

Tattlings of a Retired Politician.

By Forrest Crissey.

"The Tribune" today publishes the fourth article of a series of political reminiscences based on real events and throwing much light on political methods. Many readers will be able to fathom the real names in some of the occurrences related.

A Million Dollar Bribe.

BROKENSTRAW RANCH—1903.—Dear Ned: No doubt the new governor is all of the moral athlete you set him up to be; but somehow I can't quite go into spasms of enthusiasm over the chief executive of a great state who allows his friends to cackle like a bevy of Shanghai pullets simply because he has managed to turn down a temptation that a Chicago alderman would scavenge. Of course it was a virtuous performance on the governor's part; but he would pull heavier on my admiration if he hadn't allowed you fellows to draw the inference that he had felt any temptation to be resisted. When a man admits to himself that he is tempted he marks down his own moral backbone about 20 per cent; and when he brags that he didn't yield to the temptation he unconsciously puts himself on the bargain counter and classes himself along with the unsold goods in stock. At least that's the way a good many discriminating people, who have had their eye teeth cut, are inclined to look at the matter.

In all my recollection I can recall just one man who could afford to admit, without cheapening his own character, that he was subjected to a downright temptation—but he didn't admit it! And when the story leaked out, after his death, there wasn't a man in the state who didn't take off his hat to the moral stamina that the governor had shown. That little incident made the eulogies of the pulpits and the newspapers look cheap.

It happened while you were kicking a pigskin at Princeton. There never was a better campaign than the one in which Uncle Cal. Peavey knocked out the machine and landed in the governor's chair. It made a bigger rumpus than a fox in a henhouse, and there was a mighty shaking of dry bones in the fat places on the pay roll.

Almost the whole press of the state was against him and he was hounded as an anarchist, a calamity howler, and a general enemy to society, capital, vested rights, and a whole lot of other sacred and civilized things. But Cal. kept his nerve and continued to talk right out in meeting. The harder they pounded, the more he showed his teeth and stuck out his bristles.

That was the winter before the United Traction's franchise expired, and a new charter was simply a ground hog case.

Times were tighter than a February freeze. Every cent that the governor had made in a series of nifty speculations in city real estate had been put into the big Empire building, just before the hard times set in. Tenants were scarcer than rats, rents fell like snowflakes, and the old man was in the hole for twice what he was worth, with big payments coming due in the course of the winter. He didn't know which way to turn as the money market froze tighter and tighter, and it was a certainty that he stood to lose the fortune he had made in years of hard hustling, unless some unexpected stroke of providence should come to his relief.

But he was made of stern stuff and never gave out a whimper, although he couldn't keep his condition from the wise ones on the street.

Just as he was driving ahead to the last ditch in his private affairs, the United Traction was making hay at the session. The governor wasn't the only man in politics that winter who had been caught in the financial squeeze. Plenty of the legislators were worrying over mortgages and investments—a fact that didn't escape the attention of the traction company's agents.

Although the governor and his forces put up a strong and crafty fight against the bill, the franchise measure passed both houses by a big majority—and the men who held mortgages on the assets of the members concerned stopped worrying about payments.

Then the calcium light was suddenly shifted to the executive mansion, and the question in every mouth was: "What will the governor do?" The situation was strained up to concert pitch and there were all sorts of speculation as to the course which Uncle Cal would pursue. Generally, however, it was agreed that there were enough votes to pass the bill over his veto and that probably, as a sensible man who knew enough to know when he was licked, he would let the measure become a law without his signature. This was considered the proper way for a governor to surrender under protest when there were not enough votes at his command to sustain his veto.

A day or two after the bill had gone up to the governor, one of the smoothest mechanics in the line art of "fixing" ever on the confidential pay roll of the traction company dropped in at the office of the Empire building for a little chat with Mike Boylan, the governor's business partner and general handy man.

Now Mike had knocked about town a good deal, been up as late as midnight several times, and was fairly well acquainted with the landscape in the neighborhood of the city hall; but for all that he didn't really know that his caller was a scout of the traction company. In other words, the fellow was the man for the hour; he had just enough reputation to arouse in Mike's mind a suspicion of his connection with the company and save awkward explanations. On the other hand, he had not made himself common so that his name was known to the members of the gang generally. In short, he was an artist and accepted about one commission in four or five years, but made that one something handsome.

"Mike," he finally said, after they had chatted awhile, "if you're not too busy, I'd like you to do me a little favor."

"Certainly," responded Mike.

"I'd like you to introduce me to the man in charge of the safety deposit vaults of your building here. I want to get the right sort of accommodations, and if you take me in tow I'll insure me proper attention from the general in command down there in the basement."

"Sure, I'll fix that," said Mike, taking his hat and wondering if it really were true that his caller was mixed up with the traction people, as he had heard.

They were starting away from the largest wall safe, or "box," when the new patron of the institution called Mike into one of the private stalls. On the table were two good fat telescopes.

Up to that time Mike had been merely an interested spectator; but this move gave him a jolt. Could it be that the fellow had trapped him into a position that might be made to reflect on the governor if it should ever get out?

Mike's conscience had been trained in the kindergarten of the street paving contract business and never swung a danger signal short of the question, "Will it get out?" Nothing but that possibility presented a moral problem to him. The next semaphore which was swung by his acute spiritual sensibilities operated on the question of whether or not a certain course would bring him under the heel of the law.

"If this chap makes a straight proposition," reasoned Mike, as his companion was untrapping the telescopes, and it should ever get to the governor's ears it'll be all day with me. He'll raise my scalp."

"I hope you'll not think I'm suspicious of the boys down here," said the caller, "but I'm taking care of a whole lot of cash for a pool I'm interested in; the fellows who are with me are afraid of banks in these times and insist on planting our funds in a safe deposit vault. That puts the whole thing on my shoulders and it occurred to me that it would be a safe precaution to ask you to come down here and check up with me the amount I'm planting—it won't take but a minute."

"You chaps going to make books on the races?" laughed Mike.

His answer was a knowing wink and Mike heaved a sigh of relief at the thought that he was out of a disagreeable scrape in which a quarrel with the governor was almost a moral certainty—and Mike was more afraid of old Cal. than of any other being in the whole universe. In fact the governor had become a sort of god to Mike, although Cal. didn't know it himself.

Half the packages were in thousand dollar bills and the rest in five hundreds, so it was an easy job to check them up, according to the figures on the paper bands pinned about the packages. Mike's eyes fairly stood out of his head as he looked from the figures on his tab to the currency on the table. One million dollars! He had never seen that much money in one lump before in his life, and his nimble, acquisitive mind began right away to figure out the things that could be done with that money. It almost stupefied him and he made no objection when asked to help stack it away in the big wall safe.

Then they went upstairs and the caller suddenly remembered that he had left his umbrella in Mike's private office. He got it, and started for the door, then stopped and began to draw on his gloves. Mike had not yet come out of his trance. He was still saying to himself: "A million dollars."

"You're satisfied as to the amount in the vault?" casually inquired the caller.

"Yes," absently responded Mike, writing the figures on the desk blotter.

Suddenly the keys to the big deposit drawer fell on the desk in front of him and he heard the words:

"Well—you know what to do with these!"

For a second he stared hard at them. Then he grabbed them up and made a plunge for the door and out into the hall. But his smooth caller had gone down the stairs to the floor below, taken the elevator which served the side entrance to the building and was gone!

From that time until Friday afternoon, when the governor came to the city to give two or three days to his private affairs, Mike scoured the town for a trace of the man who had dumped a million dollars of bribe money into his hands. And in that time he felt more stings of conscience than he had ever known in all his life before. He was the worst scared man in the city and it seemed to him he'd rather jump into the crater of a volcano than face the wrath of the governor. Or could it be that under the certainty of complete financial ruin the old man was facing he might possibly weaken? And why shouldn't he take the money? He would be doing nothing for it—not so much as signing his name! Hadn't the governor fought the bill tooth and nail? And wouldn't his failure to sign it be a protest against it? This was just what the party and the state expected him to do; then why shouldn't he keep the money that had been thrown at him?—and without a possible tracer attached.

But even Mike's moral obtuseness was not so great that he didn't recoil from the possibility that the governor might look at the matter in this way. If it should be so, he would know that there wasn't a man on earth who couldn't be reached if all the circumstances were right.

When the governor came in Mike was looking uncommonly pale, but the old man was too preoccupied to notice it. His grizzled old face was as haggard as if he had just got up from a run of fever, and his eyes shone with a grim, unnatural brightness.

He slumped into a big leather chair, and, in a shaky voice, said:

"Mike, it's all up! I stopped in at the trust company's office on my way from the station, and they say we can't have any more time. Then I went over to the other place and thrashed it out with fellows we hoped might come into the thing as a last resort. But they're scared, and nothing can move 'em to furnish the funds."

He choked up for a minute, but finally continued:

"But there's one consolation. The property's worth the money, and no one'll lose a dollar. And there'll be no scandal attached. Thank God, I never wronged a man out of a cent that I know of, but it's kind of tough to see the work of years swept away in a second! And then there's the little woman at home—that's the hardest part of it!"

Then Mike knew that it was up to him to make a clean breast of the safe deposit business—and he did it, too.

The eyes of the old man seemed to bore Mike right through as the story came out in a shaky voice. For a minute or two the old governor sat with his chin resting in his hands, the muscles of his face twitching like a spider's legs.

But it was all over in a minute. Slowly rising to his feet, the old man pointed his long bony finger at Mike and in a voice that had the grit of iron in it, he said:

"Young man! I'd advise you to take better care of that damned scoundrel's money than you ever did of any money in your life."

That night the governor wrote a veto message on the traction bill that fairly scorched the rails of the line. Then he called in the real scappers in his political camp and began a fight against foregone defeat that ripped up the whole state and made history. He didn't stop at anything that came under the head of things "fair in love and war." Before the fight was finished he was forced practically to kidnap two or three weak kneed members of the opposition and take them out of the state. And there were a few others that had to be given a close range view of the penitentiary before they experienced a change of heart. But when the vote on the veto was taken the old governor won out by three votes—and he celebrated the triumph by surrendering to his creditors and backers all the property that he had accumulated in fifty years of harder work than a stone breaker ever put in.

In less than three years from then I acted as a pall bearer at Calvin Peavey's funeral and joined in a subscription to buy the widow a home.

That's the sort of a moral backbone that is entitled to flowers, according to my notion. And there isn't much of anything short of that brand that is. When I go into hero worship I'm going to cap my shrine with a bust of honest Cal.

But I've run on to such a length about this temptation business that you'll veto this letter without reading if I don't quit short off.

The cattle are looking fine and I'm getting young and frisky, so that I don't have to keep a gang of office seekers in good humor or steer the ship of state between the rocks of party politics. There's nothing to put ginger into a man quite up to the liberty of speaking his mind without figuring on how it's going to affect the vote. Yours ever,

WILLIAM BRADLEY.

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