

**John Kenneth Turner**

*Barbarous  
Mexico*

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# CHAPTER I

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### THE SLAVES OF YUCATAN

#### What is Mexico?

Americans commonly characterize Mexico as "Our Sister Republic." Most of us picture her vaguely as a republic in reality much like our own, inhabited by people a little different in temperament, a little poorer and a little less advanced, but still enjoying the protection of republican laws—a free people in the sense that we are free.

Others of us, who have seen the country through a car window, or speculated a little in Mexican mines or Mexican plantations, paint that country beyond the Rio Grande as a benevolent paternalism in which a great and good man orders all things well for his foolish but adoring people.

I found Mexico to be neither of these things. The real Mexico I found to be a country with a written constitution and written laws in general almost as fair and democratic as our own, but with neither constitution nor laws in operation. Mexico is a country without political freedom, without freedom of speech, without a free press, without a free ballot, without a jury system, without political parties, without any of our cherished guarantees of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is a land where there has been no contest for the office of president for more than a generation, where the executive rules all things by means of a standing army, where political offices are sold for a fixed price. I found Mexico to be a land where the people are poor because they have no rights, where peonage is the rule for

the great mass, and where actual chattel slavery obtains for hundreds of thousands. Finally, I found that the people do not idolize their president, that the tide of opposition, dammed and held back as it has been by army and secret police, is rising to a height where it must shortly overflow that dam. Mexicans of all classes and affiliations agree that their country is on the verge of a revolution in favor of democracy; if not a revolution in the time of Diaz, for Diaz is old and is expected soon to pass, then a revolution after Diaz.

My special interest in political Mexico was first awakened early in 1908, when I came in contact with four Mexican revolutionists who were at that time incarcerated in the county jail at Los Angeles, California. Here were four educated, intelligent Mexicans, college men, all of them, who were being held by the United States authorities on a charge of planning to invade a friendly nation—Mexico—with an armed force from American soil.

Why should intelligent men take up arms against a republic? Why should they come to the United States to prepare for their military maneuvers? I talked with those Mexican prisoners. They assured me that at one time they had peacefully agitated in their own country for a peaceful and constitutional overthrow of the persons in control of their government.

But for that very thing, they declared, they had been imprisoned and their property had been destroyed. Secret police had dogged their steps, their lives had been threatened, and countless methods had been used to prevent them from carrying on their work. Finally, hunted as

outlaws beyond the national boundaries, denied the rights of free speech, press and assembly, denied the right peaceably to organize to bring about political changes, they had resorted to the only alternative—arms. Why had they wished to overturn their government? Because it had set aside the constitution, because it had abolished those civic rights which all enlightened men agree are necessary for the unfolding of a nation, because it had dispossessed the common people of their lands, because it had converted free laborers into serfs, peons, and some of them even into—slaves.

"Slavery? Do you mean to tell me that there is any real slavery left in the western hemisphere?" I scoffed. "Bah! You are talking like an American socialist. You mean 'wage slavery,' or slavery to miserable conditions of livelihood. You don't mean chattel slavery."

But those four Mexican exiles refused to give ground. "Yes, slavery," they said, "chattel slavery. Men, women and children bought and sold like mules—just like mules—and like mules they belong to their masters. They are slaves."

"Human beings bought and sold like mules in America! And in the twentieth century. Well," I told myself, "if it's true, I'm going to see it."

So it was that early in September, 1908, I crossed the Rio Grande bound for my first trip through the back yards of Old Mexico.

Upon this first trip I was accompanied by L. Gutierrez De Lara, a Mexican of distinguished family, whose acquaintance I had made also in Los Angeles. De Lara was opposed to the existing government in Mexico, which fact my critics have

pointed out as evidence of bias in my investigations. On the contrary, I did not depend on De Lara or any other biased source for my information, but took every precaution to arrive at the exact truth, and by as many different avenues as practicable. Every essential fact which I put down here in regard to the slavery of Mexico I saw with my own eyes or heard with my own ears, and heard usually from those individuals who would be most likely to minimize their cruelties—the slave-drivers themselves.

Nevertheless, to the credit of De Lara I must say that he gave me most important aid in gathering my material. By his knowledge of the country and the people, by his genius as a "mixer," and, above all, through his personal acquaintance with valuable sources of information all over the country—men on the inside—I was enabled to see and hear things which are practically inaccessible to the ordinary investigator.

Slavery in Mexico! Yes, I found it. I found it first in Yucatan. The peninsula of Yucatan is an elbow of Central America, which shoots off in a northeasterly direction almost half way to Florida. It belongs to Mexico, and its area of some 80,000 square miles is almost equally divided among the states of Yucatan and Campeche and the territory of Quintana Roo.

The coast of Yucatan, which comprises the north central part of the peninsula, is about a thousand miles directly south of New Orleans. The surface of the state is almost solid rock, so nearly solid that it is usually impossible to plant a tree without first blasting a hole to receive the shoot and make a place for the roots. Yet this naturally barren land

is more densely populated than is our own United States. More than that, within one-fourth of the territory three-fourths of the people live, and the density of the population runs to nearly seventy-five per square mile.

The secret of these peculiar conditions is that the soil and the climate of northern Yucatan happen to be perfectly adapted to the production of that hardy species of century plant which produces *henequen*, or sisal hemp. Hence we find the city of Merida, a beautiful modern city claiming a population of 60,000 people, and surrounding it, supporting it, vast henequen plantations on which the rows of gigantic green plants extend for miles and miles. The farms are so large that each has a little city of its own, inhabited by from 500 to 2,500 people, according to the size of the farm. The owners of these great farms are the chief slave-holders of Yucatan; the inhabitants of the little cities are the slaves. The annual export of henequen from Yucatan approximates 250,000,000 pounds. The population of Yucatan is about three hundred thousand. The slave-holders' club numbers 250 members, but the vast majority of the lands and the slaves are concentrated in the hands of fifty henequen kings. The slaves number more than one hundred thousand.

In order to secure the truth in its greatest purity from the lips of the masters of the slaves I went among them playing a part. Long before I put my feet upon the white sands of Progreso, the port of Yucatan, I had heard how visiting investigators are bought or blinded, how, if they cannot be bought, they are wined and dined and filled with falsehood, then taken over a route previously prepared—fooled, in short, so completely that they go away half believing that



the slaves are not slaves, that the hundred thousand half-starving, overworked, degraded bondsmen are perfectly happy and so contented with their lot that it would be a shame indeed to yield to them the freedom and security which, in all humanity, is the rightful share of every human being born upon the earth.

The part which I played in Yucatan was that of an investor with much money to sink in henequen properties, and as such I was warmly welcomed by the henequen kings. I was rather fortunate in going to Yucatan when I did. Until the panic of 1907 it was a well-understood and unanimously approved policy of the "Camara de Agricola," the planters' organization, that foreigners should not be allowed to invade the henequen business. This was partly because the profits of the business were huge and the rich Yucatecos wanted to "hog it all" for themselves, but more especially because they feared that through foreigners the story of their misdeeds might become known to the world.

But the panic of 1907 wiped out the world's henequen market for a time. The planters were a company of little Rockefellers, but they needed ready cash, and they were willing to take it from anyone who came. Hence my imaginary money was the open sesame to their club, and to their farms. I not only discussed every phase of henequen production with the kings themselves, and while they were off their guard, but I observed thousands of slaves under their normal conditions.

Chief among the henequen kings of Yucatan is Olegario Molina, former governor of the state and Secretary of Fomento (Public Promotion) of Mexico. Molina's holdings of

lands in Yucatan and Quintana Roo aggregate 15,000,000 acres, or 23,000 square miles—a small kingdom in itself. The fifty kings live in costly palaces in Merida and many of them have homes abroad. They travel a great deal, usually they speak several different languages, and they and their families are a most cultivated class of people. All Merida and all Yucatan, even all the peninsula of Yucatan, are dependent on the fifty henequen kings. Naturally these men are in control of the political machinery of their state, and naturally they operate that machinery for their own benefit. The slaves are 8,000 Yaqui Indians imported from Sonora, 3,000 Chinese (Koreans), and between 100,000 and 125,000 native Mayas, who formerly owned the lands that the henequen kings now own.

The Maya people, indeed, form about ninety-five per cent of the population of Yucatan. Even the majority of the fifty henequen kings are Mayas crossed with the blood of Spain. The Mayas are Indians—and yet they are not Indians. They are not like the Indians of the United States, and they are called Indians only because their homes were in the western hemisphere when the Europeans came. The Mayas had a civilization of their own when the Europeans "discovered" them, and it was a civilization admittedly as high as that of the most advanced Aztecs or the Incas of Peru.

The Mayas are a peculiar people. They look like no other people on the face of the earth. They are not like other Mexicans; they are not like Americans; they are not like Chinamen; they are not like East Indians; they are not like Turks. Yet one might very easily imagine that fusion of all these five widely different peoples might produce a people

much like the Mayas. They are not large in stature, but their features are remarkably finely chiselled and their bodies give a strong impression of elegance and grace. Their skins are olive, their foreheads high, their faces slightly aquiline. The women of all classes in Merida wear long, flowing white gowns, unbound at the waist and embroidered about the hem and perhaps also about the bust in some bright color—green, blue or purple. In the warm evenings a military band plays and hundreds of comely women and girls thus alluringly attired mingle among the fragrant flowers, the art statues and the tropical greenery of the city plaza.

The planters do not call their chattels slaves. They call them "people," or "laborers," especially when speaking to strangers. But when speaking confidentially they have said to me: "Yes, they are slaves."

But I did not accept the word slavery from the people of Yucatan, though they were the holders of the slaves themselves. The proof of a fact is to be found, not in the name, but in the conditions thereof. Slavery is the ownership of the body of a man, an ownership, so absolute that the body can be transferred to another, an ownership that gives to the owner a right to take the products of that body, to starve it, to chastise it at will, to kill it with impunity. Such is slavery in the extreme sense. Such is slavery as I found it in Yucatan.

The masters of Yucatan do not call their system slavery; they call it enforced service for debt. "We do not consider that we own our laborers; we consider that they are in debt to us. And we do not consider that we buy and sell them; we consider that we transfer the debt, and the man goes with

the debt." This is the way Don Enrique Camara Zavala, president of the "Camara de Agricola de Yucatan," explained the attitude of the henequen kings in the matter. "Slavery is against the law; we do not call it slavery," various planters assured me again and again.

But the fact that it is not service for debt is proven by the habit of transferring the slaves from one master to another, not on any basis of debt, but on the basis of the market price of a man. In figuring on the purchase of a plantation I always had to figure on paying cash for the slaves, exactly the same as for the land, the machinery and the cattle. Four hundred Mexican dollars apiece was the prevailing price, and that is what the planters usually asked me. "If you buy now you buy at a very good time," I was told again and again. "The panic has put the price down. One year ago the price of each man was \$1,000."

The Yaquis are transferred on exactly the same basis as the Mayas—the market price of a slave—and yet all people of Yucatan know that the planters pay only \$65 apiece to the government for each Yaqui. I was offered for \$400 each Yaquis who had not been in the country a month and consequently had had no opportunity of rolling up a debt that would account for the difference in price. Moreover, one of the planters told me: "We don't allow the Yaquis to get in debt to us."

It would be absurd to suppose that the reason the price was uniform was because all the slaves were equally in debt. I probed this matter a little by inquiring into the details of the selling transaction. "You get the photograph and identification papers with the man," said one, "and that's

all." "You get the identification papers and the account of the debt," said another. "We don't keep much account of the debt," said a third, "because it doesn't matter after you've got possession of the man." "The man and the identification papers are enough," said another; "if your man runs away, the papers are all the authorities require for you to get him back again." "Whatever the debt, it takes the market price to get him free again," a fifth told me.

Conflicting as some of these answers are, they all tend to show one thing, that the debt counts for nothing after the debtor passes into the hands of the planter. Whatever the debt, it takes the market price to get the debtor free again!

Even then, I thought, it would not be so bad if the servant had an opportunity of working out the price and buying back his freedom. Even some of our negro slaves before the Civil War were permitted—by exceptionally lenient masters—to do that.

But I found that such was not the custom. "You need have no fear in purchasing this plantation," said one planter to me, "of the laborers being able to buy their freedom and leave you. They can never do that."

The only man in the country whom I heard of as having ever permitted a slave to buy his freedom was a professional man of Merida, an architect. "I bought a laborer for \$1,000," he explained to me. "He was a good man and helped me a lot about my office. After I got to liking him I credited him with so much wages per week. After eight years I owed him the full \$1,000, so I let him go. But they never do that on the plantations—never."



Thus I learned that the debt feature of the enforced service does not alleviate the hardships of the slave by making it easier for him to free himself, neither does it affect the conditions of his sale or his complete subjection to his master. On the other hand, I found that the one particular in which this debt element does play an actual part in the destiny of the unfortunate of Yucatan militates against him instead of operating in his favor. For it is by means of debt that the Yucatan slave-driver gets possession of the free laborers of his realm to replenish the overworked and underfed, the overbeaten, the dying slaves of his plantation.

How are the slaves recruited? Don Joaquin Peon informed me that the Maya slaves die off faster than they are born, and Don Enrique Camara Zavala told me that two-thirds of the Yaquis die during the first year of their residence in the country. Hence the problem of recruiting the slaves seemed to me a very serious one. Of course, the Yaquis were coming in at the rate of 500 per month, yet I hardly thought that influx would be sufficient to equal the tide of life that was going out by death. I was right in that surmise, so I was informed, but I was also informed that the problem of recruits was not so difficult, after all.

"It is very easy," one planter told me. "All that is necessary is that you get some free laborer in debt to you, and then you have him. Yes, we are always getting new laborers in that way."

The amount of the debt does not matter, so long as it is a debt, and the little transaction is arranged by men who combine the functions of money lender and slave broker.

Some of them have offices in Merida and they get the free laborers, clerks and the poorer class of people generally into debt just as professional loan sharks of America get clerks, mechanics and office men into debt—by playing on their needs and tempting them. Were these American clerks, mechanics and office men residents of Yucatan, instead of being merely hounded by a loan shark, they would be sold into slavery for all time, they and their children and their children's children, on to the third and fourth generation, and even farther, on to such a time as some political change puts a stop to the conditions of slavery altogether in Mexico.

These money-lending slave brokers of Merida do not hang out signs and announce to the world that they have slaves to sell. They do their business quietly, as people who are comparatively safe in their occupation, but as people who do not wish to endanger their business by too great publicity—like police-protected gambling houses in an American city, for example. These slave sharks were mentioned to me by the henequen kings themselves, cautiously by them, as a rule. Other old residents of Yucatan explained their methods in detail. I was curious to visit one of these brokers and talk with him about purchasing a lot of slaves, but I was advised against it and was told that they would not talk to a foreigner until the latter had established himself in the community and otherwise proved his good faith.

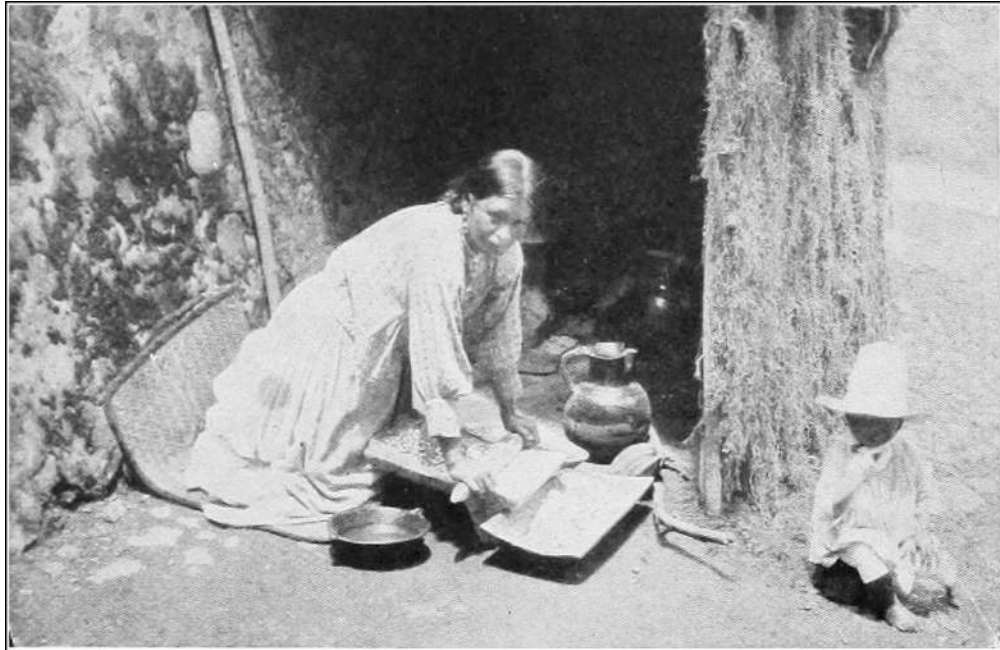
These men buy and sell slaves. And the planters buy and sell slaves. I was offered slaves in lots of one up by the planters. I was told that I could buy a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, or a thousand of any of them, to do with them

exactly as I wished, that the police would protect me in my possession of those, my fellow beings. Slaves are not only used on the henequen plantations, but in the city, as personal servants, as laborers, as household drudges, as prostitutes. How many of these persons there are in the city of Merida I do not know, though I heard many stories of the absolute power exercised over them. Certainly the number is several thousand.

So we see that the debt element in Yucatan not only does not palliate the condition of the slave, but rather makes it harder. It increases his extremity, for while it does not help him to climb out of his pit, it reaches out its tentacles and drags down his brother, too. The portion of the people of Yucatan who are born free possess no "inalienable right" to their freedom. They are free only by virtue of their being prosperous. Let a family, however virtuous, however worthy, however cultivated, fall into misfortune, let the parents fall into debt and be unable to pay the debt, and the whole family



SLAVE MOTHER AND CHILD; ALSO HENEQUEN PLANT



WOMEN ARE CHEAPER THAN GRIST-MILLS

is liable to pass into the hands of a henequen planter. Through debt, the dying slaves of the farms are replaced by the unsuccessful wage-workers of the cities."

Why do the henequen kings call their system enforced service for debt instead of by its right name? Probably for two reasons—because the system is the outgrowth of a milder system of actual service for debt, and because of the prejudice against the word slavery, both among Mexicans and foreigners. Service for debt in a milder form than is found in Yucatan exists all over Mexico and is called peonage. Under this system, police authorities everywhere recognize the right of an employer to take the body of a laborer who is in debt to him, and to compel the laborer to work out the debt. Of course, once the employer can compel

the laborer to work, he can compel him to work at his own terms, and that means that he can work him on such terms as will never permit the laborer to extricate himself from his debt.

Such is peonage as it exists throughout all Mexico. In the last analysis it is slavery, but the employers control the police, and the fictional distinction is kept up all the same. Slavery is peonage carried to its greatest possible extreme, and the reason we find the extreme in Yucatan is that, while in some other sections of Mexico a fraction of the ruling interests are opposed to peonage and consequently exert a modifying influence upon it, in Yucatan all the ruling interests are in henequen. The cheaper the worker the higher the profits for all. The peon becomes a chattel slave.

The henequen kings of Yucatan seek to excuse their system of slavery by denominating it enforced service for debt. "Slavery is against the law," they say. "It is against the constitution," When a thing is abolished by your constitution it works more smoothly if called by another name, but the fact is, service for debt is just as unconstitutional in Mexico as chattel slavery. The plea of the henequen king of keeping within the law is entirely without foundation. A comparison of the following two clauses from the Mexican constitution will show that the two systems are in the same class.

"Article I, Section 1. In the Republic all are born free. Slaves who set foot upon the national territory recover, by that act alone, their liberty, and have a right to the protection of the laws."

"Article V, Section 1 (Amendment). No one shall be compelled to do personal work without just compensation



and without his full consent. The state shall not permit any contract, covenant or agreement to be carried out having for its object the abridgment, loss or irrevocable sacrifice of the liberty of a man, whether by reason of labor, education or religious vows. \*\*\*

Nor shall any compact be tolerated in which a man agrees to his proscription or exile."

So the slave business in Yucatan, whatever name may be applied to it, is still unconstitutional. On the other hand, if the policy of the present government is to be taken as the law of the land, the slave business of Mexico is legal. In that sense the henequen kings "obey the law." Whether they are righteous in doing so I will leave to hair-splitters in morality. Whatever the decision may be, right or wrong, it does not change, for better or for worse, the pitiful misery in which I found the hemp laborers of Yucatan.

The slaves of Yucatan get no money. They are half starved. They are worked almost to death. They are beaten. A large percentage of them are locked up every night in a house resembling a jail. If they are sick they must still work, and if they are so sick that it is impossible for them to work, they are seldom permitted the services of a physician. The women are compelled to marry, compelled to marry men of their own plantation only, and sometimes are compelled to marry certain men not of their choice. There are no schools for the children. Indeed, the entire lives of these people are ordered at the whim of a master, and if the master wishes to kill them, he may do so with impunity. I heard numerous stories of slaves being beaten to death, but I never heard of an instance in which the murderer was punished, or even

arrested. The police, the public prosecutors and the judges know exactly what is expected of them, for the men who appoint them are the planters themselves. The *jefes politicos*, the rulers of the political districts corresponding to our counties, who are as truly czars of the districts as Diaz is the Czar of all Mexico, are invariably either henequen planters or employes of henequen planters.

The first mention of corporal punishment for the slaves was made to me by one of the members of the Camara, a large, portly fellow with the bearing of an opera singer and a white diamond shining at me like a sun from his slab-like shirt front. He told a story, and as he told it he laughed. I laughed, too, but in a little different way. I could not help feeling that the story was made to order to fit strangers.

"Oh, yes, we have to punish them," said the fat king of henequen. "We even are compelled to whip the house servants of the city. It is their nature; they demand it. A friend of mine, a very mild man, had a woman servant who was always wishing to serve somebody else. My friend finally sold the woman, and some months later he met her on the street and asked her how she liked her new master. 'Finely,' she answered, 'finely. You see, my master is a very rough man and he beats me nearly every day!'"

The philosophy of beating was made very clear to me by Don Felipe G. Canton, secretary of the Camara.

"It is necessary to whip them—oh, yes, very necessary," he told me, with a smile, "for there is no other way to make them do what you wish. What other means is there of enforcing the discipline of the farm? If we did not whip them they would do nothing."

I could make no reply. I could think of no ground upon which to assail Don Felipe's logic. For what, pray, can be done to a chattel slave to make him work but to beat him? With the wage worker you have the fear of discharge or the reduction of wages to hold over his head and make him toe the mark, but the chattel slave would welcome discharge, and as to reducing his food supply, you don't dare to do that or you kill him outright. At least, that is the case in Yucatan.

One of the first sights we saw on a henequen plantation was the beating of a slave—a formal beating before the assembled toilers of the ranch early in the morning just after the daily roll call. The slave was taken on the back of a huge Chinaman and given fifteen lashes across the bare back with a heavy, wet rope, lashes so lustily delivered that the blood ran down the victim's body. This method of beating is an ancient one in Yucatan and is the customary one on all the plantations for boys and all except the heaviest men. Women are required to kneel to be beaten, as sometimes are men of great weight. Men and women are beaten in the fields as well as at the morning roll call. Each foreman, or *capataz*, carries a heavy cane with which he punches and prods and whacks the slaves at will. I do not remember visiting a single field in which I did not see some of this punching and prodding and whacking going on.

I saw no punishments worse than beating in Yucatan, but I heard of them. I was told of men being strung up by their fingers or toes to be beaten, of their being thrust into black dungeon-like holes, of water being dropped on the hand until the victim screamed, of the extremity of female punishment being found in some outrage to the sense of the

modesty in the woman. I saw black holes and everywhere I saw the jail dormitories, armed guards and night guards who patrolled the outskirts of the farm settlements while the slaves slept. I heard also of planters who took special delight in personally superintending the beating of their chattels. For example, speaking of one of the richest planters in Yucatan, a professional man of Merida said to me:

"A favorite pastime of ——— was to sit on his horse and watch the 'cleaning up' (the punishment) of his slaves. He would strike a match to light his cigar. At the first puff of smoke the first stroke of the wet rope would fall on the bare back of the victim. He would smoke on, leisurely, contentedly, as the blows fell, one after another. When the entertainment finally palled on him he would throw away his cigar and the man with the rope would stop, for the end of the cigar was the signal for the end of the beating."

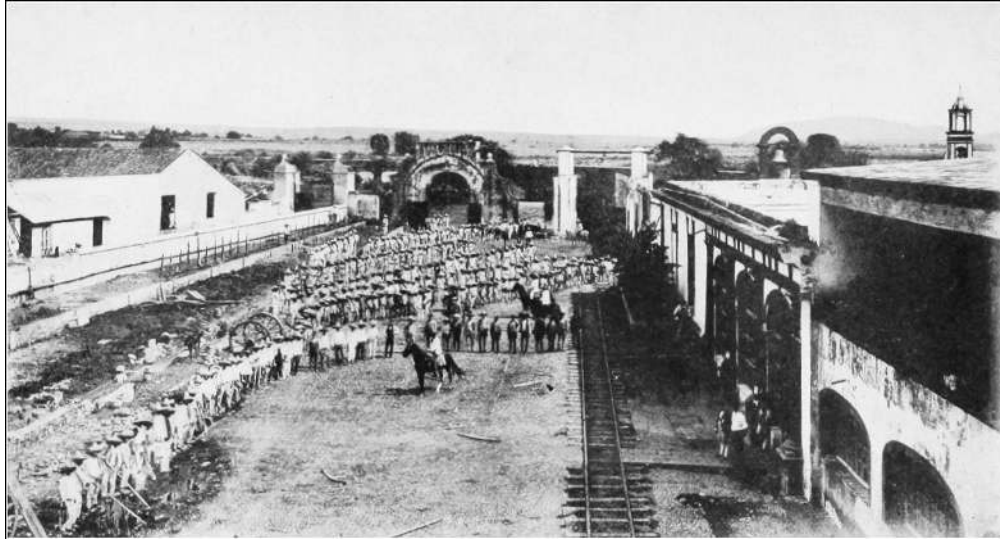
The great plantations of Yucatan are reached by private mule car lines built and operated specially for the business of the henequen kings. The first plantation that we visited was typical. Situated fifteen miles west of Merida, it contains thirty-six square miles of land, one-fourth of it in henequen, part of the rest in pasture and a part unreclaimed. In the center of the plantation is the farm settlement, consisting of a grass-grown *patio*, or yard, surrounding which are the main farm buildings, the store, the factory, the house of the *administrador*, or general manager; the house of the *mayordomo primero*, or superintendent; the houses of the *mayordomos segundos*, or overseers, and the little chapel. Behind these are the corrals, the drying yard, the stable, the

jail dormitory. Finally, surrounding all are the rows of one-room huts set in little patches of ground, in which reside the married slaves and their families.

Here we found fifteen hundred slaves and about thirty bosses of various degrees. Thirty of the slaves were Koreans, about two hundred were Yaquis and the rest were Mayas. The Maya slaves, to my eyes, differed from the free Mayas I had seen in the city principally in their clothing and their general unkempt and overworked appearance. Certainly they were of the same clay. Their clothing was poor and ragged, yet generally clean. The women wore calico, the men the thin, unbleached cotton shirt and trousers of the tropics, the trousers being often rolled to the knees. Their hats were of coarse straw or grass, their feet always bare.

Seven hundred of the slaves are able-bodied men, the rest women and children. Three hundred and eighty of the men are married and live with their families in the one-room huts. These huts are set in little patches of ground 144 feet square, which, rocky and barren as they are, are cultivated to some small purpose by the women and children. In addition to the product of their barren garden patch each family receives daily credit at the plantation store for twenty-five *centavos*, or twelve and one-half cents' worth of merchandise.





CALLING THE ROLL AT SUNRISE ON A SLAVE PLANTATION

No money is paid; it is all in credit, and this same system prevails on about one-half the plantations. The other half merely deal out rations. It amounts to the same thing, but some of the planters stick to the money credit system merely in order to keep up the pretense of paying wages. I priced some of the goods at the store—corn, beans, salt, peppers, clothing and blankets was about all there was—and found that the prices were high. I could not understand how a family could live on twelve and one-half cents' worth of it each day, a hard-working family, especially.

The slaves rise from their beds when the big bell in the *patio* rings at 3:45 o'clock in the morning, and their work begins as soon thereafter as they can get to it. Their work in the fields ends when it is too dark to see, and about the yards it sometimes extends until long into the night.

The principal labor of the plantation is harvesting the henequen leaves and cleaning the weeds from between the plants. Each slave is given a certain number of leaves to cut or plants to clean, and it is the policy of the planter to make

the stint so hard that the slave is compelled to call out his wife and children to help him. Thus nearly all the women and children of the plantation spend a part of the day in the field. The unmarried women spend all the day in the field, and when a boy reaches the age of twelve he is considered to be a man and is given a stint of his own to do. Sundays the slaves do not work for the master. They spend their time in their patches, rest or visit. Sunday is the day on which the youths and maidens meet and plan to marry. Sometimes they are even permitted to go off the farm and meet the slaves of their neighbor, but never are they permitted to marry the people of other plantations, for this would necessitate the purchase of either the wife or the husband by one or the other of the two owners, and that would involve too much trouble.

Such are the conditions in general that prevail on all the plantations of Yucatan.

We spent two days and two nights on the plantation called San Antonio Yaxche and became thoroughly acquainted with its system and its people.

Not only do not the owners of the great henequen farms of Yucatan live on their farms, but neither do the managers. Like the owners, the managers have their homes and their offices in Merida, and visit the plantations only from two to half a dozen times a month. The *mayordomo primero* is ordinarily the supreme ruler of the plantation, but when the manager, or *administrador*, heaves in sight, the *mayordomo primero* becomes a very insignificant personage indeed.

At least that was the case on San Antonio Yaxche. The big *mayordomo* was compelled to bow and scrape before

the boss just as were the lesser foremen, and at meal time Manuel Rios, the *administrador*, I and my companion—the latter, much to the disgust of Rios, who looked upon him as an underling—dined alone in state while the *mayordomo* hovered in the background, ready to fly away instantly to do our bidding. At the first meal—and it was the best I had in all Mexico—I felt strongly impelled to invite Mister *Mayordomo* to sit down and have something. I did not do it, and afterwards I was glad that I did not, for before I left the ranch I realized what an awful breach of etiquette I would have been guilty of.

In the fields we found gangs of men and boys, some gangs hoeing the weeds from between the gigantic plants and some sawing off the big leaves with machetes. The harvest of the leaves goes on unceasing all the twelve months of the year, and during the cycle every plant on the farm is gone over four times. Twelve leaves are usually clipped, the twelve largest, the thirty smallest being left to mature for another three months. The workman chops off the leaf at its root, trims the sharp briars off the two edges, trims the spear-like tip, counts the leaves left on the plant, counts the leaves he is cutting, piles his leaves into bundles, and finally carries the bundles to the end of his row, where they are carted away on a movable-track mule-car line.

I found the ground uneven and rocky, a punishment for the feet, the henequen leaves thorny and treacherous and the air thick, hot and choking, though the season was considered a cool one. The ragged, barefooted harvesters worked steadily, carefully and with the speed of better paid laborers who work "by the piece." They were working "by

the piece," too, the reward being immunity from the lash. Here and there among them I saw tired-looking women and children, sometimes little girls as young as eight or ten. Two thousand leaves a day is the usual stint on San Antonio Yaxche. On other plantations I was told that it is sometimes as high as three thousand.

The henequen leaves, once cut, are carted to a large building in the midst of the farm settlement, where they are hoisted in an elevator and sent tumbling down a long chute and into the stripping machine. Here hungry steel teeth tear the tough, thick leaves to pieces, and the result is two products—a green powder, which is refuse, and long strands of greenish, hair-like fibre, which is henequen. The fibre is sent on a tramway to the drying yard, where it turns the color of the sun. Then it is trammed back, pressed into bales, and a few days or weeks later the observer will see it at Progreso, the port of Yucatan, twenty-five miles north of Merida, being loaded into a steamship flying the British flag. The United States buys nearly all the henequen of Yucatan, our cordage trust, an alleged concern of Standard Oil, absorbing more than half of the entire product.

Eight *centavos* per pound was the 1908 price received for sisal hemp in the bale. One slave dealer told me that the production cost no more than one.

About the machinery we found many small boys working. In the drying yard we found boys and men. All of the latter impressed me with their listless movements and their haggard, feverish faces. This was explained by the foreman in charge. "When the men are sick we let them work here," he said—"on half pay!"

Such was the men's hospital. The hospital for the women we discovered in a basement of one of the main buildings. It was simply a row of windowless, earthen floor rooms, half-dungeons, in each of which lay one woman on a bare board, without a blanket to soften it.

More than three hundred of the able-bodied slaves spend the nights in a large structure of stone and mortar, surrounded by a solid wall twelve feet high, which is topped with the sharp edges of thousands of broken glass bottles. To this inclosure there is but one door, and at it stands a guard armed with a club, a sword and a pistol. These are the quarters of the unmarried men of the plantation, Mayas, Yaquis and Chinese; also of the "half-timers," slaves whom the plantation uses only about half of the year, married men. Some of them, whose families live in little settlements bordering on the farm.

These "half-timers" are found on only about one third of the plantations, and they are a class which has been created entirely for the convenience of the masters. They become "full-timers" at the option of the masters, and are then permitted to keep their families on the plantations. They are compelled to work longer than half the year if they are wanted, and during the time when they are not working they are not permitted to go away on a hunt for other work. Generally their year's labor is divided into two sections, three months in the spring and three in the fall, and during that period they cannot go to visit their families. They are always kept in jail at night, they are fed by the farm, and their credit of twelve and one-half cents per day is kept back

and doled out to their families a little at a time to prevent starvation.

A moment's figuring will show that the yearly credit for a half-timer who works six months is \$22.50, and this is all—absolutely all—that the family of the halftime slave has to live on each year.

Inside the large, one-room building within the stone wall at San Antonio Yaxche we found, swinging so close that they touched one another, more than three hundred rope hammocks. This was the sleeping place of the half-timers and the unmarried full-timers. We entered the enclosure just at dusk, as the toilers, wiping the sweat from their foreheads, came filing in. Behind the dormitory we found half a dozen women working over some crude, open-air stoves. Like half-starved wolves the ragged workers ringed about the simple kitchen, grimy hands went out to receive their meed of supper, and standing there the miserable creatures ate.

I sampled the supper of the slaves. That is, I sampled a part of it with my tongue, and the rest, which my nostrils warned me not to sample with my tongue, I sampled with my nostrils. The meal consisted of two large corn *tortillas*, the bread of the poor of Mexico, a cup of boiled beans, unflavored, and a bowl of fish—putrid, stinking fish, fish that reeked with an odor that stuck in my system for days. How could they ever eat it? Ah, well, to vary a weary, unending row of meals consisting of only beans and *tortillas* a time must come when the most refined palate will water to the touch of something different, though that something is fish which offends the heavens with its rottenness.

"Beans, *tortillas*, fish!" I suppose that they can at least keep alive on it," I told myself, "provided they do no worse at the other two meals." "By the way," I turned to the *administrador*, who was showing us about, "what do they get at the other two meals?"

"The other two meals?" The *administrador* was puzzled. "The other two meals? Why, there aren't any others. This is the only meal they have!"

Beans, *tortillas*, fish, once a day, and a dozen hours under the hottest sun that ever shone!

"But, no," the *administrador* corrected himself. "They do get something else, something very fine, too, something that they can carry to the field with them and eat when they wish. Here is one now."

At this he picked up from one of the tables of the women a something about the size of his two small fists, and handed it to me, triumphantly. I took the round, soggy mass in my fingers, pinched, smelled and tasted it. It proved to be corn dough, half fermented and patted into a ball. This, then, was the other two meals, the rest of the substance besides beans, *tortillas* and decayed fish which sustained the toilers throughout the long day. I turned to a young Maya who was carefully picking a fish bone. "Which would you rather be," I asked of him, "a half-timer or a full-timer?"

"A full-timer," he replied, promptly, and then in a lower tone: "They work us until we are ready to fall, then they throw us away to get strong again. If they worked the full-timers like they work us they would die."

"We come to work gladly," said another young Maya, "because we're starved to it. But before the end of the first