

SHROPSHIRE MEN.

BY E. F. MARSHALL.

CXXXVIII.
CHARLES DARWIN.

Although barely twelve months have elapsed since we wrote and published a somewhat lengthy appreciation of the great scientist, we do not think any apology is needed for our reverting to the subject of Darwin, and giving him a place in our series as one of the greatest men of whom Shropshire can boast.

Born at The Mount, Frankwell, Shrewsbury, on February 12th, 1809, Charles Robert Darwin was destined to rank amongst the intellectual mighty, and to illustrate in his own person the force of some of the scientific doctrines he was afterwards to propose.

If there be any truth in the theory of heredity, he was uniquely fortunate. His father, Dr. Robert Waring Darwin, was son to that better known man, Erasmus Darwin, who won a three-fold reputation, as physician, poet, and naturalist. His mother was Susannah, daughter to Josiah Wedgwood, the great Staffordshire potter. It was from his two grandfathers that Charles Darwin inherited those peculiar qualities which enabled him to make good his title to a place in the temple of the immortals. Neither Robert Waring Darwin nor his wife displayed more than the average intellectual ability of their class: that they were what they were was an evidence to the force of that particular law of heredity by which it is laid down that a heritable characteristic of a parent may be unexpressed in the development of the offspring, but re-appear in the third generation.

There can be no doubt that Darwin inherited the peculiarly scientific side of his mind from his paternal grandfather. That eminent authority Dr. Ernest Krause is of that opinion. He says: "Almost every single work of the younger Darwin may be paralleled by at least a chapter in the works of his ancestor: the mystery of heredity, adaptation, the protective arrangements of animals and plants, sexual selection, insectivorous plants, and the analysis of the motions and sociological impulses; nay, even the studies on insects are to be found already discussed in the writings of the elder Darwin. But, at the same time, we remark a material difference in their interpretation of nature. The elder Darwin was a Lamarckian, or, more properly, Jean Lamarck was a Darwinian of the older school, for he has only carried out the opinions of Erasmus Darwin, although with greater acumen; and it is to Darwin, therefore, that the credit is due of having first established a complete system of the theory of evolution."

If Charles had not been a born scientist, though he might have read the works of his grandfather, he would never have so thoroughly assimilated them as not only to clearly understand all they laid down and all they implied, but also to detect their weak points, and to go still deeper into the subject of the truth they were to convey. It was undoubtedly fortunate that Charles deeply inherited the scientific cloak of Erasmus, and that he was not heir to his grandfather's poetic phylactery. The elder Darwin's weak point was that he was a poet. He lost many of the solid advantages of direct science in the glare of the aureole of the bard. In his quest of truth, he was tempted to leave the highway by the flowers in the meadows. It is true that the natural beauty of any subject he had chosen for a scientific study did not deter him from dissecting it and pulling it to pieces to get at its soul; but it is equally true that, having attained his object, he tried to rehabilitate the original beauty of his subject by writing about it in poetry instead of telling the world the story of his discovery in sober and stilted prose. The scientist, if he would succeed, must not only delve into the heart of nature to find her secret, but, having found it, he must also burn the midnight oil until he has thoroughly mastered the language that secret speaks. If he does not understand its language, he cannot tell its story, complete from its initial letter to its final period. The elder Darwin was not so great a scientist as the younger, because Erasmus was a poet, and Charles was not.

Professor Pearson says, and we may safely accept his dictum, that "a man is not only the product of his father, but of all his great ancestry; and, unless very careful selection has taken place, the mean of that ancestry is probably not far from that of the general population." That being so, we may conclude that it was a good thing for the scientific world that Charles Darwin's mother was daughter to Josiah Wedgwood, the potter, whose temperament was antipathetic to that of Erasmus Darwin, the man whose scientific studies was hampered by his love of fanciful analogies in nature.

The Wedgwoods were a race of practical hard-headed men, who, having a purpose in view, followed it to the goal, undaunted by difficulties, and endowed with the habit of utilising their failures as stepping-stones to success. Josiah, the greatest of them, displayed all the family's characteristics in that respect. He, too, had a scientific mind, an unflinching aptitude for research, and for finding gold where other men had only dreamt of rubbish. He could analyse and discriminate. He was not a poet, but he had the artistic sense, and that, in a great measure, helped him on the way to success.

It was because he inherited the solid characteristics of his paternal grandfather, that Charles Darwin was able to overcome the difficulties of the path he had set himself to travel, and to weld theories into systems. The great potter was not merely a mechanician, or a man of commerce: his own peculiar genius was equal in its way to that of the poet-naturalist. His whole success was based upon his powers of research, his faith in the utility of his conceptions, and the perseverance with which he carried out his object, from the starting-point to the goal. His characteristic, combined with the peculiar scientific instincts of Erasmus Darwin, was repeated in the greater mind of Charles Darwin, who became the man he was because of what both his grandfathers were before him.

Next Week. DARWIN AS A POET.

