

THE HUMAN ADVENTURE

Alone among all the living things this globe has borne, man reckons with destiny. All other living things obey the forces that created them; and when the mood of the power changes, submit themselves passively to extinction. Man only looks upon those forces in the face, anticipates the exhaustion of Nature's kindness, seeks weapons to defend himself. Last of the children of Saturn, he escapes their general doom. He dispossesses his begetter of all possibility of replacement, and grasps the sceptre of the world. Before man the great and prevalent creatures followed one another processionally to extinction; the early monsters of the ancient seas, the clumsy amphibians struggling breathless to the land, the reptiles, the theriomorpha and the dinosaurs, the bat-winged reptiles of the Mesozoic forests, the colossal grotesque first mammals, the giant sloths, the mastodons and mammoths; it is as if some idle dreamer moulded them and broke them and cast them aside, until at last comes man and seizes the creative wrist that would wipe him out of being again.

There is nothing else in all the world that so turns against the powers that have made it, unless it be man's follower fire. But fire is witless; a little stream, a changing breeze can stop it. Man circumvents. If fire were human it would build boats across the rivers and outmanoeuvre the wind. It would lie in wait in sheltered places, smouldering, husbanding its fuel until the grass was yellow and the

forests serene. But fire is a mere creature of man's; our world before his coming knew nothing of it in any of its habitable places, never saw it except in the lightning flash or remotely on some volcanic coronet. Man brought it into the commerce of life, a shining, resentful slave, to hound off the startled beasts from his sleeping-place and serve him like a dog.

Suppose that some enduring intelligence watched through the ages the successions of life upon this planet, marked the spreading first of this species and then that, the conflicts, the adaptations, the predominances, the dyings away, and conceive how it would have witnessed this strange dramatic emergence of a rare great ape to manhood. To such a mind the creature would have seemed at first no more than one of several varieties of clambering frugivorous mammals, a little distinguished by a disposition to help his clumsy walking with a stake and reinforce his fist with a stone. The foreground of the picture would have been filled by the rhinoceros and mammoth, the great herds of ruminants, the sabre-toothed lion and the big bears. Then presently the observer would have noted a peculiar increasing handiness about the obscurer type, an unwonted intelligence growing behind its eyes. He would have perceived a disposition in this creature no beast had shown before, a disposition to make itself independent of the conditions of climate and the chances of the seasons. Did shelter fail among the trees and rocks, this curious new thing-began to make itself harbours of its own; was food irregular, it multiplied food. It began to spread out from its original circumstances, fitting itself to novel needs, leaving the

forests, invading the plains, following the watercourses upward and downward, presently carrying the smoke of its fires like a banner of conquest into wintry desolations and the high places of the earth.

The first onset of man must have been comparatively slow, the first advances needed long ages. By small degrees it gathered pace. The stride from the scattered savagery of the earlier stone period to the first cities, historically a vast interval, would have seemed to that still watcher, measuring by the standards of astronomy and the rise and decline of races and genera and orders, a step almost abrupt. It took, perhaps, a thousand generations or so to make it. In that interval man passed from an animal-like obedience to the climate and the weather and his own instincts, from living in small family parties of a score or so over restricted areas of indulgent country, to permanent settlements, to the life of tribal and national communities and the beginnings of cities. He had spread in that fragment of time over great areas of the earth's surface, and now he was adapting himself to the Arctic circle on the one hand and to the life of the tropics on the other; he had invented the plough and the ship, and subjugated most of the domestic animals; he was beginning to think of the origin of the world and the mysteries of being. Writing had added its enduring records to oral tradition, and he was already making roads. Another five or six hundred generations at most bring him to ourselves. We sweep into the field of that looker-on, the momentary incarnations of this sempiternal being, Man. And after us there comes--

A curtain falls.

The time in which we, whose minds meet here in this writing, were born and live and die, would be to that imagined observer a mere instant's phase in the swarming liberation of our kind from ancient imperatives. It would seem to him a phase of unprecedented swift change and expansion and achievement. In this last handful of years, electricity has ceased to be a curious toy, and now carries half mankind upon their daily journeys, it lights our cities till they outshine the moon and stars, and reduces to our service a score of hitherto unsuspected metals; we clamber to the pole of our globe, scale every mountain, soar into the air, learn how to overcome the malaria that barred our white races from the tropics, and how to draw the sting from a hundred such agents of death. Our old cities are being rebuilt in towering marble; great new cities rise to vie with them. Never, it would seem, has man been so various and busy and persistent, and there is no intimation of any check to the expansion of his energies.

And all this continually accelerated advance has come through the quickening and increase of man's intelligence and its reinforcement through speech and writing. All this has come in spite of fierce instincts that make him the most combatant and destructive of animals, and in spite of the revenge Nature has attempted time after time for his rebellion against her routines, in the form of strange diseases and nearly universal pestilences. All this has come as a necessary consequence of the first obscure gleaming of deliberate thought and

reason through the veil of his animal being. To begin with, he did not know what he was doing. He sought his more immediate satisfaction and safety and security. He still apprehends imperfectly the change that comes upon him. The illusion of separation that makes animal life, that is to say, passionate competing and breeding and dying, possible, the blinkers Nature has put upon us that we may clash against and sharpen one another, still darken our eyes. We live not life as yet, but in millions of separated lives, still unaware except in rare moods of illumination that we are more than those fellow beasts of ours who drop off from the tree of life and perish alone. It is only in the last three or four thousand years, and through weak and tentative methods of expression, through clumsy cosmogonies and theologies, and with incalculable confusion and discoloration, that the human mind has felt its way towards its undying being in the race. Man still goes to war against himself, prepares fleets and armies and fortresses, like a sleep-walker who wounds himself, like some infatuated barbarian who hacks his own limbs with a knife.

But he awakens. The nightmares of empire and racial conflict and war, the grotesques of trade jealousy and tariffs, the primordial dream-stuff of lewdness and jealousy and cruelty, pale before the daylight which filters between his eyelids. In a little while we individuals will know ourselves surely for corpuscles in his being, for thoughts that come together out of strange wanderings into the coherence of a waking mind. A few score generations ago all living things were in our ancestry. A few score generations ahead, and all mankind will be in sober fact

descendants from our blood. In physical as in mental fact we separate persons, with all our difference and individuality, are but fragments, set apart for a little while in order that we may return to the general life again with fresh experiences and fresh acquirements, as bees return with pollen and nourishment to the fellowship of the hive.

And this Man, this wonderful child of old earth, who is ourselves in the measure of our hearts and minds, does but begin his adventure now. Through all time henceforth he does but begin his adventure. This planet and its subjugation is but the dawn of his existence. In a little while he will reach out to the other planets, and take that greater fire, the sun, into his service. He will bring his solvent intelligence to bear upon the riddles of his individual interaction, transmute jealousy and every passion, control his own increase, select and breed for his embodiment a continually finer and stronger and wiser race. What none of us can think or will, save in a disconnected partiality, he will think and will collectively. Already some of us feel our merger with that greater life. There come moments when the thing shines out upon our thoughts. Sometimes in the dark sleepless solitudes of night, one ceases to be so-and-so, one ceases to bear a proper name, forgets one's quarrels and vanities, forgives and understands one's enemies and oneself, as one forgives and understands the quarrels of little children, knowing oneself indeed to be a being greater than one's personal accidents, knowing oneself for Man on his planet, flying swiftly to unmeasured destinies through the starry stillnesses of space.