

## CURLEY OF BOSTON

BY FRANK L. KLUCKHOHN

**J**AMES MICHAEL CURLEY, Boston's aging Mayor, recently left the Federal penitentiary in Danbury, Connecticut, where his six-to-eighteen months sentence for mail fraud had been commuted to a brief five months. The next morning he was back running Boston's affairs as he has, off and on, much of his long adult life.

This comeback was against all the rules; it is axiomatic that once the Boss of a major American city does a stretch in Federal prison he is politically as dead as though he already had a slab of marble at his head. That was true of Boss Pendergast of Kansas City and of many others of like ilk.

Mr. Curley, however, came back triumphantly to the Mayor's office from which, with a battery of telephones around him, he directs government in the sedate Hub of the Universe. Not only that: he is being courted by both Republicans and Democrats as the one individual in a position to decide the outcome of the 1948 election in Massachusetts, whose sixteen electoral votes could well decide the national contest.

His latest return from the dead, and his present key position, may surprise folks in other parts of the nation, but not the people of Boston. Even before he went to Danbury, Boston had seen Curley use a jail sentence as a springboard to get ahead. It employs a number of adjectives, such as "amazing," "colorful" and "dynamic," as well as others rather less complimentary, to describe him. It is as impossible, however, to fit the Mayor of Boston to a simple description as it is to keep him, more than momentarily, out of office. It is, in fact, hard to pin him down at all.

When, in the Federal District Court of the District of Columbia, Mayor Curley was ordered to serve his term in Danbury for a felony, he arose in the courtroom and dramatically told the Judge, "You are sentencing me to death!"

Five months later, on his return to Boston just before Thanksgiving, he said at a press conference, "I feel better than I have for ten years, physically, spiritually and mentally." Then, putting one arm around Mrs. Curley and the other about his daughter,

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FRANK L. KLUCKHOHN is a veteran newspaper reporter and foreign correspondent. He contributed "Some Officers Enjoyed the War" to last month's AMERICAN MERCURY

Mrs. Mary Donnelly, he added, "Surround yourselves with beautiful women and you always will feel young."

"Jim" Curley, as Boston calls him, does not believe in consistency as a political virtue. He has little use for political orthodoxy generally. Although he bosses Boston, he is not a political boss in the usual sense, like Frank Hague of Jersey City or Ed Crump of Memphis, because he does not have a machine. His following is personal. Yet Mr. Curley induced a Republican governor — no less a blue-blood than Robert Bradford, direct descendant of the early governor of Plymouth Colony — to continue his \$20,000 annual salary while he was in jail and to see that the mayoralty seat was kept warm for his return. President Truman felt it advisable to commute his sentence completely, rather than let him out merely on parole with a suspended sentence hanging over his head. And the people of Boston had earlier elected Mr. Curley while he was under indictment.

There is a strange tale behind all this. It is, in part, a story of Jim Curley's rare histrionic ability, his mellifluous voice and his quotable humor. Partially, it is a story of the odd setup in Boston and Massachusetts, both of which enjoy being "different."

## II

That Mr. Curley himself is a character, there can be no doubt. Curleyisms are repeated and discussed in

Boston to the same extent that Goldwynisms are in Hollywood. When he was Governor of Massachusetts, for instance, Mr. Curley was accustomed to go to the Parker House, two blocks away, for lunch. With his usual flair for the dramatic, however, he made these trips a spectacle for the public, traveling so that he was preceded by, flanked by and trailed by state troopers on motorcycles with sirens wailing. As they cleared the way, Hub traffic became even more snarled up than usual.

One day, as he stepped from his sumptuous car at the Parker House, a down-and-outer, with several days' growth of beard on his face, approached and mumbled that he needed "two bucks."

"What do you want the two bucks for, Joe?" asked Mr. Curley, as curious bystanders gathered around.

"I got a tooth I wanta have yanked," the man answered, leering.

"Here is four dollars," said Curley. "Have two of them yanked."

Jim always disliked W. E. Mullins, the blunt and able political writer of the Boston *Herald*. Mr. Mullins, however, was a close friend of Joseph F. Timilty, once Mr. Curley's military aide and later police commissioner. One day, Timilty saw Mullins outside the Bellevue Hotel, just across the street from the State House. He grabbed him and laughingly invited Governor Curley to strike him.

"What," thundered Jim, looking down his nose and drawing himself up, "cannonade a rowboat?"

On another occasion, Mr. Curley was beaten in a mayoralty race by Maurice Tobin, a handsome former aide. Meeting Mr. Curley on the street some days later, Tobin said briefly, "Sorry, Jim."

"That's all right," replied Mr. Curley genially. "That wasn't an election; it was a beauty contest."

Mr. Curley once attended a now extinct dramatic and elocutionary school. It is doubtful, however, that he needed much embellishment of his natural flair for acting and talking. Although he came, so to speak, from the wrong side of the railroad tracks, he has developed a diction almost indistinguishable from a Harvard accent. Since he has a remarkable memory, and has read widely, he not only appears, but actually is, erudite.

This does not mean he always stays on a high plane. His ability to act out an amusing story which, when told, puts his opponent in a ridiculous position, makes opposing political candidates fearful to go on the same platform with him. His is the method of sharpening a witty saying into a sword with which to slay a competitor. He likes to commit political murder with a well-turned phrase and, often, the Marquis of Queensberry rules are out.

Back in 1924, for instance, when he was running for Mayor against one John R. Murphy, he was addressing, in Roxbury, an audience composed largely of Roman Catholics.

"Where was James M. Curley last

*Friday* night?" he asked. "He was conducting a political meeting in Duxbury. Where was Mr. Murphy last *Friday* night? Eating steak at the Copley Plaza!"

Once, when a political follower had deserted to the opposing camp, threatening his election, reporters tackled Mr. Curley after he left a speaking platform.

"I have nothing to say about Mike," he stated flatly. "But I will take care of him." As he stepped into his waiting car, however, he deliberately misquoted:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,  
Just for a dollar to put in his coat.

The story spread over Boston by word of mouth. It was widely enough accepted to wreck the deserter.

Sometimes, however, Mr. Curley's methods do not work.

In 1936, when he ran for the United States Senate against Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., Mr. Curley sought to slay his opponent by referring to him constantly as "Little Boy Blue." The implication, of course, was that Mr. Lodge was both naïve and blue-blooded. Despite the apparently sure-fire phrase, Lodge won by over 100,000 votes.

Again, when the star of Joseph B. Ely was rising in Massachusetts politics, Mr. Curley backed for governor Mr. Ely's opponent, John R. Fitzgerald, father-in-law of Joseph P. Kennedy, former Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Jim arose at a dinner and said:

"I am no enemy of Joe Ely's. He is a good country boy."

Then, turning to Mr. Ely who was present, Mr. Curley continued: "Joe, better you should be buried 20,000 leagues under the sea than be elected governor of this great and glorious Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As I consider you, I am reminded of the Biblical story of the man who came down from Jericho and fell among thieves."

Since Mr. Ely happened to be sitting next to Daniel Coakley, who was on the way to being, as he subsequently was, disbarred as an attorney, this remark caused a sensation. But it did not keep Mr. Ely from winning.

That Jim Curley probably could have risen in politics without the setting of Boston was indicated in 1932 when he was blocked out of his state's delegation to the Democratic National Convention. Not only did he wangle himself into getting named as a delegate from Puerto Rico, but he ended up as chairman of the convention which first nominated Franklin D. Roosevelt.

### III

At 72 years of age, Mr. Curley still maintains the charm, the know-how and the ability to sell himself to the public that he possessed in 1901, when he was elected to the Boston Common Council from Ward 17, after serving as a drug store and grocery clerk.

It was just a year after this, when he had been elected to the state legis-

lature, that Jim Curley started toward his first experience in prison. He was convicted of impersonating another man in a civil service examination for letter carrier. This was a Federal offense and, despite appeals, he was sent, in 1904, to the Charles Street prison for two months.

Undaunted, he employed his imprisonment as a springboard for moving ahead in politics, playing the rôle of a martyr in a big way for the first, but far from the last, time. He explained and re-explained that he took the examination for a destitute friend with a wife and several children. He did it so well that, to a large part of the public, he made himself a wronged hero rather than a wrong-doer. From his cell, he successfully conducted a campaign for election as alderman. From the Aldermanic Chamber, he eventually went, when there was a revision of the Boston charter, to the City Council.

From this, he moved forward on the shoulders of the electorate to the Federal House of Representatives. Republicans tried to prevent his seating because of his jail sentence, but he talked his way, before the House, out of an adverse vote. After several terms in Congress, during which he became a favorite of the late Speaker, Champ Clark, Mr. Curley became Democratic whip in the House.

Backed by the Good Government Association, one Thomas J. Kenney opposed Mr. Curley when he first ran for the job of Mayor of Boston. Jim coined a new phrase and ridiculed the

"goo-goos" — the do-gooders — and ended by winning in 16 out of 26 wards.

Three times more, amidst turbulence and name-calling, charges and counter-charges which shocked the Proper Bostonians on Beacon Hill, Mr. Curley was elected Mayor. In 1934 he was elected Governor of Massachusetts, serving one term. Twice more, in 1942 and 1944, the voters sent him to the United States Congress.

During his term as Mayor beginning in 1929, Jim was charged with improperly receiving \$63,000 in settling claims of the General Electric Corporation against the city. This fight, after three years and 34 continuances, went to the Supreme Court. Mr. Curley was ordered to pay \$500 a week until he restored \$42,629. He made the payments, finishing them in 1945. It did not affect his political career.

Apart from his personality and persuasiveness, Mr. Curley's huge personal following in Boston may be explained by the fact that — over a long career and with cumulative effects — he has followed the old Tammany methods of taking care of his followers. The fact that the Boston Irish enjoy disliking and distrusting the Proper Bostonians — including the Cabots, the Lodges and the Saltonstalls — has also helped him.

Any taxi driver in Boston will tell a casual visitor to the city how Jim Curley took off his fur coat and gave it to a half-frozen jobless man.

If Old Joe Murphy called the Mayor and reported that his nephew, Tim, who had a wife and two children, was out of a job, Jim would say, "Send him over."

The young man might be given a hundred-dollar bill and be told to come back next week. Meanwhile, Jim would call businesses indebted to him for favors, or comb the official payrolls, and find the lad a job.

Grateful enough to become his supporters for life were not only Old Joe Murphy and Nephew Tim and his wife and growing children, but all their numerous blood connections and some friends. Multiply this over the decades, and you have a large part of the explanation of Curley's success. He ran a one-man Tammany Hall, and word about his beneficences got around.

Mr. Curley was not at all reluctant to advertise his help-'em-out technique, nor to do so on a large scale. In the early days of the New Deal, when the jobless were measured in millions, Mr. Curley contributed 20 per cent of his official salary to charity. Amidst much public ballyhoo, he also took out a \$102,385 insurance policy on his own life. When he died, the money was to be held for 125 years when, theoretically, it would have grown to \$45 million. This money was then to be employed for "the needy poor of Boston."

When he went to Danbury for his most recent "rest-cure," and his \$20,000 a year was continued, Good Old Jim ordered that this salary be paid

to charity during the period he was living at Federal expense. He was, he insisted to his followers, a victim of politics who had been "framed." But, while they were keeping him in jail, his pay was the people's.

## IV

As in most big cities, there are in Boston more under-privileged than over-privileged persons. Moreover, in Boston, it is not "shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves in three generations." The old families still have "theirs" and live on the earnings of mid-western stockyards, railroads, newspapers and sundry other types of investments. The Boston Brahmins are conservative and careful with their pennies and, to some extent, this has set the tone of Boston business. Resentment against this attitude adds to Mr. Curley's appeal to the Boston Irish, the numerous immigrants and all the "masses" when he strikes his softer notes as a self-announced fighter for the have-nots.

A large element of the business community, nevertheless, is far from against him. As one businessman phrased it, "Jim has been fair about dealings" in everything from tax abatements to permits to cut drive-ways across city sidewalks into business buildings.

This brings us down to the amazing show that has gone on ever since Mr. Curley went to Danbury Penitentiary. In it, both Governor Bradford and President Truman have played their parts. It would be hilarious

drama, in the best Gilbert and Sullivan tradition, except that it obviously has serious undertones.

In the 1944 elections, Maurice Tobin, Mr. Curley's former aide and later Democratic opponent, was governor and running for re-election. Jim, as a Democrat, was seeking to become Mayor another time.

In Massachusetts, the Republicans normally must win a heavy chunk of the Boston vote to carry a national or state election. Mr. Curley allowed publicly as how he would not vote for Democratic Mr. Tobin for governor (apparently this was not a beauty contest). The Republicans pasted posters all over Boston quoting Jim's exact words. The Republicans won in the national and state contests and Mr. Curley won in the city.

Governor Bob Bradford and his aides indignantly deny that there was any deal, as some newspapers asserted, by which Mr. Curley's official seat would be kept warm for him if he went to jail, or that the fact Jim could again help the Republican cause in 1948 had anything to do with what subsequently happened. They claim there was no legal method of dealing with the situation, other than that employed.

On the very day that the Federal Judge in Washington ordered Mr. Curley to Danbury, the Republican Governor sent a message to the Republican legislature. With astonishing alacrity, both houses of the legislature acted on it the same day.

Mr. Curley was guaranteed his salary, as Governor Bradford had recommended. John Hynes, the City Clerk, was made Temporary Mayor until Jim's return. To make sure that some politicians did not "get" Mr. Hynes afterwards for what he did while nesting on Mr. Curley's chair, the City Clerk was guaranteed his office at a good salary for life.

That night in Boston, Gael Sullivan, President Truman's Bright Young Man, was making a speech to Democratic stalwarts. He abandoned his prepared text and announced that the Republicans had cut their throats by this act. Thousands upon thousands of names were signed to a petition asking Presidential clemency, but Mr. Truman refused to act. Mr. Curley went to Danbury.

Gradually, however, it began to seep into the Democratic consciousness that Republican Governor Bradford had become a near-god to Mr. Curley's enthusiastic followers. Had Jim been paroled at the end of five months, the Federal Parole Board could have kept him out of politics for another thirteen months, up to the maximum term of his sentence. Convicted stock swindlers, for instance, have been prevented after parole from dealing in stocks until the period of their maximum sentence is over. But only Mr. Curley could, if he would, see that his followers did

not vote the Republican national and state tickets in 1948.

It may easily be denied that this had anything to do with the commutation of Mr. Curley's sentence a full month before he had served his minimum term. It may also be argued that he had done his penance, with time off for good behavior.

The fact remains that President Truman cut short Mr. Curley's sentence at the end of five months by commutation thus, albeit perhaps unwittingly, finally assuring that Jim would arise from his political tomb and return to his office in Boston.

Today, Mr. Curley, still somewhat rotund, his eyes as sparkling as ever and his health apparently improved, is sitting behind the huge desk in the center of the Boston Mayor's office.

He picks up one phone and snaps, "Bill, Mike O'Halloran was seen at a wrong meeting last night. Find out what he was doing there." Shifting to another phone he says, "Pat, come over and see me about those paving estimates." He is a busy and a happy man.

The big question now is this:

Will he "knife" the Democrats again next year for letting him go to jail, as he knifed Tobin in the last election; or will he be grateful to President Truman for commuting his sentence? On that may well hang the result of the Massachusetts vote.



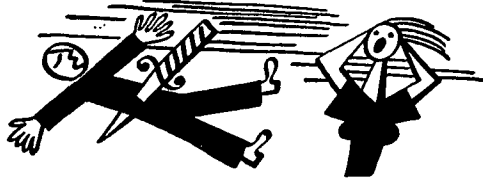


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# THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

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## CLINICAL NOTES

**Greasepaint Cerebrum.** In older days, the rôle closest to the heart of an actor was the one which offered him as a male beauty passionately craved by numerous members of the fair sex. If it further presented him as a fellow of great valiance, preferably a Duc, who, clad in a white silk shirt with balloon sleeves, single-handed put to rout with his sword twenty or more minions of his enemy, his satisfaction knew no bounds. But times have changed. The rôle most courted by the actor of these later years is one which proffers him as a Thinker. To appear as a profound philosopher or scientist, or even merely as a mentality capable of meditating the current problems of the cosmos, affords him a larger ecstasy and a larger dose of unction to his vanity than his curly-haired, bull-chested predecessors ever enjoyed in rescuing the fair Lady Melrose from the foul embraces of the dissolute Comte de Beaulieu or in duelling all over the stage and by their pluck and spirit

arousing the admiration of the entire erstwhile foolishly contemptuous corps of Louis XIII's Musketeers.

**Stage Trees.** The trees of scene designers, be they of whatever species, generally resemble no tree or trees ever contemplated or produced by nature. I have now seen something like four or five thousand trees on the stage and the only occasions on which one looked anything like a tree was when the play was performed *al fresco*. Beholding the arboreal specimens in the usual stage production, I find myself jingling, "Poems are made by fools like me, But only God can't make a tree — like Jo Mielziner."

**Intimate Revues.** The day has surely come for someone to think up at least a slight departure from the routine pattern of the so-called intimate revues. One and all, they are much alike. First, the master of ceremonies with the patter. Second, the rough blues singer in a bright light followed by the dancing couple. Third, the sketch.