

THE COURIER

VOL. XVII, NO. II

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 1902

ESTABLISHED IN 1886

THE POTENT POWER OF POLITICS

It Raised Joseph S. Bartley to a High Official Station,
Then Sent Him to Prison,
And After a Lapse of Five Years Finally Set Him Free.

"I hope that no official act of mine may cause the party to regret the choice you have just made."

The speaker was a tall, black-whiskered, well-groomed, fine-looking young man, not yet thirty-five years old. It was the republican state convention he was addressing. The delegates were crowded into the new Oliver theatre a hot day in August of 1892. The day before the convention had met and fought long and bitterly over the selection of a candidate for governor. A truce over night settled the matter. It also disposed of the ambitions of several other gentlemen and when the roll was called on nominations for state treasurer, Joseph S. Bartley, of Holt county, was named before it was half finished. It was, in fact, never completed, the call being suspended and the nomination made by acclamation.

Cries for the nominee brought forward Mr. Bartley. It was then that he spoke the words given above. How well he kept his promise is history.

This was not the first appearance of Mr. Bartley in state politics. Almost from the time when a young man of twenty-six he founded the Exchange bank of Atkinson he was a power and a prominent figure in state politics. Active, energetic and alert he easily took rank at state conventions among the leaders. In the old days the worthy ambition of every country banker interested in politics was to become state treasurer. Mr. Bartley was among them. He first shied his castor into the ring in 1888. The completion of Charley Willard's second term left the field open to all who aspired. A dozen or more republicans, most of them bankers, came forward.

This was shortly after the Elkhorn railroad had brought north central Nebraska into close touch with the state capital. The evening train over that road the night before the convention brought two special cars in which traveled the delegates from Holt and adjacent counties, the men pledged to support Bartley for treasurer. Banners depending from the sides of the car announced that the choice of that section for state treasurer was Joseph S. Bartley, of Holt. Accompanying the delegation was a fine brass band, and it announced the arrival of the delegation in no uncertain tones. The entry of the Bartley delegates to Lincoln was spectacular and they hewed to that line until they went down in defeat. Bartley was the third man in the race on the first ballot, but he never came within sight of the goal. The fight narrowed down finally between Einsel of Phelps and Hill of Gage, and Hill won.

Bartley made such an impression, however, that four years later he found the plum easy picking. But in reaching the goal of his ambition he laid the foundation for trouble of the bitterest sort.

Mr. Bartley was born in Indiana in 1858. His earlier years were spent on farms in that state and in Illinois.

In 1880 he came to Nebraska and homesteaded in Holt county near the town of Atkinson. He became interested in farming and stock-raising, and in 1884 established a bank that was a money-maker from the start. It went down, however, in the stress of the panic in 1897.

Bartley bears in his person none of the traces of the hard toil of his earlier years on the farm. When he became state treasurer he was but thirty-five years of age. He was courtly, suave, polished—a distinctive man of the

last term he served. His excuse was that it was necessary to save the banks. That he did prevent failure in a number of instances is a fact too well known to be disputed. In other cases, however, where he deposited sums largely in excess of the amount the bank's bond called for, the state lost heavily through the subsequent failure of the institutions. It has been charged and never denied that in a good many instances the state treasurer loaned the state's money to banks and kept the interest for himself.

tion to tell. The democratic attorney general found, however, that the retiring treasurer had sold a state warrant for \$180,000 and turned the proceeds into his private account. In the Capital National bank failure the state's sinking fund had lost that amount, and in order to restore it the legislature passed a law appropriating that sum from the general fund. All that was really necessary was for the treasurer to make two entries of transfer on his books. He chose, however, to issue and market the warrant and when the state was finally called upon to pay it had reached the amount of \$201,800. It was because of this transaction that Bartley was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in the penitentiary. He was released after actually serving four years and five months.

Joseph Bartley is a man of indomitable spirit. It was not crushed by imprisonment. It may have been because he held in his hands the power to make proud men bow before him, because he possessed information that would have brought sorrow and degradation upon them—a power that he well knew would speedily force his own release. A weaker man, one with a coarser conception of fidelity, with less tact and acuteness, would long ago, to save himself from the pangs of imprisonment, have made a clean breast of it all. But he would have come out from prison a man without those same powerful friendships that a man like Bartley finds the savor of life, he would have emerged a pariah, a scorned and despised man. As it is, he was released upon petitions signed by the most influential men in the state, and although the act of the governor has met with a storm of criticism, Bartley finds friends and sympathizers by the score.

There is little in Mr. Bartley's face and person to indicate that he has just emerged from so long an imprisonment. His countenance bears little trace of suffering, his hands are as soft and white as ever. Prison life for him was not the rigorous, monotonous round of existence that is the fate of the ordinary criminal. Much of his time was spent in the greenhouse, where he had access to company and to friends and where his tasks were the lightest. He slept in the hospital and not in a cheerless cell. He has come out full of life, full of hope and vigor. He avows his intention of remaining in Nebraska and proving to its people that he was not so black as he has been painted. The future will prove it all.

The storm of protest and criticism that followed his unconditional pardon astounded both Bartley and his friends. They realize now that they misjudged the sentiment of the people, but they seem to believe that explanation avoids explanation—and the man who loaned the state's money and the men who borrowed it have all taken out charter membership in the Don't Tell club.



JOSEPH S. BARTLEY.

world. There was pride, amounting almost to imperiousness, in his bearing. His position as state treasurer placed him in the possession of the state's millions, made him part arbiter of the financial destiny of banks innumerable in the state. Just before he took charge of the office the legislature passed a law requiring the deposit of certain funds in such banks as could give approved security in the shape of personal bonds. This curtailed greatly the power of the treasurer in the disposition of state's moneys, but still left him a considerable leverage. He could disregard the law if he cared to run the risk, and he did so during

Twenty-five hundred dollars a year is all the statute allows the treasurer, but for years it was a well-established tradition that by farming out of state funds the office was worth all the way from \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year. His predecessors had done it and Bartley followed the old, profitable custom.

When Bartley was called upon at the end of his second term to turn over the state's cash, he found himself lacking in ready money almost three-quarters of a million dollars. Just how much of this had been lost in banks or how much he had lost in private speculations of his own, only Mr. Bartley himself knows and he shows little disposi-