

## Loveliest of Men extract

### Chapter 1.

#### The Loveliest of Men

Charles Darwin must have been by nature one of the dearest men who ever breathed. He was modest, humble, gentle, exquisitely sensitive and extra-ordinarily compassionate, even to the lowliest of creatures. He was profoundly disturbed by the sufferings of sub-human life, by the caterpillar whose body is eaten away from within by the larva of the ichneumon fly, even by a cat playing with a mouse. This extremely self-effacing man once stopped his carriage, got down and assaulted a complete stranger whom he saw maltreating a horse. He had a most noble love of truth and justice. Outraged by slavery, it was the one subject over which he nearly came to blows with Captain Fitzroy on *The Beagle*. 'The remembrance' his son wrote 'of screams or other sounds heard in Brazil, when he was powerless to interfere with what he believed was the torture of a slave, haunted him for years, especially at night.'<sup>i</sup> Meeting in Brazil a charming Irishman called Patrick Lennon and, very taken with him, returning with him to his plantation, he was appalled to see Lennon turning into a hideous monster when dealing with his slaves. Lennon would take all the slave women and children from their menfolk and sell them at the market in Rio, even a little mulatto he had fathered himself. 'Picture to yourself' wrote Darwin in anguish, 'the chance, ever hanging over you, of your wife and your little children – those objects which nature urges even the slave to call his own – torn from you and sold like beasts to the first bidder!'<sup>ii</sup> He was himself the most loving of parents. On the only occasion when he was known to have spoken a cross word to one of his children, once when his son Francis appeared to be apologizing for the brutal behaviour of the infamous Governor Eyre in Jamaica, he was unable to sleep all night and couldn't rest until he had begged his son's forgiveness in the morning.

His anguished suffering when his beloved daughter Annie died is almost beyond description. He could make no sense of the cruel death of his nine year old daughter, his was the classic case of the appalled human who cannot accept that a loving and merciful God could allow such terrible and senseless things to happen. Ironically, his

grief was compounded by guilt that he had handed on to Annie what we would now call a genetic disposition, an inherited variation, which expressed itself in the mysterious wasted condition which laid him low for months on end and took her life. She was, he feared a victim of natural selection. Becoming increasingly desperate as her malady worsened, he took her to Malvern to be treated by Dr Gully, the hydrotherapist who had ministered to his own condition. At Edinburgh he had given up medicine because he could not bear to be at the bedside of a tortured child. Now the child was his own. At Malvern he watched at her bedside night and day and broke down completely. She rallied and he was ‘foolish with delight’. But there was no recovery. He wept and wept. How gladly he would have sacrificed his own life if only she could live. But Annie sank lower and lower until finally she died. Annie, he wrote later ‘..was all but perfect....generous and handsome and unsuspecting, free from envy and jealousy, good tempered and never passionate’. He had never had to reprimand her. ‘A single glance of my eye, not of displeasure (for I thank God I hardly ever cast one on her) but of want of sympathy would for some minutes alter her whole countenance’. It was this fine sensitivity that left her ‘crying bitterly ...on parting with Emma even for the shortest interval’ and that made her exclaim when she was very young “Oh Mamma what should we do if you were to die”. She had very physically affectionate ways and from earliest infancy would fondle her parents, much to their delight. ‘All her habits were influenced by her loving disposition’. After her death Charles cried for days and days and never got over it.<sup>iii</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

As a young man Darwin was full of fire and passion. He read the poets, Gray, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge and most especially Milton, with great enjoyment. Music and painting gave him extreme pleasure. He deeply loved Handel’s *Messiah*, and the anthems during evensong that he had heard in King’s Chapel while an undergraduate made him ‘shiver with delight’.<sup>iv</sup> When twenty-nine, he spoke of getting up close to a painting and being laid open by ‘the peculiar smell’, presumably varnish, to the ‘old irrational ideas’ that ‘thrilled across me’ in his early twenties in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.<sup>v</sup> Above all he was deeply moved to ecstasy by natural scenery. Standing upon the summit of the Andes and gazing at the prospect all around he felt ‘as if his nerves had become fiddle strings and had all

taken to rapidly vibrating'.<sup>vi</sup> In Patagonia 'the stillness and desolation' gave him inexplicable pleasure.<sup>vii</sup>

On top of the Andes:

'The atmosphere so resplendently clear, the sky an intense blue, the profound valleys, the wild broken forms, the heaps of ruins piled up during the ages, the bright coloured rocks, contrasted with the quiet mountains of Snow, together produced a scene I could never have imagined.....I felt glad I was by myself, it was like watching a thunderstorm, or hearing a chorus of *The Messiah* in full orchestra'.<sup>viii</sup>

In the Cape Verde Islands:

'here I first saw the glory of tropical vegetation. Tamarinds, Bananas & Palms were flourishing at my feet – I had expected a good deal, for I had read Humboldt's descriptions & I was afraid of disappointments: how utterly vain such fear is, none can tell but those who have experienced what I today have. – It is not only the gracefulness of their forms or the novel richness of their colours, it is the numberless & confusing associations that rush together on the mind, and produce the effect. – I returned to the shore treading on volcanic rocks, hearing the notes of unknown birds, & seeing new insects fluttering about still newer flowers. – It has been for me a glorious day, like giving to a blind man eyes – he is overwhelmed with what he sees and cannot justly comprehend it - Such are my feelings and such may they remain –

<sup>cix</sup>

In the Guyatecas

'It was fortunate we reached this shelter. For now a real storm of T. del Fuego is raging with its wonted fury. White massive clouds were piled up against a dark blue sky & across them black ragged sheets of vapor were rapidly driven. The successive ranges of mountains appeared like dim shadows: it was a most ominous sublime scene. – The setting sun cast on the woodland a yellow gleam much like the flame of spirits of wine on a man's countenance'<sup>x</sup>

While journeying to Rio

‘At night in these fine regions of the Tropics there is one sure & never failing source of enjoyment; it is admiring the constellations in the heaven. – Many of those who have seen both hemispheres give the victory to the stars of the North. – It is however to me an inexpressible pleasure to behold those constellations, the first sight of which Humboldt describes with such pleasure...’<sup>xi</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro

‘At this elevation the landscape has attained its most brilliant tint.- I do not know what epithet such scenery deserves: beautiful is much too tame; every form, every colour is such a complete exaggeration of what one has ever beheld before.- If it may be so compared, it is like one of the gayest scenes in the Opera House or Theatre’<sup>xii</sup>

In Terra Del Fuego

‘The gloomy depth of the ravines well accorded with the universal signs of violence.- in every direction were irregular masses of rock & uptorn trees , others decayed and others ready to fall. – to have made the scene perfect there ought to have been a group of Banditti – in place of it a seaman (who accompanied me) & myself, being armed and roughly dressed were in tolerable unison with the surrounding Magnificence’<sup>xiii</sup>

Again in Terra Del Fuego

‘In many places magnificent glaciers extended from the mountains to the water’s edge. – I cannot imagine anything more beautiful than the beryl blue of these glaciers, especially when contrasted with the Snow’<sup>xiv</sup>

But above all it was in the great Brazilian rainforests that he felt most keenly the sense of the sublime, in ‘the great, wild, untidy, luxuriant hothouse’ of the Amazon.<sup>xv</sup>  
In Brazil even Humboldt’s ‘glorious descriptions’ did not do justice to the reality.  
Darwin was dazed by:

“the luxuriance of the vegetation.....the elegance of the grasses, the novelty of the parasitical plants, the beauty of the flowers’ His mind was ‘a chaos of delight’. Pausing in a shady nook, he listened to the droning, croaking, throbbing life. Now, as in ages past, when no human interlopers were around to hear, the forest reverberated to ‘ a most paradoxical mixture of sound and silence’, like some great cathedral at evensong, with the anthem fading to ‘universal stillness’. Adding ‘raptures to...raptures’ he began collecting flowers enough to ‘make a florist go wild’ and countless beetles. Such ‘transports of pleasure’ he had never known”.<sup>xvi</sup>

‘The air is motionless and has a peculiar chilling dampness. – While sitting on the trunk of a decaying tree amidst such scenes , one feels an inexpressible delight. – The rippling of some little brook, the tap of a Woodpecker, or scream of some more distant bird, by the distinctness with which it is heard, brings a conviction of how still the rest of Nature is...’<sup>xvii</sup>

‘Again I went to the forest which has proved so fruitful in all kinds of animals. – It is probably the last time that I shall ever wander in a Brazilian forest – I find the pleasure of such scenes increases instead, as might have been expected, diminishing ...’<sup>xviii</sup>

It was beyond description, a source of incommunicable delight, more marvellous, in his own comparison, than the landscapes of Claude Lorraine. Several times during the voyage he felt totally transported by an experiential influx of the sublime, invaded by ‘the higher feelings of wonder, admiration and devotion’ that, he felt at the time, ‘bore irresistible testimony to God and the immortality of the soul’.<sup>xix</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time he published *The Origin* this wonderful man was already beginning to die within. In his *Autobiography* he lamented the death of his aesthetic sense.

‘Formerly, pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But for many years now I cannot endure a line of poetry; I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me.....My mind seems

to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of a large collection of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend I cannot conceive'.<sup>xx</sup>

His inability to feel aesthetic delight was deeply bound up with his increasing distaste for religion. The sublime, which he had experienced so powerfully during *The Beagle* voyage, had formerly induced in him strong feelings of devotion, awe and reverence. 'Great art' writes Donald Fleming of Darwin, 'by association with scenic grandeur, scenic grandeur with religion, and all three with the sublime, became part of a single universe of experience'<sup>xxi</sup> And in his autobiography Darwin himself attests to the connection between scenic grandeur and religion. 'The state of mind which grand scenes formerly excited in me, and which was intimately connected with a belief in God, did not essentially differ from that which is often called the sense of sublimity'. Grand natural scenes, which he had felt so acutely as a young man, arouse 'the powerful though vague and similar feelings aroused by music.....which readily pass into devotion'.<sup>xxii</sup> But now grand scenery 'does not cause me the exquisite delight which formerly it did'<sup>xxiii</sup> His old delight in pictures and music had likewise deserted him: 'Music generally sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure.'<sup>xxiv</sup> Worst of all, even his power to feel deep love for his friends had deserted him: 'Whilst I was young and strong I was capable of very warm attachments, but of late years, though I still have very friendly feelings towards many persons, I have lost the power of becoming deeply attached to anyone, not even so deeply to my good and dear friends Huxley and Hooker, as I should formerly have been.'<sup>xxv</sup>

He came to feel that scenic grandeur, art, religion and music all colluded in arousing irrational passions in man that clouded his reason. Increasingly he accepted Bentham's dictum that all art is lies. In *The Descent Of Man* he lumped together the gusts of emotion that whip through a crowd of African Negroes, the chattering of monkeys and 'the sensations and ideas' aroused by music in modern man that are 'from their vagueness yet depth, like mental reversions to the emotions and thoughts of a long-past age'<sup>xxvi</sup>. Art alluringly tells us lies by clouding our reason. It gives us no true evidence of anything but instead substitutes irrational emotions that by right belong to a human past long since overtaken by natural selection. In being seduced

by the arts the most advanced products of evolution, the eminent Victorians themselves in fact, were not being faithful to the truths of science. Music ‘arouses dormant sentiments of which we had not conceived the possibility, and do not know the meaning; or, as Richter says, tells us of things we have not seen and shall not see’. Finding Shakespeare intolerably dull, music leaden on the ear, scenic grandeur not what it had been and even friendship unsatisfying, Darwin fell back on having his wife read trite and sentimental Victorian novels. Even the impeccably free-thinking George Eliot was rejected for writing novels that were too serious and emotionally disturbing. Of these cheap and sentimental novels ‘A surprising number have been read aloud to me, and I like all if moderately good, and if they do not end unhappily – against which a law ought to be passed. A Novel, according to my taste, does not come into the first class unless it contains some person whom one can thoroughly love, and if it be a pretty woman all the better’.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The bleak vision that conceived the rich and gorgeous varieties of life as the products of war, famine, pestilence, extermination and death was surely not unconnected with this terrible internal dying. More tragically still, it blinded Darwin to the great truths that really were implicit in his wonderful discovery: the unity of all life, the developing beauty of organic forms, and the increasingly complex inwardness that is the characteristic hallmark of living things.

---

<sup>i</sup> *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* III 200

<sup>ii</sup> Browne *op. cit.* Vol 1 pp213-214

<sup>iii</sup> Desmond and Moore *op. cit.* ch 25

<sup>iv</sup> Donald Fleming *Charles Darwin: The Anaesthetic Man* Victorian Studies 4. (1961) pp. 219-36

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> *Life and Letters* III 54

<sup>vii</sup> Desmond and Moore *Darwin* London Penguin 1992. p.145

<sup>viii</sup> *Voyage of The Beagle* p. 394

<sup>ix</sup> Browne *op.cit.* p.164

<sup>x</sup> *Beagle Diary* p.273

<sup>xi</sup> *Beagle Diary* p.48

<sup>xii</sup> Charles Darwin’s *Beagle Diary*. Ed. R.D. Keynes 1988 CUP

<sup>xiii</sup> *Beagle Diary* 125

<sup>xiv</sup> *Beagle Diary* p. 139

<sup>xv</sup> C. Darwin. *Journal Of Researches Into The Geology And Natural History Of Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle* 1839. pp590, 604

<sup>xvi</sup> Desmond and Moore *op.cit.* p.119

<sup>xvii</sup> *Beagle Diary* p.74

<sup>xviii</sup> *Beagle diary* p.76

<sup>xix</sup> *Autobiography*, p.91

<sup>xx</sup> Browne *op. cit.* p. 429

<sup>xxi</sup> Fleming *op.cit.* p. 226

- 
- xxii *Autobiography* pp. 91-92  
xxiii *ibid.* p.138  
xxiv *ibid.* p. 138  
xxv *ibid.* p. 115  
xxvi *Descent* p.336  
xxvii *Autobiography* po. 138