

SOCIAL RIGHTS AND DUTIES

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ADDRESSES TO ETHICAL
SOCIETIES

BY

LESLIE STEPHEN

IN TWO VOLUMES

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NOTE.

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L. S.

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HEREDITY.

I FOUND, the other day, that an address upon Heredity had been announced, of which I was to be the deliverer. I admit that I was fully responsible for the statement, although, for reasons with which I need not trouble you, I was not quite prepared for it in this form. I mention this fact in order simply to say that the title may possibly give rise to false expectations. I am quite incompetent to express any opinion of the slightest scientific value upon certain problems suggested by that rather ugly word "heredity". The question as to the precise relationship between any organism and its parents or remoter ancestors, is one of the highest interest. The solution, for example, of the problem, whether is it possible for a living being to transmit to its descendants qualities which have only been acquired during its own lifetime, has an important bearing upon the general theory of evolution. But I have nothing whatever to suggest in regard to that problem. I simply take it for granted that there is some relation between parents and children: and a relation, speak-

ing in the most general way, such that the qualities with which we start in life, resemble more or less closely those of our ancestors. I may also assume that, in some form or other, the doctrine of evolution must be accepted: and that all living things now in the world are the descendants, more or less modified, of the population which preceded them. I proceed to ask whether, as some people appear to believe, the acceptance of this doctrine in the most unqualified form, would introduce any difficulty into our primary ethical conceptions. I will also at once give my answer. I do not believe that it introduces any difficulty whatever. I do believe that the general theory of evolution tends in very important ways to give additional distinctness to certain ethical doctrines; although, to go at all fully into the how and the why would take me beyond my present purpose. All that I have to argue to-day is, that a belief in "heredity" need not be a stumbling-block to any reasonable person.

I cannot doubt that the popular mind is vaguely alarmed by the doctrine. I read, the other day, a novel by a well-known author, of which, so far as I can remember, the main substance was as follows: A virtuous doctor (his virtue had some limitations) studied the problem of heredity, and had read Darwin, and Herbert Spencer, and Weissmann, and all the

proper authorities. His own researches are carefully described, with the apparent assumption that they were both profound and of tremendous significance. He had, it appears, accumulated a vast amount of material; and his method was to cut out slips from newspapers, whenever they recorded any events in his own family history, and to preserve them in a mysterious cabinet. These investigations proved that there was a decided family likeness running through the descendants of a common ancestor. As a general rule, they had all belonged to the class "blackguard". From this result he inferred that there was no God and no soul. His relations were dreadfully scandalised: one was converted to his views; but the others contrived diabolical plots for setting fire to these marvellous collections and so stopping the contagion of these dreadful doctrines at their source. It struck me, I confess, that instead of burning the collections, they would have done better to ask him what was the connection between his premisses and his conclusions. What was this terrible, heart-paralysing truth which the poor man had discovered? Has any human being ever doubted, since mothers were invented, that children are apt to resemble their parents? I do not personally remember the fact, but I should be prepared to bet, if the point could be settled, that, before I was a month