

CHAPTER XXVI

BETTING PIES

Meanwhile this Fall term had been enlivened by the colorful exploits of a Freshman whom Grandfather had brought to the University from his home town. Harry Harding was one of Grandfather's friends in Brodhead - a youth of unusual nerve and virility who while in high school grew a full beard that would have done full justice to a Russian Bolshevik and since he could lick anyone who might object, he was allowed to wear whiskers as long as he pleased.

This youth, minus his whiskers, but with all his abounding animal spirits and high ambitions - for withall Harry was a lad of fine ideals and student ambitions - Grandfather with mingled pride and misgivings took to the University in the fall of 1892, and that Grandfather might the better restrain any desires Harry might have to lick the Sophomore class, Grandfather parked Harry in the same rooming house with himself.

Harding was cautioned to stay away from the Freshman class meeting. That evening he returned with his hand done up in surgical dressings. He had intended, as exhorted, so he explained, to stay away from the Freshman meeting, but had accidentally found himself near the meeting and had gone inside. When a Soph. outside made faces at him, not noticing that the window was down, Harry slugged at the Soph. through the glass. Fortunately no permanent injury had been received.

A few days later Grandfather saw a group of Sophs. gathering. Grandfather said: "Harry, they are planning to get you." He said: "I think not," and crossing the street, walked boldly through the crowd. No one quite liked to be the first to tackle him.

It happened that Harding was a Democrat while his roommate - Lucas - also a Freshman from Brodhead, was a Republican, and they bet two weeks pie on the outcome of the election. Perhaps it may be necessary to stop a minute to explain to you about the Poynton Boarding Club. In the University it was a custom in the early '90's for students to manage their own boarding clubs - a group of students would elect a manager, he would hire a woman who had suitable dining room and who would agree to cook and serve for a definite sum per week. The manager would buy all provisions and could collect from the students the actual costs, the student manager for his services receiving his board free. A student manager who could not keep the cost below \$2.00 per week for the twenty-one meals was N. G. and was fired. One of the most famous of these student clubs in the early '90's was the Poynton Club, so named for Mrs. Poynton, who was an excellent cook and a great favorite with the students.

Most of the members were upper classmen, but some Freshmen were admitted when recommended and vouched for as good fellows and financially reliable by some upper classman who was a member. Grandfather got Harding and Lucas accepted at the club. It was more of a kindness to Harding than to the club, for Harding had a most amazing appetite. He was working his way through college by sawing wood. In that day student's rooms were heated for the most part by wood stoves. The wood was brought

in by farmers in four-foot lengths and each length needed to be sawed by hand into three pieces. This was vigorous work, as Grandfather well knew, from his experience sawing wood for his mother at Bredhead. Harding, while a student, sawed wood to get money to keep him in the University, and with this vigorous exercise he ate such quantities of food that he began to make the manager anxious.

Now each student received just one piece of pie at dinner, which was always at noon, and the piece was not large enough to be satisfying. So it was a custom of the boys to bet their pie for a stipulated time. Harding and Lucas bet "two weeks pie", that is, the loser would give the winner his piece of pie every day for two weeks.

When excitement began to run high on Cleveland's election, Harding being one of the few Democrats in the University, bet "two weeks pie" with his roommate Lucas. This was a large bet, for the loss even of one week's pie was considered a catastrophe and the paying of it led to a major deprivation. Harding did not expect to win - he applauded himself as a martyr to the cause.

When Cleveland won Harding was filled with unexpected glee in anticipation of extra pie for two whole weeks. But Lucas craftily appealed to his fellow Republicans to cheat Harding out of the pie. The plan was simple. They would wait until Harding had completed his usual large dinner and then the fourteen Republicans would each shove over their pie. Harding would be unable to eat the pie, the Republican sympathizers would get their pie back, the bet would be paid and at least one Democratic victory would prove futile.

Harding did eat a huge meal and then drawing his own piece of pie toward him, grinned triumphantly at the table of Republicans and demanded payment of the bet. Whereupon fourteen Republicans simultaneously shoved their pie over to him and waited expectantly for its return. No one piece of pie was large in those days, but fifteen pieces (his own and the fourteen paid on the bet) of pumpkin pie looked like an impossible challenge even to Harding's voracious appetite. But Harding gleefully attacked the problem, and as piece after piece disappeared, the countenances of the Republican conspirators fell, and when Harding swallowed the last morsel of pie and smacked his lips, a political as well as a gustatory victory had been won and Grover Cleveland himself could hardly have gloated with more pride over his defeated and crestfallen opponents.

Harding walked home all right and for the rest of the day seemed none the worse for his exploit, but on the following day he developed an acute pain in his sciatic nerve. This grew so severe that we finally took him in a carriage to old Doctor Sheldon, a family doctor of the old school who was something of a favorite among the students. The doctor looked in puzzled amazement at this strapping youth with ruddy face just beaming an exuberance of health and said: "I must say, young man, you look like a mighty healthful specimen to me."

But Harding still insisted the pain in his sciatic nerve was excruciating and winced whenever the doctor touched his leg. The doctor with a curious look on his face looked him over and finally straightening up, repeated: "I must say, young man, you look like a mighty healthful specimen to me." The doctor looked puzzled but finally added: "The only

thing I can think of that might be the matter with you is that you might have digested more food than your system can assimilate." The doctor was right - after a couple of days of eating more lightly, Harding was quite himself again.

Some of the members of Poynton Club who had left early greatly regretted they had not stayed to see this eating championship event and a little later fixed up another "two weeks pie" bet with Harding which he would be sure to win. Again in unison fourteen people shoved their pie across the table to him, while the whole club formed a gallery. But Harding, after eating two pieces, asked the waitress for a basket and carefully packing the pie in a basket, started for home. The disappointment of this dencouement was too great to be endured, and as Harding went down the steps, someone snatched the basket and a pie riot ensued.