

HOW POLITICIANS CORRUPTED MEMBERS OF LEGISLATURE

By ROBERT M. LA FOLLETTE

"MY OWN STORY" is an exclusive newspaper version of one of the great autobiographies of modern times. La Follette's own story of adventures in politics as written by himself, will together with an authorized narrative of his experiences in the years since then.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS

After two defeats as a progressive candidate for Governor of Wisconsin, La Follette was unanimously nominated and elected in 1900. The political bosses back the administration program at the time. La Follette's views are presented in his message to the Legislature—advocating direct primaries and railroad taxation. He is successful in regaining control of the Milwaukee Sentinel, the "political bible" of the State, and attacks La Follette's political enemies with every power to defeat the railroad taxation and direct primary bills. The free use of money, the use of anonymous officeholders, misrepresentation through the corporation newspapers, and the "lobby." Honest men begin to fail before these insidious forces.

How did the lobby get them? Various ways. There was Senator A. He was a poor fellow from a northern district; a lawyer without much practice—rather a weak fellow. I can't remember on just what bill it was, but they got him. When he returned to his district, after the session, he built an expensive home, to the amazement of all his friends, and then came down to Washington to a Federal position.

We depended on Senator B. He made a statement that he could be relied upon to support the direct primary bill. We figured him on our list until about the time that Spooner visited Madison and he got away.

Senator C. was another man we had counted upon as one of the old reliables in the movement. He was an Irishman and a good talker and debater. They finally got him, too. I remember he came to me one night and said:

"Well, I don't know but what I'm going to disappoint you in my vote on the direct primary bill."

I could not at first think of a word to say—it was a staggering blow.

"Why, C." I said finally, "if you were to go over to the other side on these measures it would seem to me like the end of everything. You couldn't do things like that. You have been one of the pillars of the movement."

I don't believe I tried to reason with him. It simply was not a case for argument. There was only one side to it, for he himself had been one of our ablest speakers on the stump in favor of the direct primary.

Got Federal Office

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Another instance was that of Assemblyman D., who had been for some time quite an active supporter of the reform movement. He was a small business man and came to the Legislature from a county in which I was personally very strong.

He stood with us in the vote on direct primaries, but some little time after that Assemblyman E., who was one of our leaders in the Assembly, came into my office one morning. E. was a fine young fellow and regarded as thoroughly reliable. He was often in the executive office and I trusted him absolutely. Upon the occasion to which I refer he said:

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all I have in the world I have put into that factory of mine. I have told you about how proud I was of the thing.

Faces Ruin

"Now," he said, "this railroad lobby tells me that if I vote for that railroad taxation bill they will ruin me in business. They can take away everything I've got. They have threatened to give my competitors advantages over me in railroad rates that will offset any advantages I have with my new machinery. Now, I can't beggar my family. I have a wife and babies."

I said, "E., you can't do this wrong. You can't violate your conscience." I talked to him quite a bit. He got up and walked the floor. He said he would always be for our measures, but he could not risk being driven to the wall. And then he left the office.

A few minutes before the roll call on the bill, E., who sat next to Lenroot, turned to him and said, "Lenroot, in five minutes I am going to violate my oath of office."

Lenroot was shocked and said,

"What do you mean?"

He replied: "It is a question between my honor and my bread and butter, and I propose to vote for my bread and butter." And he voted against the bill.

Assemblyman F. was nominated by a convention that was overwhelmingly for the direct primary. It adopted a platform specifically pledging the nominees to support the direct primary bill, and F., the candidate, formally accepted and agreed faithfully to carry out the instructions of the convention.

During the all-night session in the Assembly on the primary bill, F. was called from the floor into the clerk's room by a member of the Senate who offered him \$500 to vote against the bill.

F. told the lobbyist that he would not dare to go back to his constituents if he voted against the bill, as he had solemnly promised them when nominated to vote for it.

F. said he would like to do anything the Senator wanted him to do, and he would like the \$500, but he did not dare to violate his pledge. After more of this talk they left the clerk's room. The room was not locked.

At the time there was lying on a lounge in that room Assemblyman G., who was ill and had been brought from a sick room to attend upon this important session.

He recognized F.'s voice and also

the name of the Senator, which F. repeatedly used during the negotiations.

Assemblyman G. reported the whole matter to Lenroot, who informed me. We agreed that here was a case that we could take into court if G. would swear to the facts as reported to Lenroot. It was hoped that a successful prosecution might check the bribe in their raid on our legislation.

I sent for G. In Lenroot's presence he repeated the conversation between F. and the Senator just as he had given it to Lenroot.

I then called F. to the executive chamber. He admitted the conversation as detailed by G., but was slow about confirming G. as to the name of the Senator which he had used again and again in discussing the \$500 proposal while in the clerk's room.

Another interview was arranged, at which time he promised to tell everything. Before that interview the lobby did such effective work with both F. and G. that their members utterly failed them as to every important detail of the whole event, and without these two witnesses there was no case.

Such was the opposition we had to meet on all of our measures, the lobby standing together as one man against both the taxation and the direct primary bills.

It was about the middle of March.

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somewhat surprised and asked him why he had moved.

"Well," he said, "I propose to be where I can watch the game that these lobbyists are playing. I am satisfied that they are working on some of our weak members, and I am going right into their camp to see what they are doing."

I have said that we trusted E. implicitly. He was one of the most enthusiastic men we had, and being a high-spirited, energetic young fellow, he was of great assistance in our fights.

Whenever we gathered a little group of the members in the executive office to talk over any critical situation in the Legislature, E. was always with us. He was an active young manufacturer. He often talked with us about his business, which enabled him to make his products more cheaply than other manufacturers.

One day E. Ray Stevens came into my office and said, "Governor, I wish you would send up and ask E. to come down here. I don't just like the way he talks."

"Why," I said, "Ray, there can't be anything wrong with E."

Then I began to think that he had not been in to see me for three or four days. "Well," I said, "I will send up."

When he came through the door he did not meet me with his characteristic frankness. But I greeted him exactly as usual and said, "E., I want to have a little talk with you."

I moved my chair right up to his, placed my hands on his knees and looked him in the eye a moment before I spoke. Then I asked, "E., what's the matter?"

The tears started in his eyes and the response came at once.

"Governor, I can't help it. I've got to vote against the railroad taxation bill." After a moment he added, "I haven't slept any for two or three nights. I have walked the floor. I have thought of resigning and going home."

"Tell me all about it, E."

"Well," he replied, "you know that

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