

### IS NATURE CRUEL?

An enlightening and very consoling chapter concludes Dr. Wallace's book, 'The World of Life,' coming to grips with the old problem of the seeming cruelty of Nature, which, of course, means the seeming cruelty or callousness or impotence of God. John Stuart Mill probably outstripped everyone in his indictment against Nature, and other men—a long procession of them—have gone with him. Huxley, after describing the sufferings of the animals, said that if our ears were sharp enough we should hear sighs and groans of pain like those heard by Dante at the gate of Hell. Tennyson's 'Nature, red in tooth and claw with rapine, shrieked,' is only too familiar; and ten thousand kindly but inconsiderate bewailers have followed him.

Dr. Wallace faces it all like a man, and begins his chapter with a sympathetic but firm recognition of the distress of the humanitarians who are so disturbed at the sufferings of all kinds of 'dumb creatures' that they find it difficult to believe in a God who is all-wise, all-powerful, and all-good. He kindly but bluntly tells them that they are wasting an immense amount of sympathy, and quite mistaking the situation. Dr. Wallace quotes 'the poet' who tearfully wrote:—

The poor beetle, that we tread upon;  
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great  
As when a giant dies.

He thinks this is sad nonsense, and says, 'Whatever the giant may feel, if the theory of evolution is true the "poor beetle" certainly feels an almost irreducible minimum of pain, probably none at all.'

Of course it is not denied that there is a margin of misery that cannot be comfortably accounted for, and he excludes benevolence and omnipotence (in our 'ignorant' use of these terms) in relation to Nature and Nature's God. But what he stoutly maintains is that the mighty whole is a unity, that the course of Evolution has been beneficent, and that successive orders of life have contributed and, on the whole, happily, to the splendid end of the process, the advent of Man.

Dr. Wallace, as a sort of text, cites two brief passages from Darwin's 'Origin of Species':—

Thus, from the war of Nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows.

When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief that the war of Nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy and the happy survive and multiply.

But Dr. Wallace does not think these statements go far enough. He advances the controlling doctrine that no faculty, no sensation, is developed until there is a use for it, and is therefore never developed beyond the economical use of each form of life, or beyond what was actually needed for the preservation of that life. This rules out an enormous area of life-forms as sufferers, in our sense of the word. The early forms of life had to exist under conditions of utility—were, in fact, simply food-stuff, with no sense or sensation beyond mere existence. But for the development of higher forms of life, these lower forms would have occupied the whole available space. Referring to one of the infusoria, Paramecium, Dr. Wallace says that if it had been possible for these little creatures to go on increasing and multiplying unchecked for about two years the produce would have been sufficient in bulk to occupy a sphere larger than the known universe. Obviously these gentry needed keeping down. Prolific multipliers of that kind were needed, however, as food-stuff: and very useful they have been and are, without any inconvenience to themselves. We really must try hard to grasp the idea of orders of creatures existing as necessary food-stuffs, quite in the same way that grain and berries and vegetables exist. 'We find, then, that the whole system of life-development is that of the lower providing food for the higher in ever-expanding circles of organic existence.' 'That system has succeeded marvellously, even gloriously, inasmuch as it has produced, as its final outcome, MAN, the one being who can appreciate the infinite variety and beauty of the life-world, the one being who can utilise in any adequate manner the myriad products of its mechanics and its chemistry.'

Dr. Wallace argues that the method—shall we say adopted?—was not only the best but the only one. The whole cosmic process is an orderly and a progressive one, involving the gradual development of faculties, functions and sensations; and this could only be by the provision of food for each fresh and higher stage. The creatures which thus served for food multiplied rapidly for the purpose, and, being produced for that purpose only, there was no reason why death should be associated with pain: their end fulfilled in mere existence, without the fears or sensations we associate with death and pain. 'Our whole tendency to transfer our sensations of pain to all other animals,' says Dr. Wallace, 'is grossly misleading. The probability is that there is as great a gap between man and the lower animals in sensitiveness to pain as there is in their intellectual and moral faculties.'

The grave problem of pain, indeed, seems to begin only as we near Man, for knowledge, anticipation and sensation only then severely intervene. And here Dr. Wallace is greatly daring, but only so as pushing home his argument. He pictures Man as tormented with exposure and the sense of it precisely because that was a condition of his advance. Every added possession was an added danger. He was to be exposed to a thousand self-created dangers totally unknown to the rest of the animal world. His use of fire, his more intricate dwellings, his cookery, his weapons and tools, were sources of danger; and all kept him on the alert and thus ministered to his growth in care, to his experience, his sensitiveness and his skill: and it is as man progresses that he is more susceptible to pain: and, says Dr. Wallace, 'it is this specially developed sensibility that we, most illogically, transfer to the animal-world in our wholly exaggerated and often quite mistaken views as to the cruelty of Nature.' 'No other animal needs the pain-

sensations that we need ; it is therefore absolutely certain that no other possesses such sensations in more than a fractional degree of ours.'

Dr. Wallace, as an honest truth-seeker and truth-follower, falters not in his argument although he is aware that it will be used against him as an anti-vivisectionist : but he protests that the moral argument against vivisection remains :—

The bad effect on the operator and on the students and spectators remains : the undoubted fact that the practice tends to produce a callousness and a passion for experiment which leads to unauthorised experiments in hospitals on unprotected patients, remains ; the horrible callousness of binding the sufferers in the operating trough, so that they cannot express their pain by sound or motion, remains : their treatment, after the experiment, by careless attendants, brutalised by custom, remains ; the argument of the uselessness of a large proportion of the experiments repeated again and again on scores and hundreds of animals, to confirm or refute the work of other vivisectionists, remains ; and, finally, the iniquity of its use to demonstrate already-established facts to physiological students in hundreds of colleges and schools all over the world, remains. I myself am thankful to be able to believe that even the highest animals below ourselves do not feel so acutely as we do, but that fact does not in any way remove my fundamental disgust at vivisection as being brutalising and immoral.

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