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Latitude and Longitude Among Reformers

ONE of Miss Mary E. Wilkins's delightful heroines remarks, in speaking of certain would-be leaders of social reform in her village: "I don't know that I think they are so much above us as too far to one side. Sometimes it is longitude and sometimes it is latitude that separates people." This is true, and the philosophy it teaches applies quite as much to those who would reform the politics of a large city, or, for that matter, of the whole country, as to those who would reform the society of a hamlet.

There is always danger of being misunderstood when one writes about such a subject as this, because there are on each side unhealthy extremists who like to take half of any statement and twist it into an argument in favor of themselves or against their opponents. No single sentence or two is sufficient to explain a man's full meaning, any more than in a sentence or two it would be possible to treat the question of the necessity for, and the limitations of, proper party loyalty, with the thoroughness and justice shown, for instance, by Mr. Lecky in his recent queerly named volume, "The Map of Life."

All men in whose character there is not an element of hardened baseness must admit the need in our public life of those qualities which we somewhat vaguely group together when we speak of "reform," and all men of sound mind must also admit the need of efficiency. There are, of course, men of such low moral type, or of such ingrained cynicism, that they do not believe in the possibility of making anything better, or do not care to see things better. There are also men who are slightly disordered mentally, or who are cursed with a moral twist which makes them champion reforms less from a desire to do good to others than as a kind of tribute to their own righteousness, for the sake of emphasizing their own superiority. From neither of these classes can we get any real help in the unending struggle for righteousness. There remains the great body of the people, including the entire body of those through whom the salvation of the people must ultimately be worked out. All these men combine or seek to combine in varying degrees the quality of striving after the ideal, that is, the quality which makes men reformers, and the quality of so striving through practical methods—the quality which makes men efficient. Both qualities are absolutely essential. The absence of either makes the presence of the other worthless or worse.

If there is one tendency of the day which more than any other is unhealthy and undesirable, it is the tendency to deify mere "smartness," unaccompanied by a sense of moral accountability. We shall never make our republic what it should be until as a people we thoroughly understand and put in practice the doctrine that success is abhorrent if attained by the sacrifice of the fundamental principles of morality. The successful man, whether in business or in politics, who has risen by conscienceless swindling of his neighbors, by deceit and chicanery, by unscrupulous boldness and unscrupulous cunning, stands toward society as a dangerous wild beast. The mean and cringing admiration which such a career commands among those who think

crookedly or not at all makes this kind of success perhaps the most dangerous of all the influences that threaten our national life. Our standard of public and private conduct will never be raised to the proper level until we make the scoundrel who succeeds feel the weight of a hostile public opinion even more strongly than the scoundrel who fails.

On the other hand, mere beating the air, mere visionary adherence to a nebulous and possibly highly undesirable ideal, is utterly worthless. The cloistered virtue which timidly shrinks from all contact with the rough world of actual life, and the uneasy, self-conscious vanity which misnames itself virtue, and which declines to cooperate with whatever does not adopt its own fantastic standard, are rather worse than valueless, because they tend to rob the forces of good of elements on which they ought to be able to count in the ceaseless contest with the forces of evil. It is true that the impracticable idealist differs from the hard-working, sincere man who in practical fashion, and by deeds as well as by words, strives in some sort actually to realize his ideal; but the difference lies in the fact that the first is impracticable, not in his having a high ideal, for the ideal of the other may be even higher. At times a man must cut loose from his associates, and stand alone for a great cause; but the necessity for such action is almost as rare as the necessity for a revolution; and to take such ground continually, in season and out of season, is the sign of an unhealthy nature. It is not possible to lay down an inflexible rule as to when compromise is right and when wrong; when it is a sign of the highest statesmanship to temporize, and when it is merely a proof of weakness. Now and then one can stand uncompromisingly for a naked principle and force people up to it. This is always the attractive course; but in certain great crises it may be a very wrong course. Compromise, in the proper sense, merely means agreement; in the proper sense opportunism should merely mean doing the best possible with actual conditions as they exist. A compromise which results in a half-step toward evil is all wrong, just as the opportunist who saves himself for the moment by adopting a policy which is fraught with future disaster is all wrong; but no less wrong is the attitude of those who will not come to an agreement through which, or will not follow the course by which, it is alone possible to accomplish practical results for good.

These two attitudes, the attitude of deifying mere efficiency, mere success, without regard to the moral qualities lying behind it, and the attitude of disregarding efficiency, disregarding practical results, are the Scylla and Charybdis between which every earnest reformer, every politician who desires to make the name of his profession a term of honor instead of shame, must steer. He must avoid both under penalty of wreckage, and it avails him nothing to have avoided one, if he founders on the other. People are apt to speak as if in political life, public life, it ought to be a mere case of striving upward—striving toward a high peak. The simile is inexact. Every man who is striving to do good public work is traveling along a ridge crest, with the gulf of failure on each side—the gulf of inefficiency on the one side, the gulf of unrighteousness on the other. All kinds of forces are continually playing on him, to shove him first into one gulf and then into the other; and even a wise and good man, unless he braces himself with uncommon firmness and foresight, as he is pushed this way and that, will find that his course becomes a pronounced zigzag instead of a straight line; and if it becomes too pronounced he is lost, no matter to which side the zigzag may take him. Nor is he lost only as regards his own career. What is far more serious, his power of doing useful service to the public is at an end. He may still, if a mere politician, have political place, or, if a make-believe reformer, retain that notoriety upon which his vanity feeds. But, in either case, his usefulness to the community has ceased.

The man who sacrifices everything to efficiency needs but a short shrift in a discussion like this. The abler he is, the more dangerous he is to the community. The master and typical representative of a great municipal political organization recently stated under oath that "he was in politics for his pocket every time." This put in its baldest and most cynically offensive shape the doctrine upon which certain public men act. It is not necessary to argue its iniquity with those who have advanced any great distance beyond the brigand theory of political life. Some years ago another public man enunciated much the same doctrine in the phrase, "The Decalogue and the Golden Rule have no part in political life." Such statements, openly made, imply a belief that the public conscience is dull; and where the men who make them continue to be political leaders, the public has itself to thank for all shortcomings in public life.

The man who is constitutionally incapable of working for practical results ought not to need a much longer shrift. In every community there are little knots of fantastic extremists who loudly proclaim that they are striving for righteousness, and who, in reality, do their feeble best for unrighteousness. Just as the upright politician should hold in peculiar scorn the man who makes the name of politician a reproach and a shame, so the genuine reformer should realize that the cause he champions is especially jeopardized by the mock reformer who does what he can to make reform a laughingstock among decent men.

A caustic observer once remarked that when Dr. Johnson spoke of patriotism as the last refuge of a scoundrel, "he was ignorant of the infinite possibilities contained in the word 'reform.'" The sneer was discreditable to the man who uttered it, for it is no more possible to justify corruption by railing at those who by their conduct throw scandal upon the cause of reform than it is to justify treason by showing that men of shady character frequently try to cover their misconduct by fervent protestations of love of country. Nevertheless, the fact remains that exactly as true patriots should be especially jealous of any appeal to what is base under the guise of patriotism, so men who strive for honesty, and for the cleansing of what is corrupt in the dark places of our politics, should emphatically disassociate themselves from the men whose antics throw discredit upon the reforms they profess to advocate.

These little knots of extremists are found everywhere, one type flourishing chiefly in one locality and another type in another. In the particular objects they severally profess to champion they are as far asunder as the poles, for one of their characteristics is that each little group has its own patent recipe for salvation and pays no attention whatever to the other little groups; but in mental and moral habit they are fundamentally alike. They may be socialists of twenty different types, from the followers of Tolstoi down and up, or they may ostensibly champion some cause in itself excellent, such as temperance or municipal reform, or they may merely with comprehensive vagueness announce themselves as the general enemies of what is bad, of corruption, machine politics, and the like. Their policies and principles are usually mutually exclusive; but that does not alter the conviction, which each feels or affects to feel, that his particular group is the real vanguard of the army of reform. Of course, as the particular groups are all marching in different directions, it is not possible for more than one of them to be the vanguard. The others, at best, must be off to one side, and may possibly be marching the wrong way in the rear; and, as a matter of fact, it is only occasionally that any one of them is in the front. There are in each group many entirely sincere and honest men, and because of the presence of these men we are too apt to pay some of their associates the unmerited compliment of speaking of them also as honest but impracticable. As a matter of fact, the typical extremist of this kind differs from the practical reformer, from the public man who strives in practical fashion for decency, not at all in superior morality, but in inferior sense. He is not more virtuous; he is

less virtuous. He is merely more foolish. When Wendell Phillips denounced Abraham Lincoln as “the slave-hound of Illinois,” he did not show himself more virtuous than Lincoln, but more foolish. Neither did he advance the cause of human freedom. When the contest for the Union and against slavery took on definite shape, then he and his kind were swept aside by the statesmen and soldiers, like Lincoln and Seward, Grant and Farragut, who alone were able to ride the storm. Great as is the superiority in efficiency of the men who do things over those who do not, it may be no greater than their superiority in morality. In addition to the simple and sincere men who have a twist in their mental make-up, these knots of enthusiasts contain, especially among their leaders, men of morbid vanity, who thirst for notoriety, men who lack power to accomplish anything if they go in with their fellows to fight for results, and who prefer to sit outside and attract momentary attention by denouncing those who are really forces for good.

In every community in our land there are many hundreds of earnest and sincere men, clergymen and laymen, reformers who strive for reform in the field of politics, in the field of philanthropy, in the field of social life; and we could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times these men have been really aided in their efforts by the men of the type referred to in the preceding paragraph. The socialist who raves against the existing order is not the man who ever lifts his hand practically to make our social life a little better, to make the conditions that bear upon the unfortunate a little easier; the man who demands the immediate impossible in temperance is not the man who ever aids in an effort to minimize the evils caused by the saloon; and those who work practically for political reform are hampered, so far as they are affected at all, by the strutting vanity of the professional impracticables.

It is not that these little knots of men accomplish much of a positive nature that is objectionable, for their direct influence is inconsiderable; but they do have an undoubted indirect effect for bad, and this of a double kind. They affect for evil a certain number of decent men in one way and a certain number of equally decent men in an entirely different way. Some decent men, following their lead, withdraw themselves from the active work of life, whether social, philanthropic, or political, and by the amount they thus withdraw from the side of the forces of good they strengthen the forces of evil, as, of course, it makes no difference whether we lessen the numerator or increase the denominator. Other decent men are so alienated by such conduct that in their turn they abandon all effort to fight for reform, believing reformers to be either hypocrites or fools. Both of these phenomena are perfectly familiar to every active politician who has striven for decency, and to every man who has studied history in an intelligent way. Few things hurt a good cause more than the excesses of its nominal friends.

Fortunately, most extremists lack the power to commit dangerous excesses. Their action is normally as abortive as that of the queer abolitionist group who, in 1864, nominated a candidate against Abraham Lincoln when he was running for reëlection to the Presidency. The men entering this movement represented all extremes, moral and mental. Nominally they opposed Lincoln because they did not feel that he had gone far enough in what they deemed the right direction,—had not been sufficiently extreme,—and they objected to what they styled his opportunism, his tendency to compromise, his temporizing conduct, and his being a practical politician. In reality, of course, their opposition to Lincoln was conditioned, not upon what Lincoln had done, but upon their own natures. They were incapable of supporting a great constructive statesman in a great crisis; and this, not because they were too virtuous, but because they lacked the necessary common sense and power of subordination of self to enable them to work disinterestedly with others for the common good. Their movement, however, proved utterly abortive, and they had no effect even for evil. The sound, wholesome common sense of the

American people fortunately renders such movements, as a rule, innocuous; and this is, in reality, the prime reason why republican government prospers in America, as it does not prosper, for instance, in France. With us these little knots of impracticables have an insignificant effect upon the national life, and no representation to speak of in our governmental assemblies. In France, where the nation has not the habit of self-government, and where the national spirit is more volatile and less sane, each little group grows until it becomes a power for evil, and, taken together, all the little groups give to French political life its curious, and by no means elevating, kaleidoscopic character.

Macaulay's eminently sane and wholesome spirit and his knowledge of practical affairs give him a peculiar value among historians of political thought. In speaking of Scotland at the end of the seventeenth century he writes as follows:

"It is a remarkable circumstance that the same country should have produced in the same age the most wonderful specimens of both extremes of human nature. Even in things indifferent the Scotch Puritan would hear of no compromise; and he was but too ready to consider all who recommended prudence and charity as traitors to the cause of truth. On the other hand, the Scotchmen of that generation who made a figure in Parliament were the most dishonest and unblushing time-servers that the world has ever seen. Perhaps it is natural that the most callous and impudent vice should be found in the near neighborhood of unreasonable and impracticable virtue. Where enthusiasts are ready to destroy or be destroyed for trifles magnified into importance by a squeamish conscience, it is not strange that the very name of conscience should become a byword of contempt to cool and shrewd men of business."

What he says of Scotland in the time of King James and King William is true, word for word, of civic life in New York two centuries later. We see in New York sodden masses of voters manipulated by clever, unscrupulous, and utterly selfish masters of machine politics. Against them we see, it is true, masses of voters who both know how to, and do, strive for righteousness; but we see also very many others in whom the capacity for self-government seems to have atrophied. They have lost the power to do practical work by ceasing to exercise it, by confining themselves to criticism and theorizing, to intemperate abuse and intemperate championship of what they but imperfectly understand. The analogues of the men whom Macaulay condemns exist in numbers in New York, and work evil in our public life for the very reason that Macaulay gives. They do not do practical work, and the extreme folly of their position makes them not infrequently the allies of scoundrels who cynically practise corruption. Too often, indeed, they actually alienate from the cause of decency keen and honest men, who grow to regard all movements for reform with contemptuous dislike because of the folly and vanity of the men who in the name of righteousness preach unwisdom and practice uncharitableness. These men thus do inestimable damage; for the reform spirit, the spirit of striving after high ideals, is the breath of life in our political institutions; and whatever weakens it by just so much lessens the chance of ultimate success under democratic government.

Discarding the two extremes, the men who deliberately work for evil, and the men who are unwilling or incapable of working for good, there remains the great mass of men who do desire to be efficient, who do desire to make this world a better place to live in, and to do what they can toward achieving cleaner minds and more wholesome bodies. To these, after all, we can only say: Strive manfully for righteousness, and strive so as to make your efforts for good count. You are not to be excused if you fail to try to make things better; and the very phrase "trying to make things better" implies trying in practical fashion. One man's capacity is for one kind of work and another man's capacity for another kind of work. One affects certain methods and

another affects entirely different methods. All this is of little concern. What is of really vital importance is that something should be accomplished, and that this something should be worthy of accomplishment. The field is of vast size, and the laborers are always too few. There is not the slightest excuse for one sincere worker looking down upon another because he chooses a different part of the field and different implements. It is inexcusable to refuse to work, to work slackly or perversely, or to mar the work of others.

No man is justified in doing evil on the ground of expediency. He is bound to do all the good possible. Yet he must consider the question of expediency, in order that he may do all the good possible, for otherwise he will do none. As soon as a politician gets to the point of thinking that in order to be "practical" he has got to be base, he has become a noxious member of the body politic. That species of practicability eats into the moral sense of the people like a cancer, and he who practices it can no more be excused than an editor who debauches public decency in order to sell his paper.

We need the worker in the fields of social and civic reform; the man who is keenly interested in some university settlement, some civic club or citizens' association which is striving to elevate the standard of life. We need clean, healthy newspapers, with clean, healthy criticism which shall be fearless and truthful. We need upright politicians, who will take the time and trouble, and who possess the capacity, to manage caucuses, conventions, and public assemblies. We need men who try to be their poorer brothers' keepers to the extent of befriending them and working with them so far as they are willing; men who work in charitable associations, or, what is even better, strive to get into touch with the wage-workers, to understand them, and to champion their cause when it is just. We need the sound and healthy idealist; the theoretic writer, preacher, or teacher; the Emerson or Phillips Brooks, who helps to create the atmosphere of enthusiasm and practical endeavor. In public life we need not only men who are able to work in and through their parties, but also upright, fearless, rational independents, who will deal impartial justice to all men and all parties. We need men who are far-sighted and resolute; men who combine sincerity with sanity. We need scholarly men, too—men who study all the difficult questions of our political life from the standpoint both of practice and of theory; men who thus study trusts, or municipal government, or finance, or taxation, or civil-service reform, as the authors of the "Federalist" studied the problems of federal government.

Above all, the political reformer must not permit himself to be driven from his duty of supporting what is right by any irritation at the men who, while nominally supporting the same objects, and even ridiculing him as a backslider or an "opportunist," yet by their levity or fanaticism do damage to the cause which he really serves, and which they profess to serve. Let him disregard them; for though they are, according to their ability, the foes of decent politics, yet, after all, they are but weaklings, and the real and dangerous enemies of the cause he holds dear are those sinister beings who batten on the evil of our political system, and both profit by its existence, and by their own existence tend to perpetuate and increase it. We must not be diverted from our warfare with these powerful and efficient corruptionists by irritation at the vain prattlers who think they are at the head of the reform forces, whereas they are really wandering in bypaths in the rear.

The professional impracticable, the man who sneers at the sane and honest strivers after good, who sneers at the men who are following, however humbly, in the footsteps of those who worked for and secured practical results in the days of Washington, and again in the days of Lincoln, who denounces them as time-servers and compromisers, is, of course, an ally of corruption. But, after all, he can generally be disregarded, whereas the real and dangerous foe is the corrupt

politician, whom we cannot afford to disregard. When one of these professional impracticables denounces the attitude of decent men as “a hodge-podge of the ideal and the practicable,” he is amusingly unaware that he is writing his own condemnation, showing his own inability to do good work or to appreciate good work. The Constitutional Convention over which Washington presided, and which made us a nation, represented precisely and exactly this “hodge-podge,” and was frantically denounced in its day by the men of the impracticable type. Lincoln’s career throughout the Civil War was such a “hodge-podge,” and was in its turn denounced in exactly the same way. Lincoln disregarded the jibes of these men, who did their puny best to hurt the great cause for which he battled; and they never, by their pin-pricks, succeeded in diverting him from the real foe. The fanatical antislavery people wished to hurry him into unwise, extreme, and premature action, and denounced him as compromising with the forces of evil, as being a practical politician—which he was, if practicality is held to include wisdom and high purpose. He did not permit himself to be affected by their position. He did not yield to what they advised when it was impracticable, nor did he permit himself to become prejudiced against so much of what they championed as was right and practicable. His ideal was just as high as theirs. He did not lower it. He did not lose his temper at their conduct, or cease to strive for the abolition of slavery and the restoration of the Union; and whereas their conduct foreboded disaster to both causes, his efforts secured the success of both. So, in our turn, we of to-day are bound to try to tread in the footsteps of those great Americans who in the past have held a high ideal and have striven mightily through practical methods to realize that ideal. There must be many compromises; but we cannot compromise with dishonesty, with sin. We must not be misled at any time by the cheap assertion that people get only what they want; that the editor of a degraded newspaper is to be excused because the public want the degradation; that the city officials who inaugurate a “wide-open” policy are to be excused because a portion of the public likes vice; that the men who jeer at philanthropy are to be excused because among philanthropists there are hypocrites, and among unfortunates there are vicious and unworthy people. To pander to depravity inevitably means to increase the depravity. It is a dreadful thing that public sentiment should condone misconduct in a public man; but this is no excuse for the public man, if by his conduct he still further degrades public sentiment. There can be no meddling with the laws of righteousness, of decency, of morality. We are in honor bound to put into practice what we preach; to remember that we are not to be excused if we do not; and that in the last resort no material prosperity, no business acumen, no intellectual development of any kind, can atone in the life of a nation for the lack of the fundamental qualities of courage, honesty, and common sense.