

CHARLES WATERTON

| The Bird Sanctuary | The Spartan |

THERE are other island tombs. An appreciation by my favourite living prose-writer, Mr. Norman Douglas, of Charles Waterton, the Yorkshire squire and naturalist, who was famous in his day for having ridden on an alligator, sent me again to his *Essays in Natural History*, a book of which I was fond when I was at school not far from the author's home: Walton Hall. The edition which I have just secured, published in 1871, has an additional interest in that it comprises a memoir of Waterton, by another Norman—the late Sir Norman Moore the physician; but that interest is accompanied by a deep sense of disappointment, for although it was my privilege to meet Sir Norman frequently in his last years and to get many glimpses of his ripe and amazingly well-stored mind, never did he mention his friendship with Waterton. Now, had I known about this memoir, I should have extracted countless additional anecdotes of that fine eccentric gentleman. Too late.

Waterton's best-known work is not his *Essays* but his *Wanderings*, and he was a wanderer indeed. He began in 1802, at the age of twenty, when he went to Cadiz and witnessed the ravages of the plague of Malaga. In 1804 he sailed for British Guiana; in 1812 he was in Brazil; in 1816 he was in Pernambuco, and in 1817 in Rome, where he climbed to the top of the lightning conductor of St. Peter's and stood on the head of the angel on the Castello. It was in Demerara in 1820 that he performed his great feat of riding on a cayman, which all students of cross-word puzzles know to be a crocodile. In 1824 he began his explorations of America and Canada, returning home via Demerara, where he acquired not only many skins of birds and animals but also a wife. This was a Miss Edmonstone, who, however, poor lady, lived only for a year. The *Wanderings* were published in 1825, and thenceforward, until his death in 1865, Waterton remained at home, a recluse with a passion for Nature. He still wrote, mainly recording the results of his observations, but now and then throwing himself with fury into controversies with other naturalists.

To me one of Waterton's greatest attractions is his establishment of a bird sanctuary in his park. At a cost of nine thousand pounds he built a wall eight feet high, the money having been saved, as he used to say,

by the wine he had not drunk. This abstinence began with a promise to his tutor in 1798, and was never broken. Within the enclosure nothing might be killed. 'Waterton', says his biographer, 'never fired a shot within his park, never permitted dogs or keepers to range the woods, nor allowed a boat on the lake from Michaelmas Day to May Day. Along with the herons, ancient princes among game, nourished the modern lords, the pheasants, in the presence of every species of vermin, save the most destructive vermin of all, the animal-destroyer who goes by the name of a gamekeeper. Nature herself preserves the balance, with little interference from man, who is apt in his ignorance to shoot the policeman under the belief that he is killing the thief. The owls and kestrels which prey upon mice, the numerous birds which feed upon insects and grubs, would long ago have been exterminated, if the power of past generations of farmers had been equal to their folly. . . . Nothing has done so much to propagate sounder opinions as the essays and example of Waterton.'

Indoors, however, was a museum which could never have existed had Waterton not used his gun on his many travels, all the animals being of his own stuffing. Taxidermy was indeed his secondary pleasure in life, observing being the first. His habits—regulated by a very remarkable chiming clock which had belonged to Sir Thomas More, an ancestor of whom he was rightly proud—were simple and rigorous. He slept in the room where he worked, extending himself on the bare boards, in a single blanket, with a block of oak for a pillow. He retired at ten for the night, unless he happened to be entertaining a guest whose conversation kept him up then or cheered him later. Such a one, for instance, was Norman Moore himself, whom he had summoned in May, 1865 (the day, as it happened, before his fatal accident) to hear the nightingale. (Let those, by the way, who maintain that no nightingale sings north of Birmingham bear this in mind.) 'I found', says Sir Norman, 'the dear old wanderer sitting asleep by his fire, wrapped up in a large Italian cloak. His head rested upon his wooden pillow, which was placed on a table, and his thick silvery hair formed a beautiful contrast with the dark colour of the oak. He soon woke up and withdrew to the chapel, and on his return we talked together for three-quarters of an hour about the brown owl, the night-jar, and other birds. The next morning (May 25) he was

unusually cheerful, and said to me, "That was a very pleasant little confab we had last night: I do not suppose there was such another going on in England at the same time." '

The visit to the chapel—all his life Waterton was a zealous Catholic—was timed for midnight exactly. After an hour or so's more sleep he rose promptly at three o'clock, lit his fire and then lay down for half an hour's wakeful meditation, which he called his 'half hour of luxury'. By four he had shaved and dressed, and then till five he performed further religious offices. Between five and eight he read Spanish—the life of St. Francis Xavier and a chapter from Don Quixote—wrote letters and stuffed birds; at eight he ate a frugal breakfast and then till noon was out of doors, coppicing, foresting and farming. From noon till dinner, at half-past one, he re-read favourite English authors, chief of them, of whom he never tired, being Sterne, Goldsmith, Gilbert White, and Washington Irving. After dinner he was in the sanctuary till it was time to come indoors again and think about sleep.

Although a generous friend to the poor, Waterton would never allow his name to be printed in any list. On his walks he carried an old knife which, when tramps begged of him, he handed to them, telling them to take it to a certain shoe-maker in Wakefield. This was a token to the shoemaker to provide the bearer with new boots and return the knife to Walton Hall. One day, not having the knife with him, the Squire surrendered his own boots and walked home lame. His spartan habits made him a very strong man, and he might have been living still —almost—if he had not had, at the age of nearly eighty-three, a bad fall. He was buried on the island in his lake, and I hope that the grave is still honoured.

Extract from

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by E.V. Lucas, 1930.

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