

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE

By HARRY LOWERISON.

*"Life is not as idle ore,
But iron dug from central gloom,
And heated hot with burning fears,
And dipt in baths of hissing tears,
And battered by the shocks of doom
To shape and use."*



O quotes my dead friend from Tennyson on the last page of his book "Darwinism," and surely his life has been such an one as is there described.

I may call him my friend I think yet, though for many years now we have

exchanged scarcely a word.

I met him first about the year 1890. We were both members of the Land Nationalisation Society, and that brought us together. He was then, having been born in 1822, nearly seventy years of age, but "his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated." Among a thousand intellectual faces his would have been a prominent one, not only for its keenness but for its kindness. Strangely enough, this powerful intellect hesitated a long time on the verge of declaring for Socialism.

He had come, if I remember rightly, to Land Nationalisation by way of Mill and Spencer (1st edition "Social Statics"), and yet for quite a long time did not see the futility of nationalising the land without socialising other sources of wealth.

During this period I often urged him to join the Fabian Society, of which I was then a member. I do not know if he ultimately did, but the last time I spoke to him he was a convinced Socialist.

Too much has certainly been made of Wallace's magnanimity in allowing Darwin to take precedence over him in the matter of the theory of Natural Selection. Darwin was thirteen years Wallace's senior. He had given longer thought to the theory. He had made a careful series of experiments lasting over many years. He had, in fact, been elaborating the theory long before it occurred to Wallace. He was on the spot, in London, where the bitter hostility it was to be met with would have to be fought; and he was equipped with knowledge gathered laboriously for this set purpose, while Wallace lacked a similar equipment.

Never, after all the patient work that Charles Darwin had put in to verify and buttress the great new truth he was to communicate, could

of course, by the bishops and clergy, shallow, insincere fools, ignorant of the simplest biological facts on which the theory was founded. Huxley and many another valiant fighter came in under the banner of the new truth and laid about vigorously on the thick heads of prejudice and superstition. Still, it is scarcely believable, but it is true, so slowly does a great truth permeate to the masses, that the fable of Adam and Eve is yet retailed in our State schools to "the heirs of all the ages," the children of to-day. Nay, the very schoolmasters themselves are actually ignorant of the fact that the theory of evolution by natural selection has knocked the bottom out of it, and with it has disposed of all that is vital in the Hebrew Bible.

I doubt if the world ever saw an epoch so wonderful, so revolutionary, so pregnant with change, as the 19th century, with Darwinism as its new improving spirit. The theory was found by scientific men to be the master key with which science went forward to unlock doors long closed. It opened up avenues long hidden or blocked, and any biologist coming into the field now without this knowledge would be hopelessly handicapped and left in the race.

Of course, a few fossils still survive, helpless antiquities of man whose eyes cannot open wide enough for the new light, because their eyes were sealed in their youth.

Their eyes were sealed in their youth. Here a wonder. Alfred Russel Wallace's eyes were sealed while he was young, and he, even he, never wholly got rid of the part blindness.

When I wrote my Stone-Age stories he wrote me: "We have no evidence that these early men were, on the average, any worse than ourselves, or any lower, either intellectually or morally"! Yet he himself, in "Darwinism" quotes authority as to savages of to-day who cannot count beyond two, and who have only the veriest dawn of a moral feeling.

Surely if the body has evolved from lowliest origin, this wonderful complex, symmetrical autonomous body, then side by side with it, or rather within it and through it, have the brain and the mathematical and

the new theory have been known as Wallaceism. Let it be said, to the credit of a great man and a truth-loving, that he did not claim any of the honour of discovery. "Use my material," he practically said to Darwin, "to back up and fortify your own. The great thing is to get the truth established."

A self-seeker, for money, for power, for "honours," titles, or other of this world's gauds Alfred Russel Wallace never was. Rather a man like Darwin's self, quiet, retiring, self-effacing, yet resolute, laborious, clear-sighted, keen-brained, and truth-loving, utterly truth-loving.

This can be said, and without claiming too much: that had there been no Darwin, then the great doctrine of Natural Selection would still have been preached, at practically the same time, and by Alfred Russel Wallace.

Great this truth assuredly is. We are what we are, not because of any Special Creation of our genus, but simply because we are on the top-most bough of the great tree of evolution. At one time, ages ago, life existed on this slowly cooling earth of ours only in a state of "undifferentiated protoplasm," a blob or blobs of jelly-like life-matter. From that time onwards this life-matter differentiated, into skin and contents, into granular and smooth protoplasm, into prolongations which became feelers and legs and arms, into orifices which became mouth and excretory ducts, into sensitive spots which became eyes and ears and nose, and all the while cells were dividing and multiplying and specialising, and a muscular frame and brain system were slowly evolving. But there was never any special creation. Even the beginning of life, so long a ditch behind which the God Apologists fought, is on the eve of being discovered. Natural causes will certainly account for the origin of living matter in a few more years, and the last great battle in the fierce Darwinian controversy will close for ever for scientific men.

Modification of the theory there will certainly be, but the central fact stands assured and unassailable, that all the wonderfully diverse forms of life, plant and animal, we see today, have evolved from the primordial protoplasm, the blob of life-jelly of aeons of years ago.

Wallace was in the Malay Archipelago when the theory occurred to him, and it seems to have come in a flash and have been written down within the few minutes following. Darwin, as I said before, had been building the theory carefully and patiently up for long years. Their names will go down together on the long roll of fame, as those of two brave, good, fearless men. It needed bravery. Wallace was out of the fight; but Darwin, weak and in ill-health, was the best-hated man of his time, the opposition being led and fostered,

reasoning powers been developed. And with the evolution of the social state, through the individual, the sexes, the family, the gens, the tribe, the nation, have evolved the moral powers necessary to co-relate us with our environment. But our friend could not believe that evolution explained it all. "No," said Alfred Russel Wallace, "it does not. Man's mental and moral powers are a gift from a Higher, a Spiritual World." Herein the weakness of a strong man. Herein the blinding effects of that early seal laid on his eyes by superstition.

Never was great man so belittled as Alfred Russel Wallace by Spiritualism. "Evolution is true," he said, "of the body and its functions and its organs: it is not true of the mind and the soul." And evolution is true right through to its logical conclusion, say we; body and mind have evolved together, and the moral qualities are the product of the two, and "soul" and "spirit" and "immortality" and "God" and "heaven" are the names the brain has given to clothe it and make real some of its splendidly pathetic yearnings and visions.

Now lies he there, and all are glad to give him reverence, for that with the weapons he had and the limitations he laboured under he fought as a man should fight for the truths it was given him to see. If among those truths some error found its way, why trouble? He did a man's work manfully, and now he has won his peace. On the whole the world is better, sweeter, cleaner, nobler, for our great comrade's life in it.

SIR OLIVER LODGE, whom we asked for an appreciation of our great man, writes:

It seems to me that his noble, simple life, and high standard of scientific honour, are among his best legacies to humanity.
