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**HENRY ADAMS**  
**DEMOCRACY**  
*an American novel*



Introduction by Clarence A. Andrews  
Complete and Unabridged

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# DEMOCRACY

AN AMERICAN NOVEL



Henry Brooks Adams



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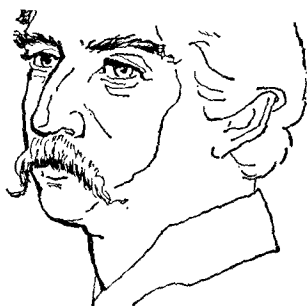
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# DEMOCRACY

HENRY BROOKS ADAMS

## INTRODUCTION



From one's reading of the newspapers and the magazines, one might readily conclude that two favorite subjects of the typical American reader are politics and romance. That being the case, you, who now hold this book in your hands preparing to read, are in luck; politics and romance are the twin themes of this novel.

Still, you should be warned from the beginning that the politicians and the romancers in this novel are not the types that Hollywood or the magazines have relied on all too often; the "hero" (and he doesn't get the "girl") is a "western widower of fifty" who retires occasionally to his home in "Peonia," Illinois; the "girl" is a thirty-year-old widow who has also lost a child. One president of the United States and his wife are seen as "two seemingly mechanical figures, which might be wood or wax"; his successor is a person who is prevented "from making a fool of himself fifty times a day" only by the cleverness of those who have outwitted him.

So the stuff of this book, it is seen, is not the stuff of romanticism, but the stuff of realism. And this is the way it should be if we are to have a novel centered in Washington, D. C. in about the year 1868, a novel which describes life in the White House (even though somewhat peripherally), in the two Houses of Congress, and the men and women whose lives revolve around American politics.

An acquaintance who had been the long-time editor of a British weekly magazine once pointed out to me the danger

in attempting to create fiction under such conditions. "Suppose you tried to do a fictional television series on the activities of the various members of the royal family," he said. "If you told the truth, people would simply say 'Preposterous; no royal family could possibly be like the one you're showing on the telly.' If you told less than the truth, people would simply not be interested." His point is a good one; truth is always stranger than fiction; truth can be incredible, but fiction must be credible.

Faced with the literary difficulty implied in the statement of my British friend, the author of *Democracy* has brought his story off quite well indeed. He has done it, in one instance, by keeping the figures of the two presidents almost always in the background, thus avoiding lese majesty (if lese majesty were possible when we are describing the terms of some of the presidents who served after the Civil War), and, what might be even worse, historical inaccuracies of a gross sort; and by focusing on two people, one a fictitious senator from Illinois (who, nevertheless, might have existed in those times), the other (the most important character in his story) an even more fictitious lady who has vaguely been connected with the society of New York, Boston and Baltimore, and with "one branch of the Virginia Lees."

*Democracy*, although sometimes billed as a "searing novel of the American political scene," and as the "*Advise and Consent* of its day," is not the muckraking work which such advertisements might imply. Anyone who has read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* will have become acquainted with muckraking at its best; and *Democracy* is a far cry from the exposé type of literature found in such examples of muckraking. Rather, it is a comedy of manners set against a backdrop of political intrigue.

The term "comedy" as used here does not necessarily imply the presence of a great many situations which lead to laughter, for Adams is a proper Bostonian whose sense of wit and humor is more akin to that of the eighteenth century than it is to the twentieth. Rather it implies a literary piece in which the manners and social relationships of a given group are held up to gentle ridicule and satire as in this description of the new president:

He came to Washington determined to be the Father

of his country; to gain a proud immortality—and re-election.

As a comedy of manners, *Democracy* focuses on the adventures which befall Mrs. Madeleine Lee, her sister Sybil Ross, Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe, and John Carrington. Around these four central figures there is a swirl of others with names like Clinton, French, Schneidekoupon, Gore—names which indicate the ethnical melting pot from which the alloy of democracy is poured. There are other names too—Lord Skye, Popoff, Orsini, Baron Jacobi—the old world representatives of the decadent society from which the vitality of the new republic sprang.

We can contrast the old world and the new by considering two women. In the year 1137 A. D., Eleanor of Aquitaine, the 15-year-old heiress of a rich duchy in France waited in her castle while a dying king selected a husband for her. (He chose his own son and made Eleanor a queen.) Seven and a half centuries later Madeleine Lee, an heiress to twenty-thousand a year (rather sizable in its purchasing power at that time) was able to ponder her own future, move about as freely as she wished, and make her own choices:

She wanted to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive power . . . What she wanted was POWER.

So far had women advanced in that three-quarters of a millennium that Madeleine Lee is a relatively free agent—not the captive of a despotic political system as Eleanor had been, nor, for that matter, the unwilling victim of a system based on tradition, law, heritage and cultural taboos, as the heroines of Greek tragedy had been. Madeleine is free because she lives in a democracy—a political institution in which culture, politics, law, and tradition do not control the people, but are controlled by the people, and the rules of the game have yet to be formed. She is free to choose the society in which she will live, free to choose between the money barons of New York City and the political barons of Washington, D. C. But note that it is money which gives her that

freedom; money and its power is one of the themes of this novel.

The man she chooses is not a member of the relatively old and aristocratic tribes which had grown up along the East coast as a result of the first settlements—tribes whose sons are named Schuyler Clinton and Nathan Gore. He is a son of that relatively recent westward movement which had peopled the broad plains of the middlewest, a movement which had derived its strength from the restlessness, and the desire for land and wealth, of the sons and daughters of those who had come to the new world from the old. By the time of this novel the sons of the pioneers are already looking back toward the East; to the financial opportunities in Chicago or New York City, or to the political opportunities in Washington. The man Madeleine Lee chooses as her potential mate bears the homespun name of Silas P. Ratcliffe. "What does the P. stand for?" Sybil Ross asks. "Perhaps it is Peonia or Prairie," is the reply. (Or Pirate, we might say, by the time we have reached the end of this book.) In a democracy a man's aspirations and fate are not settled because he bears a name or a title. In a democracy names do not matter; what does matter is what a man can accomplish.

Madeleine's choice at first seems to be a wise one. Although Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe is older than she, he is headed for a position of power. Almost certainly he will soon be Secretary of the Treasury (a position which he does achieve), and after that, nothing apparently stands between him and the presidency of the growing nation. Today we are so accustomed to the power of a president of the United States that we take it for granted, but at the time of this book that power was only in the process of becoming established. A clever politician might very well control the president, as Ratcliffe eventually does. Nevertheless in the young country the president has the most powerful position. European lords, barons and counts fawn over him and foreign rulers come to pay their respects to him.

But as I said earlier the rules of the game of democracy have yet to be formed. Senator Ratcliffe and the others involved in the power struggle detailed in this book must, therefore, formulate their own rules as they go along, and each will formulate his rules according to his own beliefs and

principles. Ratcliffe works along the lines that a Machiavelli might have admired. To him the ends are what count and the means of achieving them may be bent or twisted in any needful way. We may see him, as Madeleine and John Carrington do, as corrupt or at least somewhat dishonest. But to Ratcliffe, money is a concomitant of politics and power, and if it can be used to make the inefficiencies of the democratic process more efficient, then it should be so used. There can be no doubt about the fact that he thinks of himself as essentially an honest man.

One of the merits of this book is that Adams does not stack the cards against Ratcliffe. He simply shows us things as they are and leaves us to form our own conclusions. Our first tendencies, therefore, might be to sympathize with Madeleine and Carrington, but should we? Carrington also has a goal. Is his letter to Madeleine any more honest or straightforward than some of the means used by Ratcliffe? Is Madeleine really so straightforward in rejecting Ratcliffe and the power she once had wanted? Isn't there perhaps a sort of poetic justice in the implication that Madeleine and Carrington will someday be united in marriage?

Finally, what are the implications in Madeleine's final note that "nine out of ten of her countrymen would say that she had made a mistake," and her somewhat earlier wish to escape to the Great Pyramid? Is Madeleine's real problem one that she lives in a world of manners, inherited from an aristocratic age, and is not cut out for democracy at all—a democracy which is a government of the people, by the people and for the people, to be sure, but which is at the same time an institution which, in order to survive and function, requires compromise, barter and exchange, give-and-take, perhaps even occasional bribery? Is Madeleine's real problem the fact that she has dreamed of the sort of power which exists in a monarchy or a dictatorship, a nice clean efficient power?

I find the notion tantalizing that in the end it is Ratcliffe whom I must admire. Where do you stand?

The author of this novel was a member of that Boston family of Adams which produced two United States presidents and several dozen others of the same name whose records adorn the pages of our encyclopedias and our histories. Henry Adams (1838-1918) was the son of a diplomat,



the grandson and great grandson of the two presidents. He was primarily an historian; he taught at Harvard and served as editor of the *North American Review* in some of that periodical's better days. He wrote a nine-volume history of the United States which is still authoritative on the presidencies of Jefferson and Madison. Perhaps his best known works (other than this novel) are *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1901) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906). The first is a valuable study of medievalism; its chapter on the virgin and the dynamo ought to be required reading for every schoolboy. The second illustrated the fact that a new kind of man and a new kind of education were needed for the twentieth century; eighteenth-century values and standards would no longer do.

*Democracy* was published anonymously in 1880; the novel shocked and fascinated many by its apparent exposés of life in Washington. For a long while there was a great deal of speculation as to its author on the part of the many readers of the numberless unauthorized editions which were printed in both the United States and England. Most people thought it had been written by one or another of Adams' close friends. It was not until after Adams' death that his publisher officially announced the identity of the author.

*Democracy* was written from first-hand knowledge and experience; Adams was not only an historian; he lived in Washington from 1868 on, departing occasionally for chores elsewhere. He knew, as John O'Hara once wrote about another author, on which side of the plates the forks were placed; he wrote with grace and charm and wit; and so this book has become a classic fictional study of the American political system.

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## ONE

For reasons which many persons thought ridiculous, Mrs. Lightfoot Lee decided to pass the winter in Washington. She was in excellent health, but she said that the climate would do her good. In New York she had troops of friends, but she suddenly became eager to see again the very small number of those who lived on the Potomac. It was only to her closest intimates that she honestly acknowledged herself to be tortured by *ennui*. Since her husband's death, five years before, she had lost her taste for New York society; she had felt no interest in the price of stocks, and very little in the men who dealt in them; she had become serious. What was it all worth, this wilderness of men and women as monotonous as the brown-stone houses they lived in? In her despair she had resorted to desperate measures. She had read philosophy in the original German, and the more she read, the more she was disheartened that so much culture should lead to nothing—nothing. After talking of Herbert Spencer for an entire evening with a very literary transcendental commission-merchant, she could not see that her time had been better employed than when in former days she had passed it in flirting with a very agreeable young stockbroker; indeed, there was an evident proof to the contrary, for the flirtation might lead to something—had, in fact, led to marriage; while the philosophy could lead to nothing, unless it were perhaps to another evening of the same kind, because transcendental philosophers are mostly elderly men, usually married, and, when engaged in business, somewhat apt to be sleepy towards evening. Nevertheless Mrs. Lee did her best to turn her study to practical use. She plunged into philanthropy, visited prisons, inspected hospitals, read the literature of pauperism and crime, saturated herself with the statistics of vice, until her mind had nearly lost sight of virtue. At last it rose in rebellion against her, and she came to the

limit of her strength. This path, too, seemed to lead nowhere. She declared that she had lost the sense of duty, and that, so far as concerned her, all the paupers and criminals in New York might henceforward rise in their majesty and manage every railway on the continent. Why should she care? What was the city to her? She could find nothing in it that seemed to demand salvation. What gave peculiar sanctity to numbers? Why were a million people, who all resembled each other, any way more interesting than one person? What aspiration could she help to put into the mind of this great million-armed monster that would make it worth her love or respect? Religion? A thousand powerful churches were doing their best, and she could see no chance for a new faith of which she was to be the inspired prophet. Ambition? High popular ideals? Passion for whatever is lofty and pure? The very words irritated her. Was she not herself devoured by ambition, and was she not now eating her heart out because she could find no one object worth a sacrifice?

Was it ambition—real ambition—or was it mere restlessness that made Mrs. Lightfoot Lee so bitter against New York and Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston, American life in general and all life in particular? What did she want? Not social position, for she herself was an eminently respectable Philadelphian by birth; her father a famous clergyman; and her husband had been equally irreproachable, a descendant of one branch of the Virginia Lees, which had drifted to New York in search of fortune, and had found it, or enough of it to keep the young man there. His widow had her own place in society which no one disputed. Though not brighter than her neighbors, the world persisted in classing her among clever women; she had wealth, or at least enough of it to give her all that money can give by way of pleasure to a sensible woman in an American city; she had her house and her carriage; she dressed well; her table was good, and her furniture was never allowed to fall behind the latest standard of decorative art. She had travelled in Europe, and after several visits, covering some years of time, had returned home, carrying in one hand, as it were, a green-gray landscape, a remarkably pleasing specimen of Corot, and in the other some bales of Persian and Syrian rugs and embroideries, Japanese bronzes

and porcelain. With this she declared Europe to be exhausted, and she frankly avowed that she was American to the tips of her fingers; she neither knew nor greatly cared whether America or Europe were best to live in; she had no violent love for either, and she had no objection to abusing both; but she meant to get all that American life had to offer, good or bad, and to drink it down to the dregs, fully determined that whatever there was in it she would have, and that whatever could be made out of it she would manufacture. "I know," said she, "that America produces petroleum and pigs; I have seen both on the steamers; and I am told it produces silver and gold. There is choice enough for any woman."

Yet, as has been already said, Mrs. Lee's first experience was not a success. She soon declared that New York might represent the petroleum or the pigs, but the gold of life was not to be discovered there by her eyes. Not but that there was variety enough; a variety of people, occupations, aims, and thoughts; but that all these, after growing to a certain height, stopped short. They found nothing to hold them up. She knew, more or less intimately, a dozen men whose fortunes ranged between one million and forty millions. What did they do with their money? What could they do with it that was different from what other men did? After all, it is absurd to spend more money than is enough to satisfy all one's wants; it is vulgar to live in two houses in the same street, and to drive six horses abreast. Yet, after setting aside a certain income sufficient for all one's wants, what was to be done with the rest? To let it accumulate was to own one's failure; Mrs. Lee's great grievance was that it did accumulate, without changing or improving the quality of its owners. To spend it in charity and public works was doubtless praiseworthy, but was it wise? Mrs. Lee had read enough political economy and pauper reports to be nearly convinced that public work should be public duty, and that great benefactions do harm as well as good. And even supposing it spent on these objects, how could it do more than increase and perpetuate that same kind of human nature which was her great grievance? Her New York friends could not meet this question except by falling back upon their native commonplaces, which she recklessly trampled upon, averring that, much as she admired the gen-

ius of the famous traveller, Mr. Gulliver, she never had been able, since she became a widow, to accept the Brobdingnagian doctrine that he who made two blades of grass grow where only one grew before deserved better of mankind than the whole race of politicians. She would not find fault with the philosopher had he required that the grass should be of an improved quality; "but," said she, "I cannot honestly pretend that I should be pleased to see two New York men where I now see one; the idea is too ridiculous; more than one and a half would be fatal to me."

Then came her Boston friends, who suggested that higher education was precisely what she wanted; she should throw herself into a crusade for universities and art-schools. Mrs. Lee turned upon them with a sweet smile. "Do you know," said she, "that we have in New York already the richest university in America, and that its only trouble has always been that it can get no scholars even by paying for them? Do you want me to go out into the streets and waylay boys? If the heathen refuse to be converted, can you give me power over the stake and the sword to compel them to come in? And suppose you can? Suppose I march all the boys in Fifth Avenue down to the university and have them all properly taught Greek and Latin, English literature, ethics, and German philosophy. What then? You do it in Boston. Now tell me honestly what comes of it. I suppose you have there a brilliant society; numbers of poets, scholars, philosophers, statesmen, all up and down Beacon Street. Your evenings must be sparkling. Your press must scintillate. How is it that we New Yorkers never hear of it? We don't go much into your society; but when we do, it doesn't seem so very much better than our own. You are just like the rest of us. You grow six inches high, and then you stop. Why will not somebody grow to be a tree and cast a shadow?"

The average member of New York society, although not unused to this contemptuous kind of treatment from his leaders, retaliated in his blind, common-sense way. "What does the woman want?" he said. "Is her head turned with the Tuileries and Marlborough House? Does she think herself made for a throne? Why does she not lecture for women's rights? Why not go on the stage? If she cannot be contented like other people, what need is there for abus-

ing us just because she feels herself no taller than we are? What does she expect to get from her sharp tongue? What does she know, anyway?"

Mrs. Lee certainly knew very little. She had read voraciously and promiscuously one subject after another. Ruskin and Taine had danced merrily through her mind, hand in hand with Darwin and Stuart Mill, Gustave Droz and Algernon Swinburne. She had even labored over the literature of her own country. She was perhaps the only woman in New York who knew something of American history. Certainly she could not have repeated the list of Presidents in their order, but she knew that the Constitution divided the government into Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary; she was aware that the President, the Speaker, and the Chief Justice were important personages, and instinctively she wondered whether they might not solve her problem; whether they were the shade trees which she saw in her dreams.

Here, then, was the explanation of her restlessness, discontent, ambition,—call it what you will. It was the feeling of a passenger on an ocean steamer whose mind will not give him rest until he has been in the engine-room and talked with the engineer. She wanted to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive power. She was bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government. She cared little where her pursuit might lead her, for she put no extravagant value upon life, having already, as she said, exhausted at least two lives, and being fairly hardened to insensibility in the process. "To lose a husband and a baby," said she, "and keep one's courage and reason, one must become very hard or very soft. I am now pure steel. You may beat my heart with a trip-hammer and it will beat the trip-hammer back again."

Perhaps after exhausting the political world she might try again elsewhere; she did not pretend to say where she might then go, or what she should do; but at present she meant to see what amusement there might be in politics. Her friends asked what kind of amusement she expected to find among the illiterate swarm of ordinary peo-

ple who in Washington represented constituencies so dreary that in comparison New York was a New Jerusalem, and Broad Street a grove of Academe. She replied that if Washington society were so bad as this, she should have gained all she wanted, for it would be a pleasure to return, —precisely the feeling she longed for. In her own mind, however, she frowned on the idea of seeking for men. What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of forty millions of people and a whole continent, centering at Washington; guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work. What she wanted was POWER.

Perhaps the force of the engine was a little confused in her mind with that of the engineer, the power with the men who wielded it. Perhaps the human interest of politics was after all what really attracted her, and, however strongly she might deny it, the passion for exercising power, for its own sake, might dazzle and mislead a woman who had exhausted all the ordinary feminine resources. But why speculate about her motives? The stage was before her, the curtain was rising, the actors were ready to enter; she had only to go quietly on among the supernumeraries and see how the play was acted and the stage effects were produced; how the great tragedians mouthed, and the stage-manager swore.

## TWO

On the first of December, Mrs. Lee took the train for Washington, and before five o'clock that evening she was entering her newly hired house on Lafayette Square. She shrugged her shoulders with a mingled expression of contempt and grief at the curious barbarism of the curtains and the wall papers, and her next two days were occupied with a life-and-death struggle to get the mastery over her surroundings. In this awful contest the interior of the doomed house suffered as though a demon were in it; not a chair, not a mirror, not a carpet, was left untouched, and in the midst of the worst confusion the new mistress sat, calm as the statue of Andrew Jackson in the square under her eyes, and issued her orders with as much decision as that hero had ever shown. Towards the close of the second day, victory crowned her forehead. A new era, a nobler conception of duty and existence, had dawned upon that benighted and heathen residence. The wealth of Syria and Persia was poured out upon the melancholy Wilton carpets; embroidered comets and woven gold from Japan and Teheran depended from and covered over every sad stuff-curtain; a strange medley of sketches, paintings, fans, embroideries, and porcelain was hung, nailed, pinned, or stuck against the wall; finally the domestic altar-piece, the mystical Corot landscape, was hoisted to its place over the parlor fire, and then all was over. The setting sun streamed softly in at the windows, and peace reigned in that redeemed house and in the heart of its mistress.

"I think it will do now, Sybil," said she, surveying the scene.

"It must," replied Sybil. "You haven't a plate or a fan or coloured scarf left. You must send out and buy some of these old Negro-women's bandannas if you are going to cover anything else. What is the use? Do you suppose any



human being in Washington will like it? They will think you demented."

"There is such a thing as self-respect," replied her sister, calmly.

Sybil—Miss Sybil Ross—was Madeleine Lee's sister. The keenest psychologist could not have detected a single feature or quality which they had in common, and for that reason they were devoted friends. Madeleine was thirty, Sybil twenty-four. Madeleine was indescribable; Sybil was transparent. Madeleine was of medium height with a graceful figure, a well-set head, and enough golden-brown hair to frame a face full of varying expression. Her eyes were never for two consecutive hours of the same shade, but were more often blue than grey. People who envied her smile said that she cultivated a sense of humor in order to show her teeth. Perhaps they were right; but there was no doubt that her habit of talking with gesticulation would never have grown upon her unless she had known that her hands were not only beautiful but expressive. She dressed as skillfully as New York women do, but in growing older she began to show symptoms of dangerous unconventionality. She had been heard to express a low opinion of her countrywomen who blindly fell down before the golden calf of Mr. Worth, and she had even fought a battle of great severity, while it lasted, with one of her best-dressed friends who had been invited—and had gone—to Mr. Worth's afternoon tea-parties. The secret was that Mrs. Lee had artistic tendencies, and unless they were checked in time, there was no knowing what might be the consequences. But as yet they had done no harm; indeed, they rather helped to give her that sort of atmosphere which belongs only to certain women; as indescribable as the after-glow; as impalpable as an Indian summer mist; and non-existent except to people who feel rather than reason. Sybil had none of it. The imagination gave up all attempts to soar where she came. A more straightforward, downright, gay, sympathetic, shallow, warm-hearted, sternly practical young woman has rarely touched this planet. Her mind had room for neither gravestones nor guide-books; she could not have lived in the past or the future if she had spent her days in churches and her nights in tombs. "She was not clever, like Madeleine, thank Heaven." Madeleine was not