THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

William Marion Reedy
AND HIS MAGAZINE

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CHAPTER 8

STREETCARS AND CORRUPTION

WHEN Reedy turned back to local concerns after the treaty with Spain had been ratified early in 1899, it was on the languishing plans for a World's Fair that he centered his attention. While the choice of such an objective may baffle outsiders, to St. Louisans it seemed natural enough.

Even in the hazy days before the Civil War the October Fair had been the cynosure of St. Louis pride. Abraham Lincoln, Edward Prince of Wales, and P. T. Barnum had all been ferried across the river to see it. In time the primordial river had been spanned and prehistoric mounds on its bank had given way to soot-blackened warehouses. But the Fair went on, reliable as the season of cool mists and floating gossamer after September's breathless heat. The Fairgrounds remained a favorite resort, a place to walk beside graceful lagoons under crimson oaks and ink-black cypresses, and pennants flying from high pergolas over race track and parade ground, side shows and bear pits and beer gardens.[1]

James Campbell's old streetcar line brought the holiday crowds to the Fairgrounds, setting them down within elegant fretwork pavilions spanning the Grand Entrance. Like every symbol of progress and civic greatness, the famous Veiled Prophet's parade that opened the Fair moved on car tracks. The Prophet is a romantic figure out of *Lalla Rookh*, but his floats are flatcars.

During the nineties the Fair had begun to fail, though its

president, Rolla Wells, whose father had started the town's streetcar system (driving his own horsedrawn omnibus, collecting his own fares) did what he could to revive it. Soon pleasure domes were left to crack and peel, and the once elegant Jockey Club was given over to bookies, touts, and auto racers. But while the antique magnificence of the Fairgrounds faded and sagged, St. Louis dreamed of a fair to end all fairs—a World's Fair to celebrate the centenary of Jefferson's purchase of the Mississippi Valley from Napoleon in 1803.

A series of articles in the *Globe-Democrat* in 1893, the year of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, had set the grand scheme in motion. But with depression and wars and the bitter campaign of 1896, interest had flagged. One of Reedy's themes had always been the niggardly ways of the rich. They seemed to take more pride in abstaining from sins of the flesh than in any gesture toward generous living, and the Fair needed money. It required an initial outlay of five million dollars. So when he turned his attention back to local matters it was to the lack of support for the Fair that he pointed. The town's leaders were smug and indifferent, he said. What kept the Fair from becoming a reality was "the terrible, the deadly, mean envy of a lot of snarling rivals in business."[2]

He launched his campaign with a ferocious diatribe which he entitled, with apologies to William Allen White, "What's the Matter with St. Louis?" Lack of pride, especially among the wealthy leaders, had left St. Louis a "bloated village," "an execrably governed city, with public buildings that are disgraceful, with streets that are frightful, with every evidence that there is no strong power working here for the day of better things." Summing up, he hoped the World's Fair would at last "awaken this city's anaemic soul" to action. "The matter with St. Louis, then, is too much matter, too little mind. The people who predominate lack vision." There had been no "community of affectionate desire" to make it beautiful, but

there was still time to show the world a metropolis whose people had hearts "responsive to beauty and all exalted things." [3]

Despite the resentment such an indictment aroused, it succeeded in its purpose. The response filled bushel baskets; the magazine was sold out at once. When the article was reprinted in a new pamphlet series, the pamphlet was sold out in turn. Afterward, Reedy dated the success of the St. Louis World's Fair and the civic reform movement that paved the way for it to the day his article appeared, in November 1899.[4]

Meanwhile the town's business proceeded as usual. That same month James Campbell handed the Democratic boss of St. Louis his check for $47,500 to buy a ten-year contract for his Welsbach Gas-lighting Company. That was the way business was done—through Ed Butler, an illiterate blacksmith who had made a fortune selling horseshoes to the street railway companies and now did a thriving business selling city contracts and franchises to the utilities. Ambitious to found a dynasty, Butler had sent his son to the university Reedy attended, then made him a member of the school board Reedy covered as a reporter. Now he was running him for Congress.

A gas company case had precipitated the slaying of Colonel Slayback, but it was the streetcar lines that dominated the economy of the spreading city. The individual streetcar companies had borrowed money to electrify their lines. Now, by devious means, they had been consolidated into one great trust, so overcapitalized that it could not afford to pay both its bondholders and its motormen. The mismanagement of the new Central Traction Company educated Reedy in what was basically the matter with St. Louis—and the nation.[5]

Early in 1900 the discontent of street railway workers was obvious to every passenger. Reedy noted that the company's management wielded such political power, had "such a death grip on the community," that the union labor people talked of

the necessity of a general strike to bring management to terms.[6] When the strike of streetcar workers broke that spring, however, there was an air of unconcern, almost of gaiety, in the air. At first Reedy went so far as to blame the whole affair on spring fever. Its seriousness soon became clear, however, as the national head of the union came to St. Louis to take charge. By summer, violence on both sides had become a national scandal. Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, entered the fray. Scab labor was being housed in car barns and fed from federally protected mail cars. Cars were being dynamited at night. Women passengers were hauled into the streets, stripped naked, and painted green. Patrons of scab-operated streetcars were refused groceries in neighborhood stores. Timid citizens left town, knowing the police had been taken over by the state Democratic party while the Republican mayor begged in vain for the militia. Business was in shambles.

But there was an *esprit de corps* among the patrician rulers of the city's economy, and they now proceeded to take matters into their own hands. They organized a posse of fifteen hundred gentlemen, set up barracks in the heart of the downtown wholesale district, and assured their wives they would soon bring the strikers to terms. Reedy could no longer write of workers suffering from spring fever. "All the rottenness of our system is exposed in this strike," he now wrote; "bribery in legislation, corruption in politics, bestowal of monopoly without compensation, concentration of power into irresponsible and incompetent hands . . ."[7] And what seemed most terrifying of all was the failure of the daily press to make clear what issues were at stake. Each paper was inhibited by its own political or financial affiliations. So Reedy decided to publish a comprehensive account of the origins and conduct of the strike, dealing out blame wherever it was deserved. His detailed narrative was gathered into another pamphlet, which had to be reprinted again and again.

"As soon as all the street railways were consolidated into a Trust it was inevitable that there would be a strike. The Trust threatened the usual economies. The employes began to organize . . . If the capitalists could tie up the whole city in unescapable coils of rail and prevent construction of competing lines, why could not the employes . . . tie up the capitalists?" [8] He went on to give details of the managerial and political transactions that had taken place and to blame the union for its clumsy strategy and extravagant demands. Immediately after getting himself elected on a promise to curb the "insolence" of the trusts, the governor of Missouri had accepted a $50,000 bribe for signing a bill sanctioning the formation of a street railway monopoly in St. Louis. That intricate piece of legislation had been linked, Reedy said, to another scheme; it put the St. Louis police department in the hands of a Democratic jobber, Harry B. Hawes. The police in a body were then taken into the Democratic party's Jefferson Club, of which Hawes was president. Hawes had withdrawn police guards from trolley cars so they could help his candidates carry the Democratic primaries.

Then the posse had been formed, ostensibly to restore law and order. Reedy told of calling at its barracks on a grim Sunday afternoon, as striking union men paraded home from a rain-drenched picnic, right past the barracks. A streetcar approached. The striking marchers jeered. Some of them jumped aboard to pull the scab motorman into the street. Now shots rang out. "The way the *posse* rushed to its guns, the sharp, metallic clattering chorus of filling magazines, the dash for the street of those ready armed . . . showed that the *posse* men were more than half glad 'the music had begun.'" It was hard to believe how eager these impatient warriors were to kill, and yet they were no thugs but leading business and professional men, vestrymen in churches. If it had not been for the coolness of their leaders they might have shot

down a hundred strikers instead of the four who were hit. And the strikers were not entirely innocent; some carried pistols and brass knuckles. But Reedy could not repress a surge of pity for the poor fellows hauled into the barracks, "soaked in rain, pale and trembling, in their railway uniforms." These were no criminals, either, but humble men defending their rights. Not one would ever get his job back, though his family might starve for it. And their dead bore "ghastly testimony" to the folly of their leaders, who had brought them to the barracks, and to the stupidity of the mayor and the police, who had allowed them to bait the bloodthirsty sportsmen beside whom Reedy had stood, as if in a duck blind.[9]

One man who had made a fortune building up the St. Louis street railways seemed to have a solution for the complex of problems underlying the strike. He was Tom L. Johnson, one of the former owners whose lines had been consolidated by the Central Traction Company. Some years before, Johnson had read a copy of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, one of the books Reedy had given Fanning as a cub reporter. Deeply impressed, Johnson had retired from business to devote the rest of his life to promoting George's single-tax plan, a program for wresting the control of public resources and utilities from the hands of enterprisers who were misusing them and corrupting the political system. Tom Johnson had served as campaign manager when Henry George ran for mayor of New York. Then he had gone to Cleveland, been elected to Congress, and finally given up his seat to work as mayor for municipal reform. After serving Governor Francis, who was now president of the St. Louis World's Fair corporation, Fanning had followed Johnson to Cleveland and become prominent in the reform movement.

Reedy, who despised George's "socialism," had attacked Henry George bitterly during his campaign for mayor of New

York, vilified him when he collapsed and died during the campaign, and gone on ridiculing his theories after he lay dead. But Reedy had heard Johnson speak and been impressed by his humor and self-sacrifice.[10] Shaken by events in St. Louis, six months after the strike had been broken, Reedy published Henry George's short résumé of *Progress and Poverty* in the *Mirror*. Two years later he announced that he had signed an agreement with the typographers' union "in accordance with the principles of the paper on economic subjects generally." It was at this time that he let it be known that he had become a single-taxer, a position he maintained, half jokingly, as if indulging a personal foible, for the rest of his life.[11]

Meanwhile he continued to lunch with Campbell and his friends in a paneled private dining room at the Noonday Club, atop a downtown skyscraper. Several of this chosen group of rising young lawyers and executives were intimately concerned with the World's Fair and had been involved in the streetcar strike as well. Harry B. Hawes, president of the Jefferson Club and the police board, was one member of the group. Frederick W. Lehmann, attorney for the Central Traction Company and a close friend of Reedy and Campbell, was another. A third was James Blair, general counsel of the World's Fair corporation, a wealthy and idealistic reformer; his father, Francis Preston Blair, had saved Missouri for the Union and died poor for his pains—a course young Blair had no intention of emulating. A fourth member was Reedy's old friend George Tansey, now president of the St. Louis Transfer Company.

These and some others debated all that summer of the strike, agreeing that St. Louis must be cleansed of the paralyzing corruption that had overtaken its politics and that representative citizens must be drafted into the municipal govern-

ment before the World's Fair could become a reality. What they could not agree on was a method of belling that particular cat. All summer and fall the *Mirror* echoed their debates. It published an article from Fanning showing how partial reform had been achieved in Cleveland by a unified effort to nominate business leaders at the primaries of the two major parties. It printed Reedy's conflicting plea for a third party that would inaugurate "a veritable cyclone of reform" in St. Louis. It printed James Blair's lofty rhetoric, preaching new political idealism and a return to old principles.[12]

Lunching at the Noonday Club, Campbell heard the debate wear on, listening with his customary patience and occasional bursts of his famous laughter. Then he decided that the time had come to act. His own plan was simple and forthright, characteristic of a man reputed to be worth $60 million and used to having his own way. He would buy up both parties, pay for their campaigns, and demand the right to pick a decent slate for each.[13]

He sent Harry Hawes to call on Ed Butler, the Democratic boss, and arrange the details. Apparently the first concession that had to be made was to send Butler's son Jim to Congress. Congressional elections were taking place that fall, and Campbell was to pick the municipal slate that would run on the Democratic ticket the following spring. Rolla Wells, son of the founder of the earliest streetcar lines and now president of the American Steel Foundry Company, told Campbell's emissary, James Blair, that he would run for mayor. Butler had already picked a candidate for circuit attorney when Harry Hawes called on him, but Hawes persuaded the Democratic boss to have his candidate give up the nomination. As Butler himself tells it: "So the next time I seen Harry I says, 'bring your little man around,' and he done it and I looked him over, and there didn't seem to be anything the matter of him, so I says all right and he was nominated."[14]

The little man was Joseph W. Folk, a newcomer from Tennessee, a solemn, very young lawyer in black frock coat with black eyes behind shiny pince-nez. Folk was a lover of good round platitudes about good government, which nobody took literally. Although he had been Hawes's predecessor as head of the Jefferson Club, he had first come to general prominence as one of the attorneys for the labor union in the streetcar strike. Reedy mistrusted him as he did all declared reformers.[15]

Reedy nevertheless gave up without ado his plea for a third party and reconciled himself to Campbell's plan for municipal reform by bribery. It appealed to his sense of the absurd, and he printed a rollicking satirical ballad about the luncheon group at the Noonday Club, lampooning the incongruous alliance between Campbell's earthy practicality and Blair's high-flown idealism. The combination struck him as irresistibly funny—and harmless enough, since Campbell had now succeeded in getting as good a ticket for the Republican party as for the Democratic.

What Reedy found less easy to treat in a comic vein was the fact that a third party had been launched without the approval of the Noonday Club. Lee Meriwether, an able and practical advocate of reform and of public ownership of municipal utilities, split the Democratic ticket by filing as a public-ownership candidate. It was his second campaign for mayor. William Jennings Bryan supported Meriwether by attacking Rolla Wells in his new weekly, the *Commoner*. Old Governor Altgeld came across the river to speak for Meriwether, and was astonished by the massiveness of his following, which consisted of unpaid volunteers with no machine affiliation. Butler offered Meriwether $50,000 of Campbell's money to withdraw from the race, and was prepared to double that sum. When the bribe was turned down flatly, three gunmen were hired to put Meriwether out of the race, but he refused to be intimidated. He finished up the campaign guarded

by six burly members of his campaign organization, each carrying a revolver. Although Wells was declared the winner in the unusually bloody elections of April 1901, there can be little doubt that Meriwether actually won a plurality over both machine candidates. As a prominent Republican told a conference on good government, however, no one could be sure. "No one knows and for that matter, few enough care." The state supreme court issued an injunction preventing a recount, saying that the sanctity of the ballot box must be upheld. But Ed Butler's son was refused his seat in Congress owing to the obvious fraudulence of the polling the previous fall.[16]

"The cry of fraud is rot," Reedy retorted in the *Mirror*. He claimed a share in the successful election of Wells and Folk, saying he had "reasoned out the situation" for a year and kept the public informed, which was more or less true. "It was Mr. James Campbell who found the way to reform," he went on shamelessly. "It was he who united the Democratic party . . ." There was no shred of truth in that claim, since the party had been irretrievably split. Reedy did not make the mistake of adding, as he had after the mayoralty campaign of 1897, that Meriwether had been secretly working for Ed Butler all along.[17]

When the *St. Louis Republic* did make that accusation Meriwether brought suit for libel. The jury hearing the case asked the judge if it might award him *more* than the $10,000 he was asking in damages. So there was a retrial, which Meriwether won, trying the case himself against Frederick Lehmann, the friend of Reedy and Campbell, who had taken part in the lunches at the Noonday Club and in the whole plan for reform by bribery. Meriwether won one libel case after another. In one criminal action he sent a Lehmann client to jail for two years for saying that Meriwether was secretly on Butler's side.[18]

Although the Campbell scheme had succeeded by sheer

force and could hardly be called a moral victory, Blair was as outspoken as Reedy in his satisfaction. He wrote a fairly detailed account of the proceedings for *Harper's Weekly*, hinting that the plan might well be tried in other corrupt cities. Reedy contented himself with claiming that an honest city government had been achieved. He preferred not to reflect on the methods of violence, intimidation, and fraud that had been used, for his objective was to make the city great and beautiful, to arouse its self-consciousness and shape its pride. He said that there had never been a perfect government and never would be while men remained imperfect. Meanwhile it was at least possible to put the best men in office.

The impression Reedy managed to convey was summed up in a flattering editorial by Sir Hubert Stanley in *Current Literature*. No magazine in the country, it said, had so consistently led sentiment "toward civic beauty" as had the *Mirror*. "While in its literary function the *Mirror* has contributed to the delight of readers everywhere, it has been especially admirable in its work for what it calls a 'new St. Louis' and 'a better St. Louis,' striving to impress citizens with a sense of corporate being." [19]

But for Reedy it was a Pyrrhic victory. Publicly he could take pride in having helped promote a better town and in keeping the plan for a World's Fair alive. His private misgivings were expressed in constant allusions to the *alleged* election of Wells and Folk. Publicly he could reprint with a touch of vanity Sir Hubert's praise and other evidence of growing recognition, for he was conceded to be a successful man and was not yet forty years old. Privately he was consumed by grief over the sudden death of his young wife.

Soon after they were married the Reedys had moved to a modest house on Spring Street in the West End, not far from

Lindell Boulevard. A younger sister of Mrs. Reedy had been divorced, so they had a nursery furnished for her baby daughter, Carol Ralston, who spent half her time with them, half with her grandparents, the Bauduys. That they would have welcomed children of their own was apparent from the affection they showed this child, who still recalls the lavish presents showered on her by her Uncle Billy. But Mrs. Reedy fell ill of a thyroid condition, then contracted an incurable heart disease. Carol was taken home by her grandmother, who brought her for one last visit to the house where her aunt lay dying. The old lady and the little girl stood in the hall, and the child looked up the long flight of stairs to the bedroom door where her uncle stood with his head in his hands, sobbing.

Lalite Reedy died in agony early that November before reaching her thirtieth birthday. George Tansey, the friend who had taken Reedy in after his disastrous first marriage, wrote her obituary for the *Mirror*.[20] Reedy at first wrote nothing to give any hint of his feelings, and his friends feared that the black mood he was in might lead to suicide. In his Thanksgiving issue were poems from friends like Bliss Carman, arguing against his despair; anonymous tales of lovers' quarrels happily mended, and an anecdote about some poignant incident when Lalite Reedy had met Addie Baldwin on a streetcar. In his editorial for that issue Reedy wondered what there was to be thankful for that Thanksgiving Day, and answered: "even for sorrow, even for death that comes at the end of a full draught of life to give it the last fine flavor and then—rest. *Deo gratias.*" [21]