

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE

By G. K. CHESTERTON

IF I were asked who ought to be regarded in future ages as the greatest man of our time, I should hesitate between Walt Whitman and an old inn-keeper I once knew, quite unknown to the public. But if the question were what great man would be regarded as the most important and significant figure of the nineteenth century, I should hesitate between Walt Whitman and Alfred Russel Wallace. Remarkable as Russel Wallace is in the matter of individual intellect, in the matter of representative opinion he is more remarkable still. For he has been the leader of a revolution and the leader of a counter revolution.

The one revolution is triumphant and universal; that is, as a revolution it is dead. The second revolution is still fantastic, infantile, a laughing stock; that is, as a revolution it is living and strong. The first was the Darwinian Movement, the second is the movement of Psychical Research. It is a conventional image of life that men are fire-brands in their youth and Conservatives in their old age. But it is peculiar to notice that most good and vigorous men who live to an advanced age gain the reputation, and have to many the appearance, of having been in their youth austere and rational, and in their old age lunatics and incendiaries. It was so with Gladstone. It is so with Russel Wallace. The real truth is that these men have always been in love with revolutions, but the old revolution has become a respectability. They love, like boys, the fruit while it is still green and bitter.

Alfred Russel Wallace, as everyone knows, discovered the process of natural selection simultaneously with Darwin. Glorious as was that achievement in science, it stirs the blood less than the conduct of the two great men when fronted with the ethical problem of this involuntary rivalry. Nothing in all the chronicles of great stoics or great gentlemen is more manly and wholesome than the letters of Darwin and Wallace upon that matter. Finally, Wallace effaced himself, and the great discovery went forward as the Darwinian theory, or the principle of

Darwinism, when we might have been calling it to this day the Wallacian Theory, or the Principle of Wallacism. Wallace lived and took his part, however, in that superb April of science, that heroic age of biology, when the triumphs of evolutionism had almost the air of great legends, when Huxley and Clifford preached and questioned in public like Paul and Socrates, and when *The Challenger* sailed the great seas like the *Argo* seeking for the fleece. If ever men felt as if they were founding a new world, it was they. They had so much hope that faith seemed to them needless, an anachronism. They found the humming birds more resplendent than angels. They cast Heaven down into Limbo, and put the earth above it. They flung theologies away from them with a splendid pride of ignorance. Night and its ghosts were finally left behind. But happily, or unhappily, night cannot be left behind. More than forty years have passed; those brilliant rationalists have gone to the grave long ago. One of them alone survives in a new world, and he is writing like an Irish poet or a Breton peasant of symbolic dreams and ancient incantations, of the truth in legend, and scientific probability of witchcraft. For the night has returned with its ghosts, and also with its stars.

Night is as normal, and therefore as healthy, as day; and there is a great deal to be said for the proposition that ghosts are quite as normal and healthy as living people. The only places on the earth where men are not superstitious are the great towns where they are not healthy; and it may be that rationality is the wild dream of a decadent poet. But these new questions of the underworld of the spirit are of their nature so disturbing and incomplete that any man who touches them, especially when full of years and honour, begins something intoxicating and dreadful which he cannot hope to finish. Alfred Russel Wallace can scarcely live to see himself as right over psychical as he was over the biological problem, or to rejoice in the day when it shall not be quite respectable not to be a spiritualist.

All his later works have this odd and

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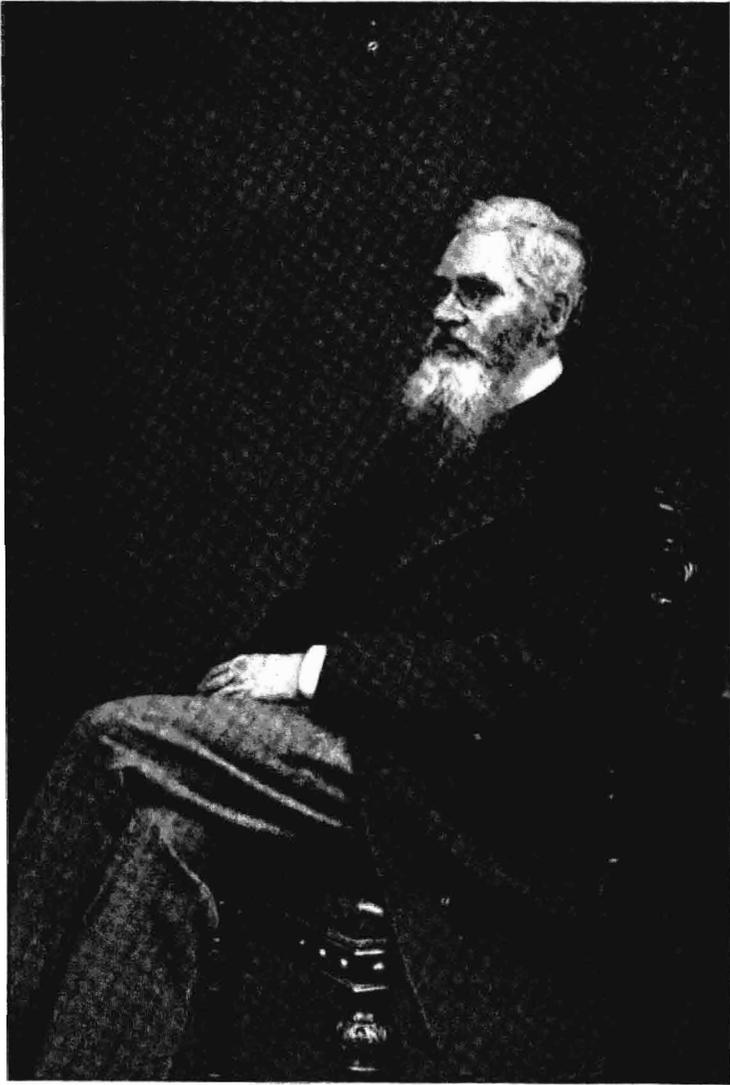


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ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

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almost apocalyptic character. The most recent is the remarkable work in which he gives interesting reasons for the belief that this earth is really the central point of a group of worlds alone in space. Of its scientific validity I cannot speak; but it is a more poetical conception than the boasted infinity of worlds. Men can be patriotic only for islands, and we should rise to a great cosmic patriotism and a great world religion if we could only convince ourselves that the whole universe was a little island.

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