

GETTING AT THE BOTTOM OF OUR CORRUPTION

BY BOLLING SOMERVILLE

FOR those of us who sincerely feel that corruption is growing in politics and in general, here would seem a simple enough summary of the thing:—A world growing in corruption is a world in which the more corruptible people are growing in power. It is a world in which the people who would have things otherwise are losing the necessary power. Those who would cannot, and those who can will not, bring about a better state of things. Realization of this marks the proper beginning of any thought and effort towards improvement.

How can one speak of improvement after saying that those who would bring about a better state of things cannot do so? It is because a better state can often be hoped of the somewhat distant future than of the immediate future. By allowing themselves a greater length of time for the task, and husbanding their resources, the less corruptible among us can effect good changes almost without limit. It is the patient focusing of effort and power alone which brings about good things. It is the focusing of effort and power which is to say it is purpose, which binds together all time, all days and generations, thereby giving meaning and value to all. What a relief to think that good things which are absent and impossible at present yet exist in the possibilities lying before us!

Of course this belief in vast possibilities lying before us makes many of us wax weak in present effort. Over-confidence comes before a slipping and a backward slide. (There is indeed no progress for us except that progress which we *make* with our own efforts.) Now this devitalizing over-confidence on the one hand, and on the other hand the present widespread pessimism as to the possibility

of spiritually rejuvenating civilization, hang very much like millstones about our neck. Both weigh us down far more than we are wont to admit. Both act as aids to the forces of decadence.

Both are great enemies of ours. Between the extremes of popular optimism and high-brow pessimism lies of course the golden mean of action, of amelioration, of effort which is focused and which makes good things to come. The necessity and way of focusing is indeed too little realized by the people who would have the world grow ever less corrupt. It is too little realized by the dutiful, that is by those who endeavor to act with regard to the interest of the human whole. Instead of acting as a well united, focused body, the dutiful everywhere stand noticeably scattered. They lack common impulse to come to the aid of one another and to make their weight felt at the points where their weight is needed above all other things. They stand helpless in the face of the greatest and most widespread age of corruption which has ever found the human race. Their voice is of all things like that of the lamb crying in the wilderness. It shows no power. It inspires no fear. It is the voice of deep distress.

During war we have all witnessed how dutifulness and idealism can be made to flow into the channels which serve the interests of a special class of rulers or manufacturers or even laborers as against the interests of the whole state. During war the enslavement of idealism, its wounding and partial destruction, is verily writ red. The aftermath of disillusion, disgust and decadence fully verifies the thing. Now the diversion of idealism which is very evident during war also goes on during peace, as things now are in this unfinished world of ours. Notice how often advertisements which are not of the "statement of fact" variety appeal to the higher, deeper, and more generalized wants and fears. Undoubtedly "it pays to advertise." It pays the advertiser to capture all he can of our interest in ourselves and as well in our families and communities, whether or not it pays the community itself. Even in the drives for charity, there is little regard for things other than "getting results." "Five dollars will save a life" is a fine slogan for opening up the pocketbooks of men; and it seems a pity that it will save a life for a very short while only. It also seems a pity to ask whether such exaggeration will not eventually dull the charitable spirit! And so on the whole all interests squeeze and suck at

the strength of our sympathies and loves, and leave us somewhat weaker at the end of every year. We become weaker, and, by way of self-protective compensation, harder and more thoughtful of ourselves. The age sinks deeper into egoism.

It is truly difficult to realize the dutiful everywhere are deplorably lacking in unity as a group. It is difficult to believe it even when our eyes and ears tell us it is surely so. For we are wont to think of dutifulness as a rather self-sufficient affair. Many of us resent the idea that "an honest man has a poor show." We resent it, but we give little critical consideration to it. The fact is that an extremely dishonest man has about as poor a show on the whole as the opposite extreme in the way of an honest man. It is the lukewarm to whom all blessings seem to flow, at present. In honesty, the "point of diminishing returns" is soon reached; from this point on, the more scrupulous you are, the greater is your handicap, your chances of bankruptcy or other loss. As competition grows, the general plane of practice in every field is set by the least scrupulous man who succeeds in that field. If they would survive in that field, the others must sooner or later move towards the plane of the least scrupulous. Men say with a certain truth that they are "forced to do it," and they seldom feel pangs of conscience, but the fact we need to remember, is that they actually do it—that it is the tendency wherever there is competition.

Every phase of life is of course more or less filled with competition, and that brings us to the appalling possibility, which as we study it, seems more and more a certainty, that on the whole scruples are declining. On the whole, survival in power and possessions goes more and more to the strongest in "immediate values," such as cunning and self-interest. Consideration for others, consideration for the human whole, acts always as an immediate handicap. No wonder decadence has stolen upon the world!

In a true sense, any active interest in society is an "investment" of self-interest. For the time being, we suffer a certain loss, but in time (with society properly organized for such an extremely important thing) full return with interest is to be expected. What we have a right to complain of then, is not that we suffer an immediate loss in interesting ourselves in society, but that society is still childishly unaware that it is under real obligation to meet, as far as possible, its payments. What we have a right to complain of is the

fact that there is being developed no "machinery" for rewarding the higher human excellences, such as the higher degrees of honesty and courage. On the lower levels of human activity, the monetary system sustains reciprocity among men fairly well. Men give and take of much stuff and services through the medium of "currency." On the higher levels of human activity, however, there is really nothing to sustain reciprocity among men. Therefore reciprocity here is not being sustained. On these levels those who give of their stuff and services receive in turn little and seldom. It has become more and more a one-sided affair. Have not all of us heard of the increasing disproportion within the last hundred years between the monetary returns for mere commercial service as compared with that for more humane services such as those of the teacher and research worker? Truly, the problem of curing the world of its decadence is the problem of sustaining reciprocity on the higher levels of human life. It is the problem of showing dutiful men everywhere their duty to sustain one another—to support,—or as we often say, "back" one another—more whole-heartedly. In politics, in business, and in everything else, eternally confronting us is the problem of taking up for the dutiful man, the man with a conscience, the man who considers his fellows as a whole.

For many ages the idea has prevailed that the universe on the whole acts to support the good man and to bring the evil to destruction. This idea, like that of "automatic progress," is certainly very pleasant to those of us who held to it, and certainly very deadening to our efforts. If only we can believe that nature, or even human nature, works on the whole for the well-being of the dutiful, we can avoid so much effort in his behalf! But it is not so. There is neither automatic progress nor automatic reward for the good man. Sadly we learn that the support of the good man is to a certain extent a real struggle against human nature, a real struggle against this world of the majority, the flesh and the devil. It is the real struggle of human life. According as we become aware of the thing, and conduct ourselves properly with it all in mind, can we hope that amelioration will set in, that the good and dutiful among men will gain in power and means for improving the world. The dutiful need become aware of the great need for their cooperation in behalf of their own special interests as a group. A peculiar and all-important group they are, indeed. And it is only in being

true to their own "group-self" that they can hope to be true to humankind. The special interest of the dutiful as a group gathers into itself all other interests, and therein fully simplifies the problem of accelerating social and moral progress. It gives a bulls-eye, a point of unity, to our at present conflicting ideals and efforts to improve mankind's well-being.