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‘Tropical Nature.’¹

Twelve years’ residence in the eastern and western tropics of the equatorial zone and an attentive study of nature have richly endowed Mr. Alfred R. Wallace with that knowledge which is essential to a writer on the fruitful theme which he has selected to explain and illustrate. As he informs the reader in his preface—“the three opening chapters treat the subject under the headings of ‘Climate,’ ‘Vegetation,’ and ‘Animal Life.’” One of the chief agencies equalising the equatorial climate is earth heat, a great portion of which escaping at night maintains the warmth of the daily atmosphere. The author in this opening chapter treats of a very important subject which has of late employed the thoughts of many men. He writes, after due regard having been given to the climatic influence of the moisture of the atmosphere and the agencies of winds—“In Central India the scanty and intermittent rainfall, with its fearful accompaniment of famine, is no doubt in great part due to the absence of a sufficient proportion of forest covering to the earth’s surface, and it is to a systematic planting of all the hill-tops, elevated ridges, and higher slopes that we can alone look for a radical cure of the evil. This would almost certainly induce an increased rainfall.” The extensive clearings for coffee plantations both in India and Ceylon Mr. Wallace (considering the experience we have had in the south of Europe of similar workings) looks upon as almost criminal, drought inevitably following such operations in natural sequence of cause and result. As a foot-note informs us, the third chapter of Mr. Marsh’s work, “The Earth as Modified by Human Action,” gives a terrible picture of the irreparable devastation caused by the reckless destruction of forests. In his lucid and animated description of equatorial vegetation Mr. Wallace gives of necessity due prominence to palm trees and to the infinite variety of ferns, which in luxuriant profusion decorate tropical forests and delight the hearts of travellers and naturalists. The noble family of palms are of essential service to the indigenous inhabitants, who turn them to profitable uses in a thousand and one ways. The trunk of the sago-palm supplies Europe with that edible starch so familiar to every household. The assai of the Amazon, made from the fruit of *Euterpe olacacea*, is a drink which both refreshes and nourishes. The sap which issues from the cut flower-stalk of several species of palm, when fermented, forms palm wine or toddy (inferior, of course, to Islay or Glenlivet), and when boiled and evaporated produces excellent sugar. The sugar-palm of the Malay countries being especially fertile, “a single tree will continue to pour out several quarts of sap daily for weeks together, and where the trees are abundant this forms the chief drink and most esteemed luxury of the natives.” The propagation of this tree in countries suitable to its cultivation, in place of the sugar-cane, has been warmly advocated by men of science. Palms supply bread, oils, sugar, salt, wax, resin, fruit, and vegetables—the terminal bud, or “cabbage,” of many trees being excellent and nutritious. The leaves are used for thatching, and the petioles or leaf-stalks form doors, shutters, partitions, and even walls of houses. The fibres fringing the leaves are woven into ropes and cables, bowstrings, fishing-lines, hammocks, and hats. In fact, the palm-tree in the equatorial regions of the world is as useful to “the poor Indian” as the reindeer is to the hardy, fur-clad, dirty denizen of the Arctic zone. The bamboo is also of infinite service for various domestic purposes, too numerous, indeed, for detail. The author describes it as being “the greatest boon which nature gives to the natives of the eastern tropics.” Any botanist, traveller, or sportsman passing through the tangled pathways of tropical forests cannot fail to remark with admiration and wonder the diurnal lepidoptera, or butterflies. They measure six to eight inches across the wings, and are gorgeous in colouring—blue, golden green, crimson, orange.

Lustrous and lovely, they pass slowly over the flowering shrubs, shimmering and changing hues like opals. In contrast to the exquisitely attractive forms of humming-birds and butterflies are the insect pests of wasps and ants. The latter are a constant source of bodily pain and irritation—fire-ants being especially obnoxious. “It is very difficult,” writes Mr. Wallace, to preserve bird-skins or other specimens of natural history where these ants abound, as they gnaw away the skin round the eyes and the base of the bill; and if a specimen is laid down for even half an hour in an unprotected place it will be ruined. I remember once entering a native house to rest and eat my lunch; and having a large tin collecting-box full of rare butterflies and other insects I laid it down on the bench by my side. On leaving the house I noticed some ants on it, and on opening the box found only a mass of detached wings and bodies, the latter in process of being devoured by hundreds of fire-ants.” The celebrated Sauba ant of America is even more destructive, devastating young plantations of orange, coffee, and mango trees. Carbolic acid and corrosive sublimate are capital weapons of offence against these rapacious insects. The reader curious to make an intimate knowledge of their habits and instincts is referred to Bates’s “Naturalist on the Amazons,” second edition, pp. 11-18, and Belt’s “Naturalist in Nicaragua,” pp. 71-84. The bees compensate for their stinging qualities by forming large semi-circular combs of delicious honey, which they suspend to the branches of the loftiest trees. Their larvae also afford a rich feast to the natives [p. 3c] of Borneo, Timor, and other islands where bees are numerous. Beetles of magnitude, spiders, scorpions, and centipedes must be included in the catalogue of dangerous and disgusting insects which threaten the wanderer in American and Malayan forests. With ordinary precaution, however, they are comparatively harmless. Mr. Wallace during twelve years of tropical adventure “was never once bitten or stung by them.” Snakes and lizards are abundant and obtrusive, the latter more especially so. The former in some cases are welcomed as friends, and perform the services of our domestic pussy. “The smaller pythons are not dangerous, and they often enter houses to catch and feed upon the rats, and are rather liked by the natives. You will sometimes be told, when sleeping in a native house, that there is a large snake in the roof, and that you need not be disturbed in case you should hear it hunting its prey.” Europeans in the East get in time accustomed, we suppose, to “strange bedfellows,” but the nerves of newcomers must be considerably disturbed by such novel and unwelcome visitants. Chapter IV. is on “Humming Birds,” and these vivacious and gem-coloured little beauties are written of with a keen perception for and love of their charms. Like our own robins, they are very pugnacious wee birds, and “set to” with an aerial rival on the slightest provocation. They may be said to live like insects in the air, so short is the rest that they take when passing with extreme rapidity from flower to flower. Mr. Nuttall, writing of the rufous flame-bearer, an exquisite species found on the West Coast of North America, compares the humming bird to “a breathing gem, a magic carbuncle of flaming fire. The belief of Buffon and other early writers on ornithology, that these little creatures live solely on the nectar of flowers, is a fallacy, their food being gnats and other tiny insects, mixed with some honey. Innumerable passages invite quotation, and the reader will find in the fertile pages of Mr. Wallace much thoughtful and effective reasoning on the colours of animals and sexual selection. Paying all due tribute to Dr. Darwin’s ability, the author disputes his theory in a very earnest, dispassionate, sensible tone. “Tropical Nature” is a collection of valuable essays replete with varied information and intellectual power. The book teems with interesting matter, imparted in a style solid yet lively.

¹ Tropical Nature, and other Essays. By Alfred R. Wallace. London: Macmillan and Co.