

THREE BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

ALFRED RUSSELL WALLACE'S
"MY LIFE"*

This is the story of a living paradox: a discoverer with Darwin of natural selection, yet "more desirous of discovering new truths than of gaining credit for himself;" an agnostic as regards religion, yet a believer in spiritualism; a scientific reasoner, yet an opponent of vaccination; a man of strong feelings and prejudices, yet, like one of his disembodied spirits, able to get outside of himself and write an autobiography as interesting as it is disinterested.

As an evolutionist Wallace naturally begins with an account of his ancestry and environment. Coming from rather long-lived families, from the paternal side he thinks that he inherited a certain amount of constitutional inactivity or laziness, while the necessity for work that resulted from his father's loss of property was perhaps a blessing in disguise, beneficial for developing whatever powers were latent in him. Thus his early life on the river Usk and his boyish explorations with his brother brought out that love of nature, with its mystery and charm, which made him one of the most famous travellers of his day. So the simplicity and kindliness of home life contrasted with the days at the Hertford school, where the rod was not spared, accounted for his later belief that the only way to teach and to civilise, whether children or savages, is through the influence of love and sympathy. Remembering how his father treated him with the tolerant courtesy of a gentleman of the old school, while his masters crammed down his throat the "degrading and horrible religion" of future rewards and punishments, Wallace came to have the most absolute respect for the

**My Life*. A Record of Events and Opinions by Alfred Russell Wallace Author of "Man's Place in the Universe," "The Malay Archipelago," "Darwinism," "Geographical Distribution of Animals," "Natural Selection and Tropical Nature," etc. With facsimile letters, illustrations and portraits. Vol. I., pp. vi. and 435; Vol. II., pp. vi. and 464. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905.

rights of others and a certain disrespect for the dogmas of Christianity. Hence arose his admiration for secular philanthropists like Robert Owen and his indignation against so-called Christian governments—the English which professes the brotherhood of man and oppresses the Irish; the American which starts with the Declaration of Independence and rules the Filipinos against their will.

As a relief from these strenuous passages are the author's delightful descriptions of his rural excursions in English shires and Welsh valleys. Engaged with his elder brother in surveying trips, at the time of the mania for railway building, the two managed to have a deal of fun in the midst of hard work. The accounts of the old inns and the farmer's club form a sort of genuine *Pickwick Papers*, while the characters found in the remoter parts of Wales are worthy of George Borrow. Thus he met a young Welshman who "prided himself on being a kind of champion smoker and assured us that he had once, for a wager, smoked a good-sized china teapot full of tobacco through the spout." Although the young surveyor found it delightful to be cutting all over the country, following the chain and admiring the beauties of nature, he was nevertheless oppressed by the all-embracing system of land robbery exhibited in the immense holdings of the church and the many useless estates of the nobility. This ultimately led him to advocate the theories of Henry George, to aid in forming the Land Nationalisation Society, of which he was the first president, and to deplore the colossal land speculations of the Western States, the wealth from which "gained by individuals, initiates that process which culminates in railroad and mining kings, in oil and beef trusts, and in the thousand millionaires and multi-millionaires whose vast accumulated incomes are, every penny of them, paid by the toiling workers."

But perhaps Wallace the socialist is not as interesting as Wallace the naturalist, for he does not appear so strong in

high finance as in low life. It was while teaching small boys in Leicester that he formed a taste for the wonders of the insect world, which opened a new aspect of nature, without which he might never have ventured on his journey to the Amazon. This, he asserts, was one of the events which formed a turning point in his life, the other equally important circumstance being his reading Malthus, without which he would probably not have hit upon the theory of natural selection and obtained full credit for its independent discovery.

To his published travels the author now adds some hitherto unpublished letters descriptive of the wonders of the South American forests, a fire at sea by which his painfully gathered collections of birds and beetles was destroyed, his voyage to Singapore and his adventures in the Malay Archipelago. As showing the humour of a writer who disclaimed the sense of humour, we may here quote from a letter written from the tropical jungle in June, 1855:

"I must now tell you of the addition to my household of an orphan baby, a curious little half-nigger baby. Don't be alarmed; I was the cause of its mother's death. It happened as follows: I was out shooting in the jungle and saw something up a tree which I thought was a large monkey or orang-utan, so I fired at it, and down fell this little baby—in its mother's arms. What she did up in the tree, of course, I can't imagine, but as she ran about the branches quite easily, I presume she was a wild 'woman of the woods;' so I have preserved her skin and skeleton, and am trying to bring up her only daughter, and hope some day to introduce her to fashionable society at the Zoological Gardens. When its poor mother fell mortally wounded, the baby was plunged head over ears in a swamp about the consistency of pea soup, and when I got it out looked very pitiful. . . . About a week ago I bought a little monkey with a long tail, and as the baby was very lonely while we were out in the day time, I put the little monkey into the cradle to keep it warm. . . . It is the most wonderful baby I ever saw, and has such strength in its arms that it will catch hold of my trousers as I sit at work, and hang under my legs for a quarter of an hour at a time without being the least tired. . . . From this short account you will see that my baby is no common baby, and I can safely say, what so many have said before me with much less truth, 'There never was such a baby as my baby,' and I am sure nobody ever had such a dear little duck of a darling of a little brown hairy baby before."

Volume II is taken up with chapters on the explorer's friends and acquaintances, his American lecturing tours, a sketch of his life work and those changes in thought which carried him from land naturalisation to socialism, and from mesmerism to spiritualism. After quoting some of their letters there is given an outline of the chief difference of opinion between Darwin and the author on the origin of man and the heredity of acquired characters. Here Wallace confesses that he is more of a Darwinian than Darwin himself, yet never does he begrudge to his colleague the glory of the greatest discovery of "the wonderful century." Likewise in Spencer's *Synthetic Philosophy* he perceives certain defects, yet considers these as but spots on the sun of his great intellect. With Huxley also he differs, still he looks up to the anatomist as being immeasurably superior to himself in scientific knowledge.

And yet Wallace's modesty and dislike of controversy did not prevent him from gradually acquiring confidence in his own judgment, so that, as he tells us, in dealing with any body of facts, provided he clearly understood their nature, he was able to draw conclusions to which the scientific world is now coming round. So in reasoning upon the general phenomena of nature and of society he felt able to hold his own with his contemporaries, though he was conscious of an inferiority consisting in his limited knowledge and smaller power of concentration for long periods of time. Adding to these qualities a certain natural diffidence, Wallace protests that in the United States he met hosts of people who were "really too polite and enthusiastic—'proud to meet me;' 'honour and pleasure never expected;' 'read my books all their life!' etc.—leaving me speechless with amazement."

There now follows a store of anecdotes on American thinkers and American ways, from the absent-mindedness of Professor Sylvester, of Johns Hopkins University, to the vagaries of Boston spiritualistic mediums. Returning to England, after his trans-continental lecturing tour, the author gives a most amusing account of his experiences as a civil service examiner. For example,

to the question: "Mention the natural habitat of the horse and elephant," the answer was given: "The habit of the horse is ploughing, the elephant goes to shows;" and when asked to describe the origin of icebergs, the student replied: "They come from the Alleghanies on the east of America; when they reach the valley below they melt and form small straits, which in time spread out into rivers. They enrich the climate through which they pass."

The absurdities of these papers led Wallace to doubt the good of examinations under government auspices, and yet in the next two chapters we find him arguing in favor of government ownership of land, and, after giving high praise to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and *Equality*, declaring himself an out-and-out socialist. But these very inconsistencies, like the transition from mesmerism to spiritualism, furnish proof of the author's ingenuousness. So after giving a summary of his own character, from a most remarkably objective point of view, he closes with a list of his dozen "new ideas"—those suggestions or solutions of biological problems which he has been the first to put forth, from his independent discovery of the theory of natural selection in 1858 to his recent simplification in the classification of the races of men.

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