

CHAPTER XX

PRICKING A BUBBLE.

When Patsy arrived home she called a council of war and related the conversation she had overheard in the dentist's office.

"It isn't a very nice thing to do--listening to a private conversation," said the girl, "but when I discovered they were going to play such a trick on Kenneth I couldn't help eavesdropping."

"I think you were justified," declared Mr. Watson, with a grave face; "for this matter is very serious indeed. Tomorrow is election day, and if a toothache hadn't carried you to the dentist's office Kenneth would surely have been defeated."

"And we'd never have known how it happened," declared Uncle John.

"But can the plot be foiled at this late date?" inquired Louise, anxiously.

"I think so," said Mr. Watson. "Dr. Squiers was correct in saying that such a crime was a state's prison offense. Our discovery of it will send both Erastus Hopkins and Dr. Squiers to prison. Probably Mr. Marshall, the manager of the mill, will go with them."

"Oh, I don't like that!" exclaimed Patsy.

"Nor do I," added Kenneth. "It would be a sad beginning to my political career to send three such men to prison. I'd like to avoid it, if I can."

"Perhaps it may be quietly arranged," said the lawyer. "If they knew you had discovered the false registration of these men, they would never dare vote them."

"How would it be to send Mr. Burke, the detective, over to the mill to talk with Mr. Marshall?" suggested Beth.

"That is an excellent plan, and would be very effective in determining the manager to abandon the plot."

"I'll go and see Hopkins myself," announced Uncle John. "I know how to manage men of his sort."

"Very good," approved the lawyer, "and I'll see Squiers."

"If you do," said Patsy, "just ask him to sign a paper saying that Lucy Rogers was falsely accused of stealing the ring, and that his mother found it in a vase, where she had forgotten she put it."

"I'll do that," replied Mr. Watson. "And I'll get the sixty dollars back that Tom Gates paid him. I'll make it a condition of our agreeing not to prosecute the man."

"It looks as if we were going to win the election," said Uncle John in a pleased voice. "If Hopkins was driven to such methods as stuffing ballot-boxes, he must know very well he's defeated."

"He acknowledged it to Dr. Squiers," said Patsy, gaily. "We have eighteen sure majority, and perhaps more."

"It's likely to be more," predicted Uncle John.

"I suppose congratulations are in order, Ken," said Louise.

"Not yet, cousin," he replied. "Wait until tomorrow night; and then don't congratulate me, but the campaign managers--three of the nicest and cleverest girls in existence!"

"You're right, my boy," declared Uncle John. "If you pull through and take your seat in the Legislature, you'll owe it all to these girls."

"That is true," smiled the lawyer. "Kenneth was badly beaten when you arrived."

Of course our girls were very happy at receiving this praise, but more

pleased to realize they had actually been of service to their boy friend. They believed that Kenneth would prove a good Representative and carry out his promises to the voters; and if he did, that his political career was assured.

Mr. Burke appeared in the afternoon with a telegram from Dr. Hoyt, the specialist, saying that he would be at Elmwood on the noon train Wednesday. His engagements prevented him from coming any sooner, and in the meantime Mr. Burke advised keeping a close watch on Eliza Parsons, to see that she did not run away.

"I'll attend to that," said Louise, quickly. "Eliza and I are friends, and I'll take care of her."

"Aren't you going to the polls?" asked Patsy.

"No, dear; why should I go? Our work is done now, isn't it?"

"Well, I'm going to the polls and work for every vote," declared Patsy.

"I shan't be happy unless Kenneth gets more than eighteen majority."

When the Hopkins plot was explained to Mr. Burke, the detective readily agreed to go to Fairview and see Mr. Marshall. As no time was to be lost he was sent over in an automobile, and arrived at the mill just before the hour for closing.

The next day being election day the mill was to be closed, and the manager was very busy in his office when Mr. Burke requested to see him.

"You will have to come around Wednesday," said Marshall, fussily. "I can't attend to you now."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," replied the detective, "but my business won't wait until Wednesday."

"What is it about, sir?"

"About the election."

"Then I won't be bothered. The election doesn't interest me," said Mr. Marshall, turning away.

"Very well, I'll call Wednesday, sir, at the jail."

Marshall gave him a quick look.

"Who are you, sir?" he asked.

"John Burke, a detective."

The manager hesitated a moment.

"Come in, Mr. Burke," he said.

"I represent the Forbes interests," said the detective, seating himself in the private office, "and it has come to our notice that Dr. Squiers has permitted sixty-six fraudulent registrations to be entered on the books. These sixty-six men are supposed to have been imported by you and are now working at this mill."

"This is all nonsense!" protested the manager, growing pale.

"Forty men are sleeping in a near-by barn, and twenty-six in the stock-room of the mill," added Mr. Burke.

"That isn't criminal, sir."

"No, indeed. The criminal act is their false registration, so far," said the detective, blandly.

"But mark you, sir; if an attempt is made to vote those men tomorrow, I shall arrest you, as well as Mr. Hopkins and Dr. Squiers."

"This is preposterous, sir!" blustered the manager. "There will be no attempt made to vote them."

"I am quite sure of it," was the reply. "You may thank Mr. Forbes for warning you in time. He wished to save you, and so sent me here."

"Oh, he did!" Mr. Marshall was evidently surprised. "May I ask how you discovered all this?" he added.

"I am not at liberty to give you the details. But I may say the exposure of the plot occurred through Mr. Hopkins's own carelessness. I've seen lots of crooked politicians, Mr. Marshall, but this man is too reckless and foolish ever to be a success. He deserves to be defeated and he will be."

The manager was thoughtful.

"This is all news to me," he declared. "I needed these extra men to help me fill a contract on time, and so employed them. I had no idea Hopkins and Squiers would try to vote them tomorrow."

This was a palpable falsehood, but Mr. Burke accepted the lame excuse without question.

"You are a valuable man in this community, Mr. Marshall, and Mr. Forbes seemed to think the Hopkins people were trying to get you into trouble. Of course it would have caused trouble had these men voted."

"Of course, Mr. Burke. I'm much obliged to Mr. Forbes for warning me."

"You'll find the next Representative a very agreeable man to get along

with, Mr. Marshall. Good day, sir."

"Good day, Mr. Burke."

When the detective had gone Mr. Marshall sat in a brown study for a few moments. Then he summoned his superintendent and said:

"Please ask the men to assemble in the yard before they go home. I want to have a word with them."

The request came just in time, for the men were already beginning to stream out of the mill. They waited good-naturedly, however, grouping themselves in the big yard.

Then Marshall mounted a lumber pile and addressed them briefly.

"Boys," he said, "I told you all, a week or so ago, I'd like you to vote for Hopkins for Representative, as I believed his election would result in more work for the mill and better wages for the employees. But I've been watching matters pretty closely, and I've changed my mind. Forbes is a coming man, and he'll do more for us all than Hopkins could. So every man who is entitled to vote will please me best by voting for Kenneth Forbes."

There was a cheer at this, and when it subsided, the manager continued:

"Of course none of the new men, who were not properly registered, have a right to vote at this election, and I command them to keep away from the polls. Anyone who attempts to vote illegally will be promptly arrested."

This caused more cheering, for the workmen had suspected that the new hands would be voted illegally, and they were relieved to find that it was a "square deal all 'round," as one of them remarked with satisfaction.

Meantime, Uncle John was having a "barrel of fun" with Mr. Hopkins.

The little millionaire, although a man of simple and unobtrusive ways, was a shrewd judge of human nature. Moreover he had acquired a fund of experience in dealing with all sorts of people, and was delighted to meet Mr. Hopkins under the present circumstances.

So he drove over to Elmwood and was fortunate to find Mr. Hopkins in his "office" at home where he was busily engaged instructing his "workers" in their duties at the polls.

At sight of Mr. Merrick, whom he knew by this time to be a friend of Kenneth Forbes, staying at Elmhurst, the politician scented some pending difficulty, or at least an argument, and was sufficiently interested to dismiss his men without delay.

"Ah, this is Mr. Merrick, I believe," began Mr. Hopkins, suavely. "What

can I do for you, sir?"

"Considerable, if you're disposed," answered the other. "For one thing I'd like to hire Eliza Parsons away from you."

"Eliza Parsons!" gasped the Representative.

"Yes, your spy. Election's about over and you won't need her any longer, will you?"

"Sir, do you mean to insult me?" asked the Honorable Erastus, indignantly.

"By no means. I thought you were through with the girl," said Uncle John with a chuckle.

Mr. Hopkins was distinctly relieved. With a full recollection of his wicked schemes in his mind, he had feared some more important attack than this; so he assumed a virtuous look, and replied:

"Sir, you wrong me. Eliza Parsons was no spy of mine. I was merely trying to encourage her to a higher spiritual life. She is rather flighty and irresponsible, sir, and I was sorry for the poor girl. That is all. If she has been telling tales, they are untrue. I have found her, I regret to say, inclined at times to be--ah--inventive."

"Perhaps that's so," remarked Uncle John, carelessly. "You're said to be a good man, Mr. Hopkins; a leetle too honest and straightforward for a politician; but that's an excusable fault."

"I hope I deserve my reputation, Mr. Merrick," said Erastus, straightening up at this praise. "I do, indeed, try to live an upright life."

"I guess so, Mr. Hopkins, I guess so. You wouldn't try, for instance, to encourage false registration."

"Sir!"

"Anything wrong, Mr. Hopkins?" asked Uncle John, innocently.

Erastus looked at his visitor tremblingly, although he tried to control his nerves. Of course Mr. Merrick couldn't mean anything by this chance shot, so he must be thrown off the scent.

"You have a disagreeable way of making remarks, sir, and I have no time to listen to foolish speeches. Tomorrow is election day and I've a good many details yet to arrange."

"No chance of you're getting in jail, is there?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I only thought that if you'd done anything liable to make trouble, you'd have to arrange your affairs for a long spell in jail. Politicians sometimes make mistakes. But you're such an honest man, Mr. Hopkins, you couldn't possibly go crooked."

Mr. Hopkins felt shaky again, and looked at his tormentor earnestly, trying to discern whether there was any real knowledge beneath this innuendo. But Uncle John met his gaze with a cheerful smile and continued:

"I guess you've got a hard fight ahead of you. My young friend Forbes is trying to get elected himself, and you can't both win."

"Oh, yes; Forbes," said Erastus, trying to regain his accustomed ease.

"A worthy young man, sir; but I'm afraid his chances are slim."

"Are they, now?" asked Uncle John, pretending a mild interest.

"Pretty thin, Mr. Merrick. Our majority is too great to overcome."

"What do you think your majority will be? About sixty-six?"

Mr. Hopkins gave a start and turned red.

"About sixty-six," he repeated, vacantly, trying to decide if this was

another chance shot.

"Yes; about sixty-six mill hands."

The cat was out of the bag now. Hopkins realized that Merrick had some knowledge or at least suspicion of this plot. He tried to think what to do, and it occurred to him that if his visitor positively knew anything he would not act in this absurd manner, but come straight to the point. So he ignored the speech, merely saying:

"Anything else, sir?"

"No," replied Uncle John; "I'll go home, I guess. Folks'll be expecting me. Sorry Forbes hasn't got that sixty-six mill hands; but Doc. Squiers probably registered 'em all right, and they'll probably vote for Hopkins."

"Wait a moment, sir!" cried Erastus, as Uncle John was turning away.

"That speech demands an explanation, and I mean to have it."

"Oh, you do? Well, I don't object. You may not know it, but Squiers has registered sixty-six non-voters, and I want to know whether you're prepared to give half of them to Forbes, or mean to keep them all for yourself."

"If Squiers has made false registrations he must stand the consequences."

I want you to understand, sir, that I do not countenance any underhand dealing."

"Then it's all off? You won't vote the mill hands?"

"Not a man shall vote who is not properly registered."

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Hopkins. Perhaps you can get that twenty-five hundred back. I don't think Squiers has cashed the check yet."

The Honorable Erastus gave a roar like a wild bull, but Uncle John had walked quietly out and climbed into his buggy. He looked back, and seeing Mr. Hopkins's scowling face at the window returned a pleasant smile as he drove away.

Mr. Watson had just finished his interview with the dentist when Uncle John picked him up at the corner. The lawyer had accomplished more than the other two, for he had secured a paper exonerating Lucy Rogers and another incriminating the Honorable Erastus Hopkins, as well as the sixty dollars paid by Tom Gates. The dentist was thoroughly frightened, but determined, now that the conspiracy was defeated, that the man who had led him to the crime should not escape in case he was himself arrested. So he made a plain statement of the whole matter and signed it, and Mr. Watson assured Squiers immunity from arrest, pending good behavior. The man had already cashed Hopkins's check, and he knew the Representative could not get the money away from him, so after all the

dentist lost nothing by the exposure.

It was a jolly party that assembled at the dinner-table in Elmhurst that evening.

"You see," explained Uncle John, "the thing looked as big as a balloon to us at first; but it was only a bubble, after all, and as soon as we pricked it--it disappeared."