

The Civic Official

Fourth in a Series on Phases of Municipal Life

By BRITTON B. COOKE

THE most pathetic figure in connection with city governments in this country is not the poor, over-burdened tax payer, nor the deluded gentleman who buys the bonds for a trunk sewer for Smith's Corners, nor the disappointed applicant for a position on the city scavenging department, nor the haggard alderman, panting in the pursuit of recalcitrant voters, nor the mayor, dizzy with the effort to keep his balance on the fence, nor the feverish reformer blowing on the blisters which his cruel rake has raised on his tender palms. It is the civic official. Does anyone love the civic official? Has he ever any credit—that he dare accept? Does anyone move in his defense, or his praise? Is he permitted to have ambition or ideas or friends or a decent bank account that is not likely to inspire a graft investigation? What sort of a life does he lead? No life at all. His is the sad figure in the municipal pageant. Though he is often a sinner he is more often than not the victim of other people's sinning; the victim of municipal indifference which encourages him to be a loafer and discourages him in any efforts to show his metal; the victim of the alderman and the board of control and the mayor; the victim of the cliques that also victimize the alderman; and the victim of the tradition which insists that a gov-

thing else, what references could he give? The City Hall? What worse could he give?

Then there is the kind of city servant who takes part, secretly, in ward politics. He holds a small office in a political organization. He picks a big man who he thinks is a likely winner and therefore someone to be cultivated in connection with the City Hall, and he offers himself as toady and chief doer-of-menial-offices. His life is one constant dread that somebody else will get a better "standing" with "the chief" than he has, or that an election will slip up on him some day, or that the chief will drink too much beer and die of apoplexy or get religious or do something that would make the services of a toady unnecessary. It is a very miserable life.

Then there is the honest but unimaginative official who is having more work crowded on him than he can take care of, who knows that if the public ever hears of his neglect of some of the work it will never consider the real cause for it. He is afraid to say boo for fear he will be discharged and find himself in the cold world with no recommendation but the fact that he worked in the City Hall. He

One day this man announced that he would resign. He had been offered a position as engineer to a large and growing western city and at a largely increased salary. The friendly papers told their readers how they had always said this man was a good man, the other hinted that the western city was buying a pig in a poke. As a matter of fact the western city took this man on the recommendation of an engineering expert who explained to the westerners just how good a man the engineer was and why he was not getting a fair chance in Toronto. "That man," he said, "has just one weakness. He can easily be over-ruled. He hates fighting. He hates trouble. He will do anything rather than have a row. He's nervous. Hire him. Give him plenty of rope and on technical matters take his say-so exactly as he gives it, and you will make no mistake. If a particular job is too big for him he is honest enough to say so and call in a specialist for the time being. But if he offers his engineering opinion, believe him—he's right. What was wrong with him in Toronto was just this: He would recommend that a bridge be built in a certain way, or that a sewer be laid a certain way, or certain materials be used in this or that piece of city work. But the aldermen or the mayor would meantime have been lobbied by some contractor, or some friend, or some newspaper had heard of some fancy stunt done in some fancy Yankee city, and they would tell the engineer to go ahead and use that kind of material, or that form of construction. Being afraid of trouble he would accept the ruling—and the job would often fail. He was a sound man and a good one, but he lacked the moral courage to tell the interfering old nancies where they got off."

The western city took the Toronto engineer, gave him rope, and have had great satisfaction from him.

IN another city a man, otherwise supposed to be a first-class commissioner of public works, failed because contractors were continually going to friendly aldermen and getting instructions over his head. He would carry the plans for certain work so far and then find the work taken out of his hands and given to some firm with a pull. Other engineers would be put in over his head. He was put in a junior position in respect to that contract, amounting to little better than an expert clerkship. Was it then any wonder that this man finally dropped into the habit of doing only routine work? Was it to be wondered at that he ceased to take a keen interest in his work and failed to keep himself posted and make the suggestions to save the city money as once he had done? Time had been when this man would sit up till all hours planning works for the city, putting his very best thought into them, doing his utmost to show that he loved his work and was a good man. But when he died, he had lost all of that. He was only a common civil servant, a slightly expert clerk, with a chronic grouch and a hobby or two. And his chief anxiety was what?—that he should not lose his position. For with interest in his work he lost also his skill. He got rusty. He made a few attempts to retrieve himself, but was always met with a series of rebuffs sooner or later. He lost confidence, lost his nerve and spent the rest of his days in office grumbling under his breath and hiding his incompetency from his own clerks. That was real tragedy! The tragedy of the civil servant.

In a certain city the aldermen have a certain way of trimming the budget so as to make a good showing before the voters. As a matter of fact the voters know very little about it and the aldermen might as well save themselves the trouble or rolling up what looks like a surplus. But they do it, and this is how; first they over-estimate the possible and probable revenues, tacking on five thousand dollars here and there, or even as high as fifty thousand. They increase an item with a mere stroke of the pen, and the city is not in a position to deny it. Then, on the other side of the book, they start making reductions. A certain department wants so much money. It has to have that money to get along. It has mentioned necessary items and added only a small percentage for necessary extensions of work. The aldermanic pen goes through this department's estimate. It is cut down five per cent., ten per cent.—anything at all. It makes little difference. It makes it appear on the city budget that the city will have a surplus for the year. The departmental head is supposed to try to cut down his expenses as indicated. If he is a wise head he pays



"What worse could he give?"

ernment job is a soft snap held by a man who couldn't get a job anywhere else.

There are many varieties of these lugubrious figures. There is the plain clerk whose wife's uncle used to be an alderman and stood strong with the Oddfellows or the Orangemen or the Knights of Columbus or something like that. He has a fairly comfortable clerkship in a cozy office, without too much to do, with no responsibility and with no hope of ever getting any further than he now is. His wife's uncle asked for a clerkship and a clerkship he got and a clerkship he will keep till he dies, except and unless somebody starts an investigation of something or other and all the innocent, harmless old clerks are picked out as goat-meat and "dumped," to satisfy the cravings of a reform appetite in the city. There is one subject that never dare be mentioned to this clerk; that is politics. He has a vote. He recognizes that fact, but when election day comes he steals away privily and votes surreptitiously for the men he thinks are sure to be elected. That is all he cares; he wants to be sure he picks the winners so that without lying he can say, should the question ever be raised, that he voted for the powers that be. He lives in dread of a crusade of municipal purity, not because he has ever done anything wrong, or revolts at the idea of purity. As a matter of fact he is a very pure-minded man. But he knows in such crusades it is not always the saracen that feeds the crows. His is a sad, furtive, frightened little life. The only place he expands is at home, behind drawn blinds with his wife and the kiddies, and every night they pray that the chief kiddy may grow to be a good son and get a job as a railroad president—something a long way from a city hall. If this man were "fired" or gave up his clerkship to apply for some-

is the man whose life is one long evasion, one long effort to cover up half-done work, or badly-done work. He is afraid of his shadow. He is the ready victim of bolder men, contractors or higher officials, who shove off their misdeeds on him. He, too, dreads investigations, not because he is guilty—he is not guilty—but because he knows he would be blamed for what he is really not responsible for.

There may be the real grafter, the real plunderer. I don't think there are very many of his kind in Canada. Most of the graft, if any, is in cigars and perhaps a little free coal from coal dealers, and paint from the Property Department and so on. But the next kind of municipal servant I am interested in is the departmental head, who wants to do his duty, has the brains, the ambition and the energy, but who is so held down by circumstances that he can't. He is the real man to be sorry for.

THERE once was in a Canadian city an engineer who knew his work, liked it and loved his city. He was an expert. His profession recognized him as a first-class man. His department ran along all right for years, until the city began to undertake additional works—which at that time came under his department. Some of these, after completion, did not give satisfaction. Some of the newspapers took it up. There was a mild protest. A certain paper began to nag at the engineer's department. It nagged him day in and day out. It found fault not only with the wrong things, but with things that were not wrong at all. It set up certain aldermen to agitate for the engineer's removal. Other papers backed him up as best they could, not because they knew anything about engineering, but because something told them this man was a good man; they liked the way he looked folks in the eye.