



HUMOURS OF ELECTION- EERING

BY

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I HAVE been asked to write a short article on the Humours of Electioneering; now the humorous side of electioneering is perhaps less apparent to a candidate for Parliament than to those who support him on the platform and in his canvass. The candidate is usually too busy and sometimes too exhausted to bear in mind the ludicrous incidents which from time to time occur during a contested election. Still, all who take part in public life must have now and then amusing experiences, so I will try and recall a few that have happened to me in a political career of not inconsiderable duration.

Rural audiences are now much more enlightened, and consequently much easier to address, than they were fifteen years or so ago. When the Constitutional Union—now merged with the United Club—was formed in 1880, one main object of the association was to supply lecturers to visit districts where, through the apathy of those who should have been the leading members of the Conservative party, the principles of that party had never been adequately laid before the rural electors. As I was an active agent in founding the society, so was I among the first to be told off to deliver a series of addresses in places where a Conservative speaker was something of a rarity. My first address

was given in the sanded parlour of a village inn—a long low room dimly lighted—with a paraffin lamp at one end and two candles placed on the table at which I was to stand. A neighbouring farmer had promised to preside, but at the last moment pleaded illness, of a diplomatic character as I was subsequently led to think, and the village carpenter somewhat reluctantly took his place. I had to wait some time for my audience, but at length from twenty to thirty men, mostly, I should judge, farm labourers, slouched in by twos and threes, and with much shuffling of hobnailed boots settled themselves as if they were half ashamed of being seen there on the benches round the wall, while the *habitués* of the inn took possession of the chairs by the fire. My chairman was commendably brief, and I began a speech which, for all the interest it excited, might have been uttered in Greek. Nothing is so trying to an inexperienced speaker—and such I then was—as dead silence, and I suppose my embarrassment was noticed by the carpenter, who intervened with the well-meant suggestion that perhaps the gentleman would like a drop of something to drink, and if so would he give it a name. I named whisky and water, which was promptly brought by a servant girl. In my confusion I did not observe that he had placed two tumblers on the table—one of whisky and one of water—and hastily taking up the nearest I swallowed half its contents, which turned out to be raw spirit of a peculiarly fiery blend. Of course a fit of choking followed, which

raised a hearty laugh at my expense. This mishap, however, broke the ice. The affair from that moment took a conversational turn, and I was soon on friendly terms with my audience, by whom I was invited after speaking for about half an hour to sit round the fire with them and smoke a pipe. That I had not created a wholly unfavourable impression was proved by my receiving shortly afterwards a special request to address another rural audience in a part of the same county. I was told that it was a rough neighbourhood, and if I had a thick stick I should do well to bring it with me, a piece of advice which I took for a joke. We had a long drive to the place of meeting, and arriving late were greeted with marks of impatience by a crowd of villagers crammed into a small school-room. I had not spoken for more than five minutes before the row began. At the back of the room were a number of youths, who, throwing peas, nuts, and other small missiles at the platform, soon caused such an uproar that not a word I said could be heard except by the occupants of the front seats. Finding that the interruption was mainly caused by the youths on the back benches, I addressed myself to the men nearest me, and asked them whether they had come there to hear me or the boys. If the boys, I and my friends would leave the platform; but if, whatever their political views might be, they were willing to listen to me, then I asked them to turn the boys out. The men seemed to think this a sensible suggestion, for they immediately adopted it, and, as soon as the authors of the disturbance were removed, listened to what I had to say with close attention. When I had finished, one of the men, after a courteous and kindly reference to myself, proceeded in a forcible speech to demolish my arguments, and ended by proposing a vote of confidence in Mr. Gladstone, which was carried by a large majority. Although political opponents, they were not unfriendly, for several of them when the meeting broke up volunteered to form a bodyguard to the carriage—a not unnecessary precaution, for it was pitch dark, and we had not gone many yards before the youths who had been expelled assailed us with a shower of stones. However, with the exception of some trifling bruises and the loss of a hat, we reached the carriage in safety. At a bend in the road another volley of stones was directed against us.

One hit the driver and several the carriage, but fortunately the horses were not touched, and breaking into a canter soon took us out of harm's way.

Riotous meetings at elections are not common nowadays, except when, as sometimes happens, such gatherings are taken advantage of by organized bodies of thieves for their own ends. On one occasion, indeed, I presided over a meeting held in a schoolroom underneath a Methodist chapel which had been called in support of the Conservative candidate, who was a personal friend of mine. Two local ladies much interested in the cause accompanied me on the platform. The proceedings throughout were of a lively character, and free fighting was the order, or rather disorder, of the evening. The elder of the two ladies pluckily kept her seat, prepared as she afterwards declared to defend the chair, if attacked, at the point of her umbrella. The younger, when the meeting broke up, could not be found. Diligent search was made, in vain, and we were about to leave without her, thinking she had gone home, when one of the deacons recollected that at the height of the tumult a lady had sought refuge in the vestry, and had been locked up there. The key was turned, and our friend emerged, more frightened than hurt. With the exception of the stone-throwing incident, I never experienced any personal harm at political meetings, and cannot therefore in this respect put myself on a par with a gentleman from Ireland who, to enhance his claim to the post of secretary to a Conservative association, stated to the committee of selection, of whom I was one, that in Dublin "he had many times sacrificed his life for the cause." I have indeed suffered in property, if not in person, to a limited extent. Some years ago I was wired for to assist at a bye election in a large town in the Midlands. As generally happens on such occasions, more platform assistance was asked for than was needed, and I was sent off to speak at some ward meetings. At the first of them, although as the hour was early the attendance was thin, I was much struck with the excellent spirit of those who were there. Not content with giving us an enthusiastic reception, a number of young men insisted on shaking us warmly by the hand, and pressed so closely round us as we left the hall, chanting at the same time the refrain of a popular political

song, that with difficulty could we make our way to the carriage. As we drove off I remarked to my companion, a son of the candidate, how gratifying it was to note the interest the young took in the cause, seeing that the future of the country depended on the rising generation. His reply startled me. "Confound the rising generation!" he

detectives on the trail of the thieves. Mine was a cheap silver watch bought some years before to replace a gold one of which I had been robbed in a crowd on Ludgate Hill, on the occasion of the Prince of Wales returning thanks for his recovery from illness, but my companion's was a valuable chronometer, the gift of a relative, and prized on that account.



"CONFOUND THE RISING GENERATION!" HE SAID, FUMBLING IN HIS POCKET.

said, fumbling in his pocket: "they have taken my watch. How about yours?" I looked down: watch and chain were both gone. These young politicians whose enthusiasm had so roused my admiration were swell mobsmen from Birmingham. We drove straight to the police station, and, finding that no train for Birmingham left for two hours, set

How the matter was managed I do not know, but as a fact this gentleman on payment of a considerable sum subsequently recovered his watch. At supper that night the robbery was the subject of conversation, and the Conservative candidate, a very wealthy man, turning to me said, "Don't trouble about your watch: you've lost it helping me, and I will get

you another to-morrow." In the excitement of the election, which he won, I assumed that he forgot the matter; but some years after, when I had also been elected a member of Parliament, I found myself seated next to this very gentleman. In a jocular tone I reminded him of the watch incident. "I remember it perfectly," he said, "and I have a watch put away in a drawer for you somewhere. I'll look for it." My old friend has long since gone over to the majority, and the watch I suppose still remains in the drawer.

Of course odd mishaps occur to one at times. For instance, I was to speak at an evening meeting in a country town, and had been invited to dine first at the house of two elderly ladies who lived in the neighbourhood. When dressing for dinner, I discovered to my dismay that my servant had omitted to pack up my waistcoat. What was to be done? There were no gentlemen in the family of whom I could borrow, so I applied to the butler—a stout elderly man. Fortunately he had a spare waistcoat, which, though not indeed a match for my clothes, would pass muster, but it was miles too big. The guests had arrived, and the dinner was ready. My dilemma had become known to the servants, and a sympathetic housemaid knocked at the door, and producing some pins deftly took in a large pleat at the back of the waistcoat and made me fairly presentable. Dinner over, we drove to the meeting, where I was to make the principal speech. The platform was raised several steps above the general level of the room, and the speakers stood almost at its edge. I had spoken for about ten minutes, and was warming to my work—the subject, so far as I recollect, admitted of energetic treatment—when I felt one pin give way, then after a short interval another, and so on, until at length I appeared in all the capacious bulk of the true owner of the garment. The general body of the audience did not seem to perceive the transformation I had undergone, but I noticed some tittering among the ladies in front, and one gentleman observed to me afterwards that public speaking evidently agreed with me, for that when I sat down I was twice the man I was when I rose.

Occasionally doubtful compliments are paid one. Some years ago my friend Mr. Byron Reed, then one of the members for Bradford, asked me to take his place and speak at a large gathering of the Primrose

League in the North of England, where he has long established a reputation as a powerful platform orator. Breaking the journey from London at York, I arrived at my destination pretty early on the day of the demonstration. My host, who had given the use of his grounds for the occasion, and his family were too much engaged to pay me attention, but a neighbouring clergyman, who also came early, showed me round the place, and put me up to several matters of local interest with which it was desirable that the chief speaker should be acquainted. It is a trying ordeal at the best of times to fill the position of stop-gap in place of a deservedly popular favourite, and this good cleric did not dispel the nervousness I felt by descanting at length on the charms as a public speaker of Mr. Byron Reed, of whom he was evidently an enthusiastic admirer, and on the disappointment to the assembly which his absence would occasion. However, he took some comfort in the reflection that Mr. Reed was a man of sense, and would be certain not to send an utter duffer to represent him. When the meeting was over, and I was leaving the tent, my clerical friend was waiting for me. "There is a working-man who wants to speak to you," said he, and he took me off a little distance to where the gentleman in question was standing. He was a big burly north-countryman, who could have taken Byron Reed up in one hand and me in the other and held us both at arm's length with scarcely an effort. This gentleman wasted no words. Gripping my right hand in his as with an iron vice, he said, "Mon, I should like to hear thee in a chapel," and that was all. From his manner and the warmth and strength of his salutation, I took his aspiration for a compliment, but he may have implied that my speech was as dull as a sermon. At any rate, if my discourse on that day would be considered to be suitable for delivery in a chapel, the worshippers must be treated to some strange examples of pulpit oratory in that district.

It is not often that I write out a speech, much less learn one off by heart, but I did so once, with the result, as it happened, of grievously offending some leading Conservatives who supported me on the platform. I had been asked to give an address to the members of a Conservative association in a fashionable town in the Midlands. In order to save myself trouble I wrote out my speech, and when

I had completed it found that, what with reading it over in the course of composition, I knew it by heart sufficiently to be able, with the aid of a cue or two on half a sheet of notepaper, to dispense with the manuscript. But I took the latter with me for the benefit of the reporters, and as I passed by the table at which they were seated on my way to the platform

speech at one meeting, took the opportunity of earning an extra fee by reporting the speakers at the other meeting as well. Now my chairman was an influential man in the neighbourhood, and was well supported by several notabilities of more or less repute. These gentlemen had prepared neat speeches, the chairman was really eloquent in his introductory



"MON, I SHOULD LIKE TO HEAR THEE IN A CHÂPEL."

I threw the written speech upon it and said, "You need not trouble to report me, gentlemen: you will find my address there." They thanked me profusely, and in a few minutes left the room in a body. It appeared that a temperance meeting was held on the same evening in another part of the town, and the reporters, having secured the principal No. 143. August, 1895.

remarks, and the movers and seconders of resolutions performed their parts with marked effect, consequently great was their disgust, I was afterwards told, when, on opening the leading local paper, they found an admirable *résumé* of my address, and nothing else but a string of names.

Talking of local celebrities and matters of local interest, I may give a word of

caution founded on my own experience. One always likes on going to a strange place to speak to be put *au courant* with local affairs and local feeling, not merely in order to avoid treading on people's toes, but also that one may, to use a music-hall term, bring in with effect a topical allusion or two. Some years ago I was to speak at a Conservative meeting in support of a gentleman, whom I will call Brown-Jones, who had for many years represented the constituency in Parliament. Now I had a fixed impression in my mind, how or whence derived I cannot now remember, that this elderly gentleman, whom I had never seen before, had served with distinction in the Royal Navy, and was actually an admiral on the retired list. So, thought I, a little local colour at the outset of my speech would tell well with the audience, to whom I was a complete stranger, and put me on good terms with them. Consequently I

began by expressing the great gratification I felt at being privileged to speak on behalf of their old and tried representative, Admiral Brown-Jones. An ominous silence welcomed this exordium—a silence which should have warned me that, to use a not inappropriate metaphor in this connection, I was on the wrong tack. But I perversely stuck to my point. "Gentlemen," I continued, "the presence in the House of Commons of naval men of the experience and ability of your honoured member is of incalculable advantage to the British nation." At this juncture I felt a violent tug at my coat-tails, and turning round faced Brown-Jones himself, who, fuming with rage, exclaimed in a whisper that every one could hear, "What are you talking about? I never was in the navy in my life!" I fumbled out of my blunder in some fashion, but the edge was taken off my speech from that moment.

