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CHAPTER 14

My Association with Hazen S. Pingree Plunges Me into Politics Deeper than Ever

It was the age superlative of riding on people’s necks. The strong rode the shoulders of the weak night and day, and the rich seemed only to regard the poor as beasts of burden. Nor did it matter, as in mule packing and horse use, whether the collar galled, or the girth fit, or the saddle was on right, or the pack was properly cinched or whether the work animals were properly watered and fed or given rest or taken to a blacksmith or veterinary or turned out to pasture. They just threw the diamond hitch on man and never took off the load. There were more men than mules, and they were easier to get; the supply was unending. Social reformers were anarchists. A disciple of Karl Marx and Rudolph Engels was crazy. Any one who agreed with Henry George was a moron. Herr Most and Emma Goldman should be hung.

Nevertheless, things could not always go on as they were. No thought to speak of had been even given to the idea that the despotism of wealth should ever be benevolent. God works in a mysterious way; yesterday, to-day, forever. Man with brief authority and enlarged stomach, containing all the coarser passions and desires, has deluded himself with the conceit that he was doing things, when all the time he was contributing to the plan of Providence. Man has exactly the same relationship to the vast thing defined as Universal life as the microscopic cells of the human body have to the life of that body. He is a microcosm of the macrocosm.

He is a cell and his intracellular and intercellular activities cause him only to be conscious of action. There is no such thing as inertia or he would know that. There is no such thing even as
physical death: it is only disintegration in order that more perfect reintegration may occur. How wondrous the periodic law, the elements of Mendeleeff, the triads of Dobereiner and the octaves of Newlands—business of the three entities: matter, energy and ether, and business going on all the time and, aided by oppression and repression making for localized power, men popped up everywhere who represented something that just would not be poohed aside and so had to be reckoned with.

Hazen S. Pingree was one of this sort. He was an extraordinary ordinary man. Out of the Green Mountains he came, a shoemaker. Grandfather in Revolutionary War, father in Mexican War, and he a private in the Civil War. Fighters. In Detroit he became quite rich manufacturing shoes. They ran him for mayor. No one knew him as a great humanist; he did not even know it himself. Elder Blades told him about it, and John Atkinson told him more. Charley Joslyn was one of his young adherents who showed symptoms of humanity that might develop, if he were permitted to run free and unhaltered.

When Pingree began to find out how things were in a social and political way, he began to raise the dickens. This marked him as a troublemaker and undesirable by the machine. James McMillan was a United States Senator of Michigan, and chairman of the Republican State Central Committee. He was a rich, Scotch Canadian, whose money had been gleaned from public land grants, and playing the game as honestly as it was played in that time by the big fellows and those who parroted them. Anything was legitimate during that epoch, that would not land a man in the penitentiary, and the function of lawyers was to steer their clients so that they could do business and keep out of jail—but do business. Senator Stockbridge had died in office with the peaceful consciousness that he had had Schuyler Olds pay for all he got. John Patton had been appointed by good Governor Rich to the vacancy, and, being in advance of his time in morals and ethics, he had to be displaced, because his fellow citizen, Blodgett, a lumber king, decided to buy the place for Julius C. Burrows. The railroads, and principally the specially chartered
Michigan Central, at the head of which, under the Vanderbilts, was the master mind of Henry B. Ledyard, exercised a large political influence in the State, often secondary, however, to the McMillan influence. Mr. Ledyard and Mr. McMillan were too strong individually, and had too many clashing interests, always to work in harmony.

General Russell A. Alger, with a disposition as sweet as a good woman’s, brave when he knew where and how to strike, cherishing a high desire to be right and do right, clean as a man could be and be in big business in those days, was a friend and ally of Ledyard and also was Tom Platt’s agent in Michigan.

This is a partial mirror of political conditions when Hazen S. Pingree began to horn down the shelves of the china shop. There had not been a big man in the public life of Michigan since the passing of Zach Chandler. Big occasions make big men; just mean money grabbing does not. The Pingree crowd, and it was as crazy a crowd finally of irresponsibles as ever was permitted to gather around a man whose greatest weakness was his inability to judge men, could not work with any existent political entity. So it worked alone. Pingree wished to be governor. It was natural for a lot of reasons that he should. Many of the sycophants nearest to him wanted to use him as such. Others who believed in him were certain he had a mission. Such modernists as Captain Gray, of Glasgow, and William T. Stead spurred him honestly. And the “Old Man” himself had his fighting blood at boiling point.

Every newspaper in Detroit was against him. He had to put up bulletins in the city hall in order to secure any kind of publicity. Not one of the papers could be induced to mention him for governor. Among the old liners he was either a rattlesnake or crazy. Albert Pack finally lined up with him. Pack was to succeed Burrows as United States Senator if things came out right. Pingree started on a tour of the State with O. C. Tompkins, who later, as warden of Marquette Prison, shot off some fingers of Holzhay, the Gogebic bandit. Very few outside of Detroit had any crystallized convictions about the man. Perry Powers, of Cadillac, while
president of the Michigan Press Association, had made a fight for my appointment as state game and fish warden by Governor Rich, which I had clinched by waylaying the Governor between three and four o'clock one morning. This had introduced me into state politics. Consequently I knew Mayor Pingree, and I had some idea of what he was up against. When he came to the Sault to see me I at once enlisted in his cause, and agreed to bring him out for governor in the Sault News, which I did. It took some scoring, but he finally won. I was continued in the office I held; in fact my term was for four years, and I had two more to serve when Governor Pingree was inaugurated. He began many reforms and had a knock down and drag out fight every minute with the legislature, while it was in session. The notorious “Immortal Nineteen” lined up against him in the senate and headed him off at every turn.

So it went for two years. When he came up for renomination we hoped to get him through on a truce. Prospects were not good. I went to Washington and had a number of sessions about the matter with Senator McMillan, during which I made the discovery that there was no reason to be afraid of a United States Senator; that even the strongest of them are not supermen.

Decision was made that Governor Pingree had so intrenched himself that he could not be successfully opposed without more of a fight than was worth while. I had a good many reasons for desiring to be a factor in the second Pingree convention. Principally I desired to secure the nomination of Horace M. Oren, of my home town, for attorney general. The idea was put into my head by Fred A. Maynard, whose time had come to retire from that office, which he had ably filled. There was no fight on Pingree, but there was plenty of opposition to everybody else.

I succeeded in organizing and controlling the convention, and our slate went through, of course including Oren. I did not know then that the attorney general has a fat lot of state law business to give out, with the consent of the Governor. It was, and still can be, one of the most productive sources of graft.

Eli Sutton, a son-in-law of Governor Pingree, seemed to have
his ear and his confidence to a greater extent than anybody else. Others of the kitchen cabinet were Bill Judson, of Washtenaw, Sybrant Wesselius, John Atkinson, Arthur Marsh and Charley Joslyn. Now and then Oren and I would be invited to the “meetings,” but I was not often taken into the inner circle. Whether it was because they were going to “bunk” the Old Man or do some dirty work, I do not know, but they were careful. Personally, I do not think a single one of the intimates of Governor Pingree was dishonest intentionally. Some of them had supported him on principle and others, who were outside the political breastworks, picked him as a hundred to one shot. The kitchen cabinet was in disagreement. Wesselius seemed to lead one wing and Eli Sutton the other. Sutton won out.

Wesselius was commissioner of railroads; a big, able, unpoised man. To my surprise that place, about the best in the gift of the Governor, was offered to me. I did not want it. But I had come to know and love and trust General Alger. So I asked his advice. He was emphatic in telling me to take it. There was some delay, not serious, in my confirmation. Then the office was turned over to me. When I walked through the door I thought that about all the equipment I had for the job was acquired when I was one of the Chicago & Northwestern construction gang. Mr. Wesselius and his friend, Fred Britton, one of the best of Michigan newspaper men, were the only occupants of the office, and I was alone, so simple may be the investiture of authority. Some commonplaces were exchanged during which I observed that I hoped to administer the office in the interests of all the people, but with no unfairness or injustice to the railroads, whereupon Wesselius snorted:

“Young feller, you pray to God and ask him to look out for you and the people; the railroads will look out for themselves.”

Now I was commissioner of railroads of the State of Michigan, with more authority, positive and negative, if exercised, than any one man should ever have.

As long as I occupied the office Governor Pingree never crossed its threshold. He sent for me the first day and told me
that he had promised that Senator Frank Westover, of Bay City, an able man, should be appointed deputy commissioner. That was exactly the time for a showdown as to whether I was commissioner of railroads or a dummy for the Governor, or much worse perhaps, for some of his advisers. I told him that I did not know Mr. Westover, that I had nothing against him, that I did not wish to thwart him as governor and even would help him carry out his promises when I could adjust actions to public interests. Then I told him I would resign, that there would be no feeling and that he could appoint Mr. Westover as commissioner.

Secretly I think he liked my straight talk and respected me, but outwardly he sniffed and snuffed air through one side of his nose, and we never became intimate. I did not know then, nor until long afterwards, that I had been appointed really because General Alger had asked Governor Pingree to do so, and Mr. Ledyard had asked General Alger. Not another request was made of me by the Governor, nor did General Alger or Mr. Ledyard ever ask a favor that had any bearing on my official acts.

Governor Pingree had Ralph Stone as private secretary. Then the position of secretary carried the title of major. He was even then, though a young man, possessed of superior attainments of heart and mind. While with the Michigan Trust Company at Grand Rapids, Major Stone acquired valuable business experience to supplement his academic law training at the University of Michigan. At the 'Varsity he had been an independent and a leader among the "non-frats." This was due to a deeply set humanity, probably inherited from a sensitively organized father, who at that time was a Unitarian preacher in New Jersey. Between Major Stone and the purely political crowd there was always friction. The secretary was constant in his endeavors to protect his chief from the wolves. More than once he tore up wild speech manuscripts that had been supplied the governor, and wrote addresses to replace them. Very much credit for the many concrete achievements of Governor Pingree’s administration belongs to Ralph Stone. I always found it a satisfaction to cooperate with him, and early I was impressed with his clean and
clear and courageous thought processes, his poise and good judgment, and his common sense and kindliness. He had deeply at heart the welfare of the masses with no desire to make political capital of his sentiments. And yet, when he sought employment after leaving the executive office, he found that capital regarded him as a dangerous socialist, if not an anarchist. This made his ladder climb to the presidency of the Detroit Trust Company a trial of his manhood and principles. Ralph Stone was one of the first to demonstrate the reasonable and human tendency in modern business.

Governor Pingree made enemies in phalanxes. They dogged him everywhere, as always is the case when men in public or private who are worth while, assail the established order, no matter how bad the established order may be. Pingree fought back bravely. The *Detroit Free Press*, which has had a history of malignancy unsurpassed since the days it hounded Lincoln, and was the organ in London of the rebel Knights of the Golden Circle, set its spies on his track and after all of those who were a part of his administration.

As is often the case, internal conditions proved fatal when external attacks are easily resisted. There was crookedness in the Governor’s official family. Probably the acts were not more dishonest than many past practices, but always higher standards are being erected by which public acts are judged, and no one had done more than Governor Pingree to improve conditions in this respect.

One evening I received a hasty summons to come to the Executive Chambers. Assembled was every friend of the administration that could be reached. The military scandals had been unearthed. Then occurred a demonstration of the wonderful, though blind, personal loyalty of Governor Pingree. He would not believe a single charge made. It was the work of his personal enemies who, because they could not “get the old man,” were determined to ruin any or all who were his friends. And in this view he persisted to the last, finally pardoning those who pleaded
guilty so as to give him an opportunity to do so, rather than to trust their fate to a succeeding governor.

While the grand jury was in session, nearly all the Governor’s appointive heads of departments took to the woods. No one molested me, because there was nothing that could be tortured into a dereliction. They hounded me though, and I enjoyed it, because I have never feared that a clear case could be made out against a man unless he had left himself open somewhere, either by carelessness or dishonesty. In every way I had taken my public work seriously and had tried to do more than the law required me to do. It was not enough for me to do what the law specified. I tried to carry out anything and everything within my power in the interest of the public, that the law did not forbid. Very little time elapsed before I discovered that the strong have a way of sending special representatives to a state capitol, and that the weak and unorganized are not represented at all, unless public officials constitute of themselves their especial guardians. That was my view of public duty.

One of the first things I had to decide was whether I would accept passes and permit my subordinates to use them also. In the past it had been the practice of all public officials I knew anything about, who could get passes, to take them, use them and charge up their railroad fare to the State just as though they had paid it. There was no commoner graft, and while petty in one, it amounted to a big total when all did it. There was no law then against accepting a pass on anything. It was easy to determine that the passes were sent to me as commissioner of railroads, and not personally. So to each railroad and other transportation company that sent a pass, I wrote the following:

"Received as a courtesy extended to the State of Michigan, to be used as such."

And of course I did not charge, or permit to be charged by subordinates, to the State, any railroad fares. The saving thus made was considerable in four years, but it was much greater in principle, because it was an index of that right performance, which made it impossible for the many who subsequently delved into my record to ‘‘get anything on me.’’