



# THE CITY

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

DISTRUST of democracy has inspired much of the literature on the city. Distrust of democracy has dictated most of our city laws. Many persons are convinced that mass government will not work in municipal affairs. Reform organizations have voted democracy a failure. Beginning with a conclusion, they have aimed to temper the failures of an experiment that has never yet been fully tried. They have petitioned State Legislatures to relieve the overburdened city of the duty of self-government. To these men of little faith, we have too much democracy, too wide a suffrage, too many people in our confidence. From their point of view corruption is fivefold. Its origins may be traced to the spoils system, the party machine, the saloon, the foreign voter, and faulty charter provisions. According to them democracy has broken down of its own weight. They conceive our mistake to be an attempt to extend government to the many, and believe that it should be left to the few.

To such persons, the cure seems as simple as

the disease. They would limit the suffrage. They would divorce national issues from city politics. They would pass civil service reform laws. They would elect better men to office. They would treat the city as a business concern, and put its affairs in the hands of commissions or experts. A business man's government is their highest ideal.

We are beginning to see that such analyses as well as such reforms are inadequate. The evil is not only personal—it is industrial and economic. The mass of the people are not corrupt. We have not too much democracy. In all probability we have too little. The spoils system is pernicious, but it is not maintained by democracy so much as by business interests which use it for private ends. As a matter of fact we nowhere have a democratic government. What we really have is government by special privileges and big business men. These privileges are owned by leading members of the community. And they give us such government as best serves their business. Any government which is good for the people is bad for privilege, for privilege cannot be secured from honest officials, while disinterested men are kept out of politics not so much by the people as by the system of government which has grown up about these business interests.

Nor is the foreign voter greatly at fault, for Philadelphia is more corrupt than New York,

although Philadelphia is a city of American-born citizens. Moreover, Chicago, Boston, and New York have known corruption under the merit system just as do Cincinnati, Pittsburg, and St. Louis under the spoils system. The election returns in almost any city show that as discriminating voting is done in the mill districts as in the well-to-do, brownstone wards. Apparently the poor are not wholly to blame. Nor is the foreign voter. And while the spoils system is an evil, it does not explain the big corruption. The machine finds the model charter as easy to control as the earlier forms which it has superseded. While reform halts in Philadelphia, Pittsburg, and New York, where model charters, designed by the best talent of the community, have been adopted, it proceeds to success in Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere where discredited forms of government survive. Something more than the legal framework is at fault.

Any one familiar with political conditions in any one of our large cities knows that the largest campaign contributions invariably come from the street railways, the gas and electric-lighting companies. These contributions are sometimes made to the Republican, sometimes to the Democratic party. Officials of these companies control the party committees. They name candidates for mayor, for tax officials, and for the council. In

the aldermanic districts the agents of the corporations supply the candidates with funds. In many of the wards they nominate the candidates upon both tickets. In addition to this they control the county auditor, who fixes the appraisal of their property for taxation.

On the organization of the council, the managers of franchise corporations caucus the members, select the candidates for president and clerk, and through them make up the committees. These officials form the lobby in the council chamber.

Wherever one may go the same phenomena appear. Always the boss is the recognized agent of the public service corporations. Everywhere campaign contributions come from the same source; everywhere hostility or apathy on the part of big business, everywhere the cry of socialism, of anarchy, whenever reform touches vested interests, everywhere a class-conscious distrust of democracy and an organized alliance between what President Roosevelt has termed "the criminal rich and the criminal poor." And when Mr. Steffens lent his open-minded skill to the task of reporting St. Louis, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, and Chicago, as well as the states of Missouri, Illinois, New Jersey, and Wisconsin, the truth became even more apparent, and the root of the disease that is responsible for the "shame of the city" more clearly appeared.

In city and in state it is the greed for franchise grants and special privileges that explains the worst of the conditions. This is the universal cause of municipal shame. By privilege, democracy has been drugged. And this explanation is susceptible of deductive as well as inductive proof. The franchises are the most valuable gift in the possession of the city. Those to whom our cities have given millions, those who have been enriched by the city's liberality, those who have grown in wealth by the mere growth of population, have not been content with the city's generosity; but, like the serpent in the fable, have turned and stung the breast of those who have befriended them.

The fact that Cincinnati is governed by an ex-saloon keeper, that St. Louis has been ruled by a blacksmith, and that in every large city this type of boss appears, is not conclusive that we are governed by saloon keepers, blacksmiths, or prize-fighters. Neither Cox, Butler, nor Croker govern their respective cities. They are but representatives of privileged interests. They sit on the throne of power. But the real authority is behind them, invisible and secure, in the office of the big business man. Not the wholesale nor retail dealer, not even the jobber nor the manufacturer; not these any more than the spoilsman, the petty grafter, or the saloon keeper. The latter are but

camp followers, who join in the looting and form but the fringe of the system.

(We have been living in a false philosophy.) We have not what we want, but what we say we want. We want better government. We say we want a business men's government. We already have a business men's government, supplied through the agency of the boss. But he is the broker of unseen principals who own or control the privileged interests which have identified themselves with the government through the aid of the party. Herein lies the explanation of the inertia of the "best" people, the languor of reform, the burdens resting heavy on the shoulders of democracy.

Such evils as these will never be corrected through charter reform, the merit system, or the limitation of the suffrage. They are organic, not external. (Reform will come and is coming by and through the people.) The American city is awakening from below, whence reform has almost always come. New issues are arising of a popular nature seeking a readjustment of the burdens of city life.) They seek relief from unjust taxation; the ownership or control of the franchise corporations; the opening up of life to the people through parks and playgrounds. With this has come a demand for greater responsiveness in the governmental machinery, so that it will be democratic in substance as well as in form. ' Distrust of party,

the caucus, and the convention is increasing, as well as the intrusion of business interests into the government.

Despite current pessimism, the outlook for the American city is reassuring. The city contains the independent vote. Here are the militant forces of our politics. As time goes on this independence will be extended to the state and the nation as well, with a consequent toning up of the larger issues in American life. To the city, we are to look for a rebirth of democracy, a democracy that will possess the instincts of the past along with a belief in the power of co-operative effort to relieve the costs which city life entails. We already see this manifest in many forms, in our schools, libraries, parks, playgrounds, kindergartens, bath houses, where conservatism has not been so strengthened by vested interests as to be able to resist democracy's coming.

And if democracy has not justified its highest ideals, it has at least given assurances of great vitality in many cities. The city is the hope of the future. Here life is full and eager. Here the industrial issues, that are fast becoming dominant in political life, will first be worked out. In the city, democracy is organizing. It is becoming conscious of its powers. And as time goes on, these powers will be exercised to an increasing extent for the amelioration of those conditions that

modern industrial life has created. And to those who are fearful of this tendency towards increased activities and larger municipal powers, the words of Macaulay, in his essay on Milton, are suggestive:

“ There is only one cure for the evils which newly acquired freedom produces; and that cure is freedom. When a prisoner first leaves his cell he cannot bear the light of day; he is unable to discriminate colors, or recognize faces. But the remedy is, not to remand him into his dungeon, but to accustom him to the rays of the sun. The blaze of truth and liberty may at first dazzle and bewilder nations which have become half blind in the house of bondage. But let them gaze on, and they will soon be able to bear it. In a few years men learn to reason. The extreme violence of opinion subsides. Hostile theories correct each other. The scattered elements of truth cease to contend, and begin to coalesce. And at length a system of justice and order is educed out of the chaos.

“ Many politicians of our time are in the habit of laying it down as a self-evident proposition, that no people ought to be free till they are fit to use their freedom. The maxim is worthy of the fool in the old story, who resolved not to go into the water till he had learnt to swim. If men are to wait for liberty till they become wise and good in slavery, they may indeed wait forever.”