

A PROPHET IN JUDGMENT.

It is not chiefly the large store of experience that constitutes the wisdom of old age. It is more a certain clearness and simplicity of understanding that comes with the decline of the bodily passions and with the necessary withdrawal from the battle of life. After a long and arduous experience, in which all the powers of the human spirit have been bent on ordering the affairs of man or on enlarging the bounds of knowledge, there sometimes comes a lucid interval of later years, in which a spiritual settlement takes place, the bewildering complexity of things giving way before the few issues of supreme import. In a mass of broad humanity, such issues are always definitely moral issues, rooted deeply in the destiny of man. Such men have always been the prophets and the soothsayers, and people have always done well to listen to them. It follows from the nature of the case that the thoughts they utter are more truly revolutionary than anything that comes from the wilder and more heated blood of the younger generation. For the notion that old age tends to conservatism is only true of those who have spent their lives in narrow processes of self-seeking, or when the collapse of physical and mental powers brings extreme personal timidity. The grey spirit of such men as Tolstoy, Björnson, or Alfred Russel Wallace becomes bolder and more adventurous as it passes beyond the normal limits of life.

Dr. Wallace, for over half a century one of our foremost thinkers and fighters, celebrates

the completion of his ninetieth year by a message of moral appeal to his countrymen, entitled "The Revolt of Democracy" (Cassell). It contains, of course, nothing novel, either in analysis or advice. But it once more challenges society to perform the plain primary duty which it persistently ignores of making the necessary arrangements to secure life and the opportunity to work for all its members. Even at the present time, when trade is prosperous in our land, thousands of children perish every year in our great towns for lack of the food, fresh air, and care which their parents cannot afford to give them. More than a quarter of our population are living shortened and damaged lives because they have not food enough to support them properly. Most of our children are still forced into unwholesome labor in their proper years of education and of playtime. Millions of women are forced to sell their labor for pay which cannot, and does not, keep them alive. Even now, though employment is very full in the organized trades, there are many thousands of working-men in London and elsewhere willing to work for a livelihood, but unable to find work, losing their strength, efficiency, and courage as they batter in vain against the barriers of an industrial system which seems to have no place for them.

Here is a mass of human misery and waste which, to such a man as Dr. Wallace, signifies the criminal refusal of organized society to face its primary obligation. Confronted with the facts, no denial is possible. But the normal attitude of society is that of a tacit conspiracy to ignore the facts. Or else we say, "Oh! but things are so much better than they were, and our statesmen and social reformers are already improving things as fast as it is safe to go." To such a man as Dr. Wallace, this is sheer cowardice and hypocrisy. It is the business of the prophet, as of the poet, to "strip the veil of familiarity from the world, and lay bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms." Dr. Wallace has a vision of what our country might be if it had the courage and insight to realize the powers which science and the human will place within its grasp. Until lately, poverty appeared to be the inevitable lot of most men. For the command of man over nature was still meagre, and appeared inadequate to secure for most men anything other than a life of toil and penury. **Moreover:—**

"To those who lived in the midst of this vast industrial system, or were a part of it, it seemed natural and inevitable that there should be rich and poor; and this belief was enforced on the one hand by the clergy, and on the other by the political economists, so that religion and science agreed in upholding the competitive and capitalistic system of society as being the only rational and possible one. Hence, till quite recently, it was believed that the abolition of poverty was entirely outside the true sphere of governmental action."

Now, great abundance of wealth is both possible and existent. Poverty for the many is no longer inevitable in the old sense, and the issue of the distribution of wealth becomes the absorbing moral and practical issue of our age. Are we prepared to make the necessary rearrangements in the government of society to abolish poverty, to make destitution, starvation, and involuntary idleness impossible? That we can do it if we have the will, is indisputable. The question remains, "Have we the will?" It has not yet appeared that we have. For the quite easy way in which the large policy of organic reforms contained in such schemes as that of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission has been brushed aside in favor of less considered and unrelated palliatives indicates that the national will has so far got no firm grip upon the magnitude and the unity of the social problem. The reason for this failure is quite manifest. We are moving, we are told, "as fast as it is safe to go." It is the feeling about "safety" that is preventing us from seriously seeking to abolish poverty. "But," it may be said, "isn't everyone agreed that poverty is a disease, and that it endangers the safety of society?" "Yes," we reply, "but there is a feeling that any measures that are really large and bold enough to abolish poverty will involve large encroachments upon the present rights and privileges

of the propertied classes, and that will be exceedingly unsafe."

So, slowly, the intrinsic logic of the situation unfolds itself. So long as it can be pretended that poverty can be mitigated and reduced by concessions which leave virtually unimpaired the fortresses of property and power, the social will is ripe for such reforms. But as soon as it becomes manifest that "the poverty at one end of the social scale will not be removed except by encroaching heavily upon the great riches at the other end," the social will begins to slacken and to fail. We then begin to hear much about the wickedness of advocating a class war, of the underlying harmony of interests between Capital and Labor, and of the perils of State interference with the delicate springs of industry. What havoc does Dr. Wallace make of all this pleasing sophistry of business-men, politicians, and political economists! Of course, the abolition of poverty involves an attack upon misgotten and ill-used property, and upon the life of luxury and idleness which comes from the possession of unearned wealth. Unless the fortresses of legalized plunder are courageously assailed and taken, all talk of effective social reform is idle. More and more the State must be the instrument of such reforms, and the financial resources it needs must be taken from the treasure-houses of the rich.

"Justice and public policy alike demand that every penny of taxation should be taken from the superfluously rich at or near the other end of the scale. Thus, and thus only, could we cause the present insignificant *minimum* wage to rise, first above the bare subsistence rate, and then by a steady increase to an amount sufficient to procure for all our workers the essentials for a full and enjoyable existence."

Only by such means can the economic and moral cleavage of classes disappear. This cleavage is itself the product of the system of "impropriety," by which riches and poverty arise, and the moral sentiments which have gathered round it are still the chief obstacles to the rise of an effective social will to abolish poverty.

"It is this widespread belief in there being a 'lower class' among us—hewers of wood and drawers of water—whose *intrinsic worth* as human beings is measured by the small wages they receive, that causes the proposals to raise their earnings to what we now term 'a living wage' to be widely resented, as if it were something dangerous, unnecessary, or even immoral."

Only very slowly, in such a land as this, does the will of the people rise against the blasphemy of this valuation, and insist upon the right to live like human beings. The humility of the people in the past, the acceptance of this low valuation of their masters, has been their undoing. It has hitherto made the forms of democracy of slight account as instruments for their uplifting. The moral significance of this revolt of democracy, whose banner this veteran lifts with his undaunted hands, consists in the recognition that a people thus divided against itself, in purse and head and heart, cannot stand and prosper in the struggle towards civilization. For a people having the power to abolish poverty, and knowing that it has the power, to refuse to use that power, is to acquiesce in its own degradation, the unpardonable sin. But Dr. Wallace ends upon a note of hope, not of despair. The principle of competition as a guide of economic life has absolutely broken down. The time has already come when the workers have power and confidence enough to demand that a Government which carries the corporate strength and intelligence of the nation, shall "abolish starvation in this land of superfluous wealth." "This must be the great and noble work of our statesmen of to-day and of to-morrow. May they prove themselves equal to the great opportunity which the justifiable revolt of labor has now afforded them!"