth and his supporters approached the Opera House they heard loud cheering, and from a band-wagon covered with bunting and banners, in which he had driven to the meeting, descended the Honorable Erastus. He met Kenneth face to face, and the latter said pleasantly:

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hopkins."

"Ah, it's Forbes, isn't it?" replied Hopkins, slightly. "I've met you before, somewheres, haven't I?"

"You have, sir."

"Glad you're here, Forbes; glad you're here," continued the Representative, airily, as he made his way through the crowd that blocked the entrance. "These meetings are educational to young men. Girls all well, I hope?"

There was a boisterous laugh at this sally, and Mr. Hopkins smiled and entered the Opera House, while Kenneth followed with the feeling that he would take great delight in punching the Honorable Erastus's nose at the first opportunity.

The house was packed full of eager spectators who had come to see "the

fun." Although the girls had taken charge of all the arrangements they had devoted the left side of the ample stage to the use of the Hopkins party, where a speaker's table and chairs for important guests had been placed. The right side was similarly arranged for the Forbes party, and between the two the entire center of the stage was occupied by a group of fifty young girls. Above this group a great banner was suspended, reading: "The Signs of the Times," a catchword Mr. Hopkins had employed throughout the campaign. But the most astonishing thing was the appearance of the group of girls. They all wore plain white slips, upon which a variety of signs had been painted in prominent letters. Some costumes advertised baking-powders, others patent medicines, others soaps, chewing tobacco, breakfast foods, etc. From where they were seated in full view of the vast audience the girls appeared as a mass of advertising signs, and the banner above them indicated quite plainly that these were the "Signs of the Times."

Mr. Hopkins, as he observed this scene, smiled with satisfaction. He believed some of his friends had prepared this display to assist him and to disconcert the opposition, for nothing could have clinched his arguments better than the pretty young girls covered with advertisements of well known products. Even the Eagle Eye Breakfast Food was well represented.

After the orchestra had finished a selection, Mr. Hopkins rose to make the first argument and was greeted with cheers.

"We are having a jolly campaign, my dear friends," he began; "but you musn't take it altogether as a joke; because, while Mr. Forbes's erratic views and actions have done little real harm, we have been educated to an appreciation of certain benefits we enjoy which otherwise might have escaped our attention.

"This is a progressive, strenuous age, and no section of the country has progressed more rapidly than this, the Eighth District of our great and glorious State. I may say without danger of contradiction that the people I have the honor to represent in the State Legislature, and expect to have the honor of representing the next term, are the most intelligent, the most thoughtful and the most prosperous to be found in any like district in the United States. (Cheers.) Who, then, dares to denounce them as fools? Who dares interfere with these liberties, who dares intrude uninvited into their premises and paint out the signs they have permitted to occupy their fences and barns and sheds? Who would do these things but an impertinent meddler who is so inexperienced in life that he sets his own flimsy judgment against that of the people?"

The orator paused impressively to wait for more cheers, but the audience was silent. In the outskirts of the crowd a faint hissing began to be heard. It reached the speaker's ear and he hurriedly resumed the oration.

"I do not say Mr. Forbes is not a good citizen," said he, "but that he is misguided and unreasonable. A certain degree of deference is due the

young man because he inherited considerable wealth from his uncle,
and--"

Again the hisses began, and Mr. Hopkins knew he must abandon personal attacks or he would himself be discredited before his hearers. Kenneth and his supporters sat silent in their places, the three girls, who were now well known in the district, forming part of the Republican group; and none of them displayed the least annoyance at the vituperation Mr. Hopkins had employed.

"I have already called your attention in my circulars," resumed the speaker, "to the fact that advertising signs are the source of large income to the farmers of this district. I find that three thousand, seven hundred and eighty-three dollars have been paid the farmers in the last five years, without the least trouble or expense on their part; and this handsome sum of money belongs to them and should not be taken away. Stop and think for a moment. Advertising is the life of every business, and to fight successfully the great army of advertisers whose business is the life-blood of our institutions is as impossible as it is absurd. Suppose every farmer in this district refused to permit signs upon his property; what would be the result? Why, the farmers of other sections would get that much more money for letting privileges, and you would be that much out of pocket without suppressing the evil--if evil can attach to an industry that pays you good money without requiring either investment or labor in return."

After continuing in this strain for some time, Mr. Hopkins announced that "he would now give way to his youthful and inexperienced opponent," and asked the audience to be patient with Mr. Forbes and considerate of "his extraordinary prejudices."

Hopkins's policy of discrediting his opponent in advance was not very effective, for when Kenneth arose he was more enthusiastically cheered than Hopkins had been. The meeting was disposed to be fair-minded and quite willing to give Mr. Forbes a chance to explain his position.

"The arguments of our distinguished Representative are well worthy of your consideration," he began, quietly. "It is only by understanding fully both sides of an argument that you can hope to arrive at a just and impartial decision. Mr. Hopkins has advocated advertising signs on the ground that your financial gain warrants permitting them to be placed upon your premises. I will not deny his statement that three thousand, seven hundred and eighty-three dollars have been paid the farmers of this district by advertisers in the last five years. It is quite likely to be true. I have here the report of the Department of Agriculture showing that the total amount paid to farmers of the eighth district in the last five years, for produce of all kinds, is eleven millions, five-hundred thousand dollars."

A murmur of amazement rose from the audience. Kenneth waited until it had subsided.

"This seems surprising, at first," he said, "and proves how startling aggregate figures are. You must remember I have covered five years in this estimate, as did Mr. Hopkins in his, and if you will figure it out you will see that the yearly average of earnings is about six hundred dollars to each farmer. That is a good showing, for we have a wealthy district; but it is not surprising when reduced to that basis. Mr. Hopkins slates that the farmers of this district received three thousand, seven hundred and eighty-three dollars during the last five years for advertising signs. Let us examine these figures. One-fifth of that sum is seven hundred and fifty-six dollars and sixty cents as the income to you per year. We have, in this district, twenty-five hundred farmers according to the latest reports of the Bureau of Statistics, and dividing seven hundred and fifty-six dollars and sixty cents by twenty-five hundred, we find that each farmer receives an average of thirty and one-quarter cents per year for allowing his fences and buildings to be smothered in lurid advertising signs. So we find that the money received by the farmers from the advertising amounts to about one-quarter of one per cent of their income, a matter so insignificant that it cannot affect them materially, one way or another.

"But, Mr. Hopkins states that you give nothing in return for this one-quarter of one per cent, while I claim you pay tremendously for it. For you sacrifice the privacy of your homes and lands, and lend yourselves to the selfish desire of advertisers to use your property to promote their sales. You have been given an example of clean barns and fences, and I cannot tell you how proud I am of this district when I

ride through it and see neatly painted barns and fences replacing the flaring and obtrusive advertising signs that formerly disfigured the highways. Why should you paint advertising signs upon your barns any more than upon your houses? Carry the thing a step farther, and you may as well paint signs upon your children's dresses, in the manner you see illustrated before you."

At this, Louise made a signal and the fifty children so grotesquely covered with signs rose and stepped forward upon the stage. The orchestra struck up an air and the little girls sang the following ditty:

"Teas and soaps,
Pills and dopes,
We all must advertise.
Copper cents,
Not common sense.
Are the things we prize.
We confess
Such a dress
Isn't quite becoming,
But we suppose
Hopkins knows
This keeps business humming."

As the girls ceased singing, Kenneth said:

"To the encroaching advertiser these signs of the times are considered legitimate. There is no respect for personal privacy on the advertiser's part. Once they used only the newspapers, the legitimate channels for advertising. Then they began painting their advertising on your fences. When the farmers protested against this the advertisers gave them a few pennies as a sop to quiet them. After this they gave you small sums to paint the broad sides of your barns, your board fences, and to place signs in your field. If you allowed them to do so they would paint signs on the dresses of your children and wives, so callous are they to all decency and so regardless of private rights. Look on this picture, my friends, and tell me, would you prefer to see this--or this?"

At the word each child pulled away the sign-painted slip and stood arrayed in a pretty gown of spotless white.

The surprise was so complete that the audience cheered, shouted and laughed for several minutes before silence was restored. Then the children sang another verse, as follows:

"Now it is clear
That we appear
Just as we should be;
We are seen
Sweet and clean
From corruption free:
We're the signs
Of the times--
Fair as heaven's orbs.
If we look good,
Then all men should
Vote for Kenneth Forbes!"

The cheering was renewed at this, and Mr. Hopkins became angry. He tried to make himself heard, but the popular fancy had been caught by the object lesson so cleverly placed before them, and they shouted: "Forbes! Forbes! Forbes!" until the Honorable Erastus became so furious that he left the meeting in disgust.

This was the most impolite thing he could have done, but he vowed that the meeting had been "packed" with Forbes partisans and that he was wasting his time in addressing them.

After he was gone Kenneth resumed his speech and created more enthusiasm. The victory was certainly with the Republican candidate, and

the Elmhurst people returned home thoroughly satisfied with the result of the "joint debate."