

THE BEST AND THE GOOD

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AMONG the people to whom we are all under a very real debt of obligation for the help they give to those seeking for good government at Albany is Bishop Doane. All of us who at the State capital have been painfully striving to wrest, often from adverse conditions, the best results obtainable, are strengthened and heartened in every way by the active interest the bishop takes in every good cause, the keen intelligence with which he sees "the instant need of things," and the sane and wholesome spirit, as remote from fanaticism as from cynicism, in which he approaches all public questions.

Quite unconsciously the bishop the other day gave an admirable summing up of his own attitude in quoting an extract from the "Life" of Archbishop Benson. In a letter which the archbishop wrote to his chancellor in regard to a bill regulating patronage in the Church of England, occurs the following passage:

“The bill does not, of course, represent my ideal, but it is a careful collection of points which could be claimed, which it would be indecent to refuse, and which would make a considerable difference about our powers of dealing rightly with cases. Gain that platform, and it would be a footing for more ideal measures. I do not want the best to be any more the deadly enemy of the good. We climb through degrees of comparison.”

This is really a description as excellent as it is epigrammatic of the attitude which must be maintained by every public man, by every leader and guide of public thought, who hopes to accomplish work of real worth to the community. It is a melancholy fact that many of the worst laws put upon the statute-books have been put there with the best of intentions by thoroughly well-meaning people. Mere desire to do right can no more by itself make a good statesman than it can make a good general. Of course it is entirely unnecessary to say that nothing atones for the lack of this desire to do right. Exactly as the brilliant military ability of an Arnold merely makes his treason the more abhorrent, so our statesmanship cannot be put upon the proper plane of purity and ability until the condemnation visited upon a traitor like Arnold is visited with no less severity upon the statesman who be-

trays the people by corruption. The one is as great an offense as the other. Military power is at an end when the honor of the soldier can no longer be trusted; and, in the right sense of the word, civic greatness is at an end when civic righteousness is no longer its foundation.

But, of course, every one knows that a soldier must be more than merely honorable before he is fit to do credit to the country; and just the same thing is true of a statesman. He must have high ideals, and the leader of public opinion in the pulpit, in the press, on the platform, or on the stump must preach high ideals. But the possession or preaching of these high ideals may not only be useless, but a source of positive harm, if unaccompanied by practical good sense, if they do not lead to the effort to get the best possible when the perfect best is not attainable—and in this life the perfect best rarely is attainable. Every leader of a great reform has to contend, on the one hand, with the open, avowed enemies of the reform, and, on the other hand, with its extreme advocates, who wish the impossible, and who join hands with their extreme opponents to defeat the rational friends of the reform. Of course the typical instance of this kind of conduct was afforded by Wendell Phillips when in 1864 he added his

weight, slight though it was, to the copperhead opposition to the reëlection of Abraham Lincoln.

The alliance between Blifil and Black George is world-old. Blifil always acts in the name of morality. Often, of course, he is not moral at all. It is a great mistake to think that the extremist is a better man than the moderate. Usually the difference is not that he is morally stronger, but that he is intellectually weaker. He is not more virtuous. He is simply more foolish. This is notably true in our American life of many of those who are most pessimistic in denouncing the condition of our politics. Certainly there is infinite room for improvement, infinite need of fearless and trenchant criticism; but the improvement can only come through intelligent and straightforward effort. It is set back by those extremists who by their action, always invite reaction, and, above all, by those worst enemies of our public honesty who by their incessant attacks upon good men give the utmost possible assistance to the bad.

Offenders of this type need but a short shrift. Though extremists after a fashion, they are morally worse instead of better than the moderates. There remains, however, a considerable group of men who are really striving for the best, and who mis-

takenly, though in good faith, permit the best to be the enemy of the good. Under very rare conditions their attitude may be right, and because it is thus right once in a hundred times they are apt to be blind to the harm they do the other ninety-nine times. These men need, above all, to realize that healthy growth cannot normally come through revolution. A revolution is sometimes necessary, but if revolutions become habitual the country in which they take place is going down-hill. Hysteria in any form is incompatible with sane and healthy endeavor. We must never compromise in a way that means retrogression. But in moving forward we must realize that normally the condition of sure progress is that it shall not be so fast as to insure a revolt and a stoppage of the upward course. In this country especially, where what we have now to contend with is not so much any one concrete evil as a general lowering of the standards, we must remember that to keep these standards high does not at all imply that they should be put upon impossible positions—positions which must ultimately be abandoned. There can be no compromise on the great fundamental principles of morality. A public man who directly or indirectly breaks the eighth commandment is just as guilty as an editor or a speaker

who breaks the ninth, and it matters little whether the fault be due to venality in the one case or to morbid vanity and mean envy in the other. If a man is dishonest he should be driven from public life. If a course of policy is vicious and produces harm it should be reversed at any cost. But when we come to the countless measures and efforts for doing good, let us keep ever clearly in mind that while we must always strive for the utmost good that can be obtained, and must be content with no less, yet that we do only harm if, by intemperate championship of the impossible good, we cut ourselves off from the opportunity to work a real abatement of existing and menacing evil.

**THE
STRENUOUS LIFE**

**ESSAYS AND
ADDRESSES**

**BY
THEODORE ROOSEVELT**



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