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 Yucatan, Volume 1  
 John Lloyd Stephens  
 Excerpt  
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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 McDonald.—Origin of Balize.—Negro Schools.—Scene in a Court-room—Law without Lawyers.—The Barracks.—Excursion in a Pitpan—A Beginning of Honours.—Honours accumulating.—Departure from Balize—Sweets of Office.

BEING intrusted by the President with a Special Confidential Mission to Central America, on Wednesday, the third of October, 1839, I embarked 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 wharves 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 me on board left me; 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.

My only fellow-passenger was Mr. Catherwood, an  
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experienced traveller and personal friend, who had passed more than ten years of his life in diligently studying the antiquities of the Old World; and whom, as one familiar with the remains of ancient architectural greatness, I engaged, immediately on receiving my appointment, to accompany me in exploring the ruins of Central America.

Hurried on by a strong northeaster, on the ninth we were within the region of the trade-winds, on the tenth within the tropics, and on the eleventh, 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 twenty-ninth 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 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 canvass, 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,

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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 a little island at the mouth of the river, the spire of a Gothic church behind the Government House, and groves of cocoanut-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, bungoes, 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,

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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 at home, 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.

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## A SAMPLE OF THE PICTURESQUE. 13

I hardly knew whether to be shocked or amused at this condition of society ; and, in the mean time, 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. As this was the first appointment I had ever held from government, and I was not 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 Guatimala, 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 ;

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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 steam-boat 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 cocoanut-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 bucanier 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 Moscheto 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 thirty-first 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 forever;" "Civil and religious liberty all over the world." Nelson Schaw, "a snowdrop of the first water," continues the Alma-

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nac, "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 is 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 countymen, 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. Hubbabboo Cochalarum 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 had had great experience in teaching; and she told us that, though she had had many clever black girls under her charge,

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## SCENE IN A COURTROOM.

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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 I 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 them 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

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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 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. 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 courtroom 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 re-