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Untold Tales

XVIII—How Claudius Nero Ippolitus Rose to Eminence and Later Lost His Job

Lobbying as a profession, probably reached its high water mark during the third century, A. D., when money was plentiful in the city of Rome and the Roman politicians and statesmen were willing—nay, eager—to have it adhere to their mucilaginous palms.

J. Demetrius Bacilli, the celebrated bon vivant of the time of Aurelius Maximus—A. D. 134-192—is credited by most of the historians, including Gibbon and Macauley, with being the originator and inventor of the art, but in truth it attained its proudest position among the genteel occupations during the lifetime of Claudius Nero Ippolitus, who was by long odds the most distinguished of its votaries. Ippolitus, during the years between 245 and 261, was pre-eminent, and there was only one lobbyist in all Rome who was ever placed in the same class with him.

This fortunate one was Cyanide Africanus, son of the celebrated bunco steerer, Bichloride Africanus, and brother of the equally famous and genial saloonist J. Iodine Africanus, and to Cyanide fate awarded the honor of finally putting the Carthaginian curse on Ippolitus.

When the Legislature assembled, in the fall of the year A. D. 261, the two found themselves arrayed against each other in what promised to be the most bitter Legislative fight in the history of Rome. Ippolitus was the agent and attorney of the Rome, Carthage and Athens Steam Navigation Company—commonly known as the Galley Trust, which sought a franchise for the exclusive right to operate steam galleys upon the Tiber. Cyanide, in direct opposition, represented the Sardinian Barge and Galley Company, a powerful and independent concern, which resisted the trust's encroachments. As may be expected, the members of the Legislature hailed the fight as a windfall, for both antagonists were rich, and the bell seemed likely to ring frequently and loudly.

In truth, for a while, it was even thus, and some of the more energetic and crafty of the legislators succeeded in touching the treasurers of the two organizations for sums ranging from 1000 denarii to as much as 10,000. But after a time it became evident that the legislative chasm was so deep that neither could hope to fill it with money, and the two under a flag of truce held a conference, and decided to dispense with open bribery. An agreement was signed whereby each contracted to forfeit to the other 10 times the amount of any sums it might be detected in offering to members of the Senate and House, and it was mutually agreed that only the more refined methods of molding legislative opinion should be employed during the remainder of the contest.

This, beside exciting the ire of every member of the Legislature, doubled the difficulty of the task set before Ippolitus and Cyanide, for while open bribery is a job which even a novice may undertake with fair hopes of success, the finer points of lobbying demand a degree of skill and natural talent possessed only by the masters of the art.

Ippolitus, during the week succeeding the signing of the protocol, spent his time endeavoring to hit upon a scheme which should insure victory without necessitating a violation of the agreement. Shut up in his palatial apartments at the Jupiter Hotel, he thought and thought and thought. Ever and anon he rang the bell and ordered a Mamie Taylor, and as its glittering drops trickled down his throat in a pellucid stream, his brain spun ideas like a loon. But one after the other seemed lacking in practicability, and finally he determined that he must put originality aside and fall back upon some old and time-worn plan that had been tried and found adequate in practice.

Then he thought again, and finally there ran through his mind a catalogue of the average Roman's weak points.

"First of all," he said to himself. "the typical legislator is a grafter. He craves coin. But the agreement forbids. In the second place, he is fond of fast horses. He likes to own them. But they are too expensive as presents. In the third place he is a flashy dresser. He adores diamonds. But diamonds cost even more than horses. In the fourth place he has a sneaking admiration for the little brown jug. He loves—but hold! Why not? I will give a dinner. Every self-respecting Roman is an epicure. Gormandizing is the national vice. I will give a dinner with champagne water ad lib, with turtle soup and canvasback ducks and clam chowder and nine kinds of wine. I have it!"

And then Ippolitus fell to meditating upon the details of the feat. There were 250 members of the Legislature. Of these he owned 69 absolutely. The opposition owned 62 more. The latter, he knew, he couldn't hope to buy. This left 119 in the open market. He would invite the 119. A hundred and twenty-five plates—allowing for himself and a few extras—at 100 denarii a plate would be 12,500 denarii. He would ask for 25,000. This would leave him a personal profit of 100 per cent.

Ippolitus' clients—the trust magnates—gladly allowed him the sum he demanded, and he at once issued invitations to the 119 and set about making preparations for the feast. In the hand of the boss chef of the Jupiter Hotel he placed 12,500 cold glinting denarii.

"Cut loose," he said, "and do yourself proud."

With tears of professional joy the chef cut loose, and for 10 days he labored day and night. And then the night of the banquet came and—

But why describe it in detail? It was the most elaborate feast in the history of Rome. Nero's feasts were showed back in the ten-twenty-thirty class. Epicurus' philosophy was put on the bum. Belshazzar's choicest efforts were made to resemble a trio of counterfeit 10 denarii notes.

At 11 P.M. the 119 were mellow. At midnight they were grey eyed. Ippolitus arose to make a speech, and with their goblets in their hands and geniality and good fellowship and loving kindness in their hearts, the 119 hearkened unto him. He was never more eloquent and he never had a more sympathetic audience. In a moment they were cheering him: in another moment they were giving loud hurrahs for his clients—the trust magnates—in another moment they were weeping softly at the iniquity of the trust's rival.

Suddenly someone at the far end of the table set up the cry:

"To the council chamber!"

It was taken up, and soon the 119 were staggering, galloping and rolling down the street to the Forum.

"We will pass the bill!" they shouted. "*Vive le trust! A bas le Sardinian Barge and Gallery Company! Hoch Ippolitus Conspez Africandus!*"

They rushed to the Forum and up the broad marble steps and through the big front door and so into the council chamber. Ippolitus smiled broadly.

But the 69 legislators who were owned by the trust and the 62 who were owned by the opposition were before them. The latter were sore because they had not been invited to the banquet and given an opportunity to sell out. The former were sore because they had not been invited to the banquet and given an opportunity to sample the champagne water. They had combined.

As Ippolitus, at the hand of the trusty 119, rushed into the chamber the sore ones were taking a final vote upon the bill giving the trust the monopoly it desired. The roll call was nearly ended. There had been 123 “nays.”

The clerk did not stop

“Mr. Ysippi,” he called.

“Nay!” shouted the genial representative of Caligulas county. He was a trust minion—or had been.

“Mr. Zimpano, called the clerk.

“Nay!” bellowed Zimpano.

“Mr. Zuzziguzziguz,” called the clerk.

“Nay,” shrieked Zuzziguzziguz.

“The clerk will please count the vote,” said the president pro tem.

There was a pause. Ippolitus fell in a swoon.

“A hundred and thirty-one ‘nays.’” Said the clerk, “and no ‘ayes.’”

“This being a constitutional majority,” said the president pro tem, “the bill is defeated.”

Ippolitus, regaining consciousness, stabbed himself with his pocket knife. The 119 faded into the night. Cyanide Africanus laughed.

Moral—The free lunch is a quicksand.

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