



TAKING THE NEW YORK POLICE OUT OF POLITICS.

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

IT is a rather severe commentary on New York politics in the past that the present effort to manage the police department in that city on a basis of common honesty should be considered revolutionary. An even worse reflection is contained in the fact that "practical politics" in New York is generally recognized as a synonym of "base politics." Of course, every man should be a politician, using the word in its proper sense, and, equally of course, a man who is not a practical politician can accomplish nothing of moment. But there is no use blinking the fact that in New York, as in many other parts of our country, the class of men who make their living out of politics and who are styled both by themselves and by their neighbors "practical" or "professional" politicians, often possess a standard of public morality so low as to verge on the criminal. This is due largely to the timidity, selfishness,

and apathy of the "better citizens," who shamefully neglect their political duties. It is also due to the easy good-nature—half criminal, half cynical—with which the public has so often condoned gross offenses against honesty on the part of public men. Finally, it is due, more than to any other cause, to the habit of regarding public office as a bribe or reward for political services. When the offices collectively are used to reward the friends of a party and punish its foes, when each, individually, is the gift of some powerful politician, who, of course, exacts from the beneficiary services in kind, there is certain to follow a condition of thorough debasement and corruption. When the spoils are held to belong to the victor, the latter will use them, as the victor in such cases always does use them, for his personal pecuniary benefit. When this fact is once realized by decent people, when once they wake from their lethargy

on the subject, they will make short work of the spoils-mongering politician who plunders and cheats them, and of his corrupt defenders among the newspapers.

Very naturally the professional politician, produced under such corrupt conditions, regards honest men in public office with venomous hatred, and feels a sense of keen personal wrong when any office is administered in accordance with the elementary principles of decency. The rich man who buys up a board of aldermen to secure a street railway franchise, the big politician who blackmails corporations until he becomes a man of

to discriminate between the good men and the bad, and to regard them as all more or less wicked. One result of this is an indifference on the part of the voters to the character of their representatives; they refuse to punish the men who really are scoundrels because they have been trained to disbelieve in public virtue in any one, and do not regard a bad man as much worse than his decent fellows.

But the professional spoils-mongering politician is the real foe of decent government. One of the accusations which he is fondest of bringing against the man

who would like to make public life better, is that the latter is impracticable, and a theorist, and as such only fit for academic work. A good many honest people have really grown to believe this; and as a consequence they acquiesce in the degrading doctrine of the necessary immorality of public life. It is for this reason that the experiment now on trial in the New York police force is especially noteworthy. There cannot well be imagined anything less academic than the management of the New York police force; and it would be quite as difficult to imagine a course of conduct more practical than the principle of administering the department in accordance with those elementary principles

of morality outlined in the Ten Commandments and without any regard to what is now miscalled "politics."

The police force was the center of the misgovernment and corruption under Tammany Hall. It was through the police force that gross frauds were committed during election times, and that at other times the saloon-keepers and houses of ill-fame were blackmailed to swell the coffers of Tammany, and of the fragments of the other political organizations with which it was momentarily allied. Under the old dispensation this force was handled with much efficiency, but chiefly for improper ends; under the new, we have



"FATHER KNICKERBOCKER (DESPAIRINGLY):—'WHAT A PITY HE DOESN'T CUT HIS WISDOM TEETH.'"—From the New York Herald.

wealth in the city, the little politician who blackmails saloon-keepers until he becomes a man of wealth in his ward, and the "heeler" who takes a small office for what he can make out of it, and pays for it by dirty work at the primaries and the polls, are all united in an active and intelligent hatred of applied morality in public life. They are often materially helped by those genuinely "academic" reformers whose actions discredit the reform movement. These really are ignorant of politics, and show their ignorance by cordially abusing, not the worst men, but the best, and therefore train the public mind to be unable



"INTEMPERANCE" — From the New York Evening Telegram.

raised higher the standard of efficiency, and we have administered the department with an eye single to the best interests of the city. The management has been just as practical as ever: the difference has been one of honesty.

The present board as a whole took office on May 6th. Two of the commissioners are Republicans and two Democrats. But we all recognize the obvious truth that it is absurd to manage the police department of a great city with reference to national parties. The duty of a police department is to preserve order and to protect life and property. In New York we have the further duty of securing honest elections. Not a single question of administration arises which can properly be considered as having any bearing upon national politics.

When a burglar breaks into a house, and a policeman arrests him, it is of exceedingly little consequence to the householder whether the burglar believes in a loose or strict construction of the Constitution, or what particular form of tariff the policeman favors. When a riot is to

be put down, the views of the police department from the highest to the lowest on the question of the free coinage of silver are of small moment. The general public is concerned solely with the efficiency and honesty of the force. These facts are so patent that it seems a little ridiculous to so much as state them; but in practice their truth has certainly not been recognized in time past. Prior to our taking office, policemen were appointed and promoted almost solely on the ground of political favoritism, save that, by way of added infamy, a system of pecuniary corruption was gradually grafted on the system of political corruption. Men were appointed and promoted because of their politics; but in addition they were forced to pay heavily for the appointment or the promotion; and they expected to make good what they had paid out by widespread and wholesale blackmail and plunder. And this was what the defenders of the old order called "practical!"

The first and obvious duty of the board was to rule out the question of a man's politics in making appointments, promo-

MULBERRY STREET

ZOO



"HE'S ALL RIGHT WHEN YOU KNOW HIM; BUT YOU'VE GOT TO KNOW HIM FIRST."—From the New York Evening Telegram.

tions, reductions, and dismissals. A great many people said that this could not be done. I think the majority of expert investigators were inclined to regard it as an impossibility. Yet it proved in practice most easy. The mountain shrank to a mole-hill the minute we strode steadily toward it. For a short time we had to explain over and over and over again, that politicians could neither help nor hurt any man unless they could show something about him which was to his credit or discredit as a citizen and an official. This idea finally got through their heads, and then all the trouble vanished like smoke. In no single instance did we pay the slightest heed to a man's political affiliations; and the result was that we got better men promoted and appointed than had ever been the case before, and punished the bad in a way they had never before been punished.

This point is worth calling to the attention of those who consider civil service reform impractical. We had to keep the force up to the highest standard of practical efficiency. We had to protect life and property in a community which would have cared nothing for theory if, in practice, the force went wrong. We found the easiest and cheapest way to attain our end was to pay strict heed to the cardinal principles of civil service reform.

We had hundreds of vacancies to fill: we filled them all with absolute indifference to the politics of the applicants, and we paid as little attention to their creed. Any man within proper age limits, and a citizen of the United States, who applied was given the examination. He was required to furnish vouchers from five responsible citizens as to his character, and, furthermore, we carefully investigated his character through our own



"THE DRYEST MAN ON MANHATTAN ISLAND."
—From the New York Recorder.

officers. He was subjected to a rigid physical examination to prove that he was sound in body, and possessed strength and activity. Then he was put through a careful mental examination, and was required to show that he had ability such as would be necessarily implied by ordinary attendance at our public schools. Not a fifth of the applicants succeeded in passing all the tests. Four-

an honest politician as to a man's character precisely as we accepted the word of any other citizen. But if an applicant got nobody but politicians to vouch for him, and especially if he merely varied the list with an occasional saloon-keeper, we felt that he had given us reason to scrutinize his character most carefully before being willing to accept him. If he was vouched for by a corrupt politician,



"THE MAYOR RETURNS TO THE CITY, BUT HE HARDLY KNOWS IT, FOR IT HAS BECOME THE GREAT SUNDAY DESERT SINCE HE WENT AWAY."—From the *New York Evening World*.

fifths were excluded because of shortcomings in body, in mind, or in character.

The tests were rigid, for the position of a police officer is one of great responsibility, and is very well paid; so we felt the city had a right to demand a high-grade man. But if the man did pass the tests, his politics, whatever they might be, did not weigh a feather in the balance. If he was a mere hanger-on of public office, and evidently dependent upon politics for a livelihood, we treated this as a circumstance requiring careful explanation. We accepted the word of

his chances were at an end unless he gave a satisfactory explanation. So that an applicant might readily hurt himself if he were backed by politicians of bad character, and he did not help himself in the least by the support of politicians of good character any more than by the support of other reputable citizens. A man backed by President Cleveland and Governor Morton would have stood no more chance than a man whose character was testified to by the grocer with whom he dealt, and the boss carpenter for whom he worked.



"WHAT MAY BE EXPECTED IF THE UNION LEAGUE CLUB DOOR IS CLOSED ON SUNDAY."
—From the *New York World*.

In making promotions we followed exactly the same principles, but we varied their application so as to suit the changed condition. In making appointments to the grade of patrolman, the only practical method to obtain good men was by a rigid competitive examination. Not once in a hundred times did any of us know anything about the man until after he had applied; and we found as a matter of experience, that our rigid tests gave us excellent material out of which to develop good patrolmen. But no physical or mental examination would, by itself, have met our needs in making promotions; while, on the other hand, we of course knew all about the men to be promoted. The police force of New York, numbering as it does over four thousand

officers, is a half-military organization, and many of the principles on which it is governed are analogous to those which obtain in the army or navy. Policemen must at all times exercise vigilance and good judgment, and must sometimes show great energy, courage, and determination in the performance of their regular duties. They are continually called upon to arrest murderers, burglars, and criminals and desperados of every grade; and now and then they must wage pitched battles with mobs. Every year a great many runaway teams are stopped, and a great many persons saved, by individual members of the New York police force, from death by burning or drowning.

Of course, some of the men who perform heroic deeds of this kind are, for other reasons, unfit for promotion. Steady and active performance of ordinary duty must always be given full weight. But it is important that the deeds of heroism should be given their weight, too. On the whole, the best soldiers are those who win promotion by some feat of gallantry on the field of battle, or by signal excellence in the management of the troops under them, whether many or few, in some engagement or campaign.

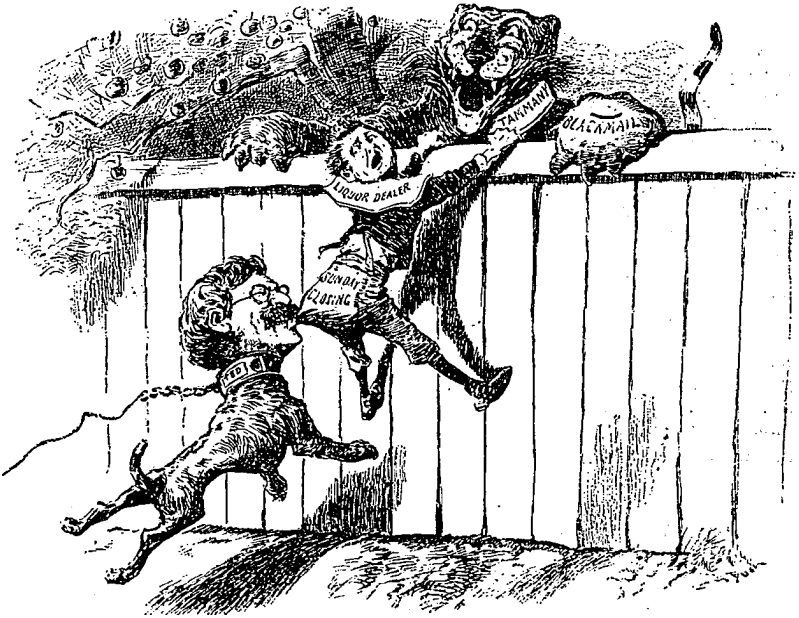
Accordingly, we



"CROKER MADE THE LAW; ROOSEVELT ENFORCES IT."
—From the *New York World*.

adopted the principle of forming a merit list on which we put the names of the men who had distinguished themselves by gallantry in saving life, in protecting property, or in arresting dangerous criminals; and also of the men of marked excellence in the performance of their ordinary duties. The list thus obtained, we tested the men on it by competitive examination. In the higher places we paid special heed to the skill and success with which the officers handled the men

not discover until months afterward, and then by accident.) Another captured three burglars at one time. Another captured an armed and desperate murderer, and, in addition, was found to have served for seven years with an aggregate of fines in all that time amounting to but two days' pay. Another captured three burglars in a week, one of them under circumstances which spoke most highly for his nerve and daring. Another, a very active and intelligent officer, saved a man from



"IN A FIX."—From the New York Herald.

under them, and repressed vice and disorder in their precincts.

To illustrate our action, I cannot do better than refer to our first dozen promotions. These included one man—a veteran of the Civil war—who had just saved his twenty-fifth man from drowning. Another had rescued a woman and two children from a burning building. A third, when assailed by a drunken criminal who had just murderously attacked a citizen, shot the would-be murderer, and when, by permission of the board, he was given a sum of money by the man he had rescued, he turned it over to the widow of the criminal, (a fact which the board did

drowning, at the peril of his own life, and also gallantly stopped a dangerous runaway, besides having served over six years without a complaint against him. Another, by persevering vigilance and fearlessness, broke up and dispersed a gang of toughs who infested a certain neighborhood. Yet another, in making an arrest, was set upon and very badly wounded by the associates of the criminal whom he had seized, but nevertheless contrived not only to hold his prisoner, but to capture one of his assailants, though he had to go to the hospital for two weeks afterward. The others had been particularly zealous and faithful

in the performance of their duty, though no opportunity had arisen for them to specially distinguish themselves. In but one instance did we know the politics of a promoted man.

One of our important functions is to see that elections are carried out honestly. Under the old Tammany rule the cheating in New York was gross and flagrant. The police were often deliberately used to facilitate fraudulent practices at the polls, and the commissioners of police were in part directly responsible, not only because of the actions of their subordinates, but because of the character and intelligence of the men whom they allowed the two parties to put in as election officers. We have tried to remedy this by making the police understand that their sole duty is to guarantee an honest election so far as lies in their power, and that they will be punished with the utmost rigor if they interfere with honest citizens on the one hand, or if they fail to prevent fraud and violence on the other. We have also exercised great care in choosing the officers of elections. We have put them through an examination designed to test their capacity to perform the duties allotted to them. This is to prevent what has sometimes happened in the past, when

a police clerk or inspector of elections has shown himself so ignorant that an unscrupulous opponent could cheat at will, undetected. Finally, we have, as far as possible, carefully inquired into the character of the different party nominees. With nearly eleven thousand of these officers to appoint, it has been impossible to scrutinize their character as rigidly as is desirable, but we have published the names in the City Record, have made all possible inquiries ourselves, and have invited the action of outside citizens (and especially of the Good Government clubs, which are well organized for the work) to help us. As a consequence we have very appreciably raised the character and caliber of the election officers. The need of what we did may be judged from the fact that we were obliged to reject, for moral or mental shortcomings, over a thousand of the men whom the regular party organizations proposed for these positions.

When we took office, long years of constantly growing corruption had utterly demoralized the force. Every kind of criminal who could afford to pay for protection had long been systematically blackmailed. Laws that were irksome to any class of citizens had been enforced only to the extent that the politicians of



"THE HAND OF THE LAW AGAINST THE TIGER'S PAW—WHICH WILL PREVAIL?"
—From the New York Recorder.

the dominant party demanded, in order to coerce the threatened classes into the support of their own party. Promotions—especially to the higher places—had been purchased for enormous sums of money, which sometimes went to political organizations, sometimes to some individual official, and the promoted parties reimbursed themselves by flagrant blackmail. As a sequel to this corruption, an utter laxity of discipline had begun to obtain. The force had much good material in it, but was, as a whole, very badly demoralized, indeed. The only way we could remedy matters was by an active and vigilant personal supervision on our own part, and by insisting on a strict compliance with the rules within the force and a strict enforcement of all laws by the force.

The Legislature, so far from helping us, hampered us greatly by its action. It deliberately curtailed the powers of the board, instead of increasing them. It thus prevented our dismissing any of the corrupt men in the force save in cases where we could prove their corruption by fulfilling all the technical requirements of a court of law. It must always be remembered that, so far from giving us special powers to do our work, we had even less power than our predecessors had, and worked at a greater disadvantage. The difference was purely the difference between the boards themselves.

Yet, in spite of the way in which we were hampered by legislation, we worked a revolution in the force. Each of us saw for himself how the duties were performed by the captain of each precinct, and, if not by the patrolmen of each beat, at least by a sufficient number of patrolmen



"WHICH WILL IT BE—THRONE OR THROWN?"—From the New York Recorder.

to find out what they were doing. We went to the station-houses and through the precincts at every hour of the day and night. Exactly as we rewarded promptly and with a free hand the best members of the force, so we mercilessly punished the worst by heavy fines and by dismissal. The officer who slept on his post, who got drunk, or showed laxness in dealing with crime or criminals, or was guilty of brutality toward unoffending citizens, was promptly dismissed, exactly as his faithful brother was promoted and rewarded. As a result, the morale of the force improved with almost startling rapidity. Discipline in the force was observed as it was never observed before; and vice and disorder in the city diminished equally.

A violent outcry followed our determination to enforce all the laws, and especially the Excise law. The law against opening saloons on Sunday and after hours on week days, and the law against gambling-houses and houses of ill-fame, had been the most fruitful sources of blackmail in the past. They

had never been dead-letter laws. They had always been partially enforced; but never against those who paid sufficient blackmail, or who possessed the requisite political influence. There was but one way to cut off this system of corruption and blackmail, and that was to require an immediate and strict enforcement of the law.

Our enforcement of the Sunday Excise law caused most disturbance. Up to the time we took office no official had ever made a serious and consistent effort to enforce this law. Almost all men of much experience insisted that the law could not be enforced. After carefully consider-

cal clubs for their neighborhoods. Under such conditions we had to expect violent opposition.

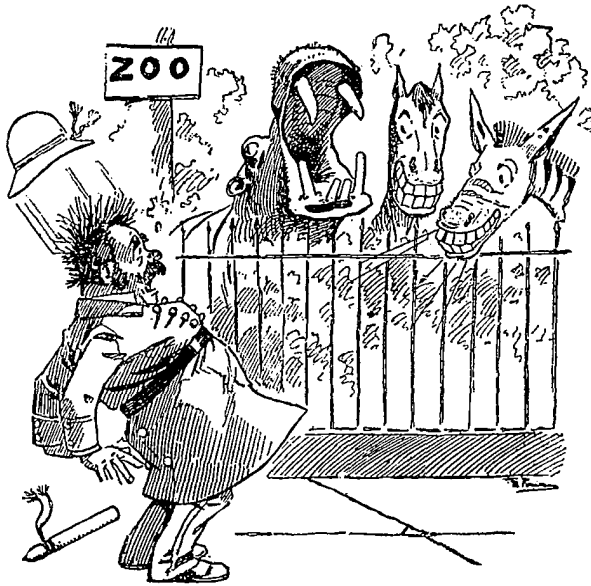
At first, few public officials and hardly a single newspaper gave us hearty support. All the Tammany politicians, and some Republican and anti-Tammany Democrat politicians as well, denounced us, and the papers opposed to us literally went into a frenzy of abuse and anger. But our position was impregnable. We stood on the principle that the law should be honestly and fairly enforced while it remained on the statute-books. We had nothing to do with putting it on the statute-books, but while it was there

we would in good faith enforce its observance.

It seems incredible that so simple a proposition should have needed defense. Gradually all men who were both honest and intelligent saw this. Toward the end we were opposed only by the liquor dealers who had thriven on their illegal traffic, by the most evil and reckless politicians, by the foulest portions of the newspaper press, and, finally, alas! that it should be written, by the ordinary citizens who were either indifferent to law as well as to honesty and decency, or who were so ignorant as to fall an easy prey to the demagogue and the corruptionist, or who, though with tendencies toward decency, never-

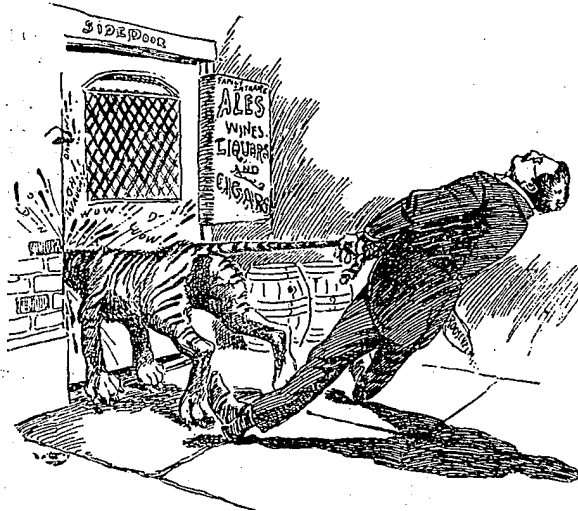
theless put appetite above conviction and deliberately asked to gratify their thirst for liquor at the cost of every principle of order and fair dealing.

The effect of our action upon politics is not easy to foretell, for there are, unfortunately, too many men whose foolishness or whose greediness and low ideals render them the ready tools of unscrupulous and reckless politicians. But the effect of our action on the administration of the city has been very marked. After



"TERRIBLE EFFECT OF THE 'ZOO' UPON THE ORDINARY POLICEMAN OF THE DAY."—From the *New York Evening World*.

ing the matter, however, we came to the conclusion that it could be enforced, and that, in any event, we had no alternative save to try and enforce it if we wished to retain our self-respect or obey our oaths of office. There were ten thousand liquor dealers in New York, and they were backed by the immensely wealthy organization of the brewers, while their support among the voters at large was very great, as the saloons were in each case the lounging places and social and politi-



"THE MAN WITH THE PULL AT PRESENT."—From the *New York Recorder*.

two months of desperate opposition, the saloons broke down completely and the law was rigidly enforced. All the prophecies of the prophets came to naught. We proved, once for all, that the saloons could be shut in New York City. It is an object lesson which cannot but bear fruit in due season. It must always be remembered that our sweeping and complete victory was only rendered possible by the cordial and active support of the judiciary.

The outcry of that portion of the press which, for the moment, made itself the tool of criminals and lawbreakers, availed as little as the protests of politicians, or as the resistance of the lawbreakers themselves. We pursued our course steadily without halting or wavering, and we carried our point.

Under our administration of the police department there has been in New York a steady diminution of offenses against the laws. In a city as large as New York there will always be some crime and disorder; but as the disci-

plined and morale of our force improved, the disorderly and the vicious were forced to work with ever more and more caution. The statistics show that, when compared with similar periods of time under our predecessors, there were under us a considerably smaller number of felonies committed, and yet a considerably larger number of felons arrested. What we had done was so simple that it excited wonder as to why it had never been done before. There is no mystery about obtaining good govern-

ment for our cities: there is not much need of any radical and elaborate change in the form of government. Occasionally a law will be so bad that it has to be repealed or modified before good government in a certain direction is obtainable. If it had not been for the fact that, ten years before Mayor Strong's election, the Legislature took away from the aldermen their power of confirming or rejecting the



"THIS IS NOT A DOG, BUT A TIGER, AND THE MAN IS NOT FREEZING IN THE ICE, BUT DYING IN THE GREAT SUNDAY DESERT."—From the *New York Evening World*.

mayor's appointments, the victory of last fall would have amounted to little or nothing. But it is only in exceptional instances that legislation is of such importance. We need wiser legislation for our cities; and here and there we need radical reforms which can only be obtained through the enactment of proper laws; but what we most need is honesty, fearlessness, and efficiency among public officials.

Examples to prove this are ready to hand. In New York the present Excise board works practically under the same laws which controlled its predecessors. Yet the present Excise board has made a complete revolution in the whole system of granting and refusing licenses, in the case of licensees accused of keeping disorderly houses, by the simple process of acting in strict accordance with the rules of elementary honesty.

So it has been with the police department. The board, from the beginning, ruled out every question of mere partisan politics. We did not in any way lose our loyalty as individuals to our respective

parties. On the contrary, we felt that we rendered our parties the best of services by ourselves acting as honest officials, without regard to party. We made up our minds also that, in any question of honesty and decency, we had no right to take into account considerations of mere expediency. It is eminently right and proper that legislative bodies should consider what is expedient, as well as what is right in the abstract. To behave otherwise would mean to break down popular government. They are always obliged to content themselves, as Abraham Lincoln phrased it, with the "best possible" when they cannot secure the best. So a great party leader, when formulating a party policy, is obliged to take into consideration conflicting prejudices, and must—at least normally—adopt a course of action which will secure popular support. Occasionally, of course, it is the duty of the legislator and the party leader alike to defy or disregard public opinion, no matter what the consequences may be. But this cannot be and ought not to be the ordinary attitude of either.



"A FEW POSSIBILITIES OF COMMISSIONER ROOSEVELT'S INTENDED SHAKEUP."
—From the New York Recorder.

An officer to whom is confided the carrying out of the laws has no such discretion. It is a lamentable thing when the people and the public officials alike grow to think that laws should only be enforced so far as the officers of the law think that public opinion demands their enforcement. It is such a belief that inevitably leads to lynching, white-capping, and all kindred forms of outrage. The members of the Board of Police feel certain that they can render no greater service to the cause of honest government than to try to root out this feeling.

Some years ago a then noted politician stated that the golden rule and the decalogue had no place in practical politics, and that the purification of politics was but an iridescent dream. The base cynicism of such an utterance endears it to the knave and the fool, and under one or

other of these categories we must place every man who does not condemn it. Whatever the present Board of Police has accomplished is due to the fact that it has proceeded on the assumption that the decalogue and the golden rule are peculiarly in place in practical politics. So far as the department under us is concerned, we have shown that the purification of politics is easy enough if men will start about it with common-sense and earnestness. We have acted with the ordinary honesty which would be expected in private life of men who were engaged in some enterprise for the common good; and the practical effect of our actions has been that in New York the orderly observance of law has been secured as it has never been before, and that the honesty and efficiency of the police force have been immeasurably increased.