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‘Something Wrong With the World? Prof. Alfred Russell Wallace in “Social Environment and Moral Progress”’

Professor Wallace deserves an attentive hearing. An old man now, he has given his life to scientific investigation and research, and so has won the right to dictate terms and propound judgments. It will be readily recalled that Professor Wallace was the co-temporary of Darwin, and when the latter had published his findings and his conclusions he discovered that a young man thousands of miles away in the Southern Seas had, upon a like foundation, built a superstructure similar to his own. That young man was Alfred Russell Wallace, who has never faltered in his allegiance to that science which wooed and won him in the early days of the nineteenth century.

This latest volume of his compels our attention, because it deals with phases of human life which are of paramount importance nowadays. I am not sure that one can agree with everything he says, but one is perforce bound to investigate the statements which he makes. Some of these are wonderfully strong and far-reaching. But I fancy that it would be for the betterment of our Anglo-Saxon people and those who have been entrusted to our care, if our legislators and men in authority would pause long enough to ponder deeply these problems which he presents. His solution may not be the best, but he has at any rate a way out.

I.

He first of all presents the statement that early civilizations were as far advanced and as intellectual as any we know to-day; in other words, that there has been a permanence of high intellect.

“When we remember that the Great Pyramid covers 13½ acres of ground, that it is truly square and on a truly horizontal base, that each side is accurately directed to a point of the compass, that the angle of its slope is such that the area of each of the four triangular faces is equal to that of a square whose sides are equal to the height of the pyramid; and, further, that the slope of the long descending tunnel is precisely such as to point accurately to the pole star of the epoch at the lowest part of its circuit round the true pole; and, lastly, that all this could be done, as accurately as it has been done, by the system of subterranean tunnels and galleries that actually exists, while almost all the details of their construction are shown to be adapted for astronomical observations of the nature required, the conclusion becomes irresistible that they were designed and used for such observations, and that by no other means could the same amount of accuracy have been attained.

“I have given a rather full account of what the pyramid builders really did, because it forms a very important part of the argument I am developing as to the stationary condition of the human intellect during the historical period.

“The great majority of educated persons hold the opinion that our wonderful discoveries of art and science prove that we are really more intellectual and wiser than the men of past ages—that our mental faculties have increased in power. But this idea is totally unfounded. We are the inheritors 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.

“We can perhaps best understand this by supposing any one of our great men of science to have been born and educated in one of the earliest of the civilizations. If Newton had been born in Egypt in the era of the Pyramid builders, when there were no such sciences as mathematics, perhaps even no decimal notation which makes arithmetic so easy to us, he could probably have done nothing more than they have actually done. In building up the sciences each of the early steps was the work of a genius. But now that there has been nearly a hundred centuries of discovery and specialization by thousands or even millions of workers, that by means of writing and of the printing press every

discovery is quickly made known, and that ever larger and larger numbers devote their lives to study, the rule of

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progress becomes quicker and quicker, till the total result is amazingly great. But that does not prove any superiority of the later over the earlier discoveries. There is, therefore, no proof of continuously increasing intellectual power.”

I have quoted thus largely here because these words seem to lay the foundation upon which he builds his argument. Not only are we prone to look with disdain upon the achievements of past ages as compared with what we think are our own, but we, of British race, are still more prone to rate other nations and other races our inferiors in these modern days. And, too, within ourselves, class distinctions rule. Professor Wallace pleads for a spirit of universal brotherhood. So much for intellectual progress; moral progress fares little better.

“The general result of the facts and arguments now set forth in the merest outline leads us to conclude that there has been no definite advance of morality from age to age, and that even the lowest races, at each period, possessed the same intellectual and moral nature as the higher.”

“It follows that no definite advance in morals can occur in any race *unless there is some selective or segregative agency at work.*”

“The reason of this is that heredity follows the law of ‘recession to mediocrity.’” That is, that all groups of living things vary around an average or mean as regards each of their characters.”

Which all means that in a family of great ability there appear those who have no special aptitude for any pursuit in life while in a family of mediocre ability, or of no ability at all in any special direction there appear those who become geniuses, proclaimed such by the whole world.

II.

Having stated his fundamentals in these ways, Prof. Wallace becomes more practical in his indictment of the nineteenth century in its treatment of industrial workers and the wretched environment provided for its children to grow in. Referring, of course, especially to the British Isles, he charges the health authorities (corporation and other Local Boards) with criminal negligence.

“Again and again, in all parts of the country, the health officers have duly reported, but their reports have been ignored. In some cases, where the health officer has been too persistent, he has been asked to resign, or has been discharged.”

This praise of medical officers of health is pleasing, and it is none too strong. Many a brave doctor, not only in England, but in Canada, had deliberately fought powerful interests in his devotion to public health, knowing that his position and his living were at stake. In London, out of a total of 1,019,646 tenements, 672,030, or considerably more than half, have from one to four rooms; while there are about 150,000 tenements of only *one room*, in which are living 313,298 persons, or about two and a quarter persons in each room on the average. Oh, yes! I know you shudder when you read such a statement, but have you ever investigated Montreal, or Toronto, or Winnipeg? Have you ever visited the stranger within our gates, where he lives? How can we expect a splendid citizenship from such an environment.

“Such facts exist all over the kingdom. They have been talked about and deplored for the last half century at least. Who has murdered the 100,000 children who die annually before they are one year old? Who has robbed the millions that just survive of all that makes childhood happy—pure food, fresh air, play, rest, sleep and proper nurture and teaching? Again, we must answer, our Parliament, which occupies itself with anything rather than the immediate saving of human life and abolishing widespread human misery, the whole of which is remediable. Wealth has been deliberately preferred to human life and happiness.”

I shall pass over those chapters which refer to the prevalence of adulteration, bribery and gambling, although these are claiming the best attention of thoughtful men and women everywhere. I

shall also leave that most interesting portion which refers to our administration of “Justice” as being immoral, although I should like in a word to remind you that there is always a cry for “law reform” in the air, because of existing burdens, and pass to what Prof. Wallace terms increasing moral degradation. Some people would tell us that the world is better than it ever was. I shall quote one table, referring naturally to the British Isles:

Average of Years.	Deaths by Suicide per Million Living.
1866-1870	66.4
1871-1875	66.0
1876-1880	73.6
1881-1885	73.8
1886-1890	19.4
1891-1895	88.6
1896-1900	89.2
1901-1905	100.6
1906-1910	102.2

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“Such a table as this, occurring in a country which boasts of its enormous wealth, of its ever-increasing commercial prosperity, of its marvellous advance in science and the arts, and command of natural forces, should, surely, give us pause, and force upon us the conviction that there is something radically wrong in a social system which brings about such terrible evils.”

Upon the vast subject of prostitution he is eminently fair, for he says:

“I can find no statistics to show whether it has increased or decreased during the last century. But as the conditions have all been favorable for it, I have little doubt that it has increased in proportion to population. Such conditions are, the enormous growth of great cities; an increasing number of unmarried and wealthy young men; with an enormous number of girls and young women, whose wages are insufficient to provide them with the rational enjoyments of life.

“The proceedings of the divorce courts show other aspects of the result of wealth and leisure; while a friend who had been a good deal in London society assured me that both in country houses and in London various kinds of orgies were occasionally to be met with, which could hardly have been surpassed in the Rome of the most dissolute Emperors.”

One can scarcely believe that such statements are true, and yet our daily press, only too vividly, portrays a style of living which stamps truth upon every syllable of the great scientist.

III.

And now we come to the field in which Prof. Wallace loves to roam, where he has been roaming for a half century. I refer to natural selection in the animal world.

“By far the larger part of the criticisms of Darwinism by popular writers are due to their continually forgetting these two great natural facts; enormous *variability* about a *mean value* of every part and organ; and such ever-present powers of multiplication that, even in the case of vertebrate animals, of those born every year only a small proportion—one-tenth to one-hundredth or thereabouts—live over the second year. If they all lived their numbers would go on continually increasing, which, we know, is not the case. Hence arises what has been termed ‘the struggle for existence’ resulting in ‘the survival of the fittest.’ It is a mere truism that the *fittest survive*.”

Darwin came to use the term “Natural Selection” because it was suggested to him by the way plants and animals breed large quantities and always preserve or “select” the best in each generation to be the parents of the next.

“This method carried on by hundreds of farmers, gardeners, dog, horse or poultry breeders, and especially by pigeon fanciers, has resulted in all those useful, beautiful and even wonderful varieties of fruits, vegetables and flowers, dray horses and hunters, greyhounds, spaniels and bull-dogs, cows which give large quantities of the richest milk, and sheep with the greatest quantity and finest quality of wool. All these were produced gradually for the special purposes of mankind.”

People have objected to the Darwinian theories because they do not explain the origin, the beginning. There is always that “missing link.” Prof. Wallace very finely expresses one of the greatest truths in the universe when he says in answer to these objectors:

“The *beginnings* of things can never be known; and, as Darwin well said, it is foolish to waste time in speculation about them.”

If we would only realize that there are mysteries, hidden from us for a purpose, which no man will ever unravel this side of the grave, and let it go at that, how much brain misery and futile argument we should save.

But I see that my space for this month is exhausted, and as there are many interesting passages in the concluding third of this book which apply what Prof. Wallace believes to be the remedy for a very bad state of affairs, I shall pursue this in the next issue.

“The conclusion reached in the earlier portion of this volume, that the higher intellectual and moral nature of man has been approximately stationary during the whole period of human history, and that the cause of the phenomenon has been the absence of any selective agency adequate to increase it, renders it necessary to give some further explanation as to the probable or possible origin of this higher nature, and also of that admirable human body, which also appears to have reached a condition of permanent stability.”

(To be Continued.)

[After the above was in type, the news flashed around the globe that Professor Alfred Russell Wallace passed away on November 7th in his ninety-first year. This but enlarges our interest in this last published work of his which was presented to the public on his ninetieth birthday.]

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(Concluded from the November number.)

IV.

We now enter upon a discussion and of Heredity and Environment, and this book reminds us in no uncertain way that there is probably no department in which so much error and misconception prevails as on the nature and limitations of Heredity.

“The subject is of special importance here because it involves the question of whether the effects of the environment, including education and training, are in any degree transmitted from the individuals so modified to their progeny—whether they are or are not cumulative. It is, in fact, the much discussed and vitally important problem of the Heredity of Acquired Characters.”

As we very well know it is a common belief that numerous characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation. To a certain extent this is true, but not by any means to the degree commonly supposed.

“We see then that over by far the greater part of the whole world of life any modification of external structure, form or coloring during the life of the individual is impossible; while in the

remainder its action, if it exists all, is of very limited range. No adequate proof of the inheritance of the slight changes thus caused has ever yet been given, and it is therefore wholly unnecessary and illogical to assume its existence and to adduce it as having any part in the ever active and universal process of evolution.”

“Many people are alarmed at the statement that the effects of education and training are not hereditary, and think that if that were really the case there would be no hope of improvement of the race; but closer consideration will show them that if the results of our education in the widest sense, in the home, in the shop, in the nation, and in the world at large, had really been hereditary, even in the slightest degree, then indeed there would be little hope for humanity; and there is no clearer proof this than the fact that we have not all been made much worse—the wonder being that any fragment of morality, or humanity, or the love of truth or justice for their own sakes still exists among us.”

When we seriously consider these statements they seem to open out long avenues of thought which lead on and on down the ages. The evil to-day is so evident, so tenacious, so forbidding, that we stand appalled before it. The evil of the so-called Dark Ages was hideous in other ways, and with other forms. If this heredity were placed in all its accumulated vastness upon the human race, what then? It is good to be reminded that we are mercifully spared from all such.

V.

“Think of the horrors of war in the perpetual wars of those days before the ‘Red Cross’ service did anything to alleviate them. Think of the old castles, many of which had besides the dungeons a salaried torturer and executioner. Think of the systematic tortures of the centuries, of the witchcraft mania and of the Inquisition. Think of the burnings in Smithfield and in every great city of Europe. Think of

‘Truth for ever on the scaffold, Wrong for ever on the throne.’

Freedom of speech, even of thought were everywhere crimes; how, then, did the love of truth survive as an ideal of to-day? To escape these horrors, the gentle, the good, the learned, and the peaceful had to seek refuge in monasteries and nunneries, while by means of the celibacy of the clergy the Church, as Galton tells us, ‘by a policy singularly unwise and suicidal, brutalised the breed of our forefathers.’

“When we remember that many of these degrading laws and customs, oppressions and punishments have extended down to our own times; that the terrible slave-trade and the equally terrible slavery have only been abolished within the memory of many of us; and that the system of wage-slavery, the distinction of classes, the gross inequality of the law, the overwork of our laboring millions, the immoral luxury and idleness of our upper-class thousands, while far more thousands die annually of want of the

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bare necessities of life; that millions have their lives shortened by easily preventable causes, while other millions pass their whole lives in continuous and almost inhuman labor in order to provide means for the enjoyments and luxuries of the rich—we must be amazed at the fact that there is nevertheless so much real goodness, real humanity among us as certainly exists, in spite of all the degrading influences that I have been compelled here to enumerate.”

“To myself, there seems only one explanation of the very remarkable and almost incredible result thus stated. It is, that the Divine Nature in us—that portion of our higher nature which raises us above the brutes, and the influx of which makes us men—cannot be lost, cannot even be permanently deteriorated by conditions however adverse, by training however senseless and bad.”

These are strong sentences, but are they too strong. If there is a force called Satan stalking through the world, there is a stronger force called God always ready to do battle at our behest and the mistake we make is that we do not reckon on the power which is ever at hand. With us things seem impossible. Coupled with the God-force all things are possible. And it’s just this unseen, intangible, all-powerful and progressive force which is saving the world. Otherwise—but we cannot think about it.

VI.

“Nevertheless, the omens for the future are good. The great body of the more intelligent workers are determined to have JUSTICE. They insist upon the abolition of monopolies and the forces of nature, and upon the gradual admission of all to equal opportunities for labor by free access to their native soil. Thus may be initiated the birth of a new era of peaceful and moral advancement.”

With the question of Eugenics as present outlined, Prof. Wallace has little sympathy. There is something so artificial about it, leaving out of account any natural selection that it finds no place in the programme of any sane-thinking reformer.

“Let anyone consider, on the one hand, the lives of the wealthy as portrayed in the society newspapers of the day, with their endless round of pleasure and luxury, their almost inconceivable wastefulness and extravagance, indicated by the cost of female dress and the fact of a thousand pounds or more being expended on the flowers for a single entertainment. On the other hand, let him contemplate the awful lives of millions of workers, so miserably paid and with such uncertainty of work that many thousands of the women and young girls are driven on the streets as the only means of breaking the monotony of their unceasing labor and obtaining some taste of the enjoyments of life whatever cost; and then ask himself if the Legislature which cannot remedy this state of things should venture to meddle with the great problems of marriage and the sanctities of family life. Is it not a hideous mockery that the successive Governments which for forty years have seen the people they profess to govern so driven to despair by the vile conditions of their existence that in an ever larger and larger proportion they seek death by suicide as their only means of escape—that Governments which have done nothing to put an end to this continuous horror of starvation and suicide, should be thought capable of remedying some of its more terrible results while leaving its causes absolutely untouched?”

There is nothing ethereal about this. It touches solid ground and is concerned with basic principles. If our eyes were not blinded we would see the rottenness of the texture of our governing bodies. Are they afraid to tackle these problems and solve them? Are greed and graft the two monsters standing at the gateway barring all ingress to Freedom and Happiness? To the rising generation falls the task of cleaning out the Augean *[sic]* stable of our present social organization. Woe on us if we falter!

“When men and women are, for the first time in the course of civilization, alike free to follow their best impulses; when idleness and vicious or hurtful luxury on the one hand, oppressive labor and the dread of starvation on the other, are alike unknown; when all receive the best and broadest education that the state of civilization and knowledge will admit; when the standard of public opinion is set by the wisest and the best among us, and that standard is systematically inculcated on the young; then we shall find that a system of wisely natural selection will come spontaneously into action which will steadily tend to eliminate the lower, the less developed or in any way defective types of men, and will thus continuously raise the physical, moral and intellectual standard of the race.”

And then we are told that when woman has been granted the place she should occupy she will be the one who shall make selection because she will not longer be forced to accept the attention of any kind of man who may offer her a home.

“It may be taken as certain, therefore, that when women are economically and socially free to choose, numbers of the worse men among all classes who now readily obtain wives *will be almost universally rejected*. For what we most require is to improve the *average* of our population by rejecting its lower types rather than by raising the advanced types a little higher.”

There are a lot of interesting topics in this book upon which I have not the space to touch. There is one statement which is strikingly significant.

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“Taking account of these various groups of undoubted facts, many of which are so gross, so terrible, that they cannot be overstated, it is not too much to say that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom and the Social Environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen.”

Can this be true? I, for one, am not prepared to say. If it be so, it is high time for a Remedy, efficient and far-reaching. Is this the remedy?

“It is the first duty (in importance) of a civilized Government to organize the labor of the whole community for the equal good of all; but it is also their first duty (in time) to take immediate steps to abolish *death by starvation and by preventable disease* due to insanitary dwellings and dangerous employments while carefully elaborating the *permanent* remedy for want in the midst of wealth.”

This is only one of many volumes pouring from the press depicting our savagery in the midst of our so-called civilization. If they are telling us the truth it seems certain that we are living in an age when strong men and strong women must buckle on the armour and with courage and dogged-perseverance go out to do battle against the forces of evil—SANS PEUR ET SANS REPROCHE.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2021.