

CHAPTER LXXXIX

THE PHILADELPHIA GAS RING

PHILADELPHIA, though it has not maintained that primacy among American cities which in the days of the Revolution was secured to it by its population and its central position, is still one of the greatest cities in America, with a population of more than a million.¹ Though the element of recent immigrants is much smaller than in New York or Boston or Chicago² the old Quaker character has died out, or remains perceptible only in a certain air of staid respectability which marks the city as compared with the luxury of New York and the tumultuous rush of Chicago. It has of late years been strongly Republican in its politics, partly because that party obtained complete ascendancy during the war, partly because Pennsylvania is a Protectionist State, owing to her manufacturing industries, and Philadelphia, as the stronghold of protection, is attached to the party which upholds those doctrines. During the Civil War the best citizens were busily absorbed in its great issues, and both then and for some time after, welcomed all the help that could be given to their party by any men who knew how to organize the voters and bring them up to the polls; while at the same time their keen interest in national questions made them inattentive to municipal affairs. Accordingly, the local control and management of the party fell into the hands of obscure citizens, men who had their own ends to serve, their own fortunes to make, but who were valuable to the party because they kept it in power through their assiduous work among a lower class of voters. These local leaders formed combinations with party managers in the State legislature which sits at Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania, and with a clique managed from Washington by a well-known sen-

¹ In 1890 it was 1,046,964.

² Only fifteen per cent of the people of Philadelphia are of foreign birth, whereas in Boston the percentage is thirty-five and in Chicago nearly forty-two.

atorial family, which for a long time controlled the Pennsylvania vote in Republican national conventions and in Congress. They were therefore strongly entrenched, having powerful allies, both in State politics and in Federal politics. Since they commanded the city vote, both these sets of politicians were obliged to conciliate them; while the commercial interests of Philadelphia in the maintenance of a protective tariff have for many years pressed so strongly on the minds of her merchants and manufacturers as to make them unwilling to weaken the Republican party in either State or city by any quarrel with those who swayed its heavy vote.

The obscure citizens of whom I have spoken had begun by acquiring influence in the primaries, and then laid their hands on the minor, ultimately also on the more important, city offices. They sometimes placed men of good social standing in the higher posts, but filled the inferior ones, which were very numerous, with their own creatures. The water department, the highway department, the tax department, the city treasurer's department, the county commissioner's office, fell into their hands. A mayor appointed by them filled the police with their henchmen till it became a completely partisan force. But the centre of their power was the Gas Trust, administered by trustees, one of whom, by his superior activity and intelligence, secured the command of the whole party machinery, and reached the high position of recognized Boss of Philadelphia. This gentleman, Mr. James M'Manes, having gained influence among the humbler voters, was appointed one of the Gas Trustees, and soon managed to bring the whole of that department under his control. It employed (I was told) about two thousand persons, received large sums, and gave out large contracts. Appointing his friends and dependants to the chief places under the Trust, and requiring them to fill the ranks of its ordinary workmen with persons on whom they could rely, the Boss acquired the control of a considerable number of votes and of a large annual revenue. He and his confederates then purchased a controlling interest in the principal horse-car (street tramway) company of the city, whereby they became masters of a large number of additional voters. All these voters were of course expected to act as "workers," *i.e.* they occupied themselves with the party organization of

the city, they knew the meanest streets and those who dwelt therein, they attended and swayed the primaries, and when an election came round, they canvassed and brought up the voters. Their power, therefore, went far beyond their mere voting strength, for a hundred energetic "workers" mean at least a thousand votes. With so much strength behind them, the Gas Ring, and Mr. M'Manes at its head, became not merely indispensable to the Republican party in the city, but in fact its chiefs, able therefore to dispose of the votes of all those who were employed permanently or temporarily in the other departments of the city government—a number which one hears estimated as high as twenty thousand.¹ Nearly all the municipal offices were held by their nominees. They commanded a majority in the Select council and Common council. They managed the nomination of members of the State legislature. Even the Federal officials in the custom-house and post-office were forced into a dependent alliance with them, because their support was so valuable to the leaders in Federal politics that it had to be purchased by giving them their way in city affairs. There was no getting at the Trust, because "its meetings were held in secret, its published annual report to the city councils was confused and unintelligible, and (as was subsequently proved) actually falsified."² Mr. M'Manes held the pay rolls under lock and key, so that no one could know how many employes there were, and it was open to him to increase their

¹ The ballot did not protect these voters. Prior to the introduction of the so-called 'Australian' ballot in 1891 it was generally possible for the presiding election officer to know how each man voted.

² See *Report of the Committee of One Hundred*, published November, 1884. A leading citizen of Philadelphia, from whom I have sought an explanation of the way in which the Gas Trust had managed to entrench itself, writes me as follows:—"When in 1835 gas was first introduced in Philadelphia, it was manufactured by a private company, but the city reserved the right to buy out the stockholders. When this was done, in 1841, with the object of keeping the works 'out of politics,' the control was vested in a board of twelve, each serving for three years. These were constituted trustees of the loans issued for the construction and enlargement of the works. Their appointment was lodged in the hands of the city councils; but when, on more than one occasion, the councils endeavoured to obtain control of the works, the courts were appealed to, and decided that the board, as trustees for the bondholders, could not be interfered with until the last of the bonds issued under this arrangement had matured and had been paid off. Thirty-year loans under these conditions were issued until 1855, so that it was not until 1885 that the city was able to break within the charmed circle of the Trust."

number to any extent. The city councils might indeed ask for information, but he was careful to fill the city councils with his nominees, and to keep them in good humour by a share of whatever spoil there might be, and still more by a share of the patronage.

That so vast and solid an edifice of power, covering the whole of a great city, should be based on the control of a single department like the Gas Trust may excite surprise. But it must be remembered that when a number of small factions combine to rule a party, that faction which is a little larger, or better organized, or better provided with funds, than the others, obtains the first place among them, and may keep it so long as it gives to the rest a fair share of the booty, and directs the policy of the confederates with firmness and skill. Personal capacity, courage, resolution, foresight, the judicious preference of the substance of power to its display, are qualities whose union in one brain is so uncommon in any group of men that their possessor acquires an ascendancy which lasts until he provokes a revolt by oppression, or is seen to be leading his party astray. And by the admission even of his enemies, Mr. M'Manes possessed these qualities. His origin was humble, his education scanty, but he atoned for these deficiencies by tact and knowledge of the world, with a quietly decorous demeanour veiling an imperious will. He knew how to rule without challenging opposition by the obtrusion of his own personality, nor does he seem to have used his power to plunder the city for his own behoof. The merit of the system was that it perpetuated itself, and in fact grew stronger the longer it stood. Whenever an election was in prospect the ward primaries of the Republican party were thronged by the officers and workpeople of the Gas Trust and other city departments, who secured the choice of such delegates as the Ring had previously selected in secret conclave. Sometimes, especially in the wards inhabited by the better sort of citizens, this "official list" of delegates was resisted by independent men belonging to the Republican party; but as the chairman was always in the interest of the Ring, he rarely failed so to jockey these Independents that even if they happened to have the majority present, they could not carry their candidates. Of course it seldom happened that they could bring a majority with them, while

argument would have been wasted on the crowd of employés and their friends with which the room was filled, and who were bound, some by the tenure of their office, others by the hope of getting office or work, to execute the behests of their political masters. The delegates chosen were usually office-holders, with a sprinkling of public works contractors, liquor-dealers, always a potent factor in ward politics, and office expectants. For instance, the Convention of 13th January, 1881, for nominating a candidate for mayor, consisted of 199 delegates, 86 of whom were connected with some branch of the city government, 9 were members of the city councils, 5 were police magistrates, 4 constables, and 23 policemen, while of the rest some were employed in some other city department, and some others were the known associates and dependants of the Ring. These delegates, assembled in convention of the party, duly went through the farce of selecting and voting for persons already determined on by the Ring as candidates for the chief offices. The persons so selected thereby became the authorized candidates of the party, for whom every good party man was expected to give his vote. Disgusted he might be to find a person unknown, or known only for evil, perhaps a fraudulent bankrupt, or a broken-down bar keeper, proposed for his acceptance. But as his only alternative was to vote for the Democratic nominee, who was probably no better, he submitted, and thus the party was forced to ratify the choice of the Boss. The possession of the great city offices gave the members of the Ring the means not only of making their own fortunes, but of amassing a large reserve fund to be used for "campaign purposes." Many of these offices were paid by fees and not by salary. Five officers were at one time in the receipt of an aggregate of \$223,000, or an average of \$44,600 each. One, the collector of delinquent taxes, received nearly \$200,000 a year. Many others had the opportunity, by giving out contracts for public works on which they received large commissions, of enriching themselves almost without limit, because there was practically no investigation of their accounts.¹ The individual official was of course required

¹ In the suit subsequently instituted against the gas trustees, it was shown that in six years the trust had in cash losses, illegal transactions, and manufacturing losses due to corrupt management, involved the city in an expense of three and a half millions of dollars. These were the figures so

to contribute to the secret party funds in proportion to his income, and while he paid in thousands of dollars from his vast private gains, assessments were levied on the minor employés down to the very policemen. On one occasion each member of the police force was required to pay \$25, and some afterwards a further tax of \$10, for party purposes. Any one who refused, and much more, of course, any one who asserted his right to vote as he pleased, was promptly dismissed. The fund was spent in what is called "fixing things up," in canvassing, in petty bribery, in keeping bar-rooms open and supplying drink to the workers who resort thither, and, at election times, in bringing in armies of professional personators and repeaters from Washington, Baltimore, and other neighbouring cities, to swell the vote for the Ring nominees. These men, some of them, it is said, criminals, others servants in the government departments in the national capital, could, of course, have effected little if the election officials and the police had looked sharply after them. But those who presided at the voting places were mostly in the plot, being Ring men and largely city employés, while the police — and herein not less than in their voting power lies the value of a partisan police — had instructions not to interfere with the strangers, but to allow them to vote as often as they pleased, while hustling away keen-eyed opponents.¹

This kind of electioneering is costly, for secrecy must be well paid for, and in other ways also the Ring was obliged to spend heavily. Regarding each municipal department chiefly as a means of accumulating subservient electors, it was always tempted to "create new voting-stock" (to use the technical expression), *i.e.* to appoint additional employés. This meant additional salaries, so the taxpayers had the satisfaction of knowing that the sums they paid went to rivet on their necks the yoke of the bosses, just as a Greek tyrant exacted from the citizens money to hire the mercenaries who garrisoned the Acropolis. And there was of course a vast deal of peculation

far as ascertained in November, 1884. — *Report of the Committee of One Hundred*, p. ii.

¹ A policeman is by law forbidden to approach within thirty feet of the voter. Who was to see that the law was observed when the guardians of the law broke it: according to the proverb, If water chokes, what is one to drink next?

in nearly all the departments; because clerks who had it in their power to disclose damaging secrets had little to fear, either from a superior or from the councilmen who had procured their appointment. Thus the debt of the city swelled rapidly. In 1860 it stood at about \$20,000,000 (£4,000,000). In 1881 it had reached \$70,000,000 (£14,000,000). Taxation rose in proportion, till in 1881 it amounted to between one-fourth and one-third of the net income from the property on which it was assessed, although that property was rated at nearly its full value.¹ Yet withal, the city was badly paved, badly cleansed, badly supplied with gas (for which a high price was charged) and with water.² That such a burden should have been borne, with so little to show for it, was all the more surprising, because in Philadelphia there is a larger number of well-to-do working-people, owning the houses they live in, than in any other city of the Union.³ It might have been expected, therefore, that since the evils of heavy rating and bad administration pressed directly on an unusually large number of electors, the discontent would have been universal, the demand for reform overwhelming.⁴

But how was reform to be effected? Three methods presented themselves. One was to proceed against the Gas Trustees and other speculators in the courts of the State. But to make out a case, the facts must first be ascertained, the accounts examined. Now the city departments did not publish all their accounts, or published them in a misleading and incomplete form. The powers which should have scrutinized them and compelled a fuller disclosure, were vested in the councils of the city, acting by their standing committees. But these councils were mainly composed of members or nominees of the Ring, who had a direct interest in suppressing inquiry, because they either shared the profits of dishonesty, or had placed their own relatives and friends in municipal employment by bargains

¹ I take these facts from an interesting paper on the *Form of Municipal Government for Philadelphia*, by Mr. John C. Bullitt, Philadelphia, 1882.

² See Chapter LI, p. 606 of Vol. I.

³ There were in Philadelphia in 1886, 90,000 individual owners of real estate, constituting more than a majority of all the votes ever cast in an election.

⁴ During a considerable part of the time the enormous annual expenditure for "city improvements" was defrayed out of fresh loans, so the citizens did not realize the burden that was being laid on them.

with the peculating heads of departments. They therefore refused to move, and voted down the proposals for investigation made by a few of their more public-spirited colleagues.¹

Another method was to turn out the corrupt officials at the next election. The American system of short terms and popular elections was originally due to a distrust of the officials, and expressly designed to enable the people to recall misused powers. The astuteness of professional politicians had, however, made it unavailable. Good citizens could not hope to carry candidates of their own against the tainted nominees of the Ring, because the latter having the "straight" or "regular" party nominations would command the vote of the great mass of ordinary party men, so that the only effect of voting against them would at best be to let in the candidates of the opposite, *i.e.* the Democratic, party. Those candidates were usually no better than the Republican Ring nominees, so where was the gain? And the same reason, joined to party hostility, forbade good Republicans to vote for Democratic candidates. The Democrats, to be sure, might have taken advantage of Republican discontent by nominating really good men, who would in that case have been carried by the addition of the Republican "bolting" vote to the regular Democratic vote. But the Democratic wire-pullers, being mostly men of the same stamp as the Gas Ring, did not seek a temporary gain at the expense of a permanent disparagement of their own class. Political principles are the last thing which the professional city politician cares for. It was better worth the while of the Democratic chiefs to wait for their turn, and in the meantime to get something out of occasional bargains with their (nominal)

¹ A friend in Philadelphia writes me:—"It might be thought that the power of election vested in the councils would enable the latter to control the trustees, but when 'politics' invaded the trust, a vicious circle speedily established itself, and the trust controlled the councils. Its enormous pay-roll enabled it to employ numerous 'workers' in each of the 600 or 700 election divisions of the city, and aspirants for seats in the councils found it almost impossible to obtain either nomination or election without the favour of the trust. Thus the councils became filled with its henchmen or 'heelers,' submissive to its bidding, not only in the selection of trustees to fill the four yearly vacancies, but in every detail of city government with which the leaders of the trust desired to interfere. It is easy to understand the enormous possibilities of power created by such a position."

Republican opponents, than to strengthen the cause of good government at the expense of the professional class.¹

The third avenue to reform lay through the action of the State legislature. It might have ordered an inquiry into the municipal government of Philadelphia, or passed a statute providing for the creation of a better system. But this avenue was closed even more completely than the other two by the control which the City Ring exercised over the State legislature. The Pennsylvania House of Representatives was notoriously a tainted body, and the Senate no better, or perhaps worse. The Philadelphia politicians, partly by their command of the Philadelphia members, partly by the other inducements at their command, were able to stop all proceedings in the legislature hostile to themselves, and did in fact, as will appear presently, frequently balk the efforts which the reformers made in that quarter. It was enough for their purpose to command one House; indeed it was practically enough to command the committee of that one House to which a measure is referred. The facilities for delay are such that a reforming bill can be stifled without the need of open opposition.

This was the condition of the Quaker City with its 850,000 people; these the difficulties reformers had to encounter. Let us see how they proceeded.

In 1870, a bill was passed by the State legislature at Harrisburg, at the instigation of the City Ring, then in the first flush of youthful hope and energy, creating a Public Buildings Commission for the city of Philadelphia, a body with an unlimited term of office, with power to enlarge its numbers, and fill up vacancies among its members, to tax the city and to spend the revenue so raised on buildings, practically without restriction or supervision. When this Act, which had been passed in one day through both Houses, without having been even printed, came to the knowledge of the better class of citizens, alarm arose, and an agitation was set on foot for its abrogation. A public meeting was held in March, 1871, a committee formed, with instructions to proceed to Harrisburg, and have the Act repealed. The committee went to Harrisburg and urged mem-

¹ It was generally believed in February, 1881, that the Democratic bosses had made a bargain (for valuable consideration) with the Gas Ring not to nominate Mr. Hunter, the reformers' candidate, for the receivership of taxes.

bers of both Houses to support a repealing bill introduced into the State Senate. In May this bill passed the Senate, in which there was then a Democratic majority, five Republican members voting for it. However, a committee of the (Republican) House of Representatives reported against the repeal, influenced by interested persons from Philadelphia, and (as is generally believed) influenced by arguments weightier than words; so the Commission was maintained in force. The incident had, however, so far roused a few of the better class of Republicans, that they formed a Municipal Reform Association, whose career has been summarized for me by an eminent citizen of Philadelphia, in the words which follow:—

“The Association laboured earnestly to check the tide of misgovernment. Its task was a difficult one, for the passions aroused by the war were still vigorous, the reconstruction in progress in the South kept partisanship at a white heat, and fealty to party obligations was regarded as a sacred duty by nearly all classes. Consequently it had no newspaper support to depend upon, and as a rule it met with opposition from the leaders of both political organizations. Moreover, the laws regulating the registry of voters and the conduct of elections had been so framed as to render fraud easy and detection difficult. Undeterred by these obstacles, the Association set itself vigorously to work; it held public meetings, it issued addresses and tracts, it placed tickets in the field consisting of the better candidates of either party, and when neither had made passable nominations for an office, it put forward those of its own. It continued in active existence for three or four years, and accomplished much of what it set out to do. Occasionally it succeeded in defeating specially objectionable candidates, and in electing better men to the city councils; the increase in the public debt was checked, the credit of the city was improved, and economy began to be practised in some of the departments; salaries were substituted for fees in the public offices; the election laws were revised, and honest elections became possible; prosecutions were instituted against offenders, and enough convictions were secured to serve as a wholesome warning. The services of the Association were especially apparent in two directions. It contributed largely to the agitations which secured the calling of a convention in 1873 to revise the State constitution, it had a salutary influence with the convention, and it aided in obtaining the ratification of the new constitution by the people. Still more important was its success in arousing the public conscience, and in training a class of independent voters, who gradually learned to cast their ballots without regard to so-called party fealty. It thus opened the way for all subsequent reforms, and when its members, wearied with its thankless task, one by one withdrew, and the Association disbanded, they could feel that not only was the condition of the city materially improved, but that their