

S E C T. XXIX.

A Description of the Towns of El Hammah, Zaza, or Zaara, and of the Towns and District of Derne and Sidra.

EL Hammah, an ancient town long gone to decay, is situated in thirty-four degrees north latitude, and is only remarkable for its Roman walls of square stones, and some inscriptions mentioned by Leo Africanus and Dapper, but now so defaced as not to be read, and for its hot sulphureous springs, which are conveyed to it by an old aqueduct. It is now a poor miserable town, only inhabited by a few husbandmen and fishermen, and those who seek for a better livelihood from the piratical trade.

Zaza, or Zoara, another ruinous town, encompassed by an old decayed wall, and seated near the sea, about thirteen leagues from the island of Jerba, or Jerbis. It is at present inhabited only by poor people, who live either by burning quick-lime and pot-shees, or follow the piratical and fishing trade. All these stand on the eastern coast of the gulph of Sidra: those that are within it, and on its eastern side, are in a still more ruinous condition. What has most contributed to this and to the destruction of their piratical trade, on which, like their neighbours, they chiefly subsisted, is their being so near to the island of Malta; which being conveniently situated opposite to the coast, the knights of that island have constantly watched them, and, by suppressing their frequent excursions, oblige them to apply to fishing, and to cultivate as much land about those towns as will just serve them from hand to mouth.

The only place worthy of notice on the west side of the above gulph is Derne, now a small town. It stands about half a mile from the sea, and is surrounded with fine springs of sweet water, one of which runs through the town, and others round the walls, and therefore its territory is still capable of bearing corn and garden-stuff; but it is so poorly inhabited, that little advantage is obtained from it. This town is still the capital of a district of its own name, which extends from Cape Bomb on the east to the gulph of Bengali, which is above three hundred miles; but is chiefly inhabited by wandering Arabs, who are said to amount to thirty thousand families, that pay a small tribute to the bey of Tripoli. This tract is almost every where covered with a plant or shrub that bears a thick downy leaf, with branches of yellow flowers, and not only keeps green, but blossoms during the greatest part of the year. The bees chiefly feed upon this flower, which gives an excellent taste to their honey.

On the western side of the gulph of Sidra is also the district of Mefrata, which contains the country antiently called Cyrenaica and Pentapolis, from its then having five cities; but is now called Mefrata, from its capital. It has some towns and villages, both on the sea-side and within land, that trade with the Christians for European commodities, which they sell to the negroes, and exchange for slaves, musk, and civet, which they carry into Turkey. The inhabitants were formerly rich and warlike, impatient of the yoke of the Tunisiens, as they are now of that of the Tripolitans. They can number about ten thousand men fit to bear arms, and are often at war with the Arabs.

The other countries within land are still more desert and void of towns; they are inhabited by much the same people with the two last mentioned, live after the same manner, and are perpetually endeavouring to free themselves from the tribute exacted from them. The land is for the most part dry, barren, and covered with such light sand, that one cannot travel through it without sometimes sinking into it above the middle; so that were it not for the abundance of dates that grow there, and for some mountains that afford pasture for their cattle, it would be impossible to subsist.

S E C T. XXX.

Of the Desert of Barca, its Situation and Extent, and the Manners of the Inhabitants.

THE desert of Barca, situated between Egypt and what is more properly called the kingdom of

Tripoli, is in breadth from north to south about thirty leagues; but its confines on the south side must be acknowledged to be very uncertain.

This country is for the most part, especially in the middle, nothing more than a tract of dry and barren sands, on which account the Arabs, its principal inhabitants, stile it The desert or road of whirlwinds. It almost every where labours under a great scarcity of water; and, except in the neighbourhood of the towns and villages, where the earth produces a small quantity of grain, as corn, millet, and some maize, the rest is in a manner uncultivated. Even of the small quantity of corn produced in the few spots capable of cultivation, the poor inhabitants are obliged to exchange a part with their indigent neighbours for dates, sheep, and camels; these last they stand in greater need of than they, on account of their great scarcity of grass, and other proper food.

The most desert and dangerous canton of all is that in which the temple of Jupiter Ammon antiently stood, when, though in other respects pleasantly situated, was encompassed a great way round with such quick and burning sands, as have always been detrimental to travellers, not only as they sink under their feet, but, being light and heated by the rays of the sun, are easily raised by every breath of wind; which, if it happens to be in their faces, almost burns out their eyes, and stifles them for want of breath; and, if vehement, often overwhelms whole caravans. The sad catastrophe of Cambyfes and his army in his bold attempt against that temple and oracle, as well as Alexander's more successful, though difficult expedition thither, are well known. Upon the whole, the country may be justly termed so wild a desert, that there is no travelling through it without the direction of the stars, or the help of a compass; and though it was once the thorough-fare for the caravans from Barbary to Mecca, yet it has been since so infested with wild Arabs, that those caravans are obliged to travel a hundred and fifty miles about to avoid being plundered.

Some of the French geographers divide the country of Barca into what they term the kingdom, and the desert; the former of which has some considerable ports, towns, and villages, and is under the protection of the Porte, and governed by a cady who resides at Tripoli; but other authors call the coast, the eastern shore of Tripoli: it is, however, more commonly known by the name of Derne, from one of its most considerable towns and ports; besides which it has several others, and the ruins of many more, now reduced to poor villages; but what condition they are in, or by whom they are governed, is not known. Indeed the maritime towns are probably under the protection of the Porte; but whether under the government of the basha of Tripoli or Egypt, or whether they have formed themselves into independent states, like those of Tunis and Algiers, is not easy to determine.

The inhabitants of the maritime towns are more civilized and conversable than those of the inland country, and have imbibed notions of humanity and justice, while the people who live in the desert appear in many respects savages, and, like other wild Arabs, subsist by robbery and plunder.

It was indeed by the Arabs that this tract, till then a continued barren desert, was first inhabited; these, at their first coming into it, settled in the best cantons; but as they multiplied, and the several tribes engaged in frequent wars against each other, the strongest drove the weakest out of the best spots, and sent them to wander in the desert parts, where they live in the most abject and miserable condition, the country yielding little food and no raiment. Hence they are represented as being the most disagreeable of all the Arabs, their bodies having scarcely any thing but skin and bones, their faces are meagre, their looks fierce and ravenous, and their garb, which is what they commonly take from the passengers and pilgrims who travel through those parts, are tattered with long wearing, while the poorest have scarcely a rag to wrap round their waists. It is no wonder that these are said to be the most resolute and expert robbers and plunderers; but both frequently yield them to make excursions as far as into Numidia, Libya, and other southern parts, to obtain fresh supplies. Hardened by indigence, they