

The Fate of the Last Man.

In all the discussion which has agitated the world over the Mosaic and genealogical accounts of the creation, no question has been more argued than that of the origin of the race. There is nothing like variety, even in scientific argument, and we have heard so much of the question as to whether Adam or an anthropoid ape was our primal ancestor, that we are now impelled to turn to the diametrically opposite end of creation, and consider not the beginning of the first but the end of the last man. Speculation as to future events—especially if several billion or so years distant—is not particularly profitable; but if a personal originator of the race is to be made an object of the present theory, similar theorizing as to the personal termination of the race is certainly just as useful, both hypotheses being equal in the speculative nature of their basis, and it being certain that we cannot know anything more definite about the subject of the one than about that of the other.

M. Alphonse de Candolle points out that the terrestrial surface is constantly diminishing, and that elevated regions are being lowered by the incessant action of water, ice and air. Besides earthy matter, washed or ground away, is being carried into the sea, which is thus filling up; consequently in course of time the present configuration of the land will change. Continents will be divided into islands, and these will be gradually submerged. The human race will be driven by the encroaching waters from island to island. Finally the sun will rise on a vast waste of sea, dotted perhaps by far separated islets which once were mountain peaks. One by one these will be submerged until finally but one is left; Kuehainjunga, the loftiest summit of the Himalayas, perhaps; or, more likely, some new coral reef, which an insect to-day is laboring down in the depths, to build up. Here will perish the last man, and the body of the last relic of our race will be washed away by the waves of the mighty flood. Therefore (1) if a man does not stare to death he will probably be drowned.

Another theory is that of the periodicity of deluge, proposed by Aduenar, which depends on the fact of the unequal length of the seasons in the two hemispheres. At present our winter last with the Southern hemispheres they last 186 days. These 7 days or 168 hours of difference increase each year the coldness of the pole. During 10,500 years, the ice accumulates at one pole and melts at another, thereby displacing the earth's centre of gravity. Now a time, it is reasoned, will arrive when, after the maximum of elevation of temperature on one side, a catastrophe will happen, which will bring back the centre of gravity to the centre of figure, and cause an immense deluge. The inventor of this theory fails to consider the probability of the centre of gravity returning as gradually as it was displaced; but with this defect, the hypothesis from another point of view goes on to show that (2) the last man will certainly be drowned.

Every few years or so we have a comet scare; and when the flaming comet appears in the sky, there are many of nervous persons who fret themselves over the chances of our earth coming in contact with it. It is, of course, not without the limits of possibility that such a collision should occur. If it did, our globe would plunge into an atmosphere of gas, which, mingling with the air, say those who predict this mode of death to our planet, would produce an explosion which would destroy every living being. Such being the case, the person capable of breathing deleterious gas longest would survive the rest; and therefore (3) if the last man is not suffocated by cometary gas he will be blown up.

It is believed by many astronomers that there is a retarding medium in space, based on the fact that Eucles comet, in thirty-three years, loses a thousandth part of its velocity. If the other resistances our earth's motion in its orbit, then the centrifugal force will be constantly lessened, while the action of gravity will remain constant; so that the earth will describe a spiral path, always approaching the sun. The effect of this would be to convert the tropics into a desert, which would gradually expand towards the poles, from about which the ice and snow would quickly be melted. Finally the intense heat would turn the globe into one barren waste; but then the human race would long since have disappeared. The probabilities in such event point to the supposition that (4) the last man will be smothered.

There are certain classes of rocks which are constantly becoming hydrated, and are thus occluding immense amounts of water. The theory has been broached that, in course of time, the seas will thus be dried up; and water being absent, our atmosphere will disappear, the earth becoming a waste similar to the moon. But before then, the atmosphere would probably become quite too rare for human existence. As the air pressure decreases, as M. Becq has shown, the privation of oxygen produces the deleterious effects experienced chiefly by mountaineers and mountain climbers. Con-

sequently, in view of this theory (5) the last man will be suffocated. Our sun itself may come to an end in two ways. First, as Mr. Proctor has very recently graphically described, being but a variable star, it may suddenly blaze up, and go out as other suns are known to have done. In this case, the intense heat of the colossal conflagration would destroy everything on the earth, and perhaps vaporize the earth itself. Should this event occur (6) the last man will be burned up.

Or the sun may cool down. The glacial zones would thus enlarge, the race will be crowded nearer and nearer to the equator, by the encroaching glaciers coming from the poles. The small space will no longer support the life upon it, and in the terrible struggle for existence only the fittest will of course survive. Finally, the earth becomes covered with the vast ice sheet, man with his wonderful adaptation to surrounding circumstances, will probably subsist for a certain period, but in the end the constantly increasing coldness will assert itself, and thus eventually (7) the last man will be frozen to death.

If the sun cooled, it falls apart, the production of immense fissures in its crust similar to those already visible in the moon. The surface of the earth would thus be rendered extremely unstable, while the dwellers thereon, for safety would be compelled to take refuge in caves. It is possible that the troglodytic remnant of the race might meet its fate in some cataclysm or eruption, and thus it is, assumable that (8) the last man will be crushed in some subterranean cavern. Or supposing that the people adapted themselves to their surroundings and managed to live on the surface, until the time that the earth becomes so cracked and broken that, as predicted, it falls apart, flying off in fragments into space. Possibly a part may exist large enough to preserve its atmosphere. It may either be a satellite of the first large body within whose sphere of attraction it may come; or it may fall into another world. In such case (9) the last man will be killed by the crash of rocks. But if he is not, and no one can tell to what extremes of resistance the race may develop, he will become an inhabitant of a new world. Evolution does not necessarily imply progress, and possibly the race may have retrograded until the human being possesses the nature of a plant house; such being the case, this single inhabitant will spontaneously produce posterity of both sexes. A new race of men will begin to continue an infinitum. Hence (10) there will be no last man.

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