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[p. 11a]

‘Mr. Wallace and His Hobbies.’*

It is difficult for a man to wipe out his past, however hard he may try to do so. The motive for trying is generally connected with episodes of at least an inglorious character; but it by no means follows that this is always the case. Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace, for instance, has a past that most might envy. He was a pioneer of the great evolution movement, and co-discoverer with Darwin (in point of time) of the great fundamental principle of “natural selection.” As a naturalist he stands very high, and his work, especially that dealing with the Amazons and the Malay archipelago, will remain as monument. Yet Mr. Wallace is not content with these laurels. For some years past, since he crossed the bourne of active life, he has busied himself with social problems, seeking here new worlds to conquer. One of his great hobbies is land-nationalization, for which he has a special scheme of his own; another is spiritualism; a third is anti-vaccination; a fourth is industrial reform. Any one of these is a suitable hobby for an elderly gentleman, and most of them are harmless. When a hobby is pushed too far and too persistently in the direction of propaganda, however, and is backed up, besides, by the authority of a great scientific reputation made earlier in life, it is capable of becoming tiresome, and in extreme circumstances a public nuisance.

We should not go so far as to apply these terms to Mr. Wallace, but it is fair to point out that the work before us contains germs of a very bad vice, and one that will infallibly do harm to his reputation in the long run. It professes to be an account of the great and wonderful advances of the century, a jubilee summary of scientific discoveries set forth by a man of science; but less than half the book is devoted to this theme, the bulk of it being a statement of the failures that accompany the advance, and the failures being those points, such as spiritualism, vaccination, phrenology, and capitalism, wherein the world is so blind as to differ from Mr. Wallace. This slipping of tracts into the unsuspecting hand is an old device. It reminds one of the paragraphs beginning with a thrilling narrative and ending with an advertisement of patent syrup. Mrs. Schreiner has employed it in fiction to attack a political adversary who was too big for fair fight. It is only the foolish who are deceived by it, and to deceive fools is a poor advantage.

Mr. Wallace probably had no ulterior motive in compounding this sort of gilded pill than a desire to express the ideas he keenly and legitimately holds. All the more reason for showing up the way it strikes an ordinary reader. Ignorance is no excuse for breaking the laws; why should it cover a breach of literary propriety? As well might Mr. Justin McCarthy have written his history of the reign of Queen Victoria in order to foist off an authoritative diatribe on the subject of Ireland. Ireland is mentioned, of course, and sympathetically from Mr. McCarthy’s point of view; but the rest of the history is not dwarfed by his feelings on the subject. The personal is subordinated to the general—as good taste at least requires that it should be.

We have devoted so much space to the manner of this work that we have not much left for the matter. This, taking the ostensible part of the book first, does not really call for much comment. Mr. Wallace has set himself to describe the improvements which have taken place in travelling facilities, in machinery, in labour-saving appliances, in lighting, in photography, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology, physiology, and in the vast range of philosophy covered by evolution. All this could be done, and was

done at the time of the Jubilee, with about the same amount of success by scores of anonymous journalists. Even Mr. Wallace cannot speak with authority on every branch of science, and his work is therefore largely a compilation from obvious sources of information. To take one single branch at random, his account of the growth of photography is very imperfect, and shows a want of intimate knowledge on the subject. To quote Lippmann's interference method at length as the only solution of colour photography up to date is to do a great injustice to inventors like Ives, Lumière, Sellé, and Joly, to name only a few. One feels, however, from the first that this part of the subject is perfunctory. It is not till we get to the alleged "failures" that the author really warms and settles down to his work. And what are these "failures"? Without taking any dogmatic attitude on the subject, one might surely hint that they damn each other by their mere connection. Phrenology may have been unjustly scorned, as Mr. Wallace says, and bumps may be capable of the most productive study; but when Mr. Wallace goes on to allege that the neglect of phrenology is one of the crimes of the century, because he happens to believe in it, one cannot help smiling. As for vaccination, Mr. Wallace's objections have been before the public for a good many years, and no one has yet regarded them as convincing beyond the small body who already share them. We are content to follow Mr. Wallace in bracketing anti-vaccination and pro-phrenology as of equal importance. The third subject of complaint, the neglect of spiritualism, is a rock on which men of science have been rather prone to come to grief lately, with more harm to themselves than good to any one else. In the abstract, there is not the slightest reason for despising any one who takes an interest in spiritualism, or who tries to read its riddles; but when time after time men of judgment in ordinary matters are found letting themselves be gulled by vulgar tricksters into beliefs and practices that are repugnant to common sense, the world at large can hardly be blamed for remaining sceptical. On industrial questions Mr. Wallace is entitled to all respect as an earnest striver after the welfare of the poorer and less educated classes. The object is also one which must command sympathy from all. Whether his panaceas are worth anything time alone can tell. For us they are somewhat vitiated already by association with the fads above mentioned.

* "The Wonderful Century; its Successes and its Failures." By Alfred Russel Wallace. (London: Swan Sonnenschein.)

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