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*The Atlas* (London), Literary Supplement (24 Dec. 1853): 17a-17b. (anon).

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‘Reviews of New Books.’

*A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro; together with an Account of the Native Tribes, and Observations on the Climate, Geology, and Natural History of the Amazon Valley.* By Alfred K. [sic] Wallace. London: Reeve and Co. 1853.

It is pleasant to turn from the angry bustle and fleeting interests of everyday-life, whether commercial or political, to that world of nature which is eternal in its interests and ever varied in its manifestations, and there is no better way of doing this than by tracing the footsteps of some enterprising traveller through regions wholly or partially unexplored, and thus becoming acquainted with the physiognomy of countries widely differing from our own. Nor would it be easy to name an object which occupies a larger space in our imagination than the Amazon, the greatest river in the world, which, rising among the Andes, comparatively near the Pacific, drains six large states much bigger than all Europe in their area; and after traversing the prodigious distance of 3,200 miles, pours its immense flood into the Atlantic, and freshens the sea-water to a great distance from the shore. In the gigantic valley of this river, primeval forests oppose their almost invincible obstacles to the progress of the traveller, or reward his perseverance by strange and wonderful developments or organic life. Trees grow to immense heights, their trunks sometimes simple in structure, and at others resembling the clustered columns of a cathedral, or still more unexpectedly, propped up by large buttresses of living wood; thus claiming for the vegetable world a mode of construction and support that man might have been disposed to regard as the invention of his own busy race; or what must look singularly startling and grotesque, thrusting their roots high above the ground and then sending them back into the soil, giving the forest giants the appearance of standing on many satyr-like legs. Parasitical plants of all dimensions climb to the very summit of the trees, and often beyond the reach of sight put forth their splendid and many-coloured flowers, giving a wonderful beauty to a region which could only be seen by borrowing the wings of a bird, or taking a journey in a balloon. These plants now hang in deep festoons, making an elegant drapery, and now writhe and twist their stems round the trunks of trees like great serpents striving to overcome their prey. And where there are tracks among the dense underwood, and light and air can get access, there are humming birds, parrots, and thousands of gay butterflies glowing in the sunbeams, monkeys chattering and jumping amongst the branches, and myriads of ants and other insects teeming and toiling upon the ground. But all these things cannot be seen by the unpractised eye, and hence Mr. Wallace experienced a tinge of disappointment at the commencement of his exploration, which rapidly passed away as he learnt “how to observe” in that new world which he had so ardently longed to behold. During his wanderings on the Amazon and the Rio Negro he was indefatigably occupied in collecting specimens of natural history, and sent considerable stores to England, but unfortunately the vessel in which he returned perished by fire, and with it went his finished manuscripts and a host of treasures that he was bringing home. Notwithstanding this serious drawback, he has given us an extremely valuable and entertaining work, containing very much that will interest the professed student of science, but all conveyed in a manner that will prove enticing to every reader of taste.

The vegetable world on the Amazon is singularly rich in useful objects; thus the milk-tree yields, when cut, a rich cream, which when diluted with water is an agreeable substitute at the breakfast-table for the genuine production of the cow, which it resembles in flavour. The cassava plant furnishes the “farinha,” a kind of tapioca that forms one of the chief articles of food, and several of the palms afford in their undeveloped leaves an excellent vegetable called “palmeto,” and another tree yields a bark which is used in making pottery, while on the tributaries of the Rio Negro a singular palm produces large quantities of fibre which supplies the country with the material for ropes and cables. Mr.

Wallace says, "it grows in most places, and is about twenty or thirty feet high, with the leaves large, pinnate, shining, and very smooth and regular. The whole stem is covered with a thick coating of the fibres, hanging down like coarse hair, and growing from the base of the leaves which remain attached to the stem." The Zoology of this district is quite as interesting as its vegetation, including the celebrated vampire bats, that were more obliging to Mr. Wallace than to Mr. Waterton, and bit him once on his toe and once on his nose, but without letting him into the secret of how they manage to persuade their patient to sleep through the process, or by what peculiar manipulation they make the mysterious little hole through which the blood flows so plentifully. He comes to the conclusion that after having been bitten once just "for the curiosity of the thing, the affair is "very disagreeable."

We have not space to give any details of his observations upon animals and birds; but they will be found well worth perusal. Mr. Wallace found the Indians of the Amazon Valley very superior, both physically and intellectually, to those of most other parts of South America. The women wear no clothing, and the men very little; but the Uuapés part their hair, cultivate long locks, and stick combs on the tops of their heads, which give them a very feminine appearance. Both sexes paint themselves, and the ladies make an artificial drapery by pouring an inky juice over their heads and allowing it to run down their backs in coloured streams. Their theology is exceedingly imperfect, but they are very superstitious, and among other strange customs the men play at certain times on a kind of trumpet made of bark, when all the women and children are expected to hide themselves. These instruments are carefully concealed, and if a woman should ever by accident behold them she is generally poisoned or made away with in some other manner. Their treatment of young women is very peculiar. Before the first signs of puberty a girl is secluded for a month and slenderly fed upon bread and water, then a party of the family and friends are assembled, all bringing with them slips of *sipo* (an elastic climber) the young woman is led in, perfectly naked, and each one of the guests in turn gives her five or six blows across the back and breast till she falls senseless, it being considered very disrespectful not to strike hard. If she recovers from this treatment, which is not always the case, the ceremony is repeated four times at intervals of six hours, and then the sticks are dipped into pots of various kinds of meat, from which children are interdicted, and these being given her to lick she may afterwards eat anything, and is considered a woman, ready for marriage. The boys are treated in the same way, but with less violence. When a marriage is arranged, a pretence is made of carrying off the bride by force, and this constitutes the chief part of the ceremony. The dead are usually buried in their houses, after which a party is assembled to drink and make merry. Some of the tribes disinter the corpse about a month after its burial, bake it till it is quite dry, reduce to fine powder, and mix it with their favourite beverage, when it is drunk by the assembled company. By this means the survivor becomes possessed of the virtues of the deceased.

It is some consolation, after reading of the splendid scenes of a tropical land, to learn, that although well worth the journey to behold, they do not surpass the beauty our familiar objects at home. The forests our author found gloomy and solemn, but on the rivers' banks, where the vegetation is seen in its richest perfection, the impression was that we might "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." With this pleasant conclusion we end our notice of a very delightful book, which our readers will not fail to peruse for themselves.