

NATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE MEXICANS.

From "Notes on Mexico, made in 1822. By the Hon. Joel R. Poinsett.

Notwithstanding the little time I have to spare, I have spent part of the day in leave taking, for nothing could induce me to be wanting in respect to people, who have treated me with so much kindness and hospitality. The gentlemen with whom I have associated, are intelligent men; and those who have had it in their power to pursue liberal studies, are fond of literature and science. The Creoles in general, possess good natural talents, and great facility of acquiring knowledge, They are extremely mild and courteous in their manners, kind and benevolent toward each other, and hospitable to strangers. Their besetting sin is gambling. The married women are very pleasing in their manners. They are said to be faithful to the favoured lover, and a liaison of that nature does not affect the lady's reputation. The young women are lively and accomplished. They sing and play agreeably, dance well, and know all they have an opportunity of learning. If they would leave off the detestable practice of smoking, they would be very pleasing and amiable. This is to be understood as characterizing society generally. There are certainly some young ladies, (very few I am afraid,) who do not smoke--some married women (may I hope) who have no lover, or if this would be interpreted to derogate from their charms, who consider him only as a convenient dangler, and are fondly and faithfully attached to their husbands; and there are certainly many gentlemen who are not gamblers.

It is difficult to describe accurately a nation composed of such various ranks, and of so many different castes as that of New Spain. The most important distinction, civil and political, was founded on the colour of the skin. Here to be white, was to be noble; and the rank of the different castes is determined by their nearer or most distant relation to the whites, the last in the scale being the direct or unmixed descendants of the Africans or Indians.

The character of the Indian population, which exceeds two millions and a half, remains very much the same as that of the lower class of the natives is described to have been at the time of the conquest. The same indolence, the same blind submission to their superiors, and the same abject misery are to be remarked. The forms and ceremonies of their religion are changed, and they are, perhaps, better pleased with the magnificence of the Catholic rites than with their former mode of worship. They take a childish delight in forming processions, in which they dress themselves most fantastically, and the Priests in many parts of the country, have found it necessary to permit them to mingle their dances and their mummeries with the Catholic ceremonies. They were oppressed and trodden under foot by their emperor and caciques; and ever since the conquest, they have been oppressed by laws intended to protect them. For the most part, they are distributed in villages, on the most barren and unproductive lands, and are under their own caciques, who are charged with the civil government, and with the collection of the tribute, a tax of about two dollars on each male, from ten to fifty years of age.

The castes, that is to say, the *mestizos*, descendants of whites or Indians; *mulattoes*, descendants of the whites and negroes; *samboes*, descendants of negroes and Indians—are scattered over the country as labourers, or live in towns as artizans, workmen, or beggars.—There are some Indians who have accumulated property, and some few of the castes may be seen living in comfort and respectability in the cities and in the country; but these instances are rare. From the cacique or Indian magistrate of the village, to the most abject of his fellow sufferers, they are indolent and poor. The only difference between them is, that the cacique does not work at all. By a law passed since the revolution, they are declared, together with all the castes, to be possessed of the same rights as the whites. The tribute is abolished; but they will be, as a matter of course, subject to the alcabala, or tax on the internal commerce, from which they were heretofore exempt. This declaration will produce no alteration in the character of this class of the population. Measures must be taken to educate them, and lands distributed among them, before they can be considered as forming a part of the people of a free government.

The titled nobility are white Creoles, who, satisfied with the enjoyment of large estates, with the consideration which their rank and wealth confer, seek no other distinction. They are not remarkable for their attainments, or for the strictness of their morals. The lawyers, who, in fact, exercise much influence over the people, rank next to the nobles. They are the younger branches, of noble houses, or the sons of Europeans, and are remarkably shrewd and intelligent. Next in importance are the merchants, and shop-keepers, for the former are not sufficiently numerous to form a separate class. They are wealthy, and might possess influence, but have hitherto taken little part in the politics of the country—most probably from the fear of losing their property, which is in a tangible shape. The labouring class in the cities and towns includes all castes and colours—they are industrious and orderly, and view with interest what is passing around them. Most of them read; and in the large cities, papers and pamphlets are hawked about the streets, and sold at a cheap rate to the people. The labouring class in the country is composed, in the same manner, of different castes. They are sober, industrious, docile, ignorant and superstitious; and may be led by their priests or masters, to good or evil. Their apathy has in some measure been overcome by the long struggle for independence, in which most of them bore a part; but they are still under the influence and direction of the priests. They are merely labourers without any property in the soil; and cannot be expected to feel much interest in the preservation of civil rights, which so little concern them. The last class, unknown as such in a well regulated society, consists of beggars and idlers, drones, that prey upon the community, and who, having nothing to lose, are always ready to swell the cry of popular clamour, or to lend their aid in favour of imperial tyranny.

The influence of this class, where it is numerous, upon the fate of revolutions, has always been destructive to liberty. In France they were very numerous; and the atrocities which disgraced that revolution, are, in a great measure, to be ascribed to this cause. In Mexico these people have been kept in subjection by the strong arm of the vice-regal government; but it is to be feared that they will hence forward be found the ready tool of every faction. The priests exercise unbounded influence over the higher and the lower orders in Mexico; and, with a few honourable exceptions, are adverse to civil liberty. It may not, perhaps, be altogether correct, to consider the influence of the clergy as confined exclusively to the upper and lower orders of society, but certainly a very large proportion of the middle class are exempt from it. Unfortunately too, many who were educated in the forms of the Catholic church, have emancipated themselves from its superstitions, only to become sceptics and infidels.