

elections for places of honour, and corruption in parliamentary government. But, though perfection is unattainable, improvement is best effected by keeping a perfect system in view as a goal, which may be neared, though it cannot be reached, and moral influences have already done much to purify English government. In the seventeenth century there was not only general corruption of constituencies and notorious bribery of Members of Parliament, but there were also venal ministers of State. It is long since there was even a suspicion that an English Minister of State could be bribed. The corruption of Members of Parliament by government bribes was rampant in the last century, and there are men living who may remember traces of it; but we may say that bribery of Members of Parliament has been for many years extinct. The corruption of constituencies remains to be cured. Words used by Andrew Marvel in 1678, to describe the evil which had then suddenly assumed large proportions, are still applicable to a large number of English constituencies. "It is not to be expressed, the debauchery and lewdness which upon occasion of elections to Parliament are now grown habitual through the nation. So that the vice and the expense are risen to such a prodigious height that few sober men can endure to stand to be chosen on such conditions."*

Bishop Burnet, in the general review of the moral and social condition of England, with which he winds up the History of his own time, covering four reigns and half a century, wrote thus in 1708 on bribery at elections:—"All laws that can be made will prove ineffectual to cure so great an evil till there comes to be a change and reformation of morals in the nation. We see former laws are evaded, and so will all the laws that can be made, till the candidates and electors both become men of another temper and other principles than appear now among them."†

Since the Reform Act, and more especially since the general election of 1841, Parliament has passed a number of acts against bribery at elections; and an able historian of our own time, having passed in review this series of acts, each rapidly proved inefficacious, makes some remarks which, after the lapse of a century and a half, are an unconscious reproduction of Bishop Burnet's observation. "To repress so grave an evil," says Mr. Erskine May, in his "Constitutional History," published in 1861, "more effectual measures will doubtless be devised, but they may still be expected to fail, until bribery shall be unmistakably condemned by public opinion. The law had treated duelling as murder, yet the penalty of death was unable to repress it; but when society discountenanced that time-honoured custom, it was suddenly abandoned. Voters may always be found to receive bribes if offered; but candidates belong to a class whom the influence of society may restrain from committing an offence condemned alike by the law and by public opinion."‡

I wish to suggest whether at this moment, when a general election cannot be far distant, but while there is yet time to act on public opinion, and while, before parties are engaged in passionate contention, the voice of reason may yet be heard, an Association might not be called into existence to rouse, concentrate, and guide the moral feeling of the nation, and to arrange and superintend an extensive system of concerted practical effort, for an object which all respectable men desire, and which laws will not accomplish.

The sudden turn of feeling, which within our memories suppressed the long-cherished and strongly rooted fashion of duelling, gives encouragement to hope for good effects of a well-aimed impulse to public feeling on corruption at elections,

which is not favoured, as duelling was, by opinion, but which is connived at from habit, and sheltered by charitable indulgence, and practised with compunction of conscience under the influence of circumstances, passion, rivalry, and temptation. I believe that the formation of the Anti-duelling Association in 1844 had some share in bringing about the sudden great change of public opinion on duelling which occurred shortly after, and I feel sure that the formation of an Association against corruption at elections, comprising the leading men of all parties, and perhaps combining for a social reform dignitaries of the Church and of the Law with the most eminent in political life, would be itself a great stride towards success.

Such an Association might of course act on opinion by large public meetings and circulation of suitable pamphlets; but I look chiefly to the following mode of action, aided by the enthusiasm which the existence of the Association would engender.

Endeavours should be made to include as many Members of Parliament and candidates for seats, and leading members of constituencies, as possible, of all parties. Every one in becoming a member of the Association would thereby pledge himself to abstain from corrupt expenditure by himself or friends, and to do everything in his power to discourage and prevent it.

Local committees composed of leading men of all parties should be organised through the constituencies. Endeavours should be made everywhere to procure agreements between opposing candidates, and opposing leaders of parties in constituencies, to abstain from bribery and to limit expenditure. Such agreements could probably be made without much difficulty in most cases some time before an election. All candidates have a strong common interest in abstaining from bribery, and election expenditure is for the most part a matter of forced habit and involuntary rivalry. There can be no doubt that it is generally the wish of the respectable leading men in all constituencies to put down bribery and profligate expenditure at elections. They know and regret the bad effects on the classes which furnish the bribed, and must care something for the reputation of their own communities. But in this as in other matters, what is everybody's business is nobody's; no one initiates a reform; political opponents do not naturally come together to talk of joint action; there are those interested in keeping up the system; the election comes on, candidates spend largely because they cannot help themselves, following the habits of the place, and one doing what the other does, and bribery is practised at the last to win, or to meet bribery. In many boroughs compulsion is put upon candidates by inferior persons, having influence among the poorer electors which they use for their own profit, and encouraging large expenditure for the same object; where one such middle-man of corruption exists on one side, his fellow is generally to be found on the other; these men might generally be overcome by previous concert between candidates and leading electors.

It is to be expected that these agreements deliberately made between gentleman and gentleman, and comprising the leading supporters on each side, would in general be honourably and completely fulfilled.

Public meetings might, if necessary, be held in constituencies to promote the desired end; in some cases, perhaps, a body of electors of different politics might act together to require from the candidates and leaders on both sides abstinence from corrupt expenditure. I should look for much aid from the clergy both of the Church and of the dissenting bodies for this movement in constituencies.

In many cases, parties will remain in the same relative position in constituencies after such an agreement. Candidates will save their money, the cause of public morality will gain, and the result of the election be the same. In other cases where a candidate could only gain his end by bribery, he and

* Marvel's "Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England." Works, vol. 1, p. 540.

† Burnet's "History of His Own Time," VI. 208, ed. Oxford, 1823.

‡ May's "Constitutional History of England," I., p. 336.