

THE GREATNESS OF ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

The sudden passing away of a great man often lets loose a flood of sentimental or dramatic appreciation which obscures for a time the real significance of his life. This has been the case with Alfred Russel Wallace. The numerous obituary notices would have us believe that his fame was founded and will rest upon his discovery, coincident with that of Charles Darwin, of the origin of species by natural selection. The marvel of these two minds, working entirely independently, but led by the same clue, Malthus's "Principles of Population," to the same novel and audacious conclusion, was indeed well calculated to impress the unreflective mind. The pleasant and creditable story of the joint-publication of their discovery to the Linnean Society in 1858, and of the cordial relations existing between the "rivals," gave the glow of generous feeling required to touch the imagination. But to most people Wallace had never been more than a figure of vague importance, a great naturalist, who, since Darwin's death, had become the representative sage in this department of learning. In point of fact, there was nothing marvellous about the coincidence of the discovery. In the first place, it was not coincident, for though Wallace, brooding over the problem of the origin of species for over ten years, seems to have had a

sudden access of illumination in 1858, Darwin had reached the conclusion some years before. The publication was indeed coincident, but it was a designed coincidence.

But even had the discovery itself been simultaneous, it would deserve no wonder. For, as Samuel Butler has clearly shown, Buffon, Lamarck, and Erasmus Darwin had between them gone far towards an exposition of the same theory unmarred by the factor of fortuitous variation, which Charles Darwin introduced; and many minds, besides those of Darwin and Wallace, were in revolt against the prevailing doctrine of cataclysmic changes, and were fumbling for the same escape. What Darwin and Wallace really did was not so much to invent a theory of evolution by natural selection, as to furnish and marshal the large and varied evidence necessary to establish it in the world of science, and to exhibit its far-reaching consequences in the life of thought. In this work Wallace was an able though an independent lieutenant. But his true service to his age was in furnishing a stout barrier to the torrent of quasi-scientific rationalism which, drawing over-freely from the new evolutionary teaching, threatened to submerge all the landmarks, not merely of dogmatic religion, but of morality and humanitarianism. For the "Ori-

gin of Species," when it had fought its way into the fortress of scientific orthodoxy, seemed likely to prove a far more subversive agency than any of the earlier forces of religious or philosophic scepticism. By definitely placing man as a specimen in natural history, body and soul, emerging by slow, continuous growth from brute creation, and by bringing biology under the same general reign of law as geology, astronomy, and the other physical sciences, it seemed destined to cancel all those higher spiritual values which formerly separated man from Nature.

Moreover, the central rôle assigned to the struggle for existence in the process of evolution towards higher types appeared to conflict violently with the humaner sentiments and policies which were slowly gaining ground in civilized communities for the protection of the weak and ignorant, and for ending the barbarities of competition between individuals and nations. For, if the ascent of man and his dominion over the rest of Nature, his environment, was compassed in no other way than by an unceasing struggle in which, seizing the happy chance of favorable variations, fitter organisms thrive and propagated their kind by out-competing less fit ones, any attempt out of pity or kindness to repress the struggle, or even to mitigate its severity, would either be a futile folly or a "sin" against the law of human progress. Poverty and its attendant starvation, war and its attendant slaughter, were painful but necessary instruments in the biological struggle for fitter organisms and a higher complexity of life! Nor was that all. Religion, art, politics, and the intellectual activities, must, in the last resort, derive any validity that they possessed from their contributions to "survival value" as psychical adjuncts to the struggle. Though biol-

ogists were slow to press these spiritual implications, and political thinkers shrank from giving full utterance to them, they none the less began to undermine the confidence with which humanitarian reformers carried on their labors for the protection of the weaker members of society and the weaker races. Even those who realized the importance of repressing the cruder and more brutal struggle between members of the same race or nation began to evolve a doctrine of social or racial efficiency which left them free to approve war and collective exploitation for the subjugation, or even the extermination, of backward or inferior races. The logic of Imperialism is still built upon this basis, avowed or implicit.

Now, the importance of Alfred Russel Wallace is that from the very outset he revolted against these extensions of the biological doctrine. He refused to hand over to Nature, "red in tooth and claw," the creation and control of man as an intellectual and moral being. Like Huxley, when confronted with the havoc which the new biology threatened to bring into the realm of human conduct, he sought an escape through the dualism of body and spirit. In the ethical and higher intellectual life of man, the physical laws of struggle and survival were superseded. How Huxley, with his keen logical sense, achieved what seems a plain breach of continuity in evolution, always remained unintelligible. But Wallace's escape from the intolerable grip of biology is more easily understood. From the first, there evidently arose in his mind a difficulty in believing that the higher qualities and capacities of man were mere extensions of characteristics of his animal ancestry evolved for physical survival. He soon came to hold, as he expressed it, that "certain definite portions of man's intellectual and

moral nature could not have been developed by variation and natural selection alone, and that, therefore, some other influence, law, or agency, is required to account for them." A spiritual nature was engrafted upon man at some point in his natural evolution. Wallace was led to conceive the possibility and then the actuality of such a process by what appeared to him the convincing, independent testimony of spiritualism. There he found outside of Nature a world of psychical powers competent to intervene in and to direct the affairs of man. The laws of this spiritual direction could utilize, modify, or abrogate and override the physical laws of evolution for their proper purposes. In his earlier exposition of this creed, Wallace appears to have conceived this spiritual intervention as confined to man. Indeed, throughout his life, man is not merely the crowning achievement of Nature, but the purpose for which Nature exists.

This anthropocentric doctrine he came to hold ever more passionately as age advanced. It affords, indeed, a curious example of the power of a strong emotion to subdue a powerful intellect to its purposes. To satisfy this craving he entered in his later years the alien kingdom of astronomy, seeking to establish the conclusion that ours was the only world in which human life was possible, and that the entire cosmos found its only meaning in its contribution to the service of man. It was, of course, this same intense sympathy with humanity which inspired the social politics to which he devoted himself with so much ardor. Herbert Spencer and Henry George made of him a land nationalizer; Edward Bellamy converted him to Socialism. Socialists themselves are usually contemptuous of "Looking Backwards," and it seems strange to them that a quiet man of science should

have been stirred so deeply by the most elaborately artificial of Utopias. But, in truth, it was not the constructive features, but the powerful revelation of the inhumanity of the current industrial order that came home to the heart of Wallace as of so many other ordinary men and women. For Wallace was not even in theory an intellectualist, he was not swayed by logic, and he knew it. When, therefore, he saw the evolutionary doctrine which he assisted to create turning into a monster that would devour all his cherished desires and aspirations for humanity, he clapped fetters on it. His imaginative sympathies drove him, indeed, to what more sober and less audacious minds call "violent courses." In order to save the soul of man from the clutches of the demon he had helped to evolve, he was perforce driven to Spiritualism and Socialism, both of a somewhat crude and uncompromising form.

There are those who express a naive wonder that so great a thinker could fall into such foolishness. But great thinkers enjoy no such immunity as is suggested. It is probably the case that most great scientists contain among their stock of ideas and judgments heterodoxies and credulities quite as violent and quite as inconsistent with their scientific principles as those of Wallace. But they have not the same courage and the same public spirit to compel their revelation. One of the signal qualities of Wallace's greatness was his unconcern for taunts of inconsistency or credulity. If he thought he had got a truth that contributed to human welfare, he told it with all the force with which he felt it. Whether it fitted in precisely with other truths and so helped to make a neat logical system did not concern him. He was not primarily a logician or a system-monger, but a devotee of truth and humanity. Most of his

truths he was willing to hang on two or more separate strings. In his last years he seems more and more, however, to have approached a Theism. the spiritual power and meaning of which he came to extend more and more widely over the realm of Nature and which gave a clearer unity to his outlook. This position is summarized in a very interesting letter quoted by Mr. Marchant in the little biographical sketch appended to his latest book, "The Revolt of Democracy." "The whole cumulative argument in my 'World of Life' is that it calls for the agency of a mind or minds so enormously above and beyond our human minds, as to compel us to look upon it, or them, as 'God or Gods,' and so-called 'Laws of Nature' as the action by will-power or otherwise of such superhuman or infinite beings. 'Laws of Nature,' apart from the existence and agency of some such Being or Beings, are mere words that explain nothing—are, in fact, unthinkable. That is my position. Whether this 'Unknown Reality' is a single Be-

The Nation.

ing, and acts everywhere in the universes; as direct creator, organizer, and director of every minutest motive in the whole of *our* Universe, and of all possible Universes, or whether it acts through variously conditioned modes, as Herbert Spencer suggested, or through 'infinite grades of beings' as I suggest, comes to much the same thing."

Here, of course, we have something very different from the abrupt doctrine of the earlier position, a Universal Mind informing and directing not merely the higher operations of humanity, but the entire course of Nature. The conviction that some such power or purpose is demanded alike by logic and by morality to give consistency to the evolutionary process is evidently gaining an ever stronger hold upon thinkers of our time. They differ as to how far such Power or Purpose is fitly expressed in terms of Personality. But the sense of its presence is more and more widely diffused.