LONDON, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1853.

REVIEWS.

A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro. By Alfred R. Wallace.

Review:

To travel well and easily is a gift given to few, abundant though travellers be. Out of the crowd of voyagers who narrate their journeys, very few are qualified to give any intelligible account of what they have seen. Each region requires a different kind of person for its exploration: for one, a scholar and antiquarian; for another, a second-rate historian of manners; for a third, an artist; for a fourth, a naturalist. Very rarely do we find several of these qualities combined, though, for the great and true traveller, all are more or less requisite. Above everything it is to be desired that the man who undertakes to describe a country, new or old, with its people, productions, and scenery, should understand himself, and know well wherein his own weak points, as well as the strong ones, lie.

If there be one country more than another in which the possession of a taste for natural history and of one or two of the necessary animal types are necessary for the explorer, it is South America. Antiquarian learning and scholarship are there of little avail; man presents himself either under a debased form of civilization, or as a simple and picturesque savage, but nature exhibits her charms in wonderful variety and ever-interesting shapes. The man who is neither zoologist nor botanist had better leave this vast continent for fitter enthusiasts to explore.

Mr. Wallace is a traveller of the right stamp for this rich and wonderful region. If, as he has no reason to fear, we have heard of him before, noticing his volume on the 'Palm Trees of the Amazon,' he is not always minutely accurate in his botanical descriptions, as a describer of the aspects of the flora and fauna of a country prolific in organic treasures, he may lay claim to have had a commission with any secret state of nature, with the attractions of warmer latitudes.

The following estimate of tropical vegetation in South America is highly instructive and well stated:

"There is grandeur and solemnity in the tropical forest, but little of beauty or brilliancy of colour. The human tame, the rare and wreathed climbers, and the elegant palms, are what strike the attention and fill the mind with admiration. When we wander in the forests, we do not bear the sensation of the daily world, or experience the wholesome and simple feelings of the primitive man. We seem to have lost the fancy of old voyagers. We respect, the account of these Indians is or not be sorry to be told how he conducts himself when at home in his own country.

Mr. Wallace has an instructive memorandum concerning the Myrmecephala jubata:

"This animal is rare, but widely distributed. During rain it turns its long bushy tail up over its back, which it carries in a graceful curve, with the point resting on the ground. It is then seen with one, rustle the leaves, and it thinks rain is falling, and turning up its tail, they take the opportunity of killing it by a blow on the head with a stick. It feeds on the large termites, or white ant. This animal has claws that can pierce the earth and wooden tree in which its nest are made. The Indians positively assert that it sometimes kills the jaguar, embracing it and forcing it in its enormous strength to the ground. It is a great animal, and the poor man in its own words, 'It is the 'curupira,' or demon of the forests: the peculiar organization of the animal has probably led to this error. It lives entirely on the nests of termites, and of the fruits of various kinds is almost confined to the men. The women wear a bracelet on the wrists, but none on the neck, and of particular friends on Sunday afternoons,—whose tail and tongue are as attractive as its wings. To see the great Ant-eater, the horse-chesnut, lilac, and laburnum, will vie with the choicest tropical trees and shrubs. In their habits they are agricultural, and have permanent abodes. Their habitations remind us of the colossal houses of the people of New Guinea, being built so to contain many families each, sometimes an entire tribe. One mentioned as being one hundred and fifty feet in length, fifty-five feet in breadth, and thirty high, built of wood and palm leaves, with much labour and skill, and carefully thatched with palm leaves. These houses are well furnished in their way, though the people who construct them almost entirely eschew comfort, and content themselves with skin as the best proof of delicacy. In one respect, the account of these Indians is of singular interest, since their customs and appearance would seem to explain the old fable of a nation of Amazons inhabiting the valley of the mighty river that received its name from this fancy of old voyagers.

We give Mr. Wallace's highly probable solution of the fable in his own words:

"The use of ornaments and trinkets of various kinds is almost confined to the men. They wear a bracelet on the wrists, but none on the neck, and no comb in the hair; they have a garter below the knee, worn tight from infancy, for the purpose of swelling out the calf, which they consider a great beauty. While dancing in their festivals, they wear a sort of crown, made of beads, prettily arranged: it is only about six inches square, but is never worn at any other time, and immediately the dance is over it is taken off. Above all, one of the hair carefully parted and combed on each side, and tied in a queue behind. In the young men, it hangs in long locks down their necks, and, with the comb, which is invariably carried stuck in the top of the queue, the appearance of the face is increased by the large necklaces and bracelets of beads, and the careful epilation of every symmetrical bead. Taking these considerations into consideration, I am strongly of opinion that
the story of the Amazons has arisen from these feminine-looking warriors encountered by the early voyager. I am inclined to this opinion, from the effect they first produced on myself, when it was only by close examination I saw that they were men; and, were the front part of their bodies and their breasts covered with shields, such as they always use, I am convinced any person seeing them for the first time would conclude they were women. We have only therefore to suppose that tribes having similar customs to those now existing on the river Uaupés, inhabited the regions where the Amazons were reported to have been seen, and we have a rational explanation of what has so much puzzled all geographers. The only objection to this explanation is, that traditions are said to exist among the natives, of a nation of 'women without husbands.' Of this tradition, however, I was myself unable to obtain any trace, and I can easily imagine it entirely to have arisen from the suggestions and inquiries of Europeans themselves.

When the story of the Amazons was first made known, it became of course a point with all future travellers to verify it, or if possible get a glimpse of these warlike ladies. The Indians must no doubt have been overwhelmed with questions and suggestions about them, and they, thinking that the white men must know best, would transmit to their descendants and families the idea that such a nation did exist in some distant part of the country. Succeeding travellers, finding traces of this idea among the Indians, would take it as a proof of the existence of the Amazons; instead of being merely the effect of a mistake at the first, which had been unknowingly spread among them by preceding travellers, seeking to obtain some evidence on the subject."

It is much to be regretted that better examples than the very refuse of white men who surround them should not be placed before the Indian tribes of tropical America. They are evidently people possessed of valuable qualities, quick to learn, and of good natural intellect. Much yet remains to be done in the investigation of their affinities and languages, and the directions in which inquiries should be made are ably indicated in a valuable commentary by our eminent ethnologist and philologist, Dr. Latham, on the vocabularies carefully procured by Mr. Wallace.