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‘Wallace’s Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro’

A thoroughly good book of travels in a thoroughly new country affords a literary repast the more satisfactory because somewhat rare. These conditions are fully realised in the present volume of Mr. Wallace. The whole country which he has explored is one very little visited by Europeans, while in some parts he had reason to believe that he was the first white man who had ever penetrated. All that he saw in so novel a region he has recorded in a sensible and unaffected manner, which wins the confidence of the reader and obviates any suspicion of being imposed upon by travellers’ tales. Of course, there is not, in describing the Valley of the Amazon, the same temptation as when dealing with countries near home, to disguise the want of matter by affected smartness and flippancy, or by meagre historical compilations cooked up for the ten-thousandth time. But we do not detect in Mr. Wallace even any tendency to those besetting sins of travelmongers. He is far from a dull writer, and can tell a good story well when occasion calls for it, but he does not think it necessary to attempt a bad joke in every third line.

Mr. Wallace is a naturalist, and his special object was to study the natural history of the region. He had made large collections both of live animals and preparations; and every reader will sympathise with the sad loss which rendered them comparatively unavailing for the purposes of science. The greater part of his collections and sketches and a considerable portion of his notes were destroyed on the voyage homewards. The ship in which he was returning caught fire in the midst of the ocean, and it is well that the crew and passengers were enabled to save their lives. But the loss to natural history is great in the extreme. Still, Mr. Wallace saved enough to form the materials of a valuable book, though we may regret the unfortunate event which hindered him from making it still more complete.

Mr. Wallace landed at Para on May 28, 1848. He spent more than a year in investigating what we suppose we may call the neighbourhood of that city, in a country where ten degrees or so occupies a very small space on the map. In August, 1849, he fairly commenced his voyage into the interior, sailed up the Amazon and its great tributary, the Rio Negro, and did not finally return to Para till the 2d July, 1852. A great part of this time was spent among the utterly uncivilized Indians in the depth of the forests, people who go stark naked and occasionally devour man’s flesh, though happily they seem never to have manifested any inclination to experimentalise upon that of Mr. Wallace. Of “adventures” he seems to have met with very few; but he has recorded what is far better—a vast number of observations on unknown or little known forms of human, animal, and vegetable life. One thing that strikes us throughout is the wonderful difference between North and South America, or rather between the dominant races in the two. In Brazil we read of “virgin forests” for hundreds of miles together—of large nations of Indians, some remaining quite in their original state, others half civilised and half Christianised; but we do not read of steamers navigating the great rivers one or two thousand miles from their source, between great cities which spring up every ten or twenty years to the size of Norwich or Bristol. The man of Southern Europe seems far less capable of subduing nature than his brethren of Dr. Lieber’s “Anglican tribe.” A good deal, of course, must be allowed for the climate; under the equator man neither can nor need to do so much as in a more temperate zone, but this can never account entirely for the marked difference between

the results of English and of Spanish or Portuguese colonization. On the other hand, if the southern colonist does not subdue nature, neither does he exterminate man in the same way as his northern fellow. That the Europeans and natives have mingled in Brazil in a way which they have not in the United States, is probably owing to differences on both sides; anyhow, there does not appear to be that wide distinction of races which prevails in the other continent. The Indian is subdued and sometimes oppressed, but he does not disappear before his conqueror, and he partakes of such civilization and religion as his conqueror has to give him, though certainly both articles are occasionally of a very extraordinary kind. For instance, the object of the following cultus appears to be a Christian saint, but we can hardly conceive any form of fetish-worship more degrading. The scene lies in a remote part of the interior, after Mr. Wallace had crossed the Brazilian frontier, and was tarrying in the dominions of Venezuela:—

“Senhor Antonio Dias delayed his return, and rather a scene in his domestic circle took place in consequence. As might be expected, the ladies did not agree very well together. The elder one, in particular, was very jealous of the Indian girls, and took every opportunity of ill-treating them, and, now that the master was absent, went, I suppose, to greater lengths than usual, and, the consequence was, one of the girls ran away. This was an unexpected *dénouement*, and they were in a great state of alarm, for the girl was a particular favourite of Senhor Antonio’s, and if he returned before she came back he was not likely to be very delicate in showing his displeasure. The girl had gone off in a canoe with a child about a year old; the night was wet and stormy, but that sort of thing will not stop an Indian. Messengers were sent after her, but she was not to be found; and then the old lady and her daughter went off themselves in a tremendous rain, but with no better success. One resource, however, more remained, and they resolved to apply to the saint. Senhor Domingos was sent to bring the image of St. Antonio from the church. This saint is supposed to have special power over things lost, but the manner of securing his influence is rather singular. The poor saint is tied round tightly with a cord and laid on his back on the floor, and it is believed that in order to obtain deliverance from such duration vile he will cause the lost sheep to return. Thus was the unfortunate Anthony of Torno now treated, and laid ignominiously on the earthen floor all night, but without effect. He was obstinate, and nothing was heard of the wanderers. More inquiries were made, but with no result, till two days afterwards, Senhor Antonio himself returned, accompanied by the girl. She had hid herself in a site a short distance from the village, waited for Senhor Antonio’s passing, and then joined him, and told her own story first; and so the remainder of the harem got some hard words, and, I am inclined to think, some hard blows too.”

Now this is really the hardest measure that we ever heard of being applied to any object of worship. The Arcadians need to scourge Pan, and the Samoides, we believe, to this day roll their idols in the mire; but this is only after an unsuccessful day’s hunting. Senhor Domingos seems to treat his deity something like those Roman masters who flogged their slaves beforehand, lest they should be too much occupied when they had actually committed an offense.

The Brazilians seem to have but small notions of geography, apparently completely identifying Old and New England:—

“One inquired if in America (meaning the United States) there was any *terra firma*, appearing to have an idea that it was all a cluster of islands. Another asked if there were campos, and if the people had mandioca and seringa. On being told they had neither, he asked why they did not plant them, and said he thought it would answer well to plant seringa trees, and so have fresh milk every day to make India-rubber shoes. When told that the climate was too cold for mandioca, or seringa, to grow, if planted, he was quite astonished, and wondered how people could live in a country where such necessities of life could not be grown; and he, no doubt, felt his superiority over us, on account of our coming to his country to buy India-

rubber and cocoa, just as the inhabitants of the Celestial Empire think we must be very poor miserable barbarians indeed, to be obliged to come so far to buy their tea. Even Senhor Seixus himself, an educated Brazilian, and the commandante of the district, inquired if the Government of England were constitutional or despotic and was surprised to hear that our Sovereign was a woman.”

Here is a specimen of a Portuguese philologist, recalling the old story of the “horse” and the “shovel.”

“During our make-shift conversation, carried on with our very slender Portuguese vocabulary, Senhor C. would frequently ask us what such and such a word was in ‘Americano’ (for so the English language is here called), and appeared highly amused at the absurd and incomprehensible terms used by us in ordinary conversation. Among other things, we told him that we called ‘rapaz’ in Americano ‘boy,’ which would (*boi*) in Portuguese means an ox. This was to him a complete climax of absurdity, and tickled him into rears of laughter, and he made us repeat it to him several times, that he might not forget so good a joke, and when we were pulling away into the middle of the stream, and waving our ‘adeos,’ his last words were, as loud as he could bawl, ‘O que se chama rapaz?’ (What do you call rapaz?)”

Against him, however, we ought in fairness to balance Senhor José Antonio Brandao, whom Mr. Wallace thus describes:—

“He is a remarkable intelligent man, fond of reading, but without books, and with a most tenacious memory. He has taught himself French, which he now reads with ease, and through it he has got much information, though of course rather tinged with French prejudice. He has several huge quarto volumes of ecclesiastical history, and is quite learned in all the details of the councils, and the history of the Reformation. He can tell you, from an old work on geography without maps, the length and breadth of every country in Europe, and the main particulars respecting it. He is about seventy years of age, thirsting for information, and has never seen a map! Think of this, ye who roll in intellectual luxury. In this land of mechanics’ institutions and cheap literature, few have an idea of the real pursuit of knowledge under difficulties—of the longing thirst for information which there is no fountain to satisfy. In his conversation there was something racy and refreshing—such an absence of information, but such a fertility of ideas. He had read the Bible in Portuguese, as a forbidden book, though the priests made no very great objection to it here; and it was something new to hear a man’s opinions of it, who had first read it at a mature age, and solely from a desire for information. The idea had not entered his mind that it was all inspired, so he made objections to all parts which he thought incredible, or which appeared to him to be capable of a simple explanation; and, as might have been expected, he found of his own accord confirmation of the doctrines of the religion in which he had been brought up from childhood.”

Of the Brazilian character, Mr. Wallace does not speak very highly—at least, cheating and lying prevail to an awful extent. On the apparent lack of energy, by which they have fallen so far below the English colonist, he thus comments:—

“Before proceeding with my journey, I will note the few observations that occur to me on the character and customs of the inhabitants of this fine country. I of course speak solely of the province of Para, and it is probable that to the rest of Brazil my remarks may not in the least apply, so different, in every respect, is this part of the empire from the more southern and better known portion. There is, perhaps, no country in the world so capable of yielding a large return for agricultural labours, and yet so little cultivated; none where the earth will produce such a variety of valuable production, and where they are so totally neglected; none where the facilities for internal communication are so great, or where it is more difficult or tedious to get from place to place; none which so much possesses all the natural requisites for an immense trade with all the world, and whose commerce is so limited and insignificant.

“This may well excite wonder, when we remember that the white inhabitants of this country are Portuguese and their descendants—the nation which a few centuries ago took the lead in all great discoveries and commercial enterprises—which spread its colonies over the whole world, and exhibited the most chivalric spirit of enterprise in overcoming the dangers of navigation to unknown seas, and of opening a commercial intercourse with barbarous or uncivilised nations.

“But yet, as far as I myself have been able to observe, their national character has not changed. The Portuguese and their descendants exhibit here the same perseverance, the same endurance of every hardship, and the same wandering spirit, which led and still leads them to penetrate into the most desolate and uncivilised regions in pursuit of commerce and in search of gold. But they exhibit also a distaste for agricultural and mechanical labours, which appears to have been ever a part of their national character, and which has caused them to sink to their present low condition in the scale of nations, in whatever part of the world they may be found. When their colonies were flourishing in every quarter of the globe, and their ships brought luxuries for the supply of half the civilised world, a great part of the population found occupation in trade, in the distribution of that wealth which set in a constant stream from America, Asia, and Africa, to their shores; but now that the stream has been diverted into other channels by the energy of the Saxon races, the surplus population, averse from agriculture, and unable to find a support in the diminished trade of the country, swarm to Brazil, in the hope that wealth may be found there in a manner more congenial to their tastes.”

Slavery the author strongly condemns, though in the parts of the country he visited it did not appear at all in its worst form. The following instance of negro credulity is too good to omit:—

“There was a negro (said he) who had a pretty wife, to whom another negro was rather attentive when he had an opportunity. One day the husband went out to hunt, and the other party thought it a good opportunity to pay a visit to the lady. The husband returned rather unexpectedly, and the visitor climbed up into the rafters, to be out of sight, among the old boards and baskets that were stowed away there. The husband put his gun by in a corner, and called his wife to get his supper, and then sat down in his hammock. Casting his eyes up to the rafters he saw a leg protruding from among the baskets, and thinking it something supernatural crossed himself and said, ‘Lord deliver us from legs appearing overhead!’ The other, hearing this, attempted to draw up his legs out of sight, but losing his balance came down suddenly on the floor, in front of the astonished husband, who half frightened asked, ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘I have just come from heaven,’ said the other, ‘and have brought you news of your little daughter Maria.’ ‘Oh! Wife! Wife! Come and see a man who has brought us news of our little daughter Maria;’ then, turning to the visitor, continued. ‘And what was my little daughter doing when you left?’ ‘Oh! she was sitting at the feet of the Virgin, with a golden crown on her head and smoking a golden pipe a yard long.’ ‘And did she not send any message to us?’ ‘Oh yes, she sent many remembrances, and begged you to send her two pounds of your tobacco from the little rhossa, they have not got any half so good up there!’ ‘Oh! wife! wife! bring two pounds of our tobacco from the little rhossa, for our daughter Maria is in heaven, and she says they have not any half so good up there.’ So the tobacco was brought, and the visitor was departing, when he was asked: ‘Are there many white men up there?’ ‘Very few,’ he replied, ‘they are all down below, with the *diabo*.’ ‘I thought so,’ the other replied, apparently quite satisfied, ‘good night!’

Side by side we may place the following rite, which, if we were inclined to mysticise upon, we might pronounce to be of Phœnician origin:—

“About two days before had been St. John’s day, when it is the custom to make bonfires, and jump over and through them, which act is considered by the common people as an important religious ceremony. As we were talking about it, the old lady gravely asked if we knew that animals also passed through the fire?

We replied that we were not aware of the fact, upon which she informed us that we might hereafter believe it, for that she had had ocular demonstration of it. 'It was last year,' said she, 'on the day after St. John's, my son went out to hunt, and brought home a cotie and a pacá, and both of them were completely scorched all along the belly: they had evidently passed through the fire the night before.' 'But where do they get the fire from?' I asked. 'Oh, God prepares it for them,' said she; and on my hinting that fires were not often found in the forest, unless lit by human hands, she at once silenced my objections by triumphantly asking me, 'if anything was impossible with God,' at the same time observing that perhaps I was a Protestant, and did not believe in God or the Virgin. So I was obliged to give up the point: and though I assured her that Protestants did generally believe in God and went to church, she replied, 'She did not know, but had always heard to the contrary.'"

The godliness of the Rodentia seems, however, to be fully matched by the proficiency of the Pachydermata in the virtue which ranks next thereto:—

"The tapir, they say, has a peculiar fancy for dropping his dung only in the water, and they never find it except in brooks and springs, though it is so large and abundant that it could not be overlooked in the forest. If there is no water to be found, the animal makes a rough basket of leaves, and carries it to the nearest stream, and there deposits it. The Indian's tale goes, that one tapir met another in the forest, with a basket in his mouth. 'What have you in your basket?' said the one. 'Fruit,' answered the other. 'Let me have some,' said the first. 'I won't,' said the other. Upon which the first tapir pulled the basket from the other's mouth, broke it open, and, on seeing the contents, both turned tail, quite ashamed of themselves, ran away in opposite directions, and never came near the spot again all their lives."

The traveler in these countries must be prepared for an occasional lack of provisions, though we remember to have found a state of things almost literally the same as the following at what professed to be an inn in a region no more remote than Monmouthshire:—

"As we had nothing for dinner, I went with Mr. Leavens in the Montaria, which our Indians were to return in, to a house up an igaripé, to see what we could buy. Cattle and sheep, fowls and ducks, were in plenty, and we thought we had come to the right place; but we were mistaken, for the following conversation took place between Mr. Leavens and a negro woman, the only person we saw:—'Have you any fowls to sell?'—'No.' 'Any ducks?'—'No.' 'Any meat?'—'No.' 'What do you sell here then?'—'Nothing.' 'Have you any eggs to sell?'—'No; the hens don't lay eggs.' And, notwithstanding our declaration that we had nothing to eat, we were obliged to go away as empty as we came, because her master was not at home, and nothing was hers to sell. At another house we were lucky enough to buy a small turtle, which made us an excellent meal."

Space will not allow us to put before our readers all the passages which we had marked for their entertainment. We will rather send them straight to Mr. Wallace's volume, to cater for themselves. Our extracts have been chiefly from the light portions of the book; but it contains much, especially in its later chapters, of great importance to the scientific inquirer, including an essay on the Amazonian dialects, from the pen of Dr. Latham.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2014.