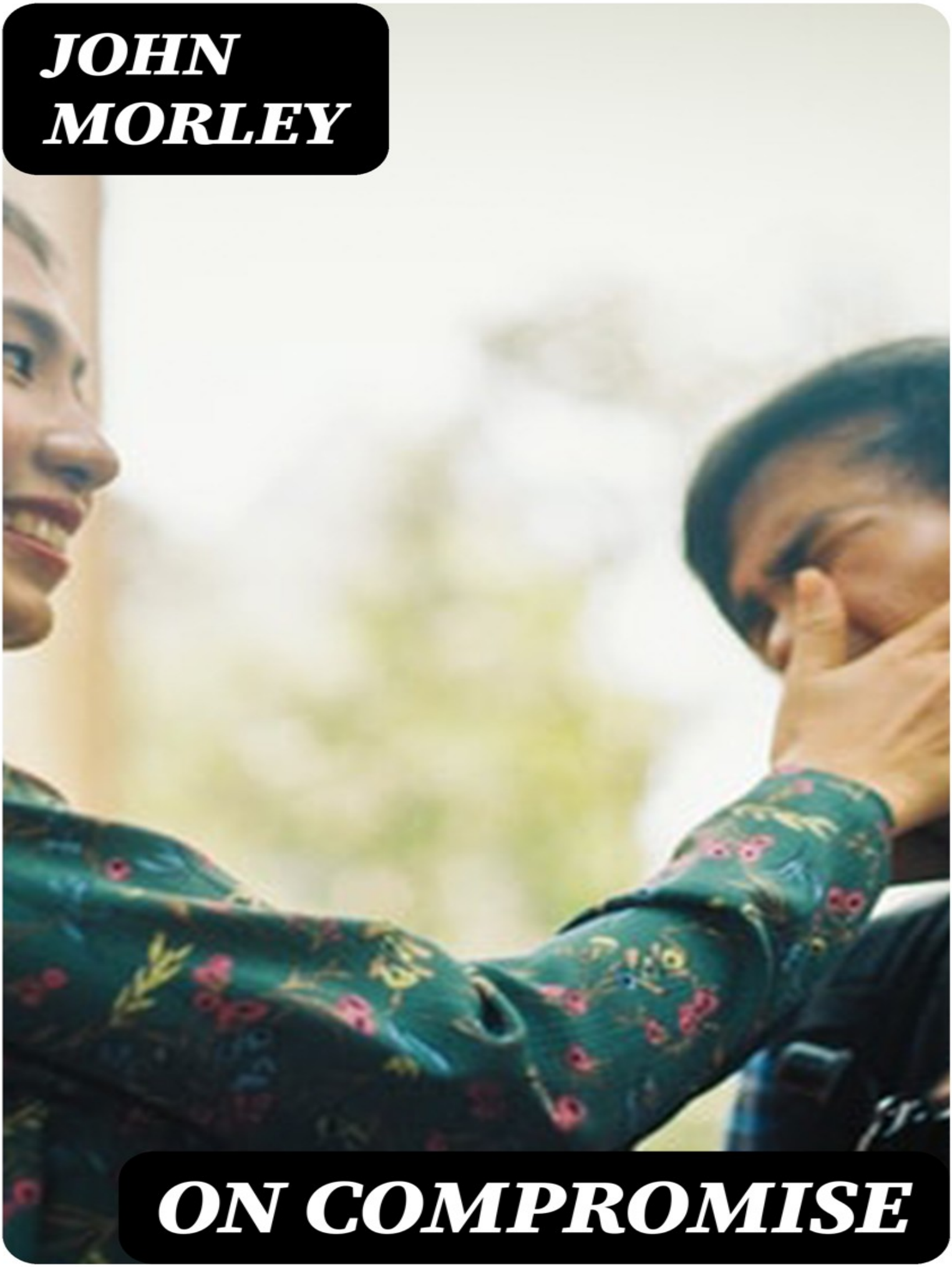
JOHN MORLEY



ON COMPROMISE

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CHAPTER I.

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INTRODUCTORY.

The design of the following essay is to consider, in a short and direct way, some of the limits that are set by sound reason to the practice of the various arts of accommodation, economy, management, conformity, or compromise. The right of thinking freely and acting independently, of using our minds without excessive awe of authority, and shaping our lives without unquestioning obedience to custom, is now a finally accepted principle in some sense or other with every school of thought that has the smallest chance of commanding the future. Under what circumstances does the exercise and vindication of the right, thus conceded in theory, become a positive duty in practice? If the majority are bound to tolerate dissent from the ruling opinions and beliefs, under what conditions and within what limitations is the dissentient imperatively bound to avail himself of this toleration? How far, and in what way, ought respect either for immediate practical convenience, or for current prejudices, to weigh against respect for truth? For how much is it well that the individual should allow the feelings and convictions of the many to count, when he comes to shape, to express, and to act upon his own feelings and convictions? Are we only to be permitted to defend general principles, on condition that we draw no practical inferences from them? Is every other idea to yield precedence and empire to existing circumstances, and is

the immediate and universal workableness of a policy to be the main test of its intrinsic fitness?

To attempt to answer all these questions fully would be nothing less than to attempt a compendium of life and duty in all their details, a Summa of cases of conscience, a guide to doubters at every point of the compass. The aim of the present writer is a comparatively modest one; namely, to seek one or two of the most general principles which ought to regulate the practice of compliance, and to suggest some of the bearings which they may have in their application to certain difficulties in modern matters of conduct.

It is pretty plain that an inquiry of this kind needs to be fixed by reference to a given set of social circumstances tolerably well understood. There are some common rules as to the expediency of compromise and conformity, but their application is a matter of endless variety and the widest elasticity. The interesting and useful thing is to find the relation of these too vague rules to actual conditions; to transform them into practical guides and real interpreters of what is right and best in thought and conduct, in a special and definite kind of emergency. According to the current assumptions of the writer and the preacher, the one commanding law is that men should cling to truth and right, if the very heavens fall. In principle this is universally accepted. To the partisans of authority and tradition it is as much a commonplace as to the partisans of the most absolute and unflinching rationalism. Yet in practice all schools alike are forced to admit the necessity of a measure of accommodation in the very interests of truth itself. Fanatic is a name of such ill repute, exactly because one

who deserves to be called by it injures good causes by refusing timely and harmless concession; by irritating prejudices that a wiser way of urging his own opinion might have turned aside; by making no allowances, respecting no motives, and recognising none of those qualifying principles, which are nothing less than necessary to make his own principle true and fitting in a given society. The interesting question in connection with compromise obviously turns upon the placing of the boundary that divides wise suspense in forming opinions, wise reserve in expressing them, and wise tardiness in trying to realise them, from unavowed disingenuousness and self-illusion, from voluntary dissimulation, and from indolence and pusillanimity. These are the three departments or provinces of compromise. Our subject is a question of boundaries.[1] And this question, being mainly one of time and circumstance, may be most satisfactorily discussed in relation to the time and the circumstances which we know best, or at least whose deficiencies and requirements are most pressingly visible to us.

Though England counts her full share of fearless truth-seekers in most departments of inquiry, yet there is on the whole no weakening, but a rather marked confirmation, of what has become an inveterate national characteristic, and has long been recognised as such; a profound distrust, namely, of all general principles; a profound dislike both of much reference to them, and of any disposition to invest them with practical authority; and a silent but most pertinacious measurement of philosophic truths by political tests. 'It is not at all easy, humanly speaking,' says one who

has tried the experiment, 'to wind an Englishman up to the level of dogma.' The difficulty has extended further than the dogma of theology. The supposed antagonism between expediency and principle has been pressed further and further away from the little piece of true meaning that it ever could be rightly allowed to have, until it has now come to signify the paramount wisdom of counting the narrow, immediate, and personal expediency for everything, and the whole, general, ultimate, and completed expediency for nothing. Principle is only another name for a proposition stating the terms of one of these larger expediencies. When principle is held in contempt, or banished to the far dreamland of the philosopher and the student, with an affectation of reverence that in a materialist generation is in truth the most overweening kind of contempt, this only means that men are thinking much of the interests of to-day, and little of the more ample interests of the many days to come. It means that the conditions of the time are unfriendly to the penetration and the breadth of vision which disclose to us the whole range of consequences that follow on certain kinds of action or opinion, and unfriendly to the intrepidity and disinterestedness which make us willing to sacrifice our own present ease or near convenience, in the hope of securing higher advantages for others or for ourselves in the future.

Let us take politics, for example. What is the state of the case with us, if we look at national life in its broadest aspect? A German has his dream of a great fatherland which shall not only be one and consolidated, but shall in due season win freedom for itself, and be as a sacred hearth

whence others may borrow the warmth of freedom and order for themselves. A Spaniard has his vision either of militant loyalty to God and the saints and the exiled line of his kings, or else of devotion to the newly won liberty and to the raising up of his fallen nation. An American, in the midst of the political corruption which for the moment obscures the great democratic experiment, yet has his imagination kindled by the size and resources of his land, and his enthusiasm fired by the high destinies which he believes to await its people in the centuries to come. A Frenchman, republican or royalist, with all his frenzies and 'fool-fury' of red or white, still has his hope and dream and aspiration, with which to enlarge his life and lift him on an ample pinion out from the circle of a poor egoism. What stirs the hope and moves the aspiration of our Englishman? Surely nothing either in the heavens above or on the earth beneath. The English are as a people little susceptible in the region of the imagination. But they have done good work in the world, acquired a splendid historic tradition of stout combat for good causes, founded a mighty and beneficent empire; and they have done all this notwithstanding their deficiencies of imagination. Their lands have been the home of great and forlorn causes, though they could not always follow the transcendental flights of their foreign allies and champions. If Englishmen were not strong in imagination, they were what is better and surer, strong in their hold of the great emancipating principles. What great political cause, her own or another's, is England befriending to-day? To say that no great cause is left, is to tell us that we have reached the final stage of human progress, and turned over the last leaf

in the volume of human improvements. The day when this is said and believed marks the end of a nation's life. Is it possible that, after all, our old protestant spirit, with its rationality, its austerity, its steady political energy, has been struck with something of the mortal fatigue that seizes catholic societies after their fits of revolution?

We need not forget either the atrocities or the imbecilities which mark the course of modern politics on the Continent. I am as keenly alive as any one to the levity of France, and the [Greek: hubris] of Germany. It may be true that the ordinary Frenchman is in some respects the victim of as poor an egoism as that of the ordinary Englishman; and that the American has no advantage over us in certain kinds of magnanimous sentiment. What is important is the mind and attitude, not of the ordinary man, but of those who should be extraordinary. The decisive sign of the elevation of a nation's life is to be sought among those who lead or ought to lead. The test of the health of a people is to be found in the utterances of those who are its spokesmen, and in the action of those whom it accepts or chooses to be its chiefs. We have to look to the magnitude of the issues and the height of the interests which engage its foremost spirits. What are the best men in a country striving for? And is the struggle pursued intrepidly and with a sense of its size and amplitude, or with creeping foot and blinking eye? The answer to these questions is the answer to the other question, whether the best men in the country are small or great. It is a commonplace that the manner of doing things is often as important as the things done. And it has been pointed out more than once that England's most creditable

national action constantly shows itself so poor and mean in expression that the rest of Europe can discern nothing in it but craft and sinister interest. Our public opinion is often rich in wisdom, but we lack the courage of our wisdom. We execute noble achievements, and then are best pleased to find shabby reasons for them.

There is a certain quality attaching alike to thought and expression and action, for which we may borrow the name of grandeur. It has been noticed, for instance, that Bacon strikes and impresses us, not merely by the substantial merit of what he achieved, but still more by a certain greatness of scheme and conception. This quality is not a mere idle decoration. It is not a theatrical artifice of mask or buskin, to impose upon us unreal impressions of height and dignity. The added greatness is real. Height of aim and nobility of expression are true forces. They grow to be an obligation upon us. A lofty sense of personal worth is one of the surest elements of greatness. That the lion should love to masquerade in the ass's skin is not modesty and reserve, but imbecility and degradation. And that England should wrap herself in the robe of small causes and mean reasons is the more deplorable, because there is no nation in the world the substantial elements of whose power are so majestic and imperial as our own. Our language is the most widely spoken of all tongues, its literature is second to none in variety and power. Our people, whether English or American, have long ago superseded the barbarous device of dictator and Caesar by the manly arts of self-government. We understand that peace and industry are the two most indispensable conditions of modern civilisation, and we draw

the lines of our policy in accordance with such a conviction. We have had imposed upon us by the unlucky prowess of our ancestors the task of ruling a vast number of millions of alien dependents. We undertake it with a disinterestedness, and execute it with a skill of administration, to which history supplies no parallel, and which, even if time should show that the conditions of the problem were insoluble, will still remain for ever admirable. All these are elements of true pre-eminence. They are calculated to inspire us with the loftiest consciousness of national life. They ought to clothe our voice with authority, to nerve our action by generous resolution, and to fill our counsels with weightiness and power.

Within the last forty years England has lost one by one each of those enthusiasms which may have been illusions,—some of them undoubtedly were so,—but which at least testified to the existence among us, in a very considerable degree, of a vivid belief in the possibility of certain broad general theories being true and right, as well as in the obligation of making them lights to practical conduct and desire. People a generation ago had eager sympathy with Hungary, with Italy, with Poland, because they were deeply impressed by the doctrine of nationalities. They had again a generous and energetic hatred of such an institution as the negro slavery of America, because justice and humanity and religion were too real and potent forces within their breasts to allow them to listen to those political considerations by which American statesmen used to justify temporising and compromise. They had strong feelings about Parliamentary Reform, because they were penetrated by the principle that

the possession of political power by the bulk of a society is the only effective security against sinister government; or else by the principle that participation in public activity, even in the modest form of an exercise of the elective franchise, is an elevating and instructing agency; or perhaps by the principle that justice demands that those who are compelled to obey laws and pay national taxes should have a voice in making the one and imposing the other.

It may be said that the very fate of these aspirations has had a blighting effect on public enthusiasm and the capacity of feeling it. Not only have most of them now been fulfilled, and so passed from aspiration to actuality, but the results of their fulfilment have been so disappointing as to make us wonder whether it is really worth while to pray, when to have our prayers granted carries the world so very slight a way forward. The Austrian is no longer in Italy; the Pope has ceased to be master in Rome; the patriots of Hungary are now in possession of their rights, and have become friends of their old oppressors; the negro slave has been transformed into an American citizen. At home, again, the gods have listened to our vows. Parliament has been reformed, and the long-desired mechanical security provided for the voter's freedom. We no longer aspire after all these things, you may say, because our hopes have been realised and our dreams have come true. It is possible that the comparatively prosaic results before our eyes at the end of all have thrown a chill over our political imagination. What seemed so glorious when it was far off, seems perhaps a little poor now that it is near; and this has damped the wing of political fancy. The old aspirations have vanished,

and no new ones have arisen in their place. Be the cause what it may, I should express the change in this way, that the existing order of facts, whatever it may be, now takes a hardly disputed precedence with us over ideas, and that the coarsest political standard is undoubtingly and finally applied over the whole realm of human thought.

The line taken up by the press and the governing classes of England during the American Civil War may serve to illustrate the kind of mood which we conceive to be gaining firmer hold than ever of the national mind. Those who sympathised with the Southern States listened only to political arguments, and very narrow and inefficient political arguments, as it happened, when they ought to have seen that here was an issue which involved not only political ideas, but moral and religious ideas as well. That is to say, the ordinary political tests were not enough to reveal the entire significance of the crisis, nor were the political standards proper for measuring the whole of the expediencies hanging in the balance. The conflict could not be adequately gauged by such questions as whether the Slave States had or had not a constitutional right to establish an independent government; whether the Free States were animated by philanthropy or by love of empire; whether it was to the political advantage of England that the American Union should be divided and consequently weakened. Such questions were not necessarily improper in themselves, and we can imagine circumstances in which they might be not only proper but decisive. But, the circumstances being what they were, the narrower expediencies of ordinary politics were outweighed by one of

those supreme and indefeasible expediencies which are classified as moral. These are, in other words, the higher, wider, more binding, and transcendent part of the master art of social wellbeing.

Here was only one illustration of the growing tendency to substitute the narrowest political point of view for all the other ways of regarding the course of human affairs, and to raise the limitations which practical exigencies may happen to set to the application of general principles, into the very place of the principles themselves. Nor is the process of deteriorating conviction confined to the greater or noisier transactions of nations. It is impossible that it should be so. That process is due to causes which affect the mental temper an a whole, and pour round us an atmosphere that enervates our judgment from end to end, not more in politics than in morality, and not more in morality than in philosophy, in art, and in religion. Perhaps this tendency never showed itself more offensively than when the most important newspaper in the country criticised our great naturalist's scientific speculations as to the descent of man, from the point of view of property, intelligence, and a stake in the country, and severely censured him for revealing his particular zoological conclusions to the general public, at a moment when the sky of Paris was red with the incendiary flames of the Commune. It would be hard to reduce the transformation of all truth into a subordinate department of daily politics, to a more gross and unseemly absurdity.

The consequences of such a transformation, of putting immediate social convenience in the first place, and respect for truth in the second, are seen, as we have said, in a

distinct and unmistakable lowering of the level of national life; a slack and lethargic quality about public opinion; a growing predominance of material, temporary, and selfish aims, over those which are generous, far-reaching, and spiritual; a deadly weakening of intellectual conclusiveness, and clear-shining moral illumination, and, lastly, of a certain stoutness of self-respect for which England was once especially famous. A plain categorical proposition is becoming less and less credible to average minds. Or at least the slovenly willingness to hold two directly contradictory propositions at one and the same time is becoming more and more common. In religion, morals, and politics, the suppression of your true opinion, if not the positive profession of what you hold to be a false opinion, is hardly ever counted a vice, and not seldom even goes for virtue and solid wisdom. One is conjured to respect the beliefs of others, but forbidden to claim the same respect for one's own.

This dread of the categorical proposition might be creditable, if it sprang from attachment to a very high standard of evidence, or from a deep sense of the relative and provisional quality of truth. There might even be a plausible defence set up for it, if it sprang from that formulated distrust of the energetic rational judgment in comparison with the emotional, affective, contemplative parts of man, which underlies the various forms of religious mysticism. If you look closely into our present mood, it is seen to be the product mainly and above all of a shrinking deference to the *status quo*, not merely as having a claim not to be lightly dealt with, which every serious man

concedes, but as being the last word and final test of truth and justice. Physical science is allowed to be the sphere of accurate reasoning and distinct conclusions, but in morals and politics, instead of admitting that these subjects have equally a logic of their own, we silently suspect all first principles, and practically deny the strict inferences from demonstrated premisses. Faith in the soundness of given general theories of right and wrong melts away before the first momentary triumph of wrong, or the first passing discouragement in enforcing right.

Our robust political sense, which has discovered so many of the secrets of good government, which has given us freedom with order, and popular administration without corruption, and unalterable respect for law along with indelible respect for individual right, this, which has so long been our strong point, is fast becoming our weakness and undoing. For the extension of the ways of thinking which are proper in politics, to other than political matter, means at the same time the depravation of the political sense itself. Not only is social expediency effacing the many other points of view that men ought to take of the various facts of life and thought: the idea of social expediency itself is becoming a dwarfed and pinched idea. Ours is the country where love of constant improvement ought to be greater than anywhere else, because fear of revolution is less. Yet the art of politics is growing to be as meanly conceived as all the rest At elections the national candidate has not often a chance against the local candidate, nor the man of a principle against the man of a class. In parliament we are admonished on high authority that 'the policy of a party is

not the carrying out of the opinion of any section of it, but the general consensus of the whole,' which seems to be a hierophantic manner of saying that the policy of a party is one thing, and the principle which makes it a party is another thing, and that men who care very strongly about anything are to surrender that and the hope of it, for the sake of succeeding in something about which they care very little or not at all. This is our modern way of giving politicians heart for their voyage, of inspiring them with resoluteness and self-respect, with confidence in the worth of their cause and enthusiasm for its success. Thoroughness is a mistake, and nailing your flag to the mast a bit of delusive heroics. Think wholly of to-day, and not at all of to-morrow. Beware of the high and hold fast to the safe. Dismiss conviction, and study general consensus. No zeal, no faith, no intellectual trenchancy, but as much low-minded geniality and trivial complaisance as you please.

Of course, all these characteristics of our own society mark tendencies that are common enough in all societies. They often spring from an indolence and enervation that besets a certain number of people, however invigorating the general mental climate may be. What we are now saying is that the general mental climate itself has, outside of the domain of physical science, ceased to be invigorating; that, on the contrary, it fosters the more inglorious predispositions of men, and encourages a native willingness, already so strong, to acquiesce in a lazy accommodation with error, an ignoble economy of truth, and a vicious compromise of the permanent gains of

adhering to a sound general principle, for the sake of the temporary gains of departing from it.

Without attempting an elaborate analysis of the causes that have brought about this debilitation of mental tone, we may shortly remind ourselves of one or two facts in the political history, in the intellectual history, and in the religious history of this generation, which perhaps help us to understand a phenomenon that we have all so keen an interest both in understanding and in modifying.

To begin with what lies nearest to the surface. The most obvious agency at work in the present exaggeration of the political standard as the universal test of truth, is to be found in some contemporary incidents. The influence of France upon England since the revolution of 1848 has tended wholly to the discredit of abstract theory and general reasoning among us, in all that relates to politics, morals, and religion. In 1848, not in 1789, questions affecting the fundamental structure and organic condition of the social union came for the first time into formidable prominence. For the first time those questions and the answers to them were stated in articulate formulas and distinct theories. They were not merely written in books; they so fascinated the imagination and inflamed the hopes of the time, that thousands of men were willing actually to go down into the streets and to shed their blood for the realisation of their generous dream of a renovated society. The same sight has been seen since, and even when we do not see it, we are perfectly aware that the same temper is smouldering. Those were premature attempts to convert a

crude aspiration into a political reality, and to found a new social order on a number of umcompromising deductions from abstract principles of the common weal. They have had the natural effect of deepening the English dislike of a general theory, even when such a theory did no more than profess to announce a remote object of desire, and not the present goal of immediate effort.

It is not only the Socialists who are responsible for the low esteem into which a spirit of political generalisation has fallen in other countries, in consequence of French experience. Mr. Mill has described in a well-known passage the characteristic vice of the leaders of all French parties, and not of the democratic party more than any other. 'The commonplaces of politics in France,' he says, 'are large and sweeping practical maxims, from which, as ultimate premisses, men reason downwards to particular applications, and this they call being logical and consistent. For instance, they are perpetually arguing that such and such a measure ought to be adopted, because it is a consequence of the principle on which the form of government is founded; of the principle of legitimacy, or the principle of the sovereignty of the people. To which it may be answered that if these be really practical principles, they must rest on speculative grounds; the sovereignty of the people (for example) must be a right foundation for government, because a government thus constituted tends to produce certain beneficial effects. Inasmuch, however, as no government produces all possible beneficial effects, but all are attended with more or fewer inconveniences; and since these cannot be combated by means drawn from the