

PLUNKITT of TAMMANY HALL

A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics,
Delivered by Ex-Senator George Washington Plunkitt,
the Tammany Philosopher, from His Rostrum—
the New York County Court House Bootblack Stand

Recorded by William L. Riordon / *New York Evening Post*
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____Preface. Chapters 1-7____



PREFACE

THIS volume discloses the mental operations of perhaps the most thoroughly practical politician of the day — George Washington Plunkitt, Tammany leader of the Fifteenth Assembly District, Sachem of the Tammany Society and Chairman of the Elections Committee of Tammany Hall, who has held the offices of State Senator, Assemblyman, Police Magistrate, County Supervisor and Alderman and who boasts of his record in filling four public offices in one year and drawing salaries from three of them at the same time.

The discourses that follow were delivered by him from his rostrum, the bootblack stand in the County Court-house, at various times in the last half-dozen years. Their absolute frankness and vigorous unconventionality of thought and expression charmed me. Plunkitt said right out what all practical politicians think but are afraid to say. Some of the discourses I published as interviews in the *New York Evening Post*, the *New York Sun*, the *New York World*, and the *Boston Transcript*. They were reproduced in newspapers throughout the country and several of them, notably the talks on “The Curse of Civil Service Reform” and “Honest Graft and Dishonest Graft” became subjects of discussion in the United States Senate and in college lectures. There seemed to be a general recognition of Plunkitt as a striking type of the practical politician, a politician, moreover, who dared to say publicly what others in his class whisper among themselves in the City Hall corridors and the hotel lobbies.

I thought it a pity to let Plunkitt’s revelations of himself — as frank in their way as Rousseau’s “Confessions” — perish in the files of the newspapers; so I collected the talks I had published, added several new ones and now give to the world in this volume a system of political philosophy which is as unique as it is refreshing.

No New Yorker needs to be informed who George Washington Plunkitt is. For the information of others, the following sketch of his career is given. He was born, as he proudly tells, in Central Park; that is, in the territory now included in the park. He began life as a driver of a cart, then became a butcher’s boy, and later went into the butcher business for himself. How he entered politics he explains in one of his discourses. His advancement was rapid. He was in the Assembly soon after he cast his first vote and has held office most of the time for forty years.

In 1870, through a strange combination of circumstances, he held the places of Assemblyman, Alderman, Police Magistrate and County Supervisor and drew three salaries at once — a record unexampled in New York politics.

Plunkitt is now a millionaire. He owes his fortune mainly to his political pull, as he confesses in “Honest Graft and Dishonest Graft.” The character of his business he also describes fully. He is in the contracting, transportation, real estate, and every other business out of which he can make money. He has no office. His headquarters is the County Court-house bootblack stand. There he receives his constituents, transacts his general business and pours forth his philosophy.

Plunkitt has been one of the great powers in Tammany Hall for a quarter of a century. While he was in the Assembly and the State Senate he was one of the most influential members and introduced the bills that provided for the outlying parks of New York City, the Harlem River Speedway, the Washington Bridge, the 155th Street Viaduct, the grading of Eighth Avenue north of Fifty-seventh Street, additions to the Museum of Natural History, the West Side Court, and many other important public improvements. He is one of the closest friends and most valued advisers of Charles F. Murphy, leader of Tammany Hall.

WILLIAM L. RIORDON

INTRODUCTION

A Tribute to Plunkitt by the Leader of Tammany Hall

SENATOR PLUNKITT is a straight organization man. He believes in party government; he does not indulge in cant and hypocrisy and he is never afraid to say exactly what he thinks. He is a believer in thorough political organization and all-the-year-around work and he holds to the doctrine that, in making appointments to office, party workers should be preferred if they are fitted to perform the duties of the office. Plunkitt is one of the veteran leaders of the organization, he has always been faithful and reliable, and he has performed valuable services for Tammany Hall.

CHARLES F. MURPHY



Plunkitt of Tammany Hall

Ch 1. Honest Graft and Dishonest Graft

“EVERYBODY is talkin’ these days about Tammany men growin’ rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawin’ the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. There’s all the difference in the world between the two. Yes, many of our men have grown rich in politics. I have myself. I’ve made a big fortune out of the game, and I’m gettin’ richer every day, but I’ve not gone in for dishonest graft — blackmailin’ gamblers[,] saloon-keepers, disorderly people, etc. — and neither has any of the men who have made big fortunes in politics.

“There’s an honest graft, and I’m an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin’: ‘I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.’

“Just let me explain by examples. My party’s in power in the city, and it’s goin’ to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I’m tipped off, say, that they’re going to lay out a new park at a certain place.

“I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.

“Ain’t it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? Of course, it is. Well, that’s honest graft.

“Or, supposin’ it’s a new bridge they’re goin’ to build. I get tipped off and I buy as much property as I can that has to be taken for approaches. I sell at my own price later on and drop some more money in the bank.

“Wouldn’t you? It’s just like lookin’ ahead in Wall Street or in the coffee or cotton market. It’s honest graft, and I’m lookin’ for it every day in the year. I will tell you frankly that I’ve got a good lot of it, too.

“I’ll tell you of one case. They were goin’ to fix up a big park, no matter where. I got on to it, and went lookin’ about for land in that neighborhood.

“I could get nothin’ at a bargain but a big piece of swamp, but I took it fast enough and held on to it. What turned out was just what I counted on. They couldn’t make the park complete without Plunkitt’s swamp, and they had to pay a good price for it. Anything dishonest in that?

“Up in the watershed I made some money, too. I bought up several bits of land there some years ago and made a pretty good guess that they would be bought up for water purposes later by the city.

“Somehow, I always guessed about right, and shouldn’t I enjoy the profit of my foresight? It was rather amusin’ when the condemnation commissioners came along and found piece after piece of the land in the name of George Plunkitt of the Fifteenth Assembly District, New York City. They wondered how I knew just what to buy. The answer is — I seen my opportunity and I took it. I haven’t confined myself to land; anything that pays is in my line.

“For instance, the city is repavin’ a street and has several hundred thousand old granite blocks to sell. I am on hand to buy, and I know just what they are worth.

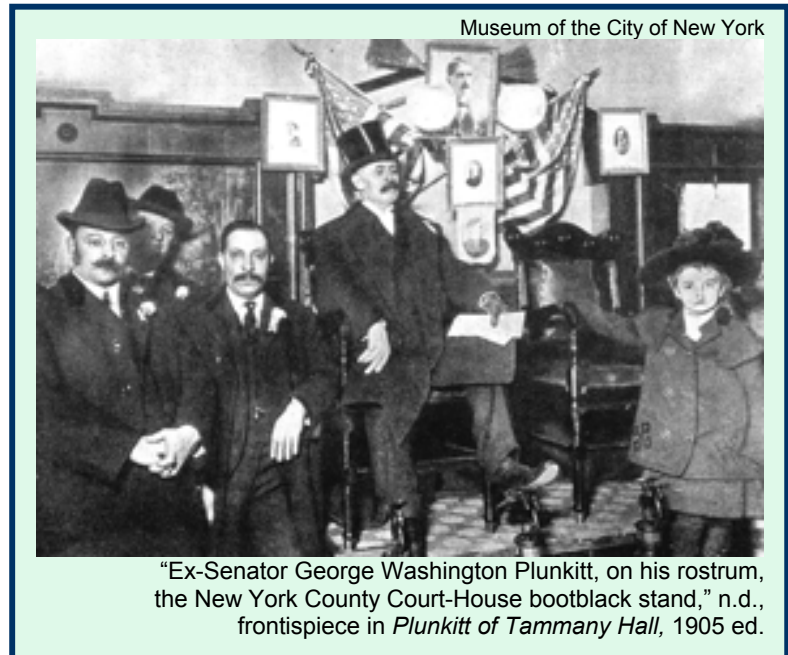
“How? Never mind that. I had a sort of monopoly of this business for a while, but once a newspaper tried to do me. It got some outside men to come over from Brooklyn and New Jersey to bid against me.

“Was I done? Not much. I went to each of the men and said: ‘How many of these 250,000 stones do you want?’ One said 20,000, and another wanted 15,000, and another wanted 10,000. I said: ‘All right, let me bid for the lot, and I’ll give each of you all you want for nothin’.

“They agreed, of course. Then the auctioneer yelled: ‘How much am I bid for these 250,000 fine pavin’ stones?’

“‘Two dollars and fifty cents,’ says I.

“‘Two dollars and fifty cents!’ screamed the auctioneer. ‘Oh, that’s a joke! Give me a real bid.’



“He found the bid was real enough. My rivals stood silent. I got the lot for \$2.50 and gave them their share. That’s how the attempt to do Plunkitt ended, and that’s how all such attempts end.

“I’ve told you how I got rich by honest graft. Now, let me tell you that most politicians who are accused of robbin’ the city get rich the same way.

“They didn’t steal a dollar from the city treasury. They just seen their opportunities and took them. That is why, when a reform administration comes in and spends a half million dollars in tryin’ to find the public robberies they talked about in the campaign, they don’t find them.

“The books are always all right. The money in the city treasury is all right. Everything is all right. All they can show is that the Tammany heads of departments looked after their friends, within the law, and gave them what opportunities they could to make honest graft. Now, let me tell you that’s never goin’ to hurt Tammany with the people. Every good man looks after his friends, and any man who doesn’t isn’t likely to be popular. If I have a good thing to hand out in private life, I give it to a friend. Why shouldn’t I do the same in public life?

“Another kind of honest graft. Tammany has raised a good many salaries. There was an awful howl by the reformers, but don’t you know that Tammany gains ten votes for every one it lost by salary raisin’?

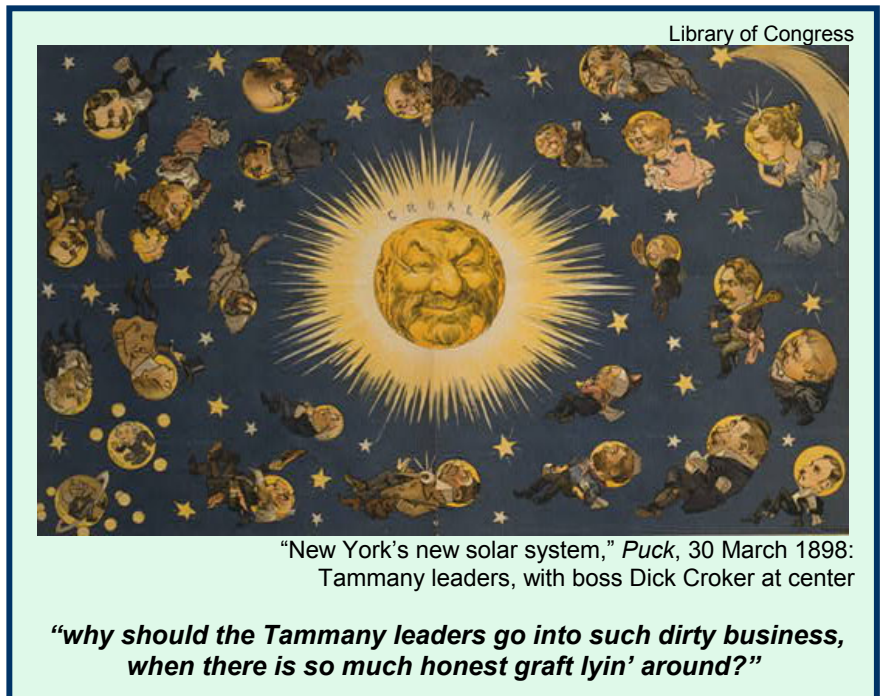
“The Wall Street banker thinks it shameful to raise a department clerk’s salary from \$1500 to \$1800 a year, but every man who draws a salary himself says: ‘That’s all right. I wish it was me.’ And he feels very much like votin’ the Tammany ticket on election day, just out of sympathy.

“Tammany was beat in 1901 because the people were deceived into believin’ that it worked dishonest graft. They didn’t draw a distinction between dishonest and honest graft, but they saw that some Tammany men grew rich, and supposed they had been robbin’ the city treasury or levyin’ blackmail on disorderly houses, or workin’ in with the gamblers and lawbreakers.

“As a matter of policy, if nothing else, why should the Tammany leaders go into such dirty business, when there is so much honest graft lyin’ around when they are in power? Did you ever consider that?

“Now, in conclusion, I want to say that I don’t own a dishonest dollar. If my worst enemy was given the job of writin’ my epitaph when I’m gone, he couldn’t do more than write:

“George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took ’Em.”



Ch 2. How to Become a Statesman

“THERE’S thousands of young men in this city who will go to the polls for the first time next November. Among them will be many who have watched the careers of successful men in politics, and who are longin’ to make names and fortunes for themselves at the same game. It is to these youths that I want to give advice. First, let me say that I am in a position to give what the courts call expert testimony on the subject. I don’t think you can easily find a better example than I am of success in politics. After forty years’ experience at the game I am — well, I’m George Washington Plunkitt. Everybody knows what figure I cut in the greatest organization on earth, and if you hear people say that I’ve laid away a million or so since I was a butcher’s boy in Washington Market, don’t come to me for an indignant denial. I’m pretty comfortable, thank you.

“Now, havin’ qualified as an expert, as the lawyers say, I am goin’ to give advice free to the young men who are goin’ to cast their first votes, and who are lookin’ forward to political glory and lots of cash. Some young men think they can learn how to be successful in politics from books, and they cram their heads with all sorts of college rot. They couldn’t make a bigger mistake. Now, understand me, I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ against colleges. I guess they’ll have to exist as long as there’s bookworms, and I suppose they do some good in a certain way, but they don’t count in politics. In fact, a young man who has gone through the college course is handicapped at the outset. He may succeed in politics, but the chances are 100 to 1 against him.

“Another mistake; some young men think that the best way to prepare for the political game is to practice speakin’ and becomin’ orators. That’s all wrong. We’ve got some orators in Tammany Hall, but they’re chiefly ornamental. You never heard of Charlie Murphy delivering a speech, did you? Or Richard Croker, or John Kelly, or any other man who has been a real power in the organization? Look at the thirty-six district leaders of Tammany Hall to-day. How many of them travel on their tongues? Maybe one or two, and they don’t count when business is doin’ at Tammany Hall. The men who rule have practiced keepin’ their tongues still, not exercisin’ them. So you want to drop the orator idea unless you mean to go into politics just to perform the sky-rocket act.

“Now, I’ve told you what not to do; I guess I can explain best what to do to succeed in politics by tellin’ you what I did. After goin’ through the apprenticeship of the business while I was a boy by workin’ around the district headquarters and hustlin’ about the polls on election day, I set out when I cast my first vote to win fame and money in New York City politics. Did I offer my services to the district leader as a stump-speaker? Not much. The woods are always full of speakers. Did I get up a book on municipal government and show it to the leader? I wasn’t such a fool. What I did was to get some marketable goods before goin’ to the leaders. What do I mean by marketable goods? Let me tell you: I had a cousin, a young man who didn’t take any particular interest in politics. I went to him and said: ‘Tommy, I’m goin’ to



be a politician, and I want to get a followin'; can I count on you?' He said: 'Sure, George.' That's how I started in business. I got a marketable commodity — one vote. Then I went to the district leader and told him I could command two votes on election day, Tommy's and my own. He smiled on me and told me to go ahead. If I had offered him a speech or a bookful of learnin', he would have said, 'Oh, forget it!'

"That was beginnin' business in a small way, wasn't it? But that is the only way to become a real lastin' statesman. I soon branched out. Two young men in the flat next to mine were school friends. I went to them, just as I went to Tommy, and they agreed to stand by me. Then I had a followin' of three voters and I began to get a bit chesty. Whenever I dropped into district headquarters, everybody shook hands with me, and the leader one day honored me by lightin' a match for my cigar. And so it went on like a snowball rollin' down a hill. I worked the flat-house that I lived in from the basement to the top floor, and I got about a dozen young men to follow me. Then I tackled

the next house and so on down the block and around the corner. Before long I had sixty men back of me, and formed the George Washington Plunkitt Association.

"What did the district leader say then when I called at headquarters? I didn't have to call at headquarters. He came after me and said: 'George, what do you want? If you don't see what you want, ask for it. Wouldn't you like to have a job or two in the departments for your friends?' I said: 'I'll think it over; I haven't yet decided what the George Washington Plunkitt Association will do in the next campaign.' You ought to have seen how I was courted and petted then by the leaders of the rival organizations. I had marketable goods and there was bids for them from all sides, and I was a risin' man in politics. As time went on, and my association grew, I thought I would like to go to the Assembly. I just had to hint at what I wanted, and three different organizations offered me the nomination. Afterwards, I went to the Board of Aldermen, then to the State Senate, then became leader of the district, and so on up and up till I became a statesman.



"That is the way and the only way to make a lastin' success in politics. If you are goin' to cast your first vote next November and want to go into politics, do as I did. Get a followin', if it's only one man, and then go to the district leader and say: 'I want to join the organization. I've got one man who'll follow me through thick and thin.' The leader won't laugh at your one-man followin'. He'll shake your hand warmly, offer to propose you for membership in his club, take you down to the corner for a drink and ask you to call again. But go to him and say: 'I took first prize at college in Aristotle; I can recite all Shakspeare [sic] forwards and backwards; there ain't nothin' in science that ain't as familiar to me as blockades on the elevated roads and I'm the real thing in the way of silver-tongued orators.' What will he answer? He'll probably say: 'I guess you are not to blame for your misfortunes, but we have no use for you here.'"

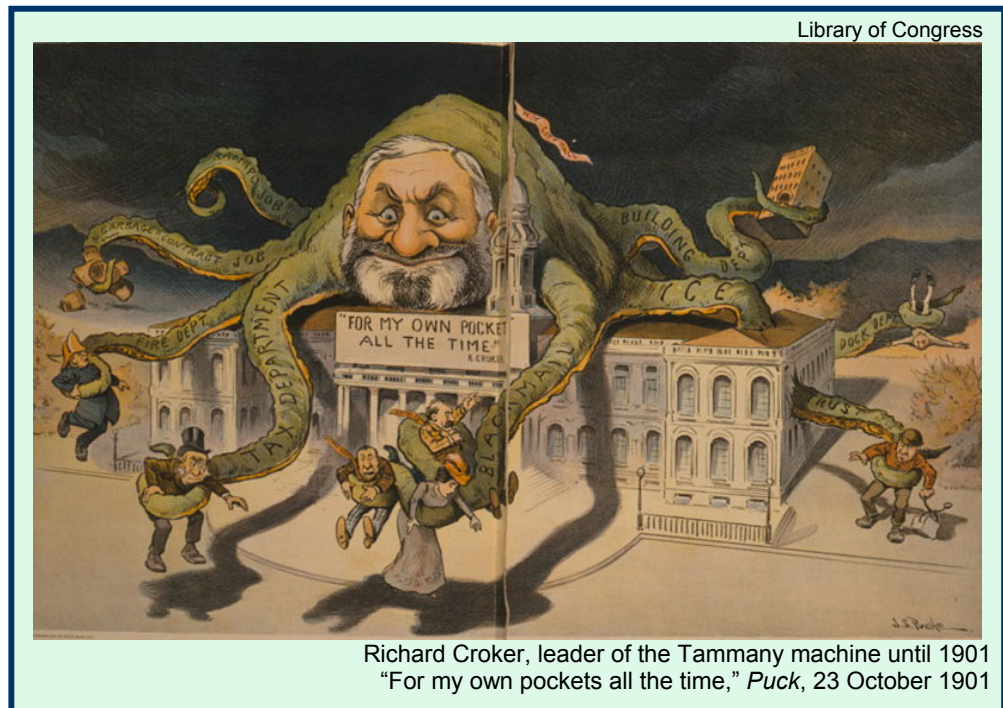
Ch. 3. The Curse of Civil Service Reform

“THIS civil service law is the biggest fraud of the age. It is the curse of the nation. There can't be no real patriotism while it lasts. How are you goin' to interest our young men in their country if you have no offices to give them when they work for their party? Just look at things in this city to-day. There are ten thousand good offices, but we can't get at more than a few hundred of them. How are we goin' to provide for the thousands of men who worked for the Tammany ticket? It can't be done. These men were full of patriotism a short time ago. They expected to be servin' their city, but when we tell them that we can't place them, do you think their patriotism is goin' to last? Not much. They say: 'What's the use of workin' for your country anyhow? There's nothin' in the game.' And what can they do? I don't know, but I'll tell you what I do know. I know more than one young man in past years who worked for the ticket and was just overflowin' with patriotism, but when he was knocked out by the civil service humbug he got to hate his country and became an Anarchist.

“This ain't no exaggeration. I have good reason for sayin' that most of the Anarchists in this city to-day are men who ran up against civil service examinations. Isn't it enough to make a man sour on his country when he wants to serve it and won't be allowed unless he answers a lot of fool questions about the number of cubic inches of water in the Atlantic and the quality of sand in the Sahara desert? There was once a bright young man in my district who tackled one of these examinations. The next I heard of him he had settled down in Herr Most's saloon smokin' and drinkin' beer and talkin' socialism all day. Before that time he had never drank anything but whisky. I knew what was comin' when a young Irishman drops whisky and takes to beer and long pipes in a German saloon. That young man is to-day one of the wildest Anarchists in town. And just to think! He might be a patriot but for that cussed civil service.

“Say, did you hear about that Civil

Service Reform Association kickin' because the tax commissioners want to put their fifty-five deputies on the exempt list, and fire the outfit left to them by Low? That's civil service for you. Just think! Fifty-five Republicans and mugwumps holdin' \$3000 and \$4000 and \$5000 jobs in the tax department when 1555 good Tammany men are ready and willin' to take their places! It's an outrage! What did the people mean when they voted for Tammany[?] What is representative government, anyhow? Is it all a fake that this is a government of the people, by the people and for the people? If it isn't a fake, then why isn't the people's voice obeyed and Tammany men put in all the offices?



“When the people elected Tammany, they knew just what they were doin’. We didn’t put up any false pretenses. We didn’t go in for humbug civil service and all that rot. We stood as we have always stood, for rewardin’ the men that won the victory. They call that the spoils system. All right; Tammany is for the spoils system, and when we go in we fire every anti-Tammany man from office that can be fired under the law. It’s an elastic sort of law and you can bet it will be stretched to the limit. Of course the Republican State Civil Service Board will stand in the way of our local Civil Service Commission all it can; but say! — suppose we carry the State sometime, won’t we fire the upstate Board all right? Or we’ll make it work in harmony with the local board, and that means that Tammany will get everything in sight. I know that the civil service humbug is stuck into the constitution, too, but, as Tim Campbell said: ‘What’s the constitution among friends?’

“Say, the people’s voice is smothered by the cursed civil service law; it is the root of all evil in our government. You hear of this thing or that thing goin’ wrong in the nation, the State or the city. Look down beneath the surface and you can trace everything wrong to civil service. I have studied the subject and I know. The civil service humbug is underminin’ our institutions and if a halt ain’t called soon this great republic will tumble down like a Park-avenue house when they were buildin’ the subway, and on its ruins will rise another Russian government.

“This is an awful serious proposition. Free silver and the tariff and imperialism and the Panama Canal are triflin’ issues when compared to it. We could worry along without any of these things, but civil service is sappin’ the foundation of the whole shootin’ match. Let me argue it out for you. I ain’t up on sillygisms, but I can give you some arguments that nobody can answer.

“First this great and glorious country was built up by political parties; second, parties can’t hold together if their workers don’t get the offices when they win; third, if the parties go to pieces, the government they built up must go to pieces, too; fourth, then there’ll be h — to pay.

“Could anything be clearer than that? Say, honest now; can you answer that argument? Of course you won’t deny that the government was built up by the great parties. That’s history, and you can’t go back of the returns. As to my second proposition, you can’t deny that either. When parties can’t get offices, they’ll bust. They ain’t far from the bustin’ point now, with all this civil service business keepin’ most of the good things from them. How are you goin’ to keep up patriotism if this thing goes on? You can’t do it. let me tell you that patriotism has been dying out fast for the last twenty years. Before then when a party won, its workers got everything in sight. That was somethin’ to make a man patriotic. Now, when a party wins and its men come forward and ask for their reward, the reply is, ‘Nothin’ doin’, unless you can answer a list of questions about Egyptian mummies and how many years it will take for a bird to wear out a mass of iron as big as the earth by steppin’ on it once in a century?’

“I have studied politics and men for forty-five years, and I see how things are driftin’. Sad indeed is the change that has come over the young men, even in my district, where I try to keep up the fire of patriotism by gettin’ a lot of jobs for my constituents, whether Tammany is in or out. The boys and men don’t get excited any more when they see a United States flag or hear ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’ They don’t care no more for fire-crackers on the Fourth of July. And why should they? What is there in it for them? They know that no matter how hard they work for their country in a campaign, the jobs will go to fellows who can tell about the mummies and the bird steppin’ on the iron. Are you surprised then that the young men of the country are beginnin’ to look coldly on the flag and don’t care to put up a nickel for fire-crackers?

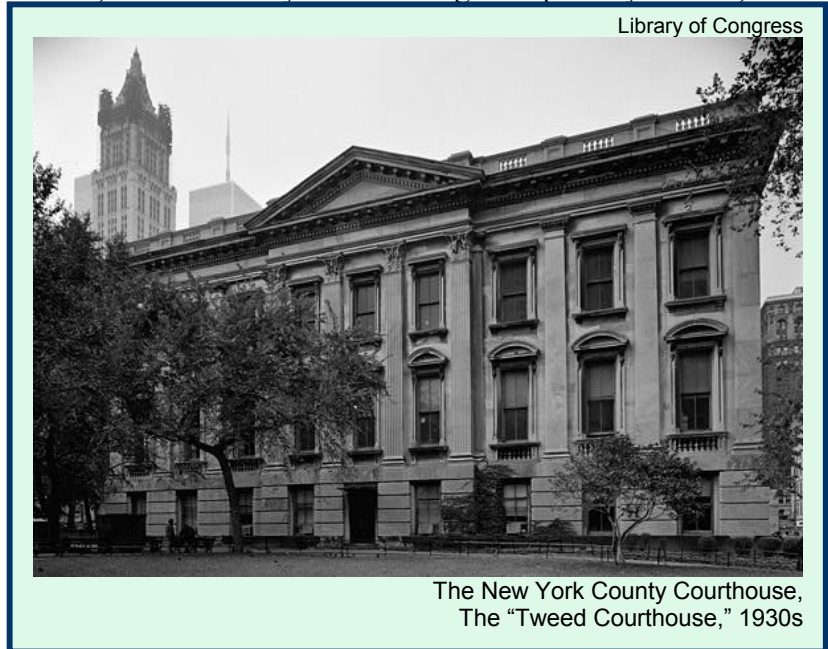
“Say, let me tell of one case. After the battle of San Juan Hill, the Americans found a dead man with a light complexion, red hair and blue eyes. They could see he wasn’t a Spaniard, although he had on a Spanish uniform. Several officers looked him over, and then a private of the Seventy-first Regiment saw him and yelled, ‘Good Lord, that’s Flaherty.’ That man grew up in my district, and he was once the most patriotic American boy on the West Side. He couldn’t see a flag without yellin’ himself hoarse.

“Now, how did he come to be lying dead with a Spanish uniform on? I found out all about it, and I’ll vouch for the story. Well, in the municipal campaign of 1897, that young man, chockful of patriotism, worked day and night for the Tammany ticket. Tammany won, and the young man determined to devote his life to the service of the city. He picked out a place that would suit him, and sent in his

application to the head of department. He got a reply that he must take a civil service examination to get the place. He didn’t know what these examinations were, so he went, all light-hearted, to the Civil Service Board. He read the questions about the mummies, the bird on the iron, and all the other fool questions — and he left that office an enemy of the country that he had loved so well. The mummies and the bird blasted his patriotism. He went to Cuba, enlisted in the Spanish army at the breakin’ out of the war, and died fightin’ his country.

“That is but one victim of the infamous civil service. If that young man had not run up against the civil examination, but had been allowed to serve his country as he wished, he would be in a good office to-day, drawin’ a good salary. Ah, how many young men have had their patriotism blasted in the same way!

“Now, what is goin’ to happen when civil service crushes out patriotism? Only one thing can happen — the republic will go to pieces. Then a czar or a sultan will turn up, which brings me to the fourthly of my argument; that is, there will be h — to pay. And that ain’t no lie.”



Library of Congress

The New York County Courthouse,
The “Tweed Courthouse,” 1930s

Ch 4. Reformers Only Mornin’ Glories

“COLLEGE professors and philosophers who go up in a balloon to think are always discussin’ the question: ‘Why Reform Administrations Never Succeed Themselves!’ The reason is plain to anybody who has learned the a, b, c of politics.

“I can’t tell just how many of these movements I’ve seen started in New York during my forty years in politics, but I can tell you how many have lasted more than a few years — none. There have been reform committees of fifty, of sixty, of seventy, of one hundred and all sorts of numbers that started out to do up the regular political organizations. They were mornin’ glories — looked lovely in the

mornin' and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines went on flourishin' forever, like fine old oaks. Say, that's the first poetry I ever worked off. Ain't it great?

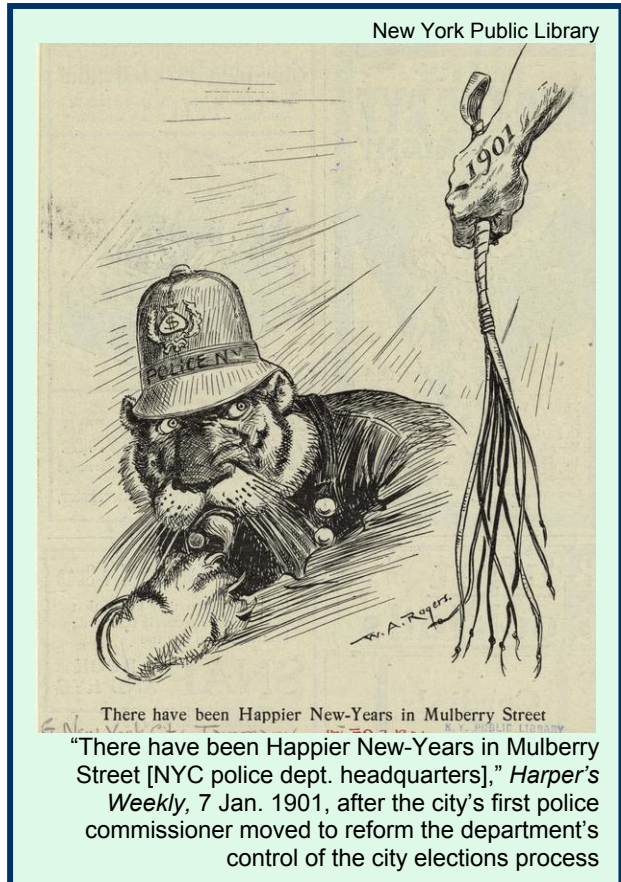
"Just look back a few years. You remember the People's Municipal League that nominated Frank Scott for mayor in 1890? Do you remember the reformers that got up that league? Have you ever heard of them since? I haven't. Scott himself survived because he had always been a first-rate politician. but you'd have to look in the newspaper almanacs of 1891 to find out who made up the People's Municipal League. Oh, yes! I remember one name — Ollie Teall; dear, pretty Ollie and his big dog. They're about all that's left of the League.

"Now take the reform movement of 1894. A lot of good politicians joined in that — the Republicans, the State Democrats, the Stecklerites and the O'Brienites, and they gave us a lickin', but the real reform part of the affair, the Committee of Seventy that started the thing goin', what's become of those reformers? What's become of Charles Stewart Smith? Where's Bangs? Do you ever hear of Cornell, the iron man, in politics now? Could a search party find R. W. G. Welling? Have you seen the name of Fulton McMahon or McMahon Fulton — I ain't sure which — in the papers lately? Or Preble Tucker? Or — but it's no use to go through the list of the reformers who said they sounded in the death knell of Tammany in 1894. They're gone for good, and Tammany's pretty well, thank you. They did the talkin' and posin', and the politicians in the movement got all the plums. It's always the case.

"The Citizens' Union has lasted a little bit longer than the reform crowd that went before them, but that's because they learned a thing or two from us. They learned how to put up a pretty good bluff — and bluff counts a lot in politics. With only a few thousand members, they had the nerve to run the whole Fusion movement, make the Republicans and other organizations come to their head-quarters to select a ticket and dictate what every candidate must do or not do. I love nerve, and I've had a sort of respect for the Citizens' Union lately, but the Union can't last. Its people haven't been trained to politics, and whenever Tammany calls their bluff they lay right down. You'll never hear of the Union again after a year or two.

"And, by the way, what's become of the good government clubs, the political nurseries of a few years ago? Do you ever hear of Good Government Club D and P and Q and Z any more? What's become of the infants who were to grow up and show us how to govern the city? I know what's become of the nursery that was started in my district. You can find pretty much the whole outfit over in my headquarters, Washington Hall.

"The fact is that a reformer can't last in politics. He can make a show for a while, but he always comes down like a rocket. Politics is as much a regular business as the grocery or the dry-goods or the drug business. You've got to be trained up to it or you're sure to fall. Suppose a man who knew



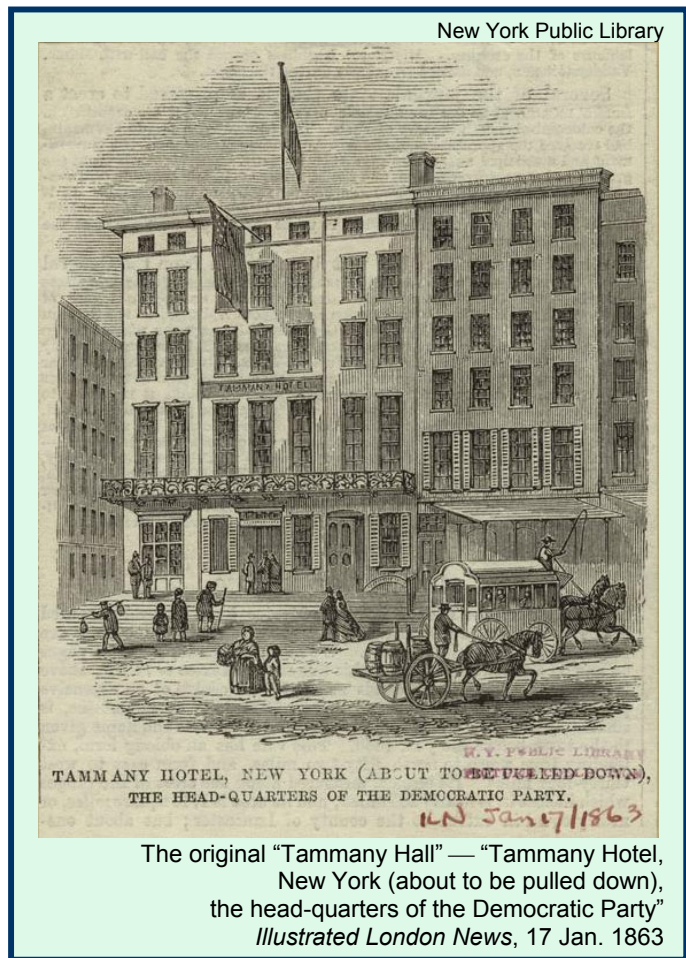
nothing about the grocery trade suddenly went into the business and tried to conduct it according to his own ideas. Wouldn't he make a mess of it? He might make a splurge for a while, as long as his money lasted, but his store would soon be empty. It's just the same with a reformer. He hasn't been brought up in the difficult business of politics and he makes a mess of it every time.

"I've been studyin' the political game for forty-five years, and I don't know it all yet. I'm learnin' somethin' all the time. How, then, can you expect what they call 'business men' to turn into politics all at once and make a success of it? It is just as if I went up to Columbia University and started to teach Greek. They usually last about as long in politics as I would last at Columbia.

"You can't begin too early in politics if you want to succeed at the game. I began several years before I could vote, and so did every successful leader in Tammany Hall. When I was twelve years old I made myself useful around the district headquarters and did work at all the polls on election day. Later on, I hustled about gettin' out voters who had jags on or who were too lazy to come to the polls. There's a hundred ways that boys can help, and they get an experience that's the first real step in statesmanship. Show me a boy that hustles for the organization on election day, and I'll show you a comin' statesman.

"That's the a b c of politics. It ain't easy work to get up to y and z. You have to give nearly all your time and attention to it. Of course, you may have some business or occupation on the side, but the great business of your life must be politics if you want to succeed in it. A few years ago Tammany tried to mix politics and business in equal quantities, by havin' two leaders for each district, a politician and a business man. They wouldn't mix. They were like oil and water. The politician looked after the politics of his district; the business man looked after his grocery store or his milk route, and whenever he appeared at an executive meeting, it was only to make trouble. The whole scheme turned out to be a farce and was abandoned mighty quick.

"Do you understand now, why it is that a reformer goes down and out in the first or second round, while a politician answers to the gong every time? It is because the one has gone into the fight without trainin', while the other trains all the time and knows every fine point of the game."

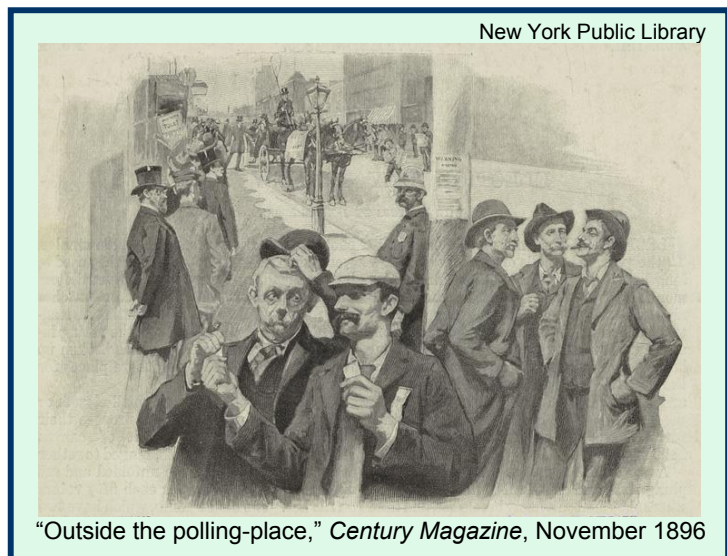


Ch 5. New York City Is Pie for the Hayseeds

“THIS city is ruled entirely by the hayseed legislators at Albany. I’ve never known an up-State Republican who didn’t want to run things here, and I’ve met many thousands of them in my long service in the Legislature. The hayseeds think we are like the Indians to the National Government — that is, sort of wards of the State, who don’t know how to look after ourselves and have to be taken care of by the Republicans of St. Lawrence, Ontario, and other backwoods counties. Why should anybody be surprised because ex-Governor Odell comes down here to direct the Republican machine? Newburg ain’t big enough for him. He, like all the other up-State Republicans, wants to get hold of New York City. New York is their pie.

“Say, you hear a lot about the downtrodden people of Ireland and the Russian peasants and the sufferin’ Boers. Now, let me tell you that they have more real freedom and home rule than the people of this grand and imperial city. In England, for example, they make a pretense of givin’ the Irish some self-government. In this State the Republican government makes no pretense at all. It says right out in the open: ‘New York City is a nice big fat Goose. Come along with your carvin’ knives and have a slice.’ They don’t pretend to ask the Goose’s consent.

“We don’t own our streets or our docks or our water front or anything else. The Republican Legislature and Governor run the whole shootin’-match. We’ve got to eat and drink what they tell us to eat and drink, and have got to choose our time for eatin’ and drinkin’ to suit them. If they don’t feel like takin’ a glass of beer on Sunday, we must abstain. If they have not got any amusements up in their backwoods, we mustn’t have none. We’ve got to regulate our whole lives to suit them. And then we have to pay their taxes to boot.



“Did you ever go up to Albany from this city with a delegation that wanted anything from the Legislature? No? Well, don’t. The hayseeds who run all the committees will look at you as if you were a child that didn’t know what it wanted, and will tell you in so many words to go home and be good and the Legislature will give you whatever it thinks is good for you. They put on a sort of patronizing air, as much as to say, ‘These children are an awful lot of trouble. They’re wantin’ candy all the time, and they know that it will make them sick. They ought to thank goodness that they have us to take care of them.’ And if you try to argue with them, they’ll smile in a pityin’ sort of way as if they were humorin’ a spoiled child.

“But just let a Republican farmer from Chemung or Wayne or Tioga turn up at the Capital. The Republican Legislature will make a rush for him and ask him what he wants and tell him if he doesn’t see what he wants to ask for it. If he says his taxes are too high, they reply to him: ‘All right, old man, don’t let that worry you. How much do you want us to take off?’

“‘I guess about fifty per cent will about do for the present,’ says the man, ‘Can you fix me up?’

“‘Sure,’ the Legislature agrees. ‘Give us somethin’ harder, don’t be bashful. We’ll take off sixty per cent if you wish. That’s what we’re here for.’

“Then the Legislature goes and passes a law increasin’ the liquor tax or some other tax in New York City, takes a half of the proceeds for the State Treasury and cuts down the farmers’ taxes to suit. It’s as easy as rollin’ off a log — when you’ve got a good workin’ majority and no conscience to speak of.

“Let me give you another example. It makes me hot under the collar to tell about this. Last year some hayseeds along the Hudson River, mostly in Odell’s neighborhood, got dissatisfied with the docks where they landed their vegetables, brickbats, and other things they produce in the river counties. They got together and said: ‘Let’s take a trip down to New York and pick out the finest dock we can find. Odell and the Legislature will do the rest.’ They did come down here, and what do you think they hit on? The finest dock in my district. Invaded George W. Plunkitt’s district without sayin’ as much as ‘by your leave.’ Then they called on Odell to put through a bill givin’ them this dock, and he did.

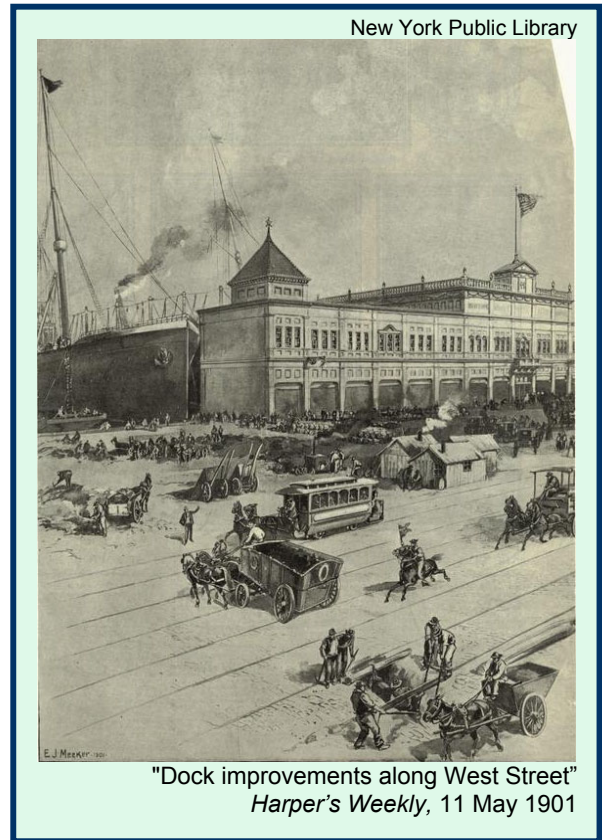
“When the bill came before Mayor Low I made the greatest speech of my life. I pointed out how the Legislature could give the whole waterfront to the hayseeds over the head of the Dock Commissioner in the same way, and warned the Mayor that nations had rebelled against their governments for less. But it was no go. Odell and Low were pard and — well, my dock was stolen.

“You heard a lot in the State campaign about Odell’s great work in reducin’ the State tax to almost nothin’, and you’ll hear a lot more about it in the campaign next year. How did he do it? By cuttin’ down the expenses of the State Government? Oh, no! The expenses went up. He simply performed the old Republican act of milkin’ New York City. The only difference was that he nearly milked the city dry. He not only ran up the liquor tax, but put all sorts of taxes on corporations, banks, insurance companies, and everything in sight that could be made to give up. Of course, nearly the whole tax fell on the city. Then Odell went through the country districts and said: ‘See what I have done for you. You ain’t got any more taxes to pay the State. Ain’t I a fine feller?’

“Once a farmer in Orange County asked him: ‘How did you do it, Ben?’

“‘Dead easy,’ he answered. ‘Whenever I want any money for the State Treasury, I know where to get it,’ and he pointed toward New York City.

“And then all the Republican tinkerin’ with New York City’s charter. Nobody can keep up with it. When a Republican mayor is in, they give him all sorts of power. If a Tammany mayor is elected next fall I wouldn’t be surprised if they changed the whole business and arranged it so that every city department should have four heads, two of them Republicans. If we make a kick, they would say: ‘You don’t know what’s good for you. Leave it to us. It’s our business.’”



Ch 6. To Hold Your District — Study Human Nature and Act Accordin’

“THERE’S only one way to hold a district; you must study human nature and act accordin’. You can’t study human nature in books. Books is a hindrance more than anything else. If you have been to college, so much the worse for you. You’ll have to unlearn all you learned before you can get right down to human nature, and unlearnin’ takes a lot of time. Some men can never forget what they learned at college. Such men may get to be district leaders by a fluke, but they never last.

“To learn real human nature you have to go among the people, see them and be seen. I know every man, woman, and child in the Fifteenth District, except them that’s been born this summer — and I know some of them, too. I know what they like and what they don’t like, what they are strong at and what they are weak in, and I reach them by approachin’ at the right side.

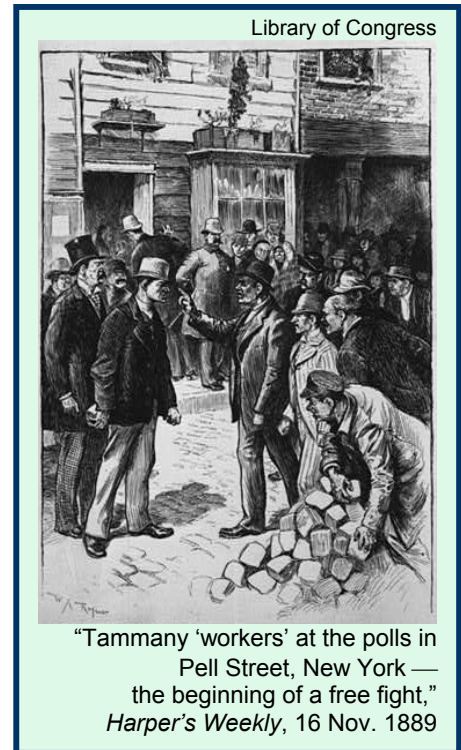
“For instance, here’s how I gather in the young men. I hear of a young feller that’s proud of his voice, thinks that he can sing fine. I ask him to come around to Washington Hall and join our Glee Club. He comes and sings, and he’s a follower of Plunkitt for life. Another young feller gains a reputation as a base-ball player in a vacant lot. I bring him into our base-ball club. That fixes him. You’ll find him workin’ for my ticket at the polls next election day. Then there’s the feller that likes rowin’ on the river, the young feller that makes a name as a waltzer on his block, the young feller that’s handy with his dukes — I rope them all in by givin’ them opportunities to show themselves off. I don’t trouble them with political arguments. I just study human nature and act accordin’.

“But you may say this game won’t work with the high-toned fellers, the fellers that go through college and then join the Citizens’ Union. Of course it wouldn’t work. I have a special treatment for them. I ain’t like the patent medicine man that gives the same medicine for all diseases. The Citizens’ Union kind of a young man! I love him! He’s the daintiest morsel of the lot, and he don’t often escape me.

“Before telling you how I catch him, let me mention that before the election last year, the Citizens’ Union said they had four hundred or five hundred enrolled voters in my district. They had a lovely headquarters, too, beautiful roll-top desks and the cutest rugs in the world. If I was accused of havin’ contributed to fix up the nest for them, I wouldn’t deny it under oath. What do I mean by that? Never mind. You can guess from the sequel, if you’re sharp.

“Well, election day came. The Citizens’ Union’s candidate for Senator, who ran against me, just polled five votes in the district, while I polled something more than 14,000 votes. What became of the 400 or 500 Citizens’ Union enrolled voters in my district? Some people guessed that many of them were good Plunkitt men all along and worked with the Cits just to bring them into the Plunkitt camp by election day. You can guess that way, too, if you want to. I never contradict stories about me, especially in hot weather. I just call your attention to the fact that on last election day 395 Citizens’ Union enrolled voters in my district were missin’ and unaccounted for.

“I tell you frankly, though, how I have captured some of the Citizens’ Union’s young men. I have a plan that never fails. I watch the City Record to see when there’s civil service examinations for



good things. Then I take my young Cit in hand, tell him all about the good thing and get him worked up till he goes and takes an examination. I don't bother about him any more. It's a cinch that he comes back to me in a few days and asks to join Tammany Hall. Come over to Washington Hall some night and I'll show you a list of names on our rolls marked 'C. S.' which means, 'bucked up against civil service.'

"As to the older voters, I reach them, too. No, I don't send them campaign literature. That's rot. People can get all the political stuff they want to read — and a good deal more, too — in the papers. Who reads speeches, nowadays, anyhow? It's bad enough to listen to them. You ain't goin' to gain any votes by stuffin' the letter boxes with campaign documents. Like as not you'll lose votes, for there's nothin' a man hates more than to hear the letter-carrier ring his bell and go to the letter-box expectin' to find a letter he was lookin' for, and find only a lot of printed politics. I met a man this very mornin' who told me he voted the Democratic State ticket last year just because the

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Thomas A. Edison, Inc., stills from film "Dick Croker Leaving Tammany Hall," 1905

To view the film online, go to <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mbrsmi/edmp.0978>, in Early Motion

Republicans kept crammin' his letter-box with campaign documents.

"What tells in holdin' your grip on your district is to go right down among the poor families and help them in the different ways they need help. I've got a regular system for this. If

there's a fire in Ninth, Tenth, or Eleventh Avenue, for example, any hour of the day or night, I'm usually there with some of my election district captains as soon as the fire-engines. If a family is burned out I don't ask whether they are Republicans or Democrats, and I don't refer them to the Charity Organization Society, which would investigate their case in a month or two and decide they were worthy of help about the time they are dead from starvation. I just get quarters for them, buy clothes for them if their clothes were burned up, and fix them up till they get things runnin' again. It's philanthropy, but it's politics, too — mighty good politics. Who can tell how many votes one of these fires bring me? The poor are the most grateful people in the world, and, let me tell you, they have more friends in their neighborhoods than the rich have in theirs.

"If there's a family in my district in want I know it before the charitable societies do, and me and my men are first on the ground. I have a special corps to look up such cases. The consequence is that the poor look up to George W. Plunkitt as a father, come to him in trouble — and don't forget him on election day.

"Another thing, I can always get a job for a deservin' man. I make it a point to keep on the track of jobs, and it seldom happens that I don't have a few up my sleeve ready for use. I know every big employer in the district and in the whole city, for that matter, and they ain't in the habit of sayin' no to me when I ask them for a job.

"And the children — the little roses of the district! Do I forget them? Oh, no! They know me, every one of them, and they know that a sight of Uncle George and candy means the same thing. Some of them are the best kind of vote-getters. I'll tell you a case. Last year a little Eleventh Avenue rosebud whose father is a Republican, caught hold of his whiskers on election day and said she wouldn't let go till he'd promise to vote for me. And she didn't."



Ch 7. On “The Shame of the Cities”

“I’VE been readin’ a book by Lincoln Steffens on ‘The Shame of the Cities.’ Steffens means well but, like all reformers, he don’t know how to make distinctions. He can’t see no difference between honest graft and dishonest graft and, consequent, he gets things all mixed up. There’s the biggest kind of a difference between political looters and politicians who make a fortune out of politics by keepin’ their eyes wide open. The looter goes in for himself alone without considerin’ his organization or his city. The politician looks after his own interests, the organization’s interests, and the city’s interests all at the same time. See the distinction? For instance, I ain’t no looter. The looter hogs it. I never hogged. I made my pile in politics, but, at the same time, I served the organization and got more big improvements for New York City than any other livin’ man. And I never monkeyed with the penal code.

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"Tammany is great and Croker gets the profit" *Puck*, 12 Nov. 1900
[knife is labeled "Tammany vote"]
William Jennings Bryan hobbles away on crutches]

Library of Congress



Richard Croker, 1908

“The difference between a looter and a practical politician is the difference between the Philadelphia Republican gang and Tammany Hall. Steffens seems to think they’re both about the same; but he’s all wrong. The Philadelphia crowd runs up against the penal code. Tammany don’t. The Philadelphians ain’t satisfied with robbin’ the bank of all its gold and paper money. They stay to pick up the nickels and pennies and the cop comes and nabs them. Tammany ain’t no such fool. Why, I remember, about fifteen or twenty years ago, a Republican superintendent of the Philadelphia almshouse stole the zinc roof off the buildin’ and sold it for junk. That was carryin’ things to excess. There’s a limit to everything, and the Philadelphia Republicans go beyond the limit. It seems like they can’t be cool and moderate like real politicians. It ain’t fair, therefore, to class Tammany men with the Philadelphia gang. Any man who undertakes to write political books should never for a moment lose sight of the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft, which I explained in full in another talk. If he puts all kinds of graft on the same level, he’ll make the fatal mistake that Steffens made and spoil his book.

“A big city like New York or Philadelphia or Chicago might be compared to a sort of Garden of Eden, from a political point of view. It’s an orchard full of beautiful apple-trees. One of them has got a big sign on it, marked: ‘Penal Code Tree — Poison.’ The other trees have lots of apples on them for all. Yet, the fools go to the Penal Code Tree. Why? For the reason, I guess, that a cranky child refuses to eat good food and chews up a box of matches with relish. I never had any temptation to touch the Penal Code Tree. The other apples are good enough for me, and O Lord! how many of them there are in a big city!

“Steffens made one good point in his book. He said he found that Philadelphia, ruled almost entirely by Americans, was more

corrupt than New York, where the Irish do almost all the governin’. I could have told him that before he did any investigatin’ if he had come to me. The Irish was born to rule, and they’re the honestest people in the world. Show me the Irishman who would steal a roof off an almhouse! He

don't exist. Of course, if an Irishman had the political pull and the roof was much worn, he might get the city authorities to put on a new one and get the contract for it himself, and buy the old roof at a bargain — but that's honest graft. It's goin' about the thing like a gentleman — and there's more money in it than in tearin' down an old roof and cartin' it to the junkman's — more money and no penal code.

“One reason why the Irishman is more honest in politics than many Sons of the Revolution is that he is grateful to the country and the city that gave him protection and prosperity when he was driven by oppression from the Emerald Isle. Say, that sentence is fine, ain't it? I'm goin' to get some literary feller to work it over into poetry for next St. Patrick's Day dinner.

“Yes, the Irishman is grateful. His one thought is to serve the city which gave him a home. He has this thought even before he lands in New York, for his friends here often have a good place in one of the city departments picked out for him while he is still in the old country. Is it any wonder that he has a tender spot in his heart for old New York when he is on its salary list the mornin' after he lands?

“Now, a few words on the general subject of the so-called shame of cities. I don't believe that the government of our cities is any worse, in proportion to opportunities, than it was fifty years ago. I'll explain what I mean by 'in proportion to opportunities.' A half a century ago, our cities were small and poor. There wasn't many temptations lyin' around for politicians. There was hardly anything to steal, and hardly any opportunities for even honest graft. A city could count its money every night before goin' to bed, and if three cents was missin', all the fire-bells would be rung. What credit was there in bein' honest under them circumstances? It makes me tired to hear of old codgers back in the thirties or forties boastin' that they retired from politics without a dollar except what they earned in their profession or business. If they lived to-day, with all the existin' opportunities, they would be just the same as twentieth century politicians. There ain't any more honest people in the world just now than the convicts in Sing Sing. Not one of them steals anything. Why? Because they can't. See the application?

“Understand, I ain't defendin' politicians of to-day who steal. The politician who steals is worse than a thief. He is a fool. With the grand opportunities all around for the man with a political pull, there's no excuse for stealin' a cent. The point I want to make is that if there is some stealin' in politics, it don't mean that the politicians of 1905 are, as a class, worse than them of 1835. It just means that the old-timers had nothin' to steal, while the politicians now are surrounded by all kinds of temptations and some of them naturally — the fool ones — buck up against the penal code.”

