

LONDON, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1853.

REVIEWS.

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

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 a second, an observer 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 is it 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 a knowledge of vegetable and 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 we have had occasion to remark, when 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 very great merit, and his book abounds with well-drawn pen-and-ink pictures of the world of creatures that surrounded him during his wanderings. Moreover, he is not dazzled, as too 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 huge buttress trees, the fissured 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 and surprise and awe. But all is 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, within reach, their flowers and 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,—a hill-side covered with gorse and broom,—a mountain rich with purple heather,—or a forest-glade, azure over a carpet of wild hyacinths, and they will bear a comparison with any scene the tropics can produce. I have never seen anything more glorious than an old crab-tree in full blossom; and the horse-chestnut, lilac, and laburnum, will vie with the choicest tropical trees and shrubs. In 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 that of the *Nymphaea alba*, 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 comparison of individual plants, or the effects they may produce in the landscape, but on the frequency with which they occur, and the proportion 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 of their occurrence, it was not an uncommon thing for me to pass days travelling up the rivers, without seeing any striking flowering tree or shrub. This is partly owing to the flowers of most tropical trees being so deciduous: they no sooner open, than they begin to fall; the *Melastomas* in particular, generally burst into flower in the morning, and the next day are withered, and for twelve months that tree bears no more flowers. This will serve to explain why the tropical flowering trees and shrubs do not make so much show as might be expected."

Whilst all London is rushing to the Zoological Gardens to see the great Ant-eater, whose slender nose has put out of joint the obtuse snout of the Hippopotamus, who holds a levee 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 when at home 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 and stands still; the Indians, when they meet 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 ants, tearing up 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 in its enormous claws, till they mutually destroy each other. They also declare that these animals are all females, and believe that the male 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 ground."

Among the human kind encountered by our traveller were not a few characters as odd of their kind as our acquaintance, the Ant-eater, though seldom as respectable. Strange people, not being Indians, find their way into wild and distant regions, and the poor gentleman described in the following passage, had he lived to reach home again, might have rivalled that venerable and excellent lion of London parties, Lieut. Holman:—

"There was also a deaf and dumb American, named Baker, a very humorous and intelligent

fellow, who was a constant fund of amusement both for the Brazilians and ourselves. He had been educated in the same institution with Laura Bridgman, as a teacher of the deaf and dumb. He seemed to have a passion for travelling, probably as the only means of furnishing through his one sense the necessary amount of exercise and stimulus to his mind. He had travelled alone through Peru and Chile, across to Brazil, through Pará to Barra, and now proposed going by the Rio Branco to Demerara, and so to the United States. He supported himself by selling the deaf and dumb alphabet, with explanations in Spanish and Portuguese. He carried a little slate, on which he could write anything in English or French, and also a good deal in Spanish, so that he could always make his wants known. He made himself at home at every house in Barra, walking in and out as he liked, and asking by signs whatever he wanted. He was very merry, fond of practical jokes, and of making strange gesticulations. He pretended to be a phrenologist; and on feeling the head of a Portuguese or Brazilian would always write down on his slate, 'Very fond of the ladies;' which on being translated, would invariably elicit, 'He verdade' (that's very true), and signs of astonishment at his penetration. He was a great smoker, and would drink wine and spirits so freely as sometimes to make him carry his antics to a great length; still he was much liked, and will be long remembered by the people of Barra. But, poor fellow! he was never to see his native land again: he died a few months after, at the fortress of Sao Joaquim, on the Rio Branco—it was said, of jaundice."

Mr. Wallace gives a full account of the several nations of aborigines met by him during his researches. Among them the tribes of Indians of the river Uaupés appear to be most interesting, and capable of considerable intellectual cultivation. Physically they are tall, stout, well developed people. In their habits they are agricultural, and have permanent abodes. Their habitation reminds us of the colossal houses of the people of New Guinea, being built so as to contain many families each, sometimes an entire tribe. One is mentioned as being one hundred and fifteen feet in length, by seventy-five broad, and about 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 clothes, and regard a painted naked 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 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, the women wear a small tanga, or apron, 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.

The men, on the other hand, have 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 head, gives to them a most feminine appearance: this is increased by the large necklaces and bracelets of beads, and the careful extirpation of every symptom of beard. Taking these circumstances 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.
