## CHAPTER VIII

## BRAVO THE A.V.'S

In another week the writ had been issued, and we were in the thick of the fight. What a fight it was! Memory could not record; tradition did not even record another half as fierce in the borough of Dunchester. For the most part, that is in many of our constituencies, it is not difficult for a candidate standing in the Radical interest, if he is able, well-backed, and not too particular as to what he promises, to win the seat for his party. But Dunchester was something of an exception. In a sense it was corrupt, that is, it had always been represented by a rich man, who was expected to pay liberally for the honour of its confidence. Pay he did, indeed, in large and numberless subscriptions, in the endowment of reading-rooms, in presents of public parks, and I know not what besides.

At least it is a fact that almost every advantage of this nature enjoyed to-day by the inhabitants of Dunchester, has been provided for them by former Conservative members for the borough.

Under these circumstances it is not to be wondered at that in choosing a candidate the majority of the electors of the city were apt to ask two leading questions: first, Is he rich? and secondly, What will he do for the town if he gets in?

Now, Sir Thomas Colford was very rich, and it was whispered that if he were elected he would be prepared to show his gratitude in a substantial fashion. A new wing to the hospital was wanted; this it was said would be erected and endowed; also forty acres of valuable land belonging to him ran into the park, and he had been heard to say that these forty acres were really much more important to the public than to himself, and that he hoped that one day they would belong to it.

It is small wonder, then, that the announcement of his candidature was received with passionate enthusiasm. Mine, on the contrary, evoked a chorus of disapproval, that is, in the local press. I was denounced as an adventurer, as a man who had stood a criminal trial for wicked negligence, and escaped the jail only by the skin of my teeth. I was held up to public reprobation as a Socialist, who, having nothing myself, wished to prey upon the goods of others, and as an anti-vaccination quack who, to gain a few votes, was ready to infest the whole community with a loathsome disease. Of all the accusations of my opponents this was the only one that stung me, because it alone had truth in it.

Sir John Bell, my old enemy, one of the nominators of Sir Thomas Colford, appeared upon the platform at his first meeting, and, speaking in the character of an old and leading citizen of the town, and as one who had doctored most of them, implored his audience not to trust their political fortunes to such a person as myself, whose doctrines were repudiated by almost every member of the profession, which I disgraced.

This appeal carried much weight with it.

From all these circumstances it might have been supposed that my case was hopeless, especially as no Radical had even ventured to contest the seat in the last two elections. But, in fact, this was not so, for in Dunchester there existed a large body of voters, many of them employed in shoe-making factories, who were almost socialistic in their views. These men, spending their days in some hive of machinery, and their nights in squalid tenements built in dreary rows, which in cities such people are doomed to inhabit, were very bitter against the upper classes, and indeed against all who lived in decent comfort.

This was not to be marvelled at, for what can be expected of folk whose lot, hard as it is, has none of the mitigations that lighten the troubles of those who live in the country, and who can at least breathe the free air and enjoy the beauties that are common to all? Here, at Dunchester, their pleasures consisted for the most part in a dog fight or some such refining spectacle, varied by an occasional "boose" at the public-house, or, in the case of those who chanced to be more intellectually inclined, by attending lectures where Socialism and other advanced doctrines were preached. As was but natural, this class might be relied upon almost to a man to vote for the party which promised to better their lot, rather than for the party which could only recommend them to be contented and to improve themselves. To secure their support it was only necessary to be extravagant of promises and abusive of employers who refused to pay them impossible wages.

Next in importance to these red-hot "forwards" came the phalanx of old-fashioned people who voted Liberal because their fathers had voted Liberal before them. Then there were the electors who used to be Conservative but, being honestly dissatisfied with the Government on account of its foreign policy, or for other reasons, had made up their minds to transfer their allegiance. Also there were the dissenters, who set hatred of the Church above all politics, and made its disendowment and humiliation their watchword. In Dunchester these were active and numerous, a very tower of strength to me, for Stephen Strong was the wealthiest and most important of them.

During the first day or two of the canvass, however, a careful estimate of our electoral strength showed it to be several hundred votes short of that of our opponents. Therefore, if we would win, we must make converts by appealing to the prejudices of members of the electorate who were of Conservative views; in other words, by preaching "fads."

Of these there were many, all useful to the candidate of pliant mind, such as the total drink-prohibition fad, the anti-dog-muzzling fad, and others, each of which was worth some votes. Even the Peculiar People, a society that makes a religion of killing helpless children by refusing them medical aid when they are ill, were good for ten or twelve. Here, however, I drew the line, for when asking whether I would support a bill relieving them from all liability to criminal prosecution in the event of the death of their victims, I absolutely declined to give any such

undertaking.

But although all these fancies had their followers, it was the anti-vaccination craze that really had a hold in Dunchester. The "A.V.'s," as they called themselves, were numbered by hundreds, for the National League and other similar associations had been at work here for years, with such success that already twenty per cent. of the children born in the last decade had never been vaccinated. For a while the Board of Guardians had been slow to move, then, on the election of a new chairman and the representations of the medical profession of the town, they instituted a series of prosecutions against parents who refused to comply with the Vaccination Acts. Unluckily for the Conservative party, these prosecutions, which aroused the most bitter feelings, were still going on when the seat fell vacant; hence from an electoral point of view the question became one of first-class importance.

In Dunchester, as elsewhere, the great majority of the anti-vaccinators were already Radical, but there remained a residue, estimated at from 300 to 400, who voted "blue" or Conservative. If these men could be brought over, I should win; if they remained faithful to their colour, I must lose. Therefore it will be seen that Stephen Strong was right when he said that the election would be won or lost upon anti-vaccination.

At the first public meeting of the Conservatives, after Sir Thomas's speech, the spokesman of the anti-vaccination party rose and asked him whether he was in favour of the abolition of the Compulsory Vaccination

laws. Now, at this very meeting Sir John Bell had already spoken denouncing me for my views upon this question, thereby to some extent tying the candidate's hands. So, after some pause and consultation, Sir Thomas replied that he was in favour of freeing "Conscientious Objectors" to vaccination from all legal penalties. Like most half measures, this decision of course did not gain him a single vote, whereas it certainly lost him much support.

On the same evening a similar question was put to me. My answer may be guessed, indeed I took the opportunity to make a speech which was cheered to the echo, for, having acted the great lie of espousing the anti-vaccination cause, I felt that it was not worth while to hesitate in telling other lies in support of it. Moreover, I knew my subject thoroughly, and understood what points to dwell upon and what to gloze over, how to twist and turn the statistics, and how to marshal my facts in such fashion as would make it very difficult to expose their fallacy. Then, when I had done with general arguments, I went on to particular cases, describing as a doctor can do the most dreadful which had ever come under my notice, with such power and pathos that women in the audience burst into tears.

Finally, I ended by an impassioned appeal to all present to follow my example and refuse to allow their children to be poisoned. I called on them as free men to rise against this monstrous Tyranny, to put a stop to this system of organised and judicial Infanticide, and to send me to Parliament to raise my voice on their behalf in the cause of helpless

infants whose tender bodies now, day by day, under the command of the law, were made the receptacles of the most filthy diseases from which man was doomed to suffer.

As I sat down the whole of that great audience--it numbered more than 2000--rose in their places shouting "We will! we will!" after which followed a scene of enthusiasm such as I had never seen before, emphasised by cries of "We are free Englishmen," "Down with the baby-butchers," "We will put you in, sir," and so forth.

That meeting gave me my cue, and thenceforward, leaving almost every other topic on one side, I and my workers devoted ourselves to preaching the anti-vaccination doctrines. We flooded the constituency with tracts headed "What Vaccination does," "The Law of Useless Infanticide," "The Vaccine Tyranny," "Is Vaccination a Fraud?" and so forth, and with horrible pictures of calves stretched out by pulleys, gagged and blindfolded, with their under parts covered by vaccine vesicles. Also we had photographs of children suffering from the effects of improper or unclean vaccination, which, by means of magic lantern slides, could be thrown life-sized on a screen; indeed, one or two such children themselves were taken round to meetings and their sores exhibited.

The effect of all this was wonderful, for I know of nothing capable of rousing honest but ignorant people to greater rage and enthusiasm than this anti-vaccination cry. They believe it to be true, or, at least, seeing one or two cases in which it is true, and having never seen a

case of smallpox, they suppose that the whole race is being poisoned by wicked doctors for their own gain. Hence their fierce energy and heartfelt indignation.

Well, it carried me through. The election was fought not with foils but with rapiers. Against me were arrayed the entire wealth, rank, and fashion of the city, reinforced by Conservative speakers famous for their parliamentary eloquence, who were sent down to support Sir Thomas Colford. Nor was this all: when it was recognised that the fight would be a close one, an eloquent and leading member of the House was sent to intervene in person. He came and addressed a vast meeting gathered in the biggest building of the city. Seated among a crowd of workmen on a back bench I was one of his audience. His speech was excellent, if somewhat too general and academic. To the "A.V." agitation, with a curious misapprehension of the state of the case, he devoted one paragraph only. It ran something like this:--

"I am told that our opponents, putting aside the great and general issues upon which I have had the honour to address you, attempt to gain support by entering upon a crusade--to my mind a most pernicious crusade--against the law of compulsory vaccination. I am not concerned to defend that law, because practically in the mind of all reasonable men it stands beyond attack. It is, I am told, suggested that the Act should be amended by freeing from the usual penalties any parent who chooses to advance a plea of conscientious objection against the vaccination of his children. Such an argument seems to me too puerile,

I had almost said too wicked, to dwell upon, for in its issue it would mean that at the whim of individuals innocent children might be exposed to disease, disfigurement, and death, and the whole community through them to a very real and imminent danger. Prophecy is dangerous, but, speaking for myself as a private member of Parliament, I can scarcely believe that responsible ministers of any party, moved by the pressure of an ill-informed and erroneous opinion, would ever consent under this elastic plea of conscience to establish such a precedent of surrender. Vaccination with its proved benefits is outside the pale of party. After long and careful study, science and the medical profession have given a verdict in its favour, a verdict which has now been confirmed by the experience of generations. Here I leave the question, and, turning once more before I sit down to those great and general issues of which I have already spoken, I would again impress upon this vast audience, and through it upon the constituency at large," etc., etc., etc.

Within a year it was my lot to listen to an eminent leader of that distinguished member (with the distinguished member's tacit consent) pressing upon an astonished House of Commons the need of yielding to the clamour of the anti-vaccinationists, and of inserting into the Bill, framed upon the report of a Royal Commission, a clause forbidding the prosecution of parents or guardians willing to assert before a bench of magistrates that they objected to vaccination on conscientious grounds.

The appeal was not in vain; the Bill passed in its amended form; and within twenty years I lived to see its fruits.

At length came the polling day. After this lapse of time I remember little of its details. I, as became a Democratic candidate, walked from polling-station to polling-station, while my opponent, as became a wealthy banker, drove about the city in a carriage and four. At eight o'clock the ballot-boxes were sealed up and conveyed to the town-hall, where the counting commenced in the presence of the Mayor, the candidates, their agents, and the necessary officers and assistants. Box after box was opened and the papers counted out into separate heaps, those for Colford into one pile, those for Therne into another, the spoiled votes being kept by themselves.

The counting began about half-past nine, and up to a quarter to twelve nobody could form an idea as to the ultimate result, although at that time the Conservative candidate appeared to be about five and thirty votes ahead. Then the last ballot-box was opened; it came from a poor quarter of the city, a ward in which I had many supporters.

Sir Thomas Colford and I, with our little knots of agents and sub-agents, placed ourselves one on each side of the table, waiting in respectful silence while the clerk dealt out the papers, as a player deals out cards. It was an anxious moment, as any one who has gone through a closely-contested parliamentary election can testify. For ten days or more the strain had been great, but, curiously enough, now at its climax it seemed to have lost its grip of me. I watched the denoument of the game with keenness and interest indeed, but as though

I were not immediately and personally concerned. I felt that I had done my best to win, and no longer cared whether my efforts ended in success or failure. Possibly this was the result of the apathy that falls upon overstrained nerves. Possibly I was oppressed by the fear of victory and of that Nemesis which almost invariably dogs the steps of our accomplished desires, of what the French writer calls la page effrayante . . . des desirs accomplis. At least just then I cared nothing whether I won or lost, only I reflected that in the latter event it would be sad to have told so many falsehoods to no good purpose.

"How does it stand?" asked the head Conservative agent of the officer.

The clerk took the last numbers from the counters and added up the figures.

"Colford, 4303; Therne, 4291, and two more bundles to count."

Another packet was counted out.

"How does it stand?" asked the agent.

"Colford, 4349; Therne, 4327, and one more bundle of fifty to count," answered the clerk.

The agent gave a sigh of relief and smiled; I saw him press Sir Thomas's hand in congratulations, for now he was sure that victory was theirs.

"The game is up," I whispered to Strong, who, as my principal supporter, had been admitted with me to the hall.

He ground his teeth and I noticed in the gaslight that his face was ghastly pale and his lips were blue.

"You had better go out," I said, "you are overtaxing that dilated heart of yours. Go home and take a sleeping draught."

"Damn you, no," he answered fiercely in my ear, "those papers come from the Little Martha ward, where I thought there wasn't a wrong 'un in the crowd. If they've sold me, I'll be even with them, as sure as my name is Strong."

"Come," I said with a laugh, "a good Radical shouldn't talk like that." For me the bitterness was over, and, knowing the worst, I could afford to laugh.

The official opened the last packet and began to count aloud.

The first vote was for "Therne," but bad, for the elector had written his name upon the paper. Then in succession came nine for "Colford." Now all interest in the result had died away, and a hum of talk arose from those present in the room, a whispered murmur of congratulations and condolences. No wonder, seeing that to win I must put to my credit

thirty-two of the forty remaining papers, which seemed a thing impossible.

The counter went on counting aloud and dealing down the papers as he counted. One, two, three, four, and straight on up to ten for Therne, when he paused to examine a paper, then "One for Colford." Then, in rapid successful, "Five, ten, fifteen for Therne."

Now the hum of conversation died away, for it was felt that this was becoming interesting. Of course it was practically impossible that I should win, for there were but fourteen papers left, and to do so I must secure eleven of them!

"Sixteen for Therne," went on the counter, "seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty."

Now the excitement grew intense, for if the run held in two more votes I should tie. Every eye was fixed upon the counter's hand.

To the right and left of him on the table were two little piles of voting papers. The pile to the right was the property of Colford, the pile to the left was sacred to Therne. The paper was unfolded and glanced at, then up went the hand and down floated the fateful sheet on to the left-hand pile. "Twenty-one for Therne." Again the process was repeated, and again the left-hand pile was increased. "Twenty-two for Therne."

"By heaven! you've tied him," gasped Stephen Strong.

There were but seven papers left, and the candidate who secured four of them would be the winner of the election.

"Twenty-three for Therne, twenty-four, twenty-five"--a silence in which you could hear the breath of other men and the beating of your own heart.

"Twenty-six for Therne, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, all for Therne."

Then, bursting from the lips of Stephen Strong, a shrill hoarse cry, more like the cry of a beast than that of a man, and the words, "By God! we've won. The A.V.'s have done it. Bravo the A.V.'s!"

"Silence!" said the Mayor, bringing his fist down upon the table, but so far as Stephen Strong was concerned, the order was superfluous, for suddenly his face flushed, then turned a dreadful ashen grey, and down he sank upon the floor. As I leant over him and began to loosen his collar, I heard the Conservative agent say in strident tones:--

"There is some mistake, there must be some mistake. It is almost impossible that Dr. Therne can have polled twenty-nine votes in succession. On behalf of Sir Thomas Colford, I demand a recount."

"Certainly," answered some official, "let it be begun at once."

In that ceremony I took no part; indeed, I spent the next two hours, with the help of another doctor, trying to restore consciousness to Stephen Strong in a little room that opened off the town-hall. Within half an hour Mrs. Strong arrived.

"He still breathes," I said in answer to her questioning glance.

Then the poor little woman sat herself down upon the edge of a chair, clasped her hands and said, "If the Lord wills it, dear Stephen will live; and if the Lord wills it, he will die."

This sentence she repeated at intervals until the end came. After two hours there was a knocking at the door.

"Go away," I said, but the knocker would not go away. So I opened. It was my agent, who whispered in an excited voice, "The count's quite correct, you are in by seven."

"All right," I answered, "tell them we want some more brandy."

At that moment Stephen Strong opened his eyes, and at that moment also there arose a mighty burst of cheering from the crowd assembled on the market-place without, to whom the Mayor had declared the numbers from a

window of the town-hall.

The dying man heard the cheering, and looked at me inquiringly, for he could not speak. I tried to explain that I was elected on the recount, but was unable to make him understand. Then I hit upon an expedient. On the floor lay a Conservative rosette of blue ribbon. I took it up and took also my own Radical colours from my coat. Holding one of them in each hand before Strong's dying eyes, I lifted up the Radical orange and let the Conservative blue fall to the floor.

He saw and understood, for a ghastly smile appeared upon his distorted face. Indeed, he did more--almost with his last breath he spoke in a hoarse, gurgling whisper, and his words were, "Bravo the A.V.'s!"

Now he shut his eyes, and I thought that the end had come, but, opening them presently, he fixed them with great earnestness first upon myself and then upon his wife, accompanying the glance with a slight movement of the head. I did not know what he could mean, but with his wife it was otherwise, for she said, "Don't trouble yourself, Stephen, I quite understand."

Five minutes more and it was over; Stephen Strong's dilated heart had contracted for the last time.

"I see it has pleased the Lord that dear Stephen should die," said Mrs. Strong in her quiet voice. "When you have spoken to the people out

there, doctor, will you take me home? I am very sorry to trouble, but I saw that after he was gone Stephen wished me to turn to you."