

*IS MANKIND IMPROVING?*

Sharer with Darwin in the creation of the doctrine of natural selection, and preserving in extreme old age, with apparently no diminution, the intellectual vigor and the power of forcible expression which characterized him in his prime, it was natural that Alfred Russel Wallace, on the advent of his ninetieth birthday, should be approached by many interviewers, asking him for some message to the world. The message he gave to one of these journalists related to no less a question than that of his estimate of the whole moral and intellectual condition of mankind in the present day, as compared with past ages. And its essential purport was contained in a single sentence. "I have come to the general conclusion," he said, "that there has been no advance either in intellect or morals from the days of the earliest Egyptians to the keel-laying of the latest Dreadnought."

That this was no random utterance was evident enough. In point of fact, he was at the time engaged upon a book, "Social Environment and Moral Progress," which has now been issued, and which maintains the thesis then announced, and more. To attempt to appraise its pronouncements on past and present, and its proposals for the future, would be to pass judgment on all the deepest questions of life and society, of economics and ethics. But the book, like the interview before it, is sure to attract widespread interest; and it seems worth while, therefore, to analyze the significance of his chief proposition and to examine the character of his argument.

In the first place, then, the assertion itself does not mean what many doubtless will take it to mean. When Mr. Wallace speaks of morality not having improved, he refers to no objective standard, but to those "inherent and unchangeable" qualities that constitute what is truly "character," as distinguished from the external acts which we may perform, or from which we may refrain, out of regard to the demands of the society around us, and for the sake perhaps of winning praise or honor or worldly advancement. But with this understanding, we imagine that there are few thinking people who will be greatly startled to hear that morality has made no advance. Not many of us

are in the habit of pluming ourselves on being intrinsically better than our ancestors; we do not flatter ourselves that we are firmer in adhering to the standards of to-day than they to those of their own time and place. If to the red Indian the torture of an enemy is to be imputed as a virtue, if to the account of the mediæval soldier burning and pillage and rape are to be charged as the mere exercise of passions nobody expected to be held in check, if the barbarities of the slave trade are not to be accounted as having been morally worse two hundred years ago than are such evils as happen to-day to excite a corresponding degree of reprobation, and so on all along the line, then most of us will be quite prepared to admit that the world has not progressed morally. From the dawn of history, and before, there were manifested probably just about the same varying degrees of devotion to whatever were the accepted standards and ideals of the time and place, as are witnessed in our own day.

Dr. Wallace's arraignment of existing conditions is, however, by no means confined to the maintenance of this comprehensive but negative thesis. He pours forth denunciation after denunciation, with the fervor and scorn at once of a prophet speaking to a godless generation and of a man of science addressing an unthinking and ignorant world. He goes far beyond the assertion that the world is no better; again and again he declares that it is worse—and worse, too, in no refined meaning of the word, but in its simplest and crudest significance. "It is not too much to say," he declares near the end of the book, "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." But it is difficult to combine the rôle of the flaming prophet with that of the scientific seeker after truth. If any one wishes to be reminded of the evils that exist in our society, and of our moral shortcomings in dealing with them, he can find them set forth powerfully in Dr. Wallace's pages; but, incredible as it may seem, there is hardly so much as the pretence of an attempt at comparison with the past. It is almost as though one were to find out the dark places of a single city, and, not content with in-

dignation and rebuke, incontinently declare that one has proved this city to be the wickedest and most depraved "the world has ever seen."

The single place in which any serious attempt at comparison is made is in the chapter entitled *Indications of Increasing Moral Degradation*. How inadequate the statistics cited by Dr. Wallace are to the proving of what he alleges we cannot here undertake to show. But it is instructive to point out one cardinal defect. This may be indicated by taking that one of his three instances which he makes most prominent—the increase of deaths from alcoholism. The figures are very irregular, but let it be granted that they show, in the past half century, an increase from 40 deaths annually per million inhabitants to 65 deaths per million. Dr. Wallace himself admits that the showing is surprising, since "the drinking habit has certainly diminished"; and he proceeds to account for it in various more or less ingenious ways. But there is one way that does not occur to him, and which yet may be the true explanation. Everybody knows that the mean duration of life has been greatly increased during the half century. Is it not at least possible—nay, is it not, in the absence of evidence, highly probable—that these 25 additional drunkards per million who die nowadays of "alcoholism" used to be carried off by all sorts of diseases before they had had time to drink themselves to death? The eyes, as Carlyle said, see what they bring with them the power of seeing; and a passionate desire to find a foregone conclusion may deprive of all efficiency, as an instrument for the ascertainment of the truth, even so fine a mind as that of Alfred Russel Wallace.