Henry Brooks Adams was born in Boston in 1838, the son of Charles Francis Adams (who served as the American minister to Great Britain during the Civil War), the grandson of President John Quincy Adams, and the great-grandson of President John Adams. Having graduated from Harvard and begun studying the law, Henry Adams accompanied his father to England during the war. When he returned to the United States, he took up journalism and scholarship, producing myriad works that gave vent to his pessimistic view of human nature and the failings of American democracy.

In 1880, he anonymously published his first novel, Democracy: An American Novel. Set in postbellum Washington, D.C., the novel tells the story of Boston widow, Madeleine Lee, who had grown bored with the life of a socialite in Boston and New York and had come to the nation’s capital in search of “POWER,” of the “tremendous forces of government and the machinery of society, at work.” She befriends the powerful Illinois Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe, who confesses, “Believing as I do that great results can only be accomplished by great parties, I have uniformly yielded my own personal opinions where they have failed to obtain general assent.” Only “national allegiance” was “more powerful than party allegiance.” Over the course of the novel, Ratcliffe schemes to dominate the cabinet of the newly elected president from the position of secretary of treasury, while preparing for his own eventual ascendance to the White House. Lee eventually declines Ratcliffe’s marriage proposal when she discovers that he accepted a bribe to move forward a bill granting a subsidy to a steamship company. She is unmoved when he protests that he did not personally profit from the payment but instead used the funds to secure the victory of his party, and himself, and keep the control of the government out of the “bloodstained hands of the rebels.” Upon hearing this, Lee recognizes that she has finally seen the “heart of politics” and realizes that her idea of “purifying politics is absurd.” “She had got to the bottom of this business of democratic government, and found out that it was nothing more than government of any other kind.” The novel was an instant sensation among political elites in the late nineteenth century, who speculated for years over who might be the author and who might be the models for the various characters in the book. Its caustic portrayal of the corruption and ruthless machinations of American politics in the years after the Civil War both dismayed and energized reformers.

In this scene early in the book, Lee hosts a dinner party in Washington, D.C. Among her guests are Senator Ratcliffe, the Bulgarian ambassador Baron Jacobi, the Virginia lawyer John Carrington, and the historian and office-seeker Nathan Gore.

Mrs. Lee, with much earnestness of manner, still pressed her question: “Surely something can be done to check corruption. Are we forever to be at the mercy of thieves and ruffians? Is a respectable government impossible in a democracy?”

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Her warmth attracted Jacobi’s attention, and he spoke across the room. “What is that you say, Mrs. Lee? What is it about corruption?”

All the gentlemen began to listen and gather about them.

“I am asking Senator Ratcliffe,” said she, “what is to become of us if corruption is allowed to go unchecked.”

“And may I venture to ask permission to hear Mr. Ratcliffe’s reply?” asked the Baron.

“My reply,” said Ratcliffe, “is that no representative government can long be much better or much worse than the society it represents. Purify society and you purify the government. But try to purify the government artificially and you only aggravate failure.”

“A very statesmanlike reply,” said Baron Jacobi, with a formal bow, but his tone had a shade of mockery. Carrington, who had listened with a darkening face, suddenly turned to the Baron and asked him what conclusion he drew from the reply.

“Ah!” exclaimed the Baron, with his wickedest leer, “what for is my conclusion good? You Americans believe yourselves to be excepted from the operation of general laws. You care not for experience. I have lived seventy-five years, and all that time in the midst of corruption. I am corrupt myself, only I do have courage to proclaim it, and you others have it not. Rome, Paris, Vienna, Petersburg, London, all are corrupt; only Washington is pure! Well, I declare to you that in all my experience I have found no society which has had elements of corruption like the United States. The children in the street are corrupt, and know how to cheat me. The cities are all corrupt, and also the towns and the counties and the States’ legislatures and the judges. Everywhere men betray trusts both public and private, steal money, run away with public funds. Only in the Senate men take no money. And you gentlemen in the Senate very well declare that your great United States, which is the head of the civilized world, can never learn anything from the example of corrupt Europe. You are right—quite right! The great United States need not an example. I do much regret that I have not yet one hundred years to live. If I could then come back to this city, I should find myself very content—much more than now. I am always content where there is so much corruption, and ma parole d’honneur!” broke out the old man with fire and gesture, “the United States will then be more corrupt than Rome under Caligula; more corrupt than the Church under Leo X; more corrupt than France under the Regent!”

As the Baron closed his little harangue, which he delivered directly at the senator sitting underneath him, he had the satisfaction to see that everyone was silent and listening with deep attention. He seemed to enjoy annoying the senator, and he had the satisfaction of seeing that the senator was visibly annoyed. Ratcliffe looked sternly at the Baron and said, with some curtness, that he saw no reason to accept such conclusions.

“The Baron discomfited the senator,” said Gore, with a certain hesitation. “Why did Ratcliffe let himself be trampled upon in that manner?”

“I wish you would explain why,” replied Mrs. Lee; “tell me, Mr. Gore—you who represent cultivation and literary taste hereabouts—please tell me what to think about Baron Jacobi’s speech. Who and what is to be believed? Mr. Ratcliffe seems honest and wise. Is he a corruptionist? He believes in the people, or says he does. Is he telling the truth or not?”

Gore was too experienced in politics to be caught in such a trap as this. He evaded the question. “Mr. Ratcliffe has a practical piece of work to do; his business is to make laws and advise the President; he does it extremely well. We have no other equally good practical politician; it is unfair to require him to be a crusader besides.”

“No!” interposed Carrington, curtly; “but he need not obstruct crusades. He need not talk virtue and oppose punishment of vice.”

“He is a shrewd practical politician,” replied Gore, “and he feels first the weak side of any proposed political tactics.”
With a sigh of despair Madeleine went on: "Who, then, is right? How can we all be right? Half of our wise men declare that the world is going straight to perdition; the other half that it is fast becoming perfect. Both cannot be right. There is only one thing in life," she went on, laughing, "that I must and will have before I die. I know whether America is right or wrong. Just now the question is a very practical one, for I really want to know whether to believe in Mr. Ratcliffe. If I throw him overboard, everything must go for he is only a specimen."

"Why not believe in Mr. Ratcliffe?" said Gore; "I believe in him myself, and am not afraid to say so."

Carrington, to whom Ratcliffe now began to represent the spirit of evil, interposed here, and observed that he imagined Mr. Gore had other guides besides, and steadier ones than Ratcliffe, to believe in; while Madeleine, with a certain feminine perspicacity, struck at a much weaker point in Mr. Gore's armor, and asked point-blank whether he believed also in what Ratcliffe represented: "Do you yourself think democracy the best government, and universal suffrage a success?"

Mr. Gore saw himself pinned to the wall, and he turned at bay with almost the energy of despair:

"These are matters about which I rarely talk in society; they are like the doctrine of a personal God; of a future life; of revealed religion; subjects which one naturally reserves for private reflection. But since you ask for my political creed, you shall have it. I only condition that it shall be for you alone, never to be repeated or quoted as mine. I believe in democracy. I accept it. I will faithfully serve and defend it. I believe in it because it appears to me the inevitable consequence of what has gone before it. Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to a higher intelligence than formerly. All our civilization aims at this mark. We want to do what we can to help it. I myself want to see the result. I grant it is an experiment, but it is only the direction society can take that is worth its taking; the only conception of its duty large enough to satisfy its instincts; the only result that is worth an effort or a risk. Every other possible step is backward, and I do not care to repeat the past. I am glad to see society grapple with issues in which no one can afford to be neutral."

"And supposing your experiment fails," said Mrs. Lee; "suppose society destroys itself with universal suffrage, corruption, and communism."

"I wish, Mrs. Lee, you would visit the Observatory with me some evening, and look at Sirius. Did you ever make the acquaintance of a fixed star? I believe astronomers reckon about twenty millions of them in sight, and an infinite possibility of invisible millions, each one of which is a sun, like ours, and may have satellites like our planet. Suppose you see one of these fixed stars suddenly increase in brightness, and are told that a satellite has fallen into it and is burning up, its career finished, its capacities exhausted? Curious, is it not; but what does it matter? Just as much as the burning up of a moth at your candle?"

Madeleine shuddered a little. "I cannot get to the height of your philosophy," said she. "you are wandering among the infinites, and I am finite."

"Not at all! But I have faith; not perhaps in the old dogma, but in the new ones; faith in human nature; faith in science; faith in the survival of the fittest. Let us be true to our time, Mrs. Lee! If our age is to be beaten, let us die in the ranks. If it is to be victorious, let us be first to lead the column. Anyway, let us not be skulkers or grumblers. There! Have I repeated my catechism correctly? You would have it! Now oblige me by forgetting it. I should lose my character at home if it got out. Good night!"

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