

LETTER II.

It was well that our minds, on landing, were really disposed to contentment, and that we were inclined to overlook minor grievances in our escape from far greater, otherwise, there were circumstances attending our first *début* in this land of delights, teeming, as we supposed, with gold and silver, and the richest fruits, of the earth, which were certainly far from agreeable, setting aside the causes of trial at which I hinted at the close of my last letter.

The first thing we experienced, which considerably surprised us on placing foot in the town, was the great difficulty of finding a *shelter*: and we were in the end fain to put up, all three, with a small room in the second-story of a square, ill-built, open, wood barrack, the ground floor of which served as a billiard-room and gambling house to the pie-bald population of *Tampico de las Tamaulipas*.

The second thing which quite horrified us, was the difficulty of procuring *food* wherewith to satisfy the appetites of three able-bodied gentlemen just from sea. *Eggs* we found were rare, meat was rarer, bread the rarest of all; and, except at certain hours of the day

when it was doled forth in most apologetic morsels, could not be had for love and money.

The third thing in my list, which nearly petrified us, was the *cold*. Lying under the tropic of Cancer, we were absolutely forced to rise in the night, and dress ourselves before we could sleep.

The fourth—but no, I will save a few miseries to qualify some future page of enjoyment.

As late as 1825, the site of the present town of *Tampico* was solely occupied by a few Indian huts, and the feeble commerce carried on in the Port, was concentrated at the *Pueblo Viejo*, or Old Town, situated on the shore of a shallow lagoon a few miles distant, in the state of *Vera Cruz*. The difficulty of approach, added to the heavy dues exacted for all goods crossing into the State of *Tamaulipas* on their road to the interior, seems to have directed the attention of the merchants and other speculators, to the present site. And truly no possible position could have been better chosen, as it is nearer the bar, situated on the main river, with sufficient depth of water to admit vessels of burden to anchor close to the town, and moreover, commands an unimpeded interior navigation for one hundred and twenty miles up the country. Were it not for the annual visits of the yellow fever, and the irremediable difficulties which the interposition of the bar imposes upon the merchant, there is no doubt but *Tampico* would become the most flourishing port in *New Spain*. As it is, vessels are frequently detained four or five months;

being blown off and on by the frequent severe gales, before they can unload and get inside the bar; and held prisoners as long, before they can cross it again.

The New Town is built in regular squares, upon the narrow and depressed termination of a rocky peninsula, at the lower extremity of a cluster of lakes which empty their waters into the Gulf by the river Panuco. The houses have no pretension to uniformity in their style of architecture. The European merchant builds substantial stone stores and dwelling-houses, according to the fashion of his country. The American runs up his flimsy clap-board edifices. The Mexican of Spanish descent, exhibits his taste and his knowledge of the climate, by low thick walls, gaily painted and flat-roofed habitations, with internal courts; and the Indian raises his bamboo cage, plastered with mud, and thatched with palm leaves, according to the custom of his forefathers.

The population is of course the most mongrel that can be conceived. The commerce of the port is principally in the hands of foreigners; the imports consisting of every imaginable fabric, whether their introduction is consistent with the existing laws of the Republic or not. Smuggling is reduced to a system. The exports are confined to specie and fustic alone. Of the former, seven millions of dollars from the upper Provinces were shipped at this port alone, during the year 1833.

The sum of the population the preceding year, before the cholera broke out, had been estimated at five

thousand. Of these, three thousand are said to have been swept away; and though the town was rapidly recruiting its numbers at the time of our visit, the enormous price paid for every article, whether of foreign or domestic production, as well as for labour, is hardly to be credited. Wages for the poorest mason or carpenter, generally English or German, amounted to three or four dollars a day: indeed I knew one instance of a 'turn out' of the workmen employed upon the house of one of the principal merchants, who were not content with four dollars, but laid a claim to six! The most ragged urchin lying all day under the shade in the street, if asked to lend a hand to aid the operations of the merchant for a few hours, will not stir till he has made his bargain for a couple dollars payment. You cannot cross the river a row of five minutes for less. To come up from the Bar, a distance of six miles, though you be ten in company,—ten dollars per head is the sum demanded. Good law, and good physicking,—and one might add, good advice—that cheapest of all articles in an ordinary state of society, cannot be had for love or money. This, among a beggarly, half-naked population (I cry your pardon for speaking so of a sovereign people) would be perfectly laughable, if it were not felt to be a serious matter. You may remark that both classes, native and foreign, have the same lust of gain; they only differ in their mode of following it, the one striving for it by hook and crook, the others waiting till it drops before their noses.

While I am scrawling these general outlines upon paper, I may at once say that the tone of society is neither creditable to the superior education of European residents, nor to the lofty pretensions of the Mexican *employés*, who form the nucleus of native society here. The latter are ignorant and debased, insufferably bigoted and proud: jealous of foreigners, and I believe, the majority here, as throughout the country, thoroughly unprincipled. Extraordinary indeed must the virtue be, which will make the possessor sensible to stern justice, and insensible to a bribe.

As to religion—name it not:—the God of the South is Mammon. There is nothing in the degraded ultra-Catholicism of New Spain which can touch the heart and elevate human nature; and unfortunately the majority of the young European merchants who resort here to drive their gainful commerce, evince by word and deed, that the lessons of their youth, and the God of their fathers, are alike forgotten. Had there been more family men among them, one might perhaps have met with more honourable exceptions. Like many *mauvais sujets* all the world over, they were in general good-tempered, serviceable fellows; and, personally, we had nothing to complain of, as far as our slight intercourse with them went.

I have summarily mentioned the two principal classes of the inhabitants, forming, as it were, the elite of the town. It may be observed of the common people, that, little as can be said in their favour as a mass, individually they are by far the most picturesque

in form, manner, and clothing. Their characters and costumes are as various as their blood. The poor Indian is distinguished by his sandaled foot, miserable attire, and subdued air. He, at least, seems to have gained nothing by the change of masters. How should he! He was the slave of the few, now he is the slave of the many. If the Spaniard did little to raise the character of his conquered vassal, the Mexican does less, if possible, to instruct the darker skin whom he pretends to consider politically as his equal, but whom in fact he always treats as his inferior. They are as they ever were—governed by the priests, and kept in utter ignorance. They supply the market with fruits, water, and vegetables.

You have here the modern Mexican of every degree from the substantial *Rancho*, or proprietor, bespurred, and bedizened in the full and showy Mexican costume of stamped leather, embroidered vest, and gaudy *serape*, and curbing a wild horse loaded with furniture; or the trusty *arriero*, with his long string of mules, his precious cargo of specie, and his train of assistant *mozos*; down to the poor adventurer whose whole wardrobe consists of a pair of faded velveteen trowsers slit half way up the leg, and a tawdry cloak, haunting the gambling-table, and living upon what fortune sends.

The costumes are extremely picturesque from their diversity of colour and pattern, and the brilliant hues in fashion. I have omitted to mention the soldiery, than which a more shabaron, cut-throat set, whether

officers or men, I never beheld. It is said that they fight well. I do not dispute the *on dit*, but from all the evidence I could ever collect, I have considerable difficulty in believing it. I think they would run better; and I know that on most occasions, they do so with very slight provocation. As to costume, nothing could be more diverting. There was *an orderly* in attendance on a general officer dwelling in our vicinity, who used to shamle past our quarters every morning at a certain hour, garbed in a short coatee, richly embroidered with worsted, a clumsy sword, a cap and sash, and never a strap or shred upon his lower limbs,—saving your presence.

The *Fonda de la Bolza*, where you have seen us lodged, was, at the time of our visit, in the hands of a Frenchman. He was on the point of retiring with a handsome independence drawn from divers sources; to wit, the gleanings of the billiard tables below stairs,—the proceeds of the miserable lodgings above, let to gentlemen, who could, unfortunately, not better themselves;—those of a *Bar* for the dispensation of *aqua ardiente*, strong waters, lemonade and liqueurs;—a table d'hôte, morning and evening; furnished with a little fish, a little flesh, and a little fowl; and garnished with gizzard, tripe, ox cheek, yams, black beans and bananas;—and lastly, a gaming table in a retired piazza, over which he acted as presiding genius and banker.

Uncomfortable within, and environed with filth and garbage without, there was little in the *Fonda* to keep

us willing prisoners; for we happened neither to be addicted to tippling nor gambling; and our first care after realizing our position, was to contrive the means of passing as much of our time as possible, out of doors.

A few days gave us an insight into all the capabilities of the spot where we were cooped up. Society, I have said, was very confined. The young foreigners, when emancipated from their counting-houses, passed their evenings in riding in the vicinity; playing at bowls, or worse, at *monte*; or made an attempt to get up a waltz by aid of a poor piano-forte, a fife, and a pair of matrons. Books and literature, or the study of natural history, had no votaries among them. Now and then a tawdry masquerade, in which all classes mingled, was the amusement of the evening: but they were dull and stupid as might be, and only to be surpassed in stupidity by the fandangos danced by the lower orders once or twice a week, under an open thatched shed, in the outskirts of the town.

By aid of sundry letters of credit, and the real kindness of the gentleman who acted as English and American consul, to whom we were all along greatly indebted, we soon achieved the purchase of horses. They may always be purchased—as to selling them, that, we found on divers occasions, to be quite another affair. We also hired *an orderly* to wait upon our *Donships*; and set to work to make such preparations for our journey into the interior, as were in our power, in the absence of all the accoutrements purchased at *New Orleans* for the purpose; and more-

over took occasion as weather and temper invited, to garb ourselves in our best,—in which you will recollect we were not much embarrassed by variety of choice,—to sneak out of our den at the Bolza, and ride about the environs.

These rides, however, were principally confined to the evening hours preceding sun-set, and to the back of the ridge on the San Luis Potosi road, from many of the banana and sugar plantations on which line, the view over the nearer lakes, and towards the distant Sierra Madre, a spur of which appeared far to the southward, were uncommonly beautiful.

A rocky bluff overhanging the Panuco, at the upper end of the town just above the market, was the scene of almost a daily visit, as it commanded an extended view over the distant country both far and near. A little above this point, the river Tammasee, draining the Lago Chairel, and many other lagoons covering a vast tract of country to the westward, forms its junction with the Panuco or Tula, which comes from afar, flowing in a most graceful sweep among low wooded islands from the south-west. Beyond the further shore lies the Lagoon of Pueblo Viejo; and further to the south, far in the distance, the fertile uplands of the Huastec, and the advanced spurs of the eastern Cordillera of Mexico.

There is yet a distant object, which excites the marvel of the traveller at Tampico, and this is the Bernal, an isolated mountain, rising like a huge stack, with smooth perpendicular sides, and a jagged sum-

mit, over the level line of the horizon to the westward. It is about thirty leagues distant, if we were rightly informed.

Immediately above Tampico, the peninsula, which is rendered such by the Lagoon Carpentaro at the back of the town, continues to rise gradually towards the westward, and appears crowded by the Indian huts. They and their bamboo inclosures are nearly buried in a tangled labyrinth of a weed of the Solanum species, overtopped occasionally by a banana, or the tall mutilated trunk of a yellow-wood tree.

At early morning the landing below the bluff might be observed beset by the market boats and canoes of the Indians, laden with the produce of the farms of the upper district,—sugar-cane, bamboo, hay, and fruit, or with loads of sweet water brought down the Tammasee. At the same hour the shore was lined by females standing up to their knees in water, patiently labouring at the purification of some article of apparel, in defiance of the alligators swarming on the neighbouring swampy shore, and disporting themselves in the river. Lower down, abreast of the Custom-house, and busy market-place, appeared the various foreign merchant-vessels at anchor; and still further to the left, the range of hills which rises above Pueblo Viejo, and form the right bank of the Panuco to the Gulf. Nothing could exceed the picturesque appearance of many of the figures which here continually passed before us, or the classic character of the