23 July, 1898

The Saturday Review.

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THE WONDERFUL CENTURY.


If Carlyle's doctrine concerning self-consciousness is true, and true of ages as well as of individuals, this age must be the most spiritually destitute that has yet elapsed. It seems to be our maxim that the proper study of mankind is the Nineteenth Century. One man views it with exultation, another with melancholy: Mr. Wallace justifies both. According to his estimate the progress that we have made in scientific discovery and in the application of science to the arts of production has been accompanied by such a distribution of wealth that, whilst scores of millionaires have been created at one end of the social scale, at the other end poverty, disease and starvation have spread and strengthened their hold upon the feebler sections of human population. As to our successes in science and the useful arts, the number of their marks had been brought up to twenty-five.

This is a new version of the quarrel between ancients and moderns, and another Swift might write "The Battle of the Projectors," in which Archimedes should hang Edison by an ingenious arrangement of pulleys, and some palaeolithic genius with his fire-stick impale the inventor of lucifer matches. On the whole, are not we ourselves among the achievements of our forefathers, and is it not a little strange that one of the great founders of the theory of evolution should encourage a contention for pre-eminence between the acorn and the oak?

As to our failures, it is to be feared that an irreverent reader, glancing down the list of them, will be tempted to smile. Mr. Wallace is as courageous as he is veracious, and accordingly he begins with our neglect of phrenology. But in this there is really nothing to laugh at, for the modern doctrine of the localisation of cerebral functions adopts the fundamental position of phrenology. Next comes our thick-headed opposition to hypnotism and psychological research; and then "the delusion of vaccination"—the longest chapter of all, and an extremely serious one. Moreover, instead of putting an end to war, we have devoted to its service all the resources of science and industry. Finally, the system of industry involves incalculable evils: it is wasteful and unjust; the immense increase of production has been accompanied by such a distribution of wealth that, whilst scores of millionaires have been created at one end of the social scale, at the other end poverty, disease and starvation have spread and strengthened their hold upon the feebler sections of the working classes. As Mr. Wallace interprets, statistics, pauperism, lunacy, suicide, infant mortality and crime have not only increased, but have increased in greater proportion than the population itself.

Whatever the precise figures in which these evils should be estimated, the magnitude of the evils and our failure to deal with them must be acknowledged. And we will not comment particularly on the "remedies for want," proposed by Mr. Wallace in an appendix, though we cannot agree with him; but, speaking generally, it is difficult to see the connexion between his biological and his social science. His biology is the greatest success of this century, his social schemes are among the failures of preceding ages. He says, "We are not ready yet to take the whole system of science and industry in our arms and to lay down the great maxim, 'The greatest happiness for the greatest number.'"

In an interesting autobiographic passage on p. 139 Mr. Wallace tells us that the theory of Natural Selection of them. To subserve music, they made the psaltery, sackbut and all other kinds of instrument. As for money, and instruments of credit, Mr. Wallace may think they have done more harm than good. Still he might have given credit to Socrates and his successors for the founding of logic, ethics and politics; to Descartes and Locke for introducing the empirical study of psychology; to Grotius for international law; and to Adam Smith for political economy. Huxley would have reckoned the metaphysics of Berkeley and Hume amongst the useful exercises of human reason. If to this list we add religion, morals and the British Constitution, perhaps the balance may be considered in favor of the advantage of those who have gone before. In making this list, we ceased counting when the number of their marks had been brought up to twenty-five.

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In an interesting autobiographic passage on p. 139 Mr. Wallace tells us that the theory of Natural Selection
was suggested to him at Ternate, in the Moluccas, during an attack of fever, by a reminiscence of Malthus's "Essay on Population." Yet he never seems to have remembered that essay when thinking over the problem of the unemployed. The growth of pauperism, lunacy, infant mortality, and suicide seems to show that Natural Selection is still busy with mankind. But no more of this; it would be much pleasanter to agree than to disagree with our benignant and magnanimous philosopher.