

## THE CROWN OF COYOPAN

### By H. Bedford-Jones

*The concluding chapters of Richard Warren's quest  
for Inca gold, emeralds, and romance.*

#### CHAPTER XI THE CROSS OF THE INCAS

**W**ARREN HEARD THE PRIEST GIVE ANOTHER order. He opened his eyes, looking up at the poised knife, still red with the blood of victims.

One of the old women came from beside her jar and clawed at Warren's collar and coat. She ripped away the cloth, ripped away the shirt beneath, baring his chest for the knife. And suddenly a shrill, terrified cry burst from her, and she pointed.

The little gold cross upon its chain lay exposed for all to see.

The old hag's voice died away. Amid a deathly silence the masked priest leaned forward, and others crowded up to look. Why the sight of this tiny golden cross should have produced such an effect, Warren had no idea. It was rather ridiculous to suppose that these pagan worshipers would hold the Christian symbol in veneration or awe. And yet, to his intense astonishment, this seemed to be the case.

Voices arose in evident argument, fear, consternation. The masked priest wiped his knife and put it away, giving another of his sharp, quick orders. Warren was released.

He sat up, feeling faint and overcome anew by those insidious incense fumes. One of the girls brought a cup. The priest took it; after tasting its contents to show it was not harmful, he shoved it at Warren. The latter recoiled, then saw it was an ordinary crockery cup, and the contents wine. He accepted it and drank, now perceiving that no injury was intended him.

The wine was grateful to his throat, and he gulped it eagerly.

The others had drawn back, all staring at him. He hurriedly got off the altar and stood beside it. Something was rough under his head; he looked, and it was the fragment of the crown on the rounded stone. The cool luster of the emeralds startled him.

Then his head swam suddenly. He clutched at the altar, clutched and caught the segment of the crown, and sank down in a daze. A frantic oath escaped him. The wine had been drugged, of course! He might have known that these devils—

With that, darkness enveloped him.

When he wakened, he was still lying there beside the altar, clutching in both hands the segment of the Crown of Coyopan. A deathly silence was over everything. He stirred and sat up, came erect, and stared around.

There was no one here. There was no sign of the scene he had so recently witnessed. The flowers were gone from the altar, the canopy was gone, everything was gone; the only light came from a lantern hung from a hook in the wall. The patio was bare, empty, save for something that lay beneath the lantern covered over by a straw mat. Upon the whole place, on all the house, was the perfect stillness of a deserted edifice.

Warren swallowed hard. Had it all been a dream, an illusion of the senses? No. The thing in his hands made eloquent denial. Here was the seventh portion of that glorious crown to be in his possession. His? He started, drew a deep breath, went over toward the light of the lantern. Yes; the

emeralds flashed up at him, the carved virgin gold glimmered under his fingers. It was real. It was his. Why not?

He looked down at the straw mat. Something struck his attention—a human hand that protruded at the edge. He bent, moved the mat aside, and saw the form of Don Jose Flores—though the white robe was gone. The man was dead.

Servants? He saw no one as he made his way through the house and let himself out into the deserted street, under the cold stars. He went back to his hotel room, got the wondrous fragment of gold and emeralds on the table, and sat for a long while looking at it, touching the stones, drinking in their clear beauty. His brain was feverish, distorted, overwrought. This lovely placid green was a restful solace; those emeralds, the very stones the Incas had worn, held healing and comfort. When he turned off his light and stretched out in bed, he was asleep almost at once.

With sunrise, the seventh portion of the crown had disappeared.

LATER THAT MORNING, NERVE-WRACKED AND distraught, he strode up and down in the reception parlor of Dona Ysleta's house. When she appeared, he was too taken up with his own troubles to note her parlor, her stricken eyes, her air of bewildered helplessness.

"Ysleta! I don't know whether I'm mad or sane!" he burst out. "Whether it was all some horrible dream—whether it really happened—well, there's the devil to pay! And if I'm at all sane," he added bitterly, "the devil has been paid. Something has happened."

"Obviously!" she said, with a faint smile. "Something has happened here, too; but you're first, my dear. Last night? Tell me all about it. Sit down—"

"I can't sit down," he exclaimed. "I'll tell you the whole thing. Here, take

back your cross. That's got me jittery, too—"

He poured out the story of the hideous scene in the Flores mansion, leaving out nothing but telling of the morning's loss.

"I can meet anything that's substantial—enemies, plots, force," he concluded with a despairing gesture. "But this is something I don't savvy. Now, was that scene real or was it illusion? Why did that little cross of yours have such an effect? Or did I imagine it all?"

"My dear, my dear, you did not!" she exclaimed, intent and earnest. "What you've just told me proves the reality of it."

"But how?" he stared blankly. "It's nonsense to say that a bunch of Indians would revere the Christian cross, or if it's not nonsense, then I'm all set to believe in miracles."

"I'd love to keep you in that frame of mind," she rejoined, "but I'll be as frank as you, Don Ricardo. Listen. That little cross has been made Christian in all due form; but in the beginning it was pagan. Hernando de Soto, according to tradition, took it from the last Inca, Atashualpa. It's the cross worshiped by the Indians here, by the Mayans, by the Aztecs; the cross of Quetzal, denoting the four winds of heaven. You see? Last night, they recognized it as having belonged to the last Inca himself. They know! And they were afraid to touch you. The little cross saved your life after all!"

Listening, he drew a deep breath. As he had said, this was reality; he could meet it halfway. The explanation made everything clear. His fevered brain quieted.

"All right, then," he said abruptly. "Now listen to the rest. I took that portion of the crown with me. Last night I left it on the table in my room, covered over from sight. This morning it was gone. Gone, do you understand? The door was locked. There was nothing to indicate any theft. It made me think I'd gone out of my head, had

imagined the whole thing last night—made me doubt even my own sanity! Why, what's the matter?"

At his words she had started; her eyes widened, she made a frightened gesture.

"I—I told you something had happened here," she said. "You know, I've kept the other parts of the crown in my wardrobe trunk, locked, in my own room. I know they were in it last night. This morning, when I was putting some things in the trunk, I wanted to make sure they were all right. Well—they were gone!"

She flung out her hands. "Gone!" echoed Warren. She nodded.

"Gone. Not there. The trunk had been locked, the keys in my purse. Apparently it hadn't been touched. But the crown—all of it—is gone, gone!"

For a moment they met each other's eyes. To Warren, the blow was acute; the impact was shattering. Then he rallied, conscious of the despair on her face, and forced a laugh. Taking her hand, he kissed her fingers.

"If the crown's gone, it's gone; at least we're facing reality!" he said quietly. "Let it go, my dear. After all, it doesn't matter that terribly! We have each other. If I've failed, if I've lost what I came to get—well, at least I've won something greater than any crown on earth!"

"Ah, you're a darling!" she exclaimed. "But, Ricardo! Do you see what it means? You've thought no one suspected you. We've both thought we were safe. We were not. Somehow, they knew. Remember, what I told you when we first talked about it."

"What?"

"The Confraternity of the Crown," she said, terror in her eyes, "still exists."

In vain did Dick Warren argue. In vain did he tell Dona Ysleta that no longer was the Confraternity of the Crown to be

feared. In vain did he point out that death had thinned the ranks. She remained adamant.

"I'm afraid, yes; we must leave Coyopan, go at once, forget the crown!" she said firmly. "The mere fact that we've lost it so mysteriously, that they undoubtedly know all about you and me and what we've done—this shows that the confraternity is still to be feared. Here is your choice. If you mean your words, if you prefer me to the crown, you can prove that very easily."

Warren sighed a little, and smiled.

"Very well; there's no choice, my dear. When shall we leave?"

"Ah!" Her eyes warmed on his. "You'll really give it up?"

"Of course. I can pack and be ready in an hour."

She frowned thoughtfully. "I can't. The papers about the property must be signed. I'll send word at once to my relative; we'll do that this afternoon. I'll get off the things I'm sending by freight to the coast—yes, I can get everything done today. Have dinner with me here, tonight! Your first dinner in this house, my last; our first together. Yes? And at sunrise we'll get off. We can both go in my carriage."

"Agreed." Warren brought her fingers to his lips. "Eight tonight?"

She nodded, came to him and lifted her face. Their lips met. She flushed a little, and still looking him in the eye, drew back and smiled.

"I'm really very much afraid, but you make me brave," she said simply. "You make fear seem silly; but I know I'm right, none the less. It may seem cruel to make you give up what you've come so far and have worked so hard to win—but I do love you with all my heart, and I'll try to make up for what you lost."

"Nonsense! It's all ended and forgotten, so pass it up." Warren waved a

cheerful hand. "Eight tonight, the road at sunrise, and the wedding at the coast—eh?"

"Agreed."

**N**ONETHELESS, IT CAME HARD TO ACCEPT defeat, to let the greatest treasure in the world be taken from him, to see his dreams and ambitions all shattered. The more so, as he knew exactly who must be responsible.

As he sat and lunched in the cafe on the Plaza, he checked up mentally on the confraternity. Legally, part of the crown was his own property, and a part belonged to Dona Ysleta, but here in Coyopan the law was hardly taken seriously. Stiff old Don Diego de Ribera had been elected to the confraternity to replace Ysleta's father; of the other seven members, one by one all had died or departed for parts unknown, except the amiable Dr. Lores y Castro, who now possessed a replica of his own segment of the crown, and Don Augustin de Beltran, that rapacious and brutal caballero, who had aspired to the hand of Dona Ysleta.

"Lores is clean out of this," reflected Dick Warren. "So, I rather think, is Don Diego; not sure. The active party is Beltran. I underestimated that chap evidently. He and his worthless, disreputable brother Don Porfirio—yes, they're the ones. They've had pretty hard luck in previous meetings with me; and they're evidently smarter than I believed. So what?"

As though in reply to his mental query, rose in his brain the vision he had seen in the draught of the Sun, only last night. Himself, with the iron collar of the garment about his throat and the faces of the Beltran brothers gloating. It was ghastly real. He started, passed a hand across his eyes, and put all thought of fight or regret out of his head. Dona Ysleta was right. Let the crown go, and get away from this place of loveliness and stagnant death!

All the same, defeat rankled, particularly defeat at such hands.

Back in his own room in the shabby tavern, he finished his packing and was about to pay up his bill when a knock came at the door. To his careless wont, the door swung open to reveal a strange man in rags, unshaven for days, shapeless old hat pulled down over his eyes, tattered cloak pulled up about his beard-blurred mouth. He came inside and shut the door, and pulled off his hat. Even then, Warren did not recognize him.

"Who the devil are you? What do you want here?"

A hollow, mirthless laugh escaped the visitor.

"So you do not know me! Then, assuredly, no one else would."

Warren started. That voice was familiar. He came close to the man, met the deep eyes in the haggard face, and stupefaction seized him. Don Jaime de Mondano—who by this time should have been far away with his daughter!

"Don Jaime! Is it really you?"

"It is I, my friend." And he dropped into a chair, a dreary, hopeless wreck. "She is dead, Maria, my beautiful one; she who loved you—"

A convulsion seized him, he put his face down in his hands and shook with sobs, tears dribbling through his fingers. Warren, remembering that lovely child, that sweet and sunny fairy princess, stood with his hand on Don Jaime's shoulder, wordless. At last he found tongue.

"Tell me. It seems impossible. What happened?"

The other got himself in hand. "You must pardon me, Don Ricardo; it is the first time I've been able to weep," he said brokenly. "I buried her, and came back here, got here last night. It's just as well no one knows me—those damned Beltrons!" A fierce, hard note leaped in his voice. "I've

learned something I had to come and tell you. They're plotting something against you—"

"No matter. I'm leaving here in the morning." Warren thought the man was raving and paid little heed to the words. "Tell me about your daughter. It can't be possible that she's gone!"

A deep groan was wrenched from Don Jaime.

"It is so, Don Ricardo. She died in my arms. That night, you remember, when you saved her from Don Porfirio—we fled. We rode fast and hard. We were safe. But she had received a great shock and fright. She became ill with pneumonia—and passed."

"Good Lord!" breathed Warren aghast. He knew how much this man had loved his daughter, how all his life, his future, had been built upon her, how for her sake he had sold his portion of the crown and fled with her.

"Look here, Don Jaime. What can I do for you? How can I help you?" he exclaimed. The other rose, with a shake of the head.

"Thanks, my friend; there is nothing anyone can do. Do not mention me, for no one must suspect that I've returned. I came here to warn you. What they're plotting I haven't yet discovered; as long as you're leaving in the morning, no matter."

For an instant Warren thought of telling Don Jaime everything, about the loss of the crown, about his own blasted hopes. Still, that would do no good. He had definitely given up the emeralds of the Incas.

"Do you need money?"

"No. I have most of what you gave me. I must get away now; it is the siesta hour and while the streets are deserted I can get out of town. Remember, have a care, have a care! Don Augustin is dangerous!"

"I know it," said Warren. "I've learned that lesson—but my affairs are of no concern now. I'm leaving early in the morning with Dona Ysleta de Soto. Tell me where your daughter lies buried. When we pass there, I'll put flowers on her grave, for memory."

Brokenly, caught anew in a surge of grief, Don Jaime told him, then wrung his hand and departed like a shadow.

The shock of this information hit Warren hard, for he had a warm spot in his heart for the lovely girl just budding into womanhood. He had kept silent about the loss of the crown, too, lest Don Jaime insist upon returning the money Warren had paid for his portion of the emeralds—money of which he had bitter need.

"It is a bit of a jolt to lose all I've sunk in this affair," reflected Warren, and shrugged. "No help for it, though; after all, Ysleta's the great thing, her love is worth all the emeralds on earth! Money be damned!"

That afternoon he drifted about the city making his farewells to the friends he had made, chiefly among the poets of Coyopan. They had welcomed him, and he was not minded to steal away like a thief in the night. He had still to keep up his role of poet; and managed it with good grace, confessing that he was leaving Coyopan in order to be married. This intimate confidence charmed his auditors, and while Ysleta's name was never mentioned, Coyopan had been by no means blind to the current of affairs.

In the course of the afternoon, Warren dropped in upon Don Diego de Ribera, and fully satisfied himself that this astute gentleman, who was the chief poet and political wire-puller of the city, did not in any way suspect him of being anything more than a poetical aspirant. Much to his relief, too, he discovered Don Augustin de Beltran was out of the city, being at a family hacienda across the valley—an old and

highly interesting place, according to Don Diego.

“It is regrettable,” went on the stately don, “that Don Augustin and his brother Don Porfirio are so different. That younger man has great genius—misdirected.”

“To be frank about it,” said Warren, “he struck me as being a ruffian.”

The other shrugged, and made dignified yet gentle reproof.

“A harsh word, Don Ricardo, to apply to one of noble blood. The young man went to Buenos Aires and did get into some trouble there; a misapprehension, of course, since he was accused of robbery and theft. Some ridiculous charge. Heaven knows the Beltran family has no need of money! Well, well, we shall be sorry to look in vain for your cheery countenance—”

There Warren had what most he desired to know; the last mystery was cleared up. Don Porfirio was, to put in bluntly, a clever thief, and his brother had put his “genius” to good use. The disappearance of the crown was no longer a secret, and Warren sighed at the thought of his promise to Dona Ysleta. Temptation burned at him to rob the thief and fairly set his brain afire.

However, he resisted the temptation.

SIX O’CLOCK FOUND HIM SITTING AT THE CAFE on the Plaza, chatting with a group of acquaintances, sipping an aperitif and watching the sun sink toward the ocean horizon in the west. The cone of El Viejo, the snowy-crowned volcanic peak so appropriately termed The Ancient One, lifted against the eastward sky all roseate and serene. Warren felt an acute regret to be leaving this lovely place, with its eternal placidity, its even temperature, with all the distraction of the world shut out and fallen to nothing.

A man, an Indian, signaled him from the edge of the sidewalk. Warren recognized

one of Dona Ysleta’s house servants; excusing himself from the group, he paid for his drinks and joined the Indian, who saluted him.

“Senor,” he said, “I have a message from my mistress. She is riding part way home with her relative, who is buying the property. She said that if you cared to meet her in half an hour at the Well of the Angels and ride back in the twilight, she would be glad.”

“Good!” exclaimed Warren. “Of course! I’ll get my horse at the stable at once.”

His riding things were packed; no matter. He strode briskly to the livery stable and had his usual horse saddled—a last ride before leaving Coyopan, a farewell to El Viejo, he jested with the half-Indian proprietor.

So he rode out of the city in the sunset glow, riding unhurried down the valley past the tobacco fields, saluting the cowed and deferential Indians who touched their wide hats with a murmur of “Su Merced!” until he felt like a very lord indeed. A happy thought on the part of Dona Ysleta, he reflected. A ride together before dinner in the glowing twilight, a smile at the starry pin-points in the greenish sky, a farewell to indolent Coyopan and all its secrets.

“A kiss to Coyopan!” he said aloud, and blew a kiss back toward the queenly, darkling city. “After all, I owe you much. If I’ve failed greatly, at least I’ve also won greatly within your ancient walls!”

He came at last to the trickle across the road, and drew rein. Here, beneath the enshrouding brush to the right, was the Well of the Angels, the secluded, beautiful spot where he had first met Dona Ysleta alone. There was no sign of her now; the dusty, winding road was empty. It was like her, he thought tenderly, to want their last meeting

here where the first had been, with all the memories.

Not far away rose the wall of the Benalkebir plantation. Towering out of the seared and blasted vegetation, he could see the blackened chimney; all that remained of the fire-swept hacienda house, where he had sat at dinner with Don Pedro that memorable night. Don Pedro was dead now, and more than one of his brethren of the confraternity with him.

"Buenas noches, Senor! A good evening and pleasant thoughts to you poet of the north!"

At the voice, Warren started. He turned in the saddle. From the underbrush had emerged a horse and rider who now sat looking at him with a gloomy, sardonic smile. It was Don Augustin de Beltran, powerful, arrogant, brutal of visage.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE CONFRATERNITY IS DISSOLVED

**T**HESE MOCKING WORDS, AND THE SIGHT OF the speaker, held the American stupefied. Upon the instant, apprehension smote him. Don Augustin seemed amused by his expression.

"You seem confused, Don Ricardo, even, shall I say somewhat terrified?"

"Good evening," Warren rejoined. "You surprised me, Don Augustin."

"That was my intent," said the other, calmly. "You expected to see Dona Ysleta here. She is not coming. I sent that message, Senor."

Warren turned his horse. "You, Don Augustin?"

"Precisely, Senor. Hearing that you were soon to leave Coyopan, we have come to give you an invitation which is very seldom extended to any outsiders. I believe that in the past three hundred years it has not been given more than half a dozen times."

Something in the man's perfect composure impressed Warren with a chill sense. Then the Indian house-servant had been bribed—

"We?" he repeated, bewildered, alarmed, confused.

Don Augustin waved his hand. Another horse was emerging from the leafy covert, and in the saddle sat the younger brother, Don Porfirio, wearing his malignant smile. Across his saddle he balanced a double-barreled shotgun.

Warren collected himself. He began to understand everything. With an assumption of coolness he was far from feeling, he produced a cigarette and struck a match.

"You make things rather obvious, at last," he observed, exhaling. "May I ask regarding the nature of this invitation—which is, apparently, to be enforced?"

Don Augustin inclined his head gravely.

"You are invited to attend a meeting, Senor, of the Confraternity of the Crown."

For an instant Warren could only stare blankly.

"Oh!" he said, and looking from one to the other. "Under the circumstances, it seems to me that you invest the matter with more formality than necessary, Senors. You represent yourselves, not the confraternity. Your intentions—shall we call it murder and be done with it?"

Don Porfirio cackled as though amused. But Don Augustin shook his head.

"No, Senor," he responded gravely. "While one member exists, the Confraternity of the Crown itself exists. Representing it, we invite you to its final meeting. If you refuse, the matter is ended."

Warren knew better. This was all a theatrical gesture. He had been lured here and trapped; why? What was back of it all? If they knew he was about to leave Coyopan, why bother with all this nonsense?

As though aware of his thoughts, Don Augustin went on with smooth gravity.

"You wonder, no doubt, at the manner of this meeting. However, there are certain things I desire to say to you, and not hurriedly. You go with me as a guest to my house; and there you will become a guest of the Confraternity of the Crown, whose meeting-place is at my hacienda."

Warren did not try to conceal his astonishment.

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly, *Senor*. If you refuse, our regret would be mutual, I assure you."

Backed by the shotgun, these words were eloquent. Warren, knowing the nature of this man, was beginning to appraise the situation correctly. Murder? He did not doubt it for an instant; but murder deftly and beautifully concealed behind a curtain of theatrical weave. Melodrama, masked by stately courtesy and Spanish dignity.

"Why speak of refusal?" he said, and flipped away his cigarette. "I shall be charmed to accept your hospitality, *Don Augustin*."

"Then let us be going." *Don Augustin* turned his horse. "My brother will follow, to make certain no one molests us. The roads are unsafe of late; many peculiar tragedies have happened in and about *Coyopan*."

They rode away together, with *Don Porfirio* following. Those sardonic words gave Warren the final clue. The shotgun in the rear, yes, *Don Augustin* was taking no chances this time on the unexpected chances that had so mysteriously stricken him before this. The mystery no longer obtained. He understood everything. And he had *Dick Warren* right where he wanted him.

As they rode along in the deepening twilight, as the hoary crest of *El Viejo* turned from pink to scarlet, and faded again into purple and blue, as daylight died and the stars came out, *Don Augustin* clung to

his mantle of stately gravity. He discussed *Coyopan*, its history, the confraternity; he talked freely, but he never mentioned the crown.

They turned in at the open gate of a hacienda, and beside the house where lights illumined the entrance drive, Indian grooms came and tethered the horses.

"You will join me, perhaps," said *Don Augustin*, "in a bite to eat and a glass of wine, *Senor*? My house is your own, and all in it—"

Warren accepted, once more utterly astonished. It seemed impossible that this man could intend to betray every law of hospitality observed in this country so rigorously.

The two of them entered the mansion. *Don Porfirio* disappeared. *Don Augustin* was pleasant, affable, highly polite. In a long, narrow dining room they sat down to a light repast and excellent wine. Then, suddenly, Warren broached what was in his mind.

"Do you know where the Crown of *Coyopan* now is?"

"Where it has been for centuries," *Don Augustin* surveyed him with a dark and gloomy eye. "In the keeping of the Confraternity of the Crown. Do you find this wine to your taste?"

"It is admirable," assented Warren, and had what he wanted to know. With lessening of acute fear and surprise, he began to feel a mounting curiosity about this trap and the reason for it. After all, he reflected, he had not broken his promise to *Dona Ysleta*; and if he had to fight for his life, anything might happen. So, outwardly smiling and composed, inwardly he was on the alert.

The repast finished, *Don Augustin* rose.

"The Hall of the Confraternity is across the garden, *Senor*. You will accompany me?"

Warren bowed in his best Castillian manner. They stepped outside, and found lighted lanterns illuminating a path across the garden, where a strange, dark little building loomed. As they came to it Don Augustin paused.

“Senor, you now become a guest of the Confraternity of the Crown. Will you have the goodness to enter? I regret to tell you that no weapons are allowed under this roof, so if you have a pistol—“

“I have none,” said Warren amiably. “If I had, then I might not be here.”

The other bowed, and he stepped into the building. Once inside the door, he was in a long room, empty save for table and chairs. At this table were eight chairs. Lights glittered along the walls. And upon the table—

Upon the table was the Crown of Coyopan.

**W**ARREN WAS STRUCK DUMB BY THIS sight. He fumbled his way forward, came to a halt by a chair against the wall, in which Don Augustin silently assigned him; he could not take his eyes from the thing before him. It was the first time he had seen the crown in its entirety, and it was a sight never to be forgotten. He was deaf and blind to everything around, as he sank into the chair, leaned forward, and fastened his bemused gaze upon the greatest treasure of its kind in the world.

Put together with their golden hinges and pins invisible, each of the eight portions had vanished. Here was now one glorious creation of virgin gold and emeralds, a creation ineffably lovely in curve and line and artistic conception, exquisite past belief in all the tiny details of chiseling and carving. The gold seemed, indeed, a living and bowing material, so deft was the illusion produced by those ancient craftsmen.

Against this background were the emeralds of the Incas, softly glowing, their limpid and serene purity bringing a catch to the throat, as when one gazes upon supernatural beauty.

Voices made themselves heard through Warren’s abstraction. Seated at the head of the table, Don Augustin was gravely calling the roll of the Confraternity of the Crown.

“Don Diego de Ribera?”

“Not here,” said a voice.

“Don Pedro Benalkebir?”

“Present.”

“Don Juan de Montillo?”

“Present.”

“Don Jose Flores?”

“Present.”

Warren started, took his fascinated gaze from the crown, glanced wildly about. Benalkebir was dead—ah! Comprehension came to him and he relaxed, began to give the scene his attention. As each name was called the answer came, not from those empty chairs, but from Don Porfirio, who stood before the door. The sole member of the order present was Don Augustin.

Was it merely a ghastly theatrical farce, then? Warren eyed his captors with a certain contempt. It occurred to him that this Don Augustin, despite his rapacious and brutal spirit, might have some feeling, some reverence for the ancient and historical confraternity; next moment he was disabused of the notion.

“This is the final meeting of the Confraternity of the Crown of Coyopan,” went on Don Augustin gravely. “Dispensing with the usual formalities, I now declare the meeting open. A motion is heard from Don Pablo Salazar. It is proposed that the confraternity be dissolved forever, that the books be closed, that the Crown of Coyopan be entrusted to me for disposal. It is now put to the vote.”

So it was done, in solemn face, Don Porfirio answering for those who were dead or forever departed, and giving a clear majority. Warren now began to perceive light on the mystery, which became suddenly clear.

"It is ordered that the resolution be affirmed and copied, and signed with the seal of the order, and by me, its president," said Don Augustin. He was now gazing at Warren with a slight smile. "This resolution will be antedated, and there will be none to dispute the signatures of the officers, who are unfortunately present only by proxy. I trust you will get the point, Senor. I now declare the meeting dissolved."

So saying, he produced an automatic pistol and laid it on the board before him.

"Now, Senor Warren, don't move from that chair," he said in a new voice, "or you'll be killed. We're aware of your exceptional abilities, and propose to take no chances with you, as we discuss the matter. Porfirio, sit down!"

The younger brother obeyed, with a grin. He, too, held a ready pistol.

"You flatter me," said Dick Warren dryly. "What is there to discuss?"

"The legality of the sale of the emeralds."

"Oh!" With this Warren comprehended everything. The precious pair meant to decamp and sell the treasure, probably on the curb jewel market of Paris.

"I understand perfectly," Don Augustin went on, "that no one person could buy these stones. It must be a syndicate, such as you yourself represent."

"You know a little about me, eh?" said Warren.

"A great deal. I've made it my business to learn by cable, lately. Senor, you may have the Crown of Coyopan for five million dollars, gold."

Warren leaned back, smiling.

"So that's your racket. Well, a good share of the crown is already mine, or under control, legally. I've no intention of paying double. I couldn't pay such an amount if I were willing. Your little game of offering the forged authority of the confraternity doesn't impress me in the least, though it might impress certain people abroad. Legally, the confraternity has no right whatever to the crown, which belongs to the individual members. Your light-fingered brother stole the thing—"

"You're not so guiltless yourself," sneered Don Augustin. "However, any possible objections from you will be eliminated. Sooner or later, we'll get our price; meantime, we can always sell the stones one by one."

"Only a rascal could be guilty of such a crime."

Don Augustin produced a typed paper.

"I have here a release from you of all rights and interest to the crown in whole or in part," he said calmly. "You'll sign it."

"I will not." Warren reached for cigarettes and matches. Instantly, the two pistols were covering him, to be lowered as his intent became apparent. He lit a cigarette and smiled. "So what?"

"Allow me to correct you, Senor. You will sign it." Don Augustin eyed him for a moment. "There are ways, direct or indirect. The chair you occupy, for example, was made to be used in connection with the garrote."

Remembering his vision in the accursed cup, Warren swallowed hard.

"Perhaps," the other pursued, "you count upon the fact that Dona Ysleta has a claim on a portion of the crown. I have already arranged to eliminate her claims. In fact, she will be here shortly to witness your signature. And if you prove obdurate in the matter, we shall persuade you indirectly, through her, I trust it will not come to this,

for I have my heart upon this lady as my future wife, and it would be sad to have her beauty tarnished—”

Face white, Warren came half out of his chair. The pistol of Don Porfirio, the glittering eyes of the two brothers, halted him.

“To kill you would solve the problem, if you force us to it,” said Don Augustin. “At the same time, we prefer your signature.”

“You accursed dogs!” Warren’s Castilian, which is rich in epithets, entirely expressed his feelings. Don Augustin shrugged.

“Words break no bones, Senor. It is possible you underestimate me.”

That was precisely the fact, as Warren realized. He forced himself into calm and faced the issue, whose menace had grown upon him gradually, until now he perceived full strength.

Because he had twice checkmated the Beltrans, taking them off guard, he had indeed rated them too low. Now Don Augustin was in the saddle with a vengeance; aided by the “genius” of his brother, he had the crown itself—and his wealth was as nothing to the millions represented by its treasure. He held Dona Ysleta’s servants, either by bribery or fear, in his grip; he was sure of Dona Ysleta herself, as he now was of Warren. That the man would stop at nothing in the way of brutality, Warren already knew.

“Right; I did underestimate you,” he agreed. “On two occasions, as you’re no doubt aware, I spared your life. It was a mistake.”

“There’ll be no third time.”

“There’s always a third time.”

“Not now.” Don Augustin grinned wolfishly. He raised his pistol, and Warren noted that the safety catch was off. “Sit still. You’ve had warning enough. You refuse to

buy the crown at my price, or to sign this release?”

“Absolutely.”

“The collar, Porfirio.”

Don Augustin sat grimly intent, watching the American like a cat.

Putting his own pistol down on the table at one side, Don Porfirio busied himself behind the prisoner, fitting a heavy standard into supports on the back of the heavy chair.

Weighing his chances with a desperate clarity, Warren found them nil. One pressure of Don Augustin’s hand would squeeze out his life upon a bullet’s course, and gladly done. If necessary, they could do without his signature, provided he were past talking.

He paused hesitant, and his last possible chance to dare fate departed as the iron collar slid around his throat. He made a brief, startled movement, and desisted to a shrill cackle of mirth from behind him. Like a dog, he was bound by the neck to this heavy chair.

Relaxing in his seat, Don Augustin grinned and put aside his weapon.

“Porfirio, give the screw a turn or two,” he ordered, “and try the gut cord about his forehead. Not that it will change his mind, but it will look most convincing to Dona Ysleta. She should have been here before this, devil take her!”

Don Porfirio cackled afresh, and the collar of iron drew tight and constricting. It was evident that this torture play of the old Spanish viceroy had been employed ere now by the two brothers; Warren wondered what other helpless victims had sat in this chair and sated the sadistic nature of these men. Porfirio adjusted a cord of twisted gut about the American’s forehead and began to tighten it. Don Augustin spoke again.

“Let us move him out of this calm, good brother. Tell how you slipped into his room from the balcony, last night, and took

his loot. Tell him how you slipped into that of Dona Ysleta, and removed the emeralds from her trunk while she slept; and how pretty she looked in the white bed—”

Don Porfirio obeyed, with his malicious laugh, as he forced the cord tighter and tighter; and he added details, lies from a lurid imagination.

Then Dick Warren lost his control and fought furiously, like a madman, twisting and writhing, reaching for the man behind him, tearing at the iron collar and the cord circling his brain with fire. Useless; Don Porfirio was out of his reach. The iron circlet strangled him at each effort, until his eyes were bulging and his breath almost stopped. At the table, Don Augustin laughed heartily.

“Fight the leash, dog, fight the leash!” said he. Producing a cigar, he lit it and gestured his brother. “Easy there. His own pain isn’t going to make him give in; he’s not that kind. You’ll see him crumple quick enough at the first shriek from Dona Ysleta.”

Breathing hard, his neck bruised and sore, his head rimmed with agony, Warren gave up the useless, frantic effort and slumped down in the chair. A groan escaped him at the thought of how carelessly he had ignored the warning of Don Jaime. His eyes focused on the crown, glorious and serene in its majestic beauty, and an ache crept into his soul. Yes, he must sign, must give all this up forever, to save Ysleta from these two blackguards. Don Augustin was right. He would crumple.

“Our guest should have arrived before this,” said Don Augustin. “Porfirio, go out and see if you can learn anything. I told them to bring her straight here, but they may be waiting with her at the house. If not, leave word they’re to come here.”

Don Porfirio hummed a light, gay tune, went out and the door closed. Warren

straightened up a little and looked at Don Augustin.

“Very well,” he said. “The pot is yours. Keep her out of this and I’ll sign whatever you want.”

The heavy, beetling features of Don Augustin lighted up. His dark eyes glittered on Warren.

“Ah! You see reason, eh? Excellent. But I want her to witness your signature.”

“I will do that,” said a voice.

Don Augustin started, glanced around. There was no one else in the room. He gave Warren a sharp look, but Warren was equally startled.

“Eh? Did you speak?” demanded Don Augustin, and lifted his voice. “Porfirio! Was that one of your tricks? Bring her in quickly!”

“She is not coming,” replied the voice. Warren heard it, recognized it, his eyes wide and staring. The other man recognized it, also, and turned pale. Warren had last heard those deep and sombre tones amid smoke and flame. It was the vibrant bass of Don Pedro Benalkebir.

The door rattled. It came open a little way, swinging silently and stopping. No one was there. A gust of cool night air came in from outside. Furtively, Don Augustin crossed himself and then seized the pistol.

“Blast you, Porfirio!” he cried angrily. “Stop your nonsense! Come in here.”

“He is not coming. He is dead,” said the same voice. “I, Benalkebir, am here.”

“And I, too, am here,” added another voice, in the soft, dignified, stately accents of an old man. But it was one that Warren knew again, and Don Augustin as well. For it was Don Juan de Montillo, who had spoken; and he, like Benalkebir, was dead.

Don Augustin started to his feet, shoving back his chair with a rasp. His features were darkened by a rush of blood. His words rang out harshly.

“What is this? Who is it? Who’s playing tricks here?”

There was a soft, deep laugh which they both recognized. The peculiar laugh, the unctuous, affable tones of Don Jose Flores, who had died the previous night.

“Who? Why, Senor Don, the Confraternity of the Crown! This, I believe, is a meeting of the Order?”

It was uncanny: more, it was terrible. A ghostly step sounded at the empty doorway. Nothing happened. Silence deepened upon the room. Don Augustin, now pale as death, glanced about as though something touched his shoulder each instant.

“Ha!” It was the throaty bass of Don Pedro Benalkebir once more. “So, my good Augustin, you intend to steal the crown, do you?”

Warren sat strained, gaping blankly. He knew those voices, as did Don Augustin, who had known them all his life.

“You lie! You lie! It’s a trick—Porfirio, I’ll thrash you for this!” suddenly blazed out Don Augustin. “If—if you know the password, whoever you are—the password of the order—“

“No, Porfirio could not know the password. Only a member of the confraternity can know it,” said the gentle, courtly accents of old Don Juan de Montillo. But Don Juan was dead. “The word, Don Augustin is ‘Muy noble y muy leal,’ Most Noble and Most Loyal. I fear you do not deserve the sentiment, having been false to your oaths.”

**D**ON AUGUSTIN FELL BACK A STEP FROM the table, his eyes bulging. Again he crossed himself, stammering something; consternation and dismay and bewildered terror struggled in his face. Then he threw off his fears as a spasm of renewed fury seized him.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this!” he cried, as pistol in hand, he strode around the

table toward the half-open door, paused there for one instant, then quickened pace and was gone with a rush.

Warren glanced around, himself badly shaken by those voices. On the table was the pistol Don Porfirio had laid down, but it was well beyond his reach.

Suddenly came a rustle. He looked up with a start. A figure, cloaked and hatted, was sliding into the room. The door closed, the lock clicked. The figure straightened up and darted forward, and threw off the hat and cloak.

It was Don Jaime de Mondano and beside him was Ysleta, terrified, her eyes seeking Warren.

Don Jaime, now shaven and shorn, well dressed, deep dark eyes ablaze in his hollow features. He flung himself at Warren and with eager fingers began working at the cord and the collar, tumultuous eager speech on his lips.

“Thanks Heaven, my friend, I’m in time. Did you hear my little game? I’ve always had the gift of mimicry, and the voices of my friends I knew well. I have no weapon; I’ve had no chance to get one. I caught that accursed Porfirio outside and strangled him, but he had no weapon either—ah! There, you’re loose.”

The cord was gone, leaving a red weal. The collar came away. Warren was free, and came out of the chair with a bound. He rushed to embrace Ysleta. Tears were in her eyes. He managed a reassuring smile then faced Don Jaime.

“You! Then it was you who did that talking?”

“Through the crack of the door, yes. No time to lose now! He’ll be back.”

“There’s a pistol—“

As Warren spoke, Don Jaime saw the weapon of Porfirio lying on the table, and scooped it up with a sharp, exultant cry.

“Now we shall see—now! I was hiding among the trees by the gate, here,

waiting for them, waiting for my chance. I saw them bringing you.”

“The devil! What about you, Dona Ysleta?” cried Warren.

“They sent for me,” she gasped, “It was a ruse to trap us both. Luckily the servants fled as we neared the hacienda when they saw the flames bursting from El Viejo. So I left my horse and hurried here alone and found Don Jaime.”

Don Jaime laughed. “Aye, and the Beltrans little reckoned on me. But hurry, take the crown, take the crown, go! Both you and Dona Ysleta.”

The crown? Warren glanced at it, hesitated, looked at Don Jaime.

“Yes, take it,” said the latter. “Why not? The Confraternity of the Crown is no more.”

“But you? Aren’t you coming too?”

“I remain here.” Don Jaime fingered the pistol. “It’s thanks to these two devils that my daughter is dead. I’ve settled with one, now I shall pay the other. Take the crown, I tell you! Throw that cloak of mine over it. It is accursed; all Coyopan is accursed. Do you know that El Viejo has wakened from his sleep and is spouting smoke and flame? This is true as Dona Ysleta says. The end of the world, this night! Get off, get away before he comes back. Quickly!”

Warren chose not to argue. He caught up the cloak and flung it over the crown, then seizing Ysleta’s arm, moved to the door. Don Jaime patted his shoulder in farewell, shoved him hastily outside. The voice of Don Augustin was bawling profanely for his brother; apparently he was returning.

Striking aside with Ysleta into the gardens, Warren stumbled toward the driveway, his wild senses imagining the white face of the strangled Don Porfirio amid the bushes to right and left. He came at

last to the driveway and headed through the starry darkness for the gates.

It all seemed unreal, incredible, like some magic evocation. He was suddenly free, the crown was in his arms, Ysleta with him.

At the gates, with the road ahead and open, he halted; a hot breath checked him in mid-step. The air was shaken and whistling about him and hot, very hot. Something scarlet lay in the sky. As he looked, he heard a shot from the Hall of the Confraternity—then a second explosion. Those two shots told that Don Jaime had accomplished his furied intent.

But Warren’s gaze was gripped upon that blazing terror in the sky, where El Viejo had lifted white and serene at sunset. Now a red gash ripped open the heavens; the red flames widened and broadened in a lurid glare, and dimmed again behind smoke. The earth beneath him quivered. The air was filled with rumbling thunder that died away as the earth-shock passed.

Warren broke into a stumbling run, Ysleta at his side. They gained the tethered horses and dashed away.

**W**ITH SUNRISE, THE CARRIAGE OF DONA Ysleta was rolling out of Coyopan. Warren, at her side, looked up where El Viejo was smoking against the sky, the white cone blown off, the once hoary locks now wrapped in fire.

“Good thing I’m not superstitious,” he observed. “I might think that the Ancient One, yonder, was angry because the Crown of Coyopan was being taken away.”

“Don’t joke about it.” Dona Ysleta shivered a little. “It’s all too terrible! I can’t believe even now that we’ll reach the seacoast safely.”

“And Philadelphia?” Warren laughed softly. “Don’t worry. All danger’s gone, all’s clear now, my dear. Terrible? Not a bit of it. Beautiful! The terror lies behind us.

Remember how you told me, in the very beginning, that I was meddling with death and peril? And I laughed at it then. We've won through, we've got the treasure of the world within ourselves, and the emeralds of the Incas, to the blue sky on the horizon ahead!"

She smiled a little, and then leaned forward, watching him as he tore up pieces of paper.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, as he handed her the torn bits.

Warren's eyes twinkled.

"Do you mind tossing these to the winds, my dear? They're the notes for my great epic poem on Hernando de Soto! Which, thank heaven, will never be written."

*The End*