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MAYOR JOHNSON

ON the morning of the 4th of April, 1901, Tom L. Johnson took the Mayor's office by storm. He actually burst into the room. Mayor Farley, seated at his desk, looked up and beheld his successor. A cloud darkened his face as he arose. His greeting was chilly, but Mr. Johnson took no notice of this. He announced that he had qualified for the office of Mayor, and was ready to take up his duties. "But there is no hurry, Mr. Farley," he said. The ex-mayor did not tarry long, for he hated the new man, with whom he had nothing in common, even in politics, though both were Democrats.

There was special reason for the haste with which Mr. Johnson assumed his new work. He had some days before procured an injunction against Mayor Farley who was

on the point of signing an ordinance turning over the rights of the city to lake front land to the steam railroads. The injunction expired at 11 o'clock A. M. Half an hour before that time Johnson became Mayor, and the ordinance was never signed. The lake front leases are still in the courts.

Mayor Johnson, happy as a lark, had a well-conceived plan for the development and aggrandisement of the City of Cleveland. Streets were to be paved, and sewers built as fast as possible. The new water-works tunnel, begun under McKisson's administration was to be finished; grade crossings were to be abolished; new bridges across the Cuyahoga River, a new City Hall, a new Market House for the West Side of the city were included in the plan. There were many other things to be done. Mayor Johnson insisted upon clean and well-lighted streets, that the great park system be opened for use of the people, public bath houses, first-class fire and police protection, new hospitals and better conditions for the poor and for the

prisoners in the city institutions. He particularly demanded cheaper street railway fare.

In order to secure these improvements two elements were required—honest and efficient officials, and money. Mayor Johnson, who had the appointing power under the then existing federal plan of city government, chose for his department chiefs men of unusual ability, of integrity and untiring devotion to duty. The people had elected with him a Council of his own choice, or nearly so. At all events he had a working majority and could execute his plans as far as the Council was concerned.

The money question offered more difficulties, but Johnson had the experience of a business man and was, besides, a man of resourcefulness. He was an expert in taxation matters, having studied them under Henry George. There was plenty of money in Cleveland which could be made available, if he could get at the tax dodgers.

Being a thorough-going man he began at

the root of the evil, the iniquitous appraisal of all taxable property. The famous tax school under Peter Witt, of whom we shall learn more later on, was established. Peter and a number of clerks made large maps of the city, showing all properties and their real values. The result of this work was a howl from the rich and a grunt of satisfaction from the small property owners. Peter was reckless enough to proclaim with a loud voice that the great burden of taxation fell upon the poor. Of course, this was nothing new, but Peter had the figures in all instances. Mayor Johnson was denounced for spending the people's money in illegal enterprises. He answered that he would pay the expenses of the tax school out of his private purse. Thereupon the tax school was killed by decree of court, but the judge was kind enough not to condemn the Mayor to the payment of said expenses, and Mr. Johnson did not reach into his own pocket. The tax school had cost the people something like \$30,000. It was a small matter, after all, for the much

attacked school led nine years later to new and better taxation laws. It also led to a fierce struggle between the Mayor on one side and the County Auditors, the Legislature and the great corporations on the other side.

Undaunted, Mr. Johnson sought to prevail upon the County Auditors to assess the railroads at the same rate as that at which other private property was being appraised. The Auditors refused to listen to him or even to receive his figures, which had been worked out with great diligence by Professor E. W. Bemis. The sessions with the Auditors were stormy, and Mr. Johnson did not mince his words in argument. His effort was of no avail.

Apparently more successful were his efforts to secure a just appraisal of the property of the public service corporations. In filling the vacancies in the annual City Board of Equalisation he appointed four new men in sympathy with his policy. The board added to the duplicate nearly twenty million dollars, by raising the valuation of the prop-

erty of the street railroads, gas and electric light companies. The higher assessment went upon the tax duplicate, but the companies never paid, for they succeeded in Columbus in causing the new valuation to be stricken out. The city having expected an increased income through this source, faced a greatly reduced revenue.

Mayor Johnson saw quickly that he had to carry his fight into the State and before the Legislature, a Republican body. His energy, and enjoyment of strife were such that he promptly undertook an energetic campaign. Though victorious in electing a Democratic delegation from Cuyahoga County, he found himself confronted by an immovable body of Republican politicians at the State capitol.

He was frequently accused of neglecting the affairs of the city, and devoting his time to politics. The small minds could not understand the big aims of the man. He had tumbled into a Herculean task and used gigantic energies to accomplish it. There was

really something heroic in his efforts to overcome the obstacles which were thrown in his way. As Mayor of Cleveland it was incumbent upon him to seek ways and means which would enable him to meet the demands of a new era in municipal life. It was his right and duty to go before the Legislature and ask for such laws as he thought would be necessary. The affairs at home were in good hands.

There can be no question that Cleveland to-day would be the most advanced city in the land, if he had had a free hand. He would have spent millions upon millions for her development in all directions. The money was to come from an equal taxation, and the city being rich, there would have been plenty of it. He had the people on his side, but not the rich and the powerful. His great scheme fell through in spite of his mighty efforts. The courts and the Legislature were invoked by his enemies, and the contests were bitter ones.

Johnson's endurance and power for work

seemed without limitation. While he became engaged in his great struggle, he still found time for the details of his home work. New life entered the City Hall. Things had to be done quickly, for patience he had but little. Yet he was no scold. His knowledge of municipal matters was astonishing. There was no hesitancy on his part in deciding a question, be it of a financial, political or technical nature. He was naturally a mathematician, a builder, an engineer and a mechanic. Long explanations were cut short, for he would see the merits of a case in an instant, and seldom made a mistake. His solutions took account of the future, farsightedness being one of his great gifts.

Those who accused him of negligence in his municipal duties knew little of his methods.

"I am responsible and want to be responsible for my administration," he used to say, "and therefore I must be informed on what is going on." And he was informed. His directors made no appointments without his

sanction, nor did they introduce new measures without his knowledge. He had a good memory and allowed nothing to escape him, even to the smallest details. It was a pleasure to watch him at his work, to hear him tell a funny story, illustrating a case on hand. His smiling face and his familiar way of treating with people became well known. He, however, could say "no" more easily than most men, but he possessed the rare faculty of not thereby offending the petitioner.

He demanded unquestionable honesty of his officials and employés, and was without pity for an offender. During the first few months of his incumbency a newly-appointed officer was convicted of some dishonest transaction. He called the man to his office, read him the riot act, discharged him on the spot, and almost threw him bodily out of doors. The newspapers were informed of the occurrence, and the Mayor announced that swindlers were not to be protected. During almost nine years of Mayor Johnson's administration, not a half dozen cases arose in

which occasion required that city employes be dealt with for dishonesty. This was certainly a remarkable showing, and one of which the City of Cleveland may well be proud. No scandal could ever be attached to the Johnson administration.

With the entry of Tom L. Johnson into the City Hall, Gentlemen George and John made their exit. One could see them formerly at every meeting of the City Council. Now they became not only invisible, but also almost unimportant. Of course, at election times, they would see to it that their men were elected from wards where the Mayor's friends were in the minority. In the Council, the other men were in the minority, so they could do little harm and were carefully watched besides. The scenes under the former administration, when the people hunted certain Councilmen with ladder and rope for trying to sell them out to the Railway Company, needed no repetition. The eye of the boss was watchful, and it was a sharp eye.

There is no denying that Johnson had absolute control of his Council from the beginning to the end. The working majority was with him with one short exception. On that occasion there were seated in the Council seventeen Republicans and fifteen Democrats, the president of the Council also being a Democrat. The leading Republican members were men of small calibre, and Johnson was able to outwit them on many occasions. One of the Republican councilmen died and it became the duty of the Council to elect a new man. Johnson succeeded in winning one of the Republican councilmen over, and in the place of the dead Republican a live Democrat was elected. With the vote of the president, the working majority was restored, and the Mayor once more enabled to follow his course.

There were also a few instances when some of the Democrats in the Council rebelled against his dictation. He either succeeded in reconciling them to his leadership or defeated them at the polls. He preferred the

latter course, as he was always more or less distrustful of his converts. During his first three terms his orders were unquestioned, but later on, when the Street Railway fight had become tiresome, the Democrats would try to convert him to their views expressed in caucus. He was obliged to yield on certain occasions. He was not intolerant of opposition, and found pleasure in combating opinions different from his own, so long as no important matters were to be decided. On more than one occasion he deemed it expedient to take his opponents in the Council severely to task, and even to accuse them of dishonorable conduct. Of course, he had no direct proof, but his suspicion had been aroused and he took this means of uttering a warning. He cared but little whether he gave offence or not on these occasions.

Mayor Johnson never objected to being called a boss, though he was most of the time, especially in later years, careful to hide his personality behind the Council, when measures of weight were to be considered.

“It all depends,” he used to say, “whether a boss is a good or a bad boss. A bad political organisation is worse than a good political machine.”

His City Hall machine was working to perfection, not only in a political way but also in the fulfilment of civic duties. The different departments were well organised and demanded a full day's work of their men. Of course, there were some instances of unfaithfulness and laziness on the part of employés. However, such men would never last long, and it made no difference that a given culprit were an active and valuable politician, and with influential friends backing him. In such cases Mayor Johnson sustained his directors or went even farther than they did themselves. He wanted strict honesty and adherence to duty, nothing less would do. He would not allow himself to be moved by pity or political considerations. It was a strong trait of his character to stand by his officials when he thought them in the right. As an executive, he had no superior,

and the same may be said of him as an organiser.

It required but a short time for him to advance the City of Cleveland to one of the best and most honestly governed places in the country. He spent more money than any of the former mayors, and under his administration the bonded indebtedness was steadily increased. The small politicians made a great noise about extravagance. Yet, at no time were they able to prove that the money was not spent well and honestly. Johnson as a man of large business experience, was wont to figure with dollars where they turned a penny over. Some of the people failed to understand him, because they were not used to seeing a big man occupying the Mayor's chair. It is an erroneous idea that Johnson had no friends and admirers among the business men of the town. Even in the Chamber of Commerce his friends could be found in goodly numbers. Many of them expressed no opinions, but on election day they cast their ballots for him. Some considered his

election and re-elections as a calamity for the City, yet they and Cleveland survived the shock splendidly.

The Republican party nominated the best of their men against him, but they went down in defeat, even as strong a politician as Theodore E. Burton. The Johnson victories would have been impossible without the votes of the business men. They recognised his capability and saw that he gave the city an honest and progressive administration, such as it had never had before. He antagonised them in many ways, and was forgiven. His re-election in November, 1905, by a plurality of 12,169 votes was a great tribute to his popularity. The people of Cleveland rewarded his successful efforts in building up their city. Many streets had been paved since 1901, and many sewers built. The streets were clean and well lighted, the parks made accessible to the common people; the former "Keep off the Grass" signs had disappeared, and upon the very lawns picnics could be held. To the last Mayor Johnson

and his administration marched abreast with the times, assimilating and putting into practice the most advanced theories on the governing of a modern city.

Those who were in a position to watch the daily life of the City Hall became impressed with its intensity of purpose, its manifold activities and its earnestness to master every new arising task. It was not to be wondered that Cleveland began to make a name for itself in this large land of ours.