

A NEW WAY WITH PROPHETS.

STRESS is often laid by panegyrists of modern progress upon the toleration and the open-mindedness meted out to unorthodoxy in religion and politics, or even to subversive social doctrines. The change of treatment is particularly noticeable in our attitude towards prophets. For a prophet's *métier* is to accuse a people of its sins and to warn them to flee the wrath to come, neither of which proceedings is calculated to win popularity. In all ages, then, a prophet has laid up trouble for himself in this world. Ruder peoples have always stoned their prophets, a rough-and-ready but effective way of getting rid of inconvenient truth-tellers. Milder-mannered peoples have tried suppression by the gag, or exile, or by the simple process of the boycott, sending the prophet to Coventry or Patmos. As liberality of thought advanced, the protective instincts of society reached a higher stage of precaution. Observing that prophets counted persecution as good for business, the guardians of the existing order decided to cultivate and feign indifference, and to let the prophet talk himself dry. The self-approval of our tolerant age appraises its liberality too high. For its toleration is commonly indifference, and its mind is open at both ends.

But there is a still more "enlightened" way of treating prophets coming into vogue. We disarm them and inoculate the public whom they seek to poison, by praising them. Men like Ruskin and Tolstoy strove by burning words to sear the conscience of the world and to force it to repentance and reform. Among other charges they deny our Christianity. And yet what can be more Christian than the soft answers we return to their outrageous accusations and extravagant demands?

We do not any longer boycott them. We bestow on them the Order of Merit; we do not burn their books, but buy them, and form societies for reading and interpreting them. We add their strong or wild ideas to our interesting collection. For when, as the reward of a long life of intellectual and moral agony, popular acclamation has bestowed the prophet's cloak and staff, the recipient and his "gospel" (for this title we now give to his bundle of pestilent heresies) become national intellectual assets. We are proud of our prophet and deny him nothing—except what he most wants and has worked to win. We listen to his deepest words of wisdom, the fruitage of his life-long toil of intellect and soul, and we say how extremely interesting it all is how fine it is to have an old man with the courage of such strong convictions and capable of such splendid indignation! We did this to Ruskin, and it literally drove him mad, as readers of "Fors Clavigera" will recollect. Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace is of tougher material and of better emotional economy, and though subjected to a similar treatment, preserves his sanity. He even smiles. For faith in a divinely ordered evolution gives him a comfort and security for a belief in human progress which Ruskin, after the decay of his earlier religious faith, never properly recovered.

As in Ruskin's case, so in Dr. Wallace's, we no longer stone the prophet and leave our children to build his tomb. We build it for him in his lifetime, and put inside it his works, and outside it a beautiful effigy, with a most magnificent inscription announcing the virtues he possessed and the services he rendered. Dr. Wallace has become a British institution. We are proud of him, and he can say anything he likes. What is more, we shall admit that he has said it very well, and that it much needed saying. But there his influence will stop; we shall not allow his thoughts to generate energy for action. We are afraid of utterances which are big, simple, and strong, such as prophets are wont to make. Yet, if we really were the practical nation we are supposed to be, we should surely be prepared to take more seriously the social doctrine and advice which this great pioneer of evolutionary teaching has drawn from the thought and study of a long lifetime. For within the compass of a single little volume, "Environment and Moral Progress" (Cassell), Dr. Wallace packs all the substance of his intensest thought and feeling upon the condition of human life in his own country and time. His attitude always remains that of the Naturalist. But his interpretation of Nature is so wide as to include the higher as well as the lower modes of life. When, therefore, he summarises his survey of social conditions by telling us that "the social environment as a whole, in 'relation' to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen," the statement ought not to be set aside as mere inflammatory rhetoric. Nor is it met by showing that many of the very evils and iniquities on which he dwells—the grinding poverty, the sweating, overcrowding, industrial diseases, and other miseries and burdens of the poor—were worse in the past than in the present. For it is probably true that "in relation to our possibilities and our claims" his indictment of our social environment is just. The active and widespread "unrest" is a simple testimony to this truth. For our "possibilities" of providing opportunities of decent material conditions, health, education, justice, leisure, and other requisites of a good life for all our population, have increased immensely during the last two generations.

Science has been mainly responsible for this growth of possibilities. And with the possibilities has arisen a corresponding growth of claims. But comparatively little has been done to meet these new claims, to convert these new possibilities into actualities. The growing industrial and moral discontent is directed against the clearer consciousness of man. The "evolutionism" of which Dr. Wallace is the pioneer and veteran has made good against all criticism its central thesis that progress comes by "natural selection." The life of reason and of morals does not, as is sometimes falsely supposed, cancel this fundamental truth. Though the cruelties of primi

tive selection can and ought to be suppressed within the nation, and in the relations between nations, the gradual disappearance of starvation and war does not involve the disappearance of natural selection, but merely the adoption of better and more economical modes of that selection. It is necessary to provide a social environment by which equality of opportunity for all may determine survival and parentage by fair tests of personal value, in which social fitness will be duly represented in accordance with the stage of civilisation that is reached. At present our environment is admittedly a bad selective agency; it encourages the multiplication of undesirables, discourages that of desirables. What is the remedy?

The artificial interferences which Eugenists suggest are impracticable, and would not achieve their object. For they leave the bad selecting agency untouched. We must alter the social environment if we would regain Nature's aid in the ascent of man. The changes of environment which Dr. Wallace urges aim at strengthening the co-operative structure of society, so that within the group the higher individual and social qualities may thrive, while, in the competition between groups, those groups where mutual aid and the bonds of thought and feeling it implies are strongest, will achieve success. The social reforms which secure equal access to land and capital, education, justice, mobility, and other opportunities, involving the destruction of private monopolies and industrial inequalities, are thus placed on a strictly scientific basis as essential to the furthering of normal processes of human evolution. In proportion as our men of science escape the thralldom which a too-restricted interpretation of biological laws has imposed upon their minds, they will come to a plain recognition of the truth that the progress of man, regarded either as an animal or as a soul, requires a focussing of all our powers upon the provision of an economic-spiritual environment which shall produce and educate the highest types of man.

One implication of reformed environment Dr. Wallace develops as of prime importance. A sound environment is necessary in order to furnish a basis of sound parentage. It must do this by restoring natural selection for marriage. Liberty and security of livelihood for all women, the option to remain unmarried, will stop marriages contracted merely for a home and livelihood. Not merely will much unwilling and unfit maternity be prevented. "When women are economically and socially free to choose, numbers of the worst men among all classes who now readily obtain wives, will be almost universally rejected." The marriages which will be made will thus be more largely the results of "natural affinity," favorable to sound parentage and careful rearing of offspring. Because the emergence of human mind and morals, and the social life to which they belong, involve spiritual considerations that are not applicable in the lower stages of the evolutionary process, it by no means follows that the operation of the lower laws is superseded or suspended. The power to adjust his material and spiritual environment to his changing needs for purposes of a better life for the individual and a better selection for the race, is the great intellectual and moral trust which Nature has reposed in man. The refusal of any nation to fulfil this trust is the unpardonable sin against humanity. If the performance of this social duty involves inconvenient disturbances of some existing institutions and accepted usages, this inconvenience is the penalty society must pay for disobedience to Nature's laws.