

LETTER XXXIII.

POLITICAL PROSPECTS OF MEXICO.

THERE are in Mexico but two important classes of people, without any numerous and distinctive body of enlightened lawyers or merchants, who, together with the educated and respectable mechanics and agriculturists, would counterbalance the influence of the church and the army.

Almost every respectable man you meet on the streets, bears some military insignia upon his person; and when the troops are abroad, you will frequently find them commanded by beardless urchins of not more than fifteen or sixteen years. In this manner, important families and extensive connections are secured by a patronage which amounted, in the year 1841, (as we have seen,) to the enormous sum of eight millions of dollars.

The other important class (but with diminished power,) is composed of the clergy, who,—you will remember from the statistics already recorded in these letters,—have accumulated a large share of the real property of the Republic, in addition to the immense personal wealth that swells their coffers.

Thus, between the army and the church, (one by the direct influence of authority and force, and the other by as dreaded spiritual weapons,) the whole nation is surrendered to but two influences, while the body of the people is too ignorant and disunited, and the men of wealth and education are too supine or peaceful, to interfere in behalf of the democratic progress of their country. You are warned of this double domination by the constant sound of the drum and the bell, which ring in your ears from morn to midnight and drown the sounds of industry and labor.

It will be at once perceived, that, in such a state of society, there are none either to express a disinterested *public opinion* in favor of really free institutions, or to sustain them with manly energy.

I confess, that I have studied the history of her civil commotions without satisfaction, in seeking for the causes of this political condition of Mexico. They have always appeared to me (as I before said,) to be entirely objectless, and rather momentary *disorders* than well devised revolutions. They have been utterly unprogressive, and never enforced or decided a principle.

The result is, that in such a bungling system of strife, THE PEOPLE have had neither peace nor advancement, while incessant commotion

has disturbed the healthful action of internal police, and consequently impaired the morals of the masses.

It must be remembered that when Mexico threw off the Spanish yoke, it was at first rather to get rid of her rulers than of her system;—more to overthrow *foreign* tyranny and colonial subjection, than to establish a Republic. The original Plan of Iguala, to which Iturbidé adhered, proposed the offer of the Mexican Crown to Ferdinand, as a separate sovereignty from that of Spain. Events prevented the fulfillment of this scheme; and as soon as Iturbidé became successful in his military career, he influenced his soldiery (contrary to the wishes of the people, as expressed in Congress,) to proclaim him Emperor.

Had there been intelligence, virtue, and power enough among the masses to resist this encroachment in the bud; or, had Iturbidé imitated Washington, in the possession of a limited authority together with great popular *confidence*, he might have laid deeply and firmly the foundation of a Republican Constitution. The people would have bestirred themselves liberally in systems of National Education and improvement, and a free Press would have completed the project by disseminating the principles of freedom to every nook and corner of the country. Instead of this, however, the mass of good and educated men—unaided by liberal example from the Government—found it impossible to unloosen the mob of Spanish monarchism, or, to teach it to govern itself. Party spirit began to rage without stint and for feigned objects. The contest was between the possessors of power and the aspirants. The Yorkinos represented or pretended to represent the republican or advance party. The Escossaises—the aristocratic, or antagonists of a too liberal grant of popular rights and privileges. In this manner the whole country has been converted, by turns for twenty years, into a camp or battle-field. The army (without a foreign war,) is regarded as a separate body, created and supported—not to guard the nation against invading enemies—but to protect the Government against the people; and the church, in the meanwhile, naturally leans in favor of that powerful support which preserves its property and its Orders.

A long continued disturbance of the nation, like this, has of course checked industry and prevented emigration from abroad. It has made agriculture but a menial toil;—it has created an aristocracy of arms and spiritual power;—it has covered the people with foreign debt and domestic embarrassment;—it has taught the masses to permit control and to lose independence;—it has forced the Government to mortgage every resource at ruinous interest;—it has fostered the most extensive political corruption that ever beggared a nation, and has afforded an opportunity, amid all this turmoil, to successive bands of ambitious plunderers to grow rich on the public spoil.

The lesson of chicanery and corruption taught to its colony by old Spain,—through her injustice and oppression,—became a principle of action, and duplicity was raised to the rank of a virtue.

Nations, habituated to be ruled for centuries, cannot rule themselves in a minute. People must learn to think for themselves, and, in order to do so, must be instructed. Agriculture must be cherished, and farmers made to elevate themselves in society;—to become rich by their toil, and cultivated by study. The mechanical class must become ambitious of being something more than the mere servant of the capitalist's wants;—in fine, all classes must shake off that lethargy, which, arising either from old habits, or an enervating climate, makes them the servants of the passing hour, and content with bare existence.

As the agriculture of the country is chiefly in the hands of rich proprietors and of the church, that branch of independence has no *general* influence. The mass of the mechanical class is exceedingly poor, and indescribably ignorant; and large portions of other classes are avaricious, gambling and bigoted, while over all extends that spiritual power, which still exercises an influence little inferior to the army.

Such a population,—ignorant, poor and servile,—cares but little for politics; and it is a mercy to rule them wisely and justly. If wages are good, and crops plentiful, the farmer and mechanic are contented, provided the taxes are not high. In a soil which yields so readily and abundantly, and a temperature so genial, men are naturally indolent. It is easier, thus provided with the necessities of life, to be governed than to govern,—especially, if they do not feel the pressure of the crown, or the blows of the sceptre. They are, therefore, docile, quiet, and ready to pass from one chief to another without inquiry. In addition to this, it should always be remembered, that Mexico is of all civilized countries perhaps the least accessible, both from abroad and in its interior. Its coasts ravaged by dangerous fevers; its territory piled up on an isthmus between two great Continents on the north and south, and two great oceans on the east and west. It may be literally called a nation hanging on the sides of a mountain; the Atlantic thundering at its base on the one side, and the Pacific on the other; without steamers, railways, or means for the easy transmission of papers—by which not only the news of the day and of the whole world may be transmitted to every cabin of its forests; but by which the people themselves may travel, easily and cheaply, and thus become knit together by friendship, kindred, and kindly intercourse. It is an affair of as much importance to make a journey of a hundred miles,* as it was with us during the Revolution; for not only are they obliged to travel in slow coaches, over bad roads on mules and horses, but they must be accompanied by a horde of servants and sumpter animals, a mountain of bedding, baggage and cooking utensils, and, besides, be guarded for fear of the robbers! Thus, while there is no extensive intercommunication, there is less perhaps from abroad; and, of course, the opinions of Europe and America can have but little influence on a nation

* Last year only eleven hundred and nine persons arrived as passengers at Vera Cruz, and four hundred and fifty-nine left that port, so that the average of population by emigration, was only six hundred and fourteen through that city.

so imprisoned, both by the nature of its territory, and its own mismanagement.

I have thus spoken of some of the causes of Mexican adversity; let me go further. *It has been a difficult thing to make the Mexicans believe that they possessed any other kind of wealth but money or mines.* It was difficult to make them understand that they were poor, in the midst of gold and silver, and that the wealthiest nations were England and Holland, the one without a precious mine in her soil, the other redeemed from the washes of the sea.

In 1833, they were at the expense of \$17,000,000 for their army, and in 1841, of \$8,000,000, with only between seven and eight millions of people, and no foreign war; and while they were furnishing from their mines the circulating medium of the world, they thought themselves exceedingly successful, if they could borrow money at an interest of fifty or even sixty per cent.

Again, by the reduction of the export duty, on the precious metals, to three per cent., and the lax administration of the Custom Houses in the year from 1821 to 1822, \$66,000,000 passed through the ports regularly to foreign nations—besides what was secretly taken from the country—which was thus depleted, in one twelvemonth, of a mass of wealth that would have assured it prosperity for years. The consequence was a paper money system, that soon lost its credit, and produced the most disastrous results.

Again, they allowed no liberty of worship. They forbade foreigners to acquire real estate or freehold interests of any kind;—they clogged their naturalization laws with odious incumbrances to emigrants;—they threw a thousand obstacles in the way of the marriage and even burial of foreigners;—and, as to the “*protection*” afforded by their tribunals, it was too notoriously infamous to be patiently spoken of.

Again, after severe losses by the export of the precious metals, a short-sighted policy was adopted by legislators in regard to commerce. With fair promises and plausible declarations, they professed a spirit of “*free trade*,” while, at the same moment, there was no invention that ingenuity could devise, which they did not throw in the way of merchants. They commenced the prohibitory system. They imposed duties to the amount of double or triple the value of imports, allowing but short indulgence on the bonds; and the result was, that there were no cash sales. This operated as a direct bounty in favor of contraband, not only in the importation of merchandise, but in the export of silver; at the same time that by these high duties the people were indirectly taxed to an exorbitant degree, and the nation was deprived of a large revenue, which she might have derived from moderate levies that would not have tempted to illicit trade.

We are taught to regard this as an era of regeneration in the Government of Mexico.

General Santa Anna was the individual who struck the first blow against the power of Iturbidé, and it is to be hoped that his heart has not grown cold to liberty as it has grown in years.

Now, although it is true that THE PEOPLE are usually but slightly interested in the *pronuncimientos*; (which are made by regiments or officers of the army,) yet, I believe that the *émeutes* of 1841 were decidedly popular with the masses, and chiefly so, on account of an internal consumption duty, which they found extremely onerous. It must be said, in justice to Bustamante and his cabinet, that they too were opposed to it; but finding Congress resolved to continue its enforcement, they felt bound to sustain the law as long as they were its ministers under a Constitution.

At the outset of his administration, in September, 1841, Santa Anna had the most extraordinary difficulties to contend with. An army of near thirty thousand men was on foot, and to be maintained;—the officers of the Government were extremely numerous, and to be paid;—there were dissensions among his troops, and jealousy of his power;—the whole country was in a political ferment;—the copper currency (the only currency of the masses,) was depreciated more than fifty per cent.;—and, to crown the catalogue of misfortunes, when he entered the Palace there was not a single dollar in the Treasury!

Still, he was unappalled by these amazing difficulties. He supported his army, paid his clerks, quelled all dissensions among the troops and officers, pacified the country, called in the copper coin and issued new, dispersed a Congress whose Constitution he disliked—and, for more than two years, has held the Supreme power of his country in defiance of rebellious chiefs and angry demagogues. Nor were his efforts confined to his domestic relations alone, during this stormy period. By his skill and energy he managed to avert the horrors of a foreign war, and to preserve amicable intercourse with all those powers to whom Mexico bears the relation of a debtor.

Having thus passed the most trying portion of his administration, and established a system of government which can scarcely be called constitutional, it is his first duty to administer that government with a *strong* but patriotic arm. He must insure PEACE to his country at all hazards,—even if that peace be effected by despotism. He must end, for ever, that rebellious spirit in the army, which is so easily excited by every ambitious leader who obtains a momentary influence, and embroils the whole nation in order to elevate him to power.

Foreigners, who are ignorant of the trials and turbulence by which he is surrounded, and the efforts that are often made in Mexico to defeat the most patriotic intentions, may call him a tyrant; but it is, nevertheless, his duty to persevere enduringly until he establishes permanent tranquillity, under which alone his country can advance.

There is one thing which, I confess, I desire particularly to see General Santa Anna effect; and that is, an act for which the reign of Henry VIII. is chiefly commendable. I mean the seizure and distribution of the church property.

It is true, that the President may have yet to fear a power which the brotherhood possess, not only over the common people, but over the very common materials of which the army is composed;—but dangerous diseases require dangerous remedies, and a bold and trustful hand to apply them. Henry VIII. did this in an essentially Catholic country and in a most superstitious age, and it has been recently effected in Spain and Havannah. In order to effect this object, successfully, and in the most beneficial manner, not only to the church but to the mass of the people, it would be well for him, in his present increase of the army, to press into the service every idler, vagabond or *lépero*, with which the city and the suburbs swarm; and after due drilling, and accustoming them to military obedience, to colonize these troops in the different parts of the Republic, giving, as bounties for their services, portions of the estates now held by the priesthood, reserving the rest for sale at moderate prices to the Indians who labor for the church. In doing this he would benefit the nation by bringing a large property into the common weal, and by giving employment to thousands, whose utter vagrancy and vagabondism are unparalleled in any other part of the world.

The territory thus acquired, and sold or distributed,—what a picture of dawning civilization would spread over the land! The half-starved slaves of the church, and of the large proprietors, erected suddenly into manliness, would stand up feeling that they were truly human, and a speedy intellectual progress would commence with the acquirement of property.

The increased productions of the soil would naturally require new markets—markets would produce new roads—new means of transportation—new inventions of agricultural implements—new wants in articles of taste, luxury and refinement. Men would begin to travel on the new roads. Mexico would become acquainted with herself. The idle spirit created by lavish productions of the mines, would be aroused from its lethargy. There would be a gradual infusion of foreign blood, making her citizens emulous of other nations; and thus, in a few years, Mexico would behold her own ships bearing abroad her own products—would learn that she had within her soil other sources of wealth besides her ores—would attract back some of the millions she has furnished the world for the last three hundred years, and, in fine, become in every respect independent.

These are beautiful objects to present for a patriot's ambition. If he possesses the power and influence, which I think he does, Santa Anna can effect all this if he lives, for he has talents and energy competent to the task; but if he fails and assumes the Imperial purple, I shall be as mistaken as I shall feel grieved to see so glorious a chance for a splendid immortality lost by a hero.

To the reorganization, then, of his country, Santa Anna will, I believe, apply himself vigorously and he must remember, that although the same spirit of aristocracy; and democracy were at work in the United States immediately after our Revolution, that they had very different materials to operate on. Let him but emulate the example of Washington, whose government, it must be acknowledged, was a strong one, during a long period of his Presidency. Our Constitution was then assailed by many perils. The inflammatory appeals of Genet; the bitterness engendered by Jay's treaty; Congress doubtful of its powers; the States mutually distrustful; agriculture and commerce languishing; and an anarchical spirit disseminated through the land!—Yet, above all these discords, rose the calm, patient and patriotic spirit of Washington, triumphant; equally untempted by the blandishments of power, and unquailing before the dangerous assumption of authority. He knew the true interests of the people, and working for them alone, confided to the generous heart of the nation, to interpret his acts aright, when he seemed to trench on the Constitution. He dared to take an unpopular side, and thus checked Genet,—had him recalled, and settled the French interest and interference for ever. He assured peace by the sanction of Jay's treaty—and, as he says himself in one of his letters, "gave our country time to settle and mature its yet recent institutions, and to progress, without interruption, to that degree of strength and consistency which is necessary to give it, humanly speaking, the command of its own fortunes." And yet, throughout this trial, with what malevolent bitterness was he assailed even by the people he had just freed! Painful, indeed, is power, when it has to combat, by virtuous and truly patriotic efforts, the prejudices, errors, and selfishness of the multitude for which it toils!

It was remarked by Mr. Jefferson, in regard to our country, that "more than a generation will be requisite, under the administration of reasonable laws, favoring the progress of knowledge in the general masses of the people, and their habituation to an independent security of person and property, before they will be capable of estimating the value of freedom, and the necessity of a sacred adherence to the principle on which it rests for preservation. Instead of that liberty which takes root and growth in the progress of reason, *if recovered by mere force or accident*, it becomes with an unprepared people—the tyranny, still, of the many—of the few—of the one."*

It may perhaps be improper for me, after so short a residence in the country, to make suggestions as to the mode of its regeneration; but there are many obvious improvements which must strike every one, and which it will not be inappropriate to mention. It seems to me to be absolutely necessary:—

* Letter cxxi.

- 1st. To establish a constitutional Confederacy.
- 2nd. To assure the people of the permanency of that institution, and of pacific self-government.
- 3rd. To encourage emigration, holding out inducements to foreigners, either alluring them to acquire freehold property, or such title to real estate, as will confer upon them the unquestionable and undisturbed right to the soil for a considerable length of time.
- 4th. To alter the tariff, so as to free trade from many of the ridiculous restrictions that impair it, and allow native industry to take its direction from wholesome competition, rather than dangerous legislation.
- 5th. To establish a universal system of public education.
- 6th. To make the Press entirely free.
- 7th. To distribute the church lands among the people, or to put them up at such minimum prices, as will enable all classes to become freeholders.
- 8th. Gradually to diminish the army, and colonize it.
- 9th. To destroy the corruption of Government patronage, and purify the Customs.
- 10th. To restore the mining interests, and reform the mint.
- 11th. To purify the Judiciary, and cause law to be fairly administered between man and man.
- 12th. To destroy the contraband trade entirely: and
- 13th. To permit religious liberty.

Of all these improvements, I regard the encouragement of emigration as the most essential, after the establishment and assurance of peace and religious liberty. Men will not toil to get rich, merely by virtue of acts of Congress. It requires the stimulus of example, and the infusion of a new and energetic blood into the system.

Nor is it to be feared, that the country will be absorbed at once by foreigners and foreign influence. The old staid Spanish prejudice, in favor of its own kindred, must be overcome. French, Irish, Dutch, Germans, Spaniards, Italians, Russians, Hebrews, Greeks, Norwegians, Swedes,—all find representatives in our population, harmoniously acting together for their personal advantages and the prosperity of the common weal.

Many years will be required to produce adequate confidence in Europeans and North Americans, to induce them to emigrate to Mexico for the purpose of settlement. They have had too hard a lesson in the past, to allow them to plunge into Mexican trade and territory again, notwithstanding the temptation of the country. Emigration will be by gradual and kindly progress, and I question much whether the feelings or the language of the nation will be changed. It will be a melioration of lot, without an alteration of nature; and thus, without any violent disturbance of the tastes, sympathies, or prejudices of the old, a new race will grow up with the renewed country, regenerated by the graft of foreign stamina and talent.

Mexico, must not, however, flatter herself, that the world is humbly on its knees seeking admittance at her portal. Not so. She has too long exhibited the picture of an ill-regulated and quarrelsome household to tempt mankind to become her inmates, notwithstanding the allurements of her beauty. I do not believe that she will ever advance to any degree of greatness, without foreign emigration to her shores; yet, in order to attract an influx of artisans and laborers, ripe from the improved fields and the skillful workshops of the rest of the world, she must prove herself worthy of their advent by the peaceful and prosperous future she promises to secure them.

If Mexico, however, sees fit to pursue a narrow system of exclusion, akin to that under which she suffered while a colony of Spain, I confess that I behold but little prospect for her future. She will want the illustration of example—the virtue of emulation. As long as Santa Anna remains at the head of affairs, and is able to retain control over the army by pay or by its attachment to his person,—so long will that remarkable genius continue to preserve tranquillity. But it may be the peace of dread,—the subordination of fear,—the muteness of slavery. If, in the meantime, he chooses to bring the people gradually to a knowledge of their rights and a habit of self-government, while he destroys, for ever, the disturbers of their peace,—he will mingle the patriot's with the hero's wreath, and deserve a high place in the story of this Continent's progress to glory.

But if, on the other hand, he is seduced by the possession of power or only continues to hold it for despotism and plunder;—if the result of his administration is unsuccessful, and those who came into authority under solemn pledges to purify the Government shall prove false to their trust;—if such are to be the only results of so much tumult and warfare, the downfall of Mexico is, indeed, close at hand!

The clouds of rebellion which have so long lowered over the country, will descend in showers of blood,—and a war of retribution, or, of castes, as in Guatemala, must end the circle, and give up again the fair territory of Mexico to the forests and its beasts or to be the spoil of some foreign invader.

In every event, her fate must be most interesting to the people of the United States. If peace, and its train of attendant results, are to bless her with success and happiness, our stake and sympathy with her republican system must be great and enduring. If anarchy, and dismemberment of her States ensue, we will be burdened with a dangerous neighbor and annoying enemy. But if *foreign occupation* be attempted, the bloody war that must ensue, can only be ended by the expulsion of the intruder, and the reestablishment of republicanism on this Continent.

CONCLUSION.

On the 9th of November, 1842, I left the Capital in the diligence, accompanied by Mr. Peyton Southall bearing dispatches to our Government. We had secured the attendance of a strong guard, and found three or four Englishmen in the coach as well accoutred as ourselves.

I was greatly struck with the change that had been effected in everything during the last year. The road was in excellent order;—the ruts in the mountain sides had been filled and levelled;—the inns were refitted and neatly kept;—the villages along the way-side had been cleaned and painted, and scarcely a vestige remained of the misery and desolation that oppressed me on my arrival.

On the 11th, at sunset, we passed through Plan del Rio,—supped at Puente Nacional,—and, at daylight on the 12th, (precisely a year from the date of my arrival,) again reached “La Villa rica de la Vera Cruz.”

After a delay of a day or two we embarked on board the U. S. Steamer Missouri. On the 20th, we reached the southwest pass of the Mississippi, and once more hailed with pleasure our native shores.

I only repeat the sentiment of almost every traveller in the beautiful country I have been describing, when I say,—that no matter how impatient we may be to leave Mexico, yet, when her frontier has been passed, perhaps for ever, there are few who do not long to enjoy once more her cloudless skies, her bountiful soil, and her eternal spring!

THE END.