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*Untold Tales*

*III.—The Revolt of the Dogs*

When the practical politicians of the ancient Roman school were in the heyday of their glory, about the beginning of the reign of Marcus Leviticus (AD. 145-173), the accepted method of dividing the spoils of victory was of such a nature that all classes of active workers were prosperous and satisfied.

According to this system, the larger rake-offs and percentages—such as were obtained, for instance, on big cobblestone and asphalt contracts—went to the big bosses and head chiefs, in rotation. All that remained—the small divvies on sodding parks and painting drinking fountains and washing the forum windows—went to what were facetiously denominated “the dogs,” i.e., the ward and precinct workers.

For many years the division of the spoils was made in this manner of satisfaction, as has been stated, of all concerned. The plan might have been followed for centuries longer, in fact, without causing friction or dissension. But with the ill-luck that pursues all things political it collided, in the course of time, with a senseless and ridiculous reform movement, and thereby it came to its undoing.

This reform movement was engineered by certain self-obtruding citizens of the how-much-better-I-am-than-thou-art breed. It was an idiotic notion that the public still should be surrounded by Gatling guns and that office holders charged with the execution of public works should receive no percentage on contracts. Ridiculous as these ideas may seem, they found ready supporters, and after a long agitation laws were passed which made it practically impossible for the big bosses to knock a profit out of cobblestones and asphalt.

For awhile the latter hardly realized what had happened. Such a condition of affairs, to their minds, was almost inconceivable. But after two contractors had flatly refused to hand over the usual 10 percentum, and an effort to discipline them had failed—the big bosses “got on,” as the saying is, and in consequence were much downcast.

Finally J. Caesar Ifreus, the head boss, called them together and they took counsel one with the other.

“It’s up to us,” he said, sadly, “and if we don’t hit on a plan of action in short order we’ll be occupationless.”

Then there up and spoke one George R. Appoggiatura, a boss whose might lay in his pull with the Federal administration.

“It’s true,” he said—“and alas! it’s too true—that all chances of working the good old big grafts are gone. But the new law does not affect contracts for amounts less than 500 denarii. Hitherto we have left much small game to the ‘dogs.’ Now we need it ourselves. Down with ‘the dogs.’”

“Bravo!” cried the bosses, in chorus.

“A good idear!” exclaimed Ifreus.

“The dogs must go!” said the bosses, again in chorus.

So it came about that the dogs were warned to surrender their birthright and the big bosses descended upon the minor grafts. Naturally the dogs were indignant. But to their protests and entreaties the big bosses were deaf.

“To h— with the dogs!” they shouted, humorously. “Us first; them afterwards. Haw! Haw!”

But the dogs saw nothing funny in this, for most of them had families to support, and they needed the money. So they appointed a committee to call upon the big bosses and lodge a complaint.

For answer the big bosses issued an order to the municipal department chiefs to remove half of the existing dogs and to double the grandmother’s fund assessments of the other half. And herein they made a mistake, for even a dog has a soul, and this addition of insult to injury was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Next day, at noon, the dogs held a meeting. That night they announced that they had formed a union. The big bosses laughed derisively. Two days later the dogs demanded a compromise. The bosses still laughed. A week later the dogs presented an ultimatum.

“If you don’t surrender,” they said, “in 48 hours we will send two of your number to the penitentiary for bribe-taking in the matter of the Appian Way paving job.”

The bosses laughed again. At the end of 48 hours “Silly” Constantinatus, president of the dogs’ union, swore out a warrant for the arrest of J.R. Ippius and G. William Allegretti, two of the big bosses, on a charge of accepting a bribe from a contractor who repaved the Way.

The bosses were startled, but not scared. “Tut, tut!” they said. “The courts wouldn’t dare touch us. We’ve got the judiciary by the neck.”

This, perhaps, was true. But it was also true that the dogs had a good lawyer. Ippius and Allegretti foolishly demanded a jury trial. The dogs’ lawyer, when it came to selecting 12 tried men and true, was what the vaudevillians denominate a bird. Two of the jurymen were naturalized Carthaginians. Another was Phoenician, who couldn’t speak Roman. Another was a rabid anti. They found Ip and Ally guilty, not only of bribe-taking, but also of arson, mayhem and night assault. The judge, helpless, said “Ten years.”

Then the big bosses arose in their wrath and swore that they would obtain revenge.

“Two,” they said, “can play at that game!”

Constantinatus, the president of the dogs’ union, was their first victim. They had him arrested on a charge of taking a 15 percent commission on a contract for varnishing the dome of the Temple of Venus. He was convicted and given 37 years at hard labor.

Then it was the dogs’ turn to be startled. But they were undismayed.

“Verily,” they said, “the game is like unto golf. Two can play at it.”

So they told what they knew about J. Fred Smitticus and Phillipus Demetrius Octavius, Jr., two other big bosses, and Fred and Phil went to the pen. Thereafter the courts were overworked. Both sides were determined and both sides had much material to work upon. In a week the entire executive committee of the dogs’ union was at labor in the state penitentiary shoe shop. Twenty-three big bosses kept the members company.

In a month it became necessary to add a new wing to the pen building. The contract was let, and 37 dogs were caught red-handed in the act of holding up the contractor. They watched the balance of the work from within the walls.

In six months there were only three politicians at large in Rome. One was a retired gum show man in the Eighth ward. The second was laid up with a broken leg. The third was in hiding in the catacombs.

They held out for a year. Then an afternoon paper succeeded in connecting them with an asphalt steal of eight years before. Their sentence aggregated 74 years, and with them the machine fell to pieces.

Forty years afterward, when most of the bosses and dogs were liberated—gray-bearded and senile—an attempt was made to revive the good old times of yore. But the people, long unaccustomed to a fair division of the spoils, rebelled, and the machine became a heap of scrap iron. And though other men, years later, endeavored to rejuvenate it, it never regained its old time vigor, and until the fall of Rome few politicians made enough money to keep the wolf from the door.

Moral—See to it that there is harmony and the grafts will take care of themselves.