

## THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST.

Rev. E. A. Wasson in the Crown for December. The Crown is Edited by Mr. Wasson, and Published by B. W. Terlinde, at Newark, N. J.

"The survival of the fittest."

This phrase was devised by Herbert Spencer to indicate the result of the struggle for existence. This struggle, and hence the consequent survival, is supposed to exist in the whole sphere of life, vegetable as well as animal. You can see it, most of the year, in any vacant lot among the weeds. You find it exemplified among vagrant cats and dogs. The vegetable is in its way as pugnacious as the animal, as pugnacious and as cruel. Why do animals fight? Watts's answer will not carry us far:

Let dogs delight to bark and bite  
For 'tis their nature to.

But why is it their nature? Because self-preservation is the first law of nature. Creatures fight to live, and they destroy others in order to save themselves. The big fish swallow the little, because they need them in their life business.

This struggle for existence often develops qualities that from the human point of view are admirable; strength, swiftness, keenness of vision and of scent, size, and others.

Now, some men, and some wise and good men, hold that this struggle for existence is as necessary and potent and beneficial in human society as among the flora and fauna. It is cruel, they say, but beneficial. It eliminates weaklings, and builds up strong, self-reliant men and women. As the big fish swallow the little fish, so the big men swallow the little men, and the strong men the weak. And so this principle is employed to excuse and even justify cruelty and oppression and robbery and wrong generally.

In this argument there is a confusion of thought. The word "fittest" is used in a double sense. Scientific men use it in a natural, not a moral sense. "Fittest" means best adjusted to conditions. It is an unmoral word. It applies as fully to the vegetable as to bird or man. Nature has her own standard of fitness. Nature has no regard for what we call progress nor for our morality. She has an ethics of her own: "Meet my conditions or perish." In some situations she prefers the rat to the man, for the rat survives and the man perishes. In Death's Valley the horse left to his own resources speedily dies; but some forms of desert life flourish and multiply. Under certain conditions a man is of less account than a clam in nature's eyes. The struggle for existence does not necessarily call for or make for what we call progress from lower to higher forms. Far from it. In a cold climate the higher tropical vegetation would be crowded out by lower and simpler forms; and when the earth enters on its decline nature will progressively prefer the simpler cruder forms, the forms that make the least demand on her; as the 50-cent coolie will crowd out the \$2 American.

Moreover, it must be admitted that in the human sphere the fittest to survive are by no means always the best morally; often the reverse. Often we mourn at the funeral of some man or woman untimely cut off, whose life was a beneficence to all,

who could be ill spared, whose departure fills some home and some lives with misery. Yet here nearby, perhaps in the same family, is some good-for-nothing, of no use to himself or anyone else, who is spared to a good old age. The ne'er-do-well in this case is preferred and favored by nature as in her view the fittest to survive. The murderer survives his poor, misled, deceived, trusting victim. Nature prefers the murderer as in her view the fittest. A man died some time ago full of years and honor and in the odor of sanctity. A few months after his death it was discovered that for years he had been a rogue. Yet through all those years nature had no rebuke. "He was good enough for me," was her attitude. If he had been an honest man and had encountered disease in the line of duty, it is by no means certain that she would have saved him alive. In politics nature by no means uniformly gives the palm to the upright and wise man. In fact, integrity is oftener a bar to advancement in politics than not. The poet tells of "serpents which creep where man disdains to climb." Virtue is often a positive handicap to natural survival. The martyrs of all causes have found and find it so. Jesus perished and Barabbas survived, because nature thought Barabbas the fitter; and so of Peter and Paul; and Savonarola, and Bruno and Mozart. And Brigham Young died wealthy and powerful and happy.

All this to show that the law of the survival of the fittest has of itself no moral value; unless indeed we include ethics and conscience in the realm of nature. This is quite permissible; only in that case our argument would have to be stated differently, but the conclusions would not be affected.

Now, of course, the law of the survival of the fittest applies to man. Only, with man there is another factor to be taken into account—reason. Here is a plot of ground with potatoes and corn growing on it; and a little garden with roses. Now let that plot and that garden alone for the season, and then for a second season; and where will your potatoes and corn and roses be? Run out and overcome by the weeds. And in your sorrow I remark, "Well, the great beneficent law of the survival of the fittest has been vindicated. Let us utter our thanks into the infinite vault." And you answer, "The law of the survival of the fittest be hanged. Next time I'll pull the weeds up, and the potatoes and corn and roses will grow." Now, in uprooting the weeds will you be uprooting also the law of the survival of the fittest? By no means. That law will be as potent as ever. Under the new conditions, the flower and the vegetable will flourish because they are better suited to the new conditions than the weeds are. But what has made the difference? Why, a power that wars on weeds and carefully nourishes their competitors. Nature does not care what that power is, whether human or animal or vegetable or climatic or chemical. The hairy mastodon was once fitted to conditions in Siberia and flourished in great numbers. A sudden catastrophic glaciation took place and the mastodon perished because he was unfitted for the new conditions. In that case, the power that worked the change was natural. But the effect was the same as if it had been national. For reason can alter, select, abolish, substitute, create conditions, of course, within certain limits. That is, man can determine what is to sur-

vive by his control over conditions. Man is the product of conditions; but he is also the producer of conditions. Thus, naturally, the weak, diseased, insane of men would perish. But man has altered the conditions so these classes are kept alive. Chickens survive and hawks perish; the sheep survive and the wolves perish; consumptives survive and the bacilli perish; not because man arbitrarily wills it, but because willing it, he has the knowledge and the power to alter conditions to produce the desired result. Under certain conditions, which in fact have been historical and are, in parts of the world, contemporary, the heavy-weight champion will survive an Emerson or a Longfellow. But under other conditions the heavy-weight champion is flung into a cell unless he behaves himself; and Emerson and Longfellow dine with the president. Certain social conditions encourage well-bred idlers and loafers; and if individually they perish, their race survives. But other conditions will extinguish them, and encourage honest labor of brawn or brain. Man himself decides, or may, what sort of fitness shall survive, moral fitness or merely natural, that is, animal fitness, the fitness of brute might. The drivers of the mail carts on a certain long route in England in the early days were invariably very late in arriving at their destinations, because they stopped and tarried at the public houses along the road to tipple. Fines, reprimands, threats, discharges, were of no avail. Finally a bright official conceived this remedy. He gave these drivers permission to carry passengers as well as mail; and the passenger fares were to go into their own pockets. Presto, there were no more late arrivals. For the passengers who had paid their good money would not permit the driver to loiter at public houses; and the driver himself had no inclination to do so for fear of losing his fares. The change in conditions made different men, where exhortations and prayers were of no avail.

Out of nature's overflowing storehouses man can order what he pleases; for she has everything in stock. Only you can't get what you wish at once, and it takes longer for some orders to be served than others. Man is making himself, and he is making his fellows. If he wishes it, he can produce a state of society where fraud and violence and cruelty and rapine and falsehood and pride and greed and brutality shall shrink and hide themselves abashed, and waste and perish in the presence of truth and honor and justice and love. There is a way to do it. If man does not know this way, he can learn it. The law of the survival of the fittest shall always rule; but that very law, in happy contrast with its earlier remorseless workings, shall give the victory to the divine man, who shall carry the lambs in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young; in whose hands the bruised reed shall not be broken, and the smoking flax shall not be quenched.

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