

CHAPTER XVIII.

Description of the Republic of Colombia—Mountains—Climate—Air—Seasons—Temperature—Wind—Rain—Tropical Influence—Harvest—Forests—Rivers—Ravines—Mines—Lakes—Seas—Wild Animals—Domestic Animals—Plains of the Orinoko—General appearance of the Country.

THE republic of Colombia comprises two countries entirely different, which the Spanish government had also separated in the political division it established. 1. New Grenada; this viceroyalty was formed of the provinces of the Cordilleras from Guayaquil to Merida, of that of Casanare and San-Juan de los Llanos. 2. Caracas; this captaincy contained Cumana, Barcelona, Caracas, Varinas, and Guyana, consequently the greater part of the plains.

The Cordillera of the Andes, at 2° of the south of the line, divides into three branches, only one of which, the most westerly, extends through the isthmus of Panama into North America; the two others terminate at the gulph of Mexico. All these are divided into *tierras calientes* (warm lands), which are generally the vallies of the rivers and the maritime provinces; *tierras templeadas* (temperate lands); *tierras frias* (cold lands); *paramos* (bar-

ren lands ; lastly, nevados (lands covered with snow.) The same mountain sometimes contains them all. It is strange enough, and is the most curious phenomenon in the Indies, that we can pass, in the same day, from the burning climate of the coast of central Africa to that of the frozen regions of Lapland ; a transition which is without danger, because it is not sudden, and a man may change his climate according to circumstances and the strength of his constitution. Thus, invalids of Santa-Fè, who cannot bear the cold, which is often severe, go in search of warmth, as people visit France to take the waters, yet with the singular advantage of finding a milder temperature, before the end of the day on which they set out. For instance, if they go to Cakesa, after passing at sun-rise fine fields of barley and green meadows, and crossing rapidly, at eleven o'clock, the heaths of the damp and frozen mountains which overlook them, they descend their sides at three o'clock under the shade of quinquina-trees, and walk before night among banians, sugar-canes, the sugar-apple (*annona squamosa*,) and coffee-trees ; a valuable privilege attached to this fortunate country, and which is repeated in a thousand places.

The appearance of these mountains is no less varied than their temperature. At their feet extend on one side immense pastures, on the other impenetrable forests ; the vallies, if we except

those through which the rivers flow, are generally at a considerable elevation.

The climate of the *tierras calientes*, in the *Cordilleras*, is burning, without being unwholesome; the European suffers much from the heat, but it seldom proves fatal to him. The temperature is too hot to be agreeable to him; but, being cooled from time to time, and purified by the salutary breezes from the *Andes*, it is not deadly. As soon as you have ascended to the elevation of 400 toises, you breathe a cooler air, which, however, does not yet seem temperate; at 600 toises, the European approaches an atmosphere which suits him; at 900, is on its borders; from 1,000 to 1,400, he is in it; these are the *tierras frias*. Here he finds his own climate, though the cold is disagreeable to him for some time. Higher up, that of the *paramos* appears rigorous; and, in the *nevados*, he sometimes perishes, like the natives of the country, benumbed by the chilling winds which blow there.

The air respired is therefore very different, according to the elevation at which we are placed; rendered heavy by the vapours with which it is loaded, it is disagreeable to the smell at the foot of *Cordillera*, and reminds those who have visited other parts of the world between the tropics, of that which prevails in the low regions, and the pestilential exhalations brought by it. Above these burning spots, the air, embalmed by

the sweet perfume of the flowers and aromatic plants, charms every sense, and we fancy ourselves in Europe.

There are in the Cordilleras four seasons different from ours: they rather resemble those of the tropics, that is to say, there are two dry and two rainy seasons. The first commence at the solstices, and the other at the equinoxes; their setting in, sometimes varies a fortnight.

As to the temperature, it does not experience any change, and it is in this that the seasons of America are so different from ours. Two degrees produce a sensible difference between the cold of winter and that of the dry season; yet it must be observed, that it is greater in proportion as you descend towards the foot of the mountain; it is then sometimes one-third; so that, after rain, the thermometer sometimes falls from 24° to 16° .

The snow-clad mountains of Cucuy serve to cool the lower and interior tracts which surround them, in the same manner as the mountains which are nearer the equator temper the heat, which would have burnt up the provinces situated along the great Ocean. At intervals, we saw in the western Cordillera some of those summits covered with snow, such as the Coconuos and the Quindiu; lower down there are none of them, because to the east the mountains of Santa-Martha rise to the limit of perpetual snow; and

further on the Cordilleras, confined between two seas, exposed on all sides to the winds and tempests.

Though the winds are variable in the Cordilleras, two may be distinguished as general, namely, the north and the south ; these follow the direction of the Cordillera : the south wind brings fine weather, and the north rain and storms. Nevertheless, all the places situated beyond the mountain to the east, are excepted from this rule ; they are subject to the winds of the plains, as the provinces washed by the great Ocean are to the sea winds, and those to the south of the line to the winds from the north-west.

It seldom rains in the Cordilleras in the dry season, and there is rarely a day without rain during the wet one ; so that, as in all the equinoctial regions, we may reckon six months rain and six months dry weather, though they are differently distributed ; in fact, it rains in March, April, May, and June ; the sky is serene in July, August, and September ; the rains recommence in October, November, and December, and are succeeded by the fine weather, which continues from the end of that month to the beginning of March.

Even in that part, where we are reminded of Europe and its productions, as at Tunja and Santa-Fè, the same tropical influence is observed. The trees are always green ; instead of

the rains, which inundate the plain from June to October, there are frozen mists, which render the dog-days very cold. To these revolutions of the atmosphere, very different from those which take place among us, are attributed the fatal diseases which there often afflict man, and which we ascribe to the excessive heat.

To this benevolent arrangement of nature are owing more abundant harvests, which are rarely destroyed by the rigour or changeableness of the seasons; if any circumstance destroys it in one place, the effect of these disasters is easily repaired by the products of the rich harvests gathered at a short distance.

The land, therefore, hardly ever disappoints the expectation of the cultivator; thus his labours are different, according to the places in which he sows. In the burning plains of the Magdalena and of the Cauca, excellent tobacco is grown: they cultivate the banians, sugar caue, cacao, and likewise maize, the constant companion of man wherever he settles; in fact, it is met with near the fields of wheat, oats, and potatoes, which cover the regions of the cold lands.

In the elevated spots, wheat is sown in March; towards the middle of the mountains, maize in July; and in the valley, in September. The harvest is gathered here in January, higher up in October, and on the paramos in August.

The more the soil is scorched by the heat of

the sun, and at the same time the more frequently inundated, the more vast and majestic are the forests. In proportion to the elevation, the height of the trees diminishes, and at 1,300 toises they are very rare.

A great number of rivers, which are important on account of the communications they may sometime afford, flow in the territory of Colombia: the Zulia, enters the lake of Maracaïbo; and the Atrato, the gulph of Mexico, after having traversed a part of Choco; the Rio San-Juan, which flows through the western part of this province, empties itself into the great Ocean: the impetuous Dagua, which rises in the heights of the Cali, falls into the same sea at San-Buena-ventura; the Rio de las Esmeraldas, which comes from the environs of Quito; and the Rio de Guayaquil, by which the productions of the provinces near Chimborazo are conveyed to the coast, also go into the great Ocean. From the back of the eastern chain of the Andes, larger rivers flow than those which descend from the western Cordilleras; they carry the tribute of their waters to the Orinoko and the Amazon, both of which enter the Atlantic, after having been joined in their course by the rio Negro and the Cassiquiare. The principal are, the Apure, which traverses the province of Varinas; the Meta, which rises at the distance of some days' journey from the capital, and in the same chain

of mountains where it is situated ; lastly, the Putu-Mayo, which, issuing from a lake upon a paramo, situated on the mountains of Pasto, carries its waters to the Amazon.

These are not the only means of communication afforded by nature: she has every where pierced the walls of the Cordilleras, and opened passages by means of rivers, which although considerable, are scarcely navigable on account of the rocks obstructing their beds. Torrents, ravines, rivulets, fertilize the country, and often afford the inhabitants roads, which all their efforts would never have been able to open. The streams issuing from the Cordilleras, flowing on rocks and beds of gravel, are generally clear and cool ; for this reason they are said to be unwholesome, the cause of which may be the particles of metal which they contain. Among the sands which they bring down, small grains of gold and of iron pyrites are often found, and even emeralds and other precious stones, which the people are too ignorant to collect.

The Cordilleras must not therefore be looked upon as an assemblage of inaccessible mountains, as they appear to be at a distance. By means of the first range of the heights, which are, as it were, buttresses destined to support the prodigious arch of the Andes, and of the ravines, which the rains have hollowed out, and which serve to carry them off, the people everywhere find steps

to aid them in ascending the mountains ; as they advance, they meet with vallies which nature has placed at intervals, and has adorned with all imaginable charms. At last, they arrive at the plateaus, which, like those of Bogota and Quito, form the boundary of so many wonders ; when we reach the Panama, where vegetation ceases, we are not inclined to complain of the rigour of the cold, upon reflecting that these sterile tracts are destined to preserve it, for the hot and unwholesome winds of the plains, purified on their summits, descend from them in beneficial breezes into the vallies which they command, while from their sides the streams flow which are to fertilize them.

If the earth produces abundant harvests, if the same mountain yields the harvests of Europe, and, lower down, those of the tropics, lastly, if the forests, which partly cover it, abound in medicinal plants, gums, resins, and valuable woods both for dying and building, its bosom contains immense riches. There are provinces, like Choco, where the soil may be said to be entirely of gold. The metals, like the agricultural produce, are, with some exceptions, limited to particular districts. At 50 toises, we begin to find the zone of gold and platina, and higher that of silver ; copper and iron are nearly at the summit of the mountains.

In the neighbourhood of the principal para-

mos, there are generally lakes, often of considerable extent, and agitated like the sea. They may be considered as the source of all the rivers which defend the Andes from the drought, which the vicinity of the equator would occasion, but for wise disposition of Providence.

The seas which bound the republic of Colombia are tranquil. The temperature and climate of that part of the great Ocean which bathes the coasts of this country, are the same as those on the continent. The Atlantic ocean has few dangers for mariners; the gulph of Mexico, on the contrary, present many. The storms and the pirates combine against merchants; both spread terror and devastation on the sea and the coast.

The wild animals, the jaguar, the conguar, the serpents, crocodiles and large lizards, centipedes, scorpions, toads, (*acarus americanus*) the sting of which causes the hair to fall off, make the shuddering of terror succeed to melancholy in the hot plains. The traveller knows not where to walk, to sit down or to sleep; the howling of the winds, the rustling of the leaves, every thing alarms him; the spangles with which the fire flies illumine the woods during the night, look like the glaring eyes of a serpent, and chill him with horror.

All the domestic animals of Europe* have

* At Popayan and Santa-Fè, llamas are kept as a curiosity, for they are never employed as beasts of burthen.

increased prodigiously in America. While every where else, the heat and low situation contribute to develop their strength and size, and the elevation of the lands and the cold to check them, in the immense territory of Colombia, we find just the contrary: the animals are all small and untameable in the plains, while those on the mountains are strong, large and docile;* a fact which is the more curious, as in the Antilles they have preserved the habits, the forms and the size which they have in Europe. These islands have, in every thing, the appearance of colonies, the continent alone has a physiognomy peculiar to itself.

At the foot of these heights extend the almost uninhabited plains watered by the Meta and the Orinoco, and further towards the north, the rich plains of Venezuela. The physical description of these countries may serve for all those which are scorched by the equatorial sun. Six months rain from April to November, and six months drought, divide the year. The east wind prevails in the one, and the north in the other. Nature shines in this country in all the splendour with which the climate of the tropics adorns it; immense forests, savannahs of prodigious extent, and which are traversed by rivers confined within

* It is not the same with birds, which are larger and fatter in the plains than in the mountains.

their beds for six months, and during the other six, overflowing their banks to a great distance, such is the picture of the provinces of the Llanos, of the Guyana and of the Casanare ; we must return into those of Caracas and the Cumana to escape the deluge which changes so considerable a tract of country into marshes and lakes. Thus, while a mild temperature and a drier soil induce the whites (Americans) to cultivate the noble country of Venezuela, breeding of cattle seems to be the only kind of occupation which can be followed in the midst of the marshes formed by the overflowing of so many rivers, and of the forests which line their banks, the trees of which serve as the abode of some Indian tribe during the season of storms.

Thus on an immense extent of 29,952 square leagues, which M. von Humboldt supposes it to contain, the territory of Colombia presents a thousand different aspects ; they are seldom animated by the presence of man ; a profound silence reigns through nature ; the desert spaces are so great, that, during whole days, the traveller might fancy himself in a country where human foot had never trod. The names of places, villages and provinces ; the manners, customs, and even the situation occupied by the Indian habitations, are all unchanged. The solitudes are as profound, the forests as impenetrable, the

mountains as inaccessible, animated nature as solitary; every thing, in short, with the exception of a few places, is as savage as when the Spaniards entered it. They have contented themselves with enlarging the hamlets and villages where the aborigenes dwelt, and have only cultivated those fields which surrounded places formerly inhabited.