

THE
WEST INDIA
SKETCH BOOK.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BASSETERRE—SIGNS OF AFFLUENCE—STORES—PUBLIC BUILDINGS—EXTENT AND CHARACTER OF THE ISLAND—KNOT-GRASS AND GUINEA-GRASS—CAYON—PROVERBS—JELLY COCOA-NUTS—NEGRO DIALOGUE—A PORTRAIT—CATTLE CARTS—CAPTAIN DOVE—THE LODGE—PUNCH AND FIG-TAILS—CRABS—MONKEYS.

“ I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow ;
And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts ;
Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble marmozet.”

Tempest.

BASSETERRE is seen to great disadvantage after visiting the Danish colonies of Santa Cruz and Saint Thomas. It is not so extensive, nor so well built as Christianstadt, and Charlotte Amalia. The streets, which run at right angles, are mostly

unpaved, and have a deep sandy soil, yielding to the tread, and covering you with dust, and the few exceptions afford no redeeming benefit, with the chance of spraining an ankle, or snapping the tendon Achilles, in traversing the irregular flag-stones which slope from the houses towards the middle of the streets to form a gutter. Some of the habitations are built of a dark-coloured stone, others with the basement story only of that material, with a wooden superstructure, but most of them are built entirely of wood, uniformity in design or capacity seldom extending beyond half a dozen buildings in succession, without being interrupted by ill-constructed wooden tenements, or small square hovels of one or two rooms, that might be compared to bird-cages, jammed in between so many larger packages. These, in some instances, are occupied by indigent mechanics, or by coloured women who sell cakes and fruit, but they frequently appertain to the larger edifice for the accommodation of the servants; and in the open yard usually allotted behind the residence, there are often three or four or five of them, placed in such situations, and removed as convenience

may dictate. The kitchens are also detached from the dwelling. Here and there a well finished building, having an air of neatness and cleanliness afforded by paint, meets the eye, and bespeaks the superior taste, if not the opulence of the tenant; but the general aspect of the place denotes poverty and depression of trade, to which the paucity of persons seen abroad materially adds: and the shops, or stores, afford no relief in appearance either externally or within, to the prevailing effect. There are no capacious glazed fronts exhibiting in tasteful arrangement the several articles of the trader's stock; no emblazoned arms to notify distinction or pre-eminence in purveyors to his Excellency the Governor; no graining, and painting, and lettering, to engage the attention of the passer by; no "Red Lion," or "George and Dragon," to invite the traveller to alleviate his parched palate; and other metropolitan signs of a populous and affluent community are equally obsolete¹.

In the West Indies, hospitality is opposed to

¹ "Pour nous donner une idée," says a French writer, speaking of London upwards of a century ago—"du grand nombre de ses habitans, il remarque que treize cens apoticairens en prouvent l'affluence."

the well doing of inn-keepers: Old Madeira is a Catholicon to preserve health, calomel to restore it, and a *short* illness circumscribes the dimensions of a doctor's bill.

The stores, inside, are no less remarkable to a new comer, for the gloom which pervades most of them, the light being admitted into the extensive area only through a door, and perhaps one small window. Under a tropical sun, shade is naturally coveted by man for his own comfort, but in his depository for "pickled tripe, hams, ling-fish, salt butter, honey, hogs'-lard, candles, mill-grease and *gunpowder*," even damp maintains a preference over *heat*; and the effect we speak of, is materially promoted by the gloomy *exterior* of the buildings, which affords no reflected light, but rather adds to the depth of the shadows it casts. The generality of the houses inside, or that portion of them assigned to domestic intercourse, or to such business avocations as admit of different arrangements, is by no means gloomy, the great number of venetian windows admitting at discretion as much light and air as may be agreeable to the occupants.

The tradesman, or merchant, as he is more

commonly termed, is a sort of Caleb Quotum in commerce, his reputation and credit depending greatly upon anticipating all the wants of the community, and upon the length of his advertisements in the colonial newspapers. There is one remarkable distinction to be observed among the fraternity, which consists of those persons who deal exclusively in "dry goods," such as ironmongery, saddlery, haberdashery &c., and those who furnish articles of more general consumption; and the heterogeneous mixture of commodities in promiscuous heaps, *multifarius et omnifarius*, usually contained in their respective depôts, might lead the novice to imagine that he had got into Noah's store-room, and that the venerable cosmopolite had not only included in his viaticum ample supplies for the immediate demands both of man and beast, but that he had catered for artificial necessaries to suit the refinement of succeeding generations.

In the upper part of the town, on the boundary opposite to the beach, stands a church dedicated to Saint George. It has a square tower, whose elevation exceeds only by a few feet that of the roof which covers the main body of the building.

The whole fabric exhibited the powerful influence of a tropical atmosphere on the fragile materials of which it is built, and which had long been denied the protection of paint.

The court house, and council and assembly chambers, with the offices appertaining to them, under one roof, stand in the eastern quarter of the town, on one side of a square of about four acres in extent, denominated "the *pasture*," for no other reason that we could divine, than because it is destitute of *grass*. It is the market-place of the negroes, where they assemble to gossip and quarrel, as well as to dispose of their stock, to the infinite annoyance of the inhabitants of the surrounding buildings, who have their peace invaded by the interminable hubbub of their voices, seasoned with the compound effluvia of their persons and their cooking. It is also the place where the militia occasionally parade, and pigs, goats, and dogs enjoy their instinctive privileges.

Government house is situated in College-street, in the north-western suburbs, and at this time it was a very humble dwelling for the representative

of majesty, but it has been since converted into a very commodious and agreeable residence. Previously to quitting the town we paid our respects to his Excellency, an act which etiquette demanded of us on our arrival.

We have already noticed the form of this island, which has been compared in its outline to that of a lute, its longitudinal extremes lying *north-west* and *south-east*, the neck running in the latter direction, and having the town of Basseterre on the dexter shoulder. The extreme length is about twenty-one miles; its breadth at the broadest part about seven miles; and the road round the body by the coast, excluding the neck, extends upwards of thirty miles. It contains about sixty-eight square miles, or forty-four thousand acres, of which about thirty thousand are cultivable¹.

The road which diverges from the town in a north-easterly direction, approaches the windward coast at a distance of about two miles; the interior mountains flanking you on the left. The intermediate country abounds in objects of picturesque

¹ For a statistical account of the colony, see Appendix D.

interest, combining all the essential features of a rich and varied landscape; and the great number of windmills infuses into it a spirit of animation and cheerfulness. You will find the heat oppressive, and the roads dusty, until you approach the coast, when the sea breezes diffuse a refreshing coolness through the atmosphere, and render the journey pleasant. The estates on each side the road appeared to be suffering much from drought, and all of them were more or less overrun by a grass which is inimical to the sugar-cane, and which all the skill and perseverance of the planters could not eradicate. A small quantity of it was originally sent to the island as a present to a young lady by her sweetheart, (simple soul!) whence it gained a footing over the country; and if the execrations of the planters could aught affect him, he may have been doomed to a phytivorous diet for the rest of his life, with a fair fame to secure him a warm berth in purgatory. The grass bears the name of *knot-grass*, or *nut-grass*, from the small knots about the size of a small hazel-nut, which frequently occur in a fibrous root, and from which the grass is propagated, the fibres destroy-

ing, or retarding the growth of the young cane-plant¹.

Here and there the hedge-rows were formed of the logwood, or *lignum campechense*, which makes an excellent fence, somewhat resembling the quick-set; and in other spots appeared a beautiful flowering shrub, to which is assigned the several names of *flower-fence*, *Barbadoes-pride*, *doodle-doo*, and *poinciana pulcherrima*. It is also called *cauda pavonis*, on account of its singular beauty: and an extremely pretty vine, the wild liquorice, was seen occasionally intermingling its scandent tendrils with the leaves of the nearest tree or plant, and opening its ripened pods, to enliven with their red beads the varied tints of nature's gay attire. They are called by the negroes, *jumbe-beads*, (jumbe, an evil spirit) and are the same seen sometimes in England, of an oviform shape, with black spots at

¹ A very different result attended the accidental introduction of the *Guinea-grass* into Jamaica in 1744. The seed of it came as food for some birds sent from Africa as a present to the chief justice, but the birds dying it was thrown away. The eagerness of the cattle to eat the grass which sprang from it suggested the idea of cultivating it, which has been continued with great advantage to the planters, who appropriate large quantities of land to its growth, which had hitherto been too sterile to be productive.

one end, worn as necklaces by children : numerous lizards too, of various colours and shades, were seen now and then crossing the paths, or rustling among the fallen leaves.

At the distance of about five miles from Basseterre, we came to a spot of romantic beauty called *Cayon*, where the mountain waters were meandering through a deep and rocky ravine towards the sea, and where stood in the eddying currents about a dozen negresses, with their petticoats raised to the height of their knees, and their busts disencumbered of the upper part of their dress. They were in the act of washing linen, by a method assimilated to that of taking out stains with a pair of scissors, totally unscrupulous about causing a few holes, or the divesture of buttons and strings. They belaboured the garments most unmercifully with a piece of wood, as they lay on the huge stones, as if intent upon taking revenge upon the owners for an unpaid bill. Among the minor miseries of human life, we may certainly include that of dressing in a hurry—a misery in itself—and discovering that you lack either strings or buttons, or both, wherewith to accommodate your habili-