LOST TREASURE

 The April 9, 1865 surrender of the Confederates to the Union Army at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia marked the final defeat of the South and the end of the agonizing American Civil War.

 But there were some Southerners who refused to abandon their cause and their traditional way of life. Such rebels chose instead to completely leave the United States and emigrate to another country -- even though such a move was strongly discouraged by both Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the former President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis. Colonial Loyalists to Great Britain had similarly fled to Canada during and after the earlier American Revolutionary War. Citizenship in both instances was simply forfeited by those whose side lost in the given conflict and left.

 Such Rebels organized themselves into small bands and made a choice of moving to either Brazil, Mexico, or British Honduras in Central America. Ten to twenty thousand determined emigrants -- dubbed *Los Confederados* -- initially sailed to Brazil, where its ruler, Emperor Dom Pedro II, promised them cheap land, tax breaks, and even subsidized transport if they would come down to live permanently in Brazil and grow cotton. Slavery was also still legal in Brazil, which was an added bonus. The self-exiled Southerners founded a town which they named *Americana*, in the state of Sao Paulo, and set about rebuilding their lives. Mostly, they had decided to leave the United States after losing their lands when the War ended. Many were also uncertain about the long-term revitalization prospects of the Southern economy, as well as being unwilling to live under the harsh yoke of the conquering Yankee army. Additional Brazilian settlements were also started, such as *Rio Doce* (near the coastal city of Rio de Janeiro), and *New Texas* (near the expanding interior city of Sao Paulo).

 Meanwhile, other Rebel families joined together and moved overland to Mexico -- specifically to an area between Mexico City and Veracruz. They founded a 'New Virginia' colony there (with others being planned near Tampico, Monterrey, and Cuernavaca), under the leadership of Richard L. Maury. It was named *Carlota*. Mexican Emperor Maximilian eagerly encouraged such emigration by offering lucrative land grants to the newcomers. This lure was quite enticing to many of the self-exiled Southerners, even though slavery had been made illegal in Mexico by this time.

 But Confederate Colonel Seth Daggett was convinced that his family of six -- along with their forty-seven compatriots from Georgia -- should emigrate instead to the third possibility: tropical British Honduras. The welcoming governor there needed growers to produce rice, cotton, and sugar cane. Land was extremely cheap, and almost the entire country was undeveloped. Plus -- as a further enticement -- the residents there already spoke English, so there would be no need to learn either Portuguese or Spanish. Seth was thirty-three years old, with dark hair and brown eyes, still rugged and tough. He was perfect for such group leadership, even after having survived the brutal War and being twice wounded.

 The small town of Puerto Gordo, on the southern Caribbean coast of British Honduras, would be Daggett's new base -- and a chance for a fresh, free life for himself, his family, and his trusted companions. The Rebel band had wisely pooled their remaining savings -- due to Confederate money being worthless, the women had sold off their jewelry and other valuables for Mexican pesos, while their men had earlier hidden a substantial amount of hoarded gold and silver coins when they realized that the South was certain to lose the War. That cache had later been safely recovered, in preparation for their covert escape from Georgia.

 The group left Savanna the day after Christmas, 1865, on the Panamanian ship *La Victoria.* From there they sailed smoothly to Havana, then went on to and down the Yucatan coast, stopping briefly in the British Honduran capitol, Belize City, until finally arriving in Puerto Gordo. As expected, the weather this far south was balmy and warm, even in late December. The interior lands were basically unexplored raw jungle and thick rain forest. The British had originally come here to harvest the area's valuable mahogany and other hardwood trees. Eventually, they went on to officially claim and establish Honduras as a Crown colony in 1862. Slavery had earlier been abolished here in 1838.

 Colonel Daggett and his wife, Camille, quickly set about organizing the men and women once the group's official harbor documentation was approved. Fortunately, there had been no sickness on board during their voyage, hence there was no need for any port quarantine. Assorted luggage, tents, cooking equipment, necessary building tools, and the usual standard farming implements were offloaded. The Colonel's five children -- ages three to twelve -- joined seven other energetic youngsters in play and exploration near the dock until the vital task was completed. *La Victoria* then raised her anchor and headed off to the south towards Panama, as a peaceful purple and pink evening fell.

 The colonists were on their own.

 Families erected their shelters and supper was prepared in a previously cleared area on the outskirts of tiny Puerto Gordo. The town had a population of about three-hundred and seventy souls, mostly temporarily idled British sailors, busy merchants, and modest shop keepers. There were also six taverns, three constables to enforce the law, a busy food market, and the usual blacksmith shed with an attached livery barn. As one would expect, horses and mules provided basic transportation in the Colony.

 Being from Georgia, *Los Confederados* naturally knew all about raising rice, cotton, and sugar cane, but now they had to accomplish those labor-intensive tasks themselves without the help of any Negro slaves. Fortunately, there were native Indians (descendents of the once mighty Mayans -- the Yucatec and the Mopan) and even some mixed-blood mestizos, who were all eager for work and an opportunity to earn cash wages. So, after several busy months, the necessary log homes for the former Confederate families were finally completed, and tracks of land in the nearby interior were cleared and then expertly planted. Before long, the selected crops were growing well year-round, and the harvests were bountiful. The soil was rich, and there was plenty of both sun and rainfall. Thus, the Southern colony continued to thrive as the years gradually went by.

 Over time, and when in season, the Southerners tried many new sweet or tangy local tropical fruits: custard apple, star-fruit, sopadilla, guaya, sapote, craboo, cashew fruit, Malay apple, and soursop, The rather starchy but filling breadfruit also became a dependable staple. (At least pineapples, mangos. papaya, and coconuts were familiar here, they had learned.) For protein -- other than fresh fish and shrimp -- they enjoyed wild turkey and chicken, sea turtles, kinkajous, the pork-like local jungle tapir, peccaries, and sometimes even dined on the abundant howler monkeys.

 Meanwhile, satisfaction with all of their accomplishments at this time was such that not a single colonist entertained the thought of giving up and returning to Georgia. The rebel children were tutored in the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic by their earnest mothers, and the boys and girls were taught appropriate practical skills by both parents when they came of age. In addition -- and quite happily -- the Southerners' similarly industrious British neighbors had proven themselves over time to be friendly, helpful, reliable, and steadfast.

 One day, Colonel Daggett sailed north up the coast to Belize City to conduct some necessary legal business with the Crown authorities. After buying his wife a bolt of brightly colored cloth for her dress-making, he stopped at a wharf-side tavern (the "Crow's Nest") for a refreshing tankard of ale. The blazing sun was especially hot this June afternoon, and Seth's tunic and brow were soaked with sweat, even though he was wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat. While taking his ease in the cool tavern interior, a stranger approached his table and asked if he minded a bit of company. The man's name was Todd Manor. He was a retired British sailor, about age sixty-five, with wispy gray hair tied back and white stubble on his cheeks and chin. Todd explained that he originally hailed from the Isle of Wight. His green eyes were clear and keen, such evidence attesting that he was neither a rummy nor a wastrel. The old salt's manner was relaxed and cordial.

 "You must be one of those Rebel farmers from America, judging from your Southern accent," Manor casually remarked, after they exchanged introductory pleasantries. The veteran jacktar confessed that he chose to live in the colony here rather than return to England for his remaining years. "Weather's better -- no winter cold or snow -- and the cost of living's cheaper. Plus, nobody bothers you. I'm free to do as I please. I work a bit at the docks loading and unloading cargo when I need more food or some grog money."

 Colonel Seth and Todd discussed current crop prices -- which were good -- and import/export tariff charges, which were not. "The Crown squeezes her colonies like a milk tit to pay for its never-ending expansions and continual wars. Always did, always will. That's why you Americans had your Revolution against us Limeys during the last century. Governments and taxes...bah! You can have 'em both!" He hoisted his tankard of ale and swigged a healthy mouthful, gulped, then belched. "Beggin' your pardon, Matey," he modestly added.

 Daggett then asked Manor where he had sailed during his years serving in His Majesty's Royal Navy. Todd reeled off the ports and the countries he had seen, and the ships and their captains that he had served under for over forty years. Then the retired sailor asked Seth about the action he had seen during the War Between the States, and what it was like to run a large plantation back in Georgia.

 The ex-Colonel looked up from his drink and fixed his eyes far away. "Death and blood, sir, that's what it was like fighting for four long, painful years...our finest Southern young men, the cream of the Confederacy, slaughtered by the Yankees...We were simply outmanned and out-supplied. As for my cotton plantation, what had once been a fine life for me and my family and my slaves was ruined...destroyed...then taken away from us. We had to leave and come here and begin again. And like you, sir -- thanks to God's grace -- we are all well and free men again."

 Daggett's ship would be sailing south back to Puerto Gordo with the tide in another hour, so he informed his visitor of the limited time factor.

 "I understand, my friend. But there are two bits of information I should share with you about this colony. First, you and your people need to know about the existence our fierce tropical hurricanes. We haven't suffered one here for a few years lately, but we'll get hit again sooner or later. Winds over 120 m.p.h. for hours, coming out from the Caribbean, with torrential rains and flooding...So make sure your Confederate colony has plans for shelter during such storms and for your recovery afterwards. Secondly, have you ever heard about the sinking of the Spanish treasure galleon *La Sevilla*? She went down in 1522 during a storm off Ambergris Caye -- not too far from where we sit now, to the northeast. She was carrying a fortune in Aztec gold back to Spain via Hispaniola. They say it was the last of the priceless treasure that Cortes himself had stolen from their ruler, Moctezuma II. The gold was never recovered from the wreck over the last 350 years because the waters are too deep and treacherous. But local legend has it that part of the loot was salvaged by some of *La Sevilla's* crew before the doomed ship went down, and that a handful of survivors made it here to the our coast. The Aztec gold was said to be hidden by them somewhere in the remote jungles down south, close to the Honduran border with Guatemala -- in fact, not very far from your colony near Puerto Gordo, which is why I'm telling you this story, Colonel. The legend goes on to say that the surviving Spaniards were later killed by the Mayans, so the unlucky sailors never got to return to civilization and spend their precious treasure. If I were you, I'd ask around among your native workers when you return home tonight, Seth. Maybe you can learn more and even get lucky! Come back and see me if you do. You can buy my drinks then for the rest of my life!" Todd laughed. The men shook hands as Colonel Seth rose and headed out towards the dock to catch his ship home. As a gesture of thanks and good will, the Rebel leader tossed a few coins on the wooden bar to pay for their drinks before exiting the Crow's Nest.

 About a week later, Daggett was talking with one of his indigenous field hands by the name of Chaac. Did you ever hear the legend of the lost Aztec treasure? Seth wanted to know. Chaac was the brightest and most literate of his workers.

 "Yes, Colonel sir, I have heard of this rumor. I was first told the story by my father when I was young. It was said that the sailors were killed because they tried to dig and hide their plunder near some remote Mayan ruins deep within the jungle. It was actually atop an ancient burial ground for the sacred ancestors. The Spaniards certainly had no idea that such a place was taboo. They must have been completely surprised when they were ambushed and massacred by the local jungle natives," Chaac explained. "Probably killed by poisoned Mayan arrows and spears."

 Seth next wanted to know if Chaac believed that the lost treasure was still out there, somewhere -- and if so, could it be found again?

 "I'm not sure, Colonel sir...Either the gold was taken away by the attacking Mayans and kept for its eventual rightful return to Tenochtitlan, or the Spaniards had just buried it and were covering their tracks when they were caught leaving the area. That was when they were surprised and slaughtered."

 Daggett then asked Chaac if he knew where the sacred burial ground place was located. Do people still know of its whereabouts, or travel there occasionally to pay their respects?

 "All Mayan descendents like myself know roughly where it is located, but no one goes there anymore because it is forbidden. There are also primitive native tribes who still live in the deep jungles there, and they are very hostile to any outsiders trespassing on their lands. I know of no one of my generation who ever searched for this sacred place, let alone been there. Perhaps my grandfathers or great-grandfathers visited it once, but I'm not sure. My father never mentioned it, though, if they ever did," Chaac admitted.

 Seth let Chaac get back to work doing his job chopping cotton under the punishing summer sun. But the Colonel's curiosity had certainly been aroused as a result of their conversation. Could such a lost treasure be found again? A fortune, perhaps, in Aztec gold -- just waiting there, for the taking! I wonder, he mused...

 That evening after dinner, Daggett meet with his four closest *Confederado* friends -- Harlan Clay, Jubal Stanton, Ambrose Finn, and Brax Tidwell. Seth told them what Todd Manor had shared a week ago in Belize City about the legend of the missing Spanish gold, as well as what Chaac had just told him today about the lost Aztec treasure. Their eyes widened in amazement at the many possibilities to be had, should they be lucky enough to find such riches.

 Jubal broke the silence and spoke first. "Seth, I think there is no question but we should take a week or so off from the farms and go look for that gold." Harlan, Brax, and Ambrose solemnly nodded and voiced their full agreement.

 "That was my thinking too, boys...Our wives and the other men of our colony can keep things going with the aid of our hired help until we get back. Maybe we'll return empty-handed, or maybe we'll come home rich...who knows? But it's worth a serious attempt. I'll try to coax Chaac into leading us into the jungle as far as he thinks he can go, then we can continue on our own in the general direction he indicates towards this supposed sacred burial ground area." The others found Seth's plan both feasible and exciting. The idea was set.

 But Chaac was quite hesitant when he was fully informed of Daggett's grand treasure scheme.

 "Colonel sir, the wild jungle here is very deadly and dangerous. There are poisonous plants, insects, and reptiles... Maya coral snakes, vipers like the Fer-de-Lance, poison dart frogs, bark scorpions, black widow spiders, and stinging bullet ants...Hungry jaguars and crocodiles too! After many miles inland, there is no trail. You would need to hack your way forward hard with machetes, and then lead your horses and pack mules on foot. You should not attempt such a hazardous journey, Colonel sir. Please reconsider."

 But Seth was undeterred. He badgered Chaac repeatedly to take them, offering him increasing amounts of money to lead his party inland. At last, a weary Chaac agreed. For the equivalent in British pounds of 75 American silver dollars, the Mayan descendent promised to guide them -- but only part of the way. Ancient superstitions were still strong in the young native's heart and mind. "I will take you to the sacred *cenote* that my father once told me about, near the place of black boulders and stone skulls. Then and there, you and your men must proceed alone, always keeping to the west towards the setting sun. I must return at that point to Puerto Gordo, and will go no further with you."

 The expedition gathered food and other necessary equipment for an estimated ten days gone and set out two days later. Seth confidently kissed his wife, Camille, and his five children good-bye. "Bring us some gold home, Father!" his youngest daughter, Andrea, squealed. The six men each rode a horse with a tethered loaded pack mule behind them, and headed west into the shadows on a narrow jungle trail, with Chaac leading the way.

 Four days of arduous travel quickly took its toll. The steamy humidity and fetid air was oppressive, with the added heat pounding them like a cruel, relentless bludgeon. Itchy, sweat-soaked clothing and chaffing saddle sores was their unchanging daily ordeal. Attempts at sound sleep in their large canvas tent were thwarted by startling sounds of rarely-seen night creatures hunting, or birds abruptly screeching, or strange insects calling aloud. The temperature barely cooled off at night, adding to the group's general feeling of abject misery. Ambrose and Harlan had to be regularly cajoled by Seth into not simply turning around and returning to civilization. Meanwhile, Jubal and Brax had both suffered red, swollen insect bites all over their bodies. Chaac helpfully offered a Mayan herbal remedy -- made from readily available plants found on their journey -- to sooth their discomfort. Much to their relief, the poultice worked wonderfully.

 On the fifth morning, the narrow trail ended, as Chaac had earlier warned them. Now began the hard struggle of hacking and slashing the green jungle hell with their sharp steel machetes. For the next two days, the expedition moved slowly onward. Time seemed to crawl, the hours long and difficult.

 Chaac was probably as surprised as the other men when suddenly there appeared a clearing ahead. In the center was the cenote -- a large, natural sinkhole in the subsurface limestone rock, filled with water from untold years of rainfall. The cenote was remarkably circular, presenting a pool about twelve feet in diameter. Such sinkholes were common in these parts of Central America, and could be hundreds of feet deep. The Mayans believed certain perfectly-formed cenotes to be sacred places, and regularly offered human sacrifice -- in the form of virginal young women -- to such watery portals to appease their gods. The women drowned as their tightly-bound bodies sank, their corpses gradually reduced to skeletons as they eventually rotted in the cold, dark, watery depths.

 In the corners of the jungle clearing, with the cenote in the center, were four dramatic black boulders -- whether naturally arranged or moved into position by the ancient Mayans, it was hard to tell. And arrayed around the base of each boulder was a ring of human skulls carved from gray limestone.

 While Daggett and his men inspected the open area further, Chaac announced that he would go no further. It was taboo for his people, he explained. "The ancestors are buried further to the west. Maybe several hours, or maybe days away. No one knows. Colonel sir, keep heading towards the sunset through the jungle again. If Spanish gold is to be found, that must be the only direction to proceed. Good luck, brave gentlemen. I will return now to the sea coast and home in Puerto Gordo."

 Seth asked if any of the rest of the party wanted to give up and return with Chaac back to civilization. But the lure of riches was too strong, and untold wealth appeared so close to them, that not even one former Rebel volunteered to abandon their quest. Daggett shook hands with Chaac and the stolid Mayan left, after promising to tell the wives back home that their husbands were still doing well, and would be returning soon -- hopefully laden with rich golden treasure!

 The expedition camped in the wide clearing for the rest of the day, cooked their evening meal, and erected their tent for the night. It was a welcomed comfort to see a canopy of stars and a crisp, glowing crescent moon again, both having earlier been obscured for days in the deep jungle. They then carefully filled their water jugs with the somewhat clear rainwater from the cenote before retiring.

 It took another day and a half of tough hacking once again through the jungle when the group unexpectedly came upon a low, gray stone ruins -- about a foot in height -- in the shape of a square, perhaps thirty feet on each side. The structure was somewhat overgrown with thick green foliage and vines. Yet when such growth was moved aside, dozens of similar stone-carved human skulls -- like those which had been noticed at the sacred cenote -- were eerily revealed near the ruins' inner perimeter.

 "Could this be the ancient burial ground where the Spanish sailors were ambushed and killed?" the Colonel wondered aloud. "If so, perhaps we are also near the spot where they had once hidden the gold. Get the shovels off the pack mules, boys, and let's start digging inside this stone square area." Harlan, Brax, Jubal, and Ambrose quickly followed their leader's orders.

 After thirty minutes of hard, sweaty digging, Jubal was the first to cry out, "Look, Seth! I think I see it... something shiny down here!" Daggett and the others rushed over. Seth bent down and brushed some of the dirt aside. It was gold! Several bars were plainly visible. He reached deeper with his fingers and unearthed a single heavy bar of the untarnished precious metal. It had the small but distinct ownership mark of Charles V, King of Spain, stamped in the center of the ingot. "Hmm...this has to be some of the Aztec gold which was melted down back in Mexico and remolded by Cortes' men for shipment back to Spain," the Colonel surmised. "Boys, we are holding history in our hands, and it's all ours now!" He grinned a grin of sheer relief and triumph, and the other men cheered.

 But that was when a shower of poisoned arrows and lethal spears rained down, felling the doomed men before they could reach for their rifles and defend themselves. The attacking native tribe of primitive, nearly naked men -- direct descendents of the once mighty Mayans -- had remained hidden until the last, crucial instant. Within minutes, all five of the explorers were dead -- Rebel Colonel Seth Daggett stricken with an arrow in his right eye, which had fatally found its way deep into his brain.

 The lone gold bar was taken from Seth's dead hand and returned to its earthen resting place, then carefully covered up again with soil by the natives. The bloody corpses of *Los Confederados* were loaded onto their horses and led back eventually to the sacred cenote area, where they were unceremoniously dumped into the circular water pool and noiselessly sank within moments -- exactly as the small band of hapless Spanish sailors had been disposed of by Mayan warriors some 350 years earlier...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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