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The Political Honesty of Women

A quizzical columnist on a clever and daring Midwest newspaper, reported not long ago that at a gathering of ladies in his town to discuss law enforcement, the president of the league, who had just returned from Europe, entertained her guests before calling the meeting to order by showing them a quantity of beautiful gowns which, she gleefully boasted, she had been able to bring in, duty free. This entertainment over, the meeting was called to order and there was a severe arraignment of nullificationists.

The writer of this item was probably taking a cynical fling at a certain inconsistency in notions of honesty which he felt he had discovered in womankind, not reporting literally; but many an ocean traveler could match the story from his personal experiences with ardent advocates of prohibition law enforcement, whose deep concern on the voyage was how to get their foreign purchases in without paying duty.

The last two days on an incoming liner, particularly in the fall, is a curious and entertaining exhibit of the muddled notions of law and order held by a considerable number of women. They make

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no bones about their intention to smuggle - their only question is what will be safest and surest. New lingerie is crumpled and stuffed into laundry bags along with obviously soiled articles. If the tailor, dress maker or milliner has left tags on coats, gowns or hats, they come off - possibly to be slipped into books so that the distinguished mark can be replaced once safe inside the American shores. Many of the leading hat and gown makers on the other side never put their labels on goods for American customers, though they will, if you wish, give you the labels to be put on at home. Lace is frequently sewn on used garments - not because it belongs there but as a device for escaping the eye of the examiner. Perhaps as amusing as anything that occurs in preparing for the entry is the dress parade at the last night's dinner when evening gowns, carefully packed for the voyage, come out of their boxes and wrappings and are donned in order that their owners may say "Not new - has been worn."

In the old days, women caught in attempts to slip by dutiable articles, not infrequently said, ahughtily, "I had no share in making this law, I don't propose to obey it." They cannot plead that today - it is now some years since they have had a responsibility towards duties and power to attack them if they were so minded.

A mockery of the situation is that many of the most successful women smugglers are beneficiaries of the tariff. I have heard custom house officials, made cynical by experience, declare that the women who require closest watching are those made rich by a highly protected industry. Apparently they think if the government takes care of them so liberally in one way it should in all ways. They are an ironical parallel to the ladies who began their tea party in support of law enforcement by rejoicing over law evasion.

The bad logic and bad morals of these exhibits can of course be laughed off as specimens of human inconsistency, but they have too

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real a bearing on the serious question of what we are to expect from women in making and administering laws, to be dismissed with a cynical "That's that." Nor can we fairly escape by pointing out the similar inconsistencies of men - men who vote 'dry' and live 'wet,' men who are the master smugglers, not dallying with mere articles of personal and home adornment like women but carrying on big and lucrative trades in forbidden goods. These facts in no way change the quality of the women's logic and morals; they remain just as bad and absurd, and they take the life out of that argument so widely used in the campaign for giving women votes - the argument that she would purify politics because inherently so much more honest than men, also so inexperienced in grafting and favoritism that she would neither understand nor be able to adapt herself to the widespread subtle practices that go on under the head of "honest graft." That is, women were to purify politics through their very innocence.

Women who argued that their sex knew nothing of the gentle art of grafting overlooked the vicious system of handling household and personal expenses under which the average American woman has been obliged to live for generations - a system not only inherently humiliating but inherently dishonest.

As heads of households they were obliged to spend money constantly; probably the bulk of their husband's income was directly or indirectly spent by them. But they did not know what a budget meant, they had no ideas about living within a income. They had to ask for every dollar - a humiliating condition that probably has been the cause of as much domestic unhappiness in this country as any other

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one thing. There are few of us who have lived to be fifty or over that cannot remember seeing a woman almost in hysterics because she must ask her husband for money. Almost universally among the well-to-do class the charge system prevailed - and still does. Women run up bills at the butcher's, the baker's, the candlestick maker's, the dry-goods store, the flower shop. I have known women of wealth who could run up bills into the thousands of dollars and yet who rarely had five dollars in their purses.

Now, what is the inevitable effect on a woman in this situation? She runs up her bills recklessly, generally without considering prices. The end of the month when these bills come in is a dreadful moment. When she knws she has seriously overrunn she sticks a bill in the back of a drawer, hoping that next month she can economize and will later dare present it.

Another habit born of this unsound practice has grown up among women of various classes, particularly women of wealth. Shop keepers, tailors, dress makers, come to know those of their customers who do not handle their own money. They have been known to give a woman a commission on the very gown that she bought. The price is $100 - it is billed to her husband at $110. She gets the $10. She is doing, however, just what the cook in her kitchen is doing. The cook arranges with a butcher to give all her orders to him if he will give her a percentage. It is one of the commonest practices of servants in households where a woman has not allowance to which she rigidly holds expenditures.

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The woman who practices these evasions and makeshifts rarely understands why her husband is angry when he discovers them. She does not know that if he found a business associate doing what she does it would quickly lead to separation perhaps prosecution. In his code his wife is dishonest. In her code he is unkind, unfair, and that is, to a degree, true, for he does not reflect that no business associate would tolerate the situation into which he forces his wife.

Tens of thousands of the girls who annually go into one kind or another of business in this country go from homes where these more or less unsound, unfair and dishonest practices in handling the domestic budget prevail. It is inevitable that these girls have a blunted sense of meum and tuum. They go into offices which, five times out of ten, are honeycombed with small graft. They do as they see others doing. My first realization that one must individually watch her steps in an office if she did not wish to become a petty grafter, was when I discovered myself using office stamps on personal letters! It came to me with a sudden shock that I was stealing. This realization not only made me watchful of myself but of others. I think it may safely be said that in hundreds of offices in this country, where there is no scientific system of handling supplies, employees keep themselves and their friends in pencils, pads, stationery, and frequently postage stamps. I have known of a sheet of one hundred postage stamps being presented to a friend by a young woman in charge of office supplies. If you had told this girl she

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was stealing she would have been horrified, she belonged to the office - you had your perquisites, naturally. I am told it is a fact that many business men never buy stamped envelopes, although they are more convenient because grafting employees make it too expensive.

It is not always the underling that is at fault. This pilfering is not infrequently suggested to him by a purchasing agent who gets his little commission on supplies - the larger the order, the larger the commission, and he encourages those under him to use for their own purposes the pads, pencils, etc., which belong to the establishment. Worse, he involves them in his grafting until they become, in spite of themselves, his protectors.

All this is petty - a matter of cents, a few dollars at most; but let the practitioners advance - find positions in institutions where the purchasing and distributing runs into tends of thousands or more dollars, laxly supervised, and the thieving goes on, involves associates, grows almost by necessity, once established, until discovery overtakes it, with the inevitable disgrace though probably not in most cases public scandal. It is "hushed up" for the good of the college, church, hospital, "home."

Such is the school in which tens of thousands of young wkmen in their struggles for economic independence are getting their ideas of the way things are done in the active world. How can we expect a woman, familiar in private/business life with such practices, to be shocked when she comes upon them in public life. She naturally gravitatesthere to that considerable group found in every party -

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conservative, liberal, radical - always on the lookout for what they can get out of it. To them every election, every department, every new undertaking of the government, is a legitimate field for exploitation. When efficiency, the good of the public, the sacredness of law is urged, their answer is, "Let us talk patronage."

It was these long-known, long-fought political boodlers that women were to overwhelm, put out of business. The idealistic suffragist spurned the idea that there would be women ready to strengthen their ranks.

It is high time that the great body of fine women political leaders in this country realized that they have other obligations to their sex than teaching how the laws are made and repealed and how to mark a ballot. They have a primary work to do in exposing in some kind of vivid and intelligible way to the mass of women whatdishonesty in politics is; its relation to dishonesty in daily life, domestic or business, - how related it is and how certain it is that the woman whose sense of honesty has been dulled by the practices of her world, will carry on in political life quite as effectively as men do.

In the last two years we have had a warning - terrible and humiliating - of this fact - the case of Mrs. Knapp, of New York State. "Let us forget Mrs. Knapp," I have heard women say. Rather, let us remember her. She is a perfect example of what we are in for as long as we try to deceive ourselves by believing that a woman will be honest in public office because a woman, that whatever may have been

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her home and business training and practice.

And what is the case of Mrs. Knapp?

Here is the story.

It began for the American public outside - and for not a few inside - New York State, one day in the fall of 1924, when a gay crowd of a hundred or more highly animated women invaded the Hotel Seneca in Rochester, where they made the lobby and corridors ring with the noise of their bid red wooden rattles, and their cries of "Scrap for Knapp."

The ladies were Onondaga County delegates to the Republic State Convention, met to make up its ticket for the coming election. They wanted a woman - Mrs. Florence Knapp - for secretary of state.

Outside of the county, the name of Mrs. Knapp was not too familiar. But inside, in political Syracuse and vicinity, there was certainly none so well known. When it came to looking her over there seemed to be every reason for the regard in which she was held. She was at that time a woman close to fifty - a handsome, well set up woman.

Born in Syracuse, into a family of modest means, she had been early recognized as one of that type so familiar in this country -- the eager, pushing, ambitious girl, determined to get ahead. She had taken advantage of every opportunity, became a teacher and promptly a leader among her fellows. She shone in teachers' institutes, became superintendent of county schools - the Dean of the College of Home Economics of Syracuse University - a school which she had herself organized.

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There was reason for her rapid advance. She was capable, adroit, resolute, knew her own mind, went after what she wanted, could give orders. Many women admired her and willingly followed her; they felt her to be a champion of their rights.

The coming of Suffrage opened a new field to Mrs. Knapp. She went into politics and soon had won recognition from the Republican organization of Onondaga County. She attracted the attention of State leaders, puzzled about how to handle women voters. Soon there were those who spoke of her as one of the State's Republican "Big Four".

Mrs. Knapp's relish of her growing political importance was keen - she began to think and talk of office, and in 1924, when it seemed wise to her party to give a little more recognition to the women of the S tate than had yet been done, the Onondaga men said confidently to their fellows, "Give Mrs. Knapp an office. She wants it, has been working for it, and we can trust her." So she was nominated and elected. Her election was matter of jubilation among women, and more than one whispered to the victorious lady, "It's only the beginning. We'll make you governor one day." Mrs. Knapp took it all complacently. "It only proves", she said, "that when men believe a woman is capable of holding office, they are willing she should have it."

And so, on January 25, 1925, Florence Smith Knapp went to Albany as secretary of the great S tate of New York. She began her work in a blaze of glory, for her first duty was a spectacular

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one, swearing in the Governor. The adoring young women reporters described her as clad in "peach-colored velvet, a picture of lovàliness." There were those who remarked that "It was a Knapp rather than a Smith day."

Whatever Mrs. Knapp's interest in clothes and ceremony, she was the strict school teacher in office from the first day. "Nine o'clock in the morning is the hour at which this office opens," read the notice she ordered tacked on the door. "Please report promptly."

She hastened to make it clear to those in her department that all activities centered in her, and that she proposed to understand them all, herself perform them, unless she wished to delegate them. She extended this supervision even to the signing of the thousands of routine documents which go out from the office of the secretary of state - certificates of incorporation, records of commissions, licenses of peddlers and canvassers, and what not - a daily pile. Mrs. Knapp's bold and vigorous signature, done in a distinctive purple ink she had adopted, was soon spread all over the State of New York. When it was suggested to her that established etiquette allowed her associates to have what little advertising and glory there was in signing their names to those routine documents, she answered nobly, "I am the Secretary of S tate, responsible for whatever goes out from this office. I do my own work."

It was not the routine work of her department that made

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Mrs. Knapp important, however, it was the fact that her first year in office (1925) was the year for the decennial census which New York has been taking since 1790. This gigantic undertaking is largely in the hands of the Secretary of State, subject only to certain precedents which the experience of the past had imposed.

But Mrs. Knapp attacked her problem with confidence, even eagerness, talking freely of her intention not only to make the completest enumeration that ever had been made, but do something for women as well as herself. She sought the best advice, made her plans carefully. She had the generous idea that the 7500 or more enumerators required to count the people should be women - where possible, teachers. The politicians took care of that. The fraternity have but few ways of honestly rewarding those who aid them. They are glad enough when once in ten years there comes a chance to help a friend to fifty or one hundred extra dollars. They may be very glad, indeed, to have that extra fifty or one hundred dollars come into their own households. They explained to Mrs. Knapp that it had been the practice to allow the district leaders of the party in power to name the enumerators. Mrs. Knapp, being eminently practical, saw the point, and cheerfully conceded that in that way the best interests of all could be served. She did insist, however, that women be given their share. Critical statisticians who have examined the New York census of 1925 with none too kindly an eye to Mrs. Knapp, declare that, in their judgment, this

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large use of women was wise, that they took more pride than the men did in making neat, legible and complete returns, and that it would have made for efficiency if the entire enumerating force had been women.

But counting the inhabitants was not the only business of the census which Mrs. Knapp was superintending. The largest sum ever appropriated for a state census had been given her -- $1,200,000 - with the understanding that there should be a complete tabulation of all the information obtained in the enumeration - a tabulation which would give a complete picture of the condition and needs of the citizenship of the state.

Mrs. Knapp herself was enthusiastic over this scientific tabulation. She had money enough left for it from the counting, she said in her report, and she promised that it should be something that would be of inestimable value, particularly to welfare agencies. In order to have the best possible results, she negotiated with Secretary of Commerce Hoover, Chief of the Federal Census Bureau, for the use of his machinery and methods, the highest developed in the world. Under Mr. Hoover's direction, the Federal Bureau acted most generously, taking over, practically at cost, the task of tabulation. Then suddenly those interested in census tabulation received a body blow in September 1926. The work must be suspended, Mrs. Knapp announced, for lack of funds.

Now, running out of funds in a tremendous undertaking, the expense of which it is difficult to forecast because it comes only once in ten years, must be put through in a short period of time by

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untrained people, and is badly mixed up with politics, is not, in itself, astonishing. Certainly there is no reason to spring to the conclusion that there has been grafting or crime. There might be inefficiency in spots, poor judgment, necessary and expensive changes of method, poor work to be done over - that was to be expected. W hat was astonishing was the casual way in which Mrs. Knapp made her announcement, and the large sum of $300,000. which she told the legislature would be necessary if the work was to be properly completed.

Mrs. Knapp, however, was not to have an opportunity to finish her census work, for at the end of her term, January 1927, she retired from office. Though out of office, she was by no means out of public life. Indeed she went back to her home the most conspicuous political figure among the women of the State, and her followers on all sides continued to whisper in her ear, "We'll make you governor."

And once governor, what might not happen. The governorship of New York has always been one of the roads to the White House. It is inevitable that one day a woman will be President of the United States, why should it not be Florence Knapp? Who can doubt that such a dream may have crossed her mind? It would have been more suprising if it did not than if it did. She had played her part as she conceived men played theirs in politics - had used her influence as she conceived they used theirs - taken her perquisites as they did - been quite "regular." She had the right, as she saw things, to count on a future under their protection. She apparently thought it mattered very

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little
/to her fellow politicians that she had left the census hanging in midair - her great job incomplete - in spite of the vast sum with which she had been entrusted, and she no doubt was right in so thinking.

But Florence Knapp had left out of her calculations the burning interest certain non-official, non-political people took in the results of her census tabulation. These people wanted the figures to help them in directing various social and educational enterprises. When they found the work was unexpectedly stopped they insisted that the legislature set aside money, as Mrs. Knapp herself had suggested, to finish the job whether she was there to use it or not. Most interested in seeing the census tabulation through was a powerful organization of New York City known as "The Cities Census Committee". This organization had as its agent an impassioned believer in the value to the public of the enumeration which had been planned - the Rev. Walter Laidlaw.

Mr. Laidlaw began to haunt Albany in the interest of the completion of the census work, but soon discovered that there was little or no hope of getting $300,000 out of the members of the legislature. Accordingly he undertook to study carefully the way in which Mrs. Knapp had spent her money in order to discover if there had been leaks or waste which could be avoided so that a smaller sum - something that the assembly might grant - would be sufficient. He had not been long at this self-imposed task when he ran upon startling evidence of something which he had not

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suspected, and that is, that a considerable sum at least of Mrs. Knapp's money had been handled in an out-and-out illegal way.

Mr. Laidlaw hurried back to his committee with his report, and was ordered by them to at once make a thorough sifting and analysis of the accounts, to find out to the last penny how Mrs. Knapp had spent her $1,200,000.

Mr. Laidlaw did not keep still about his suspicions or his commission. The State was soon buzzing with it - and buzzing louder because at the same time came a rumor that Mrs. Knapp when she left Albany at the end of her term, had ordered sent after her all of the pay rolls, cards and memoranda connected with the taking of the census - documents belonging of course not to her but to her office.

It took the Rev. Mr. Laidlaw three months to make the investigation his committee ordered. He did not spare himself, thousands upon thousands of vouchers, accounts, bills were examined; and in September of 1927 he sent to Governor Smith what he called a "Communication." Although loaded with statistics, it was a scorching and sensational document, bristling with charges of what he called "non-feasance," "Mis-feasance" and "mal-feasance," backed by apparent proofs. The one in the multitude which struck the casual reader hardest was that after work on the census had been shut down entirely for lack of funds in September 1926, Mrs. Knapp had gone on paying

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salaries to various people. The majority of these people were members of her own family, no one of them as far as Mr. Laidlaw could discern had ever done any census work and some of them were not residents of the State.

And there was something still more startling: apparent proof that Mrs. Knapp had, throughout her term, been signing people's names to vouchers and checks, without proper authorization. He might never have noticed this if it had not been for the purple ink. It was hardly likely that all these friends and relatives used purple ink; Mr. Laidlaw was convinced that they did not, that this royal color which Mrs. Knapp had chosen to make still more distinctive her distinctive signature had been used by her. It was an irregularity that required investigation.

I doubt if Governor Smith ever received a more unwelcome report than Mr. Laidlaw's. The man hates inefficiency and dishonesty, and this looked like both. Then the charges concerned a woman, and since the granting of the suffrage, no man in public office had done so much as he has to help women to play a useful part as public servants. He has had unusual success in his appointments, which have been many. He knows well enough that women are bound to come more and more into elective offices, and he would have been glad to have Mrs. Knapp as much of a success as various of his own appointments had been. But there was a disturbing political angle - Mrs. Knapp was a Republican. Any notice that he would take of the Laidlaw report was bound to be met by the cry that she, poor woman, was a

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victim of his brutal partisanship. But Governor Smith, though he undoubtedly detested his duty, did not shirk it. No more did Attorney-General Ottinger who, being a Republican, would probably have preferred a live bomb on his desk to the Laidlaw report.

A commissioner was promptly appointed to investigate the Laidlaw charges - an experienced and able man who had served under Hughes in the Insurance Investigation, and had distinguished himself since in various similar undertakings, an Albany lawyer, Randall J. LeBeouf, Jr. The commissioner did a most thorough job. Those who may have believed that the case against Mrs. Knapp would evaporate when subjected to the rigid scrutiny of an honest and trained investigator, were soon disabused. The case was seen to be worse than any one had believed. Not only had Mrs. Knapp diverted funds to her own pocket by skilful forgery of the names of relatives and friends, but she had paid from census moneys both her butler and her lawyer. More serious yet, she had involved subordinates associated in the work in such a way that Mr. LeBeouf considered them criminally liable. The report was a terrific arraignment, making a criminal prosecution inevitable. Even if Governor Smith and his associates had tried to evade it, the public would have insisted, for public opinion on Mrs. Knapp's case had crystalized in an unusually hard and harsh form, particularly among women. Men said rather wonderingly to one another, "My wife is bitter, insists Mrs. Knapp be tried - punished if the jury finds her guilty. <u>That</u> she

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calls equality of the sexes." Mrs. Knapp and her friends were claiming, however, that a man in her place would never be brought to trial, that the whole business was a proof of inequality! for Mrs. Knapp throughout this period had refused to take the charges against her seriously - refused to answer them catagorically: -

"Not worth answering," she told reporters, smilingly. Not a cent had been paid in salary to relative or friend that had not been earned by hard work - not a cent on travel that had not been necessary. She was a sacrifice to politics. The Democrats her determined to "get" her because she was a woman, and a Republican. She had an explanation for everything - adroit, plausible, and always the core of it was that somebody was seeking revenge - out of jealousy or fear of the heights to which she had risen - the future which was to be heres - for Florence Knapp saw herself still, inspite of all charges, as a woman of destiny.

The trial of Mrs. Knapp came in April of 1928, and if ever a man or a woman had assurance of a square deal it was she. Capable, honest, experienced men had been chosen to conduct her case: as prosecutor, George S. Medalie, of New York; as judge, Justice Stephen Callaghan, of Brooklyn. Any evidence of the political persecution, the personal malice, the false accusations which Mrs. Knapp charged were back of her case, were certain to be given full consideration by these men. But there was no evidence of any malicious underhand influence at work against the woman - it was the facts that were all against her. She had bribed, forged, stolen. The one count on which

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she was tried and found guilty was that of appropriating $2,875.06 by forging the name of a step-daughter who lived in Vermont, had never done any work on the census, never received any money, did not, in fact, know that her name was on the pay roll.

Public opinion generally sustained the verdict as it did the sentence which, three months later, Judge Callaghan pronounced - a merciful sentence, surely, for while the crime of which Mrs. Knapp was convicted, carried a penalty of from five to ten years' imprisonment, she received but thirty days. The mildness of the sentence was but an expression of a reluctance, even sorrow, that almost without exception the men forced to deal with the case had shown.

And that, in outline, is the case of Mrs. Knapp.

How explain her? No explain a woman who, before the Laidlaw report with its wealth of detailed charges, drawn from official records, could smilingly wave them all aside, who could refuse every effort of investigator and prosecutor to persuade her to face the music, who, when she was forced in April to come into court by Judge Callaghan's notice that if she did not he would serve a warrant, came with lofty disdain, faced the most damning testimony with a toss of her head, and who, after

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the jury had brought in its verdict, could leave the court room, "still maintaining," as the correspondent of one great newspaper wrote, "the outward manner of a tolerant lady who is harrassed by a number of annoying persons.

Never for one moment did Florence Knapp face realities - never for a moment show a consciousness of guilt. She had moments of alarm, anger, even of tears, but they were incidental. She swung back quickly into self-confidence, an apparent settled conviction that it was unthinkable that she, could be convicted, - she meant too much to women, to her party - they would not be swayed by the evidence of peccadillos like hers - "pin money" a friend called it - the 'honest graft' everybody in positions of trust enjoyed. Considering the immense sum which had been entrusted to her - $1,200,000 - how small the few thousands she had taken - certainly not proportionately more than the rake-off many a purchasing agent enjoyed in secret commissions.

Moreover, she was not the only one, as everybody knew, that had friends on the census pay roll, drawing money and doing no work. She knew, for she had found places for these persons herself. She had accepted placing them as a necessary and legitimate part of her political duty. It might not be true that these members of the assembly, these gentlemen in high places who had insisted on

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positions for friends, whether there was work to do or not, received any part of the pay envelope; but that they had their pay of some kind, she knew well enough. It was all part of the established system of 'honest graft.'

And there is the master key to the downfall of Mrs. Knapp - 'honest graft.' It had honey-combed her world - home, school, business, social, public life. She probably had accepted it from childhood as a lubricant on the hard road she had to travel to rise from poverty. She came into politics prepared to accept to the full what she believed to be the law of politics - the rule of fear and favor, and she was already skilled in applying it. She could not believe that her political backers would allow her to suffer for doing what she apparently believed they all did.

What shocked her political backers, or perhaps scared them so that they shamelessly deserted her, publicly at least, in her day of need, was less, I take it, that she had profited than that she had left so many traces behind her,--that, and her frank dependence on them, her faith that they would not dare let her be punished. When they did not save her, she believed, or at least claimed to believe, that it was because they saw that she was about to take from them offices which they wanted for themselves. "They feared me," she told a friend on the very eve of her sentence, "<u>feared I would be Hoover's running mate!</u> They wanted a man - I am the victim of man's jealousy of women in politics. It was necessary to ruin me."

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However exaggerated Mrs. Knapp's self-deception, her apparent inability to believe that she had done anything out of the ordinary, there is nothing illogical about her case, given the practices of the social, business and political worlds in which she had always lived. And if one Mrs' Knapp is possible, others are. That is why she should not be forgotten. Let us not delude ourselves. So long as we tolerate the system of 'honest graft' which today is thriving and growing everywhere in American life, we can count on future Florence Knapps as we can on future Harry Sinclairs and Albert Falls.

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