

CHAPTER XIX.

Inhabitants of the Isthmus—Their Number—Whites—Negroes—
Half-castes—Their Customs and Manners.

THE population of the Isthmus, like that of the greater part of Spanish America, is composed of three races, the Caucasian, the African, and the American, and the numerous shades and varieties produced by their intermixture. So long as the country remained a colony of Spain, colour was of importance on account of the privileges or disadvantages connected with it; the distinction of castes formed a part of the Spanish policy. Since however these distinctions have been abolished, any man, whether he be black, brown, or white, may hold the highest office of the state. In accordance with these principles no particular mention is made in the census respecting the coloured inhabitants, and it is therefore impossible to speak with any degree of certainty of their number, but, judging from appearance, they would seem to constitute about two-thirds of the population.

The exact number of inhabitants is also a matter of doubt. In almost every part of the country there are

tribes of savage Indians, whose number does not appear in official documents; they must amount to at least 10,000. Assuming this estimate to be correct, the population of the Isthmus would be 129,697. The increase of the population from 1822 to 1843 has been 18,147, or about 8 per cent. in ten years, as the following table will show.

Census taken in the Years 1822 and 1843.

PROVINCE OF PANAMA.

<i>Canton of Panama.</i>		1822.	1843.
	1822.	1843.	
Panama (San Felipe and Santa Ana)	10,730	4,897	
Cruces...	1,200	1,091	Pocri 1,939 2,299
Chepo...	1,933	1,818	Tablas 3,577 5,488
Chiman	238	276	
Gorgona	549	617	<i>Canton of Natà.</i>
Pacora	657	659	Natà (<i>cabece-</i>
San Juan	174	165	ra) 4,262 5,504
Taboga	543	971	Anton 1,281 1,749
			Ola 360 564
			Penenomé . . 8,643 8,598
			Santamaria . . 2,562 3,195
			<i>Canton of Parita.</i>
<i>Canton of Chorera.</i>			Parita (<i>cabe-</i>
Chorera (<i>ca-</i>			cera) 2,170 3,258
becera)	4,000	2,937	Macaracas . . 2,338 3,806
Araijan	834	851	Minas 1,141 1,886
Capira	1,000	1,461	Ocú 1,179 2,027
Chame	1,000	1,329	Pesé 3,142 4,142
San Carlos	577	981	
			<i>Canton of Portobelo.</i>
<i>Canton of Los Santos.</i>			Portobelo (<i>ca-</i>
Los Santos (<i>ca-</i>			becera) 1,257 1,340
becera)	4,318	6,051	Chagres 856 1,340
Pcdasi	1,544	701	Minas No returns 114
			Palenque 312 463

PROVINCE OF VERAGUAS.

<i>Canton of Santiago.</i>			<i>Canton of Alanje.</i>		
	1822.	1843.		1822.	1843.
Santiago (capital)	4,568	5,974	David (<i>cabe- cera</i>)	2,385	4,321
Atalaya	785	1,084	Alanje	2,611	2,998
Calobre	1,463	1,923	Boqueron	334	629
Cañazas	2,542	3,924	Bugaba	242	361
Mesa	4,451	3,534	Dolega	739	1,583
Mineral	No returns	301	Gualaca	842	1,019
Montejo	1,182	2,281	Remedios	1,800	1,235
Palmas	545	2,345	San Felix	324	451
Posinga	509	363	San Lorenzo	2,477	1,781
Rio Jesus	1,276	1,183	San Pablo	312	733
San Francisco	4,387	5,358			
Soná	1,184	1,343			
Tole	409	652			

TERRITORY OF DARIEN.

	1822.	1843.		1822.	1843.
Yabisa (<i>cabe- cera</i>)	341	332	Molineca	35	78
Chapigana	262	296	Pinogana	176	142
Islas del Istmo	700	1,941	Santamaria	245	204
			Tucuti	113	155

TERRITORY OF BOCAS DEL TORO.

	1822.	1843.
Bocas del Toro	No returns	595

TOTALS.

	1822.	1843.
Province of Panama	64,316	70,5786
Province of Veraguas	35,367	45,376
Territory of Darien	1,872	3,148
Territory of Bocas del Toro		595
Supposed number of Indians	10,000	10,000
Grand Total	111,550	129,697

With the exception of some of the more recent settlers, the white Isthmians are of Spanish descent. The men are rather tall, slightly but well built, and have black hair; their complexion is pale, without the least tinge of colour, and their countenance is enlivened by dark and flashing eyes. The women are small, and have delicate feet and hands, generally fine faces, but bad figures; not using stays, and always having their dress untied, they have no waist, and look very ungraceful in public. The men are very fond of dress, and exhibit much more taste in their attire than the women; even those who cannot afford to spend much money, will rather undergo privations than be deprived of the pleasure of appearing as dandies. They are generally seen in straw-hats, and what we call summer dresses, adhering as closely to Parisian fashions as the nature of the climate permits. The women also imitate the European style. They are never seen without a shawl of blue cotton or silk around their shoulders, but wear neither caps nor bonnets when in the streets. Stockings are not in general use, being only worn on particular occasions. At balls and on gala-days they display a profusion of pearls, gold chains, and other ornaments: there are several ladies whose pearls alone amount to a small fortune.

The worst features in the character of the Isthmians are want of moral principle and steadiness of purpose. For the first their religion may account, for the second the enervating climate. They are indolent, licentious, fond of gambling, and, although not destitute of talent, without much application. The country has not produced a single individual who has raised himself above

mediocrity. With these bad qualities they possess also some good ones. They are hospitable, obliging towards strangers, and generous towards the poor and infirm: almost every family of consequence has several pensioners, who come regularly every Saturday to receive alms; but it must be admitted that in many instances rather too much display is made of this liberality. With the exception of those who have been brought up in Europe or in North America, their education is defective; they derive therefore no pleasure from rational conversation, reading, or any other intellectual occupation. The women especially are ill-informed, and are highly delighted if any one talks to them in high-sounding phrases, however empty they may be. This however is the fault of the Isthmians in general, and is probably the reason why they show a greater liking for the French than for other foreigners. Yet sensible men are fully aware, that to the English and North American, and not to the Gallic race, they are indebted for their present prosperity. All the French ever did for the Isthmus consists in having talked and written about assisting in carrying out various improvements; here however their friendship stopped. But when the Anglo-Saxon appeared, the country began to revive and prosper. With all these defects however the Isthmians stand far above the Spanish Americans. Frequent intercourse with foreigners has greatly diminished their bigotry, and rendered them more liberal than their neighbours, a tendency which will soon emancipate them from those prejudices which Spanish priestcraft and tyranny have bequeathed to them.

The negroes are treacherous, thievish, and extremely indolent. Those who are free, work perhaps one or two days and then cease, until necessity compels them to resume their occupation. "Only fools and horses work" is one of their favourite sayings, and is the principle on which they act: for this reason they will always fill subordinate situations, although the law places them on a level with the rest of their countrymen. They are very noisy, and their continual spitting, screaming, and loud laughing make them disagreeable companions. Slavery exists to a limited extent. Slaves, it must be remembered, were private property, and the Republican Government, although prohibiting their importation, could not at once emancipate them without disregarding individual interests. But as the immorality of the system called for reform, a course was adopted which seems to have satisfied all parties. Every slave was allowed to purchase his own freedom, and all children born of slaves after the 21st of June, 1821, were declared free. The proprietors have to clothe, feed, and educate them, and the children in return have to work till their eighteenth year for their mothers' masters. This law will speedily effect the emancipation of the slave population, without injury to private interests, or suddenly throwing a number of labourers out of employment. Although the slave-trade is prohibited, yet a few years ago a number of negroes were sent from Panama to Peru, where they were smuggled on shore, the law of that country not permitting them to be landed openly. It must however be added, for the honour of the Isthmians, that they had no part in the proceeding, the culprit being a Frenchman.

The British consul protested against the act, as equally opposed to the constitution of New Granada and to her treaty with England ; unfortunately the mischief was done before any more effectual measures could be adopted.

The character of the half-castes is, if possible, worse than that of the negroes. These people have all the vices and none of the virtues of their parents. They are weak in body, and are more liable to disease than either the whites or other races. It seems that as long as pure blood is added the half-castes prosper ; when they intermarry only with their own colour they have many children, but these do not live to grow up, while in families of unmixed blood the offspring are fewer, but of longer lives. As the physical circumstances under which both are placed are the same, there must really be a specific distinction between the races, and their intermixture be considered as an infringement of the law of nature. The negroes and half-castes, who, with a few exceptions, are the poorest of the inhabitants, dress very simply. The men, if they follow a trade or profession, wear white trowsers and jackets ; the slaves, carriers, and labourers, a straw-hat, a shirt, and a pair of short breeches, reaching a little below the knee. The women are seen in loose gowns, which hang negligently around their shoulders, and frequently slip down. They have gold chains round their necks, to which *escuditas* or other gold coins are fastened, a custom which, however ostentatious it may appear, is not without its good effect : if the money were kept in a box it would be spent, but having it about their persons, vanity makes them preserve it, and in case of distress they have always something to resort to. The

coloured children wear a straw-hat and a shirt, very often only the former, especially in the country districts.

The upper classes are sober and regular in their habits. They rise and go to bed early, take breakfast about ten o'clock, a siesta in the middle of the day, then a bath, and about three or four o'clock dinner; after which the men ride on horseback, and the women sit on the balconies or in the verandas, conversing. Their meals are varied and substantial; even the poorer people always have rice, vegetables, and meat, and if they are told that in Europe there are many who cannot purchase meat for days or even weeks, they hardly credit it: never having known any real poverty, they are unable to form an idea of it; and having heard so much of the splendour and riches of the Old World, they entertain just as extravagant notions respecting that country as many Europeans in regard to America. The common bread of the Isthmus consists of *tortillas de maiz*, or cakes made of Indian corn, which differ from those of Mexico and Central America by being about a foot across and an inch thick, or of a cylindrical shape, and rolled in palm-leaves. Bread made of wheat is only to be procured in towns and large villages. The meat most in use is pork and beef; the latter, when cut into thin, long slices, slightly salted, and dried in the air, is called "*tasajo*," and is in some parts sold by the yard. The whites are temperate in drinking, and carefully avoid strong coffee, tea, beer, or spirits. Intoxication is of rare occurrence among them, but more frequent among the negroes and zamboes. The beverages most in demand are those made in the country, viz. *aguardiente* (brandy),

extracted from the sugar-cane, *chicha*, a beer made from Indian corn or the pine-apple, and palm wine. The latter is obtained by felling the tree, and making, under the crown, where the leaves take their rise, a square hole; the sap, in ascending, is thus stopped, and the hole filled with a delicious fluid, which resembles champagne, and is drunk without further preparation. Except by the white ladies, especially the young ones, smoking is generally practised, although it is a rather expensive habit, the sale of tobacco being a government monopoly. The negroes often put the burning end of the cigar in their mouths, and are so skilful in holding it, that they are able to carry on long conversations without ever burning their tongues or taking the cigar out of their mouths. The children commence smoking at four or five years of age; and, strange to relate, even babies, when they scream, are quieted by putting a cigar in their mouths. Their fond mothers imagine that nothing is more calculated to pacify their darlings than giving them a thing which they themselves consider the height of luxury. The mode of swimming pursued generally by the Isthmians is the same as that practised by several tribes of North American Indians—it is that of turning from side to side, and throwing out the arms alternately: this manner is said to save the strain upon the breast and spine.

Notwithstanding the prevailing absence of honourable principles, comparatively few crimes are committed. A superficial observer might take this fact as a proof of the high moral standard of the population, but it is far from being so: few men will commit outrages in cold blood;

the generality are either influenced by passion, or fancy themselves driven to it by necessity, and, as the Isthmians are neither passionate nor deprived of the common means of existence, they have little to impel them to crime. The country is therefore perfectly safe: highway robberies are never heard of, murder is rarely committed, and great theft is unfrequent; the negroes, it is true, are much inclined to stealing, but they confine themselves to small articles, and such as are not easily missed. That the people have little fear of burglary, a glance at their dwellings will show: no iron bars guard the windows and doors as in most parts of Spanish America, in fact they are so slightly protected that the least exertion will open a passage. Perhaps the greatest crimes with which the Isthmians can be charged are those arising from their licentious habits. Unnatural crimes do not seem to prevail; it is well known however that the women are occasionally guilty of using, in order to procure abortion, several herbs, the most effectual of which is said to be the *Culantrilla de pozo* (*Anemia Seemanni*, Hook.). But being without the Book of books to guide them, having a number of ignorant and sluggish priests who confuse their ideas of right and wrong by indulging in everything contrary to morality and respectable conduct, and living in a tropical climate, where exposures which would cause people of a colder climate to blush are every-day occurrences, they must not be judged too severely.

Schools having only been established in the country districts since the war of independence, the education of the poorer classes, especially of the older people, is very backward, and reading and writing not much diffused.

What appears strange is their total ignorance of time and distance, and even measure and weight. If they want to express that they left a place at eight P.M., and reached their destination at noon, they say, "We left when the sun was there (pointing to the sky), and reached our destination when it was just above us." They have a faint idea that there are such divisions as leagues, but if anybody asks them about the distance from one place to another, they are unable to give a decisive answer, though they may frequently have traversed it.

The Roman Catholic religion, professed by all the natives, is maintained by the state, but other creeds are not prohibited, so long as the laws of the republic are not infringed. Protestant worship, established since the arrival of the North Americans, is performed in private houses. Some of the ceremonies connected with the *cultus* of Catholicism at Panama are probably quite peculiar. Towards Easter the city becomes more lively than usual by the great influx of strangers from all parts of the country; nearly every night processions are formed, which are attended by vast crowds, singing, praying, and strewing flowers. On the morning of Palm Sunday all assemble in the cathedral; the bishop and several priests, bearing palm-leaves, proceed to its principal gate, begging permission to enter. Their chanting is responded to by the congregation within, and after several interrogations and answers, and a heavy knock at the door, the party is admitted. The interior of the cathedral is handsomely decorated, and the clergy, with banners and crosses, and all the young Panamians holding tapers and palm-leaves, march several times round the

nave. In the afternoon the whole town is alive; the balconies, ornamented with palm-leaves and gay-coloured hangings, are filled with spectators, multitudes stroll through the streets, all the bells of the churches and convents are set ringing,—Christ makes his entry; a wooden image, with a gilt “glory” around the head, placed upon a she-ass, is followed by a priest walking under a blue canopy, a number of boys blowing instruments made of palm-leaves, and crowds of people who give vent to their feelings by screaming, whistling, jesting, and laughing. The procession entering the principal gate, proceeds to the Plaza del Catedral, and thence to the Convent of Concepcion, where the ass is entertained with “sweatmeats and wine.” After the image and animal have been delivered to the nuns, a boxing-match takes place. The connection between this fight and the religious ceremony the Panamians are not able to explain: it is an old custom, and thought indispensable. On the eve of Good Friday all the churches are illuminated and thrown open. During the night parties consisting of forty to sixty go thither, walking slowly, and praying aloud; the women have white or black kerchiefs over their heads, the men carry their hats in their hands; the pilgrims cast themselves before the altars, repeat a number of prayers, and then proceed to another place of worship. On Good Friday everything is quiet, but at noon on Saturday a curious scene ensues. Silence had reigned up to that time, but just when the clocks strike twelve all the bells begin to ring, cannons are fired, and the people all rush into the streets, making as much noise as possible: some scream, others strike

stones together, here are seen boys sending up rockets, there women dancing. A person beholding these proceedings for the first time fancies that a fit of madness has seized upon the population, and if, after the noise has abated, he asks what all signifies, he learns, to his surprise, that it is the way in which the Panamians celebrate the resurrection of the Saviour. On Easter Sunday mass is performed with great pomp, and the afternoon dedicated to the burning of Judas. A figure, filled inside with rockets, is suspended across the Calle Principal, and, while a band of musicians is playing, moved up and down till it explodes, to the great joy of the multitude. The ceremonies attending the other festivals are equally strange, but this may be a sufficient specimen of the manner in which they are conducted.

The principal amusements are horse-racing, cock-fighting, dancing, music, singing, billiard-playing, cards, and gambling; bull-fights, which in most Spanish countries are the great source of diversion, are so much restricted in New Granada, that they are little practised. It is to be hoped that the government will soon find itself strong enough to prohibit also the demoralizing practice of cock-fighting. Balls are conducted in almost the same manner as in Europe, beginning at nine or ten o'clock, and lasting till three or four in the morning. At midnight a room is opened, where a table is spread, covered with sweetmeats, fruits, and wines; the ladies are conducted thither, stand around it, and after partaking of the refreshments, they are taken back to the ball-room; the gentlemen then return to have their share of the supper. The dances are slow waltzes,

contra-dances, and quadrilles; the polka is too heating, and therefore not much liked. The punta, a dance peculiar to the country, is now seldom seen in ball-rooms,—a matter of little regret: it is performed by only one pair, and consists of a series of quiet movements with the feet, and waving with handkerchiefs. The negroes are very fond of dancing: in moonlight nights they assemble and dance till the morning, accompanied by chanting, a drum made of the hollow trunk of a tree, and an instrument of bamboo filled with pebbles. There are generally conjurors, rope-dancers, and bands of comedians at Panama, who always attract a great mass of spectators.

The amusements of the children are characteristic of the country, being such as require but little bodily exercise, and devoid of that gaiety and wildness which attend the juvenile games in northern regions. Fireworks, kite-flying, "pitch and toss," and mimicking religious processions, form their principal games. The latter, far from being displeasing, is, on the contrary, encouraged; the parents delight in seeing their offspring, at so early an age, practising the outer forms of their worship. But the young soon lay playthings aside, and early assume the air and dress of grown-up people, resembling in this respect most Spanish Americans, of whom it has been sarcastically said, that they are never children and never become men.

The Spanish language, the vernacular tongue, is spoken with greater purity than in most parts of America. It abounds however in provincialisms, and Castilians find much to censure. The letters *c* and *z* are never lisped; the *s* is generally left out if at the end of a word; the *d*

is not pronounced in many instances; the *l* and *r* are often interchanged. Besides these peculiarities, a number of expressions are peculiar to the country, and originated either in the corruption of Indian words or in local causes. French, Italian, and Portuguese, from their close resemblance to Spanish, are understood by many educated people. But it appears that respecting English, some misconception prevails. Captain Basil Hall, when visiting Panama in 1822, met several negroes who could speak the latter, and hence concluded that that language, on account of the intercourse with Jamaica and other British colonies in the West Indies, was much diffused. The conclusion was far from being correct. Before the arrival of the North Americans, there were only few who had mastered it; at present several newspapers are published in English; it is also taught in the College, which will undoubtedly greatly assist in spreading it. Those however who think that within a few years it will become the vernacular tongue, seem to be rather sanguine in their expectations. Many attempts have been made to establish English in Wales, Ireland, and the Highlands of Scotland, French in Alsace, and Danish in Holstein, but little progress has yet been made. To suppress a language by substituting another, is a most difficult and tedious task: a satisfactory result must be the work of centuries.