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‘Dr. A. R. Wallace’s ‘Studies.’’

We have delayed too long our welcome to the two handsome volumes containing ‘Studies scientific and social’ by Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace (London: Macmillan and Co.). We have felt unwilling to deal with the work inadequately, and yet the longer we hesitate the more difficult the task appears. The volumes cover such an enormous area, touch on so many great subjects, raise so many arresting problems, and pour out so many fine and invigorating thoughts, that we are embarrassed with riches, and hesitate to begin.

Of course, the 52 chapters in these volumes are mainly on scientific subjects, and in the sphere of Natural History, including ‘Earth Studies,’ ‘Descriptive Zoology,’ ‘Plant Distribution,’ ‘Animal Distribution,’ ‘Theory of Evolution,’ ‘Anthropology,’ ‘The problem of Instinct,’ and ‘Human Selection.’ Other subjects are Educational, Political, Ethical and Sociological. Some of the chapters on these subjects strongly appeal to us, as indirectly bearing on our own subject—which, by the way, is remotely represented by the inclusion of Dr. Wallace’s Paper read at the International Congress of Spiritualists in 1898. The following chapters, for instance, appear to us to bear strongly upon the ethical and constructive sides of that process of human development which we regard as spiritual;—‘Are acquired characters inherited?’ ‘How to civilise savages,’ and ‘Human Progress, Past and Future.’ Indeed, we are not sure whether Dr. Wallace’s extreme views respecting Socialism have not a spiritual basis. This will not be generally granted, but the presentation of these views at our Congress indicated that Dr. Wallace thought they had. In fact, he virtually went down to the root of the matter when he appealed to Spiritualists ‘who know the higher law,’ and ‘who realise that every child born into this world is a living soul, which has come here to prepare itself for the higher life of the spirit world.’ The suggestion here is, of course, that everything must give way to this consideration;—all ‘personal rights,’ for instance, and all ‘rights of property.’ Dr. Wallace does not flinch from the inference, that ‘equality of opportunity’ is the first right of all, and he insists that the State should assure this for all. Hence, ‘there must be no *inequality* of inheritance; and, to give equality of inheritance, the State, that is, the community, must be the universal inheritor of all wealth.’ This is a hard saying, and few there be who will accept it. We do not accept it ourselves—for this planet—but our point is that, even if it is a dangerous error, it draws its nourishment from a profound truth, and from sympathies to which every good Spiritualist can and will respond.

The same remark will apply to many of Dr. Wallace’s scientific studies. The doctrine of Evolution itself has a radically spiritual basis. Evolution works from within, and no merely external or material causes can account for its strange and subtile persistency. Moreover, when one comes to consider its extraordinary far-reachingness, as though it determined an end and steadily pursued it through thousands of centuries, one must admit that it seems to know what it is about: and it really does look as though only ‘the fool’ could ‘say in his heart,’—‘This body of Nature has no soul. We do not much care whether men like Darwin or Wallace say ‘God’ and ‘Spirit.’ We, of course, are refreshed when they do; but we care very much that they should open secret doors and windows for us and supply material for our great inferences.

A chapter, for example, like that in Vol. II., on 'Human Progress; Past and Future,' is of very high value from our point of view. The mere Materialist has one notion of progress: the Spiritualist has another: and Dr. Wallace strikes that note in his first sentence. Progress in the acquisition of wealth, in luxury, in standards of comfort, in mechanical skill, is one thing: but progress in sympathy, refinement and the brotherly instinct, is an entirely different thing. The real problem is whether man has advanced as a moral, intellectual and humane being. Dr. Wallace thinks that while the intellectual high-water level of humanity has sunk rather than risen during the last two thousand years, this is not incompatible with the elevation of the mean level of the human ocean. Several influences have been at work, through the law of the survival of the fittest, to eliminate the vicious and the incompetent: and this tells on the whole. Nature, after all, is not a devil. She works for the survival of the fittest to pity as well as the survival of the fittest to kick: and, through sympathy, she is creating a higher type of the human animal.

Dr. Wallace thinks that this law of the survival of the fittest will, on the higher planes of its working, secure for the race true progress, and especially through the elevation and enfranchisement of women. More occupations will be open to women, as time goes on, and the necessity for marriage will be checked. Education will result in finer tastes. The sot, the harsh, the fool, will not stand much chance. Women will marry later and more at their leisure. There will result a general rise in character and fineness which will cause 'a corresponding rise in the high-water mark of humanity.' And truly, even though we lose the power to build pyramids, it will be an enormous gain if we do not wish for them, and if we are incapable of practising the cruelties and being responsible for the waste connected with the building of them.

The chapter on 'How to civilise savages' may be cited as another typical Study with indications of Dr. Wallace's central thought and inspiration. He is the philosopher reproving the brute; the humanitarian teaching the tyrant; the spiritualist revealing the world's secret to its material exploiter. This chapter we commend to those who need it. Alas! they are not likely to see it; but it is well that it should be written. It is only eight pages long, and would form as good a 'Tract for the Times' as anything we have seen.

We have endeavoured, in our brief space, to get at the point of view of this noble thinker and explorer, and to indicate the hidden spring from which so much in these precious volumes has flowed: and now have only to add that the work is enriched with a very large number of beautiful illustrations, including several lovely scenes, and, of course, portraits of birds, animals and human beings; and that everywhere we feel the presence of a calm, patient and original thinker, with not only a 'mind to let' but with a heart to feel.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.