

**"IS MANKIND ADVANCING?"
[FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.]**

"IN A BOOK of the above title Mrs. John Martin administers a stiff rebuke to the pride and self-confidence of our age. She feels, and she argues with great skill, that humanity is not advancing in any real sense. 'The world today,' she remarks, 'is convinced that it is making rapid progress. In western Europe and in America increased wealth production, democratic institutions, free education, free thought, the opening of opportunities in new countries, the acceleration of travel and communication, have combined to produce upon our generation an exhilarating sense of expansion, of liberation, of growing power.' But this impression, it seems, is an illusion. We have not really progressed. Mrs. Martin likens modern civilization to a runaway locomotive going at tremendous speed on a wrong track. 'We have lost our way,' she says; and adds: 'Man may have risen from the ape; also the ape may be a degenerate man. Men are headed ape-ward quite as frequently as angel-ward. Time runs an elevator which goes both ways, down as well as up.'

"'What *is* progress?' asks Mrs. Martin at the outset of her argument. She replies: 'The word progress should, I believe, be exclusively used to express a rise in human capacity, the development of higher orders of human beings. Thus restricted, it remains, as it should, a strictly qualitative, never a quantitative, term. Improved conditions conduce to progress, and are necessary to progress, but may exist without producing progress. Progress is something more than improvement. Progress means movement forward.' This definition leads on to a wonderful picture:

"'Looking back along the line of history, we can see that we (mankind) have been traveling a long, long road whose winding way, rising and falling century after century, we can trace back for a few thousand years until it enters a trackless desert and fades utterly from

our view in the mists of antiquity. Immediately behind the spot where we now stand there seems to lie a downward slope; that is to say, we seem to have been ascending since the eighteenth, the seventeenth, yes, part of the sixteenth centuries. But the Elizabethan era and the period of the Renaissance in Italy do not lie below us. Life was very full and splendid then; man had climbed to a higher point of outlook than that upon which we now act out our little day. Behind those centuries the way becomes obscure; it seems to pass through deep and [R4916 : page 419] silent forests, over dim, somnolent plains, in shadowy twilights and through deserted wastes, until it falls away into a wide, cold swamp, noisome, dark, terrible, abounding in reptiles and the horrid monsters of sick dreams.

"Beyond this death-bound stillness of the Dark Ages, the road ascends again into the upper air. Birds are singing, the sunlight touches the grain fields; the bustle of human life appears, troops of soldiery in glittering armor, citizens in gorgeous raiment, all the pomp and pageantry of the triumphant Roman Empire. Behind Rome the road drops away again suddenly, a deep, sharp drop into a valley, beyond which it begins to rise once more and, becoming steeper and steeper, it lifts our gaze to the very mountain top, where among the clouds against the deep blue sky, swept by fresh breezes, enthroned amid snow-white temples, gleaming in the golden sunshine, Greek civilization sits upon the pinnacle of human greatness.'

"Having formulated her definition of progress and expressed her conception of the human zenith, Mrs. Martin goes on to ask by what method we may set about to measure the degree of progress existing in any age. She answers this question in the spirit of Huxley's statement: 'The advance of mankind has everywhere depended upon the production of men of genius.' It is by the number and caliber of its men of genius, she holds, that any epoch must be tested.

"In the realm of practical science and pure thought, Aristotle and Plato are probably the two greatest intellects the world has ever

known. 'Aristotle,' says Hegel, 'was a genius beside whom no age has an equal to place'; while Emerson exclaims: 'Compare Plato with other men. How many ages have gone by and he remains unapproached!' 'Have we, in modern times,' Mrs. Martin inquires, 'any thinkers who can compare with these ancient Greeks? Kant may be cited, and Darwin and Herbert Spencer; but are they as great as Plato and Aristotle? Very few would seriously maintain that Plato and Aristotle have ever been equaled, much less surpassed.

"Greek sculpture, by almost universal consent, is unexcelled. The work of Phidias has no rival unless it be the work of Michael Angelo. Greek poetic genius finds transcendent expression in Homer, one of the four or five greatest figures in the world's literature, and the dramas of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus take their place with the dramas of Shakespeare. Dante, of the thirteenth century, and Goethe, of the eighteenth century, have no peers today. The great story-tellers,' Mrs. Martin reminds us, 'appeared, as was fitting, in the childhood [R4916 : page 420] of the race. The writers of the Old Testament were delightful *raconteurs*. Ruth is the most lovely of idyls, the stories of Adam and Eve, Joseph and his brethren, Moses and Pharaoh's daughter, Samson and Delilah, are unsurpassable as tales, while the story of the Exodus and the adventures of the children of Israel in the wilderness are told with unending charm and epic fire. As for animal stories, fables, etc., Aesop, writing seven centuries before Christ, has never been surpassed for point and brevity as well as for practical common sense. Boccaccio (1313) and Cervantes (1547) can hardly be said to have been outdone by any of the countless numbers of story-tellers who in our day are pouring out such a flood of fiction that one is sometimes almost led to believe that the world is entering upon its second childhood.'

"Coming next to men of action and statesmen, Mrs. Martin names four as being of the first rank, namely, Alexander, Caesar and Pericles, who lived before Christ, and Napoleon, who belongs to the nineteenth century. 'We may say,' she continues, 'that there seem to have been in

history about thirty-five men of absolutely first rank. These are Raphael, Michael Angelo, Phidias, Ictinus, Homer, Shakespeare, Demosthenes, Goethe, Aeschylus, Beethoven, Aristotle, Newton, Euclid, Plato, Dante, Kant, Saint Paul, Pericles, Darwin, Moses, Cicero, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Mahomet, Socrates, Columbus, Thucydides, Hipparchus, Hippocrates, Hannibal, Washington.' If Cicero, Thucydides, Hipparchus, Hippocrates, Hannibal, Columbus, Washington and Darwin be omitted from this list, as possibly not measuring up to the first rank, we have twenty-seven names. 'Of these twenty-seven men of transcendent genius,' Mrs. Martin comments, 'eleven were produced by one small district. Ten of them were brought forth by one small city about the size of Fall River, Mass., or Paterson, N.J. The little city of Athens produced in a few years more men of consummate genius than did all the millions of inhabitants of China, Arabia, India, Palestine, Rome, Carthage and all of Europe breeding for two thousand years!'

"But surely, it will be objected, genius is not the only standard of progress. Mankind, though it may not produce today the equals of the intellectual prodigies of the past, is nevertheless advancing in industrial and scientific efficiency, in moral insight, in democratic culture. Mrs. Martin meets this objection in a series of chapters.

"The fact that we have more things than we ever had before and can go to more places and 'get there' more rapidly, is not necessarily, she contends, a sign of progress. 'I detest,' she quotes Herbert Spencer as saying, 'that conception of social progress which presents as its aim increase of population, growth of wealth, spread of commerce. In this ideal of human existence there is contemplated quantity only, and not quality. Instead of an immense amount of life of low type, I would far sooner see half the amount of life of a high type. A prosperity which is exhibited in board of trade tables, year by year increasing their totals, is, to a large extent, not a prosperity at all, but an adversity.' In spite of all our wealth, the blight of poverty, with its accompanying sickness, suffering, crime, insanity and vice, continues. The social

disease manifested in 'atrophy and hypertrophy,' in 'extremities bleeding at the bottom, bloating at the top, decay in both,' is a portent of the modern world. It was not known in Athens. 'Improvements in machinery,' Mrs. Martin continues, 'have rendered the lot of the workers in some respects harder than before. Machinery,' she says, 'is the great disappointment of the modern world. We have quadruple-expansion engines which have a thirty-seven thousand horse-power, but they have not rendered less arduous the labor of coal miners. The sewing-machine was hailed as the deliverer of the sewing woman, but since its invention the sweating system has spread. The digging of the Suez canal brought India four thousand miles nearer to Europe, but India remains as miserable and poverty-stricken as before. Ocean freight rates on wheat from England to the United States have dropped to one-third in thirty-five years, but twelve millions of people, it is reported, remain in that country on the verge of starvation.' The argument proceeds:

"Many modern inventions, instead of being sources of pride, should be occasions to us of the deepest humiliation, and others are only suggestive of the varied misery whose existence demanded their invention. Thus ingenious firearms witness to burglary and need of self-defense and the sleepless hatred between men; varieties of medicine indicate new varieties of disease, while surgery points to the failure of the whole science of medicine, even as charities reveal the depth of national poverty and the breakdown of the national economies; the police force marks the extent of national crime; insane asylums, prisons, tell their own story, as do the mountains of false hair, legs, arms, and the annual consumption in the United States alone of twenty millions of false teeth!"

"The real point at issue, as Mrs. Martin sees it, is summed up in the question: Is it possible to point to the modern world and say, 'Here are men of a more developed type, more intelligent, healthier, more moral, and made so by our vast improvements in the material conditions of life?' She herself does not see how this question can be

answered in the affirmative. In her eyes, modern civilization is a Frankenstein that already threatens to destroy its makers. Very much of our modern activity appeals to her as 'sound and fury signifying nothing.' As she puts it:

"The enormous number of inventions which are daily rendering the mechanism of our existence more complex may be roughly divided into four classes, those whose purpose is:

"1. To make more things.

"2. To get there more quickly, or to communicate more quickly.

"3. To kill men faster.

"4. To alleviate suffering.

"These, then, would appear to be the leading ideals of our age. To have more things; to get there quickly; to kill men rapidly; and to save pain.

"There is one element common to the first three classes of invention – they are designed to save time. The mammoth reaper which mows a county in a few days, the express train with its sixty miles an hour, the marine cable bringing an answer from the antipodes in a few minutes, the machine guns which cut down an army like a field of timothy, or the torpedo-boats which sink a navy – down to the latest egg-beater and corkscrew, are all designed to save time. We may almost say that the whole aim of man's ingenuity, embodied in thousands upon thousands of contrivances, has been directed toward the one sole object of saving time. His railroads, trolleys, canals, tunnels, cables, elevators, bicycles, automobiles, etc., are all for the purpose of enabling him to save time in getting there. His telegraphs, telephones, etc., are devised in order to save time in sending messages. His myriad machines are invented for the purpose of saving time in producing more things. His Gatling guns, torpedoes, automatic firing

rifles, etc., are designed to save time in killing men.... [R4917 : page 421]

"And what is the result? "*The result is that men have less time now than they have ever had since the world began.*"

"Mrs. Martin is equally emphatic in denying any substantial moral progress. In the matter of ethical theory, she agrees with Buckle in feeling that advance has not only not taken place, but is not possible. To do good to others; to sacrifice for their benefit your own wishes; to love your neighbor as yourself; to forgive your enemies; to restrain your passions; to honor your parents; to respect those who are set over you – these and a few others, according to Buckle, are the sole essentials of morals, and they have been known for thousands of years. In the matter of moral practice, can it be contended that our present age is supreme? On the contrary, Mrs. Martin avers, we are not as honest, as temperate, as just, as brave, or as public-spirited as the ancient Greeks.

"When she comes to the question of the diffusion of intelligence, she is still skeptical. Even granting that we have today a far larger number of good, average intelligences than in the past, can this fact be said to constitute progress in any real sense? Mrs. Martin replies:

"Progress concerns itself only with quality; it means the increased power of human faculty, not the mere numerical increase of human beings.

"This is perfectly clear if one reflects a moment upon what took place in the past, during the march from the anthropoid age up to, say, Shakespeare. Suppose at any step of this ascent it had been asserted that to multiply the species in its then stage would be progress; suppose, for instance, that a community of apes, being fairly well fed and merrily engaged in pelting one another with cocoanuts in the forest primeval, should have decided that the multiplication of apes in this (to them) satisfactory condition should be esteemed progress.

Obviously they would have been mistaken. Progress meant moving toward Shakespeare, and progress could not take place until the anthropoid ape passed up into a higher species. This is as true of our stage as it has been of any previous one.'

"Genuine progress, in Mrs. Martin's sense of the word, takes place when certain individuals emerge from the common level and establish a higher standard of human capacity and excellence. The problem of progress is therefore synonymous with the problem of producing great men. She says:

"The ideal aim of society is the production of men of genius, because it is through the activities of these that mankind acquires the means of its highest development and the satisfaction of its deepest needs. A society adopting such an end as its goal would find all grades of labor falling each into its just and honorable place, being each contributive, inasmuch as in it lay, to the attainment of the consciously realized common end.

"The ideal of democracy is a horizontal society, but every day is demonstrating more and more clearly that this ideal is unattainable because in the nature of things impossible. Society is not horizontal; it is perpendicular. It is not flat like the sea; it grows upward like a tree toward the light. The Greek method of trying to discover justice and apply it to society, on the hypothesis that society was perpendicular (that is, naturally disposed in sections one above the other like a tree), might have led to success. It is becoming increasingly evident that our efforts to achieve justice, based upon the false hypothesis that society is level like the sea, can never solve our problems. Justice is within the bounds of attainment to a society which realizes that it has at the heart of its life a common aim – to produce the fruit of the tree – and where each individual aims at fulfilling the function to which it is best adapted toward that common end.'

"This train of argument inevitably culminates in a plea for eugenics; but eugenics in its present stage holds out what Mrs. Martin

can regard only as a somewhat desolating prospect. She declares in concluding:

"No more alluring prospect could be held up to the sorrowing and impatient lover of his kind than that propounded by the eugenicist. Think of breeding poets to order like Saint Andreasberg canaries, or Abraham Lincolns as required! Think of winning blue ribbons with lovely young girls and athletic boys bred and groomed for the show! Think of securing Rockefellers or Carnegies in one's family at will, and thus successfully replenish the family coffers!

"Alas for the vanity of these hopes! Eugenics in its present amorphous condition, while it presents no end which seems to be unattainable, presents no beginning which seems to be feasible. Many decades must be passed in the bare effort to accustom men to the idea. Long, long years the deliberate improvement of human breeds must be discussed and dreamed of before it can be done. For this, which is the most stupendous task man has ever attempted, will need his all of intelligence, will, endurance, and foresight."

– *Current Literature.*

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