

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WATER SCANDAL.

From 1900 to 1906, Grand Rapids occupied public attention because it had a municipal scandal equaling and in many respects surpassing those of St. Louis, Minneapolis, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. It would be a bold novelist who would write up a conspiracy with ramifications and complications like that revealed by judicial inquiries in Grand Rapids. There was nothing peculiar or extraordinary about Grand Rapids, its people or its social and political conditions which led up to the water deal scandal. The city had good schools and large, active church organizations. No city had more or better managed charity, benevolent and fraternal societies. The city was progressive, busy and prosperous, and in private business always demanded and maintained a high standard of morality, but in civic affairs the people for a time were loose and lax. They did not require or apparently expect honesty and integrity in political or official life. In public affairs men of high standing for years sanctioned; encouraged and participated in shady transactions which they would instinctively have scorned and heartily condemned in business. This double standard of morality, a high one for business and a low one in politics, at last brought sorrow and disgrace to the city.

The water deal scandal could not be charged to partisan politics. Grand Rapids was never under the complete control of one political party for any great length of time. The city administration frequently shifted from the control of one party to that of another. At no time did one party have complete control of all the city offices for more than two consecutive years. No political party could claim all the virtue or disclaim all the evil in Grand Rapids municipal affairs, or avoid all responsibility in the water scandal. Bad and weak men were found in all parties. Prior to the consummation of the water scandal and leading up to it, the city had some peculiar experiences which disclosed a morbid sentimentality among the people and a weakness in the civic conscience. Within a few years the city had three defaulters among its officials who not only escaped punishment but were rewarded for their acts. In 1891 the city treasurer for the four preceding years was re-elected for a third term. Soon after his election, while he was absent from the city for several weeks, an