

### LETTER III.

THE Norte continued to blow strongly the following morning; and contented with having effected our escape, and an advance of two whole leagues into the country, we resolved by common consent, to remain tranquilly at Tampico Alta, till we saw what another day might bring forth.

We were luxuriously lodged in one of the mud cottages, in a windowless apartment, without a stick of furniture but what we brought into it. That, however, was more than sufficient to fill it, as our camp-beds, with which we had been fortunately furnished from Europe for this tour, completely occupied three fourths of the floor.

So here we abode, leaving our retainers, whose number had now increased to five in all, to make the most of the halt with the horses and mules under their care. We breakfasted and supped upon *tortillas* or maize-cakes, fowls, chili pepper, rice, coffee, and *frijoles* or black beans; with the addition of an agreeable liquor, made of the fermented juice of the sugar-cane. We looked to our accoutrements, cleaned guns and pistols, strolled in the forest, and at night

enjoyed the most luxurious rest, in our clean and well appointed beds; and blessed our stars, that we had turned our backs for ever upon the Halcyon, the Fonda de la Bolza,—the heat, the impurities, and the nuisances of Tampico. Dull as it was without doors, I could not help strolling about, for a few hours, among the low woods, and did not fail, in spite of all my care, to gather a plentiful harvest of *gorapatos*, to rid myself from which gave me an hour's employment in the evening.

The following day, however, we were up betimes and set seriously forward.

The ordinary road from Tampico to the capital, is a very circuitous one, passing by the towns of San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato; and we had decided to leave it far to the right or north west; pursuing as an alternative the more direct, more difficult, but far more picturesque mule-tract of the Cañada.

I may here, without offending you, bring to your recollection, thus much of the physical geography of the remarkable country which was now the scene of our rambles: namely, that its peculiar geological structure admits of its surface being divided into three distinct parts, the *Tierras calientes*, *tierras templadas*, and *tierras frias*. The first, the *hot districts*, lying on the Pacific and Atlantic border, and in greater or less contiguity to the sea, are fertile in sugar, indigo, bananas, and cotton; and exhibit all the phenomena

of the tropics. The second, *the temperate lands*, forming a zone of mountains and broad plains of four or five thousand feet elevation, are blessed with a climate of rare beauty, and favourable to many of the productions of our milder latitudes, while the third, *the cold regions*, occupying the central table-land of the high Cordillera, are exposed to greater vicissitudes of heat and cold, and overlooked by the highest summits of the Mexican chain, rising into the region of eternal snow. Our progress from Tampico to the capital, which lies at an elevation of upwards of seven thousand feet above the Gulf, would accordingly give us a glance at each in turn.

As our line of route has not been often described, I will give you as much detail as I am able. The incorrectness of the best maps, and the difficulty of getting two people of the country to concur in assigning the same relative position to any given town or remarkable object beyond the bare line of the route, must necessarily throw a degree of indistinctness over my narration.

Imagine us then mounted and setting forward from our homely quarters at Tampico Alta, like gentle knights, attended by our string of sumpter-mules and serving men. I flatter myself that to a peaceful looker-on, we afforded a gallant spectacle, and that our motley contrasted well with the wild country into which we immediately plunged; while, in the eye of the predatory spectator, there was that in the glitter

of our arms and the resolute look of the party which must have commanded respect, and quelled the desire of plunder. But that you may better judge yourself, I present you with the following extract from our muster-roll.

In advance rode Don Alberto, Don Carlos, and Don Carlos Jose, mounted upon three steeds of doubtful pedigree—Blanco, Rosso, and Pinto, which had been kindly pressed upon our purchase by worthy acquaintances in Tampico, as possessing a thousand virtues, fitting them for the peculiar purpose for which we required them, and no faults but such as were to be absolutely of no account to us. When they dozed,—which was often,—the prick of the enormous Spanish spurs which jingled at our heels incited them to action; and when once upon a time we found them too lively, the pressure of the powerful Spanish bit soon reduced them to order. For the journey we preferred using the European saddle rather than the Mexican, and had accordingly included them in our purchases in New Orleans.

We were all armed with holster-pistols and sabres, to which Pourtales and myself added our double-barrelled guns. M'Euen had furnished himself in New Orleans with a formidable dragoon sabre of such length, that it quite put the light curved cymeters of his companions to the blush. Our costume was a marvellous mixture of European and Mexican; the serape, the sombrero with its silver band, the scarlet sash, and jacket of the latter having been adopted, while the residue of the male outfit was European.

Our tail was very long, and composed as follows: Two armed, and mounted, ill-looking serving-men, clad in the costume of their country, by name Juliano and Miguel—rogues both. The former had now been our equery and valet for a month. He was a smooth-looking varlet, with a soft voice, small and active person and habits. Now that he had money, there was an affectation of spruce trimness in his clothing. He was in all a perfect contrast to his comrade—a huge-boned, powerful man, with strongly marked features, half shrouded by a mass of tangled black locks; and whom, we all agreed, would form the finest study in the world for a bandit. We never liked him or his looks, or his deep church-yard cough; but necessity has no law. They were both armed with rusty sabres; and Juliano had, moreover, stolen an unwieldy carbine from a some dear confiding friend of his, and was wont to speak most confidently of his valour, and of the execution he was to perform in case of our being attacked by banditti, which was all along spoken of as a more than probable event. He had thrown us into convulsions of laughter at the very outset, at Pueblo Viejo, by a preliminary discharge of the mighty engine, which he had seen good to indulge in previous to the real battle which he expected, when we saw his diminutive person fairly overthrown by the recoil.

Next in the train came Don Juan Espindola of Zacualtipan, the *arriero*; whom we had hired with a train of eight mules, to convey us and our baggage to

the capital. He was a worthy man; and true, faithful, and simple in manners, like most of his class. Our confidence in him was well placed.

The *arriero* is the carrier of New Spain, and the little honesty and uprightness to be found in the country, seem to have fallen exclusively to the share of those of his rank and profession. The most precious commodities are unhesitatingly delivered to his care, merely inclosed in bags for conveyance to the coast, and the *arriero* never fails to perform his contract. Espindola had come down to Tampico, with a *conduta*; and there we engaged him for the return, with as many of his mules as were necessary. The remainder were sent in advance under his domestics or *mozos*, two of whom however, accompanied us on foot as whippers-in; and fine, active lads they were. In them the Indian blood predominated over the European. The *arriero* had, with our concurrence, invited a certain friend of his, Don Gaetano, to accompany us, and to take advantage of our escort. To this arrangement we acceded with the more readiness, as though evidently of a most unwarlike character, he added another to our number; and had moreover been one of our fellow-prisoners in the Halcyon. I should still mention two saddle mules; and then sum up our forces, as consisting in all, of nine souls, and seventeen quadrupeds. Whatever may have been the intrinsic value of our pluck, we certainly cut a rather imposing figure.

Till we should arrive at the town of Zacualtipan, within four or five days' journey of the capital, there

was nothing to fear from banditti, if common report spake truly.

Thus you may imagine us, when once in motion on the morning of our quitting Tampico Alta, proceeding league after league, under an easy pace, through that beautiful undulating country, clothed with its gorgeous flowering thickets, to which I have already alluded. Many an expression of admiration burst from us as a new bird or splendid flower attracted our attention. An occasional shot hazarded at a rabbit or pheasant, alone broke the silence which reigned over this waste but beautiful region. After about seven leagues' ride, we halted for two hours at a Rancho, or farm, for our breakfast of cabbage-palm salad and eggs;—poor fare! you would say—but truth compelling, I must admit that sundry additions were supplied from our travelling stores, and to name them would at once let you into the secret, that however warlike, we were not to be classed with those doughty warriors of old, who had 'no stomach but to fight.'

From the vicinity of this farm, the undulating country for many miles became perfectly open, totally denuded of bushes, though occasionally studded with bands of thick forest, and altogether reminded us strongly of the great Prairies, till about sun-set, when we gained a swelling elevation affording a wide view towards the east. In that quarter the vast Laguna Tammiagua, only separated from the Gulf by a narrow band of sand hills, extended as far as the eye could reach.

Shortly after, we arrived at a large Hacienda, called La Messa, situated on a commanding eminence, at the edge of prairie-country alluded to, and overlooking to the south, a deep glen full of wood, and a far stretching expanse of roundish hills covered with luxuriant vegetation.

In the absence of more regular places of entertainment, the custom of the country authorizes the traveller to make his halt with his retinue at the first farm which may suit his convenience; and though the Hacienda is in general the country residence of a rich and wealthy proprietor, we felt no scruple in dismounting and asking shelter and provender for ourselves and our party.

And here I have to record one of those strange rencontres which the Rambler has sometimes to note upon his tablets in utter amazement how they are brought about.

On riding round the corner of one of the principal buildings, what was my surprise to see my friend Pourtales folded in the embrace of a huge brawny young Mexican,—and yet greater to find in dismounting, that I was to be honoured with a fraternal squeeze from the same arms, before I could see what face there might possibly be appended to them. I was not long however in recognizing in the athletic, sun-burned young man, who thus welcomed us to his home, a certain smooth-faced, ungainly stripling, who had been our fellow-passenger two years before, in the New York packet, from Havre de Grace to America. He

had been sent from Mexico to Paris, to be instructed in the language, literature, and manners of the politest country in Europe; and, at that epoch, having finished his term of education, was returning with his bundle of acquisitions, to enlighten his benighted countrymen. On ship-board, where he was generally known by a singular *sobriquet*, bestowed on him by my light-minded companion, namely, '*aimable et execrable Tampico*,'—we had of course made acquaintance. We found that he had learned to eat with a knife and fork, to dress like a civilized man, to talk a little bad French; to dance, and to play the monkey, which he did *à merveille*, clumsily aping Pourtales in his various changes of costume, and his whimsical contrivances for banishing ennui; and emulating the sailors in their expeditions to the top-gallant-mast head. After landing, we had lost sight of him. We heard however, he had been delivered up by the Captain with a regular bill of lading to the Mexican consul at New York, and to his utter dismay and disappointment, not being considered accomplished enough, had been sent to a 'finishing academy' in Pennsylvania. Many adventures, and the multitude of strange personages with whom we had come in contact during the rambles of the two past years, had driven him out of our remembrance, till most unexpectedly we found his two, long, Indian-shaped arms locked round our necks at La Messa,—a brown athletic Mexican, utterly forgetful of all the polite education he had undergone, curbing a wild horse, and hunting a wilder leopard. He seemed

to be absorbed in his hunting schemes; and, instead of a collection of books, valued himself upon the number of lion, ounce, and wild-cat skins which decorated his apartment. His thin and meagre French was richly larded with noble sounding Spanish words and phrases; but we contrived to converse about old and new times.

La Messa, the property of his uncle, to whom he seemed to be considered as future heir, was the centre of a vast estate, stretching many leagues on every side.

From the specimen before us, however, nothing could exceed the poor homely style and rough living of these wealthy proprietors, at a distance from the capital.

Our evening meal, which we were invited to take with the family, was a sleepy entertainment, in which we tasted nothing but the burning *chile* or red pepper with which every dish was seasoned; and that done, we all packed together with *aimable et execrable Tampico* into a small apartment, where, fortunately, the cold air of the Norte which was still blowing, prevented us from being at once suffocated by heat, and bitten to madness by the musquitoes.

The following morning, after a loving adieu from our acquaintance, who left the Rancho at dawn to join in a tiger-hunt in a distant part of the country, we continued our journey to the southward.

Our route led us down into the dell below La Messa, and over the hill side opposite, till we entered a broad, green glade, stretching through the forest for some

miles to the foot of the eminences upon which the large Indian village of Osuhuama is situated. We were quite unprepared for the vast panoramic view which unrolled itself to our view from the summit of a high conical mound perched on the very edge of the declivity, with which this,—the first step of the higher country as it were,—breaks down to the general level of the country in the vicinity of the coasts.

The village with its picturesque huts and enclosures of bamboo, and little patches of cultivation, lies scattered over the ridges of a number of broken hills. The church is nearly on the highest point, and directly at the foot of the mound, whose form and position, in defiance of its size, would suggest the idea of its being artificial.

Any description of the wide view to the north, west, and east, comprizing in the latter direction the Laguna Tammiagua, and fading to the apparently illimitable horizon, would be utterly impossible. The slope of the hills displayed a wilderness of rank vegetation. To the south rose several groups of conical hills, in advance of the more distant chain to which we were gradually approaching.

The afternoon's march brought us some leagues on our road over an undulating country, covered for the most part with forests of palmetto; and we took up our night's quarters at a poor Rancho, tenanted by an old woman, and, unfortunately for us, preoccupied by a gambling party, whose drunken and lawless demeanour was sufficiently offensive and menacing, to keep us in

hot water for some hours; when they were pleased to take their departure, relieving us from the necessity of either blowing out their brains, or being ourselves stabbed;—a choice of evils truly, but one which appeared for a while almost inevitable.

The night was gloomy; and the mountains in advance half shrouded by curtains of dark clouds. I have a disagreeable recollection of the whole scene. I remember, however, that both amusement, interest, and surprize, were excited in us by three distinct circumstances. Amusement at the extravagant joy and pride of heart evinced by Juliano, when a rabbit was killed with his mighty carbine, by Espindola;—interest at the visit of two fine boys, lineal descendants of Montezuma, from a neighbouring Rancho;—and surprize at the fact being mentioned to us, that the father of an old gallant who was the leader of the debauchees before named, was at that hour in sound health at the next Hacienda, at the age of one hundred and twenty years. This Rancho lay twenty-four leagues from Pueblo Viejo.

*March the first,* we proceeded through the same broken line of country. Some difficulty was experienced from our being several times entangled in jungles of bamboo, and in muddy swamps, or thick natural groves of lemon and orange trees; till two o'clock in the afternoon, when the country became more open, and finding a poor Indian hut, beautifully situated, we halted to breakfast, and to repose ourselves and our animals. The cabin was constructed

of light bamboo frames, thatched with palmetto leaves not only on the roof but the sides, and divided into two or three compartments, with coarse screens of grass matting.

The inhabitants were all of the softer sex; consisting of three young maidens, under the surveillance of two most forbidding crones. We here, if I recollect right, made our first experience of the difficulty to which the traveller is exposed in Mexico, in persuading the Indian to furnish him, even if paid in advance, with the slightest food or provender either for man or beast. Nothing was to be had. *No hai!* was the answer to every query. They had neither maize, nor chocolate, nor fodder, nor eggs, nor fowls; nor bananas, nor *frijoles*, nor *tortillas*, nor dried meal, nor even *chile*. Whatever did they live upon,—for they were all, old and young, as plump as partridges? *No hai!* was the only word you could extort. However there was no alternative; our animals must rest, if they might not eat; and we consequently unsaddled, and began to amuse ourselves, as we might, in looking at the bone of our costly ham, and the pounded contents of our biscuit bag, more especially as Espindola whispered to us to have a little patience. Five minutes passed by, and not a word was said. A packet of *cigaritas* was produced and passed round. What the old Venuses did not refuse, the young ones thought proper to accept. Espindola got into conversation by degrees with one of the elders, and Pourtales began to play the '*irresistible*' with another of the party. Good

humour and confidence began to thaw distrust, and conquer prejudice. By and by, old and young began to move listlessly about. The charcoal fire was stirred up. Still there was no hurry. Another moment, and from under a cloth in a dark corner of the hut, the stone used in the preparation of tortillas-cakes was produced; and, as though by accident, a bowl full of maize flour was discovered. As it was there, one of the old squaws fell to work to kneed the bread; while the other after looking very carefully about her, found a store of *chile* and a bag of *frijoles*. This was not all. A gutural parley in their own language, was followed by one of the girls stepping out with Espindola to a secret store-house, from which he returned looking very sly with his arms full of rich golden ears of maize, and a bundle of fodder. By accident, a little loop-hole in the same quarter flew open, and the premises were immediately overrun by a quantity of poultry, rejoicing at their emancipation from the thraldom to which they had evidently been subjected on our approach. More wonderful than all,—we found that, apparently, quite unsuspected by the possessors, the hens had employed their time while thus hidden from the light of day in the production of a dozen fine eggs. In short, within an hour after the hut had been at the extremity of famine, we were furnished with an excellent meal, and there were no signs at our departure that we left discontent behind us. This is strange,—but nothing but what is very comprehensible; being a remnant of old times and old policy, when, in consequence of the