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### ‘The Bookmarker. Comments on Matters Literary.’

Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace is the Grand Old Man of Science. But, unlike many scientists, whose interests are mainly in abstract theories, he takes an extraordinarily keen interest in social reform. In his new book, “Social Environment and Moral Progress,” just published by Messrs. Cassell (3s. 6d.), he exhibits the same fine fighting spirit, the same burning indignation against wrong and injustice that have characterised him throughout life. His ardour is undimmed by age, and he steps into the fray with all the fire and zeal of a stripling. In this book he aims at exposing the root causes of social degeneracy and exploding the fallacy of our modern progress. But his book is not merely destructive. Dr. Russel Wallace offers a constructive policy worthy of the serious consideration of every citizen.

#### **Permanence of Character**

In opposition to the theory of the evolution of human character, Dr. Wallace claims that there is no proof of any real advance in it during the whole historical period. In the earliest records which have come down to us from the past we find ample indications that general ethical conceptions, the accepted standard of morality, and the conduct resulting from these, were in no degree inferior to those which prevailed to-day. He mentions in proof of this Socrates and Plato, about 400 B.C.; Confucius and Buddha one or two centuries earlier; Homer earlier still; the great Indian Epic, the Mahabharata (about 1500 B.C.), to which I have referred and from which I have quoted in these columns. All these afford indications of intellectual and moral character quite equal to our own.

#### **Heirs of All the Ages**

The great majority of educated persons hold the opinion that our wonderful discoveries and inventions in every department of art and science prove that we are really more intellectual and wiser than the men of past ages—that our mental faculties have increased in power. But this idea is totally unfounded. We are the inheritors of the accumulated knowledge of all the ages; and it is quite possible and even probable, that the earliest steps taken in the accumulation of this vast mental treasury required even more thought and a higher intellectual power than any of those taken in our own era.

Referring to the recent discovery of papyri which give us information as to the ideas, the beliefs and the aspirations of a period even earlier than that of the Great Pyramid, Dr. Wallace quotes a significant passage by Professor Adolf Erman in “The Historian’s History of the World.”

#### **The Lessons of History**

“When one considers the ancient resident of the valley of the Nile as a human being, with desires, emotions, and aspirations almost precisely like our own; a man struggling to solve the same problems of practical Socialism that we are struggling for to-day—then, and then only, can the lessons of ancient Egyptian history be brought home to us in their true meaning, and with their true significance. And clearest of all will that significance be, perhaps, if we constantly bear in mind the possibility that the whole sweep of Egyptian history, during the three or four thousand years that separated the Pyramid builders from the contemporaries of Alexander, was a time of national decay—a dark age, if you will—in Egyptian history.”

In this and in much else that he has to say, Dr. Wallace administers a wholesome rebuke to the smug, self-complacent spirit of the age which is apt to preen itself on its superiority to the past.

### **Social Immorality**

Dealing with the great changes of the nineteenth century in the economic environment due to the rapid invention of labour-saving machinery, Dr. Wallace has some burning words of protest against the employment of child labour, which amounted to slavery of the most infamous kind. Successive "Factory Acts," each bitterly opposed by employers of labour, did something to ameliorate the lot of the children, but as Mrs. E. B. Browning's poem, "The Cry of the Children" shows, even after fifty years of struggle, "the condition of the child-workers was still in a high degree cruel, degrading, and, therefore, immoral; while that of the half-timers who succeeded them was almost as injurious."

As the century wore on other evils of a similar nature were gradually brought to light. Children and women were found to be working underground in coal mines, under equally vile conditions as regards health and morality; and an enormous loss of life was caused by inadequate ventilation, insecure roof-propping, imperfect winding machinery, and other causes, all due to want of proper precautions by the owners of the mines. As a matter of simple justice, such owners should be held responsible to the injured person not only to the full extent of his wages and for medical attendance, but should also pay a liberal compensation for the pain suffered, and for the extra labour, expense and anxiety to his family. But all such things are ignored in the case of poor workers, so that even the money compensation is reduced to the smallest amount possible.

### **A Criminal Offence**

Dr. Wallace suggests that the employer should be made criminally responsible for preventable deaths which occur.

It is one of the great defects of our law that deaths due to preventable causes in any profit-making business are not criminal offences. Till they are made so it will be impossible to save the hundreds or even thousands of lives now lost owing to neglect of proper precautions in all kinds of dangerous or unhealthy trades.

He has a chapter on insanitary dwellings and unhealthy trades in which he pays a glowing tribute to the work of Mr. Keighley Snowden in *The Daily Citizen*, whose articles should be read by all "who want to know what horrors can exist to-day in England." Dr. Wallace also deals with adulteration, bribery, gambling, and what he describes as our immoral system of administration of "Justice," which is utterly unjust "because it is based on a system of money fees at every step; because it is so cumbrous and full of technicalities as to need the employment of attorneys and counsel at great cost, and because all petty offences are punishable by fine or imprisonment, which makes poverty itself a crime while it allows those with money to go practically free."

### **The Indictment**

Here is, in his own words, Dr. Russel Wallace's indictment:—

*Taking account of these various groups of undoubted facts, many of which are so gross, so terrible, that they cannot be overstated, it is not too much to say that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom and the Social Environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen.*

This is pretty strong, but no one who reads the book will feel that it is one whit too strong. But Dr. Wallace does not leave the matter there. He does not write only to destroy. He has a practical policy to suggest.

### **The Remedy**

All the social evils, he claims, however diverse in their nature and result are due to the same general cause, which may be defined or stated in a variety of different ways:—

- (1) They are due, broadly and generally, to our living under a system of universal competition for the means of existence, the remedy for which is equally universal co-operation.
- (2) It may be also defined as a system of economic antagonism, as of enemies, the remedy being a system of economic brotherhood, as of a great family or of friends.
- (3) Our system is also one of monopoly by a few of all the means of existence: the land, without access to which no life is possible; and capital, or the results of stored-up labour, which is now in the possession of a limited number of capitalists and therefore is also a monopoly. The remedy is freedom of access to land and capital for all.
- (4) Also, it may be defined as social injustice, inasmuch as the few in each generation are allowed to inherit the stored-up wealth of all preceding generations, while the many inherit nothing. The remedy is to adopt the principle of equality of opportunity for all, or of universal inheritance by the State in trust for the whole community.

And he condenses his message into one general proposition: that it is the first duty (in importance) of a civilised Government to organise the labour of the whole community for the equal good of all; but it is also their first duty (in time) to take immediate steps to abolish death by starvation and by preventable disease due to insanitary dwellings and dangerous employments, while carefully elaborating the permanent remedy for want in the midst of wealth. I hope all my readers will read and study this fine book.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2020.