

EDITORIAL

## STIFFENING THEIR OWN BACK-BONE.

By DANIEL DE LEON

**H**OW charmingly virtuous and virtuously charming looketh the bill introduced by Assemblyman Walker at Albany “intended to check arson.”

Isn't arson a bad thing? Does not arson destroy wealth, endanger still more wealth, and even endanger life itself? Can there be any guile lurking under the charmingly virtuous, and virtuously charming countenance of a bill to check the mischief?

The language of modern events is best understood when translated into the language of events that have passed.

The present Constitution of the State of New York has a clause that renders the giving of passes by railroads a punishable offence. How came this about? Was the New York Constitutional convention of 1894 run by agrarians, intent to shackle the hands of the Railroads?

The question is sufficiently answered by stating that the chairman of the convention was none other than the corporation lawyer Elihu Root. That fact underscores the other fact which it reflects—the convention was run from top to bottom by the plutocracy. They stood at the throttle, and had the convention machinery well in hand from start to finish.

How, then, came such a convention to enact a punitive clause against a “Railroads practice?”

It happened this wise: Applications for passes were so common that they became a positive nuisance. The worst of it was that the Railroads did not always dare refuse. The applicants—politicians and other folks with power to take revenge—could not very well be put off. How escape the trouble without running the risk of “reprisals”? The convention solved the problem. The clause forbidding passes

and rendering the Railroads criminally responsible enabled the Railroads to look any undesirable pass-applicant innocently in the face; assure him of the Railroad's almost uncontrollable desire to accommodate him; but, pointing to the constitutional clause, say unto him: "Our hands are bound; fain would we, but we are forbidden by Law." It was a "clever" move.

The bill to "check arson," if translated into the constitutional law regarding passes forthwith becomes as lucid as a Mother Goose rhyme.

There are people, not uninfluential ones, who make a business of "fires." Insurance companies, of course, do not hanker after such customers. In order to steer clear of them, insurance companies "put questions." The questions are often resented as "impertinent" and "insulting"—for instance, the question whether the applicant ever had been refused insurance; or, whether fires had occurred previously on premises owned by him. Companies do not like to forfeit premiums. Towards prospective premiums companies' politeness eclipses the politeness of a Louis XVI reception. At the same time companies dislike to pay insurance moneys: they entertain a positive aversion for the thing. How reconcile the two sentiments—enjoy the flowers of the former, avoid the thorns of the latter? The Walker bill is expected to do the trick. What applicant can take offence at any question that the company is forced by law to put, and puts only in patriotic submission to the law? Of course none.

And there you have it.

By pulling the wires for the enactment of such laws as the one provided by the constitution against passes, and the one now introduced by Assemblyman Walker, the Corporations but stiffen their own backbones while seeming to bend their knees in humility.

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