

Cumana, Coro, the island of Margareta, and Curassoa, are the parts of South America that abound most in plants of the nopal family. There only, a botanist, after a long residence, could compose a monography of the genus cactus, the species of which vary not only in their flowers and fruits, but also in the form of their articulated stems, the number of costæ, and the disposition of the thorns. We shall see hereafter how these plants, which characterize a warm and singularly dry climate, like that of Egypt and California, gradually disappear in proportion as we remove from the coasts, and penetrate into the inland country.

The groups of columnar cactus and opuntia produce the same effect in the arid lands of equinoctial America as the junceæ and the hydrocharides in the marshes of our northern climes. Places in which the larger species of the strong cactus are collected in groups are considered as almost impenetrable. These places are called Tunales; and they are impervious not only to the native, who goes naked to the waist, but are formidable even to those who are fully clothed. In our solitary rambles we sometimes endeavoured to penetrate into the Tunal that crowns the summit of the castle hill, a part of which is crossed by a pathway, where we could have studied, amidst thousands of specimens, the organization of this singular plant. Sometimes night suddenly overtook us, for there is scarcely any twilight in this climate; and we then found ourselves dangerously situated, as the Cascabel, or rattle-snake, the Coral, and other vipers armed with poisonous fangs, frequent these scorched and arid haunts, to deposit their eggs in the sand.

The castle of San Antonio is built at the western extremity of the hill, but not on the most elevated point, being commanded on the east by an unfortified summit. The Tunal is considered both here and everywhere in the Spanish colonies as a very important means of military defence; and when earthen works are raised, the engineers are eager to propagate the thorny opuntia, and promote its growth, as they are careful to keep crocodiles in the ditches of fortified places. In regions where organized nature is so powerful and active, man summons as auxiliaries in his defence the carnivorous reptile, and the plant with its formidable armour of thorns.