

CHAPTER II.

How we discovered the Province of Yucatan.

ON the eighth day of the month of February in the year fifteen hundred and seventeen, we left the Havana from the port of Axaruco, which is on the North coast, and in twelve days we doubled Cape San Antonio, which is also called in the Island of Cuba the land of the Guanahataveyes, who are Indians like savages. When we had passed this Cape we were in the open sea and trusting to luck we steered towards the setting sun, knowing nothing of the depth of water, nor of the currents, nor of the winds which usually prevail in that latitude, so we ran great risk of our lives, then a storm struck us which lasted two days and two nights, and raged with such strength that we were nearly lost. When the weather moderated, we kept on our course, and twenty-one days after leaving port, we sighted land, at which we rejoiced greatly and gave thanks to God. This land had never been discovered before and no report of it had reached us. From the ships we could see a large town standing back about two leagues from the coast, and as we had never seen such a large town in the Island of Cuba nor in Hispaniola, we named it the Great Cairo.

We arranged that the two vessels which drew the least water should go in as near as possible to the Coast, to examine the land and see if there was an anchorage near the shore. On the morning of the 4th March, we saw ten large canoes, called *piraguas*, full of Indians from the town, approaching us with oars and sails. The canoes were large ones made like hollow troughs cleverly cut out from huge single logs, and many of them would hold forty Indians.

To go back to my story ; the Indians in the ten canoes

came close to our ships, and we made signs of peace to them, beckoning with our hands and waving our cloaks to induce them to come and speak to us, although at that time we had no interpreters who could speak the languages of Yucatan and Mexico. They approached quite fearlessly and more than thirty of them came on board the flagship, and we gave them each a present of a string of green beads, and they passed some time examining the ships. The chief man among them, who was a *Cacique*, made signs to us that they wished to embark in their canoes and return to their town, and that they would come back again another day with more canoes in which we could go ashore.

These Indians were clothed in cotton shirts made like jackets, and covered their persons with a narrow cloth which they call *masteles*, and they seemed to us a people superior to the Cubans, for the Cuban Indians go about naked, only the women wearing a cloth reaching to the thighs, which cloths they call *naguas*.¹

To return to my story; the next morning the same *Cacique* returned to the ships and brought twelve large canoes, which I have already said are called *piraguas*, with Indian rowers, and with a cheerful face and every appearance of friendliness, made signs that we should go to his town, where they would feed us and supply all our needs, and that in those canoes of his we could land.

He kept on saying in his language, "*cones catoche*", "*cones catoche*", which means "come to my houses", and for that reason we called the land Cape Catoche, and it is still so named on the charts.

When our captain and the soldiers saw the friendly

¹ Why the author should have written "que llaman naguas" is not clear. Enaguas or naguas is the Spanish, not the Cuban, word for the skirt, petticoat or upper skirt of a woman's dress.

overtures the chief was making to us, we agreed to lower the boats from our ships, and in the vessel of least draught, and in the twelve canoes, to go ashore all together, and because we saw that the shore was crowded with Indians from the town, we arranged to land all of us at the same moment. When the Cacique saw us all on shore, but showing no intention of going to his town, he again made signs to our captain that we should go with him to his houses, and he showed such evidence of peace and good-will, that our captain asked our advice whether we should go on or no, and most of the soldiers were of opinion that with the precaution of taking all our arms with us we should go on, and we took with us fifteen crossbows and ten muskets, so with the Cacique as our guide, we began our march along the road, accompanied by many Indians.

We moved on in this way until we approached some brush-covered hillocks, when the Cacique began to shout and call out to some squadrons of warriors who were lying in ambush ready to fall upon us and kill us. On hearing the Cacique's shouts, the warriors attacked us in great haste and fury, and began to shoot with such skill that the first flight of arrows wounded fifteen soldiers.

These warriors wore armour made of cotton reaching to the knees and carried lances and shields, bows and arrows, slings and many stones.

After the flight of arrows, the warriors, with their feathered crests waving, attacked us hand to hand, and hurling their lances with all their might they did us much damage. However, thank God, we soon put them to flight when they felt the sharp edge of our swords, and the effect of our guns and crossbows, and fifteen of them fell dead.

A short distance ahead of the place where they attacked us, was a small *plaza* with three houses built of masonry,

which served as *Cues*¹ and oratories.² These houses contained many pottery Idols, some with the faces of demons and others with women's faces, and there were others of evil figures of Indians who appeared to be committing sodomy one with another.

Within the houses were some small wooden chests, and in them were some other Idols, and some little discs made partly of gold but more than half of copper, and some necklaces and three diadems, and other small objects in the form of fish and others like the ducks of the country, all made of inferior gold.

When we had seen the gold and the houses of masonry, we felt well content at having discovered such a country, for at that time Peru was unknown, indeed, it was not discovered until twenty years later.

While we were fighting with the Indians, the priest González had accompanied us, and he took charge of the chests and the gold, and the Idols, and carried them to the ship. In these skirmishes we took two Indians prisoners, and later on, when they were baptized, one was named Julian and the other Melchior, both of them were cross-eyed. When the fight was over we returned to our ships, and went on exploring along the coast towards the setting sun, we set sail as soon as the wounded were cared for, and what else happened I will tell later on.

¹ *Cue* is the name commonly applied to the Indian shrines or temples, usually small buildings raised on pyramidal foundations. It is not a Maya or Mexican word, but one picked up by the Spaniards in the Antilles.

² It should be noted that, although the Spaniards had now been in America for twenty-four years and had explored the Islands and the coast of the mainland from the mouth of the Orinoco to the Bay of Honduras, and part of the coast of Florida, this was the first time they had seen houses and temples built of stone; and with the exception of the crew of a canoe which Columbus met during his fourth voyage near the Islands of the Guanajes off the coast of Honduras, this was the first meeting of the Spaniards with any of the more civilised races of America.

CHAPTER III.

How we coasted along towards the west, discovering capes and deep water, roadsteads and reefs.

BELIEVING this land to be an Island, as the Pilot, Anton de Alaminos, had assured us that it was, we travelled with the greatest caution, sailing only by day and anchoring by night. After voyaging in this manner for fifteen days, we descried from the ship, what appeared to be a large town near to a great bay or creek, and we thought that there might be a river or stream there, where we could provide ourselves with water of which we had great need, because the casks and other vessels which we had brought with us, were not watertight. It was because our fleet was manned by poor men who had not money enough to purchase good casks and cables, that the water ran short. We had to land near the town, and as it was Sunday, the day of San Lázaro, we gave the town that name, and so it is marked on the charts, but its proper Indian name is Campeche.

In order that we could all of us land at the same time, we agreed to approach the shore in the smallest of the vessels, and in the three boats, with all our arms ready, so as not to be caught as we had been at Cape Catoche.

In these roadsteads and bays, the water shallows very considerably at low tide, so that we had to leave our ships anchored more than a league from the shore.

We went ashore near the town where there was a pool of good water, used by the people of the place for drinking water, for as far as we had seen there were no rivers in this country. We landed the casks, intending to fill them with water, and return to our ships. When the casks were full, and we were ready to embark, a company of about fifty Indians, clad in good cotton mantles, came out in a peace-