

DECENT BODIES.

In one of his books of retrospect and reminiscence Lord Frederic Hamilton tells of a Scottish clerical friend whose theory was that there are just two categories of people in the world, that is to say, 'decent bodies' and the other kind; the teaching of his seventy years of experience being that the 'decent bodies' predominate. Now if by this expression Lord Frederic's friend meant people who may be relied on to do the becoming thing by themselves and others when put to the test, I am inclined to think that he was right. The majority of human beings with whom I have come in contact have certainly not belonged to 'the other kind.' That is one of the reasons why I am an optimist.

But let it not be assumed that the 'decent body' is necessarily a paragon of all the virtues. While it is possible for him to be such, there is always the danger that the unco' guid will lack that tender compassion for the weaker brethren which would impel him to treat them becomingly. It is rather the man whose recognition of his own imperfections makes him tolerant of the shortcomings of others who best measures up to the definition of a 'decent body.' Sometimes it happens that one who has every right to be numbered of that pleasant tribe of men forfeits his place there because of an unfortunate reputation for super-excellence. Undoubtedly one can thus be defamed by fame. Take the case of Aristides, whose life was spent in making Athens a great city worthy of an enlightened people—spurning personal reward and dying in poverty. Yet we know that the only reason that one Athenian gave for voting for the ostracism of Aristides was that he was weary of always hearing him styled "the Just."

I think the poet Horace must have been regarded as a 'decent body' by his friends. Amongst his intimates he numbered the Emperor Augustus and the great contemporary poet, Virgil, not to mention Mæcenas. And yet he never ceases to sing the praises of his father, a manumitted slave, at a time when snobbery was one of the vices of Roman society. Knowing no envy, he holds the *auræ mediocritas* as the touchstone of the best in life. "Whoso cherishes the golden mean, safely avoids the foulness of an ill-kept house and discreetly, too, avoids a palace exciting envy." And

again, "Grant me to be content with what I have, and, sound of body and mind, to pass an old age lacking neither honour nor the lyre."

Montaigne convinces one, despite the sceptical implications of his perpetual cry, *Que sçais-je?*, that he, too, was a 'decent body.' His religious doubts never in point of fact disturbed his own peace of mind nor that of any one else. They shock us no more than the wild words born of the pure intensity of love of the youthful Aucassin in the old French 'chante-fable'—Aucassin who spurns the joys of Paradise because he was told that no human passion, innocent though it may be, has any place there:—"En paradis qu'ai-je a faire? Je n'i quier entrer, mais que j'aie Nicolette, ma très douce amie, que j'aime tant . . . Mais en enfer voil jou aler." The man who framed those words was a 'decent body' according to mediaeval standards.

Montaigne says in one of his inimitable essays:—"We may so seize on virtue that if we embrace it with an over-greedy and violent desire, it may become vicious." And in another:—"We belie ourselves to salve a lie we have given to another. You must not look whether your action or word may admit another interpretation, but it is your own true and sincere construction that you must now maintain, whatsoever it cost you. It is to your conscience that men speak; parts that ought not to be disguised. Leave we these base courses, wrangling shifts and verbal means to pettifogging lawyers."

I look upon these as the words of a 'decent body' although they contain a hard crack at a profession whose ethics are undoubtedly high in the abstract but are not always translated pragmatically.

And mention of the legal profession leads me to say that there is now and always has been a very fine array of 'decent bodies' on the Bench and at the Bar. Indeed I was forgetting that the Seigneur de Montaigne was himself bred to the law.

There was Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More, whose physical stature was sadly diminished by Henry VIII. but whose mental and moral stature made him one of the greatest Englishmen of all time. So decent was he in his behaviour that merely to read his history is a process of discipline in the art of right living. In answer to a son-in-law who complained that his family connection with the Lord Chancellor meant nothing to him in the way of 'commodity' (i.e. tips) from suitors, Sir Thomas said:—"I can assure thee, on my faith, that if the parties will at my hands call for justice and equity, then, although it were my father, whom

I reverence dearly, that stood on the one side, and the devil, whom I hate extremely, were on the other side, his cause being just, the devil of me would have his right."

Nor was he puffed up in his high estate. On Sundays instead of attending a London church with all the pomp and circumstance of his office, he walked with his family to the parish church at Chelsea. There it was his wont to don a surplice and sing as a chorister during the Mass—much, we learn, to the disgust of his friend the Duke of Norfolk. As to whether the Duke disliked his vocal efforts we are not informed; but he certainly objected to the humility of the Chancellor's bearing in such a matter.

As one of the modern instances of a 'decent body' in the ranks of the Bar, rare Sir Frank Lockwood might be cited. The excellence of his pencilled caricatures of his friends was matched by the excellence of his devotion to them. It was fun and not malice that guided his artistic fingers. The story of his family life as related in the pages of Mr. Augustine Birrell's biography is refreshment for the soul in these days when divorce trials abound and companionate marriages are prescribed as a prophylactic against conubial disharmony.

Mr. Birrell declares that Lockwood's home was "the place he loved best, and where, when he was minded to be gay, he was the gayest;" and he adds that he would have preferred Frank Lockwood as a son-in-law to any of the fine types of men delineated by Sir Walter Scott in the *Waverley Novels*.

Lord Rosebery finely summed up Sir Frank Lockwood's character in the following words:—

"When a man who has shown exceptional qualities of head (especially that of acute and humorous perception) displays also exceptional qualities of heart, he irresistibly attracts his fellow-men. This was the final, subtlest touch of Lockwood's fascination, for it gave the charm to his manners. His manners were the mirror of his soul: the clear, pure, sympathetic mirror of a clear, pure, sympathetic soul."

May the tribe of 'decent bodies' ever abound and flourish. Whatever bit of earth is pressed by their feet and howsoever barren it may erstwhile be, there and then it is changed, for all and sundry who meet them, into a garden of pleasant living.

Charles Morse.