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Untold Tales

*XV—How Z. Antonius Caramba Invented an Underground Railway and Later
Earned a Commutation for Good Behavior*

A politician, in many respects, is like a warrior on the battlefield, for if he would succeed in his chosen profession he must do battle relentlessly and fearlessly day and night, year in and year out. If he lays aside his side arms for one brief moment he may be set upon by a horde of his opponents and borne to the earth; if he closes his eyes for one brief second he may awake to find a bayonet piercing his spare ribs.

Even more than the professional soldier must he be vigilant, for it is only upon extraordinary occasions that the average soldier is compelled to engage more than one antagonist at a time. The politician—more's the pity—must at all times engage at least two regiments of them—the politicians of the opposing party and the moral and mental degenerates commonly known as the reformers. Against the former he may use the ordinary weapons of his profession, but against the latter he must proceed with caution and finesse, for, like the banes of civilization that they are, the reformers are crafty rascals, and in dealing with them it is necessary to keep all four eyes wide open.

In the city of Rome, during the third century *anno domini* and the height of whig supremacy, the reformers were much in evidence, just as they have been in every city and at every time since. In the spring of the year 234, rendered sore by their failure to encompass the downfall of the eminent district leader J. Cato Oi, they conspired to ruin the business of the ward politicians in general, and after a long fight, aided by several chicken-hearted traitors in the Legislature, they succeeded in securing the enactment of a law making repeating at elections a felony and providing a penalty of 50 years in jail for the “crime”—as they denominated it—of harbouring repeaters or in any manner engaging in their purchase, sale, exchange, stabling or transportation.

At first the whig politicians laughed at this law, as they had laughed at many another “reform” measure in the past, but after Ippius Bichloride, the whig boss of the Tenth Ward, had been convicted and sentenced for harbouring 25 up-country repeaters in his cellar, and J. Catulus Vermicelli, the well known saloonist, had been sent to the “pen” for providing a squad of professional voters with free ale, they took a tumble and saw that they were up against it for fair.

Then ensued a period of terror, for the fall election was fast approaching, and the condition of affairs made it necessary that some arrangements be made for securing at least 10,000 repeaters from out of the city. At first it was proposed to hire local talent at advanced rates, and to trust to luck, but this, it was soon seen, would be too risky. Then it was suggested that the money ordinarily spent for repeaters be devoted to the corruption of the opposition precinct workers. But this scheme also, it was decided, would not work well in practice. Then came propositions to organize a regiment of hoodlums to intimidate the opposition voters, and to establish shotgun quarantines about the polling places, and to bring

repeaters to town in balloons, and to do many other things—rash, foolish and absurd. But all were weighed and found wanting.

It was Z. Antonius Caramba, the genial boss of the Third Ward, that finally suggested the plan that was adopted. It was at one of the regular weekly councils of the bosses that he laid it bare.

“As you are doubtless aware,” he said, “the city of Rome is honeycombed with long darksome caverns known as catacombs. They are mentioned in all of the guide books, and tourists visiting the city frequently descend into the more accessible of them and catch cold. Some of these catacombs are as secure and as safe as a bank vault. One of them begins in the suburbs, under the ruins of an old temple to Vulcan, and has ramifications extending all over the city. It is my plan that we inject repeaters from the counties into this entrance and conduct them underground to the various polling places. From the cellar of each house in which there is a polling place we can sink a shaft downward to the nearest branch of this catacomb. Then, on election day, we can raise the needed number of repeaters to the surface, vote them, return them, and next day conduct them out to the entrance to the catacomb and dispatch them to their homes.”

The assembled bosses greeted this speech with loud cheers, and next day work was begun. All of the various repeater brokers in the counties were notified by telegraphy to secure at once as much stock as they could, and, two days later, 5000 men were marched to Rome, under cover of the night, and dropped into the catacombs. Two days later came 3500 more and next day 1500 more. The needed 10,000 was complete.

Two hundred precinct shepherds were sent down the elevator to look after the marshaling and manipulation of the repeaters, and 500 kegs of beer were lowered to keep them quiet. Then work was begun upon the shafts leading down from the various polling places, and two days before election day all was in readiness. The precinct shepherds had their charges divided into squads, and each squad was encamped beneath the polling place to which it was assigned: the men were instructed in the manner of voting the ticket, and the more intelligent of them were taught how to vote twice and even thrice with one ballot; the judges and clerks of election were instructed in their part of the game; the police end was fixed, and arrangements were made, even for the return of the repeaters to their ancestral homes on the completion of their labours.

But in the plan—or rather in the execution of it—there was a flaw. Nine out of 10 of the repeaters underground were peasants from the north. All their lives they had lived upon the sun-kissed and vine-embowered slopes of the Apennines and Lepontine Alps, and there they had learned to drink the juice of the grape. Beer was a new one on them. It made them bilious. They grew restive. They made loud and unseemly noises. They raised a rough house.

Frightened and puzzled, the bosses sought to quiet them by lowering more beer to them. When they still yelled a pipe line was hastily laid from the largest brewery in Rome and spigots were placed at every 50 yards. But it was too late. Their unearthly shrieks had been heard. The opposition leaders were “on.”

An hour after they discovered the plot the opposition leaders had their plans of battle perfected. Valerianus Nero Aggripina, the big boss, personally carried it into effect.

Armed with a can of gasoline he proceeded to an alley behind the Temple to Ceres. In the middle of the alley was a ventilator manhole leading to the catacombs. Tearing off the iron top Aggripina dropped the can of gasoline into the hole. When it struck the bottom it exploded and in a second dense clouds of black smoke were pouring out. Then he turned in a fire alarm, and in half a minute the engines were on the spot.

And then, while the whig bosses wailed and tore their hair and gnashed their teeth, whig firemen—their own appointees—turned streams of water into the manhole, and filled the catacombs and drove the repeaters out. Some of them were overcome by the smoke: some

were drowned: some were trampled to death in the mad rush to safety, and some, the more fortunate, reached the catacomb entrance and were loaded into waiting patrol wagons and carried off to the jail.

The jig was up, and a month later Z. Antonius Caramba, the boss who had suggested the use of the catacombs, was found guilty of harbouring repeaters and sentenced to 45 years in the state's prison at hard labor.

The aggregate sentences of his 243 accomplices totaled 7,651 years.

Moral—It will all come out in the wash.

(Source: Baltimore Sunday Herald, September 29, 1901, transcribed from Google News, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=TGemctCAZTQC&dat=19010929&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>)