

Alfred Russel Wallace's *My Life*<sup>2</sup> may, in one sense, be called *The Autobiography of a Crank*. The writer's contributions to modern science have been of a solid kind; and it is noticeable that those parts of the present narrative which have to do with this serious achievement take on a

<sup>2</sup> *My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions*. By ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE. In two volumes. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1905.

simple dignity of phrase which is elsewhere lacking. The present commentator is not qualified to speak of the points in controversy between Wallace and Darwin and others, but supposes that Wallace is right in asserting that time has thrown the weight of evidence, with regard to many points so disputed, upon his side. But a comparatively small part of the book has to do with the work for which the writer will be remembered. Much of it is a record rather of his avocations and secondary enthusiasms; and here he becomes now and then a little truculent, even strident. The most striking quality of the narrative as a whole is that *naïveté*, that innocent ingenuousness of attitude toward himself and the world, which so often belongs to the philosopher and the scientist. It was marked in Darwin, as his published correspondence not long ago showed; it is even more marked in Dr. Wallace. The earlier chapters are especially amusing reading, because our scientist, in his mood of detached concentration upon the past, is content with such *trivia* as may chance to come to him out of that dark backward and abysm. Never was a remembrancer less solicitous as to the appositeness of events; never one with less imaginative power to rehabilitate and glorify, to hit upon the salient and picturesque incidents of a sufficiently varied life. Yet the narrative is not dull; the speaker is himself too sincerely interested in his tale for that; his eye does not glitter, but he holds us with it. What robs the narrative of dullness is, we have suggested, the cheerful pre-occupation of the narrator: a zest which, however irrelevant, may be counted on to carry the reader over a thousand places which would otherwise have been heavy going.

But in truth the narrative has very little literary charm, ingenuous or other. The annalist's expression is often incorrect, and invariably clumsy. He has no organic mode of speech, and words are but rough counters with him. He is rather complacent over the fact that he is less

crabbed and tongue-tied than Darwin, but it would not occur to him that for simplicity and strength, as well as for finish, he is infinitely inferior to Spencer and Huxley. As for his recorded taste in literary matters, his favorite author was Hood, and, failing him, he was able to put up with strange poetical bedfellows. He quotes, with an altogether innocent air of scientific scrutiny, some early doggerel of his own, containing one good line, which he evidently does not know is lifted bodily from Gray's *Elegy*. His brother, however, he tells us later, was "the only one of our family who had some natural capacity as a verse-writer." This statement we might be inclined to take on faith; but evidence is given to the contrary in the form of a considerable number of alleged poems, from one of which we quote the opening lines:—

Well, we are here at anchor  
 In the river of Para;  
 We have left the rolling ocean  
 Behind us and afar;  
 Our weary voyage is over,  
 Seasickness is no more,  
 The boat has come to fetch us,  
 So let us go on shore.

Apart from his services to science in the interpretation and development of the Darwinian theory, Dr. Wallace's most dignified work seems to have lain in his advocacy of socialism. In concluding his account of experiences in America, he takes occasion to point a moral in connection with a matter to which the attention of the American people has just been called very forcibly: "Not only equality before the law, but equality of opportunity, is the great fundamental principle of social justice. This is the teaching of Herbert Spencer, but he did not carry it out to its logical consequence, — the inequity, and therefore the social immorality, of wealth-inheritance. To secure equality of opportunity there must be no inequality of initial wealth. To allow one child to be born a millionaire and another a pauper is a crime against humanity and, for those who believe in a deity, a crime

against God." Dr. Wallace is not one of those who believe in a deity; he believes, however, in astrology, phrenology, and spiritualism.

In connection with spiritualism his character of crank is most fully developed. He is not, be it noted, especially interested in the scientific investigation of occult phenomena, and rather sniffs at the Society for Psychical Research as unnecessarily reluctant and skeptical. "They have worked . . . for a quarter of a century," he says, "and yet they are only now beginning to approach very carefully and skeptically even the simpler physical phenomena which hundreds of spiritualists, including Sir William Crookes and Professor Zollner, demonstrated more than thirty years ago." But what are these "physical phenomena," in detailing which our truant scientist occupies several chapters? Nothing more nor less than the usual paltry affairs of the table-rapping, the bell-ringing, the slate-writing, the apparition of Indian chiefs and other ghostly persons: all of them, let us hastily admit, sufficiently unaccountable, but none of them marvelous, because they effect nothing. If we are going to be so vapid and trifling in the Beyond, so fond of silly games, so prone to the dialect of servant girls, as these spooks of Dr. Wallace's, let us by all means pray for annihilation.