

LIFE AND LETTERS OF
HERBERT SPENCER

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME II

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*Herbert Spencer
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From Electric Engraving of

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LIFE AND LETTERS OF HERBERT SPENCER

the mind. His powers of analysis and synthesis were unsurpassed. He had a rare gift of seizing upon the important aspects of a question, and of keeping the unimportant points in the background. But for this he could not have marshalled his numerous facts so effectively. Complaint is sometimes made of the abstractness of his terms; but such terms were necessitated by the width of his generalisations, only a part of the denotation of which would have been covered by less abstract terms. A more serious complaint was that he not infrequently passed without warning from the general and abstract use of a term or proposition to the special and concrete, or *vice versâ*, drawing conclusions which, though warranted in the one case, were not warranted in the other.

In some ways he gained, and in others lost, by not having had the training given by University life, which as Rev. J. W. Chadwick says, acts as "a social mill in which men grind each other's angles down. Spencer's never were ground down: they were acute angles always." But argumentative and disputatious as he was, he never argued for victory. Always there was a principle to be contended for. Mr. Francis Galton writes:

Mr. Herbert Spencer's magnificent intellect was governed by a very peculiar character. It was full of whimsies that unduly affected the opinion of those who did not appreciate its depth and purpose. His disposition was acknowledged by himself to be contentious; I would venture to consider it also as being sometimes a little perverse.

My knowledge of him was chiefly due to our both being in the habit of spending an afternoon hour or so in the then smoking room of the Athenæum Club, which was a very suitable place for quiet conversation. This is

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

quite altered now. He always took interest in my hobbies, and I owe much to his remarks and criticisms, which were not however always accepted. He loved to dogmatise from *a priori* axioms, and to criticise, and I soon found that the way to get the best from him was to be patient and not to oppose. He was very thin skinned under criticism, and shrank from argument; it excited him over much, and was really bad for his health. His common practice when pressed in a difficult position, was to finger his pulse and saying: "I must not talk any more," to abruptly leave the discussion unfinished. Of course, wicked people put a more wicked interpretation on this habit than it should in fairness bear. Anyhow, when Spencer forsook the Club as he did some years ago, to seek greater quiet elsewhere, I was conscious of a void which has never since been filled. . . .

An amusing instance of his strong leaning to *a priori* reasoning rather than to experiment occurred on his coming to a laboratory I had then established for anthropometric purposes. . . . I told Spencer of the difficulty of accounting for the peculiarities in the pattern of finger prints, and that the dissections of embryos had thus far told no more than that they could be referred to folds of membrane in which the sudorific glands were formed, but threw no light on the reason why the pattern should here be a whorl and there a loop, and so on. He said that dissection was not the best way to find out what I wanted to know: I ought to have started from a consideration of the uses of the ridges, and he proceeded to elaborate a line of argument with great fulness in his usual sententious way. It was to the effect that the mouths of the ducts, being delicate and liable to injury from abrasion, required the shield of ridges, and on this basis he reared a wonderfully ingenious and complicated superstructure of imaginary results to which I listened with infinite inward amusement. When he had quite concluded, I replied with mock humility, that his arguments were most beautiful and cogent and fully de-

served to be true, but unfortunately the ducts did *not* open out in the shielded valleys, but along the exposed crests of the ridges. He burst into a good humoured laugh, and then told me the story, which also appears in his *Autobiography*, of Huxley's saying, that if Spencer ever wrote a tragedy, its plot would be the slaying of a beautiful deduction by an ugly fact. . . .

The power of Spencer's mind that I most admired, was that of widely founded generalisations. Whenever doubt was hinted as to the sufficiency of his grounds for making them, he was always ready to pour out a string of examples that seemed to have been, if not in his theatre of consciousness when he spoke, at all events in an ante-chamber of it, whence they could be summoned at will. In more than any other person whom I have met, did his generalisations strike me in the light of true "composite" pictures. Whether the examples he gave in justification were selected with a conscious or unconscious bias, or were taken at random, is another matter. Anyhow his wealth of ready illustration was marvellous.

The verdicts on his style have been almost as divergent as those on his doctrines. Occasionally, but rarely, it has been described as obscure—a criticism open to the retort that the obscurity may be due to the inability of the reader to grasp the meaning, no matter how it is expressed. Bearing in mind the highly abstruse nature of his thought, one will have to admit that few writers have so seldom left their readers in doubt. Burdened by wealth of illustration and exemplification, his style is apt to appear wanting in lightness and grace: but occasionally "a grave eloquence lights up his pages." Its massiveness corresponds with the massiveness of his thought. Occasionally it is lightened by singularly felicitous words, or phrases, or passages, which have be-

come part of the English language—thus furnishing additional examples of the survival of the fittest. Though condemned for its "barbarous terminology," it has also been praised for its "wonderful simplicity," its "terse-ness, lucidity, and precision." The author of the *Philosophy of Style* had, naturally, his own ideas about punctuation, and was often annoyed at the liberties taken by compositors and press readers. "The structure of a writer's sentence is in part the structure of his thought." His faculty of composing, under what would be to many very distracting circumstances, was remarkable: showing his rare power of concentration—of abstracting his thoughts from his surroundings. Whether in a racket court at King's Cross, or in a sports field at Kensal Green, or in a boat on the Serpentine, or under the trees in Kensington Gardens, he was able to carry on a train of abstract thinking, and to dictate to his secretary, as serenely as if he were in the privacy of his study. Unlike his friends, Mr. G. H. Lewes and Professor Huxley, who wrote and re-wrote their compositions,¹ he made comparatively few changes in his manuscript. In revising for future editions, however, he made numerous changes in the expression, but very few in the argument.

One of Mr. Spencer's traits (says Mr. Troughton), was his seeming inability to take in hand two or more things concurrently. If, for instance, some controversy occupied him, permanent work was for the time being put aside altogether. He had a rooted dislike to being hurried. A sequence of this was that he resented being

¹ *George Eliot's Life*, ii., 99. *Life of Professor Huxley*, ii., 42, 308.