A Freeman's Will—A Political Reminiscence

North Duke Street in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was formerly carried over the tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad by a bridge divided longitudinally by an iron rail. An automobile and a trolley car once came to a stop facing each other near the center of this bridge and on the same side of the iron rail. The name of the driver of the automobile was Frank C. Musser. In early manhood he had lost his right arm through the negligence of the predecessor of the street railway company whose car confronted him on the bridge. He was on the right side of Duke Street so that an argument may be made in support of the proposition that he had the right of way. On the other hand, the movements of the trolley car were necessarily limited by the rails on which it stood, and its motorman may have been dimly aware of the legal principle that while a street railway company does not have the exclusive right to its tracks, its rights are superior to those of the traveling public. At all events the motorman refused to back his car and the man with only one arm refused to back his automobile.

A congestion of traffic ensued, and a crowd collected. The police proved unequal to the task of convincing either of the disputants that he was in the wrong. At the end of more than an hour the motor-
man backed down, to speak figuratively, and backed up, to speak literally. The automobile proceeded triumphantly on its way. Some men say that the coalition movement of 1921 came into King Street on the wheels of that automobile.

Other men say that the coalition movement was born of an effort on the part of the Chamber of Commerce to add the name of Mayor Horace E. Kennedy to the roster of its members. In the course of a membership drive he had been asked to join the Chamber of Commerce and had declined to do so. He was a man past middle life, a bachelor, who lived on King Street with his aged mother. He was a politician who had never held elective office and who had been chosen mayor by the vote of city council upon the death in office of his duly elected predecessor. He was not a progressive. He believed in King Street as it was and had been, and instinctively distrusted the good faith and good judgment of anyone who wanted to change it. Perhaps he had given too little thought to the saying of the poet that one good custom may corrupt the world.

When the mayor's unwillingness to join the Chamber of Commerce was made known to the board of directors of that organization there were those who remembered that the mayor's salary was not large and who pointed out that the support of his mother might be a burden greater than had been generally supposed. The upshot was that he was elected an honorary member and that a committee of three was appointed to present him with an appropriate certificate of membership.

When the committee, acting in pursuance of its instructions, visited City Hall it was brusquely received. The mayor informed its members that he did not wish to belong to the Chamber of Commerce and had already said so. He refused to discuss or reconsider his decision and refused to receive the tendered certificate of membership. It may well be that he appraised more justly than his visitors the importance of the work in which they were engaged. Within five minutes after they had entered City Hall they found themselves in the act of leaving it. They stopped for a few moments in conversation in the doorway. The building in which they were standing had been built in 1795, but at some time in its history a nearly successful effort had been made to make it look as if it had been built during the period of the Civil War. Above its main door a
battered sign bore the single word “Welcome.” The sign had been erected a number of years previously in connection with a parade of the visiting members of a fraternal organization. No one had gone to the trouble of taking it down. The members of the committee looked at it and were suddenly made aware that the time was out of joint. At the end of their conversation they solemnly shook hands. Two of them were Republicans and the third was a Democrat. “If that man ever runs for mayor,” they said, “we will beat him whether the organization supports him or not.”

But the true cause of the coalition movement lay deeper than either the episode on the Duke Street bridge or the attitude and idiosyncrasies of any particular mayor.

Sometimes an image that has stood so long
It seems implanted as the polar star
Is moved against by an unfathomed force
That suddenly will not have it any more.1

The Republican political organization was such an image and it had never seemed stronger than on the day when the indignant apostles of the Chamber of Commerce shook hands in the corridor of City Hall. Its beginning went back to the wars between the factions known in earlier days as the “bull ring” and the “hog ring.” It had brought those wars to an end, and had governed King Street without interruption for more than a generation. Its leader, W. W. Griest, was not only a respected and useful member of Congress, but was also the president of the local traction, electric, and gas companies. Unlike most political organizations it was the reverse of predatory. It asked nothing except to be let alone. It obtained its funds from contributions, ostensibly voluntary, by those upon whom it conferred public office. It was sparing in dispensing the public funds which were committed to its care. It made no public improvements, and in justification pointed to the lowest tax rate in the state. This policy was not without its local supporters. As Charles I. Landis, the President Judge of our courts once said to me, “What difference does it make whether King Street is full of holes or not? King Street has always been full of holes.” Logic apart, the fact was indisputable.

1 Stephen Vincent Benét, John Brown’s Body.
In such matters everything depends upon the point of view. A telephone company once sought to remove a pole from the yard of a client of mine and to substitute for it an underground conduit. My client protested violently. "My sister and I are old-fashioned," she said, "and we like telephone poles." It is to be supposed that if she and her sister had been still more old-fashioned they would not have liked them. To one with the point of view of an American colonial, King Street in the condition in which it was when LaFayette addressed the Revolutionary veterans from his barouche did well enough. But to one with the point of view of LaFayette himself or of an American of the twentieth century it seemed in need of repairs.

Though the general policy of the organization was both conciliatory and economical, it brooked no opposition. On the few occasions on which its authority had been seriously challenged it had spent money lavishly in order to maintain its supremacy. The leaders who opposed it had either been won over by political preferment or had been discredited by repeated defeats. As time passed rebellions against it became less frequent and menacing. The Democratic Party, forgetful of ancient victories, sank comfortably into the role of the minority party, content with the crumbs that fell from the Republican table. Elections came to be regarded as no more than ceremonious ratifications of the decrees of the invisible powers. The pax Romana settled over the length and breadth of King Street.

The evils of the organization were those which are incidental to the pax Romana. They were largely intangible. When business and professional men met daily at the round table of the Hamilton Club their conversation ranged freely over almost the whole range of human activities. Politics in the larger sense of that word were by no means excluded. If the discussion turned upon the issues in a Presidential campaign or upon the justice and expediency of a given foreign policy, the comments which ensued were as spontaneous and informed as those to be heard at a thousand similar luncheon tables in other towns and cities. But if someone rashly suggested that the paving on King Street ought to be replaced or that the fire department needed a new engine, a silence fell upon the room as if a breach of etiquette had been committed. Since, so far as I am aware, there is no characteristically Republican or Democratic
method of repairing streets or putting out fires—since, in short, the affairs of a city are merely well conducted or the opposite—it has always seemed to me a bad thing to inject bipartisan politics into municipal government. But it is a worse thing for the citizens of a city to abdicate their local political rights. The citizens of King Street had abdicated their rights. They had received in exchange the pax Romana, and their abdication had been so long continued that they had forgotten that they had ever had any rights. A discerning observer at the round table of the Hamilton Club could see well enough what the secret heart and temper of these men were—they trembled and were afraid.

It was doubtless a too strong reliance on this temper which led the organization to commit the major political blunder of announcing that Mayor Kennedy would be a candidate for re-election in his own right. Within a few weeks rumors were current that for the first time in more than a decade a serious contest was to be expected at a municipal election. It was said that a series of conferences had been held by old-line Democrats brought up in the political tradition of Buchanan, disgruntled Republicans who had fought in the wars of the “bull ring” and the “hog ring,” and certain young men of vague political affiliations who had had no previous experience in politics. It appeared that the latter were willing to learn. Three members of the Chamber of Commerce were active in these conferences. They and their associates selected a life-long Republican as the coalition candidate for mayor. He was a man with only one arm. The battle lines were drawn. The coalitionists announced as their slogan “Make Musser Mayor.” The organization answered, “Keep Kennedy.”

The campaign of that year was really won on the three registration days which preceded the election, although neither party was at the time aware of that fact. It was obvious from the outset that the coalitionists could count on the support of those groups which invariably align themselves behind the banners of political protest— idealists and reformers, disappointed office seekers and those who, for one reason or another, conceive themselves to have been wronged by the existing order and, in effect, regard any change as likely to be a change for the better. These groups are, however, to a certain extent mutually antagonistic, and differences of opinion among their
members became apparent even in advance of election day. To those contributors to the campaign fund who favored a liberal use of money at the polls and who advanced in support of their views the time-honored argument of Bassanio, "To do a great right do a little wrong," the idealists made the stern answer of Portia, "It must not be." Other contributors, while disavowing a wish to condone outright bribery, saw no objection to the organization of large "poll committees" whose members were compensated for their political activities in the form of reimbursement for money supposedly lost by reason of their absence from their regular work. The debated issues of the campaign were corruption and mismanagement at city hall, an obsolete and inequitable real estate assessment, and the failure of the administration to make needed repairs to the streets and to the system of water distribution. The coalition candidate promised to make the requisite repairs and improvements, but before his campaign had closed was compelled to make a further promise not to raise taxes. In the midst of charges and countercharges which multiplied from day to day, he and his advisers endeavored at best they could, though without entire success, to be all things to all men.

Congressman Griest, being in command of regular troops instead of volunteers, was confronted by no such difficulty. The issues raised by his adversaries were brushed aside as no more than the vain imaginings of inexperienced amateurs and pushing outsiders whose policies would plunge the city into a welter of extravagance. His workers in every precinct were disciplined and experienced. The contributors to his campaign fund asked no questions and expected no explanations. He could count, moreover, on the votes of the employees of the city and of the public utility companies and on the influence and assistance of the members of the police force.

The latter, while generally benignant in attitude, sometimes fell into mistakes as to the scope of their duties. A stranger once asked one of them to direct her to a boarding house. He understood her to say "sporting house" and obligingly sent her to one. She brought suit against him as a result of this misdirection, and though the suit ended in his favor the experience must have served to impress

---

2 "Bawdy house" would appear more probable, but the testimony of the policeman at the trial was that he understood the words to be "sporting house."
him with the truth of the observation that a policeman's lot is not a happy one.

But whatever may be said about some of the campaigns that followed it, the first coalition campaign was not decided by the use of money. It was decided by the votes of citizens who had, in the past, taken no interest in politics, who had seldom gone to the trouble of registering as voters and who had almost invariably remained at home on election day. Such votes are not to be purchased and are not easily influenced by argument or persuasion. They represent the political manifestation of the unfathomed force to which reference has been made, and which, from time to time and then only for brief intervals, converts our theoretical democracy into an actual one. The size of the registration was evidence enough that this force was about to move.

The direction of its moving was, however, another matter. When the polls closed on election day nothing was known except that the coalition cause had been vigorously represented at the various polling places, and that the purchasable vote had not gone altogether one way. It is to be supposed that some of the coalition poll committees had considerably enlarged their memberships. At eight o'clock the oracles who declare the destinies of King Street met according to their custom in the smoking room of the Hamilton Club. In little more than an hour the first news came in—Kennedy, it was reported, had carried the Third Ward by thirty-five votes. Now the Third Ward, which abuts on King Street and which had at the time about eleven hundred eligible voters, stood toward the organization's leader in much the same relation as the Tenth Legion stood to Julius Caesar. In close elections it was in the habit of reporting last, and there were those who asserted that its returns were sometimes affected by the requirements of the situation as a whole. On this occasion it had, for some reason, seen fit to report first. As matters turned out, no coalition candidate ever carried it, or ever came as close to carrying it as on this election day. After due consideration the oracles concluded that it was not true that Kennedy's majority in the ward was only thirty-five votes. Indeed, after certain calculations, they gave it as their opinion that the correct majority was three hundred and thirty-five votes and noted the latter figure on the margins of their newspapers.
But as in the case of the messengers who bore evil tidings to Job, hardly had the first messenger departed when there came yet another. Musser, he averred, had carried the Second Ward by one hundred and fifty-seven votes. The Second Ward lies on the north side of King Street even as the Third Ward lies on its south side, and at the word confusion descended upon the oracles and those who had assembled to listen to their interpretations. A second mistake was clearly impossible, and it immediately became doubtful whether there had been a first mistake. Something unusual, it appeared, had happened at the polls. It was not necessary to wait long in order to learn the result. Before the last of the nine wards had reported the oracles had gone to their homes. Musser had carried every ward except the Third. Poll committees, whether large or small, had been entirely unnecessary. The unfathomed force had given a new mayor to King Street.

Not long after the election I had a conversation with a friend of mine, an experienced politician, who was a resident of a neighboring city. “I hope very much,” he said, “that your friends will get a lot done in the course of the next year.” “Why,” I asked, “in the course of the next year?” “It is all the time you will have,” he answered. “A year from now your mayor will still be in office, but he will have been repudiated at the polls. There will be a general election next year, and no coalition movement ever survives a general election.” But Congressman Griest was wiser. On the morning after election day he discussed his defeat with one of his lieutenants. “Do not worry, Congressman,” said the latter, “We will get it all back for you next year.” “We will get it all back,” agreed the Congressman, “but it will take ten years.” He was very nearly right. It was eight years before a mayor of his own choosing was again seated in City Hall, and almost eleven years before the term of the last coalition officeholder expired. He did not live to see the latter event take place.

The coalition party had a working majority in both city council and the school board for a period of about five years. During that period it made two unsuccessful efforts, the first of which failed by only a very narrow margin, to extend its control from the city to the county. An apologist would find it easy to enumerate and appraise the items which make up the sum of its tangible accomplish-
ments. It performed, at least in part, its campaign pledges to repair the streets and improve the water system. The real estate assessment which it put into effect, though bitterly attacked in the first instance, remained substantially unchanged for many years. It likewise respected the pledge of its candidate not to raise taxes, until he had been released from his undertaking in that regard by a triumphant re-election as mayor on a platform in which no such pledge was included. It took an antiquated and inadequate system of public education and through the gratuitous efforts of devoted and experienced citizens converted it into one of the best systems of education in the state. It bestowed, finally, upon the community which he served, a mayor of such consistent sweetness of temper and such transparent honesty of purpose that the first was never ruffled and the second never attacked in the course of political wars which lasted for a decade.

As against this profit account there is a loss account which is not easy to evaluate. Political wars inevitably beget personal animosities. These animosities divided King Street from end to end. In addition, the coalition leaders pursued in certain instances civic policies which were unquestionably mistaken. In other instances they appointed to office those who were afterwards shown to have been unfaithful public servants. Evils such as these may perhaps be dismissed as no more than unavoidable incidents in the routine of municipal self-government.

A much graver indictment may be founded on the social consequences of the money expended in the successive campaigns which were conducted. In all of these campaigns, with the possible exception of the first, the organization had at its disposal more ample resources than its opponents. It used at each election as much money as it thought necessary, drawing in emergencies on the funds of the state organization. Enormous parades were arranged, in one of which the marchers were led by a herd of elephants, and speakers with national reputations came from Washington to King Street in order to explain the civic advantages likely to result from a strict adherence to the principle of voting the straight Republican ticket. In the nature of the case the coalitionists were compelled to seek their campaign funds from local contributors. They collected from time to time as much money as they could, and spent all of it. That
both parties made large disbursements not represented by elephants or their advertising equivalent was abundantly shown by a steady rise in the per capita cost of purchasable votes. Some of the idealists had begun to talk about the necessity of fighting fire with fire. The others asked very few questions.

In at least one instance, however, it may be shown that no bribery was committed. On the day of one of the most bitterly contested elections a taxicab driver whose vote was notoriously for sale to the highest bidder appeared early in the morning at his appointed polling place. It so happened that the workers at this polling place, though lacking nothing in loyalty to the rival candidates in whose causes they were engaged, had formed a habit of fraternizing with each other, as soldiers in the trenches are said to do. In some way a tacit agreement was struck that no advances to the taxicab driver were to be made. He hung fruitlessly about the polls all day, watching, with what feelings may be imagined, the arrival of sundry friends and acquaintances, the invitations which they received to attend secret conferences around the corner, and their several departures as soon as their votes had been cast. At five minutes before the closing of the polls at seven o'clock it became impossible for him to ignore any longer the fact that he had been made the victim of a cruel practical joke. Had the quotation been familiar to him, he might aptly have exclaimed with Mercutio, "A plague o' both your houses." What he actually said was "To Hell with all of you," and with these words he entered the voting booth and cast his vote for the candidate of his choice. Nearly a century ago an American poet described the ballot as

A weapon that comes down as still
As snowflakes fall upon the sod;
But executes a freeman's will
As lightning does the will of God.³

It is certain that the taxicab driver executed a freeman's will, though the precise manner of its execution remains a secret to this very hour.

But when the final balance is struck the coalition movement is not to be justified by reason of the civic improvements which it

³ John Pierpont, "A Word From Petitioner."
inaugurated, or to be condemned by reason of the bitterness which it engendered or the electoral frauds for which, in principle at least, it must bear a moiety of the blame. The greatest of the benefits which it conferred upon King Street were as intangible as the evils of the organization which it attacked. It brought local politics from the council chamber into the market place. In so doing it drew to the polls, whether as supporters or opponents, hundreds of men who had voted only at infrequent intervals and hundreds of women who had never voted at all. It may be said, therefore, that in the largest sense it succeeded as well in its defeats as in its victories. It ended the *pax Romana*. The resulting tension, however costly in certain respects, must be judged in the spirit of those earlier Romans who cared little for peace but who held it to be the right and duty of every citizen to look to it that the city took no harm.

*Lancaster, Pa.*  

F. Lyman Windolph