

'BLOND BILL' LORIMER, FACING BLINDNESS, TOILS IN TROPICAL JUNGLE TO RECOUP FORTUNE

Disgraced U. S. Senator and President of Bank That Collapsed Struggles to "Come Back" at 61 and Pay Every Dollar Lost by Former Depositors

STRICKEN WITH MALARIA WITH CATARACTS ON EYES BRAVES COLOMBIA WILDS

Former Newsboy, Bootblack, Politician and Financier Returns to Chicago for Treatment After Experiences Thrilling as an Arabian Night's Tale

BLOND BILL LORIMER is still trying to come back. He is partly blind and threatened with total blindness, which would blast his expressed hope to pay back, dollar for dollar, the vast sums lost to depositors through the crash of his La Salle Street Bank in 1914. Yet the former United States Senator and Republican "boss" of Illinois, bootblack, newsboy, financier and politician, is back again in Chicago, after a series of thrilling adventures in the wilds of South America, where he went as a representative of an American development company and to recoup his fortunes.

Lorimer has had a career as strange as the strangest fiction. A meteoric rise to political influence culminated in his election to the United States Senate, only to be ousted on the grounds that his election was featured by bribery and corruption. He then turned financier only to have his hopes for regained influence shattered with the Lorimer-Munday bank crash that threatened for a time to rend the financial fabric of his adopted city.

Today, at sixty-one years of age, he seems no nearer to the fulfillment of his dreams of political and financial power than when, as a newsboy and bootblack in Chicago's streets, he strove to earn sufficient to support his widowed mother and her large family.

Bronzed with the suns of Caidon, Boyaca, Culinamaren and Taluma, emaciated from tropical fevers and with a grizzled beard hiding the thin features once so rotund and smiling; suffering intense pain at times from cataracts which threaten him with total blindness, Lorimer today still radiates something of the indomitable spirit which took him from lowly levels to the seats of the mighty.

"I am in excellent health, with the exception of my eyes," he says. "The outdoor life has been beneficial to me. I am much thinner and my waist line has been reduced by half. I find that my old trousers are too big. This, however, is due to roughing it and riding muleback in the open.

"Upon the success of an operation on my eyes depends my return to South America. I have communicated with Colonel P. J. H. Farrell, who served for three years, during and following the war, as chief eye surgeon of the American Expeditionary Forces. He was also an army surgeon in the American forces during the Spanish-American War and in addition to this he was for four years eye surgeon in St. Joseph's Hospital in Chicago. I have faith in him."

In his work in South America "Bill" Lorimer is striving to wipe out the past. In a purgatory of loneliness, the sixty-one-year-old explorer and former national figure has been suffering privation, danger, back-breaking and soul-scarring labor in his fight to "come back."

Faces New Handicaps Blazing Jungle Trails

Blazing trails through jungles, climbing mountains, crossing raging streams and rapids; in general, conducting extensive exploration and investigation of the natural resources of South America, the former Senator has been working hard under greater difficulties and handicaps than he has ever faced before.

When not invading virgin forests, canoeing on alligator-infested waters and fighting malaria-breeding mosquitoes, he has been searching for mine locations and scaling the steep sides of perpetually snow-capped mountains. In addition to these he has had to find time to meet the legal requirements and official red tape of the countries in which he sought options on property and governmental concessions for the American interests he represented.

Above the grizzly beard he wears heavy spectacles to protect his afflicted eyes. He emerged recently from a siege of malaria, greatly weakened but with no other noticeable effects.

Physicians in Bogota and other South American cities he visited in the course of his duties say he is completely rid of the malaria. But, according to the engineers working with him, all the doctors plainly told him that unless his eyes were attended to immediately and the operation for cataracts performed promptly he was in peril of losing his sight.

Mule riding is one of the principal means of travel in the interior of Colombia, and Lorimer, with his party of engineers, Indians and native whites, has a goodly share of that mode of travel. It requires continuous practice before it ceases to be a hard and tiresome task.

Eugene Underwood, an American mining and construction engineer and brother of Senator Oscar Underwood, in 1886 he laid the foundations for Lorimer's immediate political career as a politician and he



William Lorimer, former Illinois Senator, who is trying to recoup fortune

that position until he was able to launch forth in the real estate business in the rapidly expanding city of Chicago. Six years later he again became politically ambitious and ran for clerk of the Superior Court. He was defeated.

Then commenced the upward political climb which resulted in his election to the United States Senate after a deadlock in the Illinois Legislature threatened to disrupt State politics, and his loss of the coveted toga, charged with obtaining it by bribery and corruption.

Lorimer's financial difficulties by no means began with his banking activities after he had been expelled from the Senate. As far back as 1898, when he was a Representative in Congress, his financial transactions were publicly questioned. At that time Chicago newspapers raised a hue and cry about certain large sums which Lorimer and his associates seemed to acquire after the passage of numerous bills favoring public utility corporations.

Bribery figured for the first time in Lorimer's career, however, during the first senatorial investigation into the conditions surrounding his election. Although it was widely heralded at the time in members of the opposing parties that Lorimer had been merely a compromise candidate, the announcement that fifty-three of the 108 votes which elected him came from hereditary political enemies, Democrats, was followed with numerous open charges that bribery had broken the long legislative deadlock which lasted from January 20 until May 26. No investigation was made at the time, however, and the matter was apparently forgotten publicly.

Illinois Legislator Admits He Got Bribe

Almost a year later Charles A. White, a member of the Legislature who voted for Lorimer for the Senate, made a signed confession under oath that he had received a bribe for his vote. That was the beginning of the end.

The White incident resulted in the return of criminal indictments against several persons, all of whom escaped conviction. The same charges were filed finally with the United States Senate and the first investigation there resulted in Lorimer's clearance. In 1911 the Illinois Senate by a vote of 29 to 19 asked the Helu Committee in the Senate to investigate once more. On March 1, by a vote of 46 to 40, the United States Senate had upheld the Senator from Illinois. As a result of the second investigation, however, he was ousted.

The scene of the Illinois Senator's dismissal was one of the most dramatic ever staged in the historic halls of Congress. Calm and apparently unmoved, Lorimer sat like a marble statue as the words were read which cast an indelible stain upon his life. He had never been known to give in to a political foe, and defiance marked his bearing that day as the Senate gave its decision.

Worn with the strain of defending himself against the vicious attacks of his colleagues, showing every evidence of fatigue, yet with a firm and dignified tread "Blond Bill" Lorimer, discredited in the service of his country in one of the highest positions it had to offer, walked from the chamber amid an intense silence. Tears ran down the faces of many in the galleries as they watched him go, and the strain on the floor was equally tense. It could have been staged no better in the world's greatest theater. "Bill" Lorimer passed out of public and political life defiant to the end.

Despite the fact of his political downfall from the national standpoint, Lorimer still retained some influence in Chicago and State politics. Republican candidates for office constantly sought his favor, and asked his expert advice. Having ruled with an iron hand and being popular alike with Repub-

lican and Democratic elements, he was still a power to be feared in a crisis. The man who had made and unmade Governors, who had controlled legislation and State elections, could not be deposed in a day. The turned-down thumbs of the United States Senate could not disrupt the organization of a lifetime.

One of the greatest setbacks Lorimer ever received, according to politicians, was when Theodore Roosevelt, invited to attend a banquet at the Hamilton Club, in Chicago, in 1910, notified the committee in charge that he would attend only on the condition that "Boss" Lorimer would not be present. The affair was given great publicity and Lorimer, warned by fellow club mem-

bers, stayed away. In turn he forwarded his resignation, which was promptly accepted.

In his own story of his life the former Senator pictures his antecedents as humble, and his father as a religious man who labored in the fields as a farmhand to keep body and soul together when there was not sufficient call for him as a Presbyterian minister.

When the Lorimer family arrived in America they settled in Ohio. Not prospering there they moved to Illinois, where the elder Lorimer died when "Billy" was but ten years old.

When the little money left by the father was spent it was up to the oldest son to provide for the family. This he did by selling newspapers and delivering a route each morning, continuing on downtown with his shoeshine box and picking up as much as he could on the way. His earnings grew to as high as \$20 weekly with this combination of activities.

Through the various stages of bundle boy for a laundry and almost every

humble position in the meat-packing industry, Lorimer's health broke down, and he was forced to seek employment in the open air, finally obtaining a job as a street railway conductor. It was during the Blaine campaign and as a conductor that his first political tendencies came to the surface. He took the defeat of Blaine as a personal sorrow.

In later years, when politicians and powerful influences wanted to know why Lorimer in his local campaigns had never fought with McKenna, later the notorious "Hinky-Dinky," Lorimer always recalled an incident of his newsboy days.

The second Sunday he had been selling papers several boys spied the newcomer in their ranks and took his papers from him. Without sufficient capital to renew his stock and apparently without friends to take his part "Billy" Lorimer was heartbroken. A larger boy, newsie and bootblack like himself, found him in a dejected attitude and inquired his trouble. When

told, the larger boy disappeared and in a few moments returned with the stolen papers and started the young merchant once more on his way. The older boy was Mike McKenna, later alderman and saloon proprietor, but an everlasting friend of "Billy" Lorimer, who, although far superior in station and political influence, never fought against McKenna in the latter's precincts.

Known in Congress as Packers' Representative

During Lorimer's twelve years in Congress he became known as "the representative of the meat-packers," his most conspicuous fight being that to introduce legislation favorable to the manufacture and sale of substitutes for butter. He also was an ardent supporter for the plan to build a deep waterway from Lake Michigan to the Gulf of Mexico, and he led the fight which obtained the first Federal appropriation for a preliminary survey and estimate of the cost for the proposed improvement.

Lorimer married Susan K. Mooney, and seven children, two sons and five

daughters, were the result of the union. Thwarted in his political ambitions by his dismissal from the Senate, a nationally disgraced figure, "Blond Bill" Lorimer turned to the field of finance for his next great venture, and, backed by the powerful influences that had molded his political career, joined hands with E. C. Munday in the great banking interests controlled by the staid La Salle Street Trust and Savings Bank, one of Chicago's foremost financial institutions.

Then began the second and most serious of all his misfortunes, for although his political disgrace in Washington affected him at home with certain classes, the thousands of poor depositors who suffered from the bank crash were up to that time still his friends and many of them had placed their money on deposit in his bank as a testimony of their unshaken confidence. When the crash came unexpectedly there was very little that was good in life for "Blond Bill" Lorimer.

On the fateful morning of June 12, 1914, reports of the big bank's failure spread like wildfire through the downtown districts of Chicago long before the hour scheduled for opening. Before 10 o'clock, La Salle street was crowded with an anxious throng. When the doors failed to open on the minute excitement grew and a detail of mounted police was added to the little force already sent to "keep 'em moving."

Two hours before the bank was supposed to open the city treasurer, M. J. Flynn, had notified the bank authorities that he would be on hand at the opening hour to collect on checks the city's funds of \$350,000 then on deposit. Flynn received the reply that the checks could not be honored.

When the crowd was at its height the doors were opened and many of the leaders managed to crowd in. They were promptly ordered out as they stood grouped before the empty tellers' cages. Then, when the doors were closed another bank official took his stand just inside, and if a depositor managed to break through the police lines he obligingly handed out a card bearing the inscription "O. K. Reitz," telling the eager depositor it would be honored at the Corn Exchange Bank. Those who were given such cards were told at the Corn Exchange Bank that

wreck the bank, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, while Lorimer still kept up his fight. Judge Dever finally granted the preliminary motion of the defense that the major charges against Lorimer of conspiracy to defraud be consolidated with the minor charge of receiving deposits after the bank's insolvency became known and of operating a confidence game, resulting from alleged misrepresentation of the institution's assets. The State made no objection to the consolidation.

More than two hundred veniremen were cross-examined before a jury was selected. Many of them stated they thought "Lorimer should be run out of town on general principles," Oberly admitted that the influence of other

banking interests said to be opposed to the Lorimer-Munday combination might have a bearing on their verdict as they had accounts at the banks of the other group. In the interim Lorimer was released in \$15,000 bail.

Ascribed Bank's Collapse to Newspaper Reports

At the trial in his own defense Lorimer charged the newspaper reports of his trouble in the Senate with being the cause of the bank's downfall, although it was also testified that during the Washington investigation the Senator had forbidden his stenographer to give out to the newspapermen any inkling of what had gone on in the committee room. To such an extent was this secrecy carried, it was testified, that even Senators making the investigation were permitted to have only such parts of his speeches as those in which their own names appeared.

It was also brought out by witnesses that Munday, without authority, had signed Lorimer's name to checks permitting the use of the bank's funds. Lorimer, it was said, knew nothing of such transactions.

At the conclusion of the sensational trial Lorimer was acquitted of all charges, although the majority of his associates did not get off so fortunately. His financial ruin was complete. Like other deposed monarchs, he took to sawing wood, with the disastrous results chronicled above.

Just what sincerity was in his plea that he had come to the time of atonement, few Chicagoans were able to say. Some of them were inclined to believe that the apparently indomitable spirit of the old "boss" could bring him through in the end. He obtained the position as representative in South America of some of the great financial interests of the country. It was a going concern with much capital for the development of the rich regions of several countries. Thus started the explorations which have seemingly ended in another impasse for "Blond Bill" Lorimer.

The question now agitating Chicago is whether the latest moves of the sagacious political boss are based on sincerity or whether they are just another of the "grand stand" plays for which he was famous in his more powerful days. Will a successful operation on the eyes cause him to start once more on his journeyings through the South American wildernesses to recoup his "million-dollar" pledge to his former depositors? Or will Nature, too, go back on him during his final struggle and bring low for all time the politician who fought his way to the top over the political bodies of his adversaries only to be thrown down by them in the end?

As posing herself that question Chicago today sits back, wishes "Blond Bill" Lorimer the best luck in the world, and says, "Well, we'll see!"

