

CHAPTER II.

POLITICAL DANGERS.

THE American Republic is to-day unquestionably foremost of the nations—the van leader of modern civilization. Of all the great peoples of the European family, her people are the most homogeneous, the most active and most assimilative. Their average standard of intelligence and comfort is higher; they have most fully adopted modern industrial improvements, and are the quickest to utilize discovery and invention; their political institutions are most in accordance with modern ideas, their position exempts them from dangers and difficulties besetting the European nations, and a vast area of unoccupied land gives them room to grow.

At the rate of increase so far maintained, the English-speaking people of America will, by the close of the century, number nearly one hundred million—a population as large as owned the sway of Rome in her palmiest days. By the middle of the next century—a time which children now born will live to see—they will, at the same rate, number more than the present population of Europe; and by its close nearly equal the population which, at the beginning of this century, the whole earth was believed to contain.

But the increase of power is more rapid than the increase of population, and goes on in accelerating progression. Discovery and invention stimulate discovery and inven-

tion; and it is only when we consider that the industrial progress of the last fifty years bids fair to pale before the achievements of the next that we can vaguely imagine the future that seems opening before the American people. The center of wealth, of art, of luxury and learning, must pass to this side of the Atlantic even before the center of population. It seems as if this continent had been reserved—shrouded for ages from the rest of the world—as the field upon which European civilization might freely bloom. And for the very reason that our growth is so rapid and our progress so swift; for the very reason that all the tendencies of modern civilization assert themselves here more quickly and strongly than anywhere else, the problems which modern civilization must meet, will here first fully present themselves, and will most imperiously demand to be thought out or fought out.

It is difficult for any one to turn from the history of the past to think of the incomparable greatness promised by the rapid growth of the United States without something of awe—something of that feeling which induced Amasis of Egypt to dissolve his alliance with the successful Polycrates, because “the gods do not permit to mortals such prosperity.” Of this, at least, we may be certain: the rapidity of our development brings dangers that can be guarded against only by alert intelligence and earnest patriotism.

There is a suggestive fact that must impress any one who thinks over the history of past eras and preceding civilizations. The great, wealthy and powerful nations have always lost their freedom; it is only in small, poor and isolated communities that Liberty has been maintained. So true is this that the poets have always sung that Liberty loves the rocks and the mountains; that she shrinks from wealth and power and splendor, from the crowded city and the busy mart. So true is this that

philosophical historians have sought in the richness of material resources the causes of the corruption and enslavement of peoples.

Liberty is natural. Primitive perceptions are of the equal rights of the citizen, and political organization always starts from this base. It is as social development goes on that we find power concentrating, and institutions based upon the equality of rights passing into institutions which make the many the slaves of the few. How this is we may see. In all institutions which involve the lodgment of governing power there is, with social growth, a tendency to the exaltation of their function and the centralization of their power, and in the stronger of these institutions a tendency to the absorption of the powers of the rest. Thus the tendency of social growth is to make government the business of a special class. And as numbers increase and the power and importance of each become less and less as compared with that of all, so, for this reason, does government tend to pass beyond the scrutiny and control of the masses. The leader of a handful of warriors, or head man of a little village, can command or govern only by common consent, and any one aggrieved can readily appeal to his fellows. But when the tribe becomes a nation and the village expands to a populous country, the powers of the chieftain, without formal addition, become practically much greater. For with increase of numbers scrutiny of his acts becomes more difficult, it is harder and harder successfully to appeal from them, and the aggregate power which he directs becomes irresistible as against individuals. And gradually, as power thus concentrates, primitive ideas are lost, and the habit of thought grows up which regards the masses as born but for the service of their rulers.

Thus the mere growth of society involves danger of the gradual conversion of government into something indepen-

dent of and beyond the people, and the gradual seizure of its powers by a ruling class—though not necessarily a class marked off by personal titles and a hereditary status, for, as history shows, personal titles and hereditary status do not accompany the concentration of power, but follow it. The same methods which, in a little town where each knows his neighbor and matters of common interest are under the common eye, enable the citizens freely to govern themselves, may, in a great city, as we have in many cases seen, enable an organized ring of plunderers to gain and hold the government. So, too, as we see in Congress, and even in our State legislatures, the growth of the country and the greater number of interests make the proportion of the votes of a representative, of which his constituents know or care to know, less and less. And so, too, the executive and judicial departments tend constantly to pass beyond the scrutiny of the people.

But to the changes produced by growth are, with us, added the changes brought about by improved industrial methods. The tendency of steam and of machinery is to the division of labor, to the concentration of wealth and power. Workmen are becoming massed by hundreds and thousands in the employ of single individuals and firms; small storekeepers and merchants are becoming the clerks and salesmen of great business houses; we have already corporations whose revenues and pay-rolls belittle those of the greatest States. And with this concentration grows the facility of combination among these great business interests. How readily the railroad companies, the coal operators, the steel producers, even the match manufacturers, combine, either to regulate prices or to use the powers of government! The tendency in all branches of industry is to the formation of rings against which the individual is helpless, and which exert their power upon government whenever their interests may thus be served.

It is not merely positively, but negatively, that great aggregations of wealth, whether individual or corporate, tend to corrupt government and take it out of the control of the masses of the people. "Nothing is more timorous than a million dollars—except two million dollars." Great wealth always supports the party in power, no matter how corrupt it may be. It never exerts itself for reform, for it instinctively fears change. It never struggles against misgovernment. When threatened by the holders of political power it does not agitate, nor appeal to the people; it buys them off. It is in this way, no less than by its direct interference, that aggregated wealth corrupts government, and helps to make politics a trade. Our organized lobbies, both legislative and Congressional, rely as much upon the fears as upon the hopes of moneyed interests. When "business" is dull, their resource is to get up a bill which some moneyed interest will pay them to beat. So, too, these large moneyed interests will subscribe to political funds, on the principle of keeping on the right side of those in power, just as the railroad companies deadhead President Arthur when he goes to Florida to fish.

The more corrupt a government the easier wealth can use it. Where legislation is to be bought, the rich make the laws; where justice is to be purchased, the rich have the ear of the courts. And if, for this reason, great wealth does not absolutely prefer corrupt government to pure government, it becomes none the less a corrupting influence. A community composed of very rich and very poor falls an easy prey to whoever can seize power. The very poor have not spirit and intelligence enough to resist; the very rich have too much at stake.

The rise in the United States of monstrous fortunes, the aggregation of enormous wealth in the hands of corporations, necessarily implies the loss by the people of govern-

mental control. Democratic forms may be maintained, but there can be as much tyranny and misgovernment under democratic forms as any other—in fact, they lend themselves most readily to tyranny and misgovernment. Forms count for little. The Romans expelled their kings, and continued to abhor the very name of king. But under the name of Cæsars and Imperators, that at first meant no more than our “Boss,” they crouched before tyrants more absolute than kings. We have already, under the popular name of “bosses,” developed political Cæsars in municipalities and states. If this development continues, in time there will come a national boss. We are young; but we are growing. The day may arrive when the “Boss of America” will be to the modern world what Cæsar was to the Roman world. This, at least, is certain: Democratic government in more than name can exist only where wealth is distributed with something like equality—where the great mass of citizens are personally free and independent, neither fettered by their poverty nor made subject by their wealth. There is, after all, some sense in a property qualification. The man who is dependent on a master for his living is not a free man. To give the suffrage to slaves is only to give votes to their owners. That universal suffrage may add to, instead of decreasing, the political power of wealth we see when mill-owners and mine operators vote their hands. The freedom to earn, without fear or favor, a comfortable living, ought to go with the freedom to vote. Thus alone can a sound basis for republican institutions be secured. How can a man be said to have a country where he has no right to a square inch of soil; where he has nothing but his hands, and, urged by starvation, must bid against his fellows for the privilege of using them? When it comes to voting tramps, some principle has been carried to a ridiculous and dangerous extreme. I have known elections to be decided by

the carting of paupers from the almshouse to the polls. But such decisions can scarcely be in the interest of good government.

Beneath all political problems lies the social problem of the distribution of wealth. This our people do not generally recognize, and they listen to quacks who propose to cure the symptoms without touching the disease. "Let us elect good men to office," say the quacks. Yes; let us catch little birds by sprinkling salt on their tails!

It behooves us to look facts in the face. The experiment of popular government in the United States is clearly a failure. Not that it is a failure everywhere and in everything. An experiment of this kind does not have to be fully worked out to be proved a failure. But speaking generally of the whole country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Lakes to the Gulf, our government by the people has in large degree become, is in larger degree becoming, government by the strong and unscrupulous.

The people, of course, continue to vote; but the people are losing their power. Money and organization tell more and more in elections. In some sections bribery has become chronic, and numbers of voters expect regularly to sell their votes. In some sections large employers regularly bulldoze their hands into voting as *they* wish. In municipal, State and Federal politics the power of the "machine" is increasing. In many places it has become so strong that the ordinary citizen has no more influence in the government under which he lives than he would have in China. He is, in reality, not one of the governing classes, but one of the governed. He occasionally, in disgust, votes for "the other man," or "the other party;" but, generally, to find that he has effected only a change of masters, or secured the same masters under different names. And he is beginning to accept the situation, and

to leave politics to politicians, as something with which an honest, self-respecting man cannot afford to meddle.

We are steadily differentiating a governing class, or rather a class of Pretorians, who make a business of gaining political power and then selling it. The type of the rising party leader is not the orator or statesman of an earlier day, but the shrewd manager, who knows how to handle the workers, how to combine pecuniary interests, how to obtain money and to spend it, how to gather to himself followers and to secure their allegiance. One party machine is becoming complementary to the other party machine, the politicians, like the railroad managers, having discovered that combination pays better than competition. So rings are made impregnable and great pecuniary interests secure their ends no matter how elections go. There are sovereign States so completely in the hands of rings and corporations that it seems as if nothing short of a revolutionary uprising of the people could dispossess them. Indeed, whether the General Government has not already passed beyond popular control may be doubted. Certain it is that possession of the General Government has for some time past secured possession. And for one term, at least, the Presidential chair has been occupied by a man not elected to it. This, of course, was largely due to the crookedness of the man who was elected, and to the lack of principle in his supporters. Nevertheless, it occurred.

As for the great railroad managers, they may well say, "The people be d—d!" When they want the power of the people they buy the people's masters. The map of the United States is colored to show States and Territories. A map of real political powers would ignore State lines. Here would be a big patch representing the domains of Vanderbilt; there Jay Gould's dominions would be brightly marked. In another place would be set off the empire of

Stanford and Huntington; in another the newer empire of Henry Villard. The States and parts of States that own the sway of the Pennsylvania Central would be distinguished from those ruled by the Baltimore and Ohio; and so on. In our National Senate, sovereign members of the Union are supposed to be represented; but what are more truly represented are railroad kings and great moneyed interests, though occasionally a mine jobber from Nevada or Colorado, not inimical to the ruling powers, is suffered to buy himself a seat for glory. And the Bench as well as the Senate is being filled with corporation henchmen. A railroad king makes his attorney a judge of last resort, as the great lord used to make his chaplain a bishop.

We do not get even cheap government. We might keep a royal family, house them in palaces like Versailles or Sans Souci, provide them with courts and guards, masters of robes and rangers of parks, let them give balls more costly than Mrs. Vanderbilt's, and build yachts finer than Jay Gould's, for much less than is wasted and stolen under our nominal government of the people. What a noble income would be that of a Duke of New York, a Marquis of Philadelphia, or a Count of San Francisco, who would administer the government of these municipalities for fifty per cent. of present waste and stealage! Unless we got an esthetic Chinook, where could we get an absolute ruler who would erect such a monument of extravagant vulgarity as the new Capitol of the State of New York? While, as we saw in the Congress just adjourned, the benevolent gentlemen whose desire it is to protect us against the pauper labor of Europe quarrel over their respective shares of the spoil with as little regard for the taxpayer as a pirate crew would have for the consignees of a captured vessel.

The people are largely conscious of all this, and there is among the masses much dissatisfaction. But there is a

lack of that intelligent interest necessary to adapt political organization to changing conditions. The popular idea of reform seems to be merely a change of men or a change of parties, not a change of system. Political children, we attribute to bad men or wicked parties what really springs from deep general causes. Our two great political parties have really nothing more to propose than the keeping or the taking of the offices from the other party. On their outskirts are the Greenbackers, who, with a more or less definite idea of what they want to do with the currency, represent vague social dissatisfaction; civil service reformers, who hope to accomplish a political reform while keeping it out of politics; and anti-monopolists, who propose to tie up locomotives with packthread. Even the labor organizations seem to fear to go further in their platforms than some such propositions as eight-hour laws, bureaus of labor statistics, mechanics' liens, and prohibition of prison contracts.

All this shows want of grasp and timidity of thought. It is not by accident that government grows corrupt and passes out of the hands of the people. If we would really make and continue this a government of the people, for the people and by the people, we must give to our politics earnest attention; we must be prepared to review our opinions, to give up old ideas and to accept new ones. We must abandon prejudice, and make our reckoning with free minds. The sailor, who, no matter how the wind might change, should persist in keeping his vessel under the same sail and on the same tack, would never reach his haven.