

Touch and Go

An Incident in a British Election Campaign

By JOHN W. KERSHAW

PAUL CROMPTON was in a very bitter, savage mood as he followed the path through the grounds of the Grange, and truly he had some cause for exasperation, for he had just had a rather bad rebuff which, besides ruffling his spirits, had sent his heart down below zero. So when just as he reached the wicket he met Sylvia Sledmer, even the sight of her failed to bring the accustomed brightness to his face.

"Well?" she said, with a bright smile and just a faint touch of crimson on her cheeks.

"It isn't well," he replied. "It is all ill. Hang politics and elections—and candidates," he added to himself.

"Is it so bad?" she asked, mockingly.

"It is. I've just seen your father, and he practically told me never to visit the Grange again. It seems that the Colonel and my governor have had a terrific row this morning about the election, and have ended with a declaration on both sides that there is to be no more intercourse between the two families. What d'ye think about that? And he has almost ordered me off the premises."

"But he wouldn't do that without some cause. You must have annoyed him."

"Perhaps I did," he replied, with a twinkle. "I asked him if he would have any objection to me as a son-in-law."

Her face flushed crimson. "You didn't?"

"I did. I've told you over and over again that was my greatest desire—to win you; so I blurted it all out."

"And what did he say?" she asked.

"What I have told you. He'd see me in a warm climate first, though before I came away he cooled down a little, and said if Captain Barclay won the election and you accepted me, he would think it over, adding certain uncomplimentary remarks about my father. So your fate and mine apparently are to hang on the chances of the ballot-box."

She broke into a ringing laugh. "It is the funniest thing I ever heard of," she said. "Poor Paul! It is hard on you. What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? I wish you would be serious, Sylvia. It isn't a laughing matter."

"I think it is. May I give you a tip?"

"What is it?"

"Come over to our side, and help Captain Barclay."

"How can I do that? It would be opposing my father," he said.

"And pleasing both me and my father. Besides, I can't oppose my father. Now can I?"

"And I suppose I can?"

"That's different," she replied, with a woman's inconsequence. "You have told me you love me. Now here is the opportunity to show you are in earnest. It isn't much to ask you to support the Captain. He is a delightful man."

"Is he?" retorted Paul, savagely, to himself.

"I can't," he replied. "My father is the chief supporter of Mr. Mason."

"All the more reason you should do your best for us," she said, with a merry twinkle which rather belied the demure face.

She was really a charming girl, as bewitching as a healthy English maiden of twenty-two can be, and Paul Crompton loved her to distraction. He had told her so, and had never been able to obtain a serious answer, either affirmative or negative. In truth, he never knew quite how to take her, and to-day she was in one of her most tantalizing moods. They had known each other pretty well all their lives, for their sires were the leading people in the little town, one the chief landed proprietor at the Grange at one end, the other the wealthy manufacturer at the Laurels at the other. It was true there had never been warm friendship between the two parents, for the Colonel was aristocratic and proud, and the manufacturer was reserved, and also proud, and differences in politics separated them. But what cared the young people for that? Elections only came at fairly long intervals, and party feeling slumbered between. Now all was rancour, for the division was plunged into the turmoil of a fiercely-contested election, and while Paul Crompton found himself dragged into the whirlpool on one side, Sylvia Sledmer was equally involved on the other. To make matters worse for Paul, there were rumours that the Colonel's candidate, Captain Barclay, had a bigger stake in view than the representation of the Cleveleys Division—to wit, the

Colonel's fair daughter. That made Paul Crompton desperate.

"It isn't fair, Sylvia," he said. "I'd do anything for you in reason."

"Except the one thing that I want," she retorted, with a pout. "For my sake, if you do love me as you pretend, you might do this."

"I can't. What has the election to do with you and me?"

"Oh, it isn't any use arguing," she said, with an air of offended dignity. "Captain Barclay is much readier to please me."

"Have you asked him to change his politics?"

"No doubt he would if I asked him," she returned.

"Well, good-bye. I suppose I shall not see you any more."

He caught her, and she turned on him with an air of cold defiance.

"You aren't in earnest. You can't be," he said.

"We can't part like this."

"I think we can."

"Do you mean you take the same line as the Colonel?"

"Exactly. Let me see, what was it? You are not to come near till the election is over, and not then unless Captain Barclay is victorious. If he wins, then I will consider it—in the light of your refusal to make this sacrifice for me," and she slipped out of his grasp and ran away.

IT is to be feared Paul Crompton swore, and if there ever was an occasion where profanity was justifiable this was one. What is a man to do when he is madly in love and full of hope of winning the girl, and an election and a charming candidate favoured by the father come in the way? Certainly such a situation does not conduce to high spirits. So during the next ten days, while the contest was in progress, Paul Crompton was cross and irritable.

At first he was so disgusted that he felt half-inclined to throw up all connection with the election and go away. But he could not do that, and presently he caught the feverish infection, and flung himself with all his heart into the fight. His father was keen and unusually bitter. He was angry at the Colonel, and eager that his own candidate should win. Paul said nothing about his own worries, but, as the days passed, he grew more wretched, and hard work came as a sort of palliative. There never was such a contest in the Cleveleys Division. It was certain from the first that the result was doubtful, and the majority would be a small one. Party feeling ran higher than it had ever done before. Both sides were making desperate efforts. Mr. Crompton, as chairman of his party, was in the very thick of it; and Paul, as his son, was spending almost the whole of his days in his motor-car riding about the division.

Only once in that ten days did he see Sylvia, though he knew that she was devoting herself to the canvass of Captain Barclay as zealously as he was to that of Mr. Mason. Moreover, the tongue of rumour was very busy, and it was certain that Captain Barclay was finding great attraction at the Grange, and that he and Sylvia were spending a good deal of time together.

As the days passed Mr. Crompton grew more and more confident. "I feel certain we shall win," he said, one evening. "Mason's power is growing. By the way, it is rumoured that Barclay is engaged to Miss Sledmer, or likely to be. Do you know?"

Paul did not reply. He had already heard the news, and feared it was true.

It was the following morning that he met Sylvia in the main street, gaily flaunting her party colours. She waved her hand merrily. He stopped to speak, but she turned away, and he saw that Captain Barclay was approaching, and when he reached the next turning and looked back it was to see them walking side by side engaged in obviously merry chat, and on the most cordial of terms. And Paul Crompton's heart sank. Clearly the rumour was true.

The next day was the one fixed for the nomination, and when he reached home after a complete tour of the division, Paul brought with him full reports of prospects.

"What d'ye really think of it?" he asked his father, as they smoked a cigar just before going to bed.

"It is a toss-up who wins," was the answer. "I'm afraid Barclay has gained here, and this is our chief stronghold. If we don't poll heavily here we

lose, and Miss Sledmer has done us a good deal of harm. She has worked hard, and is popular, and the rumour of her engagement to Barclay has helped him. Now about to-morrow. I must be at Cleveleys when the nomination papers are handed in at twelve. You must stay here. Maldon will pass through on the 11.30, and you had better see him and tell him to meet me at two."

Next morning, soon after nine, Paul walked down to the committee-room of his party for a few words with the sub-agent.

The man received him with a grin, and it was evident he was in high spirits.

"D'ye want to make a bit of money, Mr. Paul?" he asked. "Put all you can on Mason. The other side are cocksure and ready to bet. Between me and you I've got a lot on, for it is a dead certainty."

"How do you know?" Paul asked.

"Don't ask, but take my word for it," was the reply; and the man could not be induced to say another word.

Somewhat puzzled by the air of complete certainty on a result which he knew to be at least problematic, Paul returned to the mills. A few minutes before half-past eleven he rode up to the station in his motor-car, which was adorned with party colours and carried the name "Mason" in big letters.

As he stepped out he became aware of the sub-agent and another man coming out of the station full of half-suppressed merriment, and the former as he hurried by gave him a wink.

Inside the station he found Colonel Sledmer and Captain Barclay in close conversation with the station-master. There were no signs of any train, and the porters were standing idly at the other end of the platform.

The conversation between the station-master and the gentlemen was very serious, and Paul saw that the Colonel's face was red and flushed, and his manner angry. Once the station-master pointed to Paul and said something which produced a violent explosion and a shake of the head from the Colonel.

In the end the two gentlemen came towards him, and passing by, went out, the Colonel giving him an angry scowl, but no other sign of recognition.

"What is the matter?" Paul asked the station-master, who came up with a half-suppressed smile.

"The line is blocked," was the answer, "and no trains can get through for some hours. The Colonel and his friend want to get to Cleveleys. It seems that they have the nomination papers with them, and they were going by this train to hand them in. However, I don't suppose it matters much. There is plenty of time to drive over."

"Plenty of time!" Paul exclaimed, looking at his watch. "Why, it only wants a little over twenty minutes."

"The papers have to be handed in at one o'clock," the man replied.

"At twelve o'clock!" Paul burst out.

"The Colonel himself said one," the station-master answered. "They are going to get a carriage to drive over. Well, if it is twelve the election is over, and Mr. Mason has been elected. I suggested they should ask you to run over with them, but the Colonel was quite huffy about it."

Paul turned away. For a moment he was inclined to laugh. That there had been some knavery at work he was certain. The cocksureness of the local agent and his jubilation were all indicative of a knowledge that the nomination papers would be handed in too late.

THEN his gorge rose. It was a mean and dirty trick, and it would not be winning with clean hands. It was not sportsmanlike. There was just one chance for the Colonel and his friend, and that was only a meagre one. Paul's motor was outside, and by a desperate race against time he could just carry them to the Shire Hall some ten miles away in the time. It was for his rival in love and his opponent in the fight. It would be looked on as treason by his side. Should he do it?

His mind was made up in a moment, and he made a dash for his car. Colonel Sledmer and Captain Barclay were still in sight, walking down the road. They looked up in surprise as his car dashed up.

"Jump in!" he shouted. "I'll take you to Cleveleys!"

The Colonel scowled at him and continued his walk. "Many thanks," he said. "There is plenty of time."

"There is about twenty minutes!" Paul yelled. "Don't hesitate. If you do you are lost. The nomination papers must be in at twelve."

"I told you so, Colonel," the Captain exclaimed, catching the elder man's arm. "Come along. We haven't a second to spare."

"We can't trust that," Colonel Sledmer replied, (Continued on page 28.)