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Nellie Bly And Mr. Lexow

*The Chairman of the Senate Investigating Committee
Answers Some Very Interesting Questions*

More Exposures To Come

What Mr. Lexow Believes Will Be the Ultimate Result of the Revelations of Corruption

The Excise Department Next

Mr. Croker May Be Put on the Witness Stand Later On and Asked "Where He Got It"

Tammany Responsible For Corruption

Important Bills to Be Introduced to Put an End to Police Blackmail and Persecution

I have been to see Mr. Lexow.

There is only one Lexow. It doesn't matter what his Christian name is, or whether it is single, double or triple, or whether he writes it in full or only signs initials for one to guess at.

There is only one Lexow. There may be other men of the same name, but they have a baptismal prefix and are doomed to be forever telling whether they are or are not related to Lexow of the Police Investigating Committee.

Mr. Lexow woke up the next morning and found himself famous. He read it in the morning newspaper. He may have expected its coming, but the world didn't. Doubtless he knew its nearness, for men don't climb the dear old ladder without an occasional lifting of the head to see just how far off still hangs the laurel. It is only the world that rubs its eyes the morning after and says that fame came like a dream in the night. The perspiring brow on which the laurel rests might tell a different tale if the world had time to care or listen.

But it hasn't. It acknowledges a man's fame as it rushes on, wants to know what he says, how he looks and lives, and hasn't time to read his early history until the morning the crepe dangles from his front door.

It was to learn the things the world wants to know that I endured an excruciating two hours on the Northern Railroad of New Jersey, a road that doesn't seem to circulate any time tables. I landed at Nyack, only to find that Mr. Lexow lived in South Nyack.

The Senator's Home

But I did not mind that, as the road was fine and my driver loquacious. In the very short drive I heard not only all about the hotels and boarding-houses, but all about graveyards and Mr. Lexow's real estate. "This" belonged to Mr. Lexow and "that" belongs to Mr. Lexow, and he was "a party smart man, and kinda stirring you New Yorkers up a bit."

Mr. Lexow's house is handsome and majestic, surrounded by a very fine lawn. The exterior is even finer. I was expected, so when a maid took in my card, Mr. Lexow instantly came to the drawing-room to greet me. He proposed that we go into his study, or den, where we could converse without interruption, to which I gladly agreed.

I always try to have a man at perfect ease before I begin to talk to him. And that's why I always try to talk with him where he feels the most at home. A drawing-room interview is always frosty and unsatisfactory.

"This is my den," said Mr. Lexow as we entered.

It was a very small room, and only saved from being extremely business-like by its two windows, one commanding a beautiful view of the lawn, and the other opening into a small bay-window conservatory.

Otherwise the walls were lined with shelves, which in turn were packed with law books. A flat-top desk was in the middle of the room and a brick chimney, with three niches holding busts, filled a corner. Near the chimney was a glass case filled with stuffed birds, and other birds crowded the tops of the bookshelves.

Mr. Lexow asked me to sit before the desk, and he took a chair near the window.

What Started The Investigation.

Then I looked at him. I was disappointed. That is, I found the man totally unlike my idea of him.

In the first place, I had expected to see a tall thin man, with a long, straggling beard and a sharp nose, through which he talked. Instead I found Mr. Lexow to be quite short and with a face that women would undoubtedly pronounce handsome. He has fine blue eyes that smile in unison with his lips. He has a beard, but it is the kind that is but square and parted at the chin.

I asked Mr. Lexow the first question that came to me.

"How did you come to start the investigation, and what brought you to it?"

"The reformation of the Police Department attracted my attention first," he replied. "I thought there ought to be no partisanship. I then introduced a bill for the equal division of representation of two parties in the Police Board, that board having control of the elections controlling the city. I thought it only fair that both parties should have equal control. More so since the election the preceding year showed that the police were not only partisan in feeling, but carried it to the polls and exhibited it by interference, passive and active, to the advantage of Tammany Hall and the detriment of the Republican party.

"No sooner had I introduced this bill," he continued to explain, "than there arose a public demand for investigation. The investigation spread further, and revealed corruption. In other words, the present investigation has reached proportions far greater than was at first contemplated."

I am sure the majority on the outside have wondered where Supt. Byrnes stood in this police investigation. Some call him friend and others call him foe to the committee. No one seems to know exactly. So I venture a question on the subject.

“Do you expect to call Supt. Byrnes?” I asked carelessly, for if one asks a question with any show of eagerness, the one questioned is sure to be on his guard.

As To Supt. Byrnes

However, I gained very little by my caution. Mr. Lexow did not seem inclined to answer the question, and when he did, it was in a very diplomatic way.

“If it becomes necessary or expedient,” he replied slowly and carefully, weighing every word, “during the investigation to call Supt. Byrnes, he will be called upon to testify.”

“Has Mr. Byrnes helped very much?” I inquired innocently.

Mr. Lexow looked at me and smiled. Then he looked out upon the lawn, and after remaining in silent thought for some moments replied slowly, but with emphasis:

“I don’t know that Supt. Byrnes has been of any assistance whatever to the committee.”

“Do you know him personally?”

“I have met him—on one occasion,” was the reply.

“Why has the committee not examined the men connected with the Lucy McCarthy protection money case?” I asked.

“We can’t do everything at once,” was Mr. Lexow’s reply. “She, the principal witness, has considered it wise to absent herself. I believe she is in England at present.”

“Is there any reason why those police captains who are known to have become rich should not be placed upon the stand to explain the sources of their wealth? That is, would any testimony they may give before the committee act to prevent their being prosecuted afterwards?”

“There is no reason whatever why they should not be called,” he replied. “But if they are, according to Penal Code 79, any testimony they may give cannot afterwards be used against them”

And to prove what he said, Mr. Lexow stepped to the shelf, and, taking down a book, read the law to me on the subject; so if I were a police captain possessed of riches mysteriously acquired, I should sail into a safe and secure haven by having myself brought at once before the committee. I always argued that it is better to confess a sin than have some one else tell it, and even the law upholds me in it.

The Social Evil

“What, in your opinion, Mr. Lexow, is the best method for the regulation of gambling and the social evil? Is it necessary that they should exist at all?”

“That question is as wide as sociality itself,” he declared stoutly. “If anybody could answer it he would merit the greatest reward the world could bestow upon him. I think gambling can be wiped out and the social evil controlled. The best way to control I can see at present is to legislate so as to prevent police from protecting vice. At present there is an incentive for them to do so. Now, what that legislation shall be is the burning question of the hour. It will take the best minds of the community to solve it, and then it will only be experimental. On the subject of gambling, such as policy shops, poolrooms and public gambling houses, I believe the police, as soon as the financial inducements held out to them are removed, will put a stop to the whole business in comparatively a few hours.”

“So far, in your investigation, have you learned anything you hadn’t known all along?”

“Yes, indeed,” emphatically, “We all knew of the wrongs, but no one ever suspected the systematic money paying—not even Mr. Goff.”

“Are you against adjourning, or do you want a vacation?”

“I would cheerfully sacrifice vacation and everything if it is going to be conducive of good results.”

“Do you think as the result of these exposures of the effect of politics on the police force, legislation will be enacted next winter providing for a chief of police at the head of the police force independent of political commissioners?”

“Ah, I couldn’t answer that!” he exclaimed quickly; but after an instant’s thought he said carefully:

“I can’t say what the character of the legislature will be. Certainly an effort will be made to correct whatever faults may be found in the present construction of the Police Department. I don’t think it wise or prudent to permit politics to intervene in the administration of the criminal law of the city. That would necessarily include every department having jurisdiction over the criminal classes. The temptation to protect or wink at crime in exchange for political service is too great to be entirely resisted.”

“Do you not think,” I ask, “that a system under which blackmail and other police abuses have grown up is so discredited as to make it necessary to find a substitute? In other words, is not something more required than a mere change of officials?”

Mr. Lexow got up and thoughtfully paced the floor. His brows were drawn and he seemed to be giving the question careful consideration.

Reorganization Needed

“If the statement made in regard to officer Breeck (spelling the name for me) is true, namely, that he has entailed the enmity of the force simply because in telling the truth as a witness he exposed a sergeant, and this enmity manifests itself in all manner of petty annoyances, it would seem as though the seed of corruption had been sown so deep that a complete reorganization of the entire force would be advisable.”

“Don’t you think Guy Flower’s veto of the appropriation of the expenses of your committee has acted as a boomerang?”

“I should say so!” with a hearty laugh. “It was the last nail driven into a political coffin already well perforated.”

“Has the veto hampered the committee in its work? I mean, has the committee found any difficulty in securing the necessary money to meet the expenses of the investigation?”

“It did at first hamper us, and does now to some extent. Largely, however, in the way of delay. The comptroller has, however honoured the requisitions of the committee.”

“Was the adjournment of the committee over the hot weather partly determined by a desire to be merciful to the police officials, who were finding the weather hot enough without the rise of temperature which a summons before the committee is supposed to cause?” I asked, with a pretended seriousness.

Mr. Lexow laughed merrily, as if he understood me to be jesting, but replied as if he thought me serious.

“It was not dictated by any sympathy for the physical comfort of the department, but because of the laboriousness of the work and preparation as well as the presentation of the evidence.”

“Don’t you think the committee’s adjournment will stop an impending exodus of Tammany statesmen?”

“Will stop?” questioningly.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know anything about that. I believe that we should be fair to all people and not condemn any one in default of positive proof.”

“Had you heard of any other leaders who were about to follow Mr. Croker across the water?”

“No,” laughingly. Then suddenly, seriously and anxiously, “Had you?”

As to Mr. Croker

When I made reply he added quickly:

“And Croker is coming back.”

“Will you ask him where he got it?” I demanded.

Mr. Lexow grew very serious. “I prefer not to answer that,” he said; but if eyes tell secrets, Mr. Croker will hear the query.

“Is there any other summer occupation you would personally prefer to probing into the police mysteries of New York?”

“Every other that I can think of,” he said, energetically. “It is not a pleasant occupation by any means. I think after a hard year’s work a man ought to be entitled to a little leisure.”

“Why don’t you follow Uncle Dan Bradley’s example, and see for yourself how law is violated in New York?”

“I prefer not to criticise my associates,” quietly, but there is a smile in his blue eyes.

“Do you think your investigation will put a stop to police blackmail, and if it puts a stop to it, will the police then be tempted to do their duty, and if the police do their duty, will we see an end of disorderly houses, gambling places, dives and violations of the excise law?”

“If we can’t train legislation so that it will at least mitigate these evils we will stand out as a dime museum to all the centuries to come.”

“Will your revelations result in any new legislation at Albany?”

“If they don’t the sooner we stop investigating the better. It will certainly result in a proposition to the legislature. I would consider my time poorly spent if there were no result. We are there to ascertain facts upon which to base legislation, not for the purpose of fastening specific crimes upon individuals, as some seem to think. Ascertaining crimes is simply incidental to the real purpose.”

“Will you submit to the next legislature any bill which shall aim to root out these evils you are exposing?”

To Purify The Police

“That is a hard question to answer. I think that legislation should have the effect of mitigating or controlling the evils, if not removing. I shall certainly present a report, and hope that the first effort made will be to purify and purge the police of such vices as may be proved in the investigation.”

“Whom do you hold chiefly responsible for this systematic police blackmailing—the police captains, the superintendent or the commissioners?”

“That’s what we are trying to find out.”

“Have you any suspicion?”

“It wouldn’t be proper for me to say.”

“Is Tammany Hall also responsible for corruption in this department?”

“How can it be otherwise? Any organization which controls absolutely and autocratically as does Tammany Hall must be held responsible for the conduct of the department.”

“Will you be satisfied simply to submit a report of the evidence you have uncovered, or will you set the local machinery in motion to bring blackmailing police officials to justice?”

“We have no function except to report to the legislature.”

“As a matter of fact, Senator Lexow, do you think any police officials will actually go to jail?”

“That would be passing upon the weight of the testimony, which it would not be proper for me to do, they not having been heard in their own defence at all.”

Mr. Lexow’s Witnesses.

“Do you think any jury would convict on the evidence of such disreputable people as most of your witnesses have been?”

“I am not prepared to admit that most of our witnesses have been disreputable to be believed merely because they are connected with social evil. I haven’t any doubt that the word of most of them is as good as anyone’s. What a jury will do no one can say.”

“Have you had to pay a bonus to your witnesses to induce them to come and testify?”

“Not one cent” (vehemently).

“What protection can you give them against police persecution hereafter?”

“The protection of public opinion, and the further protection that the state Senate will last just as long as the police department. If a witness is hereafter annoyed by the police for testifying, the dignity of the Senate would require an immediate investigation.”

“Have you investigated the condition of officers in any other of the city departments?”

“No, excepting incidentally, as it has come out in the testimony.”

“Will you, after you finish with the police, take up the Excise Board and others?”

“I doubt very much whether we will have time. If the situation will warrant it, we would ask for extension of time—that is, if the public demands it after we have reported on the Police Department.”

Excise Board Next

“What city department will you take up next to investigate?”

“Probably the Excise Department.”

“Do you expect, later on, to unearth any evidence that is really more startling or surprising than you have already discovered?”

“Yes: but don’t ask me what, I can’t tell you.”

“If you were the superintendent of police of New York City, do you believe you could stop police blackmailing?”

“I know too little about the police in general. Theorizing is one thing; practical observation another.”

“Do you believe such a thing is possible for the present superintendent?”

“Don’t see why he shouldn’t. If my bill had become a law he would have been better able to prevent blackmail than under the present law.”

“Do you believe it is possible to reform the Police Department of New York without removing almost the entire police force?”

“I can’t answer that until the investigation is over. We will have to show how we can reach an intelligent conclusion.”

“Would the overthrow of Tammany Hall mean the purification of the city government?”

“If I did not believe that I would not be as much opposed to Tammany Hall as I am. I think the principle of the organization is the seat of all evil. It looks at politics from the standpoint of how much there is in it. It is an aggregation of men not for the furtherance of any political principles, but for spoils. Whoever heard of Tammany Hall being the creator or sponsor of political principles? They believe rather in mathematics—addition, division and silence!”

“Do you expect, later on, to show that a portion of the money obtained by police blackmail finds its way into the hands of Mr. Croker, Mayor Gilroy and other big leaders of Tammany Hall?”

“That is a part of the investigation of which I must not speak. It is not proper for me to tell what we propose or intend to do.”

May Be Asked Where He Got It

“Do you expect to call Mr. Croker before you finish your investigation? If so, will he be required to explain where he obtained his wealth?”

“That will be determined entirely by the necessities of the situation. We would have to have a pretty loud voice to call him just at present. If he is called he will probably be politely requested to account for his wealth.”

“Will you summon Mayor Gilroy as a witness?”

“That is a branch of the investigation I prefer not to speak of.”

“Do you believe that the witnesses who have appeared before you have been telling the truth?”

“I do,” he vowed emphatically, but added in a moment: “Assuming that they cannot be satisfactorily answered.”

“Are you not convinced by the disclosures before your committee that the police force should be completely disconnected from politics?”

“Either that,” he replied, “or safeguards should be imposed that would make a repetition of the things testified to impossible. The total separation of politics from the police would seem to be the easiest remedy and yet most difficult of attainment. For the reason that while you may take away the cross-eyed judicial functions of the police exercised with reference to the elective franchise, it is difficult to see how their political influence, exerted through the channels of their control over those classes that come into close contact with them, viz., the criminal, the semi-criminal and the destitute classes, can be eliminated. Two principles would seem to be contending for the mastery, one the principle of one-man power in the department, which may or may not remove the evil according to the character of the man; the other, the principle of non-partisanship, the efficacy of which obviously also depends to a large extent upon the character of the men who are appointed. So that in either case it seems to resolve itself into a question of appointment.”

Having asked Mr. Lexow all the serious questions I could think of I proceeded to ask him about things I wanted to know.

First, if he is superstitious. I have an aching desire to find a man who will acknowledge he is superstitious or whom I can prove to be honest in saying he isn't. Men seem to fancy that it is woman's prerogative to entertain superstitious beliefs, and are so ready to disclaim any of their own, but they are merely pretending. Some of them thoroughly, and somewhere will be found the strange streaks which seems to run in every human being.

Personal Fads

Mr. Lexow was not very emphatic in his denial.

"No: I don't believe I am superstitious," he replied: but when I asked him another question I struck his "mania." People without manias are scarcer than people without noses.

"Do you believe in dreams?" I asked and by the gleam of his eye I knew I had him.

"I do," he replied, "I can't say that I believe in them, but I've had some very extraordinary coincidences. For instance, I've gone to places where I had never been before and instantly found everything familiar to me. Then I would recall that probably years before I had dreamed of the place. It is the same with events. I have often dreamed of events so plainly that they remain in my mind, and years after the very event would transpire."

"What books do you read?"

"Principally law books. If any book of any especial interest appears I like to scan it, but I haven't as much time for reading as I would like. I am afraid I have a vulgar taste. I prefer Dickens to any other writer. I find an intermingling of comedy and pathos, as in Dickens, more refreshing than anything else after reading all day obtuse and uninteresting stuff."