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

REVIEWS.

LONDON, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1853.

Mr. Wallace is a traveller of the right stamp for this rich and wonderful region. If, as we have reason to believe, 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 having been possessed of curiosity and of a remarkable power of observation, and of well-drawn pen-and-ink pictures of the world of creatures that surrounded him during his wanderings. Moreover, he is not dazed, as so many before him have been, with the individual splendours of the tropics, but carries with him a cool judgment, that enables him to compare fairly the charms of the temperate zone 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 humdrum trees, the faded foliage, the twisted trunks, the extraordinary air roots, the twisted and wrinkled climbers, and the elegant palms, are what strike the attention and fill the mind with admiration, but not with any sense of gloomy and solemn, and one feels a relief on again seeing the blue sky, and feeling the scorching rays of the sun.

It is on the roadside and on the rivers' banks, that we see all the beauty of the tropical vegetation. There we find a mass of bushes and shrubs and trees of every height, rising over one another, all exposed to the bright light and the fresh air; and putting forth new shoots, that fruit, which, in the forest, only grow far up on the topmost branches. Bright flowers and green foliage combine their charms, and climbers with their flowery festoons cover over the bare and decaying stems. Yet, pick out the loveliest spots, where the most gorgeous flowers of the tropics expand their glowing petals, and for every scene of this kind, we may find another at home of equal beauty, and with an equal amount of brilliant colour.

"Look at a field of buttercups and daisies in the summer, a hill-side covered with gorse and broom, a mountain rich with purple heather, or a forest-glide, azalea with a carpet of wild hyacinths, and they will show the same combinations and metamorphoses that can produce. I have never seen anything more glorious than an old crab-tree in full blossom; and the horse-chestnut, lino, and laburnum, will vie with the magnolias of the Amazon. In the Amazon, the tropical waters are no more beautiful plants than our white and yellow water-lilies, our irises, and flowering rush; for I cannot consider the flower of the Victoria regia more beautiful than the Magnolia obovata, though it may be larger, nor is it so abundant an ornament of the tropical waters as the latter is of ours.

"But the question is not to be decided by a count and stand still, to see if plants, effects may happen in the landscape, but on the frequency with which they occur, and the proportion of the brilliantly coloured bear to the inconspicuous plants. My friend Mr. R. Spruce, now investigating the botany of the Amazon and Rio Negro, assures me that by far the greater proportion of plants gathered by him have inconspicuous green or white flowers; and with regard to the frequency with which species are distributed, I am led to think for me to pass days travelling the rivers, without seeing any striking flowering tree or shrub. This partly owing to the flowers of most tropical trees being so deciduous; they are so soon opened, that the blossoms wither and drop, and the fruit belongs to another season. It generally bursts into flower in the morning, and the next day is withered, and for twelve months that tree bears no more flowers. This will be a leaven of the world in general every week-day, and of particular friends on Sunday afternoons—whose tail and tongue are as attractive to sightseers as the jewels of Jung Behadur were three years ago, his admirers and friends will not be sorry to be told how he conducts himself towards them in his own country. Among many interesting notices of Amazonian animals, Mr. Wallace has an instructive memorandum concerning the Myrmecophaga jubata:

"This animal is rare, but widely distributed. During rain it turns its long bushy tail up over its back, with its fore feet, then meets the one 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 termite, or white ant, tearing with its powerful claws the earth and rotten wood in which their nests are made. The Indians positively assert that it sometimes kills the jaguar, embracing it and forcing it in its enormous mouth, with the(resulting) consequence that the jaguar also declares that these animals are all females, and believe that the male is the 'curupira,' or demon of the forest; the peculiar organization of the animal has probably led to this error. It lives entirely on the termite, 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 take off this garter, and adorned their 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. The women wear their hair gathered up on the top of their head, 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 take off this garter, and adorned their 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:

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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 Uaupes, 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.