

PAGAN CROSS



FRONTISPIECE BY LOUISE BRANN

Princess Cheeah yearned to be enfolded in Gallo's embrace. (Page 57.)

PAGAN CROSS

A Romance of Pre-Conquest Yucatan

BY DR. BEN HELPRIN

"Cortez was amazed by the sight of a cross, of stone and lime, about ten palms high. It was the emblem of the (Mayan) god of rain. Its appearance suggested the wildest conjectures . . ." (PRESCOTT, CONQUEST OF MEXICO.)

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BENJAMIN E. HELPRIN, M.D., Ph.D.

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PROLOGUE

WHERE, ALMOST five centuries ago, once flourished populous and thriving centers, glamorous, if barbaric, cultures and civilizations—today, the Sacred Isle of Cuzmil, off the eastern coast of Yucatan, has long ere this been debauched into the decadence of primeval, impenetrable forest and jungle.

The history of Sacred Cuzmil is thus both a panegyric and an elegy.

The panegyric is, that in the heyday of its prime, it shared its glory with but one other Mayan shrine, Chichen-Itza, on the peninsula proper, and leagues away. To both flocked the faithful, if gullible, votaries from throughout Yucatan to the native sanctuaries, or *teocallis*. They also crowded the great markets and fairs displaying everything from the everyday necessities to the most luxuriant indulgences. They lived their many centuries of existence, steeped in barbarism, subjugated by a priestly caste, unheralded, unknown to the World beyond. Then Cuzmil and Chichen-Itza, like Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon, Carthage, of remote antiquity, had risen to exalted heights.

In the elegy to Cuzmil may be depicted all the glamorous pagan splendor that had lived its day only to be effaced from the earth by the fell iniquity of the worship of the prototype of the Canaanite Moloch, the Mexican war-god-patron, *Huitzilopochtli*. Cuzmil, once the land of mute, impotent, yet cormorant idols, is now of the dim past, yet never were the pilgrimages to Benares and the Ganges, to Mecca, or even to the pagan Rome of antiquity the more devout.

Despite the passing of the portentous, epoch-making centuries, there still exists a sad admixture of superstition and atavism, and this reversion to ancient type is more emphatically stressed by curious tales filtering through various and divers channels, of strange pagan ceremonials to the tutelary idol-gods of their ancestors, especially when the irate elements unleash forces of destruction. The lowly nomads then shake their heads ominously, they cross themselves lest the anathema of the Church befall them, yet turn their thoughts to the deities of their Mayan forebears—the god of war, *Huitzilopochtli*, the god of the winds, *Thatchel*, and the god of rain, *Tlaloc*—to whom are ascribed the visitations of tempests and devastation in retributive justice against the progeny of the Toltec-Mayans who deserted the deities of *Anahuac* for the worship of Christianity.

When the rumble of distant thunder is heard, when the gentle zephyrs and patter of rain warn of tempestuous storm in the offing, the elders of the tribe are apprehensive that their ancient gods are again

active, even as when, almost five centuries ago, their idol deities strove desperately to repel the first pale-face invasion of their homeland.

One legend in particular is recalled with the onset of threatening bluster and gale and torrent, and this has been treasured and transmitted from generation to generation, for it concerns the wreck of the first alien "water-house" with huge wings on stripped trees. From this seemingly phantom craft but very few survived, yet they were fated to sway the destiny of the two most sacred Mayan shrines, Chichen-Itza and Cuzmil !

PAGAN CROSS

I

INSURRECTION had broken out in Spain's new El Dorado, Darien, and Captain Pedro de Nicuessa, envoy of Velasquez, High Commissioner of the Spanish dominions of the New World, was authorized by royal warrant to debark for the rebellious province to take command, restore order and reinstate the deposed governor, or *adelantado*, Enciso. On arrival, however, at the port of Darien, the arrogant usurper, Balboa, who had seized the reins of government, flaunted the authority of Velasquez, and Captain de Nicuessa, indignantly spurning the vile lure of turning renegade and espousing the cause of Balboa, was denied even the humane privilege of docking for much-needed repairs to his caravel, the Ventura, and for provisioning against the return voyage to Cuba.

Fate had spun its fickle wheel and dealt the envoy a stunning blow. On the return voyage, the idol gods

of the Mayans, enraged at the presumption of aliens daring invasion of their age-old pagan domains, sought naught but total annihilation of the trespassers.

The shipmaster of the caravel, Captain Requal, fared well through the placid Caribbean, but later, a raging storm necessitated veering his course, sharply due-west, in the desperate but urgent hope of being driven towards the then little-known islands, or reefs, dotting the sea.

The Ventura, however, was now careening toward the unknown, the hostile realms of the deities of *Anahuac*, those holding sacred, undisputed sway over the Gulf, as well as over the land of myriads of Mayan votaries. The undulating waves gained rapidly in momentum and rolled and heaved in ever-increasing billows; palling clouds coursed madly over the obscuring sky; from the distance came ominous rumblings of thunder; the caravel soared, as the sea sprang up in spouting sheets, then lurched dizzily from the impact of onrushing surge. Soon fell bleak, portentous gloom!

The grim-visaged, blood-lusty *Huitzilopochtli*, patron deity, dread war god, emerged shrieking from the fastness of his sanctuary, the *teocalli*. With demoniac fury he hurled himself on the onrushing wings of the gale. With the blare of sacred horn, the *atabal*, and the weird boom of the snake-skin covered, priestly drum, the *teponoztli*, the irate war god summoned his retributive pantheon in solemn, awe-inspiring conclave!

The war god commanded his satellite, the moon god, *Meztli*, to bedim his luminary, and not a lone beam was thereafter visible. He commanded *Thatchel*, god of the winds, to unleash sinister messengers of destruction, and the winds then shrieked with the fury of stinging, lashing gale, followed by the weird howling of the hurricane. The roaring winds ripped the sails of the floundering craft to shreds, straining the ropes taut; then followed fearful blasts, and both helmsman and rudder were hurtled into the vortex and caldron of the sea.

The war god commanded *Tlaloc*, god of rain, to open the sluice-gates of the heavens, and the flood of torrents poured upon the helpless ship as a deluge; now the *Ventura* tossed, now spun in the fearful swells surging mountain high about and above, pounding furiously against her sides until the harsh impact opened her very seams.

Like crashing shrapnel hurled from the vastness of the heavens, reverberating thunder bellowed in increasing fury. Bolts of lightning, lurid and terrifying, split the firmament, zigzagged, yet in unerring course, cleft the mainmast which swung perilously for a dazing moment, then was precipitated into the abysmal sea. With its collapse the toll of victims mounted. None could glimpse the terror-stricken face of Captain Regual, whose commands were lost in the cannonade of thunder and the shrill blasts of the hurricane.

Wild and staggering, the *Ventura* was gradually being engulfed like a cockle-shell in the vortex. Those

who still survived expected momentarily to be dashed into oblivion!

But *Quetzalcoatl*, the humane god-hero of Toltec antiquity, now intervened. He was the merciful, cultural deity who preceded the gory, cannibalistic idol-gods usurping the sacred *teocallis*, which were now reeking with the dripping blood of countless victims of the sacrifice.

This benign deity prostrated himself before *Hunal Ku*, supreme god of all Mexico, enthroned in celestial sphere, and with anguish in his heart and soul, besought mercy for the survivors. The plea fell not on unsympathetic ears, for *Hunal Ku*, unlike the retributive lesser deities, who fostered greed, lust, war and pestilence, was the deity to whom the superstitious, priest-ridden votaries appealed when deserted or punished by the malign idols.

The few survivors who, by the momentary flashes of vivid lightning, had glimpsed a vista of welcoming coral reefs in the distance, now hurled themselves into the seething waters and fought through the maelstrom of swell and surge and shark-infested Gulf to the haven so miraculously revealed; this was their last glimpse of the doomed ship's unperturbed, gallant knight, the figurehead with sword clasped in one hand, and Cross in the other, scornfully disdaining to desert the prow it had so glamorously adorned. Perhaps the refuge revealed them was a response to prayers to their patron saints, or, as later native historians chronicled, it was due to the plea of *Quetzalcoatl* to *Hunal Ku*!

Tossed, whipped and lashed, as if in the embrace of gigantic serpent coils, the Spaniards, now almost engulfed by huge waves, now soaring atop heaving crests, stubbornly fought against the turbulent elements and the shark scourges of the deep which, in the phosphorescence of their dread trail, beset them.

In vain the nerve-racking, appalling shrieks of anguish and despair pierced the inky murkiness, time and again conveying the message of poignant doom!

Miquitzli, spectral god of death, engulfed his victims in ghoulish realm, and the fiendish war god roared a mocking, defiant laugh even against sacred *Hunal Ku*. Then *Huitzilopochtli* turned his venomous eyes towards the great altar of basalt, the sacrificial stone of the *teocalli*. There would be still more "food for the gods"!

Now reverberated the last thunderous, annihilating blast which cleft apart the canopy of the heavens; the bolt unerringly found its target in the gunpowder magazine; the last vestige of the hulk once the *Ventura* rocked dizzily and trembled in its death throes, then disappeared into the depths.

The careening course of the *Ventura*—at the sinister mercies of the elements in unbridled wrath, bobbing dizzily in the foaming surge — was being anxiously followed from the coast. Stationed in a strategic point of vantage—the sentry tower on the topmost terrace of the *Cuzmil* sanctuary—several *nacons*, the novitiate priests, on night watch, closely scanned the

open sea in the momentary intervals when the lightning flashed. In the vivid streaks they caught but mere glimpses of a strange craft floundering, seemingly beyond control, and being driven towards the coast.

What manner of phantom craft this could be was conjectured and debated in utter bewilderment. Surely not a native canoe—it was, by far, the largest they had ever beheld, and, strangest of all, unless their eyes deceived them, this craft, they would have sworn before the very gods, was being driven at a terrific speed by the hurricane winds lashing and pounding against huge wings protruding from massive trees!

Amazed and terrified were the *nacons*, for craft of such alien design and rig had never before been witnessed. Each stared furtively into the eyes of the other, as if to pierce the other's hidden thoughts and dreads; but the enigma of the sea was not for them to solve.

Hastily a *nacon* sped his report to his superior, a *chilan*, but that worthy, though incredulous, deemed it best to apprise the high priest, or *ah-kin-mai*, Teotzl, then asleep in his private chambers.

The high dignitary of the *teocalli*, Teotzl, when awakened from a fitful, disturbing sleep, deigned but a few petulant words of reproof to the sycophant *chilan* for his seeming credulity of a phantom craft, and, for the time being, the matter was dismissed.

The fury of the tempest had not abated until the supreme *Hunal Ku*, at the intercession of *Quetzal-*

coatl, decreed surcease of devastation, and the irate gods of the elements could do naught but comply. The first rays of the radiant sun emerged and slowly, shyly spread a luster of light, warmth and renewed life on land and sea. On the wings of the dazzling sun god, *Tonatiuh*, blithely danced *Nanotzin*, Lord of Day.

Man and beast; the bounties of the earth's fructile bosom, particularly the green-golden-yellow maize, or *teosinte*; the myriads of flowers and other growths; the chirping birds; everything of the blessings of nature, and all that soar or creep or walk, having witnessed the manifestations of the destructive forces when in vengeful mood, in unfettered frenzy, now glimpsed the resplendence of *Tonatiuh*, and each and all expressed gratitude, for in the exotic tropics, such astounding paradoxes of the elements are as old as time itself!

At dawn, on an outlying reef, stretched out on the damp, shifting sands, were the still half-stunned survivors: Friar Alva, a Dominican missionary-priest; the padre's orphaned nephew, a young, handsome stripling, Gallo; also Captain de Nicuessa, erstwhile envoy of Velasquez; and Miguel, ship's cook. They alone were fated to survive despite the turbulent elements, the voracious sharks and the vengeance of *Huitzilopochtli*. Chilled and spent from almost superhuman efforts to struggle to the coral reef, they felt reverential awe as they joined the friar in a prayer of thanksgiving and contrition, combining repentance

for those living, with a memorial to the unshriven and in nameless graves.

From the position of the castaways, a long, low stretch of shore was visible in the distance, its banks lined with thickets of spreading mangrove, closely intertwined with rootlets and thorns of the liana, forming a strong attachment of vines.

From behind the screen network, several natives, evidently fishermen, passed to and fro. They approached the shore and uncovered their *piraguas* — native canoes hollowed out of huge, single logs — which had been partially concealed by the dense tangle of foliage.

One of the natives, on glancing towards the reefs, beheld a group of tattered strangers, distinctly alien, such as never before had been seen in that region. He rubbed his eyes in astonishment and disbelief, and again viewed the Spaniards in frank incredulity; then he voiced his amazement in a startled shriek. Attracted by his cry of alarm, the others immediately joined him, began to converse earnestly, gesticulating animatedly in the direction of the reef, but utterly at a loss as to what to do.

Summoning the courage of curiosity they now piled into their canoes, each with two men at the paddles, and headed for the castaways; with swift, even strokes, they skimmed the narrow stretch of inlet.

These natives were rather short and squat, bronzed, with thick lips, coal-black hair, broad nose, low, receding forehead, hair tied in a knot at the top of the

head. They wore the coarse *nequen* loin-cloth, but their sparse apparel was compensated by vivid daub on limbs and body. One, seemingly the headman, the most bedaubed of all, also displayed a circular nose-plug of copper.

Their approach was apprehensively awaited by the Spaniards, but as the natives were apparently unarmed, and their actions betokened bewilderment more than hostility, Captain de Nicuessa suggested that his companions conceal, beneath the shreds of raiment left them, their short poniards, their entire armament.

The roly-poly Miguel, with his smattering insight of the Arab's devious ways, through a short, enforced sojourn in the Orient, now remarked: "Captain, well you recall that the Arab places his faith in Allah, but securely tethers his horse. I place unfaltering trust in my Maker, but may I hold on to my poniard just for emergency?"

"Your skillet would be more to the purpose," bantered the irrepressible Gallo. "And if memory plays me not false, several señoritas, so gossip rumors, would fain do some tethering too!"

But a chiding look from Friar Alva ended the banter.

The natives had, by now, pulled up to the reef, hauling their *piraguas* after them. They dropped to their knees, their foreheads touching the earth before the alien beings whom they deemed scions of *Tonatiuh*, or of the traditional Mayan god-hero, *Quetzal-*

coatl, whose ultimate return to Mexico was a national belief. The much-bedaubed spokesman, he of the nose-plug, ventured a question, but with reverential awe; then, realizing the futility of conversing with seemingly divine beings, the natives again eagerly resumed their conference and gesticulations, but still in amazed incomprehension.

Young Gallo ever relished the satiating food so indispensable for a healthy, active youth — far more than assuming a divine role. He essayed conveying to the spokesman of the natives that food and drink would be highly acceptable. He opened wide his parched mouth and rubbed his belly with his palm, first slowly, then vigorously, hoping to inform the attentive fishermen that therein was a great and empty void.

The mystified natives, watching the pantomime, smiled in sympathy, but all they could glean was that Gallo possessed a wonderful set of pearly teeth; that he was indeed a most handsome scion of divine origin; that his eyes were as the cerulean blue of the now gorgeous heavens; and that his thatch of yellow-gold must have been blessed by none other than their own goddess of the maize. But, on second thought — and may the sacred deities forefend — mayhap the golden-haired one was in the throes of mere mortal's belly-ache. Rather peculiar, though, that a divine being should be so afflicted! But can lowly fishermen fathom the inscrutable? Finally, it began to dawn upon them that perhaps, after having journeyed from

vast, mystic heights, hunger and thirst may beset even immortals, just as is the lot of common man!

A gourd, or *olla*, of the squash type was brought from the canoe and the friar essayed a long draught from its contents. He was evidently not very enthusiastic; in fact, he almost strangled in his avid gulps. Instead of water, it was the potent *octli*, an aloe-brewed beer — hardly palatable at the first venture, and particularly distasteful to the very abstemious friar.

After much more of pantomime, a gourd of cool, clear water was produced and hesitantly sampled. Since Gallo had been vigorously pointing to the waters of the inlet, the Spaniards feared that the natives, misunderstanding, might hazard a container of seawater.

From the same *piragua*, a veritable genii's treasure-trove, also came ample provisions, succulent fruits and the indigenous maize-wafers, their sparse supply, but hospitably dispensed by the awed fishermen.

Having extended their humble welcome, the natives commandeered their craft and all proceeded to the mainland. After trudging through a narrow but well-beaten path, they approached the fisherfolk's hamlet with mud-and-rubble, twig-bound huts, or *jacales*, which boasted of but one room each, and also of the traditional hearth, or *koben*, an earth floor and palm-thatched, peaked roofs. Entirely bare of any furniture were these huts, save for rude hammocks and straw mats and common earthenware utensils;

the only possessions were the meager supplies of their calling, and garments and coverlets of the coarse *nequen*.

The entire population now turned out to view and welcome the strange beings; it was a timorous and awed assemblage. Suckling babes, bronzed, squat striplings, scantily garbed, were there in amazed groups, with staring, fawn-like eyes, mouths agape. The more timid scurried to the haven of ample bosoms, or peeped surreptitiously from behind the broad backs of equally curious parents.

In his quandary, the headman consulted with several of the elders, whether to conduct the Spaniards to their king, in distant Mual, the seat of government; or, as gods' progeny were within the sacerdotal, to escort them to Teotzl at Cuzmil. It was, emphatically, the weightiest problem confronting them.

Again were the *piraguas* in action, and, hours later, after skimming through a long stretch of calm waters, taking an easterly, then a due-south course, they gradually neared a strange, populous city, the soaring towers of which had been visible long before their arrival.

But keen-eyed sentinels in the watch-tower had been carefully noting the progress of the craft as soon as they were sighted, and reports were quickly relayed to the *chilan* superior when, but a short distance from the landing, strange, alien faces were observed.

II

HIGH ON ASCENDING terraces, massive, impressive, was the Cuzmil *teocalli*, dedicated to the patron war-god, *Huitzilopochtli*, and to the lesser deities of the Mayan pantheon, a structure visioned by the most versatile minds, the outstanding native architects and master-builders. This sanctuary was consummated with the countless man-power of generations, with the ceaseless toil of endless hordes of captives who were unmercifully exploited and scourged, and who, if recalcitrant, were doomed to the sacrifice, their corpses fought over to grace the orgies of cannibal feasts.

Comparable to this almost superhuman project were the marvelous pyramids of glamorous Egypt, so many remote leagues distant; yet the many centuries past have not ferreted out a key like the Rosetta stone, nor other credible link between the symbolic pyramids dedicated to Egypt's sun god, Ra, and the Mayan sun god, *Tonatiuh*, or any other of the multiplicity of deities of the Mexico of antiquity.

How stupendous was this titanic undertaking may well be imagined, considering that pre-conquest, though iron was known and utilized in other civilizations for many centuries, and though the ore existed in Mexico, its use was unknown there. The tools employed for construction were of the crudest, and consisted in the main of wood or stone mallets, and very sharp but also short-lived gouging implements of volcanic *itzli*, or obsidian.

No pack animals native to pre-conquest Mexico existed to lighten the burdens or to assist the lash-driven toilers; the wheel, though known for many centuries in other advanced civilizations, was here absent.

For the sanctuaries and the palaces, the immense blocks of stone, so indispensable for construction, were hewed from the indigenous porous-stone, or *tetzontli*, abounding throughout Yucatan. Upwards of two hundred feet above the terrain soared the marvelous structure, the *teocalli* of Cuzmil, a masterpiece of stone masonry, earth-and-rubble, and the almost indestructible *yax-nic* and *sapote* woods.

The sacred pagan cathedral was decorated with most elaborate, barbaric sculpture in relief and frescoed stucco, depicting, in the carvings, mythical ancestors, grotesque idols, representation of the planets, and still others of symbolic motif. Over the main portal was a carved lintel in bas-relief, of a *teotl*, or deity, with feathered headdress, and long nose-plug protruding from attenuated nostrils. The finer details were elaborately carved with gouging chisels of *itzli*, or

with keen-edged nephrite, and embellished with brilliant pigments of the sacred blue-green, with red, black, yellow, white and brown. The chief motif, striking, massive, almost breath-taking, was the wall of serpents, or *coateplante*, a startling representation, symbolic of *Quetzalcoatl*, surrounding the lower masonry of the *teocalli*.

Atop the surmounting terrace was stationed a huge, cylindrical drum, the priestly and sacred snake-skin covered *teponoztli*; when struck with rubber-tipped sticks this drum would send forth weird, melancholy reverberations heard for miles around, not only a summons but a command, calling the votaries for worship, or as a solemn warning of impending peril. On each terrace were huge braziers of copper, with perpetual fires of charcoal; side vents permitted steady, fanning drafts; copal, or *psom* resin, over the embers wafted incense smoke to the deities in celestial sphere.

The Mayans, as the Aztecs, were, pre-conquest, the embodiment of culture, advanced civilization and even intellectual achievement, but distinctly of the barbaric type. They were easily on a fair parity with the progress, the material evolution from the primitive, in other lands, on other continents; yet they were not advancing towards the goal, the true evolution resulting in civilization as it contemporaneously existed on the eastern hemisphere.

In this one respect, alone, may the apologists for the *conquistadores* be given merited appreciation in

both the chronicles of history and the annals of the Church: the Spaniards' sword-menacing, dubious proselytism, and the mass-executions to which they resorted in annihilation of the foul rites of human sacrifice, were exculpated by the hypothesis that the blot of Moloch, in the worship of *Huitzilopochtli*, well deserved stern, repressive measures for its extirpation from the earth. Here, the conquerors, the New World Crusaders, are worthy of the panegyric of history, and here the ameliorating efforts of Diaz and Olmedo, exponents of the struggles of Montesino, "champion, savior of the Indians," against the foul system of enslavement, or *repartimiento*—the humanitarian attributes of these true soldiers of the Cross cannot be strongly enough commended. In every age, in every land, heroic defenders of the oppressed have saved civilization from the stigma of recrudescence!

In the land of the Mayans, for the bounties of nature—all nurtured in the prolific bosom of the earth—there was human sacrifice. When the elements ravaged, or when the rain god withheld the rains—so the priests interpreted—it was in punishment for the sins of the land, and again were victims offered to placate the cormorant idols, and so on with war, pestilence, and holocausts in general. "Food for the gods" constituted atonement, for the idea of sin was a Mayan obsession, to be washed away only by the blood of the immolated!

Next to the merciful supreme being, *Hunal Ku*, ranked in importance the war god, *Huitzilopochtli*. This monolith idol was sculptured with a broad, hideous face and terrifying eyes. It was bedecked with gold and gems. Great serpents of precious metal encircled the base and girth. In the right hand was a bow, in the left a bundle of arrows, the martial symbol. From the neck hung pendants of glittering gold, heart-shaped, symbolic of the ripping-out of the victims' hearts as placating offerings.

Of the dread, foul caste of priests swaying the destinies of the myriads of gullible votaries of this benighted land, Teotzl was the *ah-kin-mai*.

Yet he, Teotzl, symbol of sanctimony, the very embodiment of divine mysticism, intrepid champion and exponent of the sacred deities, was, himself, now veritably in the horns of a dilemma, for events he could but scarcely comprehend were besetting him — and the oracles were still strangely apathetic in this crucial crisis!

When apprised of the sentinel's report Teotzl was struck with consternation. Disturbed both by fitful dreams and the nightmare of the storm throughout the night, the disquieting tidings had unnerved him still the more. His aged head was bowed in deep contemplation. His rheumy eyes teared and blinked against the glare of the glowing sun streaming in through the paneless windows.

Teotzl stroked his chin with unsteady hand. What manner of phantom craft was the mystic "water

house"? If not phantom, but of divine origin, why were the scions of the gods deserted by the deities who sired them? Surely there must be some connection between the craft and the strangers at the shore!

But, ah! *Quetzalcoatl*, even of yore, had frowned upon human sacrifice! What then, if these messengers were of the intent to dethrone him from the powerful hierarchy he had so laboriously ramified? Had he, Teotzl, somehow and unwittingly failed in his stewardship? Better, far better, that his aged body be consumed in the fires of cremation; better that a tomb open its freshly spaded depths and inter him; better that his spirit be wafted to the elysium of the gods he had so very faithfully served, venerated and exalted—all far better than to fall from divine grace!

The high priest rose wearily and paced his chamber, his mind harried with forebodings of ill, his steps hesitant. Teotzl's appearance—sans the glamorous vestments, sacred *penache*, or tiara, of pure gold, exotic gems and *quetzal* feathers, sans the sacred mask besprinkled with rare turquoise—stripped of the haughty mien and priceless regalia, seemed now not attuned to his exalted dignity.

The head and face of the *ah-kin-mai* were as mummiform parchment, with but a coronal fringe of gray-white hair about the temples. He was smooth-shaven; his eyes were ever rheumy; his nose was as prominent as the hawk's beak; his lips were thin and cruel; his fingers were like talons, with long, sharp nails. His once powerful frame now presented but the hulk, and

bordered on the senile, the cadaverous. His wizened body did not belie the almost four-score years; rather, it markedly emphasized his age. If ever there were the flicker of a smile for a deed well done, for a reward well meted, or in courteous greeting, very few could bear confirmatory witness. He well indeed merited the sobriquet, "the vulture"; but this, it must be added, was only cautiously whispered, in bated breath, then very warily and to the most intimate.

Stern and autocratic, Teotzl ruled with a hand of iron. As chief of the sacred judiciary his quality of mercy was as the flint of his heart. He was notorious for the severity of his sentences; to him, the unfortunate sacrificial victim, cringing with every venomous word of condemnation, was doomed!

Teotzl was ever an implacable foe, swift and retributive. The sinister, demoniac rites to the idols—the writhings of endless files of victims, their cries of anguish, their last, despairing shrieks as they were about to be immolated on blood-drenched altars—left the high priest inexorable! Teotzl, the *ah-kin-mai* of Sacred Cuzmil, was a most worthy proponent of the diabolic *Huitzilopochtli*!

Again Teotzl fervently invoked the elusive spirits of the deities for but a mere inkling of omen to meet the vexatious, perplexing problems—the storm, the mystic "water house," and now . . .? But the arrival of mysterious beings was neither phantom nor nightmare. Now was the time, not for vacillation, but for action!

Thus, hardly had the fishermen and the Spaniards set foot on land when an eager, awe-stricken crowd gathered about them. The natives disregarded the grime and tatters of the white beings, rather they marked the fine, spiritual features, the piercing eyes of the zealot priest, Friar Alva, and the glowing charms of the blue-eyed, god-like Gallo. The pagans prostrated themselves before seeming esoteric progeny, then they began an interminable and insistent questioning of the headman.

The Spaniards were extricated from the curious, still amazed hordes when, from the direction of the sanctuary, came the fanfare of trumpets and drums, flageolets, horns, and conch-shells, the shuffle of many bare feet, and soon several-score bedaubed warriors speedily approached, armed with spears, bows-and-arrows, stout war-clubs, sling-throwing *hulches*, or *itzli*-tipped pikes. In command was a much over-adorned and bedaubed official languidly reclining in a litter borne by four native carriers, or *tamanes*. Other litters were now placed on the ground, and the esoteric beings ceremoniously, deferentially beckoned into them. Sacred Cuzmil, at the direction of Teotzl, *ah-kin-mai*, was to welcome the scions or messengers of the deities!

The bewildered friar and his equally apprehensive companions could do naught but ponder over the vagaries of fate, as they were being officially escorted to the dubious haven of Teotzl and the sanctuary!

Having been temporarily separated from their erstwhile guests, the highly elated fishermen, under the protecting guidance of a *nacon* guard, blithely trudged on to the imposing sanctuary, nor did they go as meek spectators timorously come to worship with the common rabble, nor yet as humble votaries, with propitiary offerings to the idol gods, of wild flowers, or the first fruits of their little *milpas* of maize, the best within their means.

Now were they as invited guests, welcome messengers proudly vaunting intimate contact with esoteric beings, of most mystic import. So elated, so vastly superior did they feel that, in the eupathy of their spirits, their feet seemed to tread on air. They, the very lowliest of the land, had been so divinely favored as to have been the first to behold, to greet, hospitably to entertain at their own *jacales*, and to enjoy the thrilling exhilaration of consorting with divine beings.

Ah! What a glamorous tale could be related, when the neighboring villagers, of an evening, were squatted before the cheering blaze of the *koben*, by the light of huge torches, and the narrator was aided by a little—very little, of course—of the potent *pulque*, just enough to loosen one's parched tongue. What a marvelously regaling topic for an avid-eared audience, not adults alone, but also, and especially, the youngsters with their interminable craving for the lurid!

Forgotten and in the discard would now be the tales of ghostly *aluxab*. those spirits delighting to

gorge on tender nursing forcibly dragged to foul grotto; even forgotten would be the exploits of the hunters of the ferocious tiger, the slinking panther, the lithe, rash jaguar, or the dreaded *chaib*, the monstrous boa-constrictor, which alone dares to flaunt the otherwise undisputed sway of jungle marauders, and not to forget the tale about the *balche*, the spirit palling the heavens and terrorizing the inhabitants of the land. Why, even the engrossing story of the most beautiful maiden, fairest virgin of the land, *Tlaloc's* tribute and bride, would now be but secondary, as would be the tale of the misshapen, blind gnome who jealously guards the treasures of the bowels of the earth, the immense stores of gold and silver over which man forever wars. All these, and many others of their ilk, would now be relegated to the obscurity of the croakings of hag-like, toothless great-grandmothers!

One would, of necessity, start with a vivid account of the devastating storm, the ominous plaint of the mournful bird of evil, the *tecolote*, of the sleepless night; how then came the early dawn and *Tonatiuh*, the radiant, and, marvel of marvels! the thrilling, never-to-be-forgotten sight of the heaven-sent beings!

But their fanciful musings were turned to more material thoughts. Such impressive information, when imparted to the *chilan* superior, perhaps to the holy *ah-kin-mai*, in person, should merit some appreciative acknowledgment. Say, an ample supply of the cured leaves of the *yetl* plant, so very solacing when smoked through a long reed tube, or may not one even hope

for a bright-hued *tilmatli*, so soft and comfortable against the chill of the night?

If the reward, however, be even grudging, then a supply of *teosinte* would, if needs must, also be welcome, for the catch of the day is frequently but scarce, mayhap is seized by an overzealous tax-collector.

Ah! Would the gods but soften the hearts of the *chilans*, especially of the sainted Teotzl, for then there might be the barest moiety of that glittering gold, the "excrement of the gods" — true, never having been actually owned, but once displayed as yellow, sand-like material, in a very small quill, by their own headman; then only after much cajoling, when in most gracious mood, to a gaping, amazed and favored few.

What a world of necessities, even luxuries, could then be within one's very grasp! Now, first of course, there would be maize and beans and chili to replenish the meager larder; then, perhaps, a *nequen* garment for the wife; trinkets and baubles for the blessed brood; and, if dreams and hopes avail any, perhaps a slight concession in the ever-harrying taxes, surely the bane of one's existence.

With such exhilarating anticipations, as the bearers of momentous information, the fishermen arrived at the sanctuary. It was with difficulty that they could make themselves clear, for the sanctified environments and the tense excitement had a most disquieting effect on the simple, superstitious souls. The sharp, impatient interrogation by the *chilan* superior befuddled them the more into hesitant answers.

The spokesman was still in quite a daze—an awe-stricken daze—and, to make matters worse, the fishermen were finally led to the appalling presence of the high priest, whose name was a household byword of power, to be dreaded, revered. The baneful glare of the much-perturbed Teotzl tended to terrorize them the more.

Was all this, they wondered, but a vague, vanishing nightmare? Would they awaken to the squall of petulant infant stricken with colic, or to the nagging of shrewish spouse? But, no! Eyes and ears could hardly be so deceptive, so cruel. Here, in the very flesh, was the sainted Teotzl, intermediary of the deities, the potentate whose approving nod augured weal for the favored, but, when in irate mood, threatened woe, even doom!

From the rather disconnected, hesitant description, some semblance of understanding was finally forthcoming: Very handsome indeed is the young, blond god, with hair as if dipped in gold, matching the ripening *teosinte*; and as for his eyes, never has such blue been seen, save perhaps in the priceless pendant of *chalchihuitl* on the sainted *ah-kin-mai*. And tall is he despite his evident youth, far above the tallest of the warriors or guards of the *teocalli*.

The chieftain of the mystic beings is tall and very stately, with hair of gray-white, eyes like that of the eagle, yet benign. And strange beyond understanding, on the breast of the elderly one is a metal cross, of close resemblance to the rain god's cross so symbolic in Mayan worship.

And the two others: one, a commanding figure, not quite so fair of features, and with a black beard; the other, a most grotesque gnome, with hair of fiery red, with belly so rotund as that of the buffoon at the palace of the *tlatoani*, or at the exhibition on market-days at the *tianguetz*.

How the mystic beings arrived is, to them, a mystery, for *piragua*, or other craft, there was none. They came, seemingly, on the wings of the storm. They converse among themselves, but not a single word of Mayan. Their raiment but ill befits progeny of the deities.

“Venerated *ah-kin-mai*, we have fed them from our meager store, and they ate as if famished. We have brought them directly to your very presence, as surely would have been your dictate. We crave approval from Your Holiness.”

Such was the highly colored, if not very elucidating report; and Teotzl and the *chilans* alike were mystified. Though amazed, though aroused to forebodings of ill, the high priest had followed the narrative with keen interest. Not deigning to interrogate menials, all questioning had been by the *chilan* superior. The fishermen’s description but added to the dismaying reports of the sentinel, as relayed from the watchtower on the previous night. What did these mystic beings portend? Whence came they? What was their purport?

To all attracted to the *teocalli* by the unusual activities, the mien of Teotzl conveyed the impression

that the mystic crystal, the *zaztun*, and the sacred omens had long ere this foretold the important tidings of events to come—thus, not the slightest change of countenance, thus the calm of his austere features, his seeming lack of curiosity. But the agitation stirring within, the apprehensions and disturbing premonitions, were not for the minions whom he despised for their spineless servility.

Yet, perturbed as was Teotzl, he unbended to the extent of directing his *chilans* amply to reward the fishermen, and, strange to relate, he also commended his lowly subjects by voicing a meed of approval that they had conducted the esoteric beings directly to the *teocalli*, instead of to Mual, and the *nachi cocum*, or sovereign of the realm.

The confirming, propitiary omen from any of the thirteen tutelary deities, those whom he had so unremittingly exalted during the entire tenure of his stewardship, had again lamentably failed to materialize. Was it possible that the white strangers were with a message of divine will? Was this message for weal or woe?

How futile in this crisis to place faith in the dubious omens of the entrails of a fowl, or the augur of the direction of the flight of migratory birds, even of other time-tried prognostications?

But, if anything, the high priest was ever the opportunist rather than the fatalist. Through many years of hard-fought battles to retain his supremacy, he had somehow managed to remain the smug victor. In the

past, Teotzl had never been vacillatory in maneuvering his dominant will in the light of interpretations of sacred revelations from the oracles. But now . . . ?

But the Machiavelli of Cuzmil, Teotzl, swiftly determined plans for the most spectacular showmanship yet witnessed in the *teocalli!*

III

ON TO THE *teocalli* now swarmed the multitudes alert to the insistent, clarion call of priestly drum and trumpet. From the soaring turret came the muezzin-like chanting summons to the faithful. Groups of *chilans* and *nacons* were conspicuous in their robes of scarlet or white or somber black. Temple guards and warriors mingled freely with the crowds. Dancing maidens, led by a superioress of the nunnery, added to the glamorous spectacle.

The chanting drone of the priestly choir rose in fervor as the dancing virgins gyrated in the pleasing rhythm of the ritual dance; soon priests, spectators, even captives joined; beginning in slow, measured steps, it became more active, finally ending in a mad, frenzied whirl, to the discordant blast and blare and clang of native instruments.

Now the captives destined for the sacrifice were separated from the votaries, encircled by a strong *nacon* guard, and led, one by one, to the altar. Not a

semblance of emotion appeared on their unwashed, bloated faces. They were miserably cowed, shivering from the long exposure and rigorous imprisonment in narrow, filthy cages, where the elements, as cruel as their human captors, had chilled and sweated them. They were befouled in their own excretions, and the acrid odor of rank perspiration was as a sacrilege to the brilliant sky and the pure air.

One by one, unresisting as cattle driven to the abattoir, quivering, terror-stricken, forcibly stretched out on the immolating altar, the victim's chest was yanked upward; powerful *nacons* held limbs and body in vise-like grip. Came the shriek of anguish and despair, as *itzli* razors, in the clutch of fiendish, scarlet-robed *chilans*, slashed through the ribs, exposing the inner cavity. Claw-like hands ripped the bleeding, still-palpitating heart; the priceless votive offering was poised aloft to the mute, distorted, diabolic *Huitzilopochtli*, then tossed into a golden censer at the base of the idol!

The scarlet robes, the sneering faces, the thickly matted hair of the gory executioners and of the human fetters gripping the victim, all were bespattered with blood, yet the callous votaries chanted prayers, and tensely awaited still more victims!

Many human lives had been snuffed out—humans who once had breathed the air even of restricted freedom; who once had lived and loved and toiled; who had shed their blood and the blood of their foes, not for their own penurious hearths, nor for their cher-

ished ones, nor for the noble cause of patriotism, but only as minions of petty *batabs*, or arrogant *caciques*, for more and more victims for the human sacrifices! Immolated victims, once tenderly nurtured by careworn, tireless mothers—mothers, who, since Mother Eve, have borne the Cross!

Now, at a given signal, the diabolic rites were stayed. His Holiness, Teotzl, was being ceremoniously escorted by church nobility and superiors of the priesthood to the center of the terrace.

Preceded by a glamorous guard of honor, the high priest was in full ceremonial regalia, with vestments of the finest cotton, feather-weaves and golden threads, and clasped at the neck with a blue-green turquoise. In his right hand was the golden, forked *caluac*, the baton of the highest dignitary of the church of the Mayans.

With his appearance, the babel of voices, tense, eager, expectant, suddenly became hushed, as Teotzl raised his *caluac* and the gullible, fanatic hordes prostrated themselves before their *ah-kin-mai*. The magnetism of the ceremonial, the glamorous spectacle being staged, eliminated interest in aught else.

“My children, faithful votaries of the omniscient deities of the land of *Anahuac*,” perorated the high priest, “the deities, in their infinite wisdom, have so favored our devout prayers for an omen of their beneficence, that messengers, heaven-born progeny, are come to Sacred Cuzmil, transported on the wings of storm.

“Mayhap, their message to my faithful votaries presages the return of the sage, benign patron of our Toltec forebears, *Quetzalcoatl*.

“Ere the wrath of the gods descended and caused havoc and devastation even upon Sacred Cuzmil, I communed with the divine spirits, then only after long fasting and flagellation; in deep humility, in deep repentance for the sins of the land, I prayed and pleaded.

“Then, in the heavens, I beheld the dread *balchi* overspreading the sun and the new-born moon. From the *balchi* sprang destroying eagles and serpents, and yet more eagles and serpents until the light was completely obscured, and darkness set its dire pall upon the land and the sea.

“And *Thatchel*, god of the winds, and *Tlaloc*, god of rain, unleashed sinister forces with ensuing incessant gale and torrent, and unbridled fires of destruction.

“Through the roar of the tempest came to me the spirit voice, and it proclaimed: ‘the *zaztun!*’ And the spirit voice again echoed: ‘the *zaztun!*’

“Devoutly I peered into the sacred crystal and the mystic visions were revealed to me! The spirits of the benign deities enveloped me with wreaths of *psom* incense. I was in a sacred trance, as if my soul from its casket body had taken wing and soared to celestial sphere for guidance.

“The message of the sacred deities of *Anahuac* I will now reveal: As the *balche* beset the sun and moon

with its pall of darkness, so will the gods of my people cause visitation of gloom, even death, upon the land for the iniquities rampant! Repentance, contrition, or the votaries are doomed! Revere the sacred deities! Honor their priests! The *zaztun* reveals the will of the gods! Heavenly messengers are now to greet you!”

“A miracle! A miracle from the heavens!” came the thunderous exclamations from the enthralled spectators, as the clash and blast of arms and drums and trumpets rent the tenseness of the air.

The spirit emanation of the very deities seemingly electrified the awe-stricken, superstitious fanatics! Teotzl, the wily opportunist, had seized a most auspicious moment. His hands were raised aloft in benediction on his flock, in exaltation of the gods. On his lips there was even a smile. The day was his!

The flint-hearted, rapacious vulture had again squirmed out of a very trying situation, and the power he so craved, the power nourishing his wizened, senile body and withered soul, his sacerdotal supremacy, again were safe. His priestly structure, seemingly on the verge of tottering, was again on a firm foundation. Again he held the destiny of his Sacred Cuzmil in the palm of his hand. “Let King Xoctli beware!” was his triumphant thought.

How little did Teotzl reckon with the avenging hand of Fate, with the monarch’s long-enduring patience now almost to the bursting point!

The stage-setting had been well timed. With the din and clamor, with the awed hush and the spontaneous

shouts of acclaim, and the reverberations of the barbaric strains—not the weird, mournful dirge, but that of staccato cadence—the vibrant voices of priestly choir, the soft chant of nunnery singers rose; louder and louder the paean resounded! To an enthralled audience there came the waving, glamorous head-dress, richly hued robes and panoply, the glitter of arms, of metal ornamenting ornate shields. It was the stately vanguard of the church nobility and military commanders with colorful pennants and regalia. Then warriors, and more warriors, fully armed, barbarically bedaubed!

This was indeed a gala day. What a heavenly blessing to have been so fortunate, so worthy of divine favor as to witness this amazing spectacle, this very miracle! For generations to come would this epochal day be memorialized. Its praises would be sung throughout the land by itinerant minstrels. Artists would depict this pageantry in the full glory of Mayan picture-glyphs.

Now a surging mass of humanity shouted greetings to the divine messengers in the train of the vanguard. With alacrity way was made.

Arrayed in the ample, full-flowing *tilmatlis* provided them, the thoroughly puzzled castaways of the storm, still apprehensive, advanced slowly, and the high priest, Teotzl, paced his steps to meet them; he stared, perhaps furtively, at the seemingly divine beings. Through his mind flashed the storm! Was not that, then, the message from the oracles?

The Spaniards, quaking inwardly, too mystified by the turn of events for thought or action, awaited the seeming century crowded into but a few, fleeting moments, for the decisive crisis—life or death! Was this fanfare and glamour a vista of an Arabian Night's phantasmagoria and a triumphal entry, or the barbaric culmination of their terrestrial existence?

The answer came swiftly, and the fell apprehensions, the ominous doubts, were set to rest!

Friar Alva, easily singled out as the leader—with his finely shaped head, prominent, intellectual brow, long, gray-white locks, full-flowing beard, benign, patriarchal features and splendid physique — was embraced by Teotzl. But immediately thereafter Teotzl made the gravest faux pas! To impress his subjects with his own intimate association with the very deities whom he represented on this mundane sphere, the *ah-kin-mai* also embraced the other Spaniards!

The Spaniards were now convinced that all the homage and glamour in this barbaric, exotic setting denoted that they were being regarded in the light of divine beings!

Padre Alva was filled with emotion, with gratitude that his life and the lives of his companions had not been summarily forfeited at the hands of the barbaric votaries of a blood-lust cult, and there was a sobbing ache in his benign heart and soul that the multitude had not yet attained the goal, the civilization inimical to the worship of the prototype of Moloch.

The friar sorrowfully scanned the faces of his now happy companions, then he regarded the awe-stricken, ecstatic votaries who, at first, had prostrated themselves before the Spaniards, and now eagerly awaited word from their sainted *ah-kin-mai* as to their further course.

Friar Alva raised his hands in benediction, and in his soul there was the supplication: "Lead these benighted souls from the purgatory of their paganism into the light of Thy spirit. Amen!"

The natives sagely reasoned that the traditional *Quetzalcoatl* had, in the remote past, fostered the culture of their Toltec forebears. Their own *ah-kin-mai* was neither seared by actual contact, nor was he, through their mystic incantations, transposed bodily from their midst to the spiritual realm he so often chose as the topic of his preachments. Instead, Teotzl seemed to consort with them, not as the suppliant, but as the intimate. Was it for them, then, to question? If their own sainted high priest were so favored of the gods, then must Sacred Cuzmil be indeed veritably under the especial patronage of the high heavens!

Before the cheering blaze of every *koben*, whether in humble *jacale* or pretentious *tecpan*, the one engrossing topic was the soul-inspiring legend of the Messianic allegory prognosticating the return of their god-hero, *Quetzalcoatl*, or his progeny. The miracle had arrived!

In most comfortable quarters assigned them, the Spaniards sought relaxation from badly frayed nerves, sleep for the hectic and enervating sequence of still more incomprehensible events—as strange, if not more so, than the fantastic ballads and tales recounted by the itinerant troubadours wandering through the hamlets of old Spain.

What tomorrow and the tomorrows yet to come would unfold in fate's bundle of tricks, none dared venture even to conjecture. The diabolic spectacle of the fruits of the sacrifice, the reeking hearts in the golden censers at the feet of the hideous idols, the superstitious adulation of the natives, the exotic surroundings—what did it all betoken? What new, inexplicable gordian knot was to be untangled? What new labyrinthian intricacy was to enmesh them into a somber net? Were they, then, the prey of satanic machinations, the victims-to-be of Beelzebub and his fiendish minions, totally forsaken by the Omniscient?

Nor was Teotzl either in a state of blissful repose. The herculean task of effecting the spectacular had, it seemed, been successful even beyond his cherished dreams and hopes, and had won most popular acclaim; the clamor of the superstitious multitudes was as divine music to his ears, yet . . . ?

But why had the esoteric beings, seemingly messengers from the Mayan deities, recoiled in horror at the shrine of *Huitzilopochtli*? And why had the aged one cried out in such soulful anguish? Why had he uplifted his hands to the high heavens in supplication?

What was the purport of his earnest, yearning plea? What form of worship did these beings practice, in kneeling, their heads bowed low, the elder one towering above them, and all repeating the strange, mystic word that sounded very much like "Amen!"?

Welcome sleep and oblivion is nature's solace, the gift of the heavens, to saint and sinner alike—then follows the dawn, but also awakening to the drama of life, consciousness and understanding, and the mundane problems come to harry one's existence. When the Spaniards awoke with the early, tropic sun streaming in, a full complement of apparel awaited them, and ubiquitous attendants to meet their wants.

Friar Alva recited the matins, ablutions were performed and, strange to relate, the precedent of Mahomet and the mountain was reversed; instead of the friar being escorted to Teotzl, the holy personage was ceremoniously ushered into the white priest's chamber.

The Spaniards were now conducted about the terraces, through the various chambers and niches housing the idols. The stench from blood-reeking altars, the bespattered, gory walls and floors, the human hearts in the censers, sickened, horrified them. Even the friar and Captain de Nicuessa, steeled veterans of Indian savagery and their sordid tortures, recoiled in disgust.

The embarrassment of Teotzl was not feigned. Were the white, esoteric beings displeased with his

stewardship? Yet *Quetzalcoatl* also, so tradition reported, abhorred human sacrifice! Would his glory as *ah-kin-mai* be turned into ignominy? Yes, that would smite very vulnerably indeed!

Teotzl now turned his steps into another direction, and, despite their loathing, the Spaniards were forced to marvel at the magnificence of the pagan sanctuary, at the barbaric monoliths, at the strange, exotic carvings and sculptures, feather-weaves and priceless handiwork of the artificers.

By mere chance the Spaniards peered over the parapet surrounding the terrace. The odor of decaying vegetation and of brackish water from the miasmatic lagoon below was offensive. The lagoon, itself, was almost completely obscured by giant trees and thick branches which crossed and intercrossed, seeming to form a bridge much used by the small game and migrant birds from the jungle beyond. Intertwining shrubs, vines, lianas, the aloe and mangrove, in riotous, natural growths, abounded.

No more particular heed would have been paid but for a curious green-and-brown object, slowly and by twisting strokes moving across the almost stagnant water. Fully twelve feet long, it had raised its loathsome, green-eyed head, emitted a short bark and displayed its seizer-tooth. The hideous, seeming-log was a monstrous, horny-plated crocodile! Raising its head for but a brief moment, it then was completely hidden below the lagoon.

Still another quirk of fate led their steps into one of the numerous and spacious courts. Here they beheld an awe-inspiring spectacle, a veritable miracle in this land of incongruous paradoxes, for here was the symbol of Christianity, the Cross!

Entirely mystifying to the Spaniards, and a very queer, inexplicable coincidence, was this symbol of the Mayan rain god, *Tlaloc*, a mighty deity, or *teotl*, in Yucatan.

To the Spaniards, the awe-inspiring spectacle of the Cross was as a portentous omen from the very heavens! What a marvelous, strange, mystic setting! What a study in contrasts and paradoxes! The Cross, envisioned here in a most benighted land, where paganism and human sacrifice prevailed.

The Spaniards were deeply affected by this seeming miracle, and many were the wild, superstitious conjectures arising in their thoughts. The barbaric scenes but recently enacted, and which had left such vivid, horrifying impressions, were so completely incongruous in the very shadow of the symbol of the True Faith! It was like an emergence from the foul Gehenna to a veritable Paradise!

Here, in the land of gullible superstition, under the sway of an iniquitous priestly caste; here, sans the crown of thorns, sans the bleeding heart, sans the face of despairing anguish, sans the remotest knowledge of Him, yet here was the Cross, symbol of Gethsemane!

Friar Alva, the lowly shepherd of the Church, knelt in humility, raised his eyes to the sympathetic heavens, and his voice implored in paraphrase of sixteen crucial, epoch-making centuries, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

Friar Alva now celebrated mass in the simplest, yet not the less devout ceremonial ever before witnessed in this land of mysteries. Then, in the ebullience of his soul, in the glory and zeal of his heart, his full-throated voice resounded in a paean of the effulgence of the Omniscient!

Friar Alva's paean was vibrant and reverential. The hushed enthralment of the natives evidenced the solemnity of the hymn, inspiring even to the pagan priests as they watched the reaction in the face of their *ah-kin-mai*.

In solemn exaltation the friar chanted "*Te Deum laudamus, Te Dominum confitemur*," the hymn of thanksgiving, of triumph, simple, yet solemn, majestic and inspiring!

Teotzl opined that the white priest was voicing an invocation to *Tlaloc*! Teotzl reverentially fingered the Cross on the friar's breast; he gazed at the stone symbol of the rain god, then stared, bewildered, at the padre—but, despite his perplexity, Teotzl mentally visioned an elaborate ceremonial to *Tlaloc*, the fairest virgin as votary-bride, and the unwitting friar in the stellar role of celebrant!

In their separate quarters, the Spaniards and the high priest pondered long and deeply, but the enigma of the fates was yet to be unfolded!

IV

BEYOND THE lagoon lay the labyrinth of almost primeval jungle with its green mantle of moss, and tangle of giant trees, vines, ferns, mangroves and lianas; here the fauna still felt a measure of safety against native hunters; here, every possible type of tropic flora vied with the sunbeams in riot of hues.

This almost pristine jungle formed nature's bulwark against attack on the south side of the terrace surrounding the Cuzmil sanctuary. The quagmires of the bordering lagoon offered but very precarious footing for even the smallest of furry animals, and the driftings of carrion and exuvia, the putrefactive stench, made that region one to be decidedly avoided.

The jungle extended uninterruptedly, save for very few natural clearings, for over fifteen miles southward, then terminated abruptly, as if by some freak of nature, at the upper limit of Mual. The outlying region was inhabited by the humblest peasants with

their rude wattle-huts and tiny patches of maize. Towards the east coast were small fishing hamlets as indigent as their neighbors of the interior.

The sacerdotal shrine of the Sacred Isle of Cuzmil was in the northern section, but at Mual were the imposing royal palace of King Xoctli and the fairy-like *tecpan*s, or castles, of the nobility and nabob merchants, a powerful class in their influence and seafaring ventures.

The merchants' guild maintained fleets of commodious, seagoing *piraguas*, plying to distant ports, exchanging their wares of cotton, feather-weaves and other commodities for dye-woods, native gems and the more precious metals.

They were received hospitably everywhere, frequently being empowered to conclude treaties, or other friendly pacts. As news gatherers and purveyors from port to port, and from distant councils to the court of their monarch, Xoctli, they were, not without reason, suspected of espionage in foreign affairs. Their maritime activities, however, were extended on an ever-increasing scale, and their wealth gave them prominence in the affairs of the realm, ranking equally with the *tlatoani*, or the nobility.

The royal palace of the *nachi cocum*, or monarch, towered on a steep terrace of earth strengthened by sun-dried bricks. Its imposing construction was of the customary porous-stone, the *tetzontli*; the surface of the stone was of stucco, dazzling as silver in the sun's glare. Huge beams of cedar and cypress supported

the roof, which was decorated as an *azotea*, a fairy-land garden, above. The castle was noted not only for its magnificence, but also for its utility as a fortress, in its earlier days having withstood siege and attack in the tribal wars then raging.

In the main court of the palace a conference was in active session. Staunch intimates of King Xoctli, in swiftly paddled *piraguas*, were the first to speed to Mual with tidings of the unusual events transpiring in the sanctuary at Cuzmil. They preceded the anticipated messengers from Teotzl, who would render an official report from the high priest, verbally and with picture-glyphs, depicting the white beings who supposedly had come from the celestial sphere.

All agog with the important tidings, the monarch had summoned his council, including the chief of his military staff, Uinic, a time-tried veteran; the high magistrate of the realm; and also a number of the nobles and merchant nabobs, then on an extended visit to Mual to participate in the noble sport of *tlachtli*, a game somewhat akin to modern tennis and basketball combined, on which the wagers on the contending teams ran very high. Among the trusted staff was always the monarch's personal priest, or *ah-kin*.

The monarch was addressing his council: "Some of you will doubtless recall that quite some time ago, I headed a large party embarking on an extensive fishing expedition and vacation. We pursued an easterly course in two of our war-craft, each well manned by twenty stalwart paddlers, and amply provisioned.

“It was then the season when we did not fear the hazards of storms, and we encountered moderate gusts and easily weathered squalls. Good fortune pursued us until our reed and maguey baskets, covered, yet trailing in the freshness of the sea, were filled with a very satisfactory catch.

“Though quite a distance from the shore, we were not at all lonesome, as our companions were in holiday mood and spirits, and very congenial; several had excellent voices and their songs were very entertaining. Mind you, we were ever in the lane of stout merchant craft plying towards distant ports. A number of these we hailed, exchanged pleasantries, and, if I recall, even did some bartering.

“Well, we were quite undecided whether to head for home then, or to extend our trip, as all were eager as schoolboys released from the austere walls of the sanctuary and the driving priest-tutors. We decided finally that it was best not to expose our catch needlessly long, and that further absence might cause apprehension at Mual.

“Just then, the steersman — a remarkably keen-eyed veteran of the sea, loaned us by favor of the chief mariner of the merchants’ guild—reported an object in the distance. At first I could make nothing of his animated description, and believed it was but a huge fish bobbing with the swell of the waters. Our curiosity was, however, aroused by the steersman’s persistence.

“We paddled swiftly towards the uncertain object in a direction other than our course. Soon, a very small, frail canoe was seen, with a limp arm hanging over its side. Finally overtaking the canoe, we found within it a prone, exhausted, seemingly lifeless body.

“We forced a goodly draught of the potent *pulque* down his throat, only after prying apart his clenched teeth, then removed him to our craft. His canoe was a very curious contraption which we towed along. It contained pieces of partly decayed fish and an almost empty water-gourd, a rather poor subsistence.

“He was not of our people, quite taller and of a different cast of features. He wore but a simple loin-cloth and a very tattered blanket. In Mual he was under the care of our most expert herb-healer. His rugged constitution served him well.

“For a number of moons and suns thereafter, he raged with fever, hovered near unto death, and maundered in some strange tongue. Later, all that could be gleaned was that his name was Chibachu, for he pointed to himself and kept repeating that name; and when he indicated the general direction out towards the distant horizon, he repeatedly mentioned Guune, but where that is remains a mystery.

“He has, since then, mastered a fair knowledge of our tongue, for that mischievous imp, the Princess Cheeuh, having formed a strong attachment for the castaway, was his patient tutor. They are, even now, almost inseparable; he is her abject slave, and, I fear, sponsor for many of her pranks.

“Chibachu unfolded a most fantastic tale of his adventure on the inclement sea, but how long he had been exposed, he, himself, could not recall, as we found him in a stupor.

“I have ordered him before you. Listen carefully to his tale, as it may have some bearing on the white beings now in Cuzmil. I may, after all, have erred in my casual judgment of his story.”

Chibachu appeared before the council and knelt to the ground, his forehead touching the earth. The monarch bade him rise.

“Chibachu,” commanded King Xoctli, “you shall now repeat your tale of the sea. Speak!”

“Highness,” began Chibachu, “many the time have I related my story of the sea, and of the strange ‘water-house’ I beheld, and the pale-face crew thereon, but ridicule has always greeted me. O, if the gods but bear with me and lend faith to your ears! I was not drunk with the strong brew of my people, nor beset with the spell of evil spirits. What I saw was real, and I can still vision that scene after these passing years.

“I was far from my native shores; I had but a very poor catch and bemoaned my fate, for it meant hunger for my family. I paddled still farther away with hopes of better fortune. Black clouds and rain soon set in, yet, despairingly, I sought to turn homewards against the wind and storm, as the waves threatened and sea-monsters looked hungrily for prey.

“Then, like an apparition from spirit-land, as I rubbed my eyes in disbelief—there, in the distance, appeared a huge ‘water-house.’ Never before had I beheld such craft, so very much larger than your greatest war-canoes. On stripped trees there were huge, white wings, and on the wings, a cross, as of *Tlaloc*. In front, there was a carving of a gay figure. There were many men on board, or running about on thick ropes from the stripped trees, and they clambered up and down like giant apes on tree branches. There were lights, but not of pine torches; the men seemed pale of face, distinctly aliens.

“May all the gods confirm my words! These men were such as I had never before seen; their garments were not as of Mual, and the few words I barely caught were not Mayan. I hailed loudly and again, but my voice was lost in the tempest, and the strong winds drove the craft away; no face was turned in my direction. I feared the worst!

“As if by a miracle, your timely arrival saved me, Highness. The rest is known. I swear by all the gods, it is the truth I speak, but none will deign to credit me!”

Chibachu’s recital and his insistence that he actually had beheld an alien ‘water-house’ now assumed some aspect of credulity, more so since reports had reached Mual of the strange events at Cuzmil. The thoughtful silence greeting his story evidenced the keen interest of his hearers.

“Well, my faithful friends,” queried King Xoctli, “what make you of this tale? Long have I believed it as the creation of an upset mind resulting from exposure and fever. But what about the important tidings from Cuzmil? This seemingly fantastic tale now merits consideration.

“Still I am sorely puzzled! How came these aliens to Cuzmil? Whence? Deities consort not with mortals; if humans, they came not on the wings of the storm. Is there, mayhap, a connection between the strange ‘water-house’ sighted by the sentinel at Cuzmil and these mystic strangers? May there have been a wreck? Were there others who did not survive?

“Now we are faced with other problems, weighty ones. Tradition has it that the year of *Ce Acatl*, the hoped-for return of *Quetzalcoatl*, soon nears. Can the dead return? True, if the omens reported from distant Tenochtitlan be credited—the three distinct comets and the very strange, mystic light in the east—then we are all at sea. Is our course to be one of credence or of superstition?

“Comets augur dire events, yet we have witnessed them in our times, and no calamity befell—but perhaps I tread on heresy?

“The fires of Popocatapetl threaten to engulf the arrogant Montezuma’s Tenochtitlan in belching smoke and fiery lava. My fervent prayer is that *Hunal Ku* smite that city of iniquity!

“On the other hand, tradition also has it that many hardy or venturesome voyagers have survived the

perils of the sea, even have emerged, after drifting aimlessly and leagues from alien shores. Man's adventurous nature has frequently swayed the destinies of nations, has inscribed the pages of history. Surely, the guiding hand is not from a clay or stone idol, but from *Hunal Ku* alone! Do I stray from the plausible to the fantastic if I surmise that such be the case of the pale-faced beings now at Cuzmil?

"From distant trading ports there are rumors current that even beyond, are still other lands and people, other customs and cultures, perhaps even other religions. May there not be then some truth in Chibachu's claim about Guune? And many other realms of which we know not?

"My faithful friends, all this but spins my brain in a hopeless whirl; my tongue is as parched as the maize in the drought. I crave refreshments and the solace of *yetl*."

An attendant, silent and alert, now sounded his tortoise-shell gong. Almost immediately a group of servitors answered with trays of delicate cups, or *xicaras*, with maize wafers and honey, fruit, confections, and foaming, vanilla-spiced chocolate; then followed the *yetl*, smoked through a reed or gilt tube, or like cigars encased in corn husks.

While enjoying the repast the participants beheld a sprite emerging from the *tecpan* and into the patio—a vision of about fourteen, in the blooming adolescence of budding womanhood, with hair as raven as the nigrescent night and flowing luxuriously over her

very shapely shoulders. Her eyes were fawn-like and as the wells of innocence; her *pic* and *huipile* were of shimmering, soft material, embroidered at the neck and ankles. Her full, round breasts were partly exposed though covered with a flimsy lace. About her neck was a gold torque with a single carnelian. Her sandals were of soft doeskin, with threads of silver.

So striking was her appearance that when Uinic—an elderly *cacique*, military commander of King Xoctli's forces, an infrequent visitor at Mual, who had not seen the sprite in some time—gazed upon this elfin apparition, he unwittingly but fervently voiced his admiration: "She is as beautiful, as marvelously comely, as any yet selected and honored as the bride of *Tlaloc*." This was his rather dubious acme of enthusiastic panegyric. And the consternation it caused smote the aged, faithful commander to the very heart!

In the utter maze of Mayan paganism, *Tlaloc*, the rain god, must be placated with a votive offering of the fairest virgin as his fitting bride. This annual ceremony caused a search from the humblest wattle-hut to the most pretentious castle, even into the otherwise inviolable harem of sovereignty.

The painstaking selection, by an unbiased (?) jury of priests, nobles and merchant nabobs, was regarded as the most signal honor which could be bestowed on a Mayan maiden. Maternal love—when the dubious distinction struck home—and the liberal distribution of largesse judiciously dispensed, would, on

occasion, circumvent the selection, but this only rarely, with many obstacles to surmount. All candidates for this much-coveted honor were very closely examined by the superioress of the nunnery for the most minute blemish, so as not to belittle the aesthetic taste of *Tlaloc*.

Then followed a period of lavish entertainment in her honor; the bride-votary was beatified by the *ah-kin-mai*, in a spectacular rite of adoration, befitting a goddess-to-be. All votaries vied in the costliness of their gifts to her, for then *Tlaloc* would cause their *milpas* of *teosinte* to flourish and their subterranean *cenotes* would not become dry.

An awed horde of pagans would prostrate themselves before the goddess-to-be; *chilans* would tenderly raise the frail, delicate body; an ecstatic hymn to the rain god would ring out; then would the chosen votary-bride be tossed into the sacred well or lagoon, where there would be union with her divine consort.

If she were not engulfed in the depths, nor destroyed by the saurian monster, it was an omen of ill, of divine repugnance; Mayan chronicles fail to record any such verified eventuality.

So, the panegyric of the *cacique*, Uinic, struck terror in the heart of her royal sire, so abject was his dismay. The dubious distinction possibly to befall his idol-daughter, the Princess Cheeuh, so utterly shocked the king as peremptorily to upset the equanimity of the repast.

To the queen mother, Cheeuah was ever on an exalted pedestal, for the queen, Nezuama, had been sterile for many harrowing years, and hope for issue had been abandoned.

But the monarch's concubines had presented their semi-consort with many sons, attained by now to man's estate, stalwart and righteous, ever the most devoted, loyal slaves to the princess whom they adored more than an idol of the sanctuary. These concubine sons shattered tradition by mingling freely with the humblest of subjects, fostering amelioration of the lot of the poor, aiding them when necessary. Perhaps, because of their own standing in the tradition of caste, their sympathies were well founded.

But Queen Nezuama had fasted and prayed devoutly, and had made extravagant votive-offerings to *Cioacoatl*, Mexican prototype of Mother Eve. Miracles may occur even among the benighted pagans, and the queen was ultimately rewarded, for Cheeuah blessed the royal court!

V

QUITE APPARENTLY the fervent supplication of the *ah-kin-mai*, Teotzl, to the rather apathetic pantheon of the Mayan deities for spiritual guidance, for even a solitary augur, in this, his mundane predicament, remained unheeded. The baneful manifestations upsetting Tenochtitlan had no repercussions in Cuzmil. Neither comet nor eclipse had come to strike terror in the realm of Teotzl. The luminaries and satellites moved on along ordained paths in the firmament, as of yore. Even the mute, impotent idols were indifferent; they still sardonically sneered or grinned, according to the human artistry originating them.

Confronted with this quandary, with the seemingly dilatory tactics of those forces usually so interpretive, the high priest procrastinated, with the result that fully two weeks elapsed before his official mission arrived at Mual to render its report.

The envoys of Teotzl descanted long and earnestly upon the portentous events in Cuzmil. Glamorous was

their description of the first sight of the white beings, of the spectacular reception at the *teocalli*—but here the voluble spokesman became diffident; he was, evidently, at a loss how properly to account for the repugnance of these esoteric beings to the sacrificial rites; still stranger was their seeming worship at the shrine of *Tlaloc*.

Then was produced a beautiful portfolio — an highly polished parchment of the agave, on which was depicted, in most faithful artistry, a representation of each of the progeny of the sun god, *Tonatiuh*, or, mayhap, of *Quetzalcoatl*.

But, after considerable thought, King Xoctli had evolved a definite plan for action. Intuitively he sensed a situation fraught with uncertainties, with ominous peril for the pale-face beings. Of their divine origin he was frankly skeptic; instead, he deeply pondered the saner idea that somewhere beyond the horizon of his own people and civilizations must exist.

Well he realized that if the unwitting Teotzl regarded the supposed divine beings as not inimical to his hegemony, they were in no immediate peril, but if the high priest should finally decide otherwise, then would reprisal against the aliens who spurned the rites of sacrifice be swift and final.

To circumvent this eventuality, yet not overtly conflict with the priesthood, the monarch entrusted the envoys of the high priest with a courtly, flowery message; the purport was an invitation, subject to the ap-

proval of the *ah-kin-mai*, to the white strangers to visit the Court at Mual. This was planned mainly to prevent the final transfer of the guests to the dubious haven of the hospitality of the Aztecs and Montezuma.

Teotzl, thus appealed to, his plans not yet fully matured for an open breach with his monarch, deemed it good policy to comply. Thus, the bewildered friar and his companions, still basking in the good graces of their thoroughly mystified host, departed with a richly bedecked escort, and on a very gayly caparisoned *piragua*.

With changing shifts, with the pulsating thud, thud of paddles dipping in and out of the placid waters, the craft skirted the coral-encrusted coast, gliding to the master strokes of the bronzed crew; long before the day had waned they were in sight of a panorama of tropic grandeur, shimmering green-blue waters, coral fronds and dazzling sands. They now beheld a vista of glistening towers and white-stuccoed *tecpan*s; Mual, their destination, was before their eyes.

The *piragua* had been sighted from shore and a welcoming escort was there to greet them, for alien features had been noted in the craft, and hurried reports had been relayed to the palace of the monarch.

King Xoctli was then in advancing middle age. He was broad of shoulder, erect in bearing, of benign mien, but his face showed the hard lines of care and service. For this state occasion he wore the royal *penache*, with *quetzal* plumage; his shoulders were draped with royal *tilmatl*i; on his breast gleamed a lapis lazuli.

Friar Alva advanced, and when but a few paces from the monarch, he gazed squarely into the eyes of his royal host. Each sought, in these few, fleeting moments, to gain insight into the innermost thoughts of the other. The historic culture of the Old World, and the exotic, though barbaric, civilization of the New were now face to face, for weal or woe. The summarization, each of the other, was impressive.

The benign friar held firmly to the teachings of the Evangelist, Luke: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's"; but before the friar could kneel in homage or deference, the monarch had risen and embraced him impulsively.

Came then the joyous, spontaneous shouts of acclaim from the spectators crowding the patio and terraces. On either side of the monarch were the nobility and merchant nabobs and dignitaries; the high magistrate sat to the right, the queen to the left of the throne. On a low ebony stool at the feet of the queen was Cheeuh. About the terraces, on the fringe of royalty and nobility, were the peasants welcomed by the benign ruler.

The queen and Cheeuh gazed earnestly at the Spaniards who were paying them courtly obeisance. Now was enacted in a few brief moments, a far-reaching scene, destined to be so portentous in its sequence as to be retained long in the memory of all.

The blond, Adonis-like Gallo, whose eyes were at first lowered while kneeling, now, with hesitant temer-

ity, met the eyes of Cheeuah. The deep emotions stirred within their young, susceptible hearts were so impressionable, so ecstatic, as to cause both an ebullience of spirit, yet a vague feeling of emerging from a trance into the elysium of requited love.

With the impetuous rashness of youth, Gallo bent over and kissed the hand of the sprite, so resplendent with the first bloom of budding womanhood. Cheeuah's heart throbbed with emotion, and she yearned to be enfolded in Gallo's embrace, to respond to his eager lips. Though her languorous eyes warned that she was the cynosure of curious observers, she timorously raised her hand to Gallo's thatch of flaxen hair, then patted his cheek, striving bravely to still the tumult in her heart.

Sudden as was this spontaneous byplay, yet it stirred conflicting emotions in the hearts of others. It was quickly perceived by the monarch, who beamed approval. The friar and the sovereign exchanged glances of mutual understanding, of felicitations.

The friar's lips moved in a silent prayer of deep thanksgiving, fervent and devout. To him it seemed to denote the materialization of his dreams, as if his trail, by some miracle, had opened its welcoming vista. He envisioned a shrine to his Faith, the first step towards enlightenment. The simple, earnest churchman envisaged a mission, the ideal of his yearnings, the holy service of proselytism, not the Cross enforced with the sword, but with the olive branch, emblem of peace, of mutual understanding. Such were

the vatical visions, the sublime aspirations of the unsophisticated prince or pauper of the Rome credo—for the friar was still the believer in divine miracles!

Queen Nezuama, however, was tortured by different emotions as she watched the strange magnet attracting her child-idol into the arms of the handsome Gallo. Why, it seemed but yesterday that she had sung a lullaby to an elfin sprite nestled in an ornate cradle. It seemed but yesterday, as she hovered over the be-draggled array of gayly bedaubed dolls in most fanciful costumes—the object of the most solicitous attention of this precious gem, mortal goddess of the royal household. Cheeuah was indeed the answer to the queen's years of yearning, earnest prayers.

Why, how vividly could the queen recall the day when the eager, soulful-eyed baby stretched out her arms and cried out to the infinitesimal heights of the heavens for a beam from the luminous moon. Yet here was this mite of womanhood grasping at an idol who, if so the gods decreed, might vanish on the morrow into evanescent vapor.

The cherub heart that had throbbed against her very own, the eyes once glowing in filial adoration, the delicate frame of body so often clutched in tight embrace, nurtured through grim illness, through romping childhood—all to be lavished on another! Be he mortal or be he divine, the queen-mother's heart rebelled; she was racked, not with the pangs of jealousy, nor hate, but with gnawing despond, the nadir of poignant, intangible fear and grief.

The tormenting thoughts harrying the mother were not reflected in the glamorous setting of the royal reception, for here was indeed a study in marked contrasts, from the lowly peasant in customary loincloth to the ornate *tilmatli*-draped noble. The variegated ensembles in display would have put to blushing shame, even to oblivion, Joseph's traditional coat of many colors, and they vied in splendor with the riotous garden blooms, even with the iridescent rainbow.

Pennants in prodigious display and brilliant hues were everywhere, and everywhere the crowds felt gayety and elation. All had come to pay homage to their sovereign and the mystic beings. They lined the terraces and mingled as mutual devotees of the royal court. Flowers in profusion bedecked the courts and patio; the palace walls were in gay festoon.

The feminine visitors gracing the reception were far more somberly clad than were their consorts and companions, for the styles of pre-conquest Maya land were fashioned almost exclusively for the male of the species.

Now, above the babel of voices, came the resounding throb and clash of drums and trumpets. Before the reverberations had ceased, the crowds began to disperse. The reception to the general public had drawn to a close, and for days to come would its memories be cherished. Before their cheerful *kobens* the peasants would the more comfortably ponder over and exchange views about the portentous happenings, and also voice praise of their liege lord. Here, also,

the beaming matrons, who had, in all these passing years, benevolently watched their glamorous princess emerge from infancy to adolescence, then to the glory of regal womanhood, compared notes avidly as to the thrilling byplay of a royal love scene, so inspiring to an adoring public—where the handsome, mystic being stood enchanted before their own goddess-mortal. The glamour of the rain god, *Tlaloc*, was as that of the handsome one!

A royal celebration, particularly a betrothal or marital union, surmised the peasantry, would mean dancing and feasting for the period of a *trecena*, the Mayan lucky-thirteen days, and the entire populace would be as guests at the palace; surely something to look forward to, they optimistically thought.

In Maya land the dance was ever an integral part of the ceremonials and rituals of the sanctuary, as well as of the gay gatherings featured alike by tribal heads and nobility. In a land where the populace was neither intellectually endowed nor trained to cope with life's problems, the exhilarating dance was indulged in frequently, whether in the public square on market days, or wherever several families gathered.

Within the palace proper, to which the remaining, the specially invited ones, now repaired, the floors of the spacious chambers had been cleared, the white walls bedecked with drapes and allied tribal pennants; low stools lined the sides; large pine torches glowed, and immense fagots crackled cheerily in the hearth-fires.

To one side were the courtiers, commanders and other dignitaries; to the other, the grace and beauty of Mual and vicinity, the matrons, sisters, daughters—all in gay, holiday spirits, all agog and awaiting the dance signal.

By the side of the queen was Cheeuah, and hovering over her was the attentive Gallo, both awaiting the rhythmic strains.

De Nicuessa and his prepossessing partner, neither able to converse with the other, and Miguel, who had centered his rather dubious attentions on a buxom, giggling lass, exemplified the theory that the terpsichorean mood is not limited to race, caste, nor clime.

Almost at the break of dawn, happy, indeed, were the Spaniards to be conducted at last to their quarters and to the relaxing comfort of pine-bough and multi-quilted beds. If the lovelorn Gallo and the equally stricken Cheeuah lingered somewhat longer over their leavetaking, to interpret, each in the other's eyes, a meed of understanding of their infatuation, to ease the utter futility of oral avowals, small wonder that the few remaining guests were in sympathetic approval.

Thus the baneful uncertainties, the incongruous surroundings, the gruesome spectacles, Teotzl and his treacherous minions, were, fortunately, of the past.

A few days later, at the invitation of the king, and to the particular gratification of the Spaniards, a visit was made to the king's *niahuatl*, the house of god, the monarch's personal temple of worship. Quick to grasp

at an auspicious opportunity, in environments so more humane than was the sanctuary at Cuzmil, and encouraged by the most favorable reception and evidence of whole-hearted cordiality, de Nicuessa, at the suggestion of the friar, now fashioned a Cross from the giant leaf of a palm. It was reverentially set on a massive trunk of a towering tree in the patio leading from the royal castle to the house of worship.

Mass was now celebrated; all confessed, took communion and were absolved. As the Spaniards knelt before the Cross, Cheeuah, believing the solemn rite was of mystic import to her mortal idol, also knelt. The friar placed his hand upon her head, pronounced a benediction, then christened her Ysabel, repeating the cherished name until its significance was impressed upon her.

The monarch, witnessing this scene, was perplexed and uneasy, though very eager to evidence his sincerity and affection for the Spaniards. Across his troubled mind there came the unwitting, if innocent, expression of admiration of his most trusted subject, Uinic—"She is as beautiful, as marvelously comely as any yet honored and selected as the bride of *Tlaloc!*" And consternation seized King Xoctli!

What if these seemingly gentle, innocent white beings were votaries of the rain god? Intuitively the monarch felt that by befriending the Spaniards, ultimately he would have to cross swords with the power of Teotzl. A priest-driven people may be swayed to rebellion, even regicide. What if those he had taken

to his very heart, the elderly seeming-priest and his companions, were merely biding their time and plotting to sacrifice Cheeuah, his adored one, as a votive offering to *Tlaloc*?

Most forcibly it struck King Xoctli that the symbol of *Tlaloc*, who annually demanded tribute, was being worshipped in solemn ritual by the very guests whom he had befriended!

With these apprehensive broodings the monarch murmured a devout prayer to *Hunal Ku* for spiritual guidance. Then he deliberated upon a plan for mutual, earnest understanding, either to master a knowledge of the Spaniards' tongue, or to impress them with the importance of learning Mayan. Yet, as he earnestly studied the benign countenance of the friar, the eager faces of his daughter and Gallo, the monarch's disquieting thoughts and forebodings were assuaged; sagely, he reasoned, love seeks to protect, not to destroy.

Nor was he in error in regard to the avid desire of his guests to master the language of their host. Gallo, with the able assistance of Cheeuah, set about the problem in very primary fashion. Starting with an object, it was named in both languages, and as both pupils were very apt, and at the age when memory is both receptive and retentive, progress was eminently satisfactory. They were soon able to converse and to express what was in their hearts. When able to interpret each other's halting sentences, they plighted their troth. The memory of this felicitous event remained

sacred through the tragic days which later beset them, and in the many years of happiness thereafter.

Though Gallo sensed that somewhere beyond the horizon, beyond the vast, boundless sea, was the home where he had been cradled and orphaned, and that there lay his proper sphere, in his country's service, yet he did not yearn for Spain. He no longer felt the glamour and urge of adventure with the staunch souls who were constantly forging ahead for the glory of Don Carlos. To Gallo these dreams were of the past; the exhilaration of the present, and Cheeuah, were far more tangible, far more important.

Friar Alva, in his new environments, had seemingly ended his quest for the grail, untrammled by pompous church dignitaries, and by the ensnaring, debasing system of Indian enslavement, the *repartimiento*, enforced by the conquerors in San Domingo, Fernandina, Darien, and elsewhere. His love for humanity was too great to countenance the bigotry of that historic age of Spain's grandeur, too zealous for the True Faith to foster proselytism by the Inquisition. Friar Alva was indeed a most worthy proponent of Montesino, of the priests, Olmedo and Diaz, the sacred gems in the Catholic escutcheon!

Friar Alva feared the day of the arrival of the explorers and conquerors who were his countrymen. His field was far more precious than all the gold of the fabled Indies, and his most devout prayer was that Mual might be spared invasion by the sword.

Chance, which the devout friar ascribed to Providence, had driven the entering wedge for his mission of proselyting by mutual understanding and good will, through the strong attachment between his nephew, Gallo, and the Princess Cheeuah, and in the whole-hearted hospitality of King Xoctli. When, through a knowledge of each other's language, mutual perception became possible, the friar strove to inculcate his own concepts of the tenets of Christianity.

The friar's preachments, earnest and convincing, fell on avid ears, but the monarch strove to drive home the more convincing and trenchant arguments that the power of the throne was as naught compared with the mastery of the priest-caste over the gullibly superstitious votaries; that this ominous peril could not be regarded with impunity; that the danger of seething revolt would inevitably result in doom for the dynasty and for the Spaniards.

Later, however, in the privacy of his own thoughts, Friar Alva pondered the problem very deeply. He was sore beset with misgivings, for this poignant realization confronted him: of what avail were his zeal if his unscrupulous compatriots of the sword and the Cross, who preached the gospel of peace and the Word of the Master, all the while lusted for conquest and spoils? Of what avail was his own faith if these buccaneers were wont to descend, as their roving spirit would finally lead them to, upon this, his haven, and destroy ruthlessly the seeds sown and nurtured so ten-

derly—this by the very ones who also professed the Faith he was even now so eloquently preaching?

The benign missionary was in the midst of a wonderful, if barbaric, civilization—arts and crafts, a highly developed agriculture, a commendable system of irrigation (considering the total dearth of proper equipment), and an extensive commercial intercourse with other tribes. The friar pondered over the desolation and havoc awaiting the land should the conquistadores overrun Mexico!

In his enthusiasm, the friar had chosen six of the most intelligent of the white-robed novitiates of the *niahuatl*, and laboriously trained them in the simple practices of his Church. What they lacked in understanding was compensated by their efforts to justify the friar's trust; from this nucleus the Faith was later promulgated throughout Yucatan.

Only the abounding, riotous-hued flowers and other simple offerings were permitted, and the communicants flocked to the ministrations of the beloved successor to their own god-hero, *Quetzalcoatl*.

King Xoctli cooperated whole-heartedly, yet he had cause to dread the sword of Damocles in the retribution of the Cuzmil priesthood!

VI

TO THE BENIGN friar, so many years inured to the frailties of humans, the insouciant transgressions of Miguel were quite perturbing; gentle chidings reacted but little upon the unconscionable rogue, and were as transitory as the flittings of the will-o'-the-wisp.

At a tender age, forced by the pangs of hunger to abandon the haven of a discarded watercask and the pilferings from waterfront hovels, the orphaned Miguel became a slaving drudge in a cook's galley. With but very brief respite, his one dark, hidden secret—an obsessive terror for swimming—was ferreted out by an unsympathetic crew; with the prevailing fellowship aboard ship, Miguel was thereafter frequently and unceremoniously heaved into the cooling waters.

These enforced lessons continued from time to time, and from ship to ship, for Miguel was ever the rover, and one ship or port was as mediocre or as bad as another. By hard and incessant toil, however, after

weathering the berating billingsgate of numerous termagant-natured cooks, he fairly earned the modicum of knowledge as how best not to upset the none too fastidious culinary requirements of a ship's crew.

While he was by no means the direct ancestor of the blithe sailor who boasted of a sweetheart in every port, Miguel, if nautical gossip be credited, was very close to the line of descent, and his philosophy of life was—"mañana!"

As from port to port, and ship to ship, provided both the requisite time and safety—the safety of distance—Miguel indulged in both wanderlust and escapades. His scruples, or lack thereof, anent the sacred ties of matrimony, were as water on the proverbial duck's back. In the course of a misguided life, Miguel would have been able to produce a list, long, but not honorable nor enviable, of discarded paramours and consorts, and, most probably, an array of progeny whose mundane destinies neither upset his equilibrium nor stirred qualms of conscience concerning his paternal responsibilities.

The easy-going Don Juan, however, at one time had caught up with a veritable Tartar, a virago whose vengeful pursuit for justice and legitimacy for soon-expected offspring was almost the undoing of the rogue. A kindly padre, appealed to, had Miguel hailed before him.

Somehow, in the mind of the reverend father, there lurked the germ of suspicion. Perhaps it was his keen and receptive recollection of a voice at the confes-

sional, or it may have been intuition; but, instead of Miguel repairing to the connubial bed, he was sentenced to the ignominy of the San Jago gaol, to contemplation and to rather dubious contrition.

Even then, Miguel's outlook on the philosophy of life, on the vagaries of harsh fate, were not overly ruffled. Almost on the hour of the Ventura's departure for Darien, death had claimed the enlisted cook. Miguel, the only one available, was substituted. Again he looked for newer, better conquests.

In his new Yucatecan environments, Miguel promptly attached himself to the royal commissary, or rather to that particular branch presided over by a short, squat, bronzed widow, who at first was awed by the persistent attentions paid her. When Miguel, again feeling the urge of mating, and now familiar with the kitchen paraphernalia, initiated the buxom relict into the mysteries of Spanish cuisine, a newer conquest was recorded in the book of fate.

Later, having glimpsed the widow's spotless *jacale*, now minus a husband-father-provider, Miguel impulsively took informal possession of buxom relict, wattle-hut, a brood of small, bronzed, totally deshabille Mayan orphans, and the invariable hairless, flea-bitten mongrel of the domicile. The orphaned brood shortly thereafter began to prattle "daddy" in their own patois, and Miguel was adopted as their very own.

Miguel came, he saw, he was conquered! Having now comfortably ensconced himself, he required no

second invitation, nor more urgent one, particularly since he understood not Mayan, nor the lady Spanish. And he continued on, despite the derision of his erstwhile companions and the tacit disapproval of the friar; sadly must it be recorded: Miguel loved not the spiritual less, but the corporeal more!

Thus, as an addition to an exotic refectory, Miguel was a valuable acquisition; as a paramour, his latest conquest seemed eminently pleased; and in the eyes of his newly-adopted brood, with whose intellect, comradery and penchant for mischievous pranks he was ever on an equal plane, he distinguished himself. So there was ample justification in Miguel's fervent hopes and prayers that the advent of soul-salvagers from his distant native land should be long delayed, and that this newest elysium should carry on.

To while away the somewhat tedious evenings after the first blush of his very latest honeymoon, and when his adopted brood had been cajoled and cuddled, each into his or her own little nook for the night, Miguel again turned to the hobby that had been a source of inspiration and amusement to him, but of despair to all others within range of the non-sonorous caterwaulings. He fashioned hybrid instruments, supposedly representing imitations of the monochord, the three-stringed rebec and the lute, even venturing to duplicate the flageolet and the ophicleide, precursor of the tuba.

From these musical make-shifts, Miguel alone could possibly conjure or coax notes as hybrid as

their source. The outstanding tune or ballad or plaintive wail of his versatile répertoire, monotonous and interminable in its lengthy stanzas, concerned a certain charming "Constancia" whose peccability certainly belied her name, and whose quite frequent peccadillos had lamentably torn the very tendrils of Miguel's vulnerable and aching heart. The very startling effect this ballad had on the sensitiveness of the various, divers, not too sympathetic nor appreciative shipmates may well be imagined; but to the buxom quasi-consort, her little brood, and an ever-increasing, admiring audience of natives, his musical outbursts were as heavenly symphonies.

Meanwhile, the friar was deep in his labors, the regeneration of pagan souls, and with all augurs of success, as he had enlisted under his standard those whose high station and influence assured a numerous and active following for the shepherd of the strange, new creed being promulgated.

Young Gallo, in those rare intervals not devoted to dancing attendance on his inamorata (who proudly displayed him at all royal and noble functions, to the dismay and envy of the belles of Mual), was taken in hand by the friar for continuance of secular instruction. Also, under the markedly efficient guidance of Captain de Nicuessa, he was given a rudimentary training in military tactics to qualify him for an active career in the services of King Xoctli, the heir-apparent, Kakama, and the commander, Uinic.

Although ever in full accord with Friar Alva in his proselyting zeal, the captain, a staunch son of the Church, nevertheless did not entertain any optimistic aspirations for the immediate regeneration of the inhabitants of Mual, nor did he harbor hopes for the millennium miraculously to blossom forth in Mual. Consequently, having laboriously acquired a fair command of the Mayan tongue, and in anticipation of the inevitable breach with the malign Teotzl, de Nicuessa devoted his energies to an intensive survey of Mual's military situation, this highly to the gratification of the king's staff.

There was ever a standing army in Mual, with some scattered garrisons in strategic centers. A fleet of large war canoes provided the naval defense, but the trained warriors were few in number, and conscription would entail time and an urgent demand for training; even then, when the maize harvest called, desertions would be frequent. It may, however, be noted, in extenuation, that the doughty warriors comprising the opposing forces were just as remiss as the Mualites; they, too, were anxious to rush to their homes and maize-terraces at harvest time, eager to provide sustenance against the ever-threatening drought. The decision would thus justifiably be called a draw, until hostilities would be resumed vigorously when they hied back to the fields of *Huitzilopochtli*, Mexico's war god.

There loomed for Captain de Nicuessa the stupendous task of developing a more dependable force,

better trained, at least, than in the past, and, above all, imbued with the spirit of loyalty. As a nucleus, a selected number of the greater and lesser tribal chieftains, the *caciques* and *batabs*, were called into council, then patiently trained and qualified to instruct their tribesmen.

Ruefully, De Nicuessa realized that the archaic customs, the superstition against night warfare, the lack of intelligent cooperation, the very lukewarm response to discipline among the tribal chieftains, and the prejudices so inherent for many generations could hardly be remedied, much less overcome, in a short period of time.

During certain days of the week the public market, or *tianguetz*, on the outskirts of the city, was at the disposal of the artisans, traders and itinerant merchants; small booths containing everything from the necessary foods to the wares demanded by exacting purchasers were offered for sale or for barter. On other days this square was turned into an active military field for maneuvers. The dense growths lining the sides were excellently adapted for feigned ambush and sorties.

Irritating as were the first attempts at revamping the entire military system, yet Uinic, Captain de Nicuessa and the heir-apparent, Kakama, persisted. Again and again would incentives be dangled—for the commanders, there would be preferment in rank, for the lowly warriors, rewards.

An entire company would be drilled with more or less military precision, colorful standards fluttering in the breeze, casque and plume and ornate shield gleaming against the sun. Uinic would harangue on discipline, the heir-apparent on loyalty. Impressed on all were the trenchant arguments that preferment was not alone for the chieftains; that the multitudes would acclaim, the monarch highly favor, the brave; that the realm would ever cherish their achievements.

But a grave, inborn prejudice, not very lightly to be dispelled, was that of arms-practice. As each and all had impressive ideas of their prowess and efficiency, no matter what the weapon, why waste time and energy? Let the foeman judge!

Captain de Nicuessa, in conference with Uinic and Prince Kakama, expressed grave doubts whether the military tribal heads, themselves, would withstand the gruelling test of battle, despite the incessant training. Uinic, the taciturn one in speech, but the leonine in action, most loyal to the monarch and Kakama, gazed squarely into the eyes of the heir-apparent, and tersely remarked: "The jungle monarch springs not from the hyena, nor the mighty eagle from the buzzard!"

While activities in Mual were progressing efficiently, and the missionary labors of Friar Alva were about to bear fruit, trusted stipendaries were relaying their espionage information to the *ah-kin-mai*, Teotzl. That crafty, sinister pontiff did not regard with equanimity the tidings presented, and he girded himself

for the inevitable contest looming between church and state in the not too distant future!

VII

AMONG THE numerous captives in the prison cages of the sanctuary at Cuzmil was Acatlan, scion of the Lacandone chieftain, Chian. Acatlan had survived the rigors of his captivity and the malign venom of the vengeful Teotzl and his sycophant minions. His endurance was as irritable as a prickly thorn in the side of the high priest, especially because the captive's mien during all his months of confinement in the foul cage seemed not to have assumed the humility of subjugation.

Teotzl, not yet deeming the time ripe to dare an open breach, nor to challenge royal mandate, grudgingly assented to one reprieve after another for the untamed wildcat of the fearless, savage, nomad tribe; but with Teotzl's avid desire for the sacrifice, these irksome reprieves but fanned his irascible ill will against the son of the tribal chieftain who had dared flaunt sacerdotal authority by summarily slaying a

priest of the Cuzmil *teocalli*, who had been in the vanguard of a punitive force against a Lacandone outpost.

More savage than human were these ever-restive, ever-roving Lacandones, occupants of the extreme southern part of Yucatan. They fought among themselves as avidly as against foolhardy invaders. They recognized no authority other than that of their own tribal head. They were fierce, cunning and elusive; they constantly terrorized such outpost communities as were within swift striking distance of their depredations. Rarely would retaliatory invaders escape unscathed—in fact, these had frequently suffered ignoble disaster at the hands of the Lacandone wills-o'-the-wisp, to whom the perils of the jungle were of great advantage.

The Lacandones slayed, rarely burdening their nomad hamlets with prisoners, for human sacrifice was not practiced among them. They struck with the small, poisonous *curare*-dipped darts from blow-guns, then rushed to the cover of the almost impenetrable jungle growths. Straggling savages would loom at most unexpected, inopportune times, slay their foes, ravage, destroy life-sustaining maize patches, then scurry away. They would double on their tracks, stalk unwary guards or harry the flank of invaders. Open battle was scorned, and they frequently availed themselves of the inky murkiness of the night for their forays, knowing that the Mayans were traditionally antagonistic to night warfare.

Of this depredatory, seemingly unconquerable tribe was Acatlan. Trapped by a cunning ruse, even then he would have fought to the death, for, to the Lacandones, capture meant loss of caste. Chian, his sire, had offered ransom and made overtures to King Xoctli, knowing full well the futility of negotiating with the implacable Teotzl. Paternal instinct had been forced to yield where hostilities were useless. Chian's gesture of amity strongly favored the policy of King Xoctli, who shrewdly envisaged the Lacandones as a powerful ally in the event of insurrection brewed by Teotzl, or against the ever possible aggression of Cuzmil's rival, Chichen-Itza.

Conferences with the uncompromising high priest had proven futile, as Acatlan was the legitimate captive of the church warriors; but overtly to please the monarch, it was finally agreed that Acatlan be graciously granted the boon reserved for nobler captives—that of defending himself against six successive veteran opponents, killers of note. This spectacular, if unequal, contest was to be staged some time later, on the eve of the important ceremonial to the god, *Zipe*, for whom Acatlan, so Teotzl decreed, would be a worthy votive offering.

Neither circus maximus nor gladiatorial contest of old was ever awaited with greater anticipation, or hailed with greater acclaim than this savage battle of brawn, the primitive lust for the blood of the kill, the plaudits of excited spectators, as against the cap-

tive's innate, undying lust for freedom, even his remotest chance for victory against the greatest odds.

If, miraculously, the captive survived the hazards, he might be set free or, at the caprice of the high priest, be actually flayed alive, and his skin be tanned to adorn the vestments of the *ah-kin-mai* for a period of almost thirty days, in dedication to *Zipe*.

Thus the vexatious problem of Acatlan was ostensibly being brought to a conclusion between the monarch and the high priest. Instead, however, each connived for the consummation of this issue to favor his personal advantage.

To the vengeful Teotzl, retribution was sweeter than life itself, and his gnawing, obsessive spite against the benign monarch for daring to intervene to thwart his nefarious schemes was assuming alarming proportions. The crafty duplicity of Teotzl emphasized the extent of his evil resources. While King Xoctli was about to dispatch an important mission secretly to the Lacandonas for assistance, Teotzl, with equal secrecy, was contriving to excite the cupidity of King Zum-pango, of the important and populous shrine center, Chichen-Itza. By gaining the cooperation of Zum-pango, the influence of the monarch of the Sacred Isle would be discredited; possibly even civil war might be fomented, and the powers of Teotzl enhanced.

For his mission to the Lacandone chieftain, Chian, King Xoctli had enlisted to his trusted services Uinic and de Nicuessa, with a suitable retinue of nobles,

representatives of the merchants' guild and tried warriors, comprising quite an imposing mission.

The nomads of the jungle were, for the time being, dwelling in their native heath. Jungle pelts, the plumage of rare birds, dye-woods and a variety of precious gems washed up by torrential streams in almost inaccessible sources known to the Lacandones alone, would be available for the market at Mual.

Gallo had pleaded very earnestly to be included, but his request fell on unresponsive ears. The pert little minx, Cheeuah, in her first emphatic display of petulance, stamped her trim feet, and with flashing eyes reproached her royal sire, who, very well feigning terror, but inwardly chuckling, denied Gallo's plea with seemingly unsympathetic disfavor. Then Cheeuah resorted to the final, clinching argument of the "weaker" sex; when gazelle eyes welled up with tears, and coy lips quivered and pouted, Gallo was completely vanquished.

Stalwart *tamanes*, the native porters, were assembled for the transport of supplies; fleet *holpopes*, or couriers, sped on their course to effect contact with their tribesmen and to assure the safety of the mission when reaching the hostile regions. The mission embarked in the dead of night and with the utmost secrecy, in large, well-provisioned war-canoes, and with a goodly supply of suitable wares for barter.

Time was pressing, as the fate of Acatlan hung in the balance, and much-needed aid from the Lacandones must be within reach at the time of the spectacular combat.

After but two days of swift, skillful paddling, they neared the mysterious wilds. Here they encamped on the white, shifting sands of the shore sloping towards the sea. Within sight were the thick growths of mangrove and liana, the clustered maguey, huge thorn-bushes, bayonet cactus, endless massive palms and gigantic, patriarch trees. From here, speedy couriers were dispatched to Chian's domain.

For days and nights, until their patience had almost been exhausted by the stinging insects and the uncertainties of the jungle beyond, de Nicuessa and Uinic awaited the return of the *holpopes*. At night, each strange sound was tense, baffling, laden with mystic portent. One evening, when dusk had almost set its pall, from the dense growths beyond came weird, piercing yells which gave the alarmed campers most uneasy moments. They sprang to their feet, and on the sharp command of Uinic, assumed the defensive, poisoning their weapons and spreading out, fan-like, about the supplies; but the few Lacandones who had remained with them as guards answered what was evidently a signal, and with equally weird whoops hailed their tribesmen, who soon burst into sight.

There now appeared a score or more of savages, stark naked save for loin-cloths, their faces covered with bristly hair, and of such general repulsiveness as to be almost a cross between ape and human. Their bronzed, glistening bodies rippled with muscles as of trained athletes. They wore crude, curious ear and nose labrets of copper or ebony. Though short and

squat, they were as agile as the feline *oceloti*, the wild-cats of the jungle.

The savages gesticulated animatedly as they conversed with their tribesmen. The presence of de Nicuessa, of whom they seemed to have been previously apprised, elicited curiosity, not fear. Approaching, they stared at him, mouths agape; then they withdrew to compare notes among themselves, and returned again to sharply scrutinize, just as would mere children with some new mechanism or difficult problem.

All rose betimes on the following morning, as the tropic sun is not conducive to a pleasant journey. A small contingent remained with the craft and with part of the provisions for the home journey. The *tamanes*, each with a burden of some forty pounds supported on their broad backs and reinforced with headbands of *heniquen*, now prepared for the arduous trek led by the *holpope* guides, advancing toward the rendezvous, Chian's forbidden territory.

The tortuous path, overgrown with dense vegetation, led through a jungle of almost pristine glory, a labyrinth of towering, mighty growths of greenery, intertangled vines and branches and climbing plants, and thickets so dense as to make progress most difficult. The peril of unseen, stealthy stalkers, of reptiles, of giant trees obstructing the way, of decaying vegetation, with fetid, miasmatic odors of the hidden quagmires, ever beset them.

From the morasses emanated exhausting stench and vapors; myriads of stinging insects attacked them at every labored step; birds of varied brilliant plumage, wild turkey, buzzards and unknown soaring creatures voiced excitement and raucous disapproval at the invasion of their Paradise, or sounded warning of the lurking jungle marauders. From aloft, on the overhanging branches, snarled the *oceloti*, as they spat their challenge of defiance, with green eyes flashing and backs arched, ready to spring and to claw. Small furry creatures, giant lizards, and many other forest and jungle denizens took hasty, speculative appraisal, then decided to scurry to cover; and the roar and shriek of wild game rasped in most ominous warning.

Worst of all were the merciless heat and the exhausting, humid air, as they struggled doggedly through the slimy quagmires tangled with snare-like marsh-grass. Blinded by trickling sweat, driven to frenzy by ripping thorns, tree-leeches and the plague of insects, onward they persevered, hard on the trail hewn by the Lacandone leaders.

They replenished their depleted water-gourds with the water-hoarding bromelia plants, or the milk of the cocoanut. Interminable was their trail, and when the resplendent rays of the sun began setting, the distance covered was but a bare few miles. They now neared a veritable oasis in a clearing, planning to pitch camp and relax from the rigors of the day's march. But instead, they beheld a sight which seemed

to freeze their life-blood, to paralyze their almost completely frayed nerves. By the waning light they observed, terror-stricken and speechless as they were, an inexorable death struggle between a beautifully mottled, gigantic boa-constrictor, the *chaib*, and a ferocious jaguar, seemingly at bay.

The jaguar had clawed the serpent savagely, then had leaped away, his tail nervously swishing and his terrible eyes ablaze, but just barely in time to elude the crushing coils. The *chaib* glided backwards in superb, sinuous motion, then suddenly shot its neck upward. Its fiery eyes and blood-curdling hiss seemed to terrorize the jaguar. Again the cornered beast, muscles taut as steel, pounced, clawed and ripped with gnashing teeth; but the embracing vise of the deadly coils caught at the flank of the beast in mid-air. With desperate jerks and twists, tearing with his sharp armament of ripping teeth and claws, the jaguar again barely loosened the *chaib's* stranglehold.

Now resounded a deafening roar of rage with challenge of ominous hiss, as each, with malign gleam in wicked eyes, speculated an appraisal of the other's most vulnerable spot for the stroke of the kill.

From distant haunts and lairs, challenge echoed and hurled defiance in answer, as other ferocious beasts, nervously agog with the growl and hiss of battle, with the maddening scent of fresh blood in their nostrils, awaited the final act of the jungle drama. Soaring above, with raucous cry, buzzards and vultures, the scavengers, in imitation of the combat be-

low, pecked and clawed for a point of vantage from which to swoop down upon the carrion soon-to-be.

The jaguar now was as if hypnotized by the venomous stare, the challenging hiss. More in fright than in rage, his tail continued to swish; no avenue of escape loomed; and even cravenly to turn tail would prove futile, as it would possibly invite the *chaib's* lightning-like leap and death-embracing coils. One desperate plan, to vault swiftly upon the huge boa, to rip savagely into its spine, and Victory! But ere the thought had filtered through the befuddled mind of the beast, the serpent again lashed out, and again hiss and roar rent the tenseness of the air, as both claws and coils maneuvered for the death-dealing stroke!

Captain de Nicuessa was as transfixed to the spot, but to Uinic it was a primal struggle he had witnessed before. In the meantime, the savages bethought themselves of more material considerations — a roaring fire, fresh provisions, a veritable feast! Now twanged dextrously aimed, unerring arrows finding their vulnerable targets. The none too delectable jaguar's meat was devoured raw.

From the safety of distance came the disappointed roars of slinking jungle prowlers; despite the maddening scent of the blood of the kill they bided their time, for they were ever wary of the savages with their death-dealing blow-guns. Time enough for the carrion when the strong scent of natives disappeared from the humid air. Peace again reigned in the still-primeval inferno!

Enervating as had been the arduous trek through the short jungle stretch, the mission was appraised by the native barbarians; the elderly Uinic had proved to be the veteran in his rugged stamina and fearlessness. Captain de Nicuessa had been furtively watched by the Lacandones, but his dogged persistence merited their silent approval, and he had not lost caste, a telling argument in the report to be made to Chian.

The ensuing days proved not quite as harassing, the path being across restful clearings and cooling hills until they were but a short distance from their destination, Tabi.

VIII

CHIAN'S LACANDONE stronghold, Tabi, was of unusual scenic grandeur, and was situated about a lake, so indispensable for the water supply of the inhabitants. Tabi was a fortified hamlet, with stockades of earth-and-rubble, being one of the very few more permanent settlements of these nomads.

Hilly terraces afforded an excellent vantage for defense, and also for the cultivation of extensive *milpas* of *teosinte*, or maize. From the summit of the largest hill there rose age-old palms upon which sentries, with the agility of prehensile simians, clambered for frequent views of the surrounding and distant terrain. The Lacandones, by sad experience of the past, were a very suspicious tribe.

A rude collection of wattle-huts, devoid even of the traditional Mayan three-stone *koben*, comprised the hamlet; the twigged hut of the headman, or *batab*, Chian, was hardly more pretentious than that of his humblest follower. There were no subjects among the

free-born Lacandonese; all were on an equal footing, the chieftain being elected for his outstanding victories in defense of the tribesmen. The peppery, savage Chian wielded his cudgel impartially upon his equally savage cohorts, and none was there to dispute his authority.

The hut of Chian could easily be recognized by a long row of gruesome, human skulls and long limb bones, all suspended from the lintel. Deep dents in a number of these skulls bore mute testimony to the skill and strength of the savage wielders of the stout war-cudgels.

Chian, himself, typified the barbaric guides and guards who had so successfully piloted the emissaries of King Xoctlí through the labyrinthian mazes of forest and jungle, past lurking, snarling killers and the treacherous quagmires and towering walls of greenery they had traversed so apprehensively since their departure from the coast of Mual. Chian's distinctive insignia of rank and authority seemed to be vested in a thick ebony nose-plug carved with a mythical figure of a naked savage with a blow-gun, and in his massive copper bracelets encircling legs and arms. Chian was wont, on the merest provocation, to wield his truncheon—a long, notched, serrated human bone of the forearm—with emphasis and strict impartiality upon the thick, squat backs, haunches or shoulders of any tribesman whose utterances or actions irked his irascible temperament. At times, he would heave the truncheon effectively at a mangy, snarling, hairless

mongrel, which did not, at all, seem to take umbrage. Regarding this as part of a game to be played with his affectionate master, the mongrel first teased, then worried and chewed at the missile, until, on the sharp command of Chian, the mongrel dutifully laid it at his master's feet, and backed away, his eyes eagerly expectant that the game would be continued.

In Tabi the members of the mission were greeted hospitably. On the day following, after a well-earned, much-needed rest on hastily improvised palmetto mats, and after a breakfast of a peculiar mixture of maize-porridge, vegetables and fruits, a long, earnest conference was held through the medium of interpreters. De Nicuessa was called for his advice regarding the contemplated surprise attack on the sanctuary at Cuzmil in an effort to rescue Acatlan before the conclusion of the combat, and the captain's suggestions were received with marked deference. This contrasted strongly with the attitude of Chian when he first beheld de Nicuessa, for then the *batab* had suddenly raised his heavy bone truncheon, as if for attack or for defense; a sharp remonstrance from Uinic and the strong, gripping arms of the erstwhile guides, as they hurled themselves upon their chieftain, changed his pugnacious attitude. Nevertheless, Chian continued to stare furtively at the pale-faced stranger, whom he regarded with puzzled concern and suspicion.

When the question of recruiting a sizable force among the tribesmen had been satisfactorily arranged, and the conference had turned to the matter of estab-

lishing a trading-post at Tabi by a representative of the Mual merchants' guild, Captain de Nicuessa quietly arose and proceeded for a leisurely stroll to observe more closely the scenic gems in nature's setting, and to view the magnificent lake but a short distance ahead. Reaching almost to the border of the lake, the captain was halted by a curious, huge mass permanently embedded in the soil. The object was pitted with deep holes, and of gray, black and rust-brown markings.

Very puzzling indeed was this natural mass, and his scrutiny turned to amazement when it finally dawned upon him that this was a very rare natural phenomenon, similar to one he had observed and studied in a field of old Spain, where the curious had gathered, gazed and gawked with most mystified wonderment; the deep impression had long been stored and remembered.

From an interpreter, hastily and excitedly summoned, the captain gleaned but very scant information. Not within the memory of the ape-like, wizened patriarchs was there one who could elucidate the mystery of this mass, nor recall a tale or tradition of credible nature.

The almost senile patriarchs would but shake their heads and vouchsafe the information that this seeming metallic mass had been securely wedged in its site when their forebears first, and by mere chance, in enforced roving and flight, had discovered this marvel of elysium they had named Tabi. Here they had

finally sought shelter by fortifications and ever-vigilant preparedness; they had hunted the wild game which abounded; they had emerged from the tree-branch stage of nomad habitation. Once established, they maintained their independence by virtual force of arms, for a haven such as Tabi was far to seek.

Here, then, was this mystifying mass, pitted with great holes, weather-beaten with unknown ages of exposure, its surface colored deep rust-brown, except where the tropic storms and inundations from the lake had washed away the oxidized surface and brought out a shiny-black coloring.

Forgotten were the thrilling episodes since his escape from a watery grave, so aroused was de Nicuessa with the vast possibilities of this meteorite. He circled it with measured steps, as if to gauge its dimensions, the while envisaging nails and knives, tips for spears and arrowheads, darts for blowguns, grappling hooks for the army, even, perhaps, a workable anvil. What a multitude of vitally essential articles could be derived from this veritably heaven-sent discovery!

Why, this treasure, thought the captain, was far more precious than the litter, the palanquin, that he had so laboriously fashioned and adjusted on wheels, to the delight of the Princess Cheeuh. Wheels, hitherto undreamt of, yet of a thousand needs and uses, as not a single pack animal existed in Cuzmil or Mual. What an evolutionary marvel he had created from strips of wood, and shiny copper nails, with quickly dulled *itzli* knives and unremitting labor! If that were

history in the making, the meteorite mass was to be a more lasting achievement in its potentialities!

But de Nicuessa's speculative contemplations and aspirations had not reckoned with his host, and he was due for a very rude jolt. Fury was let loose and went on a rampage when the captain, having provided himself with a stone mallet and a sharpened, chisel-like stone, began chopping away at the meteorite mass.

With almost the very first blow, Pandora's traditional box-of-trouble could, in comparison, have been cast into the discard as a child's playtoy. Spontaneously, and without warning, the unusual and calm dignity of the conference, the divers and various culinary and other tasks of Chian's nondescript cohorts of savage warriors, of interpreters, guards, huntsmen and fishermen, of an assorted and very ugly collection of viragos, even of stark-naked striplings—all were abruptly and irately disrupted in a wild, surprise attack upon the unwitting desecrator!

Ominously and precipitously the conference disbanded. Primitive earthen pots were relegated to their own dubious prospects of spoiled culinary needs; wails and loud laments rent the air; short, squat bodies jumped as if in the throes of St. Vitus' dance, and appeared from goodness knows where! They raced excitedly from the wattle-huts, from maize terraces, from the lake and its outskirts, from all points of the compass! Threateningly they poised their rude weapons; they almost hurled themselves upon the amazed de Nicuessa, the wanton desecrator of their tribal totem!

But swift as was the hostile onset, the alarmed Uinic outraced the pugnacious savages, swung into position before the unwitting de Nicuessa, and forestalled retribution. In a sharp, excited denunciation, quickly interpreted, he demanded that explanation be made for this flagrant breach of hospitality, this unwarranted attack upon the white envoy of the monarch, King Xoctli.

Scores of voices gibbered and shouted, almost defying apoplectic strokes by the violence of their outbursts. A temporary truce was restored only after explanations that, while the origin of the meteorite mass, as interpreted to the pale-face, was unknown, yet it was an object of most devout worship and reverence by the tribe. But Uinic and de Nicuessa countered and expostulated, with strenuous appeal as to the unlimited uses and possibilities of the metallic mass.

Earnest and vehement explanations waxed and raged uninterruptedly, furiously, and with avid gusto. It was by no means a strictly limited melee, as it called forth the undivided attention, the eloquence and the irate gesticulations of every man, woman and child assembled. Even the mangy, flea-bitten mongrels, avid for battle, proceeded forthwith on their own account. Not to be neglected, scores of apes in overhanging branches, to whose addle-pated semblance of intelligence the Darwinian theory had not yet penetrated, less so assimilated, gave startled glances at the accusing, counter-accusing, brawling humans below, then sagely decided that a barrage of

cocoanuts rained down upon the combatants would tend to add much zest to the fracas. A covey of gorgeous-hued, chattering or scolding parrots, fleeing precipitantly from the danger-zone—since the missiles were being hurled without discrimination, and in all directions—gave vent to raucous noises fairly counterfeiting contemptuous laughter and sarcasm for the frailties and foibles of upstart humans.

How long this would continue was anyone's conjecture, for time means but little in the tropics, much less in Tabi; but at this juncture there emerged a virago, with teeth green from some species of leaf she chewed, with nose broad and flat, with eyes almost popping out in her agitation.

She wrenched the human-bone truncheon from the grasp of her oldest offspring, none other than the truculent Chian, and with fiery jungle billingsgate, at which she was adept, harangued bitterly: "Apes! Descendants of apes! Sires of apes! You wrangle and gibber like mincing popinjays, you squabble like the wildcats you resemble, and all this time my grandson, Acatlan, is in dire peril. Grant the white god his demands! On to Mual and Cuzmil, or I hie there alone!"

Whether it was the very forceful eloquence of her tirade which settled the discord, or the more tangible and smarting belaborings of the bone truncheon, wielded with precise, effective blows on the backs and shoulders and haunches of the recalcitrant savages, was a mooted question, for they hastily scurried from her belaborings. The interminable wranglings had

ceased; shamefacedly they glanced at each other, furtively they scanned the aged virago, and timorously awaited final decision from the remorseful Chian.

The trenchant argument that Acatlan's fate was of their own making was most appealing to the tribesmen. Chian, with very ill grace, wrested his truncheon from the aged matriarch and continued the chastisement from the point at which she had reluctantly desisted.

Uinic and the captain now conferred with Chian. Patiently it was explained to the chieftain that the deities, in their beneficence, had dispatched the sacred mass as a messenger from the heavens, just as they perpetually ordained the blessings of the sun and moon, and the rains for searing crops. The deities provided plentiful game, fish in the lake, life-sustaining maize, and other indispensable growths, of which the maguey was of particular value—for it yielded fibers for their cloth, and ropes and baskets, needles from its thorns, thatch doing service for the roofs of wattle-huts, and food and drink from the stalks.

This homily of the beneficence of the heavens was patently the clinching argument. The totem the Lacandones revered was intended to be utilized. The white god would teach them, as did *Quetzalcoatl*, whom they revered, the benefits of what the gods provided, especially the vast uses for this heavenly metallic object.

The barbaric mind and nature are as simple, as naive, as that of a child; and since no apparent, no direct retributive manifestations were hurled from the

very serene sky, nor did any other sudden, dire calamity immediately smite the desecrator, de Nicuessa was soon surrounded by an eager, repentant throng of savages, by now far more contrite than vengeful.

The *batab*, Chian, as an act of grace, hewed a sizable chunk of meteorite from its base. Now followed patient hammering and chiseling, then the kindling of a new fire; in the bosom of the roaring fire, the metal became glowing, malleable; when this fiery, malleable mass was persistently hammered on an improvised stone anvil, a large, perfect dart was patterned—a most wonderful sight to behold!

This dart, when properly affixed to a slender, supple shaft, became an arrowhead. The mystified Chian now gingerly fingered the curious missile, and with caution, as if fearing its unknown potency, his coal-black eyes gleaming with excitement under his thick, bushy eyebrows. Again he felt an innate suspicion of the white being, the conjurer whom he could not fathom, but who was to be of such inestimable help in the rescue of Acatlan.

But here was something real, a tangible evidence of the good will of the one he so misunderstood. Chian poised the iron-tipped arrow in an arched bow; his expert eyes appraised the distance as the shaft was drawn back; then the chieftain, with true, unerring aim, shot the dart deep into the target, the solid core of a towering tree.

The arrow quivered in the tree for a thrilling moment. Chian tugged and struggled, but the dart re-

sisted all efforts to dislodge it; as he jerked and pulled, the shaft snapped, hurling him off his feet, but the long, sharp dart held firmly and deep.

What a din and clamor! What roars of acclaim! Now eager, friendly hands grasped de Nicuessa and raised him atop the meteorite, as other scores of savages encircled the mass with spears, javelins and war-clubs raised aloft; they howled and shrieked weird chants, impassioned incantations! Their fervor increased as they gyrated frenziedly about the totem. The white god had conjured a miracle! At their bidding was a new, death-dealing emissary. And they shouted: "On to Mual! On to Cuzmil! Let the accursed Teotzl beware!"

Beyond cavil, King Xoctli's acumen in his selection for the mission had proved how great a monarch he was.

Now plans were expedited for departure with the addition of a thoroughly impressed, dependable force of warriors. Chian's warnings to his followers faithfully to heed the commanders, Uinic and the white god, were unnecessary, as the magic conjured before their very eyes was the most assuring argument.

At dawn they departed for Mual. The patriarchs and the aged viragos of the jungle tribe were unemotional as their near and dear ones began their march to war, perhaps never to return. Death ever lurks in the fastness of the jungle. Death, with honor, was to Tabi a creed as well as a tradition.

IX

THOUGH, AT the advent of Friar Alva and his companions, peace had reigned between those two most important Mayan shrine centers, Cuzmil and Chichen-Itza, the entente cordiale between the Courts and the sacerdotal dignitaries had been brought about, strange to narrate, through the vicissitudes of battle some two decades ago.

King Zumpango then, at the beginning of his reign, was a pliant tool of the church hierarchy of Chichen-Itza, to whom he owed his preferment and accession. In reciprocation, true to his solemn vow to the church that he would ever sate the cormorant demands of the sacrificial altars and provide slaves for the vast ecclesiastic and state projects, he schemed for expansion of his realm. His successes as a military commander had carried him on the tide of victory, but the safety of the bordering, weaker tribal *calpullis* was constantly in jeopardy.

When, however, his depredations had led him to declare war, and to attack the fortified state of Campeche, on the northwest coast of Yucatan, a thriving commercial center for dyewoods, Zumpango met with fierce resistance. The siege had been prolonged, but the besieged were in their own territory, the coast could not be blockaded—as Chichen-Itza was not a maritime power—and arms and plentiful provisions continued to pour into Campeche from neighboring communities fearing Zumpango's aggressions. Only the set determination of the monarch of Chichen-Itza prompted his persistence, as failure would have caused him to lose caste with his own priesthood.

King Xoctli, monarch of the Sacred Isle, had been constantly advised by trusted stipendaries as to the tide of battle, and he realized that the subjugation of Campeche would threaten his own realm and the integrity of his allies—Tiho, nearest to the aggressive Zumpango's realm, and Catoche, the most northern outpost of the Yucatan peninsula. Thus, when hard-pressed Campeche sent urgent representations to him for assistance, King Xoctli, at the head of a very strong force—for the enmity between church and monarch had not then assumed alarming proportions in Sacred Cuzmil—a combined force of both Mual and Cuzmil warriors, rushed into the fray and administered a sound drubbing to the rear flank of the invaders, while the forces of Campeche harried Zumpango's vanguard with effective showers of arrows and a scorching barrage of burning missiles.

This was a stinging defeat. Fearing to meet the recriminations of his virtual masters, the priesthood, Zumpango continued battle; but his high priests feared reprisal, for the combined armies of Campeche and Sacred Cuzmil were now eager for the annihilation of Chichen-Itza. The high priests, with sound acumen, now hastily sanctioned the peace King Xoctli proffered.

With conclusion of this treaty, instead of harboring animosities, Zumpango reversed his stand and courted the good will of his conqueror. Nor were the bonds of mutual esteem of a transitory or tactical nature. An invitation to Zumpango's court was accepted and King Xoctli and his entourage were entertained royally; the magnanimous victor assuaged the sting of defeat by his ingratiating qualities and charm. As the stay was to be extended, Queen Nezuama, shortly thereafter, was also welcomed as a most honored guest.

At about this time the consort of Zumpango gave birth to a son and heir, the monarch, King Xoctli, being honored as godfather.

The visit had been prolonged for several months, much to the gratification of both sovereigns, and tended to cement the political and commercial alliance.

On one momentous occasion, when both royal pates were in high exhilaration (as it must, alas! be sadly but historically recorded) from potent liquids dispensed at the royal feast, Zumpango challenged his

guest to a test of skill at the national game of *tlachtli*; this was readily accepted.

King Xoctli, very adept at the game, assisted his host in welcoming a most noteworthy gathering of the *tlatoani* and of church and state dignitaries come to witness the contest. As usual, particularly where royalty was concerned, the partisan betting ran high and exciting.

At that time, Teotzl, *ah-kin-mai* of Cuzmil, was still in the good graces of his monarch. As was customary throughout Mexico, in warfare a high priest ranked equal in importance with the military command. In every battle he would be in the vanguard, and he set the example by his bravery, for he was not averse in the heat of the battle to wielding a stout war-club on the heads of the foemen. Perhaps a dire dread inbred in the natives relative to attack on a sacred personage made the safety of the priesthood the more secure.

The avid zest of the Mexican for the festive was also evidenced in his keen interest in national sports, and gambling was a marked proclivity. Thus, extensive ball-courts were maintained not only by the wealthy but also on the sanctuary terraces and public squares.

Even beyond the confines of the church the priesthood was ever in evidence, so that when the game was called, a benediction was bestowed upon the ball-court, the contestants, the ball and the spectators. A priestly choir chanted a hymn, the royal rivals

strapped leather supports about their hips, great crowds lined the terraces, the signal was called! The high priest, Teotzl, was accorded the honor of tossing the ball out, four times about the court, towards the four cardinal points, and as midnight was about to set in, the contestants sprang to their posts.

The ball of solid rubber was tossed, and struck on the rebound by the hips of the players; the goal was to strike the ball, but only with either hip, no matter how many the throws. The objective was to force the ball through the inner circle of one of the huge rings of stone, serpent-carved, and projecting from each lateral wall at a height of approximately twenty-five feet above the ground. The winner was privileged to name the prize.

Between two such noble and notable players, victory hung in the balance for many a spirited toss or throw, and, for a time, honors were fairly even. At about the last half of the hard-fought contest, fortune seemed to favor King Xoctli; victory in attaining the goal seemed to be within his very grasp; but the huge ball tossed by him soared aloft, poised but a brief, spellbinding and hesitant moment, teetered with uncertainty on the edge of the inner ring, then very fractionally careened towards the ground.

With a shout of glee the crouching Zumpango caught the ball with his hip; with his body to the side, with a swift, running leap, the huge ball was tossed with a mighty heave and unerringly gained its goal. Zumpango was declared the victor, and the

clamor from his partisans, particularly from those who had won heavily, the cries of disappointment from the disgruntled losers, echoed through the expanse of the terraces.

Then began the inglorious, surreptitious scurry of the many who had staked and lost, those who would now, in honor bound, have to part with every type of gem, or of studded war-mace, or richly ornate shield, feathered headdress, or ample cloak of finest material—in fact, everything of garment and trinket from head to foot.

At the very convivial feast to celebrate the victory, Zumpango, responding to the toast, announced that the prize he sought, one to cement further and permanently the ties of amity between the sovereigns, was that the first daughter born to Xoctli's queen, Nezuama, be, in the course of time, united with Itzcoyotl, the heir-apparent to the throne of Chichen-Itza!

So unexpected and auspicious was this boon to the surprised guests, a boon of equal advantage to victor and to defeated, that it was hailed with great and spontaneous acclaim, and for the moment both losses and winnings were forgotten as the monarchs beamed with gratified smiles of assent.

Now followed mutual congratulations, expressions of good will and anticipation of the closest ties of alliance; the royal wager, now a pact of honor, was toasted by all as they quaffed exhilarating libations from huge tankards, or from delicate cups, the

xicaras. The celebration lasted long into the hours approaching dawn, and the entente cordiale inspired by the felicitous sequence of events augured an enduring peace.

King Xoctli, comfortably luxuriating in the guest chambers, puffed with great satisfaction at his gold-stemmed reed of tobacco; he chuckled audibly and with glee over the royal pact. Then, turning to his consort, whose eyes were now suffused with tears as she valiantly strove to stem her straining emotions, he sought to soothe her with words of solace and endearment, for Queen Nezuama had been touched to the quick. The pact and the toast but emphasized her poignant grief and disappointment of the years. Of the concubines of her royal spouse there had been gratifying issue, but to her had been denied the ecstatic joys of motherhood, the motherhood that would cement still firmer the conjugal ties.

The royal entourage finally returned to Mual. Many the time, retrospectively, the thoughts of the monarchs turned to each other; but portentous affairs of state, punitive expeditions against recalcitrant tribes and, of late, efforts to mitigate the ravages of an epidemic, all engrossed the energies of King Xoctli within his own domains.

In the midst of these activities, having returned from an exhausting tour of inspection through the disease-stricken area, the monarch was apprised of an impressive secret whispered by his ebullient consort. Then followed most anxious, yet ecstatic anticipation.

An entire realm was enthralled with the tidings, and the subjects would vie in homage and adulation to the royal infant.

When Queen Nezuama gave birth to a daughter, the naming of the princess, her glamorous destiny prognosticated in the stars, the royal celebration and the lavish largesse of the Crown, all were remembered in the many years to come.

In a land beshrouded by paganism, rampant superstition being the rule rather than the exception, it is not surprising that oracles, augurs, crystal gazers, seers, astrologers and soothsayers were given much undue prominence and credence, and that the fate of a human, whether regal or of low caste, was supposed to be subject to forecast of unnatural influence.

In the midst of the joyous celebrations in honor of the princess, an old crone who always commanded an extensive following among the gullible, who had also some reputation as a clairvoyant, awakening from a trance, prophesied a portentous and glamorous future for the princess. No union with the royal dynasty of Chichen-Itza was the dictum of her trance. Instead, from the distant horizon destiny loomed. No less than the god-hero, *Quetzalcoatl*, would inspire or sway that destiny! And there the highly credited old crone sagely, or perhaps cautiously, ended her prophecies. Just what this enigma portended, what more she had fancied or fabricated, remained a dark secret; neither cajoling nor promise of reward would bring forth any more enlightening details.

The legend of *Quetzalcoatl* was traditional from generation to generation; that it would be befitting the life-span of a princess to be under the direct, beneficent guidance of such a patron sounded plausible, or at least coincided with the sympathetic fancies and cordial approval of well-wishers.

That the royal houses of the Sacred Isle and Chichen-Itza were not fated to be united, this despite the pact between the sovereigns, was certainly within the bounds of possibility, for nations, like mere humans, propose, and the gods dispose. But to the clairvoyant's extensive following, her cryptic prophecies were food for thought, and both her popularity and clientele increased markedly.

Thus, in the passing of the years, fate hovered over the palace of Mual, waving a benediction of peace and of contentment; then, in fickle and perverse mood, swept across the green-yellow terraces of ripening maize, past the silvery white walls of the *teocalli* of *Kukul Can*, and with wand tapping against the sumptuous *tecpan* of Zumpango, stirred up a veritable hornet's nest of stinging misery! The heir to the throne of glamorous Chichen-Itza, having weathered the storms, the weals and woes of infancy, on attaining the very tender age of but four years, began to manifest all the alarming symptoms and signs of the harrowing, then-incurable disease, *cretinism*!

Despite the fervent incantations of cassocked priests, despite the ever-increasing placating votive

offerings to the mute, impotent idols, the unmitigated efforts of herb-healers, seers and astrologers, and the unremitting prayers at the sacred shrine, the condition assumed more and more alarming proportions, until the very frantic despair of the royal sire verged on stark, hopeless madness.

The princeling of the dynasty of Zumpango faced the doom of dwarfish imbecility! He was the victim of a hopeless mentality, caries of the teeth, thick, protruding tongue, grotesquely dwarfed stature, pendulous abdomen, gnome-like legs, receding forehead, contracted skull. A most unheroic, unprepossessing figure of royalty, a heritage of hope abandoned!

Yet, King Zumpango, at a solemn session of high dignitaries, swore a mighty oath: "Even if the heavens fall, whatever fate be in store, whether the oracles approve or negate, I, Zumpango, monarch of Chichen-Itza, decree that Prince Itzcoyotl shall succeed to the throne. May the deities smite those who waver in their loyalty!"

The high priests of *Kukul Can*, stunned with the blasphemies, sneered covertly at the puppet whom they had elevated to the royal crown, the sapling who had heretofore been so pliant to their dominance. The high priests eyed the monarch askance, but bided their time for more serious action.

Zumpango was embittered against the vagaries of fate, of life, and in particular against the charlatan priesthood whose subservient tool he had been. He was now no longer the suppliant. The vast resources

of the treasury, formerly ever at the beck and call of the church, were now abruptly curtailed. The balance of power rested with the forces of the monarch. The strong military battalions he had led on to victory, the invincible hordes scourging the foemen of Chichen-Itza, those who idolized him — for he had given them preferment of land grants in conquered territories and had remitted their taxes while in active service—those were unalterably and to a man with their sovereign.

Directly following the harassing session of the council of dignitaries, work had to be halted on the construction of an edifice being erected on a tremendous scale, on a towering hill within the very shadow of the sanctuary of *Kukul Can*, a vast superproject which would have entailed the continuous labors of countless toilers for the next decade. It had been planned to dedicate this edifice on the eve of the most sacred *teotleco*, or religious ceremonial, of all Mayan church history—the end of the old, the birth of a new cycle of fifty-two years, the *xiuhmolpilli*. On this day all the votaries stripped their homes of all earthly possessions, extinguished the fire in the *koben* of the home, or the perpetual fire before the idols of the sanctuary, and bewailed the impending cataclysm of the earth's destruction by the irate deities in retribution for the sins of the land during the past cycle. Later, however, at midnight, after a most impressive and solemn ritual, a new fire would be kindled by the friction of twigs against the bared breast of the noblest

of captives. With an augur of divine favor, the spark would ignite; there would be joyous acclaim, grateful oblations to the deities, and life was to begin anew!

But thus far only about half of the massive structure was in process of completion. Neither soothing banalities, nor priestly-inspired augurs of the gods would budge the monarch, Zumpango, from his sulking fiat.

The populace of Chichen-Itza, from the humblest to the most opulent, already groaning under the burdensome taxes and the never-ending levies imposed for completion of the super-edifice, gleefully accepted the determined stand of their sovereign, now that government funds were curtailed; the chagrin of the priesthood was the regaling, if very covert, topic of spicity, hearthfire gossip throughout the realm.

Matters were thus at an impasse until Prince Itzcoyotl should have attained the adolescent stage; but there was no evident progress, no vista of hope, nothing but a grotesque gnome exalted to royal estate. When he had reached the age of fifteen, court sycophants, spurred on by the scheming high priests, hit upon the brilliant suggestion that wedlock might be of decided merit. The complaisant churchmen, their eyes turned sorrowfully to the still incomplete masterpiece of their dreams, having visions of an opulent contribution from a possibly contrite monarch, let scruples fly. "The oracles have so decreed!" was the tenor of their urging.

They had chosen quite a fortuitous time, for they were then busily engaged in selection of a votary-*bride* to *Tlaloc*. The pulchritude of Chichen-Itza passed in review, in gorgeous finery and gems, before the critical and appraising eyes of the council of judges.

Again fate played an inexorable, inexplicable trick. Rumor rapidly spread that Netza, a daughter of a lay prince of the church, held a prominent place in the selection. But despite her strict rearing in sacerdotal environments, the charming damsel loved, perhaps too dearly, things mundane, and she took not at all kindly to the exceptionally coveted distinction of drawing the prize.

The benighted superstition of her people, when thus thrust directly home, seemed instead to sow the seeds of discontent, and—this must be whispered in bated breath—it seemed to savor even of heresy! Her mother, a most vigorous ally, sharp of tongue, shrewish in disposition, had severely strained the conjugal ties in outspoken condemnation of her noble, but spineless, spouse who, however, was unfortunately torn between paternal love and an Amazonian persecutor of no mean merit on the one hand, as against the Damoclian sword, the threat of the church, on the other.

Within his once happy domicile there was studied virulence of derogatory comment, but staring him wolfishly in the face was the possibility of the anathema of the church; he would be veritably hurled from

the pedestal of princely dignity and prerogatives, his property would be confiscated, even death might be imposed! But with the thought of his present opulence, there came the most logical chance for solution, for none had better insight into the extreme avarice of the fathers of the *Kukul Can* priesthood than he—himself a prince of the sacerdotal order!

Thus he dangled temptingly before the priests the bait of an unheard-of contribution in GOLD! The gold for still another terrace, for another storey for the incompleated structure. A sum of gold dazzling even to the rapacious priests.

And lo! a miracle then veritably descended upon the people of Chichen-Itza! The superiress of the nunnery, after a most painstaking scrutiny, finally was shocked to discover the smallest of small moles beneath the breast of the highly agitated damsel. Strange, passing strange, very inscrutable the ways of the deities, for how else could that fell blemish heretofore have defied detection?

Be it remembered, all you moderns not imbued with the spirit nor with the proper appreciation and respect for the high morals of the impartial judges and the “untouchables” of the sacerdotal caste of Chichen-Itza! Take heed all you skeptics who frown on superstition and paganism, that a blemish, even of the remotest degree, is unthinkable, offensive to the aesthetic, the esoteric eyes of *Tlaloc*! The rain god would frown malignly on such wanton sacrilege, and the avenging hand of retribution would smite at the iniquitous!

It may be humbly appended that if there were any tears of condign contrition, of bitter disappointment, they were entirely overt, for Netza's sorrow was manufactured for the benefit of her not entirely unsuspecting kin, far and near, and for the servitors with ears avidly awaiting the chance to pick up choice morsels of gossip about the upper stratum, to be elaborated upon and relayed to those of lower social caste—those on the fringe of the nobility.

But, subsequently, whether through qualms of conscience, or through the fear of suspicion and scandal-mongering, or perhaps of belated investigation on the part of the still sullen and recalcitrant monarch, the high priests, with the connivance of the superioress, bethought themselves of a sinister plot to enmesh both King Zumpango and the "broken-hearted" father of the damsel whom a miracle had deprived of the honor and preferment of being votary-bride to *Tlaloc*. The plan of the church was such as to involve all parties concerned by taking advantage of the sudden and unexpected turn of events, and while all Chichen-Itza was still agog with the baffling "miracle," hastily to spring still another supernatural visitation upon the land. This sinister plot was to be in the light of the decree of the oracles—Netza's disentanglement from divine union was, by grace of the beneficent rain god, to be maneuvered as a benediction upon the dynasty of Zumpango; she was to become consort to Prince Itzcoyotl!

Since political expediency, and the very portentous dictum of the oracles, required the abrogation of the royal pact entered into many years ago, which was to have united in matrimony Prince Itzcoyotl to the first daughter born to Xoctli's queen, the high priests, to favor their own fell purpose, required no urging to convince Zumpango of the stern necessity for the procedure they advocated. Nor did the monarch of Chichen-Itza require much convincing that King Xoctli would war to the death should he be forced to comply with the terms of the *tlachtli* pact.

Thoroughly to impress Zumpango with the decree of the oracles, union between the imbecile prince and Netza, was far simpler than the problem confronting the prince of the church; the reaction of the charming Netza and her shrewish mother may well be imagined.

The situation presented the prospect of jumping from the proverbial frying-pan into the fire. There was no recourse, as appeal to the monarch would have proved futile. The weal of the imbecile prince was paramount; to gain this end no sacrifice was commensurate with the ultimate goal.

The unfortunate toy of fate, of the cruel machinations of scheming priests, Netza, who loved life above sacerdotal devotion and duty, caught in the spidery web of her own weaving, was obliged to become consort to the grotesque gnome, the imbecile Itzcoyotl.

The surcease from sorrow, the modicum of happiness, the respite from mundane cares and tribulations granted by the beneficent deities were, however, but

very ephemeral. In a period of one short, hectic, nerve-shattering year of entire absence of conjugal bliss, Princess Netza was apparently "touched" by the gods, for she presented all the outward manifestations of raving mania. She had been "touched" by the very deities she had flaunted and audaciously deceived, and whose retributive justice had deprived her of sanity.

Princess Netza wandered about aimlessly; she would cower at the approach of a somber-garbed priest; she reverted to childhood proclivities in passionate devotion to a variety of grotesque, ornately dressed dolls. At times she stared fixedly at the soaring, glistening sanctuary, now in its evident fulfillment of realization, and she would cry in a voice shrill and tense with anguish: "Destroyed! With strange thunder, with strange lightning, destroyed!" But since the "touched" one of the deities was held in reverential awe by priesthood and superstitious votaries alike, her prophesies of ill omen were either condoned or ignored.

At other times Netza would disappear from her customary haunts for days at a time, and no amount of careful and prolonged search would reveal her hiding place. On returning, she was disheveled; the gleam of madness was in her eyes; she would resume her interminable doll-play, or the wanton plucking of flowers, a besetting sin in the eyes of the flower-loving natives. She was ever restless, ever muttering incoherently. In her rare lucid moments, she repulsed her consort's

attempts at conjugal endearments with such vehemence and loathing as to terrorize even his imbecile mind.

If the deities of Chichen-Itza were wroth with Zumpango, he in turn again drew tight rein on the purse-strings of the treasury for the completion of the sanctuary. The father of Netza, prince of the church, sternly repulsed even a mere suggestion of further advances of the necessary gold. As all concerned were accomplices in befouling their own nests, each furtively watched the other, none daring an open rupture.

Zumpango, his mind threatened with the same fate as was meted the heir-apparent's consort, Netza, now resorted to wild, riotous orgies upon which the priesthood looked askance. He became very haughty to tribunals and councils, was subject to fits of moody broodings which impelled him on to new invasions, further conquests, more captives. It was difficult to determine whether these actions were in repentance for his misdeeds, or the mad abandon of heretic defiance.

Yet, with it all, the sacred fires of *Kukul Can* smoked and blazed, its unquenchable altars reeking with the blood of the sacrifice. The now "touched" monarch, as Zumpango was soon termed by neighboring, not over-friendly nor sympathetic tribal communities who feared his mad depredations, rushed from one perilous situation into another. A general conflict loomed.

But frequently, whether at the dawn of a newborn day, or in the shadowy gloam of the moon, the gory hand of the scarlet-robed priest-executioner would tremble slightly, a brief moment before the death-stroke, when a shrill, tense voice of anguish penetrated the inner shrine and rose above the agonizing shriek of the helpless victim: "Destroyed! With strange thunder, with strange lightning, destroyed!" was the ominous, weirdly prophetic cry, but none dared to voice disapproval.

X

INTROSPECTIVELY, the exalted high priest of Sacred Cuzmil sincerely rued the day when he had consented to the departure of the seemingly esoteric beings from his protecting haven of the *teocalli*. Later reports, through church espionage stipendaries, as relayed from Mual, but substantiated his grievance, for the activities of Friar Alva had by now convinced Teotzl that he had unwittingly, and very unfortunately, erred in judgment; but the Spaniards were now far from his dubious protection.

The germ of suspicion harbored by the high priest that his erstwhile guests were mortals, thus not invulnerable to attack, gave him quite a rude jolt. In his heart there was bitterness, but his glamorous greeting to the pale-faced beings was now history; how could he acknowledge to the gullible votaries that their own *ah-kin-mai* had been so patently duped?

And this germ of suspicion was strengthened in the very near future, from events beyond his sphere of dominance.

History records an expedition from Fernandina, on a slave-raiding venture among the numerous islands dotting the Caribbean. Through the misfortune of violent gales and storms, the craft was driven out of its course, westward into the Gulf; land was finally sighted, but not such as was indicated on the explorers' charts. They had reached the coastal waters of Catoche, a promontory jutting from the extreme northerly point of the Yucatan peninsula. Hardly had the Spaniards recovered from their most harrying experiences, with but a very brief respite on terra firma, when excited native runners sped to neighboring Cuzmil relaying their information to Teotzl. The high priest, baffled in his first chance acquaintance with pale-faced potential invaders, threw caution to the winds, braved the ire of King Xoctli, who was then in distant Mual, and hastily commandeered a formidable force of church warriors to give battle.

The Spaniards under Cordoba, exhausted by constant vigil during the storm, now taken thoroughly unawares and but ill prepared for the furious onslaught by the native hordes driven to frenzy by the exhortations of their priests, were disastrously defeated; their cannon and falconets, still on shipboard, were not even prepared for defense. Cordoba's men rushed to the shelter of their galleon, their arquebusiers exploding a fusillade but with ineffectual result, except to startle the natives from more serious destruction. So fierce and effective was the onslaught, so decimating the rain of arrows and sling-thrown stones, that

many of the crew were mortally wounded, and Cordoba suffered what later proved to be a fatal injury.

Cordoba was compelled to weigh anchor and make an ignoble and hasty retreat. But the strange and important news of the existence of heretofore unknown land so very near Cuba aroused the cupidity of Velasquez. An ill augur for Friar Alva's benign visions! An ill omen for the safety of Mexico! But for Teotzl, who by his actions had veritably thrown the gauntlet into King Xoctli's camp, the attack and victory, having been virtually inspired by the deities, were hailed by both the priesthood and votaries of jubilant Cuzmil.

Teotzl's final conclusions were correct. The aliens were mortal, vulnerable to attack; they were a menace to the church and to his supremacy. With the jubilant celebrations, the altars again reeked with the sacrifice. The deities were fittingly remembered!

To make his position the more impregnable, to be prepared for the inevitable conflict with his monarch, now was the opportune time for alliance with Zumpango. King Xoctli must be crushed for his heresies, for his outspoken antagonism to the high priest. But to fit the punishment to the recalcitrance, to strike home, to deliver the most vulnerable blow, must be through those whom the monarch most cherished.

Now, in the most crucial stage of Zumpango's existence, beset by a sequence of events which the puppet monarch ascribed solely to the retributive manifestations of the irate gods, now was the time seemingly

most auspicious for the plans of Teotzl. With demoniac finesse he spread his ophidian-like coils beyond his own domain, hatching a heinous plot against the reigning family and against the Spaniards.

The wily opportunist, constantly in communication with his worthy allies, the high priests of Chichen-Itza, was faithfully informed and was aware of the tide of misfortunes besetting King Zumpango. With all the unconscionable resources of Beelzebub, arch prince of iniquity, of whom Teotzl may, by far and large, be justly described as a direct descendant, the high priest now despatched trusted emissaries to the sanctuary of *Kukul Can* in Chichen-Itza.

The sinister reports from the Sacred Isle were readily and avidly absorbed, as the heresies of King Xoctli were already well established. Of special interest was the conclusion of Teotzl that the white aliens were mere mortals; that they were even then sponsoring a creed inimical to the religion of all Maya. But the most trenchant argument was the almost complete annihilation of the Spanish expedition at Catoche, surely the dictum of the deities of *Anahuac*!

To the impressionable, vacillating Zumpango, the most impelling motive was as nothing compared to visioning himself at the head of a powerful force, leading in a holy war—a war decreed by the most sacred *Huitzilopochtli*! Who but the war god had hovered over the brave warriors commandeered by Teotzl? Who but Zumpango was so worthy, so competent as to rally his forces in this holy war?

Impressed upon the harassed Zumpango was the firm conviction that all the reprehensible, all the dire tribulations he had suffered were retributive manifestations of the irate gods, who were punishing him for violating the sacred pact which would have united the powerful shrines in the worship and to the glory of the deities of *Anahuac*, the sacred religion now threatened by an alien creed. All Zumpango's sins had been weighed in the balance by the very gods! Where did Zumpango stand? Would he lead in a holy war in defense of his homeland and his gods, or would he stand idly by while the faithful legions of Chichen-Itza and the church forces of Cuzmil hurled the challenge, went forth to battle and to inspired victory?

For the reprehensible remissness of Zumpango, the deities had brought sorrow to the royal dynasty. Prince Itzcoyotl had been punished, as had the Princess Netza, for the sins of their sires. The deities now decreed that Netza must be discarded, as she had failed utterly in her duty to the heir-apparent. Perhaps—and here they were somewhat diffident, fearing to tread on dangerous ground—if the apathy of the monarch had not been so marked, if, in expiation, Zumpango would cause completion of the vast edifice, the crowning glory of his reign, the noblest votive offering to the deities, the gods would have condoned! The spirit of retributive justice would have been assuaged!

The most glorious flower gracing Sacred Cuzmil, Cheeuah, must be inveigled to accept hospitality at

Chichen-Itza, and, where she went, there followed the young, blond Gallo, and the alien priest!

How very appropriate to the *teotleco*, the religious ceremonial, honoring *Tlaloc*, would be the selection of Cheeuah! How very fitting to the *teotleco* of *Tezcatlipoca* would be Gallo as a votive offering! And the white priest? What more fitting votive offering to *Huitzilopochtli*, sacred god of war, whose spirit would guide the hand of Zumpango in the holy war?

But, on the other hand, if the Princess Cheeuah, young, vivacious, a prize for the very deities, be persuaded to renounce Gallo, then would the solution to all the trials of misfortune be at hand. If Cheeuah were persuaded to wed Prince Itzcoyotl, the deities, placated with the completion and dedication of the vast, epoch-making *teocalli*, would condone a second choice for *Tlaloc*! New blood, new enthusiasm awaited the prince, and presto! To what more could mortals aspire?

History has the happy faculty of repeating itself, whether the import be baneful or benign. The age-old drama enacted in the Garden of Eden has duplicated itself on many occasions, so it is not surprising that the gullible Zumpango was beguiled by Eve's descendant-serpent.

Zumpango had been the pliant tool until madness beset him. When the panacea for all his ills and woes was dangled before him, the monarch swallowed all of the bait, the hook, line and sinker. Why, the sage admonition of the high priests of his realm and the

high dignitaries, emissaries of Teotzl, was inspired by a vision in the *zastun*, the revelation of the oracles! So vastly portentous was this, the divine message, that the inspiration was spiritually emanated to the sacred priests of both Cuzmil and Chichen-Itza! As if by a miracle the revelations now demanded union between Cheeuah and Itzcoyotl, as of the original pact; that such union would bear the benediction of the deities; that war against the infidels would be victorious for the faithful votaries of *Huitzilopochtli*; that completion of the sanctuary would be a most propitiary offering, an earnest of the sincerity, the sublime atonement and contrition of Zumpango!

Continued the voice of temptation: "The altars of *Huitzilopochtli* cry for the sacrifice of the heretics! Then alone will the spirits of the deities enter the soul of the fairest flower of Cuzmil, Cheeuah, and make her see the light. Then will the 'touched' Itzcoyotl be unfettered from the manifestations of the irate gods. Zumpango, heed the oracles!" cryptically admonished the serpent garbed in corporeal priesthood.

Addle-pated, priest-ridden Zumpango greedily absorbed the subtle appeal, the inspired revelations: A spider web for Cheeuah, or a holy war against heresy. What if his erstwhile friend, Xoctli, must be destroyed? The deities decree. Who so rash as to defy the mandates of the gods? The solace he had so long sought against his engulfing woes, the dubious calm so long denied him, now offered surcease of sorrows.

Yet these same mentors who preached the gospel of a holy war, themselves still urged caution. The vicissitudes of battle were far too hazardous to chance offensive just then. Far better to strike at the fountain head of the Mual infidels, to enmesh King Xoctli in an inextricable labyrinth whence all hope would be abandoned, to smite at his most vulnerable, treasured possession, Cheeuah. Once in their clutches, the princess as the pawn, the arrogant Xoctli, who had abandoned the sacred gods, would cringe before the feet of the all-wise, all-powerful king of Chichen-Itza. Time enough then for the extermination of the heretic followers of an alien priest. The deities would grant the mercies for which Zumpango had so long prayed. It would be an acceptable expiation, for the gods, to the truly penitent, extend their benediction.

With gifts of noble value as an earnest of good will, the acceptance by Zumpango of assistance from Teotzl, the emissaries from the scheming *ah-kin-mai* of Sacred Cuzmil departed homeward. Hardly had the entourage reached the coast for passage in *piraguas* to Cuzmil, when Zumpango lost no time in arranging for the long trip of his trusted ambassador to the Court at Mual.

This trusted emissary, in audience with King Xoctli, sought to beguile the monarch with an ingratiating conviction of Zumpango's high esteem, and with his personal curiosity as to the esoteric beings, guests at Mual. Finally came the seemingly innocent, cordial invitation for an extended visit to Chichen-Itza by

Cheuah and the queen-mother, and by Gallo, of whose pulchritude they had heard wonderful tales. As for the venerated white priest, of whom there was strange rumor that he was a dignitary of the cult of *Tlaloc*, he would honor the priesthood of Chichen-Itza with his acceptance, for the priests of *Kukul Can* would pay him especial homage; they were most eager to seek interpretation and inspiration from such a sainted personage.

In pre-conquest Mexico, as is so customary even in this age, problems of momentous importance must be carefully pondered, as seeming haste savors of discourtesy, especially to an ambassador of royalty. Thus the matter of the perplexing invitation was given weighty, deliberative thought during a secret session of the king's council. Hardly seeming would the hasty arrival and hasty departure of a visiting dignitary appear. Hospitality must be unremitting and whole-hearted, for such is the tradition of Maya land.

To the princess and Gallo, imbued with the spirit of youth, the lure of adventure, the invitation was enthralling; the friar, however, had his misgivings, as Zumpango's reputation had preceded him. His besetting misfortunes were topics, not to his credit, of conversation before the *kobens* of Mual. But natural curiosity as to the marvels of Zumpango's realm, together with the encouragement of King Xoctli, prompted Friar Alva's acceptance.

With his ambassador's departure, the thoughts of Zumpango again reverted to the unpleasantries of the

problem thrust upon him. Perhaps, in his deep, innermost conscience, there still remained the average man's desire for fair play; perhaps he still retained a remnant of the finer sensitivity against knavery and cowardice, the usual predilection of a veteran warrior for the arena of the battlefield as the more chivalrous course for a weighty dispute.

But, on the other hand—still persisted the wee voice of temptation—once more to unleash his loyal legions; to thrill with the blare of the horn as the signal for attack; to cross swords with a worthy antagonist; to hear again the fervent exhortations of divinely inspired priests in the vanguard of the attack; to hear again the resounding clash of arms, the hail and shower of countless arrows and stone-slings; to lead in the assault; to feign retreat so as to ambuscade the befuddled enemy; to view the onrush of savage foemen—all would have been far more to his martial cravings and chivalry.

But, whispered the still smaller, annoying and chiding voice which bespoke the qualms of conscience: perfidiously to ensnare an innocent victim, the cherished possession of one he had so esteemed—these are more harrowing problems! The dictum of the priesthood? At best, unscrupulous. They had failed him before. What now?

In Mual, King Xoctli, who had welcomed the arriving envoy, now evidenced a keen hope for his departure, as he feared premature arrival of couriers

from the coast with tidings of the Lacandone contingent. Preceding the gladiatorial combat, there was much to be planned, to be accomplished, and time was on the wing!

XI

AT MUAL NOT the faintest suspicion was aroused by, nor attached to, the most cordial, ingratiating invitation from Zumpango. Between the monarchs there had been a lasting peace. The abrogation of the solemn pact which was to unite the royal families and sacred shrines was of Zumpango's volition, and King Xoctli, in the light of later events, had thanked the supreme *Hunal Ku* with fervent prayer that Cheeuh had escaped a fate worse than death.

The laws of the Mayans permitted but one legal wife, with all the prerogatives and recognition inherent thereto, but no barriers were raised as to concubines who, in the courts, had no legal standing. By the church hierarchy alone could the status of a wife be determined should a breach occur.

Princess Netza, despite her misfortunes, was still the legal consort of the imbecile prince, as sacerdotal action had not been invoked for annulment. This was taken into deliberative consideration by the council

of King Xoctli as the deciding factor disarming suspicion.

Thus the royal entourage debarked, and having weathered an extended sea-trip, arrived at the sumptuous *tecpan*. Awaiting them were the feigned hospitality of Zumpango, and also the very neatly-set trap of the arch conspirators. The retinue included Prince Kakama, most promising of King Xoctli's concubine sons, to whom the safety of the party had been entrusted.

King Xoctli now began active preparations for a plan of action to meet squarely the issue forced by Teotzl. First, it was necessary to locate a suitable, yet secret hiding place for the Lacandone contingent from Tabi. The many reefs and coves fringing the coastline, where the dense tangle of tropic growths offered both haven and concealment, were decided upon. There the Lacandone allies were to encamp until the awaited day for the assault on Cuzmil. The other salient matter requiring consideration was the menace of the saurian monster in the lagoon, for should the exigencies of the combat necessitate retreat via the hazards of the pool, that danger must be eliminated.

Cholanz, the custodian of the sacred crocodile, dwelt in a rude wattle-hut adjoining the quagmire and lagoon, almost within the very shadow of a huge, precipitous cliff and gigantic, age-old trees. Surreptitiously, he also plied a lucrative trade in much sought-for love potions, and in concoctions banned by law;

for a consideration, it was whispered in Cuzmil, lethal drugs were procurable to cause secret demise of a too-malignant foe, or shrewish spouse, or haggard, concubine crone.

All these concoctions were garnered from the mazes of the mysterious jungle, along with other health-giving or death-dealing specimens of roots, herbs, barks and leaves utilized by the priesthood in their healing art. A blow-gun and an *itzli* sword were his weapons in these quests, for the jungle abounded with prowlers; large reed and bark baskets were repositories for the products of the hunt. By macerating, brewing and extracting his garnerings, either as juice or as pulp, in his rudely improvised laboratory, with open hearth-fire, stone pestle and clay crucible, he completed the process.

To Tloaxtli, of the king's guard, was entrusted the mission of prevailing upon Cholanz to abet in a plan to eliminate the crocodile, and in this he was to be directed by the allied Lacandones. The night of Tloaxtli's visit was beset overhead with dense, leaden clouds, and the path was but fitfully lighted by the transient glow and phosphorescent gleam of myriads of beetles. Furry denizens, alarmed at the soft tread of naked feet, the snapping of twigs and the approach of a human, scurried to cover. If the feathered occupants of the overhanging branches were disturbed at the temerity of a traveler at this unseemly hour, they chirped but very sleepy remonstrances at the intrusion. The shrill cry and challenge of wild *oceloti*

pierced the air; chattering parrots and scolding monkeys took up the cry of alarm or warning; then again fell the dead hush, save for the click and buzz of myriads of insects.

Reaching the wattle-hut, Tloaxtli peered within the dimly lit room and scanned the slumbering group huddled before the warmth of the *koben*. Cholanz, awakened, alarmed as he recognized the insignia of the guard, was apprised of the purport of his visit.

Aged, wizened, bristly-bearded Cholanz had inherited his vocations from a forebear, and was well known, himself, as an herb healer. Aged, and at all other times, his entire wardrobe boasted but the customary loin-cloth, of rather dubious color from collected grime, and a bone labret piercing his lower lip, which made conversation the more difficult and barely intelligible.

For his love potions, Cholanz received but a mere pittance, but the banned preparations brought good fees, the reward occasionally being even a quill of silver or gold from the more opulent, or from those pressed by the urgency of the situation. The hoardings he had amassed from culpable clients amounted to no mean sum, as competition was little, and his own needs very meager. So well concealed were these hoardings, so owlshly taciturn was Cholanz, as to deceive both his aged, ape-like hag of a spouse and his misshapen, dwarfish son, whose features were so devoid of human delineaments as to leave the question

of his age and mentality entirely to one's imagination or dubious conjectures.

The mien of Cholanz, despite the calming assurances of Tloaxtli, was of distinct terror, as, having rubbed shoulders with others before the bar of justice, he was wary of strangers, much more so of an official.

Briefly Tloaxtli explained his mission: On a certain night in the near future Cholanz was to aid in eliminating the crocodile—this was by the express command of the monarch!

In horror, with terror, Cholanz threw himself at the feet of Tloaxtli, imploring mercy from the vengeance of the priesthood, should they gain but an inkling of this purported sacrilege. "By all the sacred deities," swore Cholanz, "I concoct no lethal drugs. Only harmless potions do I brew for gullible swain or maid, and those medicinal preparations required by the priests."

Garrulously, Cholanz continued his earnest denials and abject pleas. He abhorred even the thought of dispensing aphrodisiacs for aged, dissipated roués, or sex-depressed concubines. He kept far aloof from the vile *mescal* and *peyotl*, which at first exhilarate, then envelop in lethargic, enervating stupor. As for lethal drugs, the high heavens and all the tutelary gods would bear him witness—he loathed them. Even to abet in such a fell cause as ordered by royal command would mean inevitable doom.

Impatiently, Tloaxtli gripped the arm of the cringing Cholanz and exclaimed, "Cease raving! Your

craven life is indeed to be doomed unless you comply. Recall you that, but recently, there was the matter of a love potion which reacted very, very strangely? Ah! Then you do recall! Cease quaking and gibbering. Ample reward awaits you, but if your tongue remains not mute—" (In Tloaxtli's grip was a short *itzli* sword.)

The panic-stricken Cholanz, knowing full well the swift, terrifying menace in store for disobedience of royal command, wrung his hands and moaned in abject misery; the secret fear of a ruse to enmesh him in the shackles of the law added to his dread. From Tloaxtli, whom he scanned furtively, came no sign of sympathy.

Cholanz heaved a deep sigh of relief as Tloaxtli was about to depart; then the eyes of the rogue lit up with avaricious gleam; his hand grasped at the quill thrust into his gnarled, clammy fist. He hurried out into the murkiness of the night, to add to his secret cache, the nectar and ambrosia for his warped mind, gold, "the excrement of the gods"!—for this he endured dread nightmares and daily, cowering terrors.

But a short distance from the rude *jacale* of the miserly Cholanz, in the sumptuous chambers of the *ah-kin-mai*, Teotzl was in far finer fettle and gayety of spirits than was his menial neighbor, for word had just been received from a trusted courier that the royal party from Mual, which included Princess Cheeuah, the queen mother, Friar Alva and Gallo, had arrived

at the regal *tecpan* of Zumpango. The high priest's well-set trap was being baited. Very soon he would witness the death of the hated Acatlan, a veritable thorn in his side, and the virtual downfall of Xoctli, the spectacle of a monarch cravenly pleading for mercy for his cherished ones!

The monarch at Mual, the arch-fiend, Teotzl, at Cuzmil, each envisaged the other's nadir of despair. Inscrutable fate, mocking mortals' plots, sneered and jeered at both!

The smug satisfaction of Teotzl was reflected in his mien to his sycophant *chilans* and servile *nacons*, and they in turn passed on the benign cheer to the hordes of votaries who began to pour into Cuzmil for the great occasion.

The heart of Teotzl had rarely been so exhilarated. His rheumy eyes actually sparkled; his parchment face and his thin, cruel lips were almost beatific, compared to the grotesquely hideous deities he represented. No longer would his vengeance be delayed nor frustrated. Royal reprieve for the arrogant captive, the soon-to-be victim, Acatlan, would no longer harass him.

Teotzl's crafty machinations had run the full gamut of disturbing snags, but now, through divine favor, the advantage was his. The meddling sovereign had finally been checkmated. Glory be to the deities, to whom none was so pious, none more faithful; the deities he had exalted, with whom he had never been remiss in votary-placations, for whom he had ever

replenished the sacred, perpetual fires, and had scourged the infidels on the altar of sacrifice; the gods for whom he had scoured the limits of the realm in quest of ceaseless offerings.

In the gloaming of his years, as his eyes were turned to the setting, no longer to the rising sun, Teotzl felt a smug contentment that his life had been nobly spent in his sacerdotal duties. The warmth of a smile (which, to the uninitiated or the skeptics, resembled a grotesque sneer, but to the sainted high priest was an augur of approval) seemed to emanate from the idol *Huitzilopochtli*, and this assuredly was a vision of the elysian fields, the *omeyocan* of *Hunal Ku*, the highest or thirteenth heaven awaiting his spirit.

“But,” hastily and most fervently prayed Teotzl, “may that day be long delayed!”

A summons to an important religious ceremonial was, to the natives, tantamount to a direct command. What if the festival did entail a long, arduous trek? When the deities summoned, none dared but obey; at the end of the journey, surely there would be ample recompense. Hours in the glamorous *tianguetz*, the public market, with shopping through the gayly decorated booths; the marvelous exhibitions of acrobats; the side-splitting laughter at the quips and the antics of the buffoons. And then the dance!—right out in the open, on the public square, to the tune of alluring music. Ah! the gliding, rhythmic languor and cadence of the dance!

And at dusk the pilgrims would hie to the *teocalli*, for the summons was so magnetic, so solemn—the weird, heart-gripping boom, boom of the sacred drum echoing its sacred message: “Repent! Repent! The deities beckon!” There would then be sacred services and humble oblations, for the spirit of the gods pervaded the very air. At midnight would come the soul-stirring, breath-taking struggle on the *temalacatl*, the huge, circular stone of combat—the pitting of the cunning and brawn of a lone Lacandone savage against six successive killers—to end in the climax and the victory!

The glamorous spectacle of the combat alone was indeed ample compensation for all the discomforts of the journey, be it ever so distant. Then, still later, the main ceremonial! Solemn, awe-inspiring! The chant of priestly choir, the bird-like chorus of nunnery vestals, the blaze of cheering torches, the clash of cymbals, the blare and blast of horns and trumpets, the tinkle of silver and copper bells, the gyration of the dance with priests, nunnery vestals, spectators, combatants, captives!

The atmosphere, the tenseness, the solemnity enveloped the faithful votaries with spiritual reverence! Their prayers, mingled with the incantations of the *chilan* celebrants, began as the soft intonation of a prelude and rose gradually in increasing, ecstatic fervor of a frenzied fortissimo. To the very prison cages of the numerous captives, soon-to-be victims,

came the chant and the prayers, to them the introductory to the inevitable sacrifice.

But not so to the Lacandone pawn, Acatlan, whose pagan rearing had not gone beyond the totem and fetish stage. As time dragged on interminably in his narrow cubicle of a cell, the inherent fatalism of the savage resigned him to the poignant realization that even the tribal symbols of his calm had destined him to his doom.

Unaware of the secret negotiations between Mual and Tabi, Acatlan's spirit was aroused only as a *nacon* or guard would goad him; then, with a snarl of rage, like that of a wildcat, the captive would turn on his tormenter.

Thus time passed on, with the harrying sun torturing him during the brilliant day, and the dampness, rain and fog causing him sweats and chills throughout the long nights.

Then the unexpected happened. Acatlan's foul rag of loin-cloth was replaced; he was permitted the freedom of the open for several hours daily and, marvel of marvels! he was even extended the astonishing boon of arms-practice, with the weapons to be used in the forthcoming combat. Escape was decidedly an impossibility, as he was ever under watch of a constant and vigilant guard, seemingly beyond cajoling or the dubious promise of a bribe.

These concessions, these magnificent gestures on the part of Teotzl were not motivated by the wee still voice of contrition, nor by qualms of conscience in commis-

eration for a foeman. Teotzl was essentially the showman, the promoter of the spectacular for the masses—the masses he so despised for their cringing and servility, yet to whom, on occasion, he pandered, so as to hold them to his superior will, to alienate them from their loyal devotion to their *nachi cocum*, or monarch, Xoctli. Thus the high priest practiced the allurements of the mountebank with which to sway his gullible votaries. When the show was staged, it must attain the magnitude of the spectacular. Had Teotzl been schooled by the very phantom spirits of certain Emperors of the Rome that was, in the heyday of its conquests and supremacy, the destination of pilgrimages of the then-known world, none could more fittingly have exploited the panoramic display.

An audience of faithful, enthralled votaries driven to inspired frenzy by exhortations, their souls fired by the impellent oracles, their fanaticism sent soaring to unknown heights, their lust of combat aroused—such superstitious and gullible puppets could be swayed to revolution, mass murder, even fell regicide!

Whether by divine favor of the idol-gods, or by mere fickle chance, rarely had so auspicious a night evidenced the pleasure of the deities. *Meztli*, the glowing moon, loomed in celestial splendor, and countless stars scintillated like an harmonious diadem.

Teotzl tarried, for the stage was in the final setting for his grandiose appearance. His was the stellar role; so smug was he, so did he maneuver his stratagem, that frustration seemed remote. Even when an excited,

scarlet-cassocked *chilan* superior broke through a cordon of scandalized guards of honor (who almost precipitated a casualty as they fought to stem his audacious conduct), and, prostrating himself before Teotzl, blurted out the information that King Xoctli, accompanied by an imposing retinue, had unexpectedly arrived, this news, so inauspicious at other times, caused not a flicker of the high priest's eyes, nor hesitant indecision for even the barest moment.

What Teotzl was not informed of was that Uinic, in disguise, had deployed his most dependable warriors in such strategic points of vantage as to be able to cope immediately with untoward hostility arising from the church forces.

And Teotzl smugly visioned the hostages in Chichen-Itza, the most prized possessions of his sovereign, who were in constant jeopardy, with King Xoctli sublimely unaware of the tide, unable to render help or rescue when demanded. The gods, he believed, were favorable to his most cherished plans.

XII

DESPITE THE lavish entertainment and the glamour of each day's pleurably passing hours, the heart of Cheeuah was sorely distraught by the plight of the Princess Netza. On the few occasions when Cheeuah's path would cross that of the "touched one," there was keen and responsive understanding, not because both were of royal caste, but as of one woman to another. Her heart gripped with the thought that one so exotically prepossessing as Netza should be so afflicted.

In the presence of Cheeuah, Netza was ever timid and reserved, save when her varied array of picturesque dolls were admired; then her coal-black, soulful and haunting eyes would light with gratification, and she would pronounce the name of each, and croon to them as to mortal babes.

Gallo was ever a source of bewildering curiosity to Netza. His deep-blue eyes and flaxen thatch were beyond her ken. To the friar she was ever docile and an avid listener when the benign padre, his keenest sym-

pathies aroused, leisurely strolled through the gardens, admiring and commenting on the gay foliage and on the occupants of the aviaries, whose gorgeous plumage and colorings were a sight to behold.

When in the company of the friar, Netza refrained from her usual propensity, the wanton plucking of flowers, as her keen interest had been aroused. On one occasion, however, when a *chilan* superior, in full panoply, greeted Friar Alva as *ah-kin*, meaning a chief of the priesthood, Netza gave vent to a subdued, stifled sob and fled precipitantly, with the terror of the stricken fawn; nor was she about her usual haunts for several days thereafter.

Thus, almost a month had passed pleasantly, each day bringing new and gratifying surprises of the hospitality of Zumpango, until a strange, foreboding dream, out of the stillness of the night, disturbed Cheeuh's tranquil slumber.

The spacious chamber of Cheeuh opened on a vista of flowery patio. On this starry night, the silvery glow of the moon and the serenade of feathered songsters prompted tender avowals of love to a later hour than was the smitten couple's wont. On retiring, the cheering hearth-fire was in perfect attune with her dreams of Gallo.

Seemingly from nowhere, in the intangible phantom of a dream, came a voice so close that she felt the breath, then heard the cryptic message: "Beware! Danger lurks!" At once the patter of soft sandals disappeared into the stillness. Now startled into semi-

wakefulness, the frightened Cheeuah tried to pierce the gloom beyond her chamber. She noticed that her personal maid was still in the throes of sleep. There seemingly was nothing, only the sound of her throbbing heart.

The incident would have been dismissed as but a phantom of the night, had not the same, disquieting warning been repeated but a few nights later.

Fearing to alarm her queen mother or Gallo, yet apprehensive of the mysterious import of the message, she confided in the friar. He sought to calm her uneasiness with reassuring cheer, and also with gentle chidings as to her unseemly hours; but the benign padre gained for his answer a pouting of the lips, a saucy tilt of pert nose, and a bantering laugh. His sage advice and admonition that these hours could far better be spent in relaxing slumber than in avowals of undying love, fell on pagan, unresponsive ears, for the little minx had quite suddenly emerged from the chrysalis of childhood to the glorious adolescence of young womanhood. The responsive eyes of the friar twinkled, and his heart danced with the joy of life.

But despite his sage advice, he felt ill at ease, for his devotion to the elf fully equalled his love for Gallo. The friar gave the matter grave thought, then summoned the aged servitor, Chibachu, who had accompanied the royal party as the trusted chief of the *tamanes*, or carriers. Warning him of the lurking phantom, Friar Alva cautioned him to be ever on the

alert, especially for the next few nights, in an endeavor to seek an answer to the disquieting problem.

The aged servitor, Chibachu, who, years before, had been rescued at sea by King Xoctli, who had toddled Cheeuah in her infancy, and had hovered over her as a devoted slave since, now was an eager sleuth. Night after night he kept his solitary vigil, crouched behind the massive shrubbery lining the wall nearest the paneless window of Cheeuah's chamber; but when naught developed, the friar was forced to conclude, reluctantly, that the entire matter was but a phantom nightmare, as nothing in the demeanor of the household warranted unjust, disturbing suspicion.

But in this he had erred, for one morning Chibachu remained nearby until the friar managed to give him heed. The tidings were quite startling; the prowler had slipped stealthily into the chamber of the princess, had lingered there for but a moment, then, as if possessed by an evil spirit, had pattered silently across the patio and into an alcove leading to a wing of the castle. Strange to relate, the elusive phantom of the night was none other than the "touched one," Netza.

Yet, at no time, did Netza unburden her troubles, nor explain her mysterious actions—this despite her friendly attitude to the guests. In time, her disappearances from the *tecpan* became more frequent and of longer duration. Though trailed by a stealthy guard from the household, in some uncanny way, seemingly preoccupied and unconcerned, she would wander about aimlessly, then completely disappear behind the

shelter of dense growths; the quarry thus eluded her pursuer.

The native stealthily stalked her, but his superstitious fear of the mazes of the dense woods and its wandering, spectral spirits, overcame his ambition to fulfill his assignment, and he returned crestfallen and weary. Thus Netza was left to come and go, as best suited her capricious whims or her mysterious motives.

Suspicion, even then, would not have been unduly aroused, but for events which now closely followed, for the trap set by the treacherous hosts was about to be sprung.

At a certain court reception, Gallo was assigned the seat of honor. As courtier, noble and other dignitary arrived, each prostrated himself before the feet of the astonished young Spaniard, and a *chilan* personally sprinkled him with *psom* incense, a homage usually reserved for royalty or for the high priests. By a strange coincidence, the troubadours of the palace then sang in exaltation of the god, *Tezcatlipoca*, "the soul or creator of the Universe." This deity was depicted as endowed with perpetual youth; he was the paragon of pulchritude. In his honor it was customary to select a youth of unblemished body, outstanding charm and beauty, who, after a full year of idle dalliance, after receiving the homage, even adulation, of the subjects of the realm, whether in wattle-hut or sumptuous palace, was finally stripped of his adornments, and sacrificed.

This drama of life was expounded by the priests as the parable of human destiny: glamorous at birth, a life of high aspirations, harmonizing with the esoteric exaltation of the deities, as effulgent as was the god, *Tezcatlipoca*; but closing in the sorrows of mortals—old age, disillusionment, in the dregs of a once opulent existence.

To add to the prevailing uneasiness of the situation, the superioress of the nunnery frequently graced the pool reserved exclusively for royalty, and just at the same time that Cheeuah usually enjoyed her dip. It was noted that the superioress hovered about the abashed Cheeuah, scanning her body with rather unduly inquisitive interest. On one occasion, as if in admiration of the graceful, lithe form and prepossessing charms, came the comment, more impetuous than tactful: "Princess, the mortal who aspires to possess you will be the envy of the gods, and with the deities will be forced to contend!"

Cheeuah's heart surely missed a beat as stark terror seized her, for she recalled the almost similar, equally fervent, perhaps unwitting rhapsody from the aged *cacique*, Uinic: "She is as beautiful, as marvelously comely as any yet honored and selected as the bride of *Tlaloc*!" And now came vividly, startlingly, the incident of the troubadours, the strange, pointed glances at Gallo, the paean of praise for *Tezcatlipoca*. What did all this betide? But guileless and innocent as she was, there still was no suspicion of her host's deceit nor of his despicable baseness in the mind of Cheeuah.

The embarrassment of Friar Alva to the marked deference, the almost reverential homage, paid him by the priests of *Kukul Can* was very keen. Again, as once in the sanctuary at Cuzmil, in a hallowed niche, appeared the symbol of *Tlaloc*.

To the friar, there was but one Cross, the Cross of Golgotha, whether the Holy Symbol be enshrined in the cathedral of Christendom, or in the land of paganism. It was not for him to question the origin of the Sacred Rood in this Mexico of paradoxes. His was the fundamentalist credo of Rome!

It may be noted here that this was during the early sixteenth century. Barely a century prior, the peasant's epoch-making daughter who became the Maid of Orleans was firmly convinced that the "voice" of St. Michael bade her "lead the Dauphin to Rheims!"

Almost simultaneously with the startling successes of the Spaniards in the New World, Torquemada insistently believed that no less than divine inspiration prompted the horrors of the Inquisition!

Who is to judge? Who to answer?

The benign, whole-souled padre, Alva, lived in an age when belief in miracles prevailed; thus the reverence, thus his kneeling before the symbol. But the *chilans* of *Kukul Can*, mistaking his devotionals, sprinkled him with incense, and a priest-choir, eyes raised to heaven, chanted paeans of praise: "Hail *Tlaloc*! Hail *ah-kin* to the god of rain!"

Individually, any of these strange occurrences would not, perhaps, have been of grave import, or

have been the cause of apprehension or undue alarm, for homage had been paid them since the vagaries of fate had veritably tossed them into the mystified lap of Yucatan; in fact, homage was essentially part and parcel of the kaleidoscopic episodes in which they had been constrained to assume stellar roles.

Princess Cheeuh had been accustomed to the adulation of her devotees. When, however, comparison was made and events summarized, they could not be ascribed solely to pagan superstition, nor to the halo of royalty impressed on subjects or sycophants, but rather displayed alarming significance, and were the prelude of more direful happenings.

At last the nearing climax was in the offing. And it came in a very strange way. One fateful day, the princess and Gallo were strolling through the *tianguetz* of Chichen-Itza; again they noted the marked homage. Pausing at a jeweler's booth, Gallo admired a masterpiece of gold filigree in an exotic pendant, and expressed a wish to purchase this for Cheeuh. The jeweller, all graciousness before a royal patron, deprecatingly refused remuneration, but made the very cryptic remark: "To the god, *Tezcatlipoca*, and to the expectant bride of *Tlaloc*, a most humble votary is exalted with your acceptance of this paltry bauble!"

Princess Cheeuh, who better understood the flowery comment, the superstitions and traditions of her people than did Gallo, uttered a piteous moan and promptly swooned, much to the consternation of Gallo, and of Prince Kakama, who had followed them at a

respectful distance. The sympathetic, if curious, crowds collecting were admonished to disperse; when the frail child-woman revived, bending over her was Netza, her eyes suffused with tears, her arms in fond embrace.

Nor would Netza relax her attentions when Cheeuh was carried in the strong arms of Kakama to the palace. Long and earnestly Netza seemed to struggle with the complicated problem which her "touched" mind was striving, gropingly and painstakingly, to solve. At times her eyes gleamed with satisfaction, as if the solution were at hand; then, on the entrance of the pompous, much overadorned chief of the priestly herb-healers, her reason seemed again to totter, and she moaned and muttered incoherently until, in the privacy of her quarters, exhaustion and sleep calmed her.

Even then no special restrictions were exercised at the palace and no special guard was placed over them. Escape was impossible, as all roads were under military cordons. Chichen-Itza being inland, the only avenue for escape was through the jungle; only the most foolhardy would venture there.

Despite these seeming obstacles and hazards it was shortly thereafter reported that Kakama had nevertheless mysteriously disappeared; an exhaustive search was made without any resultant findings. With him vanished two of the Mual warriors. Whether, in disguise, they had somehow outwitted the cordon, or had been swallowed forever in the treacherous jungle,

or had been offered the friendly protection of itinerant Campeche traders, could not then be learned.

Friar Alva, who was deeply attached to the neo-convert, refused to countenance the prevalent belief that he had cravenly deserted; the friar shrewdly surmised, instead, that no matter what the outcome, Kakama had heroically chanced the desperate, if futile, effort to report the treachery to Mual.

But the tender care and affection lavished on the broken-hearted Cheeuah were of little avail. Her eyes had the look of a stricken fawn. She clung with piteous appeal, not to her queen-mother, who was racking her mind for some means of summoning aid, but rather to Gallo, and all her woes were centered on him. Willingly she would have made the supreme sacrifice, but the spidery web had already enmeshed them both.

Only once did her dispirited heart rebel; then she ventured her complaint to the friar.

"Padre," she whimpered, "the gods of my forebears are wroth with my apostasy. Pray, I beseech you, for the safety of our beloved Gallo. How else may my faith in Holy Mary be strengthened?"

And to Gallo: "*Carissimo mio!* The miracle of you, and I have loved and lived!"

That was her complete credo, her encompassing love, her very life!

Small wonder that the heartbroken queen stolidly stared at the "touched" one, Netza and, confronted with the situation imperiling the life of her idol-child,

would most gladly have exchanged places with her. Small wonder that the devout aspirations of the friar, who had dreamt of the ecstatic fulfillment of his sacred mission of enlightenment against rampant paganism and superstition, were as if shattered.

But the friar's indomitable spirit and Faith voiced the prophecy: "The Father who sacrificed His Son, though His ways are inscrutable, hath wrought miracles ere this! Hallowed be His Name!"; and his companions fervently murmured, "Amen!"

But this was scant solace to the wee pagan emerged from joyous, carefree childhood to the pangs of rapturous love, to the pitfalls of the drama of life; the elfin sprite upon whom the serene fates had dropped the elusive moonbeam, then, with fickle inconsistency, had rudely grasped it away. The yearning idol of her heart, Gallo, like the elusive moonbeam, had dropped seemingly from the vastness of the sky. But now?

That night, before retiring to their respective quarters, the lovers lingered quite late in the chamber and under the affectionate chaperonage of the queen-mother. Their hearts were weighted with the reprehensible events now so evident. To calm her distraught emotions, the queen was bestirring herself with arrangement and rearrangement of an array of gorgeous-hued blooms with which the compartment was bedecked.

Friar Alva had tarried here, as was his wont before retiring to his own bed, and to the apprehensive thoughts and foreboding dreams besetting him. He

playfully pinched the cheek of his nephew, Gallo, with the admonition: "Omit not your prayers." Then, turning to Cheeuh, with the suspicion of a twinkle in his eyes: "And I may suggest that prayers will act as a charm against the baneful nightmare spirits, the *aluxab*."

The friar now raised his hands in benediction over the heads of his little flock. "*Buenas noches!*" was his parting greeting.

Without, all nature, seemingly sublimely apathetic to the trials and tribulations of mere mortals—at best, but very transient flittings through a mundane sphere—glowed an evening smile of greeting.

Arm clasped in arm, their eyes raised to the brilliance of the canopy of sky, Gallo and Cheeuh stood before the great, paneless window of the spacious compartment.

"Gallo," timorously ventured Cheeuh, "is it sinful for a devout Catholic maid to dream of the *omeyocan*, the pagan gods' supreme, or thirteenth, heaven? In this elysium is promised eternal peace, in the spirit of *Hunal Ku!*"

But before her dream-like yearnings had burst her pent-up emotions into an anguished sob, both the queen and Gallo, terrified at the turn of Cheeuh's thoughts, tearfully, earnestly pleaded, "Don't!"

It was a sobbing, hysteric Cheeuh who was clasped in Gallo's arms. To his—the interloper from the distant and vast expanse of horizon — soothing avowals, the queen-mother resigned the idol and idyll

of her aching heart. But with the flood of tears and rather dubious encompassing protection of her lover's clasping embrace, the child-woman fell into a calm sleep. Gallo settled his precious bundle into the queen's bed, who, bidding the young Spaniard "Good night!" in a low, tremulous voice, took up the refrain of a myriad of lowly peasant women, mothers of the realm, crooning over their loved ones, with the soft, soothing nursery rhymes transmitted from the remote past.

The frail, delicate form, nestled under an ornate, vivid-hued, embroidered coverlet, was now oblivious to the perils besetting her. Her knees were haunched almost to her chin; over her tear-stained cheeks glistened the pearls she had so courageously strived to stem; the thumb of her right hand was within the recess of her mouth; and her long, raven tresses hung in disarray over her head, which nestled in the crock of her left arm. The years had happily rolled back to unsophisticated babyhood.

But the sleep with which the harassed hostages sought to banish their dire cares was fitful, far from refreshing. They tossed on luxurious couches, but with invisible fetters strongly gripping them.

Long after the muezzin-like cry of the sentinel atop the somber turret of the sanctuary of *Kukul Can*, the *teocalli* housing their arch enemies, the high priests, had announced the change of watch, there came cries

of alarm from all quarters of the city, as towards the heavens ascended thick smoke and lurid flames.

From everywhere came the startled cry, "The sanctuary is aflame!"

The loud, reverberating boom of the sacred drum now echoed for miles around—it was the solemn, impelling call to the votaries within earshot of its ominous, yet clarion summons!

But louder than all was the shriek and the mad, portentous prophecy: "Destroyed! With strange thunder, with strange lightning, destroyed!"

But a very short time elapsed; then, panting as if having sped from a distance, Netza veritably burst in upon the huddled group now awakened from sleep and gathered again with Queen Nezuama.

"*Ah-kin*," exclaimed Netza excitedly, addressing the friar, "while the fire still rages at the *teocalli*, there may still be time for desperate, hasty action. The sacred laws of Chichen-Itza, as of all the land of the Mayans, demand a virgin, pure, unblemished, as the votary-bride of *Tlaloc*! Never has a matron, whatever her charms, been so exalted!"

"And what of Gallo? What of the sacrifice to the god, *Tezcatlipoca*?" almost simultaneously queried Queen Nezuama and Friar Alva.

"If the blonde god loves as his eyes betray, if love then be dearer than life itself, then is the sacrifice but small. I pray you, make haste," persisted the agitated Netza. "I shall but witness the union, then I must return to my mask of the one 'touched' by the gods, or

my life will be the forfeit for this sacrilege. Woe is me for the craven treachery of King Zumpango and the renegade *ah-kin-mai* of *Kukul Can!*”

Friar Alva was if stunned by the sudden, the amazing turn of events. The terror-stricken eyes of the queen were now averted from Gallo. Cheeuah, sobbing hysterically, clung to her lover, whose heart beat tumultously with the realization that his most cherished mundane possession might yet be saved!

No perilous, dramatic situation, so ordained by the fates, called for more prompt and startlingly heroic action. It was now very apparent that Netza's sage but persistent urging was the result of long planning, and Gallo eagerly grasped at the straw—the frail, almost hopeless one — yet presenting the bare prospect of bargaining for the life of the one for whom self-sacrifice would bring a ray of hope, of reprieve.

In the simplest of Catholic services, devoid of any of the glamour so enthralling to a maid embarking on the sea of matrimony, be she peasant or princess, Cheeuah and Gallo were united by Friar Alva. Whether the fates would decree death for both, or spread protecting armor in their defense, was for time alone to decide.

Without, the patter of many feet was heard hastening on an urgent summons to the *teocalli*, a grain storage-house of which was smoldering and gravely imperiling the sanctuary proper. Eager votaries, forming an emergency fire-brigade, spurred on by the frantic priests, grasped at gourds and earthen pitch-

ers, raced down the steep path to the *chen ku*, Chichen-Itza's sacred well, then raced up again with the sparse, precious supply of water.

Priests and the faithful votaries plaintively lamented the dire conflagration, yet no valid suspicion could be laid at anyone's door, as the outhouse was of wooden construction. Again the cassocked priests and subjects formed a procession and turned to the mute, impotent idols, in superstitious prayer for divine favor against the threatening catastrophe, the menace of the consuming flames.

Long and valiantly they strove to confine the fire to the granary, many of the fire-fighters even braving the dense smoke in a vain effort to toss the contents of gourds and pitchers into the spreading flames.

Scarlet-cassocked *chilans* prostrated themselves before *Kukul Can*. The glowing charcoal braziers wafted fragrant incense odors to the heavens, and a solemn chant arose from the terrace, before the sacrificial altar.

Surrounding the sacrificial stone, a group of blood-bespattered priests, accompanied by a score of dancing vestals, were in the frenzied whirl of a ritual dance. They shouted prayers to *Tlaloc* for a timely deluge to stem the ravages of the fire. Within the circle of the dancers, a number of doomed victims were urgently and vigorously prodded into joining the mad, weird dance, preparatory to being, themselves, sacrificed to the rain god.

Soon the dance was augmented by increasing hordes caught in the mad whirl and frenzied hysteria. Without interruption of the dance or the priestly incantations, one after another of the victims was seized by hardened *nacons*, who pinioned the prisoner's arms in a terrifying grip, then threw him upon the altar. Thus, amid the shrieks and wailing to *Tlaloc*, the victims met doom.

But Netza's ruse had served its purpose. The charming daughter of opulence, endowed with glamour and pulchritude, the gift of the very gods, had been torn from her idyll life. The base treachery of malign forces had blighted her days of innocence, her very life. Intuitively, Netza had sprung to the defense of the innocent victims of a nefarious plot. The much-needed privacy to consummate her plans, the union of Gallo and Cheeuah, thus to succor at least one life, might yet be realized. The disillusionment palling her existence had, in a measure, been assuaged by her self-abnegation in behalf of the heartbroken, storm-beset princess of the dynasty of King Xoctli, and the godlike Gallo, whose paths of weal and woe had been crossed by Fate.

XIII

TOWERING ABOVE the slimy lagoon, above the treacherous quagmires adjacent to it, even above the five-foot surrounding parapet of the Cuzmil sanctuary, was a natural, precipitous cliff with a sheer drop of over an hundred feet, facing a similar formation on the opposite bank.

The cliffs were almost concealed by a monstrous tree growth, now gnarled and multi-ringed, and blanketed with irregular patches of tenaciously adherent lichens of yellow, green and purple. Gigantic branches, dropping like fantastic draperies, or forming massive coils, met and intertangled with similar growths from across the opposite bank of the chasm, and spread like huge tentacles in every direction, forming a natural bridge.

Almost in the center of the topmost terrace, away from the intertangle of vines and branches, was a huge, circular stone, the *temalacatl*, where the combat was to be bitterly fought, where the captive Acatlan

was to meet the six successive killers in an unchivalric struggle.

Here, toward midnight, the expectant eagerness of a vast multitude called for the beginning of the battle, then the solemn ceremonial to the god, *Zipe*, to whom the spectacle was dedicated.

A long procession of cassocked priests, many with hair matted with the gore of the sacrifice, led the throngs from the lower terraces, followed by hideously bedaubed warriors of the church forces. They came from around the *coateplante*, the wall of serpents—hewed, massive carvings of the boa-constrictor—and they filed up the huge, winding staircase of the sanctuary.

Men, women and even children, bedizened nabob, sallow feather-weaver, skilled artisan and stone mason still with the dust of fresh lime on his apron, mincing dandy with the strong incense odor on his cloak, soil-bespattered tiller of the small terrace of maize—all were welcome and equal before the idol-gods of the *teocalli*.

The enervating incantations, the endless shuffling of naked feet, the shrill blare and blast and clang of music, all had dinned in the ears of the captive Acatlan. From among the stolid, heavily armed guards surrounding him, none had deigned a word of hope and cheer. Hungrily he had scanned face after face with a faint, vanishing expectation that somewhere among the hordes there might be one with a message; but not the slightest sign seemed forthcoming.

The Lacandone captive did not fear death, for continued existence in the vermin-infested, foul cubicle of a cell, where he was ever spat upon, reviled and goaded by every passerby—surely, death had no sting equal to this revolting incarceration.

The vista of the open, the faintly carried scent of the distant jungle, tantalizing in its urgent call, discouraged the desire for life. The savage, as the lower animal, became apathetic, hopeless; the innate fatalism to which he was inured would have welcomed death.

The scant freedom he had been permitted was now of the past, escape was impossible, and the approach of a priest-guard with change of watch was but the routine. The guard was brief in his message to the one he replaced, who withdrew.

“Acatlan,” whispered this new guard, cautiously, “await a signal from the turret at the cliff. Make for the lagoon, at the first chance. Be ever on the alert. Courage!”

No electric shock could have reacted more forcibly. He had not been deserted by his totem and fetish; and, mayhap, his tribesmen who would, ordinarily, have torn down insurmountable barriers with their claw-like hands in their efforts to aid their own, might even now be in the offing. Now was the time to prove one's valor, to give valiant battle, battle to the dying gasp. But only to be granted the one chance of proximity to the perpetrator of his ignoble captivity, to deal Teotzl the retributive death-stroke, then even to die!

With the first ray of hope his courage gained impetus. He would battle as became a Lacandone, scion of a chieftain. What if the accursed warriors of Teotzl blocked his rush for freedom! What if the malign high priests had decreed death in this unequal combat!

Acatlan was now led to the huge, circular *temalacatl*. He caught a fleeting glimpse of his surroundings: the soaring turret, his beacon in attempted flight; the gigantic growth of the cliff; the bridge over the lagoon; the precipitous chasm. Beyond, a vista of undulating sea lit by the glow of the moon—the sea which beckoned so invitingly to the numerous canoes littering the shore. But in the lagoon was the dread crocodile! Acatlan shuddered at the thought of the monster, yet he pondered wonderingly, for no short, familiar bark came from the saurian's hiding place.

From the inner sanctum of the brilliantly lit *teocalli* emerged Teotzl, garbed in a simple black cloak, clasped at the neck by a blue-green turquoise, sparkling against the light of torches; across his cloak was a silvery serpent depiction winding tenuously with the motion of the priest. On his brow was a stuffed *tecolote*, bird of ill omen, of death!

All was in harmony to depict the homily of the ceremonial: the outer garment—the skin—is but transitory; when stripped of this garment, the prince or the pauper is guided in destiny by the inexorable will of *Zipe*; the soul alone is everlasting. The outer garment

is interred with the corpse, but the spirit, mortal at birth, is wafted to the celestial sphere, to the final throne of judgment, each according to his standard of piety and devotion to the gods of *Anahuac*.

Concluding the solemn services, Teotzl smugly envisioned the moment when, over his somber robe of black, would be placed the outer garment, the skin flayed from the still-alive Acatlan, desperately wounded, incapable of further defense.

His was now the punitive, the mundane retribution for recalcitrance! The soul of Acatlan was for the heavenly deities to judge!

What if the entrance of King Xoctli had been heralded with a spontaneous hail of welcome? That he was accompanied by a strong retinue, yet that the queen and princess were not with the party, was not a matter for humble subjects to ponder. To Teotzl, the acclaim to the king was but the shouts of the rabble—the rabble he would sway with his spectacular showmanship, the rabble whose frenzied excitement at the spilling of blood would react to his own advantage.

Acatlan now made a furtive, speculative survey of the distance to certain points; then his keen, jungle-trained eyes turned to the jeering, hostile crowds. Then his muscles became taut, his eyes gleamed alertly, for his first adversary had vaulted onto the circular stone, contemptuously tossing an *itzli* short-sword at the feet of Acatlan, impatiently stamping as the Lacandone snatched at the weapon. The crowds yelled until hoarse as the foemen sprang at each other.

Poising their weapons, each lunged, hoping for a telling thrust. The impact almost stunned both, but the Mayan, stopping short and suddenly, thrust quickly at Acatlan's chest. The Lacandone wheeled, shot his arm upward, his sword hitting its mark! It was but a flesh wound on the shoulder, but the sight of gore on their own combatant brought howls of anger from the spectators, themselves fighting to draw nearer. The well-armed guards, however, sprang hastily into action and dispersed them.

Again the foemen speculatively appraised each other. Not a whimper came from the Mayan as the blood trickled, reddening his skin and white loincloth. The Mayan sprang at Acatlan with the fury of a jungle beast, but his rashness was almost his undoing, for Acatlan shot out his arm, succeeding in a stranglehold; the Mayan twisted his head to the side, then suddenly downwards, and Acatlan's wrist was caught between sharp, incising fangs of teeth. Acatlan, in savage wrath at the pains, countered with a punishing blow to the face. The mere instant that the Mayan was dazed was Acatlan's opportunity. An unerring lunge and a vulnerable one! Acatlan had disappointed the howling, derisive mob!

Teotzl registered chagrin, King Xoctli, calm patience. The pandemonium of the natives continued unabated.

But other troubles were brewing and not of very good omen for the votaries of Chichen-Itza, so un-

sportsmanlike in their partisanship, for as so frequently happens in the tropics, the soft glow of the moon began to pall as drifts of slow-moving clouds appeared, now partly obscuring the luminary, now clearing somewhat, but gradually increasing in volume and stirring briskly.

That there was to be a decided change in the weather, and shortly, was noticed by no less than Cholanz, the herb-healer, whose frequent camping-out in the open during his journeys in quest of botanic specimens made him well acquainted with the signs in the vastness of the sky. Cholanz had been an interested, yet quaking spectator, stealthily concealed behind a massive mangrove across the lagoon. His eyes and ears avidly grasped at every motion and sound from the arena, for the flickering pine torches and the bars of the surmounting parapets offered but a scant view of the combat.

It was at about dusk that the worthy, Cholanz, had been forced to conduct a small contingent of grim, silent Lacandones across the quagmires, across the treacherously swaying liana bridge, whence the tribesmen of Acatlan stealthily, and with monkey-like ease, swung into the foliage of the gigantic branches; their eyes, as keen as those of jungle creatures, scanned the water below; long, pliant liana ropes, with bait of fresh fish, were dangled and slowly zigzagged just above the surface. An anxious wait, then the faint ripple as of a stirring; then a lazy splash followed by swift, twisting strokes of a compressed tail; finally a

mighty heave for the bait—a fatal moment for the saurian!

With flashing speed, curare-dipped spears and sharp grappling hooks—a veritable blessing from the meteorite—were hurled at the eyes and open jaw of the monster. One dart pierced the eyeball, several lodged in the throat, both vulnerable spots. With quick jerks the liana coils were then twisted about giant branches for a retaining hold. Peculiar short barks came from the crocodile, but that was its customary voice of pleasure or disfavor in quest of food. Now ensued a violent thrashing, foaming the waters of the lagoon, and a severely but futilely tense strain on the ropes. The savages clung tenaciously to their precarious hold on the swaying branches; in the intervals of the tugging, the savages clambered upward for safer support and better concealment.

Suddenly came ominous quiet! On the opposite side there were sighs of relief from Tloaxtli and the anxious de Nicuessa, disguised by paint and garb as an almost perfect native.

The satisfaction and relief felt by de Nicuessa and Tloaxtli were not reflected in Cholanz, who quaked with fear, for the dread of priestly retribution was uppermost in his craven mind.

The Lacandone savages waited, yet how eager they were to shout their challenge of battle, of exultation, of triumph; but this would immediately have apprised the enemy of their proximity and endangered their lives, although, perhaps, their exit from this mundane

world would have been but scarcely lamented, for other scores of hideously-bedaubed kin and fellow-tribesmen were in hiding everywhere, behind thick shrubbery, in the foliage of huge branches, under overturned canoes.

From their haven of concealment the Lacandones now cursed the hours of delay, eagerly expectant of the signal to scale the bridge, the precipitous cliff, the soaring turret, the parapets of the topmost terrace, the attack!

But hark! What was the lull in the combat? Why the pandemonium, the stark, raving milling at the arena?

With the gathering dimness of obscuring clouds came shouted commands from officers to the warriors guarding the stone of combat: "Throw down your weapons! More lights! Make haste with the torches!"

The hasty obedience of the warriors left a brief respite during which Acatlan breathed easier, as he welcomed the delay. Again he anxiously, yearningly, stared in one direction, but if anything appeared to offer the faintest hope, his stolid face did not betray it.

The second adversary and Acatlan were now armed with javelins tipped with sharp copper edges. Again the mutual survey and speculative appraisal. Aside from wrist bruises, the Lacandone was hardly scathed, and one foeman had already been accounted for.

Despite the slow-moving haze of fog, the mists were not such as to mar vision entirely. Almost simultaneously the combatants poised their weapons. The

Mayan hurled his dextrously and with precision, but Acatlan, with the acumen of the jungle hunter, swerved sharply, biding his time for the throw. His foeman just barely missed, but in the anxious moment ensuing, Acatlan rushed at him; the adversary, in attempting to parry, was almost transfixed, as the sharp, ripping tip of the javelin pierced him.

The vagaries of the combat drove the spectators to unbridled fury and they jeered and shouted vociferously. An attempt by them to storm the circular stone met with the determined resistance of the warrior-guards. Such was the cowardice of the massed mob that they clamored: "To the sacrifice with the vile Lacandone!"

At this juncture, the commander of the warriors sidled over to the brooding high priest, and simpered the suggestion: "The Lacandone is but ill acquainted with the *maquahuitl*. My most trusted swordsman is straining at the leash. Grant him the boon, exalted *ah-kin-mai*, and the accursed jungle cat meets his doom!"

Teotzl deliberated for but a moment, then he deigned to respond to the fawning sycophant: "Patience, my worthy chieftain. The time is not quite propitious. Mayhap our benign sovereign sees fit to frown lest his protégé succumb too hastily," he sneered. "Fear not, the outer garment will not lose its warmth, and surely *Zipe* merits a most fitting contest."

A stout war-club, instead of the suggested *maquahuitl*, was the next weapon. This was rather a tactical error, for this was the weapon of his native heath, and Acatlan was here at his best, and at close quarters his skill had floored many a foe, both human and wild beast. But the showman that was Teotzl, with treachery in his heart, so smug, so certain in his own mind as to the outcome, must prolong the uneven, the spectacular, performance.

The monarch, Xoctli, had been closely scanning the parapets and dense foliage, and his cheery face beamed as if his eyes had beheld their potentialities.

Now the combatants rushed at each other without further ado, and the resounding crash of each stout club against its mate was heard above the noisy din of the excited and milling crowds. The foes parried; they made mock attacks to catch the other off guard; they fended and feinted, but, for a time, neither seemed to gain any distinct advantage.

Acatlan swung with a force that should have stunned even an enraged, charging beast. The weapons descended; his adversary, however, agile and alert, just then made a counter swing against Acatlan's head. So close, so simultaneous were the two opposing blows, that the only saving grace for the Lacandone was that he almost lost his footing on the now slippery stone of combat.

The Mayan's left hand hung limp, paralyzed by a blow striking his shoulder. Had Acatlan's thick pate

been but the barest space nearer, the duel would have terminated disastrously for him at that very moment.

Again the ominous signs in the sky caused uneasiness, for the coursing, vaporous clouds across the lunar luminary and its consort of stars now assumed a most threatening aspect. The weapon of nearly every guard, attendant and spectator had been discarded for torches. The deities of *Anahuac* were seemingly wroth, or perhaps it was the moon god, *Meztli*, who frowned upon man's haughty, arrogant usurpations.

At the moment that Acatlan had almost been hurled to the stone by the force of his opponent's blow, a muffled shriek, beginning low, then checked, as if the one who had attempted to cry out were being strangled, had been but very faintly heard, but the pandemonium from the spectators had drowned its source. A sharp-eyed Lacandone, who had been impatiently biding his time, had laboriously, and inch by inch, with the agility of the ape he so closely resembled, been negotiating the steep wall of the soaring watchtower by grasping the uncertain support of the thick vines and branches.

The Lacandone clutched both the frail and the thick branches merely to bring the huger limbs nearer to his reach. His heart was in his mouth with the slightest sound of a suspicious nature. The mournful note of the *tecolote* he had dislodged from its perch voiced protest and dubious discouragement as the savage clung to the tangle, but the anathemas in his heart

against the remotest progenitors of that particular *tecolote* did not augur a ripe old age for that bird of evil omen. Cautiously, skillfully, the persistent savage attained his position with one hand on the bar of a parapet, then he crept perilously towards the turret.

Very timely was this difficult move planned, for the sentry, very remiss in his vigil, was too thoroughly engrossed in the fortunes of the combat below to note that aught was wrong. Stealthily, hand over hand, the Lacandone savage inched his way to the summit. He poised his noose, allowing himself time only for one last, malign look in the direction of the croaking bird of evil. The Lacandone's home, his nearest and remotest of kin, his very life, were all at stake upon the result of this hazardous and portentous throw. Success would be rewarded with princely recompense, failure would spell doom. He must succeed!

The thick liana rope was spun down with the certain aim inspired by the mad, urgent exigency of the desperate situation; the noose shot true to its mark; the sentinel, stunned by the garrote-like strangle, was actually dragged off his feet and fell limp in a twinkling. The Lacandone hesitated for but the fraction of a moment, for silent, fervent exaltation of his totem which guided the strangling noose; then the savage was prepared to spring into the thick of the fray.

It required all the human patience and forbearance of both de Nicuessa and Tloaxtli to check the mad, impetuous Lacandonese from an untimely attack; only the growls from their own petty-headman suc-

ceeded in delaying the rash impulse. Then, upon the agreed signal, nimble savages by the score, under cover of the dense darkness, emerging from their concealment, equipped with grapple-hooks which had been fashioned in Tabi and were attached to liana ropes, stormed the parapets and battlements. They scaled the perilous heights. Not a word was uttered. Time enough for the cry of the kill!

Teotzl, sublimely unaware of the Nemesis awaiting him, fatigued from the long, arduous and exciting hours of the ceremonial and the combat, was envisaging the final act of the drama, for success was undoubtedly fated for his own combatant, despite the unpromising preliminaries. The restless king started drawing at his tobacco-like *yetl* as those in his confidence exchanged glances of approval, and awaited the outcome. The dread *maquahuitls*, deadly maces, were just being given to the combatants, but were not destined to be utilized.

Freedom seemed to loom for Acatlan. As his adversary was accepting his weapon, a small dart from a blow-gun wielded by a Lacandone pierced the Mayan battler's chest; whence it came, his befuddled mind could not fathom. At the very same time a shower of similar missiles, sharp, incising, death-dealing, fell in all directions, dangerously near the high priest, yet away from the monarch and his retinue.

Then a piercing whoop—savage, weird, ominous in its threat—was heard through the arena; as if they had sprung from the very clouds, the Lacandones

shrieked their challenge! In halting Mayan came the cry: "*Woorara!* Death to Teotzl! Death to the enemies of the freeborn Lacandones!"

Pandemonium reigned, turning to most craven panic, for the dart of the blow-gun was tipped with the deadliest of poisons, used mainly by the savages of lower Central America who sought to kill, not to take captives for the sacrifice.

This fatal drug, *woorara*, or *curare*, an extract from the bark of the strychnos, is quickly fatal to man or beast when introduced through a pierced blood vessel. Its action is on the motor nerves. Consciousness, entirely controlled by the sensory nerves, is not lost even to the bitter, strangling end. The victim undergoes horrible torture: first he experiences great difficulty in breathing; his respiration finally becomes labored and intensely painful; he gasps for breath, and he dies in the throes of choking paralysis of the lungs.

Neither the Aztecs nor the Mayans ever resorted to this weapon, as their objective was to capture prisoners for "food for the gods," the sacrifice, or for enslavement. The Lacandones fought for the lust of battle, not for human votary offerings; to them, no victory was complete until the last foeman was annihilated.

The Mayan warriors knew, too well, of this lethal poison. The tales brought back by veterans of the tribal wars, now so vividly recalled, aroused uncontrollable panic. To add to the catastrophe, the west

wall of the temple, which had been fired by the savages, now burst into flames. The mauling, maddened votaries of *Huitzilopochtli* and *Zipe* now scurried like rats away from the danger zone. Entirely contrary to the glamorous spectacle of the superior showman, Teotzl, the drawing of the curtain on the final act became a fiasco! Inscrutable, incomprehensible are the ways of the god-idols of *Anahuac!*

When danger threatened, the retinue of King Xoctli spread out in fanlike formation and succeeded in shielding the monarch by main force. Terrorized priests, though maddened by the frenzy of most ignoble defeat, extricated the fainting, helpless Teotzl from the onrush of the mob, and carried him, almost insensible, to his chambers.

Fortune had favored the rash invaders mainly because the warrior-guards of the *teocalli* had discarded their weapons for torches, also because customary vigilance had been sadly relaxed. That the ominous clouds had a hand in the drama was the belief of the gullible and superstitious; and preparations for fitting placation of the irate *Zipe* and the moon god, *Meztli*, was even then in the minds of the *chilans*.

The Lacandones effected a successful escape and were soon beyond the danger limits of Cuzmil's sanctuary. They skirted the coast in the *piraguas* dotting the shore; they gave Mual a wide berth, and when, hours later, they reached their rendezvous, their paeans of victory rent the air. They would soon depart

from the coves and be on their way to the jungle, their native heath, situated but a few days journey from Tabi; and the welcome and plaudits of Chian and all their tribesmen would be as most welcome music to their ears.

Nor were they alone in this transport of joy, for Acatlan, pawn of the malign Teotzl, was in their midst.

Acatlan felt as if he had been rescued from the brink of a perilous chasm. He was going home! Home to Chian and Tabi, the jungle infested with the deadly *chaib*, the tiger and the jaguar, myriads of stinging insects, fever-ridden quagmires, where death ever stalked for the wary, as well as for the neophyte hunter—but still far better, far safer, than the machinations of Teotzl!

When Teotzl, in his sanctuary chambers, had finally awakened from his stupor, the first face he recognized was that of his monarch, who now addressed him, mockingly: "Far wiser to have trusted the garrison of your sovereign than the irresponsible church forces. This stampede was very, very unseemly. Poor, very poor discipline, exalted *ah-kin-mai!*"

Teotzl turned purple with ill-concealed rage. He yearned to blurt out, exultantly, the doom even then threatening his sovereign's cherished ones, now in Chichen-Itza; he yearned to gloat over the effect of this fatal blow upon the mocking Xoctli; but even now, despite his exhaustion, his befuddled state, Teotzl was still the wily schemer. He would bide his

time, assured that King Xoctli would soon be cringing before his very feet.

But the retributive fates had willed otherwise! All the pent-up emotions struggling to be freed had brought the senile arch-fiend to the bursting point. Old age, the dire tribulation of his defeat, the ignoble collapse of his house of cards, all played sad havoc with his superannuated constitution. He started to answer the taunt, aye, even to flaunt his venomous message. But his lips faintly muttered a few words. His eyes were turning into a glassy stare. He quivered as if with the ague. The malignant dictatorship of the exalted Teotzl, *ah-kin-mai* of Sacred Cuzmil, was to be of the past! Teotzl was exhaling his last poisonous breath!

Sacred Cuzmil was to witness another spectacular and glamorous event, for when a high priest was to be interred or cremated, the ceremonial must be in a panoramic setting!

XIV

THE RITES solemnizing the obsequies of an *ah-kin-mai* had not been witnessed by the last two generations of the Sacred Isle of Cuzmil, for the pontifical domination of Teotzl, first as high superior of the *chilans*, later as high priest proper, had swayed a servile priesthood and a superstitious, subjugated multitude of the gullible votaries for almost two-score years. Though his demise had occurred at a time when the situation had become very tense, the obsequies were, nevertheless, to be solemnized with the impressive ceremonial befitting, and also traditional for, an exalted sacerdotal dignitary.

The beneficent, if autocratic, reign of King Xoctlí had so endeared him to his subjects that the priesthood, now deprived of their aggressive spokesman and champion, recognizing the eminently humane character of their monarch, were resigned to the handwriting on the wall. Despite their oppressive and baneful

influence, Cuzmil, seemingly, was now to emerge from its barbaric enslavement by the church.

Thus, King Xoctli, fortunately for his peace of mind, still unaware of the base treachery of the departed high priest, of the imminent peril to his cherished ones, issued a proclamation for a thirty-day period of mourning. Fleet *holpopes* spread the sad tidings of the demise of Teotzl and also heralded the king's edict. Along with the proclamation came a summons to the tribal heads—the *batabs* of the smaller hamlets, the *caciques* of the more populous *calpullis*—for attendance at the *teocalli* ceremonial, to participate with their own dignitaries in the deliberations of the high council, to culminate in the selection of a worthy successor.

When the appointed day arrived, in the sacred shrine of Cuzmil, the departed Teotzl was eulogized fittingly by the superior of the *chilans*, but it must be regrettably recorded that the fervor of the panegyric was perhaps somewhat tempered. The eulogist, himself eager to ride on the crest of the waves, to succeed to exalted dignity, now was far more anxious to curry favor with the living monarch, whose influence was real, tangible, rather than too highly to exalt the dead. When the mighty fall from grace, their erstwhile fawning sycophants rush to newer gods!

On the flowered and festooned lower terrace huge accumulations of leaves, dried twigs and branches were thrown together to a great height, forming, when completed, an immense funeral pile, on the summit of

which reposed the corpse, in the full regalia of his former office.

From the ramparts of the surmounting terraces, a great throng scattered ignited papyrus-like, thin agave bark across and at the sides of the pyre. With the first wreath of smoke came the blare of an *atabal*, then the weird chant, a lamentation from the nunnery, and the vibrant priest choir.

Above the crackle of branches, above the final roar of the flames, sounded the melancholy boom! boom! of sacred drums, the serpent-skin-covered *tunkuls*; the reverberations echoed from terrace to terrace and for miles distant. Thus the message of mundane lament was transmitted to the celestial *Hunal Ku*, advising that in the dense, soaring smoke and lurid fire, the soul of a most high dignitary of the land of *Anahuac* was being wafted to the elysium of the gods.

The ashes of the once revered, powerful chief of the Cuzmil hierarchy were deposited in an immense terra-cotta urn furbished with gold and silver picture-glyphs depicting the tenure of the sacerdotal stewardship, from the first ceremonial of his accession until the ritual to *Zipe*. With the ashes were deposited votive offerings of flowers to brighten the future abode of the departed *ah-kin-mai*, or at least to embellish the path of the road of the dead. The opulent bestowed precious metals in the pure state or exhibiting the exquisite handiwork of the artificer, also pearls or other gems.

This vast treasure, alone, accompanied Teotzl to his sepulchre in a deep crypt hewed into the very bowels of the sandstone foundation of the cathedral. Contrary to age-old tradition, not a single victim was sacrificed and interred to act as servitor or guard of the deceased in the great beyond!

As each votary deposited his offering, the donor prayed that his individual contribution would find favor with the deities, for the soul of the high priest would be wafted to the supreme heavens, the *omeyocan*, where a word of spiritual intercession would be ample reward for the mundane gift.

Whether the outlay was meager or of spendthrift proportions it was the best within one's means, for if the persistent tax-gatherer could, with such uncanny accuracy, estimate one's financial worth, surely one may not hope to cheat or temporize with the mystic, spiritual clairvoyance of the deities!

To the multitudes crowding the sanctuary, the fiat of the monarch prohibiting human sacrifice to grace the sepulchre of the late Teotzl was amazing, yet food for thought. The *chilan* superiors, from among whom would be elected a successor to the high priesthood, now that their aggressive spokesman-champion was among the lamented departed, realized the necessity of currying the good will of King Xoctli. His great influence with the other members of the high council was paramount; if they demurred to the new order, if they visioned a more humane civilization in Cuzmil, it was still to their advantage not overtly to antagonize the king.

At the conclusion of the thirty-day period of mourning, the momentous meeting of the council took place in the patio of the royal *tecpan*, adjoining the Cuzmil *teocalli*.

The vast grounds, terraces and towering walls were festooned with vividly hued standards of the tribal *caciques*, of the *tlatoani* and of the *pochteca*, or merchants' guild. The pennants displayed various motifs, such as the sacred-green-blue, with the soaring eagle; scarlet-red, with representation of the jungle monarch, the tiger; vivid yellow, with the panther; and dead-black, with the *ocelot*, symbol of the Lacandones, its green eyes, terrible claws and fangs leaving no doubt as to the tribe. The most prominent of the nobility had their own symbolic emblems, while the standard of the merchants' guild boasted of a fleet of *piraguas*, with depiction of a patron-deity at the prow of the foremost canoe. It may be added in contemplative comparison, on viewing the wildcat standard of the Lacandones, that the general genealogic transition from the fierce *ocelot* to seemingly human features was quite an ethnologic and anthropologic problem!

The garb of the gathering was no less striking nor picturesque, portraying the barbaric, the exotic splendor typical of the tropics — gorgeous plumage on *penache*, or headdress, vivid *tilmatli*, the ample square cloak, bejewelled regalia, ornate embroidery, vivid panoplies. These contrasted with the daubings comprising every tint of the spectrum, with grotesque smears on the limbs, bodies and faces.

To the right of the monarch was the High Magistrate; to the left, the more prominent of church and state dignitaries. Uinic sat beside the jurist, and in the immediate rear were the three most promising *chilan* superiors, candidates for accession to the exalted dignity of *ah-kin-mai*!

The gay and colorful regalia and panoply put to blushing shame the exotic, panoramic vista of flora, the nacreous horizon and the marvelous plumage of the birds.

The deliberations of the council had been proceeding for some time. The final decision as to the election of the new high priest was just in the offing, when there arose a commotion from beyond the patio. This did not at first disturb the assemblage, as the monarch was then in animated conversation with the supreme jurist as to the relative merits and qualifications of each of the candidates. The High Magistrate, on glancing up, gave a sudden start, a look of startled recognition; then he gently nudged the monarch who, following his alarmed stare, beheld a disheveled, unshaven, ragged, anguished apparition.

King Xoctli became rigid as if frozen to his seat. At first he stammered, then he demanded in a voice as from the tomb, "Kakama! What do you here?"

Prince Kakama, by superhuman effort, spurred on by his deep devotion for his mortal goddess, Cheeuah, had successfully reached Cuzmil through the aid of a friendly group of traders from Campeche in whose company he had been welcomed; then, in disguise,

he had braved capture, even sacrifice, after his escape from Chichen-Itza.

Having awaited a sign of recognition, Prince Kakama fell upon the ground and clasped the feet of his royal sire.

“Majesty! Father!” he cried. “Would my limbs had shriveled ere I had failed in my trust! Treachery! The queen-mother, Cheeuah, Gallo and the white priest, all those with them from Mual, are even at this moment in dire peril at Chichen-Itza. I repeat! Base, vile treachery, through the machinations of Teotzl and Zumpango!”

Sobbing, anguished with grief, with self-accusation for negligence, prostrated at the feet of the stunned, almost paralyzed monarch, he blurted out the ominous tidings while a spellbound, terror-stricken and amazed assemblage gathered closer to glean the harrowing, quaking report.

A profound hush, a tense gripping of hearts, muttered anathemas on the lips of all, ensued. All stared at the monarch with most loyal sympathy; but the king had been dealt a most stunning blow. His head was bowed in grief and he clasped and unclasped his hands in utter helplessness. From his lips came an occasional sob, and his eyes reflected the look of a hapless victim stretched on the altar of sacrifice. Then he collapsed into the arms of the alert heir-apparent.

A babel of voices arose, and excited sympathizers rushed from every part of the patio and castle. A grief-stricken gathering exchanged glances; then came

the clear and resounding cry: "Chichen-Itza must be destroyed!"

The clarion threat against the realm of Zumpango was echoed and reechoed as the full import of the dire tidings spread like wild-fire to the *teocalli*, and to the desolate crowds gathered about the vast terraces and grounds. Their hearts were seared with the keenest sympathy for their beloved ruler and for Cheeuh and the queen-mother, Mual's sacred possessions; but they were as if powerless, so amazed were they at Zumpango's and Teotzl's base, inconceivable treachery.

Again came the ringing cry, "To arms! Cursed be the memory of Teotzl! Zumpango is doomed! It is the will of the gods! Vengeance!"

Just as fifteen centuries before, the stentorian cry arose from every quarter of Rome, "Carthage must be destroyed!" so in Cuzmil the threat against Chichen-Itza reverberated. A united confederation would wage a merciless war of annihilation; with fire and sword the arrogant, treacherous realm of Zumpango, the puppet king, and the machiavelian high priests of *Kukul Can* would be destroyed!

This war was not to be fought for captives for the sacrificial altars, nor was it to be merely for the lust of conquest and territorial expansion, but against the breach of age-old tradition of the Mayans, a repugnance for treachery by one nation on terms of amity with another.

While fleet *holpopes* rushed from public square to public square of the *calpullis* of the neighborhood, an aroused populace, the dweller in humble *jacale* to the noble in palatial castle—peasant, weaver, merchant, artisan, fisherman, warrior, noble—all hastened to the tribal chieftains seeking, demanding, arms and leaders. All eagerly pleaded to be in the first conscription. Before every blazing *koben*, men, women and children wept bitterly because the flower of Mual, their idol-princess, Cheeuh, was in imminent peril.

A lesser *batab*, a petty chief of the Lacandonos, now in Mual for the sacred council, presented himself before Uinic and announced trenchantly: "The *ocelot* tribesmen of Tabi talk little, they slay many!"

But King Xoctli had learned to abhor war! He had long ere this abjured war and conquest and desolation. He labored now to create, not to destroy. He had sought, frequently in vain, to act as a buffet between his priesthood and his loyal subjects.

Apathetic, grief-stricken, the monarch was finally persuaded to return to Mual, but there the bereaved husband, father, most conscientious friend, wandered about aimlessly, through the aching void once the compartments of Cheeuh and the Queen, and poignant was his grief as each cherished object recalled memories, phantoms of the past! Then he slowly wended his way to his own sanctuary, the *niahuatl*, the house of worship devoid of idols; there he sought peace, solace against enervating broodings. Silently,

at a respectful distance, his own priest, Prince Kakama, Uinic and a few most intimate of the Court followed. Every fiber in their bodies quivered for action, yet they were obliged to look on helplessly, powerless in this dire calamity.

They would have followed him into the sanctuary, but the all-sympathetic, wiser priest of the *niahuatl* beckoned them away. Solitude and spiritual communion, not sympathy, not advice, no matter how well intended, may ease an anguished mind.

In the tower of the king's house of worship, a chamber contained a gold-emblazoned disc representative of *Tonatiuh*, god of the sun, and a silver depiction of the glowing moon god, *Mezтли*. Quizzically the monarch contemplated these discs, then, through the canopy-like, open great dome, he beheld the vista of the glory of the closing day, when *Nanotzin*, Lord of Day, rides away on the winged beams of the resplendent sun, to disappear into the vast, endless horizon.

Then the king proceeded to the sacred niche dedicated to the Most High, *Hunal Ku*. This was void either of image or crude idol or symbol—the niche where only the omniscient spirit of the supreme, the beneficent deity pervaded, and where only the more advanced of the faithful — those whose souls had emerged from darkness, disciples of their sage sovereign prior to the advent of Friar Alva—might hold communion.

Far too recent had been the monarch's conversion to a new Faith to have abjured the tenets of the cul-

tured prophet-sage, the Prince of Tezcuco, to whose moral precepts King Xoctli had, until lately, been a devout adherent.

If the spirit of the ether wafted the mournful lamentation, "Why, O royal, benign Xoctli, have you abandoned the creed of your forebears?" it was in gentle admonition, not in acrimony, for *Hunal Ku* was ever the embodiment of mercy.

Still another voice, the soft one of conscience, of loyalty to the impressionable exhortations of Alva, whom the monarch revered, whispered: "Xoctli, where is the Faith you professed?" That spirit voice seemed to draw him to the chapel dedicated to The Master.

Into the chapel he was drawn as if impelled by an infinite force. Here, a proselyte artist, under the patient guidance of the friar, had fashioned the Cross of the Crucifixion! What if the delineaments of the Savior were of somewhat local cast? What if the colorings were rather too vivid? What if the pagan color, the sacred blue-green predominated? The face was as if in extreme agony, and the drops of precious life-blood were as scarlet as if shed on the day of Xoctli's own Gethsemane, not sixteen centuries before the slow, harried advancement of enlightenment, of civilization!

Wearied, sick at heart, tormented of soul, the monarch sank down upon a low stool. Between himself and the Crucifix an immense candle—the friar's own handiwork — fitfully shadowed the Symbol of Golgotha!

Perhaps it was the subconscious workings of his anguished mind, but the mystic interpretation seemed now to prompt: "Sixteen centuries ago there was also a Zumpango, but he was known as Pontius Pilate; and there was a Teotzl, but they called him Iscariot!"

The physical and mental reactions were salutary, for all his pent-up, enervating anguish now burst forth, and the monarch, leaving the sacred chamber, sobbed hysterically. The hearts of those who had patiently waited and watched — the priest, Uinic and Kakama—danced with joy; their beloved sovereign had been on the very brink of the abyss of helpless, hopeless insanity; with the bursting of the emotional storm, lucid reason was restored. With it the monarch's indomitable spirit returned; the lust for life again asserted itself. To the utter consternation of the coterie of his intimates, he propounded the cryptic question: "If there be war to the death, if this war result in the complete annihilation of Chichen-Itza, then what? Ere our legions strike, what of my cherished ones?"

Pleaded with, urged to be more explicit, all that could possibly be gleaned from him was that he felt assured the last remnant of hope would be destroyed if war were to be declared. Despite the desperate outlook, the policy formulated in the king's mind was conciliation—humiliating as it might be—and ransom, vast sums for the avaricious high priest, but, if there must be an extreme measure, one last, overwhelming sacrifice! But here the monarch was ex-

tremely evasive as to his meaning. That was for far more deliberate contemplation.

King Xoctli's decision may have been regarded, by some, as the regrettable workings of a deranged mind; others surmised, and shrewdly so, that the king concealed from them a plan far more venturesome than wise or safe. They respected his desire for absolute secrecy, though not an intimate, not the humblest nor the most influential subject, but would gladly, eagerly have sacrificed himself in a rash, hopeless venture in the rescue of the hostages at Chichen-Itza. Uinic, however, with the aid of de Nicuessa and the more prominent of the commanders, began active preparations for a bitter campaign.

Finally King Xoctli announced the startling information that he intended to proceed to the camp of the enemy, and alone, there personally to parley for the release of the virtual hostages. Pending such negotiations, he forbade hostilities. To his intimates, who strongly, tearfully, deprecated his decision, pointing out that it would but add another victim to the treachery of Chichen-Itza, the sovereign was adamant. If his loved ones were still safe, success might crown his efforts, whereas punitive measures would be Zumpango's signal for swift retribution.

The will of their sovereign was uppermost! Their loyalty was beyond question. But it augured ill for Chichen-Itza in the minds of those determined subjects who were torn between their love for King Xoctli, their horror at treachery, at the vile disregard of the most sacred Mayan traditions!

XV

THE PARTING with de Nicuessa; with Uinic, his faithful companion during many a sanguine campaign in the past; with his spiritual mentor, who had loyally espoused the new creed of his king, and who had so tearfully pleaded to accompany him; with his intimates, who, in earlier years, were ever at his behest in convivial celebration or hazardous venture—the parting with all these subjects, nay, boon companions, was difficult and affecting. King Xoctli again swore them to do his bidding — no martial undertaking against Chichen-Itza, for the while at least. The salient factor was his expectation that the bait of ransom, not war, would be the loop-hole of possible rescue for the prisoners of Zumpango.

Captain de Nicuessa's chivalrous nature and loyalty rebelled at being seemingly relegated to several months of inactivity while his friend and patron was veritably walking directly into the treacherous lair. Uinic pleaded earnestly of his lifelong fealty; that his

aged head, grayed in his many years of faithful service, would be bowed down in shame, his very spirit would lose caste, the finger of scorn would be pointed at him in accusation of base desertion. And here the septuagenarian veteran of a life devoted to unswerving loyalty, of service, thrust his *itzli* short-sword into the hand of his liege lord, and exclaimed, "Sire! I call upon the gods of my forebears! Hasten you the hour of my departure! When my monarch seeks self-destruction, existence for me is unthinkable!"

It was not emotional pique, nor the outpourings of one nettled by the denial of a cherished desire. It was the actual baring of one's innermost soul! To counsel and console! To survive or to perish—but with the monarch; never to sever a lifelong bond!

Small wonder that stout hearts gripped; that veteran warriors sobbed unabashed. Life's poignancy had been bared. The searing iron had scorched into vulnerable nerves!

Disconsolate and brooding, de Nicuessa's cup of sorrow was as if full to overflowing. Striving to accomplish the almost impossible, he finally and firmly decided that no matter what the hazard, Spanish assistance, through Velasquez, must be forthcoming, either to force Zumpango to release his hostages or effectively to punish his betrayal.

Among the ship-craftsmen of the *pochteca*, or merchants' guild, the restive captain found ready, zealous cooperation for the construction of a small fleet of huge *piraguas*, of a design not usual for commercial

purposes, but mayhap suited for the adventurous, projected voyage to Cuba. Three gigantic logs were hollowed out, sails were laboriously sewed and installed, and the completed craft were manned with a most efficient crew. This necessitated the unceasing labor of several months. Volunteers clamored to participate both in the construction and in supplying the complement.

Like an argosy or armada was the completed fleet of three, and commanded the entire attention of the vivid population of Mual. The volunteer crew boasted that even if the wind and sails failed them, they would gladly, vigorously, ply their paddles across the entire expanse of the Gulf and the Caribbean to accomplish their mission. Captain de Nicuessa was buoyed up with the self-assurance and vivid hopes that they would be in the lane of galleons and caravels plying between Cuba and Darien, and that the journey should be no more hazardous than venturing to distant commercial ports.

The ablest commander of the guild's fleet was the *Xochteca's* contribution to the noble, if possibly forlorn, cause, and the departure from Mual was with the heartfelt prayers of all. The sight of the strange "water-houses," with huge wings billowing on tripped trees, remained long impressed in the memory of the land.

Their hands tied in the pledge they had solemnly owed to their beloved monarch, the indefatigable intimates of King Xoctli busied themselves in plans

they fervently prayed would bring order out of the chaos the situation presented.

Meanwhile King Xoctli was journeying through his own *'via dolorosa*. His peace of mind already badly disturbed, he fortunately was unaware of the hazardous expedition planned by de Nicuessa. His war-canoe had been swiftly paddled through the placid channel separating the Sacred Isle from the Yucatan coast, had weathered the head winds and reefs of Catoche, and had finally reached land, whence his party made its way to Tiho, whose *cacique* was ever a faithful ally.

Thus, to an already very complicated situation within his realm, Zumpango was one day confronted with a more ominous problem, no less than the unexpected arrival of the *caciques* of both Tiho and Campeche, in panoplied palanquins, accompanied by a formidable retinue of warriors and, in their train, the sovereign of the Sacred Isle, Xoctli!

The presence of King Xoctli was as a thunderbolt from a clear sky. Zumpango was never the craven, but now his conscience felt the full accusing sting, and it was with a gripping start of recognition that he observed the one he had so basely betrayed.

The presence of the *caciques* from the neighboring states, Tiho and Campeche, also boded ill. Though no hostile declarations had been advanced, Zumpango was forced to realize that the result of the impending conference would be war or peace, and the two allies

of King Xoctli now overtly came to the fore with their stand. Zumpango was not to be cowed even by superior forces; furthermore, the hostages were still in his power.

The totally unexpected ruse uniting Cheeuh with Gallo had caused consternation, but the fate of Gallo was definitely decided. According to the pronouncement of the high priests, the god, *Tezcatlipoca*, would look with great favor upon such a votary offering as the young, god-like alien, Gallo. The fate of Cheeuh, who had dared to thwart divine command, still hung in the balance.

The priests of the sanctuary of *Kukul Can* again turned to the oracles and the sacred crystal, the *zaztun*. The divine will of the deities was elucidated with convincing portent: "The deities smile upon the votaries of Chichen-Itza; defeat is inevitable for its enemies; what nobler champion of the gods of *Anahuac* than Zumpango?" Thus was the perplexing problem interpreted.

Zumpango was still to learn his lesson as to the base duplicity of his sinister mentors; but the glamour of a holy war, the glory of commanding his valiant hordes in the thick of sanguine battles, the plaudits of his subjects ringing in his ears, the welcome home in the great sanctuary—all these added to the prodding of his evil and virtual masters.

It was a sorry day for King Xoctli, for his mission was beset with implacable enmity. Undoubtedly victory would eventually be his in the event of war, par-

ticularly since the menace of Teotzl was now of the past; yet, rather than victory, he prayed that his cherished ones would be rescued from inevitable doom! Otherwise, retribution! Grim, devastating war! Stalking death, hunger, pestilence, ravage! King Xoctli's humane nature rebelled. In the declining years of his life he felt that peace and prosperity would be more, far more pleasing to the supreme *Hunal Ku*, surely to the God of the creed which Friar Alva had so strongly and convincingly pleaded. The inspiration to perform his sublime duty haunted the mind of the monarch.

The conference had yielded but little balm to Xoctli's troubled soul. Throughout the day's deliberations, its proposals and counter-proposals, Zumpango had studiously avoided the eyes of the one he was betraying. His conscience hammered accusations, but it was subject to the standard and bidding of the minions of Satan.

King Xoctli had pleaded his cause, neither in anger nor in incrimination. He was the suppliant rather than the accuser. At first adamant, Zumpango later was hesitant, indecisive, as he paced the chamber, beset with the vexatious problems. The pleas the monarch of the Sacred Isle had advanced were but the prelude to a most convincing portrayal of a long, bitter war, a war of extermination. Zumpango's erstwhile ally, Teotzl, was dead; Cuzmil and Mual were again united and would be arrayed with Tiho and Campeche against Chichen-Itza.

The fate of the hostages had not been satisfactorily included in the final settlement by Zumpango, and the question of their release remained mooted. Zumpango feared repercussions from his priesthood; thus Xoctli repeated his plea to the high priests who were summoned to the conference.

From his own resources (and credible report had it that these were exceptionally vast), King Xoctli pledged to bond the stupendous sums still necessary to complete the new sanctuary, the bone of contention between the church and the ruler of Chichen-Itza; this sanctuary, continued the monarch, rather convincingly, would ever reflect the glory of the stewardship of the high priests, and would be a perpetual memorial to their stupendous labors.

But the crafty cupidity of these worthies exacted more, even to their extension of sacerdotal dominance over the Sacred Isle, complete subjugation of the priesthood of the *teocalli* at Cuzmil by their personal selection of a successor to Teotzl, even virtual surrender of Xoctli's sovereignty. Again the specter of revolution, destruction and famine passed before King Xoctli's vision. The necessity of pauperizing himself he regarded with calm equanimity, but to subordinate his realm to the dubious beneficence of Zumpango's vile priesthood would ignite the spark for a civil war.

The conference thus remained at an impasse until Xoctli steeled himself for the playing of the final, the trump card. This proposal, he well knew, would astound, but would never be countenanced by those

whose high admiration for their sovereign would virtually prompt steps for the abrogation of any treaty or pact arrived at, even if war were to be declared despite the earnest wishes of their liege lord.

The high priests pondered; as yet the pound of flesh lacked the vital blood to accompany the sacrifice. Then Xoctli threw down the gauntlet! On the dedication of the new sanctuary, at the ceremonial to the new cycle—here the king's voice faltered, but not his indomitable spirit—he vowed to perform an amazing act, the details temporarily to be a secret. His proposal so stunned Zumpango and the priests that, for the moment, they stared at him with incredulous astonishment!

King Zumpango looked as bewildered as did the churchmen. Had their ears heard rightly, or was King Xoctli bereft of his reason? Such an heroic deed, such self-abnegation, had no parallel in all Mayan tradition!

King Zumpango's hands gripped at the shoulders of Xoctli; for the first time he gazed squarely into the eyes of the one he had so betrayed. His heart was touched to the quick, for his innate sense of justice came to the fore at this crucial turn of events.

"Xoctli!" cried the amazed, thoroughly contrite monarch of Chichen-Itza, "you know not what you vow! It is beyond even the wildest imagination! Consider, I beseech you, ere the pact becomes binding and your life the forfeit!"

The high priests pondered deeply. King Xoctli's climaxing vow was a sacrifice to which none other could compare. Chichen-Itza would gain both a new sanctuary, the realization of their greatest hopes, and a most exalted votive offering. As against these, they might choose war to the death, but with a strong threat to their own hierarchy. Surely, the spirits of *Tlaloc* and *Tezcatlipoca* would be appeased, in fact, would smile benevolently upon those who had engineered this remarkable contract.

"Xoctli, my unbound admiration! My trust in you is implicit, beyond cavil. Your vow, to me, is far more estimable than would be the bonding of your kingdom. May the deities of our forebears prosper you and yours. You are indeed a most worthy disciple of Nezahualcoyotl of Tezcuco!" Such was the spontaneous, the emotional, eulogy of Zumpango.

But the sinister high priests were not as generous nor as optimistic, for they were insistent that the hostages still remain at the *tecpan* of Zumpango with, however, free access to them should King Xoctli at any time visit Chichen-Itza; the friar was free to depart, as was the Queen; safety for Cheeuah and Gallo was solemnly vouched until the advent of the sacred cycle.

King Xoctli was forced to accept those terms, happy indeed for the respite he had gained for the ones he loved.

Thus was consummated a solemn pact, but not with great honor. In view of the adverse circumstances, it

was, nevertheless, a master-stroke; and most remarkable of all, in a land where life was held so cheaply, not a single one had been pledged (except that of King Xoctli himself) as the cost of this unheard-of, most unusual agreement.

Much still remained to be done in Mual, and King Xoctli's return there was in the nature of a triumphant entry, as if the victory had been won on the most sanguine field of *Huitzilopochtli*, so little did even the confidantes of the monarch dream of the nature of the pact which had taken place.

In the sanctuary of *Kukul Can*, the rejoicing was great, for the victory accomplished by the high priests was to go down in tradition. The new sanctuary, its completion assured, was to be the transcendent monument for many generations yet unborn.

In introspection, however, Zumpango did not share the ecstatic elation of his mentor-masters, the high priests. When his hands had gripped Xoctli's shoulders, and he had so impetuously voiced his admiration, he had committed himself to the admission that his last vestige of conscience was not lost, despite the threat of the harrowing retribution from his idol-gods.

This last remnant of his better self danced mockingly before his eyes, as he contemplated the noble glory of the erstwhile friend he had so wronged, and as he observed the blissful honeymoon of Cheeuh and Gallo. This was the gall and wormwood to his

melancholy broodings, when he compared their happiness with the misery of Itzcoyotl and Netza.

King Xoctli felt as if his soul had been transported to the celestial sphere, and there had been welcomed and judged by none other than *Hunal Ku*, for it must needs be recorded that pagan instincts, pagan environments, will try the most promising of neo-converts.

He could not regard the pact involving his earthly possessions, even his eventual immolation, as incribed in vain, but rather that it represented the fulfillment of his closing years, now made the more emphatic and sacred by the snatching away of those he most cherished from the machinations of scoundrels.

His later life had been that of sage and benefactor in an age of rampant darkness, since he had long ago rebjured the loathsome, benighted mysticism of the priestly caste. His dreams and ideals were like effulgent beams of light, beacons of civilization to come, even far in advance of the supposed renaissance which the *conquistadores* were destined to enforce upon a supine, subjugated nation.

But the secrecy with which the high priests and the monarchs strove to beshroud the sacred pact was doomed to disappointment. Princess Netza, curious as to the important conference, crouching below the portal of the paneless window of the council chamber, had overheard all. The participants were startled by laughter — laughter so weird, so demoniac, as to frighten them. Netza rushed from her shelter, an

amazed, incredulous eavesdropper. Her heart had been struck with stark terror as she gained insight into the enormity of the plot. The secret must not remain. The white priest must be apprised!

XVI

FOR YEARS the High Commissioner of Spain's colonial possessions in the New World, Velasquez, had bemoaned the seeming loss of his most trusted confidante, Captain de Nicuessa, whom he had commissioned to bring order out of chaos in the internecine war between Enciso and Balboa. Since then the turbulence in Darien had been quelled; the usurper, Balboa, had met with ignoble execution—strange to relate, at the hands of his own father-in-law, Pedrarias; still no news had ever been received as to the fate of de Nicuessa. The good church fathers, Diaz and Olmedo, had just as keenly rued the loss of Friar Alva, a staunch friend, a zealous and loyal missionary of the Church.

When Cordoba's fleet finally limped into the harbor, after a thorough defeat by the church forces hastily commandeered by the then high priest, Teotzl, Velasquez, avariciously aroused by the prospect of plunder and expansion, outfitted an expedition under

his nephew, Juan de Grijalva, who explored the Yucatan coast as far as Campeche. From a tribal head, Grijalva gleaned the information that there were a few white beings, shipwrecked years before, now in the interior. Grijalva's overtures to the natives were not well received, and he did not deem the opportunity ripe for the establishment of a colony without more adequate reinforcements.

Grijalva's return to Cuba had been delayed for some six months. Velasquez, in the belief that difficulties must have been encountered by the expedition, was then busily engaged in preparing still another fleet for the rescue of his nephew's party; but in the midst of these activities, the explorer hove into port. He amply corroborated the glamorous reports of Cordoba, who had since succumbed to the wounds inflicted by the furious natives incited by Teotzl.

The criticisms against Grijalva by Velasquez for his failure to establish a colony were very acrimonious and thoroughly unjust, but the vision of conquest of a vast domain, with potential booty, excited the cupidity of the High Commissioner and the coterie of adventurers, who were eager to wield their swords in spreading the True Faith—always, of course, with an eye to the division of illicit spoils!

With Captain de Nicuesa given up as lost, with the expeditions of Cordoba and Grijalva terminating in financial failure, Velasquez, who, by now, was experiencing the pinch of heavy losses, determined on one final dash into the yet little-known domain of Mexico,

empire of great potentialities. The choice of a suitable, yet trustworthy, commander for so important a venture, however, was the cause of much concern and lengthy deliberations.

All the resources at the command of Velasquez, all he could possibly garner by mortgaging his vast holdings in Cuba, or by the sale of official permits—warrants—to those who would engage in the extremely profitable slave-raids, were to be staked on this hazardous and speculative venture.

Velasquez had the unhappy faculty of making hasty and strong friendships, later to be bitterly rued; of making temperamental decisions, then reaping the reward of sorrowful repentance. This was due frequently to ill-advised judgment, or to lack of it altogether. Intrigues and bitter jealousies were ever rife among those high in his esteem and favor, many of whom were far too penurious, far too irresponsible, to venture on their own account in exploiting the vast areas still open for exploration, conquest and spoils.

One experienced military commander after another, whose resources were nil or were severely strained by inveterate gambling, or through the ill fortune of unsuccessful slave raids, now clamored for recognition and preferment. Selection remained in doubt, though never since the active preparations for the expedition against Balboa had the port of San Jago been so transformed and utilized as an important base for ships, armament, provisions, and the recruiting of ample, qualified forces for this newest adventure.

Finally, despite very strong and influential antagonism arising from mutual jealousies and keen dislikes among the rival candidates and their scheming sponsors and cohorts, an hidalgo of Cuba, named Hernando Cortes, was chosen. In making this selection, Velasquez followed the recommendation of his own secretary, Andres de Duero, and of the royal treasurer, Amador de Lares, both of whom vigorously espoused the cause of the young, but highly capable, military leader. History records that the aggressive championship of Cortes by the intimates of Velasquez was prompted more by pecuniary benefits expected to accrue, than by friendship or sincerity.

To Cortes was granted a royal warrant, almost unlimited authority, and the commission of Captain-General. All the forces which were then at hand, as well as those which were later to be recruited from whatever sources were available in Mexico, were placed under his command.

Cortes was destined later to be baptized on gory battlefields from apathetic Yucatan to hotly contested Tlascala. He was to be inexorably driven back by forces he was long powerless to stem. He was to wage war against a veritable inferno, the ferociously savage resistance of countless hordes of trained Aztecs and their implacable allies as far distant as Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) and the Pacific.

Almost five hundred adventurous souls clamored to be included in the greatest of all exploits of that epoch in Spain's pioneer gambling; with these also

were two hundred natives from Cuba. The banner of Cortes bore the portentous inspiration: "Let us follow the Cross. Under this sign and with Faith, we shall conquer!" A noble maxim truly worthy of a better cause! Truly worthy of far more sincere exponents of the creed of the Master!

And conquer they did! A very small, not always thoroughly coherent nor dependable force of less than a thousand, advancing into most hostile, unknown territory, against the vast military resources of millions of inhabitants fighting desperately, ferociously, to retain their age-old traditions, their religion, their very lives! Every mile of the invasion was bitterly contested. The military experience and tactics of the Europeans were pitted against the savagery and despair of the New World natives, valiantly delaying the day of enslavement or annihilation!

The daring achievements, the perils which the invaders and their allies so incredulously, so miraculously survived, are worthy of being recounted in the sagas of man's most bitter struggles and victories! They were undoubtedly unjust to the natives, but, in the misguided zeal of Cortes, the Spaniards acted with pride for the glory that was to be. Their bigoted proselytism may well be compared with the Crusades of the centuries preceding; it exhibited the same unbroken chain of unconscionable ravage, conquest and subjugation.

The only saving grace, the only mitigating circumstance in the history of the *conquistadores* was the con-

ciliatory effort, the strong effort at amelioration, the strenuous, heroic intercession, often but vainly, of those true soldiers of the Cross, the priests and humanitarians—Juan Diaz, Bartolome de Olmedo, and the many unknown, unsung prototypes of Friar Alva! Often without success, but ever courageously, with the love of THE creed in their hearts and souls, they strove to sanctify, not to betray, the church militant!

Cortes and his deluded, zealous bigots differed from the barbaric Mexicans—Aztec, Mayan and kindred stocks, the benighted souls whom the Spaniards set out to conquer and absorb into the Rome credo—in that the Mexican creed was a haunting, lifelong fear, based upon the idea that besetting sin could be atoned only by bloody propitiaries to cormorant idol altars. This was the interpretation of their masters, the priest-caste of the land. The Spaniards, on the other hand, with the fanatic obsession of the New World Crusaders, honestly and implicitly believed in the creed that paganism must be destroyed, no matter what the means; that the soul of the heathen must be won to the one TRUE faith! Unfortunately for the subjugated, the unhappy “choice” was usually conciliated by the system of enslavement, the *repartimiento*, or else destruction by sword or gun. In the conquest, be it remembered, the sword and the Cross were ever inseparable!

True to the apprehensions of Velasquez, this, his very latest, most portentous decision resulted in bitter

disappointment. Cortes, having hastily completed his armada, having then weighed anchor as he was about to depart for the greatest of adventures, omitted the formality or the grace of bidding his patron farewell. Hardly had San Jago been lost sight of when Cortes flaunted the authority of Velasquez and cast into the discard the pact between them.

Serving as chief pilot of the expedition was Antonio de Alaminos, a veteran who had served Columbus, Cordoba and Grijalva. Among the leaders with Cortes, those who veritably carved their way through Mexico, were Alvarado, Ordaz, Montejo and Sandoval. Some were strong partisans of Velasquez; others were so antagonistic toward him that relations between the factions were frequently strained, until the time when the direst perils compelled a united front. In emergencies, cooperation was so vital, dissension so fraught with chance of destruction, that the *conquistadores* could otherwise never have extricated themselves from the seemingly insurmountable barriers hurled against them.

The voyage of the fleet was fairly uneventful, and when the head-winds of Cape Catoche had finally been weathered, the Spaniards camped at that promontory prior to active plans for their future course.

At Sacred Cuzmil factional differences were now of the past, for the scheming Teotzl had gone to his merited reward. King Xoctli had severely frowned upon further human sacrifice, and though the proselytism of Friar Alva had not as yet progressed beyond the pro-

tecting limits of Mual, the rest of the realm also began to participate in the more humane and beneficent tenets of their god-hero, *Quetzalcoatl*, undoubtedly a very excellent step in the direction of enlightenment. The idols, however, still remained in the *teocalli* at Cuzmil.

Thus, when Cortes cast anchor off the Yucatan coast, the members of the expedition were very agreeably surprised that the savage hostilities encountered by Cordoba and by Grijalva did not beset them.

For several weeks the Spaniards remained to make much-needed repairs, to replenish their provisions and water casks, and to afford exercise for the stiffened horses, so many days cramped in narrow quarters on the voyage. Efforts were made by Cortes to glean some information about the Spaniards who, report had it, were somewhere in the interior. The natives, perhaps with more judgment than was credited to them, fearing the information that Friar Alva might disclose to this formidable alien army, were very evasive, and the leaders of the expedition were too eager to continue on to their destination, the glamorous, opulent empire of Montezuma.

Fired with the zeal of the Church, Cortes, however, found time to endeavor to convince the natives of the iniquitous nature of their impotent idols, but his polemic harangue was completely incomprehensible.

Despite the chiding admonitions of the benign priests, Olmedo and Diaz, who counseled him to bide his time, to wait for a better understanding, Cortes

summarily tumbled the grotesque idols down the steep staircase of the sanctuary.

The amazed natives wailed and demonstrated wrathfully. They feared reprisal, however, from their own monarch should they turn against the Spaniards, and they also had a wholesome respect for the white strangers with the unheard-of, never-before-seen giant animals so readily under the riders' control. The natives were further impressed with the deafening detonations as the Spaniards engaged in artillery practice, bringing "thunder and lightning" from mysterious weapons.

However, the spirits of the retributive deities of *Anahuac* deemed it not propitious to intervene in these indignities. No dire cataclysm descended from the heavens to smite the desecrators; even the devout, superstitious votaries, expecting the irate manifestation of their patron, their dread war god, *Huitzilopochtli*, remained unscathed despite their failure to fly to arms and to mass for action against the infidel invaders. The chastened natives remained to gape and marvel at the very strange ceremonial of the Spaniards—recalling tales of similar devotionals at the *teocalli* by the gray-beard priest, the unwitting guest of the late Teotzl—who were celebrating mass in the very sanctuary from which the sacred idols had been so ignominiously purged!

XVII

IT WAS EVENTIDE, just before vespers at the camp of the Spaniards, and the glorious efflorescence of the waning sun coyly flirted with the newborn shadows of the vast horizon. The tropic heat of the day was tempered by ever-so-gentle breezes wafted from the placid Caribbean as its waters met the Gulf. A faint haze disported iridescently, creating fantastic reflections and mirages. All nature rustled, buzzed, hummed, trilled and warbled as *Nanotzin*, Lord of Day, in splendrous radiance and effulgent mood, rode away on the wings of the beams of *Tonatiuh*, the sun god.

About the camp and encircling it was a cordon of sentries. A lone arquebusier was stationed before the great portal of the *tecpan* adjacent to the *teocalli*, the sacred sanctuary of the war god patron, *Huitzilopochtli*, from which the devout, if misguided, Catholics had so summarily and ingloriously hurtled the impotent, grotesque idols.

High on the soaring terrace, in massive copper braziers, still burned the sacred fires. The incense wreaths of smoke, however, were no longer intended for the pagan shrine, nor for the mute false gods, but now ascended in sanctification of the Cross, freshly hewn from a towering giant of the forest.

The vessels of the expedition swung lazily in the lapping waters of the crude harbor, but the armament of ominous cannon and falconets was trained as a precautionary measure towards the shore, directly in the range of the *teocalli*. Rigging, sails, masts, spars and halyards were under careful scrutiny in anticipation of the approaching day of departure.

From the temporary camp shelters came sounds of boisterous conversation, laughter and banter, the gay spirit of inveterate gamblers, as trinkets and baubles, trophies and mementos of old Spanish or Cuban sea-ports, even small pieces of gold and silver specie, were staked and, with good or ill grace, won or lost. Above the excitement and din of the gaming rang the chorus of an improvised anvil, sputtering with flying sparks, hissing when the searing metal was plunged into the steaming, yet cooling waters.

Guns and swords, lances and long pikes, arquebuses, quilted jackets and leather boots, quaint head-gear, regimental standards with devout devices, martial horns and trumpets with silver trimmings were scattered about in seemingly careless disarrangement, yet all were within the facile grasp of their owners in the event of untoward emergency.

Nearby, groomed by a score of soldiers, the restive horses were quartered. Their tails swished, vainly attempting to ward off the annoying barrage of stinging insects; their jaws champed and foamed; their shod hoofs and mountains of flesh and bones strained, as they impatiently awaited the cool evening breezes. They longed to be mounted and away for the exhilarating gallop across the public square, then the canter and trot over the long, tortuous path leading from the shore to the miles of inland country.

In the spacious, almost quadrangular chamber of the royal *tecpán*, with its huge-beamed, smoke-sooted rafters supporting the lofty ceiling, a number of the leaders of the expedition lolled upon chairs or benches brought from the ships in the harbor. Others lazily reclined on gay-colored Indian blankets as they puffed at the native tobacco in curious pipes or corn-stalk coverings. Cumbersome armor, thickly-padded cuirasses, metal helmets with gorgeous plumage, deadly-sharp swords and other accoutrements lay on the long, massive, roughly-hewn tables within instant reach. A metal Cross, adorned with the Madonna and the Infant Christ, was conspicuous over the huge, three-stone *koben*.

At one table a card game was in progress, of interest also to spectators standing about, freely criticising or commending each move. Nearby sat a scribe, with a deep, ponderous frown on his brow and a feathered quill in his hand, struggling with various complicated entries.

Before the massive, paneless windows several groups of officers were commenting on the activities in the harbor, or venturing surmise as to the probable day of departure for the fields of combat, where they were eager to match their European training and strategy against savage, primitive warriors.

At one of the windows overlooking the path toward the port sat the priests, Olmedo and Diaz. Soon their attention was attracted to the distance, where a sea-going *piragua* now loomed. They could discern the bronzed chests and arms of its native crew, the glistening, dripping paddles in rhythmic dip and slap as the canoe neared the shore.

Leaping agilely from the prow, a lithe, well-set native, robed in ample *tilmatli*, gained the shore. Following him, after the craft had nuzzled in closely, slowly emerged an elderly figure whose combination somber mantle and monk's cowl, hanging loosely, and partially covering his face, caused a frowning of Padre Olmedo's brow, a look of bewilderment in his eyes. Most puzzling was a gold-threaded Cross on the stranger's cloak.

"Look you, Padre Diaz," remarked the puzzled Olmedo, "at yonder visitor's strange attire! And can you make aught of the face?"

Padre Diaz peered sharply. As the stranger approached somewhat nearer, with the confident step of one seemingly acquainted with both the path and the destination, he observed: "Notice you the Cross on his rather odd cloak? And what as to his general

raiment? Seemingly, it is not entirely native, and his long, white beard and features are much beyond my understanding. What strange manner of being——?”

Here, with a surprised, questioning exclamation, he stopped suddenly, for Padre Olmedo had made a sudden dash for the stranger, through the paneless window, and with far more agility than was the slow-moving priest's usual habit.

Padre Olmedo, astounded but for the moment, now greeted the newcomer: “Hath the sea given up its dead? Doth the dead walk? Speak, I beseech you! O, the miracle of God's mercy! Friar Alva, as I hope and pray for salvation!”

With honest, rapturous greetings, he embraced the friar and escorted him to the presence of the officers gathered in curious anticipation of the stranger's identity. Here Friar Alva introduced his companion, Prince Kakama.

Friar Alva's hair had whitened considerably in the passing of the years, so portentous since his departure from Cuba. His face was marked with the deep lines of cares and worries, and his mien did not belie the apprehensions, the gnawing, ominous turbulence disturbing his troubled heart. He scanned the friendly faces of the priests, of Captain-General Cortes and of the other leaders, who by now were all agog with expectancy. The card game was abruptly abandoned; all were eager to lend ear to the tale of adventure from one who had risen as from the very grave.

Friar Alva shook his head dolefully, as with hesitant voice he questioned Padre Olmedo. The timorous question seemed to be its own negation: "Of Captain de Nicuessa—" and he could say no more.

"It is, alas, the very question I feared to ask of you!" responded Olmedo. "Yet your silence, your emotion, suffice!"

Thus the friar, with a reverential tone in his voice, his head bowed in sorrow, abandoned the last vestige of vanishing hope for his courageous companion, the chivalrous warrior who had ventured in a frail craft on the uncharted sea.

He explained somewhat apologetically, "O, comrades, my heart is exceeding sore. Had I but been in Mual then, never would I have sanctioned nor condoned de Nicuessa's rash but courageous venture. His dream, albeit noble, was mad and beyond hope, but his valor has won my unbound admiration. We all loved him as a true soldier, a staunch comrade, a devout son of the Church. May God rest his soul!"

As the pious Catholics chorused "Amen!" the friar turned to Prince Kakama, and in the Mayan tongue apprised him of the doleful tidings. The prince's tearful response was, as interpreted by the friar, that the monarch and all Cuzmil and Mual, nobles and peasants alike, had lost a valued friend; that de Nicuessa's memory would ever remain cherished in the land, an inspiration for all to emulate.

Vespers had by now been concluded, but the evening repast had lost its usual zest. Instead, there was unusual silence, vague, contemplative brooding, for each and every adventurer, in his innermost thoughts, wondered what fate had in store for him, in a land he intuitively felt would struggle to the death to retain its very existence against alien invasion and the subsequent inevitable enslavement, a land thousands of miles away from civilization, from the exceedingly necessary aid that emergencies may demand.

They crowded about the friar who, for the next hour and more, so enthralled were his listeners, dwelt on the strange, heart-gripping, panoramic episodes, from the day the Ventura was peremptorily denied haven at the port of Darien. He described the trials and tribulations of the castaways; the unwitting hospitality of that arch fiend, Teotzl; the miracle of King Xoctli's beneficence; de Nicuessa's achievement at Tabi; Acatlan's rescue; the death of Teotzl; and then the final turn of events leading to the unbelievable, yet most heroic sacrifice to which the monarch had bound himself, with the desperate hope of rescuing their own Gallo and the native princess from dire doom.

"I have just arrived from Chichen-Itza, that modern city of iniquity. Prince Kakama joined me at Tiho. The new sanctuary I spoke of nears completion; the diabolic ceremonial of the Mayan fifty-two year cycle approaches. My dear nephew, Gallo, of our own blood, his wife and their newborn son, but a few

months old, baptized into the Faith, are still hostages, and their lives are in imminent peril if the barbaric, inhuman pact go amiss. The guarantees of the wretched high priests of Chichen-Itza are, at best, very dubious, yet King Xoctli is adamant in his refusal to resort to punitive measures, lest his loved ones pay the penalty. Neither entreaties nor persuasion prevail upon him. I much fear that his proselytism is still blighted by his adherence to the noble yet pagan teachings of a Mayan sage, the Tezcucan prince, Nezahualcoyotl, whom I previously mentioned."

The benign friar's recital was now interrupted by unabashed emotion. "Forgive me, comrades. Gladly would I welcome even a pagan death in the monarch's stead. His mercies, his very saintliness—but why continue? I implore you all—you, in particular, Padres Diaz and Olmedo, my faithful brothers of the Church—to help extricate him from his own mad impulse and rash vow. Save his loved ones, now true Catholics, all, from their misguided father's pact!"

"*Nombre de Dios!*" almost exploded the exasperated Captain-General Cortes. "This veritable paragon of tinsel royalty, your King Xoctli, seeks aught else but to be rescued! He avidly courts destruction, yet you eloquently plead that we attack those barbarians of Chichen-Itza. Our destiny lies far beyond; we must await far worthier foes, Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs. We are not here for a holiday. The Cross calls! Our indebtedness to Velasquez and Don Carlos must be cancelled, and quickly. Spain must be satisfied with

our stewardship. Why embroil ourselves with the slinking jackal? Best reserve our energies and ammunition, of which there will surely be a dearth, for the more powerful eagle and tiger!"

Prince Kakama had been a patient but eager listener both to the impassioned plea of the friar and to the more impassioned tirade of Cortes. He had followed word for word, but had comprehended very little. But when King Xoctli's name had been mentioned, the prince's eyes had moistened. He approached the irate Captain-General and, on bended knees, humiliating as he knew it would appear, pleaded in words which the friar readily interpreted: "Save my beloved sire, the princess and the queen-mother; save Gallo, of your own people; save a helpless babe. All Cuzmil will forever cherish your deed. In the war against the Aztecs, my people will remember your valued help; they will be your most faithful allies. None is more beloved in many neighborhood tribal states than is my sire. Consider well his influence with these tribesmen, for under his standard they will follow to the death, or to victory if so the God of the white beings wills it."

Cortes, with frowning brow and curt shake of the head, proffered no encouragement. The prince then impetuously threw himself before the feet of the more humane priests, who had listened sympathetically to his plea, and to them repeated his supplications. Long and earnestly he entreated; he emphasized that such noble action would hasten the spread of the tenets

of Christianity, and the soulful appeal, as again interpreted, deeply disturbed Olmedo and Diaz.

Padre Olmedo placed his hand benignly and in benediction upon the head of the staunchly filial petitioner; the padre eagerly scanned the faces of Cortes and the other leaders of the expedition; there was a plea of yearning in his eyes, a devout prayer in his heart, but the apathetic silence, the seemingly callous indifference, did not augur a propitious offer of assistance.

Padre Diaz had, in the meantime, been most deeply pondering the complex situation. None better surmised the line of least resistance, the most vulnerable path of approach to these seemingly hardened soldiers-of-fortune. He very blandly, quite naively, began to ply the unsuspecting friar with a number of rather leading questions. For his military companions, Captain-General Cortes and the staff of leaders, the astute padre was baiting a very neat trap.

"Friar Alva," began the padre, "this Chichen-Itza is not very distant from here?"

"No, padre, it is but a day's and a night's forced march. A fairly good native path leads directly to the center of the city, its public square."

"And this Chichen-Itza, I am led to understand, is a most fiendishly iniquitous realm, where human sacrifice is very prevalent?"

"Abominably so! Human sacrifices prevail without measure, and at frequent intervals. The victims are

many. The altars reek with their blood in placation of hideous idols. I have dwelt at length about Zumpango's treachery; I have told of the vile priests and of their complete dominance over the puppet king; of the bargaining with their own idols. Their atonement is through human sacrifice alone, and this on a vast scale. And now an epidemic of dysentery rages within the city, a retributive manifestation from their idols, so the priests interpret; thus naught but more and more of sacrifices will appease their pagan gods."

Here the adroit Diaz, long schooled in the frailties of man, especially well aware of the Spaniards' lust for the gold of loot and spoils, innocently questioned: "From what you describe, my worthy friar, I surmise that Chichen-Itza would be well worth a surprise visit? Rather a profitable one, if I may hazard a guess?"

"Incalculable riches, padre, even beyond the dreams of avarice. Zumpango's treasure, it is credibly reported, is very great. The idols of the old sanctuary, the walls of the new structure, are freely sprinkled with gems, with the rarest of priceless plumage, with decorations of gold and silver. The superstitious votaries have donated untold wealth for the past few years."

Here the voice of the friar again broke with emotion. "But why all this catechism when the souls of proselytes are in dire jeopardy? How may their faith be maintained if the soldiers of the Cross deny them succor? Shades of Peter the Hermit! What manner of Crusaders surround me? Desert these hostages in

this, their hour of need, and all my efforts have been in vain. Padres Diaz and Olmedo, I call upon you in the name of the Christ who looks upon you all from His Cross of the Crucifixion!"

The eyes of the friar blazed with the gleam of the zealot, the martyr. His voice shook with the emotion of his earnest plea; it was tense and vibrant. As Padre Olmedo stared at him in genuine admiration, he could not help but recall the vivid, glamorous painting in an old Cathedral, a portrayal of Pope Urban II appealing to the Council of Clermont, in the year 1095, to render much-needed assistance to the Christian Byzantines' Emperor Alexis Comnennus, then in grave danger from attack by the Seljukian Turks.

The master artist had depicted Pope Urban in richly hued vestments and jewelled tiara; he had faithfully portrayed the eyes gleaming with zeal for the cause the Pope was so eloquently exhorting, the hands raised to the massive Cross at the side of the papal throne. And here, in the benighted land of paganism and superstition, was a simple, soulful missionary, his eyes also blazing with the fervor of the zealot, his hands uplifted to the Madonna above the *koben*! Many centuries of history! And it may be noted that through all the gruelling battles that later followed, in all the solemn celebrations of mass, to the portals of the pagan sanctuary in Tenochtitlan itself, the eyes of the exalted friar, the eloquent, yet simple, soulful plea, remained ever a haunting thought!

Cortes was bewildered, uneasy. He gazed quizzically at Padre Diaz, and Friar Alva he regarded with newborn respect. He now turned to observe the effect on his aides. The seeming apathy, the callousness of these worthies had undergone a change. They had listened intently when the question of treasure arose. Perhaps, also, they were awe- and conscience-stricken at the remarkable fervor of Friar Alva's call to arms, the call for a New World Crusade!

If Padre Diaz regarded the change of heart of his companions as due more to avarice than to an inspired exhortation, neither his eyes nor his lips betrayed. The Spaniards, it must be recorded, in the light of future events, were pricked, not by the wee still voice of conscience, but rather by the vista of sudden fortune—fortune veritably thrown directly into their very laps. It was a direct challenge, hurled like a thunderbolt from the clear sky.

Shamefaced, they stared askance at each other with incredulous amazement; then they turned their eyes to the keen-witted, yet seemingly perfectly innocent Diaz, who had so adroitly turned the tide from hesitant indecision to slowly rising certainty of action.

The reverend padres exchanged amused glances of understanding, and their humorously twinkling eyes expressed volumes. In the catechism to which the friar had been subjected, there had been opened the flood-gates of avarice, yet of eagerness for hazardous exploits. The goal was the traditional pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—glittering gold, the means to a

life of ease, of gaming, indolence and extravagance! The fervor of the Old World Crusaders was sadly lacking.

Padre Diaz shook his head deprecatingly, stroked his chin and gazed quizzically at Padre Olmedo. Cryptic was his comment to both the reverend padre and Friar Alva: "Ah, the pity of it! For the golden calf will the wayward children of Eve barter away their spiritual birthright, the Kingdom of Heaven! As Esau of old, they have sold their father's first blessing to Jacob for a mess of pottage. For my part in this display of crass materialism must I turn to my *paternosters*, and to contrition!"

XVIII

ON A PROMINENTLY jutting hillock, overlooking an otherwise flat terrain as far as the eye could reach, and within the very shadow of the age-old, somber gray walls of the sanctuary of *Kukul Can*, which it was reverentially to replace, soared the new *teocalli*, in massive, exotic architectural grandeur. It was a stupendous creation of hewn blocks of the limestone indigenous to that region, locally obtained or which had been hauled from great distances across improvised roads cut through jungle and forest, over crude bridges of saplings and liana spanning barriers of treacherous gorges and torrents rushing down abysmal depths. The slave-laborers faced constant and dire hazards, and ever the toll of many human lives had been taken during the construction of the project.

This new *teocalli* presented the similar and traditional pyramidal design, each ascending terrace and receding storey being of lesser dimensions than the one immediately below. The towering turret seemed

at times to be lost in the gray mists of the slowly drifting clouds; the sentry occupying it presented an eerie appearance when enveloped in the haze-like vapors.

On the brilliant nights so typical of the tropics, this sentry tower was to be utilized as an observatory by thoroughly trained *chilans*, who would scan the heavens in deep study of the planetary system in its course through the infinite vastness of the firmament, closely mapping and recording the natural changes which transpired with the alternation of the seasons. For an agricultural people these observations were of very great importance.

Through the many ages these mystic calculations and conclusions had been priestly prerogatives, and had gradually assumed the importance of scientific knowledge. Characteristic of the charlatanry of the priestly caste, however, the grandeur and vast import of the celestial bodies were ever interpreted from the dubious viewpoint of the astrologer-seer. Thus, augurs and omens, baneful and benign, swayed the destiny and very life of the Mayan, from prognostication of the future, at birth, until the hour the gullible, superstitious votary was interred with the bones of his ancestors.

Before the great, main portal of the new sanctuary stood the gargantuan, hideously grotesque basalt idol with a *penache* of priceless *quetzal*. Its nose-plug of ebony was inlaid with studs of pure gold; in its right hand was the truncheon, or *caluac*; its eyes were of

the sacred blue-green turquoise, ever scintillating in the iridescence of the dancing rays of *Tonatiuh*, or in the reflecting gleam of pine torches. Before its feet was the massive brazier of copper, its interstices capped with precious metals, its circumference carved with intricate patterns and picture-glyphs.

The huge lintel of the main portal was of the almost indestructible *yax-nic* wood, supporting an immense facade above. The carvings of the lintel and facade depicted, in bas-relief and vivid hues, a prone figure on the sacrificial stone, over which hovered priests in ceremonial regalia, in the act of rubbing twigs over the breast of the victim of the sacred ritual, symbolic of the new fire ignited on the eve of the new cycle.

The many chambers of the new *teocalli* housed other idols, of which there were thirteen comprising the Mayan pantheon. The striking white-stucco walls of these chambers were liberally covered with murals and frescoes of historic, sacerdotal and mythologic motifs.

Huge bas-reliefs encircled the outer wall—the wall of serpents, or *coateplante*—and the massive staircase was guarded by huge carvings of serpent heads, with jaws agape, fangs and forked tongue prominently displayed, all symbolic of the feathered serpent-god, ancient representation of the Toltec god-hero, *Quetzalcoatl*.

The superstitious, servile multitude hailed the completion of the marvelous creation ascribing it to the prophetic vision and tireless energies of the indefa-

tigable high priests of Chichen-Itza, and in their honor the people voiced unstinted adulation.

As if presaging a very propitious omen, the fulfillment of the completion of this masterly achievement was in time for its dedication upon the beginning of the new Mayan cycle of fifty-two years, known as the *xiuhmolpilli*. In the age-old tradition, this event symbolized and predicted the destruction of the world, then, through atonement and contrition, the world's regeneration, the passing of the old, the genesis of the new cycle.

For the Mayan there was ever the apprehension of inherent sin. For their misdeeds, the sun was to be totally eclipsed, and with the dearth of light and warmth, all the bounties of the earth, man's sustenance, would wither and die; darkness and chaos would engulf the land; then the dire holocaust and total destruction.

The last five days of the old cycle, termed the "unlucky" ones, were thus regarded as preceding the cataclysm, and the superstitious pagans abandoned themselves to utter despair. All the fires of the land, from the most sacred in the *teocalli* to the simplest pine fagots blazing in the traditional three-stone *koben* of reed-and-mud wattle-hut, were not replenished. The dying embers and gray ashes bore mute yet eloquent witness to the helpless, hopeless situation confronting the world of sin.

Garments were rent asunder; the little furniture of the household and its domestic utensils were shat-

tered; even the images gracing the lintels were destroyed. Abject misery prevailed. The sins of the inhabitants had brought about retributive manifestations from the deities.

But then would come penitence; above all, propitiary offerings of human sacrifice, "food for the gods"! The irate deities must be placated! Then, only, would they renew their role of benefactors to the humble, contrite votaries. Again the stranglehold of the priest caste would be sealed.

First in the symbolic manifestations of the regeneration, the genesis of the new cycle, was the kindling of the new fire—the fire so symbolic of progress from the mythic antiquity to the present, the fire which was again to render its beneficences. Then, after but a few hours had elapsed, the first rays of the coy yet glorious sun, the beams of *Tonatiuh*, would radiate over the land, as paeans of exaltation would arise from all the land and waters, from man and beast, from everything that walked, crept or flew.

As an earnest of good faith, the human propitiary offering would be stretched upon the sacrificial altar, where he would be held firmly in the vise-like grip of four *chilan* superiors. Mystic incantations would be chanted over the dried twigs, which would then be rubbed vigorously. Soon the tiny spark would be ignited; then, as if fanned by a sacred, spectral breath, a flame would arise which would burst into an all-consuming fire, and wreaths of smoke and lurid flame

would ascend on high to apprise the gods, in their celestial abode, of the gratitude of the votaries.

Now *Hunal Ku*, supreme deity, would command *Tonatiuh* to manifest the *tecuhtli*, the divine power which warms the earth and makes it fructile.

With impassioned ardor the votaries would appeal to each of the tutelary deities, from the supreme *Hunal Ku*, and the almost-as-important war-god-patron, *Huitzilopochtli*, down to the lesser gods, to stay the inexorably moving hand of retribution against the errant transgressors.

“Hearken, mighty lords of the heavens and the lands and the waters! But stay the ominous day of judgment! Manifest the augur of forgiveness by fanning the tiny spark, ignited on the breast of the noblest of victims, into a consuming fire, and may the incense of sacred *psom*, in its ascending smoke, meet with divine favor!

“May *Nanotzin*, Lord of Day, ride on the very first effulgent beam of *Tonatiuh*, fulfilling the augur of *tecuhtli*, thus bringing happiness into the hearts of the contrite penitents of the sacred shrine of Chichen-Itza.”

Age-old, glamorous, yet iniquitous Chichen-Itza, shrine of holy pilgrimages, the Babylon of America, was doomed by the Nemesis of retributive justice. The avenging figure against the nefarious priest-patriarchs of Mexico's Moloch, against Zumpango's base treachery, was the mild-mannered, humble friar, who was, in this exigency, forced to sear his very soul, to vio-

late his innate humanity by resorting to the indubitable argument of the grim sword and the roar of death-dealing cannon.

Captain-General Cortes had been made acquainted with the complexities of the internal politics, the inherent jealousies of the heterogeneous states of the vast regions of Mexico.

Tenochtitlan was the center of a powerful, seemingly impregnable autocracy. The smaller confederations of independent domains strove futilely to buffet Aztec aggrandizement; but, instead, they warred constantly, one against the other; there was too much jealousy preventing them from uniting in mutual protection. Time and again the Aztec hordes would crash down upon the weaker states, with resultant ravage and desolation, with capture of prisoners for enslavement or the sacrifice. Temporary peace would be restored only by levies of heavy tribute and annual taxes to the hirelings of Emperor Montezuma. Yet at no time did alliance for mutual protection attain sufficient impetus or magnitude to stem the tide of Aztec expansion.

The plucky mountaineers of Tlascala and the powerful realm of Tezcucó had the courage effectively to resist those incursions; to the rulers of the states so inimical to Montezuma, Cortes looked for alliance. With this in view, Cortes delegated the siege of Chichen-Itza to his very trusted aides, Francisco de Montejo and Diego de Ordaz—a happy choice—and

the Captain-General then bided his time awaiting results of his negotiations with Tlascala, through which territory he must pass to give battle to the stronger forces beyond. A decisive battle, with the capitulation of Chichen-Itza, would, so Cortes believed, or optimistically prayed, bolster the morale of his army, especially after a division of the spoils. Then there would be favorable repercussions by which his invaders would impress neighboring domains with the intrepidity of the Spaniards.

But Cortes was to be doomed to disappointment!

With the same military plan and strategy as were characteristic of the Captain-General's expeditions in later, more formidable campaigns, no time was now lost in forging a ring of iron about the realm of Zumpango.

Friar Alva, in conference with Prince Kakama and the military commander, Uinic, gained an eager audience to hear of the punitive expedition, particularly since the monarch, Xoctli, was then on a visit to Chichen-Itza. Those scruples formerly binding them to strict compliance to the will of their sovereign were dispelled by the forceful argument that the impending attack would be maneuvered with such secrecy that the safety of the hostages would not be jeopardized. The preservation of the lives of his cherished ones had been the one great obsession that had impelled King Xoctli to stake his own life in the fateful pact.

Emissaries had, in the meantime, made contact with the Lacandone, Chian, in Tabi, and also with

the rulers of Campeche and Tiho. The prospect of waging war against Chichen-Itza, ever the implacable, hereditary foe of his tribesmen, had aroused Chian to heights of enthusiasm. His eyes gleamed, hardly with the hauteur of the noble eagle, but rather with the rapacity of the vulture; his ultimate goal was to obtain the much-coveted head of one of the high priests to grace the lintel of his sovereign abode in the jungle, to be the prized possession, the treasured trophy, for the generations as yet unborn.

On the appointed day the concerted attack was staged. Chichen-Itza was invaded by the Lacandonones from lower Yucatan, by the forces from Tiho and Campeche, and by a grand contingent from the Sacred Isle, reinforced by the Spanish veterans and their Cuban allies. In direct command were Ordaz and Montejo.

So well timed was the planned assault that troops began to filter slowly into the now almost deserted outskirts of the sacred shrine-city long before the brilliant star Alcyon, in glittering ascendancy in the constellation of the Pleiades, had signalled the beginning of the long-drawn-out ceremonial leading finally to the sacred sacrifice and the kindling of the new fire.

From the vast terraces and surrounding grounds could be distinctly heard the piteous lamentations of the penitents, the wailing of impassioned votaries in the throes of utter despair—for what if the deities refused their supplications? — and, above all the clamor, the chant of the priests and the vestals of

the nunnery in mournful dirge. Before the massive basalt altar of sacrifice stood the high priests, in vivid and imposing ceremonial robes adorned with the silvery representation of the glittering serpent, *ahua can*. The diadems of the high priests were of shiny serpent scales, and their ceremonial masks were bedecked with sacred blue-green turquoise.

Silently, stealthily, a vanguard of several-score picked warriors of Mual, under the direct charge of Prince Kakama, surrounded the castle of Zumpango, throwing a cordon about the entire lower terrace to safeguard the hostages, who were totally unaware of the impending attack.

No apparition could so have astounded the wailing, shrieking penitents, now engaged in their superstitious, yet solemn bargaining with their pantheon of pagan deities for the blessed genesis of a new cycle, as did the first startling view of a seemingly endless procession of bedaubed warriors with full martial panoply. To add to their consternation, among those totally unexpected invaders were still others, aliens in strange costumes, metal chest armor and shining head-gear, with long swords, lances and pikes gleaming in the silvery glow of the moon, and carrying still other mysterious weapons of destruction, cumbersome, hardly describable, for never had their like been witnessed among the Mayans of this region.

But stay! Had not their lamented ally, Teotzl, erst-while *ah-kin-mai* of Holy Cuzmil, hotly combated some such similar apparition but a scant few years

ago? And had not the patron deities of the *Anahuacs*, by a divine miracle, turned the tide of battle into a decisive victory for the faithful warriors of Sacred Cuzmil? Surely the gods of their forebears, the deities of the Mayans, would not now desert them, especially on the eve of the solemn dedication of the sacred new *teocalli*, and the ceremonial of the new cycle, the *xiuhmolpilli*!

But their conjectures were dispelled very realistically! The silent, invading hordes, who had tramped into the outskirts of the realm without the usual fanfare of yells of defiance and of savage warwhoops, were now massing for action. The foremost horseman raised a glittering alien instrument to his lips, three sharp blasts issued from it, and the spectral silence was turned into stark pandemonium. It was the signal for attack!

The momentary consternation paralyzing the agitated high priests of Chichen-Itza turned to frenzied rage; the inviolability of the sacred shrine was about to be defiled! "*Alala! Alala!*" — the warwhoop of Chichen-Itza—was shrieked by the high dignitaries of the sanctuary and echoed by the enraged votaries; then the high priests hastily exhorted the panic-stricken multitudes to defend their *teocalli*, house of their sacred deities, against the vile desecrators who had dared to defile the holy shrine!

Spurred on by the almost incoherent, frenzied exhortations of their high priests, by the sharp, insistent commands of their military leaders, the faithful vo-

taries of Chichen-Itza chorused yells of defiance and anathema at the invaders. From the topmost terrace of the new sanctuary came the weird boom of the sacred drums, the *teponoztli* and *tunkul*, and the reverberations echoed for miles around. It was the solemn call to arms. Now was heard the blare of the sacred horn, the *atabal*; the deities summoned the faithful to fly to the defense of their sanctuary!

Though morally weak, King Zumpango was never the craven, and, like the traditional war-horse of old, the veteran commander's eyes glowed with the first clarion call to arms and battle. There was no need to ferret out the enemy; the invaders were now within the very portals of his realm; a challenge had been flaunted; the din of battle was hammering in his ears. War! Holy war!

But in their frenzied rage the high priests had made a most tactical blunder, for they began inveighing against their puppet-monarch, Zumpango, at this most inopportune, most critical moment, for his vacillatory attitude when they had urged invasion of Cuzmil and Mual. The high priests vindictively charged him with deliberate dilatory evasions. Their venomous diatribes—ill-timed amid the battle raging in the public square, when the life of Chichen-Itza was in the balance—and their unseemly outburst but emphasized the madness of their course. “Whom the gods would destroy——!” was never better exemplified.

The votaries of Chichen-Itza peremptorily abandoned their idols and made a wild dash for the arsen-

als. They hastily armed themselves with every available weapon they could grasp, but again terrorizing fright seized them, for a lurid flash and a detonating roar, not from the abode of the gods of thunder and lightning, but from the lower terrace of the old sanctuary of *Kukul Can* now rent the air. The charge was from a Spanish falconet, skillfully aimed at the topmost branches of a giant patriarch of the forest towering above the ramparts of the new *teocalli*, and in immediate proximity to the wooden upper storey. The flash and roar resulted in singeing, sickening smoke. Again the challenge was hurled and answered from opposing camps.

A dense shower of arrows and sharp stones descended upon the invaders; the cry of "*Alala! Alala!*" again rang out clear and defiant, then the answering vaunt, "*San Jago, and at them!*" from the Spaniards.

The frontal attack and defense were now being vigorously prosecuted, and the strategic maneuvers of the invaders were running true to form. The warriors and untrained hordes of the holy shrine had been inveigled to abandon the terrace which housed the sacrificial altar, leaving but a very small group engaged in acrimonious accusations and counter-accusations.

When the signal from the trumpet of the Spaniard sounded the attack, the savage Lacandones sprang into action from still another quarter. They had been concealed in the dense shrubbery surrounding the rear of the sanctuary; now grasping at vines, tangled

cords of liana and spreading branches, they hastily scaled the walls. Higher and higher they swung, until they attained the very heights of the parapets, yet so stealthy were their movements that their presence was not in evidence until they were ready to strike with their obsidian-tipped short-swords, their primitive, cruelly sharp knives and the fatal, *curare*-dipped darts from their blow-guns.

Chian had slyly concealed himself in the screening foliage of a massive tree immediately above the group which comprised the passion-maddened high priests, the monarchs, Xoctli and Zumpango, and a few dignitaries who had remained.

Not content with his vituperative and vociferous denunciation of Zumpango, one of the high priests now turned his maddened, malevolent spleen on King Xoctli. He accused the monarch of treachery, and of being responsible, despite his sacred vow, for this attack. King Xoctli, astounded, unarmed, with not the barest chance for self-defense, was taken thoroughly unawares; but Zumpango, still smarting from the stinging tongue-lashing, made a heroic, if futile, effort to protect the hostage he had so banefully betrayed.

The high priest attempted a sudden lunge at the breast of King Xoctli. Zumpango made a quick dash to grip the arm of the frenzied priest, but in his desperate haste he slipped, and his body, now interposed between the high priest and the monarch, was the unwitting target for the blow! To his already numerous and heinous misdeeds, the high priest had added

regicide! King Zumpango met his untimely doom, not at the head of his legions repelling invasion, but at the hand of one whose puppet he had been for many years. In his last moments he had atoned for his base treachery.

Confused by the roar of the falconets and the astounding revelation of huge beasts and their riders, seemingly as one inexplicable, terrorizing unit, Chian lost his hold on the precarious footing of a slippery, swaying branch, at a dizzy height above the wrangling group, just at the moment that the tragedy below was being enacted. Chian made a vain effort to grasp at the lower branches in his hurtling descent, but instead he catapulted and landed squarely, and with crashing force, upon the neck and shoulders of the befuddled regicide.

Both were precipitated to the ground by the impact, while scores of Lacandones raced to surround their chieftain and King Xoctli. Chian, but little the worse from his sudden descent, snarled an order for his cohorts not to interfere, but to attack the surrounding group of nobles. Then, dextrously, with amazing finesse, with the gusto of the kill, Chian completed the fulfillment of his savage lust and his yearning of many years. By slashing and hewing with his cruel, serrated short-sword, the head of the stunned high priest of Chichen-Itza was actually severed, a trophy to be treasured in Tabi. The other dignitaries and the small retinue with them were summarily despatched by the savages of the jungle.

As the slinking hyena or jackal licks his chops on the carrion of fallen beast, so Chian looked as he next cast hungry glances at the head of Zumpango. What a trophy! Only the quick action of King Xoctli, a hasty, sharp exclamation of reproof, and the ghoulish hand was stayed! But Chian would then and there happily have bartered his birthright to kingdom-come for the valued memento.

The battle below raged with unabated fury. The sight of horse and rider, seemingly a single, united phantom of destruction, completely unnerved the defenders, as yet unaware of the turn of events on the topmost terrace. On they pressed about the public square and grounds, impelled by the impassioned exhortations of the *chilans* in the thick of the fray, spurred on to heroic defense, with the more timorous threatened by the retributive vengeance of the defiled deities.

King Xoctli had been saved from doom, and the strong surrounding guard of savage Lacandones augured ill for any who dared challenge their protecting mission. King Zumpango lay dead, his last deed on earth an expiation for his ignoble breach of faith, his last despairing whisper a mute appeal to King Xoctli: "Protect and harbor Prince Itzcoyotl!"

Only a very short distance ahead loomed the pretentious *tecpan* of the late monarch of Chichen-Itza. The strong cordon about the royal palace left but little doubt as to the safety of the cherished group from Mual—Cheeuh, Gallo and the queen mother—who,

overjoyed at the sight of the invaders, were with difficulty restrained from rushing to the side of King Xoctli.

In the heart of Sacred Cuzmil's benign monarch, who, for an ominous moment, had been on the brink of eternity, and who had been saved only by the timely intervention, the self-sacrifice of Zumpango, there was sadness for man's inhumanity to man. He was bitterly disappointed, cruelly disillusioned, that the mild-mannered Friar Alva, who had so zealously, so convincingly, pleaded a creed of brotherly love, was now in the thick of the battle, shouting encouragement to the invaders, yet exhorting the frenzied defenders to surrender ere Chichen-Itza was completely annihilated.

Before the horrified view of King Xoctli now appeared the gruesome spectacle of Chian holding a long spear on which was impaled the severed head of a high priest of the conquered shrine. Bands of jungle savages followed in his wake, slashing, ripping at the rear flank of the enemy, or effectively completing the orgy of destruction with lethal, *curare*-dipped darts shot from blow-guns.

From the flowered *azotea* of the royal palace and from the high terrace of the *teocalli* of *Kukul Can*, a devastating rake of fire and destruction were discharged from arquebus and falconet, decimating or cruelly crippling the helpless defenders. No quarter was asked nor given. This was a battle to the death!

The glamorous spectacle of the awe-inspiring ceremonial dedicating the new cycle, the most solemn

and sacred *xiuhmolpilli*, had veritably been turned into a desolate and ominous shambles. From all quarters came the heart-gripping cry of despair, of doom: "Chichen-Itza is destroyed! The deities of *Anahuac* have so decreed!"

The defenders beheld the gory head of their erstwhile highest dignitary of the church ignobly impaled on a long spear, in the triumphant hand of the chieftain of a savage tribe they loathed. They beheld the stupendous creation, that masterpiece of achievement, the new *teocalli*, enveloped in smoke and lurid flame. They ran helter skelter in demoralized panic. The invaders rushed in pursuit, slaying unmercifully and without quarter. The Babylon of the New World was in the throes of total extinction.

Above the din and clamor arose the plea of Friar Alva to desist from the slaughter. Only the personal intervention of Ordaz and Montejo caused a halt. Now came a mad rush for the loot, the magnet which had drawn the invaders into their first conflict with the natives of the domain, and in which they were fated to be baptized in the blood of many a sanguine future encounter.

From still another quarter sounded a shrill cry of mad exultation. It was Netza, in wild abandon, in full realization of her prophetic vision: "Doomed! Destroyed! By strange thunder, with strange lightning, destroyed!"

In the tropics the pall of night settles rapidly. The sun god, *Tonatiuh*, having lived his resplendent day and shed his nacreous iridescence in celestial benediction on land and sea, now graciously ceded scepter to his consort, the moon god, *Meztli*, and the soft, relaxing glow came in its perpetual alternation. Now the beasts slunk to their lairs, now the birds winged to their aeries, and with cubs or brood snuggled into the embracing mantle of sleep. Now the belated bittern's boom was challenged by the chatter of parrots and the scolding of apes in their green, branched arbors, and by the sleepy remonstrance of the timid wood-thrush hieing to roost, voicing *aves* to both the departing and the newborn god of light!

In their wake might be heard the ominous cry of the bird of ill omen, the *tecolote*, in warning that the buzzards and the vultures were on the wing for the carrion of the high and mighty of the glamorous, age-old Chichen-Itza that was now of the past!

As the *tecolote* sounded its mournful notes, so the tocsin of the Spaniards announced the knell of the holy shrine. Captain-General Cortes had initiated his rule of ruin! All Mexico was soon to become an armed camp, defending with pitiful desperation the cruel, priest-ridden, bloody, yet, withal, romantic civilization of the Mayans and the Aztecs! A scant century later the once imposing sanctuaries, representing a thousand years or more of a benighted, decadent religion, were completely obscured by verdant jungle! The magnificent palaces once gleaming with the spar-

kle of gems and precious metals, the gathering-places for the rulers of an exotic culture and civilization, where once flourished autocrats, were to become the retreat for the monkey and the lizard!

The regeneration of age-old, glamorous Mexico was to begin in ravage, desolation and despair! The deities of *Anahuac* had, themselves, met with retributive vengeance!

