

PLUMED KNIGHT AND TURKEY-GOBBLER

BY BENJAMIN DeCASSERES

IN THE House of Representatives which began its sessions in December, 1865, there sat three obscure, heavily bewhiskered saviors of the Republic, only one of whom had actually smelled blood on the Field of Glory. The other two had done their bits without musing a fold of their immaculate attire. The three were the Hon. Roscoe Conkling, of the Utica district of New York, aged thirty-six; the Hon. James G. Blaine, of Maine, aged thirty-five, and General James A. Garfield, of Ohio, aged thirty-four.

If the youthful General Garfield had cast his eyes in the direction of the gentleman from New York he would have observed a man handsome beyond the dreams of Lohengrin's Elsa: six feet two; "the head of a Norse war god," as one of his acolytes tells us; yellow wavy hair with Hyperion curls. If Garfield had looked then in the direction of the gentleman from Maine he would have observed another figure out of a tailor's pattern-plate: about the same height as the god from Utica, and as erect and as robust looking, with an Apollonian brow and delicately pink cheeks which peeped through a well-pruned hedge. They were both clad in undertaker's black, and had resonant and magnetic voices which rolled from vibrant larynges. Both attracted the immediate attention of the House and especially the attention of Garfield, who, although more unobtrusive than either Conkling or Blaine, was himself something handsome to look upon and also not without oratorical gifts. He, later on, was to pipe their praises on his pastoral flute.

About this time another bewhiskered

young man, dark-skinned, black-eyed, and of morose aspect, was engaged, in the up-and-coming burg of Chicago, in the then popular American pastime of seducing a young lady, a librarian in the Young Men's Christian Association. His name was Charles J. Guiteau. If young Garfield had had gifts of intuition as great as his gifts of rhetoric he would have forsworn, there and then, all contact with Blaine and Conkling, for he would have perceived the sinister-looking Chicago seducer standing in back of the gentleman from New York. Looking closer, he might have observed, also, that the figure behind Roscoe was about to empty the contents of a pistol in his direction. But one of the qualities that Garfield lacked entirely was clairvoyance, political or otherwise.

Thus, while the future Plumed Knight of Maine and the Hyperion from Utica were walking around each other, sizing up each other like two débutantes with nascent thoughts of "There is my enemy!" and the tow-path Demosthenes from Ohio lolled a-squat between them, there began the comedy-drama of the most curious, the most unexplainable, the most venomous and the longest-lived political feud in American politics. It was to envenom the latter years of the two main actors, cause the assassination of a President, and send the first Democrat to the White House since the Civil War.

None of the historians has ever got at the real origin of the Blaine-Conkling feud. The biographers of both men frankly give it up as a mystery. Blaine and Conkling themselves remained profoundly silent about it all their lives. While pursuing and

trailing one another like two rival bandit chiefs, each avoided mentioning the name of the other—except, as in Blaine's case, to lavish praise! Blaine, in his "Twenty Years in Congress," published in 1884, while Conkling was still alive, said: "The ablest and the most brilliant man of the New York delegation was Roscoe Conkling. . . . In affluent and exuberant diction Mr. Conkling was never surpassed in either branch of Congress, unless, perhaps, by Rufus Choate." Throughout the two volumes, a dry, unimaginative piece of hack work, he referred again and again to Conkling and his career in politics without a trace of feeling. There was even no mention of the General Fry matter in the session of '65, which marked the overt break between the two men. General Fry, in a book written in the early 90's, said:

I believe there would have been a rupture between Mr. Blaine and Mr. Conkling had this [the debate over Fry] never occurred. . . . There was manifested [in this debate] bad feeling so intense, firmly rooted and so well grown as to be sure of fruit sooner or later.

"Bad feeling so intense, firmly rooted and so well grown." This from a man who knew them both intimately, and over whom, as Provost General of the Army, they had fought to a finish. There is no record that Blaine or Conkling had ever met, or had ever heard of one another, until the session of '65. There was no question of Swag—toward which all hands pointed and all noses were set after Appomattox—for the two were from different States. *Cherchez la femme?* Tush, tush—were they not both American gentlemen? Money? Out of the question, even over the gaming table—though it was a time when gambling was recognized as one of the cardinal virtues of a gentleman. No, nothing as banal as any of these things was the cause of the tragi-comedy which lasted from '65 until Conkling's death in 1888.

I lay the whole conflict to a purely romantic motive, the Narcissus complex. It was a War of Adonises, a combat to the death between rival Pretty Fellows. Nei-

ther Blaine nor Conkling, I am convinced, would ever have been heard of in the political arena if he had been scant of stature, lantern-jawed and intellectual.

II

But before I go further into this pleasant matter I must outline how the predestined war took on concrete form. It began with an almost imperceptible slap on the wrist and mutual poutings. A bill was up to limit the power of the President in appointing cadets to West Point. Conkling, his god-like head thrust back at an impressive angle and his Hyperion curls quietly a-quiver, directed Blaine's attention to certain provisions of the bill which, so Conkling averred, the former had not understood. At once the big brown eyes of Handsome Jim flashed a Maine earthquake at the Curls. Did the gentleman from Utica insinuate there was *anything* he did not understand? Light satiric fencing between the two. Poutings. No decision is recorded in the *chronique imbecilis* known as the *Congressional Record*. Nor do I know what became of the bill.

A few nights afterward our two Superbas met at dinner. Now, it seems that one of the results of the War to Disfranchise the Negro was a revival of taste for classical allusion. When the coffee and wine were running strong and the dreadful condition of the South and the embarrassing question of bounty-jumpers and substitutes had been quietly coughed away, some profound wag, looking at Blaine and Conkling, innocently enough asked who was the author of:

No pent-up Utica contracts your powers,
But the whole boundless continent is yours.

Utica, the home of Hyperion! What was this roguish fellow up to?, thought Blaine. Was this the beginning of a sly boom for the Presidency? The first thing to do was to squash the pent-up Utican's pretension to culture before it went any further. Blaine said that he'd bet Conkling did not know who was the author of the verses. Conkling, rage-swollen to Wodenesque propor-

tions, offered to bet a basket of champagne that Addison wrote them. But Handsome Jim had gone to three colleges to Conkling's one. He proved that the lines were in Sewall's "Epilogue to Cato." Conkling paid the bet, but only after intimating that Blaine had been reading up and had framed the whole thing. He felt so certain about it, in fact, that he refused to go to Blaine's dinner celebrating the triumph of Pennsylvania (Blaine was born in Pennsylvania) over New York learning.

But these were merely whiffs, preliminary psychic feelers in the coming War of the Adonises. Festering and simmering for months in the emotional vats of these rival Malvolios, the great explosion came when, in connection with the Army bill of 1866, Conkling moved, at the instance of General Grant, to strike out the appropriation for the office of Provost Marshal General, at that time held by General Fry, thus abolishing the office. Conkling in the course of his speech made a vitriolic attack on Fry, scored him as "an undeserving public servant" and otherwise laid it on as Grant had dictated. Blaine came back with a lecture on ethics and manners. (*Ethics and manners*, the Malvolio motive, with the famous Mulligan letters not far away!). Conkling then challenged Blaine to a duel. (What a sight that would have been, O Clio: a sword-combat between Handsome Jim and Hyperion in back of the White House at dawn, with Pig Iron Kelley as referee!). Blaine stiffened up and spurned such "cheap swagger," "Southern manners," etc.

When the first round closed Conkling was a morose but dignified Norse god, and Blaine, his whole magnificent form palpitant with and sweating righteousness, after a pause to let the House survey him, began to read a document which, instead of being a defence of General Fry and his office, was a letter from Fry himself, charging that Conkling, while Judge Advocate during the war, had accepted illegal fees during his prosecution of a Major Haddock. A committee vindicated Conkling and con-

demned Blaine for reading the letter. Conkling then finally refused to have anything further to do with Blaine, even declining to yield the floor to him. This brought from Blaine a blast which in a day lifted both of the warriors out of the trough of obscurity into the bull-light of nationwide fame. Said Blaine of Conkling (and here, I think, the beans of the matter are spilled):

The contempt of that large-minded gentleman is so wilting; his haughty disdain, his grandiloquent swell, his majestic, supereminent, overpowering, *turkey-gobbler strut* has been so crushing to myself and all the members of this House that I know it was an act of greatest temerity for me to venture upon a controversy with him!

Turkey-gobbler! The label stuck to poor Conkling for the rest of his life. To George Boutwell he wrote: "That attack was made without any provocation by me as against Mr. Blaine and when I was suffering more from other causes than I ever suffered at any other time, and I shall never overlook it." Nevertheless, Blaine had told the truth. Conkling had all the pomposity of a turkey-gobbler and little else. He possessed, like nineteen-twentieths of all American statesmen, as little originality, real brains or independence as it is possible to conceive. His pig-headed stubbornness and extreme partisanship ("I do not know how to belong to a party a little," he once said) was mistaken for character. "He had the pose of great statues," said Ingersoll, in the most gushing of all funeral orations. This statuesque pose passed for wisdom. There was, in fact, nothing behind it but arrested mental development. From his earliest years he had heard himself referred to as Jove-like, proud, Hyperion-like, a Coriolanus, as everything lofty and gaudy—except a turkey-gobbler. He was a man of great physical strength; he actually partly got his first nomination for Congress because of it. After Brooks of South Carolina had caned Sumner the word went forth that the Republican party should send physically strong men to Congress. Only a few days after his election he, as the House Hercules, threw himself in front of

Thaddeus Stevens to protect the latter from an onslaught of Southern fire-eaters.

This, then, was Conkling—the Adonis-Dempsey of the House of Representatives. In politics he was a gangster, a factionist. He allied himself with, was the breath and brains of, the corruptest elements in the Republican party—the Camerons of Pennsylvania, Tom Platt, Bill Mahone of Virginia, and the thieves and pork-barrel nuzzlers who worked Grant. Conkling himself always used Grant's back to climb on. "The higher obligations among men are not set down in writing, signed and sealed, but reside in honor," he said with a Coriolanic gesture. This meant, "I never sign on the dotted line," for what could the "higher obligations" have to do with men like Grant, Platt, the Camerons and Mahone? He was the shrewdest politician of his time in this respect; his brown-stone front and shuttered face conveyed an air of ultra-respectability. Nobody ever had the goods on Roscoe. He was a super-spoilsman without a trace of statesmanship.

Blaine was of the more tricky, volatile, prehensile type. He is described as a young man of "distinguished presence, a social favorite, genial, fascinating, fixing upon himself the admiring gaze of both young and old." The future Plumed Knight was already sparking around Pennsylvania at the time when Conkling's Hyperion curls and Jovian frame were first upsetting Utica. Blaine then went to Maine and became the editor of the *Kennebec Journal*. He was weaker in character than Conkling. He loved money more than anything in life. He had the art of making friends, as Conkling had the art of repelling them. He knew how well spread-eagle patriotism pays. As Conkling was the Gang, Blaine was the Fourth of July. He once wrote to his son: "There is no success in this life that is not founded on virtue and purity and a religious consecration of all we have to God." No man, in fact, knew so little about virtue, purity and God—and no man knew better how well it paid to exploit all three.

He was the perfect American of his time, bombastic, demagogic, jingoistic, oozing from every pore that babbittarian magnetism that was to descend to Roosevelt, who succeeded him as the great American Harangueoutang. Being more unscrupulous and more of an opportunist than Conkling, he came nearer being what is known in children's text-books as a statesman. But, like Conkling, he was first, last and all the time, a show-off. All the evidence thus tends to prove that the whole Blaine-Conkling-Grant-Garfield-Guiteau mess began in the instinctive and instantaneous hatred of two prize turkey-gobblers in the same barnyard.

III

The comedy now moves to higher levels, if one can speak of higher and lower levels in an epoch when all offices were put up at public auction, when a large faction of the Republican party was for treating the South as a conquered province with military Governors who were to carry away millions of loot in the shape of "war indemnities," and when for many years to come the national conventions of both parties were to be, in the words of the New York *Herald*, "mobs of drunken adventurers." Conkling was elected to the Senate in 1867 and Blaine was chosen Speaker of the House in 1869. Both thus had blue ribbons tied around their necks by their party, which only made matters worse in the barnyard. Conkling, with Grant in back of him, now became absolute boss of New York State and of all the spoils thereof, while Blaine, with one eye on the New York Senator and the other on the back country, heard the first faint buzz and hum of the Presidential bee in his whiskers.

It was agreed that Grant was to have two terms, so Blaine and Conkling set 1876 for their trial of strength. The latter was the leader of the Senatorial cabal that during Grant's administration formulated most of the policies of the President—one

of the most incompetent we have ever had. But Grant, as weak as he was, had a private hunch about Conkling and his gang, for in 1873 he tried to get rid of Blaine's turkey-gobbler forever by offering him the Chief Justiceship of the Supreme Court. But Conkling had no intention of being buried alive in that sad office while Blaine had his eye on the White House. The election of Blaine would have meant his own downfall as head of the New York machine. They came to grips in the Republican convention of 1876, when Blaine came within twenty-eight votes of obtaining the nomination. He was defeated by a coalition led by Conkling, who had nominated Governor Hayes of Ohio. First blood for the turkey-gobbler! It was in this convention that Blaine was crowned the Henry of Navarre of the Republican party—its Plumed Knight—by Robert G. Ingersoll in one of Bob's most famous perfumed belches:

Like an armed warrior, like a plumed knight, James G. Blaine marched down the halls of Congress and threw his shining lance full and fair against the brazen forehead of every traitor to his country and every malinger of its fair reputation.

But the turkey-gobbler's bill having proved more powerful than the shining lance, Blaine's party could do no less than send its Plumed Knight to the Senate, where once again the two rival Adonises eyed one another, Conkling morosely and Blaine cynically defiant.

Meanwhile, General Jimmy Garfield, who had, as a devout Christian, advocated the confiscation of Confederate property and denounced Lincoln for his forbearance to the South, and who was covered all over with *Crédit Mobilier* mud, as Blaine was charged in the Mulligan letters with having taken bribes from a Western railway—Garfield, eel-like and bland, continued down in the House to tootle on his pastoral pipe melodious airs on bonds, taxation, specie payments and the public debt. He was totally oblivious, of course, of the fact that the swarthy Guiteau from the West, who had been worrying Grant for a

consulship, and who incidentally—between jail-terms for welching on debts—had proclaimed, on Ingersoll's heels, the Second Coming of Christ (whom he had personally met, he said, in the year '70), had gone into the Conkling camp as a Stalwart with a pistol in his pocket. The Blaine-Conkling comedy began to veer toward its tragic *dénouement* with the appearance of Guiteau in the East, with Garfield as the hand-picked goat of Destiny.

In the Republican convention of 1880 the bosses of New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois (the Stalwarts) had decided to nominate Conkling's man Grant for a third term ("Anything to beat Blaine!"). They mustered 306 votes. The opposition rallied around Blaine and John Sherman of Ohio, with the rallying cry of "Anything to beat Grant!," which, so far as Blaine was concerned, meant "Anything to beat the turkey-gobbler." Conkling himself put Grant in nomination. He passed down the hall to present his name, his Hyperion curls in gala dress, his Coriolanic disdain bristling in every whisker-hair, his uncrinkled Jovian brow hurling forked defis at what he called the "man-milliners of politics," "the diletantes and carpet-knights" (*knights!*—hear! hear!), and—alas! and alack!—his turkey-gobbler strut on full parade. It settled down to a prolonged fight between the Plumed Knight and Conkling. There was a flat deadlock, and then, on the thirty-sixth ballot, the Blaine-Sherman forces suddenly reached down into the pit of the House of Representatives and presto! picked up the bucolic essayist from Ohio, who, like Br'er Rabbit, lay low and say nothin'. Garfield was nominated. Blaine had done it. Conkling was in the dust. Guiteau, Stalwart of the Stalwarts, whom Conkling had never heard of, silently took his place at the side of the New York Senator with a pistol pointed squarely at Garfield's heart.

Conkling stumped for Garfield, but never once mentioned his name. He was really stumping for the New York swag

in case of Garfield's election. He knew that Blaine was slated to be Secretary of State, which meant he could begin to knit his own shroud. As a few of us middle-aged ones know (the rising generation, I find, knows nothing of American history prior to 1914), Garfield was elected and Blaine was made Secretary of State. Guiteau, following the lead of Conkling, had also stumped for Garfield, hoping for the consulship that Grant and Hayes had refused him. If Garfield had only thrown it to him this tale would have continued as a comedy to the end.

Blaine took over Garfield and his administration bag and baggage. The pastoral flutist was completely lost in the feathers of the Plumed Knight. Gail Hamilton records that "Mr. Blaine adopted the administration with absorbing ardor." Blaine patted General Jimmy on the cheek and said: "You are to have a second term or to be overthrown . . . by the Grant crowd. . . . The Grant forces were never more busy than at this hour. . . . They must not be knocked down with a bludgeon; they must have their throats cut with a feather." Henry of Navarre had now become Iago. But Garfield had a grandiose idea—to put Conkling in the Cabinet with Blaine. Kiss and make up (for my second term), he tootled on his flute. "No Cabinet could get along with him!" thundered Blaine. So a beautiful idea curdled in the creaming.

But it wasn't with a feather that the throats of the Grant crowd were to be cut. (Whenever Blaine said Grant he meant Conkling.) What Blaine slipped into Garfield's hand was a butcher-knife. Before using the knife, however, gentle James still had it in his mind to bring Conkling out of his megrims. But the Coriolanic soul of the New Yorker refused to stoop to lunch with the President to discuss the New York appointments. Then came the deed. (Guiteau, Second Adventist, a Conkling Stalwart of the Stalwarts, is now actually circling around the White House with a loaded gun.) On March 23, 1881, Garfield

threw out General Merritt, a Conkling man, as Collector of the Port of New York and put into that crib William H. Robertson, Conkling's worst political enemy and the leader of the bolt in the convention that nominated Garfield. Conkling said Garfield had lied to him, that he had promised him he would not appoint Robertson. The Plumed Knight wiped the blood off of the butcher-knife and made another notch with it in his score against his rival.

Conkling resigned from the Senate. "Me, too!" cooed Tom Platt, who from that day became Me-Too Platt. They both hoped that the New York Legislature would vindicate them by instantly reelecting them. But Blaine was boss, and in spite of the fact that Vice-President Arthur himself (Ingalls' prize political ox) went up to Albany to lobby for Conkling and Platt, the Legislature refused to reelect either of them. The New York trough had changed hands, and the Albany boys were with the new pig-feeders. Grant was politically dead anyhow, so the turkey-gobbler now had no perch from which to crow.

Conkling took up the law and Guiteau took up his pen. He sent this letter to Garfield:

I regret the trouble you are having with Senator Conkling. You are right and should maintain your position. You have my support and that of all patriotic citizens. I should like an audience for a few moments.

The italics are mine. Garfield refused to see him, thus prolonging his life until July 2, when Guiteau, emerging at last as the tragic core of the long battle of the two Adonises, shot him while he and Blaine were standing on the platform of the Baltimore and Ohio station in Washington waiting for a train. When they grabbed Guiteau he said, "I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts, a Conkling man." He said that he had murdered the President as a political necessity to make Arthur President and to reunite the Republican party.

Curious documents were found on this crackpot follower of Conkling. He had undoubtedly intended to kill Blaine also,

although he said he was going to kill Mrs. Garfield with the next bullet. Here is his most remarkable letter:

To the White House:

The President's tragic death was a sad necessity. . . . to save the Republic. . . . Life is a flimsy dream. . . . A human life is of small value. . . . I presume that the President was a Christian and that he will be happier in Paradise than here. . . . I had no ill-will toward the President. His death was a political necessity. I am a lawyer, a theologian and a politician. I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts.

Another letter was to General Sherman, asking him to "order out your troops and take possession of the jail at once." He had also engaged a hackman for \$2 before he fired the shot to take him to jail afterward. Guiteau is of no importance except to show how a high comedy may evolve into a low tragedy.

But the next day the storm broke in all its fury in the newspapers. The *New York Times* said: "Certainly we are far from holding any party or section of a party responsible for this murderous act . . . , but it is not inexplicable." The *Tribune* headed its editorial "Factions's Latest Crime," and said: "A Stalwart of the Stalwarts, his passion was intense enough to do the thing which other reckless men had *wished* were done. . . . The spirit of faction which fired the shots of yesterday. . . ." The *Tribune* denied that Guiteau was insane and in line after line aimed directly at Conkling. The *Baltimore American* came out flatly with: "His monomania

is identical, except as to its practical result, with that of Conkling and Cameron and Logan and Grant. . . . It is unhappily but too certain that the assassination of President Garfield is the logical outcome of the third-term conspiracy. The Stalwarts have indeed destroyed the President at last."

Of course, Conkling had personally nothing to do with the shooting of Garfield, who died in the following September. He disappeared out of the picture and took to the practice of law in New York. But his haughty ghost haunted Blaine again in the presidential contest of 1884 and was unquestionably a big factor in the thumbs down of the voters. In the blizzard of '88 he was buried for twenty minutes in a snowdrift in Madison square and died shortly afterward. Blaine lived on, toying with Pan-American policies and pursuing what is known in the encyclopædias as "a vigorous foreign policy" as Secretary of State under Harrison. He died in 1893, the most idolized man of his time—whom everybody distrusted.

With Blaine, Conkling, Grant and Garfield dead and Guiteau hanged, the Republican party hurriedly threw a sheet over the mess and passed on to the greater glory of Quay, McKinley and Hanna. The little spat between two political débutantes, begun in 1866 and ended in a pool of blood in 1881, seems to me, who can still dimly remember the tragic ending of it, just a curious proof of the stupidity of four utterly superfluous human beings.

THE TALKIES COME TO TOWN

BY MAURICE S. SULLIVAN

THE floor of the eating-house was wet. Water slithered down the tent-pole, or dripped where the canvas touched wood.

One by one the patrons of the establishment pushed open the screen door and stooped to enter, each receiving on the back of his neck an untidy rill of water from the canvas overhead. The conventional greeting, "Good morning, gentlemen! You too, Horace," was forgotten. There was either silence, or a harsh word for the weather.

Breakfast was late. The cook was having trouble with an oil-stove.

Horace the Bolshevik took the Milwaukee *Leader* from his overall pocket. The wrapper was torn.

"Somebody at the postoffice is readin' my paper before I see it," he grumbled, hinting of Federal spies.

"That must be the reason why there's nothin' in it when it gets down here." Tut, the colored cook, remained unaffected by the Bergerian message.

"You tend to your oatmeal," warned Horace. "And don't make it like soup the way it was yestiddy mornin'. A man can't work with mush like soup inside of him. Put some stiff in it, so it will stay with a man."

"You won't need stiff oatmeal today, Horace," Tut reminded him, amiably. "You ain't a-goin' to be able to work none today."

"Looks like nobody's ever goin' to be able to work again, the way this rain keeps up," complained Wisley. Much of Wisley's time was spent in cowboy attire, riding a horse, and the weather nullified

him. He demanded in irritation: "What does anybody want to come out to a place like this for?"

"Right, boy!" the frizzy-haired youth nodded. He was on the road. "I'm pullin' outa here soon's this rain stops—if it stops."

A couple of Indian horses, harried by yelping dogs, galloped and splashed by the tent. The racket was smothered by the almost indefinable roar of a flood, rushing down off the mountain, through the outskirts of the village and across the reservation. The cook wiped away a little pool of water dripping from the edge of the table.

"If you fellas would study up on these matters," advised Horace, "you would see that it's the System that's wrong. Word-elizin' won't get us anythin'. Nothin' can be gained except by force."

He put his paper away as Tut poured out cups of steaming coffee.

The warm liquid revived the spirits of a horse wrangler from stables where ponies were kept for the use of tourists and other hotel guests. Currycomb Rice, tall and bony, had a face singularly equine.

"I hear the movies are comin' to town when the rain stops," he volunteered.

For most of those present the announcement renewed interest in life. These picture people spent money like water. And pictures require sunshine. It was almost a promise of fair weather.

"Tom Mix?" queried Shorty Cramm, the teamster.

"No," said Currycomb. "He's quit account of them talkin' pitchers. Some other Western outfit, though. They're goin' to