

THOMAS M. WALLER

THE HON. THOMAS M. WALLER of New London, beginning life as a New York newsboy and rising to many positions of public preferment, including those of governor of his State and of consul general to London, has had a career that fascinates by its romance and convinces by its success.

"Governor Tom Waller," as he is still familiarly and affectionately called, was born in New York City in 1840, of Irish parentage. His father, Thomas C. Armstrong, his mother, Mary Armstrong, and his only brother, William, died before he was eight years old, leaving him entirely alone and unassisted to face the world. Sufficient courage to bring him success could not have developed so quickly without his having inherited a good-sized germ of it; inheritance and development together produced an asset which dwellers in the sumptuous houses of the metropolis might have envied at that very moment when he was an orphan in the streets. And if ever he deserved the title of "Little Giant," later bestowed upon him, it was then.

With pennies given him by a stranger, the boy bought a few papers and started upon his career, soon doubling his capital and putting aside a fair percentage. But there were broader fields for him. Without realizing how broad, his boyish fancy began to picture them till, after one summer as a newsboy, restlessness aroused his spirit of adventure. It was in the days of the gold fever of '49. We cannot dismiss this newsboy period, however, without enjoying one glimpse of it which he himself gives, with a quotation which at the same time will illustrate that native wit which on many occasions has served as a sesame for him. The quotation is from a speech delivered not many years ago in Brooklyn. "The papers I was selling on the streets of New York," he said, "were so filled with accounts of mountains of gold that I thought gold would not be 'worth a cent,' and with this apprehension, instead of going west with the star of empire, I went to Connecticut. I went there as to a reformatory school, thinking that when I was good enough I would return to New



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York and become a New York politician. I have stayed there a good while. I have returned to New York, but only to do business, not to be a politician. I have had some temptation to step into the political waters here, but I have resisted it. I am satisfied that a larger probation is necessary. I am not good enough yet."

His next step after being a "newsy" was to become a cabin boy in a fishing vessel sailing from New York. Speak of it as he will now, it was almost impossible that he should not be caught in the strong current toward California. He had gone so far as to make his plans to sail in a schooner for the Golden Gate, when he came under the notice of Robert K. Waller of New London. Mr. Waller was of a benevolent disposition and his farsightedness was to be tested. Discerning the boy's capabilities, he offered him a home and education, and the boy had sense enough to prefer them to the glittering allurements of the gold fields. He adopted him into his family and gave him the name to which he was to bring honor. The little fellow, who had picked up some schooling at odd moments in New York, was put into the New London schools, where he made rapid progress and entered the Bartlett Grammar School of which E. B. Jennings was the master. There he was graduated with high honors in a class which included several who were to become prominent in life, and there he began to develop those oratorical powers which later were to enable him to hold large audiences spellbound. He took the first prize in oratory at the school, at the age of seventeen, and has taken it in the forum, at the Bar, and in the convention hall many times since.

His inclination was toward the law. After a due course of study, he was admitted to the Bar and soon had established a lucrative practice. His power to move a jury was particularly wonderful. With the coming of the Civil War, his warm heart and good red blood compelled him to throw aside his law books and enlist. He was appointed sergeant in Company E of the Second Connecticut Volunteers April 22nd, 1861, but being incapacitated by a serious disease of the eyes he was discharged on June 27th. Thwarted in this direction, he forthwith proceeded to employ his talents as a speaker in aiding the recruiting of other regiments in his own and other states. It was then, in this worthy cause, that he first gained fame as a public speaker.

In 1867 and again in 1868, he was chosen representative from New London to the General Assembly. One of his most notable efforts of this period was his argument in behalf of a bridge across the Connecticut River at Saybrook. Senator W. W. Eaton, the "War Horse" of Hartford, was the leader of the opposition, which saw in the plan nothing but irremediable injury to commercial interests along the river, "God's highway." To-day when a wooden bridge has been succeeded by an iron one and that in turn is being succeeded by one still greater, to meet the growing requirements, it is difficult to recall or conceive the amount of excitement which the bridge project aroused and consequently the reason for the tremendous rejoicing by its advocates when the resolution was adopted. The point of Mr. Waller's argument was, "You can't resist the nineteenth century."

In 1870 Mr. Waller was elected Secretary of the State on the Democratic ticket, a position which did not interfere with his law practice. In 1876 he was sent to the House again and was the choice for speaker. The commendable shortness of that session was ascribed largely to his proficiency. After the close of the session he was appointed by the judges state's attorney for New London County. It fell to his lot to have to conduct some of the most remarkable cases known to Connecticut jurisprudence. Whatever the cases were, it might be said, he made them interesting. One of them was outside his county—over in New Haven County, where State's Attorney Tilton E. Doolittle was disqualified because of professional relations with the accused. It was the Hayden murder trial, where the State introduced expert testimony on a more comprehensive plan than had been known up to that time. One juror by preventing a conviction made his name celebrated.

Mr. Waller, as mayor of New London for a period of six years, gave that city a sharp, strenuous administration, so much so indeed that at one time there was a mass meeting to censure him for energetic efforts to work improvements. However, at that meeting he was permitted to speak in his own defense. The meeting adjourned without action and at the next election the people continued the reformer in office.

In 1882, while still state's attorney, he was nominated at the State Democratic Convention for governor. With his brilliant campaign oratory supplementing his record, he won a splendid victory.

Those who had professed to fear a whirlwind administration were happily disappointed in the dignity and conservativeness of it, in good keeping with those of Puritanical predecessors. At the next convention he was renominated unanimously by acclamation. It was the year of Cleveland's first presidential campaign. Waller's name was like a watchword, and "Our Tom" received even a larger vote than did Cleveland, who carried the State. By the peculiarity of the old Connecticut law, however, he failed of election because he did not have a majority over all, and a Republican General Assembly chose his Republican competitor, the Hon. Henry B. Harrison of New Haven.

In the National Democratic Convention which chose Mr. Cleveland, the "Little Giant" from Connecticut had made a speech which was notable for its eloquence and power. On Mr. Cleveland's accession to office, he gave Mr. Waller the very responsible and lucrative appointment of consul general to London, England. In that office the late governor made still another record for himself, and for his country as well. His achievements on several occasions elicited words of high praise from the State department at Washington. At the close of his four years' service, a banquet was tendered him by Englishmen and Americans, including the United States officials in England, and a massive silver loving-cup was presented to him in appreciation of what he had done.

On his return to America, he resumed the practice of law, the firm of Waller, Cook & Wagner being established at No. 15 Wall Street. "I work five days a week in New York that I may live two in Connecticut," he once remarked. His name has been mentioned since his retirement to private life as a worthy one for the vice-presidency of the United States on the Democratic ticket and again for governor, but he practically has abstained from politics. He had no sympathy whatever with the free-silver movement. Governor Morgan G. Bulkeley appointed him on the commission for the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893 and he was chosen first vice-president of that body, in which capacity he frequently had to preside in place of President Palmer, and his zeal had much to do in making it the crowning exposition of the world up to that time. His last public service was as delegate from his town to the Constitutional Convention in 1902, where his voice ever was uplifted in

the interests of reform and fair representation for the people. The document as indorsed by that non-partisan body bears the impress of his ideas in many places. That the reforms failed of approval by the Legislature was a disappointment to him.

Mr. Waller married Miss Charlotte Bishop of New London and has a family of one daughter, the wife of Professor William R. Appleby of the University of Minnesota, and five sons, Tracey, Martin B., Robert K., Charles B., and John M., all of whom, excepting John, who is a senior in Amherst College, are members of the Bar. The ex-governor spends a good share of his time now at his beautiful home in New London, but seclusion is impossible for one with pronounced ideas on affairs of public moment or for one whose opinion party leaders and the public generally are desirous to learn.

Since the above was written, the *Hartford Courant*, alluding to Governor Waller's appearance and speech as the president of the Democratic State Convention of September, 1906, editorially said:—

“Whoever heard Governor Waller's rattling speech at yesterday's Democratic Convention will be ready to aver that he is not a day over thirty years of age, no matter when he was born. It was common talk about the convention that he was asked to speak only as he was going to bed the night before. It was essentially and necessarily an impromptu address, but it was full of fire, sparkling with quick wit, eloquent, and at times very right. Somebody said it was ‘the old Tom Waller.’ Utterly wrong; it was the young Tom Waller,—who, in our opinion, will be young as long as he lives.

“Governor Waller never made a better off-hand speech than that of yesterday. He was never younger than he was yesterday. We look confidently to his appearance in, say, fifteen years, as a new boy orator; and we venture the safe prediction that the people will hear him gladly.”