

POLITICAL LESSONS FROM THE TIMES OF CICERO.

BY EDWARD MEEK.

THE political situation of the Roman Empire in the time of Cicero affords many lessons which apply with striking force to the political condition of the commonwealths existing at the present day.

The Roman experiment of self-government, though based on a narrow foundation, was carried out on an extensive scale. In the age of Cicero, the commonwealth was nearing the apex of its greatness. Its military discipline had conquered, and its generals and governors ruled, all the civilized and settled peoples of Europe and Africa, and of Asia as far as the confines of Persia. Rome had become the centre of power, of government, of wealth, and of civilization.

The condition of a nation at any period of its history, is the result of the forces which have operated in its development.

After the abolition of Monarchy, the Roman constitution, at first oligarchical, gradually became more democratic.

All the offices, from those of Pontifex Maximus and Consul, down to the lowest, were elective. Most of the officials were elected annually,—every Roman citizen from the wealthiest to the poorest, having a vote.

It was a plutocratic age—a new and numerous wealthy class had grown up—most of them ready to purchase their way into office and power. Hence, electoral corruption and bribery became rampant. In theory, every office was open to the poorest; in practice, none but the wealthy could hope to succeed.

There were stringent laws against bribery and corruption at elections. Then, as now, the ballot box prevented intimidation and concealed corruption.

Then, as now, there were election contests, election trials, and elections set aside, and men were unseated, disqualified and disfranchised for corrupt practices.

Corruption and intimidation eventually found their way to the seat of justice. Injustice, violence and disorder called for the interference of a stronger power. The way was opened for a permanent Dictator; and Julius Cæsar, the man of destiny and necessity, became supreme ruler.

The wars in which the Romans were forced to engage, compelled them to be conquerors, or to submit to the dominion of neighboring states. The subjugation of the Italian states carried with it their ultimate incorporation in the Roman commonwealth. Each conquest brought the state in contact with some new tribe or nation. This generally produced new complications and imposed new duties, which, in honor, the victors could not shrink from undertaking. These circumstances and conditions made the Romans a nation of warriors. Created and maintained by martial discipline, the commonwealth necessarily developed the military element, and that element naturally became predominant. The career of a soldier was the surest road to honor and power. Eventually it opened the way to the acquisition of wealth. War, originally a necessity, became in a time a profession. The patriotic citizen, in the early days, took up arms as a duty, and fought for the honor and glory of his country. Later, the soldier made the practice of arms the business of his life, and enrolled in the legions for the pay and spoils of war.

It seems clear to us, and it must have been apparent to many Romans,