

THE SENATE'S LAST LEADER

BY CHARLES WILLIS THOMPSON

BOIES PENROSE, of Pennsylvania, who died on the last night of 1921, took the leadership of the United States Senate with him and has never sent it back. In the sense that Penrose was a leader, and George F. Edmunds before him, there is no leader in that body today. Brains are at the base of leadership in the Senate, as organization is the essence of leadership in the House. The strange thing is that the last of the Senate leaders should have come to Washington looking like the model for May Irwin's New Bully. Edmunds looked like a Senator. Penrose looked like a tough.

He was a silent man. Humor was deep within him, but he uttered no jokes, or very few. He cared not a jot what people thought of him. He walked straight his own road, whither it led him; and looked neither to the right nor to the left. In his train he always kept a company of "Penrose reformers," and whenever the control of his machine was threatened these white mice would begin running around their cage and start a "reform" movement. There was never such a movement in Philadelphia that Penrose did not have his hand in. At times he appeared openly, and took no care whether his sincerity was believed in or not. The fact is that he really did believe in reform—as a theory—long after he had become a boss. He started life, indeed, as a reformer, and joined the machine only when he discovered that there was nothing for him in kid gloves.

Before he ever ran for office he published three books on government, so solid and authoritative that they were quoted by James Bryce, and are still standard. He was ever a reader, and all his life he read solid

stuff, for he was none of your Senators who devour dime novels to while away the cares of office. He was a cultured man, one of the best read of his time, and when he came out of Harvard the reformers had high hopes of him—though they might have been dubious if they had looked at Quay, also a man of culture, who delighted in catching those who dabbled in the classics and hanging them up by the tail. At any rate, in his reforming youth the machine offered to make Penrose mayor of Philadelphia if he would quit his cussedness, and he agreed. Everything was ready when part of the Hog Combine suddenly threw him over. Penrose uttered oaths the size of his long frame and was preparing to go back to reform when Quay led him aside and mentioned a United States Senatorship two years in the offing. When the time came Penrose got it. He was devoted to the machine from that day.

He went to Washington as Quay's Bad Boy. When the newspapers mentioned him, it was to groan over the spectacle of a cultured man deliberately throwing away his opportunities to run Quay's errands in Washington, play dominoes for the control of a State Convention, and boss a ward in Philadelphia. True, he looked the part. He was enormously big, with a red face and a bartender's moustache. With a moan the elect gave him up as a bad job. And Penrose helped them to that despair. He consorted with the boys. He flung his arm over Mike's neck as he steered him to Johnny's bar. His vacation place was Atlantic City, and it was the riotous revelry of that pre-Hollywood Gomorrah that enticed him, not the fresh air. He was proud

to be Quay's lieutenant, and the fact, perhaps, should not count wholly against him, for Quay had two sides; he was the cultured gentleman in private and the utterly unscrupulous politician in public. Roosevelt discusses that duality amiably in his autobiography. Quay was never vulgar, even in public, but Penrose was. He was not only a ward boss; he looked the rôle precisely. Such was the young man who, years later, was to conquer the United States Senate and the Republican Party by the sheer power of his brains.

It was not until he had been dead some time that Pennsylvania remembered that she had had a boss for twenty years whose skirts were unstained by personal scandal. If anyone recalls the \$25,000 check written by John D. Archbold and receipted for by Boies Penrose, I heave him a sigh over my shoulder and hasten on. The simple fact is that that \$25,000 was Pennsylvania's quota of the Standard Oil's contribution to the National Committee, and that Penrose, with his habitual indifference to what people would say, left the words "Chairman Pennsylvania State Committee" off his receipting signature. Neither did he explain; not then nor at any later time. He contented himself with a madcap and characteristic performance: he read a code telegram from his enemy, Flinn of Pittsburgh, who had stirred up all the mud, in which Flinn sought Standard Oil aid from Archbold and told Archbold he would try to get the aid also of Penrose, with whom he was supposed to be at bitter odds. No, Penrose never denied Flinn's charges; but having read this telegram to a howling Senate, he passed contentedly down its perspiring August aisles, agitating a palm-leaf fan and leaving Flinn's senatorial boom on both sides of the road up there in Pittsburgh, far away.

When Penrose went joyously forth with his comrades on a night of fun, there were no women in the party, nor did he incline to cards. He did drink, but he purposely exaggerated his own drinking to burlesque

the holy rollers with hip flasks. His true joys, as he grew older, were in the deep waters where the bass lurk, and on the Rockies where big game flees and turns. There he was likely to be found when scandal whispered dirty reasons for his failure to answer the call of the Sergeant at Arms.

II

Penrose was Puck himself in his spirit of irresponsible deviltry. Once when the Vare machine of Philadelphia commanded Mayor Smith to make war upon him, that buccaneer of a day began throwing Penrose's men out of office all over town. To the big chief his ward leaders came rushing for help. First came Tom Cunningham: "Senator, they've just checked out two of my best men." "All right, Tom," drawled the boss, "write their names on a piece of paper and leave them up on that mantel." Cunningham did so and departed, relieved in mind.

He almost ran into Harry Trainor, another ward leader, who came into Penrose's presence in a panic. "Senator, one of my men has just been fired at the City Hall!" "All right, Harry," came the unmoved drawl; "write his name on a slip of paper and put it up on that mantel." The last was Oscar Noll, with the same complaint, and he got the same answer.

Then, being alone, Penrose called his man of all work, Sam Dunlap.

"Sammy," he said, with the air of one who had been through a hard day, "tear up those pieces of paper you will find on that mantel and put them in the waste basket, draw the blind, and we'll call it the end of a perfect day."

He cared not a jot for his reputation. His utter indifference to the effect his speeches might have on the public is best illustrated by a colloquy between himself and Senator Sheppard, of Texas, who never neglects a chance to conciliate the pious, when Prohibition was being debated in the Senate. With an appearance of searching for light, Penrose inquired: "If I happen

to get sick, can the doctor prescribe liquor for me?"

"Certainly," the apostle of virtue replied. "The bill makes every provision for such cases."

"Then I'm for the bill," drawled Penrose, shouldering his massive way out of the Chamber. "I know some doctors who are damn good fellows."

In Penrose's first term as Senator, Dave Martin ruled the Hog Combine and the Hog Combine ruled Philadelphia. One day it became news that General Hastings, the Governor of Pennsylvania, had dismissed two of his cabinet. In place of one of them, Reeder, an excellent man, he had appointed Dave Martin, fore-front of the Hog Combine. A reporter encountering Penrose inquired: "Senator, what do you think of the Governor's appointing Dave Martin Secretary of the Commonwealth?" "There is precedent for that," answered Penrose, with that weight of voice and that slanting sneer which ever lent emphasis to his witticisms; "didn't a Roman Emperor appoint his horse to be a Consul?" The reporters—there were many present—were frightened at what one of them had pulled down and begged Penrose, for the sake of his own political future, to put the seal of secrecy on what he had said—a by no means uncommon occurrence in the relations of reporters and public men. Penrose laughed his scornful laugh. "Well, well," he said, "do as you please about it," and changed the subject.

To the end there remained two Penroses, the Penrose of Philadelphia and the Penrose of Washington. In Philadelphia he still is and always will be remembered as the ward politician, rough and common. He was a Senator, but he became one by grace of a machine that could have bestowed the office on Bill McCoach, or Jim McNichol, or, for that matter, Dave Martin. The praise bestowed abroad on his climbing steps the Philadelphians heard of only through their local newspapers, and quite wisely they never believed anything they saw in those gazettes.

What the out-of-town papers said about him never reached Chestnut Street.

He was, as a young man, full of blood and gifted with a most profound contempt for humbug, under which word he enumerated every convention, every prune and prism. Public opinion was nothing to him. He vastly enjoyed the rough heartiness that goes with belonging to a gang. When he reached Washington he expected to be bored, and as often as he could he slipped back to Philadelphia and plunged into the rough-house pleasures that go with gang leadership. To the end of his life he never wholly lost his taste for that sort of thing, but as he grew older another side of him began to emerge. College did Quay good, and his scholarship was greater than he cared to let his followers or even his equals know. I do not know that it did Penrose any good, for he probably had from the beginning of his life the tendency which now began to make itself manifest. In the Senate he could not avoid mixing with Senators who played the game of politics and yet were gentlemen. Neither could he avoid seeing, by the documents and problems that were thrust upon him in his committee-rooms, that there was a world outside Philadelphia. He got interested in these problems, he worked over these documents, he discussed them with such men as Nelson W. Aldrich. In Philadelphia the gang rule was, "Follow your leader." He found it the same in Washington, and as a loyal gang man he followed Aldrich. Aldrich found that his new pupil had brains, and was especially interested in finance. He, with the other leaders of that day, Spooner, Allison, Hale (not, of course, the present one), and Platt of Connecticut, undertook in off moments the education of Boies Penrose.

Penrose went much further than his old chief, Quay, and at last governed the Republican Party in the nation, which was the same thing as governing the nation itself, or would have been if his health had held out in 1920. The Senate and the party would have followed him as it had fol-

lowed the leaders who went before him. When he died it became leaderless and has remained so. Lodge is only a party chief; Robinson is another. But such men as Aldrich, Platt of Connecticut, and Penrose could look as far afield as Root himself.

III

The more Penrose got interested in national and international affairs, the less interested he was in local politics. Gradually he let some of his fences go unrepaired. But whenever he did go home to Philadelphia, he was the same old Boies. The members of the Senate Committee on Finance would have looked on him in amazement. Not that he ever became a sweet-scented lily, even in Washington. But there he was certainly not regarded as vulgar. At home it was different. When news of his rise got back to Philadelphia, they laughed and couldn't understand it. They concluded simply that the power of the Keystone State machine must have reached from Philadelphia into the National Capital. It was analogous to the case of David B. Hill, who was always regarded in his own State as a peanut politician. New Yorkers never could understand the reverence with which Senators from other States spoke of Hill,

how amazed they seemed to be at finding him without honor in his own State. So it was with Penrose.

He was dying from 1920 to the end of 1921. When the Republican National Convention of 1920 came on he was on his sick bed in Philadelphia, and he used the telephone in his room chiefly to prevent the Pennsylvania delegation from breaking away from the control of the Senate clique that was running things in Chicago. It is not likely that Harding would have been nominated if Penrose had not been at the point of death. But even before this, he had lost some of his old interest in Philadelphia politics, and he had a hard time maintaining his hold in 1919; he could not, indeed, have done it if he had not thrown his support to a reform candidate. In 1921, even with this combination, he was beaten out of his boots by the local machine, and a few months later he died. I saw him for the last time just before the opening of that campaign, and he was the mere ghost of his old self. That great form had shriveled; the bull neck was like a turkey's; he needed assistance when he went about. He had been dying for two years. He maintained his leadership of the Senate to the last, but the harpies of his own town saw only a dying politician and leaped forward eagerly to share his garments.

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

MARTIN BROWN's "Cobra" is a sincere and honest attempt at respectable dramatic writing that fails because its author's competence and talents are insufficient to warrant the attempt. Mr. Brown has pitched his aspiration too high. Ambition is a commendable thing, but too much pious nonsense has been preached about it. The ambitions of all of us should properly be bounded by a critical appreciation of our own limitations. I, for example, should like nothing better than to be able to afford the ambition to write dramatic criticism as profound and as fine as John Dryden's, but I have enough critical common sense to know that such an achievement is beyond my capabilities. A playwright like Brown should similarly be cognizant of his prescriptions. He should rest content to write the ordinary plays of commerce and not aim his popgun at quality. That way lies unhappiness. True enough, this play of his may very well be of the sort that makes money, but it would unquestionably make a deal more money had he more frankly directed his attention to that end and not partly corrupted his chances with a striving for authentic merit. This striving has resulted in a play that is alternately good and bad, to the confounding of what might have been a stunningly successful thoroughly bad play. Here and there a sound and shrewd fathoming of character checks the even course of the play's essentially box-office flow. And now and again a veracious bit of observation and the truthful handling of a penetrating situation serve only sympathetically to irritate such persons as are unable to stomach the surrounding dramatic material—as wasted quality ever sympathetically irritates—

and to dismay such others as relish more greatly the kind of stuff that has gone before and that comes after.

As straws show which way the wind blows, so do trivialities show which way a playwright's instruction blows. In the very midst of a trace of dramatic quality is Brown's cheapness thus embarrassingly revealed. He resolutely begins the character sketch of a virtuous woman and is no sooner well under weigh than he confounds physical purity with an almost sadistic boneheadedness. He begins to limn illuminatingly the character of a young man and then gives away his night-school tuition by picturing the character, a college athlete in training, drinking whisky and indulging in sexual excesses. He builds up a promising dramatic structure and, at the very moment when the need for imagination and skill confronts him, runs away, declining to put up any fight. He gives us a vivid picture of a sex-mad woman and fades it out before one can clearly read the subtitle. He gives us the fruitful situation of two ill-matched persons in the married relation and kills one of them off before the premise to his thesis has barely died out of our ears. He outlines an excellent study of a young voluptuary and then, like Ed Wynn with his blackboard and lightning calculation act, rubs out the outlines before one has had a chance to see them clearly.

All this, I appreciate, is what is mournfully called destructive criticism, yet I believe that it is the only kind of criticism that fits the case. No other kind would be of any value that I can see. Let me illustrate. An admirable example of what is commonly called constructive criticism may be found in the appraisal of the play,