

CHAPTER V

DARWIN'S HOME

[The Council of the British Association desired me, if an opportunity should occur at the end of my Presidential Address, to make an appeal for the preservation of Darwin's Home at Down. The opportunity came; I made an appeal: that appeal to audience and to Press had the most gratifying results. Next morning came a telegram from Mr. G. Buckston Browne, a Fellow of the College to which I also have the honour of belonging, offering to purchase Down House for the nation, endow it so that it would be preserved as it was when Darwin lived in it, and at the same time serve some charitable purpose for the poorer followers of science. The Council accepted this offer with gratitude, and resolved that this act of generosity should be known for all time as the "Buckston Browne Gift to the Nation."

The wireless message thrown out at Leeds cannot be called an S.O.S., for the Darwin family had resolved, particularly the present owner of Down, Professor C. G. Darwin, a grandson of the great naturalist, that so long as it was within their means Down House should remain unchanged. In seeking to make Down House a National Trust the Council of the British Association had no thought of establishing a memorial to Darwin; by his works he himself established a monument which the passage of time will but enhance. What the Council felt was the unfairness of saddling a family which has done

so much for science with a permanent burden, while men of science who owe it so much stood by and did nothing to show their gratitude. Mr. Buckston Browne has paid our debts for us, and it will now be possible for students in coming centuries to warm their enthusiasm for research and for truth by visiting the scenes of Darwin's labours. We cannot know Darwin unless we know Down; living science can never be divorced from its great personalities. The essay here reproduced was written for the *R.P.A. Annual* of 1923.]

LONDONERS living on the northern heights, often mark the Crystal Palace gleaming high above the south-eastern suburbs, but few know, or care to know, that only eight miles beyond, nestling in a hollow of the wooded chalk downs of Kent, is the village of Down, and near by Down House, where Charles Darwin, single-handed, wrought the miracle of the nineteenth century. For the man who changed the outlook of all thinking men throughout the world, and transformed the face of all kinds of learning, surely performed a miracle. But if the student of Darwin's works longs to know the home in which they were produced, and the establishment of which their author was master, he will not easily come by a description of them. Yet to really appreciate and understand the writings of Charles Darwin it is essential to have a mental

picture of their birth-place. It seems to me that this neglect of Darwin's home and of Darwin's life is symptomatic of an ignorance or indifference on the part of the rising generation of scientific men of how much they owe to Darwin and to Down. The day will assuredly come when Down will rival Stratford-on-Avon as a Mecca for pilgrims.

Readers of Sir Francis Darwin's "Life" of his father are familiar with the picture given there of Darwin's home at Down. Before giving quotations from that work I may remind my readers that prior to moving into Kent Darwin lived in Gower Street. He made his home there when he married, January 29, 1839, having then almost completed his thirtieth year:—

On September 14, 1842, my father left London with his family and settled at Down. In the Autobiographical chapter his motives for moving into the country are briefly given. He speaks of the attendance at scientific societies and ordinary social duties as suiting his health so "badly that we resolved to live in the country, which we both preferred and have never repented of."

The choice of Down was rather the result of despair than of actual preference; my father and mother were weary of house-hunting, and the attractive points about the place thus seemed to them to counterbalance its some-

what more obvious faults. It had at least one desideratum—namely, quietness. Indeed, it would have been difficult to find a more retired place so near to London. . . . It is a place where new-comers are seldom seen, and the names occurring far back in the old church registers are still known in the village.

The house stands a quarter of a mile from the village, and is built, like so many houses of the last century, as near as possible to the road—a narrow lane winding away to the Westerham high road. In 1842 it was dull and unattractive enough; a square brick building of three storeys, covered with shabby whitewash and hanging tiles. The garden had none of the shrubberies or walls that now give shelter; it was overlooked from the lane, and was open, bleak and desolate.

The house was made to look neater by being covered with stucco, but the chief improvement effected was the building of a large bow up three storeys. This bow became covered with a tangle of creepers, and pleasantly varied the south side of the house. The drawing-room, with its verandah opening into the garden, as well as the study in which my father worked during the later years of his life, were added at subsequent dates.

Eighteen acres of land were sold with the house, of which twelve acres on the south side of the house form a pleasant field, scattered with fair-sized oaks and ashes. From this field a strip was cut off and converted into a kitchen-garden, in which the experimental plot of ground was situated, and where the greenhouses were ultimately put up.

No doubt Sir Francis Darwin had in his mind a clear picture of his beloved home as he penned these passages, but by reading them and re-reading them I could never obtain a concrete conception of the establishment which Charles Darwin set up at Down, and where he taught mankind how to study the world into which it has been born.

Hence it came about that in a gleamy morning of February, 1921, I found myself in the lane mentioned in Sir Francis Darwin's description, leaning against the flint wall which his father built to separate passers-by from the frontage and approach to Down House. As I stood there, I instinctively began to count the windows in the stucco-visaged middle block, fifteen in all, five to each of the three floors. The two windows on the ground floor to my right I recognize as those of the old study in which the "Origin of Species" was written; the three in the same row to the left certainly open into the "old dining-room"; the two rows of windows in the upper storeys mark the bedrooms. This older central block, ending above in a rather flat slate-covered roof, finished by rising chimneys, would have satisfied the needs of most men who have to

depend on learning for a living, but it proved too small for the ever-growing Darwin family; hence continuing the central block to my right is the new wing. I note the plain hall door between the old and new parts which gave Darwin's visitors entrance when they passed through the gateway in the flint wall, and made their way along in front of the new wing; between flint wall and the house there is only the carriage approach, flanked by a flower-bed and low shrubs. The two windows on the ground floor of this new wing look into the new study; just behind one of these windows Darwin sat daily at his dissecting table, or writing on a board resting on the arm of his easy-chair. Above the "new study" more bedrooms. Then away to the left of the central block a gabled creeper-covered extension—the kitchen, scullery, and offices. Among the trees which shelter this end of the house and flank the roadway I can see a detached cottage, the home of the servant who acted as gardener, and on occasions as coachman when Darwin, in his earlier years at Down, drove to Sydenham to catch the train for London. Altogether an establishment of substantial appearance, which a

passer-by on this country road would have assigned to the sporting scion of a country family. No one could have guessed it sheltered the greatest student England ever produced, and was the birthplace of some of her most lasting books.

Having duly counted the windows, I turn right about to realise that the house does not quite face the rising sun, but turns its front almost as much to the north as to the east; looking in this direction, I see below me the red-roofed village of Down with its church spire covered with grey wooden shingles. The village is built irregularly at cross roads, sheltered among tall elms, and only a meadow length away. I see that the lane on which I stand issues from the west side of the village, passes the pond and the blacksmith's shop, creeps along the hedge on one side of the meadow, and presently turns along another towards where I stand. Then, curving past Down House, the lane holds its way mainly in a southerly direction, until it is lost in the wooded hollows and ridges which form, some six miles away, the flank of the Kentish plateau. It is an easy step to the village from Down House. In search of a pinch of snuff at the Vicarage Charles Darwin had not far to go; nor

had the vicar far to come when he made one of his welcomed calls.

The sounds which issued from its windows on this February morning would have told me, had I not already known it, that Down House had become a school for girls—a young ladies' seminary. Presently I was within the entrance hall, which passage-like runs from front to back of the house. I was introduced by a letter which Major Leonard Darwin had kindly given me. Near the far end of the hall one might turn to either the right or the left. The passage or corridor to the left passed behind the rooms I had surveyed from the outside; the first door on the left leads into Darwin's old study—where so much was accomplished—now a teacher's room, while beyond is the door of the old dining-room, now a schoolroom. This left-hand corridor ends in the kitchen quarters. On its right side opens the roomy staircase leading to the bedroom floors above; beyond the staircase, between it and the kitchen, opens the door to the “new” and spacious dining-room. Through that door in days gone by came and went Joseph Parslow, Darwin's butler, for forty years an integral part of the family; from within the dining-room one can al-

most catch an echo of a large and laughing family—one of the happiest in all England—an echo of sixty years ago.

We have been standing in the far end of the hall looking to our left along the corridor of the old house; near here in olden days stood the hall table with its jar of snuff. On our right open two doors, through either of which Darwin was wont to issue as he came to refresh himself from the jar. The first door leads into the study, the new study, with its fireplace in the wall opposite to the door. At each side are the recesses where Darwin had his shelves and loose folios; one can see where the easy chair stood between the far window and the fireplace, and the position of the flat table near the middle of the room, and the bookcase against the wall on the left. Just beyond the study door opens that to the drawing-room—the new “new” drawing-room—of goodly proportions and well lighted from the verandahed window looking out on the shrubberied lawn behind the house. Who has not felt a tugging at their heart-strings when reading of the evenings which Mrs. Darwin and her husband have spent here? There is only a partition between this room and the adjacent study

where Darwin, more than any man, helped to free the human mind from the shackles of tradition.

As is often the case in English homes, the back of Down House is really its front. Here we note one of Darwin's earliest improvements—the building out of the bow-windowed extensions of the dining-room and of his bedroom above the dining-room; the great mulberry tree, which met his glance as he looked out of a morning, still stands and flourishes; so do the great lime trees under which he loved to sit as his children played tennis on the lawn; his gravel walks are still preserved.

On the side we are now examining, Down House catches the afternoon sun, for it faces the south and west. Away in these directions lie the eighteen acres of lawn, garden, and paddock of which Charles Darwin was master for almost forty years—the scene of his many experimental triumphs. It is an oblongish, uplandish strip of land, nearly 600 feet above sea-level, the road or lane from the village bounding it on the north and east; away in the south, the property ends at the brink of one of those deep round-bottomed, grassy valleys which everywhere cut into the Kentish plateau; on the west are neighbouring gardens and fields. Away,

at this narrower southern end, just above the coppiced and meadowed valley beyond, is a belt of shrubs and trees, about three hundred yards in length and some fifteen or twenty in width, planted by Darwin. Round this belt runs a walk—the famous “sand-walk” where almost every day, wet or fine, the bearded seer of Down took his midday walk and exercise. The Darwin children, bird-nesting and playing in the plantation, noted that the philosopher, as he came opposite a heap of stones by the side of the “sand-walk,” kicked one on the path at every passing to keep a reckoning of his rounds. Often he was there early enough—he who, had he so chosen, could have been a man of leisure—to see the prowling fox slink home on a winter morning, his brain brooding all the while.

At 12.15 on this February morning of which I write, it is not difficult to conceive a vision of the patriarchal form of Darwin come stepping across the lawn as he sets out for his accustomed walk before lunch-time, followed by his half-bred retriever dog “Bob”—him of the “hot-house” face. As we follow his footsteps westwards across the lawn, towards the garden and the greenhouses built against the high brick garden wall, I long to ask

him about a stone, shaped like a bench-mark, which has lately been dug up in the lawn. Was it part of his work on earthworms—the forty years' study he brought to the point of publication the year before his death? To-day "Bob" could hardly forget his manners so far as to put on his "hot-house" face, for we are received at the greenhouses by a trousered handsome "land girl." The years of war have been hard, and Darwin can hardly expect to find experiments on foot in the greenhouses which in his day teemed with them. To the right of the greenhouses, built into the garden wall, is the great tower-like structure, which he erected to test the effect of various kinds of rays on plant life; this we find still intact, but derelict.¹

¹Major Leonard Darwin, who has been so good as to read the proofs of this article, informs the writer that this tower-like building was put up to get views of the setting sun, and was never employed for the purposes mentioned in the text. As this left the elaborate machinery of shutters in the roof unexplained, I asked for still further information. Major Darwin obtained the following statement from his brother, Sir Horace Darwin, concerning this erection, which was known to the family as "Bo-peep": "Bo-peep was the pigeon-house used by father when he was experimenting with pigeons. It originally stood somewhere near the well—exactly where I do not remember. It was hoisted to the top of the wall . . . because father did not know what to do with it and thought it would be a nice place to see sunsets from. I do not believe arrangements at the top for letting in different kinds of light existed." I have allowed my original statement, given to me by my guide, to stand, as the appa-

We pass southwards along his garden, still well tilled, and note through an opening in the high brick wall his orchard and hard tennis-court beyond. Still holding our way along the garden on a narrow walk edged by high borders of boxwood, we soon see before us the "sand-walk," round which we shall leave the shade of the beloved Charles Darwin to wander. On our left between the "sand-walk" and the house is the paddock where Darwin's pony and cattle grazed, now full of joyous girls, in full swing in a full-throated quickly moving game of hockey. Beyond the paddock a farm cart is plodding southwards on the road leading to some farm on the edge of the Downs to the Weald. Just beyond the road, looking still towards the east, there comes into view the tiled roof of a comfortable Jacobean farmhouse nestling among its trees, just as it did in Darwin's time, and in that of his grandfather Erasmus and other northern and western forebears.

Thankful am I that I have seen Darwin's home so well preserved as it is, and deeply indebted for

tus I noted must have been put up for some special purpose. I also desire to draw attention to the fact that, if we have difficulty in understanding the equipment of Down House now, it will be impossible to understand it when this generation is gone.

the gracious reception which met me there. But what of the future? Since my visit the property has been in the market, with what result I have not learned. What if a future owner is one who knows not Darwin, and is all unconscious that he has become the absolute owner of the Nazareth of Evolution? Is it not right that this pulpit from which Darwin spoke to all the world should become the home of a national Darwinian experimental garden? Surely something of the spirit of Darwin, the father of modern biological knowledge, hangs still over the place. The simple means by which he won such great results are still there, calling aloud for utilisation. But failing this scheme for its preservation, why not have prepared and published an accurate big scale plan of the battlefield on which Darwin won his peaceful victories? I have a hope that Major Leonard Darwin may add this to his many public services.¹ A thousand years hence studious men will pray for the information which can be furnished so easily now.

I set out with the intention of enumerating in

¹ Major Darwin prepared plans of Down House and of the grounds which are now in the keeping of Mr. V. Plarr, Librarian to the Royal College of Surgeons.

this article the signs and circumstances which make me believe that not only the general public, but the vast body of scientific men, have grown indifferent—nay, ungrateful—to the incalculable benefits which Darwin has conferred on them. Their attitude to Down House is only one of them; I have a long list, but they need the brain and pen of Huxley to do them justice. It is more true to-day than in 1888, when Huxley wrote to Michael Foster thus:—

I am getting quite sick of all the paper philosophers, as old Galileo called them, who are trying to stand on Darwin's shoulders and look bigger than he, when in point of real knowledge they are not fit to black his shoes. It is just as well I am collapsed, or I believe I should break out with a final "Für Darwin."

I should like to see Huxley again unleash his "war dogs" on the "paper philosophers," who now flood the pages of scientific journals, and on the literary men who pass glib and complacent judgments on Darwin. There would be a rare scuttle for shelter in their respective hutches and kennels! And yet it is not by the forceful Huxleian methods that Darwin is to win his final victory. He is to

win by his sheer love of truth and the devoted pains he took to find out where the truth lay. Above all, he is to win because of the sweet reasonableness of his personality; his happy spirit came nearer a true ethical ideal than that of the saintliest bishops of the nineteenth century. And yet the rising generation passes his writings by unread and his personality unappreciated.

More than other classes of professional students, men who are investigating problems relating to the origin of mankind and to the beginnings of religious creeds owe a daily debt to Darwin and to Huxley. Because of the victories gained by these pioneers in the "sixties" and "seventies" of last century, anthropologists can now go about their lawful vocations untrammelled by tradition and unparalysed by prejudice. It is to Darwin more than to any other thinker or writer that scientific men in England owe their present-day liberties.

If I had to cite a crowning example to justify our capitalistic system, I would bring forward the life and works of Charles Darwin. He conquered the indulgences and temptations which beset inherited wealth, and, in the surroundings I have sketched above, gave the world an untold fortune

of knowledge in return for a limited allowance of capital and leisure. He wrecked his health for the good of humanity. It may be soon or it may be late, but assuredly the morning will dawn when England will wake up to its neglect of Darwin.