

CHAPTER XVI.

Dangerous navigation of the Dagua—San-Buenaventura—Description of the province of Choco—Departure from San-Buenaventura on board a Peruvian schooner—Arrival at Panama—Observations on the great Ocean.

THE day after my arrival at las Juntas, I prepared to embark on the Dagua, though its waters had been considerably swelled by a storm, which raged during the night: but I wished to arrive speedily at San-Buenaventura, and was, besides, unacquainted with the dangers the people spoke of; I thought they wished to alarm me, in order to dissuade me from my purpose, and detain me the longer among them.

I was furnished with two negroes reputed to be excellent sailors, and a long narrow canoe. In order to preserve the equilibrium, my baggage was divided into two parts, an equal weight being placed at each end; three feet in the centre were appropriated to receive my body bent almost in two; my two negroes, one provided with an oar, the other with a pole, were stationed at each end of the canoe; when all was ready and duly adjusted, the rope which moored us to the beach was loosened, and imme-

diately, we were hurried on by the stream with the rapidity of an arrow, and carried before a wall, over which the waters passed with a frightful noise. Which way shall we pass? was the thought that struck me at the sight of so terrible an obstacle: quicker than thought, the bark, skilfully guided between a very narrow opening, glided into calmer water: having escaped one danger we encountered another, having to descend from the high mountains of las Juntas, into the plains, which are washed by the Ocean; and when I thought the Dagua had reached its level, I perceived its agitated waters flowing several feet below the place where I was.

The negro with the pole, like a skilful pilot dexterously avoided the current of the river where it was too rapid, entered boldly among the windings of the rocks, and without fearing to dash the canoe to pieces, conducted it through those narrow issues: sometimes, however, a stone baffled his address, and stopped us on the edge of a fall; the water, foaming against this new obstacle, threatened to swamp us; this was the critical moment: the two men then leaped into the water, and thus lightening the canoe, held it with all their strength to hinder it from being ingulphed by the water among precipices where it would have perished.

Dangers of so novel a nature of course alarm the traveller. Imprisoned in the middle of the

canoe, and motionless for fear of upsetting it, he mechanically sighs with pleasure after having passed over a shoal, or descended a rapid; this sometimes happened to myself. The negroes, mistaking the expression of joy, for a sigh of complaint, asked with the most laughable sang-froid, "Are you wet, sir?" In truth I was wet through. The rain fell in torrents, and the sailor, while intent upon avoiding the rocks, which every where obstruct the passage, was constantly striking his feet against each other to throw out the water which filled the canoe.

We were one hour in reaching the place called the Salto, where there is so great a fall, that the canoes are conveyed over land, and are changed at the Bodega (or public warehouse), where the government has placed an agent to superintend the police of the river. My negroes, after landing my effects, amidst torrents of rain, were going to leave me, pretending they had not agreed to accompany me any further. I was cruelly embarrassed; for if I had been left in these forests, I should have perished with hunger or disease, while waiting for another boat: the white who had the care of the Bodega, took pity on my situation, and, joining with me, persuaded the sailors to accompany me farther. I employed other means to induce them. I had given them four piastres, though they could only demand two for the first passage, and promised

them three more for the second ; this was paying double what other travellers give. They gladly accepted my offer, and immediately launched another canoe.

Without authority, or rather fearing to employ that with which they are invested, the agents of the Colombian government are rarely of any service in protecting the traveller, especially a foreigner : it is only by means of exhortations or money that he can make himself obeyed ; for, being the only guides amidst the dangers of the navigation or the roads, the sailors and muleteers are respected by all the officers of government, who, being generally engaged in trade, are afraid of suffering for their rigour if they executed the laws. When the roads become better, and the navigation more perfectly known, these men will be less extortionate, and will be made to obey.

My negroes having resolved to accompany me, I embarked in another canoe, and launched again into dangers no less terrible than those which we had just escaped. Encouraged, however, by the repeated proofs of the dexterity of the negroes, the traveller begins to familiarize himself with so frightful a navigation ; he is at length able to distinguish the rocks which are really dangerous, from those which are alarming only from the noise produced by the waves of the river breaking over them ; but I doubt whe-

ther he can, at any time, feel himself so secure as to be able to sleep, as many persons have assured me they could do ; for one is involuntary agitated or uneasy ; and, were it only from the effect of the rapidity with which the canoe proceeds, the passenger has his eyes constantly open.

In a short time we arrived at the Saltico. Near this dangerous place we found some huts ; it cost me many hours to persuade my inconstant sailors to take me any farther ; they hesitated a long time, and at last yielded to my offer of five piastres, if they would take me to San-Buenaventura ; and, after having again changed our canoe, we set off. I went on foot, as I had done at the Salto, as far as the other side of the fall. There I met my negroes and my canoe. An idea may be formed of this navigation, when I say that, on the beach where I walked, I observed long furrows traced by the canoes, which are kept as close the shore as possible.

After passing the Saltico, the Dagua, less violent, does not rush forward in an impetuous torrent ; it is now only an extremely rapid river, yet still very dangerous, because it is far from having attained its level : the fall being only one foot instead of three which it had been higher up.

The negro who held the pole, no longer directed his comrade with the alarming silence he before preserved, which, however, was neces-

sary not to lose any time ; it was not merely by signs that he guided the steersman, his voice was louder than the roaring of the waters ; we were soon able to converse on the dangers we had incurred, and the pleasure of quickly reaching the port ; before we got there, we stopped at a hamlet, at Santa-Cruz, where I passed the night.

On the following day, a pure sky, which is very uncommon in the rainy climate of this country, promised us a fine day, and the river being broader, contributed to render this last part of our voyage very agreeable. If the trunks of the trees under water, still exposed us to some risks, the bed of the Dagua, which was broad and deep, enabled us to avoid them : at length, after having again glided along with rapidity for some time, our canoe could not proceed without the aid of the oar.

We had now, therefore, need of vigorous exertion to descend this river, the current of which hurried us along the day before, in spite of all our efforts. As it approaches its mouth it has attained its level. Its deep and muddy waters have now only low and marshy banks, which they constantly inundate, and on which grow trees of a large size. It is there that the mangrove and other large trees, which are fond of brackish water, spread afar their numerous roots. The Dagua, which, higher up, when it was confined in a narrow channel be-

tween the steep walls of the Cordilleras, flowed precipitating itself from fall to fall, has an almost imperceptible current ; it is as calm as the sea which receives it. Their waters unite unobserved, for there is no bar to impede them, and a navigator does not perceive that he has entered the sea except by the taste of the waters. Contrary to all observation, the crocodile does not shew itself in the river, and delights only in the ocean, upon whose sandy banks this terrible animal is sometimes met with.

We at length arrived without danger, but not without difficulty at San-Buenaventura.

Considering the importance and beauty of its situation, San-Buenaventura ought to be a considerable town ; an active commerce should animate its port ; a rich and industrious population fill its streets ; lastly, it should be frequented by numerous vessels. Nothing of all this is to be seen. A dozen huts inhabited by negroes and mulattoes, a barrack with eleven soldiers, a battery of three pieces of cannon, the residence of the governor, built like the custom-house, of straw and bamboo, on a small island called Kascakral, covered with grass, brambles, mud, serpents and toads ; such is San-Buenaventura !

Yet the commerce carried on is not without importance, though chiefly of very common articles, for instance salt,* onions and garlick.

* The salt of Païta, costs one piastre per quintal.

These in general are the only cargoes brought by the schooners from Païta. To these must be added straw hats and hammocks from Xipixapa, singular importations into a province so rich in gold. The exportations consist of rum, sugar and tobacco.* This unwholesome place suffers a continual scarcity of provisions, it is difficult to procure green bananas, or bread made of maize and cheese. Fowls cost a piastre a piece, and can hardly be obtained even at that price; fish is scarce, and said to be injurious to the health.

San-Buenaventura therefore is, at present, a village of no importance, but may rapidly increase in time, if, conformably to a plan which has been recently suggested, it be removed to the north north-east of its present site. The place where it is proposed to make the new port, being rather elevated, is consequently drier. As it is on the continent, there will be an opportunity to extend it, and it will be easy to employ more solid materials than bamboo. The houses built there being better secured than with leather, will offer greater security to the merchant; lastly, there will be no reason to apprehend that excessive dampness so fatal to strangers who reside at Kascakral. Thus this port may one day hold a considerable rank among those on the great

* Vessels also come from Costa-Ricca with cargoes of salt meat; it costs eight piastres per quintal, and causes the dysentery.

Ocean. Instead of the canoes which now constitute its marine, we shall see large vessels; and its filthy huts will be superseded by rich magazines containing the produce of India and Europe.

Every inlet of the waters of the great Ocean is said to be a good port, in fact this sea is so rarely agitated by storms between the tropics along the coast of America, that vessels are safe in all places that are a little sheltered. To this advantage, common to all the creeks on this coast, the bay of San-Buenaventura joins a considerable extent and depth of water. The bottom is excellent, and ships of war can enter and remain at anchor without danger. The entrance is to the west south-west of Kascakral, whereas the mouth of the Dagua is to the south-east of the same point. This is not the only river which empties itself into it.

The port of San-Buenaventura depends on Choco, a very interesting but imperfectly known province of New Grenada. This country begins at the gulph of Mexico, borders the north-west upon the territory of the barbarous hordes who live three days' journey from Panama, comprising a part of the eastern Cordilleras, is bounded to the west by the great Ocean, and terminates on the south at Escuande, situated to the south south-east of the Gorgona, two days journey from San-Buenaventura.

As Holland has been able by artificial means to make all its provinces communicate by water, so Choco is full of natural canals, which afford convenient means of intercourse between the gulph of Mexico and the great Ocean ; to render them the more easy, it would be sufficient to cut through the isthmus of San-Pablo ; then one might go from San-Buenaventura to la Quebrada de San-Joachim, which may be ascended in five hours ; two hours are sufficient to cross by land, the space between San-Joachin and the Guineo, which empties itself into the Calima. You descend this river till it falls into the San-Juan ; thence it takes one day to the Monguido ; from the Monguido to Panama, one day ; from Panama to Noanamon, one day ; from Noanamon to la Boca de Dispurdu del Goasimon, one day ; from Dispurdu to la Boca de Tamana, one day ; from la Boca to Novita, six hours ; from Novita to la Boca San-Pablo, one day ; the isthmus of San-Pablo is traversed in four hours ; on the other side at San-Pablito, you embark on the Rio-Quito, reach in one day la Boca Certiga, and in another day, from Citara to the Atrato : from Citara to the mouth of the river, it is hundred and thirty-four leagues. In fifteen days therefore one may go from one extremity of the province to the other, or from the Escuande, to the mouth of the Atrato.*

This large proportion of water, so advanta-

* Vide note XII.

geous to commercial intercourse, causes throughout the country a too great humidity, which the nature of the soil contributes to maintain. In fact from the sea-coast to the Cordilleras, Choco forms but one plain, which, in its greatest extent, may be about thirty leagues, is very low and covered with impenetrable forests; the west north-west wind which daily blows on these coasts, violently impels the clouds against the mountains, where they accumulate, break, and daily pour down torrents of rain which supply the infinite numbers of rivers with which the country is intersected in all directions. It would therefore be very difficult, without considerable expense to have good roads; in this respect, the nature of the country has been favorable to the Spanish policy which dreaded, in the highest degree, all connexion between the countries of the interior, and the great Ocean; even now it is attended with the greatest difficulty.

The continual humidity which prevails in Choco, renders the climate, notwithstanding its latitude, very supportable, and at the same time very unhealthy; the heat is tempered in this marshy country, but on the other hand, as nothing can become dry there, the strongest constitution is undermined; all Europeans fall ill. The sun is not often seen, being almost constantly obscured by clouds; sometimes however, when it approaches the horizon, it shines with

extraordinary splendor, and seems by the purple and golden tints with which it adorns the sky, destined to console this country so abundant in treasures, and so seldom enlivened by a fine day.

The soil of Choco has no variety ; no rocks are seen except in the beds of rivers ; the lands near the mountains are rich ; we remark however but little cultivation ; that which has been here and there attempted, has produced such abundant crops as should be an inducement to extend it. The soil is in general of a very bright red colour, it consists of undulating vallies which contain very fine pastures ; the mountains, which surround them, are clothed with forests, into which man has never yet penetrated. There is a covering of gravel, sand, stones, and clay parallel to the horizon and confined within narrow limits. It begins at a 100 varas* above the level of the sea, and terminates at 800. It is there that gold is found, always mixed with platina ; beyond this point no metal is discovered. Thus not only the surface of Choco possesses the richest forests, but the most precious and abundant treasures are extracted from its bosom ; gold is found wherever it is dug for, if care be taken not to go beyond the limits here pointed out.

In the midst of all these riches, man is poor

* About 259 French feet.

and miserable, it is only on the eminences which are met with from time to time on the banks of the rivers that he has built his dwelling, raising it upon pillars : the beams and the floors which compose it, and the roof which covers it are all of bamboos.

It is impossible to grow culinary vegetables in the natural soil, because the humidity would destroy them ; they therefore erect a flooring of bamboo several feet above the ground, which they cover with a thick layer of earth ; thanks to this precaution, the vegetables they sow thrive very well. The same means are not necessary for the maize, sugar-cane and bananas ; these plants thrive remarkably well in these marshy countries ; they might be grown in abundance if the constant dampness of the soil did not hinder the inhabitants from burning the forests which cover it, and from clearing a large extent of ground for cultivation. For the same reason, pastures are rare ; we therefore see but few cattle : while on the bank of the eastern Cordilleras, no value is attached to this kind of property, the inhabitants of Choco attempt in vain to increase the number of their domestic animals.

Thus the inhabitants of Choco have not, like those of the Magdalena, fine days to console them in their poverty ; the rain daily inundates their retreats, and cover with mud the spot they occupy ; their canoe is perhaps the most healthy, if

it be not the driest place where they can live, and they accordingly pass all their time in it. Their huts are uninhabitable sties, and when they ascend by means of a beam of wood rudely cut into steps, to the chamber where they sleep, the slight roof is no defence against the rain which every where penetrates. The inhabitants of Choco, are therefore very miserable, and it is very difficult for the population to increase in this country. It does not now amount to more than twenty thousand souls, and yet the province is nearly a hundred leagues in extent. The number of villages, if we may call by that name two or three huts, collected in one spot, is very limited. They are inhabited for the most part by negroes, people of colour and some Indians. The latter, though very mild, are still little better than savages. They are entirely naked; the women wear only an apron. They paint themselves of divers colours; this they say is a dress which clothes them. It is remarked, that the men prefer red, and the women black. They make in their ears large holes, in which they put bones, reeds or feathers. They blacken their teeth. These people are not brave; they fly into the woods if a stranger enters their villages. The women weep and hide their faces with their hands, when spoken to. The Indians have a violent antipathy to the negroes, and yet out of fear, give them, as they do the whites, the title of *Amo* (master.)

The men in general are better made than the women; their features are more regular, and change less with time. The industry of these Indians is confined to the weaving of baskets or the manufacture of straw hats. Like all men of their race they do not love the whites, fear them greatly and never seek to form alliances with them.

The language of the Indians of Choco is remarkable for the harshness and roughness of the pronunciation. By questioning these people we can learn what things they possessed before the arrival of the Spaniards; for they have in general adopted the Castilian names for horses, cows, wheat, &c., while maize, sugar-cane and potatoes, have proper names in the language of these Indians.*

The blacks predominate in Choco. Almost all the negroes are slaves and work in the mines. The number of mulattoes is inconsiderable; they here constitute the patrician class and are almost all proprietors of mines.

Independent of gold and platina† this country might export a considerable quantity of valuable wood, resins, gums, tortoiseshell and pearls from the Gorgona. The dearness of provisions, the difficulty of collecting the productions, the bad condition of the towns and the ports, the

* Vide Note XIV.

† Platina is sold at three or four piastres per pound.

insalubrity of the air, which even obliges the government to increase the salaries of its officers one third, will long deter merchants from resorting to it. A good road from the sea to the valley of the Cauca is particularly necessary; all those which have been made are very bad. The ports which are at present the most frequented, are upon the great Ocean, namely Escuande, el Varo, San-Buenaventura, Chirambira, and Cupica; on the gulph of Mexico, all the intercourse is carried on by the Atrato. Vessels of any considerable burden remain at the mouth of this river, where they generally are able to negotiate with the captain who guards the entrance. They agree with him for the purchase of tortoiseshell; the English commonly prefer to treat with the Cunannas whose ignorance they easily deceive. In general, therefore, only the Champans of Carthagená are seen at Citara, a port of the Atrato and chief town of the northern part of the province. There are not a thousand inhabitants at Citara.

I found three Frenchmen at Kascakral. It will be easy to conceive the surprise and joy we mutually experienced on meeting at so great a distance from our native country. My companions had been by no means successful in business. After having engaged a passage on board a ship of Guayaquil, they took leave of me, and I was left alone. The pleasure which I felt at meeting with these Frenchmen, in a

place where I was so far from expecting it, greatly increased my desire of seeing my country again. At first fortune did not favour my impatience. There was in the port only one vessel, a schooner from Païta which was bound for Panama: though I had heard a great deal of the inconveniences to which passengers are subject, I did not hesitate to take a passage in it, for which I agreed to pay forty-five piastres.

The cargo of this vessel consisted of onions and salt. The delay in the sale of these articles impeded our departure. The vexation which this delay gave me, the privations I endured, and the kind of famine I had suffered ever since I left Cali, brought on an inflammatory fever; I thought for some moments that I should never leave Kascakral, but my constitution resisted the disease. I soon recovered, and was able, on the 4th of November, to go on board. All our provisions consisted of some yards of dried meat.

I was lodged in the store room; this was the cabin. The rain setting in during the night, the crew took shelter in it, and then closed all the openings. I was stifled; the heat, the offensive exhalations from the garlick, the onions, the bacon and the dirty clothes of the sailors prevented me from sleeping; however, thinking to set sail the same night I did not complain.

My expectation was deceived, the captain did not return on board till day-break, when they prepared to set sail. I came out of the filthy hole in which I had passed so wretched a night. To my great surprise I found on deck seven sailors, eight passengers, and the three negroes of Païta with whom I had travelled to las Juntas. The captain took the speaking trumpet and gave the word of command, with the coolness and importance which skill and experience inspire. Every body worked, but with so little dexterity that it took much time before we could get out to sea, though among the sailors there were two Genoese. It could not fail to excite surprise to see two men of the country of Columbus in the pay of an Indian captain. This man, notwithstanding the arrogance with which he gave himself out for a Spaniard, had no feature which could, in this respect, impose upon a European; he was fat, of very low stature, had a square countenance and tanned complexion; his small eyes placed obliquely, his long hair braided on the top of the head after the manner of the Chinese, fully justified the title of *Chinos*, Chinese, which is given to the inhabitants of Païta*. May we not suppose that, after that

* Some years ago San Martin made the soldiers of Païta have their hair cut; this measure met, with strong opposition.

town had been burnt by Anson, the Spaniards repeopled it with Chinese from Manilla?

At last we set sail, and doubled the sand bank to the left of the bay, and the two insulated rocks which terminate it on the right. My Peruvians had given me a very poor proof of their ability, and I much feared lest their imprudence should cost me dear; but I soon gave up my bad opinion of them when I saw them boldly launch into the open sea, and in spite of their cotton sails, the cordage which was quite chafed, and the heavy and unmanageable sails of the schooner, steer off from the coast, and, without any other guide than the compass and some points the position of which is perfectly known to them, navigate without sextant, and without a log, pass near the pearl island, and arrive at Panama without any accident.

I must confess however, that I was not always without uneasiness, respecting their experience, though, on the other hand, I was tranquillized by the calmness of the sea. The sailors of the great Ocean are so timid that, on the least agitation of the waves, mine began to sing hymns; this seemed to presage great dangers; every morning and evening they assembled to invoke the protection of the Saints, whose existence the captain afterwards had the boldness and impiety to deny when the winds grew calm, and we approached near to Panama.

We cast anchor in the roads of this town on the 12th of November, after a voyage of eight days. Though it was night, and I was exhausted by several days fasting and fever, I went on shore. I found a room, a bad supper and a hammock ; but I enjoyed during a few moments reflection, which preceded my sleep, the inexpressible pleasure of being on land, far from the pestilential exhalations of the vessel of Païta, from the brutal savages on board it, and from all the hardships that are experienced at sea, and which I had felt to their fullest extent in my passage from San-Buenaventura to Panama.

The great Ocean, between the tropics, enjoys like the Cordilleras, a temperature which is almost constantly the same. The air is calm, and but seldom agitated by the dreadful storms which ravage the gulph of Mexico*. As in the Cordillera, the atmosphere is cooled by two general winds or monsoons. Thus the wishes of the navigators on this Ocean, like those of the cultivator in the Andes, are seldom disappointed ; his only cause of complaint is that he is sometimes detained in his course by the want of wind. Between the tropic of Cancer and the line, the winds blow from November to April from the north and are rainy ; during the other six, when they come from the

* The establishment of steam boats would be very easy and advantageous on the great Ocean, in a few years the English will have them between Lima and Panama.

south, they are dry. This order is sometimes interrupted by west winds or by easterly breezes, which are at times pretty violent before the isthmus of Panama. These exceptions do not however destroy the influence which the Cordillera has upon the great Ocean, and which is said to be perceptible two hundred leagues from the continent. Two main currents have been observed; as well as the tides they are very strong.

The sky in these seas has neither the azure of that of the Canaries, nor the ashy whiteness of that on the coasts of the Zahara; it rather resembles that of our western maritime provinces. In proportion as the Cordilleras approach the sea the sky is less sombre; near Panama it has only some scattered clouds; from Païta to Lima it is dry, fogs take the place of the rains which fall periodically between Guayaquil and la Veragua. The great Ocean is almost solitary between Lima and Mexico; but few ships are met with. The commerce is confined to six principal ports: Valparaiso, (Chili), Callao, (Peru), Guayaquil, and Panama, (Colombia), San-Blas, and Acapulco, (Mexico.) A small number only of English, French, Genoese, and north Americans go higher than Guayaquil. The English of Jamaica, who have the monopoly of the trade of the isthmus of Panama, are said to send merchandize to the value of two millions of piastres. They employ a ship of war to protect the small vessels used in

this trade : they take great care to send them at different times, that there may not be any glut at Panama, and consequently a decline in the prices. The returns from Mexico, by this channel, consist of silver ; those from Guayaquil of gold and cocoa.

The ships of Païta alone carry on the coasting trade. This port of Peru, which has been burnt at two distant periods by two Englishmen, Anson in 1741, and Cochrane in 1810, contains a population of very active Indian half whites. They are the Bretons of the great Ocean, and are met with every where. The cargoes they take, and which are sufficient to maintain the intercourse between Panama, Guayaquil and Peru, consist of wine of Lambaïke*, salt, onions, garlic and scullions. The price of these articles like that of the macaw of Cuba at Carthagená, occupies much more attention than that of gold and pearls. Thus Holland founded its wealth on the herring fishery ; but Païta is very far from that point.

Guayaquil is, at present, the most important port in the great Ocean ; numerous vessels are attracted there by the quantity of goods collected which consist of cocoa, coffee, wood of all kinds and cocoa-nuts. This latter article, though of little value, is in great request : in general the fortun-

* A town of Peru.

of nations has been founded on the sale of the commonest articles. Ships seldom put into Buenaventura or Panama ; there nothing is to be had, and here there is only a transit trade which is entirely in the hands of the English. In consequence, if they do not return from Guayaquil to Europe, they prefer employing two months to go as high as San-Blas to sell mercury and other goods receiving ingots in return. Though the ships fitted out in the great Ocean are not numerous, yet the trade in iron, tar and cordage is not inconsiderable ; iron is sold at 10 piastres, cordage 16, and tar from 8 to 10 piastres per quintal.

Provisions are scarce and dear in all the ports : no dependence can now be placed on the kind hospitality of the inhabitants of the Cordilleras, every thing is sold and at a high price ; services, attention, every thing must be paid for : in consequence of the increased connexion of these countries with Europe, who knows how high they will rise ? The people who inhabit the coast of the great Ocean from Lima as far as Panama, have an Asiatic physiognomy and habits ; they are greedy and self-interested, and have entirely retained the moral and physical character of their ancient fellow citizens of the Philippines.