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Untold Tales

*XIV—How Livius R. Harmonium Was Seized by an
Ideer and Later Conveyed to the Tomb*

It is an axiom that the man with original ideas is the man destined to make his way in the world. Thus it has been ever since Adam evolved the plan of employing fig leaves as garments, and thus it was from the beginning of civilization to the fall of the last Egyptian dynasty, and from the fall of the last Egyptian dynasty to the rise of the potent and mighty Roman Empire. Thus it was, also, at the time when the glory of Rome was at its zenith, in the year 206 A. D., when galleys loaded to the water line sailed up the Tiber daily with cargoes of gold and silver and myrrh and frankincense from the vassal kingdoms of the Levant, and the stock market reflected unprecedented prosperity, and everybody had ready money, and Ippius Hydrochlorate was mayor of Rome, and the whigs were in power, and grafts were many and pickings rich.

In politics, as well as in other industries, men with ideas are bound to succeed, and at the time mentioned men with ideas were on top. There was J. Cassius Sulphide, for instance. One day, in a moment of leisure, he invented an automatic brad-awl which rendered obsolete the old methods of assaulting and battering opposition voters at the polls. For this he was rewarded with the whig leadership of the Seventh Ward, and a life interest of 3 percent in all paving contract grafts.

Then there was Nero Macormickus, the inventor of the steam power percentage computer. He was appointed custodian of the buttonhole workers' vote, and enjoyed pickings worth 10,000 denarii a year. Again there was J. Brutus Violincelli, the inventor of the double bottom ballot box and the indestructible asbestos ballot. He was given the whig shrievalty nomination and eventually rose to be leader of the Third Legislative district. Similar, and even greater, rewards were given to Caesar O Cato, the discoverer of an easy method of teaching Carthaginian immigrants to mark their ballots; James R. Andantino, the inventor of the triple expansion naturalizing machine; Augustus Catulus, the inventor of the torchlight parade, and many others.

It was a saying in Rome that the man with originality was bound to get next, and every young and ambitious politician spent his days and his nights cudgelling his brain in search of available ideas.

One of those who thus burned the midnight oil most industriously was a certain Livius R. Harmonium. Livius entered politics upon his 21st birthday, when he voted once in each of the 22 wards of the city of Rome. At the next election he was employed as a herder of Polish illiterates. For his ability and fidelity in executing this task he was appointed precinct shepherd of the Eighth Precinct of the Seventh Ward—one of the toughest in the city. Then, in order to learn every branch of his chosen profession, he served a year as bartender in the saloon of J. Cassius Jonesii, the well known alderman, and, upon completing this term, another year as a patrolman attached to the Appian Way Police Station.

Then he was given a job in the tax department, and in the course of a few years rose to the position of ward executive and was twice mentioned for legislative honors. To the naked eye his future seemed to be promising, and many there were—and older men, too—who envied him. But Livius himself was not satisfied.

“True enough,” he said, “I am getting along very nicely, and in time I may reach the proud eminence of a district boss or a member of Congress. In fact, I may even become mayor of Rome, or the right hand man of the big boss. But this will require years, and it will be no improvement upon the careers of other men. I am moving along in a groove. I am one of the among-those-present. Why can’t I strike out for myself and carve my name upon the topmost pinnacle of the temple of fame in one fell swoop? Why can’t I steer a new course and climb the ladder without waiting in ante-rooms?” (When eloquent, Livius often mixed his metaphors.) “Why can’t I evolve something new under the sun and make it pay me a pension for the rest of my natural life?”

Burning with these thoughts Livius set to work, and in a few days he had completed a model of a new and novel hygienic high hat for campaign parades. The bosses did not regard it with favour, but this failed to damp Livius’ enthusiasm, and in a few days he had invented a modified Bertillon method of identifying repeaters. But this, too, was a failure, and for the nonce he was in despair. In a day or two, however, he was at work again, and soon he completed his celebrated steam power stencil for branding ward heelers. This brought him immediate fame and eventually the leadership of a legislative district, and a fat job in the department of charities and correction.

This success, beside giving him a ready hearing, goaded him on to even greater efforts and for a year he worked industriously. His invention of the bone breaking machine for torturing unwilling contractors followed. Then for another year, he held his peace. Nothing was heard from him. He kept under cover.

And then—

And then—upon the Monday following the ides of October, in the year 209 A.D.—he handed to the bosses the plans of the invention which was destined to make his name immortal.

It was epoch-making and it stunned them, and as he spoke they heard him as men dreaming.

“As all of you know,” he said, “the largest expense attached to a modern election is incurred in the purchase and voting of voters. In the first place it is necessary to provide polling places in all of the wards and precincts, and to pay large sums for watchers, challengers and workers. In the second place it is necessary to spend thousands in buying voters and repeaters and in employing shepherds, heelers and herders to manage them and watch them and vote them. My invention will save all of this expense, and in addition it will save time and labor, and annoyance and worry. It is, in brief, a machine for doing all of the voting of the city, by steam power, at one central polling place. It will cast a vote of 100,000 in 10 minutes, and will automatically count the ballots as it casts them. So perfect is its design that but one engineer and one oiler are required to attend it.”

Great, indeed, was the joy of the bosses when they heard these words, and great their gratitude of Livius. Falling upon his neck they thanked him with tears in their eyes, and next day the construction of a machine for use at the coming election was begun at the works of the Tiber Ship Building and Iron Company. Two days before the election it was ready for use.

Trembling with excitement the bosses tested it. It cast 357,896 votes in half an hour.

On the spot Livius, then but 24 years of age, was unanimously chosen to be the whig big boss of Rome.

The opposition, terrified by the appearance of the leviathan apparatus, had melted like butter on an ear of corn, and there was but one party in Rome.

The whigs were it.

But Livius was destined to profit little by his marvellous invention, and his fellow whigs but little more. On the morning of election day, while the machine was being given a preliminary trial spin, and all of the bosses stood about observing it, it exploded with a loud crash and 234 of them were killed. Livius himself was blown high in the air and did not come down until the next morning.

He was buried in a cigar box.

Moral—Never monkey with the buzz saw.

(Source: Baltimore Sunday Herald, September 22, 1901, transcribed from Google News, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=TGemctCAZTQC&dat=19010922&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>)