CHAPTER XLI

CAMPECHE

JUST beyond Tabasco, and between that state and Yucatán, is Campeche. It has an area of twenty-six thousand and ninety square miles, and, like its neighboring states, the population is largely Indian. It was formerly a part of Yucatán, but was separated in 1858. The principal river is the San Francisco. The Champotón also is important, and there are numerous smaller streams. There are, besides, some small lakes; so that, taken as a whole, Campeche is a well-watered state. The soil is for the most part sandy, except near the capital and in the forests. There are

PALACE OF JUSTICE, CAMPECHE.

good pasture-lands, and cattle-raising is an important industry. Salt, rice, and sugar are prominent among the products, and henequin is raised in prodigious quantities. There is a great future for this part of Mexico as soon as capitalists shall discover what opportunities

are open there for the manufacturer who will work up the textile material that can be raised in Campeche.

The capital of the state is the city of Campeche, which is also an important seaport for all the surrounding states. It is situated on the Bay of Campeche, at the mouth of the San Francisco River. It has a population of about twenty-five thousand, and is fast growing. The streets are irregular, and the houses remarkable for their uniform height of one story, their square form, and for all being built of the limestone which abounds near the city.

We were charmed with Campeche; it is very picturesque, with its great wall surrounding the city, built in defence against Indian raiders and French and English buccaneers. Governor Montalvo and others entertained us. We were struck with the affectionate regard

CALLE DE ZARAGOZA, SHOWING THE WALL WHICH SURROUNDS THE CITY.

shown for the family of Honorable Joaquin Baranda, minister of justice. The Barandas have been intimately associated with the history of the state, and I believe the records show that Minister Baranda's father was admiral of the tiny Mexican fleet that operated against the Spaniards in the colonial struggle for independence. The state is now called Campeche de Baranda, in his honor.

Campeche was founded in the middle of the sixteenth century, and has figured in history more or less ever since. It was sacked by the British in 1659, and again by pirates in 1678, and by filibusters in 1685. Its site has been twice changed, the present one being honey-combed with subterranean chambers which were dug out ages ago by the Mayas Indians, ruins of whose structures may be seen in the vicinity of Campeche even now. The city of to-day has several churches and convents, a museum containing interesting aboriginal relics, a theatre, and several

schools and colleges. It has a beautiful alameda, embellished with alleys of orange-trees and seats of the native marble. There is a lack of good water at Campeche, and living is consequently higher than in some other Mexican towns. The port is defended by three fortresses. The roads are extremely shallow, and few of the numerous vessels can approach the mole. Vessels drawing ten feet of water have to anchor a mile off shore, and those drawing fifteen feet from six to seven miles away.

The commerce of Campeche was, under the Spanish colonial system, in a most flourishing state, as it had the monopoly of the imports to Yucatán; but it is now confined mostly to salt, sugar, hides, henequin and articles manufactured from it. Logwood and other dyestuffs are still exported in quantities, but the cigar industry is greater. The Campeche cigars are made

Plaza de la Independencia, Campeche.

from Tabasco tobacco (which is superior to that of Yucatán), and are often sold in foreign markets for the Havana.

In many respects, nature has been kind to Campeche. It needs only good judgment and industry to develop its riches. There are plenty of rivers for irrigation, each worth a gold-mine, if properly used, but now comparatively valueless because unemployed. There is but one railway in the country, that to Minatitlán, three hundred and eighty-five miles long, a branch of the celebrated Tehuantepec route.

Everybody has heard of the "Mysterious City," which tradition places somewhere in this region. Deep in the wilderness, on some far-off unnamed tributary of the Rio Usumasinta, is supposed to be hidden a splendid city, whose white walls shine like silver in the sun, and inhabited by unconquered aboriginal Indians who yet worship the hideous idols of their

ancestors. At least it is true that several adventurous explorers of our own time, who have made this region the study of years, believe in the mysterious city. Stephens, Morelet, Squier, and Le Plongeon tried hard to find it; and Ober, being on the border of the wilderness, was strongly tempted to venture alone in search of it, but was dissuaded from the undertaking.

It is said that only one person in the world claims to have actually sojourned within the aboriginal city and lived to tell the tale. This is Señor Don Pedro Velasquez, a Guatemalan. He says that he accompanied two young gentlemen from Baltimore, Maryland, who, with several Campeche Indians, were prospecting the wilderness in search of mines and india-rubber, and who, after many hardships and hairbreadth escapes, reached the shining city. According to

Ruins of Hoch-ob, Campeche.

his account, the wonder is that they were allowed to enter at all. But once inside the city, they were safe enough so long as they showed no desire to depart. At the first attempt to leave it they were bound hand and foot and thrust into a pen adjoining the temple. That same evening one of the Baltimoreans was sacrificed on the blood-stained altar of the sun, having the heart torn from his living body and placed reeking before the idol just as the sun sank below the horizon. The others expected the same fate, but during the night they managed to effect an almost miraculous escape. Only Don Pedro, however, and one of his Indians returned to civilization, the rest having perished in the wilderness.

Carmen, while it has the best harbor on the Mexican coast, is one of its least known ports. As no regular line of ocean-steamers stops there, it seldom falls to the lot of tourists or travellers to visit the place; yet there are from a dozen to two dozen foreign vessels

anchored there a great part of the time. At the lower extremity of Yucatán a fringe of islands hems in a portion of the gulf, forming a large lake. The early navigators, believing this lake to be a strait separating Yucatán from the mainland, and here terminating their voyages for the time being, gave it the name of Términos, which name still remains. But the lake is really the estuary of the great Usumasinta River, which drains an area of country extending from the Cockscomb Mountains of British Honduras on the east to the rugged mountain-peaks of Chiapas on the west and the cordilleras of Guatemala on the south. Since its birth the wealth of Carmen has consisted in the logwood cut in the vicinity and on the banks of the Usumasinta, with large quantities of mahogany felled in the interior and floated down the streams to the port. For the shipment of these valuable woods many vessels are required.

Travelling in the jungles of Campeche is not particularly inviting as yet. Wild beasts and

Palacio Central, Ruins of Hoch-ob, Campeche.

hostile Indians are not the greatest perils in that tropic forest. Terrible tales are told of enormous serpents which hurl themselves from the trees with the force of a catapult, by one twist of their sinuous coils crushing the life out of a man on horseback, and swallowing small animals in the twinkling of an eye. Even worse than the giant boa is the small *vibora de sangre*, whose bite causes the blood of man or beast to ooze through the pores of the skin until the veins are empty and the victim dies from exhaustion. There are also tiny vipers, the exact color of the leaves under which they lurk, whose sting is certain death.

And yet, life in many parts of the state is almost ideal; and invariably the stranger in Southern Mexico is astonished at the magnificence in which the wealthy planters live. Each is

like a king in his own extensive domain, absolute monarch of all he surveys, as well as lord of the lives and destinies of his peons.

The hacienda garden is a wonder in its way. In it are cocoanut-, mango-, and red-pear-trees, clumps of oranges and limes, thickets of figs and pomegranates, while the flower-beds, raised a foot from the ground and bordered with beautiful shells bedded in mortar, are filled with roses, narcissus, pansies, and tuberoses, almost unrecognizable as the familiar favorites because grown to such perfection. On the average hacienda, too, the proprietor's residence is a model of elegance and comfort, suited to the climate and typical of the rural homes of wealthy Mexicans.

The governor of Campeche is Señor Don Juan Montalvo, whose administration is distinguished by prudent foresight and wise economy.