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Untold Tales

XIII—How J. Ippius Valereanus Evolved a Brilliant Scheme and Afterward Had an Elephant on His Hands

There had been torchlight parades and torchlight parades in Rome from far back in the time of Archives Chloridius (B.C. 254-173), who invented the campaign transparency and the pink high hat, and some of them had been great, unwieldy, spectacular affairs, with 20 bands and tons of red fire and big floats and other features approaching in magnificence the star attractions of the regardless-of-expense triumphs of the eminent Roman soldier, Fiedl Marshal the Honorable Julius Caesar: there had been torchlight parades which stretched their snaky lengths for miles and miles, and there had been torchlight parades graced by scores of open barouches and great forests of elegant, artistic transparencies and gaudy, tramping regiments of ward heelers and precinct shepherds in ready-made frock togas and gleaming white gaiters, and there had been torchlight parades which swung the balance of power from one party to another and ended in rough-houses and broken heads and 30 days in jail—but, in all the history of Rome there had never been a torchlight parade such as the one with which the whig leaders of the city proposed to mark the finish of the legislative campaign of A. D. 221.

Preparations for it were begun the day after the adjournment of the convention which named the party candidates, and an able and efficient committee, headed by the well known district leader, J. Marcus Ozzazzius, of the Third District, had the arrangements well in hand before the first gun of the campaign was fired. Every band in Rome was hired a month in advance, and at great expense a number of new ones were organized. One of these, which was called the Nero Imperial Fiddlers, was composed of 37 pieces and a drum major. Another, the Third Ward Active Whig Brass Band and Drum Corps, was composed exclusively of officeholders. A third, of 50 pieces, was made up of deaf mutes. Five hundred tons of red fire were purchased a week before the date set for the parade, and orders were given for all the Roman candles the local manufacturers could turn out. Three skyrocket experts were imported from Athens and a force of 200 carpenters and 50 garment workers were employed to make transparencies. The parade, in short, was planned to be a winner, and as an additional attraction it was decided to have the principal ward leaders and district bosses ride upon elephants. In the past it had been the custom for the notables to occupy open barouches. But in this parade all customs were to be cast to the winds. There was to be no thought of expense. In every detail it was to eclipse every circus parade and every military triumph in the history of Rome.

The opposition bosses, when they heard the details of the plans, were naturally rather disturbed, as the potency of processions and red fire, in politics, was well recognized. Many a time in past campaigns votes had been bought with skyrockets. Many a time doubtful wards had been brought into line with roman candles and prancing steeds.

But J. Ippus Valereanus, the opposition boss, did not despair. It took more than a mere parade no matter how dazzling or how magnificent it might be to scare him. As he often said himself, he was one of the unterrified.

"The very costliness and grandeur of the procession," he said at a council of the opposition bosses, "is its weak point. The elephants are expected to put the curse on us. They constitute a challenge, a 'defi.' Very well, let them do their worst. It is our cue to lay low. Lay low, then, all of you—and rely on me!"

The minor opposition bosses, knowing well that Valereanus was to be relied upon, relied upon him, and the whigs went on with their preparation unobstructed. Gradually the news of the magnificence to come percolated among the populace, and there was tremendous public excitement. Country people from the backwoods came to town by thousands, and each train from Naples and Milan and other cities was loaded to the waterline. Among the Romans themselves there was equal excitement and equal interest, and the whig bosses, observing the stir that their preparations were causing, slapped each other on the back and began estimating the majority which their candidates would roll up on election day—the day following the parade.

By and by the days and hours went by and the great day of days dawned. Before noon the crowds began to line the route of the procession, and by dusk there were teeming thousands along every street to be traversed. Early in the day Valereanus, the opposition boss, passed word among his adherents that the open plaza opposite the reviewing stand would be the most favourable place for viewing the pageant. Before the darkness descended 2000 opposition politicians—candidates, ward leaders, precinct herders, shepherds, heelers and hangers-on—were there.

An hour before the time set for the beginning of the parade Valereanus himself appeared. The whig bosses on the mammoth reviewing stand, discerning him in the crowd, gave him the laugh. But he was not abashed, and, with a merry wink, he laughed back at them.

Suddenly there was a loud, hoarse shout up the street, and the vanguard of the procession hove in sight. Then came a dense mob of colored boys carrying clubs. Then came a platoon of mounted police, and after them a band. Then came Octavius Cicero, the whig chief boss, and his cabinet, mounted upon huge Abyssinian elephants, gaudily decorated and caparisoned. Behind them stretched dazzling miles of lights and marchers.

Just as the mob of colored boys reached the reviewing stand Valereanus dispatched a newsboy across the street. The boy carried in his hand a big box of carpet tacks. As he elbowed his way among the Afro-Romans, he allowed some of the tacks to spill. Valereanus, "shoved" back by a whig policeman, observed him and smiled confidently.

In a few moments the elephants came plodding along, swinging their trunks and tails and chewing upon long straws. On their backs the whig leaders sat, with shoulders thrown back and eyes glued upon the dignitaries upon the reviewing stand.

Just as the elephant bearing Octavius Cicero, the whig chief boss, came abreast of the stand, it swerved to one side—and stepped upon a select dozen of tacks. With a shrill squeal it reared upon its hind legs and bucked Cicero off of its back. Then it turned round and charged the line of elephants behind it. They, too, had stepped upon tacks, and in the twinkling of an eye 20 maddened mastodons were plunging up and down the plaza with heart-rending shrieks of pain. One huge beast started to the rear along the line of the procession, and before he dropped dead with exhaustion had effectually put the parade to the bad. The marchers and transparency bearers, scared half to death, took to flight up the side streets, dropping roman candles, skyrockets and red fire as they ran. It was the most riotous panic in the history of Rome.

Bu the opposition gained little by the rout, for six big elephants dashed into the crowd of opposition bosses and candidates, who had assembled opposite the reviewing stand to see the fun, and nearly 500 were trampled underfoot. Next day—election day—the whigs had an easy victory, for all but three of the opposition candidates had been killed, and of the three, one was in bed with a broken leg and the other two were in full retreat toward the tall timber.

Moral—The undertaker is the only man that can really afford to laugh.