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[p. 4]

‘Amazon and Andes.’

Alfred Russel Wallace was just the man to edit the papers of Dr. Richard Spruce, and consequently in “Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes” we get a very interesting and useful narrative of the life of a working naturalist half a century ago. Richard Spruce was born at Ganthorpe, in Yorkshire, in 1817. His father was a village schoolmaster, and he himself taught school for a few years up to 1844; but as a young man he was an almost chronic invalid. He early developed a passion for botany, and as he had the good luck to discover several new British species of plants—not altogether an easy thing to do—he came in contact with the best botanists of the day. On the suggestion of Sir William Hooker he made his first foreign collecting tour in the Pyrenees in 1845, and this was so successful that it was decided he should go to the Amazon—where Bates and Wallace had already been reaping a rich harvest. Accordingly he spent the years 1849 to 1864 in travel on the Amazon and the eastern side of the Andes. On his return to England he lived for twenty years or more in a retired little cottage, a great sufferer from incurable disease, but none the less accomplishing a large mass of descriptive botanical work, and he has the further credit of having been a thoroughgoing Darwinian. Incidentally he introduced the valuable red-bark into India, and for this service he had a small pension, which was his chief income. He died in February, 1894. Altogether he collected upwards of 7000 plant species from the Amazon district. In his own work he specially devoted himself to the Hepaticæ—and to his monographs in this field Sir Joseph Hooker himself applied the epithet monumental. Altogether he contributed some 54 memoirs to botanical journals. It is, however, as a simple, unaffected book of travel that the present work will appeal most to many readers, and in that light it hardly belies the editor’s estimate of it as one of the most interesting records of nineteenth century exploration. The descriptions of primeval forests, covering millions of square miles, owe nothing to literary finish, but overwhelm the mind at last by their accumulation of detail. The whole of the year 1860 was occupied in procuring seeds and plants from cinchona forests for the Indian Government. Although he was by thus time half paralysed, Spruce executed this commission with wonderful determination. It is mentioned as a curious fact that the people of South America have an invincible repugnance to quinine as a medicine, nor could they be persuaded that the red bark was wanted for this purpose. In the course of some months of actual work, Spruce collected at least 100,000 well-ripened seeds. In addition, several hundreds of young plants were collected and forwarded, in spite of the extraordinary difficulties in transit. None the less, both plants and seeds reached India successfully. Unfortunately, not the best situations were chosen for the plantations, and of late years the cinchona industry in the Neilgherry district has been rapidly diminishing. The plant requires a region of almost continuous rainfall. The two volumes are sufficiently illustrated with maps and drawings, and include a brief account of Spruce’s principal papers, in addition to his main narrative. They form a worthy monument to a man who devoted himself to science with conspicuous zeal, and with little or no hope of material reward. (Macmillan and Co.).