

MR. DARWIN AT DOWN.

A GREAT peal of laughter fills the modest house at Down. Not one of those sharp metallic cachinnations which jar on the ear and set the teeth on edge, nor one of those dry wooden rattlings like the crackling of thorns under a pot, nor yet the loud laugh which speaks the vacant mind; but a rich Homeric laugh, round and full, musical and jocund—a laugh to remember. This outburst of merriment proceeds from the recluse of Down, infinitely amused to hear that, while he has been watching the tendrils of the vine and examining the predatory habits of the sundew, our microscope has been focussed upon the great observer himself; that, without going through the preliminary process of pinning him to a cork like a cockchafer, he has been a marked man for some time past; that when he has imagined himself most secure at the pleasant house of his friend Dr. Farr, discussing the light and exhilarating subject of vital statistics, the same penetrating orb was still fixed upon him; that, in the little garden where he cultivates his plants for experiment, ‘observation with extended view’ was at his

elbow. 'It is better so,' says Mr. Darwin, 'than to be interviewed and harassed with questions which cannot be answered without some appearance of vanity. Moreover it strikes me as not proper that a man should communicate anything to the author of a biographical notice. He should behave as if already dead.' On any subject but himself he is the most free and communicative of living philosophers. Without an atom of scientific jealousy, he is always ready to expound his views, to narrate the result of the delicate experiments on which he is perpetually occupied, and to assist other investigators from the stores of an experience that has ranged over the whole field of natural science, and the conclusions of a mind trained to reason closely on such facts as have been ascertained by actual observation. No naturalist of this or any other time has confined himself more strictly to well-ascertained facts, and devoted more labour to original investigation. The reason of this excessive care is to be found in the keystone of the Darwinian philosophy—*La vérité quand même*; the pursuit of truth through all difficulties, and without regard to consequences.

To this object he has devoted his entire life, saving, of course, the cheerful hours spent in his family-circle—one of the most united and affectionate in England—and with his oldest friends, Sir Joseph Hooker and Professor Huxley. Perhaps no merrier trio of philosophers ever gathered together, and enlivened abstruse subjects with quaint quip and crank;

but neither of his two friends, genial companions though they be, can approach Mr. Darwin's pitch of hilarity. At a droll illustration of Mr. Huxley's, or a humorous doubt insinuated in the musical tones of the President of the Royal Society, the eyes twinkle under the massive overhanging brows, the Socratic head, as Professor Tyndall loves to call it, is thrown back, and over the long white beard rolls out such a laugh as we have attempted to describe. Unfortunately there are moments when Mr. Darwin can enjoy neither scientific investigation nor friendly converse; when sudden fits of illness, to which he has been subject since his manhood, lay him prostrate for days together. Happily these attacks are only troublesome while they last, and inflict no permanent injury on his powerful frame. The long wakeful periods of convalescence, too, are utilised for observations which require almost constant attention; so that the tables may be said to be turned on disease.

Mr. Darwin, like his friend Sir Joseph Hooker, is an instance of the hereditary transmission of peculiar characteristics. He is the third of his family in direct descent who have been Fellows of the Royal Society. He is the son of Dr. Robert Waring Darwin, F.R.S., and grandson of Dr. Erasmus Darwin, author of the *Botanic Garden*, *Zoonomia*, &c.; and by the mother's side is grandson of Josiah Wedgwood, F.R.S., the celebrated manufacturer of pottery, and founder of the works at Etruria. In

q

him, however, the artistic element which dominated the Wedgwoods has been almost entirely overshadowed by the scientific instinct which impels man to seek for knowledge for its own sake, without the slightest admixture of interest or ambition. For sculpture or pottery or even for drawing, except as an aid to botanical and zoological pursuits, he cares very little, his collection of pictures being confined to a portrait of old Dr. Darwin and one of Josiah Wedgwood, hanging in his dining-room, and sketches of Sir Joseph Hooker and Professor Huxley in the small study whence have issued the *Origin of Species*, the *Descent of Man*, and a large number of equally valuable but less generally known works on zoology, botany, and geology. It is the fate of Mr. Darwin, like that of many other celebrated men, to be best known by the works to which he would himself hardly assign the highest rank among his many productions.

The popular mind, smitten with a taste for a smattering of science, naturally pounces most eagerly upon those scientific works which approach the borderland of speculation, and has thus done him but scant justice; the hurrying and blundering million not pausing to distinguish between those statements which he puts forward as matters of fact, ascertained, beyond all possibility of doubt, by experiment, and the hypotheses which, with admirable caution, he sometimes bases upon them. This is grossly unfair to the most candid of philosophers, who cares nothing

for his theories, and, as in the well-known case of the bees in the *Origin of Species*, frankly admitted the difficulty of reconciling the phenomena of Nature with his hypothesis of divergence. Thus it is not uncommon to hear persons of supposed scientific taste, who chatter glibly enough about protoplasm and the monad, compare Mr. Darwin's most popular works with the *Vestiges of Creation*, a mere scientific romance, founded on the daring speculations of Lamarck and the nebular theory of Laplace, the famous astronomer, who, when asked by Napoleon why he had not attributed the structure of the universe to one great Architect, is said to have replied that he 'had no occasion to adopt that hypothesis.'

Mr. Darwin's books are founded upon no hasty generalisations from facts collected by others, but on patient and independent observation. Yet so persistent have been his labours that a mere catalogue of them would fill a column of this journal. Since his return from the memorable voyage of the *Beagle*, he has been constantly present to the scientific world. It was a happy thought of Captain FitzRoy to offer, on setting out in 1831, to give up part of his own cabin to any naturalist who would accompany the ship on her now historic survey. Mr. Darwin had just then taken his degree at Cambridge, his preliminary studies having been made at Shrewsbury School, under Dr. Butler (afterwards Bishop of Lichfield), and then for two years at the University of Edinburgh, when he devoted some time to marine

zoology, and read his first papers before the Plinian Society, on the movement of the ova of *Flustra*. On hearing of Captain FitzRoy's offer, he at once volunteered his services without salary, but on condition that he should have the entire disposal of his collections, all of which he deposited in various public institutions.

His work covers an immense area of thought, extending over zoology, botany, and geology, in each of which he has made the mark of an original and powerful mind, enriched by long research. The bulk of work of this kind conveys but the dimmest idea of the toil involved in the collection of material, and spent in experiment and observation. In actual writing, Mr. Darwin works on a plan of his own, in very short spells—never exceeding a couple of hours—and never commenced until the evidence has been carefully collected, arranged, and duly pondered over.

In one respect, despite his vexatious attacks of illness, Mr. Darwin must be considered a fortunate man. During the whole of his life he has been in easy circumstances, above the toil of earning an income. Unlike many philosophers, he has not had the mortification of spending his best hours in the drudgery of official routine, or the hardly less wearisome task of teaching. He has been enabled to devote his entire time to his favourite pursuits, and since his marriage with his cousin, Miss Emma Wedgwood, has resided at Down, amid the rich and

varied scenery of one of the prettiest parts of Kent. As his numerous family has grown up around him, he has been relieved of all the cares which distract the scientific worker in the heat and turmoil of active life. He leads a truly calm and philosophic existence, unvexed by the contemplation of weekly bills and the signing of cheques. In his wife and family he is especially happy, being spared the pain of degenerate offspring. His eldest son, Mr. William Darwin, is a banker at Southampton; the second, George, took high honours at Cambridge, and is now a Fellow of Trinity; the third, Frank, who has inherited his father's ill-health, acts as his secretary; the fourth, Leonard, is an officer in the Artillery, and distinguished himself as one of the scientific corps sent to observe the transit of Venus; the fifth, Horace, is an excellent mathematician. One married and one unmarried daughter complete a family whose constant care is to relieve its head of all possible trouble or anxiety.

Thus, free from the disturbing influences of the world, he can well afford to treat with admirable good-humour the attacks of scientific opponents, and the jokes of ignorant folk incapable of understanding either his books or himself. When young he pursued field-sports with the combined interest of the hunter and the naturalist; but of late years he has found his chief relaxation in reading the popular novels of the day, feeling, like Auguste Comte, that the scientific bow requires frequent unbending. In

his treatment of books and specimens, he resembles Mr. Carlyle—caring nothing for them when read or thoroughly investigated. His books and plants are always at the service of his friends and neighbours, among whom one of the nearest is Sir John Lubbock. Finally, let it be remembered that Mr. Darwin has exercised no common degree of moral influence on the scientific world. Completely possessed with the idea of absolute truth at all hazards, he abhors tampering with or shaping facts to suit preconceived theories. It is, perhaps, hardly too much to say that no man has exercised a more powerful influence on the study of natural history since Aristotle himself.