

CHAPTER VII

CROSSING THE RUBICON

My appearance as an expert before the Royal Commission gave me considerable importance in the eyes of a large section of the inhabitants of Dunchester. It was not the wealthiest or most influential section indeed, although in it were numbered some rich and powerful men. Once again I found myself with a wide and rapidly increasing practice, and an income that was sufficient for my needs. Mankind suffers from many ailments besides that of smallpox, indeed in Dunchester this question of the value of vaccination was at that time purely academical, as except for an occasional case there had been no outbreak of smallpox for years. Now, as I have said, I was a master of my trade, and soon proved myself competent to deal skilfully with such illnesses, surgical or medical, as I was called upon to treat. Thus my practice grew, especially among the small tradespeople and artisans, who did not belong to clubs, but preferred to pay for a doctor in whom they had confidence.

Three years and more had gone by since that night on which I sat opposite to a wine-glass full of poison and was the prey of visions, when once again I received a call from Stephen Strong. With this good-hearted, though misguided man, and his amiable, but weak-minded wife, I had kept up an intimacy that in time ripened into genuine friendship. On every Sunday night, and sometimes oftener, I took supper with them, and discussed with Mrs. Strong the important questions of our

descent from the lost Tribes and whether or no the lupus from which she suffered was the result of vaccination in infancy.

Owing to a press of patients, to whom I was obliged to attend, I was not able to receive Mr. Strong for nearly half an hour.

"Things are a bit different from what they used to be, doctor," he said as he entered the room looking much the same as ever, with the exception that now even his last hairs had gone, leaving him completely bald, "there's six more of them waiting there, and all except one can pay a fee. Yes, the luck has turned for you since you were called in to attend cobbler Samuels' children, and you haven't seen the top of it yet, I can tell you. Now, what do you think I have come to see you about?"

"Can't say. I give it up."

"Then I will tell you. You saw in yesterday's paper that old brewer Hicks, the member for Dunchester, has been raised to the peerage. I understand he told the Government that if they kept him waiting any longer he would stop his subscription to the party funds, and as that's 5000 pounds a year, they gave in, believing the seat to be a safe one. But that's just where they make their mistake, for if we get the right man the Rads will win."

"And who is the right man?"

"James Therne, Esq., M.D.," he answered quietly.

"What on earth do you mean?" I asked. "How can I afford to spend from 1000 to 2000 pounds upon a contested election, and as much more a year in subscriptions and keeping up the position if I should chance to be returned? And how, in the name of fortune, can I be both a practising physician and a member of Parliament?"

"I'll tell you, doctor, for, ever since your name was put forward by the Liberal Council yesterday, I have seen these difficulties and been thinking them out. Look here, you are still young, handsome, clever, and a capital speaker with a popular audience. Also you are very hard-working and would rise. But you've no money, and only what you earn at your profession to live on, which, if you were a member of Parliament, you couldn't continue to earn. Well, such a man as you are is wanted and so he must be paid for."

"No, no," I said, "I am not going to be the slave of a Radical Five Hundred, bound to do what they tell me and vote as they like; I'd rather stick to my own trade, thank you."

"Don't you be in a hurry, young man; who asked you to be any one's slave? Now, look here--if somebody guarantees every farthing of expense to fight the seat, and 1200 pounds a year and outgoings if you should be successful, and a bonus of 5000 pounds in the event of your being subsequently defeated or electing to give up parliamentary life, will

you take on the job?"

"On those terms, yes, I think so, provided I was sure of the guarantor, and that he was a man from whom I could take the money."

"Well, you can soon judge of that, doctor, for it is I, Samuel Strong, and I'll deposit 10,000 pounds in the hands of a trustee before you write your letter of acceptance. No, don't thank me. I do it for two reasons--first, because, having no chick or kin of my own, I happen to have taken a fancy to you and wish to push you on. The world has treated you badly, and I want to see you one of its masters, with all these smart people who look down on you licking your boots, as they will sure enough if you grow rich and powerful. That's my private reason. My public one is that you are the only man in Dunchester who can win us the seat, and I'd think 10,000 pounds well spent if it put those Tories at the bottom of the poll. I want to show them who is "boss," and that we won't be lorded over by bankers and brewers just because they are rich men who have bought themselves titles."

"But you are a rich man yourself," I interrupted.

"Yes, doctor, and I spend my money in helping those who will help the people. Now, before you give me any answer, I've got to ask you a thing or two," and he drew a paper from his pocket. "Are you prepared to support the abolition of 'tied' houses?"

"Certainly. They are the worst monopoly in England."

"Graduated income-tax?"

"Yes; the individual should pay in proportion to the property protected."

"An Old Age Pension scheme?"

"Yes, but only by means of compulsory insurance applicable to all classes without exception."

"Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church?"

"Yes, provided its funds are pooled and reapplied to Church purposes."

"Payment of members and placing the cost of elections on the rates?"

"Yes, the door of Parliament should not be shut in the face of all except the very rich. Election expenditure is at present only a veiled form of corruption. If it were put upon the rates it could be reduced by at least a half, and elections would be fewer."

"Home Rule--no, I needn't ask you that, for it is a dead horse which we don't want to flog, and now-a-days we are all in favour of a big navy, so I think that is about everything--except, of course,

anti-vaccination, which you'll run for all it's worth."

"I never said that I would, Mr. Strong," I answered.

He looked at me curiously. "No, and you never said you wouldn't. Now, doctor, let us come to an understanding about this, for here in Dunchester it's worth more than all the other things put together. If this seat is to be won, it will be won on anti-vaccination. That's our burning question, and that's why you are being asked to stand, because you've studied the thing and are believed to be one of the few doctors who don't bow the knee to Baal. So look here, let's understand each other. If you have any doubts about this matter, say so, and we will have done with it, for, remember, once you are on the platform you've got to go the whole hog; none of your scientific finicking, but appeals to the people to rise up in their thousands and save their innocent children from being offered to the Moloch of vaccination, with enlarged photographs of nasty-looking cases, and the rest of it."

I listened and shivered. The inquiry into rare cases of disease after vaccination had been interesting work, which, whatever deductions people might choose to draw, in fact committed me to nothing. But to become one of the ragged little regiment of medical dissenters, to swallow all the unscientific follies of the anti-vaccination agitators, to make myself responsible for and to promulgate their distorted figures and wild statements--ah! that was another thing. Must I appear upon platforms and denounce this wonderful discovery as the "law of useless infanticide"?

Must I tell people that "smallpox is really a curative process and not the deadly scourge and pestilence that doctors pretend it to be"? Must I maintain "that vaccination never did, never does, and never can prevent even a single case of smallpox"? Must I hold it up as a "law (!) of devil worship and human sacrifice to idols"?

If I accepted Strong's offer it seemed that I must do all these things: more, I must be false to my instincts, false to my training and profession, false to my scientific knowledge. I could not do it. And yet--when did a man in my position ever get such a chance as that which was offered to me this day? I was ready with my tongue and fond of public speaking; from boyhood it had been my desire to enter Parliament, where I knew well that I should show to some advantage. Now, without risk or expense to myself, an opportunity of gratifying this ambition was given to me. Indeed, if I succeeded in winning this city, which had always been a Tory stronghold, for the Radical party I should be a marked man from the beginning, and if my career was not one of assured prosperity the fault would be my own. Already in imagination I saw myself rich (for in this way or in that the money would come), a favourite of the people, a trusted minister of the Crown and perhaps--who could tell?--ennobled, living a life of dignity and repute, and at last leaving my honours and my fame to those who came after me.

On the other hand, if I refused this offer the chance would pass away from me, never to return again; it was probable even that I should lose Stephen Strong's friendship and support, for he was not a man who liked

his generosity to be slighted, moreover he would believe me unsound upon his favourite dogmas. In short, for ever abandoning my brilliant hopes I condemned myself to an experience of struggle as a doctor with a practice among second-class people.

After all, although the thought of it shocked me at first, the price I was asked to pay was not so very heavy, merely one of the usual election platform formulas, whereby the candidate binds himself to support all sorts of things in which he has little or no beliefs. Already I was half committed to this anti-vaccination crusade, and, if I took a step or two farther in it, what did it matter? One crank more added to the great army of British enthusiasts could make little difference in the scheme of things.

If ever a man went through a "psychological moment" in this hour I was that man. The struggle was short and sharp, but it ended as might be expected in the case of one of my history and character. Could I have foreseen the dreadful issues which hung upon my decision, I believe that rather than speak it, for the second time in my life I would have sought the solace to be found in the phials of my medicine chest. But I did not foresee them, I thought only of myself, of my own hopes, fears and ambitions, forgetting that no man can live to himself alone, and that his every deed must act and re-act upon others until humanity ceases to exist.

"Well," said Mr. Strong after a two or three minutes' pause, during

which these thoughts were wrestling in my mind.

"Well," I answered, "as you elegantly express it, I am prepared to go the whole hog--it is a case of hog versus calf, isn't it?--or, for the matter of that, a whole styful of hogs."

I suppose that my doubts and irritation were apparent in the inelegant jocosity of my manner. At any rate, Stephen Strong, who was a shrewd observer, took alarm.

"Look here, doctor," he said, "I am honest, I am; right or wrong I believe in this anti-vaccination business, and we are going to run the election on it. If you don't believe in it--and you have no particular call to, since every man can claim his own opinion--you'd better let it alone, and look on all this talk as nothing. You are our first and best man, but we have several upon the list; I'll go on to one of them," and he took up his hat.

I let him take it; I even let him walk towards the door; but, as he approached it, I reflected that with that dogged burly form went all my ambitions and my last chance of advancement in life. When his hand was already on the handle, not of premeditation, but by impulse, I said:--

"I don't know why you should talk like that, as I think that I have given good proof that I am no believer in vaccination."

"What's that, doctor?" he asked turning round.

"My little girl is nearly four years old and she has never been vaccinated."

"Is it so?" he asked doubtfully.

As he spoke I heard the nurse going down the passage and with her my daughter, whom she was taking for her morning walk. I opened the door and called Jane in, a beautiful little being with dark eyes and golden hair.

"Look for yourself," I said, and, taking off the child's coat, I showed him both her arms. Then I kissed her and sent her back to the nurse.

"That's good enough, doctor, but, mind you, she mustn't be vaccinated now."

As he spoke the words my heart sank in me, for I understood what I had done and the risk that I was taking. But the die was cast, or so I thought, in my folly. It was too late to go back.

"Don't be afraid," I said, "no cow poison shall be mixed with her blood."

"Now I believe you, doctor," he answered, "for a man won't play tricks

with his only child just to help himself. I'll take your answer to the council, and they will send you the formal letter of invitation to stand with the conditions attached. Before you answer it the money will be lodged, and you shall have my bond for it. And now I must be going, for I am wasting your time and those patients of yours will be getting tired. If you will come to supper to-night I'll have some of the leaders to meet you and we can talk things over. Good-bye, we shall win the seat; so sure as my name is Stephen Strong we shall win on the A.V. ticket."

He went, and I saw those of my patients who had sat out the wait. When they had gone, I considered the position, summing it up in my own mind. The prospect was exhilarating, and yet I was depressed, for I had bound myself to the chariot wheels of a false doctrine. Also, by implication, I had told Strong a lie. It was true that Jane had not been vaccinated, but of this I had neglected to give him the reason. It was that I had postponed vaccinating her for a while owing to a certain infantile delicacy, being better acquainted than most men with the risks consequent on that operation, slight though it is, in certain conditions of a child's health, and knowing that there was no danger of her taking smallpox in a town which was free from it. I proposed, however, to perform the operation within the next few days; indeed, for this very purpose I had already written to London to secure some glycerinated calf lymph, which would now be wasted.

The local papers next morning appeared with an announcement that at the

forthcoming bye-election Dunchester would be contested in the Radical interest by James Therne, Esq., M.D. They added that, in addition to other articles of the Radical faith, Dr. Therne professed the doctrine of anti-vaccination, of which he was so ardent an upholder that, although on several occasions he had been threatened with prosecution, he declined to allow his only child to be vaccinated.

In the same issues it was announced that the Conservative candidate would be Sir Thomas Colford.

So the die was cast. I had crossed the Rubicon.