

How I Lost a Friend

THE other day I ran across an essay in which the writer speculates on the course history might have taken if some of its prominent figures had not been stone broke. And that got me to thinking how poverty caused me to lose a friend.

He was, and is, an exceptionally brilliant young man, possessed of charm in both oral and written expression, with a verve for inspirational thought. His prepossessing appearance enhanced his mental gifts. But the most pleasing and at the same time the most promising of his qualities was an idealism so lofty as to lend him an air of transcendency. He was so utterly sincere that his questioning of an idea in the light of principle became a tortuous intellectual pursuit; he would accept no thought sight unseen.

But he was poor. He could not afford to be poor because, as might be expected, he was an idealist to whom ideals were worth striving to attain. His will to do was frustrated by his destitution. And among his unfulfilled desires was matrimony; quite natural in one so balanced emotionally, and quite commendable in view of the lady of his choice.

The market for rare talent being so thin these days, he turned to government service for a livelihood. Unlike the growing army of competent and incompetent young men who seek this "security," he well knew the implication of the step he was taking: it was a forced flight from reality, the suicide of intellectual integrity, the political mud bath of idealism. But what is a fellow to do when he has a girl and sees no prospect of acquiring even the price of a marriage license? He would take the job, temporarily, to tide him over his pecuniary crisis.

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In spite of popular opinion to the contrary, talent will help to get a fellow ahead in public service, provided the talent is directed toward the assigned job and is unencumbered with preconceived standards of right and wrong. It is easy to see that my friend could not willfully shed his idealism. But he wanted his job. So, without conscious intent, he made the easy adjustment: reading his idealism into the work he was forced by his poverty to do.

The least reprehensible thing about politics is the sordid use of it for private gain. This is no more immoral than any similar practice in pri-

vate life; racketeering is not indigenous to the political arena. Far worse, from the human point of view, is what politics does to the intellectual integrity of those who become enmeshed in it. And tragic indeed is its effect on the idealist who enlists in public service with the hope that he may thereby serve mankind. To see the almost imperceptible mutation of the idealist into the politician is like seeing a spirited dog become through abuse and association a mangy cur. This breakdown of the moral fiber of those who engage in politics is the first count in the indictment of it.

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The transition is never deliberate; it is a very gradual decadence. The first step is the necessary adjustment to a new order of life. Formerly the standard of the market place was the measure of one's value. Now the pleasure of a higher-up is the determinant. Not how much or how good is my work, but was it done according to regulations and the political necessity of the occasion. One must learn how to live in the world of red tape. It takes time. Ideals must wait.

Eventually the ideal crops out in a chance remark. The cognoscenti smile: "Forget it!" For the time being, perhaps, concession is made to the counsel of these wise ones. Deterioration has begun. One night there is a general discussion, and my idealist friend momentarily revives his old enthusiasm. "That's all right in theory, but see how things are really done." And he is shown that results count, that the way to get results, is laid down by experience, precedent, law.

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Results! Ah, that's the thing. A new objective has supplanted principle. He will "go along" to get results, and he will not question the ethics or purpose of the going along. That's how things get done. Some one suggests that his job depends upon his going along, but he does not admit that as a motivation, even to himself.

The rationalization is not long delayed. At first the zeal of the crusader, the logic of the philosopher will not down. Gradually both the zeal and the logic will bend to the inexorable will of political opportunism, and soon all the power of the human mind will be exerted to give this the aura of an ideal. Then personal expediency takes possession. The soul has perjured itself. Candid human relationship is no longer possible.

That is how I lost a friend.