

## FORTY YEARS OF RESEARCH AND EXPLORATION IN YUCATAN

BY EDWARD HERBERT THOMPSON

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LAST month our Librarian, Mr. Brigham, asked me to prepare a paper for this meeting and I agreed. I did this willingly for it seemed that the time had come for me to do so. I had reached the allotted three score years and ten and I felt that now, if ever, I should make a certain brief accounting of my life work, of the forty years spent among the ruins of that lost civilization of the Mayas and the descendants of its people. I came to this meeting with a feeling of solemnity, a kind of awe, as if the shades of departed friends were waiting, listening for the accounting of my stewardship in carrying out their purposes through these long years. I am going to render that accounting at this meeting and as the spirit moves me. I shall speak of the things that loom largest in my memory and tell of incidents that may interest the members here assembled.

In 1879, while yet a student of engineering at the Worcester Institute of Technology, I wrote an article entitled "Atlantis not a Myth." In this article I advanced a theory that the lost civilization of the Mayas was but the lopped-off branch of a parent stem, and that stem the strange and wonderful civilization that existed on that island continent of Atlantis when, according to the records of the ancient Egyptian priests and philosophers, it disappeared in one day and one night, engulfed in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

That article was published in the "Popular Science

Magazine" of that same year and, as this occurred several years before Ignatius Donnelly brought out his now famous book on "Atlantis," it naturally attracted attention. It may have been a case of a fool rushing in where an angel might well fear to tread but at least it served to turn the attention of several members of the Society, Stephen Salisbury, Jr., George Frisbie Hoar, Edward Everett Hale, Charles P. Bowditch and others, toward its author. They became my friends and followed my subsequent career with interest.

In 1885 at the request of Stephen Salisbury, Jr. and George Frisbie Hoar, United States Senator from Massachusetts, the President appointed me an American Consul to Mexico, my post being the Mexican states of Yucatan and Campeche. It was intended and so understood by me that I was to devote all possible time to the exploration and investigation of the ruined groups on the peninsula of Yucatan, and the study of the present Mayas, descendants of the ancient builders. Enthusiastically I undertook the double mission and, with my wife and a two months' old babe, set forth upon our pilgrimage to Yucatan.

The first important work, undertaken after becoming familiar with the people and the region, was the exploration of the large ruined group known as Labná—Old Houses, in our tongue. This was, unless I am mistaken, the first ruined group in Yucatan to be thoroughly explored and scientifically investigated. The results of this work have been recorded in the Proceedings of this Society and in the Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

During the Labná undertaking I evolved a process of making sectional moulds, using paper pulp, fibres of the region, and plaster as material. By this process moulds could be made of large sections of these ancient structures, not merely surfaces covered with carvings in low relief, but also those having undercuts and projections. Casts made from these moulds would be perfect replicas of the surfaces that they were

designed to reproduce. By request of Mr. Salisbury, then President of this Society, I made first the moulds and then the casts of a very interesting section of the *Labná Palace* façade. This was in due time erected in one of the halls of the Society and doubtless some of the older members still recollect the interesting meeting at which this work was turned over to the Society. Years after, when the Society moved into the present building, this reproduction was taken down and, together with other archaeological objects, turned over to the Peabody Museum of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Besides carrying on this undertaking, I took advantage of opportunities to search for and discover two ruined groups of minor importance near *Labná Chun Katzim* and *Mulut Seca*, and later, during an expedition into the far interior, the now important ruined city of *X Kichmook*, the city hidden between the hills, The Hidden City. Both of these discoveries are duly recorded in the Proceedings of the Society.

In carrying out the discovery of the Hidden City an interesting incident occurred. For days we sought for clues, following the narrow trails made by the wild pigs and other jungle creatures, until at last we found ourselves camping under a high stone embankment evidently the retaining wall of a big artificial terrace. Early the next morning while yet the tiny fruit bats were fluttering in the tree tops and a few belated owls were hooting shamelessly, we climbed the high wall of stone work and stood on the level space of a great terrace above the tree tops. Just as the sun's first rays illumined the horizon, we saw in the distance white walls that gleamed like silver in the sunlight and still nearer were the huge walls, gray and massive, of a pyramid crowned by a temple.

"Kichmook!" I said, half to myself.

"Kichmook! No Hoch! Hatch Tzutzi!" (X Kichmook, how big, how beautiful!) I heard my native followers behind me say.

We crossed the great terrace and climbed the wide

stairway leading up to the temple. Half way up, a stone rattled past us, and then another. I drew my heavy revolver and looked up in time to see a magnificent female jaguar glide out from a chamber entrance and leaping up to its roof gaze down upon us, her fierce yellow eyes blinking in a kind of sullen wonder. Two shots rang out as one: the sharp bark of my revolver and the dull boom of a native gun loaded with a lead slug. Both messages reached where they were sent and the beautiful creature knelt down, quietly, calmly, as if going to sleep and died with hardly the tremor of a muscle. Only the life blood welling from its mouth and falling upon the steps beneath told us that it had become a perfect blood offering for the discovery of the city.

Meanwhile the Worlds' Fair, the Chicago Exposition, was being formed. Professor F. W. Putnam was chosen head of the Anthropological Sections. By cable Prof. Putnam asked me to undertake the reproduction of the beautiful Portal of Labná and various façade sections of Uxmal structures. By cable I responded that I would. The Department of State granted me unlimited leave of absence for scientific purposes and, collecting a sufficient number of my old native workers already familiar with my process of making moulds, I started in by making the moulds of the Portal of Labná. I did this for a reason. Labná, being in a dry and comparatively healthy region, I could reasonably hope to commence and carry that part of the undertaking to a finish. At Uxmal the conditions were different. Because of the near-by swamps and marshes—the choked up reservoirs of the ancient city—Uxmal was a hotbed of jungle fevers of which simple malaria was the least. I could probably commence the work but whether I could carry it through to a finish was in the laps of the Gods. However, I commenced and in time I did carry it to a finish, a train of laden pack mules and then a train of freight cars carried the carefully packed

moulds to the port of Progreso and then stowed in the holds of the steamship *Thornhill*, Captain Wetherell, they went on their way to God's country—and to Chicago. In a cabin on that same steamship my half-conscious, fever-racked body was being tenderly cared for by my devoted wife.

The rest of the tale can be briefly and completely told by the following excerpt taken from the Report of the Massachusetts Board of World's Fair Managers.

The recent work in Yucatan by Mr. E. H. Thompson, a Massachusetts man and United States Consul to Merida, acting as assistant to Professor Putnam and the Peabody Museum, was shown partly within and partly outside the Anthropological Building. Ten thousand square feet of molds were taken by the expedition under his charge, during fourteen months of hard labor and serious risk of life in the dense, malarial jungles of Yucatan. The principal sections chosen as characteristic examples of the architecture and sculpture of these magnificent ruined temples were the "Portal of Labná," with dimensions of twenty-five feet in height and forty feet in width; "The Straight Arch of Uxmal," twenty-seven feet high and twenty-two feet wide; the famous façade of the "Serpent House"; and three different sections of the "House of the Nuns." Full-size reproductions of these sections were made in staff and erected on the grounds just north of the Anthropological Building. Every one who visited the Exposition will recall the weird effect produced on the imagination by these old monuments of an unknown past standing in stately grandeur amidst all the magnificence and beauty that landscape art and architecture of today could devise.<sup>1</sup>

While at Chicago I made the acquaintance of Allison V. Armour. Mr. Armour physically and mentally was a prince among men, and I am proud to say that he was and is still my firm friend.

My task at Chicago accomplished I returned to Yucatan. I found that the old plantation of *Chichen*, founded in 1681, destroyed by the *Sublevado Mayas* in 1841 and since then abandoned, could be purchased. By the aid of Mr. Salisbury and Mr. Armour I pur-

<sup>1</sup>Report of the Massachusetts Board of World's Fair Managers, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893, Boston, 1894, pp. 162-163.

chased the plantation, rebuilt the plantation house and outbuildings, adding modern improvements, peopled the plantation with servants, stocked it with fine cattle and then, not only made it my scientific home and that of my friends but from the sales of cattle and fine timber, commenced to materially aid in the financing of my archaeological undertakings.

When a young man writing articles like that of "Atlantis," I had access to the, even then, extensive library of this Society I came upon a copy of an old book written by one of the earliest Bishops of Yucatan, Diego De Landa, a volume written in the early half of the sixteenth century. In this book among other "things of Yucatan" he spoke of Chichen Itzá, the once great capital of the Mayas on the peninsula of Yucatan, and among the wonders of this city he spoke of the Sacred Well around which the city was built. He wrote of the traditions as told him by the native converts. Their forefathers believed, so they said, that the God of Waters had his palace in the deep down waters of this Well and that in times of drouth, pestilence and evil omens, young women, captive warriors of renown were sent as messengers, and rich treasures were cast as offerings into this well to appease the vengeance of the offended deity.

As I read the quaint Spanish phrases of that old volume the thought came to me, "O that wonderful Sacred Well! If I could only be given a tongue and made to tell what it has seen, what world romance could equal it." When, long years after, by what seemed to be almost an act of Providence, I became the sole owner of the great plantation *Chichen* on which *the City of the Sacred Well* and the Well itself rested, the knowledge that the chance to solve the mystery of the Sacred Well was now mine came to me overwhelmingly. Realizing that this would be the culmination of my life work, I resigned my post as Consul and as soon as my successor had taken up his duties, I settled to the task. When I did this the

thought came to me as a surprise, almost as a shock, that from being the youngest Consul in the Mexican field of service, I had become not the oldest Consul, but the one longest in years of actual service. As I looked back on that long period of intensely congenial official work and scientific endeavor it seemed to have passed like a pleasant dream.

For days after I returned to the plantation I became to all appearances a fervent worshipper at the ruined shrine on the brink of the Well. I made conjectures and verified calculations. I meditated on its surroundings and measured its contour. I studied its still depths and I sounded them, then, I awaited the maturing of my plans.

This Sacred Well of Chichen Itzá, the Chen Ku of the Maya traditions, is a huge natural water pit in the limestone of the region, of the kind known as sink holes to the geologists. It is roughly oval in contour over two hundred feet in diameter and reaching eighty feet from the forest-covered surface down the cliff-like sides to the still, jade-colored waters beneath, then, between sixty and seventy feet of water and mud to the bottom. Underneath the water and in this mud the objects that I sought were imbedded. I felt, *I knew* that they were there, despite the contrary opinions of noted archaeologists.

I returned to the United States, and in Boston became a deep sea diver. Then with all the data accumulated, I appeared before Mr. Salisbury and Mr. Bowditch, both not only members of this Society but officials of Harvard University as well, to outline my plan and then to ask their moral and financial aid in carrying it into effect. Briefly, the scheme was this: To dredge the calculated and measured working area of the Well and, when this area was cleared of mud and of the objects that mud held, to go down myself in a diving suit and glean from the crevices and holes in the bottom that the dredge could not enter, the objects that were there. I found my two friends

very hesitant to approve of this audacious undertaking. They were fascinated by the idea and perfectly willing to finance the undertaking but hesitated at becoming morally responsible for my life. I finally argued them out of their misgivings and, all other obstacles having been overcome, in due time I found myself on the brink of the Sacred Well with the dredge, a stiff-legged derrick with a swinging thirty-foot boom and an orange peel bucket, and a good working gang of natives, all functioning perfectly.

For days the dredge bucket went up and down interminably it seemed bringing up loads of rock, punk and muck, and depositing on the observation platform, rock, punk and muck only. I began to get nervous and sleepless of nights. I thought "Can I have let my friends in for all this expense and myself for the ridicule of my scientific friends who have claimed that these so-called traditions were but fantastic tales?"

At last one day when the sky was as overcast and as drab as my spirits I saw in the chocolate colored mud that the dredge brought up an object about the size, color and shape of a baseball. I examined it closely; it looked resinous. I tasted it—*it was resin*. I touched a match to it and at once the odor of incense permeated the atmosphere about me. Like a ray of light the words in a Maya ritual came to me: "In those most ancient times they burned the sacred incense, *pom*, that by its fragrant smoke their prayers would be carried to the *Hunal Ku*, the Supreme God in Heaven." I held in my hand at last the proof that I sought. That night I slept long and well.

After that the dredge rarely came up without bringing some object or portion of object valuable to archaeological science: a wooden figure with incense moulded on it, or a native vessel of terra cotta filled with incense. Among other artifacts of wood and stone brought up at this time was a nearly perfect series of the rare, until then almost unknown, weapon, the *Atlatl*, of the Toltecs and the Nahuatl the *Hul Ché*

or Dart Throwers of the Mayas. Some of the finely chipped dart heads of stone and portions of the darts themselves were secured from under the thick layers of mud and leaf muck on the floor of the Sacred Well. Then came increasing quantities of the heavier objects, artifacts of stone, flint chisels, axe heads and hammer stones, implements of copper, bells of copper and bronze, jewels of carved and polished green stone—the true American jade said to be one of the most mysterious stones on earth, and esteemed by the ancient Americas as the modern Americans value emeralds.<sup>1</sup> These jewels of jade were most of them broken by the priests according to rituals as they were offered to the Water God, but some for unknown reasons were thrown in unbroken and as perfect as when they left the hands of the artist-craftsman who carved and polished them, no one yet knows the hundreds or possibly the thousands of years ago. And the objects of gold that were brought up: ewers, bowls and cups, bells of gold carved into symbolical shapes and highly conventionalized outlines, amulets and disks covered with figures like those in the codices, cut, twisted and torn, *killed* by the priests like the jades and the bells but still with a world of meaning for those who study them.

There came a time when the dredge no longer served its purpose. It came up either empty, its steel jaws white through scraping the limestone bed of the Sacred pool, or else bringing only rock fragments. Once it brought up a heavy stone figure gripped in its jaws, a figure half-human, half jaguar. "One of the attendants of the Water God," my workmen whispered to each other. I had the figure carried to the

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<sup>1</sup>"Jade! Why must it always present the same mystery? Plenty of jade has been found in Mexico but none in the place God put it. None. Rather is it found in wells, in graves, in other places where man has secreted it, and none of it is newly mined. Thousands of years ago it was marked by primitive man, rubbed and polished, carved and graven, *all the jade that's ever been found in Mexico*. No gem has ever caused the mineralogist or the archaeologist quite the headache that jade has."—"A Gem Collector in America," Dr. George Kunz, *Saturday Evening Post*, December 10, 1927.

house for future observation and study. Some years later the plantation was looted and burned, this figure calcined by the fire broke when we moved it and the heavy base falling on one of my feet crushed the small bones leaving me half crippled, probably for life. "The vengeance of the Water God for having disturbed the peace of his home," one of the Maya workmen said, and I heard him. "Bey Ani," I answered, laughing. Bey Ani in Maya means in English, "It may be so!"

The dredging having ended, the diving began. By previous arrangement, a young Greek diver came from the sponge beds of the Bahamas to be my assistant in this phase of the work. He taught a selected four of my Maya workmen how to manage the air-pump and answer the signals. Then the pontoon made for the purpose, loaded with the air-pump and all the rest of the diving outfit was carefully lowered by means of the dredge until it rested on the still, jade-colored waters. After the dredge went the pump gang and then the Greek and myself followed, lowered in the closed basin of the dredge bucket. All else in readiness I donned the one-piece suit of canvas with soles faced with half inch cast-iron plates and a copper collar around the neck. On my shoulders was a heavy necklace of lead plates; my assistant then placed the copper helmet with goggle eyes and ear valves and screwed it down on the copper collar. Thus dressed for the journey, I grasped the life line and approached the short ladder leading from the side of the pontoon into the water. As I took a last look around each of the men at the pump came up and shook hands with me as if in farewell, and then with a sober face returned to his place at the pump. With this vision in my mind I loosened my hold on the ladder and sank like a bag of lead into the unknown depth. It was not the depth or the unknown surroundings but what awaited me at the bottom that kept me wondering as I went down. As I sank I felt sharp pains pounding

on my ear drums, but by gulping and opening the ear valves of the helmet these pains subsided.

Still sinking I had the feeling as of lessening weight until when I reached the bottom and my feet rested lightly on the upturned base of a column that probably had toppled from the ruined shrine on the surface above it, it seemed that I had lost all weight. Beyond and above all these sensations was the one thrilling fact that of all living beings I was the only one who had reached these depths in this place and ever expected to keep on living.

Then my Greek assistant came down and we shook hands, after which we delved with our hands and fingers into the mud-filled crevices and pot holes of the bottom finding many things. A curious fact came out as we worked together digging in the mud. By placing our helmets so the nose projections touched each other we could talk to each other, our voices sounded flat and lifeless as if coming from distant chambers, but I could give him his instructions and he understood. With our helmets separated by even an inch of space we might as well have been in different planets.

And now those artifacts of wood and stone, strange weapons of a past civilization, those jewels of carved and polished jade stone, those objects of cast and beaten gold, covered with mystic symbols—all those treasures of a past civilization—are stored under the roof and between the walls of a great institution, safe from the grasp of vandal hands, saved for science to study and reveal. *For which I am thankful.* And I thank God that before my friends passed on I was able to show them by my works that their faith in me was not in vain.

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