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RORAIMA.

READ AT MEETING OF BRITISH ASSOCIATION, ABERDEEN, SEPT. 1885.

BY EVERARD F. IM THURN.

THE whole country of Guiana may be likened to a wedge driven into the very distinct north-eastern shoulder of the continent of South America; or, rather, it is like three wedges, represented respectively by the three countries of British, Dutch, and French Guiana. Of these, British Guiana penetrates furthest inland; and just beyond the apex of this,—where, according to the at present vaguely accepted limitations of their respective boundaries, Brazil, Venezuela, and British Guiana meet,—stands the wonderful mountain of Roraima, which, till the 18th of last December, was deemed inaccessible. It stands, therefore, just outside British territory, in the Brazil.

Roraima was first heard of—if we except a possible but doubtful reference to it by Sir Walter Raleigh—and then reached, some forty-five years ago, by the brothers Schomburgk. Their account of the remarkable character of this mountain, and especially of the inaccessibility of its—as it seemed to them—for-ever-isolated summit, excited the vivid interest of scientific men. Since their time, some half-dozen white men have reached its foot, only to return with renewed stories of the wonder and the inaccessibility. In 1877, an article in the *Spectator* may be said to have popularised, raised, and spread far the fame of Roraima.

Yet, in mere height, the mountain is but a dwarf, surpassed by many up which tourists every summer-day carry their bottled beer and sandwiches; for its summit is but between 8000 and 9000 feet above the level of the sea, and only some 5000 feet above the level of the plain from which it rises. The interest lies, not in its height, but in its extraordinary formation, and in the apparent inaccessibility of its summit. Imagine a flat-topped pillar, itself some 2500 feet in height, set on a very steeply-sloped truncated cone of about another 2500 feet in height; or rather, first imagine a flat-topped, mason-wrought pillar of but 25 feet in height, set on a steeply-sloping pediment of another 25 feet. It would be rather difficult, if unaided by ropes or mechanical appliances, to ascend that pillar.

Much more difficult, then, did it seem to ascend the natural pillar, in all some 5000 feet in height, formed by Roraima. And even yet more difficult did this feat seem when it is remembered that the sloping base on which stands the pillar-like portion of Roraima is, over the greater part of its surface, rendered but just barely passable by reason of a complete covering of huge boulders and rocks, such as would present the appearance of an enormously magnified moraine, and that it is clothed, obscured, and rendered yet more impassable by one of the densest and most tangled forests to be found even in the tropics. And, once again, yet more difficult did the feat seem, when it is

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remembered that on many days throughout the year—only, however, the Indians vow, when white men are about it—the mountain is enveloped from base to summit in densest mist, and that hardly ever is it clear in all its parts from huge masses of drifting vapour.

Yet, on the 18th of December last year, without any difficulty greater than might be overcome by a very ordinary degree of endurance, my companion and I, followed by seven Indians, reached the summit; and reached it—at first sight curiously enough—from the very point from which almost every one of the few previous attempts had been made and abandoned as hopelessly impracticable. Nor can we claim merit for the success which, after being denied to others, came to us. The merit is due to this Association and to the other Societies which by their liberality enabled us to spend sufficient time on the mountain—seeing our way—before we finally ascended. Previous travellers had reached the mountain, but had almost immediately been driven back by want of provisions before they had had time to see their way. Many, in all probability, never saw the path unobscured by mists, which led us to the summit. We were enabled—by you—to spend some three weeks on the mountain, watching and noting day by day, as occasion and the floating mists allowed, each detail of the mountain, and so determining the course which, with full knowledge gathered, we afterward followed with ease.

I must pause here to dispel a notion which seems to be not uncommonly held about Roraima—the notion that this mountain, so remarkable in form, is solitary, unique, and peculiar. Rather is Roraima the most famous, slightly the most lofty, and perhaps really the most striking of a group of similar mountains. If you have followed and realised the description I have given of Roraima as quite essentially pillar-like in form, you will not find it hard to follow me when I now declare that Sir Robert Schomburgk's description of this whole group of pillar-like mountains, of which Roraima is but slightly the most remarkable, as resembling, when seen from a sufficiently distant height, an indescribably vast natural forum—a forum in ruins—is an entirely adequate and satisfactory description of the appearance of the group.

Or perhaps, if you will let me depict the group in yet another way, it may raise a more distinct mental picture. Probably most of you have noticed in winter, when a thaw has set in after heavy snow, how, on the vanishing snow-drifts, small pillarlets of snow, capped and protected each by some small pebbles, are ranged over the surface; and, if you have been in the tropics, you will, after some terrific downpour of water—such as often there takes the place of our gentler rains—have seen, on some thrown-up heap of loose soil, many pillarlets of earth like those pillarlets of snow. And again, if you had walked with me to Roraima over the savannahs—over those swelling surfaces, barely covered by a thin sheet of hardest conglomerate, or of hardened mud, but really consisting of sand which is just coherent enough to seem at some times sandstone—jus friable enough to seem, at another time, rather sand than sandstone—you

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would have seen that, in places, the conglomerate or mud sheet had been broken up, and lay in small patches over the otherwise exposed and underlying sand, and would have noticed that there, occasionally, the sand, where exposed, had been washed away, but that where capped and protected by small patches either of conglomerate or hardened mud, it still stood in the form of pillarlets—sometimes even of great pillars—of sand, corresponding to the pillarlets of snow. Not seldom, hundreds of these pillars stand in great pits formed by the washing away of the sand from a hill-side. The phenomenon is indeed so common as to have earned a name from the Indians of the district, who call such places *Eppeling*.

The most noticeable instances of these eppelings were on a hill near the village of Konkarmo, some 50 miles south, but within sight of Roraima. At some five different parts of that hill, apparently very many hundreds of tons—in one place very many thousands of tons—of sand had been washed away, leaving countless erect pillars, of which the tallest corresponded in height to the original height of that part of the hill. The whole effect was most peculiar. Sometimes, I may add in parenthesis, the picturesque effect of these places was much increased by the extraordinarily pure rose-red colour of the sand.

Eppelings, on the comparatively small scale here described, abound about Roraima. I have dwelt on them because it seems to me that the group of remarkable pillar-like mountains of which Roraima is chief is but an eppeling on a gigantic scale, formed in the same way, and altogether—except in its gigantic size—equivalent to the pillarlets on the loose water-washed earth and to the pillarlets of snow on the snow-drifts.

Here it occurs to me that, having dwelt so long on the pillar-like form of Roraima, I had better explain that it does not form a round pillar. Were we to make a ground-plan of it, its diameter would be much greater from north to south than from east to west. From east to west, as viewed from the south, the mountain is just about four miles across; from north to south it appears to be some seven or eight miles.

Of our actual ascent of the mountain I need not say much here; for I have elsewhere told of this in some detail. We reached the mountain on its southern side; and on that side, too, we made an ascent. The house which we built for ourselves and occupied during our three weeks of preliminary exploration, was rather more than half-way up the sloping part of the mountain, the pediment of the pillar. Up to that point the slope, on that side, was grass-covered and swampy; the cold and damp were intense. Above that point, from our house to the base of the actual cliff, the slope was much more steep, and was entirely covered by terrific moraine-like masses of huge fragments of rock, over which had grown the densest forest of small but gnarled trees, matted together by ferns and climbing bamboos. At the top of this slope—at the base, that is, of the actual cliff—was a curious belt of blackberry bushes—a rare, perhaps a unique, instance in the tropics. And immediately above this, rose, for more than 2000 feet, the sheer cliff. Or rather the cliff was not quite sheer;

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for its top overhung its base; and, as I sat at the base of the cliff, with my back against it, trying to put roughly into papers the too abundant new plants which I had gathered on the way up, the water which ever drips from every part of the upper edge of the cliff, fell, not on to, but beyond me.

So far the way had been but a very difficult climb up the slope. To this point others had reached. But above us, still to be ascended, rose the real difficulty—the cliff.

From below, we had noticed, and carefully noted, a broad but uneven, and in many parts much-broken ledge, which runs diagonally up the face of the rock, from the top of the forested slope to the upper ledge of the cliff. It was obviously the path by which we should ascend. One difficulty which had presented itself to our eyes from below had already been overcome; for, wandering, without being able to see more than a yard or two on each side of us, up through the densely tangled vegetation of the slope, we had yet managed to strike the bottom of the ledge where, emerging from the slope, it passed up the cliff. The lower part of the actual ledge was, however, much broken, and its surface was much obscured by blocks of stone and dense plant-growths. Higher up, a yet more serious difficulty had seemed to present itself. For there, a stream of some size, falling over the upper edge of the cliff down on to the ledge, had worn away the latter, and made for itself a deep ravine—a break in the shelf. It proved, however, not very difficult to climb down into this gap, to pass (in that state of the water it was possible, though after heavy rain it might not be) actually through the water as it fell like very heavy rain, from 2000 feet high on to our heads; and then to climb up the other side of the gap on to the upper part of the ledge: and on, through a paradise of strange and lovely plants, to the top of Roraima. Then the pillar had been climbed, and we stood on its summit.

Surely no stranger sight than that which now met our eyes was ever seen. Now and again in an old picture by some skilled painter, who, never having been outside his flat rockless native land, has yet ventured to add an imaginative background of rocky landscape to his figure subjects, is to be seen some approach to the landscape on Roraima. In the foreground, on either hand, rose a fantastic pyramid of rock, and these were as the gate-posts; within, on the right, three detached pillar-like blocks of stone, lying evenly side by side on the top of one huge square block, pointed, in marvellously close resemblance to three great guns, outward through the entrance. Within the gate thus strangely guarded lay a great plain, with surface generally somewhat uneven, its lowest flatter parts clothed with a grass-like and very peculiar vegetation, the even stretch of which was broken by but a few, singly and widely scattered, very low shrubs, its higher more swelling parts of bare rock curiously, most elaborately, and intricately terraced. Through the plain meandered numberless tiny streamlets of clearest water, now falling in miniature cascades over the sloping rocks, then winding through the grass, and again

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widening out into little pools. And on this plain, singly, in the foreground, but more and more abundantly in the distance, till they excluded further view, were ranged, in orderly disorder, many single masses and piles of masses of great rocks from 20 to 80 feet high—each single rock, each pile of rocks, of perfectly indescribable, nay—to those who have never seen them —incredible strangeness of form. It seemed a disordered gallery of countless vast stone monsters. Here was a rocking-stone—or so it seemed until experiment proved that its upper part was really fast joined by a narrow neck of stone to the lower; there was an "Old Man of Hoy;" then again an archway, seeming the strange proscenium to that strange scene beyond; then a terraced Mexican pyramid, its steps even enough to afford easy access to its summit; then a gigantic human mask of stone; next a cap of stone; animal figures of stone, and hundreds of similar natural grotesques. In short, it seemed for the moment hard to believe but that there had been gathered together, and put away on that lofty and isolated small summit, all those grotesque, artificial-seeming natural rocks which, attracting the attention of the curious traveller, are usually found scattered singly, and at wide intervals over the face of the whole earth.

At the moment it all seemed inexplicable, and even now I seem to feel it almost presumption to suggest an explanation of this strange scene. But it must be done. The whole group of grotesque rocks seems to me to be but another and very remarkable example of one of those eppelings—the nature and origin of which I have already described. Each of the rock-monsters on the top of Roraima, whether it consists of a single rock or of a pile of rocks, is distinct from each of its fellows. Each is, it seems to me, a single pillar—more or less gigantic as it may be, yet comparable to the melting pillarlet of snow; and each of these pillars is gradually melting away (like a snow-man in a thaw) under the influence of the aërial denudation which on Roraima,—the very home of all mists and rain and storms and winds,—exercises in a degree hardly approached elsewhere its unchecked and powerful sway.

Before I close, there is another aspect of Roraima, the "ever-fruitful mother of streams," as the Indians call it, on which I must say a few words. Gathering their waters on this marvellous top of Roraima, and starting with a wonderful leap of 2000 feet down over its cliff, are streams which flow in various directions to swell with no inconsiderable contribution of water the Orinoco, the Essequibo (the little sister of the Orinoco, the Indians say this is, but it is only little by comparison) and the Amazon, —the three chief river systems which water the greatest part of the Atlantic side of the continent of South America. Roraima is but a little mother; but her offspring—her streams—are great. To the poetical imagination the summit of Roraima is a most fitting home and place of origin for these great streams; but to the more sober reason it seems at first sight a little wonderful that so small a plateau should pour out such great waters. Yet the phenomenon can be very easily explained.

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The summit of Roraima is in reality not a perfectly level plateau, but a very slightly hollowed basin. The countless pillars of absorbent sandstone which stand on it constantly gather the great moisture which the winds ever drive round about and against them; and this moisture trickling down through the rock pillars, accumulates in the spongy masses of soil formed in the lowest parts of the basin by the herb-like vegetation. Thence, in the tiny streamlets which have already been described, the water makes its way to the edge of the plateau through deep channels which it has cut for itself through the rim of the rock basin; and, emerging not quite at the top of, but some distance down the cliff, it makes its great leap downwards, and then hurries some of it to the north, to the Orinoco, some to the west, to the Essequibo, and some to the south, to the Amazon.

It will not be difficult to understand, then, that the streams which ever drop—sometimes it may be but a trickle—down the face of Roraima, are normally but small in volume, but that at very frequent intervals the shortest rainfall—tropical rain-pour, though, it must be remembered—swells them to great and potent size.

My farewell to Roraima was made with curiously mixed feelings, for not often in any lifetime does one come to such a place, under such circumstances, and consequently acquire for it in so brief a stay so much affection. The closing day of my stay there was last Christmas Day, which we spent at Teruta, the Arecuna village at the foot, and from which is the most astoundingly magnificent view of the twin mountains of Roraima and Kookenaam. In the morning, the day before having been dry, the streams were but barely discernible as they descended the cliff; but during the day rain fell, the streams increased in volume, doubling—though that had seemed impossible—the magnificent beauty of the scene, and adding to its grandeur the splendid music of their roar. In such a scene, on such a day, all other impressions were effaced in that of grand and terrific splendour. Then, when night fell and hid this, the Indians around us, under the influence of a most remarkable ecclesiastical mania which had just then spread in a wonderful way into those distant parts, raised—as they kept Christmas with much drinking, without intermission from sunset to the next dawn—an absolutely incessant shout of "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" Such an anti-climax to the most impressive scene I have ever witnessed, sent me, with mingled regret and sorrow, away on my homeward journey in the morning.

But a very few words more, and I have done. We found the way up Roraima; but, that done, we had exhausted our means, and were unable to proceed with the further exploration of the mountain which is most desirable. Often I hope that I may still be permitted to do that further work; always I wish that, whether I or another do it, it may be done. The knowledge which I have gained would enable it to be done with comparative ease; and if there is any one here, or elsewhere, who will undertake it, that knowledge shall be placed as freely at his disposal as it would be used by myself.

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