

## THE CROWN OF COYOPAN

By H. Bedford-Jones

*An Incan treasure. An old city tucked into the Andes, ruled by the heirs of the conquistadores. A secret society. Murderous plots. Can one man survive the intrigues to capture fortune in gold and emeralds?*

### CHAPTER III

#### THE WELL OF THE ANGELS

PUTTING ASIDE HIS CIGAR, DON PEDRO placed his elbows on the table. Leaning forward, he fastened his intent, hypnotic eyes upon the horrified and incredulous Dick Warren.

“Being a poet,” he observed gravely, “you’re sensible enough to realize that certain persons actually have power to read the minds of others. All the Benalkebir family could do it; it’s a heritage from the days of the Moors. My son, who was killed in your America of the north, could do it. I can do it. Even now, I get the dismayed and horrified thoughts of your brain.”

Warren forced a laugh. “It’s a good trick, Don Pedro! Still, it’s not hard to guess that someone just from Coyopan would be thinking of Dona Ysleta.”

“But not everyone would have a rendezvous with her at ten tomorrow morning, at the Well of the Angels.” Don Pedro smiled. “No, my friend! I knew from our first meeting that you were not a poet at all, but had come to Coyopan for a very different reason.”

The American sat absolutely speechless. It occurred to him that those flaming black eyes might have exerted some species of hypnotism; he pinched himself, covertly, to see if he were awake. He was. Don Pedro chuckled in his beard.

“Hypnotism? No, no, my friend! I’m not a master of the art. Come, your brain has told me many interesting things. Your business is not that of a poet, but of one who deals in jewels. You came to Coyopan

because you had heard that here were kept hidden away some of the marvelous emeralds that the conquistadores took from the Incas. And you were quite correct.”

Don Pedro paused. He was obviously enjoying Warren’s look of bewildered futility. For once in his life, indeed, Dick Warren faced an inexplicable enigma. Desperately he strove for some explanation, and found none. Every word that Don Pedro spoke made the thing more baffling; it eluded him, alarmed him horribly, sent a chill of terror coursing through him.

“A man from America of the north, a mere man of business,” went on Don Pedro with a gesture of disdain, “cannot understand that Coyopan is proud of the past, of its heritage, of its blood—proud, with an enormous pride! But so it is. You know the history of the Crown of Coyopan. You know that today it is in eight pieces, each kept by the owner; eight men, the Confraternity of the Crown. Or, more correctly, seven, since one is dead. You know that I belong to this confraternidad.”

A glimmer of hope shot athwart Warren’s friend! “I am going to prove my friendship for you. I shall show you the piece of the crown that is in my keeping. Eh? Would you like to see it?”

“Oh, of course, of course,” said Warren. “It’d be very good of you, Don Pedro.”

He relaxed, and tried to throw off his oppression, get back to normal. After all, he had done nothing amiss. He had not come to steal. There must be some hocus-pocus.

He settled back in his big chair, his hands on the highly carved arms, his fingers playing with the carven ends. Something clicked. Another click. He glanced down in astonishment, suddenly changed to dismay.

From the carven oak had emerged two iron hoops, circling each wrist and holding them firmly pinioned to the chair-arms. He looked up, to see Don Pedro's grin.

"Clever men, the old Viceroy! They took no chances. Nor do I take chances, my friend, with visitors from America of the north, where my son was killed." A brief contortion, a lightning flash, passed across his face. "He was shot down, for no reason, by police who were shooting at robbers and aimed badly."

Warren blinked, wrenching at his wrists, without result.

"A joke is a joke, Senor Don—"

"This, however, is no joke. Let us speak about the emeralds of the Incas, my friend; about the glorious section of the crown which I shall show you! It holds some of the finest, largest stones. And you will be the last living person to see it."

"I?" Warren was calm now. He knew, or feared, the worst; with a supreme effort, he gathered himself to meet it, forced his brain to be on the alert, choked down the fear that gripped him and resolved to fight for his life. He had no more illusions, under those words, and the burning flames of those eyes.

"Yes, you." Don Pedro spoke very calmly. "It will be destroyed; then you shall die. That fire, yonder, is laid to destroy it forever."

"You're mad!" cried the American. "Destroy those jewels, those historic treasures—"

"They are mine to destroy." Don Pedro actually smiled. "Your presence here shows what will happen; after you, will come others. My ancestor tore those

emeralds from the body of the Inca, Atahualpa. I will not permit them to be cheapened, to be bought and sold, those emeralds of the conquistadores!"

His voice deepened. "No, my friend. I am the last Benalkabir. With me perishes my part of the Crown of Coyopan, wrought in gold and emeralds over three hundred years ago! If I had the entire crown here, I would destroy it; but as it is, the destruction of my own portion will be enough. A Benalkebir won these stones, a Benalkebir sacrifices them in the flames. And I perceive, my friend, that you can understand my action."

Yes. Warren, for all his dismay and startled anger, did understand. A sudden comprehension of the man broke upon him, for he, too, loved such things. A man, agonized by sorrows, tormented by pride of blood and race.

"Listen, Don Pedro," he said quietly. "I understand. But I didn't come here to cheapen those stones. If I can get them, I'll give them to the world."

"You'll never get them!" Don Pedro lost his calm. "American huckster! You shall see them, yes, in order to know what they are, in order to see how insignificant you are alongside such glorious beauty. Then you shall see them destroyed in the fire yonder, and then you shall die. As my son died. I have sworn that the first American to come under this roof should meet the fate of my son. That honor is yours. Meantime, look at what you desire and shall never have!"

He leaned forward, tore the cover from the round silver dish, and shoved it under the startled gaze of Warren. The latter straightaway forgot peril, horror, every other emotion, as the wonder burst upon him.

He had previously seen a small section of the crown, and it had stupefied him. But that was almost nothing, beside this glorious frontal piece. Here was the

same exquisite carved gold, the emeralds, and the same chaste and limpid green matched by nothing on earth; but what stones they were!

The large central one, he guessed staringly, must be forty carats or more. His eyes roved about the piece as he counted—thirty or more, and other small ones at the bottom. To consider these stones in terms of dollars was impossible to one who felt as Dick Warren did about them; nonetheless, he subconsciously began to reckon, and his brain reeled. When the value leaps and doubles, carat by carat, one emerald of forty carats is enough to stagger any imagination.

“Do you—do you know what these stones are worth?” he muttered hoarsely, lifting his gaze to Don Pedro. “Do you realize that hundreds of thousands of dollars are here before you—”

“Is that all you can think of you contemptible American?” spat out the other haughtily. “I might have known it. Value!” Reaching out, Don Pedro touched the big stone. “My ancestor tore that from Atahualpa; and you talk of value.”

“No, no!” Suddenly Warren burst into speech, the veins in his temples swelling, a rush of blood coming to his head. “You can’t do this insane thing! You can mean what you say—it’s a crime! You haven’t the right to deprive the world of such beauty. Emeralds of such size and lustre are not mined any more. They’re unknown!”

“So! It moves you does it?” Don Pedro surveyed him with a gratified air. “You possess a cool soul, after all! Well, you shall see them destroyed. And then you shall die.”

Rising, he moved to the hearth, set a lighted match to the firewood, and returned to the table.

A groan burst from Warren, “No, no,” he cried, horror in his eyes, as Don Pedro seized the silver dish and started for

the fireplace, “you can’t destroy those glorious stones.” Don Pedro paused to transfix the American with his glittering gaze.

“What a Benalkebir won, a Benalkebir returns to the gods!” he exclaimed. “Of all my house, I and I alone remain; there is none other. I do what I will with what belongs to me. You shall see.”

Warren looked down at his wrists. To find the secret of those iron hoops was impossible but he saw even in his desperation that, centuries old, they were deeply pitted by rust.

Don Pedro was behind him now, at the fireplace. Warren paid no heed but strove with all his force to break his bands. The hoops bit into his flesh; but after all the iron was thin and soon the hoop on the right wrist gave a little. Careless of pain, Warren redoubled his effort until the right-hand hoop broke.

It still clung to his wrist, sunk into his flesh. Don Pedro, pausing at the fireplace, had not seen what was happening. Carefully Warren lifted his right hand into his lap, loosened the iron hoop free of his wrist, and hooked his fingers around it.

“There!” Don Pedro straightened up, with an explosive breath. “The funeral pyre of the crown is well laid! A trickle of melted silver and gold, and the spirit of the emeralds will go to join the spirits of the dead Incas, of the dead Benalkebir—”

Warren scarcely heard. His movement hidden by the sight of the chair, he got the broken hoop under that which imprisoned his left wrist, and tried to bend or break it; in vain. This time it was the oak that splintered. Possibly age-rotted, it suddenly let go; his left hand was free.

Warren slumped in the chair, weak and exhausted, unnerved, resting his hands on the carved arms again. Well that he did so, for it looked as though he were still held captive. Don Pedro came towering over him,

seized the chair-back, and jerked it partly around.

“Look!” he exclaimed. “Look at the funeral pyre; it is ready. You shall see the work done, before you die as my son died!”

Warren twisted his head around toward the fire. He saw glimmer of silver. The dish was there, with its precious contents.

Don Pedro uttered a harsh laugh. It changed suddenly into a wild, inarticulate cry of furious incredulity, His flaming eyes bulged. He was looking at Warren’s wrists.

As though on springs, Warren came up out of his chair, hand flashing to pocket. Too late! Before he could reach the rubber bulb with its ammonia-mixture that meant life and escape, he found himself gripped and shaken. In those huge, bony hands he was powerless. A roaring scream of rage escaped the gaunt giant. He lifted Warren like a child and flung him, hurled him through the air and at the wall.

With a crash and a wrenching cry, Warren struck with crushing impact. He felt the ancient paneling groan and rend and splinter, but behind it was solid stone. The breath was knocked out of him. He fell in a writhing heap and then lay still, blood on his face.

In a moment his eyes opened, but he was unable to speak or move. In front of him, a terrible thing was happening.

Don Pedro stood there clutching and clawing at himself, eyes distended and rolling, features contorted and purple, mouth open but soundless. He took a tottering step, reached out to a bell-cord and jerked it, took another step, then lost his balance and toppled over against the long table. It stayed his fall, but the candelabra beside him rocked and fell, the lighted candles sliding out and rolling across the floor.

A frightful cry burst from Warren. He scrambled to his feet—and from the fireplace came a terrific burst of smoke and

flame, a dull explosive road, and the whole room seemed filled with fire. Warren was knocked off his feet, and pain racked his whole body as he fell.

He came to one knee. Through the murky flame that was now licking at the ancient walls, figures moved. The two servants rushed in. Warren they ignored or failed to see. They caught Don Pedro and dragged him away; the door clanged shut again. Warren scarcely knew anything of what happened after that.

He was on his feet, and was beating frantically at the spouting flames. He found a chair-back in his hand—he must have splintered it. He had no memory at all of those moments, of what he did, of how he commanded his bruised body. When he came to his full senses, he wakened to find himself hammering uselessly at the closed door. It would not open. He was locked in.

Flames were everywhere, licking along the tinder-dry wood of the walls on all sides. Burned, blackened, overwhelmed by horror and stark fear, seared by the heat, Warren lifted a chair and with the strength of desperation smashed the nearest window and managed to crawl through to the open air.

For a moment he felt revived. He tried to go on but smoke was in his eyes and a dizzying weakness stormed over him. He staggered blindly away from the house, unable to tell where he was, tripped, fell and felt his senses leaving him.

**D**AYLIGHT WAKENED HIM; SUNLIGHT in the sky, and an excited babble of voices.

Memory flooded upon him. It was no evil dream, but reality, as his bruised and aching body testified. Stiffly, pain-wracked, he got to his feet. It was early morning, and he had lain amid a dense thicket of bushes, now all heat-seared. He emerged, to stand staring.

The house, now a blackened ruin, was still smoking. All about was a surging throng of men, mostly gente del pueblo. Indian-blood farmers and workers; a few whites. They must have come afoot and in saddle to the scene of the fire. Now they came crowding around him with wild, eager voices. Someone told who he was. Mira! An Americano. Don Pedro's guest and friend! They pressed food and drink upon him, and he accepted eagerly. A dash of water over his face washed the smoke out of his eyes and cleared his brain.

"Don Pedro? Where is he?" came his question. Looks were exchanged; those around crossed themselves in the swift intricate fashion of the country. One made answer.

"Dead, Senor, dead! His servants have taken him to the city. They got him out of the fire, but he never spoke again; he had been seized with a stroke."

A horse dashed up, foam-lathered. A man flung himself to earth and came shoving through the crowd, to seize Warren in a swift embrace, to clasp his hand, to utter loud praises to the saints. It was the ragged Don Jaime Mondano of the unkempt black beard, his thin, pallid features now in a fervent glow.

"Senor! I heard, I came," he broke out. "You, the savior of my daughter's life—"

He broke off, glanced around, and urged Warren out of the throng. A little apart, he spoke low-voiced.

"You should have told me you meant to come here," he said gravely. "I would have warned you. Don Pedro did not like Americans of the north."

"No, you're right about that." Warren laughed mirthlessly. He raised his voice for all to hear. "We were at dinner. He had a stroke, the candles were overturned—before I knew it, the house was afire. I barely got out alive, and fell unconscious."

He caught the arm of Mondano. "Thank God you're here! Help me out of this. My horse, in the stable."

Don Jaime hurried off. The stables with their red tile roofs, at some distance from the house, had escaped the fire.

In ten minutes the two men were riding down the drive together. It was barely eight o'clock.

"Where to, Senor?" asked Don Jaime. "Perhaps you will accept my invitation now, come and visit me? It is true that my poor house is unworthy of you—"

Warren's eye lit up. "Yes, yes!" he exclaimed. "First to the Well of the Angels. It is close by here. I'll bathe, clean up, rest a bit; at ten o'clock, Dona Ysleta de Soto is coming to meet me there. Afterwards, I'll be glad to go with you."

The other beamed. "Ah, praise God! That is good news, Senor. My daughter will be overjoyed to behold her rescuer again! To the Well of the Angels, then, and I'll keep all curious rascals away. There's no hurry."

THE WELL OF THE ANGELS WAS A pleasant, secluded spot. Water gushed down from the rocks above into a natural rocky pool, and from this filled a long stone trough at the roadside. Warren bathed luxuriously, got into the sorry remnants of his clothes, lit a cigarette, and reflected.

Don Pedro was dead. From the remarks of the crowd Warren knew there had been no leak; not even the two servants would know if anything amiss. The death was obviously accidental. There were no heirs. The lucky thing was that Don Pedro had died without talking. The other members of the Confraternity of the Crown would have no reason to suspect the American in their midst of designs on their emeralds. If they—

Warren leaped up. Two horses had arrived beyond the leafy screen; Dona

Ysleta and a servant, a groom. She exchanged a word with Don Jaime and Warren met her as she came into the covert. She was anxious, wide-eyed, and stopped short at the sight of him.

"Oh! You're safe, safe!" she exclaimed. "I came ahead of time. I heard of the fire, of Don Pedro's death—I was afraid."

"So was I," and Warren smiled whimsically. She searched his face.

"You're hurt?"

"Nothing that a few days won't cure. I'm going to visit my friend Don Jaime."

"Yes, I heard you had acted the knight errant to his pretty daughter."

Warren caught the touch of asperity in the words, and chuckled.

"Come, sit down," he said. "There's a lot I need to know. It's been hard to see you alone, hard to see you at all. Do you notice anything peculiar about this place?"

She glanced around, seated herself on a rock, shook her head at him.

"No. What?"

"It's transformed into Paradise by your presence."

Her little laugh died quickly. She leaned forward, gravely. Anxiety returned to her lovely features, to her blue eyes, to her voice.

"Don Ricardo, what about the section of the crown you took from Don Diego?"

"Keep it; it's yours by right," he rejoined.

"I dare not, I dare not!" she breathed. "You don't understand..."

Her voice died. Warren nodded.

"I do understand. You're going to have all the Crown of Coyopan. Somehow, I'm going to get it for you, Dona Ysleta."

"Don't be absurd, please," she said impatiently. "You must not have such thoughts. I fear it's not going to be safe here for you."

"I know it's not," he laughed shortly. "What I want most is to see you—not in a hurry, but at length. To know you. To get better acquainted with you."

He proffered cigarettes. She took one, and gave him a sidelong glance.

"That might happen," she said. "I'm going to visit friends in a few days at their hacienda; the Lores y Castro family, five miles down the valley. Dr. Lores studied medicine abroad. He does not bother about conventions; he's quite American. His mother was English. If you like, I'll ask him to invite you also. He has many house guests."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Warren. "I think I met Dr. Lores in the city once. A fine fellow. But I have a little present for you. Shut your eyes—tight! Hold out one hand."

Smiling, she puffed at her cigarette, removed it, closed her eyes. Her hand came out—a lovely, delicate hand, but strong-fingered. Warren bent over and kissed her palm.

"Hold on, now!" he added. "Don't move!"

He leaned over the pool and reached down into the water, not bothering to bare his arm. From the crystal depths he brought what he had deposited there for safekeeping and laid it dripping on her extended hand. She opened her eyes and a faint cry escaped her; then she sat silent, staring, transfixed.

She held the Benalkebir section of the Crown of Coyopan.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### THE CONFRATERNITY STRIKE

**F**LUSHED, INCREDULOUS, ECSTATIC, Dona Ysleta stared at the emeralds of the Incas, while Dick Warren recounted what had happened in the house of Benalkebir.

"When I woke up, I found that piece of the crown under my shirt," he concluded. "I must have rescued it from the flames, but

I just don't remember a thing. Anyway, here it is. There's no legal heir except the state, and the state be hanged! It's yours."

She looked up at him gravely.

"It's not; be sensible, Don Ricardo! You came here to find and obtain these precious emeralds of the crown. You rescued the first piece and returned it to me. Well, I don't want it; I don't want this. What good are they to me? None. It's ridiculous for me to possess a thing of such enormous value. No, no! I refuse absolutely."

"You refuse the most beautiful creation in the whole world of jewels?"

"Absolutely."

"Very well," said Warren. "At least take care of the pieces for me."

"Do you know the danger of possessing these things—here in Coyopan?"

He nodded. "I've no choice. You can keep them, hide them; I can't. Now, please give me some information. The eight parts of this crown. Two, we can rule out. Who are the remaining six?"

Dona Ysleta smiled at him, her slim fingers toying with the emeralds and chiseled gold of the glorious segment on her knee.

"First—you're going to visit Don Jaime Mondano for a few days, then come as a guest at the end of the week to the hacienda of Dr. Lores y Castro. Right?"

"I hope so." Warren's eyes twinkled. "If I get the invitation from Dr. Lores."

"You'll get it. Both those men belong to the Confraternity. So does Don Juan Montillo, whom you know—the old gentleman of Coyopan. No doubt you've met the other three as well; Don Jose Flores Huertado, Don Pablo Salazar, Don Augustin de Beltram."

Warren assented thoughtfully. His eyes were drawn to the gold and emeralds; they were drawn to the face of Dona Ysleta, and his heart followed them.

"To buy any part of the crown," she went on, "would be impossible; the mere offer would be an insult. Its very existence is kept secret. Its owners are all descendants of the conquistadores who won these emeralds from the Incas, remember. So am I, but as a mere despised woman, I can't belong to the confraternidad. Yet I warn you again—it's powerful, deadly powerful. Let your objective be suspected, and you'll feel its power. So will I. You've hidden your motives well. No one suspects you're not a mere wandering poet, come to visit the famous poets of Coyopan—and you'd better not arouse any suspicions. "Right," assented Warren. "Enough of that subject. Tell me about yourself. Shall you live out your life here in lonely Coyopan? It's beautiful, but it's afar from the whole world."

"What do you think?"

"Beautiful as it is, this is an atmosphere of decay and stagnation. You're alive, vibrant, with beauty and life. Still—where would you be happiest?"

"Does that matter?"

"To me, it matters tremendously," he said quietly. "Look. Behind me are years of work and study and hardship/ I've devoted myself to my profession—jewels. I've won my place in the front ranks of that profession. But I'm going to take time off from now on, so that I won't become a man hard, cold, wrapped in one idea, lost to all other things!"

"You could never be that," she said softly. Then, with a slight flush, she hurried on. "Yes; you've put your finger on it. Coyopan is stagnant with beauty. I came back here to settle my father's estate. When that's done, I'm returning—where? America perhaps. I like Philadelphia. I know people there, was at school there."

She rose abruptly. "I must go. And this?" she held up a segment of the gold and green jewels. "Shall I take care of this for you?"

"If you will."

Warren accompanied her from the trees to the waiting horse.

A handwave, a farewell, and she was gone. Warren turned to Don Jaime Mondano. "I am in your hands, Senor Don."

THEY RODE AWAY TOGETHER, ACROSS the smiling valley toward the foothills of the craggy peaks and the snowy crests of El Viejo, the volcano that towered into the sky. As they rose, Don Jaime drew rein suddenly and held up a listening hand. Warren caught the faint clatter of a distant bell and glanced back at the city. His guide smiled.

"That, Senor, is the Mondano bell of the Cathedral. At its casting, my ancestor poured fifty pounds of pure gold, that it might silence all others; one hears it five miles."

"You must love this marvelous country," commented Warren.

"Bah! I do not love it; I detest it. Here I must earn my bread; my daughter must do washing with the Indian women. I long for the day when I can leave this accursed spot, take Maria with me, give her the position in the world that is her due. And," he added darkly, "I shall do it very soon."

"Except for Maria, I'm alone in the world. For her sake—well, well, it will be very soon. Every day I am expecting a gentleman from Bogotá, a German merchant named Gutman, who will be the messenger of destiny. Then you shall see my little Maria bloom as the rose!"

Leaving behind the vast fields of tobacco the two turned off on a side road. Don Jaime pointed to the vista ahead and Warren exclaimed in delight as he saw pillars, a broken wall, an avenue of untended shade trees—all ending at a charming little old house of carved stone blocks beside a

torrential brook that curved about it under ancient trees.

"Yonder lies the old hacienda, Senor. This used to be the gardener's cottage; we are thankful to inhabit it now. Such as it is, it is yours, and everything in it."

"Everything?" said Warren, knowing he could trust Don Jaime. "Even to your portion of the Crown of Coyopan?"

"Even to that, Don Ricardo. You have only to speak."

Warren relaxed and smiled. "At least, I should like to see it."

The other assented, made a gesture of caution, and they dismounted as Maria came running from the house with a burst of eager greetings. Girl in years she might be, but as Warren had noted that day when he pulled her out of the stream, she was full woman in development, a lovely creature of faintly dusky beauty, with eyes like unfathomable pools, and a figure of bewitching beauty.

She was wearing an unusual gown made of glorious silk brocade, exquisitely figured and stained with age, evidently fashioned from some heirloom. Warren, stately as any don, bent over her fingers with grave courtesy and rolling Castilian compliments. Leaving the horses, Don Jaime walked to the house with his daughter and his guest.

"I am ashamed to bring you under so poor a roof," he said, putting real feeling into the customary phrase, as he waved his hand around. "Get wine and cakes, Maria. Has anyone been here?"

"Yes, just after you left," she replied. "Don Augustin de Beltran and his brother were here. They seemed annoyed that you were gone; they'll return in two or three days, as they're going to Coyopan on business."

"Beltran!" echoed Don Jaime. For one instant anxiety and alarm flashed across his bony features, then were gone. He went

out and put up the horses. Maria called after him.

"Farther! Did you find any letters? Did you hear from Bogotá?"

"There were no letters," Don Jaime made answer, in a despondent voice and went on.

Maria disappeared to return presently with wine and glasses and cakes. She set them down, glanced at Warren, and came impulsively to him with hands outstretched.

"Ah, Señor, I must thank you!" she exclaimed, flushing. "I am in your debt forever—"

"Then, suppose we become friends and lay aside formality!" Laughing, Warren disclaimed any heroism. "It was very simple to pull you out of the water like a bog fish, Maria. So you've rented your house in the city and have come here to stay, eh?"

"Yes, we rent that house often; it helps us to live," she said.

Don Jaime came in, told about the fire, stretched comfortably, and Warren was amused at the eager interest of Maria in hearing the story. When she had left them, Don Jaime spoke.

"You see, Señor, one reason why I'm anxious to get away from here, why I must take her afar. Here, one of these days she'll take a flame. She has a heart of gold, but a girl like that—eh?"

"Is she in love with anyone?" asked Warren.

"No, thanks to the saints!"

"Well, I owe you a good turn for the warning you brought me the other day," said Warren. "About Don Diego de Ribera. He's a sharp one; you saved me from a bad half-hour."

The bony features darkened. "He, and others, are not good men, my friend. I'm glad that I came in time. You recall the subject we mentioned on the way? Tomorrow we shall talk of it again; you

shall see what you desire to see. If you have rested, shall we take a look about?"

Don Jaime led the way to a path that brought them through an enormous doorway of carved stones. Bare, ruined walls rose roofless; for floor, was sold green turf, and about the ancient stones twined ivy and flowering vines.

"Everything is beautiful here, Don Jaime," cried his guest; "your daughter, your house, the entire place. What a fortunate man you are!"

"There are places where I would be happier, where Maria and I would be safer," said the other gloomily. "I have a distant cousin in New Orleans. Two days after the German comes from Bogotá we shall be gone. But what of your own plans?"

Warren shrugged. "They're vague. I'm expecting an invitation from Dr. Lores for the weekend; it should come here. If it comes, well and good; I'll get you to send to town and have my things taken to the Lores hacienda. Yes?"

"Of course, of course. A fine man, the good doctor!" exclaimed Don Jaime warmly. "But, mark you, not a lucky man. Oh, I know he was everything! A beautiful wife, tall sons, wealth, everything—except one thing. The most important. Above his head hangs a threat, like the sword of Damocles. Any day, any moment, that sword may fall, to destroy all that he has."

"What is it?" demanded Warren. The other shook his head.

"That is not for me to say. Come, it grows cool; we must return."

They left the roofless, ancient walls and went back to the cottage.

**W**HEN ON THE MORROW DON JAIME made no mention of the crown, Warren did not protest for he was a prisoner of enchantment, partly of the place, partly of the girl who had welcomed him as a friend.

He wandered about the place, gathering flowers with Maria, helping Don Jaime in the garden, loafing in the kitchen; and always the charming, vivacious personality of the girl grew upon him, with her startling combination of womanhood and childish perspective. Beneath her untrained, untutored frankness was a deep fund of laughter, of singing thoughts, of vivid enjoyment of life. It was like a touch of fairyland in which time drifted unobserved.

Then, with the next sunset, came two riders appareled in all the panoply of the country's riding costume, from white gloves to umbrellas. They were Don Diego de Ribera and Dr. Lores y Castro.

They alighted with great ceremony and many fine phrases, Don Diego thin and saturnine, Dr. Lores pink and chubby, a man in his forties. He had no professional manner. In fact, he wore an air of beaming simplicity, of open-hearted confidence in all the world.

"We heard you were here, we came to see you," said Don Diego warmly to Warren. "This terrible happening—ah, we have been worried about you, my friend! Greatly worried. I'm glad all is well with you. And your friends of Coyopan will be glad."

"It's most kind of you," said Warren. So far as he could see, Don Diego had no suspicion of his real activities here; that had been averted for once and for all.

They discussed the end of Don Pedro Benalkebir, of which Warren gave his own version. And presently Dr. Lores invited the American to his hacienda, a few miles down the valley. When? Any time, any time!

"There are always guests to my house, mine or my wife's," and the doctor laughed heartily as though it were a good joke. "Come the day after tomorrow, if you like. Friday. Come for Friday evening. There is to be a dance; Don Lois Moreno is

to be there from Quito. He is an artist, a musician—mira!" and the doctor blew a kiss to the ceiling. "You must meet him. He has set to music some of Don Diego's lovely poems. Yes, yes. You must be there Friday evening. No dinner until midnight—it is a fast day, you comprehend. Yes?"

So it was arranged. Warren mentioned that all his effects were at the little hotel in Coyopan, and as he would need clothes, the jolly Dr. Lores promised to have them taken out to the Hacienda del Sol in readiness for Warren's arrival. So, presently, the two departed, and Don Jaime stood for a while looking down the road after them, a queer expression on his bony features. Warren came to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Eh? One would say, Don Jaime, that you're worried about something."

The other turned. "I am, my friend, I am. Those men know you are here, and that you leave here Friday evening. And Gutman has not come from Bogotá."

Puzzled, Warren frowned. "What's to worry about in all this?"

"I'm not sure; but all the same it worries me," the other evaded. "Well, no matter, no matter! Tomorrow we shall look at my portion of the Crown of Coyopan. Now that Don Pedro is dead, and his section destroyed with his house, the Crown of Coyopan will never again be put together. And a lot I care!"

Don Jaime laughed shortly, savagely. He was gloomy that evening, and with early morning he had to depart—to Coyopan, for mail. It was nearly noon when he returned, and announced to Maria that there were no letters. The non-arrival of the German, Gutman, seemed to worry him acutely.

In the afternoon, Warren was summoned by his host to visit the ruined hacienda. The two, alone, strode down the path, stepped through the ancient doorway, and into that green lush enclosure with its

flowers and vines, to where gaped the opening of a huge fireplace. Not until he began to fumble with the stones did Warren sense his objective, and then thrilled suddenly to it.

A stone moved, came away. From the recess Don Jaime produced a box of scuffed and faded leather. This he put in Warren's hands.

"There. Look at it," he said simply, and lit a long cigar.

Warren's fingers shook a little as he opened the box and looked at the third segment of the crown to meet his eyes.

The same chiseled virgin gold, exquisite beyond belief. Emeralds of the same glorious virgin green, a limpid and peculiar green that flashed across the brain and left a sense of unutterable beauty. Tiny golden pins and hinges indicated that this segment fitted in with the several others of the eight into which the crown had been divided.

"Gutman's coming to buy it," Don Jaime said nonchalantly.

The words numbed Warren with an actual shock. It was impossible to credit that any member of the Confraternity of the Crown, the secret eight whose ancestors had guarded this imperishable jewel for centuries, should sell his birthright. Don Jaime read his look; and smiled thinly.

"Why not? It means nothing to me. Today, this heritage from the past is all I have left. Converted into money, it means wealth for my daughter, education, life in the great world—everything! Now that Don Pedro is dead and his portion of the crown destroyed, all the more reason why I should take the practical view of the matter. Legally, of course, it is mine to sell. My ancestor took those emeralds from the Incas. Today, they can give me and Maria a new future. So I saw Gutman in Bogotá, and he comes here to buy."

"It is, of course, a dangerous business," went on Don Jaime, after a pause. "The other members of the confraternity would go to any length to stop us. The crown is regarded as a sacred trust; its holders regard themselves above the law. When someone robbed Don Diego de Ribera of his portion, you fell under suspicion. I warned you. They no longer suspect you. But I am convinced you have some interest in the matter."

Warren found tongue, and cast aside all secrecy.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "Yes. I came to Coyopan to—to buy the crown if I could. It was impossible apparently. The portion taken by Don Diego belonged legally to Dona Ysleta; he took it because she, a woman, could not belong to the Confraternity. She was helpless, I robbed him and gave it back to her, secretly."

"You did well, my friend."

"If—if you want to sell this, sell it to me!" burst out Warren. "I'll pay you more than Gutman would; a fair price, so much per carat for the stones, to be weighed and appraised later—an advance in cash and check—a written agreement—"

"Ah, my friend, how sorry I am! But I gave Gutman my word; and it is more sacred to me than many oaths. I can disagree with him on price. I can give you particulars on these emeralds, the weight of every single one. I can agree with you upon a price, and if Gutman does not come up to it, can break off negotiations and sell to you. But I've promised him the first chance."

"Very well. Suppose we settle the details, you and I; and I'll have to await the outcome of Gutman's visit."

"Agreed."

"Tell me, what made you suspect that I had an interest in the crown, the very existence of which was a closely guarded secret?"

Don Jaime looked at him steadily.

“Months ago, I wrote my cousin in New Orleans asking where I could best sell. He gave me the name of your firm in Philadelphia. The name was Warren. When you came here, I remembered. It was very simple.”

Warren stared again at the emeralds. His heart hammered again; their limpid loveliness, the wonder of the chiseled gold, the glorious and historic beauty of the whole thing reached into him like some angelic face seen in a dream. Reluctantly, he closed the box. It was put away, the stone was replaced. The two men departed in silence.

Back in the cottage they sat down and figured. When it was done, Warren named a fair buying price. Don Jaime agreed in amazement at the sum offered; he had not anticipated a tenth of that amount. An agreement was written out and signed.

Warren had rescued from the fire only the clothes he stood in, but these contained his letter of credit, his cash, his checkbook. Little else, except the rubber bulb with its ammonia contents, unused, untouched, the nozzle protected by a clip against accidental emptying. He smiled to himself at the touch of it—no use now for this thing, so carefully planned in case a weapon were needed!

“I’ll write out the check for luck and leave it in the book,” he said smiling. “That, and sufficient cash to get you away. When will I know whether or not Gutman comes?”

“He is overdue,” said Don Jaime anxiously. “I’ll go to Coyopan in the morning once more to see if there is a letter. On that letter depends our future—Maria knows this, but does not know why. Well, I’ll give Gutman three more days. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Warren, and his heart leaped anew. Three days between him and the possession of the third segment! “You need worry no longer, Don Jaime.”

The other smiled. “My worry is not all about money. The two were here the

other day—Don Augustin de Beltran and his brother Don Porfirio. They are evil, those brethren; their lives are evil. They have murdered, burned, attacked women. They’re driven by twin devils of lust and cruelty. They’re above the law. Don Augustin belongs to the confraternity. His brother wants to marry Maria—less from love of her, than to become heir to my portion of the crown. I shall be glad to get her away from here quickly.”

“You mentioned some queer trouble, a sword over the head of Dr. Lores,” Warren observed. “Are you willing to tell me more?”

Don Jaime shook his head. “No. It is his intimate affair, not mine. I am no scandal monger. When a man like that does waken, he wakens terribly; some day there’ll be a tragedy at the Hacienda Del Sol. However, let us speak of more pleasant things—”

CAME THE MORNING OF FRIDAY. DON Jaime was gone on his errand to Coyopan. Warren went across the fields with Maria. As they were returning home, he mentioned the Beltran brethren, one of whom he had met in Coyopan, and jokingly teased Maria about Don Porfirio. She turned to him, all her lighthearted gaiety gone, and flashed forth in sudden fury.

“Don’t joke! For that rascal, the knife; and for his brother, Don Augustin, also. They wish to kill my father!”

“What?” Warren was taken aback. “Kill him? Surely you’re mistaken—”

“My father said so himself yesterday. Ah, if I had only known that when the two were here, the other day! But if they come again, I’ll know how to receive them. Say no more about those scoundrels, I beg of you.”

Warren complied, but remained thoughtful. Kill the father and marry the daughter. Or was Maria mistaken? It all seemed rather fantastic.

Don Jaime returned in time for lunch, with an empty-handed shrug. No word from Gutman. Warren's hopes and spirits began to rise.

That afternoon, following the customary siesta, the three of them went up the brook among the trees and loafed deliciously. Don Jaime took along an ancient concertina, Maria danced and sang. Warren pitched in with a comb and thin paper; it was a shamelessly childish afternoon, concluding with bread and cheese and wine and more laughter. They did not get back to the cottage until the sun had vanished, and the white locks of El Viejo were glowing scarlet and gold against the eastern sky.

"You must permit me to ride with you to the Hacienda del Sol," said Don Jaime.

"By no means!" cut in Warren hastily. "I don't like the idea of leaving Maria alone in the darkness. Besides I know the way." With hearty farewells ringing in his ears Warren turned out of the drive into the country road, and a quarter-mile farther on descried two horsemen approaching in the twilight, cloaked and hatted. They met and Warren recognized Don Augustin de Beltran; and the other he did not know. A courteous word of greeting, and they were past. Warren rose on, but presently reined in, looking back.

"The two brothers—going whither?" he thought uneasily. "No place they'd be going except to Don Jaime's house. Why, at this hour? Mm! If there's any basis to this talk of murder—hang it. I'm going back! That fellow Augustin has the face of a brute. He's capable of anything."

He turned his horse. Easy enough to say he had forgotten something; if trouble were brewing, his appearance might put a stop to it. And how had that precious pair known when he would be leaving? Was it possibly that their coming was timed to find

the American gone? In that case, it looked like collusion; the Confraternity of the Crown against Don Jaime.

Warren imagined that he heard a thin, shrill scream across the gather night. He quickened the pace of his horse. Back at the scene he had recently left, he tethered his steed and hurried toward the little house, dimly lit by a single lamp. Two horses stood at one side. The brethren were here!

He came to the cottage, heard no sound, glanced into the main room. A chair was overturned, the room was empty. Near the door, however, lay a torn piece of figured cloth. It had not been there when Warren departed. It was a piece ripped from Maria's dress.

He stepped outside, swung hastily into the path that went to the ruined hacienda, from which a dim light now shone. He stepped softly, quickly, aware of every turn in the path. Among the trees he heard voices, laughter, one angry oath in the voice of Don Jaime, and the thud of a blow. Then a glow of light greeted him, and he stepped into the ancient doorway and halted, a lantern lighting everything within those roofless walls. One glance, and he drew back a little into the darkness.

The lantern had been set in a niche by the huge old fireplace, just opposite him. Before it was Don Jaime, stooping a little, for his arms were twisted cruelly, behind his back and lashed together; his thin, bony features were pallid as death. Don Augustin stood beside him negligently holding an automatic pistol.

"You lie, Don Jaime, you lie!" he was saying, amiably, but his voice was denied by the massive brutality of his features, by his viciously glittering eyes. He broke off his glance at his brother. "Hold her tight, Porfirio! Don't let the cat loose."

"No danger." Porfirio laughed. Younger than the other, his features

betrayed a depravity that Don Augustin lacked. "A sweet little kitten she is, eh?"

The figure of Maria was revealed in the glow of the lantern as she fought with her enemy. Her richly brocaded gown was torn. Her eyes were blazing pools of hate. No sound came from her lips and Warren, restraining a wild impulse to rush to her aid even at the risk of certain death, realized she was putting forth all her strength to battle to the last with the sneering Porfirio.

Infuriated by the sight of her father, bound and helpless, she was struggling madly.

In her right hand was a stiletto with which she made frantic efforts to stab her annoy. Don Porfirio had seized her wrists and held her off with a malicious pleasure at her futile attempts to drive the blade home. He laughed as she strained to free her arms from his iron grasp. That laugh sent a shiver through Dick Warren.

Don Augustin, meantime, went on speaking to his own victim.

"Lies will not avail with us, Don Jaime. The confraternity knows all that you do, all that you plan, every secret of your brain! You've been looking for the coming of that German merchant, Gutman, from Bogotá. Well, he started from there, right enough, but on the road he encountered misfortune."

Don Porfirio snickered. "Not misfortune, brother!" he put in. "Say, rather, that he met with the long arm of the confraternity."

"You unholy devils!" gasped out Don Jaime, terror in his voice. "What do you mean? Where is Gutman?"

"He is dead," said Don Augustin sternly. "And your agreement with him, in your own handwriting, was found on his body."

Don Jaime caught his breath. Then he drew himself erect a little in his bonds, and his voice rang like an accusing clarion.

"Dead! Then you met him and murdered him, children of Satan!"

"Killed, might be a better word," Don Augustin rejoined placidly. "As in your own case, the word is execution, but first you shall reveal where you have hidden your portion of the crown of Coyopan. In the case of your charming daughter—"

He paused, suggestively, and flung his brother a glance. Don Porfirio laughed again. And again, at the man's laugh, Dick Warren felt a chill, a shiver of recoil and horror.

*To be continued...*