

CHAPTER XXIII.

Departure from Panama—Cruces—The river Chagres—The Gorgona—Chagres.

I LEFT Panama on the 18th of November, at six o'clock in the morning, accompanied by a muleteer. He had with him two baggage mules, one of which I mounted, and observing it shod, presaged that I should meet with very bad roads. My conjectures were not ill-founded.

Compared with the country I had just traversed, the Cordillera is here very low; the traveller is, however, obliged to be always ascending and descending, and that with some difficulty, for the ground, continually inundated by the storms of rain which come from the two seas, is nothing but one deep bog, rendered the more dangerous, by the stones which the ignorant labourers have thrown in it, by way of making it firmer. The traveller does nothing but slide about and fall, and is in water during the whole of the road. Upon arriving nearly half way, the declivity of the mountains is to be descended, which is far more steep on the side of the Caribbean Sea than on that of the Pacific. The

rain and the bad state of the roads prevented my arriving before seven o'clock at Cruces,* a village entirely inhabited by people of colour. One of them received me with much kindness; but his cabin presented the same scene of dirt as is general with these men.

I, therefore, congratulated myself upon being able to leave Cruces the next day, and embark in one of the *bongos* which navigate the Chagres. These piraguas are so lofty, that the negroes cannot row in them without standing upon the benches. An officer, charged with orders for the intendant of Panama, was my travelling companion; I had imagined that his presence would have rendered our passage shorter, and that I should reach Chagres the same night; it, however, made it much longer. At 11 o'clock in the morning, this young man stopped at the village of Gorgona, peopled with negroes, and composed of huts still more filthy than those of Cruces. The rain, as is the case till the end of December, was then beginning to fall. The officer was fearful of getting wet, and Gorgona offered him such seducing charms, that he resolved to pass the day there. The piragua was under the orders of this courier, and we were compelled to remain. The negroes were delighted at finding a white as indolent as themselves. We

* Had the road been better, three hours would have sufficed to go from Panama to Cruces.

recommenced our voyage at four o'clock in the morning. It was cold, and the slaves had muffled themselves up, one in the cap, and the other in the cloak of the obliging officer.

We continued our voyage the whole of the day between the Cordilleras, whose summits, but little elevated, appear of a considerable height, in comparison with the low and boggy shores of the Chagres. This river is not very wide, but its deep and peaceful waters afford a pleasant navigation. Its banks are generally covered with thick woods. Now and then a solitary hut is perceived, in which a few negroes live, surrounded by marshes; these huts are so damp, that their roofs, as in the cold countries, are covered with moss. We perceived Chagres at two o'clock in the afternoon. Four foreign vessels were at anchor. The view of Chagres is rather picturesque. An enormous rock, on which rises a castle regularly built of stone, defends the river against the Gulf of Mexico, whose waves mingle with its own; there is not, however, much motion; the mouth of the river is open to the north. The village, protected against the encroachments of the sea, and the attacks of external enemies, extends along the gentle declivities of the coasts. The water near land is so shallow, that piraguas alone can approach it.

When we had disembarked, I looked out for a hut, and soon found one very commodious for

the country; I will describe it, in order that some idea may be formed of Chagres. It was of bamboos, and consisted of two rooms; one was the kitchen, the other the sleeping room. A hammock, suspended from the middle of the first, served as a canopy, under which sat all the inmates. At night, they spread out upon the ground ox's hides and barrels of meal, these served for beds. To increase the disorder, cooking went forward in the same room; the fireplace consisted of three stones. Cords tied across the chamber were loaded with sausages, puddings, and meat, which were being dried by the smoke of the fire. Lastly, they had put upon a table all kinds of pots, which were alternately passed from the kitchen to the sleeping room, where the mother lived alone. She was a mulattoe, extremely old, but excessively proud at seeing her grand-daughter entitled by the fairness of her skin, to enter the cast of the whites.

These smoky habitations, erected in the midst of pestiferous marshes, often contain prodigious riches, the defence of which is confined to a few reeds, and a leather door tied with cords. The merchant, however, deposits his fortune here without the least uneasiness or risk; not a bale is opened, not a single box is ever forced. This wretched village, therefore, presents the appearance of opulence, nor did I, in any other part of the republic, ever see so much

money in circulation. There are few negroes who do not gain from 60 to 80 piastres a week ; these prodigious gains are all spent at little stalls, which are well stocked with wine and liquors.

The climate of Chagres, although extremely warm and damp, is not fatal ; all Europeans fall ill there, but very few do not recover. Living is very dear in this frightful spot, the price of a fowl being one piastre, and often two. Water and wood is also very difficult to be obtained in these inundated forests, as the negroes despise this kind of work, as producing little profit, and being very laborious : these men, when free, will not work without the certainty of considerable gain.

A great number of piraguas are employed in transporting the accumulated English manufactures into the huts of the Chagres, which are thus changed into warehouses, the hire of which is very dear ; for example, 400 francs* per month when the convoys arrive : a loaded bongo takes four days to ascend to Cruces. Each package† pays two piastres freight from Chagres to Cruces, and two more from Cruces to Panama. The freight from Jamaica to Chagres is also two piastres.

The inhabitants of Chagres are so united

* About £15 sterling.

† From 150 to 200lb.

amongst themselves, that neither contribution nor conscription can be levied among them. The system of suspicion established by the Spaniards in the Isthmus, equally exists under the present government, and the police regulations, with respect to passports, are very severe. Strangers are not allowed to enter the castle, which is but indifferently fortified.

An English brig of war is the only vessel of tolerable size which has come up to Chagres, for the strait is so narrow, that schooners of common tonnage alone can anchor there. Those of the English bring stuffs, and carry away the gold of Colombia and Peru, and the silver of Mexico. The cargoes of the north Americans, who undertake here, as else where, to furnish the people with provisions, consist of salted meats, cod, onions, and some goods which they purchase at Jamaica. They smuggle over great quantities of contraband tobacco, under the name of Havannah tobacco.

I have dwelt at some length upon the different parts of the Isthmus of Panama which I visited, as it appeared to me that the description of these places might be read with some interest. In fact, if the policy of the Spanish Americans, or their indifference did not leave the roads in so bad a state, every possible convenience might be met with, especially on the route to Portobello,

the port of which is very secure. The English, who permit no commercial advantage to escape them, have undertaken, as I am informed, to open a road from that city to Cruces, and from thence to Panama, upon condition of being exclusively authorized to transport the merchandize, a privilege for which they offer to pay the government the tenth part of their profits.