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[p. 17d]

‘The Wonderful Century (Swan Sonnenschein).’

Few people are better entitled to give an account of the scientific progress of the nineteenth century than Mr. Alfred Russell Wallace, who, as is well known, shares with Darwin the honour of having first given expression to the theory of evolution as it is now commonly understood. As is shown by his books on “The Malay Archipelago” and “Darwinism,” Mr. Wallace has made many fruitful observations on his own account, and he is one of the most picturesque of our writers on scientific subjects. Unfortunately he is something more. He tells us that when he was a young man a phrenologist examined his head, and in the course of his report stated that “he is fond of argument, and not easily convinced.” There is no doubt that the phrenologist was right, and, if he had spoken with the fuller knowledge which Mr. Wallace’s works have conveyed to us, he might have added that the arguments which Mr. Wallace would take up with the greatest enthusiasm were often those espoused by the people who are disrespectfully called cranks and faddists. We regret to find that nearly half the present volume, the part devoted to what the writer calls the failures of the century, is an example of this. In 33 pages Mr. Wallace denounces the age for its neglect of phrenology; he gives 20 pages to a like attack upon those who will not believe in hypnotism and psychical research; and no fewer than 100 pages are devoted to an onslaught upon vaccination, which he is pleased to call a delusion. After this it is a comparatively light matter that he should attack certain of the phenomena of civilization which by common consent are evil, and which all rational people would be delighted to abolish if they only saw the way. War, militarism, greed, ill-treatment of uncivilized races—these are unquestionable evils with regard to which our only difference with Mr. Wallace would be on the question of how to remove all trace of them. It is scarcely worth while, however, to discuss the socialistic or semi-socialistic remedies to which he is inclined. It is more interesting to follow him in the very charming account which he gives, in the first 150 pages of his book, of the great leading discoveries of the century, those discoveries, as he is careful to point out, which are not mere improvements upon what was known before, but which constitute something like a difference in kind between the nineteenth century and its predecessors. The principal heads under which he deals with these are (1) locomotion, (2) labour-saving machinery, (3) the conveyance of thought, (4) photography, (5) spectrum analysis, (6) various applications of physics leading to such discoveries as electric lighting, the phonograph, and the Röntgen rays, (7) the use of anæsthetics and antiseptics in surgery. In his concluding summary, indeed, he goes further, and puts in parallel columns 24 discoveries of the present century as against 15 covering all preceding ages. Perhaps the most interesting of the earlier chapters to the reader of ordinary intelligence is that in which the writer deals with the “importance of dust.” Here, developing some of the discoveries of Tyndall, of Mr. John Aitken, and of certain French observers, he tells us in fascinating language one of the most astonishing of all “the fairy tales of science.” He proves that, while on the one side dust when too freely produced “deteriorates our climate and brings us dirt, discomfort, and even disease,” it is under natural conditions not only the cause of the most beautiful of natural phenomena, but is absolutely essential to life. Were there no dust the sky would be black, not blue; sunset and sunrise would lose all their glories; we should have no such thing as diffused daylight, but only “bright glaring sunlight or intensely dark shadows,” and in our houses every spot outside the

direct impact of the rays of the sun would be completely dark. Of much more importance would be the fact that without dust the moisture of the atmosphere would not condense in clouds as it now does; there would be no gentle rains, but in the lowlands perpetual dew, and on the mountaintops incessant raging torrents. This is as much as to say the animal and vegetable life as we understand it would be impossible. When Mr. Wallace writes in this vein his chapters are delightful; but we are afraid that he enjoys himself more when he becomes the pamphleteer, and frames angry indictments against vaccination and other “delusions.”

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