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CERTAIN
PERSONAL MATTERS

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So with a glimpse of these human tadpoles, in their deep close gallery, with their boring machinery ringing away, and artificial lights glaring and casting black shadows, the Professor's horoscope concludes. Humanity in dismal retreat before the cold, changed beyond recognition. Yet the Professor is reasonable enough, his facts are current science, his methods orderly. The contemplative man shivers at the prospect, starts up to poke the fire, and the whole of this remarkable book that is not written vanishes straightway in the smoke of his pipe. This is the great advantage of this unwritten literature: there is no bother in changing the books. The contemplative man consoles himself for the destiny of the species with the lost portion of Kubla Khan.

THE EXTINCTION OF MAN

It is part of the excessive egotism of the human animal that the bare idea of its extinction seems incredible to it. "A world without us!" it says, as a heady young Cephalaspis might have said it in the old Silurian sea. But since the Cephalaspis and the Coelacanth many a fine animal has increased and multiplied upon the earth, lording it over land or sea without a rival, and passed at last into the night. Surely it is not so unreasonable to ask why man should be an exception to the rule. From the scientific standpoint at least any reason for such exception is hard to find.

No doubt man is undisputed master at the present time — at least of most of the land surface; but so it has been before with other animals. Let us consider what light geology has to throw upon this. The great land and sea reptiles of the Mesozoic period, for instance, seem to have been as secure as humanity is now in their pre-eminence. But they passed away and left no descendants when the new orders of the mammals emerged from their obscurity. So, too, the huge Titanotheria of the American continent, and all the powerful mammals of Pleistocene South America, the sabre-toothed lion, for instance, and the Machaonchhasia suddenly came to a finish when they were still almost at the zenith of their rule. And in no case does the record of the fossils show a really dominant species succeeded by its own descendants. What has usually happened in the past appears to be the emergence of some type of animal hitherto rare and unimportant, and the extinction, not simply of the previously ruling species, but of most of the forms that are at all closely related to it. Sometimes, indeed, as in the case of the extinct giants
of South America, they vanished without any considerable rivals, victims of pestilence, famine, or, it may be, of that cumulative inefficiency that comes of a too undisputed life. So that the analogy of geology, at any rate, is against this too acceptable view of man's certain tenure of the earth for the next few million years or so.

And, after all, even now man is by no means such a master of the kingdoms of life as he is apt to imagine. The sea, that mysterious nursery of living things, is for all practical purposes beyond his control. The low-water mark is his limit. Beyond that he may do a little with seine and dredge, murder a few million herrings a year as they come in to spawn, butcher his fellow air-breather, the whale, or haul now and then an unlucky king-crab or strange sea-urchin out of the deep water, in the name of science; but the life of the sea as a whole knows him not, plays out its slow drama of change and development unheeding him, and may in the end, in mere idle sport, throw up some new terrestrial denizens, some new competitor for space to live in and food to live upon, that will sweep him and all his little contrivances out of existence, as certainly and inevitably as he has swept away ank, bison, and dodo during the last two hundred years.

For instance, there are the Crustacea. As a group the crabs and lobsters are confined below the high-water mark. But experiments in air-breathing are no doubt in progress in this group—we already have tropical land-crabs—and as far as we know there is no reason why in the future these creatures should not increase in size and terrestrial capacity. In the past we have the evidence of the fossil Paradoxides that creatures of this kind may at least attain a length of six feet, and, considering their intense paganism, a crab of such dimensions would be a formidable creature as one could well imagine. And their amphibious capacity would give them an advantage against us such as at present is only to be found in the case of the alligator or crocodile. If we imagine a shark that could raid out upon the land, or a tiger that could take refuge in the sea, we should have a fair suggestion of what a terrible monster a large predatory crab might prove. And so far as zoological science goes we must, at least, admit that such a creature is an evolutionary possibility.

Then, again, the order of the Cephalopods, to which belong the cuttle-fish and the octopus (sacred to Victor Hugo), may be, for all we can say to the contrary, an order with a future. Their kindred, the Gastropods, have, in the case of the snail and slug, learnt the trick of air-breathing. And not improbably there are even now genera of this order that have escaped the naturalist, or even well-known genera whose possibilities in growth and dietary are still unknown. Suppose some day a specimen of a new species is caught off the coast of Kent; it excites remark at a Royal Society soirée, engenders a Science Note or so, "A Huge Octopus!" and in the next year or so three or four other specimens come to hand, and the thing becomes familiar. "Probably a new and larger variety of Octopus so-and-so, hitherto supposed to be tropical," says Professor Gargoyle, and thinks he has disposed of it. Then conceives some mysterious boating accidents and deaths while bathing. A large animal of this kind coming into a region of frequent wrecks might so easily acquire a preferential taste for human nutriment, just as the Colorado beetle acquired a new taste for the common potato and gave up its old food-plants some years ago. Then perhaps a school or pack or flock of Octopus gigas would be found busy picking the sailors off a stranded ship, and then in the course of a few score years it might begin to stroll up the beaches and batter on excursionists. Soon it would be a common feature of the watering-places—possibly at last commoner than excursionists. Suppose such a creature were to appear—and it is, we repeat, a possibility, if perhaps a remote one—how could it be fought against? Something might be done by torpedoes; but, so far as our past knowledge goes, man has no means of seriously diminishing the numbers of any animal of the most rudimentary intelligence that made its fastness in the sea.

Even on land it is possible to find creatures that with a
little modification might become excessively dangerous to
the human ascendency. Most people have read of the
migratory ants of Central Africa, against which no man
can stand. On the march they simply clear out whole
villages, drive men and animals before them in headlong
rout, and kill and eat every living creature they can
capture. One wonders why they have not already spread
the area of their devastations. But at present no doubt
they have their natural checks, of ant-eating birds, or
what not. In the near future it may be that the
European immigrant, as he sets the balance of life swing-
ing in his vigorous manner, may kill off these ant-eating
animals, or otherwise unwittingly remove the checks that
now keep these terrible little pests within limits. And
once they begin to spread in real earnest, it is hard to see
how their advance could be stopped. A world devoured
by ants seems incredible now, simply because it is not
within our experience; but a naturalist would have a dull
imagination who could not see in the numerous species
of ants, and in their already high intelligence, far more
possibility of strange developments than we have in the
solitary human animal. And no doubt the idea of the
small and feeble organism of man, triumphant and omni-
present, would have seemed equally incredible to an
intelligent mammoth or a paleolithic cave bear.

And, finally, there is always the prospect of a new
disease. As yet science has scarcely touched more than
the fringe of the probabilities associated with the minute
fungi that constitute our zymotic diseases. But the bacilli
have no more settled down into their final quiescence
than have men; like ourselves, they are adapting them-
selves to new conditions and acquiring new powers. The
plagues of the Middle Ages, for instance, seem to have
been begotten of a strange bacillus engendered under
conditions that sanitary science, in spite of its panacea
drainage, still admits are imperfectly understood, and
for all we know even now we may be quite unwittingly
evolving some new and more terrible plague—a plague
that will not take ten or twenty or thirty per cent., as
plagues have done in the past, but the entire hundred.

No; man's complacent assumption of the future is too
confident. We think, because things have been easy for
mankind as a whole for a generation or so, we are going
on to perfect comfort and security in the future. We
think that we shall always go to work at ten and leave
off at four, and have dinner at seven for ever and ever.
But these four suggestions, out of a host of others, must
surely do a little against this complacency. Even now,
for all we can tell, the coming terror may be crouching
for its spring and the fall of humanity be at hand. In
the case of every other predominant animal the world has
ever seen, I repeat, the hour of its complete ascendency
has been the eve of its entire overthrow. But if some
poor story-writing man ventures to figure this sober
probability in a tale, not a reviewer in London but will
tell him his theme is the utterly impossible. And, when
the thing happens, one may doubt if even then one will
get the recognition one deserves.