

THE LAST OF THE VICTORIANS.

With the death of Alfred Russel Wallace there disappears the last of that great breed of men with whose names the glory of the Victorian era is inseparably bound up. The reign of Queen Victoria extended from 1837 to 1901; but it is with a group of men all of whom were in the full vigor of their powers during the two decades from 1850 to 1870 that we associate the idea of the Victorian age as a distinctive epoch. If, in the mind's eye, we could marshal the long procession of their departing figures, it would be indeed an impressive array. The line—unless we were to go back to Macaulay, who died in 1859—stretches back just half a century from the present date, for it begins with Thackeray, whose death, at the age of fifty-two, took place in 1863; and then came in succession—to name only the most shining figures—Dickens and Mill and George Eliot and Carlyle and Darwin and Browning and Tennyson and Gladstone and Spencer. Wallace, surviving in the full enjoyment of his intellectual and spiritual energy to the age of nearly ninety-one, is now no

more, and he was the last of the line.

It cannot be said that Wallace took as large a place in the story of his time, that he was as potent an influence in its life or in the moulding of its thought, as any of the illustrious ten the roll of whose names we have just called. This is true in spite of his undisputed claim to independent and simultaneous promulgation, with Darwin, of a discovery which forms one of the landmarks in the history of human thought. The doctrine of natural selection was conceived and expressed as clearly by Wallace as by Darwin; and, had there been no Darwin, quite possibly the name of Wallace would be attached to it. Yet by no means certainly; for, though Wallace, too, supported the theory by a rich store of observed facts, the dominating element in its conquest of the world of science was that marvellous array of varied evidence, collected with infinite patience, analyzed with rare precision, and discussed in an exemplary spirit of scientific impartiality, which, beginning with the publication of the "Origin of Species" in 1859, formed the unrivalled distinction of Darwin's work.

As for the attitude of these two scientific worthies towards each other, the history of thought might be searched in vain for anything more ideal. Never has there been more absolute contemporaneity in the announcement of a great discovery; and yet never has there been a more complete absence of jealousy or strife. Neither of the men seems ever to have cast so much as a breath of doubt on the merit of the other. In Wallace's latest book, written after the close of his ninetieth year, the names Darwin and Darwinism are used with a total absence of *arrière pensée*—without the slightest hint that the fame which has accrued almost entirely to Darwin alone ought in justice to be shared with a greater approach to equality by his fellow-discoverer; and Darwin's attitude was equally high-minded. And this record derives added interest from its contrast with what happened in the case of a greater than Darwin. Newton was not less high-minded than Darwin, not less superior to the ordinary jealousies of scientific rivalry; but through the overzeal of friends he was dragged into a controversy with Leibnitz over the invention of the infinitesimal calculus which gave rise to much

bitterness, but which the judgment of posterity has unmistakably settled by recognizing the full claim of each to the honor of independent discovery.

Wallace's equal share in the original promulgation of the doctrine of the origin of species by means of natural selection is his most signal title to fame; but it is by no means the measure either of his scientific achievements or of his general powers. Indeed, in ranking him among the truly notable figures of his generation, one thinks not so much of his most famous achievement, but rather of the wide sweep of his scientific labors, the freshness and originality of his outlook, the vigor and energy of his attack on all manner of questions relating to man and society, and a certain quality of largeness which marks his style as it does that of the great Victorians generally. In one respect, he stands perhaps alone among them, though it is natural to couple with him in this two others of very different type. We refer to the zeal with which Wallace, even in extreme old age, looked forward to the salvation of mankind in a not too distant future through radical changes in the institutions of human society. In John Stuart Mill, the hope and purpose of human betterment burned with a steady flame throughout his life; the salient feature of Gladstone's career was the process, the reverse of that witnessed in most men, by which he gradually passed from extreme conservatism to the most advanced liberalism consistent with the English ideal of safe and orderly progress. Wallace's temper was wholly different from that of either the philosopher or the statesman; nor was it, in relation to human affairs, the temper of the man of science. His dicta, both upon the wretchedness of the present in comparison with the past and upon the possibilities of the future in comparison with the present, are guided rather by a noble, but almost blind, enthusiasm than by the clear light of reason.

It is more than half a century since the epoch-making paper embodying the conclusions of Darwin and Wallace was read to the Linnæan Society. The doctrine of natural selection had to fight its way to general adoption, but before very long it acquired supreme dominion; and this not only in the biological sciences, but in almost every domain of

human thought. During the period of its struggle for acceptance, the greatest difficulty it encountered arose from the misunderstanding of its true meaning by scientific men who opposed it; in later times misunderstanding of its true meaning by unscientific men who have swallowed but not digested it has been productive of a not inconsiderable crop of shallow and mischievous judgments. In both these respects its history has been remarkably similar to that of the doctrine of Malthus, to whose work both Darwin and Wallace owed the first impulse towards their discovery. And the analogy holds pretty closely as to a further stage of the matter. That the doctrine of Malthus has been exploded a thousand times, everybody knows; but those who really know the doctrine know that what has been exploded is only a misunderstanding of it. The case with the Darwinian theory is somewhat different, as is natural in view of the infinitely greater complexity of the problem. The researches of the past fifty years, and especially of the past twenty, have undoubtedly made necessary many modifications of the views expressed by Darwin. They have brought about a considerable shifting of emphasis in this respect and that; and they have of course filled up great gaps which he left in the doctrine of heredity. But the essence of the matter remains as he left it, and even the modifications are in large measure of a kind that he allowed for. When a man talks of Darwin as a "back number," or the doctrine of natural selection as "exploded," it is pretty safe to set him down as one of those to whom the latest thing in the newspapers is the last word of science.