

## THE CARIB QUEEN.

*By Verner Z. Reed.*

ONE sultry day I was wandering aimlessly about the dusty back streets of Ciudad Juarez. A few half naked children were lying on the ground asleep in the sun. Occasionally a policeman in a dirty white uniform slouched by me with his big revolver swinging at his side. A burro train loaded with fagots was ambling down the street in charge of a woman and a boy. A motionless Mexican, with his sombrero pulled over his eyes, was leaning listlessly against an adobe wall.

I spoke to the man, and he bowed, but he did not remove his hat as the *peons* always do. After he had bowed he turned his eyes from me to vacancy, and seemed to forget my existence. I was tired, however; there is but little shade in Juarez, and I determined to share the shelter of that wall with the man and make him talk. When I had given him a Vera Cruz cigar and a drink from my flask he deigned to take an interest in me, and after I had sat under the wall with him for an hour he told me a story. The story may not be true, and it certainly seems improbable; but the telling of it had a strange effect upon the man, and he told it in seeming sincerity; so I think after all it may not be wholly false. It is written here in the man's own words, just as he told it to me that day while the slanting rays of the burning sun were shimmering mercilessly down upon the mud walls of Ciudad Juarez.

"My name is Pablo Garcia, and I am a man for whom nature intended better things than lying idle in the shade of mud walls in a poor border town. The ancestors of my family can be traced back in unbroken lines for eight hundred years, and some of

them were the men who helped to found the kingdom of Castile. I was born in the City of Mexico and educated in Spain, and when my father died he held my hand in his and told me I might, if I willed, be one day the President of the republic of Mexico. It is well that my father died; and it is well that we poor creatures of the earth have death to hope for, for if we had not we should all go mad.

"I was ever an adventurous man. Just after I came from college I joined a revolution against the government, and was made a colonel. It was promised me that I should be the governor of a State. Then my old father came to me with tears in his eyes, and besought me not to rebel against a government that was so ready to honor him and his. For love of him I threw aside my uniform, withdrew from the rebellion, and retired to a hacienda that my father owned in Yucatan. I was to remain there but a few months, until the revolution was over, and my father had secured me a pardon, when I was to go to the capital and begin the serious work of manhood.

"Yucatan is a dreary land, unfit for men to live in, and my stay there would have been short indeed if it had not been for a strange tale I heard there that incited the desire of exploration within my breast. It was rumored in Yucatan that there was a strange city of Indians situated in a remote part of the peninsula, a city where white men had never been and where they were not allowed to go. I could learn but little of this city; the Indians would not talk of it, and the white men believed its existence a myth, as white men have but little faith in the marvelous. I

believed the city existed, and I determined to find it, to enter it, to learn of its people and their manners and customs, and then to return to it with soldiers and make it as free of entrance as any city in Mexico.

"No one would join me in the expedition, even the *peons* refusing to go for pay, and I set out alone. I rode a mule, for only mules can live and thrive in the *tierra caliente*. I rode for many days through the desert, sleeping alone on the sands, or occasionally passing the night in the hut of some Indian. In time I came to a morass that seemed to be impassable, and I could not force my stubborn beast to enter it. I believed that the unknown city lay beyond this morass, and I was determined to cross it; so I turned loose my mule and began to wade in the muddy water. The morass grew worse as I advanced, and I often thought I should sink; but I was fortunate, and always managed to save myself by grasping the branches of trees. Near night I came to a small tract of land that lay higher than the water, and I slept there. The next day I struggled onward through the swamp, and at night climbed into a forked tree to sleep, as there was no land that lay above the water.

"In this manner I struggled in that dismal forest swamp for nine days. On the tenth, just as I was ready to give up and die, I came to dry land. I was covered with slime, my feet and limbs were bleeding, my clothes were torn to shreds, I was almost crazed with hunger, and I think I could not have lived out one more day in that desolate jungle. When I reached the dry land I gathered some wild berries, and ate them, and then I lay down and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. I slept for many hours, how many I do not know, and when I awoke I was sore and stiff; but my strength partially returned, and I paid but little heed to my plight, for I believed I was near the mysterious city. I cleaned my revolver, washed myself, put my clothing in as good condition as I could, and set out directly into the heart of

the forest that lay before me. The forest was so dense that I could scarcely see the sky above me, and I was glad of this, for otherwise the heat would have been unendurable to a weak man on foot.

"I journeyed on for two days more, and then I came to another small swamp. When I crossed it I began to see signs of human inhabitation. Footprints were to be seen in the soft earth, I found a shred of a cotton garment, and I soon came to a small field of cotton and Indian maize. I ate some of the maize and slept near the field, and in the morning I was awakened by hearing a great noise like that made by a multitude singing. I then made my way forward with great caution, for I did not know what manner of people I was approaching. I made my way stealthily from one tree to another, as a wild Indian makes his way when near an enemy, and at last I came within sight of the city.

"The city stood in the center of an open space in the forest, and was surrounded by a wall of heavy masonry. It was about half a mile from the forest line to the city wall, and I feared greatly to enter the open space that lay between, as it was filled with Indians in strange garb who were dancing. By striking upon the trunks of trees I at last found one that was hollow; and upon climbing the tree I found that I could get inside of it, which I did. Then with my knife I worked to make a hole in the hard wood, and by the time I had cut through the trunk I found that the dance was over and that the Indians had gone within the city wall.

"I remained inside of the tree all night, sleeping very comfortably, and was awakened at sunrise by the sound of the Indians dancing and singing again. They numbered about two thousand, men, women and children, and they were different from any Indians I had ever seen. In their dancing they seemed exhausted and ready to drop with weariness, and I afterwards learned that they had danced for four days, and had

fasted during all that time. I could see that the dance was of a religious nature, as all Indian dances are, and a tall old man with flowing hair seemed to be the chief priest.

"After the dance had continued for several hours the priest and ten men entered the walls of the city. When they returned they bore a huge stone that was shaped like a table, and upon this stone they bound a young Indian boy, who seemed to be of a different tribe. They went again into the city, and when they returned I was greatly surprised to see them leading a white man whose eyes were bandaged. I supposed they were going to kill the white man, and I carefully examined all the chambers of my revolver to see that they were loaded; for while the Indians were a host against two, I did not intend to see a man of my own blood slain by wanton savages unless I essayed to rescue him. I was just ready to climb out of the tree when the old priest lifted up his hands, and I was greatly astonished to hear him say in as good Spanish as is taught in the college at Madrid:

"Now, oh Father Sun, is the soul of an alien to be sent across the great waters to thy land in payment for the continuance of the life of thy daughter, our queen. From the numbers of our enemies we have taken this boy, whose heart shall bleed for thee; and from the numbers of the white despoilers we have taken a white skinned man who shall be held and sacrificed at the dance of the harvest. The eyes of this boy who lies bound upon the stone shall soon gaze into the eyes of Him-Who-Rules-The-World, and we send him as a token that we are yet thy children and are yet faithful. Oh mighty Father Sun, grant us the blessing of continued life for our queen.'

"None of the Indians seemed to understand what the priest said, nor did they, as I afterwards learned; for Spanish was not taught to more than three people of that city at one time.

"When the priest had spoken I believed the white man was in no

immediate danger, and I remained within the tree. When the sun was exactly in the zenith the Indians knelt, and the old priest, with a stone knife, cut out the living heart of the boy who was bound to the stone, and cast it, all bleeding, toward the sun. My blood ran cold at this sight, and I was sorely tempted to take a shot at the murderous heathen, but my better judgment told me to remain quiet.

"After the sacrifice a great feast of maize and meat was spread, and the people ate like famished wolves. After they had eaten they went into the city, some almost falling to the ground with sleepiness. The priest led the white man away, the open space was deserted, and when the sun went down there was not a sound to be heard. I believed the people were all asleep, and I climbed out of the tree and satisfied my hunger upon some of the fragments of food that were left scattered over the ground. I rested for an hour, and then I set out to enter the city, determined to solve its mysteries if I lost my life in doing it.

"Just as I reached the gate of the city I met the white captive. He was stealing along noiselessly, and as he came outside of the gate I spoke to him. He seemed amazed to be addressed in Spanish. At first he feared it was the old priest, who could speak that language, and he started to run. I called him back, telling him I was a friend, and when he came we went to the edge of the forest to talk. The man told me he was an exile from Cuba, having escaped from a prison in that island, and made his way to the coast of Yucatan in a ship in which he hid himself. When he reached Yucatan he left the ship, and after wandering for a long time in the forests along the coast he was captured by a band of Indians who seemed careful not to hurt him, and who conducted him to the walled city and delivered him to the old priest. In the city he was kept a close prisoner, seeing no one but the old priest, and was never taken out of his cell until the day he

had been led forth to stand by the boy who was sacrificed. From the old priest he had learned that the people who dwelt in the city were Caribs who had fled from their island in the West Indies four hundred years ago. These Caribs were ruled by a white queen, and it was believed that the life of the queen was prolonged if human sacrifices were made to the sun. The queen was not allowed to marry nor to look upon any living person but the priest, and her successor was provided by capturing white girls from the Mexican cities. The white race had driven the Caribs from their ancestral island home, and they believed that the whites had a right to rule them; but they believed that if they submitted to a white ruler they would do right to kill all other white people who invaded their land.

"The Cuban told me all this, and said he had stolen away when the old priest who guarded him had fallen asleep. He begged me to go with him into the swamps and strive to escape. I would not go, however, until I had entered the city. I thought it safe to enter, as the Cuban said the people were all asleep from fatigue and gluttony, and I prevailed upon him to go with me inside the walls.

"The moon was shining brightly and we could see clearly. The houses were joined closely together and were made of heavy blocks of stone, and it seemed that the city must at some time have held a large population. The streets were crooked and narrow and were paved with rocks worn smooth by the usage of centuries. There were no animals of any kind to be seen. Great heaps of maize and raw cotton were piled in the streets, and meat, no doubt the flesh of wild animals, was seen hanging on high poles. In one corner of the city was a large building of white stone, upon the walls of which were fine carving. The Cuban said this was the palace of the queen, which no one but the priest was allowed to enter, as it was sacrilege for the Indians to look upon their ruler.

When we had seen thus much we feared to stay longer in the city and were retracing our steps toward the gate when we met the old priest. He had awakened from his sleep, had found his prisoner gone, and had started forth in search of him. When he came upon us the Cuban struck him fiercely in the face, and the priest, mad with pain and anger, drove his stone knife into the Cuban's breast. The Cuban fell, but as he fell he caught the neck of the priest in the grip of death, and drove his knife into his heart. The two men lay dead in each other's arms, and I stood alone, surrounded by the unknown terrors of that mysterious place.

"While I was wondering how I might best make my escape I heard the noise of men walking near the gate, and I knew that I would be unable to leave the city. I believed I might find safety near the palace of the queen, as the Indians were not allowed to go there, and I took up the body of the dead Cuban and stole towards the palace walls. There was a massive door entering the palace. It opened easily, and through it I entered a large chamber. The room I was in was very high, the ceiling was pictured, the walls were of the color of pearls, and a soft light came from small holes in the floor. There was a peculiar fragrance that revived my strength and spirits as though I had drunk of rich old wine. I left that room and entered another that was like a large closet. Here I left the dead body of the Cuban, after securing his knife, and returned again to the large chamber. When I had entered a door was partly opened, and a soft voice said:

"'Who comes?'

"The words were spoken in Spanish, and it seemed strange to me to hear my mother tongue in that remote place.

"The voice then bade me enter, as the queen thought it was the priest, and I went through the doorway into a room that seemed like the abode of a fairy. But I forgot its beauty when I saw the occupant; I forgot

danger, I forgot the dead Cuban and the dead priest, I forgot myself, I forgot the world. Ah, señor, in all this world there is no woman so beautiful as was that golden queen of the Caribs! Her skin was as white as the bloom of a lily, her eyes were like two stars, her long hair was like molten gold and was as soft as fine spun silk. She was tall; her form and her limbs were as perfect as statuary, and her face was the face of an angel. In all the years of my life I never expect to look upon another woman so fair as she. She looked upon me in wonder, but not in fear, and she smiled. Her smile riveted the fetters of love about my heart, and I was her slave thenceforth for all time. She asked me who and what I was and whence I came. I know not what reply I made her then, but I know that, except the old priest, I was the only man she had ever seen, and she did not fear me. But when my senses came to me I told her who and what I was. She listened to me in wonder and marveled much at what I said. Then she took my hand in hers and promised she would save my life. She feared, though, that in the morning, when the people discovered that the priest was dead, they would make a great search for his slayer and might even enter her palace. I told her of the dead body in the outer room and bade her tell the people, if they came, that the dead Cuban had slain the priest. I believed then I was safe, for the old priest was the only Carib who had seen me or knew I was in the city.

“The queen then asked me many questions. Her speech was in the purest Castilian, that language having been taught her by the priest, as it was the language in which all their worship was performed. The Caribs had learned this language while yet they lived on their island, and it had been carefully handed down among the priests ever since.

“I talked with the queen all night, forgetting that men ever slept; but in the morning we were disturbed by a summons at the outer door.

The queen went into the antechamber, where was a man who told her the priest was dead and that he himself was now priest. He told her a white captive had killed the priest, and that the man could not be found, although all the city had been searched, and he asked if the man had entered the palace.

“The queen told him that the man had come to her palace. She knew it was not meet that any but the priest should come there, and she had killed the man with her own hands. Then she showed him the dead body of the Cuban in the closet, and the priest believed her and took the body away, saying the Caribs were thrice blessed in having a queen such as she.

“The queen then returned to me, and I was no longer in danger. In all the time I remained in her palace no one ever came but the priest, and he came only to the antechamber. I was a thing of great wonder to the queen, as she had never seen a white man before; and before we knew it I and the golden queen were plighted lovers. I know not how it first came about; I do not remember what we said to each other, and I do not remember how many days went by until I took her in my arms and told her she was all the world to me. I only know that she placed her soft arms about my neck, and that it was natural that we two should love each other—as natural as it is for the flowers to bloom in the light of the sun. I loved that woman with a love such as few men know. She was a recluse, ignorant of the very existence of the world, the queen of a savage race of barbarians, but her soul was as pure as her face was beautiful. Ah, *querida hermosa mia*, the memory of you makes me at once as happy as an archangel in the highest heaven and as miserable as the lost souls who writhe in endless torment!

“For three months I remained immured in the palace with the golden queen, three months that sped by as an hour, and then I was seized with the desire to go from that place and take my loved one

with me. I set about devising a way to leave the city of the accursed Caribs. No one ever disturbed us, for the people were not allowed to go near the queen, and we might have been there until now but for my desire to go again among my own people, and to be joined in wedlock to her I loved.

"To make our escape we arranged in this wise: the queen called the priest to her, and told him that the great spirits had blessed her people with bountiful harvests. To celebrate this it was her desire that all the people of the city go four days' march into the forest and hold a feast and a great dance. When they were gone we intended to escape. The priest said he would send the people; but he himself was not allowed to go more than an hour's march from the city, as it was his duty to watch over the gates and the palace of the queen. The queen then commanded that he should go with the people. He steadfastly refused, saying that his religion was above even his queen; and we had to be content with this.

"When we knew the people had gone we stole out of the palace to go to the gate of the city. It was a glad sight to me to see the look of wonder that came over her face when she looked upon the outer world. She took my hand in hers, and we went like two children going out to play in the meadows. Just before we reached the city gate that accursed priest saw us, and came running after us with a bow and arrows in his hands. He shot an arrow at me, and it struck my arm. The arrow was poisoned, and the poison seemed like molten fire running in my veins. It almost maddened me with pain, but I grasped the hand of the queen and sped on desperately. Before we reached the swamp the priest overtook us. I drew my revolver, but he threw me on the ground and snatched it from me. He knew how to use the weapon. As I lay stunned and half fainting on the ground he pointed it at my heart. Just as he fired the queen threw herself for-

ward to defend me, and the bullet intended for me entered her bosom. Her crimson life blood spurted in my face, and she fell dead in my arms.

"The blood roared in my brain with a noise like the roaring of an angry sea, the sky seemed red, and my strength seemed to grow until I had the strength of twenty demons. I grasped the heathen priest by the throat, I tore his very flesh apart, I broke the bones in his body, and then I wailed because he was dead and beyond my power to hurt him further.

"Then I caressed the dead form of my loved one, I opened her beautiful eyes that were already glazed with death, I besought her to speak. But she was dead. Her pure soul had gone to a better world than this, and all that was left me was to return her body to the earth. I buried her there by the edge of the swamp, and plunged once more into the wilderness and left that accursed place where I had known more than the gladness of life and worse than the bitterness of death.

"I became what I now am—a wanderer upon the face of the earth, one with no joy in living, a saddened and heart broken man, longing for the day of my death. Men call me crazy, and shun me. Sometimes she comes to me, she my loved one. I can see her beautiful eyes beaming upon me, I can feel the sweep of her golden hair above my face. Ah, she comes now! Do you not see? Is she not beautiful? Oh, *querida, amante*, darling, come nearer, touch me, speak to me!"

The man fell upon his face, a white froth gathering at his mouth, and such an expression in his eyes as I never saw before. I feared that he was dying, and hurried away to find help. I met an officer of the barracks, and brought him to the spot. He looked at the prostrate man, and then, as he rolled a brown cigarette between his fingers, he said:

"Do not fear, *senor*. He will recover soon. It is only Pablo Garcia the crazed one, and he is often thus."