

DARWIN'S OLD HOME.

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

OF THE GREAT SCIENTIST.

At the recent opening of Darwin's old home to the public, consequent upon the generosity of Mr. George Buckston Browne, F.R.C.S., F.S.A., who gave it to the nation under the trusteeship of the British Association, I was struck with the fact of how very few of those present had come into personal touch with the great savant. The chief one to whom I was introduced was Major Leonard Darwin, youngest son of the savant, and several others I spoke to seemed quite surprised that I knew the great man, and I have been asked to say how this came about.

First of all I must say that my father had been accustomed, in his business as pharmaceutical chemist, to supply Mr. Darwin with nearly all his requirements in the shape of drugs and chemicals for his experiments on plants.

I came into the business about 1879 and was studying to pass my examinations. Being fond of botany especially, I was attracted by some experiments Mr. Darwin was then making with *Drosera rotundifolia* (the Sundew), which is a flesh-eating plant and easily obtained from the sphagnum-moss bed near Keston ponds. So one day I went up there with my vasculum to get specimens and was busy collecting the plant when I espied a shaggy pony wandering about, and instantly I thought Mr. Darwin must be there! Not seeing him, however, I went on with my job. Presently I was conscious of someone standing over me and a quiet voice said, "Well, young man, what are you doing here?" I got up, and there facing me was the grand old man, wrapped in his well-known cape. After recovering myself I replied, "I am collecting some *Drosera* to reproduce some of your experiments, Mr. Darwin." "You know me, then?" he said, and added, "Who are you? What is your name, please?" "William Baxter." "What?" he exclaimed, "Are you any relation to my good friend Mr. William Walmisley Baxter, of Bromley?" "I am his only son."

Then he made me shake hands with him, and asked about my father's health, saying how much he was indebted to him for the care taken in seeing that all specimens sent him were pure. I told him that I treble distilled water for him at least once a week. "Ah!" he said. "Your father is very good about that, for I know you chemists think that the treble distillation is quite unnecessary, but I am silly enough to want it done, and so your good father does it. How kind of you to attend to my whims and fancies."

Mr. Darwin then asked me what I was doing with the *Drosera* and I told him I was not feeding it on flies, &c., but on sulphur and poisonous alkaloids. I told him I found it absorbed sulphur.

"How interesting," he remarked, "for that corroborates my experience; but I envy you your access to that mysterious cupboard you have, full of interesting poisons."

I told him that of course we could send him anything he might wish for. "I know! I know!" he said, "but I should like to try *everything*."

After a few words of encouragement, and some inquiries about my examinations, he shook hands with me, caught his pony and rode away.

Well, I'm sure you will pardon me if I say I was pretty "cocky" and bucked up at having met the great man in person, and my father was delighted.

Some time afterwards we tried to make soluble salts of tin and antimony for Mr. Darwin, and after some trouble managed to get some crystals of an hydrated chloride of tin. I remember my father suggesting I should take them up myself, and I, of course, jumped at the idea and sallied forth to Downe. Arriving there on "shank's pony" I refreshed myself in the village and arrived at Downe House, where the door was opened to me by Mr. Darwin's confidential valet, Mr. Parslow, and on telling him my errand he said, "Come straight along, the master will be delighted." Mr. Darwin did not seem to know me, but on being introduced by Mr. Parslow he was as genial as ever, asking after my father and asking what had brought me.

Having explained, he sent Mr. Parslow for tubes and at once tested the salt as to its solubility in water. Finding it satisfactory he went away and returned with a dropping tube made of a child's teat on a tube of glass, and then he gave some plants a few drops of it and set them aside, saying he would see to them on the morrow.

These were the two occasions that I met Mr. Darwin in person.

Mr. Darwin always wrote to my father when he required anything, and we had dozens of his epistles. I have one from him, before me, referring to these salts of tin and antimony, which runs as follows:—

Down, Beckenham, Kent,

September 8th.

Dear Sir,

I thank you sincerely for your kind and prompt assistance. I see that the chloride of antimony does not dissolve at all well, and the chloride of tin imperfectly. Could you make or procure for me any soluble salts (nitrates or acetates would be best) of these two metals? The ammoniated of bismuth would be of no use, as ammonia in all states acts with extraordinary energy on my plants—viz. *Drosera*. Will any of your books tell you what percentage of the chloride of antimony, or tin, are dissolved?

I have got or tried the following acids: Hydrocyanic, hydrochloric, sulphuric, nitric, acetic, boracic, citric, oxalic, tartaric, arsenious, chromic and phosphoric.

Have you any other acid, pure, which is soluble; if so could you send me one, two or three, or four, more. Vegetable acids would perhaps be best. Possibly iodic acid would be worth trying.

Yours faithfully and obliged,

CH. DARWIN.

This letter was written in either 1879 or 1880.

Mr. Darwin's study as I saw it before on my visit contained dozens and dozens of bottles with our name on. When this room was cleared out, when the house was taken for a ladies' school, these bottles were lost, but I hear that Mr. Alderson, of Farnborough, had some of them and has presented them to the British Association.

The Curator of Downe has had a find on the lawn in the shape of the heavy mill stone with which Mr. Darwin observed the effects of earthworms bringing earth up, and which, of course, lowered the stone. They have also discovered the maker of the instrument that registered this, and who has generously offered to make another. This stone was brought to light by a casual remark of Mr. Darwin's grandson, Bernard Darwin, the noted golfer and not a scientific man, who said, when the Curator cried "Eureka," that he was glad to have been of some use to science after all.

WILLIAM BAXTER.

Bromley.