

A PAGE OF AMERICAN HISTORY.

BY EDWARD H. THOMPSON.

THE field whereon occurred the events which this paper chronicles is the whole Peninsula of Yucatan. The chief actors in these events are the descendants of the indomitable Maya race, that once made this peninsula the centre of a civilization, the descendants of the invading Spaniards who cut short the life of that civilization, and a band of strangers from the North. These last were the type of men that first tamed the wilds of Canada, made known the virgin richness of New England, settled Kentucky, and later drove the wedge of civilization into the unknown West.

At the time these events occurred, that called into play these three factors of humanity, the methods of communication throughout the peninsula were of a mediæval character. Native runners and vaqueros on horseback furnished the only means of rapid communication, while litters, man carried, the saddle, or the strange two-wheeled *volan coche*, drawn by three mules, furnished the means of rapid transit to the fortunate ones who could command such convenience. All others who travelled either went on foot or rode on the springless, brakeless, sideless *carreta*, drawn by six mules, that carried the heavy freight between the larger cities. In those days, many of the larger towns were not connected, even by a wagon road. A narrow, winding mule-path was the only connection with the outside world, and during the long night hours the hoarse cry of the *arrieres*, urging on the pack mules, was constantly heard.

There were revolutions in those days; sometimes, indeed, there were even revolutions within the revolution itself.

But strangely enough, with all this seething and foaming of heated blood and boiling ambition, as if clarified by it, there was evolved a spirit of letters among the cultured minds on the Peninsula, that has never been equalled before or since. Eligio Ancona, the novelist and historian, whose hatred of the Catholic religion was only equalled by his benevolence to some of its strongest adherents, Cresencio Carrillo, Bishop of Yucatan, whose hatred of atheism was only equalled by his benevolence toward some of its followers, Justo Sierra, Asnar Contreras are names of this epoch that still ring clear in Yucatan today.

The white Yucatecon of that day, whether hidalgo or artizan, was no degenerate. As a type he was generous but individually rather slow to arouse, passionate in the mass, hospitable and patriotic, although the patriotism of many was the loyalty to their leaders rather than devotion to the cause. They knew how to fight and they fought well, as the troops from Mexico, when arrayed against them, found out. Thus, man to man, native white against native red, the odds were not unequal. Today Yucatan has rapid trains, telegraph and telephone, well paved streets and all the most advanced ideas of the twentieth century.

Modern Yucatan finds it hard herself to realize that such events as are described herein have taken place within her borders and within the memory of men still living.

During the middle part of the last century, events were taking place in Yucatan that, had they happened in other lands or at other times, would have become subjects of epic poems. But the place of happening was on a distant, ragged edge of the American continent, more unknown, perhaps, to the average American of those times, than is the darkest spot of the Dark Continent to the citizen of today. Then, too, the time of happening was during one of those strange periods of world ferment, when each great nation was busy making its own history and had but little inclination to scan the minor records of its neighbors, near or

distant. Mexico herself was yet panting and heaving with the effects of her own struggles and in no condition to aid, while the United States was in the delirium of the gold fever, and besides, events were gradually shaping themselves that, later, were to lead to the war of the rebellion. Thus it was that when the "Sovereign State of Yucatan" was called upon to witness the death struggle between her white and her red-skinned children, she vainly called upon the outside world for aid and was finally compelled to rely upon such efforts as her patriotic sons could make.

It was during this life and death struggle between the two races that a page of American history became intercalated in the history of Yucatan, and though so saved, yet practically lost. It is the purpose of the writer to restore this page, a stirring record of deeds of valor and bizarre bravery of a band of American citizens, to its proper place in American annals. That we may see clearly and with understanding read this page, we must have before us a synopsis of the events leading up to the actions that it records.

From 1506 to 1519, various Spanish adventurers, Solis, Córdoba, Grijalva, and Cortes, had skirted the coasts of Yucatan and had at various times sought to make the land their own. Each time the assembled natives, well drilled, well armed for those times, and well led, received them so sturdily that the adventuresome strangers were very well content to betake themselves to their ships again while they were yet able, the more so as it at last became apparent that the conquest, even when made, offered them but little glory and still less gold, two things greatly sought for by these Castilian adventurers. Finally, in 1527, the hidalgo, Francisco de Montejo, came and spied out the land. By some occult process of reasoning he found it good. He struggled mightily at the task but died before he could prove his reasoning good, and his son took up the task that his father had turned over to him some time previous

to his death. The younger Montejo worked at it diligently, masterfully, as a smith works over refractory metal. The native Mayas were like very refractory metal, but the younger Montejo was like a very clever smith, and he found the flux that enabled him to make them like a molten, plastic mass under his manipulation. Then he kneaded and pounded and pressed them until they were moulded to his liking. To be sure, when he and his immediate successors had called their work well done there were many natives less in the land, but even then the Mayas outnumbered their conquerors by several hundred fold and only stern measures and the memory of merciless reprisals kept the conquered natives down. On the whole they kept them down below the danger mark, but the Maya race of Yucatan was seemingly a far more virile race than the natives of Cuba so quickly exterminated by the Spaniards, and despite their subjugation and the servile condition of even the highest among them, they not only increased in numbers but actually enforced their language upon their conquerors. Today, he who lives in Yucatan, outside the greater cities and cannot speak the native tongue, is like one apart.

Among the Mayas of every province, since the earliest days, there has been one of power and prominence, either by the inheritance of a noble family name or by a force of nature and strong will. When the Spanish laws came into force and being, they left, to such of these Maya chiefs as evinced desires to do the bidding of these laws, a shadowy vestige of their old time power. These men, known then as now among the natives by the native title of *Batab*, were called by the Spaniards for some curious reason by the Haytian term of *Cacique*. *Batab* or *Cacique*, they were obeyed most implicitly by the native people, who were thus by their influence made better citizens and servants. But from this class of natives, born to command and strong in will power, were to come, in later years, the leaders destined

to lead the rebellious natives to many fearful victories over the descendants of the hated white invaders.

At the time of Stephens's famous visit to Yucatan (1839-1841) the native race was still in the sullen apathy of the conquered towards the conquerors. There was an apparent tranquility over all the Peninsula. Travellers could and did journey from Bacalar to Valladolid and from Valladolid to Merida without danger to life and without more discomforts than was incident to the rigors of the sun, the presence of irritating insects and the primitive ways of conveyance. This apparent quiet was not the tranquility of contented prosperity but the sullen constraint, and beneath that deceptive calm was a deep, seething hate that only needed able leaders and a favorable opportunity to find vent and overwhelm the land in a carnage as terrible as that of the Sepoys in Eastern India. Able leaders were ready, planning, scheming, resourceful, patiently biding their time and opportunity.

About fifty miles to the south of Valladolid was (in 1847) the old ranch of Tihum. No one knows its age or origin. and it may well have been a native ranch before the conquest. Great trees were grown up around it, trees that may antedate the Conquest. Neither the Government or the Church had more than a vague knowledge of its existence, and no chapel or cross was ever found within its confines. No one knows what idolatrous rites had taken place within the darkness of its hidden history. Within the safe confines of this ranch, three powerful Caciques of Yucatan, Ay, the Cacique of Chichimila, Cecilio Chid the ferocious, tigerish cacique of Tepich and Jacinto Pat, the astute and able cacique of Tijosuco, together with others of lesser note, plotted and planned. Here, under the dark, noisome shade of the great trees was brewed the venom of the secret rebellion against the white race, a rebellion that was destined to last for half a century and to reduce the population of Yucatan from 531,000 souls in 1847 to 312,000

in 1900. Strange as it may seem, the white population of Yucatan went on their accustomed ways with an incredible sense of security. Although events that should have warned them were not lacking, few or no attempts were made to assuage the many real and some fancied wrongs against the native race. On the contrary, with strange obsession various local magnates by high-handed and arbitrary measures actually seemed to invite the outbreak.

THE WAR OF THE RACES BEGINS.

Don Miguel Rivero, an old planter, living on his plantation "Acambalam," some thirty miles from Valladolid, was a victim to insomnia and was accustomed to take long nocturnal strolls about his plantation. While thus occupied he noted, night after night, large bodies of Indians stealthily passing his ranch, going with the quick native trot, toward Calumpich, the principal ranch and abiding place of Jacinto Pat, the Cacique of Tijosuco. Distrustful of the cause, he sent a faithful native servant to join one of these bands as they passed and learn what it all meant. The servant soon came back and reported that there was to be a great uprising of the Indians all over Yucatan, and that these they saw were carrying provisions and powder and shot to Calumpich to be kept hidden until ready for use. Finding his fears only too well founded, Rivero fled with all his family to Valladolid and there gave his fateful news to the authorities. Even while the authorities were taking the declaration of Rivero an urgent communication came from the judge in the town of Chichimila, the town of which the native Manuel Ay was Cacique, informing them that Manuel Ay, while under the influence of liquor had revealed the fact that a general uprising of the natives was about to take place. With these facts before them the local authorities and the general government acted with great but belated energy. May was arrested and, confessing his part, was at once executed. But the time for the revolution had so nearly

come that when Pat and Chi heard of their fellow conspirator's capture, which they did with marvellous quickness by the means that the natives know so well how to use, "the grapevine telegraph," they at once gave the signal and immediately wails of human suffering and despair rose all over the country. It is useless to go into detail; from now on, burned villages, outraged homes, and bloody work, not wholly on the side of the Indians, make a long and evil list not good to look upon and one that I shall leave with pleasure.

The rebellious natives seemed for a while unconquerable; their savage ferocity and valor seemed irresistible. The long highway from Valladolid to Merida was thronged with constant streams of weary pilgrims striving to reach safety. At times the natives would plunge with the ferocity of demons upon these throngs of panic-stricken pilgrims, and at other times they would most strangely refrain from bloody deeds when they might easily have worked a fiendish will had they so desired. It is supposed that Jacinto Pat, the most humane of the rebellious chiefs, held back his band from useless rapine and slaughter, while Cecilio Chi, a human tiger, lost no time to glut his appetite for outrage and bloodshed. For a time it seemed as if the rebellious natives would indeed make good their threats and drive the white men into the sea. Town after town, city after city, fell by the torch and mascab of the triumphant Mayas.

From bleeding Yucatan went up a bitter wail for succor. Commissioners were sent to Mexico, to the United States, and even to the island of Cuba, asking for aid. At last, in very desperation, she was willing to sacrifice her dear bought independence to save her actual existence, and the authorities of the United States were informally consulted on that delicate point, but the opinions given were so unanimously against the probabilities of success on that line that the project was given up.

But while the United States could not and would not interfere in the matter officially, it has been stated by those who were at the time in a position to know, that all possible aid and encouragement, short of actual and direct official aid, was given them in this their hour of need. How much or how little truth there is in this statement is not for me to say at this time, whatever I may discover and make public at a later date. Suffice it now to say that in the year 1847 a well drilled, well armed and perfectly uniformed force of nine hundred and thirty-eight men disembarked at the then port of Sisal, from sailing vessels hailing from New Orleans, and were at once ordered to Merida, where they went into barracks on the site of what is now the Suburban Police Station, at Santiago Square. From there they went, as ordered, to the front, and most of them to their death, for I am told that of the nine hundred and thirty-eight that disembarked at Sisal, only eleven lived to reach the United States.

From now on I shall quote the statements of active participants on both sides of the struggle, statements made to me personally and noted down with great care. Two of the survivors of the Americans, Edward Pinkus and Michael Foster, were yet living in Merida during my remembrance. Of these two, one, Pinrus, has since died and the other, Foster, still lives but with impaired mind. Fortunately, before the one had died and the other had lost his intelligence, I had improved a favorable opportunity and had obtained from them statements as given below.

Edward Pinkus was born, he told me, in Warsaw in 1820; he came to America at an early age and in due time became a full American citizen and an enthusiastic admirer of our American institutions. He was with General Scott throughout the Mexican war. After peace was concluded he returned to the United States, where he lived until summoned by his old officer, Col. White, of the Southern

Rangers, to serve as his adjutant on an expedition against the rebellious Indians of Yucatan. After the Rangers were formally disbanded (death had practically disbanded them some time before), Pinkus, wounded and sick nigh unto death, returned to Merida. There he was tenderly nursed back to life and health by the lady, a native of Merida, whom he afterward married. Afterward he went in and fought against the French by the side of Juarez. When peace was again declared he returned to Merida and started what was then the finest tailoring establishment in the province. He lived to see his sons grow up to be men of influence and respectability in the community. He died in 1904, indirectly from the wounds received in the fights with the Indians. I now give his direct, personal statement:—

“I came over as Adjutant to Col. White, commanding Southern Rangers. Our officers were Col. White, Lieutenant Colonel Linton, Captain Smith and Captain Daws. Captain Daws came over first with two hundred men and Colonel White came over some time after, but Colonel White was in full command. We were in all nine hundred and thirty-eight men and, of all these fighting men, only eleven lived to reach the United States again. Our first fight with the Indians was at Sacalum and they beat us bad, for they fought like devils, but the second time they attacked us, at nine o'clock that same night, we beat them badly. I, with a part of our force was in Tijosuco when it suffered the great siege, and there we lost a great many men and officers. In the battles of Bacalar, in the three battles of Chan Santa Cruz, at Tabi, Peto and, most of all, at Calumpich, we lost most of our men. I was wounded three times. Captain Daws was one of those who lived to return to the States. When I was in San Francisco in 1890 I saw him there. He was short and fat but a good officer and very brave.”

Michael Foster, the second and last known survivor of the fighting Americans in Yucatan, was born in Philadelphia in 1823, and is now eighty-two years old. He was,

as he frankly states, of a roving, incorrigible disposition and apparently was given by the authorities the alternative of joining the expedition to Yucatan or going to prison. He enlisted and served with White until the rangers were disbanded, when he married a native of Yucatan by whom he had one son, Carlos Foster, still living.

Michael Foster was, at the time of making his statement, in 1904, clear in intellect but had almost forgotten his native tongue. He spoke the Spanish and the native Maya tongue with far greater facility than he did the English language. His statement is as follows:

“I came to Yucatan with Colonel White. We disembarked at Sisal and then marched on to Merida. There we executed the Cacique of Santiago; he was shot in the yard of the Santiago Police Station where we were in barracks. During the battles of Peto and Iehmul we lost many of our men. At Santa Maria we lost forty-seven and at Tabi thirty-six, but at Calumpich nearly three hundred of our bravest men were killed. The Indians there played us a trick; they made concealed pitfalls in the path and placed sharp pointed stakes at the bottom; then they appeared and dared us to come on; we rushed after them with hurrahs and many of our men fell into the pits; we lost many men that day but we killed a great many more of the Indians than they did of our men. Pinkus and myself are now the only ones left and I guess that we will go soon too. I am over eighty and have lived hard all my life.”

General Naverrette, an old Indian fighter of Yucatan, whose scarred body bears witness to his valor, stated to me as follows:

“Colonel White was my friend and so was Captain Daws; both were brave men and strict disciplinarians. The men they commanded were brave men and died valiantly, almost to a man. They suffered their greatest losses at the siege of Tijosuco and the battles of Calumpich.”

I will now give the statements of those who actually fought against those men and, right here it may be well to note two interesting facts, that by a curious coincidence make me, perhaps, of all living persons, the only man who could produce these statements. Several years ago, while on an exploration into the then almost unexplored interior, I chanced upon an aged native working his *milpa* alone. I spent some time in the neighborhood investigating a hitherto unknown ruined group, and during a part of this time he worked for me. Being conversant with his language, although a stranger, gave him confidence in me to the extent that he told me his life history. He had been one of the *Sublevados* and had fought in the battles of Tabi and Ichmul against the white strangers. Afterwards, when the great war chief, Cresencio Poot, was traitorously killed by an under chief, Aniceto Dzul, he, too, fled with other adherents of Poot, in fear of his life. Since then he had lived alone and in constant fear on one hand of the white men and on the other of the Indians. Upon my next return to Merida, I interested the Governor in his story and was to bring him back with me to Merida, guaranteeing him safety and good treatment. But when I went back on my next trip, no traces of him personally could be found, although his gun and his hammock were in their accustomed place. It seems most probable that he was killed, either by some poisonous reptile, a jaguar, or perhaps by some roving band of the *Sublevados*, his former companions.

The second interesting fact is that Leandro Poot, the younger brother of the former war chief of the rebellious Mayas, is now and has been for several years a dweller upon my plantation of Chichen. We have had many hours of pleasant and interesting conversation and the statement he gives was in this way obtained.

Dionisio Pec, the solitary maker of *milpas* made his statement as follows, and I have tried as far as was possible, to preserve his style of making it in the vernacular.

“Among those who fought us at Ichmul and Tabi were strange white men, ‘Dzulob.’ They fought like very brave men and caused us many deaths. We had guns and powder from Belize but we had few balls and so we often had to use small stones; also we made balls of red earth, well mixed with honey and hard dried in the sun. These balls made bad wounds and hard to heal. The stranger white men fought close together and for that reason it was easy to kill them. But they were brave men and laughed at death and before they died they killed many of our men.”

Statement of Leandro Poot, giving Cresencio Poot's account of the battle with the stranger white men:

“I was then young and not in the councils of those who commanded in those days, but I well remember the tales told me of the strange white men. When the strange white men came up against our people we were perplexed and did not know what to do. Our quarrel was not with them and they spoke the language of Belize, and Belize was not against us, so we waited to see what was meant. Then some of our people who came over to us from the white man's side, told us that these big stranger white men were friends of the white man of T'Ho (Merida) and had come to help him kill us. Then we fought them, but we had rather they had not come, for we only wanted to kill those that had lied to us and had done us great harm, to us and to our families, and even these we had rather send away across the water to where their fathers came from, and where they would cause us no more harm. It is finished. We fought them and we fought the white men from T'Ho and from Sacci (Valladolid) too, and we killed both the stranger white men and the white men from T'Ho and those from Sacci. It was easy to kill the stranger white men, for they were big and fought in line, as if they were marching, while the white men from T'Ho and Sacci fought as we do, lying down and from behind the trees and rocks.

“But these white men were very brave. Their captain was very brave. My brother said he was the bravest man he ever saw. So brave was he that my brother said he very foolishly spared his life once when he could easily

have shot him. My brother admired a brave man, but he said that he was foolish that he did not shoot the captain when he had the chance, for it is a man's duty to kill his enemy. But all the people said that the stranger white men were the bravest men they ever saw. They laughed at death and went toward it with joy, as a young man runs to a handsome woman. When first we met the stranger white men, they had built up, right in our path, a strong fence of thick tree trunks and behind that were the stranger white men and in the woods on each side were the white men from T'Ho and Sacci. Some of the stranger white men were clothed in uniform, the kind they always wore, while others were naked to the waist, with a red cloth tied around their heads and their swords buckled about their waists. Their big bodies were pink and red in the sunlight and from their throats came their strange war cry, Hu-Ha! Hu-Ha! (evidently a Hurrah). They were brave men and shot keenly. Some of them were such good shooters that no man could hope to escape when once they pointed at him; no, whether he ran or walked or crawled, it made no difference unless he could hide behind a tree before the shot was fired, and even then some of those who reached the tree were dead as they fell behind it, for the balls had found them, even as they ran behind it.

"So for a time we greatly feared these strange white men and only sought to keep out of their reach. Had they stayed behind their defences and only used their guns as they could use them, no one knows what might have happened, for our people were so scared of the big, pink-skinned men with their terrible cries and their death shots, that they could not be made to stand up against them. But the stranger white men were too brave, for they threw their lives away, and when they found that we did not come up to them, they jumped over the wall that they had made and came to seek us. We hid behind the trees and rocks, wherever we could, that they might not see us, and so, one by one, we killed them. They killed many of us but we were many times their numbers and so they died. Brave men, very brave. Some died laughing and some with strange words in their own tongue, but none died cowardly. I do not think any escaped. I think they lay where they died, for in those days we had no time to eat or to sleep or to bury the dead."

This can but serve as a simple brief made record of an interesting event gone by. The true record, replete in date and detail, must come later when time and circumstance permit the labor and fulfilment of the perfected work.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.