

utter desert. The road was strewed with the bones and dried skins of the many beasts of burden which had perished on it from fatigue. Excepting the Vultur aura, which preys on the carcasses, I saw neither bird, quadruped, reptile, nor insect. On the coast-mountains, at the height of about 2,000 feet, where during this season the clouds generally hang, a very few cacti were growing in the clefts of rock; and the loose sand was strewed over with a lichen, which lies on the surface quite unattached. This plant belongs to the genus *Cladonia*, and somewhat resembles the reindeer lichen. In some parts it was in sufficient quantity to tinge the sand, as seen from a distance, of a pale yellowish color. Further inland, during the whole ride of fourteen leagues, I saw only one other vegetable production, and that was a most minute yellow lichen, growing on the bones of the dead mules. This was the first true desert which I had seen: the effect on me was not impressive; but I believe this was owing to my having become gradually accustomed to such scenes, as I rode northward from Valparaiso, through Coquimbo, to Copiapó. The appearance of the country was remarkable, from being covered by a thick crust of common salt, and of a stratified saliferous alluvium, which seems to have been deposited as the land slowly rose above the level of the sea. The salt is white, very hard, and compact: it occurs in water-worn nodules projecting from the agglutinated sand, and is associated with much gypsum. The appearance of this superficial mass very closely resembled that of a country after snow, before the last dirty patches are thawed. The existence of this crust of a soluble substance over the whole face of the country shows how extraordinarily dry the climate must have been for a long period.

At night I slept at the house of the owner of one of the saltpetre mines. The country is here as unproductive as near the coast; but water, having rather a bitter and brackish taste, can be procured by digging wells. The well at this house was thirty-six yards deep: as scarcely any rain falls, it is evident the water is not thus derived; indeed if it were,