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[p. 321a]

‘The Barbarism of Civilization.’

Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace, one of the most eminent naturalists of England, in the concluding pages of his work on “The Malay Archipelago,” recently published by Messrs. Harper & Brothers, makes some startling suggestions respecting the social condition of civilized nations as compared with that of savage life, which are amply confirmed by a paper in the *North American Review* on “The Poverty of England,” from the pen of Mr. Charles Eliot Morton.

The supposition is quite prevalent that civilized nations are steadily progressing toward a state of perfection which, whether attainable or not, is ideally one of “individual freedom and self-government, rendered possible by the equal development and just balance of the intellectual, moral, and physical parts of our nature.” Mr. Wallace’s observations lead him to the following statements: “It is very remarkable that among people in a very low stage of civilization we find some approach to such a perfect social state. I have lived with communities of savages in South America and in the East who have no laws or law courts but the public opinion of the village freely expressed. Each man scrupulously respects the rights of his fellow, and any infraction of those rights rarely or never takes place. In such a community all are nearly equal. There are none of those wide distinctions of education and ignorance, wealth and poverty, master and servant, which are the product of our civilization; there is none of that wide-spread division of labor, which, while it increases wealth, produces also conflicting interests: there is not that severe competition and struggle for existence or for wealth which the dense population of civilized countries inevitably creates.”

Having with such words expressed his views of some phases of savage life, he goes on to open our eyes to the condition of England. “Although we have progressed vastly beyond the savage state in intellectual achievements, we have not advanced equally in morals... It is not too much to say that the mass of our populations have not at all advanced beyond the savage code of morals, and have in many cases sunk below it. As deficient morality is the great blot of modern civilization, and the greatest hinderance to true progress... Compared with our wondrous progress in physical science and its practical applications, our system of government, of administering justice, of national education, and our whole social and moral organization, remains in a state of barbarism. Our vast manufacturing system, our gigantic commerce, our crowded towns and cities, support, and continually renew, a mass of human misery and crime *absolutely* greater than has ever existed before.”

Mr. Wallace’s eight years of wanderings among those luxuriant islands were well spent if they only prepared him to speak to his countrymen these earnest words. Wealth, knowledge, and culture, belonging only to the few, do not constitute a true civilization. That England rapidly increases in wealth, that she has an extensive commerce, that she has made a wonderful use of physical science in her gigantic manufactures, that she has profound scholarship, a brilliant literature, and a pure Christianity, need not be denied. The inquiry is directed to the condition of the masses of the people rather than to that of the few, for if they are suffering for bread, or herding like cattle, or groveling in ignorance, and if, notwithstanding

all attempts at their elevation, they are steadily sinking to a lower and still lower degradation, the social edifice built upon such a foundation must be in peril, and the boasted civilization is a failure.

Now, what are the facts? The population of England and Wales may be divided into two great sections—one, the upper and middle classes, including wives and children, numbering five millions; the other, embracing laborers, paupers, criminals, persons dependent on wages, and those without known means of support, with their wives and children, amounting to about seventeen millions. Of the income in 1857 of £661,929,000, the first class received £407,200,000 and the second £254,729,000. That is to say, seventeen millions of the people of England must look for their livelihood to the average sum of about £15 per annum, or less than an English shilling (25 cents) a day for each person. When it is remembered that this enormous mass includes the skilled and better paid laborer as well as the unskilled and poorly paid, we are ready to infer, with the *North American* that “a large majority of the inhabitants are poor—poor not merely relatively, but positively. The great pyramid of English wealth rests on a wide base of poverty and pauperism.”

Inquiries officially instituted have spread before Parliament and the world abundant evidence of the suffering, pauperism, and degradation of millions of the population; or, as the President of the Poor Law Board said in December last, “millions of human beings, whose very name implies a degradation even in their own eyes, are recipients of parochial relief.” Think of an agricultural district where the farm laborer’s “ordinary home is two small rooms, through the thatched roof of which the rain drops to a floor half mud and half broken stones, and his daily food is dry bread and rough cider;” of hospitals that are never free from cases of chronic starvation disease; of homes of but a single room in which father, mother, children, and children’s children live, sleep, dress, and herd promiscuously; “where the whole air is sensual, and human nature is degraded into something below the level of the swine”—and this in the rural districts of merry England.

Statistics show that on any given day one twentieth of the population are in the receipt of relief from the parish; and it is certainly fair to assume that double that number receive public aid at some period of the year. Add to these the number who are sustained wholly or in part by private charity, costing in London alone seven millions sterling annually, and we have more than one tenth of the people of England supported as paupers, or dependent during a portion of every year upon charity. And while both Mr. Wallace and Mr. Norton agree in such a conclusion, the latter goes farther, and says that “it seems certain that not less than one quarter of the people of England are at some period of their lives dependent for subsistence upon public or private charity.”

Three hundred and fifty thousand children under sixteen years of age are on the hands of the parochial authorities for maintenance, a hundred and fifty thousand criminals annually emerge from prison doors, and a hundred thousand boys and girls in London alone—an army of young Arabs—are in full training for lives of wretchedness and crime. And what is worse, instead of diminishing under the influence of better legislation, material prosperity, and efforts at moral culture, these evils are fearfully increasing.

Here are some of the worst features of barbarism pervading the social condition of one of the most civilized nations of the earth. The poor are becoming poorer, with all the sad concomitants of hopeless poverty, and with absolutely no possible way of escape except by expatriation or death. We do not speak of these things for the purpose of reproach upon England, nor do we now inquire after the remedy. We ask rather, whether such aspects of barbarism be a necessary accompaniment of civilization? As the rich

become richer, must the poor become poorer? As wealthy corporations arise, must they become engines of oppression, to crush manhood and independence from the laborer? As education and Christianity elevate one portion of the community, is it a necessity that the other shall sink into ignorance, squalor, and vice? These are practical questions, and they are questions for our own people. While no such results must necessarily ensue, it becomes us to remember that only by constant effort, persisted in through the generations, will they be prevented in our own land. Our social condition is changing. New England is becoming a manufacturing region; whose villages are owned and ruled by single men or corporations, and the distance between the capitalist and the laborer is constantly increasing. The same is true out of New England. Our large cities are fast following in the wake of London.

Now, doubtless, in spite of all that can be done, some will be so improvident and shiftless that they will cumber the ground until they die; but a true civilization, we mean a *Christian* civilization, will go down to the lowest stratum of society and endeavor to raise it up to virtue, knowledge, temperance, religion, and such sources of employment as will give the comforts of life.

We expect no perfect social state on earth. Until the end of time Christianity must take the successive generations, as born of fallen Adam, to be educated, trained, and saved, in default of which our civilization can only degenerate. It must stamp its authority upon all our legislation, our labor, our business, and the relations of individuals one to another. Most of all, must it compel a recognition of the worth of man, and of his right to that which is just and equal.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.