

## THE CROWN OF COYOPAN

### By H. Bedford-Jones

*Incan gold and emeralds looted from a conquered people. Deadly intrigue. Arcane rituals and ancient evils mean danger for an American on the trail of treasure.*

#### CHAPTER IX HONOR DEMANDS BLOOD

**W**HEN DON PABLO LEFT THE HOUSE OF Dona Ysleta with Warren, he was treading on air. The carved wooden box, the emeralds of Incas had been turned over. Everything, he announced, was arranged. At nine that evening, he and Warren would be admitted by the side door of the Beltran mansion, which let him into the patio. After this, they must run their chances with Luisita and destiny.

So said, so done. At nine that evening, a stolid Indian was holding the horses, up the street. To a whistle, the door in the wall opened softly. Don Pablo handed money to a brown-faced servant, and the two entered. The Indian showed no surprise at their bizarre appearance, but led them along a narrow corridor, where a dim light burned, to the patio beyond.

“He says,” Don Pablo translated to Warren, “that she got my note and will come here. They are just finishing dinner now.”

Don Pablo was assured, aggressive, all ablaze with hope and eagerness. The patio showed as a huge square courtyard, paved, a small fountain in the center. It was well lit by the windows of the dining room along one side, whence also issued a subdued roar of voices and laughter. Many guests were on hand tonight.

The two men waited. They were grotesque figures. Warren wore a plumed hat and a cloak that hid him to his heels. Don Pablo was booted and spurred, a rapier at his hip; he wore an astonishing array of ancient garments, topped by a huge hat with broken white plume. Both were masked, and

the lyric poet was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Warren was not. He felt like a fool in this costume. However, it would preserve him from recognition in case things went amiss. He had planned it to that end. Also, the romantic touch had lifted Don Pablo to the heights of swaggering self-assurance, which pleased Warren. Further, Warren was pleased with the cane that he carried; it felt good to his hand. It was a heavy Brazilwood stick, like iron, and promised to be a great comfort if anything went wrong with the evening’s program.

A light, fluttering step, a slim shape, and here was Luisita, a sweet childish figure all in white, stopping short at sight of the two odd shapes. Don Pablo quickly went to her, and Warren watched with curiosity as they talked; the gestures were more eloquent than the murmurous voices. When one low, glad cry broke out from the girl, and Don Pablo took her in his arms, Warren chuckled.

“Romance for ever! Give me a plume and a cloak and a rapier, who could lose? Not to mention a bit of silver in the pocket—ah! Now for the needful.”

An imperative gesture from Don Pablo, and he stepped up to them and bowed.

“Dona Luisita, let me present the good angel who has made all this wonderful thing possible! A caballero of the finest, my friend Don Ricardo Warren!”

Dick Warren murmured the polite phrases, then abandoned them.

“No time to waste on courtesy,” he said abruptly. “Are you getting off?”

“Oh, yes, yes!” breathed the girl, excited. “But I can’t go like this—I must have a cloak, my jewels—”

“Jewels be hanged,” cut in Warren. “We can give you a cloak, anything!”

“It is impossible,” she said. “Wait. Five minutes, no more—look! I can’t wear them!”

She lifted her skirt to show tiny satin slippers. Then, with a quick, eager laugh, she was gone. No doubt about her willingness. Don Pablo swung around and clasped Warren’s arm.

“Blessings on you, Don Ricardo! She has been lifted from hell to heaven, even as I am—”

“You get her lifted in a saddle quickly as she shows up,” struck in Warren. “Come on back to the corridor and out of this lighted area. I don’t like delays!”

He strode across the open space, passed the fountain, and came to the shadowed opening of the little corridor. The noise in the dining room had died down, and he disliked this comparative silence. To his irritation, Don Pablo did not follow him, but remained where he was, no doubt to meet Luisita when she came.

Regretting the fleeting, wasted moments, Warren stood in the shadowed blackness waiting. There was a tinkle of music; the thrum of a piano, the mellow voice of guitars. A waltz. Somewhere in the house was, of course, a ballroom.

Suddenly, without warning, something happened.

What it was, Warren could not tell. The figure of Don Pablo disappeared; there was scuffle, then a voice rang out, short and savage and shrill.

“Got him!”

To his horror, Warren beheld a group of figures at the edge of the lighted patio, where Don Pablo had been. He knew this voice; it belonged to Don Porfirio de

Beltran, the younger brother. Now the heavier tones of Don Augustin sounded.

“Ha! It’s that damned Zalazar—look at his costume! Good crack you gave him, Mendez; he’ll be no trouble for a while.”

“Shall we throw him into the street?” shrilled Don Porfirio.

“Not much, my brother!” The elder rasped out a volley of oaths. “We’ll teach this scoundrel to violate the privacy of our house! Caballero or not, he shall pay. You, Mendez, shall have your will of him—it is your due. Carry him into the old room under the stairs that used to be the library, Porfirio, but first make sure of Luisita; lock the little cat in her room if she’s up to anything. I’ll get lights and join you, Mendez. The fine Don Pablo can scream all he likes in that room, and no one will hear. And careful, everyone! Don’t let a soul know. Let them make merry, while we make this rascal dance!”

THE OATHS, THE VOICES, THE FOOTSTEPS ebbed away. Warren, heartsick, found himself alone in the shadows. There had been no chance to help, to do anything, but fortunately his presence was unsuspected.

He knew the incredibly brutal nature of the Beltrams. If Mendez were of the same stamp, Don Pablo was going to find himself in a literal hell; no doubt they had all wined well, and were in the mood to torture their victim.

Warren left the shadows. He stepped out across the patio into the darkness on the farther side, where a doorway entered the house. As he approached it, this door swung open. Two figures emerged—Luisita and another.

“No, no!” the girl was exclaiming vigorously. “Let me alone. Porfirio—don’t you dare lay a hand on me! Oh! Pablo, Pablo!”

She was struggling with her brother, who laughed as he gripped her.

"No use calling your beloved Pablo, little one. He's safe, and your bridegroom is going to make him safer. Would you like to see Mendez carving him? Then—ah!" His voice shrilled in pain and anger: "You little cat, I'll teach you to pull a knife—"

Just then Warren came upon them, and the Brazilwood stick thudded home. Struck above the ear, Don Porfirio collapsed in a limp, inert mass. The girl, panting, drew back; she was darkly cloaked, covered now from head to foot.

"What—who—is it you, Don Ricardo?" she faltered, a tiny stiletto in her hand.

"Yes. Wait a minute now."

The cloak Warren wore was ancient, ragged. He tore a strip from it, went to one knee, and fell to work. The helpless Porfirio was efficiently if cruelly gagged, which would stop any coherent speech or cry; then was tightly lashed ankle to wrist with his own belt and kerchief. Warren rose and dragged him into a dark corner, and came back.

"He's safe, *Senorita*. They came unexpectedly and knocked Pablo out. Brace up, now!" he added sharply at her low moaning cry. "I need your help. We haven't lost the game yet. Don Augustin took him inside, to what used to be the library, under the stairs. Tell me how to reach it."

She stiffened a trifle, and obeyed. Then she caught Warren's arm.

"They'll kill him!" she groaned under her breath. "Senor, I know they will! Mendez said he would if Pablo got in his way. Augustin threatened to kill him—"

"They'll not," said Warren. "I'll bring him out of there, but I want you to go, whatever you do. Otherwise, you'll spoil everything. Do this, and trust me."

"I—I will, Don Ricardo," she promised, and despite the quaver in her

voice, Warren had to be satisfied and hope for the best.

He watched her out of sight into shadows, then turned to the doorway close at hand. Easy to lose his head, now, and he must not. He paused, fought down his excited pulse and then slowly opened the door.

A rear hallway, here ahead, empty; a long table loaded with hats and caps and coats. The music swelled more loudly as he entered, and a buzz of gay laughing voices reached him. Losing no time, he advanced swiftly, stick in hand; there was the double doorway she had mentioned, draped by heavy curtains. He went to it and paused, looking between the hangings.

Here was a glimpse of the main hall and a glorious marble staircase, with an enormous chandelier of a thousand lusters suspended from the ceiling. To the right, beneath the ascent of the staircase, was the door he sought. It was a scant ten feet away. As Warren looked, the door opened. He shrank back, for two men came into sight. As Warren looked, this door opened. One was Don Augustin, the other was Don Jose Flores.

A massive man, Flores, with square-cut black beard and heavy, florid features. He was rubbing his hands and laughing, and his laugh was boisterous and evil as himself. He was Mayor of Coyopan, a member of the Confraternity of the Crown, and no good was said of him by those who knew him best.

"No, no," he was saying to the burly Don Augustin. "I could not very well stay to enjoy the fun. I am too well known, you comprehend; my official position. Besides, this is not my affair. You do well to leave it to the hands of *Senor Mendez*. I'm going home and desire to know nothing of what may happen."

Don Augustin paused in the doorway. "Don't forget our talk before

dinner. My informant did not exactly understand everything that was said; he heard enough, however, to show that this American was helping Don Pablo. I suspect that American of being more active than we give him credit for.”

“You are absolutely wrong,” said Don Jose emphatically. “He did, perhaps speak to Salazar as one friend to another. Even if your spy had learned more he would not have learned anything to the discredit of Don Ricardo, I am convinced. Well, good night to you! However, I shall talk with him tomorrow,” he added as he turned away.

“And to you. Vaya con Dios!” rejoined Don Augustin, who stepped back and closed the door, and was gone from sight.

**W**ARREN WAS POSITIVELY PARALYZED by those words. Spy! Informant! He saw now why Don Pablo had been seized. Someone had betrayed the plan. He himself, luckily, had somehow escaped suspicion, except on the part of Don Augustin. Nothing definite was known.

The devil! He suddenly realized that Don Jose was coming straight for the curtains. No doubt, coming for hat and coat. There was no escape, no evasion!

One swift glance and Warren shrank back against the side wall, making himself desperately small, gently drawing the curtain about him to hide his figure. Then happened one of those singular chances which sometimes turn the whole course of destiny.

An Indian servant, tray in hand, came hastily from the doorway to the left. He did not see Don Jose at all, but caromed squarely into him. With one low, furious oath, Don Jose struck the man heavily and knocked him off his feet.

The hapless servant, in his fall, pitched headlong into the curtain and the unseen figure behind it, and went sprawling

on the floor. Cowed, like most of the Quichua race, by centuries of slavery and oppression, the Indian bleated out terrified excuses and scrambled away.

Don Jose came on through the curtains, picked his hat and coat from the table, and departed. He did not see Warren at all, for the American stood motionless, one curtain half about him. As Don Jose departed, the curtain fell. Warren did not move; he stood with mouth open and gasping, his features pallid and distorted. Only with a frightful effort did he keep from collapsing. Luckily, the Brazilwood stick saved him.

For that Indian, butting him squarely in the groin, had knocked the breath out of him and left him momentarily paralyzed.

After a moment his wind returned, and he stepped out. Then he realized that he was hurt, crushed between the impact of that hurtling body and the stone wall behind him; no great injury, possibly, but enough to make every motion an agonized effort.

He forced himself on, passed through the curtains, and gained the door beyond. Masked and cloaked and hatted, he dared not risk being seen. He opened the door cautiously, glanced within, then pulled it farther open and slipped inside. He closed the massive iron-bound door without a sound. One glance had served to show that the group on the other side of this room was quite oblivious to him. He leaned back against the door and repressed a groan of pain.

The room was large. It was littered to right and left with piles of broken furniture. On the far side, two oil lamps were placed on a chair. Don Augustin was just lighting a lantern, which he hung to a hook high in the wall, off at the left side. This light struck full upon the figure of Don Pablo Salazar, in his spurred boots and stripped to the waist.

A man on either side held him firmly against the far wall. Each gripped an arm; he

was helpless in their grasp. Before him stood Mendez. Not a tall man, but wide and squat and powerful, with a malevolent grin that split his swarthy features asunder. Even in his evening attire he was a shape of horror. He was exchanging jests with two friends who were holding the prisoner.

Sick and shot through with agony, Warren sank down on a bench nearby. The sickness gripped him and shut out everything in swirling chaos. Act—he must act, he must do something—and he could not. The voice of Mendez lifted and pierced through his faintness, a snarl that was bitter with mockery.

“Ah, so you are the good Salazar, the poet, the son of the conquistadores! Well, Pizarro was the son of a swineherd, and so am I. Another Pablo, you understand? Pablo Mendez the bridegroom. If I’d known who you were, out there, I’d have hit you harder.”

Don Pablo, pressed against the stone wall, eyed the man with a proud gaze. A spot of blood had appeared on his cheek, running down his hurt head.

“You should stick to your swine, cholo,” he said with slow contemptuous words. He had struggled, as his heaving chest testified. Mendez grinned anew, leaned forward, and struck him open handed across the face, twice.

“Coward!” said Don Pablo. “A cur only bites when quite safe.”

“Ha! You’ll sing another tune presently,” said Mendez, and slipped out a knife that glittered as the thumbed it. “You’ve sneaked into another man’s house, masked and rigged out with fancy clothes, intent on abduction. Well, the lady belongs to me, and I’ll see to it that she’s protected against you in future. With your cheeks slit and the soles of your feet split, you’ll think twice about violating the honor of—”

“Of a swineherd!” struck Don Pablo.

“By way of preparation, take the swineherd’s initial with you to the grave,” snarled Mendez and moved swiftly. His hand struck down and up again. Upon the chest of Don Pablo sprang blood in the shape of the letter M. Mendez stepped back, laughing.

“A good knife, Don Augustin!” he exclaimed. “And a sure hand. Note that the skin is barely slit—just enough to bring blood. We’ll rub a little lampblack into it later, so the mark will endure—”

**W**ARREN TRIED TO RISE. A WAVE OF nausea forced him back; his head swam and for an instant the world went black. The slam of the door almost at his side roused him. An outburst of voices, oaths, exclamations, then one clear voice above the others—a girl’s voice. He looked up, startled, dismayed, aghast.

Dona Luisita was there, running forward, darting at the group of men. A wild cry of horror burst from her. It echoed in Warren’s heart. The little fool—to disobey him, to come here! Now there was the devil to pay, indeed. Warren got to his feet, staggered, caught hold of a broken stool and waited for his head to clear.

The girl, like an avenging fury, hurled herself upon the men holding Don Pablo. She was upon them all before they had recovered from their consternation at her abrupt appearance—upon them, through them, striking with her paltry, little stiletto at the two captors.

These, hastily, loosed their victim. One howled with pain, the other frantically beat off the girl’s attack. Don Pablo caught up his cloak and sword, bared the blade, and lunged forward.

Mendez, still holding his blade, caught Dona Luisita by the wrist and jerked her quickly to one side. Don Augustin, with an oath drove forward, but he was too late. For, whipping around, Don Pablo’s lunge

went home, and his rapier skewered Mendez through.

It all happened swiftly and terribly, in the fraction of a second. Mendez screamed and caught at his breast. The rapier broke off with his falling weight. Don Pablo, sweeping one arm about the girl, drew her back against the wall, the broken sliver of steel in his other hand, cloak flung over his shoulder.

“My answer, swineherd!” blared out exultant, defiant voice.

Don Augustin bellowed an oath, leaped in, sprang away frantically before the lunging sliver of steel. The other two men closed in on Mendez, supporting him. He lifted an arm, pointing, bubbled out some incoherent word, and his arm fell. His head fell forward and a trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

“Dead! He is dead!” cried one of the two, straightening up. A knife flashed in his grip. Don Augustin spoke in a low voice, and Warren saw him pick up a pistol.

“Pablo! To the door!”

The words burst from Warren. As he spoke he hurled the broken stool at Don Augustin, as all the men looked around at the new voice. The stool struck the broken chair and upset the two oil lamps with a crash, swept chair and lamps and flaming oil into the legs of Don Augustin, and obscurity enveloped everything.

The pistol exploded. Shouts, oaths, a scramble of feet filled the air; the oil sent forth a murky smoke as Don Augustin stamped out the flame. The pistol roared again, and Warren felt the wind of the hot bullet. The light of one lantern was dim.

Starting across the room, his steps uncertain, Warren was aware of Don Pablo and the girl, almost upon him.

“Get out, get away!” he exclaimed. “I’ll get you a start. Don’t worry about me. Be off and on your road with her, Pablo!”

As Don Pablo and Luisita rushed on past for the door, three dim figures scrambled at Warren with ringing shouts and excited oaths. If unsure of his legs he was more of himself now. He heard the massive door slam, knew the others were off and away, and met the attack with flailing Brazilwood.

That iron-like stick drew howls of pain. Don Augustin’s pistol erupted almost in his face; as he lashed out he blessed the black mask that took the burning powder and saved his skin. His blow struck Don Augustin across the wrist, knocked the pistol away, checked the rush. A crack, slap over the face fetched a scream from one of the others. He backed away toward the door, tripped over something and went into a headlong sprawl.

One of the three crashed down on top of him, gripped for his throat, and found it. Warren beat him away and came to one knee, groped for his stick and whanged at a figure towering over him. The figure staggered back.

Up now, and at the door. With a heart-leap he remembered there had been a huge key on the outside. He drew the door open, slid out, slammed it again just as Don Augustin came at it with a rush—and the key turned.

One glance around; all was clear. Next moment he was in the cloak hall. His hat was gone, but his mask remained. Hugging himself in the ancient cloak, Warren caught up the first hat in sight, jammed it over his head, and made for the patio. He flung open the door and stepped out—to find himself in brilliant light, a dozen dancers all about, guitar players sitting on the fountain edge.

He stopped short, absolutely aghast. From the street outside he caught the ringing hooves of horses pounding past. He remembered that Don Pablo had said if would be necessary to ride by the house—

the two of them had got clean away, then! Not by this route, however.

The music had stopped; the dancers had come to pause, one and all were gaping at the cloaked, masked figure. Warren's brain came to life.

"Senores!" he exclaimed, emulating the drawing, whining accent of Quito. "I regret to interfere with your amusement, but there has been a sad accident."

With a gulp he suddenly remembered Don Porfirio. He looked under the arches at one side. The dark, bound figure was still there—evidently, some whimsy had carried the dancers out here upon swift impulses, but they had not yet discovered that figure.

"Don Augustin requests your presence in the drawing-room," he went on, stepping out and across the patio toward the corridor. Murmurs, questions, arose on all sides. "You will kindly hasten to join him, senores! I thank you for your courtesy—"

And he was gone into the little corridor before anyone could think fast enough to detain him.

Beyond, the gate opened; the door in the wall, more correctly. He stepped out into the street. It was deserted, starlit, quiet. He shed his cloak, and after it, the hat, threw his mask after them both and set out for his hotel—but not briskly. Pain racked him, his bruised abdomen was stiffening, walking was difficult.

"Looks like tomorrow in bed for me," he reflected, and then broke into a laugh. "And cheap at the price—why not? This killing will be hushed up somehow, lest too much of the truth come out. If it isn't, I'll see that it is. The sixth segment of the crown is earned—and well earned, if you ask me."

He paused, lit a cigarette, inhaled, and shook his head as he started on.

"Romance, eh?" he muttered. "Never again. Romance be hanged. But I wonder—who betrayed us? Who betrayed us?"

He was to receive an answer later; a terrible answer.

## CHAPTER X

### THE VISION IN THE GOLDEN CUP

HAVING SENT DONA YSLETA A NOTE that all was well but that his ankle was twisted, Dick Warren spent most of the next day in bed. His ankles were both all right, but being deeply in love, it seemed more romantic to blame a twisted ankle for his enforced absence than a painfully bruised stomach.

He was badly bruised, but there the damage ended. During the afternoon he obtained what was no less than a miracle for the Coyopan tavern—a hot bath. This aided him greatly, and, wrapped in a dressing gown, he made himself comfortable in a chair and set about starting up his delayed correspondence.

Of the four hundred and fifty emeralds set in the Crown of Coyopan, amounting to nearly sixteen hundred carats, undoubtedly the most precious collection of emeralds in the world, he now had three-fourths. Two segments of the crown he lacked, and was likely to lack for a long time, since one was in the possession of Don Jose Flores, and the other in that of Don Augustin de Beltran.

Warren was busily writing when a heavy tread sounded in the hall, and a knock at his door. At his careless word the door opened and Don Jose Flores stepped into the room. The little Coyopan hotel did not go in for any formality.

Instantly, Warren recollected the conversation he had overheard, and prepared for it; until now, it had slipped his mind. Don Augustin suspected him, Don Jose did not, but was going to talk with him just the same.

He had met the man, and that was all.

“Ah, Senor Don, welcome, welcome!” he exclaimed warmly. “This house is your own; this room and all in it are wholly at your service—”

The usually stately compliments and flourishes were exchanged. Don Jose was the city Mayor, and a man of dignity, in his early forties. A huge man, with square-trimmed black beard and massive mien, he was grimly dominant. He was not one of the poets of Coyopan. In fact, he belied both his name and his ancestry, for his back was squarely turned on the church, and he lived in open sin with apparent gusto.

“Ah, Don Ricardo!” he said, when compliments were over. “Do I disturb you at work?”

“At my poetical labors, Senor,” and Warren laughed. “I’ve been at them the whole day. I am writing an epic, you know. It is a pleasure to be disturbed by you.”

Don Jose grunted. He puffed out his heavy cheeks and produced fat cigars. His tobacco fields were extensive and profitable.

“As the political chief of the city,” he said, refusing a seat, “I came here to satisfy myself on one point, and I am satisfied. It was suggested to me that you, being an American of the North, might have some connection with the series of calamities that has occurred recently in Coyopan. Don Ricardo, two words with you have shown me how ridiculous was this suggestion. I flatter myself that I know a criminal when I see one, and a true caballero when I see one. Accept, I pray you, a thousand apologies for this injustice!”

Warren, behind laughing protests, wakened to the fact that this man had a peculiar brain, that his mentality had an odd twist.

“Now, in the capacity of Don Jose Flores,” went on his visitor waving his fat cigar and beaming, “allow me to offer you

my own hospitality, in the way of amends. An odd and rather fascinating possibility has occurred to me; I should like to discuss it with you. My house is close by. Will you come home with me and enjoy a glass of wine?”

Beyond a mere introduction, Warren had not exchanged two words with Don Jose before now; but if he were astonished by the invitation he was also highly curious to see the house of which he had heard a good deal. He was delighted, and said so frankly.

“Pardon me for three minutes,” he said, “and I’ll be dressed.”

He was well able to walk, as he knew; the stimulation of a twisted ankle would account for any lack of briskness, and he adopted the ruse immediately. In five minutes they set off together.

**T**HE HOUSE OF FLORES, WHICH LAY JUST off the plaza behind the cathedral, was, according to rumor, a place of dark iniquity. Thanks to his mode of life, Don Jose was something of an outcast socially.

This did not prevent his being an active member of the Confraternity of the Crown; nor, so far as politics and male friends went, did not injure him in the slightest. The dusky harem and swarm of children that inhabited the gorgeous old mansion were complacently viewed by the average citizen of Coyopan, and there were dark hints that Don Jose was a true descendant of the conquistadores in more ways than one.

If he had a name for brutality where Indians were concerned, that was nothing new.

As Warren might have known, the reality was disappointing upon reaching their objective. It was the usual mansion of old cut stone, directly behind the cathedral; with the usual coat-of-arms carved everywhere, the usual deft, hang-dog Indian

servants, the usual gloomy interiors with their seventeenth-century contents intact. And that was all. Not a sign of lissome Indian maidens of unclad offspring. Done Jose, naturally, kept his private life strictly private.

His library was a spacious, airy room with an indefatigable air of being much used by men; no doubt, for political purposes. A bottle of admirable Chilean wine, a box of superb cigars, and Don Jose came at once to business.

“Senor Warren, you’re an American of the North. You are, no doubt, aware of the mysterious and horrible tragedies which have afflicted Coyopan recently. You were at the hacienda of Don Pedro Benalkebir when it was burned and he died from it. Shortly before Don Jaime Mondano left these parts suddenly you were with him. You witnessed the dramatic happenings at the hacienda of Dr. Lores.”

“Are you inferring that I had anything to do with those events?” demanded Dick Warren. The other waved his hand impatiently.

“No, no, Don Ricardo! But there were mysteries involved. The other night a tragedy at the home of Don Juan de Montillo. Only last night, again, a strange affair at the Beltran residence. It has occurred to me that you might explain these things!”

“I?” Startled, Warren searched that grimly massive countenance.

“Yes.” Don Jose leaned forward, spoke earnestly, confidently. “I understand that all your countrymen are familiar with police methods and the exploits of your G-men in running down criminals.

“I am well acquainted with life in your country,” he went on, complacently, “for we get many of your moving pictures here which give an idea of your daily activities. As one who has witnessed the war against gangsters and crime of all kinds, you

must have formed some theories about recent happenings here. Such things, mysterious and terrible to us, must be to you an open book. For example, just what took place at the Beltran house last night? A man was killed, an accident, they say. I know better, but the matter has been hushed up. Well, I ask you, just what took place there?”

Listening, Warren relaxed. He perceived that Don Jose was speaking in perfect good faith. He became aware of a certain ponderous simplicity in the man. He leaned back, puffed at his cigar and yielded to an impulse of puckish, impish recklessness.

“Of course, I know only what I’ve heard,” he responded, smiling. “If I were at home, with crime on all sides of me, I could look into my crystal ball and tell you everything that happened.”

“Oh! Oh!” A cry broke from the other. He was astonished to find Don Jose intent and wide-eyed, staring at him in some agitation. “Then you’re a seer, a magician! You can see in the crystal all that passes!”

“A mere trifle.” Warren airily waved his cigar. “Why, in parts of America where the license fees aren’t too high, we have mystics and prophets on every street corner!”

Almost instantly he regretted his jesting words. Not only did Don Jose take them seriously, but behind his massive features was gathering a storm of excited interest, conjecture, ardent purpose. Warren noticed for the first time that the man’s eyes showed white between pupil and lower lid; too often an indication of relentless cruelty.

“Then, Don Ricardo, you’re one of us!” came the breathless exclamation. “You, too, pursue the great work! And I took you to be a fool of a poet. I should have known better. Look! Can you gaze into the crystal or the magic fluid, and tell for example what passed in the house of Don Juan de Montillo the other night?”

"Of course. However, that's quite impossible here." Warren uneasily tried to evade the consequences of his whimsical words. "Without my own crystal or magic fluid I could not do it. Let us, I beg, speak of other matters."

"No, no! Thunders of heaven, no." The ham-like fist of Don Jose crashed down on the table. "I comprehend your reluctance, my friend, but in this house you are safe. One can speak of such things here." He winked, and gulped his wine. "Tomorrow night, at nine o'clock. You shall see something, I promise you!"

"Eh?" Warren frowned, perplexed. The other leaned forward, dark eyes all aglow, a flush on his swarthy skin.

"Here, at this house; the two of us, you and I! Between us need be no secrets, no evasion. I know something of the art myself, let me tell you!" His voice dropped to a low rumble. "I can make for you to use what no one else can make. I alone! The draught of the Sun, do you understand? The magic mirror of the Incas, today a lost secret, for there is no one sufficiently gifted to make use of it. But you can do it. I will summon the old priest of the Sun to assist. He will be delighted; at your disposal will be every facility of the art. Ah, it will be magnificent, magnificent! You have the gift. I shall supply everything else!"

He spoke with feverish energy, licking his lips, smacking them, filled with a strange and terrible ecstasy. Curiosity laid hold upon Warren. He did not know what it was all about, but could not well admit it.

"The secret rites of the Sun, of the Incas," went on Don Jose. "I found the secret in manuscripts left by my ancestors. In conjunction with this ancient priest of the Indian faith I have conducted many curious experiments. In fact, some of the results have been incredible, but I never succeeded in making use of the draught of the Sun. For

that, a special genius is required. You have it. You shall share in this glorious empire."

"You honor me," said Warren.

"The honor is mine!" declaimed the other excitedly. "This house is your own, and all in it—no empty words, my friend! Tomorrow night, here, at nine. Certain preparations are necessary, but all can be arranged by then."

Rather bewildered, Warren took his departure.

HE HAD LET HIMSELF IN FOR SOMETHING, and was at a loss to comprehend just what it was. Concluding that wisdom was the better part of valor, he went straight to the house of Dona Ysleta de Soto. After a short wait in the reception room, she appeared, laughing.

"Well! You'll be glad to know that I've been packing most of the day, getting a few trunks ready with personal effects to send ahead of us! So everything went well last night?"

"Oh, like a charm!" said Warren lightly. "No trouble at all. Don Pablo got off with the lady of his heart, and I understand there's no pursuit or—eh? What's the matter?" he added, conscious of her quizzical regard.

"No trouble at all, eh?" she said. "But you have a twisted ankle, though I didn't notice you limping as you came down the street. And I hear there were some very queer happenings at the Beltran house last night. It was even rumored that someone was killed there?"

Warren flushed, then broke into a laugh.

"Oh, all right! I did hope to save you from worry. Here's the yarn." He related all that had happened. "Luckily, the thing is hushed up. Don Jose just told me as much; he's curious himself to know what took place, it appears. This means that there'll be

no pursuit, and the lovers will be safe and happy.”

“Don Jose?” Her brows lifted. “You mean Don Jose Flores?”

“Yes. And that brings me to what I came here for primarily, which is to get your help and advice again. I’ve just been at the notorious Flores mansion, and didn’t see a single indication of iniquity, to my surprise.”

He placed the whole dilemma before her. To his surprise, her face changed. Her blue eyes became wide and startled, a swift pallor swept over her features.

“Confound it, you needn’t look at me like that!” he finished. “I only meant to have some fun with the old rascal. Now I’m in for something, and I trust you’ll be able to tell me what it is.”

“My poor, poor Ricardo!” she murmured, and caught her breath. “You cannot go there tomorrow night—no, you cannot!”

“Easy, now. Why not?” he demanded, frowning a little. “What I need, young lady, is information.”

“And not orders? I know!” She smiled sadly and touched his hand. “You have come to Coyopan and pierced into the hidden things behind the placid here; now you have touched something dark and terrible. Did you ever hear the old saying that next door to the church is the devil’s chapel?”

He shook his head. “What do you mean? Surely the man is sane?”

“Oh, of course! Far too sane altogether,” she rejoined. “Look, Ricardo. Years ago he had a lovely wife, from the Ribera family. She ran away with an army officer; it was a great scandal. Don Jose became bitter. He plunged into business and made money, into politics, into other things. He insulted the church and society. He keeps a harem of Indian girls in that house now, and strange and dreadful stories are told of him. He is a cruel and evil man, Ricardo. If

you go there tomorrow night, you’ll run a fearful risk.”

He looked at her steadily.

“What, are you concerned for me?”

“Forgive me.” Her fingers tightened on his wrist. “You’re the finest man I know, Ricardo; it would break my heart to have anything happen to you.”

“Still, I shall have to go,” he said, and smiled, his gray eyes twinkling. “Do you think I’m going to stay away for fear of what may happen to me? I’m not such a weak stick. Anyhow, what’s it about? What’s the meaning of it all?”

“Magic,” she said in a low voice. “Black magic. The forbidden art.”

“Oh, is that all!” Dick Warren laughed a little. “I see. That’s why he jumped at my words. One of these hocus-pocus boys, is he? Well, my dear, I’m some wizard with a crystal ball myself, it seems to me. Anyhow I’ll give it a whirl and report back what happens.”

He spoke lightly, gaily, a little surprised at her grave manner and evident belief in the black art.

“Very well; I can’t help it, if you’re determined,” she said slowly. “But will you do one thing for me, because I love you, because I ask it?”

He stopped and kissed her fingers. “Yes, my dear. What?”

She slid a hand beneath her blouse and brought out a little gold chain that had hung around her neck, with a tiny golden cross on it.

“Let me put this on your neck and keep it there. Promise?”

He looked down at it. It was a queer little old cross, carven and decorated most curiously: a fanciful thing that she must have had as a child, he thought. As he nodded, she slipped it about his neck and fastened it, and tucked it out of sight beneath his collar.

“That’s a promise, then?”

“Why, sure, if you wish,” he said awkwardly. “If it’ll make you feel any better, I’ll wear it but I can’t say I count much on protection from it.”

“You may, before you’re through with this affair,” said she, sadly.

“Why? Do you know what goes on at his house?”

“That nobody knows except the Indians who take part. But I’ve heard hideous rumors, hints, stories!”

“Day after tomorrow, then, you’ll hear the truth, uncensored and unexpurgated!” he rejoined, laughing. “So prepare for the worst and whet your curiosity! After all, I’m following a hunch here. You know, Don Jose has a portion of the crown.”

“I know,” she said. “And I’m beginning to hate the very thought of those emeralds, looted from the Incas amid blood and horror and treachery! Only a curse can follow them, my dear.”

“Once they’re in your hands, you’ll find otherwise; you blame everything and everyone around you. Don’t worry! Remember, I’m not falling for any abracadabra work.”

**T**HE WORDS LINGERED IN HIS MIND: “NEXT door to the church is the devil’s chapel!” But in sober fact, Dick Warren did not take her words very seriously, or her fears.

To him, Don Jose was just another mystic, a bit off balance thanks to his domestic unhappiness or misfortune, and this was explanation enough. He was no stranger himself to extra-mundane experiments, which he viewed with a certain air of cynical detachment. There were things he could not explain, and he let it go at that.

“The old boy, with his square-cut beard, looks like a priest of Baal or Moloch,” he told himself. “If he has stepped backward into Indian magic, he’s probably

degenerated in more than one way, which may not be so good. I’ve got a hunch that things may prove interesting. However, one thing is certain: he has one portion of the Crown of Coyopan somewhere in that house of his, and there’s always the chance that it may fall to me in some manner, as other portions have. The main thing is to get in on the inside, which I’m about to do.”

And which he did at nine next evening, to his lasting horror.

A servant, whose eyes were rolling wildly in his brown face, took him into the same room he had previously seen; here, almost at once, Don Jose appeared. Now he looked more than ever like a priest of Moloch, for he wore a long white robe of fluffy vicuna wool which cloaked him to his heels. He greeted his visitor sedately, calmly, majestically. A servant brought in wine which the wary American refused.

A thin sound of women’s voices, singing, was in the air.

“You hear? All goes well,” said Flores complacently. “There is, you comprehend, a certain preparation necessary, a stimulation of senses. How far are you acquainted with ceremony, my friend?”

“I scarcely know to what ceremony you refer,” said Warren with perfect truth. “I thought you wanted to look into some sort of fluid?”

“Precisely; but to obtain this magic fluid involves many things. One does not leap to occult power like stepping from one room to another, as you are aware. There is the celestial worship of the Sun, the Inca worship, with which we are about to exercise. It is highly important that you utter no word until the draught of the Sun is prepared. I’ll give you a robe like this one of mine—”

“Thanks,” struck in Warren, “but I’ll get you to leave me out of the ceremony. I’m quite satisfied as I am.”

“You miss the point.” Don Jose bent that dark, wild gaze upon him fixedly. “My household is Indian, I myself am Indian by adoption. I have told the old Indian priest that you are an American Indian of the North. No white would be permitted to witness these rites or to share in them. Therefore you must don the robe of an Indian priest, and also wear the mask of one. Aside from this, your part will be purely passive until you make use of the great cup of the Sun.”

“Oh!” said Warren, at a loss. “In that case, I suppose we’ll go ahead.”

“Good!” The other lifted his head as a peculiar noise beat upon the air—a shuddering vibrancy, rather than a sound. “The drums! It is time we went in. You and I and the old priest; we three alone are males. None of the servants, no males except the priests, are allowed to witness these things. Remember that all you see, even to the victims, will be female.”

Warren blinked. *Victims?*

However, he had no chance for further questioning. His host left the room and returned with a plain white robe like his own, which he slipped over Warren’s shoulders, and an enormous mask, carved and painted into grotesque forms which reminded Warren of the Mayan carvings. It seemed impossible that anyone could wear this huge mask with comfort, until he took it into his hands and found it like a feather. It was, in effect, made of balsa wood, whose extreme lightness equaled its extreme fragility.

When it was in place, when Don Jose had secured it with knotted bands, he then donned his own mask, which carried a curious and rather horrible suggestion of his own massive features.

“Ready? Come along.”

Warren followed through other rooms. The singing, the throbbing of the drums, grew more pronounced; that instant

shudder was not loud enough to reach the street, nor were the voices, yet its reiterative effect upon the senses was pronounced. Thus cloaked and bound in, Warren felt a stirring of panic, a stifling desire to escape, but it was too late now.

They stepped abruptly through a final door, and into the patio.

This was in the center of the house itself. The night sky was shut out by a canopy of woven stuff which covered the entire patio space. The scene burst upon Warren like a sudden glimpse of bizarre loveliness.

Figures were all about, some in costume and mask, some not. The light, which was abundant, came from a dozen jars or tall braziers set about the walls; beside each sat an old woman, feeding the flame from time to time—a smoky, pungent flame which rose and filled the air with fumes of incense.

The patio walls rose about, unbroken by windows, to the canopy. In the center, instead of the usual fountain, was a large altar with flowers at the top of a series of wide steps and standing beside it, a grotesquely masked, white-robed figure which Warren took to be the old priest Flores had mentioned. Beside him was a glorious great cup of gold, wide and shallow, evidently an Inca relic; and with it, on a swell of the stone table, a portion of the Crown of Coyopan.

For the moment, this was all to which Warren could give his attention, this flame of green emeralds and chiseled gold. He had halted, in obedience to a gesture from Flores, against the wall; he was only vaguely aware of the half-dozen masked drummers, of the weaving figures in diaphanous draperies, the gorgeous play of feather cloaks, of color, of softly chanting voices. He looked only at the segment of the crown there displayed before him. It fascinated him, held him gripped. The pure

and limpid green of those emeralds seemed to scorn and shame all the gaudy display around.

The weaving, dancing figures came close, a dozen or more of them. Slim brown things, lissome and slender, rocking to the shuddering vibrancy of the drums, and led by two who wore huge gilded masks and cloaks of vari-colored feather work. These two were younger, slimmer, whiter than the others, from the glimpses given as the feather cloaks dropped aside. The others grouped about them as though in adoration. The curving, circling dance took them close and closer to the central altar, to which Don Jose now made his way.

An intoxication laid hold upon Warren. He was slow to realize the cause, but his pulses were hammering, his brain was throbbing, strange delirium seized him. It was the same with those around. The chant of the dancing girls quickened, the drums spoke in more rapid tempo.

Suddenly fell a dead silence, everything stopped. It was like a blow.

The two girls with feathered robes were beside the altar. Warren, in that complete stillness, heard a faint slithering sound. Something moved at the altar. He looked up. The Indian priest was holding up a bird, a pigeon, into which he had just plunged a knife. Don Jose held the great cup to catch the dripping blood. Another pigeon sat there, did not move when the priest put out his hand to it. This, too, was killed.

The slithering sound grew more pronounced. Warren looked down, and his heart stopped. There, coming across the stone to the altar, among the motionless feet of the dancers, were snakes, reptiles of the jungle. No one spoke or moved; only those serpents came forward. Warren recognized rattlesnakes, fer-de-lance, and others equally deadly. He tried to cry out, to act, but found himself helpless.

The two masked girls in the feathered robes stooped. Each picked up a serpent and extended it. The Indian priest took one, refused the other, moved his knife swiftly, cut off the reptile's head. Don Jose caught the blood to the golden cup.

Not once but repeatedly. Half a dozen snakes were rejected, others were accepted and killed. Abruptly, the drums began their insistent throbbing, the reptiles disappeared, the soft voices lifted and the dancing was resumed; now, however, the two leaders remained by the altar, motionless.

Dick Warren raised himself with a jerk from his paralysis of horror. He fought against an overwhelming lethargy. He felt a breath of air stealing down along the wall, from the edge of the canopy. His brain came to life for a moment. The fumes, of course! Peyote or some kindred drug that excited the brain, fed into the jars by the old women! He crowded back against the wall as far as he could, felt the welcome flicker of fresher air in his lungs, set himself deliberately to fight to keep control of his senses. Thankful now for the mask, he closed his eyes, leaned back, and waited between breaths. Little by little, his excitement ebbed away.

He was too deeply, too fiercely absorbed in his own struggle to pay any attention to what went on before him, or to open his eyes. Hysterical cries, laughter, wave upon wave, showed only too plainly that those others had yielded completely to the overwhelming powers of the incense. Gradually, he fought himself into sanity once again. He wanted to be certain he was yielding to no illusions or hypnotic suggestion.

The singing took on a new and breathless note, the drum-throbbing became more erratic yet with method in its timing. Don Jose, at the altar, was intoning some deep Indian chant. Warren opened his eyes and staring, caught his breath at the sight.

One of the two leaders had laid her robe aside and was now extended on the altar at full length, the two priests standing above her figure with muttered incantations. Warren could see her whole body quivering—and as he looked a knife flashed—now in the hand of Don Jose. Blood jetted from the girl's side and was caught in the cup.

Warren turned sick and weak. He knew this was no illusion. When he looked again the figure was gone. The second leader with robe and mask removed, was just stepping to the altar. She reclined upon it. The drums had quickened furiously. All the other dancers were in motion again, now whipping one another with strands of flowers.

Warren turned and tried to find the entrance. Dizzy and trembling he was unable to discover any door; in despair, he resumed his place against the wall, closed his eyes and fought anew to keep his brain sane.

What happened, he neither knew nor cared. The fumes had thickened, it was difficult to breathe at all, and he was gasping for the faint current of air down the wall. Each time he thought of that dripping blood he had a mental revulsion, a recoil, a shuddering horror. That the dance had passed into a swirling scene of mad motion he was faintly conscious, but it passed him by. Behind the huge mask he was perspiring copiously, and he felt his brain clearing.

Then the drums slowed, the sounds died; he was aware with a start of hands plucking at his robe. He looked, and saw Don Jose motioning him forward, a number of dancers urging him with soft fluttering voices and eager hands. He remembered what he was here for, and with a choked oath resolved to see it through.

He stumbled toward the altar, Don Jose taking the great golden cup turned to him. There were no bodies, no sign of blood.

As he came close, Flores spoke softly to him.

"It pleases you, Don Ricardo? But wait. We've only begun. Now look into the draught of the Sun."

"What do you want to know?" demanded Warren hoarsely.

"What happened the other night in the Beltran house. Who was killed there?"

Warren leaned over the cup. Blood! He could not be sure; it was filled to the brim with some fluid.

"A man named Mendez," he said. "A girl was to be betrothed to him; instead she fled with another man. The other was caught. Mendez had a knife."

"Yes, yes!" cried Don Jose eagerly. "That is true! Then what?"

"The other killed Mendez, stabbed him, fled with the girl. Her name—ah! I have it. Luisita. They are far from here."

"Look again! How did Don Juan de Montillo come to die?"

Warren pretended to look. In reality he could see nothing, except bubbles on the surface of that liquid, slow, deadly bubbles.

"He was poisoned. His son and a woman—his wife. The woman tricked his son. Instead of giving the old man a harmless drug, she poisoned him. The son discovered it and forced her to drink the poison, but he himself had also drunk it. The woman wanted to become the heir to each one. Instead, all three died. She had learned something that made her poison the son—ah! That he had previously been married. It infuriated her—"

"So that explains it!" said Flores. "Now look again, quickly! Tell me what has become of the rest of the Crown of Coyopan! Where are the lost parts?"

Warren leaned over the cup. Then he was startled. He caught his breath; there, in the cup, in that slowly bubbling fluid, he saw his own face. A reflection? No, no! His face, himself, a scene, other faces; he saw

the two Beltran brothers, he saw the face of Dona Ysleta white and terrified. Then his own figure came clear. Seated in a chair, with a red cord about his forehead, and about his neck what seemed to be a huge collar. It was the garrote.

A hoarse cry broke from him. He came erect, in a spasmodic fury of blind panic. He wanted to clear his head of this accursed mask and escape. He tore at the mask, beat at it; under his frantic fists it crumpled. His head, his face came clear.

He caught cries of protest, and terror from Don Jose. The man was trying to check him, to restrain him. He struck out, and Don Jose staggered away. The cup fell and its contents was spilled over the stones. Even then, Warren realized that this was no dream and no illusion, for he heard the soft tinkling crunch as the virgin gold struck the stones and crumpled in one side.

As to what happened next, he was by no means sure. Cries of alarm went up from all around. One voice echoed them in Spanish: "A white! A white: we are betrayed!" With this, there came a rush from all sides, and Warren found the soft clinging hands of girls and women closing in upon him.

He tried to fight them. He won clear of them, only to stagger as they hurled themselves upon him. He went down under the weight, and had a glimpse of Don Jose in like case, trying vainly to get away, calling lustily for help. Then the voice was stilled, suddenly and horribly; after one spasmodic scream.

Warren beat off the women, somehow got away from the grasping half-clad figures—only to be seized afresh. He saw the masked Indian priest standing over the shape of Don Jose, knife in hand. The priest struck and Don Jose Flores groaned as he sank down on the stones.

With this, confusion became more compounded. Warren was pressed into a

corner by sheer weight of clutching figures. He was worn down with exhaustion. The white robe was stripped from him.

Now he was rushed forward again to the altar, with half a dozen brown shapes clinging and dragging and tugging. There the masked Indian priest waited, implacable, intent, red knife ready. When Warren was drawn in close, the priest harangued him in a burst of words he did not understand and gave a quick order.

He was pushed and shoved, then picked up bodily and flung upon the stone table. There he broke into frantic struggles, as strength flooded back to him under the spur of horror and despair. He smashed two of the grotesque masks, was once again overwhelmed, and finally lay stretched on the stone of sacrifice, face up, soft hands clinging to arms and legs and holding him helpless to move.

He closed his eyes. It was the end.

*To be continued...*