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‘Dr. Russel Wallace and Human Progress.’

All who know anything of the life and work of our ‘Grand Old Man’ of Science, the co-discoverer with Darwin of the principle of ‘Natural Selection,’ are aware of his absorbing interest in human progress. His scientific pursuits have never blunted his human sympathies, but have rather quickened and enlarged them. His latest book¹ stands as a further evidence of the fact—if any were needed—and in its strength and purity of diction is a marvelous example of youthful vigour in the brain of one who has long passed the threescore and ten years proverbially allotted to human life. Even remembering that we live in an age when men and women preserve their working powers longer than ever before, it remains astonishing that the author of this book is over ninety years of age. There is no sign of the fact in the work. It is all clearly and closely reasoned, with a consistent appeal to science and history, and the problem being stated we are shown what we are fain to accept as a true solution.

In his opening chapter Dr. Russel Wallace claims that what we term morality is not entirely due to inherent perception of right or wrong conduct. It is largely a matter of convention, a product of the environment. Most people repress their passions and regulate their behaviour under the influence of example and experience.

These restraints, becoming habitual, may often give the appearance of an actual change of character till some great temptation or violent passion overcomes the usual restraint and exhibits the real nature which is usually dormant.

Then it is that the real, inherent character is shown—the character that persists and is transmitted to offspring. This being the case, any progressive improvement is dependent on some selective agency. What this selective agency is, and how its influence will be exerted, is shown in one of the later chapters to which we shall refer hereafter.

But for this later chapter one might derive an almost pessimistic conclusion from the book. For the author claims that general ethical conceptions, the accepted ideas of morality, and the conduct resulting from these are not superior to-day to those which prevailed in the remote past, and in this connection he alludes to the splendid literature and exalted moral teaching of Ancient India. Nor does he find any increase in intellectual power apparent to-day:—

We are the inheritor 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.

His review of the changes of environment during the nineteenth century when material progress, until then almost stationary, began to respond to the advance of the physical sciences, is not flattering to our civilisation. He traces the evils that resulted from a rapid growth of wealth, and an increased power over Nature—child labour, insanitary dwellings, adulteration, fraud, and other forms of social injustice.

But although one has to admit apparent failure here, it is but temporary. In the chapter on ‘Selection in the Animal World,’ Dr. Wallace deals with the purpose of Nature—‘a life-world culminating in man,’

and man he finds 'as much above and as different from the beasts that perish as they are above the inanimate masses of meteoric matter which, as we now know, occupy the apparently vacant spaces of our solar system.' Finding man to be a 'living soul' gifted with 'an insistent perception of justice and injustice, of right and wrong, of order and beauty and truth,' the author passes by a natural transition to a consideration of the extent to which man has influenced the forces of life. When he arrived on the planet a great revolution was effected in Nature. She had produced a being who was her superior, who knew how to control and regulate her action, and so we had 'Selection modified by Mind.' And it is in 'Selection,' in a newer phase, that Dr. Russel Wallace sees the avenue through which humanity will pass to its golden age. That 'new form of selection' will be preceded by changes in the social order and the economic system. Those changes will mean the sweeping away of vicious and hurtful luxury on the one hand and oppressive labour and fear of starvation on the other. This will set humanity free for the operation of a *truly* 'natural selection' which will gradually eliminate the lower types of mankind and steadily raise our physical, moral and intellectual standards. With the possibility for women of freedom of choice where marriage is concerned, large numbers of the worst men who now easily obtain wives will be rejected, and by this weeding-out process a general improvement in the race will be secured, and the true end of evolution attained.

That is Dr. Russel Wallace's solution of the problem in its larger aspect, and the argument is developed with rare ability in its various phases.

With eugenics on its mechanical and legislative side he has little sympathy, for he holds that

Nature, or the Universal Mind, has not failed or bungled out world so completely as to require the weak and ignorant efforts of eugenists to set it right, while leaving the great fundamental causes of all existing social evils absolutely untouched.

For us the argument is tremendously re-inforced by reflecting on the nature and destiny of man as a spirit, and by remembering the great host of men and women who in the world beyond represent the advance guard of human progress. Evolution in human life may be said to mean the Urge from Below. But in arisen humanity we have the Call from Above. The efforts of the workers on earth are aided by the labours of those who have gone on. On this point doubtless Dr. Russel Wallace could have spoken with the assurance of knowledge, but he has chosen to confine his argument to those practical issues best suited to the general education of the time. Those who have the knowledge can read 'between the lines' and round out his reasoning for themselves. To these the terms 'the race' and 'humanity' will have a larger meaning than that temporarily assigned to them in the pages of this book. Later philosophers, addressing a public with a larger outlook, will be able without fear of hostility and misconception to 'rise to the height of this great argument.' That time is not yet. But we are persuaded that it is not far off.

¹ 'Social Environment and Moral Progress,' by Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., D.C.L., F.R.S. Cassell & Co., Ltd., 3s. 6d. *net*.