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INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL

IN

CENTRAL AMERICA, CHIAPAS, AND YUCATAN.

CHAPTER I.

DEPARTURE—THE VOYAGE—ARRIVAL AT BALIZE—MIXING OF COLOURS—GOVERNMENT HOUSE—COLONEL M'DONALD—ORIGIN OF BALIZE—NEGRO SCHOOLS—SCENE IN A COURT-ROOM—LAW WITHOUT LAWYERS—THE BARRACKS—EXCURSION IN A PIT-PAN—A BEGINNING OF HONOURS—HONOURS ACCUMULATING—DEPARTURE FROM BALIZE—SWEETS OF OFFICE.

On Wednesday, the 3d of October, 1839, we embarked at New York on board the British brig *Mary Ann*, Hampton, master, for the Bay of Honduras. The brig was lying in the North River, with her anchor apeak and sails loose, and in a few minutes, in company with a large whaling-ship bound for the Pacific, we were under way. It was before seven o'clock in the morning: the streets and wharfs were still; the Battery was desolate, and, at the moment of leaving it on a voyage of uncertain duration, seemed more beautiful than I had ever known it before.

Opposite the Quarantine Ground, a few friends who had accompanied us on board left; in an hour the pilot followed; at dusk the dark outline of the highlands of Neversink was barely visible, and the next morning we were fairly at sea.

Hurried on by a strong north-easter, on the 9th we were within the region of the trade-winds, on the 10th within the tropics, and on the 11th, with the thermometer at 80°, but a refreshing breeze, we were moving gently between Cuba and St. Domingo, with both in full sight. For the rest, after eighteen days of boisterous weather, drenched with tropical rains, on the 29th we were driven inside the Lighthouse reef, and, avoiding altogether the regular pilot-ground, at midnight reached St. George's Bay, about twenty miles from Balize. A large brig, loaded with mahogany, was lying at anchor, with a pilot on

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board, waiting for favourable weather to put to sea. The pilot had with him his son, a lad about sixteen, cradled on the water, whom Captain Hampton knew, and determined to take on board.

It was full moonlight when the boy mounted the deck and gave us the pilot's welcome. I could not distinguish his features, but I could see that he was not white; and his voice was as soft as a woman's. He took his place at the wheel, and, loading the brig with canvas, told us of the severe gales on the coast, of the fears entertained for our safety, of disasters and shipwrecks, and of a pilot who, on a night which we well remembered, had driven his vessel over a sunken reef.

At seven o'clock the next morning we saw Balize, appearing, if there be no sin in comparing it with cities consecrated by time and venerable associations, like Venice and Alexandria, to rise out of the water. A range of white houses extended a mile along the shore, terminated at one end by the Government House, and at the other by the barracks, and intersected by the river Balize, the bridge across which formed a picturesque object; while the fort on the little island at the mouth of the river, the spire of a Gothic church behind the Government House, and groves of cocoa-nut-trees, which at that distance reminded us of the palm-trees of Egypt, gave it an appearance of actual beauty. Four ships, three brigs, sundry schooners, bungaloes, canoes, and a steamboat, were riding at anchor in the harbour; alongside the vessels were rafts of mahogany; far out, a negro was paddling a log of the same costly timber; and the government dory which boarded us when we came to anchor was made of the trunk of a mahogany-tree.

We landed in front of the warehouse of Mr. Coffin, the consignee of the vessel. There was no hotel in the place, but Mr. Coffin undertook to conduct us to a lady who, he thought, could accommodate us with lodgings.

The heavy rain from which we had suffered at sea had reached Balize. The streets were flooded, and in places there were large puddles, which it was difficult to cross. At the extreme end of the principal street we met the "*lady*," Miss —, a mulatto woman, who could only give us board. Mr. Coffin kindly offered the use of an unoccupied house on the other side of the river to sleep in, and we returned.

By this time I had twice passed the whole length of the principal street, and the town seemed in the entire possession of blacks. The bridge, the market-place, the streets and stores were thronged with them, and I might have fancied myself in the capital of a negro republic. They were a fine-looking race, tall, straight, and athletic,

with skins black, smooth, and glossy as velvet, and well dressed, the men in white cotton shirts and trousers, with straw hats, and the women in white frocks with short sleeves and broad red borders, and adorned with large red earrings and necklaces; and I could not help remarking that the frock was their only article of dress, and that it was the fashion of these sable ladies to drop this considerably from off the right shoulder, and to carry the skirt in the left hand, and raise it to any height necessary for crossing puddles.

On my way back I stopped at the house of a merchant, whom I found at what is called a second breakfast. The gentleman sat on one side of the table and his lady on the other. At the head was a British officer, and opposite him a mulatto; on his left was another officer, and opposite him also a mulatto. By chance a place was made for me between the two coloured gentlemen. Some of my countrymen, perhaps, would have hesitated about taking it, but I did not; both were well dressed, well educated, and polite. They talked of their mahogany works, of England, hunting, horses, ladies, and wine; and before I had been an hour in Balize I learned that the great work of practical amalgamation, the subject of so much angry controversy in the States, had been going on quietly for generations; that colour was considered mere matter of taste; and that some of the most respectable inhabitants had black wives and mongrel children, whom they educated with as much care, and made money for with as much zeal, as if their skins were perfectly white.

I hardly knew whether to be shocked or amused at this condition of society; and, in the meantime, joined Mr. Catherwood, to visit the house offered by Mr. Coffin. It was situated on the opposite side of the river, and the road to it was ankle-deep in mud. At the gate was a large puddle, which we cleared by a jump; the house was built on piles about two feet high, and underneath was water nearly a foot deep. We ascended on a plank to the sill of the door, and entered a large room occupying the whole of the first floor, and perfectly empty. The upper story was tenanted by a family of negroes; in the yard was a house swarming with negroes; and all over, in the yard and in front, were picturesque groups of little negroes of both sexes, and naked as they were born. We directed the room to be swept and our luggage brought there; and, as we left the house, we remembered Captain Hampton's description before our arrival, and felt the point of his concluding remark, that Balize was the last place made.

We returned, and, while longing for the comfort of a good hotel, received through Mr. Goff, the Consul of the United States, an

invitation from his Excellency, Colonel M'Donald, to the Government House, and information that he would send the government dory to the brig for our luggage. Holding an appointment under government for the first time, and not being sure of ever holding another, I determined to make the most of it, and accepted at once his Excellency's invitation.

There was a steamboat for Yzabal, the port of Guatemala, lying at Balize; and, on my way to the Government House, I called upon Señor Comyano, the agent, who told me that she was to go up the next day; but added, with great courtesy, that, if I wished it, he would detain her a few days for my convenience. Used to submitting to the despotic regulations of steamboat agents at home, this seemed a higher honour than the invitation of his Excellency; but, not wishing to push my fortune too far, I asked a delay of one day only.

The Government House stands in a handsome situation at the extreme end of the town, with a lawn extending to the water, and ornamented with cocoa-nut-trees. Colonel M'Donald, a veteran six feet high, and one of the most military-looking men I ever saw, received me at the gate. In an hour the dory arrived with our luggage, and at five o'clock we sat down to dinner. We had at table Mr. Newport, chaplain, and for fifteen years parish clergyman at Balize; Mr. Walker, Secretary of the Government, and holding, besides, such a list of offices as would make the greatest pluralist among us feel insignificant; and several other gentlemen of Balize, office-holders, civil and military, in whose agreeable society we sat till eleven o'clock.

The next day we had to make preparations for our journey into the interior, besides which we had an opportunity of seeing a little of Balize. The Honduras Almanac, which assumes to be the chronicler of this settlement, throws a romance around its early history by ascribing its origin to a Scotch buccaneer named Wallace. The fame of the wealth of the New World, and the return of the Spanish galleons laden with the riches of Mexico and Peru, brought upon the coast of America hordes of adventurers—to call them by no harsher name—from England and France, of whom Wallace, one of the most noted and daring, found refuge and security behind the keys and reefs which protect the harbour of Balize. The place where he built his log huts and fortalice is still pointed out, but their site is now occupied by warehouses. Strengthened by a close alliance with the Indians of the Moschito shore, and by the adhesion of numerous British adventurers, who descended upon the coast of Honduras for the purpose of cutting mahogany, he set the Spaniards at defiance. Ever since, the

territory of Balize has been the subject of negotiation and contest, and to this day the people of Central America claim it as their own. It has grown by the exportation of mahogany; but, as the trees in the neighbourhood have been almost all cut down, and Central America is so impoverished by wars that it offers but a poor market for British goods, the place is languishing, and will probably continue to dwindle away until the enterprise of her merchants discovers other channels of trade.

At this day it contains a population of six thousand, of which four thousand are blacks, who are employed by the merchants in gangs as mahogany cutters. Their condition was always better than that of plantation slaves; even before the act for the general abolition of slavery throughout the British dominions, they were actually free; and on the 31st of August, 1839, a year before the time appointed by the act, by a general meeting and agreement of proprietors, even the nominal yoke of bondage was removed.

The event was celebrated, says the Honduras Almanac, by religious ceremonies, processions, bands of music, and banners with devices: "The sons of Ham respect the memory of Wilberforce,"—"The Queen, God bless her,"—"M'Donald for ever,"—"Civil and religious liberty all over the world." Nelson Schaw, "a snowdrop of the first water," continues the Almanac, "advanced to his Excellency, Colonel M'Donald, and spoke as follows:—'On the part of my emancipated brothers and sisters, I venture to approach your Excellency, to entreat you to thank our most gracious Queen for all that she has done for us. We will pray for her; we will fight for her; and, if it be necessary, we will die for her. We thank your Excellency for all you have done for us. God bless your Excellency! God bless her Excellency, Mrs. M'Donald, and all the Royal family! Come, my countrymen, hurrah! Dance, ye black rascals! the flag of England flies over your heads, and every rustle of its folds knocks the fetters off the limbs of the poor slave. Hubbaboo Cochalorum Gee!'"

The negro schools stand in the rear of the Government House, and the boys' department consisted of about two hundred, from three to fifteen years of age, and of every degree of tinge, from nearly white down to two little native Africans, bearing on their cheeks the scars of cuts made by their parents at home. These last were taken from on board a slave-ship captured by an English cruiser, brought into Balize, and, as provided for by the laws, on a drawing by lot, fell to the share of a citizen, who, entering into certain covenants for good treatment, is entitled to their services until they are twenty-one years old. Unfortunately, the master was not present, and I had no opportunity

of learning the result of his experience in teaching ; but in this school, I was told, the brightest boys, and those who had improved most, were those who had in them the most white blood.

The mistress of the female department was experienced in teaching ; and she told us that, though she had had many clever black girls under her charge, her white scholars were always the most quick and capable.

From the negro school we went to the Grand Court. It had been open about half an hour when we entered. On the back wall, in a massive mahogany tablet, were the arms of England ; on a high platform beneath was a large circular table, around which were heavy mahogany chairs with high backs and cushions. The court consists of seven judges, five of whom were in their places. One of them, Mr. Walker, invited me to one of the vacant seats. I objected, on the ground that my costume was not becoming so dignified a position ; he insisted, and I took my seat, in a roundabout jacket, upon a chair exceedingly comfortable for the administration of justice.

As before remarked, five of the judges were in their places ; one of whom was a mulatto. The jury was empanelled, and two of the jurors were mulattoes ; one of them, as the judge who sat next me said, was a Sambo, or of the descending line, being the son of a mulatto woman and a black man. I was at a loss to determine the caste of a third, and inquired of the judge, who answered that he was his, the judge's brother, and that his mother was a mulatto woman. The judge was aware of the feeling existing in the United States with regard to colour, and said that in Balize there was, in political life, no distinction whatever, except on the ground of qualifications and character ; and hardly any in social life, even in contracting marriages.

I had noticed the judges and jurors, but I missed an important part of an English court, Where were the gentlemen of the bar ? Some of my readers will perhaps concur with Captain Hampton, that Balize was the last place made, when I tell them that there was not a single lawyer in the place, and never had been ; but, lest some of my enterprising professional brethren from the States should forthwith be tempted to pack their trunks for a descent upon the exempt city, I consider it my duty to add that I do not believe there is the least chance for one.

As there is no bar to prepare men for the bench, the judges, of course, are not lawyers. Of the five then sitting, two were merchants, one a mahogany cutter, and the mulatto, second to none of the others in character or qualifications, a doctor. This court is the highest tribunal for the trial of civil causes, and has jurisdiction of all amounts

above 15*l*. Balize is a place of large commercial transactions ; contracts are daily made and broken, or misunderstood, which require the intervention of some proper tribunal to interpret and compel their fulfilment. And there was no absence of litigation ; the calendar was large, and the court-room crowded. The first cause called was upon an account, when the defendant did not appear, and a verdict was taken by default. In the next, the plaintiff stated his case, and swore to it ; the defendant answered, called witnesses, and the cause was submitted to the jury. There was no case of particular interest. In one the parties became excited, and the defendant interrupted the plaintiff repeatedly, on which the latter, putting his hand upon the shoulder of his antagonist, said, in a coaxing way, "Now don't, George ; wait a little, you shall have your turn. Don't interrupt me, and I won't you." All was done in a familiar and colloquial way ; the parties were more or less known to each other, and judges and jurors were greatly influenced by knowledge of general character. I remarked that regularly the merits of the case were so clearly brought out, that, when it was committed to the jury, there was no question about the verdict ; and so satisfactory has this system proved, that, though an appeal lies to the Queen in Council, as Mr. Evans, the foreman, told me, but one cause has been carried up in twenty-two years. Still it stands as an anomaly in the history of English jurisprudence ; for, I believe, in every other place where the principles of the common law govern, the learning of the bench and the ingenuity of the bar are considered necessary to elicit the truth.

At daylight the next morning I was roused by Mr. Walker for a ride to the barracks. Immediately beyond the suburbs we entered upon an uncultivated country, low and flat, but very rich. We passed a race-course, now disused and grown over. This is the only road opened, and there are no wheel-carriages in Balize. Between it and the inhabited part of Central America is a wilderness, unbroken even by an Indian path. There is no communication with the interior except by the Golfo-Dolce or the Balize River ; and, from the want of roads, a residence there is more confining than living on an island.

In half an hour we reached the barracks, situated on the opposite side of a small bay. The soldiers are all black, and are part of an old Jamaica regiment, most of them having been enlisted at the English recruiting stations in Africa. Tall and athletic, with red coats, and, on a line, bristling with steel, their ebony faces gave them a peculiarly warlike appearance. They carry themselves proudly, call themselves the "Queen's Gentlemen," and look down with contempt upon the "niggers."

We returned to breakfast, and immediately after made an excursion in the government pit-pan. This is the same fashion of boat in which the Indians navigated the rivers of America before the Spaniards discovered it. European ingenuity has not contrived a better, though it has, perhaps, beautified the Indian model. Ours was about forty feet long, and six wide in the centre, running to a point at both ends, and made of the trunk of a mahogany-tree. Ten feet from the stern, and running forward, was a light wooden top, supported by fanciful stanchions, with curtains for protection against sun and rain; it had large cushioned seats, and was fitted up almost as neatly as the gondolas of Venice. It was manned by eight negro soldiers, who sat two on a seat, with paddles six feet long, and two stood up behind with paddles as steersmen. A few touches of the paddles gave brisk way to the pit-pan, and we passed rapidly the whole length of the town. It was an unusual thing for his Excellency's pit-pan to be upon the water; citizens stopped to gaze at us, and all the idle negroes hurried to the bridge to cheer us. This excited our African boatmen, who, with a wild chant that reminded us of the songs of the Nubian boatmen on the Nile, swept under the bridge, and hurried us into the still expanse of a majestic river. Before the cheering of the negroes died away, we were in as perfect a solitude as if removed thousands of miles from human habitations. The Balize River, coming from sources even yet but little known to civilized man, was then in its fulness. On each side was a dense, unbroken forest; the banks were overflowed; the trees seemed to grow out of the water, their branches spreading across so as almost to shut out the light of the sun, and reflected in the water as in a mirror. The sources of the river were occupied by the aboriginal owners, wild and free as Cortes found them. We had an eager desire to penetrate by it to the famous Lake of Peten, where the skeleton of the conquering Spaniard's horse was erected into a god by the astonished Indians; but the toil of our boatmen reminded us that they were paddling against a rapid current. We turned the pit-pan, and with the full power of the stream, a pull stronger, and a chant louder than before, amid the increased cheering of the negroes, swept under the bridge, and in a few minutes were landed at the Government House.

In order that we might embark at the hour appointed, Colonel M'Donald had ordered dinner at two o'clock, and, as on the two preceding days, had invited a small party to meet us. Perhaps I am wrong, but I should do violence to my feelings did I fail to express here my sense of the colonel's kindness. My invitation to the Government House was the fruit of my position as Minister of the United

States; but I cannot help flattering myself that some portion of the kindness shown me was the result of personal acquaintance. Colonel M'Donald is a soldier of the "twenty years' war," the brother of Sir John M'Donald, adjutant-general of England, and cousin of Marshal Macdonald of France. All his connexions and associations are military. At eighteen he entered Spain as an ensign, one of an army of ten thousand men, of whom, in less than six months, but four thousand were left. After being actively engaged in all the trying service of the Peninsular War, at Waterloo he commanded a regiment, and on the field of battle received the order of Companion of the Military Order of the Bath from the King of England, and that of Knight of the Order of St. Anne from the Emperor of Russia. Rich in recollections of a long military life, personally acquainted with the public and private characters of the most distinguished military men of the age, his conversation was like reading a page of history. He is one of a race that is fast passing away, and with whom an American seldom meets.

But to return. The large window of the dining-room opened upon the harbour; the steamboat lay in front of the Government House, and the black smoke, rising in columns from her pipe, gave notice that it was time to embark. Before rising, Colonel M'Donald, like a loyal subject, proposed the health of the Queen; after which he ordered the glasses to be filled to the brim, and, standing up, he gave, "The health of Mr. Van Buren, President of the United States," accompanying it with a warm and generous sentiment, and the earnest hope of strong and perpetual friendship between England and America. I felt at the moment, "Cursed be the hand that attempts to break it;" and albeit unused to taking the President and the people upon my shoulders, I answered as well as I could. Another toast followed to the health and successful journey of Mr. Catherwood and myself, and we rose from table. The government dory lay at the foot of the lawn. Colonel M'Donald put his arm through mine, and, walking away, told me that I was going into a distracted country; that Mr. Savage, the American consul in Guatemala, had, on a previous occasion, protected the property and lives of British subjects; and, if danger threatened me, I must assemble the Europeans, hang out my flag, and send word to him. I knew that these were not mere words of courtesy, and, in the state of the country to which I was going, felt the value of such a friend at hand. With the warmest feelings of gratitude I bade him farewell, and stepped into the dory. At the moment flags were run up at the government staff, the fort, the courthouse, and the government schooner, and a gun was fired from the fort. As I crossed the bay,

a salute of thirteen guns was fired; passing the fort, the soldiers presented arms, the government schooner lowered and raised her ensign, and when I mounted the deck of the steamboat, the captain, with hat in hand, told me that he had instructions to place her under my orders, and to stop wherever I pleased.

The reader will perhaps ask how I bore all these honours. I had visited many cities, but it was the first time that flags and cannon announced to the world that I was going away. I was a novice, but I endeavoured to behave as if I had been brought up to it; and, to tell the truth, my heart beat, and I felt proud; for these were honours paid to my country, and not to me.

To crown the glory of the parting scene, my good friend Captain Hampton had charged his two four-pounders, and when the steamboat got under way he fired one, but the other would not go off. The captain of the steamboat had on board one puny gun, with which he would have returned all their civilities; but, as he told me, to his great mortification, he had no powder.

The steamboat in which we embarked was the last remnant of the stock in trade of a great Central American agricultural association, formed for building cities, raising the price of land, accommodating emigrants, and improvement generally. On the rich plains of the province of Vera Paz they had established the site of New Liverpool, which only wanted houses and a population to become a city. On the wheel of the boat was a circular brass plate, on which, in strange juxtaposition, were the words "Vera Paz," "London." The captain was a small, weather-beaten, dried up old Spaniard, with courtesy enough for a Don of old. The engineer was an Englishman, and the crew were Spaniards, Mestizoes, and mulattoes, not particularly at home in the management of a steamboat.

Our only fellow-passenger was a Roman Catholic priest, a young Irishman, who had been eight months at Balize, and was now on his way to Guatemala by invitation of the Provesor, by the exile of the Archbishop the head of the Church. The cabin was very comfortable, but the evening was so mild that we took our tea on deck. At ten o'clock the captain came to me for orders. I have had my aspirations, but never expected to be able to dictate to the captain of a steamboat. Nevertheless, again, as coolly as if I had been brought up to it, I designated the places I wished to visit, and retired. Verily, thought I, if these are the fruits of official appointments, it is not strange that men are found willing to accept them.

CHAPTER II.

EVERY ONE FOR HIMSELF—TRAVELLERS' TRICKS—PUENTA GORDA—A VISIT TO THE CARIB INDIANS—A CARIB CRONE—A BAPTISM—RIO DOLCE—BEAUTIFUL SCENERY—YZABAL—RECEPTION OF THE PADRE—A BARBER IN OFFICE—A BAND OF "INVINCIBLES"—PARTIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA—A COMPATRIOT—A GRAVE IN A FOREIGN LAND—PREPARATIONS FOR THE PASSAGE OF "THE MOUNTAIN"—A ROAD NOT MACADAMISED—PERILS BY THE WAY—A WELL-SPICED LUNCH—THE MOUNTAIN PASSED.

We had engaged a servant, a French Spaniard, St. Domingo born and Omoa bred, bearing the name of Augustin; young, and, as we at first thought, not very sharp. Early in the morning he asked us what we would have for breakfast, naming eggs, chickens, &c. We gave him directions, and in due time sat down to breakfast. During the meal, something occurred to put us on inquiry, and we learned that everything on the table, excepting the tea and coffee, belonged to the padre. Without asking any questions, or thinking of the subject at all, we had taken for granted that the steamboat made all necessary provisions for passengers; but, to our surprise, learned that the boat furnished nothing, and that passengers were expected to take care of themselves. The padre had been as ignorant and as improvident as we; but some good Catholic friends, whom he had married, or whose children he had baptized, had sent on board contributions of various kinds, and, among other things—odd luggage for a traveller—a coop full of chickens. We congratulated the padre upon his good fortune in having us with him, and ourselves upon such a treasure as Augustin. I may mention, by-the-way, that, in the midst of Colonel M'Donald's hospitalities, Mr. Catherwood and I exhibited rather too much of the old traveller. When at dinner the last day, Mr. C. was called from table to superintend the removal of some luggage, and shortly after I was called out; and, fortunately for Colonel M'Donald and the credit of my country, I found Mr. C. quietly rolling up, to send back to New York, a large blue cloak belonging to the colonel, supposing it to be mine. I returned to the table, and mentioned to our host his narrow escape, adding that I had some doubt about a large canvas sack for bedding which I had found in my room, and, presuming it was one that had been promised me by Captain Hampton, had put on board the steamboat; but this, too, it appeared, belonged to Colonel M'Donald, and for many years had carried his camp bed. The result