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John Lloyd Stephens

Excerpt

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## INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL

OF

CENTRAL AMERICA, CHIAPAS, AND YUCATAN.

## CHAPTER I.

Visit to the Volcano of Masaya.—Village of Masaya.—Lake of Masaya.—Nindirí.—Ascent of the Volcano.—Account of it.—The Crater.—Descent into it.—Volcano of Nindirí.—Ignorance of the People concerning Objects of Interest.—Return to Masaya.—Another Countryman.—Managua.—Lake of Managua.—Fishing.—Beautiful Scenery.—Mateares.—Questa del Relox.—Nagarotís.—Crosses.—A Gamekeeper.—Pueblo Nuevo.

MARCH 1. Anxious as I was to hurry on, I resolved nevertheless to give one day to the Volcano of Masaya. For this purpose I sent a courier ahead to procure me a guide up the volcano, and did not get off till eleven o'clock. At a short distance from the city we met a little negro on horseback, dressed in the black suit that nature made him, with two large plantain leaves sewed together for a hat, and plantain leaves for a saddle. At the distance of two leagues we came in sight of the volcano, and at four o'clock, after a hot ride, entered the town, one of the oldest and largest in Nicaragua, and though completely inland, containing, with its suburbs, a population of twenty thousand. We rode to the house of Don Sabino Satroon, who lay, with his mouth open, snoring in a hammock; but his wife, a pretty young half-blood, received me cordially, and with a proper regard for the infirmities of an old husband and for me, did not wake him up. All at once

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he shut his mouth and opened his eyes, and gave me a cordial welcome. Don Sabino was a Colombian, who had been banished for ten years, as he said, for services rendered his country; and having found his way to Masaya, had married the pretty young half-breed, and set up as a doctor. Inside the door, behind a little stock of sugar, rice, sausages, and chocolate, was a formidable array of jars and bottles, exhibiting as many colours and as puzzling labels as an apothecary's shop at home.

I had time to take a short walk around the town, and turning down the road, at the distance of half a mile came to the brink of a precipice, more than a hundred feet high, at the foot of which, and a short distance beyond, was the Lake of Masaya. The descent was almost perpendicular, in one place by a rough ladder, and then by steps cut in the rock. I was obliged to stop while fifteen or twenty women, most of them young girls, passed. Their water-jars were made of the shell of a large gourd, round, with fanciful figures scratched on them, and painted or glazed, supported on the back by a strap across the forehead, and secured by fine network. Below they were chattering gayly, but by the time they reached the place where I stood they were silent, their movements very slow, their breathing hard, and faces covered with profuse perspiration. This was a great part of the daily labour of the women of the place, and in this way they procured enough for domestic use; but every horse, mule, or cow was obliged to go by a circuitous road of more than a league for water. Why a large town has grown up and been continued so far from this element of life, I do not know. The Spaniards found it a large Indian village, and as they immediately made the owners of the soil their drawers of water, they did not feel the burden; nor do their descendants now.

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## VOLCANO OF MASAYA.

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In the mean time my guide arrived, who, to my great satisfaction, was no less a personage than the alcalde himself. The arrangements were soon made, and I was to join him the next morning at his house in Nindiri. I gave my mules and Nicolas a day's rest, and started on Don Sabino's horse, with a boy to act as guide and to carry a pair of alforgas with provisions. In half an hour I reached Nindiri, having met more people than on my whole road from San José to Nicaragua. The alcalde was ready, and in company with an assistant, who carried a pair of alforgas with provisions and a calabash of water, all mounted, we set out. At the distance of half a league we left the main road, and turned off on a small path in the woods on the left. We emerged from this into an open field covered with lava, extending to the base of the volcano in front and on each side as far as I could see, black, several feet deep, and in some places lying in high ridges. A faint track was beaten by cattle over this plain of lava. In front were two volcanoes, from both of which streams of lava had run down the sides into the plain. That directly in front my guide said was the Volcano of Masaya. In that on the right, and farthest from us, the crater was broken, and the great chasm inside was visible. This he said was called Ventero, a name I never heard before, and that it was inaccessible. Riding toward that in front, and crossing the field of lava, we reached the foot of the volcano. Here the grass was high, but the ground was rough and uneven, being covered with decomposed lava. We ascended on horseback until it became too steep for the horses to carry us, and then dismounted, tied them to a bush, and continued on foot. I was already uneasy as to my guides' knowledge of localities, and soon found that they were unwilling or unable to endure much fa-

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tigue. Before we were half way up they disencumbered themselves of the water-jar and provisions, and yet they lagged behind. The alcalde was a man about forty, who rode his own horse, and being a man of consequence in the town, I could not order him to go faster; his associate was some ten years older, and physically incapable; and seeing that they did not know any particular path, I left them and went on alone.

At eleven o'clock, or three hours from the village of Nindiri, I reached the high point at which we were aiming; and from this point I expected to look down into the crater of the volcano; but there was no crater, and the whole surface was covered with gigantic masses of lava, and overgrown with bushes and scrub trees. I waited till my guides came up, who told me that this was the Volcano of Masaya, and that there was nothing more to see. The alcalde insisted that two years before he had ascended with the cura, since deceased, and a party of villagers, and they all stopped at this place. I was disappointed and dissatisfied. Directly opposite rose a high peak, which I thought, from its position, must command a view of the crater of the other volcano. I attempted to reach it by passing round the circumference of the mountain, but was obstructed by an immense chasm, and returning, struck directly across. I had no idea what I was attempting. The whole was covered with lava lying in ridges and irregular masses, the surface varying at every step, and overgrown with trees and bushes. After an hour of the hardest work I ever had in my life, I reached the point at which I aimed, and, to my astonishment, instead of seeing the crater of the distant volcano, I was on the brink of another.

Among the recorded wonders of the discoveries in America, this mountain was one; and the Spaniards,

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who in those days never stopped half way in any matter that touched the imagination, called it El Infierno de Masaya, or the Hell of Masaya. The historian, in speaking of Nicaragua, says, "There are burning mountains in this province, the chief of which is Masaya, where the natives at certain times offered up maids, throwing them into it, thinking by their lives to appease the fire, that it might not destroy the country, and they went to it very chearful;" and in another place he says, "Three leagues from the city of Masaya is a small hill, flat and round, called Masaya, being a burning Mountain, the Mouth of it being half a League in Compass, and the Depth within it two hundred and fifty Fathoms. There are no Trees nor Grass, but Birds build without any Disturbance from the Fire. There is another Mouth like that of a Well about a Bowshot over, the distance from which to the Fire is about a hundred and fifty Fathoms, always boiling up, and that mass of Fire often rises and gives a great Light, so that it can be seen at a considerable Distance. It moves from one Side to the other, and sometimes roars so loud that it is dreadful, yet never casts up anything but Smoak and Flame. The Liquor never ceasing at the Bottom, nor its Boiling, imagining the same to be Gold, *F. Blase de Yniesta*, of the Order of *St. Dominick*, and two other *Spaniards*, were let down into the first Mouth in two Baskets, with a Bucket made of one Piece of Iron, and a long Chain to draw up some of that fiery Matter, and know whether it was Metal. The Chain ran a hundred and fifty Fathoms, and as soon as it came to the Fire, the Bucket melted, with some Links of the Chain, in a very short Time, and therefore they could not know what was below. They lay there that Night without any Want of Fire or Can-

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dles, and came out again in their Baskets sufficiently frightened."

Either the monk, disappointed in his search for gold, had fibbed, or nature had made one of its most extraordinary changes. The crater was about a mile and a half in circumference, five or six hundred feet deep, with sides slightly sloping, and so regular in its proportions that it seemed an artificial excavation. The bottom was level, both sides and bottom covered with grass, and it seemed an immense conical green basin. There were none of the fearful marks of a volcanic eruption; nothing to terrify, or suggest an idea of *el infierno*; but, on the contrary, it was a scene of singular and quiet beauty. I descended to the side of the crater, and walked along the edge, looking down into the area. Toward the other end was a growth of arbolitos or little trees, and in one place no grass grew, and the ground was black and loamy, like mud drying up. This was perhaps the mouth of the mysterious well that sent up the flame, which gave its light a "considerable distance," into which the Indian maidens were thrown, and which melted the monk's iron bucket. Like him, I felt curious to "know what was below;" but the sides of the crater were perpendicular. Entirely alone, and with an hour's very hard work between me and my guides, I hesitated about making any attempt to descend, but I disliked to return without. In one place, and near the black earth, the side was broken, and there were some bushes and scrub trees. I planted my gun against a stone, tied my handkerchief around it as a signal of my whereabouts, and very soon was below the level of the ground. Letting myself down by the aid of roots, bushes, and projecting stones, I descended to a scrub tree which grew out of the side about half

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## DESCENT INTO THE CRATER.

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way from the bottom, and below this it was a naked and perpendicular wall. It was impossible to go any farther. I was even obliged to keep on the upper side of the tree, and here I was more anxious than ever to reach the bottom; but it was of no use. Hanging midway, impressed with the solitude and the extraordinary features of a scene upon which so few human eyes have ever rested, and the power of the great Architect who has scattered his wonderful works over the whole face of the earth, I could not but reflect, what a waste of the bounties of Providence in this favoured but miserable land! At home this volcano would be a fortune; with a good hotel on top, a railing round to keep children from falling in, a zigzag staircase down the sides, and a glass of iced lemonade at the bottom. Cataracts are good property with people who know how to turn them to account. Niagara and Trenton Falls pay well, and the owners of volcanoes in Central America might make money out of them by furnishing facilities to travellers. This one could probably be bought for ten dollars, and I would have given twice that sum for a rope and a man to hold it. Meanwhile, though anxious to be at the bottom, I was casting my eyes wistfully to the top. The turning of an ankle, breaking of a branch, rolling of a stone, or a failure of strength, might put me where I should have been as hard to find as the government of Central America. I commenced climbing up, slowly and with care, and in due time hauled myself out in safety.

On my right was a full view of the broken crater of the Volcano of Nindiri. The side toward me was hurled down, and showed the whole interior of the crater. This the alcalde had declared inaccessible; and partly from sheer spite against him, I worked my way

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to it with extreme labour and difficulty. At length, after five hours of most severe toil among the rugged heaps of lava, I descended to the place where we had left our provisions. Here I seized the calabash of water, and stood for several minutes with my face turned up to the skies, and then I began upon the alcalde and the eatables. Both he and his companion expressed their utter astonishment at what I described, and persisted in saying that they did not know of the existence of such a place.

I dwell upon this matter for the benefit of any future traveller who may go out competent and prepared to explore the interesting volcanic regions of Central America. Throughout my journey my labours were much increased by the ignorance and indifference of the people concerning the objects of interest in their immediate neighbourhood. A few intelligent and educated men know of their existence as part of the history of the country, but I never met one who had visited the Volcano of Masaya; and in the village at its foot the traveller will not obtain even the scanty information afforded in these pages. The alcalde was born near this volcano; from boyhood had hunted stray cattle on its side, and told me that he knew every foot of the ground; yet he stopped me short of the only object of interest, ignorant, as he said, of its existence. Now either the alcalde lied, and was too lazy to encounter the toil which I had undergone, or he was imposing upon me. In either case he deserves a flogging, and I beg the next traveller, as a particular favour to me, to give him one.

I was too indignant with the alcalde to have anything farther to do with him; and bent upon making another attempt, on my return to the village I rode to the house of the cura, to obtain his assistance in procuring men and making other needful preparations. On the steps



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## A BLACK PRIEST.

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of the back piazza I saw a young negro man, in a black gown and cap, sitting by the side of a good-looking, well-dressed white woman, and, if I mistake not, discoursing to her of other things than those connected with his priestly duties. His black reverence was by no means happy to see me. I asked him if I could make an inn of his house, which, though it sounds somewhat free, is the set phrase for a traveller to use; and, without rising from his seat, he said his house was small and in-commodious, and that the alcalde had a good one. He was the first black priest I had seen, and the only one in the country who failed in hospitality. I must confess that I felt a strong impulse to lay the butt of a pistol over his head; and spurring my horse so that he sprang almost upon him, I wheeled short and galloped out of the yard. With the alcalde and cura both against me, I had no chance in the village. It was nearly dark, and I returned to Masaya. My vexation was lost in a sense of overpowering fatigue. It would be impossible to repeat the severe labour of the day without an interval of rest, and there was so much difficulty in making arrangements, that I determined to mount my macho and push on.

The next morning I resumed my journey. My mules had not been watered. To send them to the lake and back would give them a journey of two leagues; and to save them I bought water, which was measured out in a gourd holding about a quart. At about a league's distance we came in sight of the Lake of Managua, and before us the whole country was a bed of lava from the base of the volcano to the lake. I met a travelling party, the principal of which I recognised as a stranger. We had passed, when I turned round and accosted him in English; and after looking at me for a minute, to

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my great surprise he colled me by name. He was an American named Higgins, whom I had seen last at my own office in New-York. He was coming from Real-ejo, and was on his way to San Juan, with the intention of embarking for the United States. We sent our luggage on and dismounted; and besides the pleasure of the meeting, I am under great obligation to him, for I was riding at the time on an alvarado, or common saddle of the country, very painful for one not used to it. My own saddle hurt my macho; and as his journey was nearly at an end, he gave me his in exchange, which I rode on afterward till I left it on the shores of Yucatan. He gave me, too, a line in pencil to a lady in Leon, and I charged him with messages to my friends at home. When he rode off I almost envied him; he was leaving behind him tumults and convulsions, and was going to a quiet home, but I had still a long and difficult journey before me.

In about three hours, after a desperately hot ride, we reached Managua, beautifully situated on the banks of the lake. Entering through a collection of thatched huts, we passed a large aristocratic house, with a courtyard occupying a whole square, the mansion of an expatriated family, decaying and going to ruin.

Late in the afternoon I walked down to the lake. It was not so grand as the Lake of Nicaragua, but it was a noble sheet of water, and in full sight was the Volcano of Momontanbo. The shore presented the same animated spectacle of women filling their water-jars, men bathing, horses and mules drinking, and in one place was a range of fishermen's huts; on the edge of the water stakes were set up in a triangular form, and women with small hand-nets were catching fish, which they threw into hollow places dug, or rather