

THE CROWN OF COYOPAN
By H. Bedford-Jones

*Youthful romances. Greed. Deadly intrigue. Murder. All for a fortune in Inca gold
and emeralds.*

CHAPTER VII

THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER

BACK AT HIS ROOM IN THE LITTLE hotel, which lacked both cleanliness and luxury, Dick Warren was subtly aware of the shocked stupefaction that had fallen upon Coyopan in general and upon the Confraternity of the Crown in particular.

He himself, again taking up his role of the poet from northern lands, come here to sit at the feet of the famed poets of Coyopan, had not fallen under suspicion. He was not supposed to know anything about the crown, or the emeralds of the Incas. The matter was not discussed in his hearing. Nonetheless, he was aware of the general uneasiness.

Don Jaime Mondano had fled forever, presumably taking with him for sale elsewhere his section of the crown. Don Pedro Benalkebir was dead, his emeralds supposedly destroyed in his burning residence. Another section of the crown had vanished with the robbers who had struck down Don Diego de Ribera. The Crown of Coyopan, as such, was doomed, was ended, would never again be hinged together.

For some days Warren made no effort to get in touch with Dona Ysleta de Soto, but he caught rumors of the sensation she was creating among her people by abandoning all the conventional restraint of formality of her ancestors. Instead of sedately driving in the family carriage, she actually rode horseback—and astride! The elder generation looked for fire from heaven to strike her down. The younger generation chuckled and followed her example.

To Warren, an American of the north, an outsider, these inner stirrings of the beautiful and indolent city did not come directly. The poets of Coyopan maintained a Moorish seclusion where their private lives were concerned. The troubles of Don Juan de Montillo y Lara, however, came to him on the wings of poesy.

Old Don Juan, like all the other local poets, took keen interest in this American who was writing an epic poem on the life of Hernando de Soto, a conquistador of Peru as well as of Florida. One morning, Warren sat at the cafe on the Piazza with Don Diego de Ribera, and saw pass a darkly forceful man with a superb young woman on his arm—a woman whose beauty and supple fire drew every eye. They seemed well known, for every one was speaking to them, but their looks, their clothes, bespoke the outer world. At Warren's questions, the saturnine Don Diego growled in his beard. With his frock coat, top hat, silver-headed cane and high white collar, Don Diego was typical of the older generation and the Coyopan poets who knew so little of the world that they were thrown upon the resources of their ancestors for recreation and occupation.

"That rascal," he said, "is the only son of Don Juan de Montillo. He came with his wife yesterday to visit Don Juan. A graceless fellow is this Don Francisco! But that reminds me," and he turned eagerly. "Don Juan has found more documents concerning Hernando de Soto among his family archives. He begs that you will call at his house this afternoon at three, and he will

display them to you. Have you finished your first canto?"

"No," said Warren with perfect truth. "A few lyrical passages to fit in here and there, the general outline, no more. Why be in haste to write an epic?"

"True, true. You are young, life is before you. Why should you hurry?"

AT THREE, AFTER THE SIESTA HOUR, Warren obeyed the summons. The old Montillo residence was on the hillside, and as he mounted the narrow, tortuous streets whose stones had been laid by the children of the Incas before the advent of white men, the lovely sleepy city came into perspective below. Six thousand feet in air, almost at the equator, its temperature scarcely varied from seventy the year around; and, far off to the west over the flank of El Viejo, glinted the blue Pacific. Almost unknown, cut off from the world, proudly complacent, Coyopan nestled among the Andes, indolent and largely ignorant of everything outside these circling peaks.

Like the majority of the ruling class, Montillo had inherited money and toiled not. Anyone who worked, indeed, was regarded as little better than an Indian. As Warren mounted the streets, cut in steps, as he met with smiling greetings on all sides from the flashing brown eyes, and respectful salutations from brown hands, it came to him that these humble Indians, after all, had more ancient lineage than the sons of the conquistadores.

The Montillo house was of stone, its two stories grimly uninviting, with the arms of the family chiseled over the entrance. Here, too, the world was shut out; once inside all was different. Don Juan led him to the patio, where a table, books, documents, drinks and cigars were in readiness beside the tiled fountain; and where the stately

courtesy, the fine Castillian dignity, were in keeping with the surroundings.

Warren liked Don Juan, the frail, gentle old man with hair and beard like driven snow, with black eyes undimmed, with a great proud spirit in his age-bent frame. No pretense here. Himself a patrician, and proud of it! Intolerant and never compromising.

With such a man, Warren felt ashamed of his pretended poesy. As they talked, as Don Juan began to open the documents and records of nearly four hundred years ago, the younger couple appeared. Warren was introduced to Don Francisco and his wife, Dona Inez; and upon the old man fell instant restraint.

"Glad to meet you!" exclaimed Don Francisco in fluent English. "I'm just back from your country. I've been to Los Angeles."

"Indeed! On business?" ventured Warren, aware of the lady's exotic presence and searching, dangerous eyes. Don Francisco, a hard man in the face and with a weak mouth, laughed.

"Yes; business of which my father hardly approves. I'm with a radio syndicate. We just bought an entire radio station and I have just shipped it down. We're going to do business down here in real American style. I'm the chief engineer of the outfit."

Warren smiled. "It wasn't your first visit north, by your fluent English."

"No. Boston Tech accounts for that. Well, my dear, coming downtown?"

Dona Inez demurred. It was too warm. She felt too lazy.

"I shall just sit here and listen to dear Don Joan, if I'll not be intruding," she said. "I love to hear about the old historic times—may I stay, please?"

Don Juan assented, but his courtly manner concealed, to Warren's eye, an ill grace. So Don Francisco, forceful and modern, went his way, and for the other two

men, the peace and pleasure of the day were destroyed.

Not that Dona Inez said anything; she had no need. One felt her like an electric presence. She curled up, shocked Don Juan by lighting a cigarette, and Warren felt the play of her eyes upon him, as he and the old gentleman discussed the conquistadores.

When Don Juan, unable to find a document he wanted, went to search for it, Warren turned to the lady and proffered a fresh cigarette.

"This isn't your first visit to Coyopan, Senora?"

"Como no?" she drawled, giving him a swift look of flashing fire. "Of course it is! We are just married, you see; I met Francisco in Panama. I never dreamed I would find anyone like you here!"

Warren, from sheer incredulity, was a bit slow on the intake. She leaned forward, her voice husky, intimate, thrilling, but no more eloquent than her magnificent eyes.

"Senor! It is urgent; there is no one else to whom I can turn, who would understand and help me! Give me your help and there is nothing I will do to repay you, nothing! Quickly, before he returns—will you help me?"

Swift appraisal tempered warning with curiosity. Her sudden unloosing of intense agitation told there was more than met the eye. He answered with a customary Spanish proverb.

"Hasty promises mother many unhappy children, Senora; but what can I do?"

"It is he—the old one. He will kill Don Francisco; he has threatened it. They had a frightful scene this morning. Francisco will come home drunk tonight, before dinner; if you do not help, Don Juan will kill him. Find him. Bring him home to the little door on the side street—the door of the gardens. I will be there after dark."

She settled back into her chair, lazily puffing on her cigarette, as the stately Don Juan returned in triumph with his documents.

Through the rest of his visit Warren's brain was working double; poetry and Hernando de Soto on the one side, amazement and puzzlement on the other. That Dona Inez would keep her promise of reward to the uttermost, and would keep it with gusto, he did not at all doubt. Her eyes said as much. Either she had swiftly switched her approach through caution, or else had been all the while thinking about Don Francisco's danger—and the latter was the more credible.

Danger? It seemed absurd. A burly forceful fellow in his late thirties—in peril from this frail old man? If Warren were any judge, Don Francisco possessed one devil of a temper. In a city where heavy drinking was the rule, where even the Indians went on weekly debauches, where prohibition and moderations were unknown, it was not likely that Don Francisco ran any danger from coming home drunk. And yet—Dona Inez, who was a good fifteen years younger than her husband, to judge by the eye, had certainly meant her words.

After a while she left them. Warren rose to depart, and Don Juan walked with him to the front door. In the long and narrow hallway, dotted with pieces of old armor and faded pannons, Warren shook hands with his host.

"A charming woman, Dona Inez," he said with an effort. "You must be happy in your son's visit. He has a wife one may well be proud to welcome as a daughter."

Don Juan groaned. His features were curiously twisted.

"Ah, Senor! You are a friend. Others understand, but you do not. I cannot let you go under this misapprehension. She is not his wife. The scoundrel would insult even his father, by bringing her here! She is the

daughter of the devil. Heaven forgive me! I must tell the truth. Go with God, Señor. I shall see you tomorrow night at the meeting of the poetical society.”

WARREN WENT, AND WONDERED, and felt a pang of pity for this splendid old caballero—pity? Don Juan would not have welcomed that word. Others understood? Probably it was no secret. She was referred to as the wife of Don Francisco merely to save scandal!

“The layout is funny, seems to me—and I don’t mean humorous,” reflected Dick Warren, sitting outside the cafe, looking across the sunny plaza, and sipping a drink by himself. The old man’s humiliation in giving him this information had been evident.

Why would Don Francisco submit his father to such humiliation? The question burned at Warren. He must be a bad one, if his own father would call him a scoundrel. Still, Don Juan belonged to the Confraternity of the Crown; there he was far from helpless. He was one of the invisible rulers of Coyopan, men above the law, men whose ancestors had won the emeralds of the Incas—ah! Was it possible?

Somewhere in that house on the hillside was a portion of the crown. Could this be why the woman was here, and Don Francisco? The more Warren thought about Dona Inez, the more she impressed him; she grew upon one steadily. Daughter of the devil? More truth than poetry in this, perhaps.

Warren glanced at his watch and rose hastily. He felt that here he needed help, and needed it on the spot. It was five; plenty of time. The Montillo dinner would not be served before eight at the earliest.

Dona Ysleta received him ceremoniously in her drawing-room. Two old gentlemen of the town, friends of her late father, were there for tea; so were

several of her relatives. As Warren was introduced, each rose in turn with a murmur of his own name, after the fashion of the country. Dona Ysleta gave him tea and a smiling glance that said private conversation was out of the question, and Warren repressed his impatience. Not until he gave up in despair, and took his leave, did Dona Ysleta break through the Castillian conventions. Then, as he bowed over her hand, she spoke quickly, in English.

“Something important?”

“Very,” he rejoined earnestly.

“The third window from the street-corner, in half an hour.”

He departed, blessing her with grateful eyes.

Gathering darkness, a deserted narrow street, the third window from the corner, grilled like all the others. For a hundred years or so Coyopan had lavished money on its ornamental iron grilles and gates—solid, substantial stuff, too. In the past century or more since building had ceased, age and weather had not affected the good Spanish iron.

He waited. El Viejo, the volcanic peak lifting to the east, showed snowy locks dimly radiant with the afterglow. They faded. Full darkness was drawing on when her voice sounded beside him, though she remained invisible at the window.

“Well, Don Ricardo?”

“This is a fine way to talk!” exclaimed Warren, laughing. “I thought you meant to throw overboard all the old cautions?”

“Not too suddenly, my friend,” she said amusedly. “Things can’t be done in the American fashion here in Coyopan. Tomorrow afternoon, come and I’ll show you my house, and we can speak freely. Now, what troubles you?”

He spoke rapidly, for time pressed, telling her the events of the afternoon. From

behind the iron grille and shutters came no sound.

“Are you there?” he concluded impatiently.

“Certainly.” His voice held a touch of cool, aloof disdain. “The affairs of Don Juan are his own; why do you interfere?”

“I’m not sure,” he said frankly. “I respect and admire him; I’m mighty sorry for him. I have the feeling there’s a lot stirring. That girl was scared! She’s got everything—that is to say, everything except the most important thing. She’s just the opposite of you, my unseen lady fair, because you have everything, plus: and I think you’re the one to advise in the matter.”

“You flatter me strangely—very strangely!” she rejoined, half angrily. “I know all about Don Francisco and this woman he picked up in Panama, or who picked him up. The whole town’s talking about it. Am I to soil my hands with trash?”

“I’m not trash,” said Warren, whimsically. “And I’m not going to be in trouble if you don’t lend a hand. I have a hunch.”

“Your hunch is correct,” she said, laughing despite herself. “Why should you have anything to do with those people?”

“Because Don Juan de Montillo has a part of the crown in his keeping.”

“Oh!” She was silent for an instant, then spoke with impetuous haste. “Very well; I understand. Thank you for your confidence that I’d help. I will. Go and start searching the wine shops for Don Francisco; he’ll no doubt be expecting you. I’ll meet you at the side street door of the Montillo house—I know it well. Remember, I’ll just be your servant Pedro. Now move fast, and tumble into the trap like a good one!”

Warren hurried away. Don Francisco expecting him for the trap—well, he’d never thought of such a possibility. Why would that woman set a trap for him? Absurd!

“They come to Coyopan, and at the first meeting lay a trap for me—rats!” he reflected, “maybe I was wrong to drag Ysleta into this. No, I wasn’t! That woman is too much for me, and I know it. She sends a shiver through me, yet I know I’d find her hard to resist. What her game can be is a mystery; but it’s not a trap for Dick Warren, that’s certain. There’d be no earthly reason.”

In the third groggery he visited he found Don Francisco surrounded by half a dozen sycophants for whom he was buying drinks with a free hand. He blinked at Warren’s greeting; then trooped toward the American and shook hands impressively.

“Glad to see you—‘ray for Boston Tech!” he exclaimed. “Have a drink—”

“No drinks, thanks,” said Warren. “I’ve come to see you home.”

When the other agreed instantly, swept the crowd aside, took his arm and lurched out with him, Warren became actively suspicious. No drunken man would acquiesce so tamely.

Don Francisco talked volubly. “This town is dead, been dead for two hundred years. This country needs a good waking up; we’re showing ‘em a thing or two! Going to have the best broadcasting station south of Mexico, on the west coast. Fifty thousand watts and there’ll be a political angle to it, you bet. Don’t see how you stand it in a dead hole like this. Heard you were here. Heard about you last week—got a copy of the Coyopan paper and read about you and your poetry. Now, I’m going to do you a good turn, Warren. A man I know told me all about you. He was coming here himself but got killed by robbers. German merchant named Gutman.”

Warren muttered something, and felt a crawling chin. Gutman! That was the name of the German who had been coming to buy Don Jaime Mondano’s part of the crown, only to be killed on the way—by the

confraternity. What had Gutman known about him?

"Inez cooked it up," went on Don Francisco, who had certainly imbibed enough to unsettle him. "Gutman told her, she fixed it up with me. I know everything, see? Everything. I can do you a good turn and give you what you're after. My father won't know anything about it. He's old-fashioned—grand man, but old-fashioned. Me. Don Francisco, most modern man in South America, and you're my friend.

He halted, opened his coat, and fumbled at his vest.

"Look there!" he went on. "Fraternity pin, see? Know where it came from?" With a shaky laugh he dug Warren in the ribs. "Philadelphia firm, biggest in the country. Man back of it is a fellow named Warren. Richard Warren. Ha! Come on home with me and we'll all have dinner. You're a good fellow. I'll show you the finest emeralds in captivity."

Warren swallowed hard.

"You've made a mistake," he said, urging Don Francisco along.

"Mistake? Not much! You're the one. Don't worry. I'll not breathe it to a soul! Not even my father—hello, here's the house."

"I'm expecting my servant to meet us here," said Warren, puffing a little. the climb had been steep and fast. "Ah, there he is, by the garden door!"

In the darkness, starlit, he pointed down the high boundary wall along the side of the house and grounds. A shadowy cloaked figure waited there.

"That you, Pedro?" exclaimed Warren. "All right. We'll turn over my friend here to his wife, and then go on our way—"

"No, no! You're coming with me!" exclaimed Don Francisco. "I insist! You and all your servants. Viva America del

Norte! Come along or I'll hammer down the door—"

Silently the door in the wall swung open.

"Francisco! Be silent!" came the voice of Dona Inez. "Who is that? Senor Warren? Ah, thank the saints—"

"Aye, Senor Warren and his servant Pedro, and your husband, woman!" exclaimed Don Francisco energetically. "They aided me home, and I say inside with them and dine with us!"

"A servant? So much the better. Enter, enter, quickly!" urged Dona Inez. "It is nearly time for dinner—oh, hurry."

The three obeyed. The gate of doom closed behind them. Warren was very aware of trees and bushes, a garden redolent of flowers, but the darkness was impenetrable. Dim lights at the windows gave no help. Don Francisco stumbled and cursed. Dona Inez took his arm and guided him. The house loomed before them and an open doorway.

"Wait here, two minutes!" exclaimed Dona Inez. "I'll help him to our room, then come back for you. I must get him upstairs quietly. Wait!"

The two disappeared. Warren turned, as Dona Ysleta, a shrouded black shape, came to his side with a soft mirthless laugh.

"Well, are you satisfied with the comedy?"

"Hanged if I know what to think!" he exclaimed under his breath. "He's not drunk. They know all about me—who I am. They suspect what I'm here for."

"Now's your chance. Shall we go?"

"No! Stay around and find out what their game is—"

"Then tell them I've gone. Trust me; I'll be close by. I know this house. As a child I've been all over it."

Her figure merged with the darkness; she was gone. Warren cursed the whole business; then he was aware of perfume, of a

warm presence, and Dona Inez was at his side, her hand on his arm.

“Come—ah! Where is your servant?”

“Gone. I sent him away—” As Warren spoke, the door in the wall was heard to close. For an instant panic seized him, lest Dona Ysleta had actually gone.

“Very well. It does not matter. Now come, my friend. Ah, I could bless you!”

She did better; in the darkness her arm stole about him and Warren found her lips against his, and he did not say no to that. He held her close; she was intoxicating, maddening in her abandon.

“A promise!” she murmured. “Come!”

They were inside the house, moving along a dimly lighted hall to a small flight of stairs; just past those was an open door, into which she led the way. A little writing room, with two candles on the table, a tray, a decanter, slender-stemmed Venetian glasses. She poured wine from the decanter and extended a glass to him, her eyes were radiant.

“A health, Senor—to all we desire!” she exclaimed, and picked up the other glass. “Dinner will be ready in a few moments. I’ll tell Don Juan you’re here. He’ll be delighted. To all we desire!”

Warren tasted the wine; it was dry, pungent, acrid, lingering on the palate. He grinned and drank it down at a draught. As Dona Inez lifted her glass to her lips she started slightly and paused.

“Ah, I forgot to close the outer door. One moment!”

She hurried out of the room. Warren lit a cigarette and glanced about, feeling ill at ease and bewildered. If it was merely a question of getting him here, why all this carefully planned byplay? He could not understand it. With a sigh, he dropped into a chair and stretched out comfortably.

Low voices at the door; he did not hear them. Don Francisco stepped into the room. With a sharp ejaculation he came forward and put his foot on the cigarette that had fallen from Warren’s fingers. Chin sunk on breast, the American sat with closed eyes. Dona Inez tripped in, put her arm around the shoulder of Don Francisco, and laughed.

“He drank it at one gulp, Francisco! You see how swiftly it works?”

“Superb! Mi corazon, you’re a jewel of jewels!” Francisco hugged her, and then drew away. “Now my brain’s none too clear—I had to drink a lot. We’ve got him here without my father’s knowledge. The old gentleman, by the way, is dressing for dinner. Suppose you freshen my mind on the details. I’m a bit hazy on my share.”

“It is simple. First, this silly gander; he’s safe. He won’t wake up till morning, if left to himself. At dinner, provoke Don Juan a bit, tell him the truth about this American—how the man is a jewel merchant, a thief, and worse. How he has come here to get the Crown of Coyopan. Then,” she ticked off the scheme on her fingers, “I make peace, we agree to leave at once, your father takes a glass of wine with us. You see? He drinks, he falls asleep.”

“Not much, not much!” Don Francisco cautioned her, frowning.

“A mere trifle, my Pancho! See—the glass is drugged, not the wine. We take the emeralds from the crown, we take all the other emeralds from the casket. We have already ordered the horses harnessed and the carriage made ready. We leave here, on the table before this man, the gold work of the crown and some of the emeralds—small ones. The we go, telling the servants to put your father to bed.”

“You’re sure the drug won’t cause him any harm?”

“Silly! Of course it won’t. We are gone. He wakes up, calls the servants. The

casket is found open, everything gone. This American is found here—obviously he sneaked into the house to steal the emeralds. The gold work of the crown is before him. He drank too heavily and fell asleep. Your father will expose him publicly for what he is. The police—”

Don Francisco gestured. “They won’t enter into it. I know the confraternity. My father’s friends will punish this fellow themselves. When they can’t find the emeralds they’ll conclude that he has hidden them. After all, the stones should be mine; they belong to me by inheritance. I’m only taking what’s mine, what he refuses me.”

“Yes.” She leaned forward, snuffed out one candle with a pinch, and picked up the other. “Come! We’d better leave this room dark. One of the servants might notice the light. Remember, provoke your father into a rage!”

“Not hard to do,” said Don Francisco, with a bitter laugh.

True enough; and he did it, while in the darkness of the writing room a somber figure worked desperately, frantically, over the inert form of Dick Warren.

OLD DON JUAN HAD DRESSED CAREFULLY for dinner in his old-fashioned evening attire, and looked the patriarch he was as he sat at the head of the board, which he would yield to no woman while he lived.

The room was a glorious one, if a trifle uncomfortable of cold nights. It was full two stories in height; at one end was a balcony, six feet above the floor, where in the old days musicians were wont to be placed. The bare stone walls were hidden somewhat by tattered tapestries, except at one spot in the center, opposite the buffet with the silver plate.

Here was a niche in the wall covered by an iron grille in the shape of two small but massive gates, always locked. Behind

this grille, in the niche showed a small iron coffer or casket, ornately fashioned. Two enormous candelabra, each holding a dozen tapers, stood on the board, which glittered with silver.

As the meal progressed, Don Francisco talked volubly of modernizing the outmoded life of Coyopan; and Don Juan listening, grew ever more grim about the eyes, for the words were barbed. Dona Inez wore a gown of silver whose daring scantiness was partially hidden by a shawl of golden silk. She was very beautiful, but the old man scarcely looked at her. Indian servants placed the dishes and served them deftly, and still Don Francisco rattled on until Don Juan could endure it no longer.

“Silence!” he barked suddenly. “It is time I said a word or two. You’ve always been a graceless blackguard, Francisco, but this time you’ve passed all limits. I’ve hoped that some day you would return here to take your rightful place in Coyopan. Instead, you show up with a traveling companion, and tell me you must have money at once. Money! Why, in your time you’ve wasted a fortune!”

Don Francisco shrugged. “Why not?” You have plenty. If all else fails, you have what lies in the iron coffer yonder.”

“Not for your hands to spend,” cried Don Juan in kindling wrath. “Your ancestors left a heritage of wealth and beauty, won by their valor; you shan’t disgrace it as you’ve disgraced me and my house. That portion of the Crown of Coyopan is a noble thing, a great and glorious thing; I’d sooner see it destroyed than soiled by your touch!”

“Indeed?” Don Francisco flushed with hot anger. “I happen to be your son and heir, so you can’t help yourself. I’ll inherit—”

“You’ll inherit what I choose to give you, nothing more!” The old man burst into sudden unleashed fury. “You shall never get your greedy hands on that coffer! I made it

over today, legally, to the confraternity, with all its contents, for the use of charity. They come for it in the morning. Laugh that off if you can, you scoundrel! You broke your mother's heart, and then you dare to come here as you do, under this roof! This time you've gone too far."

"Then it's high time I went farther." Don Francisco leaped to his feet. "Inez! Get your things together at once." Reaching into the wall, he seized the old-style bell pull and jerked it. A servant entered. "Order the horses put into my carriage at once! Get hold of my driver. Have him ready to depart."

"Aye," ordered Don Juan with grim approval. "Don't delay. Bring the carriage when ready." He dismissed the servant and eyed his son coldly. "You see, I take you at your word."

"One moment, please!" Dona Inez intervened, with anxious distress. "You must listen to me, Don Juan. I must tell you what Francisco was too proud to say. You do not understand at all."

"What right have you to speak here, *Senorita*?" rasped the old man, with deliberate use of the unmarried title. She leaned forward across the table, intent upon him, unheeding the insult.

"The right of your daughter-in-law, Don Juan."

"You? My daughter?" Don Juan spat out the word in contempt. "You mean, the paramour of this son of mine—"

"No. Your daughter. Here." She extended a paper. "It was a civil marriage, look."

Don Juan caught at the, glanced at it, thrust it back.

"A civil marriage!" he sneered. "That is no marriage, as you very well know."

"In the eyes of the law it is marriage enough!" exclaimed Don Francisco.

"Bah!" the old man's beard fairly curled with anger. "You add insult to injury. No marriage is legal in the eyes of this family or of our friends, unless celebrated by the church. Above all, a civil marriage."

"At least," pleaded Dona Inez, "it does not justify you in insulting me, Don Juan. We had hoped to follow it with a ceremony by the church."

"Indeed!" Don Juan eyed her again. A choked cry of protest broke from his son, but he ignored it. "Then you are not aware that my son here is already married and had been divorced by law—but not by the church? Your ambitions, *Senorita*, are impossible of realization."

She caught her breath and looked at Don Francisco, whose dark features were like a thundercloud—admission enough. At this moment a servant entered with word that the carriage was ready.

"Have it wait," said Don Juan. "And do not disturb us unless I summon you."

Dona Inez rose. She came around to the old man and extended her hand to him; in her lovely face was sorrow and stricken grief, and her voice was very low.

"Forgive me for everything. I did not know," she said. "I meant no insult. I wouldn't have come here had I known. Will you forgive me?"

"Why—why—God bless me!" Don Juan came to his feet, took her hand and bent his lips to it. "After all, then, I wronged you, I forgive you, and ask you to accept my apologies. This scoundrel of a Francisco—"

"Ah, but remember that I love him!" she interrupted. A tremulous sweet smile came to her lips. She turned to the buffet and swiftly filled glasses from a decanter there. One she brought back to Don Juan, one she extended to Don Francisco, one she kept for herself.

"Let us drink once together, to forgiveness, to the future!" she said, sweetly sad. She flung one glance at Francisco,

however, and for an instant her eyes flamed. "I did not know that Francisco had been married—but no matter. I regret that I brought trouble into this. Let us drink to friendship in the future."

Don Juan bowed, touched glasses with her, gave his son a gesture, and drank. Don Francisco emptied his glass. Dona Inez drank also, then uttered a sharp cry.

"Oh! Francisco, you forgot! Tell him quickly, about the American!"

"Eh? You mean Don Ricardo?" Old Don Juan glanced from one to the other.

"Yes." Don Francisco stepped forward. "He is not a poet, but a jewel and gem dealer in the United States. His errand here is to get his hands on the Crown of Coyopan. He has tricked you and the others here, by pretending to be a poet."

"No, no! It cannot be true!" Don Juan, aghast, sank into his chair. "He is a caballero, a gentleman. No, no! This must be a lie!"

"It is not, upon my honor!" declared Don Francisco solemnly. "Proofs are easy, nor will the man deny it. I was talking with him this evening, and he admitted it to me. He is well known as an unscrupulous rascal in the north."

Don Juan was fumbling at a pocket.

"Him and you—I'll cheat you all alike!" he mumbled. "The keys. The coffer goes. To be held in trust, to be divided, to be given to charity—charity—the papers are signed and sealed—"

He produced two huge keys on a leather thong. They slipped from his fingers and clanged on the stone floor. He gasped, and seized the glass from which he had drunk. Suddenly he slumped. He fell, his head resting on the table, one hand still holding the glass. His white beard brushed his chest; his eyes closed. His tired old body relaxed.

"QUICKLY!" DONA INEZ SWOOPED, caught up the keys and thrust them into the hand of Don Francisco. She was suddenly in a blaze. "You see how it works out? No need now for the keys you made. Use these. Leave them beside the American's chair. Leave the coffer locked. Hurry! This makes the final touch of perfection!"

Don Francisco wakened. He rushed across the room to the niche, fitted one of the keys to the little iron gate, and opened them. The other key fitted the coffer. He flung back the lid. From the box he brought something wrapped in thick padded cotton and tied about with faded ribbons.

"This is it; it is all here, has been kept this way always," he exclaimed. "Take it; take care of it, while I lock the coffer again."

She seized the bundle from him. He locked the coffer and the gates, pocketed the two keys, and turned to her, avid with excitement. At the expression in her face, he froze.

"What is it? What is wrong?"

She shrugged, and laid the bundle on the table and tugged at the ribbons.

"So I am your wife by law, eh? But not by custom or acceptance. You lied. You have a wife living."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. The word came throatily, hoarsely, thickly. "What does that matter?"

"It matters a good deal to Coyopan," said Dona Ysleta, stepping from an inner doorway.

They stared at her in stupefaction. She had doffed her man's wide hat and thrown back her cloak. Her golden hair was massed about her face; her eyes were fixed challengingly on both of them.

"Dona Ysleta de Soto!" exclaimed Don Francisco. "Where did you come from? How did—"

“How did I get here unannounced?” she broke in, looking from one to the other with sweep of scorn. “You may well wonder. Oh, you cowardly murderers! Look at Don Juan—that fine, noble old man! Have you no heart, Francisco, that you can murder your own father and try to cast the blame on another man?”

“Murder? No, no! It’s not so!” burst forth Don Francisco, suddenly pale as he cast a frightened glance at Don Juan. He started, gained the side of the old man. He touched the still features again, and with a rush drew back with a low cry.

“Dead, dead—you are right—good Heavens! I never dreamed.”

His hoarse voice died. His face was contorted by sudden emotion. His eyes, now wild and frenzied, settled upon Dona Inez. She broke in hastily.

“Impossible, Francisco! He’s merely sleeping. Who’s this woman?”

“She lies,” said Dona Ysleta with cold accusation. “Look at your father! One look should be enough for anyone.”

Don Francisco looked, and a groan burst from him.

“Dead, dead! And you swore to me—you swore it would not harm him—”

He turned to Dona Inez. As he approached, she drew hurriedly away from him, for a fury of grief and accusation and rage was upon him.

“No, no!” she cried out. “Francisco! It was not my fault—if it was an accident how could I help it? The drug was harmless. I swear it!”

He plunged suddenly at her, and gripped her shoulder.

“Where is the drug? Show me the bottle! Show it to me, you hellcat!” His agonized words rang with fury.

She screamed as she struggled to escape his grasp. Terror and wild anger lent her strength to resist him. For a moment she

fought him off, railing at him with a storm of words.

Into the doorway by which Dona Ysleta had entered, staggered a figure shaken and weak. It was Dick Warren. He could little more than stand, but thanks to the ministrations of Dona Ysleta he had partially thrown off the soporific effects of the drugged wine. None of the three was aware of him as he stood leaning against the stones.

With an oath, Don Francisco snatched at the dress of Dona Inez. A stiletto flashed in her hand. He caught her wrist, wrenched the dagger loose. In the struggle her shawl was torn off, the silver gown torn. Something tinkled on the floor, he stooped for it and picked up a tiny vial.

“So this drug of yours that killed my father there is harmless, is it!” he panted. “Then you’ll drink this to prove it.” And he quickly poured the vial’s contents into a glass and seized her again.

Now she struggled indeed, fighting, clawing, shrieks bursting from her as his brute strength overpowered her. Her resistance, her panicked fury, gave proof enough of her guilt. He forced her back to the table and bent her across it.

“I was warned against you, daughter of hell!” came his hoarse, panting words. “Heaven forgive me, I let you trick me! And you swore it would not harm him. You thought we would be gone, that he would be dead, that you would inherit everything with me—you thought you could lie out of it all and keep me fooled! Well, drink this. Drink, I say!”

He towered above her, disregarded her flailing hands, held her down upon the table. Then, when a low wailing scream broke from her, he forced the glass between her lips and compelled her to swallow.

All the while, Dona Ysleta stood motionless, horror in her wide blue eyes, and her helpless and unable to intervene.

Perhaps not desiring to intervene. And from the doorway behind her, Warren watched, only half comprehending.

In the furious scramble, dishes had been tossed about, glasses crashed, the bundle on the table had come apart, its ribbons already loosened. And now under the candles flashed a glory of green and gold—the section of the crown that belonged to the Montillos, half revealed.

Don Francisco stepped back, caught sight of the emeralds, and with a fierce wild laugh caught up the golden glory and flung it at the woman. It struck her across the face as she was rising, and knocked her back. With a whimpering groan she slid from the table to the floor, and then picked herself up, while Don Francisco glared at her.

“Murderess!” he said, panting. “If it’s harmless as you say, why did you fight against it!” He caught his breath suddenly, passed a hand across his eyes, wiped froth from his lips. He stood unsteadily. An expression of perplexity, of bewilderment, crept into his pallid features.

Dona Inez came to her feet. She put one hand to her face and stared at him. A shiver passed through her body. Then she flung back her head in a wild, shuddering fit of hysterical laughter. It came in spasmodic gusts, frightful to hear.

“You drank, you drank!” came her gasping words, in between the peals of horrible mirth. “You drank with him—ha, you feel it now! You black brute, to imagine that I could love you—you drank with him! Because you lied to me—”

She shivered again, and groaning faintly, collapsed on the cold stones.

From Don Francisco burst one frantic, incoherent cry. He was clinging to the table edge, leaning over it, staring with distended eyes. His head rolled, and jerked up.

“Pardon!” he said, and stretched out one hand toward the slumped figure of Don

Juan. “Pardon—I did not know—I did not mean—”

The breath left him, and he pitched forward.

THE LITTLE GARDEN GATE IN THE WALL of the Montillo grounds clicked shut. The street was dark, deserted, starlit, as Warren staggered into it with his burden. He had emerged just in time. From the gloomy house behind was coming a ring of affrightened voices; the servants must have heard and rushed to the scene.

He staggered on, cursing his lack of strength. At the last moment Dona Ysleta had gone to pieces, struck down by the stark horror of that room. He set her down at last in an empty doorway, and flexed his aching muscles. Then he sat down beside her, chafed her hands, and leaned above her. For the first time his lips brushed hers—and her lips made responses. A fluttering sigh came from her, and her fingers closed on his.

“Ricardo! Don Ricardo!” she murmured. “What happened? Where are we? It’s all like a hideous dream, unreal, horrible!”

“This is the dream, beautiful and serene. Love that is clean as the night wind and the stars!”

“Thank heaven for you!” she said softly. “That you’re what you are! Did I faint in there?”

“You did. I got you out. We’re clear of it all.”

“Oh! We can’t stay here.” With quick movement, she came to her feet. “You must see me home, and tomorrow come to the house. What’s that you have?”

Warren picked up the bundle he had cradled in her lap as he carried her.

“That? The Montillo portion of the Crown of Coyopan. I don’t understand the whole business, but brought it along on the chance.”

“Oh!” She recoiled an instant, then stood silent. “Yes, yes,” she said slowly. “Why not? The confraternity will get the coffer. They’ll find it empty. The keys—Don Francisco has the keys. They’ll be found on him. It will be thought the whole quarrel arose because of the emeralds—that he disposed of them somehow. There’s no one to inherit, certainly, except the confraternity. It was Don Juan’s wish that this treasure should go to charity.”

“Good enough,” said Warren. “I’ll make you a fair offer. You shall place the money where you like, in his name. Your job. Agreed!”

She shivered, and they fell into step together.

CHAPTER VIII MASK AND RAPIER

A NEW CHEER AND CHARM RESTED upon the old mansion of Dona Ysleta de Soto. Gone were the female relatives in swathing black mantillas, gone was the formality, the old constrictive Spanish convention. Two of her elder relatives were here, a smiling old couple who knew when to disappear and who had no word of reproof for her American ways.

Warren was charmed with it all. This was his first sense of being alone with her and he made the most of it. He was surprised when she broke her news to him.

“I’ve sold this, all of it,” she said abruptly, as they sat in that weed-grown patio and smoked and sipped chocolate. “They know I’m going away, back to America; they’re all a little relieved, to tell the truth. I’ve shocked them horribly.”

“You would,” and Warren chuckled. “Who’s bought the place?”

“My great-uncle, Don Jose Montoyer Soto,” she said. “You don’t know him; he lives far up the valley. He’s going to take it on easy terms, and the other family property here. Are you glad?”

“To know you’re going away—with me and crown? If I didn’t feel that some of the servants were probably keeping an eye on us, I’d answer you properly!” exclaimed Warren, radiant. After last night, there was no more constraint between them. “My dear, I adore you with my whole heart!”

She surveyed him, half smiling. “Yes? Suppose you had to choose between me and the crown—this uncounted fortune in emeralds?”

“Try me,” said Warren. “I’d pitch the whole crown into the river.”

“I’m afraid you might be as good as your word, Don Ricardo!” She broke into a merry laugh. It ended in a shiver, a grimace, and her eyes clouded. “Ugh! I can’t forget last night. How close death was to us then. How it’s been close to you since you came here. How it’s close to you even now. Do you know there’s a meeting of the confraternity tomorrow night?”

“Who told you?” demanded Warren, smiling.

“It’s the regular monthly meeting. If they suspect your hand in the terrible things that have happened, look out!”

He laughed lightly, to banish the gravity from her eyes. Within himself, his heart echoed her warning.

“The Confraternity of the Crown was a bogey that didn’t prove up to par, my dear! How, may I inquire, are you hiding our joint loot?”

“In my wardrobe trunk,” she said under her breath.

THAT AFTERNOON WARREN ATTENDED THE funeral of Don Juan de Montillo y Lara in the old cathedral, which was hung with black for the occasion; his son and his daughter-in-law, by whom his death had come about, were buried elsewhere. The tragedy had stunned all Coyopan, had shattered the lethargy that enveloped this forgotten city of lotus-eaters,

and the place was crammed with whites and Indians, many of the latter chewing their eternal cocoa-leaves.

After the ceremony, in the enclosure before the cathedral bounded by the tall iron grillwork, Warren was looking about for Dona Ysleta, when he came face to face with the dapper Don Pablo Salazar, a member of the confraternity and one of the chief local poets of reputation. Don Pablo, who was a melancholy, earnest man in his late twenties, was attired as usual in frock coat, high white collar, high topper, and lacquered boots over which his bell trousers fitted snugly.

His eyes lit up at sight of Warren. He removed his hat and, silver-mounted cane hooked over his arm, mopped his brow. He had fairly curly hair and blue eyes, as became the old Gothic blood of Spain.

"Ah, Don Ricardo! A melancholy day for us all," he observed. "The noblest man in Coyopan has this day been buried."

"You say well, Senor Don," rejoined Warren. "Only yesterday afternoon I was with Don Juan. He was a pattern for gentlemen, and this mold is broken."

"Ah! Even in prose you have the tongue of a poet!" exclaimed the other admiringly. "Will you honor me with your company? I feel a drink would not be amiss."

"An excellent idea," said Warren, giving up hope of finding Dona Ysleta in the yeasty throngs.

They started together across the Plaza toward the cafe, Warren taking for granted this would be their destination.

He did not know Don Pablo well, but he did know that this was the one man among all the poets of Coyopan who had genuine lyric talent. He noted that Don Pablo seemed ill at ease, that he was darting swift glances hither and yon as though keenly worried; but he knew better than to ask questions. The gentry of Coyopan kept

their private lives, their hopes and fears and what ambitions they had, carefully hidden from outsiders.

Consequently, Warren was surprised when the other halted abruptly and spoke.

"Don Ricardo! Let us go to my house instead of the cafe, I beg of you. There are too many people about. The place is too public. I am—er—well," and Don Pablo hesitated, "it were best to avoid unpleasant meetings."

This confession seemed to confuse him, as much as it astonished the American.

The Salazar mansion was small but ornately adorned with carvings in the stones, and Warren glanced about curiously as Don Pablo admitted him. No servants were in sight, and the place had a curious air of disuse. His host personally produced a silver salver with cakes and an excellent native wine, and the two men settled down in the reception room beneath portraits of the bygone family.

"I admire you Americans of the North," broke out Don Pablo earnestly. "You are men of action; luck follows such men. You, for example, are lucky that Dona Ysleta de Soto has no close relatives, no family. Oh, it's no secret!" he added before Warren could speak. "Your attentions to her have been observed, and I for one wish you well; I drink to your success!"

He suited action to words.

"It is true," said Warren cautiously, "that I hope to induce her to become my wife."

"You have enemies because of this," said the other, and sighed. "Que lastima! What a pity that all matters of the heart cannot be smooth!"

Warren ventured a question. "Is that what worries you?"

"Alas, yes; and I am desperate. I am impelled to ask your advice, if I may."

"I should consider it a great honor, Senor Don," said Warren courteously. Don

Pablo beamed, then sighed and again shook his head.

"A pity. Yet we have the same enemies, I fear. You know Don Augustin de Beltran?"

"And his brother Don Porfirio, yes. I've met them," said Warren grimly.

"Don Augustin aspires to the hand of Dona Ysleta, so beware of him! But they have a sister, a younger sister. She is not like those two. She is divine; she is, I assure you, a veritable angel!" and Don Pablo kissed his fingers to heaven.

"But I don't understand! You speak of him as an enemy!" exclaimed Warren, staring at the other. "Yet you are friends. You both, I have heard, belong to the Confraternity of the Crown."

"So you have heard of the confraternity, eh? My friend, let me explain. When I assumed my inheritance, it was burdened with debt; this was two years ago. Since then, I have existed only by the strictest economy. Since she was a mere child, Luisita de Beltran and I have been in love. I am older than she; no matter. For us, no one else exists. She is now eighteen, and her betrothal takes place."

"To you?"

"God help me, no! No! To a rich pig from Quito, one Mandez, who is not even a caballero. True, he is of the gente descente, not of Indian blood; but he is forty and rich, a merchant, a hard-handed fellow. That is why I avoided the cafe, lest I meet him or the Beltran brothers and have a quarrel."

"Why on earth haven't you married the girl before this?"

Don Pablo spread his hands. "I have no wealth, Senor! And her brothers sell her to the highest bidder, you comprehend. They toss my poems in the fire, they insult me; Luisita is afraid they would kill me did I insist. But now I wish I had instead, and they had killed me, for life is a torment."

"Cheer up," said Warren. "She's not going to be married tomorrow—"

"It is the same thing, with us. The betrothal is as good as the wedding. So I ask you; what would you, as American of the north, do in such a case?"

Warren lit a cigarette, reflectively.

He knew that the Beltran brothers were hard-drinking, hard-living, ruthless; one was a brute, the other Don Porfirio, a depraved scoundrel. Obviously they had landed a man of their own type, and wealthy to boot, as husband for their sister.

"May I be entirely frank?" he asked. Don Pablo shrugged.

"Como no? Why not? I speak as a friend."

"I answer as a friend. You say you are poor; yet you have estates."

"Mortgaged heavily. If clear, they would support me well, yes."

"You have a portion of the Crown of Coyopan, worth a fortune."

Don Pablo started slightly. "True; it is said to have much value. I do not know about such things. It cannot be sold, for we of the confraternity have taken oaths not to sell, ever. It is a priceless heritage for our children! I shall have none, assuredly! However, I respect my oaths," he added proudly. Then he gave Warren a quick glance. "Perhaps you would like to see the relic?"

Dick Warren would, and said so plainly. Don Pablo rose, excused himself and left the room. Warren puffed excitedly.

"Somehow, somewhere, fate's at work here!" he reflected. "I don't quite see how, but it'll come. This fellow doesn't care a hang about the crown. All he cares about is his precious oath, which hasn't mattered to one or two members of the confraternity, and his girl. The question is, does she love him?"

Don Pablo reappeared, bringing a box of carved wood. He set it on the table,

opened it, and laid out before Warren a section of the Crown of Coyopan.

"I have never seen the entire crown," he said indifferently. "It must be very beautiful."

WARREN SAT ENTRANCED; THE GLORY of the thing, fragment though it was, held him fascinated now as always. He wondered what the whole crown would be if intact. Probably none of the present members of the confraternity had seen it put together, the golden pins and hinges all in place.

The exquisite sample of goldsmith's art, literally carved out of virgin gold in the most delicate volutes and curves, was a worthy setting for these emeralds of the Incas. As with the other sections he had seen, the gold held a peculiar reddish patina, indescribable and to a trained eye most marvelous to behold. Part of this piece had been replaced with brighter gold, crudely imitating the original carving.

But the stones—the stones! He touched them reverently, awed by the green limpidity of those emeralds mined more than four centuries ago. Their serenity, their calm liveliness cast a spell over the mind.

"I see you admire them," said Don Pablo lighting a cigar and sipping his wine. "A pity they can do me no good."

"They can win you all your heart's desire," said Warren, looking up. "Put them away; it's hard to talk about practical things with those under one's eye. Wait! Do you know anything about those stones? Their weight?"

"Oh, yes. There's a list in the box." Don Pablo fished out a fragment of yellowed vellum on which the stones were listed. Warren eyed it, nodded, and calculated swiftly. "Yes," he said. "Your heart's desire, my friend."

"You are not in earnest?" The other replaced the treasure in its wadded nest.

"Yes." Warren emptied his wine-glass, leaned back, took a tense, anxious gaze of the blue eyes. "First, suppose you had plenty of money and married Luisita—what would you do?"

Don Pablo flushed. "Clear my estates, put them under the management of a cousin I can trust, and take Luisita to Paris. But it pleases you to jest."

"I'm not joking, believe me."

"Don't you see a marriage is impossible?" cried the other despairingly. "She will be betrothed tomorrow, I tell you!"

"Suppose, instead, she were gone—with you?" Warren, who had appraised his man and knew the proper appeal, grinned cheerfully. "Fast horses; a hard ride to the nearest seaport. There a civil marriage, to be followed by a religious ceremony at the first opportunity, and a boat to Panama."

Uncertain, tormented by mingled despair and feverish hope, Don Pablo stared.

"Yes, yes," he muttered. "But how to do all this?"

"I'll gamble on you," said Warren crisply. "Suppose you and I could reach her this evening, could talk with her—would she elope with you, on the spot?"

Don Pablo's face twisted with emotion.

"Yes; if I could talk with her for five minutes, and if there were any way of doing it without money. Listen: The worst thing is that Don Augustin has lied to her about me. One of the servants in their house told me; he is a friend to her and me."

"If she's all you say, and if she's in love with you," said Warren shrewdly, "she'd know after five minutes with you that it was all a lie—yes, I'll take the gamble! Can you arrange to speak to her this evening?"

"Yes, through that same servant. But it's cruel to talk this way!" he burst out hopelessly. "Don't you see it's all useless?"

I've no money to buy fast horses. Then there's the question of police, of being pursued and overtaken—"

"The police in these parts," said Warren, chuckling, "aren't any cause for worry. A little slice of graft, eh?"

"Oh, yes, of course—if I had anything to slip them!" exclaimed Don Pablo.

"You're a true poet, and just as practical as most poets." Warren smiled. "Do you do anything well, beside writing poetry?"

The other brightened. "Yes, I have medals for fencing! I am a very good fencer, the champion of the Republic!" His eyes clouded again. "But that doesn't make money."

Warren produced pencil and paper, figured for a moment, wrote down a fair sum, and handed it to Don Pablo, whose eyes bulged.

"What is this, Don Ricardo?"

"Yours, if you want it. Enough cash to see you through, the balance in a check you can cash in Panama."

Don Pablo drew a deep breath. He looked up, met the smiling gaze of Warren for a moment, and gestured helplessly.

"I don't understand at all. How will I get this money?"

"From Dona Ysleta," said Warren diplomatically, "though I'll actually advance it. As a loan on this section of the crown, which will be security. It is, actually, a purchase, the price being more than any loan would be; but purchase is barred by your honor. There's nothing in oaths to prevent a loan, I take it?"

"Mira! Mira! Wonderful!" Don Pablo went with joy. He leaped from the chair, embraced Warren frantically; tears coursed down his cheeks, laughter shook him. He filled the glasses again and emptied his own at a gulp, danced about the room, suddenly halted and stared at Warren.

"It is true? Did I hear aright? Is it real?"

"Absolutely!"

Don Pablo embraced him anew, thrust the carved wooden box upon him, and with some difficulty was reduced to coherence. Warren impressed upon him the necessity of utmost care.

"Bring your own box to Dona Ysleta's house in an hour," he said, "We'll draw up and sign the necessary papers. And cover the box when you bring it, too! It's against all local custom for a caballero to carry a package in the street, but you must do it."

"I will," meekly promised Don Pablo. "And I'll arrange about tonight. The Indio there can let us in by the side gate; he'll give Dona Luisita a note. Ah, wonderful!"

"Hold on, now," exclaimed Warren. "Arrange for the purchase of the horses; you'll have money after the papers are signed. As for tonight, we're liable to run into trouble if the Beltran brothers hear of this."

"True," and Don Pablo sobered. "Ah! With this sum I can clear off all the debts and have plenty left. What matters a little trouble?"

"If there's any, there'll be more than a little," said Warren grimly. "The first thing is not to do the expected. Have you any of your ancestors' clothes? Any old trunks?"

"A dozen or more. Why?"

Warren told him, and Don Pablo was in ecstasies. Upon this they parted.

DONA YSLETA HEARD WARREN'S STORY, glanced over the papers he presented for her signature, and looked up at him in laughing amazement.

"Don Ricardo, you're no less than a genius—talk about conquistadores! You come here to Coyopan, and the crown just drops into your hand!"

“Naturally, I’m the first person who thought of getting it as a wedding present for you,” said Warren. “Do you realize that with this, we now have six of the eight parts of the Crown of Coyopan? Positively. All in your little wardrobe trunk. The most wonderful jewels in the whole wide world, and in keeping of the most wonderful woman! And I have what’s worth more than the woman and the emeralds; what none of the old conquistadores themselves ever had.”

“What?” she demanded, smiling. “Unlimited impudence?”

“No. The love of such a woman as you,” he said gravely. “Without it, nothing was worth while. With it, all earth becomes paradise. Now, young lady, will you kindly sign those papers and rake up what cash you have on hand, before Don Pablo arrives with loot?”

“Gladly. I know Luisita, and she’s a darling. You’re doing a good action this night.”

“It’s not done yet.”

“True. And you’re running a fearful risk. If you were caught in that house—” She broke off, and shrugged. “It would not be a question of law, but of private vengeance. And the vengeance of the Beltrons would be horrible, horrible!”

A grim smile touched the lips of a man, crouching unseen on the stairway. A brown man, a Quichua Indian. The same servant who had admitted Warren. Grim was his smile and cruel, as though those last words had wakened all the Indian-cruelty in his heart.

He had listened intently in all Warren had said. He was one of the very few natives who understood English; he was intelligent—too intelligent. He had traveled afar, even into the United States. Now he was a servant for this house.

For a moment he gazed pondering, smiling, his snake-like eyes glittering about.

Then he went into the patio and called. Another servant came.

“Take my place for an hour at the door,” he said. “I am going on an errand for Dona Ysleta.”

Rather, he should have said, an errand for Satan, who lived in the Beltran house.

To be continued...