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Terse and Terrible Texts

“To the man on the cross-arms,” said the solon from the Forty-fourth ward, as he spurted the fizz into his highball. “It may seem—and very likely it does seem—that being a city councilman is beer and skittles and a whole lot of other pleasant things. There is the honor, for instance, and the glory and the salary, and then there are the grafts and the railroad passes and the free tickets on the street cars. All of these things appeal to the average citizen because the average citizen—though he would deny it if you said so—is by nature a yearner after notoriety and a grafter. The sight of his sloping brow in half tone on the fraternal order page makes him swell with ecstasy, and the mention of his name in the among-those-present at a clambake is enough to make an ass of him.

“Honors such as these come to the city councilman in shoals, and thereby the average citizen envies him. Grafts are his also and thereby it happens that the average citizen covets his high estate.

“But in truth it’s all a mockery, a snare and a delusion. For every dollar that the councilman grafts he must pay \$2.50 in current money. For every free pass that is his he must pay in independence and conscience. For every honor that comes to him he must pay, pay, pay in minted sections of whatever natural and inborn and sacred honor his ancestors bequeathed to him. As he rises above his fellow man his leg is pulled industriously in order that he may retain his connection with the sidewalk. Early and late he must labor in the vineyard and the salt mines—and after all, what does he get for it? Merely a chanced to strut the boards for one brief act, to see his name in lower case black, to have a line cut made of his features, to be called ‘Honest William’ by his adherents and ‘Crooked Bill’ by his enemies. It’s a con game, young man; a con game, and if you love me never buck up against it.”

With a weary sigh the solon gulped his highball, and after ordering a John Collins to wash it down, went on.

“Take my case, for instance,” he said. “I’m an honest man, as men go, and the father of a family. The nomination didn’t seek me, for the simple reason that I was so hot-footed after it that it couldn’t have caught me if it had. Anyhow, I was nominated and, after a rough fight, elected. I bucked the game because I was keen after the honors and thought that they would help me in my business. Now behold the sequel.

“The day I took my seat in the council a man whom I had paid \$6 to look after my interests in the Seventh precinct of my ward staggered into the council chamber with a floral monkey wrench four feet long. I’ve made money in the plumbing business, I admit, and I’m proud of it, but still I thought that some other design would have been more appropriate. Nevertheless I was forced to smile, and next day the same \$6 citizen came to my office while I

was busy planning a \$100 beer pump and told me that if a certain old man didn't get a job in the street cleaning department within 48 hours there would be the deuce to pay.

"Well, the upshot of the matter was that I went down to the hall and got the old man a place. On my way back to my office I met the president and secretary of the Fourth precinct club and they told me that they were glad to see me, because they had been on my trail all day. Then we had a drink at my expense—and they gave me a list of people who seemed to be out of work.

" 'All of them down to here,' they said, pointing to the 15th name, 'are willing to take any old thing. The others'll have to be handled with care. Jones, here, wants a superintendency in the water department and Ferguson wants an \$1800 clerkship. You can get it for him in the tax department. Mulligan needs something easy, because he's a travelling salesman and don't have much time. One of those \$2000 jobs in So and So's department would fit him like kalsomine.'

"Thus they went on for half an hour and my head began to feel heavy. Then they gave me a list of existing office-holders of the minority party and asked me to hurry up the swing of the axe. You may not believe it, but it's a fact that those leeches stuck to me until midnight and that I spent 12 hours a day for the next three weeks in attempting to satisfy them. After I had secured jobs for all of their nominees the presidents of the First, Second, Fifth, sixth and Seventh precinct organizations took my trail, and for a month I suffered the tortures of the deceased unbeliever.

"All things, however, must have an end, and in time I had distributed all of the pie allotted to me. Then, when I was congratulating myself upon my release from woe, the men whom I had placed in office began to trouble me. First came the protégé of the \$6 citizen. He had been suspended for confusing street cleaning and alcoholism, and as he could seldom stand upright without leaning on his brush I had much trouble in having him reinstated. Then came one of the clerks I had 'made.' He complained that he was required to work every afternoon until 3 o'clock. Then came another clerk who refused to take orders from his superior. Then came another clerk who refused to take orders from his superior. Then came other croakers with other croaks, and soon I was compelled to run down to Atlantic City for a week's soak in salt water.

"But these troubles, too, came to an end, and I was once more shaking hands with myself, when my constituents began to become perniciously active. One night a delegation of 35 of them called at my home and asked me to secure an asphalt pavement in an alley. For a while I staved them off, but they were sickeningly persistent, and at last I was compelled to introduce an ordinance that they had prepared providing that the work be done.

"Three afternoons were wasted in dragging it through the committee room, and then I wrestled for a week with the board of public improvements. After that there was a lull until it reached the board of estimates. There it ran upon the shoals, and I was forced to wade in blood. But after a while it came back to the council approved, and was given its third reading in my branch and sent over to the other branch. One of the legal sharks in the latter then discovered that there was a flaw in it, and I was confronted with the pleasant task of beginning all over again., To add to my woe the people who had drawn the ordinance roundly 'roasted' me for what they called my 'asininity.'

"While I was in the midst of this fight I received 34 requests for drinking fountains, 43 inquiries as to why there were piles of dirt in certain alleys, 23 petitions for new gutter plates, 7 for new fire plugs, 3 for new fire alarm boxes, 42 for more policemen, 764 for new schoolhouses, 4 for new engine houses, 983 for street repairs, 6 for asphalt pavements, 5 for vitrified brick, 7 for Belgian blocks and 1 for cobblestones.

“In addition I was asked to buy tickets for 7 bazars, 13 oyster suppers, 5 theatrical benefits—for people whom I didn’t know—67 musical and literary entertainments, and 84 functions of miscellaneous variety. Then, again, I was requested to make 33 speeches, to lead 3 prayer meetings, to secure the dismissal of a street cleaner who had splashed mud on a lady, to find out why the city hall bell didn’t strike, to introduce 31 people to the mayor, to lend 54 people my railroad pass, to secure passes on the street cars for 78 others, to secure places as motormen and conductors for 30, to have 5 men, two boys and an Italian released from jail, to make a speech in favor of Christian Science on the floor of the council, to introduce an ordinance abolishing ground rents, to introduce other ordinances forbidding prize fighting, permitting the public to pluck flowers in the parks, and providing for the filling in of the basin, to announce my attitude as to women suffrage, to ask the city register if he had any cheap bonds for sale, and to secure schedules of the property assessments of every millionaire in Baltimore.

“More than 100 people whom I didn’t know grew furious because I failed to salute them on the street, more than a thousand—

“But what’s the use? I could keep it up all day. The strain has ruined my digestion, reduced my weight and hurt my business. Let me tell you, young man, that being a city councilman is worse than torture—it’s h—“

And with tears in his eyes the luckless solon drained his glass and ordered a lemon seltzer.