

THE LATE ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE: by C. J. Ryan

BY the death of the great British naturalist and philosopher, Wallace, the world has lost a powerful factor. He was a scientific worker of the highest eminence whose whole life was a protest against materialism in science and worldliness in society, a giant intellect inspired by pure love of truth and the welfare of his fellow creatures. When there is a majority of scientific men of his stamp it will not be suspected that the goddess of science is a cold and unfeeling divinity, disdainful of the vital human problems of the soul and neglectful of the spiritual mystery of Beauty and all it implies. Without being in the least a dogmatist in theology, Wallace had the profoundest reverence and faith in the spiritual foundation and guidance of the universe. He writes in *The World of Life*:

Materialism is as dead as priestcraft, for all intelligent minds. There are laws of nature, but they are purposeful. Everywhere we look we are confronted by power and intelligence. The future will be of wonder, reverence and a calm faith worthy of our place in the scheme of things. . . . My answer is made as a man of science, as a naturalist, as a man who studies his surroundings to see where he is. And the conclusion I reach is this: that everywhere, not here and there, but everywhere, and in the very smallest operations of nature to which human observation has penetrated, there is purpose and continual guidance and

control. . . . I believe it to be the guidance of beings superior to us in power and intelligence, call them what you will. . . . I cannot comprehend how any just and unprejudiced mind, fully aware of this amazing activity, can persuade itself that the whole thing is a blind and unintelligent accident.

In commenting upon Professor Schäfer's Presidential Address to the British Association last year, Wallace said, in referring to the statement that mechanical and physical forces alone can explain the works of life:

I submit that, in view of the actual facts of growth and organization, and that living protoplasm has never been chemically produced, the assertion that life is due to chemical and mechanical processes alone is quite unjustified. *Neither the probability of such an origin, nor even its possibility, has been supported by anything which can be termed scientific facts or logical reasoning.*

Sixty years ago, Wallace was struck by the idea of the Survival of the Fittest and Natural Selection, while he was exploring the wilds of the Malayan Archipelago. The same principle was simultaneously worked out by Darwin, Wallace's lifelong friend, and is, of course, one of the strongest points in favor of Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis. Wallace, however, extended his researches into wider spheres of thought than Darwin; he was not content with explanations limited to the material plane only, and, in consequence of his absence of prejudice, and ability to seize quickly the meaning of some of the obscure phenomena he encountered, his convictions of the spiritual nature of man were strengthened. His mental activities were also extended in the direction of practical affairs, and he became noted for his original views upon the pressing problems of social life. In the early days of the Theosophical Society he studied H. P. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, her first important work, and his appreciation of it is shown in the following quotation from a letter to her:

I am amazed at the vast amount of erudition displayed in the chapters, and the great interest of the topics on which they treat; your book will open up to many a whole world of new ideas, and cannot fail to be of the greatest value in the inquiry which is now being so earnestly carried on.

In strong contrast to the materialistic theories, Wallace's opinion was that of Theosophy, i. e., that life is the cause, not the result, of organized forms, and that it is a wilful distortion of the meaning of evolution to teach that if science ever builds up the exact chemical compound of which living matter is composed, such a substance will present all the features of life, including reproduction. He showed

that the growth of crystals, which is sometimes used by bad reasoners, even of scientific repute, as a parallelism to the growth and increase of living cells, is an entirely different thing. The crystal grows by the addition of matter similar to itself on the outside; the cell by the internal assimilation and transmutation of various elements into living protoplasm, that mysterious substance of which so little is known while it is alive. The nucleus of a cell is a directing agent.

The attitude of Wallace toward the greatest problem of all — the existence and origin of the soul of man — is perhaps his highest claim to admiration and the one which will outlast his work as a biologist. Without mincing the matter in the least, and in spite of the harshest criticism, he had the courage to assert that as nothing in the evolution of the human body can account for the soul he was compelled to assume that the animal-man was endowed with it at some definite moment when the conditions were suitable. This perfectly reasonable and illuminating suggestion, though incomplete from the standpoint of Theosophy, was absolutely new in the atmosphere of scientific biology, which ignores the soul. It should be remembered that Wallace possessed all the available information there is on evolution, and, upon certain obscure phenomena showing the existence of hidden faculties in man's nature, far more than his critics. He dared to believe and teach that the soul is the real man, and that it came from some other source than the body:

The difference between man and the other animals is unbridgeable. Mathematics is alone sufficient to prove in man the possession of a faculty unexistent in other creatures. Then you have music, and the artistic faculty.

Wallace came nearest of all modern biologists to the real facts as given in the Theosophical teachings, but he did not pursue his researches far into the complexities of the soul's evolution or of its subtle vehicles, the Principles, of which Theosophy gives such a clear understanding. It is perhaps well that he kept to his own lines of attack on materialism in his appeal to the scientific world, for his sane and simple views about the nature of the soul are still too advanced for most of the leaders of science, though the influence of those views is plainly increasing.

Wallace stood out boldly for the real Dignity of Man, though he was under no illusions. He believed that very little progress has been made in morals or intellect since the days of ancient Egypt, ten thousand years ago. He faced the fact that Evolution moves very

slowly, but was not appalled by it, for he felt that the divine spark in man, the spirit, is bound to triumph at last, though the way be through pain and suffering until wisdom comes. He never yielded to the subtle inference that man is a clod, ephemeral and helpless, the sport of circumstances, or a miserable worm whose only hope was in some external power. His message was the inspiring one that every man had the means of rising out of his low estate to the heights of the gods. Without being connected with the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society, Wallace was a Theosophist in some of his leading ideas.