The Food Riot of 40 B.C.   L.A. Curchin

"In 40 BC, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus was stoned to death by a starving mob, and Mark Antony found himself sole ruler of Rome." This "fact" will not be found in any history book, for the excellent reason that it never happened. However, if Antony had not intervened at the last minute to save Octavian's life, the subsequent history of the western world might have been very different.

How did events reach such a critical juncture? After defeating Caesar's assassins at Philippi in 42 BC, Antony and Octavian had come to blows. Octavian had been assigned the unenviable task of confiscating land from Italian farmers and redistributing it among some 100,000 discharged veterans. Profiting from the farmers' resentment, Antony's brother Lucius led an army to Rome in 41 to "liberate" the people from Octavian, on his brother's behalf. Fortunately for Octavian, his own troops remained loyal; Lucius' force was besieged in the town of Perusia and was starved into submission. In 40, Antony himself landed in Italy and a fresh civil war seemed unavoidable, but cooler heads prevailed and the two antagonists came to an agreement. By the Pact of Brundisium, Antony kept the eastern provinces and Octavian the western, with Italy as common territory. To seal the bargain, Antony married Octavian's sister. It was this timely arrangement which was about to save Octavian's life.

Octavian's half of the empire was far from peaceful. Pompey the Great's son, Sextus Pompeius, was still at large and controlled Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, and the coasts of Africa and Spain. Antony had wanted to include him in the peace talks at Brundisium, but Octavian would not agree. Now Pompeius turned up the pressure. His fleet, which essentially controlled the western Mediterranean, cut off the grain supply to Italy, causing food prices to skyrocket. Octavian responded by renewing hostilities against Pompeius. In order to finance such a war, however, Octavian needed money, so he introduced new taxes on legacies and on slaves. For the people of Italy, already crippled by taxes, conscription and confiscations, and unable to afford scarce grain, this was the last straw. After years of civil war they wanted peace with Pompeius, not more fighting and higher taxes.

So a riot erupted at Rome. The noisy protesters, numerous enough to begin with, threatened to plunder and burn the houses of anyone who refused to join them. Thus nearly the entire population of Rome converged angrily upon the forum. Octavian, accompanied by a handful of supporters, had hoped to reason with the crowd, but as soon as he arrived in the forum, he and his followers were ruthlessly pelted with stones. Cut and bleeding, he tore his clothes in a dramatic gesture and pleaded with the rioters to desist, but to no avail.

At this moment, Antony arrived. At first the rioters, whose grudge was with Octavian, yelled at Antony to leave; when he refused, they stoned him too. But Antony sent for his soldiers, who were camped just outside the city wall, and with great slaughter they hacked a path through the crowd. With difficulty and bloodshed Antony forced his way into the forum, rescued Octavian from certain death, and carried him to the safety of his own house. The corpses of the rioters were stripped by the greedy soldiers and thrown into the river Tiber.

After this massacre, the people hesitated to riot again. Through the winter of 40/39, as the famine worsened, the people's anger increased, barely checked by their fear of the troops. Under popular pressure, Antony and Octavian negotiated a peace with Pompeius in 39. The grain routes were re-opened, and there was tremendous rejoicing at Rome. In his Res Gestae (Record of Achievements), Octavian, now known as the emperor Augustus, boasts of his clemency to his opponents, of the loyalty of all Italy, and of his free distributions of grain and money to the people. Augustus tactfully omits the food riot of 40 BC, the massacre of Roman citizens, and Antony's role in saving his life. Can you blame him?