



BY
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PAYSON
TERHUNE
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GEORGE H. BROADHURST

CHAPTER XV.

WILLIAMS entered with Roberts in tow. The latter wore a haggard, troubled look, and his natural nervousness had visibly deepened, so much so that he had not even noted Phelan's appearance in the corridor as he passed into Horrigan's private room.

"Good evening, alderman," said Horrigan civilly.

"Good evening, sir," answered Roberts palpably ill at ease.

"I understand there's a full meeting today. Even Ellis came back from the south to be here. You're the only man missing."

"I couldn't get here sooner. I—

"I see. That's all, Williams. You needn't wait. Roberts and I want a little talk before he goes in. Now, then," went on the boss, with a complete change of manner as Williams left the room, "what's the matter with you?"

"I—I can't—

"Can't what? Speak 'out, man! Don't stand there and mumble at me!"

"I can't vote for the Borough franchise bill."

"Can't, hey?" roared Horrigan.

"Why not?"

"Because—because—" faltered Roberts; then, with a rush of hysterical emotion that blotted out his fear, he cried:

"Have you heard what that man Bennett has done? He organized a voters' committee in my ward and sent them to ask me at my own house what I was going to do about that bill. They had been stirred up by Bennett till they looked on me as a crook and on the bill as a personal robbery. They told me if I voted for it they'd know I was a dirty thief and graftor and that they'd kick me out of the ward."

"Well, well!" rumbled Horrigan soothingly, as though trying to calm a fractious drunkard. "What do you care? When they've forgotten all about the bill you'll still have the dough, won't you? Folks won't ask 'How'd he get it?' All they'll care to know is 'Has he got it?'"

"That isn't all!" Roberts blundered on, scarcely heeding the interruption. "Bennett's next step was to organize a committee of voters' wives, and they came to see my wife this morning when I was out and told her they'd heard I was going to sell myself and vote for a dishonest bill. My wife—my wife thinks I'm the squarest, noblest man on earth. Oh, you needn't sneer! Her trust means everything to me. She told the women I wouldn't stoop to any deed that wasn't honest, and they answered: 'Our husbands believe Mr. Roberts is a crook. If he is really honest he'll vote against that bill, as he did before.' Then on my way home this noon I met my little boy. He was crying. I asked him what the matter was. He said that some boys had told him I was a graftor. I tell you," his voice rising almost to a scream, "Bennett's made my life a hell. I'm no crook. I'm honest and—"

"Sure you're honest!" Horrigan exclaimed, as though to a cross child. "Honest as the day! That's why you're voting for our bill. Because the crooked clauses have been cut out of it, and in its present form it's to benefit to the city."

"That isn't why I promised to vote for it," contradicted Roberts, with a despairing dash of courage. "It was because I—because—"

"Never mind why, then, but just go ahead and do it."

"I won't! I dare not!"

"You'll do it, I say!" stormed Horrigan. "You can't weich on me at this stage of the game. Those Sturtevant Trust company notes of yours were sent to you and—"

"And I won't take them!" declared Roberts, shoving two slips of paper down upon the table. "There! Take them back!"

"What do I want of them?" argued Horrigan craftily. "They belong to you."

"They don't. I won't keep them."

"You'll have to. I keep you to your promise."

"What promise?" asked a voice behind them.

Bennett, hastily summoned by Phelan, had entered the room unobserved by either of the excited men.

"What promise?" he asked again. "A promise to—"

"What are you doing here?" bellowed Horrigan in fury. "You called me down once for coming into your private office without knocking. What do you mean by coming into mine?"

"Yours?" queried Alwyn. "I had an idea it was the city's. The time is past when the words 'Horrigan' and 'city' meant the same thing. Well, Roberts, how are you going to vote? I want to believe you honest, and—Why, what's all this?" his eyes falling on the forgotten notes on the table.

"Nothing of yours!" shouted Horrigan, making a futile, furious grab for the documents which Alwyn was picking up. "Drop them! Drop them, I say, or you'll—"

"Why should I?" asked Bennett calmly, his quick eye taking in the nature of the slips of paper even as his alert brain grasped in full the meaning of the transaction in which they figured. "Do they belong to you?"

"They don't belong to you anyway," retorted Horrigan, "and if you dare read them—"

"I've already read them, Roberts," he added in a kinder voice, turning to the shaking alderman, "these were to be read by your bribe, weren't they, for voting for the Borough bill?"

It's quietly compelling tone and glance forced from Roberts a frightened "Yes" before Horrigan could interfere.

"I thought so. Be quiet, Horrigan," he commanded as the infuriated boss sought to speak through his choking wrath. "This is between Roberts and me. Now, then—"

"I returned the notes to him!" pleaded Roberts in panic. "Honestly, I did! Just before you came in, I could have kept them, and he couldn't have prevented me even if I voted against the bill. But I'm square!"

"You are square!" affirmed Bennett, gripping the alderman's cold, moist hand in friendly reassurance. "I knew all along you were honest at heart. Horrigan wanted to bribe you, and you wouldn't be bribed. Now, I want you to go into the council room and vote as the first of the three remains."

"A woman? I don't understand."

"Miss Wainwright."

"Listen here. Bennett's in love with Wainwright's niece. You've cut him out. Go and tell him if he'll let our bill alone you'll smash the engagement and leave her free to marry him. See?"

"I can't! I—hold on, though! Afterward I could deny the whole thing, couldn't I? It'd be his word against mine, and she'd never believe I could do such a thing. I—I might try."

"Yes," growled Horrigan, "you might. A cur that's lost all his nerve can try things that even an ordinary crook would balk at."

But Gibbs did not hear. He had returned to the corridor in search of Bennett. The man scarcely deserved the opprobrium heaped on him by Horrigan. A brilliant, daring operator, he was, unknown to himself, a rank coward at heart. For the first time in his life the cowardice had cropped out, and to do Gibbs justice, it had driven him temporarily insane. In his normal senses he would never have stooped to the plan he was now so eager to carry out. It was a putrid bit of jet sam at which a financially drowning man did not scruple to clutch.

Horrigan followed him from the room, his own splendid nerve quite recovered from the crushing blow his hopes had received. He had staked heavily on the deal. Moreover, its failure, as he knew, meant the wreck of that mighty political prestige he had so long and wearisomely built up. It might even, if Alwyn fulfilled his threat about the notes, lead to graver personal consequences. Yet the bulldog pluck that had carried this man of iron from the gutter to the summit of political power did not desert him, nor did he show the loss of iota of his customary monumental calm.

Scarcely had Horrigan quitted the room when Perry and Dallas entered it.

"You could cut the atmosphere in there with a cheese knife," Perry was saying. "Williams doesn't think the Borough bill will come up for half an hour or so. We'd better spend the time till then in here than to stay there and turn our lungs into a microscope."

Dallas did not answer. She sat down by the table and rested her head dejectedly on one little gloved hand. The sight of Bennett, his grave, hopeless appeal to her; the calm, utter despair of his brave face—all these had affected her deeply. Perry noticed with brotherly concern her look and attitude.

"Feeling faint?" he asked.

"No, I'm all right, thanks."

"You look pretty near as blue as Alwyn. He—"

"Don't let's talk of him, please," she begged.

"Why not? He's the whitest chap this side of Whiteville."

"That's what I used to think, but I know better now."

"Then, miss," broke in a voice from the doorway, "you're entitled to another 'know.'"

Phelan, who, passing down the corridor, had heard her last words as he reached the threshold, turned into the room.

"Excuse me for buttin' in on a family chat," he remarked, coming forward, "but I'm pretty well posted on his honor's character, an' when I hear any one knockin' him it's me to the bat. What have you got against Mr. Bennett?"

"None of your measly business," says you. "Quite so," says I, an', that bein' the case, let's hear all about it."

Something that underlay the seeming impertinence of the alderman's bluff speech touched Dallas. On impulse she spoke:

"Mr. Bennett," said she, "is opposing the Borough bill, knowing we shall be paupers if he defeats it. He also sold Borough stock short before he announced his veto. What can one think of a man who enriches himself at the expense of his friends?"

"So?" drawled Horrigan, his keen little eyes searing the other with boundless contempt. "So it was you who were secretly buying up the stock and tailing in on to our game, hey?"

He checked himself an instant too late.

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