

# APPLIED GOOD CITIZENSHIP

EDITORIAL BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

**I**N the current number of "McClure's" Judge A. Z. Blair describes a very extraordinary feat performed in cleansing the politics of Adams County, Ohio, last fall, a feat in which Judge Blair was himself the foremost actor, ably assisted by the prosecuting attorney, Mr. W. P. Stephenson, and by the special Grand Jury, consisting of seven Democrats, seven Republicans, and one Prohibitionist, with ex-Congressman Fenton as Chairman.

It would be difficult to overestimate the service to the cause of popular government—for without honesty popular government is a repulsive farce—rendered by Judge Blair,

Mr. Stephenson, and this Grand Jury. It was a great service in itself, and it was a far greater service because it sets an example for all time to the rest of the country. I very much wish that the article in question could be reprinted in pamphlet form and distributed by good government clubs, voters' leagues, and the like, as a campaign document in the vital and endless campaign for decency which every good American citizen, whatever his politics, must be constantly waging. It is a lesson in the way to turn high idealism into practical achievement. It is also a lesson of a peculiarly important type in teaching us never for one moment to per-

mit ourselves to be drawn into the belief that any particular class of our fellow-citizens must be treated as either wicked or virtuous because the individuals who belong to that class follow a given occupation, live in a given locality, profess a given creed, have a given birthplace, or belong to any particular stratum of wealth or social position. We can never get honest government if we treat capitalist or laboring man as either good or bad simply *because* he is a capitalist or laboring man; we can never get justice as between man and man if we fail to treat corporation and labor union exactly alike, each on its merits and according to its behavior. If the head of a corporation swindles and bullies, he is to be condemned with frank severity, no matter what his position in the social or business world; if the head of a labor union employs, or connives at the employment of, a band of thugs as an "entertainment committee" to advance the union's interest by lawless violence, then he is to be condemned just as emphatically as is the arrogant and crooked capitalist—and no more emphatically.

Judge Blair worked in an eminently practical spirit, and no part of the service he has rendered is more important than his perfectly frank admission of the things he himself did that were wrong prior to having his eyes opened to the wrong. Reform is always held back by hypocrisy. In Adams County vote-buying and vote-selling were practically open and universal, just as until a decade ago the giving of rebates by railway men was universal; and the real enemies of reform attacked Judge Blair when he had become thoroughly aroused to the iniquity of the transactions in which he, like almost all others among the good citizens his neighbors, had taken part, just as the enemies of reform attacked the late Mr. Paul Morton when he, for the first time, enabled the Government to take practical action to stop all rebate-giving by frankly setting forth what he himself, like every other railway man, had done in rebate-giving. The cases are parallel.

It has been the fashion to speak as if corruption arose chiefly in cities and among our foreign-born population. Adams County, however, is a purely rural county, with no railway across it when the corruption began, and now with a railway across only one corner. Its people practically all belong to the old American stock. Moreover, instead of being, as many outsiders have assumed, un-

usually bad people, they are, I think, unusually good people. It was one of the counties in Ohio originally settled by Virginia pioneers. Although a Democratic county, it was intensely loyal to the Union, and sent an extraordinary percentage of its adult men into the Union army. To this day it furnishes, as Judge Blair points out, a markedly large percentage of men to the professions, who go elsewhere to carry on these professions. The people are good Americans who went wrong, *and then themselves corrected the wrong*; and until we, who live in other neighborhoods, ourselves correct the wrongs of our own neighborhoods in similarly resolute fashion, we must make up our minds that they stand well above us when judged by the standards of decent citizenship.

Judge Blair's article itself must be read; it is impossible to give even an abstract. He shows how the very intensity of political conviction among the people led to corruption. The corruption was not caused by capitalists or by corporations; there were practically no capitalists and no corporations in the county. Public officers were, on the whole, honest, and the men who did the vote-buying were, as a rule, in all other relations respectable and upright men. If Judge Blair and his colleagues had contented themselves merely with saying that "the people were always right," that "the people were pure and incorruptible," and that the only sins of consequence committed were always due to "wicked and corrupt capitalists," he would doubtless have had a certain amount of perfunctory applause for his action; but Adams County would have remained as corrupt as it ever was. There are localities, and many of them, where capitalists are in very fact the prime offenders; and a prime need of our political, social, and economic life is to suppress corrupt, and control overgrown, capitalism. But no war for decency will ever avail for permanent good unless we attack the scoundrel simply *because he is a scoundrel*, without regard to whether he is rich or poor.

Judge Blair faced in practical fashion the very curious and ominous situation which actually confronted him. The astounding feature of this situation was that the vote-sellers practically formed an association to intimidate and punish every politician or candidate who dared in any way to interfere with the practice of buying votes. This is one of the most interesting and extraordinary

incidents in our recent political history, and every real student of contemporary politics, every man genuinely interested in the betterment of our citizenship, should study it. From what Judge Blair says it is evident that finally, simply from motives of self-preservation, the leaders of the two parties did sincerely endeavor by mutual agreement to put a stop to vote-buying, and that the vote-sellers indignantly resented this action and combined to prevent its repetition; and they succeeded in stopping the movement. It was a marvelous instance of the utter cynicism and moral callousness produced by long-continued and uncondemned corruption. Then Judge Blair and those associated with him made up their minds to proceed by drastic action, and, owing to the peculiar circumstances of the case,

they quite properly moved against the vote-sellers, and not the vote-buyers. They acted with equal efficiency and moderation. They punished in a pecuniary way only a few of the ringleaders, who endeavored to perpetuate old conditions; but they disfranchised over a quarter of the voting population of the county. One incident worth noting is that the conscience of the women of the county was aroused to active hostility towards the corruption long before the men's conscience was touched.

The whole incident was extraordinary in itself, and is fraught with the most useful lessons to our people. In closing, let me say again that every man connected with the movement for reform has a right to feel that he made the whole American public his debtor.