

RALPH THE HEIR.

BY

ANTHONY TROLLOPE,
AUTHOR OF "FRAMLEY PARSONAGE," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ
1871.

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CHAPTER I.

The Election.

THE day of the nomination at Percycross came at last, and it was manifest to everybody that there was a very unpleasant feeling in the town. It was not only that party was arrayed against party. That would have been a state of things not held to be undesirable, and at any rate would have been natural. But at present things were so divided that there was no saying which were the existing parties. Moggs was separated from Westmacott quite as absolutely as was Westmacott from the two Conservative candidates. The old Liberals of the borough were full of ridicule for poor Moggs, of whom all absurd stories were told by them both publicly and privately. But still he was there, the darling of the workmen. It was, indeed, asserted by the members of Mr. Westmacott's committee that Moggs's popularity would secure for him but very few votes. A great proportion of the working men of Percycross were freemen of the borough,—old voters who were on the register by right of their birth and family connection in the place, independent of householdership and rates,—and quite accustomed to the old ways of manipulation. The younger of these men might be seduced into listening to Moggs. The excitement was

pleasant to them. But they were too well trained to be led away on the day of election. Moggs would give them no beer, and they had always been accustomed to their three half-crowns a head in consideration for the day's work. Not a dozen freemen of the borough would vote for Moggs. So said Mr. Kirkham, Mr. Westmacott's managing man, and no man knew the borough quite so well as did Mr. Kirkham. "They'll fight for him at the hustings," said Mr. Kirkham; "but they'll take their beer and their money, and they'll vote for us and Griffenbottom."

This might be true enough as regarded the freemen,—the men who had been, as it were, educated to political life;—but there was much doubt as to the new voters. There were about a thousand of these in the borough, and it had certainly not been the intention of either party that these men should have the half-crowns. It was from these men and their leaders,—the secretaries and chairmen and presidents,—that had come the cry for a second Liberal candidate, and the consequent necessity of putting forward two Conservatives. They were equally odious to the supporters of Westmacott and of Griffenbottom. "They must have the half-crowns," Trigger had said to old Pile, the bootmaker. Pile thought that every working man was entitled to the three half-crowns, and said as much very clearly. "I suppose old Grif ain't going to turn Hunks at this time o' day," said Mr. Pile. But the difficulties were endless, and were much better understood by Mr. Trigger than by Mr. Pile. The manner of conveying the half-crowns to the three hundred and twenty-four freemen, who would take them and vote honestly afterwards for Griffenbottom and Honeywood,

was perfectly well understood. But among that godless, riotous, ungoverned and ungovernable set of new householders, there was no knowing how to act. They would take the money and then vote wrong. They would take the money and then split. The freemen were known. Three hundred and twenty-four would take Griffenbottom's beer and half-crowns. Two hundred and seventy-two would be equally complaisant with Mr. Westmacott. But of these householders nothing was known. They could not be handled. Some thirty or forty of them would probably have the turning of the election at the last hour, must then be paid at their own prices, and after that would not be safe! Mr. Trigger, in his disgust, declared that things had got into so vile a form that he didn't care if he never had anything to do with an election in Percycross again.

And then there was almost as much ill-feeling between the old-fashioned Griffenbottomites and the Underwooders as there was between Westmacott's Liberals and Moggs's Radicals. The two gentlemen themselves still ate their breakfasts and dinners together, and still paraded the streets of Percycross in each other's company. But Sir Thomas had made himself very odious even to Mr. Griffenbottom himself. He was always protesting against beer which he did see, and bribery which he did not see but did suspect. He swore that he would pay not a shilling, as to which the cause of the expenditure was not explained to him. Griffenbottom snarled at him, and expressed an opinion that Sir Thomas would of course do the same as any other gentleman. Mr. Trigger, with much dignity in his mien as he spoke, declared that the discussion of