

One

Promises of Quiet

THE NEW CONSUL WAS YOUNG, EAGER, INEXPERIENCED, and far from all he knew, posted to defend his nation's interests in a distant corner of Mexico. If he survived his first assignment abroad, he might aspire to a position in more cultured surroundings. Six months shy of his twenty-first year, Alphonse Lespinasse landed at the Mexican port of Progreso and assumed his office as the consul of the United States in Merida, Yucatan.

Born on Long Island, Lespinasse heralded from Manhattan where he'd attended Fort Washington Institute. He applied for his first real job simply by writing a letter to the secretary of state in October of 1874, seeking the vacant position in Yucatan. He had never visited Mexico, but he was well educated and knew Spanish. Of course connections, not qualifications, made the difference. A score of New York merchants engaged in Mexican commerce supported his candidacy, and Lespinasse was a protégé of Charles O'Connor, national political figure and one of the most prominent attorneys in the country. As a prosecutor of New York's Boss Tweed, O'Connor was still trying to recover the public's looted money when he paused to support Lespinasse's bid for a start in the consular service. Even that bevy of New York merchants and a highly respected attorney, however, couldn't clinch the post for Lespinasse. He needed the backing, too, of three key members of the corrupt New York Republican patronage machine—Thomas Murphy, former collector of the scandal-ridden Port of New York Customs House; the current collector of the port, Chester Arthur (whom years later an assassin would make president of the United States); and George Bliss, a federal attorney in New York who had a suspicious knack for blowing federal corruption cases. They got Lespinasse the job.¹

The Yucatan post was hardly a plum. The pay was poor. No other nation had a full consulate there. Over the previous twenty years the position of U.S. consul had been vacant for months or years at a time. When

it was filled, the consul was usually a peninsular—Mexicans naturalized as Americans but otherwise long-term residents of Yucatan. The most recent occupant had hung on just seventeen months. Six months after he quit Lespinasse arrived to pick things up in December of 1874.²

Few Americans lived in Yucatan. Only seven registered with the consulate and only three were native Americans, that is to say, really foreigners in that place.³ U.S. consuls in places like Merida mostly busied themselves filing reports on port commerce, assisting distressed or abandoned American seamen (giving them vouchers for passage home), renewing passports, and the like. They would also, if the case seemed to warrant, assist American businessmen or skippers in conflicts with Mexican authorities, especially over import duties or the seizure of cargoes or vessels.

Foreigners hardly flocked to that corner of Mexico. The Yucatan Peninsula had no mines of precious metals so coveted elsewhere. It had few factories, only dreams of railroads to come, and most of its farms produced little beyond what locals would consume. The country was still only slowly recovering from its share and more of the revolts and civil wars that had afflicted the whole Mexican republic. A catastrophic uprising of the peninsula's Maya Indians back in 1847 cut population almost by a third and destroyed much of the state. (In the desperate first months of that uprising, Yucatan offered itself to the United States, if only Americans would come to save them. A Congress already distracted by growing sectional tension between slave and free states declined the offer.) Once Yucatecans had largely suppressed the revolt and pushed remaining rebel Indians into distant forested recesses of the peninsula, whites returned to battling one another over politics and the spoils of government, until the French arrived to impose an imperial peace in Mexico. Yucatecans of all political stripes largely tolerated the imperialists, and for a while Yucatan enjoyed some relative tranquility and order. Once French troops began withdrawing from central Mexico, Yucatecans rose up and drove their imperialists out, too. Then back to fighting one another. For years Yucatan attracted some defeated American Confederates, a few intrepid archeologists and tourists come to see the Maya pyramids and temples, and hardly anybody else.

By the time Lespinasse assumed his post there things were actually looking up. The state was enjoying a rare period of prosperity, thanks to rising foreign demand for its principal export, henequen fiber for rope and



The Yucatan Peninsula

twine. Some locals busily converted their cattle haciendas to plantations of henequen and installed steam power to speed the time-consuming task of stripping fiber from henequen leaves. As they did so Yucatan exported more and more. A nascent sugar industry, destroyed back during the Indian uprising, rose from the ashes, too. Abandoned sugar estates were resettled and restocked, and new mills, boilers, and stills were installed.

Yucatecans built a new port to handle increasing exports, railroads were poised to move off the drawing board, and plans circulated to stimulate all the productive energies of the country.⁴ American merchants expected to profit directly from Yucatan's awakening, and they sent an energetic young Lespinasse to watch over their growing interests there.

Yucatan's new port Progreso ranked middle among nine Mexican gulf ports, well behind the busy harbors of Veracruz or Matamoros.⁵ But it was a new port, after all, and the exports of Yucatan were expected to grow substantially, especially with the United States. The New York merchants who backed Lespinasse expressed as much in their petition to the secretary of state. Talk like that about the boundless potential of a little-known place animated Lespinasse, too.

All told, it was not a bad place for a green twenty-year-old to get his start. Merida was neither a trouble spot in U.S.-Mexican relations (unlike posts closer to the northern border), nor an especially unhealthy place, usually. If Lespinasse did his job diligently, in a few years he'd move on to better posts in Latin America or even Europe. After acclimating himself a bit to his new surroundings, Lespinasse settled into his humble consular office—one room, one desk, one bookcase, two tables. Among his first official acts, Lespinasse requested Washington send new stationery and an American flag. He was still waiting for both nine months later when expatriate Robert Stephens walked in and turned Lespinasse's career on its head.⁶

Robert L. Stephens was co-owner and manager of a sugar estate called Xuxub out on the eastern frontier of Yucatan. He had hoped to be elsewhere at forty-four, already, he lamented, gray as a badger and bent like his aged father. At least he wouldn't have to stay there much longer, or so he hoped.

Stephens had little in common with the young American consul, except that both called home the banks of the Hudson River. Stephens came from Hoboken. His father had lived and labored as a gardener alongside other Irish immigrants on the great Stevens estate of that town.⁷ In the early 1800s the Stevens marketed parts of their Hoboken fields in small lots to crowded Manhattanites, advertising lower taxes, no yellow fever, and a cheap ferry ride each day to work in the city. Of course Stevens owned the ferry. They hired immigrant laborers to build a quaint mansion at Castle Point, replant orchards neglected since the revolution, lay cobble promenades, and prepare three or four acres as a bucolic getaway for

city families which they dubbed the Elysian Fields.⁸ They even laid out a baseball diamond, soon to become the home field for the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York.⁹

It succeeded fabulously, for a while. Ten thousand Manhattanites crossed on warm summer Sundays to stroll the river walk, peek into Sibyl's cave and pay a penny for a glass of its spring water, amble through gardens and orchards, take a spin on the Stevens railroad amusement, visit the souvenir shop, view wax sculptures, watch baseball, or simply picnic on the fields. Jobs there were for the son of a Stevens laborer, nor did it hurt that James Stephens, who then lived in a house at the northeast corner of the Elysian Fields, named his son after the principal figure thereabouts, Robert L. Stevens, and asked the famous inventor and developer to be the child's godfather.¹⁰ But young Robert Stephens had no lust to serve like his father as a park attendant or gardener, nor in any other capacity on the Stevens' suburban plantation. He shied too from labor in the manufactories of neighboring Jersey City and from mean toil with the rabble of Irish famine refugees then cutting railway tunnels through the nearby Bergen Hills. Instead, Robert signed on to a surveying expedition of the southern Atlantic coast. The work taught him drafting and engineering skills, and the voyage turned Robert's eye to southern lands, the Latin republics in which his family showed some interest. His father's dwelling on the edge of the Elysian Fields was known to all as the "Bolivar House," after the by then world famous and highly popular liberator of the young republics of South America.¹¹

At eighteen Robert wed a kindred spirit from the Bowery, Mary Donohue, child of Irish immigrants, too, and soon both boarded a steamer bound not yet to Mexico, but rather to the island of Cuba. Although leaving home, Robert and Mary were hardly mimicking their immigrant parents. Their fathers and mothers, fortunate though they were to have had the means to emigrate from Ireland, had left that green isle with reluctance. Tens of thousands of pre-famine immigrants greeted arrival in North America as a deliverance from loathsome landlords, from the avaricious English, and from the inexorably deepening misery that some already foresaw could only culminate in catastrophe. Yet sorrow tempered their joy. They'd rather have stayed home and not crossed the North Atlantic in the holds of rickety timber ships. They'd rather that Ireland were free and prosperous, or that at least a man there could feed and shelter his family as just reward for honest labor. Thousands of Irish im-

migrants like the parents of Robert and Mary forever bore the bitterness of being exiles and martyrs on foreign soil.¹²

Robert Stephens and his wife were different. They could have stayed at home. Their leaving was no flight; they were not exiles or martyrs. They ventured far from home as adventurers, pioneers, even heroes. They struck out for unfamiliar lands not just to make a living, but to play their small part in the grand march of progress, carrying their skills, their dignity as working people, and their American values to deploy in the improvement of a foreign place.

In wars of liberation decades before, Spain had lost most of its once-vast colonial empire. Cuba had remained loyal, however, and by the 1850s witnessed a feverish expansion of its sugar industry. Machinery built in the U.S. or England drove that expansion, and to install and maintain the mills and boilers, Cubans hired American and British machinists and engineers. Robert Stephens went to Cuba as one of a legion of such skilled men who kept boilers hot and wheels turning on virtually every island plantation and on the railroads over which their product moved.¹³

Machinists earned good pay in Cuba, but Robert Stephens aspired to more, and over almost two decades on the island he graduated from improving sugar estates to managing a small one around Nuevitas, a small port on the north-central coast. His wife bore him two daughters there, one of whom when grown married a local cigar maker. The whole family might well have settled permanently in Cuba were it not for the vortex of revolutionary violence and repression that soon engulfed all on the island.

Revolution had been brewing for decades, as increasing numbers of Cubans yearned for their independence from Spain. The cause was popular among Americans, too, and some joined the ranks while others cheered it on from stateside. Some of those Americans dreamed of a greater American union and believed that with independence, Cuba would seek admission. For others, many of recent immigrant origin, the Cuban struggle resonated with their own dreams of freedom for their homelands. That longing was especially intense with the Irish. They swelled the ranks of those thousands—no aristocrats, monopolists, or Wall Street types present, according to one speaker—who one night gathered under the flag of Cuban independence in a bonfire-lit square of Jersey City. Fifty-two cannon shots saluted fifty-two captured American volunteers recently executed by the Spaniards, and the crowd cheered to hear that it was “the right and the duty of the citizens of the free and enlightened republic of

the United States to sympathize with and aid every effort of the people of any country under despotic sway to free themselves from the curse of despotism." To help the people of Cuba struggling for their independence was even a special duty of the men of New Jersey, "who have ever responded to the cry of the oppressed of whatever land."¹⁴

Robert Stephens hadn't gone to Cuba to fight for its independence, but he could not escape the times in which he lived, the crosscurrents of conflicting aspirations that animated men repeatedly to arms, especially out around Nuevitas, a hotbed of resentment against the Spaniards. When in October 1868 a small band of Cuban revolutionaries issued yet another declaration of independence, the district in which Nuevitas lay quickly became the main theater of the contest. Small bands of revolutionaries enjoyed early successes against Spanish garrisons, but the struggle rapidly stalemated and turned maddeningly brutal.

It was a very dangerous place for Americans to linger, and more than one railroad man or machinist like Robert Stephens rued having ever left home.¹⁵ But the predicament of Robert Stephens was especially delicate. He was an intimate friend of one of the revolutionary leaders of the district, Napoleon Arango, for whom, it seems, Stephens worked.¹⁶ Arango and his brothers had impeccable revolutionary credentials, but they weren't happy to be fighting just now.¹⁷ Before the declaration that started the war, Arango had tried to convince his colleagues they had not prepared well enough to defeat the forces that Spain would send against them. He also feared the effect that war and independence would have upon social order in Cuba, which is to say, upon the slaves. According to Arango, Cuba was not ready to be sole master of its destiny or to abolish slavery. Despite their views, when the new revolt began the Arango brothers freed their slaves and accepted commissions in the insurrection—Napoleon as "general in the Army of National Liberation," and his brother Augusto as department chief. However, while they fought for the revolution, they also maneuvered to provoke a rapid, negotiated settlement that would bring Cuba substantial reforms and autonomy, but not a complete break with the mother country.¹⁸ The gambit failed miserably. Spanish soldiers treacherously murdered Augusto when he arrived to negotiate with their peace commissioners, and Napoleon's rebel colleagues turned on him and charged him with treason. When rebels seized Napoleon, Robert Stephens was by his side and loudly protested his innocence. So they grabbed Robert Stephens, too.¹⁹

A revolutionary tribunal acquitted Napoleon Arango and released him along with his loudmouthed American friend. Meanwhile, however, with the arrival of Spanish reinforcements in the district, the war began to turn decisively against the rebellion there. Both sides took to burning as much as they could until the district lay in ruins.²⁰ Spaniards attacked El Destino, Arango's plantation near Las Minas, and later almost managed to capture Napoleon's family. Soon after, Napoleon was offered the post of rebel commander-in-chief. He declined the honor. He still opposed this war, and despite the murder of his brother, destruction of his estate, and persecution of his family, Napoleon took the bold and desperate step of defecting to the enemy. From the Spanish side he then pleaded with his former colleagues to lay down their arms and go home. Some did, others tried but were shot by their rebel colleagues, and one hundred thousand deaths later, the Cuban revolution ended in failure.²¹

Before his friend Napoleon turned, Robert Stephens and his family (including their Cuban son-in-law) abandoned their Cuban homes and sailed for the States. Apart from a stint during the Civil War, when Robert Stephens helped install machinery in Union gunboats at New York's Novelty Iron Works, he and his family had spent little time in Hoboken over the previous twenty years.²² The town had changed almost beyond recognition. It was now a crowded place, its population ballooning from some twenty-six hundred to over thirteen thousand. The waterfronts of Hoboken and neighboring Jersey City bustled with trans-Atlantic and Latin American arrivals and departures, and the streets near the wharves hosted dozens of hotels to cater to the crowds moving through the port. Matthiesen and Wiecher Sugar Refining Company, the largest sugar refinery in the United States, rose in Jersey City, so over the docks and neighboring streets flowed sweeteners from the south and from Europe, as well.²³

Robert Stephens's father had retired from gardening for the wealthy and opened an alehouse on the fringe of the Elysian Fields.²⁴ When Robert returned, they all moved to the escarpment overlooking Hoboken and the Hudson. They bought house lots in West Hoboken, a swampy one-street village of immigrants where a humble man could at least be master of his home.²⁵

If Robert Stephens planned to settle down there, fate soon tempted him southward again, this time to the peninsula of Yucatan. For years the politicians and businessmen of the Mexican state of Yucatan had dis-

cussed and debated, and finally planned, construction of a new port to accommodate their growing exports, especially henequen fiber. Their principal port since colonial times, Sisal, was too shallow and inconvenient to handle expanded trade, and by 1871 they were ready to commence construction of facilities at a new port called Progreso. The architect of that project, the locally revered engineer Juan Miguel Castro, contacted the New York firm of Moller and Thebaud to seek their assistance in hiring an engineer to supervise erection of the main pier. Moller and Thebaud, in turn, picked Robert Stephens for the job.²⁶

Stephens sailed for Yucatan and was on the job by May. Eight months later the new port had a pier. The wooden dock ended up too short, standing dry at low tide, but that would have to do. Before he could head home again, Stephens found his other talents in demand. One of the wealthy plantation families of Yucatan had the contract to supply lumber for the pier. When the job was done they hired Stephens to install sugar-milling and refining equipment on one of their estates far east of the capital. It was out there that Robert Stephens succumbed to the siren's song of Yucatan's elite.²⁷

The political and economic leaders of Yucatan had long believed that the main obstacle to economic development of their corner of the world was the Indian population, still numerically predominant and locked into inefficient corn farming in small communities throughout the peninsula. Maya Indians raised almost everything the city- and town-dwellers of Yucatan ate, and this became even truer as white-owned haciendas abandoned cattle and corn to grow henequen for American twine factories. Yet whites held little hope that Indians with poor land, little credit, and scant incentive would ever get with the times and produce exportable products or even keep up with the rising food needs of an expanding urban population. Instead, the wise pronounced, Yucatan must lure European or North American colonists. The main commercial newspaper in Merida waxed eloquent, assuring that: "the influence of foreigners civilizes people, banishes prejudices, perfects industry, agriculture and the arts, develops commerce and propagates abundance and the celestial benedictions. Where there are no foreigners, all appears to stagnate; without life and movement, everything diminishes, and degrades itself and life comes to be impossible in that corrupt, intolerant and miserable society."²⁸ Yucatan's leaders had already gotten some 250 Germans to cross the Atlantic and establish a farming colony on the peninsula, and some Cubans fleeing their own war

had come over as well. Perhaps still more from other nations could be enticed. Men like Robert Stephens.

Working out east, Robert Stephens noticed a small sugar estate up for sale. Mauricio Palmero, a small-time cattle rancher and merchant, had founded Xuxub in the wilderness just two or three years earlier. He had thirty workers and their families there cultivating corn and sugarcane. The little place prospered, but failing health and a messy divorce forced him to liquidate. Just as Stephens showed up there, Palmero was desperately seeking a buyer for Xuxub. Stephens didn't have that kind of money, but he knew how to run a plantation. If someone would stake him the price, he'd make a go of it on the eastern frontier of Yucatan. Stephens didn't have to look very hard.²⁹

The Aznars were one of the wealthiest and most prominent families of Yucatan. The Aznar brothers were all city merchants, hacienda owners, and attorneys, born of the old wealth of Yucatan. Their grandfather had been captain general and governor of Yucatan and later viceroy of New Granada under Spanish rule. Their father was a lieutenant colonel in the Spanish colonial army, and he inherited military command over Yucatan when Mexico won its independence.³⁰ Two of the Aznar brothers, Ramón and Tomás, ran a large sugar plantation, Salsipuedes, on the western frontier of the Yucatan peninsula. When Tomás died Ramón tried to hold on, but the Mexican army, trying to dislodge French imperialists from the peninsula of Yucatan, sapped the estate of goods and workers and Ramón had to sell it for what little he could get.³¹ Ramón Aznar then dedicated himself to his other line of work—importing foreign merchandise and selling it retail from his large store in Merida. From Liverpool or New York Ramón ordered furniture, kitchenware, cloth and clothing, English beer, wine, flour, farm machinery, hardware, and, from New Orleans, lumber. He also plied domestic products—including sugar and rum from farms in the east of the state. From time to time he enticed the buying public with newspaper advertisements announcing newly arrived shipments, “Fabulously Low Prices!” and once in a while a “Great Sale That Will Cause General Surprise!” Whether the sales caused surprise or not, Ramón enjoyed success and became one of the wealthier men in Yucatan. He participated in a modest share as well of the civic and charitable duties that his station required.³²

Buying an estate was out of the question for a working man like Stephens. For a vigorous and rising entrepreneur like Ramón Aznar, it

was sport. Aznar already knew about Xuxub. His lawyer brother represented Palmero's ex-wife in her lawsuit for support, and the vexed owner of Xuxub had asked Aznar to buy him out. But Ramón Aznar had just bought an old-style hacienda in western Yucatan complete with a grand, colonnaded main house, a small church, two wells, and some thirteen thousand acres of farmland, pasture, and scrub forest on which his workers tended eight hundred head of cattle. Buying another estate on the far eastern frontier of the state then seemed poor timing to Ramón Aznar.³³ The location was good, with soils appropriate for sugar cultivation and easy access to the sea through the Xuxub River. So far out in the boon-docks one could easily evade state taxes on alcohol. No need to recruit workers, as the old ones would stay in place. Still, Aznar had his hands full with his store and the new cattle hacienda that he hoped to convert to henequen. So Aznar turned Palmero down. The appearance of Robert Stephens changed Aznar's calculations. On the verge of returning home again, Stephens made a deal with Ramón Aznar. Aznar would put up the money to purchase San Antonio Xuxub: six thousand pesos. Stephens would live there and manage operations for the next ten years. At the end of that time they would sell the place and split the gain.³⁴ Before starting this newest chapter of his life Stephens scarcely had time to sail back to Hoboken and explain all to his wife and mother—his father had just died. Stephens took a few days to put affairs in order and then sailed back again to assume his new duties at Xuxub the first week of July.³⁵

It was a long way from Hoboken to Xuxub. To get there you took the New York and Mexican Mail Steamer to Havana. It took six days to reach the Cuban capital. From there, you sailed for the Mexican mainland on a Veracruz-bound steamer, which touched twice a month at Yucatan's new port of Progreso. The only practical way to then get out to Xuxub, some two hundred miles to the east, was to hire passage on one or another of the sailing vessels that irregularly plied the waters off the north coast of Yucatan, touching near numerous villages, hamlets, or desolate loading sites along the way. Some carried their passengers, cargo, and the mail as far as the islands of Isla Mujeres and Cozumel on the Caribbean side of the peninsula, or even to Belize City, capital of British Honduras, and then returned laden with peninsular products for markets in Merida, Mexico, or abroad.

From Merida's new port of Progreso it took two or three days to reach the stop closest to Xuxub. The speck of a coastal settlement called Pun-

tachen had one "street" running parallel to the beach, along which straggled the pole and thatch houses of its hundred or so inhabitants. It had no school, no formal cemetery, no plaza, no jail, nothing, yet it counted as the seat of civil and military authority on that part of the frontier.³⁶ Three more hours by canoe took you to Xuxub. You headed east along the south coast of Conil Lagoon, a wide, shallow bay teeming with sharks in the spawning time.³⁷ Here and there along the southern coast of the bay small streams wended through the mangroves and swamps, sometimes opening into small lagoons, only to narrow again, threatening even to disappear altogether as mangrove brushed the sides of canoes and lashed at their sweltering passengers. After ascending one such tree-walled stream a low wood-plank bridge halted progress at the plantation San Antonio Xuxub.

For sure it was not Cuba. Had war not erupted in Cuba, or if Stephens had good-paying work back in New York, he wouldn't have ventured out there. His first year was especially hard. His wife and youngest daughter could not join him until he fixed up the place and made it fit for them, and he felt the isolation sorely. Not that he was alone. Some thirty families lived on the plantation, many of them Maya Indians who had labored for the previous owner and who continued on under new management. But Stephens would hardly call Mayas company, and he once wrote to his wife that "this soletery life is horable, and more so when you have no sevelised person to tell your troubles or one to sympethise with you." He



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had it in mind to hire a good Cuban overseer once the plantation started making enough money. That would relieve him of many of the cares of managing laborers and provide him with some of the civilized companionship he so missed.³⁸

Stephens made rapid progress whipping the 769-acre estate into shape. He built a new house for his family on a small island formed by mangrove and the bending river. There stood also the rum distillery. On the other side of the river shacks housing laborers and their families ringed a dirt plaza lightly shaded by coconut trees. Nearby were a mule-driven grinding mill; the sugarhouse with its stack, furnace, and train of kettles for boiling down cane juice; and storage houses for corn, sugar, and barrels of estate liquor. Still further beyond spread the cane and corn, and corrals for horses and cattle. Beyond those lay the great savanna. Beyond the savanna—Stephens had little idea what lay beyond, except forest and hostile Indians for countless leagues southward up to the border with British Honduras.

Stephens's efforts at Xuxub paid off. Laborers grew corn for their sustenance and that of their employer, but sugarcane was the main concern. From cane they made sweetener and rum. The high-quality spirits sold well in Merida. The fields of cane advanced from one year to the next, as laborers opened new ground between mangrove and savanna, until the harvest exceeded their capacity to mill and distill, let alone to transport the products back to Merida. By scrimping on expenses at Xuxub, Stephens could periodically remit some of the money Aznar gave him to his wife back in the States. He would even ship her demijohns of the estate rum from time to time, "as it will help to keep out the colde and is very handy to have in the house in case of sickness, for every boddy says it is the best that they have ever tasted."³⁹

Toward the end of his first year at Xuxub Stephens finally hired an overseer. Not the Cuban he wanted, but someone to help out nonetheless. Hiring the man gave Stephens the chance to sail home to see his family in May of 1873.⁴⁰ Robert Stephens hoped to venture home again later in that year, but a September hurricane wreaked havoc on the estate and set Stephens and Aznar back several thousand dollars. With so much now to do because of the storm, Stephens contented himself with a short trip to Belize City in British Honduras. He went to buy a small schooner to employ carrying Xuxub products to Progreso, thereby eliminating some five or six hundred dollars of freight costs every year. From Belize City

Stephens also planned to send his wife three hundred dollars or so that he had saved up.⁴¹

By 1875 all was looking up again. Stephens's wife and younger daughter finally joined him at Xuxub, and Stephens hired another assistant, a fellow Irish-American from New York, Joseph Byrne, who could keep accounts and handle sundry other administrative duties on the estate. They expected a good sugar crop, despite the drought that had worried them earlier. They thought they'd clear nine thousand dollars that year. Soon, they hoped, the plantation could yield an annual profit of some twenty thousand dollars or so—all that on an initial investment of six thousand to buy the property and about fourteen hundred in capital improvements and expenses over the last three years. If they sold the property then and there, they might get thirty thousand dollars for it.⁴²

The skies remained clear that October of 1875. Hurricanes would not strike every year, as Stephens reasoned. Seven more good harvests and he could retire in comfort back across the Hudson from New York. How sweet the promises of quiet seemed.

There was only one problem—and it was that which led the otherwise self-reliant Stephens to seek help from young consul Lespinasse. Stephens's neighbors, the Urcelays, were trying to kill him in a way so devious it took some time to explain.

11 October

A fisherman made his way up the Turbio River from Conil Lagoon. He looked for a tree that would yield a good pole to secure the sail of his small boat. He knew the area well. Ramón Gasca lived on the island of Holbox, though sometimes he stayed on the mainland at Puntachen. He had worked fourteen years off and on for the Urcelays. He knew Stephens well, too. He knew the places and people around there as well as anyone else. So it did not take him long to realize something was amiss when he found two logs lying across the narrow stream and footprints all over in the damp earth on both sides. The footprints of many men who must only recently have crossed. The normally clear water was still murky from the mud that misplaced steps had stirred. Some sort of trail through the bush appeared to have opened in the direction of the Xuxub plantation. Gasca forgot about the mast he needed and hurried back to Puntachen.

It was almost noon when Gasca arrived in the village. He headed straight to tell the National Guard commander what he had found. As far as Gasca was concerned, it could only mean one thing. An Indian raiding party had arrived. Xuxub, the nearest establishment to the Río Turbio, was in danger. They had to act quickly to warn people there.

Commander Montilla brushed off the frightened fisherman. There was nothing going on. Gasca asked at least that some men be sent to reconnoiter. Not only might Xuxub be

in danger, but Puntachen itself, or men working in cornfields thereabouts. The raiders could strike anywhere or everywhere. Montilla told him to forget about it and warned him not to tell a soul about what he had seen. The fisherman was no fool. He had been around long enough to know what Montilla could do. He was not going to cross Montilla by going himself to warn the people of Xuxub. Instead Gasca set sail for home and the safety of the island of Holbox.⁴

