

The World of Books

CHARLES WATERTON

An Eccentric Squire

The Squire of Walton Hall, by Philip Gosse (Cassell 15s.)

By Edward Shanks

CHARLES WATERTON, the Squire of Walton Hall, is not, I imagine, as well known to-day as he was thirty or forty years ago when his "Wanderings in South America" made a popular item in series of cheap reprints and a favourite present for boys known to be fond of books of travel. There have been many books of travel since then, and adventurers who have wandered further and write in a more modern, a crisper style. But the man, as presented by Mr. Philip Gosse, remains fascinating.

He is not, Mr. Gosse confesses with a faint hint of regret, to be regarded as a scientist. He did add something to knowledge, but by no means as much as might have been added by a man with his opportunities and capacities for successful travel. He once betrayed himself by remarking on the *handsomeness* of the specimens of birds he had obtained. That, Mr. Gosse comments, was what he valued, not scientific value or even rarity. He was what, perhaps, we may call a connoisseur of the brute creation. Anything that was beautiful or extraordinary either in its behaviour or its appearance attracted him.

The Three-Toed Sloth

But there was real passion in his connoisseurship. He loved and gloated over animals as a stamp collector may gloat over a rare, issue. Witness his eloquence on the three-toed sloth:

His looks, his gestures, and his cries all conspire to entreat you to take pity on him. These are the only weapons of defence which nature has given him. While other animals assemble in herds, or in pairs range through these boundless wilds, the sloth is solitary and almost stationary; he cannot escape from you. It is said his piteous moans make the tiger relent and turn out of the way. Do not then level your gun at him, or piece him with a poisoned arrow; he has never hurt one living creature.

Nor was it only creatures of this bizarre order which aroused him. Finding that his superstitious servants were exterminating the barn owls in his park he firmly forbade that they should be shot, and set to work, successfully, to encourage them to breed. Once, finding that some of his guests had one to the saddle-room for a surreptitious cigar (he did not allow smoking in the house), he put up a notice forbidding the practice even there. And his reason was that the smell of "ignited tobacco" might offend the cats when they ate their dinners. On one occasion he wrote: "I once treated a family of badgers very ill; and I yet feel sorry that I started them from their ancestral settlement." This was because he built a thigh, impenetrable wall round his park, and, having humanely trapped the foxes and badgers inside, had them expelled alive.

His Great Wall

This walled park became, as Mr. Gosse remarks, the first of bird sanctuaries, but did not endure as such much beyond the Squire's own lifetime. The Squire was the most cautious of men. When he built the great wall he did it by sections, paying for each section as it was done, and halting until he had enough money to pay for another. But not many years after his death and his extra-ordinary funeral, a procession of boats on the lake on the estate, his only son had so misconducted his affairs as to be adjudged bankrupt, and to have to sell everything to the soap-boiler with whom his father had conducted an embittered law-suit.

A Queer Marriage

This is by no means the whole of Charles Waterton. It says nothing of his queer marriage. This was with the daughter of his dearest friend, towards whom he seems to have stood, before their marriage, in the relation of guardian to ward - certainly that of godfather to god-daughter. What is queer about it is that there is virtually no evidence of any communications between husband and wife before the ceremony which made them one at (of all possible times!) four in the morning and that, in the Squire's voluminous scribblings, there are no perceptible references to the married state. In letters written on his honeymoon, he employs exclusively the first person singular. But, when Anne Waterton died untimely after giving birth to a son, her husband did make one reference to her. He wrote:

In 1829 I became the happiest I man in the world; but it pleased Heaven to convince me that a11 felicity here below is no more than a mere elusive transitory dream, and I bow submissive to its adorable decrees.

In quoting this by the way, I follow Mr. Gosse literally, but I cannot help thinking that either he has misread or been misprinted, and that the last word but one should be "inexorable." However that may be, the quotation illustrates Waterton's steadfast religious temper. He was a devout, undeviating Catholic, and his faith was the compass by which he steered his course whether at Walt-on Hall or in the rain-forests of South America. He was, in fact, an undeviating man. When once he made up his mind to a thing he held to it. One of the masters at Stonyhurst gave him advice which he accepted and followed all his life.

"Charles" he said to me in a tone of voice perfectly irresistible, "I have long been studying your disposition, and I clearly foresee that nothing will keep you at home. You will journey into far distant countries, where you will be exposed to many dangers. There is only one way for you to escape them. Promise me that, from this day forward, you will never put your lips to wine or to spirituous liquors. The sacrifice is nothing," added he, "but in the end will be of incalculable advantage to you." I agreed to his enlightened proposal; and from that hour to this, which is about thirty-nine years, I have never swallowed one glass of any kind of wine or of ardent spirits.

Incidentally, it would seem that the master, one Father Clifford, was as remarkable in his fore-sight as the pupil in his career. And Mr. Gosse is to be congratulated both on having found a subject so rich and on having handled it so admirably.