The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt

(Continued from yesterday.)

INSTALLMENT XVIII.

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IN the spring of 1895 I was appointed by Mayor Strong police commissioner, and I served as president of the police commission of New York for the two following years. Mayor Strong had been elected mayor the preceding fall, when the general anti-Democratic wave of that year coincided with one of the city's occasional insurrections of virtue and consequent turning out of Tammany from municipal control. He had been elected on a nonpartisan ticket—usually (although not always) the right kind of ticket in municipal affairs, provided it represents not a bargain among factions but genuine nonpartisanship with the genuine purpose to get the right men in control of the city government on a platform which deals with the needs of the average men and women, the men and women who work hard and who too often live hard.

I was appointed with the distinct understanding that I was to administer the police department with entire disregard of partisan politics, and only from the standpoint of a good citizen interested in promoting the welfare of all good citizens. My task, therefore, was really simple. Mayor Strong had already offered me the street cleaning department. For this work I did not feel that I had any especial fitness. I resolutely refused to accept the position, and the mayor ultimately got a far better man for his purpose in Col. George F. Waring. The work of the police department, however, was in my line, and I was glad to undertake it.

The man who was closest to me throughout my two years in the police department was Jacob Riis. By this time, as I have said, I was getting our social, industrial, and political needs into pretty fair perspective. I was still ignorant of the extent to which big men of great wealth played a mischievous part in our industrial and social life, but I was well awake to the need of making ours in good faith both an economic and an industrial as well as a political democracy. I already knew Jake Riis, because his book "How the Other Half Lives" had been to me both an enlightenment and an inspiration for which I felt I could never be too grateful. Soon after it was written I had called at his office to tell him how deeply impressed I was by the book, and that I wished to help him in any practical way to try to make things a little better.

I have always had a horror of words that are not translated into deeds, of speech that does not result in action—in other words, I believe in realizable ideals and in realizing them, in preaching what can be practiced and then in practicing it. Jacob Riis had drawn an indictment of the things that were wrong, pitifully and dreadfully wrong, with the tenement homes and the tenement lives of our wage workers. In his book he had pointed out how the city government, and especially those connected with the departments of police and health, could aid in remedying some of the wrongs.

On Board of Health.

As president of the police board I was also a member of the health board. In both positions I felt that with Jacob Riis' guidance I would be able to put a goodly number of his principles into actual effect. He and I looked at life and its problems from substantially the same standpoint. Our ideals and principles and purposes, and our beliefs as to the methods necessary to realize them, were alike. After the election in 1894 I had written him a letter which ran in part as follows:

It is very important to the city to have a business man's mayor, but it is more important to have a workingman's mayor; and I want Mr. Strong to be that also. . . . It is an excellent thing to have rapid transit, but it is a good deal more important, if you look at matters with a proper perspective, to have ample playgrounds in the poorer quarters of the city, and to take the children off the streets so as to prevent them growing up toughs. In the same way it is an admirable thing to have clean streets; indeed, it is an essential thing to have them; but it would be a better thing to have our schools large enough to give ample accommodation to all who should be pupils and to provide them with proper playgrounds.

And I added, while expressing my regret that I had not been able to accept the street cleaning commissionership, that "I would have been delighted to smash up the corrupt contractors and put the street cleaning force absolutely out of the domain of politics."

This was nineteen years ago, but it makes a pretty good platform in municipal politics even today—smash corruption, take the municipal service out of the domain of politics, insist upon having a mayor who shall be a workingman's mayor even more than a business man's mayor, and devote all the attention possible to the welfare of the children.

Therefore, as I viewed it, there were two sides to the work: First, the actual handling of the police department; second, using my position to help in making the city a better place in which to live and work for those to whom the conditions of life and labor were hardest. The two problems were closely connected; for one thing never to be forgotten in striving to better the conditions of the New York police force is the connection between the standard of morals and behavior in that force and the general standard of morals and behavior in the city at large.

Police Department Backward.

The form of government of the police department at that time was such as to make it a matter of extreme difficulty to get good results. It represented that device of old school American political thought, the desire to establish checks and balances so elaborate that no man shall have power enough to do anything very bad. In practice this always means that no man has power enough to do anything good, and that what is bad is done anyhow.

In most positions the "division of powers" theory works unmitigated mischief. The only way to get good service is to give somebody power to render it, facing the fact that power which will enable a man to do a job well will also necessarily enable him to do it ill if he is the wrong kind of man. What is normally needed is the concentration in the hands of one man, or of a very small body of men, of ample power to enable him or them to do the work that is necessary; and then the devising of means to hold these men fully responsible for the exercise of that power by the people.

This, of course, means that if the people are willing to see power misused it will be misused. But it also means that if, as we hold, the people are fit for self-government—if, in other words, our talk and our institutions are not shams—we will get good government. I do not contend that my theory will automatically bring good government. I do contend that it will enable us to get as good government as we deserve and that the other way will not.

The then government of the police department was so devised as to render it most difficult to accomplish anything good, while the field for intrigue and conspiracy was limitless. There were four commissioners, two supposed to belong to one party and two to the other, although, as a matter of fact, they never divided on party lines. There was a chief, appointed by the commissioners, but whom they could not remove without a regular trial, subject to review by the courts of law. This chief and any one commissioner had power to hold up most of the acts of the other three commissioners.

It was made easy for the four commissioners to come to a deadlock among themselves; and if this danger was avoided it was easy for one commissioner, by intriguing with the chief, to bring the other three to a standstill. The commissioners were appointed by the mayor, but he could not remove them without the assent of the governor, who was usually politically opposed to him. In the same way, the commissioners could appoint the patrolmen, but they could not remove them, save after a trial which went up for review to the courts.

Hard to Convict.

As was inevitable under our system of law procedure, this meant that the action of the court was apt to be determined by legal technicalities. It was possible to dismiss a man from the service for quite insufficient reasons and to provide against the reversal of the sentence if the technicalities of procedure were observed. But the worst criminals were apt to be adroit men, against whom it was impossible to get legal evidence which a court could properly consider in a criminal trial (and the mood of the court might be to treat the case as if it were a criminal trial), although it was easy to get evidence which would render it not merely justifiable but necessary for a man to remove them from his private employ—and surely the public should be as well treated as a private employer. Accordingly, most of the worst men put out were reinstated by the courts; and when the mayor attempted to remove one of my colleagues who made it his business to try to nullify the work done by the rest of us the governor sided with the recalcitrant commissioner and refused to permit his removal.

Nevertheless, an astounding quantity of work was done in reforming the force. We had a good deal of power, anyhow; we exercised it to the full; and we accomplished some things by assuming the appearance of a power which we did not really possess.

The first fight I made was to keep politics absolutely out of the force, and not only politics but every kind of improper favoritism. Doubtless in making thousands of appointments and hundreds of promotions there were men who contrived to use influence of which I was ignorant. But these cases must have been few and far between. As far as was humanly possible, the appointments and promotions were made without regard to any question except the fitness of the man and the needs of the service. As civil service commissioner I had been instructing heads of departments and bureaus how to get men appointed without regard to politics and assuring them that by following our methods they would obtain first class results. As police commissioner I was able practically to apply my own teachings.

(Continued tomorrow.)

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