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NOTE: James O'Donnell Bennett (1870-1940) was a writer for Chicago Record Herald and Chicago Tribune.... In addition to being a long-time journalist, Bennett was also a respected literary critic. Bennett died in Chicago in 1940.
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[page] 10

Seventy-sixth Paper-Charles Darwin; or, Reverence.

THE CLOSING WORDS OF "THE DESCENT OF MAN."

Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his having thus risen, instead of having been aboriginally placed there, may give him hopes for a still higher destiny in the distant future. But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it. I have given the evidence to the best of my ability; and we must acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.

CHARLES ROBERT DARWIN.

[1871. Descent, p. 405 AND CONCLUDING REMARKS. CHAP. XXI.]

THIS great, humble man had the true reverence. It was true because it was comprehensive. He did not wrangle and bicker with the clergyman of the little Kentish parish where for forty years he secluded himself; instead, he – he who formulated, in Justin McCarthy's pithy phrase, "the theory which astonished, captivated, or frightened the intellect of the world" [1]– sympathized with him and helped him in his social and charitable work.

[1] McCarthy, J. 1897, A history of our own times, p. 114.

He was above rancors. He knew no epithets of opprobrium. He did not say "miserable worm" about anything or anybody- nor about a worm. Such a phrase was alien to him. He could neither think it nor use it. His conception of the worm was otherwise. It was instinct with reverence. So, the year before he died, he wrote a book about worms – the common or garden worm – and that book is so entertaining, so eloquent, so packed with important matter, that it may be said to have made the worm literature. Thus:

When we behold a wide, turf-covered expanse, we should remember that its smoothness, on which so much of its beauty depends, is mainly due to all the inequalities having been slowly levelled by worms. It is a marvellous reflection that the whole of the superficial mould over

any such expanse has passed, and will again pass, every few years through the bodies of worms. The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of mans inventions; but long before he existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed, and still continues to be thus ploughed by earth-worms. It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organised creatures.

[1881. The formation of vegetable mould, through the action of worms, with observations on their habits, p. 313]

Think you that that passage was speculative? Nay: it was base upon most patient observation and on long-continued collection of data. Mr. Darwin found that in an acre of British soil there were, on an average, 53,000 earthworms, and in "fine old fallow ground" there might be half a million. They mass ten tons per acre through their bodies every year, and their castings cover the surface at the rate of three inches every fifteen years. This circulating and consequent aerating and sweetening of the soil they have been engaged upon "for millions of years."

Wilt thou, child, ever needlessly again tread upon a worm? The gentle Cowper said he would not reckon in his list of friends the man who would do that.

The child born into this age of the world can with difficulty be made to comprehend the amount of bitterness, bad language, and abject whimpering which was created by Darwin's theory – the theory which "astonished, captivated, or frightened" the intellect of Christendom. That theory, defined in the fewest possible words, and without the modifications which brevity makes impossible, is to the effect that plants and animals now on earth were not created in their present form, but have been evolved by unbroken descent, with modification of structure, from cruder forms.

The groundwork of what now is known as the Darwinian theory of evolution was laid in Mr. Darwin's first great book, "The Origin of Species," which was published on Nov. 24, 1859, when he was 50 years old. It was a best seller from the instant the first copy left the binder's hands. By evening of the first day of sale the first edition of 1,250 copies had been exhausted. The book was the result of twenty-two years of observation and thought, and of perhaps the most marvelous and fruitful genius for the correlation of data that the mind of man ever had exercised. The date of its appearance – Nov 24, 1859, is worth pinning in memory. A thousand years from now mankind will be remembering it with Oct, 12, 1492. On each date a new world swung into men's ken: Darwin's was far, far the vaster.

Twelve years later – 1871 – "The Origin of Species" was followed by "The Descent of Man," in which the theory heralded in the "Origin" was developed more systematically and was illustrated by masses of data which constitute some of the most diverting, most instructive, most humane, and most civilizing reading to be found in the English language. It is a book that meets the supreme test of a great book: No man having read it is ever the same man again. He is better friends with every living thing that moves upon the earth, in the waters beneath, or in the air above. He is more reverent and more hopeful; a more humble and at the same time a bigger man. He has ceased to think in channels; He begins to think in

vistas. He is a remade man – remade by a new sense of obligation and a new consciousness of possibilities. That is why zealots – the most clamorous of whom never looked into the book – are so affrighted by it. They know, or fear at least, that in this remade man a human soul has been lost to little things – to bickerings and cults and cants – and that the pettinesses so essential to their importance will matter no longer to him.

With these words the first chapter of "The Descent of Man" -filling twenty octavo pages and entitled "The Evidence or the Descent of Man From Some Lower Form"- Is heralded in the brief "Introduction":

The sole object of this work is to consider, firstly, whether man, like every other species is descended from some pre-existing form. Secondly, the manner of his development, and, thirdly, the value of the differences between the so-called races of man.

Twenty-one chapters follow- a pique to curiosity and a thrill of interest in the mere titles.

Here are a few: "On the Manner of Development of Man From Some Lower Form";

"Comparison of the Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals"; "On the Development of the Intellectual and Moral Faculties During Primeval and Civilized Times"; "On the Affinities and Genealogy of Man"; "Principles of Sexual Selection' -and so on.

Think you those titles threaten areas of theory and abstractions? It is not so, for such was not Darwin's method. His passion was for the concrete and specific. He probably collected and put in order, more facts than any man since Bacon had collected, and he worked on Bacon's principles, saying in the all too brief autobiography which his son Francis prefixed to his "Life and Letters":

I worked on true Baconian principles; and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale, more especially with respect to domesticated productions, by printed inquiries, by conversation with skillful breeders and gardeners, and by extensive reading. When I see the list of books of all kinds which I read and abstracted, including whole series of Journals and Transactions, I am surprised at my industry.

[Letters, p. 83]

As to the fascination of Darwin's facts, the young reader beginning the "Descent" may be referred to passage on "Attention," which comes a little less than a third of the way through Chapter III., and which begins with the pregnant words, "Hardly any faculty is more important for the intellectual progress of man than Attention."

There is an aspect of the "Descent" which it is desirable to emphasize in an article that is more especially addressed to young people: It is a matchless book of decorum. To controversial literature Charles Darwin brought a note so fine, so dignified, so suave, and still so free from palaver, that it amounted to a kind of piety. Here was a man who wrote books that dethroned ancient systems and of whom the great German newspaper, the Allgemeine Zeitung, said when he died, "Our century is Darwin's century," And yet, from first to last this man, whom Oliver Wendell Holmes called "the destroyer and creator," never failed to write in the spirit of a learner, His speculations became catapults that beat down the prisons of the mind, but if you will go attentively down his pages you will find these speculations ennobled by such phrases as "It has seemed to me highly probable,"... "as I believe,"... "as it seems to

me,"... "I am aware that much remains doubtful,"... and "but I have endeavored to give a fair view of the whole case."

- And these lines in the introduction to a work that was destined not alone to make but to, remake history always have seemed to me so gentle and simple that it is difficult- when one remembers the four and thirty years or consecrated truth-seeking Which the "Descent" represents- to read them without a moisture coming to the eyes:

This work contains hardly any original facts in regard to man: but as the conclusions at which I arrived, after drawing up a rough draught, appeared to me interesting, I thought that they might interest others.

Now, concerning the theory which he formulates and defines in the "Descent"- the two words are emphasized because men living 2,400 years before Charles Darwin and men living just before him (his grandfather Erasmus among them) and contemporaneously with him had intuitions of the theory- he says this in the last chapter of the book:

I am aware that the conclusions arrived at in this work will be denounced by some as highly irreligious; but he who thus denounces them is bound to shew why it is more irreligious to explain the origin of man as a distinct species by descent from some lower form, through the laws of variation and natural selection, than to explain the birth of the individual through the laws of ordinary reproduction. The birth both of the species and of the individual are equally parts of that grand sequence of events, which our minds refuse to accept as the result of blind chance. The understanding revolts at such a conclusion, whether or not we are able to believe that every slight variation of structure,—the union of each pair in marriage,—the dissemination of each seed,—and other such events, have all been ordained for some special purpose.

[1871. Descent, p. 395 AND CONCLUDING REMARKS. CHAP. XXI.]

That passage seems to me to epitomise as tellingly as any the spirit of sweet reasonableness which is the glory of the book, and this one (page 161 in the \$1 reprint) to sound better than any other the note of optimism which makes it one of the loftiest ethical documents of the ages:

To believe that man was aboriginally civilized and then suffered utter degradation in so many regions is to take a pitiably low view of human nature. It is apparently a truer and more cheerful view that progress has been much more general than retrogression; that man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals, and religion.

And now- although it deprives me for the present of crowding upon you young people, who are born into a happier, freer, cleaner time so far as the accessibility of this book to the young is concerned than I was born into, some of the amazing and disgusting facts concerning its early history-now, I am going to give you the ringing passage in which Charles Darwin declared that, as between remote descent from a monkey and more immediate descent from savage men, he was less reconciled to the savages, of whom he had seen much that was vile, than to the monkeys,- of whom he had seen much that was pleasant and commendable;

The main conclusion arrived at in this work, namely that man is descended from some lowly-organised form, will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many persons. But there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled, and distrustful. They possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they had no government, and were merciless to every one not of their own small tribe. He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins. For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper; or from that old baboon, who, descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs—as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practises infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.

[1871. Descent, p. 405 AND CONCLUDING REMARKS. CHAP. XXI.]