



PROFESSOR LOUNSBURY, in his delightful *Life of Cooper*, speaks feelingly of the "infinite capacity of the human mind to withstand the introduction of knowledge." I doubt whether even a college professor becomes more sadly and profoundly impressed with the truth of this statement than does a civil service commissioner. The spoils system of making appointments to and removals from office is so wholly and unmingledly evil, is so emphatically un-American and undemocratic, and is so potent a force for degradation in our public life that it is difficult to believe that any intelligent man of ordinary decency who has looked into the subject can be its advocate. On the other hand, the merit system, which we are striving to put in its place, has been proved by actual trial to work so well that it is difficult to understand how there can be any serious opposition thereto, or, indeed, how it can fail to receive the zealous support of every citizen who has sense enough to see what is best for the country, and patriotism enough to wish to see that best adopted.

The two systems are now working side by side in our government service. About a fourth of the offices under the federal government are administered in accordance with the provisions of the civil service law. The remaining three-fourths are administered as they all were until within the last nine years—that is, in accordance with that most pernicious maxim, "To the victor belong the spoils." In a nutshell, the spoils or patronage theory is that public office is primarily designed for partisan plunder, and that the victorious party is entitled to loot the departments at Washington, the navy yards, the post-offices, the custom houses, and the like, on

precisely the same grounds that entitled Tilly's veterans to the loot of Magdeburg. Politicians holding this view act on the principle, first, that adherence to the opposite party, or to no party, is of itself a disqualification for office, no matter what the incumbent's efficiency may be, and that therefore a clean sweep of all subordinate offices should be made after a change of administration; and second, that the first question in making a new appointment should be as to the services the appointee has rendered, or can render, to some big party chief or organization of the victorious faction, with, as a secondary matter, an inquiry into the man's fitness to hold the position he seeks. The better class of politicians, who are in the majority, usually insist that the appointee shall not only be an influential party worker, but also a fairly capable public servant; and deviate from this rule only when the man's partisan, factional or personal services have been very great indeed. The more disreputable politicians—such as are to be found swarming in many of the lower wards of New York, for instance—consider this attitude of mind an unworthy concession to business principles, and pay heed solely to questions of political expediency (even of criminal political expediency) in making their appointments.

A New York congressman once recommended to a friend of mine, who was then an assistant secretary of the treasury, the appointment to the secret service of the treasury of a noted local heeler. An investigation showed that among the other incidents of the aforesaid heeler's varied career he had been indicted for murder, and had got off on a technicality; but when this was pointed out the congressman declined to recognize it as a matter

that even called for explanation, waving it aside with the remark : " Oh, that was several years ago ; I tell you, sir, Mick is one of the most influential men in the deestrick today."

Now the merit theory, on the other hand, is that a man appointed to office should be appointed not with the idea of benefiting the fortunes of any political chief or faction, but with the idea of performing the work, for the whole public, which the whole public is taxed to pay for, and that he should be appointed because he has shown in common sense tests, in open, fair competition, that he is of all the candidates who have come forward the one who is presumably best fitted to perform the duties of the place sought. This method is the one now actually followed in dealing with over 30,000 places under the federal government, and its workings have been tested in these places during several years. As might reasonably have been expected, the grade of public servants obtained under the new system is decidedly superior to that obtained under the old.

But this improvement in the government service is not the chief thing at which civil service reformers aim. Our chief aim is to better the conditions of public life. We believe that the thorough and radical introduction of the reformed or merit system of making appointments will measurably improve the public service ; but, above all, that it will immeasurably raise the tone of politics. It may be doubted if any other one cause is so potent as is the spoils system among the forces that work for the degradation of our political life.

The spoils system in politics has as distinct a tendency to drive the best men from public life as a debased and dishonest currency has to drive the most honest men out of financial life. It puts a premium upon the arts of the party trickster and factional manipulator ; and it is doubly dangerous because it lends itself especially to the work of caucuses, primaries and nominating conventions, and thus accomplishes its most rapid work of degradation within the party itself. The offices, or rather the expectation and hope of receiving them, have a certain weight in the election itself ; but their chief importance comes in connection with pulling the wires for the nominations and for party control. As

the result of ten years' careful study of and active participation in partisan politics, I unhesitatingly state my belief that the main use to which the offices are put is the gaining of factional or personal supremacy within the party, not the overthrow of the opposite party. The most bitter factional fights which have ever come to my knowledge in which public officers participated were those between two wings of the same party, and as often as not for the control of a delegation from a state where that party was in an absolutely hopeless minority, and where, in consequence, the " patronage " formed the only object which the contestants had in view at all. A typical spoils politician is fond of loudly asserting that he is a genuine party man of the strictest sect ; whereas, as a matter of fact, he is not, properly speaking, a party man at all, and is of little or no use in a fight for the whole party as such, though a real and very noxious power in the factional battles which determine its leadership and control. He does not intend to use the patronage, save secondarily, against the opposite party. What he seeks to do with it is to whip his factional rivals.

To abolish the spoils system is to take a long step toward breaking the power of that most harmful body, the bread-and-butter brigade of professional politicians. To do this would immeasurably benefit each party by minimizing in its councils the weight of those particularly sordid and unlovely beings who tread the lowest and most devious political paths as a means of livelihood. When once it was done, a congressman, for instance, would be chosen because of his views on such public questions as protection and free trade, the free coinage of silver, the policy of building an efficient navy, etc. ; and not because he had the low and unscrupulous cunning necessary to enable him to manipulate the fourth-class postoffices of his district in his own interest.

As a matter of fact, the arguments in favor of the merit system and against the spoils system are not only convincing, but they are absolutely unanswerable. The present civil service commission has now been in office for three years. During that time it has been no small part of our duty to do battle with the opponents of the system in every possible way, and it has

been necessary for us to read and meet every argument they have advanced. It is the simple truth that during the entire three years I have never known a single argument advanced against the system by any one of its foes which was so much as entitled to respectful consideration by a fair-minded and intelligent man. This is a strong statement. I make it deliberately, as the result of three years' experience at Washington.

There are, of course, defects and shortcomings in the merit system. We do not for a moment pretend that it is perfect. We only assert that it is a great improvement upon the old spoils system, and that as a matter of fact in every instance where it has been tried in good faith it has worked well. We are ourselves constantly endeavoring to discover and correct any defects that may exist; yet it is noteworthy that not one of our opponents in congress or in the public press during the last three years has succeeded in touching a single weak point in the system. They have lacked even the capacity to find out the few actual shortcomings.

Almost without exception the attacks of these opponents come under three heads. First, some of them impugn the honesty and good faith of those administering the law. This method is resorted to, of course, only by men of the baser sort; their diatribes represent merely their way of expressing dissatisfaction, exactly as a pickpocket vents his chagrin by becoming abusive when arrested by a policeman: The second method is to attack the details of the administration of the law, and, notably, to insist that we ask improper or ridiculous questions. All of the attacks of this kind agree in one point: that is, the alleged statements of fact upon which they are based are simply untrue. Sometimes these statements are made by persons in high official position or by papers of standing. In such a case we always write to the individual or paper making the accusations, stating that they are absolutely false and challenging their substantiation. In no single instance has any individual even attempted to substantiate his accusations, for the very good reason that in no single instance have they possessed or could they possess even the slightest and most unsubstantial basis in fact. The third and most ordinary meth-

od of assault is for the speaker or writer to avoid specific statements and go into involved declamation, composed in equal parts of loose rhetoric and stale misrepresentation. This is the favorite method of our ordinary assailants, because of the trivial mental labor it involves.

In the departmental service at Washington the great bulk of the employes come under the provisions of the civil service act, and inasmuch as these positions are under the direct supervision of the commission itself, it is here that the law works best and that its workings can be most satisfactorily observed. There are some ten thousand of these places at Washington. So satisfactorily does the law work that almost without exception every cabinet officer, even though he may take office opposed to it, becomes its ardent advocate long before the close of his term. Under the old system a very large portion of the time of every cabinet officer was taken up by considering the claims of individuals for appointment or retention in the service. Be it understood that the claims thus considered were not the claims for particular efficiency in doing the work. What the cabinet officer was obliged to weigh was the amount of political backing and influence each candidate could command. The late lamented Secretary Windom, who occupied the position of Secretary of the Treasury both before and after the law came into effect, and was therefore peculiarly competent to pass judgment upon its merits, gave it on all occasions the most hearty support. He told me that one of the most painful portions of his public life was that succeeding his first appointment to the treasury. For three months after he took office, every day that he came down to the department he found his antechamber crowded by a nervous host of unfortunates, mainly women, who either feared that they were going to be turned out, or else desired an appointment; and he mentioned as a curious fact that all of the people who did not come to him aided by powerful "influence" invariably urged their appointment or retention on the grounds of mercy and charity, hardly ever alluding to their own efficiency or capacity to do the governmental work in the best manner.

Under the old system, if a man wished a government clerkship at Washington,

his first duty was to obtain the support of such of the more prominent politicians of his locality as were influential with the administration. To do this it was generally requisite, directly or indirectly, to bring pressure to bear upon them. They in their turn brought pressure to bear upon the appointing power in Washington. One of the silly fictions of the spoils advocates is that under the old system the appointing officers themselves made the appointments. They did nothing of the sort. The appointments were made for them by outside politicians, often of a very disreputable kind; and they did not dare to resist the demands of these outsiders. In the railway mail service, for instance, the appointments were divided among the different congressmen and senators of the dominant party according to a perfectly definite and fixed ratio; the nominal appointing officers had little to do save see that the division was fair.

The senator or representative who finally agreed to obtain or try to obtain a place for the would-be government clerk always found himself in competition with others. Each congressman, of course, had many more applications made to him for places than he had any hope of obtaining. He had to exercise some choice among these men themselves; and often the would-be appointees came to Washington to press their own claims. The congressman would, of course, try to put off the least influential or least determined of the applicants with nothing but fair words; and to get places for any he was obliged to use every possible means to bring pressure upon the heads of the departments. It was by no means necessary that he should always be in sympathy with the party in power. It was enough if he could make the appointing officers either afraid of him or desirous of placating him. The Chairman of the Appropriations committee of the House, for instance, who had the power of the purse-strings over the departments, was always able to get a great number of appointments under the old system, if he so desired, no matter what party was in power.

After the candidates had thus been themselves weeded out by the congressmen or local politicians, who threw out all but those having the strongest "pull," they were still further weeded out by the appointing officer, who, in his turn, threw

out all those who were not presented by politicians whom it was to his interest to please. If vacancies existed, well and good; if not, they could be created. Of course each officer in creating a vacancy preferred to turn out an incompetent man; but he could not afford to pay heed to this preference if the incompetent man had political influence. In consequence, every clerk was kept always in a state of anxious uncertainty, and was obliged to keep up relations with some powerful politician, under penalty of having his position jeopardized.

In short, under the old system, a man who desired a place at Washington had first to convince some local party leader that he could himself be of service in advancing that leader's fortunes. He then had to give up several weeks or several months to pushing and supervising the intrigues by means of which he finally got a place in the departments. He often had to stay in Washington two or three months before he could accomplish his purpose, and in too many cases he only did accomplish it finally at the expense of some poor fellow who was already in the departments, but who no longer had influence sufficient to insure his retention. The scramble for office was very keen, and this, of course, meant that nine-tenths of the people that sought it did not get it at all. They abandoned their work that they might come on to Washington; they spent their money and became thoroughly demoralized and unsettled, only to go back finally with a bitter sense of shame at having failed to gain the coveted prize. The career of the average political office-seeker is no less pitiful than it is shameful. In Bret Harte's striking story of *The Office Seeker* a vivid picture will be found of the degradation and heart-break which are almost necessary attendants upon the old system of a greedy, selfish scramble for plunder.

Thanks to the adoption of the merit system, all this has been completely changed. The business of obtaining government employment in Washington has been put upon the same clean, healthy basis that marks the business of getting employment in any big private enterprise. If a man wishes to try for a government position now, all he has to do is to write to the commission for informa-

tion. He then enters some examination which is held near the place where he lives, and is therein tested fairly and in a perfectly common sense way as to his capacities for performing the peculiar duties incident to the position sought. If he does not pass well, then he fails to get the position, for he does not deserve it. If he does pass well compared to the others in the examination, and if it is a position for which there is any demand, he is almost certain to get it. He does not have to bother himself about any outside influence whatsoever; it will be entirely useless to him. All he does is to stay at home and go about his work without any disturbance, and to wait until he receives a notification from Washington of his appointment. Once in, he has not the slightest fear of having his place declared vacant in order that some outsider with political backing may be put into it. If he does his duty he is protected, and he knows it. He can look at a change of administration with absolute indifference. In the old days, on the contrary, the work at each department was diminished in efficiency to the extent often of a third prior to a change of administration, consequent purely upon the nervousness and anxiety of the unfortunate clerks about their future prospects.

No class of employes or of applicants for office has been so greatly benefited by the change as the class of respectable women. It is degradation enough even for a man to be obliged to seek office as a favor from some politician to whom he is expected to render favors in return, and to pass hours of his time every day for weeks at a stretch in that most irksome and galling of occupations, dancing attendance in the antechambers of the temporarily great; but the degradation is threefold greater in the case of women. The old system put a premium on such qualities as brazen importunity and total lack of delicacy and refinement, for it was only the persistent and pushing who could force their claims upon the reluctant attention of overworked appointing officers. In other words, it bettered a woman's chances very much in an inverse ratio to her real desirability. She had to implore outside help to get into office, and appeal for sympathy and support to every

influential personage to keep her in once she got it. It is hardly necessary to point out the field for abuse this development of the old spoils system opened. Now, on the contrary, a woman who is in office is in no danger whatsoever of being turned out unless she fails in the performance of her official work; and a woman who is seeking employment has absolutely nothing to do save to show that she is well qualified for the position she seeks. There is a very keen competition for the positions usually filled by women in the government departments, a far keener competition than among men. In consequence, only a small percentage of the women that take the examinations get places; but the very severity of this competition insures the selection of the fittest and totally eliminates all personal and political considerations from the choice.

The civil service law has worked unexpected benefits in more than one way. For instance, it has proved a real boon to the better-educated colored people. Under the spoils system the negro never got his share of the appointments, and too often the loudest-mouthed among his political friends showed themselves almost as reluctant to give him office as were his political foes. The civil service law, however, guarantees him just and impartial treatment. He has to show his capacity in comparison with other men of his own race and of the white race alike. If he does better than they he gets the appointment, and that is all there is about it. During the last three years the colored people of the country have received very nearly their share of the classified offices in Washington. Those most apt to be successful are, naturally, the graduates of the higher colored academies and other institutions of learning. As everyone knows, the careers open to educated people of the colored race are lamentably few in number, and it is a source of real pleasure to be able to say that the civil service law has added another to the list of those in which an educated colored man can look for honorable advancement if his work deserves it.

The particularly gratifying feature of the working of the law at Washington during the last three years has been the fact that we have really almost attained

our ideal as regards non-partisanship. Practically all political considerations have been eliminated from the questions of making appointments to and removals from office in the classified departmental service. It always takes time to instill into the mind of the average citizen confidence that the law is being honestly observed and that politics really have nothing to do with it; but this happy result has been nearly reached as regards the departmental force at Washington. This has been shown by what has taken place in the southern states during the last three years. Several hundred appointments have been made from these states through the commission during this period. About a quarter of these were colored men. The remaining three-fourths were, in the great majority of cases, native-born southern whites; and from information which has reached the commission through various channels since their appointment, almost in every case, especially from the South Atlantic and Gulf states, these whites have belonged politically to the party opposed to the administration at Washington. Doubtless this has been the case with many of the men appointed from the north also, but it has happened that less definite information has been furnished the commission on this point. Every state and every section of the country has had exact and impartial justice meted out to it in the matter of appointments; and indeed, owing to the fact that three years ago most of the southern states were behindhand in their quotas compared to the northern ones, the people of the former have, relatively to their total number, stood a better chance for getting appointments in Washington during the past three years than the people of the latter, and this wholly without regard to their political affiliations.

Of course, every conceivable variety of individual drifts into the examinations. Many ward heelers come in, it being particularly difficult to convince these gentry that their political influence really will not avail them anything. They usually pass low or fail, and in consequence see the appointments given to men without political backing; and they naturally go away and rail at the "schoolastic" and "improper" nature of the questions asked, their complaints being taken up

and repeated by the spoils newspapers and spoils politicians, sometimes in sheer ignorance, more often from malevolence.

Often, however, the men and women who fail in the examinations are really good, worthy people, cursed with the desire to get into a service for which they are not fitted. It is perfectly astounding to see the people who gravely come forward and offer themselves as clerks and copyists. Every batch of examinations yields a few candidates whose papers look like specimen extracts from Artemus Ward's writings.

There was one particularly delicious letter which we received from a man whom I have ever since sincerely wished to meet. He had evidently regarded the formal notice of the place where he could be examined as a personal invitation, and when he was unable to keep the appointment thought that politeness required him to explain his absence. His letter runs as follows:

October 6, 1890.

To the comischer of
Sivel Sirves

My Dear Brother. I am very sorry that I could not Meet you on the day you said but gentlemen, i am glad of the cause that Kept me way. let me tell you Mrcomischer, i hav Bin mard 5 years, an tel The Other Day, me an my Wife hav bin the onley mbrs en ow Famle. well Sir on the Da before youre Exammenashun, My Wife Had a kuppel ov tuins gest Think of it MrComischer, and of corse i couldnt go off and leve Her an them.

i Just stade home an we had a sellabration—an I Invited all my frends to diner i wish you had bin thare. i Hope I can be thare next time Mr. Comischer

Very trly yores

Now, I have not the least doubt that that man is a good citizen, husband and parent. I am very much pleased with his happiness and I wish I could have been present at the "sellabration." My only regret is that his large way of looking at the technicalities of chirography and orthography seems to indicate that he is too strongly tinged with the spirit of extreme individualism to be fitted for so narrowly conventional an employment as that of government clerk.