

## A PEEP AT MR. DARWIN.

In a recent number of the *XIX. Siècle*, M. Francisque Sarcey, the brilliant French writer and critic, describes a visit which he has paid, in company with M. Barbier, the translator of Mr Darwin's works into French, to the author of "The Origin of Species," at his residence at Beckenham. M. Sarcey, after referring to the trees, fields, and hedgerows of Kent, with which he appears to have been quite charmed, and after showing that Mr. Darwin is of a retiring disposition, and rarely grants an interview to anybody, proceeds as follows:—

The servant was assisting us to take off our overcoats when Darwin appeared. He had come into the hall to shake us by the hand. It is odd what ideas we get of people when we picture them to ourselves without having seen them. I expected to see a little stooping, wrinkled, suffering old man. I knew, indeed, that he was seventy-six, and we were told in our letter of introduction that he was not well. There approached me, however, a tall fine old man, as upright as a pin, and apparently as robust as an oak. The characteristic feature of the countenance is the prominence of the forehead and eyebrows, the latter being arched above eyes of inexpressible brightness and gentleness. I was reminded of the portraits of Goethe, whose eyes were sunk in the same way behind a projecting brow. Darwin received us very warmly. He smiled when he offered us his hand, and displayed thereby a set of white teeth. Everything about him denotes at once health and strength, and seems built to live till he is at least a hundred years old. He speaks freely of his age, and of the end which he foresees, and not without a shade of melancholy. "It is a pity to have to go," he said to Barbier, "when one has still so many things to do. As I proceed in the study of nature, I discover vaster horizons, and I feel that I shall not have time to reach them." He limits his ambition to finishing two works, which he has already commenced. One is the life of his grandfather, who was a celebrated physician, and who, like himself, was overwhelmed with abuse by the contemptible and the bigoted of his time for having ventured to break a lance with certain of the prejudices which then prevailed. The other is a work upon the faculties of motion possessed by plants.

He introduced us into a spacious drawing room, the doors and windows of which opened upon a large garden. There were already a few persons in the room, and to these he presented us. He then sat down upon a very high armchair at the chimney-corner, where there burned (in the middle of summer!) a tolerably big coal fire. We were placed upon much lower seats, so that from the height of his arm chair, and with his tall figure, not an inch of which he lost, he towered above us and resembled one of those veterans whom Victor Hugo likes to draw in the *Légende des Siècles*, and whom he calls "Aïeule." Darwin does not speak French, and he excused himself for it with great politeness. As he speaks slowly—and perhaps he had the kindness to moderate his utterance out of regard to the ignorance of his guest—I half understood the sense of what he had said, and Barbier explained to me the rest. He has a very harmonious voice, and I did not notice in him that guttural accent which always astonishes our French ears among his fellow-countrymen. He explained to us that, in his day, French was not taught to young pupils, and that, later, he had thought of learning it, but that an opportunity presented itself for his making a long voyage of exploration and study. This journey round the world did not last less than five years. On his return he was engaged in occupations so numerous and diverse that he no longer had leisure to think of the French language, which was not absolutely necessary to him. He carried already within him the germ of his book on "The Origin of Species." Will it be believed, he worked twenty years in the shadow of his retreat, isolating himself in his labour, without revealing the secret of his studies to the learned societies, without relaxation, in silence and patience, because he was sure of himself and of fame! All in the drawing-room, except Darwin, spoke French fluently. The company consisted of his son, his wife, two of his daughters-in-law, and another lady. We passed into the dining-room, and the ladies, naturally enough, asked me particulars about the *Comédie Française* and our Parisian theatres. The conversation was very lively. Darwin, who heard the ladies laugh, turned sometimes from the conversation which he was holding with Barbier in English, to ask what I had said. It was repeated to him, and he gave a good natured smile.

Darwin was afterwards good enough to take me into his study. I know not with what emotion I entered the room from which so many fine works have issued. I have passed my fiftieth year, yet my heart beat like that of a schoolboy about to be presented to Victor Hugo. It is very simple and severe, this study, enlivened by the sun shedding its light over it in waves. The walls, from top to bottom, are concealed with books. Two book-cases, also occupy the middle of the study. One is full of volumes, and, on the other are arranged all sorts of scientific instruments. After we had a good look round, Darwin took us back again into the drawing-room, where the rest of the company were awaiting us. The conversation was made very animated and pleasant by the good humour of the ladies. Barbier, however, watched the finger of the clock, and at the time which had been prescribed, he beckoned to me to take leave. Darwin rose from his high chair, and, addressing himself to me, said gracefully and with such a clear articulation that I did not miss a word, "I have not been able to understand what you said to the ladies, and which amused them so much, but they will repeat it to me to-night, and I shall have much pleasure in hearing you in that way." I replied to this compliment by an inclination of the head, for I do not venture to speak a word of English. He gave us a last "shake hand," and we left, enchanted with our visit.