

CHAPTER LXIV

LOCAL EXTENSION OF RINGS AND BOSSES

To determine the extent to which the Ring and Boss system sketched in the preceding chapters prevails over the United States would be difficult even for an American, because it would require a minute knowledge of the local affairs of all the States and cities. Much more, then, is it difficult for a European. I can do no more than indicate generally the results of the inquiries I have made, commending the details of the question to some future investigator.

It has been pointed out that rings and bosses are the product not of democracy, but of a particular form of democratic government, acting under certain peculiar conditions. They belong to democratic government, as the old logicians would say, not *simpliciter* but *secundum quid*: they are not of its essence, but are merely separable accidents. We have seen that these conditions are —

The existence of a Spoils System (= paid offices given and taken away for party reasons).

Opportunities for illicit gains arising out of the possession of office.

The presence of a mass of ignorant and pliable voters.

The insufficient participation in politics of the "good citizens."

If these be the true causes or conditions producing the phenomenon, we may expect to find it most fully developed in the places where the conditions exist in fullest measure, less so where they are more limited, absent where they do not exist.

A short examination of the facts will show that such is the case.

It may be thought that the Spoils System is a constant, existing everywhere, and therefore not admitting of the application of this method of concomitant variations. That system does no doubt prevail over every State of the Union, but it is not everywhere an equally potent factor, for in some cities the offices are much better paid than in others, and the revenues which their occupants control are larger. In some small communities the offices, or most of them, are not paid at all.¹ Hence this factor varies scarcely less than the others.

We may therefore say with truth that all of the four conditions above named are most fully present in great cities. Some of the offices are highly paid; many give facilities for lucrative jobbing; and the unpaid officers are sometimes the most apt to abuse these facilities. The voters are so numerous that a strong and active organization is needed to drill them; the majority so ignorant as to be easily led. The best citizens are engrossed in business and cannot give to political work the continuous attention it demands. Such are the phenomena of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Brooklyn, St. Louis, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Baltimore, and New Orleans. In these cities Ring-and-bosssdom has attained its amplest growth, overshadowing the whole field of politics.

Of the first two of these I need not speak in detail here, proposing to describe their phenomena in later chapters. Chicago, Baltimore, and New Orleans are little if at all better. I subjoin some remarks bearing on five other cities, with which I was (in 1887) favoured by leading citizens resident therein, in reply to interrogatories which I addressed to them. Knowing how apt a stranger is to imagine a greater uniformity than exists, I am anxious to enable the reader to understand to what extent the description I have given is generally true, and with what local diversities its general truth is compatible.

Cincinnati (Ohio), population in 1890, 296,908 —

"Our Ring is in a less formal shape than is sometimes seen, but dishonest men of both parties do in fact combine for common profits at the public expense. As regards a Boss, there is at this moment an interregnum, but some ambitious men are observed to be making progress towards that dignity. Rings are both the effect and the cause of pecu-

¹ For instance, the "selectmen" of a New England Town are not paid.

lation. They are the result of the general law of combination to further the interest of the combiners.

"Where a Ring exists it can always exclude from office a good citizen known to be hostile to it. But a good easy man who will not fight and will make a reputable figure-head may be an excellent investment.

"The large cities are the great sufferers from the Spoils System, because in them power gives the greatest opportunity for profit and speculation. In them also it is easy to make a more or less open combination of keepers of tippling shops and the 'bummers,' etc., who congregate in them. Here, too, is the natural home of the class of vagabonds who will profess devotion to the party or the man who will pay them, and who combine to levy blackmail upon every candidate, and in turn are ready to stuff ballot-boxes, to buy votes, to 'repeat,' etc. These scoundrels 'live by politics' in their way, and force their services upon more prominent men, till there comes to be a sort of 'solidarity' in which men of national reputation find themselves morally compromised by being obliged to recognize this sort of fraternity, and directly or indirectly to make themselves responsible for the methods of these 'henchmen' and followers. They dare not break with this class because its enmity would defeat their ambitions, and the more unscrupulous of them make fullest use of the co-operation, only rendering a little homage to decency by seeking to do it through intermediates, so as not too disgustingly to dirty their own hands.

"In such a condition of things the cities become the prey of the 'criminal class' in politics, in order to ensure the discipline and organization in State and national politics which are necessary to the distinguished leaders for success. As a result it goes almost without saying that every considerable city has its rings and its actual or would-be bosses. There are occasional 'revolutions of the palace' in which bosses are deposed, or 'choked off,' because they are growing too fat on the spoils, and there is no such permanence of tenure as to enable the uninitiated always to tell what boss or what ring is in power. They do not publish an *Almanach de Gotha*, but we feel and know that the process of plunder continues. A man of genius in this way, like a Tweed or a Kelly, comes occasionally to the front, but even in the absence of a ruler of this sort the ward politicians can always tell where the decisive influences reside.

"The *size* of the city in which the system reaches full bloom depends upon its business and general character. Small towns with a proportionately large manufacturing population are better fields for rings than more homogeneous communities built up as centres of mercantile trade. The *tendency* however is to organize an official body of 'workers' in even the smallest community; and the selfishness of man naturally leads to the doctrine that those who do the work shall live by it. Thus, from the profits of 'rotation in office' and the exercise of intrigue and trick to get the place of the present incumbent, there is the *facilis descensus* to regarding the profits of speculation and the plunder of the public as a legitimate corrective for the too slow accumulation from legal pay. Certain salaries and fees in local offices are notoriously kept high, so that the

incumbent may freely 'bleed' for party use, or, what is the same thing, for the use of party 'bummers.' Thus we have had clerks of courts and sheriffs getting many times as much pay as the judges on the bench, etc. From this, jobbing in contracts, bribery, and unblushing stealing are reached by such easy steps that perhaps the local politician is hardly conscious of the progress in his moral education."

St. Louis (Missouri), population in 1890, 451,770 —

"There are always Rings in both parties more or less active according to circumstances.

"Two or perhaps three men are the recognized Bosses of the Democratic party (which is in the majority), one man of the Republican.

"The Rings are the cause of both speculation and jobbery, although St. Louis has had no 'big steal.'

"A good citizen seeking office would be excluded by the action of the Rings in our large cities, except in times of excitement, when good people are aroused to a proper sense of duty."¹

Louisville (Kentucky), population in 1890, 161,129 —

"It can hardly be said that there is a regular Ring in Louisville. There are corrupt combinations, but they are continually shifting. The higher places in these combinations are occupied by Democrats, these being the ruling party, but they always contain some Republicans.

"The only Boss there is in Louisville to-day is the Louisville Gas Company. It works mainly through the Democratic party, as it is easier to bribe the 'Republican' negroes into the support of Democratic candidates than white Democrats to support Republicans.

"There is very little speculation in Kentucky now — no great disclosure for over five years; but there is a great deal of jobbery.

"The effect of the combinations is of course towards excluding good and capable men from office and to make room for mere favourites and local politicians."²

Minneapolis (Minnesota), population in 1890, 164,738 (?) —

"There has been for several years past a very disreputable Ring, which has come into power by capturing the machinery of the Democratic party, through (1) diligent work in the ward caucuses; (2) by its active alliance with the liquor dealers, gamblers, and so forth, and the support of 'lewd fellows of the baser sort,' regardless of national political preferences; (3) by a skilful and plausible championship of 'labor' and a capture of the labor vote.

"The Boss of this gang is thoroughly disliked and distrusted by the responsible and reputable element of his party in Minnesota, but they

¹ My correspondent writes in 1892 that the above remarks are still equally applicable. Both parties remain under a despotic Ring rule.

² The condition of Louisville was substantially the same in 1893.

tolerate him on account of his popularity and because they cannot break him down. He has operated chiefly through control of the police system. Instead of suppressing gambling houses, for example, he has allowed several of them to run under police protection, himself sharing in their large gains. Until recently the liquor saloon licenses have been \$500 (£100) a year. He and the heads of the police department have allowed a number of places to retail liquor somewhat secretly outside the police patrol limits, within which we restrict the liquor traffic and from these illicit publicans the Ring has collected large sums of money.

"The Ring has seemed to control the majority in the Common Council, but the system of direct taxation and of checking expenditure is so open, and the scrutiny of the press and public so constant, that there has been little opportunity for actual plunder. In the awarding of contracts there is sometimes a savour of jobbery, and several of the councilmen are not above taking bribes. But they have been able to do comparatively little mischief; in fact, nothing outrageous has occurred outside of the police department. The Ring has lately obtained control of the (elective) Park Board, and some disreputable jobs have resulted. So there have been malpractices in the department of health and hospitals, in the management of the water system and in the giving away of a street railway franchise. But we are not a badly-plundered city by any means; and we have just succeeded in taking the control of the police out of the hands of the Ring officials and vested it in a Metropolitan Police Board, with excellent results. Two of the Ring are now under indictment of the county grand jury for malpractices in office."

St. Paul (Minnesota), population in 1890, 133,156 (?)—

"There is no regular Ring in St. Paul. It has for many years been in the hands of a clique of municipal Democratic politicians, who are fairly good citizens, and have committed no very outrageous depredations. The city is run upon a narrow partisan plan, but in its main policies and expenditures the views of leading citizens as formulated in the Chamber of Commerce almost invariably prevail.

"The Rings of Western cities (adds my informant) are not deliberately organized for plunder or jobbery. They grow out of our party politics. Certain of the worst elements of a party find that their superior diligence and skill in the manipulation of precinct and ward caucuses put them in control of the local machinery of their party organization. The success of their party gives them control of municipal affairs. They are generally men who are not engaged in successful trade or professional life, and make city politics their business. They soon find it profitable to engage in various small schemes and jobs for profit, but do not usually perpetrate anything very bold or bad."

I have taken the two cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul because they illustrate the differences which one often finds

between places whose population and other conditions seem very similar. The centres of these two cities are only ten miles apart; their suburbs are already beginning to touch. Minneapolis is younger, and has grown far more rapidly, and the manufacturing element in its population is larger. But in most respects it resembles its elder sister — they are extremely jealous of one another — so closely that an Old World observer who has not realized the swiftness with which phenomena come and go in the West is surprised to find the political maladies of the one so much graver than those of the other.

So stood things in 1887. In 1893 they had changed for the better in both cities. The Boss of Minneapolis had vanished, and the party opposed to that he had adorned was in power. The municipal administration, if not free from reproach, was comparatively free from scandals. St. Paul showed a marked improvement. A mayor had been elected on a "reform ticket," and the municipal clique formerly dominant had been broken up. But no one could feel sure that these gains would be preserved. Six years hence both cities may have relapsed, or the contrast that 1887 showed between them may have reappeared.¹ The great city of San Francisco, capital of the "Pacific slope," with a population of 300,000 people, was for years ruled by a boss who, through an energetic lieutenant, commanded the Fire Department of the city, and used its 350 paid employés as a sort of prætorian guard. He controlled the city elections, dominated the officials, was a power in State politics, tampered with the administration of the criminal law. At last steps were taken to have him and his grand vizir indicted for peculation, whereupon they both fled to Canada, and the city escaped the yoke. But the conditions which produced bossdom remaining, other and scarcely less audacious bosses soon arose, and now, according to the latest information I have been able to secure, the too heedless taxpayers are being plundered in the old fashion.

In cities of the second rank (say from ten thousand to one hundred thousand inhabitants) some of the same mischiefs

¹ I have just been informed (May, 1894) that the "reform" party has been defeated at the last election in St. Paul, and it is feared that the relapse contemplated in the text will now follow.

exist, but on a smaller scale. The opportunities for jobbing are limited. The offices are moderately paid. The population of new immigrants, politically incompetent, and therefore easily pervertible, bears a smaller ratio to the native Americans. The men most prominent by their wealth or capacity are more likely to be known to the mass of the voters, and may have more leisure to join in local politics. Hence, although we find rings in many of these cities, they are less powerful, less audacious, less corrupt. There are, of course, differences between one city and another, differences sometimes explicable by its history and the character of its population. A very high authority writes me from Michigan, a State above the average —

“I have heard no charge of the reign of Bosses or Rings for the ‘purposes of peculation’ in any of the cities or towns of Michigan or Indiana, or indeed in more than a few of our cities generally, and those for the most part are the large cities. In certain cases rings or bosses have managed political campaigns for partisan purposes, and sometimes to such an extent, say in Detroit (population in 1890, 205,876), that good citizens have been excluded from office or have declined to run. But robbery was not the aim of the rings. In not a few of our cities the liquor-saloon keepers have combined to ‘run politics’ so as to gain control and secure a municipal management friendly to them. That is in part the explanation of the great uprising of the Prohibition party.”

The cities of New York State seem to suffer more than those of New England or the West. Albany (a place of 95,000 people) has long groaned under its bosses, but as the seat of the New York legislature it is a focus of intrigue. Buffalo (with 255,000) has a large Irish and German population. Rochester and Troy are ruled by local cliques; the latter is full of fellows who go to serve as “repeaters” at Albany elections. Syracuse (88,000) is smaller and better than Rochester, but has of late years shown some serious symptoms of the same disease. Cleveland is a larger place than any of these, but having, like the rest of Northern Ohio, a better quality of population, its rings have never carried things with a high hand, nor stolen public money. The same may be said of Milwaukee and of such New England cities as Providence, Augusta, Hartford, Worcester, Lowell. The system more or less exists in all these, but the bosses

have not ventured to exclude respectable outsiders from office, nor have they robbed the city, debauched the legislature, retained their power by election frauds after the manner of their great models in New York and Philadelphia. And this seems to hold true also of the Western and Southern cities of moderate size. A seaside suburb of one great Eastern city lately produced a singularly audacious boss, who combined that position with those of head of the police and superintendent of the principal Sunday school. He had tampered freely with the election returns, giving his support sometimes to one party, sometimes to another, and had apparently been able to “turn over” the vote of the place at his pleasure. A rising of the “good citizens” has at last succeeded in procuring his conviction and imprisonment for election offences.

As regards Ohio a judicious authority says —

“Rings are much less likely to exist in the smaller cities, though a population of 30,000 or 40,000 may occasionally support them. We should hardly find them in a city below 10,000: any corruption there would be occasional, not systematic.”

From Missouri I am informed that —

“We have few or no Rings in cities under 60,000 inhabitants. The smaller cities are not favourable to such kinds of control. Men know one another too well. There is no large floating irresponsible following as in large cities.”

A similar answer from Kentucky adds that Rings have nevertheless been heard of in cities so small as Lexington (22,000 inhabitants) and Frankfort (8500).

In quite small towns and in the rural districts — in fact, wherever there is not a municipality, but government is either by a town meeting and selectmen or by township or county officials — the dangerous conditions are reduced to their minimum. The new immigrants are not generally planted in large masses but scattered among the native population, whose habits and modes of thinking they soon acquire. The Germans and Scandinavians who settle in the country districts have been among the best of their race, and form a valuable element. The country voter, whether native or foreign, is exposed to fewer temptations than his brother of the city, and is less easy

either to lead or to drive. He is parsimonious, and pays his county or town officials on a niggardly scale. A boss has therefore no occupation in such a place. His talents would be wasted. If a ring exists in a small city it is little more than a clique of local lawyers who combine to get hold of the local offices, each in his turn, and to secure a seat for one of themselves in the State legislature, where there may be pickings to be had. It is not easy to draw the line between such a clique, which one may find all the world over, and a true Ring: but by whichever name we call the weed, it does little harm to the crop. Here and there, however, one meets with a genuine Boss even in these seats of rural innocence. I know a New England Town, with a population of about ten thousand people, which has long been ruled by such a local wirepuller. I do not think he steals. But he has gathered a party of voters round him, by whose help he carries the offices, and gets a chance of perpetrating jobs which enrich himself and supply work for his supporters. The circumstances, however, are exceptional. Within the taxing area of the Town there lie many villas of wealthy merchants, who do business in a neighbouring city, but are taxed on their summer residences here. Hence the funds which this Town has to deal with are much larger than would be the case in most towns of its size, while many of the rich tax-payers are not citizens here, but vote in the city where they live during the winter.¹ Hence they cannot go to the town meeting to beard the boss, but must grin and pay while they watch his gambols.

Speaking generally, the country places and the smaller cities are not ring-ridden. There is a tendency everywhere for the local party organizations to fall into the hands of a few men, perhaps of one man. But this happens not so much from an intent to exclude others and misuse power, as because the work is left to those who have some sort of interest in doing it, that, namely, of being themselves nominated to an office. Such persons are seldom professional office-seekers, but lawyers, farmers, or store-keepers, who are glad to add something to

¹ It will be remembered that in the United States, though a man may pay taxes on his real estate in any number of States or counties or cities, he can vote, even in purely local elections or on purely local matters, in one place only — that in which he is held to reside.

their income, and have the importance, not so contemptible, in a village, of sitting in the State legislature. Nor does much harm result. The administration is fairly good; the tax-payers are not robbed. If a leading citizen, who does not belong to the managing circle, wishes to get a nomination, he will probably succeed; in fact, no one will care to exclude him. In many places there is a non-party "citizens' committee" which takes things out of the hands of the two organizations by running as candidates respectable men irrespective of party. Such candidates generally succeed if the local party managers have offended public sentiment by bad nominations. In short, the materials for real ring government do not exist, and its methods are inapplicable, outside the large cities. No one needs to fear it, or does fear it.

What has been said refers chiefly to the Northern, Middle, and Western States. The circumstances of the South are different, but they illustrate equally well the general laws of ring growth. In the Southern cities there is scarcely any population of European immigrants. The lowest class consists of negroes and "poor whites." The negroes are ignorant, and would be dangerously plastic material in the hands of unscrupulous wirepullers, as was amply shown after the Civil War. But they have hitherto mostly belonged to the Republican party, and the Democratic party has so completely regained its ascendancy that the bosses who controlled the negro vote can do nothing. In most parts of the South the men of ability and standing have interested themselves in politics so far as to dictate the lines of party action. Their position when self-government was restored and the carpet-baggers had to be overthrown forced them to exertions. Sometimes they use or tolerate a ring, but they do not suffer it to do serious mischief, and it is usually glad to nominate one of them, or any one whom they recommend. The old traditions of social leadership survive better in the South than in the North, so that the poorer part of the white population is more apt to follow the suggestions of eminent local citizens and to place them at its head when they will accept the position. Moreover, the South is a comparatively poor country. Less is to be gained from office (including membership of a legislature), either in the way of salary or indirectly through jobbing contracts or

influencing legislation. The prizes in the profession of politics being fewer, the profession is not prosecuted with the same earnestness and perfection of organization. There are, however, some cities where conditions similar to those of large Northern cities reappear, and there Ring-and-bossdom reappears also. New Orleans is the best example, and in Arkansas and Texas, where there never was a plantation aristocracy like that of the Slave States on the Atlantic coast, rings are pretty numerous, though, as the cities are small and seldom rich, their exploits attract little attention.

CHAPTER LXV

SPOILS

AN illustration of the familiar dictum regarding the wisdom with which the world is governed may be found in the fact that the greatest changes are often those introduced with the least notion of their consequence, and the most fatal those which encounter least resistance. So the system of removals from Federal office which began some sixty-five years ago, though disapproved of by several among the leading statesmen of the time, including Clay, Webster, and Calhoun, excited comparatively little attention in the country, nor did its advocates foresee a tithe of its far-reaching results.

The Constitution vests the right of appointing to Federal offices in the President, requiring the consent of the Senate in the case of the more important, and permitting Congress to vest the appointment of inferior officers in the President alone, in the courts, or in the heads of departments. It was assumed that this clause gave officials a tenure at the pleasure of the President—*i.e.* that he had the legal right of removing them without cause assigned. But the earlier Presidents considered the tenure as being practically for life or during good behaviour, and did not remove, except for some solid reason, persons appointed by their predecessors. Washington in his eight years displaced only nine persons, and all for cause, John Adams nine in four years, and those not on political grounds. Jefferson in his eight years removed thirty-nine, but many of these were persons whom Adams had unfairly put in just before quitting office; and in the twenty years that followed (1808–28) there were but sixteen removals. In 1820, however, a bill was run through Congress with hardly any discussion, fixing four years as the term for a large number of the more important offices, and making those terms expire shortly after the inau-