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*Untold Tales*

*XII—How the Merit System Worked Backward and Forward  
and the March to the Scaffold was Begun*

When the merit system was introduced into the Rome police department, in the year A. D. 157, all of the prophets predicted that it would lead to the downfall of the politicians who had made a living by selling places on the force, for since the earliest times it had been an axiom that politics and civil service reform were utterly unmixable.

This forecast, unfortunately, was partly a true one, for it was not long before trouble arose. When the civil service examining board submitted the first list of eligibles, it was found that the 10 men at the top of the list were rank outsiders with no more political backing than a Phoenician galley slave. The 10 men at the bottom, similarly, were stalwart precinct workers who had labored long and faithfully in the service of the machine, and who, not without reason, might expect the party to do something for them.

But the police commissioners, in view of the law requiring all appointments to be made "from the top of the list"—these were the very words of the statute—were compelled to name the 10 unknowns. A score or more times they found it necessary to repeat this unpleasant act, and by and by the politicians, becoming more and more disgruntled, determined to plunge into their sea of trouble and by opposing them, end them.

So they took up a collection of 500 denarii and employed R. Ippus Ophphro, a noted magician, to devise a scheme for circumventing the law. After taking their money and biting each coin, to make certain that it was genuine, Ophphro retired to his cave in the outskirts of the city and lay doggo for nine days and nine nights. Then he resurrected himself and announced the result of his meditation.

"The law," he says, "provides that the appointments must be made from the 'top of the list.' This is mandatory. If you violate it there will be striped togas and the lockstep to follow. So far so good.

"But the law says nothing regarding the manner in which the list is to be pasted on the wall I propose, therefore, that the eligibles be entered in the usual order, and then that the list be turned upside down."

The scheme was so cunning and so simple that the politicians, after kicking themselves for not having thought of it themselves, thanked Ophphro profusely and proceeded to put it into practice.

Next day 10 of the previous appointees were fired "for cause" and 10 earnest, hard working precinct shepherds were given places on the force. During the week following 54 other unknowns were given the car-spring start and 54 workers of known fidelity were measured for their uniforms and clubs. The scheme worked like a charm. For two moths all went well, and the ancient Roman equivalent of the modern goose hung high.

But then there appeared upon the scene a brace of prying, prowling ghouls of the breed known as reformers. They were the same who had brought about the enactment of the merit law, and when they learned how it was being systematically put to the bad they were

furious. Two of the Roman newspapers, with the usual evil yellowness of the daily press, rushed to the aid of the rascals, and soon there was a wild and tumultuous cry for an investigation.

For several days the storm raged, increasing in violence each day, and finally the powers that be were driven to the necessity of appointing a committee of investigation. This committee was made up of aldermen and was constituted as follows, to wit.

Ald. Horatius Ossius Cruso, boss of the Seventeenth Ward and leading saloon keeper of the locality known as “the Sty.”

Ald. Octavius Nero, boss of the Ninth Ward and custodian of the garment workers’ vote.

Ald. J. Caesar Thyrsuruzigus, acting boss of the Twelfth Ward and leader of the Graeco-Roman whigs.

It was an excellent committee—from the standpoint of the politicians—and when it settled down to work their hopes ran high. Its report, they thought, was foreordained. There could be no mistake.

But then there arose another clamor from the so-called reformers and the prejudiced press for a report counselling the dismissal and imprisonment of the police commissioners. This clamor broke like a fierce storm, and to counteract it the politicians raised a clamor for a report of the kind that they confidently expected. As a result the people of Rome became divided into two great factions—the one favourable to the commissioners and the other unfavourable. The investigating committee, like grist in a mill, was ground between the two forces.

For a while the committeemen remained under cover and attempted to temporize. But it was soon seen that this would not avail, and before long the examination of witnesses was begun. Half of the witnesses—those selected by the reformers—gave evidence damaging to the commissioners. The other half—chosen and trained by the politicians—gave evidence in rebuttal. If the committeemen reached a verdict favourable to the police commissioners they knew the reformers and newspapers would drive them out of town. If on the other hand, they reached a verdict favourable to the reformers, the politicians and bosses would give them one way tickets on the Salt Creek stern-wheel steamer to the murky swamp of Political Oblivion. Therefore, it came about that they were on the hooks, and all day and all night they sought means of postponing the crash long enough to give them time to seek a means of saving their skins.

But after the days had become weeks and the weeks months it became apparent that both sides would wait no longer. In great headlines and heavy black 50-point type and in strident tones and loud yells the press and the reformers demanded a report. Similarly, albeit quietly, the bosses gave the world that a report must be forthcoming.

“The police commissioners are corrupt!” bellowed the reformers, et al. “Drive them out.”

“The public be boiled in oil,” said the bosses. “The police commissioners are blameless! Exonerate them!”

So the committeemen groaned between the millstones and their woes were heavy upon them. Apparently, it was all up. They were doomed no matter what the character of their findings.

It was Thyrsuruzigus that suggested the means of his and his colleagues’ salvation.

“Let us make a report,” he said, “announcing that we have been unable to come to a decision. Let us disagree!”

“Eureka!” exclaimed Nero.

“Eureka!” exclaimed Cruso.

And so they announced that the evidence was so evenly divided that they were unable to sift the fact from the fiction, and with calm smiles they waited for their respective assailants to subside. But herein they miscalculated, for they merely antagonized both, and during the night following the day upon which their report was published a mob, composed partly of politicians and partly of reformers, visited them at their homes, and, dragging them forth in their pajamas, hanged them to telegraph poles in full view of their weeping families.

Moral—It is always best to be sure.

*(Source: Transcribed from Sunday Morning Herald, September 8, 1901, Google News, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=TGemctCAZTQC&dat=19010908&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>)*