

MARCH, 1879.

Madagascar.*

THE Island of Madagascar lies 300 miles east of South Africa, separated from it by the Mozambique Channel. Its length is about 1,000 miles: its mean breadth, about 225 miles: its area, 230,000 square miles, is more than double that of Great Britain. Excepting Borneo and New Guinea, it is the largest Island of the globe.

The physical aspect of the country is varied. Gradually sloping from the sea, the land rises to a height of 6000 feet. The highest mountain peaks reach an attitude of from 8,000 to 10,000 feet. Some of the valleys are remarkably fertile and beautiful. The soil is generally good. It is watered by numerous rivers, some of them 200 miles long. There are immense forests of heavy timber,—mahogany, ebony, and other kinds. The climate is very unequal: in some parts healthy, elsewhere subject to virulent miasma. The natives, belonging to one kindred stock of Malay origin, are divided into three distinct tribes,—The HOVAS, the SAKALAVAS, and the BETSIMISERAKAS. The first-named are the dominant race, two-thirds of the whole, and it is with them we have to do in this sketch. The Hovas are of a light olive colour, not tall, but erect and muscular, with rather good features, high foreheads and dark hair. The population of Madagascar is about 2,500,000, though at one time it was much larger. It must have an interesting history, but its chief attraction for us is that, with the exception perhaps of the Sandwich Islands, it has been the scene of the greatest triumphs of the Gospel in heathen lands. Within the last ten years, more apparent converts have been gained to Christianity than in all the rest of the world for

a quarter of a century. And nowhere has this been done with so little outside missionary agency. Christianity seems to have seized upon the people as by an inspiration. Its genuineness is attested by the fact that it has grown up and flourished in spite of persecution and attempts to suppress it such as have not been surpassed for cruelty in any country. This may be accounted for in some degree by the national religion of the people. It was of the dullest and most unimpressible description, and had a very slender hold on the people. The whole land was full of idols. Besides these, the sun, moon and stars, mountains, earthquakes, thunder and lightning, and the like, were deities before which the natives trembled with dumb infatuation. Gods without intelligence, and without power to raise their worshippers from degradation, they granted their votaries, no favours out of mercy, and were only propitiated by *pay*. They were mean, covetous, and cruel. Political upheavals, and especially the ascendancy of the Hovas, had much to do with the great change that came over the Malagasy, just in the same way that the then world was prepared for the reception of the Messiah, and the missionary labours of the Apostles by the universal empire of Rome.

The unification of this people was accomplished under RADAMA I, the king or chief of the Hova tribe, who ascended the throne in 1808 at the age of sixteen years. He was a man of extraordinary ability and proved himself the Napoleon of Madagascar. With the aid of arms supplied by English traders, he conquered all the other tribes, and quickly made himself master of the whole Island, with the exception of two small districts in the South. He was equally famous as a warrior, a ruler, and reformer. When the French threatened to invade his dominions, he laughed at the project, and boasted that he had two generals in whose hands he could safely leave any invading army, "General Forest and

*THREE VISITS TO MADAGASCAR, during the years 1853, 1854, 1856. By Rev. William Ellis, F. H. S., London, 1859, p. p. 514.

THE STORY OF MADAGASCAR, by Rev. John W. Mears, D. D., Philadelphia, 1873, p. p. 313.