

CHAPTER XX.

Character of the Colombians.

AFTER having given a sketch of the races inhabiting Colombia, we have now to paint the national character. Some of the features under which I shall describe them, will, perhaps, appear exaggerated to persons who have been acquainted only with the enlightened men who are at the head of the government, and the clergy of Bogota. Undoubtedly, the character which I draw is not taken from these persons; but, it is well known that the inhabitants of capital cities have a character of their own, infinitely different from that of the people of the provinces. It is in the latter only that a nation must be studied to obtain a thorough knowledge of it: a person who has seen only Bogota, who has met in society only the distinguished men who reside there: will be far from having an exact notion of the Colombians: the number of strangers who have visited this city has, in a great degree, effaced the national character, which is really to be met with only in the towns remote from the coast, and from the capital.

The Colombians who inhabit the hot lands are meagre; their complexion is very yellow; in general they are of small stature, and seldom well made. The state of debility in which they languish, arises from the decay of the white races under the tropics, in proportion as the black blood, which is generally mixed with that of the Europeans, is impaired and disappears.

Ascending into the colder regions, the colour of the whites is less yellow; still pale at the height of 600 toises, it assumes a colour at a 1000 toises, and has a beautiful lustre at the elevation of Santa-Fè de Bogota. Accordingly, the men there are in general rather handsome, especially in youth, and though sickly, and liable at a riper age to a thousand infirmities, their tall and well made figures prevent this premature decrepitude from being observed.*

The Colombian has but little vivacity in his features, his countenance is gloomy, melancholy and without expression; it is indicative only of indolence, and the slowness of his motions proves that these signs are not deceitful; for he is perhaps only to be surpassed in idleness by his slave.

Patience, therefore, is an indispensable quality for a stranger; the more pains he takes to accelerate the motions of a person with whom he

* The dress of the principal people is the same as in France; they have retained no part of the Spanish costume but the cloak.

has engaged in some enterprize, the less progress he will make ; and the consequence of his efforts may even be, in the end, to change into disgust the good will which was at first evinced. To hurry a Colombian is like waking *mal à propos* a man who is asleep ; he detests action, except from caprice ; to direct him, is impossible, and fatal to the person who attempts it.

The mind of the Colombian is, doubtless, no less ardent than that of the European, but, brought up under the dominion of a suspicious people, he has assumed a habit of concealing by his impassibility, the disgust which he feels. There is, however, a remarkable difference between the inhabitants of the plains and those of the mountains. Those of the Caracas, in particular, seem to have vivacity, and even self conceit, when compared with the inhabitant of Santa-Fè de Bogota, who rather seems endowed with a fund of simplicity and good sense.

That pride, which is the basis of the national character, is the source of the antipathy, which many persons bear to foreigners, and which they dissemble under the most affectionate protestations. One might be inclined to believe also that the jealousy which the Colombians feel of the successful activity of the Europeans is the cause of their hatred, for their only, their constant thought, is interest. This feeling of self-interest which, in the North American is the germ

of his industry and the developer of its progress, is in the Colombians only a mean, selfish sentiment, like that of a miser; it is a love for accumulating and scraping together, not the wish for wealth in order to spend and enjoy it which produces a great commercial activity in a nation. The Colombians have only the spirit of retail dealers.

If in commercial affairs they endeavour to conceal, under the appearance of disinterested coolness, every application of well calculated self-interest, when they treat of public affairs, they are content with a smile and protestations, the insincerity of which is more easily penetrated than they imagine. They are not backward in uttering their political sentiments, but the measures they take are not known till they are executed; the more sinister they are the less they transpire.

To every question you ask, they answer in the affirmative; whatever favour you solicit is never refused, but the promise is forgotten as soon as given. With the word *diligentia* (diligence) always in their mouth, they never stir. Nevertheless they offer of their own accord to act; every thing is *a su disposicion* (at your disposal: they are always ready, *para servir à usted* (to serve you), when you enquire after their health. It is an error to believe them, and those who depend upon their good offices, will generally find themselves deceived.

Whatever is said to them, their features are never observed to change. To hear them, their modesty seems excessive, for they place America far below Europe in knowledge and talents. All these protestations are insincere, and they are never more flattered than when they are told that nothing is done in Europe better than among them.*

They are passionately fond of law suits, and detest quarrels. Provided therefore their wives, in the hot countries, suffer them to lie at their ease in their hammocks, rocking themselves continually while smoking their cigars, constant peace reigns in the house; the more so, as notwithstanding their apparent calmness, they have all the ardour of a temperament as hot as the climate which develops it. Indifference and indulgence insure in the mountains the tranquillity of families.

Excepting the love of play, and of trifling occupations, which they carry to excess, their mode of life seems regular and steady.

Foreigners whose minds are filled with the pompous descriptions, which have been published in Europe, of the great number and the riches of the gold mines of New Grenada, think only of operations of this kind, while the inhabitants of the country, looking upon gold as merely a com-

* See note XV.

mon metal, think only of discovering diamond mines.

The generality of the Colombians are destitute of knowledge and agreeable talents*. Some of them however understand French, admire our literature and prefer it to that of other nations: the priests in particular are delighted with our sacred writers.†

In all ranks we find a studied politeness and affability, which, in some persons, are even carried to excess. The superior classes possess also the virtue of hospitality which has long since been banished from Europe. Yet it does not every where bear that character of frankness, which renders it so amiable in the eyes of travellers. In general they pay attention to strangers according to their dress; it procures them respect, or exposes them to familiarity, and if their stay is protracted, it ends in disgust, and oftentimes antipathy.

It is a rule good to be observed, to avoid as much as possible, returning to a house where you have lodged. It is necessary however to assign a motive for this conduct; but whatever it be, they will thank you for it. In fact, if you return to the house, you are looked upon as a man who seeks to become master there, and who thinks he has

* New Grenada however has produced men of extraordinary talents; we must place in the first rank Vaseques, the painter, and the three botanists Mutis, Caldas, and Zea.

† See note XVI.

a right to do so, especially if you have acted generously towards your host, for they are afraid that you might assume airs and an authority much dreaded by the restless jealousy of the inhabitants.

Respect for parents, the principle of society, is general among the Colombians, and the titles of sir and madam, are the only ones which children give their parents.

Lying, jealousy, and ingratitude, are the prevailing vices; every people has its own. To these may be added revenge, if we put any faith in the popular saying: "It is for God to pardon; man, never."

They often come to a stranger with articles of silver plate or pieces of stuff, to borrow money of him on this security; he should positively refuse to lend any, because it is not the debtor but the creditor who contracts the obligation; in fact, if he has the boldness to ask for his money back, he exposes himself at least to be called a *tyranno* (tyrant.) He must above all resist those letters in which, amidst phrases expressing the most ardent love, the writer requests an ounce of gold for a few days, adroitly insinuating that she will come herself and return it. In general he never sees either the money or the borrower.

Whether you give or lend, you will be answered by the expression so pleasing to the ear of a benefactor, but so alarming to that of a lender;

Dios se lo pague, may God reward you ; in fact it is often from his goodness that you must expect the payment of debts, which have been contracted, not so much with men as with humanity. One cannot however help being surprised at seeing all services acknowledged, by the people of the country, by this trite phrase. If they cross over a bridge, or remain several days in a house, they return thanks and go away without paying. This is without doubt the reason of the refusals which are met with in many places ; they are expressed with a delicacy which causes them to be borne without anger, though they are not always well founded ; for the people who answer when they are asked a service : *Somos pobres* (we are poor), are not always so.

The stranger must, above all things, avoid every thing that may awaken jealousy, an eternal source of hatred ; that jealousy which the Spaniards are supposed to cherish towards their women is not meant here ; very few Americans feel it. Talent, sense, knowledge must be shewn by the stranger as little as possible ; he cannot display any degree of luxury unless he join with it inexhaustible liberality ; he must, above all, never praise the merits of one man in the presence of another ; it would be very misplaced in the presence of a poor *hidalgo* to speak of the riches of an opulent neighbour. It is for this

reason that the English are reproached with speaking too much of their own country ; which gives them the air of intending to make insulting comparisons between the poverty of Colombia, and the magnificence of Great Britain. In every case it must not be forgotten, that the least preference shewn, and the most moderate eulogium are affronts which jealousy, the basis of the national character, never forgives. It must also be remembered that many Colombians lament to see their country exposed by the revolution, to become the prey of clever foreigners.*

That delicacy which may be called the essence of probity, is far from being found among the Americans. In a great number of them, the traces of recent slavery are found, which authorise cunning and often bad faith to acquire what cannot be obtained from the generosity and the justice of the master.

Another equally well founded reproach that may be made against them, is that they seldom feel the impulse of gratitude. They receive benefits with joy, but soon forget the hand which bestowed

* With the best intentions, it is not always possible to satisfy every body ; a Colombian seldom stops at dislike, he is immediately actuated by antipathy, the consequences of which are sometimes fatal ; thus as soon as you hear : Such a man, *Se puso bravo*, be on your guard : Such a woman, is *Brava*, do not go abroad. This expression does not mean that the individual is brave, courageous, valiant or good, but that he is in a passion ; thus a tiger is *bravo*, and a hen *brava*.

them. They think too that they have been extorted by importunity, and dispense themselves from recollecting them. To ask with importunity, to receive joyfully, and forget quickly, are faults common to all Colombians. If their fathers were guilty of injustice, they are of ingratitude.

In their pleasures, their feasts and their ceremonies they behave without dignity. All degenerates into a familiarity which puts one in mind of an equality certainly not that of proud republicans. On the other hand it produces in their intercourse with strangers, an amenity which is very pleasing.

When they have seen a person once, they salute him ; when they have spoken to him, they shake hands with him, and affectionately call him *mi amigo*, my friend ; and if he bear the same name, they give him the title of *tocayo* (name-sake.) These salutations and kind expressions, must be answered with civilities, and seldom with confidence ; whatever you say is repeated ; there is no secret which does not expose you to some vexations. A stranger besides must never indulge in those effusions of the heart, in that rage for giving useful advice, which a remnant of Spanish pride considers as an affront.

The less chaste conversation is, the more it pleases ; but the licence must be in the thought rather than in the expression, because the latter

leads to some punishment from the tribunal of penance, which is always dreaded.

Some persons, even ecclesiastics, manifest extreme incredulity, while they shew the most absolute respect for the external ceremonies of religion. It is permitted to read the *Guerre des Dieux*, and the *Œuvres de Boulanger*, but not to miss a mass or a sermon; for this reason, the Colombians always attend them.*

When speaking of the energy and moral force of the inhabitants of the hot countries, the developement of the mental faculties was not meant. The burning heat of the torrid zone, and particularly the swarms of insects which afflict the countries comprehended in it, weaken and distract too much the attention of the mind, for it to pursue uninterruptedly those meditations which are the parents of great discoveries. The countries scorched by the tropical sun, are the native land of courage, lively gaiety, address and imitation; such are the *tierras calientes*. Those which receive from beneficent nature a mild warmth, are the seat of the arts, taste and pensive melancholy; such are the Andes.

Hitherto the Colombians have been destitute of that enterprising energy of the Russian government, or of the people of the United States,

* The men wear a golden cross on their breast, and the women a scapulary.

which, has raised those two countries in a few years, to the first rank among civilized nations. The government is not yet powerful enough to rouse the inhabitants from their Asiatic indolence, and the people are not sufficiently fond of foreigners, to invite them with cordiality, and to favour them by all possible means. However, if they do not like them, they take a pride in treating them well. They will transact business with a north American, but will prefer living with a Spanish American, because, if his manners are less frank, they are at least more pleasing. The defects and the vices of the Colombians are common to all nations who have not yet attained the same degree of civilisation which we have. With the exception of the political crimes they have committed by way of reprisal, we have no others to lay to their charge.