

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 V

DEATH IN THE DOORWAY

THERE WAS AN INSTANT OF SILENCE. The girl ceased her struggles. Don Jaime forced himself a little more erect, painful as the effort was, and glared at Don Augustin.

“You unspeakable dog!” he exclaimed. “Then you mean to murder me?”

“A harsh word for it,” said Don Augustin, “considering your crime. By order of the Confraternity of the Crown—”

“Your own orders, you liar!” spat out Don Jaime.

“—you are to die here and now, be buried here, be forgotten utterly,” the other calmly proceeded. “Porfirio! Bind the girl’s arms.”

The younger brother nodded. “Yes, with your help,” he replied. “I’ve got the little wildcat tight but I won’t want a stiletto in my heart.” Don Augustin, with a glance at the helpless Don Jaime, moved over to his brother’s side. Laying down his pistol he approached the girl, keeping a wary eye on the hand clutching the dagger and with a hoarse laugh ripped off a strip of her brocaded skirt and proceeded to bind her wrists.

“And now,” said Porfirio to the terrified Maria, “I’ll remove your little plaything,” and he gingerly pried the stiletto from her fingers.

“Put her in that chair,” said Don Augustin, picking up his pistol, “and read Don Jaime the decree of the Confraternity of the Crown. Show him the seal.”

The younger brother, forgetting the girl for the moment, produced a document from his pocket, opened it, and read it aloud.

“At a special convocation of the Confraternity of the Crown of Coyopan, it is hereby decreed that Don Jaime Mondano y Zelaya shall be removed from life, as a traitor to his oaths and an unworthy member of this Order. To be effective immediately.”

He flourished the paper, to show a large and ornate seal.

“You planned to sell the portion of the crown entrusted to your keeping,” went on Don Augustin accusingly. “You planned to flee with the money. Therefore, you shall die.”

A fierce cry burst from Don Jaime.

“It is mine to sell! My own property, won by my ancestors!”

“The confraternity holds otherwise,” said Don Augustin coldly.

“Liar! The confraternity knows nothing about this!”

Dick Warren drew back, glancing around in the darkness, helplessly. He had no weapon. He had nothing at all—ah! The little rubber bulb in his pocket! He got it out, freed its tube of the clip, and then paused. His heart sank. So absurd, so useless, against two men and automatics! Men who had come to kill, and worse. In view of such odds, his hand sank.

“Before you die,” went on Don Augustin, while the frantic girl stared, horror in her frightened eyes, “give up that portion of the crown that is in your keeping.”

“Never!” burst from Don Jaime, with a torrent of oaths. “Never! Murderers! You can’t find it, you’ll never have it!”

“In that case,” and the other laughed softly, “your daughter will not, I fear, profit greatly for your heroism. She will, to put it bluntly, disappear. You have talked, Don Jaime; you have talked here and in Bogotá. It is no great secret that you long to go far away from Coyopan. Well, you are going, very soon! And your daughter will follow you, not so soon, unless you hand over what we desire. We know it is kept somewhere in these ruins of the old hacienda. Hand it over; in which case, I give you my word of honor that your daughter shall be married to my brother at once. And the sooner, it seems to me,” he added with a glance and a laugh at Porfirio, “the better!”

The tormented man, sweat running down his straining features, staggered back with a groan against the stones of the fireplace.

At this instant Warren, frantically fumbling for a loose bit of stone that might serve as a weapon, dislodged a mass of broken fragments that clattered down. Don Augustin swung around, startled; his pistol lifted.

“What was that!” he exclaimed. “Porfirio! Go and see. Quickly! If some wandering Indian has come past. I’ll watch the girl.”

He caught the bound wrists of Maria, and the younger man, whipping out his pistol, went with a leap toward the ancient doorway.

As he came under the portals, a startled oath burst from him, an agonizing scream. A tiny jet of fluid had struck him squarely in the eyes. He halted, staggered; the pistol escaped his fingers and was gone, as he clawed at his face with both hands.

Calmly, deliberately, Warren swung for the angle of the jaw, and his fist hammered the blow home. His cry checked

midway, Porfirio dropped like a shot. Warren drew back; the little bulb was empty.

“Who is it? Porfirio! What is it?” cried Don Augustin in alarm. With an oath, he loosed hold of the girl and sprang toward the opening.

Warren waited, invisible in the shadows. His ammonia mixture was exhausted; he was now unarmed, and desperate. He stooped, scraping up a handful of earth. As the heavy figure plunged toward him, he came erect and shot the dirt straight in beneath the wide hat brim.

Don Augustin reared backward like a startled horse, blinded and gasping. His pistol vomited flame. Warren, darting to one side, felt the hot breath of the bullet. Don Augustin fired again, aimlessly; the ball struck the stones and ricocheted into the night. Then, from one side, Warren struck his under-arm sharply. The pistol fell. Warren struck for the solar plexus with his full weight.

No luck here. Don Augustin fought back with brutal strength, whipping out a long knife, and slashing the air, frantically but wildly. Warren tripped over a lump of stone. He stooped, caught it up and hurled it. Struck full above the eyes, Don Augustin staggered and collapsed.

Panting, Warren scooped up the knife and ran to the bewildered Don Jaime. He slashed at his bonds and freed his arms.

“Quick! Take the lantern, get the two of them tied up! Quick! I’ll look after Maria. Move fast!”

Don Jaime seized the light and scuttled away, but not far. On the belt of Don Porfirio hung the coiled reata without which no local horseman would stir, although there was absolutely no need for it. He seized this and went to work.

Warren freed the girl’s arms from the binding strip, and for a moment held her as she sobbed against him like a child. He

caught up the fallen cloak of Don Porfirio and draped it about her shoulders. With a comforting hug, he kissed her forehead.

“All safe now, amiguita,” he exclaimed cheerfully. Don Jaime came close, thrusting the lantern at him and staring.

“A miracle! It is you indeed! Where is your weapon? How did you do it?”

“Ah, that reminds me. Give me the light.” Taking it, Warren went back to the opening and found the pistol Don Porfirio had dropped. He pocketed it. “Now I feel safer. You take the other one. No time to lose. You must travel fast. Are you able?”

The two of them stood gaping at him.

“Travel? But where?” exclaimed Don Jaime, with a helpless gesture. “I’ve nowhere to go. What do you mean?”

A chuckle escaped Warren. He produced his checkbook, and felt in his pockets for cash he had on hand.

“It seems quite plain to me, Don Jaime. Gutman is dead; therefore, you’re released from your bargain with him, and your agreement with me holds good. You have the signed paper. Here is what money I have, and the check for the balance. Give me the emeralds, now, immediately. Leave these two rascals here, bound, unconscious. Take their horses for yourself and Maria, and be on your way in ten minutes. Why not?”

“Ah! Ah! Valgame de Dios—why not. Indeed!” Suddenly comprehending, Don Jaime voiced his joy in a torrent of eager words. He seized Warren’s hand and wrung it, embracing him and went stumbling toward the ancient fireplace where the section of the crown was hidden. There he fell to work at the secret opening.

Maria, however, went to the bound figure of Don Augustin. Looped to his bound wrist was the long-braided quirt that was part of every horseman in the country.

She stooped, and, with a slash of her recovered stiletto freed the quirt, caught it up, and stood erect.

Warren was startled by sight of her face, of her stormy, clouded eyes as she looked down at the unconscious figure. He turned to her quickly.

“Going to use that whip on him, eh? Not a bad idea at all, my dear,” he said cheerfully. “In fact, both of them deserve a sound hiding, and then some. You have my entire permission to go the limit.”

For a moment she looked him in the eyes; then, suddenly, she flung down the quirt.

“No. Scoundrel or not, I don’t care to punish helpless people,” she said with strange pathetic dignity. She reached out and took his hand, and hesitated. Her face changed; she spoke softly, tenderly.

“We shall not meet again, Don Ricardo. I’m sorry, for it has been nice to know you; it has been more than nice. You have shown me how straight of heart and eye a man can be.”

Warren, profoundly moved by something in her words, lifted her fingers to his lip and smiled.

“That, Senorita, is the greatest compliment of my life. I thank you. But why do you say we’ll not meet again? That, I trust, is not true. I hope to meet both you and your father again many times, far from here. You and he deserve kindly of the world. All will now be safe for you, with the security of money—”

“No, no,” she broke in gently. “I feel it in my heart. We part now and we shall never meet again; it hurts me, this feeling. I should so like to know you all my life. Yet something tells me it cannot be.”

“Nonsense!” Warren patted her hand. Then, swiftly, he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, and smiled. “My dear, go with God! Tomorrow with the sunlight all your gloom will vanish and the world

will be new and glorious once more, and we'll meet in New Orleans. It's a promise!"

She shook her head a little, then moved away, walking across to the opening and there vanishing from sight.

Don Jaime, who had been watching them from one side, moved forward, chuckling.

"I'd not have blamed her if she had used the quirt," he observed. "But she is of the old hidalgo blood, that girl. I should have killed those two blackguards. Better you should kill them. If you don't, they'll make trouble for you. What do you say? Shall we share the job?"

Warren shook his head.

"I'm afraid, Don Jaime, all three of us are unable to play the game of safety first, as it should be played around here. You're not a murderer, nor am I. Besides, they'll have no idea who came; they won't know how I intervened. It'll be an inexplicable mystery. They did not see me at all, remember. I'd suggest that, as you ride out of the valley, you send some Indian here to release them before morning."

"The devil will look after them," and Don Jaime shrugged. He extended the old scuffed-leather box. "Here is my portion of the crown, my friend."

Warren tore the check, already written, from his book and passed it over.

"And here's what money I have," he said. "Is it enough?"

"Enough and more," rejoiced the other gravely. "Henceforth, I have only one thing to live for, one thing for which I care—the little Maria. My life belongs to her. My gratitude belongs to you, always."

Warren opened the box, took one look at the greenish glitter within, and nodded.

"All set, then. Get away as fast on the jump!" he advised. "And good luck go with you."

"Vaya con Dios, Senor," rejoined the other, as they struck hands for the last time. "And don't be late for the dance at the house of Dr. Lores!"

Five minutes later Dick Warren was again cantering down the drive toward the highway. The third section of the crown was won.

CHAPTER VI

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

COYOPAN OCCUPIED A "DEAD SPOT" among the Andes, and radio reception was almost nil. Dr. Lores y Castro was one of the few progressives who cared to have a radio anyway; and at the Hacienda del Sol he had a good one. This evening it was bringing in dance music from Rio and Havana for his guests.

Essentially a modern, thanks to his education abroad, Dr. Lores adhered to none of the stately Spanish formality. His guests did as they pleased. To most of Coyopan the ease of manners at his hacienda seemed scandalous, but to Dick Warren it was a relief from the ritual ceremony that obtained in Coyopan. It was, in fact, like a house party at home. Warren was one of the few in evening attire, everything was informal.

By the time he had arrived, bathed and changed, the dance was in full swing. The affable Dr. Lores introduced him here and there. He encountered two or three men whom he had met in Coyopan. He danced dutifully with Senora Lores, a slim, vivaciously magnetic woman of forty, who practiced her extremely poor English on him with a definitely flirtatious air; he was introduced to her two sons, awkward youths of fourteen and sixteen. Then, free at last, he penetrated the group surrounding Dona Ysleta and swung out with her on the polished floor of the ballroom.

"Good thing ghosts don't linger!" she said, laughing, her blue eyes like stars.

“How scandalized the old caballeros would be to see such informality in this room! Well, my friend, you look cheerful and radiant. Did you have a nice visit with Don Jaime Mondano and his very pretty daughter?”

Warren nodded. “Yes. By this time they’re riding hard for Bogotá and points north. By the way, please mention here and there having encountered me an hour or so ago. It might be highly important.”

Her gaze searched him. “But I didn’t! I thought you just arrived. You surely would not want me to tell an untruth?”

He caught the dancing mockery in her eyes, and laughed.

“It would be a lie in a good cause. Where do we go to be alone?”

“We don’t. At least, not until Don Luis Moreno begins his dance, he’s famous as a dancer. Then you might possibly find me on the patio. Are you serious about wanting me to tell a lie?”

He smiled. To be with her, to hold her in his arms, was an intoxication; the fragrance of her hair, the perfection of her loveliness, the intimacy and friendliness of her eyes, went to his head like old wine.

“Absolutely!”

“Then consider it done. What’s your riddle about Don Jaime going to Bogotá?”

“Just that. The answer is life or death.”

She looked at him sharply, a startled question in her eyes. He ignored it, deftly swung her through an opening, avoided collision with Senora Lores and a handsome partner and glanced after the latter swiftly.

“That chap with our hostess—my idea of a real conquistador!” he said. “Who is he?”

Dona Ysleta followed his eyes. “Oh! Don Luis Moreno, from Quito.”

Warren’s eyes lifted. This lean, wiry man of thirty, with his exquisite evening

attire, the long, hard jaw, the feline grace of a jaguar—yes, the fellow might be a dancer after all. He looked more like a soldier, and one capable of giving and taking hard knocks. Dona Ysleta, reading Warren’s expression, laughed softly.

“Your idea may not be so far amiss, at that! But isn’t Dr. Lores a dear?”

“A pleasant, chubby cherub, yes. Seems to have been drinking a bit. He doesn’t look like one of the confraternity by a good deal—”

Her grasp tightened. Alarm leaped across her face.

“For the love of two saints, be careful! Don’t utter that word—never, never!”

“Oh, all right, all right!” said Warren, with a grimace, as the dance ended. “How long shall you be staying here? When does the party break up?”

“Until Sunday afternoon, after an early supper—tea, Dr. Lores calls it. High tea. English fashion.”

Warren surrendered her to an eager claimant and drifted, circulating aimlessly, his eye on Don Luis Moreno. Somehow, this startlingly handsome man had an elusive familiar look, and in his mind Warren did not connect it with South America either. He even met the Quitano; Don Luis spoke no English, but his French had a charming purity of Touraine, and he himself was winning, merry, pleasant in the extreme. Still Warren was puzzled. He could have sworn that somewhere he had met this man, but probably he was wrong.

Presently Dr. Lores, finished with his libations, choked off the radio and made a florid speech anent the gracious consent of Don Luis to perform some of his famous dances. A half-Indian guitarist whom the visitor had brought with him, sauntered forward and as the floor was cleared, strummed his guitar and sang a song in the peculiar whining drawl of Quito, which set

everyone to laughing. Warren slipped out without waiting to see the dance begin. There was something peculiar about this whole place; it worried him.

The patio, set in the center of the rambling building as in the houses of Coyopan, was long and peaceful, redolent of flowers and ferns arranged in profusion, softly murmuring with the tinkling splash of a central fountain, Moorish style. Light came from ancient swinging lamps beneath the side arches, and Warren could have imagined himself in some sweetly hidden court of Fez, or of the Alhambra in olden days.

The cushioned seats, the flowered corners and nooks, were all empty now; everyone had gathered to watch the dancing. Near the central fountain Warren found Dona Ysleta, who welcomed him with a smile and an extended hand. He stooped above it, lips to fingers.

“What! An American, too?” she jeered lightly. “When I went to school in Philadelphia, Americans never kissed the hands of ladies!”

“Only when one desires the kiss to be eternal,” said Warren, so gravely that her smile died out. “Tell me, please, I feel a queer sense of strain here, as though something tremendous were going on beneath the surface. I don’t understand it. Don Jaime said that Dr. Lores was facing some sort of catastrophe—a sword of Damocles hanging over his head—but refused to explain. Something about an awakening. What does it mean?”

“Oh!” she breathed, with a catch of the breath. “Oh! Well, it is one of those things—I hardly know how to explain. Rumor, gossip? No, more than that. If you want the answer, go in and look at the face of Senora Lores while she watches Don Luis Moreno dance.”

Warren pursed his lips. “I get it. So that’s it, is it? And the cheerful cherub

hasn’t waked up to what’s going on? Family, too. Looks bad for somebody.”

“Don’t—don’t joke about it,” she said, her voice hesitant. “It’s a terrible thing, a tragedy—”

“And Coyopan is sitting around waiting for the explosion,” Warren cut in. “Society is the same the world over. What’s the background of this Moreno? We seem to have met somewhere, though he doesn’t know it, and I don’t know where or when.”

“Oh, he’s from one of the old Quitado families,” Dona Ysleta rejoined. “He studied law at the Sorbonne, lived in Europe for some years, and is very artistic. He could make a fortune dancing as a professional, but of course he wouldn’t do that.”

Warren nodded. She went on swiftly, appealingly.

“What about Don Jaime? What has happened?”

“Well, several things. I suppose you know the Beltran brothers?”

Even in the uncertain light, he could see her slight flush, her startled eyes.

“Yes. Don Augustin is—well, it’s because of him that I’m daring all the gossips in Coyopan and making a complete change there.” Her head lifted. “You see, I’ve been hemmed in and surrounded by relatives, and forced to follow the old customs. Now all that’s being altered. I’m clearing them all out, except for the family servants. I’m living my own life in my own way—just as these people here are doing. Coyopan won’t like that, but it doesn’t matter what Coyopan likes. I’m going away as soon as my affairs are straightened out and my father’s estate settled.”

Warren nodded, his eyes aglow with delight.

“Yes. We’re going together, you and I—part way, anyway! Well, your plans have something to do with Don Augustin!”

“Oh! I forgot. Yes, of course. Some of my relatives brought a proposal of marriage from him—cautious, formal, all the old routine. I’m sick of all that! I’ve ended it once and for all.”

At her flashing eyes, her rebellious words, her air of angry resentment, he reached forward, took her hand and solemnly shook it.

“Young lady, it’s unanimous; we don’t like the Beltran brothers and company. By the way, I have something here for you.”

“Wait! You haven’t told me yet what happened!” she exclaimed.

“It won’t matter.” With a glance, Warren opened his waistcoat, turned his back to her, and swung around again. In his hand was a carved, flat object, wrapped in a bit of silk; it had been hidden beneath his shirt. “This is all that’s necessary to know,” he added. “Take it away.”

Bewildered, perplexed, she took it from him, turned back a corner of the silk, and uttered a stifled cry. She shrank back.

“Oh! How did you—what did—”

“All honest and aboveboard,” Warren broke in upon her agitation. “Don Jaime wanted to sell out and get out. The confraternity found out what he was going to sell this portion of the crown to a German from Bogotá. They killed the German and came to give him the same dose. Instead, he sold out to me and skipped with his daughter for parts unknown, and there you are. Everything quite simple,” and he concluded with an airy wave of the hand.

She stared at him, eyes distended.

“But—but Don Augustin—”

“Oh, he and his brother were the messengers of destiny; they changed their minds.” Warren chuckled. “No, they didn’t get a glimpse of me. Everything’s jake, as the saying goes. Hadn’t you better get that thing out of sight?”

She started. “Oh, I—I’m furious! Why must you give this to me to keep—”

“Want to go back on your bargain with me?”

“No! Of course not. But here, tonight, with this crowd—”

“Safest possible place,” said Warren coolly, “for you to hide it. Sometime tomorrow, I expect they’ll come tracking me to see if possibly I had a hand in the game after all. That’s why I wanted you to plant the alibi—”

“I did it. Goodbye.” She turned and moved away hastily. “I’ll have to take care of this. And until we go riding tomorrow morning, don’t come near me. Promise?”

Warren bowed in assent as she hurried away.

Relieved of his far too precious burden, confident that it was now safe, he made his way back to the ballroom. He was in time to witness the last dance of Don Luis Moreno, to the accompaniment of the guitar—a stirring dance, vibrant with life and verve, a perfect miracle of grace and skill. And, looking at his hostess, Warren read in her face all that should not have been there. When Moreno finished, with a salute to her, Dr. Lores led the outburst of applause, pinkly and chubbily oblivious to anything beneath the surface.

“And,” thought Warren with a shake of the head, “he’s the kind of guy who wakes up hard when he does wake. Sword of Damocles was right! He’s got everything in the world, and he’ll lose it all when the crash comes, just as Don Jaime said. Poor devil!”

That the threatened crash might have anything to do with his own ambitions did not occur to him at all. What did occur to him was that Dr. Lores, for all his chubby affability, was a member of the Confraternity of the Crown—and must have been at the recent meeting that doomed Don Jaime to be murdered.

A sobering thought. Behind this careless, superficial exterior, behind those

pink cheeks, was the spirit of the conquistador. Dr. Lores had sprung from one of those bloody-handed, iron-hearted who had looted an empire and drowned it to death for the sake of gold and gems. The very gems somewhere in this house, emeralds of the Incas! Yes, it was a thought to chew upon. And Don Luis Moreno, grimly reflected Warren, might well be chewing upon it.

A love affair? Difficult to believe, so far as Moreno was concerned; he was the type to be pursued by women, rather than to pursue. He was not the sort of man to fall into an impetuous love affair with a married woman—this married woman, at least, beautiful as she was but no longer the flash of youth.

Warren danced again with her, appraised her carefully, and was the more puzzled. Mentally, she was a lightweight, disposed to flirt with everyone. Certainly, Moreno was not attracted to her, he could not be! He must know the peril. Then—why?

IF THERE WAS NOTHING TO EAT UNTIL midnight, there was plenty to drink. Avoiding Dona Ysleta, for he fully recognized the necessity of caution, Warren strolled into the library and glanced around with interest. It was a large room, heavily walled with books; on the two tables were magazines from America, England, France; enormous overstuffed chairs stood about, and a large flat-topped desk near the window looked quite like New York. The whole house, which was very old, had been modernized regardless of expense. Like so many of the gentlemen of Coyopan, the good doctor had wealth, but unlike so many, he knew what to do with it. A lovely family, deft servants, friends and position—yes, Dr. Lores had everything. Even a Sword of Damocles.

Warren found himself growing more and more curious about this odd love affair. He understood now the feeling of tense, strained suspense in the air, but the cause was more inexplicable than the effect.

Later, Warren strolled out into the patio for a breath of fresh air and a cigarette under the stars. He was in the act of striking a match, when he froze abruptly. A voice came from behind a tall group of oleanders, in rapid, incisive French.

“Tomorrow at one-thirty in the library. It’s the siesta hour, no one should be about. Time your play for one forty-five precisely.”

“Entendu, m’sieu,” was the response.

“And keep away from me until then!” rasped the first voice, that of Don Luis Moreno. “Sing, play, amuse the guests—but keep away from me!”

Warren stepped back into a doorway and struck his match. In a moment the guitar-player appeared, passed him with nonchalant words of greeting, and vanished. Don Luis strolled about the patio until midnight sounded.

The supper that followed was a lavish one, with champagne flowing freely. Warren was accompanied by two of Coyopan’s major poets, Don Jose Flores and Don Pablo Salazar, both of whom he knew to be members of the Confraternity of the Crown; there was much talk of poetry and of his own epic on the life of Hernando de Soto.

The champagne bubbled and chubby Dr. Lores made a speech about his pet ambition, a hospital in Coyopan to serve the poor Indians, for which he had set aside part of his fortune. Another fifty thousand dollars, gold, was needed, and far away as the moon. He was moved to tears, amid the general merriment. Where the poor Indians were concerned, the people of Coyopan were of a mind with their ancestors, the conquistadores, who believed in letting the

Indians shift for themselves as best they could. Dr. Lores was laughed into silence.

One-thirty tomorrow, in the library. Warren, looking at the vivacious Don Luis, wondered what the devil was going to happen then. How did the guitarist from Quito, who spoke such fluent French, come into the picture, and why? And who else?

"Well, it's none of my business," he thought later, as he tumbled into bed. "It's been a great day. Tomorrow I'd better step warily. It's almost certain the Beltran brothers will want to find out whether I had a hand in what happened to them early this evening. No longer ago than that? It seems days ago!"

He was asleep almost as soon as he touched the pillow.

WITH MORNING, NO ONE WAS ABOUT very early. Warren breakfasted, met Dona Ysleta and with her adjourned to the tennis courts, agreeing to put off their ride until after the siesta. The second court, soon after, was occupied by Dr. Lores and Don Luis Moreno.

For a woman to play tennis, and play as well as Dona Ysleta, was a decided innovation in Coyopan. As they played, the guitarist strolled up and sat, watching and strumming his instrument lightly. His swarthy features were framed in long sideburns, Spanish style. A set ended, and Warren flung him a laughing word.

"Ha, Senor Quitano! Suppose you sing the Toreador song and hearten me to win a victory over this stubborn lady!"

To his astonishment, the guitarist assented as a matter of course and struck into the air from "Carmen." Warren made no comment at the moment, but, instantly the set was finished, laid aside his racquet.

"Come into the patio before we dress for lunch," he exclaimed. Dona Ysleta gave him a curious glance and then accompanied him; beside the fountain she stretched out in

a long cane chair, accepted a cigarette, and eyed him again.

"You seem excited over something!"

"I am," declared Warren. He feverishly snatched out pencil and paper, flung himself down beside her, and began to sketch rapidly. "I'm not sure yet, but it's coming. I'm getting it!"

"Getting what?" she asked in amusement.

"Where I've seen Don Luis before." He gave her an eager glance. "That fellow with guitar—he's not from Quito! He's not a Spaniard at all! Did you notice him when he sang the Toreador Song?"

"Nothing unusual," she rejoined.

"Why, confound it! Any Spaniard hates it. Any bullfight fan hates it. Any matador goes into a fury over it! Bizet used the word 'toreador' in his music, yes, but invented his own meaning for it—here, here! By thunder, I'm getting it."

Under his pencil grew the face of the guitarist, minus its Spanish sideburns. He suddenly dropped it as though stung. The answer had flashed into his brain at last.

The curb market for jewels in Paris, the cafe where numerous deals in all sorts of gems were put through, a rendezvous for criminals, crooks, honest dealers alike. Another spot in Paris—a courtroom. A notorious gem swindler and maker of imitation stones—

"I have it," said Warren quietly. "The guitar player is Duprez, a rascal who drew a long sentence for selling fraudulent stones as real; he escaped soon after and was never apprehended. His lawyer—Don Luis Moreno. You said he studied law at the Sorbonne? Well, there you have it."

Her brows lifted. "So what?"

"I don't know; tell you later. At three we go riding. Maybe I'll know more by then." With a laugh, Warren flung the subject aside. But in his brain now burned with new meaning the words:

One-thirty—in the library!

THE EARLY LUNCHEON WAS WELL attended. In the midst, a servant entered and spoke softly to Dr. Lores, who rose and excused himself. He turned to the two others of the confraternity who were present.

“Don Jose, Don Pablo, will you join me for a few minutes in the library? The ladies will excuse us, I am sure. Someone has arrived—a trifle of news.”

The three departed. Warren understood perfectly that Don Augustin de Beltran had arrived to check up on him, and perhaps to get certain hurts tended by the physician. When Don Jose Flores and Don Pablo Salazar returned, they seemed pre-occupied, and sour in the eye. Warren, alert, did not miss the glances they shot at him, which confirmed his conjecture. More confirmation came when, upon going to his room, he found that it had been carefully but thoroughly searched. He grinned amusedly.

“Nothing found; cleared of suspicion. Good! Now, what’s to happen at one-thirty? We have one certain criminal, and another man who’s probably of the same stripe—”

At one-thirty, with the whole downstairs deserted even by the servants, who also observed the hour of siesta, Warren stepped into the library.

A glance around, and he swung one of the huge over-stuffed chairs with its back to the room, so it faced the windows. He settled into it and relaxed, waiting. If his presence were discovered, no harm done. It was almost certain, however, that no one would suspect the chair to be occupied. He had no compunction whatever in regard to eavesdropping, knowing with what type of person he was dealing.

He reflected cheerfully that the Confraternity of the Crown had fallen upon evil days; never again would the Crown of

Coyopan be assembled by them. One portion they believed destroyed. Another had vanished with some unknown thief. Don Jaime had fled afar; they must believe he had taken his segment with him, and while the confraternity might be omnipotent here, its powers could not reach out into the world.

“Three out of eight segments safely stowed away,” thought Warren. “Somewhere in this house, no doubt, Dr. Lores keeps his own—”

His thoughts faltered abruptly. Someone had entered the room behind him. A swift step, a rustle, then another step and a low cry in the voice of Senora Lores.

“Ah! My dear, my dear. I’m afraid! If anyone should see—”

“Nonsense!” Don Luis Moreno spoke coolly, laughed a little, stooped to kiss the woman who clung to him. “Come; keep your promise, my little heart!”

“But you know what it looks like!” she rejoined, fearful. “I sent you the photographs six months ago.”

“Photographs! I want to see the actual emeralds.”

Warren started. Emeralds! He felt the force, exultant thrill of that voice; he could sympathize with Don Luis. Overborne, the woman assented weakly.

“Yes, yes, very well. He is not here. He went to Coyopan with Don Augustin de Beltran right after luncheon. It is safe enough. I know how to get at them. No one ever looks at them; they’ve not been out of the safe for years. Come.”

“Wait!” The voice of Moreno was hoarse. “Beltran, did you say? He wasn’t here!”

“Yes, an hour ago. Why, do you know him?”

“Yes; may the saints blast his black heart!” rasped our Moreno. “Well, no matter. Where are the stones? Where do you keep that part of the crown?”

"Here. In a safe in the wall, behind the books."

Warren sat tense, every nerve strained. Did the man dare try robbery? Was this his aim in making love to the Senora? Conjecture flitted across his mind. Somewhere behind him the two were at work; he dared not turn to look. Then the woman spoke.

"Here it is, in this casket. In two pieces, just as the photograph showed—the cross from the top of the crown, and the portion of the crown itself—"

"Ah! Ah!" Don Luis caught his breath with admiration. "A wonder! A wonder!" Warren glanced at his watch. Two minutes to go, before one forty-five. The two minutes dragged. He could comprehend the stupefaction which seemed to be devouring Don Luis; though he himself had not seen these portions of the crown, he had seen others.

He tensed anew. Time was up—time was up—

"Ah! Don Luis, here you are!" A brisk step from the doorway, the voice of the guitarist. "Your pardon, Senora—I did not know you were engaged—"

A brief, low cry of fear wrenched from the woman, then the voice of Don Luis.

"Go! Go quickly, don't let him see—"

A rustle, a step; Senora Lores spoke with gulping hauteur.

"What do you want here? Who gave you the liberty of the house?"

"A thousand pardons, Senora," said the guitar-player humbly. "I was seeking a word with Don Luis about the songs and music—"

"Well, get out, get out! Don't intrude upon your betters!" snapped Moreno, and hurled a torrent of vituperation at the intruder. Warren listened admiringly; it was so well acted he could scarcely believe it

had been arranged beforehand. The guitar player departed.

"Now! Give it to me—get it out of sight, quickly!" panted the woman.

"Here; I closed the casket. He saw nothing," said Don Luis. "Look inside for yourself, make certain it's there."

"Yes, yes!" The bang of a lid; then the slam of a safe door, the sound of some further door swinging shut—a section of the bookcases, Warren thought. With this, the two departed hastily. He was alone.

He came out of the chair, glanced around, saw no one, saw no evidence of any hidden wall-safe. He dropped back into the chair, took out a cigarette, and lit it. His fingers were trembling, excitement hammered at him. He was on the verge of something here—what?

The interruption was prearranged. "Go! Go quickly!" Moreno had sent the woman to intercept the other man. Then he had insisted that she take a look in the casket; she had seen the gems, she had put the casket away. Why? Why? The word tore at him.

"What would be my game, for example, were I in Moreno's shoes?" he thought, as he pulled at the cigarette. "Duprez, a criminal, a maker of fraudulent stones—she had sent him photographs of this part of the crown six months ago, since no one ever looks at the thing and its very existence is secret—holy jumping Moses!"

He came out of the chair as though stung, a flush in his face, his eyes ablaze.

"Got it!" He dropped his cigarette on a trap, straightened up, stood frozen anew. "Now what would he do with it? He knows the risk; his brain would be in a whirl, he would neglect nothing. What would he do? What would I do? What, by heaven, did I do with the first piece of the crown that I got—"

He relaxed, with a low, soft whistle, and drew a deep breath. He understood everything at last—everything!

TEN MINUTES LATER THE GUITAR player, with his instrument slung by its gay sash over one shoulder, stepped out of Don Luis Moreno's room in the upper corridor. He stared away toward the stairs, only to find himself hailed affably by Warren, who had appeared out of nowhere.

"Ah, Senor musician. I'm glad to find you!" exclaimed Warren. "Come, step into my room for a moment, I beg of you. There's something I want very much to ask you."

The swarthy man shook his head amiably.

"I regret, Senor American of the North, that at the moment I am in some haste. I shall do myself the honor at another time—"

"No, no! Do it now, by all means. I insist!" Smiling, Warren insisted so well that the other, with a shrug, accompanied him down to the hall and into his room. Ushering in his guest, Warren closed the door—and locked it.

"Ah, now you can tell me all about it comfortably!" he exclaimed. The other regarded him in some astonishment.

"About what, Senor?"

"Well," Warren produced cigarettes, offered them, took one and struck a light, "I've always understood, with my limited knowledge, that there is only one precious stone that cannot be counterfeited to fool an expert eye, and that is the emerald. Of course, there are doublets and triplet, part nice green glass and part beryl—"

"I fear, Senor, that you mistake," said the other politely. "I know nothing about such things. What is it you desire to ask me?"

Warren's smile departed. He answered in French.

"Just where to you carry the loot, Duprez?"

Under his swarthy bronze the other went white as death; then shrugged. "Senor, I do not speak French. It is regrettable."

"Well played, well played indeed!" exclaimed Warren, not without real admiration.

"Your gifts are worthy of a better cause, Duprez. You made duplicates from the photographs; probably of imitation stones and imitation gold, yes? Moreno substituted them for the genuine ones when you interrupted him in the moment the Senora turned her back on him. And now you have the genuine ones, just as a precaution against—"

Silently, swiftly as a flash of light, Duprez had his knife out and was lunging. Warren had no earthly chance to reach his pistol or even to evade that deadly thrust. True, he spoiled its aim for the heart, but as he gripped Duprez he felt the keen bite of steel in his side—he knew the next thrust would have his life. There must be no next thrust—

He caught the knife-wrist, caught the hard, brown throat, looked into that swart face of demoniac hatred and tripped the man. It was all done in one grasping instant. The two of them came down in a twisted, writhing mass, with a hollow clang echoing from the guitar.

Warren had put forth all his strength in the effort to turn that knife aside. Now he realized something had happened; the man in his grip was unresisting, groaning terribly, gasping. Incredulous, he drew back a little, looked, and scrambled to one knee. Duprez lay inert, head resting on the guitar, eyes glittering like those of a snake.

"You devil! You—police!" he muttered. "How did you know? The guitar—"

He coughed, blood dribbling from his lips, his head drooped back in death, and he lay staring at the unseen. In the fall, the knife had been driven into his heart. His fingers were still clinging to the haft, locked there.

Warren stood panting. He moved suddenly to step on the fallen cigarettes. Then, pausing to mop the sweat from his face, he recollected the man's fatal words. He stooped, gently disengaged the guitar, and an exclamation escaped him at its weight. He examined it minutely, peered inside, took it to the window and looked again—and carefully laid it on the bed and stared at it.

"No sign of how he did it," he muttered. "It must open up, somehow. But the Lores portion of the crown is inside. Fastened by clamps no doubt; the damned thing must somehow come apart."

He looked at the motionless figure on the floor, and shivered. Then he glanced at his watch, remembering his appointment for three o'clock with Dona Ysleta.

AT THREE O'CLOCK THEY RODE AWAY down the drive together. Warren was not wearing the riding panoply of the country, but his own breeches and boots. Dona Ysleta, in jodhpurs and astride, was defying all the conventions of Coyopan, and glad of it. She glanced at him with a smile, and at the guitar slung over his back.

"No wonder the grooms snickered!" she observed. "Are you going to serenade me? In Coyopan men carry umbrellas when they ride, but I've seldom seen a guitar!"

"And you've seldom seen a man with a sore pair of ribs, either," said Warren, wincing. "I had to hem myself up with adhesive tape to keep this engagement; and believe me, I'm not riding very far. Stop when we get to the highway, at the first shady spot."

"What on earth are you talking about?" she demanded amazedly.

"A knife with a five-inch blade. Pretty near a carving knife. Look here, will it be all right for me to come and see you, when we get back to the city?"

"Yes," she replied. "But it might be wiser to meet somewhere else—whatever visitors come to my house, would be known all over town."

"That's what you get for inheriting a palace. Ouch! Right now, this is the most precious guitar in the world; it could buy Stradivarius violins by the dozen. But it hurts like the devil when it bumps my side. Slow down!"

She gave him a sharp glance. "You talk as—as though you were insane!"

"Well, I'm a bit worried, if that's what you mean. Ah, here we are!"

They turned out of the long drive that led from the hacienda into a stretch of tree-bordered highway, deserted at this hour of the afternoon. Warren headed straight for the nearest shade, slid from the saddle, rid himself of the guitar, and looked up at her.

"Are you serious about stopping here?" demanded Dona Ysleta.

"I am, you bet! Come on."

She dismounted. Warren tethered the horses, came back and picked up the guitar, and with a glance up and down the road, deliberately smashed it against his foot. A cry of protest broke from her at the splintering crash.

"Oh, what are you doing? I do believe that—that—that—"

Her voice died as she sighted the green glitter amid the ruins. A gasp broke from her. At Warren's gesture she sank down on the grassy bank, and in her lap he put the heavy section of the Crown of Coyopan, with the straight, lovely cross of emeralds that screwed into the top. Then, in silence, he picked up the bits of guitar and flung them out of sight amid the brush.

He came back and sat beside her, and touched the emeralds of the Incas. A long silence held them both, a silence of wonder and beauty and awe.

The virgin gold, worked by artistry comparable only to that of Cellini himself, is exquisite; it brought a lump to the throat. But those green stones, taken from the Incas four hundred years ago, by the ruthless conquistadores, had tongues of eloquence beyond any art. Their limpid, crystalline beauty was inimitable.

“Like looking at sunlight through diluted crème de menthe,” murmured Warren. “Why is green, the green of an emerald, the color that most powerfully affects the soul?”

The girl beside him caught her breath.

“It must be real—but are you a magician? What’s behind it? What does it mean?”

Warren produced a large silk handkerchief and some rubber bands. He wrapped the glorious thing secure against casual observation.

“Let’s get this out of sight. I can’t have it and you both beside me—and you’re more beautiful than all the emeralds of Peru! Have a cigarette and I’ll explain.”

He did so, telling his story fully, emitting nothing. She listened in silence.

“Now, Dona Ysleta, I’m no thief,” he concluded. “I couldn’t be under your eyes. By pure chance, I happened along just when those two rascals were putting into effect a scheme they’d planned out in detail—a game with a stake so tremendously big that it staggers the imagination to think of it! I can’t buy those emeralds from Dr. Lores. Somehow they must be returned. How? Leave them on his desk, perhaps—”

“No, no!” she laid her hand on his, suddenly; the touch of her fingers stopped his heart. “Can’t you see what that would

mean? Exposure, for her! It would be horrible!”

“The replica is in its casket and I can’t get at it,” said he, frowning. “It’ll stay there; the substitution may never be discovered at all, since the crown itself can’t be reunited by the confraternity. Well, I’m putting the problem up to you! As you say, if these are turned back to Lores, there’ll be mischief to pay. He’s a nice guy and I like him. I’d hate to be the one to cut the hair that suspends the sword of Damocles! It would prove that his wife was guilty, of course; beyond any doubt. It would smash her, and she may deserve it. He doesn’t. He’s the sort of man who’d never believe evil of her—”

“Yes,” said the girl softly. “I’m glad you think this way, Don Ricardo. There’s a high nobility in that man, and I’m glad that you can comprehend it, for only the noble can comprehend the noble.”

“Yes? Well, I’m in one devil of a jam myself,” said Warren. “Don’t forget, there’s a dead man lying in my room. When the police get here—”

“Don’t worry about the police here,” she broke in. “We’re not in America, you know. A word from Dr. Lores and the police will shut their eyes to anything—even what looks like murder. Remember, the police are our servants.”

“A swell theory,” and Warren grimaced, “but it wouldn’t work back home—hello! Something’s up! Look at him come!”

Dona Ysleta snatched at the wrapped object in her lap. Coming down the highway hell for leather was Dr. Lores, spurring his slaving horse like a madman, looking not to right nor left. Warren scrambled to his feet with a hail. Dr. Lores ignored it, ignored them, rode past as though not seeing them; his face pallid, strained and set.

“Here!” Warren turned swiftly. “Something’s wrong. Anyhow, I’ve got an

idea. You take care of the jewelry. Wait here for me—ride on up to the road and back. Wait for me, anyhow. I'll be back or else to jail."

And, without pause for reply, he freed his horse, jumped for the saddle, and sent the animal at a wild gallop toward the hacienda.

He overtook his host's jaded, wheezing beast at the portico. Dr. Lores reined in, hastily slid down, totally disregarded him.

"Here, wait—!" Warren caught his arm. "I must see you!"

The other looked at him with cold eyes. "Senor, I regret that I am busy."

"You're going to listen! I've killed one of your guests!"

That drove home. Lores stared at him, jaw fallen, color coming back into his livid cheeks. The cold, stony eyes came alive.

"Senor, did I hear you aright? Did you say—"

"Yes. That guitar player. I recognized him as one Duprez, a French criminal who had escaped the Paris police; I had seen his picture in the papers. When I called him by name, he attacked me with a knife—I've got a wound in my side now that you'll have to look at. I grappled him, tripped him, and we came down. He fell on his own knife. Of course, it was self-defense."

"No matter. A criminal, you say. A criminal?" The eyes of Dr. Lores suddenly blazed. He took Warren by the arm. "Here, come along, my friend. You have done me a great service. You make everything clear to me. Come, come!" To a servant who had come running, he explained in Spanish. "Go! Find Don Luis Moreno. Bring him to me in the library at once, and then close the doors. Hasten!"

Warren, propelled into the house, was now aware of a tremendous urge in the

other man. The chubby, pink-cheeked doctor was transformed. He passed a group of other guests without a word, hurried Warren into the library, and closed the door.

"What the devil's happened to you?" exclaimed Warren.

"You shall see. Sit down, Senor, your presence honors me. What did you say was the name of that Quitano?"

"The guitar player? He's not from Quito at all; originally, he was a Frenchman named Duprez." Warren seated himself. "Now, if you come to my room, you'll see that my story's true. He was still gripping the knife—"

"Never mind, never mind." Dr. Lores went behind the desk, sat down, and pulled out a drawer. "Ah! Here come Moreno now!"

A knock. The door opened. Moreno came into the room, and the door was closed behind him. He advanced toward the desk, nodding to Warren.

"Hello, caballero!" he exclaimed jauntily. "Glad to see you back again—"

"You'll not be glad long," cut in Dr. Lores, looking up with burning eyes. "I have learned from Don Augustin Beltran that you have boasted to him of my wife's favors. I have learned from others that it is an open secret that you make love to her. What have you to say?"

Warren heard these words in utter stupefaction. Don Luis went pale as death, and then laughed softly, assuredly.

"Come, come, my dear Senor Don! It is no crime to be bewitched by your beautiful lady! Of course I am in love with her; all who know her love her!"

"I think you miss the point, Senor," said Dr. Lores strangely calm and quiet now. "You boasted of her favors to the Beltran brothers—"

"Bah! Idle word, too much wine, perhaps—that was weeks ago in Quito!" Don Luis shrugged, and bent his dark, intent

gaze upon the man at the desk. "Besides, my dear sir, it is nothing to make public. You do not want any scandal—"

"There will be no scandal whatever," broke in Dr. Lores. "You have exaggerated my wife's kindness to everyone, taking it to mean that she reciprocated your guilty devotion. Such a thing is utterly impossible. Senora Ysabella is the purest and liveliest of women; she is incapable of so much as comprehending the evil that is in your black heart."

"Indeed?" Don Luis lifted quizzical brows. "Perhaps it is you, Senor, who are tempted to exaggerate a trifle. Let me advise you, have no scandal, for it might be you would discover too much."

The audacity of the man was supreme. Dr. Lores look up at him and smiled.

"Ah! I am very glad you said that, Don Luis, very glad! It proves that Beltran did not lie to me."

His hand came up. The automatic he held barked a fatal message just as the door burst open. Senora Lores, standing there, her eyes wide with terror, shrieked as she saw Don Luis crumple to the floor.

His wife's cry had wiped the terrible smile from the face of Dr. Lores. Still holding the smoking pistol, he turned. "This is no place for you, my dear," he said, gently. And then Ysleta, who had decided not to wait for Warren, came running to the frightened woman's side.

"Come away," she cried, putting an arm about her with scarcely a glance at Warren, who stood dazed by the sudden tragedy.

As the door closed he stooped to see if life remained in the body of Moreno.

"You need not bother to look," said Dr. Lores. "I am a very good shot."

Which was undeniably true, Moreno having been hit squarely between the eyes.

A few moments later Dr. Lores faced his startled guests.

"Senores, I regret to have disturbed you. My dear wife was slandered by this man; I have protected her as any caballero would. The man with him proves to have been a notorious French criminal, who attacked Don Ricardo Warren, and was accidentally killed. That is all until later. The chief of police is, I believe, on his way here."

This was so, for Dr. Lores, who possessed one of the few telephones in Coyopan, had summoned him.

"Wait," said Warren, when he got a word aside with Dona Ysleta. "The party's all gone to pieces now, but don't run away with the others. Stay around and I'll ride back to the city in your carriage.

She assented, wide-eyed. "But your hurt side? And what shall I do with—"

"Keep it. My side's all right. Dr. Lores just looked at it."

Half an hour later, the chief of police, sitting in the library, with Dr. Lores and Warren, had heard the story. At its end, he came to his feet, extended one hand to Warren, the other to Dr. Lores.

"Gentlemen, I am proud of you, true caballeros both. Let us say no more. The matter is closed. Senor Warren deserves the thanks of Coyopan for ridding us of a criminal. As for this other, this Luis Moreno of Quito—well, it is to be regretted that he came to his death through fever, eh? So. It is settled."

Dona Ysleta was waiting in her carriage. The effects of Warren were packed in. Warren himself came with Dr. Lores, who was embracing him warmly, loading him with protestations of regard and esteem. With a final hearty exchange of farewells, the carriage was off, and Warren settled beside the girl.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” she demanded, half angrily. “To think of his friendship, his regard for you, and all the while we’ve got his property here...hidden!”

“Well,” said Warren, chuckling, “do you want to return it to him and spoil all his faith in his charming wife?”

“Heavens, no! I don’t know what to do about it. I’m half distracted—”

“Well, I’ll tell you what to do. Put it with the rest of the loot. Keep it.”

“Do you mean that?” she exclaimed sharply.

“Yes,” said he. “I just gave Dr. Lores fifty thousand dollars to make up his hospital fund. The sword of Damocles is sheathed—forever, I trust.”

To be continued...