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, saloonkeepers, 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 stories do you want?” One said 20,000, and another wanted 15,000, and other 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.”
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.

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 arid pennies and the cop comes arid 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 0 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 almshouse! 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 today, 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 today 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.

Chapter 23. Strenuous Life of the Tammany District Leader

Note: This chapter is based on extracts from Plunkitt’s Diary and on my daily observation of the work of the district leader. – W.L.R.

Brought up in Tammany Hall, he has learned how to reach the hearts of the great mass of voters. He does not bother about reaching their heads. It is his belief that arguments and campaign literature have never gained votes.

He seeks direct contact with the people, does them good turns when he can, and relies on their not forgetting him on election day. His heart is always in his work, too, for his subsistence depends on its results.

If he holds his district and Tammany is in power, he is amply rewarded by a good office and the opportunities that go with it. What these opportunities are has been shown by the quick rise to wealth of so many Tammany district leaders. With the examples before him of Richard Croker, once leader of the Twentieth District; John F. Carroll, formerly leader of the Twenty-ninth; Timothy (“Dry Dollar”) Sullivan, late leader of the Sixth, and many others, he can always look forward to riches and ease while he is going through the drudgery of his daily routine.
This is a record of a day’s work by Plunkitt:

2 A.M.: Aroused from sleep by the ringing of his doorbell; went to the door and found a bartender, who asked him to go to the police station and ball out a saloon-keeper who had been arrested for violating the excise law. Furnished bail and returned to bed at three o’clock.

6 A.M.: Awakened by fire engines passing his house. Hastened to the scene of the fire, according to the custom of the Tammany district leaders, to give assistance to the fire sufferers, if needed. Met several of his election district captains who are always under orders to look out for fires, which are considered great vote-getters. Found several tenants who had been burned out, took them to a hotel, supplied them with clothes, fed them, and arranged temporary quarters for them until they could rent and furnish new apartments.

8:30 A.M.: Went to the police court to look after his constituents. Found six “drunks.” Secured the discharge of four by a timely word with the judge, and paid the fines of two.

9 A.M.: Appeared in the Municipal District Court. Directed one of his district captains to act as counsel for a widow against whom dispossess proceedings had been instituted and obtained an extension of time. Paid the rent of a poor family about to be dispossessed and gave them a dollar for food.

11 A.M.: At home again. Found four men waiting for him. One had been discharged by the Metropolitan Railway Company for neglect of duty, and wanted the district leader to fix things. Another wanted a job on the road. The third sought a place on the Subway and the fourth, a plumber, was looking for work with the Consolidated Gas Company. The district leader spent nearly three hours fixing things for the four men, and succeeded in each case.

3 P.M.: Attended the funeral of an Italian as far as the ferry. Hurried back to make his appearance at the funeral of a Hebrew constituent. Went conspicuously to the front both in the Catholic church and the synagogue, and later attended the Hebrew confirmation ceremonies in the synagogue.

7 P.M.: Went to district headquarters and presided over a meeting of election district captains. Each captain submitted a list of all the voters in his district, reported on their attitude toward Tammany, suggested who might be won over and how they could be won, told who were in need, and who were in trouble of any kind and the best way to reach them. District leader took notes and gave orders.

8 P.M.: Went to a church fair. Took chances on everything, bought ice cream for the young girls and the children. Kissed the little ones, flattered their mother: and took their fathers out for something down at the comer.

9 P.M.: At the clubhouse again. Spent $10 on tickets for a church excursion and promised a subscription for a new church bell. Bought tickets for a baseball game to be played by two nines from his district. Listened to the complaints of a dozen pushcart peddlers who said they were persecuted by the police and assured them he would go to Police Headquarters in the morning and see about it.

10:30 P.M.: Attended a Hebrew wedding reception and dance. Had previously sent a handsome wedding present to the bride.

12 P.M.: In bed.
That is the actual record of one day in the life of Plunkitt. He does some of the same things every day, but his life is not so monotonous as to be wearisome. Sometimes the work of a district leader is exciting, especially if he happens to have a rival who intends to make a contest for the leadership at the primaries. In that case, he is even more alert, tries to reach the fires before his rival, sends out runners to look for “drunks and disorderlies” at the police stations, and keeps a very close watch on the obituary columns of the newspapers. A few years ago there was a bitter contest for the Tammany leadership of the Ninth District between John C. Sheehan and Frank J. Goodwin. Both had had long experience in Tammany politics and both understood every move of the game.

Every morning their agents went to their respective headquarters before seven o’clock and read through the death notices in all the morning papers. If they found that anybody in the district had died, they rushed to the homes of their principals with the information and then there was a race to the house of the deceased to offer condolences, and, if the family were poor, something more substantial.

On the day of the funeral there was another contest. Each faction tried to surpass the other in the number and appearance of the carriages it sent to the funeral, and more than once they almost came to blows at the church or in the cemetery.

On one occasion the Goodwinites played a trick on their adversaries which has since been imitated in other districts. A well-known liquor dealer who had a considerable following died, and both Sheehan and Goodwin were eager to become his political heir by making a big showing at the funeral.

Goodwin managed to catch the enemy napping. He went to all the livery stables in the district, hired all the carriages for the day, and gave orders to two hundred of his men to be on hand as mourners.
Sheehan had never had any trouble about getting all the carriages that he wanted, so he let the matter go until the night before the funeral. Then he found that he could not hire a carriage in the district.

He called his district committee together in a hurry and explained the situation to them. He could get all the vehicles he needed in the adjoining district, he said, but if he did that, Goodwin would rouse the voters of the Ninth by declaring that he (Sheehan) had patronized foreign industries.

Finally, it was decided that there was nothing to do but to go over to Sixth Avenue and Broadway for carriages. Sheehan made a fine turnout at the funeral, but the deceased was hardly in his grave before Goodwin raised the cry of “Protection to home industries,” and denounced his rival for patronizing livery-stable keepers outside of his district. The err’ had its effect in the primary campaign. At all events, Goodwin was elected leader.

A recent contest for the leadership of the Second District illustrated further the strenuous work of the Tammany district leaders. The contestants were Patrick Divver, who had managed the district for years, and Thomas F. Foley.

Both were particularly anxious to secure the large Italian vote. They not only attended all the Italian christenings and funerals, but also kept a close lookout for the marriages in order to be on hand with wedding presents.

At first, each had his own reporter in the Italian quarter to keep track of the marriages. Later, Foley conceived a better plan. He hired a man to stay all day at the City Hall marriage bureau, where most Italian couples go through the civil ceremony, and telephone to him at his saloon when anything was doing at the bureau.

Foley had a number of presents ready for use and, whenever he received a telephone message from his man, he hastened to the City Hall with a ring or a watch or a piece of silver and handed it to the bride with his congratulations. As a
consequence, when Divver got the news and went to the home of the couple with his present, he always found that Foley had been ahead of him. Toward the end of the campaign, Divver also stationed a man at the marriage bureau and then there were daily foot races and fights between the two heelers.

Sometimes the rivals came into conflict at the death-bed. One night a poor Italian peddler died in Roosevelt Street. The news reached Divver and Foley about the same time, and as they knew the family of the man was destitute, each went to an undertaker and brought him to the Roosevelt Street tenement.

The rivals and the undertakers met at the house and an altercation ensued. After much discussion the Divver undertaker was selected. Foley had more carriages at the funeral, however, and he further impressed the Italian voters by paying the widow’s rent for a month, and sending her half a ton of coal and a barrel of flour.

The rivals were put on their mettle toward the end of the campaign by the wedding of a daughter of one of the original Cohens of the Baxter Street region. The Hebrew vote in the district is nearly as large as the Italian vote, and Divver and Foley set out to capture the Cohens and their friends.

They stayed up nights thinking what they would give the bride. Neither knew how much the other was prepared to spend on a wedding present, or what form it would take; so spies were employed by both sides to keep watch on the jewelry stores, and the jewelers of the district were bribed by each side to impart the desired information.

At last Foley heard that Divver had purchased a set of silver knives, forks and spoons. He at once bought a duplicate set and added a silver tea service. When the presents were displayed at the home of the bride, Divver was not in a pleasant mood and he charged his jeweler with treachery. It may be added that Foley won at the primaries.
One of the fixed duties of a Tammany district leader is to give two outings every summer, one for the men of his district and the other for the women and children, and a beefsteak dinner and a ball every winter. The scene of the outings is, usually, one of the groves along the Sound.

The ambition of the district leader on these occasions is to demonstrate that his men have broken all records in the matter of eating and drinking. He gives out the exact number of pounds of beef, poultry, butter, etc., that they have consumed and professes to know how many potatoes and ears of corn have been served.

According to his figures, the average eating record of each man at the outing is about ten pounds of beef, two or three chickens, a pound of butter, a half peck of potatoes, and two dozen ears of corn. The drinking records, as given out, are still more phenomenal. For some reason, not yet explained, the district leader thinks that his popularity will be greatly increased if he can show that his followers can eat and drink more than the followers of any other district leader.

The same idea governs the beefsteak dinners in the winter. It matters not what sort of steak is served or how it is cooked; the district leader considers only the question of quantity, and when he excels all others in this particular, he feels, somehow, that he is a bigger man and deserves more patronage than his associates in the Tammany Executive Committee.

As to the balls, they are the events of the winter in the extreme East Side and West Side society. Mamie and Maggie and Jennie prepare for them months in advance, and their young men save up for the occasion just as they save for the summer trips to Coney Island.

The district leader is in his glory at the opening of the ball. He leads the cotillion with the prettiest woman present – his wife, if he has one, permitting – and spends almost the whole night shaking hands with his constituents. The ball costs him a pretty penny, but he has found that the investment pays.
By these means the Tammany district leader reaches out into the homes of his district, keeps watch not only on the men, but also on the women and children; knows their needs, their likes and dislikes, their troubles and their hopes, and places himself in a position to use his knowledge for the benefit of his organization and himself. Is it any wonder that scandals do not permanently disable Tammany and that it speedily recovers from what seems to be crushing defeat?