

The Root of the Evil

Meditations of a Naturalist in Wartime

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

A MAJOR factor in the present lamentably disordered state of our planet is the delusion of certain nations that they are, on the basis of race, distinguished above all others by superior natural endowments, and that by virtue of outstanding capacities they are destined to rule and lead the dull remainder of mankind. Since this creed is fostered by scheming demagogues and spread by fanatics, it does little good for serious anthropologists to point out, as of late they have been at pains to do, that their careful measurements fail to reveal a clear superiority of one race over another in either physical or intellectual powers. More than this, some of them freely admit that they are not sure what a race is, using the term to designate the finer degrees of difference among mankind, rather than the three major human stocks.

But the student of human culture and achievements should experience no difficulty in exploding the myth of racial superiority without the aid of the professional anthropologist. Whether he consider the arts, philosophy, pure science or practical inventions, he finds it no easy matter to decide which race or nation has contributed most. The muses have not come down from Parnassus to apply for papers of naturalization in any country with which we are acquainted; the afflatus that bestows genius, wanton as the winds, blows here and there, ignoring national boundaries, color, latitude and social status, in a way no man can explain. There is scarcely any major advance in human thought that has not been forwarded by thinkers in many lands.

But it is useless to waste more ink and paper to prove what is already obvious to nearly everyone of broad culture and unbiased thought. What excites our wonder is that competent scientists should devote so much of their time and energy to the refutation of the calculated lies of unscrupulous politicians, or the even more dangerous fabrications of the pseudo-scientists who make their researches prove what is

demanded of them by their employers. Only the exigencies of war will account for it.

It is easy to see the faults of our enemies, but very difficult to detect the same failings in ourselves. We citizens of the United States have been guilty of indulging in much the same sort of vaunting that we so deplore in our adversaries, although without the same nefarious designs. I suppose that most of us heard many times in our schooldays that the United States

AN EARLY contributor to *Nature Magazine*, Dr. Alexander F. Skutch, disappeared from our editorial ken when he went to Central America for banana research. He swept back into our view when *The Scientific Monthly* for April, 1944, published a fascinating and penetrating article by him under the title of "A Parable for Peacemakers." It is an article that deserves a wider reading than the distinguished but limited audience of that publication can afford it.

We discovered that Dr. Skutch, after years of study in Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Colombia and Ecuador, had acquired a farm in the Valley of El General in Costa Rica. There he farms, studies wildlife and writes. We asked him to contribute again to our pages and this provoking and significant article is his response. It is written from the vantage point of a naturalist sufficiently removed from the swirling currents of the wartime flood-tide to be able to steer a straight and objective philosophical course. We hope, later, for more products of his pen dealing with the wildlife of the regions he now knows so well.

of America is the greatest country on earth; and since schoolchildren are little given to the analysis of careless generalizations, we took the empty phrase at its face value. A minute's reflection might have convinced us of part at least of its absurdity. Could it mean that the United States was greatest in territorial extent or population? Obviously not, for every fourth-grade pupil knows, or should know, that China, Russia and the British Empire exceed the United States in both population and area. Greatest as a military power? The question has never yet been put to the test—and we hope it will not make any difference after the present disturbance is ended. Greatest in intellectual achievements? A few more years of study would give

the young American many reasons to doubt that his new country had yet contributed as much to the intellectual and spiritual treasures of mankind as some of the older nations from which its people have sprung. Wherein, then, does this hypothetical "greatest" lie—and what difference does it make? Can not the child be taught to love and respect his country for its real and substantial achievements, without throwing it into a false perspective in relation to all the rest of the world—a tendency whose dangerous consequences are only too obvious at the present moment? It is not so important whether our country is looked upon as greatest or least among the nations, as that it is wisely governed, gives equal rights to its citizens, and deals justly with its neighbor nations.

The habit of looking upon our own tribe, race or country as superior to all the remainder of mankind is ancient; perhaps as old as human thought itself. The Children of Israel were not unique in regarding themselves as the chosen of the Lord and set apart from all their neighbors; but their case is the most familiar to us because of the genius of the men who wrote their holy books. To the Romans, as well as the Greeks, most other people were "barbarians," a term that was originally merely descriptive of their unshaven faces, but soon acquired a derogatory connotation. Probably all primitive tribes considered themselves elevated above their neighbors as to origin and worth. They were the sons of the lion and the eagle, while rival clans were sprung from the filth-devouring jackal and the cowardly hare. We laugh at so much savage simplicity—and forget how much of it still lurks in our own hearts. Few of us have learned to view ourselves objectively.

Closely associated with the habit of looking upon our own race as superior to all others is that of considering our species—mankind—as above, and greater than, all other species of animals. These two thoughts have doubtless the same origin in the primitive mind. Man is the highest of all living things, my tribe is the greatest of all the tribes of men, and I—added many a savage warrior, secretly exultant or openly boastful—am the strongest and most valiant of my tribe, therefore I am the first of all created things, the very salt of the earth. Even the great Linnaeus, superb naturalist though he was, was guilty of some of this vainglory when he gave the name Primates—the first—to that order of the Mammalia in which he placed himself, his fellow men, the apes and the monkeys.

For who ever told us that we are first? What disinterested third party, competent to judge, has declared to man that he ranks higher in the cosmic scheme of things than any of the other creatures that share the planet with him? Even the Olympian goddesses, Hera, Athene and Aphrodite, did not feel competent to pass judgment upon their own pulchritude, but left it to an outsider, a mortal who passed as a shepherd, to bestow the golden apple that was the prize of beauty. Yet mankind complacently sits in judgment of itself, and calmly declares itself first among all the myriad species of living things. In what respect are we first? And can we be sure that that quality in which we imagine that we surpass is

the most important? I was about to write that it is perfectly obvious that to man belongs the honor, if honor it be, of having caused the greatest and most extensive changes in the appearance of the earth's surface. But has he? A myriad coral islands, great and small, dot the tropic seas. They were built up laboriously through the ages by countless billions of animalcules so small and weak that we crush them by thousands as we walk across the coral reef. Have they not wrought a greater and more lasting transformation in the appearance of our planet than any that we ourselves have performed? They have built while we have largely destroyed. It is not improbable that palm trees will still wave their lordly plumes above the coral-built islands when man and all his works

have crumbled to dust, and forests have again reclaimed the many millions of acres over which he has destroyed them—where he has left any soil to support their growth.

The naturalist has wasted his time if his studies fail to teach him humility. Nature adds her voice to that of the greatest of the moral philosophers in bringing home this same lesson. The naturalist's experiences fill his mind with grateful images and sounds; he lives through hours of unforgettable elation as his researches slowly uncover

the hidden relationships between organisms and the conditions amid which they exist. *Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas*, sang Vergil two thousand years ago. We have pushed back the boundaries of our ignorance somewhat since the day of the great Mantuan—only to find that they lengthen as they recede. We have learned the immediate causes of many things; but let us pry a little more deeply, and always we are brought up against the bedrock of our ignorance. We can not claim to have thoroughly studied any process of Nature, to have pushed our researches to their ultimate limit, unless the answer to our final question is "I do not know." Our humility grows with our knowledge.

The incomparably bright tints of a Baltimore oriole glow amid the deep green foliage of my orange tree, making the golden spheres of fruit appear dull by contrast. The nearest point where the wintering bird might nest is some fifteen hundred miles to the northward in a direct line, over forest, mountain and sea. More likely, his summer home is two thousand or more miles away. Unguided, without chart or compass, flying through the darkness of

I Hear November

By COSETTE MIDDLETON

Now let November walk on cold, gray feet
And let the skies be dark with prophecy;
I love the rapid, pulsing code of sleet,
The wind's demonstrative frivolity.
My eyes shall not encompass empty fields
Nor brood upon the ambient shrouds that mold
The dusk of day and year . . . My longing yields
To inner fantasies of flame and gold:
For I have glowing logs and candle-gleam,
A vase with bittersweet, a Chopin theme;
A dog's soft throat upon my foot, and tall
Exotic shadows leaping on the wall.
Yet I must hear November to express
My credence in this warm, bright loveliness.

night, he found his way to this Costa Rican valley. When the sun swings north again he will follow it, unerringly directing his course to the same tree that last year supported the swinging nest of his mate. An aviator, with a panel full of delicate instruments, and detailed charts that others have made for him, might, after long training in celestial navigation, duplicate the feat of the oriole; but no man, relying as the bird does merely upon what he has within himself, could perform such a journey with any probability of reaching his goal. I can write the story of the oriole's life. I can photograph him. I can, if I will, shoot and dissect him. But I can not find my way as he does, and I can not even explain how he does it. Which ranks higher, my ability to do these things, or his gifts of orientation, of song, of leading the free untrammelled life of the tree-tops, confident in his own resources? Certainly neither I nor any of my species is competent to answer this question. It is not for us to say which ranks higher in the scheme of creation.

As we grow humble, we tend to grow kind and considerate. So long as we hold, as the Psalmist in one of his more arrogant moods, that we have been created but little lower than the angels, and all things have been put under our feet, we shall not care how harshly we trample upon them. But when we see in other living beings faculties that surpass our own, gifts that we can not match, a hundred abilities that excite our wonder and often our envy, while they baffle our efforts to explain, we shall be careful how we oppress them. Our lasting ignorance of the true inner or psychic life of any living creature besides our own individual selves will also make us hesitate to abuse sensibilities that may be far more

delicate than we vulgarly suppose. The very ant that struggles through the dust at our feet contains as much to excite our wonder and even our worship as the starry heavens above us. Its microscopic brain has been called the most marvelous bit of organic matter on earth. Remembering this, we shall not wantonly trample the ant, even if at times we must destroy it in self-defense. When we have developed this attitude toward the fellow creatures whose mortal state so much resembles our own with all its toils and perils, we shall not lightly cause them pain or injury, and shall never again look upon their destruction as a pastime.

As our contemplation of Nature leads us toward humility and kindness, we begin to sever the very root of that dangerous attitude of mind that has caused so much suffering and bloodshed upon this planet. As we begin to doubt whether man is the most marvelous, the most gifted and the most important animal in all creation, we are likely to question also whether our own race or tribe is the most noble division of mankind, divinely or otherwise selected to lord it over all the rest. When we feel that it is wrong to destroy any beast or bird for our own transient pleasure, there is hope that we may even attain that degree of sympathy and tolerance that will make us hesitate to injure our fellow men because they speak a different language, or profess another creed, or wear skin of a different color—and that we shall strenuously oppose any political measures that promise to lead toward this result. It may be that the ills that men wantonly inflict upon each other are merely the reflex of those injuries that they have so long and so unfeelingly showered upon all the rest of creation regarded as inferior to mankind.

