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‘Wallace’s *Malay Archipelago*.’¹

Our ideas of the relative size and importance of the various regions of the globe are insensibly influenced by the maps of ordinary atlases. Diminutive countries, which are habitually drawn on a large scale, seem large to us; while far bigger countries, drawn on a small scale, appear comparatively insignificant. An Englishman, for example, who has never crossed the Atlantic, is apt to think of Pennsylvania and Virginia as he thinks of a couple of moderate-sized English countries, notwithstanding all that he has heard and read of the immense extent of the United States. In like manner, the Malay Archipelago suffers in popular estimation because of the stingy measure dealt out to it by our geographers. It is usually stuck in a corner of the map of Asia, and to the schoolboy apprehension appears much smaller and less important than the group of islands dotted over the Ægean Sea. Now, in actual verity the Malay Archipelago forms the most magnificent series of insular countries in the world, far exceeding the West Indies in extent. The area of Sumatra alone is greater than that of all the West India Islands put together. According to the Dutch official statements, Celebes is as large as England and Wales, containing 57,000 square miles. Java is bigger than Scotland, Bali and Lombok united exceed Ireland, there are 18 islands as large as Jamaica, more than 100 as large as the Isle of Wight, while if the whole United Kingdom were laid down upon Borneo, our frontiers in every direction would be separated from the sea by a wide interval of tropical forest. Still larger than Borneo is New Guinea, which may be styled the island-king of the world, if we advance Australia to continental rank. As, moreover, the whole of this vast region lies within the hot moist equatorial zone, while at the same time it is fanned by perpetual sea breezes, it is distinguished by the most exuberant fertility, it possesses choice plants and animals elsewhere unknown, and the widest districts of South America cannot rival it in the delicious flavour of its fruits, in the delicate aroma of its spices, in the brilliant plumage of its birds, and in the glorious colouring of its butterflies. The word “butterflies” may make some readers smile, coming as it does at the end of an enthusiastic sentence, with somewhat of the effect of an anti-climax; but we have used it purposely, for Mr. Wallace, the author of the book now before us, is a zealous entomologist, and we may safely say that if there had been no beetles and no butterflies in the Malay Archipelago, all the other fascinations of those regions would not have attracted him thither.

This is not a hastily-concocted book of travels such as is sometimes put forth by those ingenious tourists who contrive to make themselves acquainted with the entire political and social organization of a country while their steamer is stopping to take in coals; it is a careful and deliberately composed narrative, the fruits of 60 or 70 journeys made within the Malay Archipelago, journeys which occupied nearly eight years of time, and extended over a distance of 14,000 miles. Mr. Wallace came home in 1862, but, as he was then in a weak state of health, he determined to defer the publication of his book until he had sorted the hundred and twenty-five thousand specimens of natural history which he had brought with him, and scientific readers will all agree that this judicious delay has greatly enhanced the value of his work. Every page contains matter of interest; we shall therefore only attempt such a cursory survey of the numerous topics discussed as may induce those of our readers who have not seen the book to get it for themselves. And here we think it only fair to mention Mr. Bickmore’s recently-published

Travels in the East Indian Archipelago. Mr. Bickmore is an American naturalist, who visited the East principally in quest of shells. His route in some respects resembled that of Mr. Wallace, and his book appears very readable and full of interesting information.

Although the islands of the Malay Archipelago lie within the region of constant high temperature, several important differences may be observed among them. Some are volcanic, others are non-volcanic. A continuous chain of volcanoes passes through Sumatra, Java, and all the smaller islands to the eastward. The chain then trends suddenly northward, through Gilolo, to the Philippine Islands, just touching the eastern extremity of Celebes. All these islands, therefore, are subject to earthquakes and eruptions, while Borneo, the greater part of Celebes, and New Guinea are entirely free from such visitations. Still more remarkable is the contrast between the plants and animals of the eastern and western portions of the archipelago. In the former division the Australian type prevails, in the latter division the Asiatic. Now, there is as wide a difference between the plants and animals of Asia and Australia as there is between the plants and animals of Africa and South America. We can understand the reason for the difference in the latter case, because a broad ocean rolls between the two continents, but how shall we explain the fact that Bali is intensely Asiatic, while Lombok, which is only separated from it by a strait of 15 miles wide, is thoroughly Australian? Volcanic and non-volcanic islands are found in both divisions; Bali is nearly as arid as Timor, while the Moluccas are as moist as the Philippines. Neither climate nor geological structure, therefore, can be the cause of this extreme diversity. The true explanation appears to be that all these scattered islands have formerly belonged to two continents, the one a south-eastern extension of modern Asia, the other a northern extension of modern Australia; and that the narrow channel between Bali and Lombok was once, as Behring's Straits is at the present day, the separating line between two mighty sections of the earth's surface.

We may glean a great deal of information from these volumes concerning the capture of insects. Coleoptera cannot be caught successfully, any more than deer can be stalked, or grouse shot, unless some rules and regulations are observed. A careless inquirer might suppose that insect life is so superfluously abundant within the tropics that every district would readily afford an ample supply of the species peculiar to it. This does not appear to be the case, and in some apparently promising localities, hardly any insects were attainable. Mr. Wallace found by experience that cleared and cultivated land made a bad insect-preserve, nor was he especially successful in the virgin forests. But when he came upon a spot in the forest where the woodcutters had been at work for several years, thus providing a stock of bark, and chips, and sawdust for insect nourishment, then he felt as a favoured shot feels who is placed by the gamekeepers in a "warm corner" on the 1st of October. In one patch of jungle at Singapore, less than a square mile in extent, he obtained in less than two months 700 species of beetles. Some insects, moreover, which from an examination of entomological cabinets we might imagine to be plentifully dispersed throughout the tropics, are rare, except at certain spots. Mr. Wallace found moths, for example, scarce everywhere except at a mountain near Sarawak, in Borneo. Here he spent a month in a whitewashed cottage belonging to Rajah Brooke, and used to lie in wait night after night for his prey, armed with net and forceps. The whitewash and the light of the lamp combined to attract the moths, but they only came in troops when the weather was both dark and wet. On such nights he could capture, perhaps, a couple of hundred, while on fine moonlight nights not more than one or two would fall into his clutches. The explanation of this phenomenon is simple enough: in spite of their proverbial folly, moths have sufficient sense to prefer light and shelter to rain and darkness.

We have an interesting chapter on the orangutan, or mias, the great man-like ape of Borneo. Mr. Wallace shot several specimens, and for three months was the owner of a baby mias, which had fallen from its mother when she was killed. The little creature was fed on cocoanut-milk and ice-water, no animal milk being obtainable among the Dyaks. The author had hoped to rear it to maturity, but it succumbed to the meagre and unnatural diet with which it was fed. The mias seldom descends to the ground, but makes his way through the forest by climbing from tree to tree. Although he appears, when undisturbed, to travel leisurely enough, he proceeds at the rate of five or six miles an hour. He never jumps or springs like an undignified little monkey; all his climbing is accomplished with calmness and deliberation. Mr. Wallace says that he never saw two full-grown animals together, but parents are sometimes accompanied by their children, and occasionally three or four young ones are seen in company. No animal dare attack the mias, say the Dyaks, except the python and the crocodile, and both these creatures are sure to be worsted in the encounter. The apparent size of these apes is much greater than the reality, and has led to a good deal of exaggeration. A ship captain and his crew killed one which they thought to be taller than the tallest of men, and pronounced when alive to be upwards of 7ft. high. After his death they found him, so they said, to be only 6ft. The skin of this very animal is now in the Calcutta Museum, and Mr. Blyth, the late curator, states that it is by no means one of the largest size, meaning that it is about 4ft. high! Mr. Wallace fixes the *maximum* height of the mias at 4ft. 2in.

Many persons whose imaginations have been excited by ideas of the brilliant colouring displayed by tropical flowers and by accounts of the delicious flavour of indigenous tropical fruits will be surprised by Mr. Wallace's remarks on these subjects. He says:—

“The reader will think that I have unaccountably forgotten to mention the brilliant flowers which, in gorgeous masses of crimson, gold, or azure, must spangle these verdant precipices and adorn the margin of the mountain streams. But what is the reality? In vain did I gaze over these vast walls of verdure; not one single spot of bright colour could be seen, not one single bush or tree, or creeper bore a flower sufficiently conspicuous to form an object in the landscape. In every direction the eye rested on green foliage and mottled rock. There was an infinite variety in the rocky masses and in the exuberant luxuriance of the vegetation, but there was no brilliancy of colour.”

Mr. Wallace proceeds to say that such was the constant impression produced upon him by repeated forest journeys both in South America and in the Eastern tropics. But where, then, it may be asked, are the glorious flowers that we know do exist in the tropics, and which we see in our hot-houses? The answer is that they have been culled from the most varied regions, and therefore give a most erroneous idea of their abundance in any one region. Our author continues:—

“The bright colours of flowers have a much greater influence on the general aspect of nature in temperate than in tropical climates. During 12 years spent amid the grandest tropical vegetation I have seen nothing comparable to the effect produced on our landscapes by gorse, broom, heather, wild hyacinths, purple orchises, and buttercups.”

We unhesitatingly accept Mr. Wallace's statement, but we are inclined to doubt whether he has assigned the true reason for this phenomenon. When he says that England, rather than Celebes, deserves to be called the “Flowery Land,” we agree with him. But is England's superior display of wild flowers due to her higher latitude, or is it not in some measure due to centuries of forest clearing and cultivation? In the days when our island was covered with continuous forests there could have been no meadows bedecked with daisies and buttercups. The indigenous flowers were, of course, in existence, but they were

concealed under overpowering masses of green foliage. An equatorial country, if cleared and cultivated as carefully as England, would, no doubt, make a much more demonstrative display of its flora.

With reference to indigenous tropical fruits Mr. Wallace tells us that

“The truly wild fruits of this grand and luxuriant Archipelago are in almost every island inferior in abundance and quality to those of Britain. A few wild strawberries and raspberries are to be found, but they are poor tasteless things compared to our blackberries and whortleberries. The kanang nut may be considered equal to a hazel nut, but I have met with nothing else superior to our crabs, haws, beech nuts, wild plums, and acorns,—fruits which would be highly esteemed by the natives of these islands, and would form an important part of their sustenance. All the fine tropical fruits are as much cultivated productions as our apples, peaches, and plums, and their wild prototypes are generally tasteless or uneatable.”

One of the most esteemed fruits of the Archipelago is the durian. The fruit grows on a large and lofty forest tree, resembling an elm, and is of a green colour, larger than a cocoanut, and covered with sharp spines. On opening the shell the fruit is found to be divided into five cells, each of which is filled with an oval mass of cream-coloured pulp, embedded in which are two or three seeds about the size of chestnuts. The scent of this curious fruit is detestable, resembling rotten onions or putrid animal matter, and a single fruit, says Mr. Bickmore, is enough to infect the air in a large house. The American traveller does not seem to have been able to overcome the prejudice caused by its abominable odour, but Mr. Wallace became a confirmed durian eater. Here is his account of its taste:—

“This pulp is the eatable part, and its consistence and flavour are indescribable. A rich butter-like custard, highly flavoured with almonds, gives the best general idea of it, but intermingled with it come wafts of flavour that call to mind cream-cheese, onion-sauce, brown sherry, and other incongruities. Then there is a rich glutinous smoothness in the pulp which nothing else possesses, but which adds to its delicacy. It is neither acid, nor sweet, nor juicy, yet one feels the want of none of these qualities, for it is perfect as it is. It produces no nausea or other bad effect, and the more you eat the less you feel inclined to stop. In fact, to eat durians is a new sensation, worth a voyage to the East to experience. I should certainly choose the durian and the orange as the king and queen of fruits.”

We English are wonderful colonizers, but we do not possess the art of managing or conciliating subject races. In America and Australia our progress has been marked by the debasement and extinction of the native tribes, and even where the original inhabitants, as in India, continue to maintain their existence, our sovereignty is decidedly unpopular, and it is a moot point whether the natives are one whit the happier for our coming among them. Mr. Wallace is a warm admirer of the Dutch system of colonial government, and no part of his work is more deserving of careful study than that which treats of the policy respectively adopted by Dutch and British statesmen in their management of intertropical dependencies. Mr. Wallace is strongly opposed to the English system of permitting free and unrestricted trade with savage or semi-savage races. The European trader resembles the tallyman at home. In order to gratify his love of finery, or to indulge in some intoxicating drug, the native gets into debt and remains a slave for life. Meantime, such is the force of competition that Manchester goods are sold more cheaply in the far East than at retail shops in England, and while the Oriental is demoralized the English weaver starves. Far better, says our author, is the paternal despotism of the Dutch. All traffic with the natives is under Government regulations, and they are paid a uniform fixed price from the produce which they raise. This is the plan which has been pursued in Java since the year 1832. The population was then 5,500,000. In 1850 it had increased to 9,500,000, and in 1865 to upwards of 14,000,000, being a denser population

than that of Great Britain and Ireland. "If, as I believe," says Mr. Wallace, "this vast population is, on the whole, contented and happy, the Dutch Government should consider well before abruptly changing a system which has led to such great results."

Altogether, one rises from a perusal of Mr. Wallace's book with an uneasy consciousness that our boasted British civilization, in spite of all its wonderful mechanical discoveries, is, socially and morally, rather a poor and unsatisfactory ideal to hold up for the imitation of the Malayan or Papuan savages. Long before we reached the end of the book we found ourselves wondering whether these civil, hospitable, well-mannered savages were not on the whole pleasanter fellows to live among than the mass of our own countrymen. If a native of the Malay Archipelago were smitten with a sudden desire for collecting British fleas, and spiders, and sparrows, and chaffinches, could he wander about our "tight little island" with such perfect freedom from molestation as Mr. Wallace experienced? It may be said that the savages even in islands where the Dutch authority is not paramount were restrained by a wholesome awe of the Dutch Government; but to admit this is to concede the whole point at issue. It is this very wholesome awe of law and authority which seems so totally wanting among a large part of our own people. And even the real superiority of some of our material improvements is rather questionable. Mr. Wallace made a voyage of a thousand miles to the Aru Islands on board of a native prau, and he declares that it was the pleasantest and most comfortable voyage he had ever made. He contrasts his snug little house on deck, "covered with cane mats and floored with split bamboo, with the gilded and uncomfortable saloon of a first-class steamer; there was no paint, grease, oil, or tar on board, but, instead of these, bamboo and rattan, coir rope and palm thatch, which smell pleasantly if they smell at all. The crew were all civil and good-tempered; with very little discipline, everything went on smoothly, and the vessel was kept very clean and in pretty good order."

Mr. Wallace visited Dobbo, the trading settlement of the Aru Islands, during the annual trade fair. His account of this place, which may be styled the Ultima Thule of the Oriental world, is especially characteristic and amusing. Five hundred people—Chinese, Bugis, half-caste Javanese, with a sprinkling of half-wild Papuans from Timor, were gathered together in this remote corner of the world to get money any way they could, yet all went on very quietly. Says Mr. Wallace:—

"This motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population live here without the shadow of a Government, with no police, no courts, and no lawyers; yet they do not cut each other's throats, do not plunder each other day and night, do not fall into anarchy. It is very extraordinary. It puts strange thoughts into one's head about the mountain load of government under which people exist in Europe, and suggests the idea that we may be overgoverned. Think of the hundred Acts of Parliament annually enacted to prevent us, the people of England, from cutting each other's throats, or from doing to our neighbours as we would not be done by! Think of the thousands of lawyers whose whole lives are spent in telling us what the hundred Acts of Parliament mean, and one would be led to infer that if Dobbo has too little law, England has too much."

A still more severe indictment against our social system will be found in Mr. Wallace's concluding chapter, the justice of which it is very difficult to gainsay; but we must stop here, and in conclusion advise our readers to do as we have done, read his book through.

¹*The Malay Archipelago*, by Alfred Russel Wallace. London: Macmillan and Co., 1869.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.