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Untold Tales

*XI.—How Livius Marcellus Opus Reformed Politics
and Was Afterward Buried From His Late Residence.*

Livius Marcellus Opus was a young man with a smooth, glinting, bulging forehead and a pallid, unhealthy complexion. Though he was but five and twenty, he was half bald in front, and wore fluffy little sideboards beside his ears. He took a great pride in his family tree, and always had his toga creased afresh every morning.

These eccentricities of architecture and manner, however, would not in themselves have been sufficient to put the curse on him. Most men, in appearance, are bizarre. But Opus, in addition, was bughouse, and this made him a rare bird indeed.

From his earliest youth he had been addicted to the reform habit. At the age of ten he attempted to induce his grand uncle, the well known millionaire bunco steerer, J. Julius Juno (A.D.141-207), to lead a better life. Juno, entirely lacking in gratitude, whaled him with a barrel stave. While at college he became president of the Y. M. C. A. and made an endeavour to start a temperance crusade. His jovial fellow students ducked him in a ton of Phoenician mixed ale, and he became much intoxicated by absorption.

After reaching man's estate he indulged in various reform sprees. First he tried to restrain the captains of the Tiber River galleys from conveying their orders to the galley slaves with hickory clubs. Unsuccessful in this, he launched a campaign against faith curists and spiritualists. One of them in retaliation hypnotized him and, in a trance, he walked overboard and narrowly escaped drowning. Then—for he was a very rich young man by inheritance—he resolved to establish a home for aged and infirm evangelists. All creeds were tolerated at the home, and after a while the inmates made an attempt to convert each other. The resultant rough house brought about Opus' arrest on a charge of keeping a disorderly house.

Finally, at the age of 25, in the year 211 A.D., he made up his mind to enter politics and put an end to crooked elections. The ward leader to whom he communicated his intention told him that he was a patriot.

"It's men like you," said the ward leader, "that we need. The party wants young blood and decent candidates. Most of the people that knock us would decline a nomination if it was offered to them. What we want is young men with the courage of their convictions."

Opus swelled with pride and the next day a delegation of bosses called upon him to take his measure. To them he explained at length his plans for purifying Roman politics. The bosses, with tears in their eyes, told him that he was right. His ideas, they said, revealed true political genius.

"Of course," they went on, "you'll have to expect, at first, to go slowly. It'll take some time to rid Rome of all of the crooked politicians now in power. It may take a month or a year, in fact, for they'll naturally fight against being put to the bad. But with a man like you to lead us, we ought to bring about honest elections. You're a born leader."

“I thank you,” replied Opus, “for your kind words. Politics, it seems to me, is my forte. I always had a leaning that way, and I’m anxious to go to work. I have time, money, and—if I do say it myself—not a little—”

“Of course,” said the bosses gently, “you must meet the boys. They will be proud to make your acquaintance.”

“Surely,” said Opus; “I must meet them.”

Then the bosses told him that there would be a meeting of the Active Whig Club of the Fifteenth Ward on the next night, and suggested that he attend and make a speech. With a blush he protested that he was not an orator, but they insisted, with many predictions that he would make a hit, and finally he was converted to their way of thinking.

Promptly, at the time specified he appeared at the club’s headquarters. The latter were in a suite of rooms above a saloon upon the Via. Antoninius, in the heart of the district known as “The Can.” The larger room was filled with chairs, and at one end stood a raised platform surrounded by a flag-bedecked dais. Beside the dais was a dumb-waiter leading to the bar below. On the walls were strange and mystic legends and symbols, for on two nights of the week the room was used as a meeting place by Cato Lodge, No. 7, of the Junior Order of United Roman Stone Cutters, and Jupiter Pluvius Chapter, No. 12, of the Amalgamated Sons of Philanthropy.

Opus, on entering the room, was seized upon by the ward leader to whom he had first revealed his political plans, and conducted to the raised dais. As he took his seat, blushing uncomfortably, someone gave a signal, and a score or more of men entered from the back room. They were horny-handed, sloping, browed citizens, and Opus, ordinarily, would have shrunk from touching them, but now, spurred on by the ward leader, he shook hands with them and told them that he was glad to meet them.

Soon more men began to climb up the stairs, and before long the room was packed to suffocation. The foul odor of the pipes smoked by the congregation half choked Opus, but he bravely held out and smiled, and, after a while, when the ward leader suggested that he address the mob, he arose, with his shoulders thrown back, and launched into an eloquent denunciation of bossism and crooked elections. For a while the horny handed sons of toil listened wearily. Then they began to yawn and finally one of them interrupted him to remark that the others were “dry.”

“They mean,” explained the ward leader, “that they are thirsty. I would suggest that you buy them some beer. It is the custom, you know.”

Opus, being a temperance advocate, was for reneging, but the frowns upon the faces of certain of his hearers caused him to adopt the suggestion, and soon large bumpers of foaming malt began to arise upon the dumbwaiter. Between the first and second round Opus attempted to resume his speech, but the noise of the clinking glasses and the dull thuds of the gobs of foam striking the floor drowned his voice, and in hopes of stopping the tumult he sat down and mopped his brow. Then the ward leader suggested that the beer he had ordered was barely sufficient to arouse the thirst of the audience, and Opus, being anxious to make a hit, ordered more. Then the ward leader suggested that among politicians it is the custom for the man who buys beer to drink some of it, and Opus, though it sickened him, sipped a tall schooner.

To make a long story short, he purchased five half barrels of beer. When the third half arrived his new found friends insisted that he join them in every drink. The fourth schooner made him groggy. The fifth made him orey-eyed. The sixth made him foolish. The seventh put the Lithuanian curse on him. He was cooked!

Wildly jumping upon a chair he called upon all men to witness that he would drive every crooked politician in Rome to suicide.

“I’ll reformsh town!” he exclaimed. “Zshare won’t be no morsh polishtish-sh-sh-ansh! I got monesh!”—displaying a wad of 50 denarii bill—“I pus-sh crush”—

Just then one of the horny-handed sons pulled his legs from under him and he fell to the floor. Swiftly and carefully the others went through his pockets. Then they lifted his scarfpin and his watch and stripped him of his imported clothing. One after another his garments were torn from his back, and by and by he stood as bare as Adam. Then a paint pot was brought forth and he was elegantly striped, like a zebra. Then 10 large schooners of beer were poured down his throat and he was rubbed with it. When he could hold no more a quart was injected hypodermically. Then he was thrown down the stairway, headed nor’-nor’ east, and started up the lane at the rate of 10 knots an hour.

When he awoke he was in jail, and in reply to his indignant inquiries, he was told by the warden that he was awaiting trial on charges of masquerading without a license, cursing and swearing, making loud and unseemly noises, being drunk on the public street, maliciously destroying property, mayhem, arson, night assault, highway robbery and interfering with the free passage of persons passing by and going along a public highway.

But the club never derived much benefit after all from the visit of Opus, for he died as a result of his harrowing experiences, and the president-at-arms were boiled in oil, as was the custom of those times, for murdering him.

Moral—Nobody ever knows how a graft is going to pan out.

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