Mid-Victorian Science Under Fire

THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB. By Horace Hutchinson. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.

THE machinery of Mr. Hutchinson's book is simple, and runs smoothly. A group of gentlemen are supposed to meet every other week in a London club for discussion, and in these chapters we have a shorthand report of their proceedings. Sometimes there is open debate, sometimes a paper is read in more formal fashion; but in either case the leader is a certain Launceston, a chemist engaged in the manufacture of poison gases (it is the time of the War), whose temper has been exacerbated by the fumes of the laboratory, and who argues with "rapier thrusts of wit" and "bludgeoning strokes of heavy and scarcely human rudeness." To him the other characters serve only as foils, but their creator has succeeded in giving a lively sense of reality to his Attic nights.

Launceston's chief adversary, rather an inarticulate foe it must be admitted, is an ancient and honored geologist who clings heroically to the mid-Victorian view of science as promulgated by Darwin and Spencer and Huxley; and the thesis of the book is primarily a savage onslaught on the presumptions of the evolutionary philosophy, as that philosophy used to be complacently held. The attack is directed mainly upon two points where a complete break occurs in the continuity of development. One of these is the transition from inorganic matter to life. Here Launceston—or shall we say Mr. Hutchinson?—has an easy victory; for it is true that every attempt to prove or discover the natural development of life from dead matter, whether by spontaneous generation or any other experiment or observation, has suffered a complete

and admitted failure—admitted, at least, except by minds immovably stalled in the bogs of mid-Victorian dogmatism.

The second point of attack is the passage from animal instinct to human reason. Here again Mr. Hutchinson maintains that the break in evolution has been radical, and to this end he supports a view of the psychology of animals which almost, but not quite, makes of them the sort of automata Descartes held them to be. Mr. Hutchinson's intention is clear enough; he would see at this point a new entity introduced by a specific act of creation, a soul conscious of itself and of divine faculties, and so would throw open the door to some form of religion. The design is laudable, but the execution leaves something to be desired. The truth is that in dealing with instinct and reason the author has laid hold of processes so subtle and evasive that no such sharp conclusions can be reached as in the case of inorganic matter and life.

The whole attack on Darwinism—Darwinism, that is, taken as an ultimately scientific and mechanical explanation of the nature of things—must be accepted as highly significant, whatever one may say of Mr. Hutchinson's chosen method of conducting the battle. His work indeed is only one of the innumerable signs that the old dogmatic position of Spencer and Huxley has lost its hold and is fast giving way to a humbler and more reasonable attitude towards the mystery of existence. Mr. Hutchinson must be recognized as a shrewd and well-armed champion, but it may be questioned whether the concentration of his attack on the two points where the wheels of the evolutionary machine do not come together—granted he is right as to the facts—does much more than scratch the surface of the problem. The dogmatism of science, as engaged to elucidate the nature of all phenomena in the terms of mechanics, can, one thinks, be undermined more effectively by showing how wilfully its central hypothesis ignores the known facts of life. Nevertheless Mr. Hutchinson's work must be reckoned with seriously, and his ability to amuse the reader with quip and jest and cutting irony may carry his arguments where a profounder philosophy would fall on deaf ears.

Having demolished the writhing monsters of mid-Victorian dogmatism, Mr. Hutchinson proceeds to plead for an admission of the great religious concepts of the being of God and of man's direct communication with the divine. He is right in maintaining that to argue for the existence of a God without at the same time showing some mode of communication between God and the human spirit is perfectly futile. Much that he writes on this head is fine and persuasive; but it might be wished that he had sufficiently shaken off the shackles of Darwinism to escape treating man's consciousness of the divine as merely a new intrusion into the scheme of development; and it would have been wiser to stand aloof from that very dubious reactionary current of the day, the effort to rehabilitate the belief in absolute mysticism.

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