

INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL

IN

YUCATAN.

BY JOHN L. STEPHENS,

UTHOR OF "INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN EGYPT, ARABIA PETRÆA, AND THE
HOLY LAND," "INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN CENTRAL AMERICA," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY 120 ENGRAVINGS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

NEW YORK:

PUBLISHED BY HARPER & BROTHERS

FOR HENRY BILL.

1855.

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We stopped at Huncuma during the heat of the day; at dark reached Merida, and once more rode up to the house of Doña Micaela. Coming directly from home, we were not so much excited as when we reached it after a toilsome and comfortless journey in Central America; but even now it would ill become me to depreciate it, for the donna had read the account of my former visit to Merida, and she said, with an emphasis that covered all the rest, that the dates of arrival and departure as therein mentioned corresponded exactly with the entries in her book.

We had arrived at Merida at an opportune moment. As on the occasion of our first visit, it was again a season of fiesta. The fête of San Cristoval, an observance of nine days, was then drawing to its close, and that evening a grand *function* was to be performed in the church dedicated to that saint.

We had no time to lose, and, after a hasty supper, under the guidance of an Indian lad belonging to the house, we set out for the church. Very soon we were in the main street leading to it, along which, as it seemed, the whole population of Merida was moving to the fête. In every house a lantern hung from the balconied windows, or a long candle stood under a glass shade, to light them on their way. At the head of the street was a large plaza, on one side of which stood the church, with its great front brilliantly illuminated, and on the platform and steps, and all the open square before it, was a great moving mass of men, women, and children, mostly Indians, dressed in white.

We worked our way up to the door, and found the church within a blaze of light. Two rows of high candlesticks, with wax candles eight or ten feet high, extended the whole length from the door to the altar. On each side hung innumerable lamps, dotting the whole space from the floor to the ceiling; and back at the extreme end, standing on an elevated platform, was an altar thirty feet high, rich with silver ornaments and vases of flowers, and hung with innumerable lamps brilliantly burning. Priests in glittering vestments were officiating before it, music was swelling through the corridor and arches, and the floor of the immense church was covered with women on their knees, dressed in white, with white shawls over their heads. Through the entire body of the church not a man was to be

seen. Near us was a bevy of young girls, beautifully dressed, with dark eyes, and their hair adorned with flowers, sustaining, though I was now a year older and colder, my previous impressions of the beauty of the ladies of Merida.

The chant died away, and as the women rose from their knees, their appearance was like the lifting of a white cloud, or spirits of air rising to a purer world; but, as they turned toward the door, the horizon became dusky with Indian faces, and half way up a spot rose above the rest, black as a thunder-cloud. The whole front ranks were Indians, except a towering African, whose face, in the cloud of white around, shone like the last touch of Day and Martin's best.

We waited till the last passed out, and, leaving the empty church blazing with light, with rockets, fireworks, drums, and violins all working away together on the steps, we followed the crowd.

Turning along the left side of the plaza, we entered an illuminated street, at the foot of which, and across it, hung a gigantic cross, also brilliantly illuminated, and apparently stopping the way. Coming as we did directly from the church, it seemed to have some immediate connexion with the ceremonies we had just beheld; but the crowd stopped short of the cross, opposite a large house, also brilliantly illuminated. The door of this house, like that of the church, was open to all who chose to enter, or rather, at that moment, to all who could force their

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way through. Waiting the motion of the mass before us, and pressed by those behind, slowly, and with great labour, we worked our way into the sala. This was a large room extending along the whole front of the house, hot to suffocation, and crowded, or rather jammed, with men and women, or gentlemen and ladies, or by whatever other names they may be pleased to be called, clamorous and noisy as Bedlam let loose. For some time it was impossible for us to form any idea of what was going on. By degrees we were carried lengthwise through the sala, at every step getting elbowed, stamped upon, and occasionally the rim of a straw hat across the nose, or the puff of a paper cigar in the eyes. Very soon our faces were trickling with tears, which there was no friendly hand to wipe away, our own being pinned down to our sides.

On each side of the sala was a rude table, occupying its whole length, made of two rough boards, and supporting candles stuck in little tin receivers, about two feet apart. Along the tables were benches of the same rough materials, with men and women, whites, Mestizoes, and Indians, all sitting together, as close as the solidity and resistance of human flesh would permit, and seemingly closer than was sufferable. Every person at the table had before him or her a paper about a foot square, covered with figures in rows, and a small pile of grains of corn, and by its side a thumping stick some eighteen inches long, and one in diameter; while, amid all

the noise, hubbub, and confusion, the eyes of all at the tables were bent constantly upon the papers before them. In that hot place, they seemed like a host of necromancers and witches, some of the latter young and extremely pretty, practising the black art.

By degrees we were passed out into the corridor, and here we were brought to a dead stand. Within arm's length was an imp of a boy, apparently the ringleader in this nocturnal orgy, who stood on a platform, rattling a bag of balls, and whose unintermitted screeching, singsong cries had throughout risen shrill and distinct above every other sound. At that moment the noise and uproar were carried to the highest. The whole house seemed rising against the boy, and he, single-handed, or rather single-tongued, was doing battle with the whole, sending forth a clear stream of vocal power, which for a while bore its way triumphantly through the whole troubled waters, till, finding himself overpowered by the immense majority, with a tone that set the whole mass in a roar, and showed his democratic principles, he cried out, "*Vox populi est vox Dei!*" and submitted.

Along the corridor, and in the whole area of the patio, or courtyard, were tables, and benches, and papers, and grains of corn, and ponderous sticks, the same as in the sala, and men and women sitting as close together. The passages were choked up, and over the heads of those sitting at the tables, all

within reach were bending their eyes earnestly upon the mysterious papers. They were grayheads, boys and girls, and little children ; fathers and mothers ; husbands and wives ; masters and servants ; men high in office, muleteers, and bull-fighters ; señoras and señoritas, with jewels around their necks and roses in their hair, and Indian women, worth only the slight covering they had on ; beauty and deformity ; the best and the vilest in Merida ; perhaps, in all, two thousand persons ; and this great multitude, many of whom we had seen but a few minutes before on their knees in the church, and among them the fair bevy of girls who had stood by us on the steps, were now assembled in a public gambling-house ! a beautiful spectacle for a stranger the first night of his arrival in the capital !

But the devil is not so black as he is painted. I do not mean to offer any apology for gambling, in Yucatan, as in all the rest of Mexico, the bane and scourge of all ranks of society ; but Merida is, in a small way, a city of my love, and I would fain raise this great mass of people from the gulf into which I have just plunged them : at least, I would lift their heads a little above water.

The game which they were engaged in playing is called *La Loteria*, or the Lottery. It is a favorite amusement throughout all the Mexican provinces, and extends to every village in Yucatan. It is authorized by the government, and, as was formerly the case to a pernicious extent with the lotteries

in our own country, is used as an instrument to raise money, either for the use of the government itself, or for other purposes which are considered deserving. The principle of the game, or the scheme, consists of different combinations of numbers, from one to ninety, which are written on papers, nine rows on each side, with five figures in each row. As ninety figures admit of combinations to an almost indefinite extent, any number of papers can be issued, each containing a different series of combinations. These papers are stamped by the government, and sold at a real, or twelve and a half cents each. Every player purchases one of these papers, and fastens it to the table before him with a wafer. A purse is then made up, each player putting in a certain sum, which is collected by a boy in a hat. The boy with the bag of balls then announces, or rather sings out, the amount of the purse, and rattling his bag of balls, draws out one, and sings the number drawn. Every player marks on his paper with a grain of corn the number called off, and the one who is first able to mark five numbers in a row wins the purse. This he announces by rapping on the table with the stick, and standing up in his place. The boy sings over again the numbers drawn, and if, on comparison, all is found right, delivers the purse. The game is then ended, and another begins. Sometimes mistakes occur, and it was a mistake that led to the extraordinary clamour and confusion we had found on reaching the neighbourhood of the boy.

The amount played for will give some idea of the character of the game. Before commencing, the boy called out that the stake should in no case exceed two reals. This, however, was considered too high, and it was fixed by general consent at a medio, or six and a quarter cents. The largest amount proclaimed by the boy was twenty-seven dollars and three reals, which, divided among four hundred and thirty-eight players, did not make very heavy gambling. In fact, an old gentleman near whom I was standing told me it was a small affair, and not worth learning; but he added that there was a place in the neighbourhood where they played *monté* for doubloons. The whole amount circulated during the evening fell far short of what is often exchanged at a small party in a private drawing-room at home, and among those who would not relish the imputation of being accounted gamblers. In fact, it is perhaps but just to say that this great concourse of people was not brought together by the spirit of gambling. The people of Merida are fond of amusements, and in the absence of theatres and other public entertainments, the *loteria* is a great gathering-place, where persons of all ages and classes go to meet acquaintances. Rich and poor, great and small, meet under the same roof on a footing of perfect equality; good feeling is cultivated among all without any forgetting their place. Whole families go thither together; young people procure seats near each other, and play at more desperate games

than the loteria, where hearts, or at least hands, are at stake, and perhaps that night some bold player, in losing his medios, drew a richer prize than the large purse of twenty-seven dollars and three reals. In fact, the loteria is considered merely an accessory to the pleasures of social intercourse; and, instead of gaming, it might be called a grand *conversacione*, but not very select; at least such was our conclusion; and there was something to make us rather uncharitable, for the place was hot enough to justify an application to it of the name bestowed in common parlance on the gambling-houses of London and Paris.

At about eleven o'clock we left. On our way down the street we passed the open door of a house in which were tables piled with gold and silver, and men around playing what, in the opinion of my old adviser of the loteria, was a game worth learning. We returned to the house, and found, what in our haste to be at the fiesta we had paid no attention to, that Doña Micaela could give us but one room, and that a small one, and near the door. As we expected to remain some days in Merida, we determined the next morning to take a house and go to housekeeping. While arranging ourselves for the night, we heard a loud, unnatural noise at the door, and, going out, found rolling over the pavement the Cerberus of the mansion, an old Indian miserably deformed, with his legs drawn up, his back down, his neck and head thrust forward, and his eyes start-

ing from their sockets ; he was entertaining himself with an outrageous soliloquy in the Maya tongue, and at our appearance he pitched his voice higher than before. Signs and threats had no effect. Secure in his deformity, he seemed to feel a malicious pleasure that he had it in his power to annoy us. We gave up, and while he continued rolling out tremendous Maya, we fell asleep. So passed our first night in Merida.