CHAPTER IX

FORTUNE

My return to Parliament meant not only the loss of a seat to the Government, a matter of no great moment in view of their enormous majority, but, probably, through their own fears, was construed by them into a solemn warning not to be disregarded. Certain papers and opposition speakers talked freely of the writing on the wall, and none saw that writing in larger, or more fiery letters, than the members of Her Majesty's Government. I believe that to them it took the form not of Hebraic characters, but of two large Roman capitals, the letters A and V.

Hitherto the anti-vaccinators had been known as troublesome people who had to be reckoned with, but that they should prove strong enough to wrest what had been considered one of the safest seats in the kingdom out of the hands of the Unionists came upon the party as a revelation of the most unpleasant order. For Stephen Strong's dying cry, of which the truth was universally acknowledged, "The A.V.'s have done it. Bravo the A.V.'s!" had echoed through the length and breadth of the land.

When a Government thinks that agitators are weak, naturally and properly it treats them with contempt, but, when it finds that they are strong enough to win elections, then their arguments become more worthy of consideration. And so the great heart of the parliamentary Pharaoh began

to soften towards the anti-vaccinators, and of this softening the first signs were discernible within three or four days of my taking my seat as member for Dunchester.

I think I may say without vanity, and the statement will not be contradicted by those who sat with me, that I made a good impression upon the House from the first day I entered its doors. Doubtless its members had expected to find in me a rabid person liable to burst into a foam of violence at the word "vaccination," and were agreeably surprised to find that I was much as other men are, only rather quieter than most of them. I did not attempt to force myself upon the notice of the House, but once or twice during the dinner hour I made a few remarks upon subjects connected with public health which were received without impatience, and, in the interval, I tried to master its forms, and to get in touch with its temper.

In those far-away and long-forgotten days a Royal Commission had been sitting for some years to consider the whole question of compulsory vaccination; it was the same before which I had been called to give evidence. At length this commission delivered itself of its final report, a very sensible one in an enormous blue-book, which if adopted would practically have continued the existing Vaccination Acts with amendments. These amendments provided that in future the public vaccinator should visit the home of the child, and, if the conditions of that home and of the child itself were healthy, offer to vaccinate it with glycerinated calf lymph. Also they extended the time during which

the parents and guardians were exempt from prosecution, and in various ways mitigated the rigour of the prevailing regulations. The subject matter of this report was embodied in a short Bill to amend the law and laid before Parliament, which Bill went to a standing committee, and ultimately came up for the consideration of the House.

Then followed the great debate and the great surprise. A member moved that it should be read that day six months, and others followed on the same side. The President of the Local Government Board of the day, I remember, made a strong speech in favour of the Bill, after which other members spoke, including myself. But although about ninety out of every hundred of the individuals who then constituted the House of Commons were strong believers in the merits of vaccination, hardly one of them rose in his place to support the Bill. The lesson of Dunchester amongst others was before their eyes, and, whatever their private faith might be, they were convinced that if they did so it would lose them votes at the next election.

At this ominous silence the Government grew frightened, and towards the end of the debate, to the astonishment of the House and of the country, the First Lord of the Treasury rose and offered to insert a clause by virtue of which any parent or other person who under the Bill would be liable to penalties for the non-vaccination of a child, should be entirely freed from such penalties if within four months of its birth he satisfied two justices of the peace that he conscientiously believed that the operation would be prejudicial to that child's health. The Bill

passed with the clause, which a few days later was rejected by the House of Lords. Government pressure was put upon the Lords, who thereon reversed their decision, and the Bill became an Act of Parliament.

Thus the whole policy of compulsory vaccination, which for many years had been in force in England, was destroyed at a single blow by a Government with a great majority, and a House of Commons composed of members who, for the most part, were absolute believers in its virtues. Never before did agitators meet with so vast and complete a success, and seldom perhaps did a Government undertake so great a responsibility for the sake of peace, and in order to shelve a troublesome and dangerous dispute. It was a very triumph of opportunism, for the Government, aided and abetted by their supporters, threw over their beliefs to appease a small but persistent section of the electors. Convinced that compulsory vaccination was for the benefit of the community, they yet stretched the theory of the authority of the parent over the child to such an unprecedented extent that, in order to satisfy his individual prejudices, that parent was henceforth to be allowed to expose his helpless infant to the risk of terrible disease and of death.

It is not for me to judge their motives, which may have been pure and excellent; my own are enough for me to deal with. But the fact remains that, having power in their hands to impose the conclusions of a committee of experts on the nation, and being as a body satisfied as to the soundness of those conclusions, they still took the risk of disregarding them. Now the result of their action is evident; now we

have reaped the seed which they sowed, nor did they win a vote or a "thank you" by their amiable and philosophic concessions, which earned them no gratitude but indignation mingled with something not unlike contempt.

So much for the anti-vaccination agitation, on the crest of whose wave I was carried to fortune and success. Thenceforward for many long years my career was one of strange and startling prosperity. Dunchester became my pocket borough, so much so, indeed, that at the three elections which occurred before the last of which I have to tell no one even ventured to contest the seat against me. Although I was never recognised as a leader of men, chiefly, I believe, because of a secret distrust which was entertained as to my character and the sincerity of my motives, session by session my parliamentary repute increased, till, in the last Radical Government, I was offered, and for two years filled, the post of Under-Secretary to the Home Office. Indeed, when at last we went to the country over the question of the China War, I had in my pocket a discreetly worded undertaking that, if our party succeeded at the polls, my claims to the Home Secretaryship should be "carefully considered." But it was not fated that I should ever again cross the threshold of St. Stephen's.

So much for my public career, which I have only touched on in illustration of my private and moral history.

The reader may wonder how it came about that I was able to support

myself and keep up my position during all this space of time, seeing that my attendance in Parliament made it impossible for me to continue in practise as a doctor. It happened thus.

When my old and true friend, Stephen Strong, died on the night of my election, it was found that he was even richer than had been supposed, indeed his personalty was sworn at 191,000 pounds, besides which he left real estate in shops, houses and land to the value of about 23,000 pounds. Almost all of this was devised to his widow absolutely, so that she could dispose of it in whatever fashion pleased her. Indeed, there was but one other bequest, that of the balance of the 10,000 pounds which the testator had deposited in the hands of a trustee for my benefit. This was now left to me absolutely. I learned the fact from Mrs. Strong herself as we returned from the funeral.

"Dear Stephen has left you nearly 9000 pounds, doctor," she said shaking her head.

Gathering from her manner and this shake of her head that the legacy was not pleasing to her, I hastened to explain that doubtless it was to carry into effect a business arrangement we had come to before I consented to stand for Parliament.

"Ah, indeed," she said, "that makes it worse, for it is only the payment of a debt, not a gift."

Not knowing what she could mean, I said nothing.

"Doubtless, doctor, if dear Stephen had been granted time he would have treated you more liberally, seeing how much he thought of you, and that you had given up your profession entirely to please him and serve the party. That is what he meant when he looked at me before he died, I guessed it from the first, and now I am sure of it. Well, doctor, while I have anything you shall never want. Of course, a member of Parliament is a great person, expected to live in a style which would take more money than I have, but I think that if I put my own expenses at 500 pounds a year, which is as much as I shall want, and allow another 1000 pounds for subscriptions to the anti-vaccination societies, the society for preventing the muzzling of dogs, and the society for the discovery of the lost Tribes of Israel, I shall be able to help you to the extent of 1200 pounds a year, if," she added apologetically, "you think you could possibly get along on that."

"But, Mrs. Strong," I said, "I have no claim at all upon you."

"Please do not talk nonsense, doctor. Dear Stephen wished me to provide for you, and I am only carrying out his wishes with his own money which God gave him perhaps for this very purpose, that it should be used to help a clever man to break down the tyranny of wicked governments and false prophets."

So I took the money, which was paid with the utmost regularity on

January the first and June the first in each year. On this income I lived in comfort, keeping up my house in Dunchester for the benefit of my little daughter and her attendants, and hiring for my own use a flat quite close to the House of Commons.

As the years went by, however, a great anxiety took possession of me, for by slow degrees Mrs. Strong grew as feeble in mind as already she was in body, till at length, she could only recognise people at intervals, and became quite incompetent to transact business. For a while her bankers went on paying the allowance under her written and unrevoked order, but when they understood her true condition, they refused to continue the payment.

Now my position was very serious. I had little or nothing put by, and, having ceased to practise for about seventeen years, I could not hope to earn an income from my profession. Nor could I remain a member of the House, at least not for long. Still, by dint of borrowing and the mortgage of some property which I had acquired, I kept my head above water for about eighteen months. Very soon, however, my financial distress became known, with the result that I was no longer so cordially received as I had been either in Dunchester or in London. The impecunious cannot expect to remain popular.

At last things came to a climax, and I was driven to the step of resigning my seat. I was in London at the time, and thence I wrote the letter to the chairman of the Radical committee in Dunchester giving

ill-health as the cause of my retirement. When at length it was finished to my satisfaction, I went out and posted it, and then walked along the embankment as far as Cleopatra's Needle and back again. It was a melancholy walk, taken, I remember, upon a melancholy November afternoon, on which the dank mist from the river strove for mastery with the gloomy shadows of advancing night. Not since that other evening, many many years ago, when, after my trial, I found myself face to face with ruin or death and was saved by Stephen Strong had my fortunes been at so low an ebb. Now, indeed, they appeared absolutely hopeless, for I was no longer young and fit to begin the world afresh; also, the other party being in power, I could not hope to obtain any salaried appointment upon which to support myself and my daughter. If Mrs. Strong had kept her reason all would have been well, but she was insane, and I had no one to whom I could turn, for I was a man of many acquaintances but few friends.

Wearily I trudged back to my rooms to wait there until it was time to dress, for I had a dinner engagement at the Reform Club. On the table in the little hall lay a telegram, which I opened listlessly. It was from a well-known firm of solicitors in Dunchester, and ran:--

"Our client, Mrs. Strong, died suddenly at three o'clock. Important that we should see you. Will you be in Dunchester to-morrow? If not, please say where and at what hour we can wait upon you in town."

"Wait upon you in town," I said to myself as I laid down the telegram. A great firm of solicitors would not wish to wait upon me unless they had something to tell me to my advantage and their own. Mrs. Strong must have left me some money. Possibly even I was her heir. More than once before in life my luck had turned in this sudden way, why should it not happen again? But she was insane and could not appoint an heir! Why had not those fools of lawyers told me the facts instead of leaving me to the torment of this suspense?

I glanced at the clock, then taking a telegraph form I wrote: "Shall be at Dunchester Station 8:30. Meet me there or later at the club." Taking a cab I drove to St. Pancras, just in time to catch the train. In my pocket--so closely was I pressed for money, for my account at the bank was actually overdrawn--I had barely enough to pay for a third-class ticket to Dunchester. This mattered little, however, for I always travelled third-class, not because I liked it but because it looked democratic and the right sort of thing for a Radical M.P. to do.

The train was a fast one, but that journey seemed absolutely endless. Now at length we had slowed down at the Dunchester signal-box, and now we were running into the town. If my friend the lawyer had anything really striking to tell me he would send to meet me at the station, and, if it was something remarkable, he would probably attend there himself. Therefore, if I saw neither the managing clerk nor the junior partner, nor the Head of the Firm, I might be certain that the news was trivial,

probably--dreadful thought which had not occurred to me before--that I was appointed executor under the will with a legacy of a hundred guineas.

The train rolled into the station. As it began to glide past the pavement of wet asphalt I closed my eyes to postpone the bitterness of disappointment, if only for a few seconds. Perforce I opened them again as the train was stopping, and there, the very first thing they fell upon, looking portly and imposing in a fur coat, was the rubicund-faced Head of the Firm himself. "It is good," I thought, and supported myself for a moment by the hat-rack, for the revulsion of feeling produced a sudden faintness. He saw me, and sprang forward with a beaming yet respectful countenance. "It is very good," I thought.

"My dear sir," he began obsequiously, "I do trust that my telegram has not incommoded you, but my news was such that I felt it necessary to meet you at the earliest possible moment, and therefore wired to you at every probable address."

I gave the porter who took my bag a shilling. Practically it was my last, but that lawyer's face and manner seemed to justify the expenditure which--so oddly are our minds constituted--I remember reflecting I might regret if I had drawn a false inference. The man touched his hat profusely, and, I hope, made up his mind to vote for me next time. Then I turned to the Head of the Firm and said:--

"Pray, don't apologise; but, by the way, beyond that of the death of my poor friend, what is the news?"

"Oh, perhaps you know it," he answered, taken aback at my manner, "though she always insisted upon its being kept a dead secret, so that one day you might have a pleasant surprise."

"I know nothing," I answered.

"Then I am glad to be the bearer of such good intelligence to a fortunate and distinguished man," he said with a bow. "I have the honour to inform you in my capacity of executor to the will of the late Mrs. Martha Strong that, with the exception of a few legacies, you are left her sole heir."

Now I wished that the hat-rack was still at hand, but, as it was not, I pretended to stumble, and leant for a moment against the porter who had received my last shilling.

"Indeed," I said recovering myself, "and can you tell me the amount of the property?"

"Not exactly," he answered, "but she has led a very saving life, and money grows, you know, money grows. I should say it must be between three and four hundred thousand, nearer the latter than the former, perhaps."

"Really," I replied, "that is more than I expected; it is a little astonishing to be lifted in a moment from the position of one with a mere competence into that of a rich man. But our poor friend was--well, weak-minded, so how could she be competent to make a binding will?"

"My dear sir, her will was made within a month of her husband's death, when she was as sane as you are, as I have plenty of letters to show. Only, as I have said, she kept the contents a dead secret, in order that one day they might be a pleasant surprise to you."

"Well," I answered, "all things considered, they have been a pleasant surprise; I may say a very pleasant surprise. And now let us go and have some dinner at the club. I feel tired and thirsty."

Next morning the letter that I had posted from London to the chairman of my committee was, at my request, returned to me unopened.