

XIV.

VISIT TO ANDRES BOLON.*

WHEN my work in Yāxchilan was finished, my men were completely discouraged with regard to undertaking further explorations and ardently longed to return to Tenosique. Such is the character of these people that even for the highest wages and with the best treatment, they cannot be induced to continue at one pursuit for any length of time. My success in having secured their services for seven months may be regarded as the utmost that can be accomplished. Nevertheless it was my wish to push forward at least as far as the lower course of the Rio Lacantun, not so much to undertake any serious work—especially as my photographic material was exhausted—as to institute inquiries at the neighboring monterías as to whether further ruins had been discovered within their precincts. I therefore persuaded my impatient men to follow me as far as the Lacantun River. They finally consented to do this, since it involved only what might be regarded as an excursion without any hard work.

Our superfluous luggage and the paper moulds were concealed in an abandoned temple to be called for on our return. In this way the difficulty of the reconnaissance was materially simplified.

About two Mexican leagues above the ruined city, opposite the mouth of the seemingly insignificant Arroyo de Yāxchilan, lie the ranchitos of José María Jiménez (mentioned in an earlier report) and of his sons and kindred, where we passed one night.

Notwithstanding the fact that in their search for caoutchouc, *hule*, Jiménez and his people are accustomed to traverse the entire Guatemala shore as far as El Cayo, they had never seen anything but *vestigios* and nothing that could be called standing ruins. Otherwise they would readily have guided us. It is extremely difficult, generally speaking, to discover a ruin containing anything of interest, and this is in part due to the fact that chains of cities, so to speak, attained architectural development along certain lines and not along others.

To gratify those who desire to have as full a description as possible, I may add that the actual and larger Yāxchilan River flows in a direction opposite to that of the smaller stream of the same name, and as a matter of fact into the Rio San Pedro (Limon). As it is easy to lose one's way in this wilderness of which no topographical charts have ever been made, travelers, on reaching the smaller stream mentioned above, believed it to be the true Yāxchilan and therefore gave it that name. Subsequently, this was found to be an error, but in popular usage both rivers are called by

* Living on the Guatemala side of the Usumatsintla River (April, 1900)

one and the same name. Hence I designate the river flowing to meet the San Pedro-Limon, "el Yāxchilan grande," and that emptying (directly) into the Usumatsintla, "el pequeño Yāxchilan," which will obviate all confusion.

We took advantage of our stay with Jiménez to buy provisions for the trip up the river, and thus fully equipped we started on our journey to the montería "Orizaba" situated four leagues farther up. This montería belongs to a German-American by the name of Schindler, and is situated on the left (Mexican) shore.

A short distance above the entrance of the Yāxchilan, the Usumatsintla again winds along through a low mountain range. For some distance the ascent is rendered difficult by numerous beds of rock, between which it was necessary for us to force our way. Enormous caymans, basking on these rocks, plunged noisily into the water at our approach. After a rather toilsome journey we reached the montería Orizaba, where we temporarily stored our luggage.

I had previously ascertained that there were some heaps of ruins in the forest behind the present location of the huts of the woodcutters. I therefore availed myself of this opportunity to inspect the most important of these ruins and to search for sculptures. The principal structure must once have been by no means insignificant. Remains of a stone stairway can still be distinguished, leading up to a terrace the superstructure of which is in utter ruins.

At this montería we succeeded in persuading an intelligent man, Manuel Reyes by name, to accompany us to the Guatemala side on a visit to the only Indian living there, Andres Bolon by name, who was well acquainted with the region and whose final opinion as an expert I wished to obtain as to whether there was actually nothing of interest in the region on the right bank.

When we were ready we embarked, accompanied by Reyes, in order to travel three kilometres down the river again to the place where a small stream "El Arroyo de Bolon" empties into it on the right. We entered the stream for the purpose of fastening our cayuco at a spot hidden from passers-by. Places where one embarks or lands are called in this country "el paso," hence the point where we landed is called "El Paso de Bolon," because that Indian's place is reached from here, and at this spot Bolon himself embarks when he wishes to go to some other montería.

On the right bank of the arroyo we pushed forward into the magnificent forest of tall trees frequently interspersed with guano and corozo palms. While traversing the very first league we came to a small ruin, where, as several heaps of débris bore witness, stone buildings had once stood.

After travelling almost four leagues (about thirteen kilometres) we emerged on a savanna covered with succulent grass, through which we had to

walk in order to reach Bolon's huts. On nearing these, I sent Reyes ahead, who was on friendly terms with the family, in order not to alarm them, and to apprise them of our coming.

In these huts we met two of Bolon's wives with their children and his eldest son, a lad of about fifteen years of age, Bolon himself was absent. Our reception was a friendly one and an empty hut was assigned to us. The women soon brought to each of us *una sartu de pezados*, which is the name given to a *bejucco* (piece of vine) having strung upon it a dozen half-cooked fish dried in the sun (*mojarras*), and some large bananas and tortillas. Here was a repetition of what I had so often experienced; namely, wherever the Indians are not affected by the Spanish element, food is remarkably abundant. Wherever the people have come under Spanish influence, we have sometimes been unable to obtain a single miserable fish even at a high price. Now each of us received a dozen large delicious fish, which we could hardly consume in three days.

We were rather weary and also quite hungry and therefore enjoyed a repast of the fish and bananas slightly roasted at the fire; we also made coffee and then sought our night's quarters, fully protected, under our *mosquiteros*, from the gnats which swarmed hither in dense multitudes from the laguna near by.

Regarding the circumstances of this man, — who preferred the free life in the wilderness to the constraints of a civilization which had conferred but little good upon him, — the following can be said: Bolon is an Indian or half-breed from Tenosique and was the *mozo adeudado* (that is, one who serves another for debt) of a business man of that town. The name Bolon is an abbreviation, the full name being Bolonchac (*bolon-tsak* = nine-red), which is the Indian name for a favorite species of quail the plaintive call of which in the silence of the night or in the early morning is heard at a great distance. Overwhelmed by his debt and seeing no better future before him, he went many years ago among the Lacantun Indians, who at that time were settled on the right bank of the Usumatsintla. Bolon therefore belongs in the category of those who in this republican land are called *mozos huidos*; but it may be incidentally mentioned that subsequently he cancelled his indebtedness with caoutchouc, *hule*, and at the present time he has nothing more to fear. As a Maya-speaking Indian from Tenosique he had no difficulty in making himself understood by the Lacantuns, whose dress and customs he adopted, and who gave him a wife. In the course of time many of these Indians moved to distant inaccessible wildernesses, others died, and in this way more women and children fell to Bolon. The last chieftain of the race, when dying at an advanced age, even conferred upon Bolon his priestly office, and earnestly impressed upon him his obligation to watch over the graves of the departed, and enjoined upon him that, when he in his turn should see death approaching, he should place in the temples at Yāxchilan the incense vessels which are in the temple hut by the graves.

This Indian settlement, where the incense vessels still remain, and where Bolon and the remaining women and children yearly burn copal and offer sacrifices, must be about two or three leagues (two or three hours' journey) below Bolon's present establishment.

Although it is not to be supposed that any valuable historical or religious traditions could have been preserved by these people, considering the extremely low intellectual condition into which they have all degenerated, it is nevertheless interesting to note how the last remnants of this race have adhered, amid every hardship, to a kind of ancestor worship, and how the memory of the former greatness and sacredness of Yāxchilan has endured among them. At any rate, we may take it for granted that Bolon has acquired a full knowledge of the habits and customs and also of the religious conceptions of the Indians with whom he has lived for so many years. Whoever should succeed in gaining his confidence might acquire much interesting information, though presented in a vague and confused style.

Thanks to our *mosquiteros*, we passed a comfortable night. We invited young Manuel Bolon to take breakfast with us, and chatting with him about indifferent matters, I introduced questions relative to that which interested me, and thus tried to find out from him whether there were any ruins or sculptures on this side of the Usumatsintla. The young man stated that he had never seen a ruin, but he knew of a *cueva* (cave) on the top of the mountain on the eastern shore of the laguna. If we wished, he would guide us thither. We accepted his offer so that the day might not pass quite unprofitably.

We had to go only about three hundred paces from the huts to reach a small lake, the greatest extent of which in the dry season may measure about one and a half kilometres. As this lake has no name, I gave it for the time being the full name of the Indian owner of the montería, "La Laguna de Bolonchac." (See map, Plate I of this volume.) There is said to be a series of small lakes in this region which have never been explored by Europeans.

Fortunately Bolon had a cayuco — a boat made of a hollowed-out tree-trunk — in which we embarked. Without stopping in the more shallow parts of the laguna, we rowed toward the mountain range, where the water attains a considerable depth and where fish are exceedingly plentiful. Water-fowl of various species enlivened the mirror-like surface. We were especially interested in some large black and white ducks, which, however, were frightened and flew away before we could get ready to shoot them. High in the air circled some beautiful *coscacauhtli*, "king vultures" (*Cathartes papa* Linn.), whose black and white plumage glistened in the sun. This noble bird — which the Spaniards call "El Rey de los Zopilotes" — can very rarely be observed in its wild state.

We soon reached the wooded slopes of the little mountain range and