

LETTER XXVIII.

MEXICAN CHARACTER.

I HAVE adverted already in previous letters to the private character and domestic customs of the Mexicans, and confess, that I came to the country with opinions anything but favorable to the morals, tastes, or habits of the people. It was alleged, that they entertained a positive antipathy to foreigners, and that the exclusive system of Spain, under which they were educated, had excited in them a distaste for innovation; an *insouciant* contentment with the "statu quo;" and, in fact, had created in our New World a sort of China in miniature.

I think it exceedingly reasonable, that the Mexicans should be shy of foreigners. They have been educated in the strict habits of the Catholic creed; they know no language but their own; the customs of their country are different from others; the strangers who visit them are engaged in the eager contests of commercial strife; and, besides being of different religion and language, they are chiefly from those northern nations, whose tastes and feelings have nothing kindred with the impulsive dispositions of the ardent south. In addition to the selfish spirit of gain that pervades the intercourse of these visitors, and gives them no character of permanency or sympathy with the country, they have been accustomed to look down on the Mexicans with contempt for their obsolete habits, without reflecting, that they were not justly censurable for traditional usages which they had no opportunity of improving by comparison with the progress of civilization among other nations.

Yet, treating these people with the frankness of a person accustomed to find himself at home wherever he goes, avoiding the egotism of national prejudices, and meeting them in a spirit of benevolence; I have found them kind, gentle, hospitable, intelligent, benevolent, and brave. Among their better classes, no people see more clearly than they do the vices of an ill-regulated society and the misery of their political condition; but, when rebuked in the presumptuous and austere spirit of arrogant strangers, they repel the rudeness by distance and reserve. The consequence is, that these disturbers of social decency are seldom the chosen friends or inmates of their dwellings. The Mexicans are a proud

MEXICAN CHARACTER.

293

and *sensitive* people; yet, none are more easily subdued by kindness—none more easily won by a ready disposition to mingle in their ranks, and treat them with a due respect for their habitudes and their prejudices.

There may be other reasons, too, why Mexicans have been jealously shy of strangers. It seems impossible for them to get rid of the idea, that European powers are seeking to obtain their wealth and territory, and to reëstablish the systems from which they freed themselves by so many years of revolutionary war; nor can they (since the Texan war,) divest themselves of the erroneous notion, that the United States has ever a longing eye on their Capital and country.

There are but few entertainments given in Mexico, in comparison with those of other cities abroad, where a lavish expenditure in viands, lights, and amusements for the few hours of a single evening, are mistaken for the elegancies and refinements of genuine hospitality;—instead, however, of these ostentatious displays, there are frequent reunions at *turtulias*, where an hour or two are most agreeably spent in friendly intercourse, and the unrestrained flow of pleasant and instructive conversation.

I have already alluded to the extreme of fashionable life, and its disposition for the theatre; and I do not intend to treat again of the propensity of the *ultras* to living thus constantly in the public eye, without devoting a portion of each day to that domestic intercourse and reunion which make the comfort and beauty of an English or American fireside. I speak, however, of that *juste milieu* of society, wherein resides the virtue and intellect of a country; and I had an excellent opportunity of judging of the private life of this class during my stay in the Capital.

It was my good fortune to reside for more than half a year in a native family, once rich and titled, but broken in fortunes by the political and commercial vicissitudes of the Republic, and it was there that I constantly witnessed the most beautiful evidences of a filial devotion and parental love, amounting almost to passionate attachment. The lady at the head of the establishment, (as I remarked in a preceding letter,) was a person who had been distinguished for her talents and accomplishments in the days when Mexico was adorned with the splendor of a Spanish court. She would have been considered highly cultivated in any country; her manners were excellent; her bearing graceful and courteous; and a wide circulation in her youth among distinguished men, (both before and during the Revolution,) and a ready talent for imparting her recollections, made her conversation delightful and instructive. Besides this, she possessed a genius for miniature painting and sketching in crayons, rarely attained by a female, and worthy of a distinguished artist. Qualities, like these, brought around her constantly a large and intelligent circle of both sexes. The change of fortune had by no means diminished her estimation in society, and the numbers of fast friends who adhered to

her in her comparative indigence, proved their admiration of talent, and the constancy of attachment, by the repetition of the most delicate and disinterested assiduities.

It was in this Mexican *home*, and not from the unsympathizing distance of the hotel and ball-room, (the scene of most travellers' observation,) that I obtained my insight into the structure of Mexican society and character. Had I kept myself aloof in my own house or my own inn, as is the habit of foreigners, I should have judged from the theatre, the *passéo*, the bull-ring, the cock-pit, and the gaming-table; that the women were but so many painted dolls, without more education or soul than was required to languish over a love-sick play, or to ogle, with idle gaze, a favored cavalier. I might have supposed, too, that the men were supremely blessed by this dalliance with the sex, and considered themselves in perfect elysium when they could divide their attention between their sirens, their horses, and the card-table;—but in the privacy of this dwelling, I learned to estimate the love and regard between parents and children; the beautiful benevolence of ancient friendship; the universal respect for genius; and, besides, had frequent occasion to notice the expanding spirit, ardent patriotism, desire of cultivation, and quick talent, which embellish the Mexican character.

It must not be said that I am estimating a country by one example;—I am as far from so partial a judgment, as the opponents of Mexico are from a just one on their side of the question. It is true, that this family afforded me an extensive field of observation, but it chiefly served to stimulate my attention and inquiries elsewhere; and I can frankly declare, that wherever I observed, I invariably found the same qualities of head and heart. It is this *heart* that is in fact the great characteristic of Mexicans, and especially of their females. There is a noble naturalness, an antique generosity about them, which is the parent of a multitude of virtues, and it is by an abandonment of themselves to *impulses*, that so much irregularity and indiscretion have been frequently manifested, both in politics and society.

I have said that the Mexicans are a people of quick talent, and my remark is borne out by the observation of all foreigners. They are quick to apprehend, quick of study, and quick in mastering a subject; but this very facility, joined with their impulsiveness, is often fatal to their enduring application and progress.

I came among these people an entire stranger, without especial claims on their attention, and studious to avoid that bill of exchange hospitality, which is the result of introductory letters from former, and, perhaps, forgotten acquaintances. Yet mingling freely among all classes, and comparing them now—when gratitude for acts of kindness has been long yielded and the annoyance of petty impertinences forgotten—I have none but kindly recollections of the people, and none but favorable impressions

of the mass of a society, in which I had been taught to believe that I should be held in utter antipathy as a heretical stranger.

There are, of course, in Mexico as in all other countries, specimens of egotism, selfishness, haughtiness, ill-breeding, and loose morals, both among the men and the women; but, although we find these floating-like bubbles on the *top* of society, they must not therefore be considered the characteristics of the country. You must separate from the multitude the few who sometimes lead and control the masses that do not wish to come in contact or conflict with them. A nation in which "revolutions and counter-revolutions are events of almost daily occurrence, is naturally prolific in desperate and crafty political adventurers," and dissimulation and stratagem may, in time, form the chief element of the character of such a people;—yet such, it is hoped, is not to be the corrupting fate of Mexico.

The idea that large social entertainments require great magnificence and lavish expense, deprives the Mexicans, in their towns, of many of those agreeable gatherings which fill up so pleasantly our winter nights and autumn evenings; but it is on their haciendas or plantations, that their hospitality is most distinguished. As you had occasion to remark in the account of my journey to the *tierra caliente*, nothing is withheld from you;—their establishments are placed at your entire control, and the welcome is as sincere as it is hearty and cheerful.

That they are brave, none will doubt, who read the history of their War of Independence, although the bad discipline (especially of their officers,) has prevented the very eminent exhibition of this quality in their foreign battles. In fact, regard them in any way, and they will be found to possess the elements of a fine people who want but peace and the stimulus of foreign emulation, to bring them forward among the nations of the earth with great distinction.

Their geographical position, however, is very unfavorable for this emulative stimulus. They are placed among the mountains, on an isthmus connecting two large Continents, while their territory is washed by two seas. They are cut off by a large belt of savage country from us at the north, and the communication with Europe is both distant and uncertain. They have a small population, spread over an immense territory, and want, therefore, both the constant comparison of the intellect of other nations, and social compacting or aggregation among themselves. I can (from personal experience,) state how disagreeable is this want of intercourse with the rest of the world. There is intelligence from the United States, perhaps, once a month, and about as often from Europe. The information brought by these arrivals, passes chiefly into the hands of the merchants,—and, after a while, is gradually translated in fragments for some of the meagre newspapers, which treat you, months afterward, to a *refacciamento* of the stories or improvements that you had already forgotten. In this respect, our community of language with Great Britain is

of vast importance to us. England acts the part of an editor for the United States. She collects the news, the literature, the progressive inventions, and the genius of the old world, with unparalleled activity;—and we are always, at farthest, but twelve days behind her in diffusing these results among the seventeen millions of our own people. But it may be feared, that it will be long before Mexico imitates our example. Spain is not an England, in intellectual energy or advancement; and the day has not yet arrived in Mexico when a work in two volumes can be printed, bound, and distributed to her chief cities within twenty-four hours after its reception from Europe.

I am afraid the tendency of our sister Republic is too much toward the opposite extreme. She has not disenthralled herself from the Spanish bigotry which inculcated the idea that a nation must do all for herself, without a commercial marine of her own to carry on a well-regulated commerce. This seems to me to be a churlish policy, and is as likely to make bores of the people who practice it, as seclusion is calculated to make ascetics of those who refuse to mingle with the world, and improve their spirits by a free interchange of opinions and feelings. It is well to live where you feel the beatings of the great pulse of society; and it is time that man should remember he is not a mere machine, whose account with time is a balance-sheet between such productive manual powers as God has given him, and certain fearful columns of dollars and cents.

In the summary I have endeavored to present you, of the Mexican character, I must not be charged with inconsistency by those who think I am contradicting what I have previously advanced, either about superstitious customs, or the vices that consign so many to the prison, and make others so reckless of life and fortune. These are evils begotten by the times and want of resources. At present, I treat neither of political nor social gamblers; neither of female frailties, nor that crafty duplicity which leads to high places in the state; neither of genteel vagrancy, nor the outcast lepéros and ignorant Indians who form so large a portion of the population of the country. All these are numerous enough and bad enough. But it has been my task—amid the desolation and ruin of the country—amid the dust and ashes to which a great nation has been reduced by civil war—to seek for some living embers, and to discover sufficient elements of a sound and healthful society, from which the regeneration of the country may be expected. With domestic virtue, genius, and patriotism, no people need despair; and it must be the prayer of every republican that enough of these still remain in Mexico to reconstruct their government and their society.

I will not venture, however, upon any conjectures in regard to these matters, until I speak of the political prospects of the country.

LETTERS

ON THE

TERRITORY, POPULATION, COMMERCE, MANUFACTURES,

ARMY, NAVY, REVENUES, CHURCH, MINES,

COINAGE, EDUCATION, POLITICAL

HISTORY, &c. &c. &c.

OF

MEXICO.