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Untold Tales

XIX—How the Reformers Displayed Pernicious Activity and the Attempt to Evangelize the Celebrated Junius O’Cato Failed

In previous chapters of this desultory history of Roman politics, literature and life, it has been hinted more than once that the leading statesmen and politicians of Rome, during the period when the city was at the height of its splendour and power, were much bothered by the eternal and senseless attacks of the brood of he-she parasites known as reformers.

Usually, of course, the politicians, profiting by their better training and greater experience in public life, put the Carthaginian obeh upon the reformers with ease, and once or twice, as has been recorded in other places, large numbers of the latter were either driven from the city or slain. But at times, by cunning and good fortune, they managed to deal the politicians severe blows, and on several occasions—even when they were finally overcome—they gave the statesman of the city very unpleasant quarters for an hour.

A case in point is remembered by those who are familiar with the history of Roman politics during the years of J. Bozzo Puritani’s third term as mayor (A.B. 187-191). Puritani, being a whig, the whigs were then in power in the city and, having held the reins for 22 years, without a break; they were very naturally somewhat keen after the grafts. The division of the loot, in fact, had been reduced to a fixed system, and there was profit enough for all. This state of affairs being eminently satisfactory to all concerned—for what had the general public to do with it?—was, by the same token, a thorn in the side of the reformers, and with their accustomed impertinent brashness they decided to butt in.

But before doing so they considered well the lay of the land, and the strength of their antagonists. There was to be an election in the fall. Members of the city council were to be chosen. The whigs, having the advantage lying in the patronage, and the added advantage of a fat bar’l, might reasonably be expected to swamp the opposition by a majority of 50,000 votes in a total ballot of 64,000. They had the coin, they had the men, they had possession of the battlefield, and they had the leader—the famous Junius O’Cato. It would be a cinch for them.

Considering well all of these things, the reformers meditated long and strenuously. It would be useless to cast their lot with the opposition. In the first place, it would do no good, and in the second place, the opposition was honeycombed with corruption. Therefore, it would be necessary to wage an independent war upon the whig machine. Referring to the works of Julius Caesar, they found that he held that the easiest way to defeat an army was to slay the leader. On the spot O’Cato was condemned. But it would not do to kill him. That would be murder, and there would be a rope to follow. And neither would it do to assault him, or batter him, or dope him, or kidnap him. Force was impossible. They must rely upon moral suasion.

So they considered yet awhile, and then an idea dawned upon them, and they chuckled merrily and waited until three days before election day. Then, knowing that the

bar'l was to be tapped next day, they hired 10 able-bodied evangelists and sent them to O'Cato's home.

"The evangelists," they said, "will convert him. He will repent and resolve to lead a better life. In pursuance of this resolution he will refuse to permit the bar'l to be tapped, and without the bar'l the whigs will hit the ceiling. Virtue and reform will be triumphant."

So on the night of the third day the evangelists formed in line and marched to O'Cato's palatial residence, on the Rue de Colosseum, and on ringing the bell were admitted. Then appeared O'Cato, and straightaway the evangelists fell upon him and begun work.

For 10 hours they labored, taking turns, and then they were relieved by a second shift, and at daybreak the members of the latter were reinforced by five picked workers from the Salvation Army. Early in the morning the afternoon papers got onto the scheme, and that afternoon they were heavy with the story. At noon the first shift of evangelists relieved the second one, and 10 singers from a leading church choir were told off to aid them. Late in the afternoon the general public began to take an interest in the thing, and by nightfall the plaza before O'Cato's house was filled with a surging, struggling mob.

To appease the demands of the latter, beginning at 6 o'clock, bulletins were posted, signed by Rev. Lycurgus Cassius, the eminent divine, and Maj. J C. Asiaticus, of the Salvation Army, stating the effect of the evangelization.

At 5 P. M. The evangelists were relieved, and a brigade of lay workers filed in. Half an hour later two female missionaries just arrived from Ethiopia were added to the force, and a second company of salvationists, with drums and tambourines, appeared. When he saw them O'Cato grew a deathly white and seemed about to surrender. But several of his friends who were present encouraged him to be brave, and he held out manfully. At 2 A. M. a bulletin was posted, stating that O'Cato had offered the tambourinists 10,000 denarii to desist from tambourining.

At 8 o'clock next morning there arrived the celebrated Pluvius W. Nero, the foremost Graeco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can evangelist of the time. The room being cleared, he attacked O'Cato single-handed and alone, and in half an hour the latter showed perceptible signs of despair. At 1 o'clock, when Pluvius left him, he was weeping.

At noon nine slum workers from the river front appeared. At 2 P. M. they were relieved by 10 star members of the Rome Young People's Mission Band. At 2.15 the latter, easily knocked out, retired in favour of a committee from the Busy Bees. At 2.30 the latter fled and were succeeded by Company A of the Uniformed and Caparisoned Rank of the United and Benevolent Enemies of the Flowing Bowl. At 2.36 the Enemies were succeeded by Col. Brutus McBacilli, of the Salvation Army, who gave way at 2.41 to Brig. Gen. Gracchi Misisipi, who gave way at 2.53 to Maj. Gen. Virgil Nero, who gave way at 3.03 to Lieut. Gen. J. Caesar Vermicelli, who gave way at 3.09 to Field Marshal Julius Constantine Aphophophiphrus.

At 3.30, despairing of success, the committee in charge determined upon a massed attack with horse, foot and dragoons, the artillery first to shell the position and later to act as a cover for the infantry. In accordance with this plan, O'Cato was subjected to a frontal attack by two companies of salvationists, a select corps of graduate evangelists and 24 selected missionaries, experienced in field work. At the same time nine slum workers were told off to secure a position enfilading his fort.

The attack began with a heavy cannonading all along the line. Three separate shots lodged in O'Cato's bump of sinfulness; and then the infantry was rushed up, and for 15 hours the fight continued without a moments cessation. Like a ship's crew the attacking party was divided into watches, with Field Marshal Aphophophiphrus, of the Salvationists, as captain. Each watch was four hours, and during their off time the workers rested.

At the end of the 15 hours the reformers began to feel alarmed. Election day was dawning. O’Cato was yet unconverted. What should be done?

The hours passed. It was 8 A. M. The whig workers were out in the highways and byways. The reform runners brought in reports that they were using money. O’Cato was unconcerned. He seemed to be gaining strength. He smiled.

The reform leaders on the scene of the fight grew pale. Why had he smiled? As the clock struck 12, at noon, he told them.

“Now,” he said to the evangelists, “you can run along home. It has been rather tiresome. I admit, but still you have amused me. I thank you.”

Bowing them out, he stopped as if he had forgotten something.

“By the way,” he said, it may interest you to know that your labor has been in vain. I knew that your labor has been in vain. I knew you were coming. One of my trusty seneschals tipped me off. So I transferred the bar’l to my assistant, Mr. J. Leviticus Plato. He has divided it among the boys. By now it has been converted into beer and consumed. If there are any sporting men among you, I might venture to say that I have 1000 denarii to risk on the chance that the whig majority will be 51,000. Are there any takers? No? Very well, then. Good day to you. Thanking you one and all, I remain, yours truly, Junius O’Cato.”

And the evangelists and reformers faded into the distance.

Moral: Don’t butt in.