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[p. 12]

*'Tropical Nature.'*¹

Mr. Wallace's new work on the tropics may be divided into two distinct sections; for a third and poetical division, consisting of two sonnets, we prefer to pass over in silence. The first portion of the book is mainly descriptive, the second argumentative and partly polemical. "The luxuriance and beauty of tropical nature," Mr. Wallace remarks, "is a well-worn theme, and there is little to be said about it." His object, therefore, is to dwell upon and give a more or less comprehensive survey of the natural phenomena which are essentially tropical, as distinguished from those of temperate zones; and for such a task an author more qualified, both as regards descriptive power and scientific observation, could not well have been found. Mr. Wallace has lived for twelve years in the equatorial zone of the eastern and western hemispheres, and the result of his experiences he has embodied in this work, which therefore combines all the advantages of vivid personal impression with strictly scientific method. Nothing could be more attractive than his descriptions of the great primeval forests which follow the line of the Equator. From the woods and glades of our temperate climate these vast expanses differ as much as possible. "The observer new to the scene," the author says, "would perhaps be first struck by the varied yet symmetrical trunks which rise up with perfect straightness to a great height without a branch, and which, being placed at a considerable average distance apart, give an impression similar to that produced by the columns of some enormous building. Overhead, at a height perhaps of a hundred feet, is an almost unbroken canopy of foliage, formed by the meeting together of these great trees and their interlacing branches; and this canopy is usually so dense that but an indistinct glimmer of the sky is to be seen, and even the intense tropical sunlight only penetrates to the ground subdued and broken up into scattered fragments. There is a weird gloom and a solemn silence which combine to produce a sense of the vast, the primeval—almost of the infinite. It is a world in which man seems an intruder, and where he feels overwhelmed by the contemplation of the ever-acting forces which from the simple elements of the atmosphere build up the great mass of vegetation which overshadows and almost seems to oppress the earth."

The author next proceeds to describe the trees of lower growth, which, underneath the high monarchs of the wood, constitute a second forest about forty or fifty feet high from root to crown, and which again in their turn give shade to a third undergrowth of dwarf palms, tree-ferns, and gigantic herbaceous ferns. A profusion of woody creepers and climbers which gracefully stretch their knotted coils from tree to tree and from branch to branch, completes the endless entanglement and variety of the equatorial forest. Mr. Wallace looks upon this forest with the enthusiasm of a lover of nature and with the interest of a scientific explorer. To him the beauty of the scene hides its terror and its gloom. It is interesting to compare with his glowing picture another recent description of a branch of the same equatorial forest, which although frequently identical as regards the objects viewed, differs vastly as to the impressions derived therefrom. The features of the Madonna rendered by the brush of Carlo Dolci and that of Ribera could not present a more marked contrast than does the tropical forest in the pages respectively of Mr. Wallace and of Mr. Stanley. This is what the American traveller saw on his weary way through the "dark continent":—

The terrible undergrowth that here engrossed all space under the shade of the pillared bombax and mastlike narilé was a miracle of vegetation. It consisted of ferns, speargrass, watercane, and orchidaceous plants, mixed with wild vines, cable thickness of the *Ficus elastica*, and a sprinkling of mimosas, acacias, tamarinds, lilanes, palms of various species, wild date, *Raphia vinifera*, the elais, the fan, rattans, and a hundred other varieties—all struggling for every inch of space, and swarming upward with a luxuriance and density that only this extraordinary hothouse atmosphere could nourish...the sloppy moisture, the unhealthy reeking atmosphere, and the monotony of the scenes; nothing but the eternal interlaced branches, the tall aspiring stems rising from a tangle through which we had to burrow and crawl, like wild animals on hands and feet.

Such is the sombre pendant to Mr. Wallace's bright picture.

All the distinctive features of vegetable and animal life are touched upon in the earlier part of this volume, from the forest tree to the sensitive plant, and from the ant to the marmoset. Marmosets are the smallest species of the monkey tribe, some of them being only about six inches long, exclusive of the tail. To equatorial America also belongs a group of bats known as vampires, whose blood-sucking and carnivorous propensities are fully established by Mr. Wallace, to the satisfaction, no doubt, of lovers of folk-lore and fable. Horses and cattle, Mr. Wallace says, are frequently attacked by these fierce creatures, and are found in the morning covered with blood. Men are no less liable to their attacks, and some persons are especially subject to them. Such are obliged to sleep completely muffled up in order to avoid being made seriously ill or even losing their lives. Mr. Wallace himself was once bitten on the toe, which was found bleeding in the morning from a small round hole, from which the flow of blood was not easily stopped. On another occasion the author's nose was the point chosen for the vampire's attentions. It is said that the motion of the wings—frequently from two to two and a half feet in expanse—fans the sleeper into a deeper slumber, and renders him insensible to the gentle abrasion of the skin. Almost as terrible as the vampire are the various kinds of ants belonging to the genus *Odontomachus*, which are seen wandering about the forest, recognizable by their enormously long and slender hooked jaws. The sting of some of these is painful, and even dangerous; and Sir Robert Schomburgh, after having been bitten by an ant of the *Ponera clavata* kind, of Guiana, fainted with the pain and had an attack of fever in consequence. Mr. Wallace himself narrowly escaped a similar fate.

From such phenomena as these it is a relief to turn to the harmless aspects of natural development in the form of trees and flowers and plants. One of the most interesting among the latter is the sensitive plant, the tropical qualities of which might have suggested additional stanzas to Shelley's beautiful poem. "The *Mimosa pudica*," Mr. Wallace states, "is originally a native of South America, but it has spread to Africa and Asia, so that sensitive plants now abound as wayside weeds in many parts both of the Eastern and Western tropics, sometimes completely carpeting the ground with their delicate foliage. Where a large surface of ground is thus covered the effect of walking over it is most peculiar. At each step the plants for some distance round suddenly droop, as if struck with paralysis, and a broad track of prostrate herbage several feet wide is distinctly marked out by the different colour of the leaflets. The explanation of this phenomenon given by botanists is not very satisfactory; while the purpose or use of the peculiarity is still more mysterious, seeing that out of about two hundred species belonging to the same genus *Mimosa*, only some three or four are sensitive, and in the whole vegetable kingdom there are no other plants which possess more than the rudiments of a similar property."

We have left ourselves little space to touch upon Mr. Wallace's controversy with Mr. Darwin. Many of our readers will probably remember the interesting article on the subject which appeared some time ago in *Macmillan's Magazine*, and of which the second portion of the present work is a further elaboration. Against Mr. Darwin's conclusion, that "all, or almost all, the colours of higher animals are due to voluntary or conscious sexual selection, and that diversity in the sexes is due primarily to the transmission of colour variations either to one sex only or to both sexes," Mr. Wallace holds, "that the primary cause of sexual diversity of colour was the need of protection repressing in the female those bright colours which are normally produced in both sexes by general laws." Into the merits of these rival theories we do not propose to enter at present.

¹ "Tropical Nature and other Essays." By Alfred R. Wallace. (London: Macmillan and Co. 1878.)

[\[Return\]](#)

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