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“The American Egypt”

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In addition to the so-called Yaqui Wars, there were other shameful aspects of the era of Don Porfirio, two of which provide the substance of John Kenneth Turner's exposé:* the conditions of “slavery” in Yucatán and Oaxaca. A generally unknown work, written by two British anthropologists who traveled through Yucatán at about the same time Turner did, generally supports the Turner account of laboring conditions in southern Mexico. The conditions discussed here are representative of the most extreme of the Porfirian Age. *The American Egypt, A Record of Travel in Yucatan* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1909), pp. 324-35.

The peonage system of Spanish America, as specious and treacherous a plan as was ever devised for race-degradation, is that by which a farm labourer is legally bound to work for the land-owner, if in debt to him, until that debt is paid. Nothing could sound fairer: nothing could lend itself better to the blackest abuse. In Yucatan every Indian peon is in debt to his Yucatecan master. Why? Because every Indian is a spendthrift? Not at all; but because the master's interest is to get him and keep him in debt. This is done in two ways. The plantation-slave must buy the necessities of his humble life at the plantation store, where care is taken to charge such prices as are beyond his humble earnings of sixpence a day. Thus he is always in debt to the farm; and if an Indian is discovered to be scraping together the few dollars he owes, the books of the hacienda are “cooked,”—yes, deliberately “cooked,”—and when he presents himself before the magistrate to pay his debt, say, of twenty dollars (£2) the hacendado can show scored against him a debt of fifty dollars. The Indian pleads that he does not owe it. The hacendado-court smiles. The word of

*See p.129 for information about John Kenneth Turner.

an Indian cannot prevail against the Señor's books, it murmurs sweetly, and back to his slave-work the miserable peon must go, first to be cruelly flogged to teach him that freedom is not for such as he, and that struggle as he may he will never escape the cruel master who under law as at present administered in Yucatan has as complete a disposal of his body as of one of the pigs which root around in the hacienda yard.

It is only by a comparison of the law of debt in Yucatan for a white man, as the Yucatecans love to call themselves, that one can realise how wickedly unjust all this is, and how deliberate is the conspiracy to keep the Indian in a bondage which spells fortune to his master. For the Yucatecan debtor there appears to be no punishment and no means of compelling him to pay. Here is a case in point. To a store in Merida comes a Yucatecan who, falsely representing himself as employed by one of the richest of Meridan merchant-houses, gets a typewriting machine valued at two hundred and twenty-five dollars, on credit. He goes off with it, and at once sells it. For thus obtaining money by false pretences he is not punished, nor can the defrauded shopkeeper recover his goods or their value except by tedious processes which will cost him more than he has already lost, even if he wins the day. Now, had this thief been an Indian, he could have been instantly arrested, his debt sold by the shopman to any hacendado, and the fellow would have become a slave for life. Thus is law meted out by the Yucatecan conspirators.

The Yucatecan millionaires are very sensitive on the question of slavery, and well they may be: for their record is as black as Legree's in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. You have but to mention the word "slavery," and they begin a lot of cringing apologetics as to the comforts of the Indians' lives, the care taken of them, and the fatherly relations existing between the hacendado and his slaves. Very *fatherly* indeed, as we shall shortly demonstrate! They take just so much care of the Indians as reasonably prudent men always take of their live stock; so much and no more.

We have spoken earlier of the recent visit paid to the country by President Diaz. It was the first time during the whole of his long reign that the great man had troubled himself about the limestone peninsula which forms the furthestmost eastern part of his dominions, and the trembling Yucatecans looked to the bolts of the cupboard in which the family skeleton was hidden, and they were not over-satisfied with those bolts. They had new locks made and new and thicker doors fixed so that august presidential ears should not be offended by the rattling of those most unfortunate bones. With their teeth chattering, they hastened to put their house in order and sweep and garnish it, for they knew quite well

that the eyes into which they had to throw dust were eyes which could see further than most eyes. It was all the fault of a snobbish governor. Many a henequen lord must have cursed the self-importance of their parvenu chief which had induced in him such a discontent with the Spartan-like simplicity of his rule at Merida that he must needs wish to entertain presidential guests and bask in the sunshine of the mighty Diaz's approval. Diaz, they knew very well, cared little or nothing for Indians *qua* Indians. But Diaz cares immensely about the fair name of Mexico, which they knew they had done for years all they could to besmirch. Would he see the skeleton through the fatal door? If money and bribery were of any avail, those slave-owners would see to it that their terrible ruler should be fooled. But they had to calculate on more than his natural perspicacity. There was much reason to believe that ugly rumours had reached Mexico City of the slavery rife in Yucatan, and that the President's visit was not unconnected with these. That skeleton must be cemented into its cupboard with the cement of millions of dollars if necessary.

Well, the President came. Never were there such junketings: night was turned into day; roadways were garlanded; gargantuan feasts were served. Lucullus never entertained Caesar with more gorgeous banquets than the henequen lords of Merida spread before Diaz. Small fortunes were spent on single meals. One luncheon party cost 50,000 dollars: a dinner cost 60,000, and so on. The official report of the reception reads like a piece out of the *Arabian Nights*. In their eagerness to keep that skeleton in its cupboard some of the hacendados actually mortgaged their estates. One of the most notable of the entertainments provided was that of a luncheon at a hacienda ninety miles south-east of the city of Merida. At the station where the President alighted for the drive to the farm, the roadway was strewn with flowers. Triumphant arches of flowers and laurels, of henequen, and one built of oranges surmounted by the national flag, spanned the route. The farm-workers lined the avenue of nearly two miles to the house, waving flags and strewing the road with flowers, while a *feu-de-joie* of signal rockets was fired on his alighting from his carriage. He then made a tour of the farm. Having inspected the henequen machinery he (we quote from the official report) "visited the hospital of the finca, and the large chapel where the Catholic labourers worshipped; the gardens and the beautiful orchard of fruit trees; and during his tour of inspection he honoured several labourers by visiting their huts thatched with palm-leaf and standing in their own grounds well cultivated by the occupants. More than two hundred such houses constitute the beautiful village of this hacienda, which breathes an atmosphere of general happiness. Without

doubt a beautiful spectacle is offered to the visitor to this lovely finca with its straight roads, its pretty village clustering round the central building surrounded by gardens of flower and fruit trees."

At the luncheon the President in the course of his speech said:—"Only can a visitor here realise the energy and perseverance which, continued through so many years, has resulted in all I have seen. Some writers who do not know this country, who have not seen, as I have, the labourers, have declared Yucatan to be disgraced with slavery. Their statements are the grossest calumny, as is proved by the very faces of the labourers, by their tranquil happiness. He who is a slave necessarily looks very different from those labourers I have seen in Yucatan." The prolonged cheers and measureless enthusiasm evoked by these words (one can understand how the conspirators chuckled at the success of their efforts at deception) were agreeably interrupted by the appearance of an old Indian, who made a speech of welcome in his own language, presenting a bouquet of wild flowers and a photographic album filled with views of the hacienda. It is not necessary to quote the fulsome stuff which had been placed in the mouth of the poor old man by his master. It is simply a string of meaningless compliments which ends with these words: "We kiss your hands; we hope that you may live many years for the good of Mexico and her States, among which is proud to reckon itself the ancient and indomitable [surely a pathetic adjective under the circumstances] land of the Mayans." Well may the official report say that "it is only justice to declare that the preparations of the feast and the decorations of the finca showed that the proprietor had been anxious to prepare everything with the most extraordinary magnificence."

This feast was a gigantic fraud, a colossally impertinent fake from start to finish. Preparations indeed! That is the exact word to describe the lavish entertainments of Mexico's ruler here and elsewhere in Yucatan. Tens of thousands of dollars were lavished to guard the hacendados' secrets. In this particular case the huts of the Indian labourers which the President visited were "fake" huts. They had been, every one of them, if not actually built for the occasion, cleaned, whitewashed, and metamorphosed beyond recognition. They had been furnished with American bentwood furniture. Every Indian matron had been given a sewing-machine; every Indian lass had been trimmed out with finery and in some cases, it is said, actually provided with European hats. The model village round which the President was escorted was the fraud of a day; no sooner was his back turned than to the shops of Merida were returned sewing-machines, furniture, hats and everything, and the Indians re-

lapsed again into the simplicity of furnitureless life which they probably cordially preferred.

We are not quoting the "faking" of this village as an example of hardship dealt out to the Indians, but as a proof of the ludicrous efforts made by those whose fortunes have been and are being built on slave labour to hide the truth from General Diaz. As for the poor old Mayan who addressed him, and as for the deputations of whip-drilled Indians who were paraded before him to express their untold happiness and loyalty, they very well knew that they had got to do exactly what they were told to do. We are not exaggerating when we state that it would have cost any Indian his life to have even attempted to make General Diaz aware of the truth. No Indian throughout civilised Yucatan could have been found to make the attempt. For nothing is sadder than the lack of all manliness and spirit which characterises the average Indian workman. It is the story of the Russian moujik over again. There is no combination or loyalty to each other among the hacienda Indians; and this is what makes possible what we are about to relate.

If the hardship of the Indians' lot was merely slavery, it might be argued that there were slender grounds for our indictment. Slavery may under certain circumstances be far from an evil, where the backward condition of a race is such as to justify its temporary existence, and where the slave-owner can be trusted. But the slave-owner can very seldom be trusted, and he certainly cannot be in Yucatan. It is no exaggeration to say that the enslavement of the Indians of Yucatan never has had, never can have, justification. Conceived in an unholy alliance between the Church and brute force, it has grown with the centuries into a race-degradation which has as its only objects the increasing of the millions of the slave-owners and the gratification of their foul lusts. The social condition of Yucatan to-day represents as infamous a conspiracy to exploit and prostitute a whole race as the history of the world affords. Yucatan is governed by a group of millionaire monopolists whose interests are identical, banded together to deny all justice to the Indians, who, if need be, are treated in a way an Englishman would blush to treat his dog. "The Indians hear only with their backs." Yes, but the ill-treatment of the poor wretches often does not end with a whipping; it ends in murder. We will give particulars of some cases.

Some years ago an Indian was thrashed to death on the estate of the brother of a high official in Yucatan. The body was easily disposed of, buried at night like a dog's. But some of his fellow-workmen talked, it seems, and news of the crime found its way to the capital. There a young

lawyer, Perez Escofee, indignant at the report, took a solicitor down to the hacienda and got from some of the Indians affidavits as to their knowledge of the murder. Armed with these he published the facts in the Merida newspaper, demanding an investigation. The hacendado concerned sent his solicitor down and obtained from the very Indians sworn contrary statements. On these Perez, his adviser, and the editor who had had the courage to publish Escofee's first appeal, were arrested and thrown into prison. That is three years and more ago, and Escofee and his lawyer were still in Merida prison without trial at the time of our visit, if our information be correct. The hacendado's family dares not allow, and has so far proved powerful enough to prevent, a trial. The third man was liberated owing to very influential friends who threatened exposure if he were not released.

Another loathsome case was that of the beating to death of an Indian girl of eleven by her old Yucatecan mistress. The poor child had been guilty of some trifling disobedience, and the murderess, having plenty of money, had no difficulty in getting an order for burial, the death being announced as due to pneumonia. The truth would never have come out but for the prattling of the granddaughter of this human beast who, child-like, told some neighbours. Yucatecan mistresses beat their Indian servants mercilessly for slight faults; but it will scarcely seem credible to English readers that Yucatecans are so lost to all sense of manliness that they, too, are often guilty of the basest cruelty towards the women servants. We heard of one case where a Yucatecan, because the Indian girl was a little late in bringing him his early breakfast of milk and bread, threw in her face the jug of boiling milk, and beat her over the head with the long stick of crusty roll till she was unconscious. For such cowardly curs there is no punishment. In this case the poor girl confessed to a friend that for days she had murder in her heart, and this feeling of revenge worried her so that at last she went to the priest for advice. That worthy told her she must be docile: that she must submit herself in all things to her master. This is really the worst feature of the conspiracy to degrade the Indians, the part the Church plays. The priests back up the hacendados in everything because it is from them they get their money.

Another outrageous case was that in which a very rich Yucatecan was concerned. Because his Indian driver did not go quick enough to please him, he thrashed him into unconsciousness in the street, and afterwards had him put in prison on some trumped-up charge for six months. This case, however, was so public, many passers witnessing the grossness of the assault, that the family found it necessary to come to terms with the injured man.

It would not be at all true to say that the Indians are often beaten to death. Labour is far too scarce in Yucatan. A perfect network of regulations and laws are in force on all the haciendas to keep the Indians. The unfortunate wretches are absolutely essential to the fortune-getting of the Yucatecans, and are far too precious to be recklessly killed off. The haciendas are regarded as excellent breeding grounds for new generations of slaves. Thus a rule is that no Indian of either sex shall marry off the hacienda. The real truth is that the Indians are nothing but cattle, and just as much the property of their master as the heifers in a farmyard in England belong to the farmer. To a friend of ours an Indian came, saying he owed his master one hundred dollars, and begging that his debt might be paid and that he might come to work for him. Well, our friend agreed to pay his debt. Then round comes the master to say that the man really owed him three hundred and forty dollars—which of course was a lie, to be supported, if need be, by forged entries in the hacienda books. He further says he will not accept payment, as he wishes to get the man back and whip him publicly to make an example of him. The man said he would rather die than go back; and it ended by the master, fearful lest the slave should kill himself, selling him for his debt to another hacendado, who, in turn, would get all the work he could out of the poor devil. Thus, though there is no open slave market in Merida, these cowardly slave-owners traffic in their slaves at their own free will, and there is literally no escape for the Indians.

There are three reasons for the continuance of this cruel system. First, the prostitution of the Church to the hacendados. Superstitious to a degree remarkable even among the many semi-civilised peoples who have been victimised by Catholicism, the Mayans look to their priests as semi-divinities whose word is law; and a debauched priesthood, eager to make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness, and themselves unscrupulous in self-indulgence, greedily support slavery.

Secondly, the lack of loyalty among the Indians to each other. This is the natural effect of all centuries of oppression which they have endured. All the manliness of the race, all the spirit and nobility of a nature which wrung a tribute even from Spanish historians, have been effectually crushed out of them. This is indeed the saddest side of it all. The Yucatecan bullies have done their work so well that if the Indians of all the haciendas could be asked whether they were contented, a large majority, possibly almost all, would apathetically declare themselves content. They are like prisoners who have been so long in the gloom of a dungeon that they would be actually terrified of the sunshine.

And thirdly, the water supply is an enormous auxiliary in the maintain-

ing of the present disgraceful state of affairs. As we have said, there are no rivers in Yucatan, and the only water available is that obtained from the cenotes or wells attached to the haciendas. Practically you may say that the whole water supply of the country is in the hands of the landlords. To leave one farm would only mean going to another for the miserable serf. Each hacendado helps every other in keeping the slaves on the places. Thus, turn where he may, the Indian has no refuge but the woods, from which he would be hunted with dogs just as Mrs. Beecher Stowe has told us was always done in the South.

He submits to his fate; but hard as we have shown that to be, there is worse to be told. A slave, with a wage which is a mockery, a pittance, given really to make more plausible the case of his master, he must see his daughters submit to a systematic tyranny of lust which is really so base that it is difficult to write of it in calm language. Here in Yucatan every sexual horror which in the story of the South in the 'sixties horrified the world is reproduced, cloaked by the foulest hypocrisy. The Indian from her childhood up is the prey of the hacendado and his sons. From their foul clutches she cannot escape. If her father had, poor devil, any scruples left, he must stifle them or be prepared to risk his life by objecting. As a matter of fact, so immoral and degraded have almost all the hacienda Indians become, that objections to this *droit du Seigneur*, this *Jus Primae Noctis*, are almost unheard of. We are not writing without weighing our words carefully when we say that there are farms in plenty where the slave-owner demands as part of his serfs' obligations the right to every lass as soon as she enters on womanhood, sometimes much before. He demands it, and he does what he will with these children, for they are usually little else; and there is no remedy for the parents.

Inconceivable cynicism is the attitude of all Yucatecans towards sexual excesses. The young sons of fourteen and upwards are not restrained from, indeed they are often actually encouraged by fathers and even mothers in indulging their boyish passions at the expense of the little Indian slave-girls. It is no answer to say, as some Yucatecans do, that the girls are in very many cases more than willing victims of their boy-lovers. Yucatecan lads are notably handsome, and even maids of the cold North would find it hard to withstand their wooing. It remains the fact that these youthful Don Juans in many cases do not woo at all. They command; and the girl-child must go at night to the boy's room or be cruelly beaten by him till she surrenders. If she plucked up courage to complain to her mistress, she would be simply laughed at. She is but a little slave-girl. What better fate could she ask for herself than to have thus early attracted

the notice of the lad who will some day be her owner? And if a child results, why, it is but one more hacienda baby, brought up with the rest. No one cares; and if it be a girl, why then in the fullness of years it will most probably attract the notice of its own father, who by that time will have inherited the estates. The girl would not know, and dare not disobey if she did; and it is quite certain the man by that time would have ruined so many Indian girls that he would be past any sensitiveness where his self-gratifications were concerned. It is possible that the reader will by this time be willing to acquit us of any unfairness of which we may have seemed guilty . . . when we divided the population of so-called civilised Yucatan into "Savages" and "Slaves."

As a rule it may be said that the Yucatecan is a benevolent master. It pays him better to be so, and every Yucatecan's one rule in life is to do what pays him. Indeed there is really no reason for him to be harsh. The average Indian is as submissive as a well-whipped hound, creeping up after a thrashing to kiss his master's hand. This Stephens actually witnessed, and the miserable slaves are always made to do it.¹ He seldom disobeys: he works uncomplainingly all his life for no pay; and he breeds pretty daughters for his lord's gratification. The Yucatecan would indeed be hard to please if he quarrelled with such an exemplary beast of burden. And the habit of submission learnt through centuries of tyranny has affected the Mayan women. They exhibit a complacency towards their Yucatecan lovers which suggests, what alas! cannot be denied, that chastity means little to them to-day. Visiting a large place, a little incident struck us as very significant. The hacendado was showing us his kitchens. Many Indian women were busied at trays and tables preparing meal and so forth. One beautiful girl, about eighteen perhaps, was bending over her task, and as our host passed her he grasped her plump brown neck, squeezing it as one would pet a dog. If we lived a century we should not forget the way that girl looked up at him. It was a mixture of animal submission and feminine coquetry which there was no mistaking. There was in the girl's eyes something which told volumes, and they were not very pleasant reading for any men who have learnt that the love of women is a prize which should be earned.

In truth, Mayan morality is very, very lax, and the blame lies on the "Christians" who came four centuries back to Yucatan to civilise and preach the love of God to the Indians. They cannot wriggle out of that

¹We saw the Indian women go down on one knee and kiss the hand of the hacendado whose farm we were viewing.

blame: they cannot shirk it. Even if doubt could be entertained as to the ancient Mayan laws . . . showing the sanctity attached by them to chastity, there can be no ground for disbelieving the Spanish historians. They bear united testimony to the evils which resulted from the Conquest. They state that the Mayan women dearly prized their chastity, but that all high ideals were lost on the arrival of the Spaniards. Yes, the "Christians" have changed all that. Who will be the thrower of the first stone at the humble Indian lassie who prefers the kisses of a lover to the whip and starvation? It is all very sad, but so natural. They have learnt their lesson. Their masters, their priests even, have taught them not to value chastity. What avails it for them to struggle, even if they had the wit to do so?

From our balcony at Tizimin we watched one morning played that comedy of life which so often turns to tragedy. An Indian girl, a beautiful young creature of about twelve, her soft white huipil clinging round the dainty brown calves, her basket of fruit balanced on her small black head, pattered down the dusty road. There met her a Yucatecan, young, tall, with big black moustache and fine eyes: just the face to win her simple heart. A look, a glance, a giggle. They stopped to speak. By the pretty toss of her head you knew he was pressing her to see him, and she was refusing. But she would, of course. Her heart, simple as a bird's, would be aflutter till she had given her handsome lover all, till she had run eager to meet Life and its secrets half-way. For him it was the merest incident. A month or two and she would be forgotten. What did it matter? She's only an Indian!

Perhaps he is right: perhaps it does not really matter. Perhaps, as she clasps closer to her brown breast the baby clinging with greedy lips to her nipple, she, too, will think it does not matter: perhaps she will not think at all. She is a mother: it matters little by whom. She has done her duty to God Who willed her maker of men. She has done her duty to her master who bids her make him slaves. Perhaps in the black head, bending, crooning, over the morsel of brown flesh, there will be no feeling, more or less, than the apathetic mother-love of the cow as it licks with loving tongue each spot on its newborn calf. Perhaps, perhaps not. He would be bold indeed who would dare to say that man has a right to command that apathy.

And so, after centuries of oppression, the race is dead, a chattel, body and soul, of a corrupt and degraded people.