

PLAIN TALK



January

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THIRTY-FIVE CENTS

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PLAIN TALK



Why the Republicans Fear Smith

By FRANK R. KENT

Political parties are guessing on account of Al Smith. Will the Republicans, whose national convention comes first, dare to put a lesser man against Smith's possible if not probable nomination by the Democrats? Whether Smith himself is nominated and elected, it looks to Frank Kent—about the shrewdest political writer in the United States—that upon Smith is going to depend who is nominated and elected President of the United States, regardless of party.

IF, AS a result of the 1928 election, the country gets a first class President it may not be Alfred Emanuel Smith—though there is every reason to think he would make that sort of President—but it very likely will be by reason of Alfred Emanuel Smith. Another way of presenting this idea is to say that Republican respect for Alfred Emanuel's prowess as a candidate is so pronounced that a real prospect of his selection by the Democrats will compel the nomination of their best available man by the Republicans, a thing to which they rarely resort or are driven, as abundantly evidenced by the present White House incumbent and his immediate predecessor. Still another form of expressing the same thing is that the more likely appears the Al Smith nomination by one party, the stronger become the chances that Herbert Hoover will head the ticket of the other.

It is true that in the seven months that must elapse before the conventions

meet the whole face of things political may have changed. It is true, too, that between the time this piece is written and the time it is printed there may easily occur developments that will cause these arguments to seem as silly as those in the elaborate article recently written by a peripatetic Republican propagandist, and printed in one of the smuggest of the Republican organs, naïvely begging Governor Smith not to run in 1928 on the ground that he could not beat Mr. Coolidge, who by now everyone except a few Slemphish fellows know will not figure in the 1928 fight at all. But those are the chances it is necessary to take in writing about politics a few weeks ahead of the time of publication. As things stand today, however, a logical defense of the theory advanced in the first three sentences above written can be made. In fact there is more logic and force to buttress them than anything else about the existing political situation that can

The American Emperor

By DAVID WARREN RYDER

In San Francisco; not so long ago, there was an "Emperor of the United States"; beloved and venerated by his subjects. He collected taxes from them, scolded them on occasions, and upon his death thousands from San Francisco and the State of California mourned him. Here is a true story of kindness to frailty by a whole city.

EVENING of a bleak day early in the month of November, 1849, saw the tiny German schooner, *Franziska*, showing unmistakably the effects of a merciless beating from the storm-swept waters of the Pacific, pass through the Golden Gate and into San Francisco Bay. Part of her cargo had been washed overboard, and she was leaking badly from an opened seam. Only the cessation of the storm and a change in the direction of the wind, two days out of San Francisco, saved her from sinking.

History, upon whose skeleton of cold facts there is engrafted layer after layer of the warm flesh of honest men's imaginings, has told us little about six of the seven passengers aboard the *Franziska*. Nor do we know in what harbor the tiny schooner rested in final anchorage, nor the fate of Nicolas Dau, its stout-hearted captain. But of him whom destiny was to clothe with America's imperial purple, history has said much, and most of it is charming.

Joshua Abraham Norton, the seventh passenger, was born in London, an English Jew. When he stepped from the deck of the *Franziska* to the shores of San Francisco he was "about twenty-eight or thirty years old, tall and well built, and bearing himself in the manner of a gentleman". He was wearing a peculiar cape, which "lent dignity to him" and which also, apparently, made him a target for the

eyes of everyone. The cape, we learn, was of a "cast of color" between blue and red, so that when wet it "gleamed in sun or lamp-light" and, beginning just atop his heels, reached to his neck, where it ended in a great fur collar that concealed the back of his head and all of his face except his "piercing" eyes and "hawk-like" nose.

At the well-known William Tell House, the principal hostelry of the day, Norton put up, writing his name on the register in a flowing hand, and adding after it the somewhat ambiguous words, "traveling merchant".

If there was some obscurity surrounding the only description Norton gave of what he was; there was not long any regarding what he proposed to do and be. The ink that recorded his hand-writing on the register of the William Tell House was barely dry before he was out of the hotel, casting an appraising eye upon the considerable expanse of vacant area which the crooked streets carved off. And in less than two months from the time that he stepped ashore from the leaking *Franziska*, there stood on one of the main arteries of foot and horse traffic a big, barn-like structure, across the whole front of which in bold lettering ran the legend, "J. A. Norton, Merchant".

The exact character of the commodities which J. A. Norton merchanted are not set down, but we learn that

"the prices for his goods were considerably below any which had previously prevailed in the community", and that he was soon "engaged in plying a lively traffic in goods and wares with the miners, cattlemen, sheepherders and other early residents". His traffic must have been lively, indeed for in less than four years he had enlarged his store to several times its original proportions and was known throughout the community as very well-to-do, owning besides his store building several other goodly structures in favorable locations.

Inasmuch as the beginning of the year 1853 found J. A. Norton a prosperous but plain citizen of the growing city of San Francisco, who could have foreseen that before another twelve-month had expired he would have forsaken the comparatively sombre garb and prosaic duties of a merchant for the habiliments of royalty? In San Francisco in the year 1853, toward the latter end of the year, came a disastrous conflagration—one of five that were to sweep the wooden city during the course of a dozen years—and razed it to the ground. Where there had been half a thousand structures of business and trade, palpitating with activity, and five or six thousand homes to house the thriving city's population, there was left only smoking ashes and ruined hopes.



All that J. A. Norton, well-to-do merchant and property-owner, had possessed was in those ashes. For days he walked the streets, visiting the places where his buildings had stood and seeing instead of the comparative wealth they had represented, only smoking, and then rain-soaked ashes, refusing to take solace from the words of any man. His actions were remarked by

many—he was well-known throughout the community—and when reports circulated that he had been seen several times wandering along the waterfront, such concern was felt that a group of leading citizens hunted him out and offered help to rebuild and re-stock his store. But he only half-listened to this kindly offer, appearing "as a man dazed and distracted by tremendous grief", and walked away without making a reply.

Youth soon forgets. Sure of its own fine destiny, youth cannot for over-long give itself to inaction and vain repining. Soon a new crop of wooden buildings sprouted in San Francisco, and men had little time to think of the once prosperous merchant, Joshua Abraham Norton. It was subject to later comment that his absence from his familiar haunts was not noted until it had endured for several weeks. Then, just as it had begun to dwell in upon his former associates, and there was talk of making a search for him, he reappeared. Not, however, as Joshua Abraham Norton, "traveling merchant". He reappeared as a *personage*.

In the beginning he bore only the title, "Norton I, Emperor of the United States of America". This, according to a public announcement which he caused to be printed and widely placarded throughout the city, had been "duly conferred" upon him by the State Legislature at Sacramento. Later, when our sister republic to the South "beseeched" him to rule because she "longed for his strong government and wisdom", he assumed the rule of Mexico and added to his original title, "Protector of Mexico". The "protectorate", however, seems to have been more of an afterthought than anything else. He made reference to it infrequently and his fame partook of it but slightly. For nearly thirty

years, until the day he died, his fame rested upon his career as "Emperor" Norton.



When Norton I "ascended the throne" and made public announcement of his investment with the high powers and titles attaching thereto, it may have caused mild astonishment amongst his fellow citizens. This astonishment was considerably increased when he supplemented the original pronouncement with the stout declaration that the first duty of "subjects" to an emperor was to pay tribute; and proceeded to obtain as much as his needs warranted; requesting in the first instance, but *demanding* with threat of penalties, in case it was necessary. The very day of his "ascension" he is said to have collected "taxes" totalling upwards of twenty-five dollars from individuals and business firms, to whom he had been well-known when he was J. A. Norton, merchant, but whom he now treated simply as "subjects".

So far as can be learned, however, no one, then or thereafter, ever offered to dispute Emperor Norton's imperial position, or to suggest even the slightest curtailment of his liberty. Everyone with whom he came in contact affected to take him and his pretensions seriously, and treated him with all the show and respect and courtesy due a reigning monarch. Seldom, it is said, did anyone make any show of resistance to his "requests" for "taxes"; and on such rare occasions as remonstrance was evidenced, it invariably capitulated to demands. On his part, the Emperor conducted himself with the graciousness which undisputed possession of rank and power can afford, yielding to choler and forceful utterances only when strongly provoked, and then but momentarily.

Upon "ascending the throne" Emperor Norton I proceeded with commendable dispatch to establish and declare his close kinship of blood to certain of the reigning monarchs and princely families of Europe. Being a Bourbon, he had nothing but hatred for Napoleon, whom he denounced with a bitterness and vehemence otherwise only evidenced when he was called upon to deny that he, Emperor Norton, was a Jew. Queen Victoria, however, was his "dear cousin", as likewise was the Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia. To the latter, after vainly trying to secure the Pope's intervention to prevent hostilities, he sent much "good and friendly advice" during the Franco-Prussian War. Upon the success of the Prussian arms in 1872 he caused to be published and placarded a proclamation of rejoicing, which bore his *imprimatur* and official seal and read:

We, Norton I, Emperor of the United States of America and Protector of Mexico, do hereby decree and ordain that for the period of one week from and after the date hereof and beginning forthwith, the people shall indulge in continuous rejoicings and most fervent prayers of thanksgiving, for that the God of Hosts, in His Majesty and Wisdom, has lent great prowess to the arms of our friends and blood-cousins the Prussians and led them to immortal victory for the greater glory of God and the Universal Brotherhood of Man.
In hoc signo vinces!

The matter of whether or not his subjects obeyed such proclamations gave Emperor Norton no concern. Once issued, a proclamation was left to take care of itself, while he turned, appropriately, to other affairs—proof, if proof were needed, that he was both a benign and a wise monarch, possessing the imperial capacity to believe that none would dare disobey a mandate of such exalted source, and if any there was thus to dare, it was best to ignore such perfidy.

Although he imposed taxes, Em-

peror Norton did not put his subjects to the expense of maintaining a host of tax-gatherers. He saved expenses by attending to this important matter in person. Of his ordinary subjects he always *requested* the excise, but upon banks and affluent business houses, he served courteous but none the less firm *demands*; threatening, in the case of occasional opposition, to "levy attachments". Here is further testimony to his sense of fitness and proportion. And if the extra-legality of his tax-gathering forays is stressed, let it be said in extenuation that they imposed no heavy burdens, reduced no subject to want, and drove none into bankruptcy. Usually the amount of a request or demand did not exceed two or three dollars. Only when the state of the royal exchequer required, did he collect as much as ten. Small amounts were acknowledged merely by a word of thanks, but larger sums he honored with a receipt, signed "Norton I, Emperor of the United States of America", and bearing a large gold seal comprising his royal crest.



It may be said of Emperor Norton in strictest verity that he was a most democratic ruler. He scorned royal equipage—no coach or carriage for him—walking everywhere. Nor did he surround himself with a host of seneschals or preserve a cold and haughty seclusion. He went everywhere, attended every public function, and save for groups of children that frequently followed him, and for his two dogs, Bummer and Lazarus, was always unaccompanied. One of his favorite forms of entertainment was a big political meeting. Neighborhood or sectional rallies he did not bother with; but came a big, city-wide meeting with a brass band and plenty of red fire, and he was almost sure to be

found occupying a seat well up to the front of the hall. Once, he was even invited to sit upon the platform, at the right hand of the candidate for United States Senator; and precipitated much hearty applause when he stood up in the midst of the candidate's address and in a loud voice, announced that the candidate need not bother to speak farther; that he, Emperor Norton, would appoint him to the senatorship without further ado.

What a picture the Emperor made on these important occasions! His full uniform consisted of a blue-green coat with long tails reaching almost to his shoe-tops, bright blue trousers with a red band running down the outside of each leg, gold epaulettes, and, to complete the ensemble, a general's high hat in which was fixed a red cockade and a long green ostrich plume. On extra special occasions he carried a massive sabre (the gift of an admiring San Francisco blacksmith); otherwise only a heavy walking stick or big umbrella. But a red rose always adorned his coat lapel, and from the breast pocket of his coat a multi-colored silk handkerchief invariably protruded. His shoes, though hardly indicative of royal station, were yet a distinguishing characteristic, and served to proclaim his predilection to put utility and comfort above beauty and rank. The Emperor suffered incessantly from corns, and humored them by puncturing his shoes generously.

The money that Emperor Norton gathered from his subjects in the form of taxes, was used by him to pay room rent, laundry and other smaller bills, and for charity; for he was always most generous to anyone in need. Cigars, tobacco and an occasional glass of liquor, he took in lieu of money for "taxes", and it was remarked of him that he was never known to display avarice, never known to ask for

or take more than enough for his immediate needs. This applied both to money and to goods and wares. When his uniform became worn and shabby, he simply announced through the press that he needed a new one; the money was always forthcoming. Several times one or another of the newspapers donated the whole amount. Once a newspaper collected it by popular subscription, and once the supervisors of the city and county of San Francisco, with discriminating disregard for the strict legal proprieties, voted him a new full dress uniform at the expense of the public treasury. The full dress uniform was made to measure at the order of the Clerk of the Board, and publicly presented to the Emperor amidst much applause from a large attendance of the populace.



A less democratic emperor might have kept a royal chef and a retinue of cooks and servitors, and taken his meals in splendid isolation. Not so Norton I. When desire for food overtook him, he merely looked for the hotel or restaurant nearest at hand, and entered. Once inside, however, he became as particular, both in respect of food and service, as the best of emperors should be. There was one time when the imperial imperium asserted itself. He commanded the instant service of everyone in sight, and if either food or service in the slightest manner displeased him, arose from his seat, pounded the floor violently with his cane or umbrella and scolded the waiters roundly. Usually this demonstration brought out the proprietor, whose profuse apologies the Emperor accepted graciously. He then took his seat and finished the meal without further complaint. Ofttimes, after dining, he went to the proprietor and inquired if a receipt was desired, invariably re-

ceiving the reply, "Never mind, Emperor". More often, however, he rose in a stately manner and stalked out without a word to anyone.

During approximately the first half of his reign, the Emperor was seldom seen without his canine escort, Bummer and Lazarus, the two Collie dogs whose affection for him and for each other was remarkable, and of whose intelligence numerous instances are noted. Once, for example, Bummer was lame from some cause and could not get about. Lazarus thereupon visited several of the restaurants where the famous triumvirate were known, and, entering, would not give over barking until he had been given a chunk of meat, which he carried at once to his lamed brother. In the year 1868 both Bummer and Lazarus fell ill of distemper, and died within a day or two of each other. Their bereaved master had a grave dug for them in a sand-cliff overhanging the waters of San Francisco Bay. There, after a funeral attended, it is asserted, by a "concourse of San Franciscans on foot and in carriage", they were buried side by side.¹

The passing of his beloved dogs was a bereavement from which Emperor Norton never fully recovered. Those of his subjects privileged to know him intimately said he spoke often of the dogs, and never without a trace of sadness. He did not, *albeit*, allow personal sorrow to interfere with public duty. He read all the papers to keep abreast of affairs, and let pass no opportunity to aid his subjects or impertune them in behalf of progress and stability. In the case of emergency he was equal to the demands of the

¹There is one report that only one of the dogs was buried; that the Emperor had a taxidermist stuff and mount the other, and afterwards presented it to the proprietor of a restaurant where he frequently took his meals. I am inclined, however, to doubt this report; there is no other evidence of favoritism displayed by the Emperor.

occasion, and never slow to act. It was not surprising, therefore, that when, along in the Fall of 1870, the community was experiencing a period of very hard times, he had the printer strike off several thousand "Treasury Certificates", as a measure of financial relief and protection. They were issued in the denomination of one dollar, and printed on heavy paper in pink lettering. They were of huge size—about ten inches square, and each bore a replica of the Emperor's signature and the impress of his seal. The wording of them ran:

The Amount of One Dollar (\$1.00) and Interest will be Converted into 7% Bonds Maturing in the year 1880, and will be paid out by the Agent of my Private Fortune in case that the Government of Norton I does not exist at that time.

NORTON I, EMPEROR OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND PROTECTOR OF MEXICO.

The issuance of these "Treasury Certificates" was announced by the Emperor in the following proclamation, reflecting alike a deep concern for his subjects' welfare and an earnest desire to aid them:

We, Norton I, by Grace of God Emperor of the United States of America and Protector of Mexico, being aware of the deplorable conditions affecting finances, and desiring above all to alleviate suffering and afford to all our people a sound and safe security for their savings, have caused to be issued Treasury Certificates which are secured by all property of the Empire, and will be paid out of my private fortune if necessary, and which I decree shall be accepted everywhere as of the same value as gold coin or currency of the Realm. In the Name of God, Amen.

Suitable for framing, the Emperor's certificates obtained a wide circulation. Until the fire of 1906, many of them were to be seen hanging on the walls of San Francisco offices and homes.



The Emperor's conception of his public duty embraced attendance upon

the sessions of the California Legislature. There was a special seat—a large and comfortable chair—reserved for him in the Senate Chamber, and during twenty years he seldom missed a session. He listened attentively to all that transpired, and took copious notes in a large black book which had a clasp and lock, and which he would never allow out of his possession. Testifying in this manner to a belief that the legislative branch of the government should be closely watched—he restricted his activity entirely to watching—he showed that his theory of government did not sanction the encroaching of the executive upon the legislative. Only once did he depart from this policy. When General Grant was seeking nomination for a third term, the Emperor requested the Legislature to protest. And when the Legislature did not obey, he sent a personal telegram, direct, ordering the General to withdraw from the contest.

Probably few people know that the ignorance of a dining-car waiter threatened the franchises of the great Central Pacific Railroad. The California Legislature was about to convene in Sacramento, and to accommodate the traveling public, the Central Pacific had instituted a dining-car service on its line between San Francisco and the State capital. Emperor Norton, *en route* to perform his duties at the capital, entered the diner and, in line with his usual custom, demanded immediate attention. Clutching a waiter by the arm, he held him fast while he gave orders to bring him French mutton chops, with side orders of various vegetables, fried oysters, and a bottle of Rhine wine. Released, the waiter ignored him; whereupon the Emperor repeated his orders. The waiter—a negro, who doubtless had never heard of Norton I—suggested that the Emperor might not have money enough to

pay for all this. In the face of such arrogance his majesty grew violent. He beat the table with his heavy cane, berated the terrified waiter, and in a loud and angry voice announced that if his orders were not obeyed instantly he would revoke the railroad's franchises.

Momentarily, the fate of one of the nation's great continental railway systems hung in the balance. Then a group of San Franciscans who knew the Emperor entered the diner; and, becoming apprised of the situation, instructed the waiter not only to fill the Emperor's order but to bring him champagne and to present the bill to them. The waiter complied, but it was not until the train conductor had come in, and on behalf of the company and himself issued a wordy apology, that the Emperor regained his composure. Afterwards, he insisted upon treating all present to champagne, and to the now joyfully obsequious waiter he gave a dollar tip. A few days after this distressing incident the Central Pacific Railroad Company sent the Emperor a life pass, good on any of its California lines, and in all its diners.

On only one other occasion, so far as can be learned, was Emperor Norton's authority disputed or his privileges denied. Again he was *en route* to a session of the Legislature. This time he had elected to travel by the Sacramento River steamboat, *Yosemite*, and the captain, evidently unaware of the royalty of his cargo, demanded fare. The Emperor was once more outraged. He returned ashore and the same day published a proclamation reading:

We, Norton I, *Dei Gratia* Emperor of the United States of America and Protector of Mexico, do command that the Steamship Company for denying us a free passage to Sacramento be blocked on the river by the Revenue Cutter, *Shubric*, until the rebels surrender.

The "rebels" surrendered; the steamship company immediately sent the Emperor a letter of apology and a pass on all its boats for life!



Although apparently not a member of any church, Emperor Norton was sincerely religious, and as broadminded in matters of religion as in other affairs. There is some proof that he had been a member of the Masonic Lodge at one time in his life. If so, he did not allow that to affect his religious views. He attended the Catholic as often as any other church. His custom was to make the rounds, going to one church one Sunday, another the next, and so on until he had completed the cycle. Few, if any, of his manifold proclamations were without reference to the Deity, or failed somewhere to sound a religious note; and aside from the newspapers, which he read dutifully to keep posted of temporal affairs, the most of his reading is said to have been confined to the Bible.

As age came on, the Emperor, although apparently losing little of his mental agility, reduced the orbit of his peregrination. Rather, it was reduced for him by the afflictions which age brought on. In the later years he suffered considerably from rheumatism in his knees; and whereas, once, on his strolls about the empire he had carried a walking-stick chiefly as a badge of authority, he now leaned heavily on his cane. To the very end, however, he remained faithful to his dream. On December 31, 1879, he issued an Imperial Proclamation, calling upon his subjects to offer "prayers of thanksgiving to Almighty God" for the blessings of the year that was closing, and to "dedicate themselves anew to good deeds and honor" for the year that was about to be ushered in.

That proclamation was the Emperor's last. New Year's Day he walked out a little, leaning heavily on his cane. But the day after he took to bed, and six days later—January 8, 1880—he died. Details of the exact nature of the illness are lacking. We only know that he died at peace with all the world, and, leaving no successor, his passing ended the Empire and America reverted to a Republic.

There was sincere grief throughout the entire city at the Emperor's death, and his funeral was a long-remembered one. The Pacific Union Club, most of whose members prized receipts

they held for "taxes" they had paid the Emperor, defrayed all expenses. The newspapers published pictures of him and long accounts of his life, and "more than 10,000 people, from working-men to millionaires and including over 2,000 women and children, followed his corpse to the Masonic Cemetery". There, whilst a choir of two hundred children—who had known and loved him during his lifetime—sang his favorite hymns, the mortal remains of Norton I, Emperor of the United States of America and Protector of Mexico, were laid to rest. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*



Aftermath

By FRANCES M. FROST

Where this lost love once was, I said,
Let there be forgetfulness,
Leading me gently to unknown peace
And death's dark quietness.

But there were my reaching arms by day
And my hungry lips by night,
And the crying silence of vanished things
Each slow twilight.

And so I said: where love once was
Let there still be, like a knife,
The piercing beauty of the olden dream
To make strong my way of life.