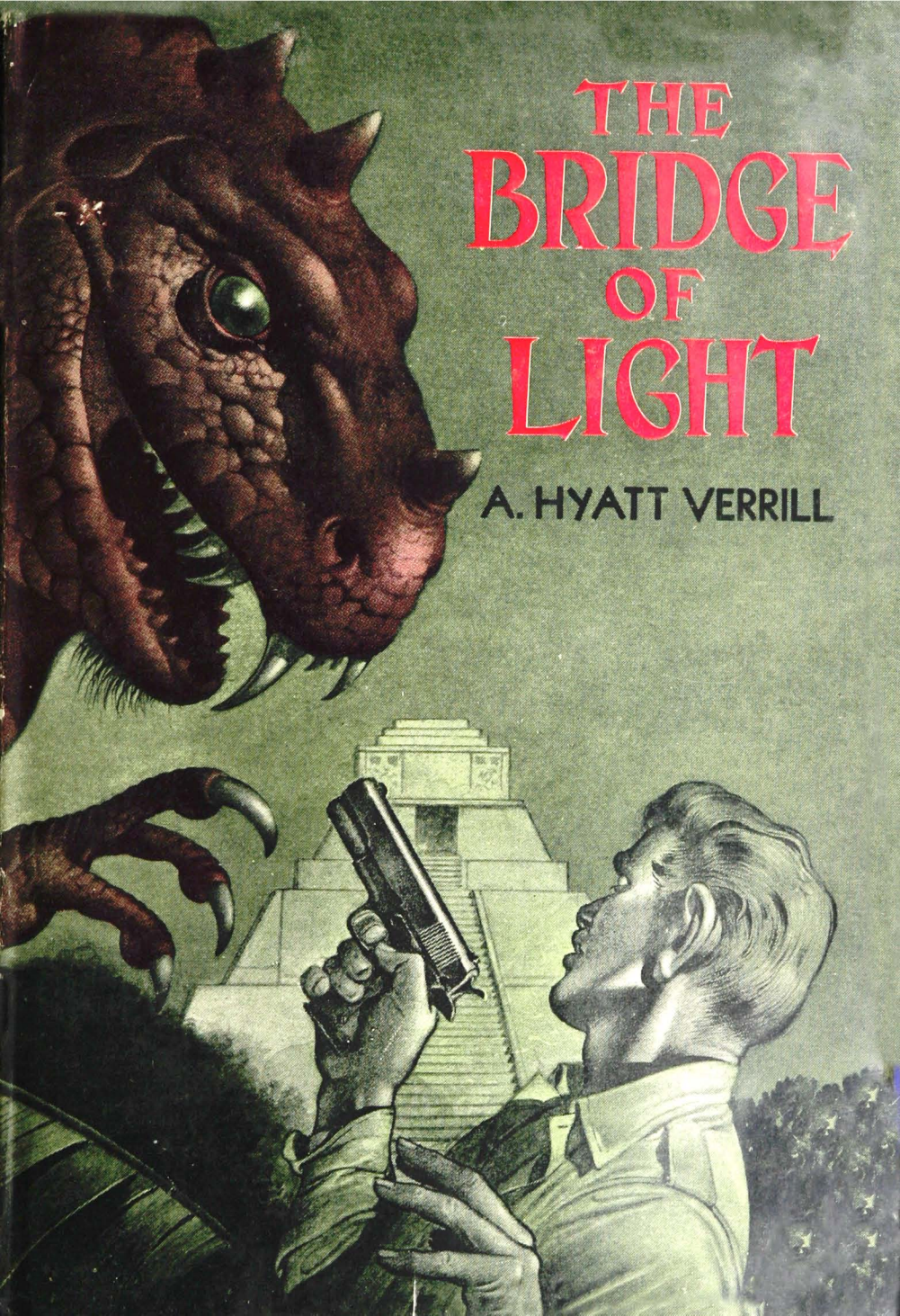


THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT

A. HYATT VERRILL



(See Description on Back Flap)

The Author

THE life of Alpheus Hyatt Verrill has been fully as adventurous and almost as fantastic as the careers of his fictional characters. It has been a long life—Verrill was born in 1871 — and a life crammed with unusual experiences. At one time he was made Chief Cuviboranadi of the Guaymí cannibals in Costa Rica. He is the only white man in four centuries who has seen the fabulously rich gold mine in Tisingal in Costa Rica. He discovered and excavated a hitherto unknown civilization in Panama. He has led several expeditions in search of Mayan treasure; has directed—and successfully—the search for lost Spanish treasure galleons. In short, he has lived the fiction he writes.

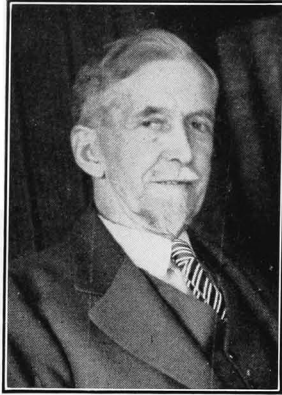
According to "Who's Who," A. Hyatt Verrill is an author, artist, ethnologist, archeologist, and explorer. A graduate of Yale University, he has spent most of his lifetime in penetrating distant jungles, in wallowing through tropical swamps, or climbing perilous mountain peaks. He is best known for his explorations in the West Indies and in Central and South America.

Since 1945 Verrill has been in the wholesale and retail shell business at Lake Worth, Florida. His most recent book (except for "Bridge of Light") is his "Shell Collectors' Handbook."

Despite his unusually active life, Verrill has somehow found time to write one hundred ten books! These have ranged from juvenile adventures to serious works on the Mayas and Aztecs and finally, to science fiction.

According to Mr. Verrill, he has just completed writing his life story, which he has titled "Never a Dull Moment"; this should be a truly fascinating volume.

In the field of science fiction, Verrill was one of the pioneers. During the early years of periodical publication of this branch of speculative literature, he was one of the most prolific and most popular of writers. His work was largely based on his own experiences and the strange things he had seen in tropical Latin America. "The Bridge of Light" is recognized as his best work in this field.



A. HYATT VERRILL

THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT

By A. Hyatt Verrill

In the Wake of the Buccaneers
Under Peruvian Skies
Marooned in the Forest
The Ocean and Its Mysteries
Smugglers and Smuggling
Great Conquerors
The American Indian
Old Civilizations of the New World
Lost Treasures
Strange Shells and Their Stories
My Jungle Trails
Wonder Plants and Plant Wonders
The Shell Collector's Handbook
Etc.

THE

BRIDGE OF LIGHT

By

A. HYATT VERRILL

FANTASY PRESS
READING, PENNSYLVANIA . . . 1950

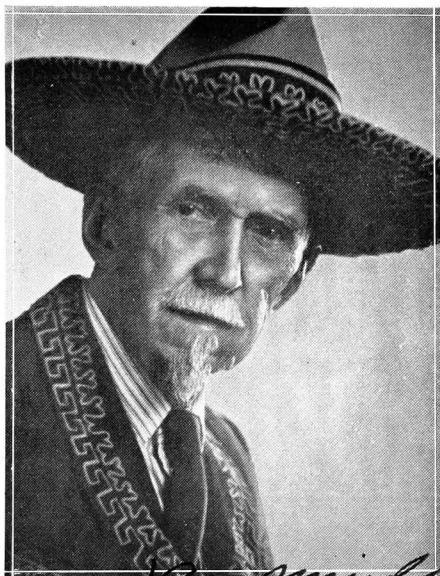
FIRST EDITION

Copyright 1950
by A. Hyatt Verrill

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form
without permission in writing from the publisher.

Copyright 1929 by Experimenter Publications, Inc.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



*Very sincerely
Albert Verneil*

This First Edition is limited to 2500 copies
of which 300 are numbered and autographed.

This is No. 4

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1	A Baffling Document	1
2	The Prophecy	13
3	Through the Valley of Death	23
4	The Tunnel of the Serpents	36
5	A Terrible Ordeal	47
6	Alone	57
7	The Bridge of Light	69
8	The Hidden City	81
9	Prince Aczopil	93
10	The Prince's Revelation	104
11	The Sorcerer	116
12	The Temple of the Plumed Serpent	125
13	The Mystery of the Green Sphere	139
14	Innovations	152
15	Nohul-Voh's Warning	169
16	The Monster of Sacrifices	180
17	The Sorcerer's Magic	193
18	The End of Kinchi-Haman	206
19	Long Live the King!	216
20	The Way of the Symbols	233

THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT

CHAPTER I

A BAFFLING DOCUMENT

LOOKING BACK UPON IT NOW I FIND IT DIFFICULT INDEED to convince myself that I actually passed through such amazing and incredible adventures as I am describing. Yet I have only to glance at my left arm and see the livid scars upon it in order to vividly recall every detail of my marvelous experience. Moreover, there is the tattooed symbol upon my chest, while if I needed further confirmation of the actuality of it all there is Itza. Surely she is very real, and should occasion arise she could confirm the greater part of my story.

Even as I am writing I have but to lift my eyes from the table before me in order to see her, seated in the hammock swung on the porch, her dark head bent over some delicate bit of handiwork, her rounded cheek and the curve of her neck glowing like old gold in the diffused light—as exotic as an orchid flower amid her conventional surroundings. But I find I am digressing, as I invariably do when I see or think of Itza.

It all began in a most ordinary way at Vigo, Spain. I was returning via Europe from an expedition to South America, and as my ship was to remain for several hours at Vigo I decided to stretch my sea-weary legs by a stroll through the picturesque port and, incidentally, have a look at the second-hand book shops where, on previous visits, I had picked up some most interesting old books and curios.

Ascending the steep Calle San Sebastian I reached the

Avenida Principal with its rush of traffic and crowded sidewalks, and turning to the right entered a narrow dark alley. A moment later I passed beneath a medieval archway and found myself in the Plazuela de Tres Santos, and stepped back into old Spain. But the tiny flagged plaza, the ancient sagging time-aged buildings, the picturesquely-clad people, the filth, squalor and odors were an old story to me. Scarcely glancing to left or right I crossed the plazuela to a ramshackle shop above whose door a faded sign informed the world that Miguel José Salceda bought and sold antiques, curios and second-hand articles of all descriptions.

It was a mere cubby hole in the massive wall of what once had been a monastery, but Miguel José had the entire plaza at his disposal and he had taken possession of several square yards of it. On boxes, tables and even upon the worn stone flagging the overflow of his stock in trade was piled and spread, looking for all the world as though the shop had spilled its contents into the square. Seated in the midst of the aggregation of everything imaginable in the shape of junk and odds and ends, was the proprietor himself. Propped against the wall in the shade, his hands clasped across his ample paunch Señor Salceda was enjoying his afternoon siesta.

Having no wish to disturb his slumbers, I moved about among his wares, examining the litter of battered, dust-covered books upon a rough deal table. Presently Don José raised his head, yawned prodigiously, stretched himself and opening his single eye caught sight of me. Instantly he sprang to his feet and hurried forward grinning until his leathery unshaven cheeks resembled a relief map of his native Pyrennes.

"*Gracias a Dios*, 'tis the English Señor again!" he cried, patting me on the back and embracing me in Spanish fashion. "And how is the illustrious Señor, and his dear Mamá and his lovely Señora and his four—no, I mistake, it is five—*ninitos*?"

"No, Don José," I replied with a laugh, "it is not the

English Señor but the Americano, and as I have neither mother, wife nor children—either four or five—I cannot tell you how they fare. Personally, *amigo*, I am in most excellent health as I trust is the case with yourself and your family.”

“*Si, si*, now I remember,” he declared. “But it is of no importance whether an Americano or an Ingles. They are the same species; all are rich, all are fond of books and all love their little jokes. As for the others—*Valgame Dios*, if you have no mother now you had one once—may her soul rest in peace—and you may yet have a lovely Señora and four or maybe five little ones. But you wish old books, Señor. Have you found what you desire?”

I asked the old fellow the price of the two volumes I had selected. One was a scarce edition of “Don Quixote”, the other a copy of a quaint old work on the Antilles, and both were battered, stained, their covers torn and warped, but in good condition within. Salceda, I knew, had no idea of the true value of his stock but priced articles according to the status of the prospective purchaser. And I was not surprised when he calmly informed me the two volumes were worth twenty pesetas.

“Not to me,” I told him, tossing the books upon the table. As I did so one of the volumes slipped to the pavement and as Salceda stooped to recover it, a piece of folded stained paper dropped from between the leaves.

“How much will your excellency pay?” he asked as he glanced at the paper in his hand.

“Ten pesetas, no more,” I replied.

“It is nothing, nothing for such fine old books,” he protested, “but the Señor Ingles—or is it Americano—knows what he can pay.”

As I counted out the money he half unfolded the scrap of paper he held and apparently deeming it worthless turned to toss it into a pile of rubbish. But I had caught a glimpse of red, blue and green upon it and thinking it might be an old map, I stayed his hand.

"Hold on," I exclaimed. "That belongs with the book."

"I think not, Señor," he said as he squinted at it, "but perhaps a map or an old picture left in the book by mistake. It is of no value, but the American Señor cares for old things and this is very old, *Si*," he continued as he again focussed his one eye upon the paper and cocked his head on one side. "*Si*, of a truth I should say it is antediluvian. So, if the Señor desires it—well, perhaps a peseta or two."

Very possibly, I thought, it was valueless and belonged in the rubbish, but I was curious to learn what it was, and handing Salceda two additional coins I slipped the stained and frayed paper into one of my books and departed with his fervent, "May you go with God, Señor," in my ears.

Little did I dream what a strange investment I had made or through what amazing experiences and adventures that fragment of paper would lead me. Indeed, at the time I gave it so little thought that it completely faded from my mind until we were well out at sea and I opened the "Explorations, Discoveries, Strange Sights and Remarkable Adventures in the Indies, etc." penned by imaginative Sebastian Gomez. Then coming upon my two peseta purchase, I unfolded it carefully, for it was creased and very old. The next moment I fairly gasped, staring incredulously at what I had revealed. One glance at the inner surface of the sheet had been enough.

It was a codex, one of those strange pictographic records kept by the ancient Aztecs and Mayas! Less than a dozen originals were in existence as far as known. Could this be an original or was it merely a copy? Could it be one of the lost codices? If so it was priceless, irreplaceable; and with shaking fingers, almost reverently, I examined and studied the texture of the material through my pocket lens. It was unquestionably ancient papyrus. The color, the technique of the green, red, blue and yellow figures proved it no copy. Old José had spoken far more truly than he had thought when he jokingly had pronounced it "antediluvian."

Incredulously I studied the codex which, by merest

chance, had come into my possession. I puzzled my brains to decipher or decode it, to recognize the figures of conventionalized human beings, of deities and weird beasts. I was familiar with Aztec pictographs and possessed a good knowledge of Mayan glyphs, but somehow these figures did not appear like either. Yet of the two they seemed more Mayan than Aztecan. A hope rose in my breast, a hope that I had stumbled upon one of the long-lost, missing records of the Mayas.

Only three Maya codices were known, yet there must have been many—hundreds in all probability—taken back to Spain as curios by the returning conquerors. Was it, therefore, beyond the bounds of possibility, even of probability, that some of these might yet be preserved, their value unknown to their owners, perhaps regarded as worthless scraps of paper or old maps, and that one such had been tucked between the pages of the ancient book I had purchased?

The more I thought of it the more reasonable it seemed. And if the bit of papyrus should prove to be a missing codex of the Mayas, then I had fallen head over heels into good luck. Not only would it be of incalculable scientific value, but in addition it would possess a very tangible and high value in good dollars and cents. That feature of the matter was a very important factor to me, I must confess. Scientists must live, and like most scientists—more especially archeologists and ethnologists—I was not overburdened with worldly goods. My last expedition had drained my resources, and even if I disposed of my collections, which would be a slow and uncertain procedure, I would be little better off than when I had started. But if the scrap of papyrus before me proved to be a Mayan codex, I need not worry over my future.

I chuckled to myself as my thoughts dwelt on such a possibility. I had devoted years to explorations in far-off lands, I had undergone hardships, had had my share of sufferings, had risked health and life a thousand times in

search of archeological finds, yet had found a far greater treasure in a second-hand shop in Vigo than in all my wanderings and explorations.

I brought myself back to earth with something of an effort. I was building castles in the air with no tangible basis for their foundation. The papyrus might be comparatively worthless, perhaps a copy or even a genuine codex made subsequent to the Spanish conquest. Until I could have its origin, its age and its value established by experts, I would dismiss the matter from my mind.

My first act after reaching London was to hurry to the British Museum with my find, and for once my old friend, Dr. Joyce, lost his habitual nonchalance when he examined the codex. He uttered an ejaculation of astonishment, his eyes sparkled and he became obviously excited.

"Extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "What a jolly find! Of course I cannot be positive on such a superficial examination," he continued, "but it unquestionably is a codex, and I should surmise of Mayan origin. The date symbols are assuredly Mayan, but there are other details that excite doubt. But of course we know so very little about Mayan codices. And it seems to bear certain Aztec characteristics. Possible it is a codex of an independent Maya state that came under Aztec influence. But we should be able to ascertain its age; the date symbols are very clear."

He studied it carefully. "Ah, here it is!" he cried jubilantly. "If I am not mistaken this symbol reads 8 Ahau 12—or is it 13? Well, either 12 or 13, the units are highly decorated and involved. But anyway, 8 Ahau and either 12 or 13 Ceh in the Calendar Round. There appears to be an Initial Series date also. However, the Calendar Round will place its age approximately. Let me see, that would be about 90-94 B.C."

I gasped. The codex, if Dr. Joyce had not made an error—and he was probably the greatest living authority on the subject—was more than two thousand years old! But aside from deciphering the date, Dr. Joyce could make little

more of the codex than could I. And before I could turn it into cash, before it held any great scientific value, it was essential that I find someone who could establish its origin, its identity and its meaning.

At Dr. Joyce's suggestion I next visited Oxford and called on Professor McCleod, who, as everyone knows, had made a life study of ancient American glyphs and symbols. But once again I was disappointed, for Professor McLeod could throw no greater light on the subject than could Dr. Joyce.

Following this I made the rounds of nearly all the archeologists and students of pre-Columbian American races, but without results. All agreed that the papyrus was a genuine codex, all agreed that it bore features of Mayan origin, and all agreed that it was so distinct from all other known codices that it was an insoluble puzzle to them. Also all agreed that if its origin could be established it would be the most valuable codex in existence and readily salable for many thousands of pounds.

So with the codex still a mystery I sailed for New York and lost no time in consulting the many experts on Central American and Mexican archeology. But I obtained little more information than I had secured in England. The American Museum in New York City. The Museum of the American Indian, the Peabody Museum of Cambridge, the Pennsylvania Museum and scores of others were visited. But neither Dr. Whistler, Professor Saville, Dr. Spinden, Dr. Mason nor any other of the scores of authorities I consulted dared express a definite opinion. The codex was genuine, it was remarkable, its date was established, but beyond that it was the greatest puzzle that had confronted the most eminent archeologists in many years.

I did, however, secure some additional information. One scientist established the fact that the codex recorded some historical event and a migration. Another was positive it dealt with a myth or a prophecy and he identified the symbol of Kukulcan, the Maya's hero-god or "plumed serpent" as

the dominating figure; while a third authority discovered symbols indicating that the codex embodied the features of a map and described some unknown locality.

By this time my interest in the monetary value of the codex had become submerged in my curiosity to learn its origin and import, and I decided that my only chance of doing so was to visit the authorities at the Museo Nacional in Mexico City.

Professor Alessandro Cervantes received me cordially and with enthusiasm for he had already heard of my puzzling codex and was elated that I should have brought it to him. He was tremendously excited as he examined it, declared positively it was genuine, assured me it was Mayan and unhesitatingly placed it as belonging to the Old Empire period of the Maya civilization, and hence of Guatemalan origin.

"Of a truth it is most wonderful, most astounding!" he exclaimed. "In all the world there is no such other. All known are of the New Empire. It is beyond price, amigo. If it can be deciphered it will solve many mysteries. It may hold the key to matters which have puzzled us for many years. It deals with Kukulcan, as my friend Saville stated. It tells of a migration and a prophecy both, and it is historical, religious and mythological all in one. But," he shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands, "my poor knowledge is inadequate to decipher it in detail. However," he continued as he noticed my disappointment at his words, "I have a very good friend who, I feel sure, can succeed where all others have failed. He dwells not here in Mexico but in the little village of Xibaltango in Guatemala."

"In that case I shall go to Guatemala," I declared. "Will you give me a letter of introduction to your friend?"

"Most gladly!" he assured me. "He is a poor priest—a most holy and devoted Padre who gives his last centavos to the Indios of his parish and goes hungry that they may eat. And when I scold him for so doing, what answer does Fray José make me? That it is the duty of all Spaniards,

and of priests in particular, to make what amends they may for the wrongs and cruelties inflicted upon the Indians by Spaniards in the past. *Caramba, amigo*, what reasoning! Were I, who have the blood of Aztecs in my veins, to go in rags and with bare feet and with empty stomach, would it bring Montezuma back to life? Would such actions cancel the tortures of Guatemozin on the rack?

"But Padre José is most holy and most wise and a deep student of all the past of his country. Si, Señor, he speaks a dozen of the native dialects, he knows the myths and legends of the Indios as well as they do themselves; he takes part in their fiestas, and he is beloved by them all. And he reads the ancient Maya glyphs as easily as he reads Castilian or the Latin of his office. Si, *amigo*, Fray José is the one man who may be able to solve the riddle of your puzzling codex."

* * *

I found Fray José in his modest quarters adjoining the ancient church in the tiny Indian village of Xibaltango. I had expected to see a cowed and tonsured priest, a grayed ascetic bent with years and with face seamed with the marks of self-denial, fasting and a rigorous life. In fact I had visualized him as a living counterpart of a martyr or a saint. Instead, the man who greeted me was short, corpulent, with a round brown face, merry gray eyes and smiling lips; and in place of cassock and cowl he wore a costume of hand-woven Indian cotton. If, as Professor Cervantes had said, the Padre starved himself in order that his Indians might eat, then most assuredly he thrived on starvation, for he looked the picture of health.

He was as jolly and as merry as his features implied, and he welcomed me effusively, apologizing for his home but assuring me, in true Spanish fashion, that such as it was it was all mine.

"But what would you?" he cried as with his beretta he dusted off an antique leather chair and asked me to be seated. "What would you? I am remote, alone, in the wilderness

among the Indios and I see not one white man, one stranger in many years. Yet I am not lonely. I am happy, I love the Indios—though of a truth my labors are of little avail. They are all Christians; all attend my little church, all are baptized, christened, married and buried according to the rites of the Church; but, as the Señor knows, they are ever pagans at heart. Not one there is, I feel sure, who does not secretly worship the old gods, who does not follow out the old religion of the Mayas. They are Christians to please me, to gain what they may and because they do not feel too certain whether the Christian or the pagan God is the more powerful.

"But they are good children, Señor, kind and lovable and generous and I find life far from dull, what with my religious duties and studying the ancient traditions and striving in my poor way to decipher the inscriptions and to unravel the mysteries of the past. And my very good friend, Professor Alessandro, tells me in his letter that you have a codex even he cannot decipher. I fear me, Señor, that if he has failed, my poor knowledge will be of little service."

But Padre José deprecated his ability and his knowledge. "Wonderful!" he cried as he studied the codex. "It is indeed of the Old Empire. It is a sacred codex, a religious myth and a history dealing with Kukulcan. But, Señor, it is unlike any other. It is, I am sure, a codex in cipher. Often, on the monuments, I have found inscriptions which I feel certain are in cipher and in this wonderful codex I see some of the same symbols. That is the reason why no one has been able to read it. One must know the key, the code, to interpret its meaning. But, much as I regret to admit it, only a Maya of the priest-cult would possess that knowledge."

I was sorely disappointed. I had traveled thousands of miles. I had wasted months of time and had exhausted my resources only to find that I had accomplished nothing. I laughed bitterly.

"In that case," I said, "the codex never will be deciphered. It is worth only its value as a curio specimen.

In order to find the man who could read it I would have to go back several centuries and be here before the Spanish conquest. The Maya priests are things of the dead past."

The Padre's eyes twinkled and he chuckled. "Perhaps, my son, I may be able to help you accomplish that miracle," he said. "Would you care to step into the past and meet one of the long-vanished priest clan of the Mayas?"

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed. "Do some of them still survive?"

He nodded. "Many things exist of which the outside world knows nothing," he declared. "Many of the Indios still worship in the ancient temples and to do so they must have priests of the old faith. Though it is guarded as a profound secret, yet the priest clans still survive. I, alone of all white men, have learned something of them. The Indios trust me, and, I believe love me for the little I have done to help them, and they have confided in me to some extent.

"Sí, Señor, I know of temples wherein they yet worship the gods of their ancestors, and I know one priest of the cult of Xibalda who might reveal to you the contents of your codex. Were I in person to go to him I feel certain he would do so, but that I cannot do, for my duty lies here. However, I will give to you that which will win his confidence and mayhap, with your knowledge of the Indians' ways, you may induce him to aid you. *Quien sabe?*"

I was elated. Even if I accomplished nothing in regard to the codex I would have the opportunity of studying the ancient priest cult, and I felt confident that the scientific discoveries I would make would amply repay me. But I soon learned that my visit to the Mayan priest was not to be accomplished as easily as I had expected.

"Katchilcan, the priest of Xibalda, speaks only his Zutugil dialect," the Padre informed me. "No doubt he understands some Spanish—he may even be able to converse in that tongue, but he will not do so. If you are to visit his village, in fact if you are to journey through the country,

you must learn the Maya language. But that matter, to you who have learned so many Indian dialects, will not require a great time and will not be difficult. My own knowledge is not accurate enough to enable me to teach you, but I have a friend, an Indio who cares for my chapel at Totil, who speaks Spanish fluently and is most intelligent. It was he who instructed me and if you do not mind the time and the journey you can stop at Totil and from Pedro acquire a knowledge of the Zutigil tongue. And Totil is on the route to the village of Katchilcan."

Once having made up my mind to exhaust every chance of learning the contents of the codex and establishing its identity beyond question, I was not to be balked by the obstacle of learning a new Indian dialect, and a few days later, I bade farewell to the Padre Jose and started for the remote village of Totil.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROPHECY

NOW ALL THAT I HAVE WRITTEN ABOVE IS MERELY A preamble or introduction to my tale, and while I deem it necessary in order that my readers may understand the events which paved the way for my amazing experiences, many may find such explanations and details tiresome and devoid of interest, and may prefer to plunge headlong into the story of my adventures which rightly begins when I finally set forth on my journey to the village of Katchilcan.

It is needless to describe the details of my trip to Totil or to relate my experiences while I remained there studying the ancient Zutugil language under the tutelage of patient Pedro, who, being in charge of Fray Jose's most outlying chapel, regarded himself as a dignitary of the Church of Rome and the most exalted and important personage in the district. Suffice to say that at the end of six weeks, Pedro assured me that I had mastered enough of his native tongue to continue on my journey, although he added: "No white man can learn the tongue of my people. Even Fray Jose speaks it always with the tongue of the white man."

I had said nothing of my purpose to Pedro, for I well knew how very rapidly and mysteriously news travels among the Indians and I preferred not to have Katchilcan learn of my intended visit in advance of my arrival. And when at last I left Totil and, accompanied by four Indians who were to act as guides, porters and camp-boys, I started on what I then believed to be the last lap of my journey, I found

myself wondering how the Maya priest would receive me, and whether or not he would reveal the contents of the codex. But Fray Jose had appeared to feel that Katchilcan would aid me after receiving the "that" which, the Padre had assured me, would win the confidence of the Maya priest and establish me in his good graces.

This open sesame to Katchilcan's friendship and trust was a strange combination of the ancient and the modern, the pagan and the Christian. Upon a sheet of paper bearing the figure of the Cross, the Padre had written a message in Mayan symbols; and accompanying this, was a little bag of painted hide containing a medal of St. Christopher and a tiny golden image of a Mayan deity. Good Fray Jose was no narrow-minded bigot but was willing to recognize conditions as they were and to make necessary concessions to occasions that arose. If the Indians were willing to please him by assuming the veneer of Christianity, he was equally ready to reciprocate by pleasing the Indians to the extent of employing pagan symbols and following pagan customs, even though he had no more faith in them than the Indians had in his Church and its rites.

At Totil I left all traces of civilization behind. Beyond was all an unknown wilderness, almost uninhabited country; a land of vast forests, great mountains, wide plains; a land where even the old conquerors had not penetrated. For miles we saw no signs of human beings. Along our route were only the occasional huts of half-savage Indians or clusters of thatched homes of tribesmen whose ancestors, centuries before, had been under Mayan dominion, though showing no traces of the culture of that wonderful race.

But if no traces remained in the people, there were abundant evidences in the mute remains the Mayas had left behind. Again and again we came upon huge stone columns or stellae, wonderful monoliths that under other conditions, I would have examined and studied with intense interest. Twice, too, we passed enormous ruined temples with great trees growing from their summits, tropical shrubs and tan-

gled vines sprouting from the cracked walls of sculptured stone, mere ruins yet still imposing in their majestic proportions and the intricacy of their elaborate design and carved facades. And once we gazed from a hilltop upon the ruins of an immense city upon a plain beside a river. But all was silent, deserted, forsaken and forgotten. Truly my visit to the little shop in Vigo was leading me far afield.

For eleven days we traveled, following trails visible only to the eyes of my Indian guides, hewing a way through jungles, following rivers, ascending mountains, marching through great open forests. The trip seemed endless; I had begun to fear my Indians had lost their way when, issuing from the dense forest, we came abruptly to a cleared plain. Tilled fields of maize, sweet potatoes and other crops covered acres of the land, and in the centre of the cultivated area was a village of thatch-roofed houses gleaming like gold in the sunshine.

That the modern village occupied the site of an ancient city was evident. Ruins of massive stone walls and building rose above the waving corn and banana trees. Towering high above the village was a great pyramidal mound topped by a temple bearing an ornate roof-comb, and as we entered the settlement we passed between two rows of sculptured stone columns. I gazed at them in utter amazement for they were gay with red, white and green paint, and at their bases were offerings of fruits and flowers. There was no doubt that here in this remote village the old faiths still survived, that here the ancient gods were still worshipped in the temple wherein, no doubt, Katchilcan still officiated, although Fray Jose had not mentioned it.

My thoughts were cut short as we reached the more populated district and I glanced about at the inhabitants. Some scurried out of sight at our approach, others stared curiously as we passed, a few wore hostile scowls while others smiled friendly greeting. But one and all were totally unlike any Indians I had ever seen. I felt as if I had actually

stepped back five hundred years, as if I had dropped into a Mayan village of the days of Cortez.

On every side were living counterparts of Maya sculptured figures. Here were the artificially-distorted skulls, the heavy hooked noses, the elaborate ornate costumes so typical of the Mayas' bas reliefs. Not that every individual was of that type. Many were ordinary every day Indians, but in every case the costumes were those of the old Mayas. There was not a shirt, a hat or a pair of trousers in the whole village. The Padre had left much untold, perhaps wishing to give me a surprise, or perchance it was all so familiar to him that he had forgotten to mention the details. But with such people all about me, with the huge temple still in perfect repair towering above my head, it seemed perfectly natural that in this spot the old priest-cult of the Mayas should still be maintained. And it spoke volumes for Fray Jose's sympathy with the natives and for the Indians' faith in the Padre that he had been permitted to visit this village and had become friendly with the Maya priest, and that I should have been allowed to reach the spot without interference or molestation.

As we neared a low stone structure with a frieze of sculptured jaguar heads and entwined serpents a man stepped from the low doorway, and instantly my Indians halted, stooped and gathering handfuls of dust from the street scattered it over their heads. The gesture of thus humbling themselves was enough to identify the man in the doorway as the high-priest of their ancient faith.

He was very old. His hair was white, his brown face was wrinkled, seamed and creased. His cheek bones seemed on the point of breaking through the tightly-drawn skin; his eyes were so sunken that they appeared mere pin points of light in the depths of their sockets and between his eagle-beak nose and his sharp bony chin his lips were like a gash amid the cavernous wrinkles. In his ears he wore huge plugs of carved jadeite; about his scrawny turtle-like neck was a necklace of huge turquoises, garnets and crystal from

which depended a gold disk representing the sun. About his head was a fillet of cotton woven in a geometrical pattern of red, white and green and with two long tail feathers of the Quetzal rising above his forehead. He was dressed in a single loose robe of black cotton ornamented with intricate designs in the sacred red, white and green of the ancient Mayas and he leaned upon a staff of polished black wood elaborately carved and with the upper half covered with turquoise mosaic work. For a space I could scarcely believe that he was not a vision, that he was actually a living being of flesh and blood.

In silence he peered at me and a frown deepened the wrinkles on his forehead, until, recovering my senses, I greeted him in Zutugil and handed him the paper and the skin bag I had received from Padre Jose.

Instantly as his claw-like fingers grasped the token, his manner changed. The frown vanished, he nodded his head, and he welcomed me to his village. In this manner did I meet Katchilcan, high-priest of Tohil the Rumbler, the god of the Kitche-Maya, and descendant of the royal line of the Great Serpent of Mayapan. Fray Jose had spoken truly when he had said he would help me to step into the distant past, for Katchilcan was the past personified.

But even if he was of the past, yet he was thoroughly aware of the present. How old he was, no one, not even he, could say, and no doubt he exaggerated his age when he declared that his parents had been killed by the soldiers of Toniatihuh (Alvarado) and that he could himself remember the Padre Landa. Yet who can say? Who can state positively that an Indian may not live for centuries? Be that as it may, Katchilcan was very, very old, a centenarian beyond question, with the wisdom of his years, a keen alert brain and steeped in the lore, the mythology, the legends, the customs and the history of his people. Though he still officiated at the temple and carried out the rites and ceremonies of the Maya faith, yet he realized that his religion and his people were doomed.

Never having come into contact with any Christian priest other than Fray Jose, he regarded the Padre as the head of both the Christian faith and the entire white race, and as such he held the most profound respect and reverence for him, quite aside from his personal friendship. For these reasons he received me as the direct representative of Fray Jose and treated me as the latter's envoy. But I was too familiar with Indian psychology to reveal the purpose of my visit at once. Impatient as I was, I bided my time, waiting until I should become well acquainted with Katchilcan, and had established myself firmly in his confidence, before I even showed him my codex.

But when at last I felt the time was ripe and I spread the papyrus before him I was wholly unprepared for the effect it produced. With a strange sharp cry he fell upon his knees, cast dust upon his head and in his thin cracked voice commenced chanting an unintelligible dialect. Then rising, he reverently returned the codex to my hands.

"Blessed by the gods are you, my lord," he cried. "I am an old man, but were I a youth in my strength I would gladly give half of my life to possess that book."

I gasped. What secret, what tremendous import did the codex hold? What had caused the old priest to be so deeply affected by his first glance at it? Why would he have given half of his life to have owned it?

Eagerly I questioned him. For a time he was silent, motionless, absorbed in thought. Then at last he spoke.

"My lord does not know?" he asked. "My lord does not know that he has the book of Kukulcan? That he holds in his hand the prophecy of him who was known to Mayapan as the 'snake with feathers'? That he holds the secret of that prophecy and its fulfillment, that he possesses the symbols which no other man has ever seen?"

"Know you then, my lord, that in the long ago ere Kukulcan the 'plumed serpent' departed, he gave unto my people a prophecy. Great should the people of my race be, mighty their power and their conquests, yet in the end they

should wither and die. Those who built the temples and carved and placed the images should be forgotten and those who remained should war one with another and should be scattered far and wide. And they should be divided among themselves and should forget their greatness and their gods and arts. But some few of the great ones should survive, and should go far from their homes to a secret place called Mictolan and there they should remain and reverence their old gods and follow their old faith and worship within their temples and should abide, until in the fullness of the allotted time, they should be called forth by their gods and once again should rule the land and again be great and should cast down the new gods.

"That they might know when their gods called them forth, the wise Kukulcan caused a book to be made telling of the prophecy and of Mictolan and its hidden people, and bearing the symbol that would serve as a token to let the people know that the allotted time had passed when the book with the symbol was brought to them.

"To you, my lord, that token has come, which, borne to the people of Mictolan, shall call them forth to once again rule in the land and cast down the new gods and once more become a mighty people. Blessed by the gods of my fathers is my lord. And that it should fall to a white man to bear the symbol and to fulfill the prophecy is not strange, for Kukulcan the Plumed Serpent was white of skin and was bearded, and it was said in the prophecy that a son of his sons should bear the book with the symbol-token of Kukulcan."

I was utterly dumbfounded at the old priest's words. But of course I did not take them literally. Much of what he had said was the same well known ancient legend or myth familiar to all students of Maya and Aztec history. Much of the so-called prophecy I had heard before for it was common to the Mayas, the Aztecs and even Incas, and much of what had been foretold centuries before the conquest, had already occurred exactly as prophesied. Or perhaps, Indian

like, the people had invented the prophecy to fit the facts.

Also, over and over again, I, like many others, had heard the tradition or legend, even rumors, of the remnants of the race dwelling in some remote, hidden secret district where they still retained their ancient customs and religion. Was it possible there might be some truth in these stories? On a smaller scale similar colonies had survived. There was the Aztec colony in the hidden valley in Mexico of which Professor Cervantes had told me. There was that isolated group of Incans in the interior of Peru which had been discovered by Dr. Armand. And I could see no reason why, somewhere in the wild interior of Guatemala or southern Mexico, a similar colony of the Mayas might not also exist.

For that matter, here was the village where I sat, where the aged Katchilcan still held sway, where the ancient temple was in daily use, where the sacred fire burned continuously, where Tohil the Rumbler-God and Xibalda the Great Serpent were worshipped, where the people still lived as had their ancestors centuries before, and yet neither hidden nor secreted from the rest of the world. If such villages and such people could survive was there anything improbable in the idea of others, entirely cut off from the world, retaining even more of the ancient life and customs?

At all events, I was convinced of one thing. My codex was the record of the prophecy of Kukulcan; it was Mayan and of the Old Empire. I had journeyed far to learn the truth but all was now clear. I possessed a priceless document of the Mayas, a codex more valuable than any other in existence, and if Katchilcan had not drawn upon his imagination, the actual work of that semi-mythical hero-god, the Plumed Serpent, Kukulcan, or as he was known to the Aztecs, Quetzalcoatl himself. Naturally, I was tremendously elated. But I was filled with curiosity and a desire to learn more details of the story of the secret colony, and I wondered just how much Katchilcan actually knew, and how much he had left untold.

"Did the prophecy fall out as foretold?" I asked him.

"Do the survivors of your people still worship the old gods and await the coming of the bearer of the token? And where, O, most Wise One, is the place called Mictolan?"

The old man's eyes held a far away look as though he were gazing into the past and seeing the glories of the civilization of his ancestors. But at my words he came back to earth and turned toward me, his deep-set eyes seeming to pierce my innermost thoughts.

"That I cannot say, my lord," he replied. "But being a prophecy of the mighty Kukulcan, it must of a surety have been fulfilled so far. Did my people not vanish? Did they not forsake their gods? Do they not speak the Pipil, the Kitche, the Zutugil and other tongues? Why then should I doubt that the great ones yet dwell in Mictolan? But where this place may be I know not. Upon the book that my lord has, a part of the symbol is missing. Yet I can read that it lies to the north and west." He waved his skinny arm in an all-embracing gesture toward the endless mountains.

"And—" he lowered his voice, "mayhap of this I should not speak, but to him who has the Master's book I feel I may speak freely. Although I cannot say where lies this place of Mictolan, yet in the book it is written that great bars are placed in the way to that place, and cleverly was it hidden, and magic surrounds it.

"To reach it one must pass through the Valley of Death, through the tunnel of the Serpents, through the Pit of the great Zotonal (crocodile). And even having passed such perils, one must cross the eight deserts with the raging whirlwind that cuts solid rock and must face the demon Ixputeque and the fiend Neztpehua in the realm of hot ashes and the two blazing mountains, and at last must enter the Cave of the Bats and cross the Bridge of Life. Did I not say, my lord, that I would give half of my life to possess the book of Kukulcan?

"Why, my lord? Because it is foretold that to him who has the book and comes by it honestly, the way to Mictolan shall be made easy, and he shall be welcomed as a great lord

and shall win peace and happiness and shall forever abide with the gods. So, my lord, I was told by my father, who had it from his father and from his father's father before him for many generations."

Very impressive were the old priest's words. There was something indescribably convincing about his manner, perhaps something hypnotic. There, in the ancient room, with the priest so like a Mayan sculptured figure, with the still more ancient codex—the Book of Kukulcan—in my hands, there seemed nothing improbable, nothing incongruous in his weird story. The prophecy seemed very real, although under any other circumstances I might have scoffed at it, regarded the whole thing as a fanciful myth. But there, with the words of Katchilcan in my ears, somehow I felt a conviction that it was all true, that I was destined to find the secret city of Mictolan, and that the entire chain of circumstances and coincidences from finding the codex in the book at Vigo to my coming to this village and meeting Katchilcan were ordained by fate or destiny.

Strange as it may appear now, at that time it never even occurred to me that I might fail, that having no definite knowledge of the site of Mictolan (provided such a place existed) I might never find it. And quite as if I had planned from the beginning to do so, I at once set about my preparations for starting forth on what, had I been in my sober senses, would have appeared to me the wildest of wild goose chases, the most preposterous and ridiculous of ventures.

CHAPTER 3

THROUGH THE VALLEY OF DEATH



OLD KATCHILCAN SEEMED TO TAKE IT AS A MATTER OF course that I would attempt to carry the codex to Mictolan. This was not surprising, for he believed implicitly in the prophecy, the legend and the codex, and as a natural result he had equal faith in my being the foreordained means of carrying the message of the codex to the hidden people.

As time passed, I became absolutely convinced that there was more than a mere foundation of fact in the Maya priest's story. There was the codex; and now that I had an inkling of its meaning, the key to it as I might say, I could decipher much of it myself, and as I studied it from my new angle, I marveled that some one of the many experts who had seen it had not interpreted its meaning.

To be sure, they had come very near solving the riddle. They had recognized its association with Kukulcan, that it dealt with a migration and a locality and that it was a combination of religious, historical and geographical symbols, all of which it was. But not one had discovered that the codex itself was a symbol or a key, although Padre Jose had come close to it when he had suggested that it might be a cipher or the key to a cipher.

But as I studied the codex in the light of Katchilcan's interpretation I realized why the scientists had failed and had been so puzzled over its peculiar features and its origin, its resemblance to both Mayan and Aztec codices, for it dealt with a legend and a prophecy common to both races. Kukul-

can and Quetzalcoatl were identical; and I was convinced that the document was prepared in the style of the semi-mythical Toltecs so that in case it came into possession of either an Aztec or a Maya its meaning and importance would be equally plain. But, unfortunately, the most important part of it, the location of the hidden city of Mictolan, was missing.

I would have given a great deal to have had that missing edge of the papyrus, but there was no sense in bemoaning its loss. And now that I was sure of the immense scientific and monetary value of the codex I was determined to insure its safety and for several days I busied myself making a very accurate copy, even duplicating the creases, the blurred portions and the stains and discolored areas of the original. I then packed the real codex in a wrapping of oiled silk and sealed it in an aluminum container.

Meanwhile I had made every possible enquiry in regard to the district to the northwest, and with Katchilcan's aid I had secured the services of several of the Indians who were familiar with the country and all the trails leading into the district. But even they admitted their knowledge of the terrain was limited to a comparatively short distance. Beyond that all was unknown unexplored country regarded with superstitious fear by the Indians. In fact, they appeared to be in such dread of the area that I was surprised that any of the villagers could be induced to accompany me, but their faith and trust in Katchilcan were greater than their fears. He assured them that as I was under the direct protection of their gods, and even hinted that I was on a sacred mission, hence they felt that in my presence they would be safe.

At last all was in readiness for my strange and decidedly hare-brained venture. Supplies of maize, cacao, cassava and dried venison had been prepared and hammocks had been made. These, with the outfit I had brought with me, were enough to see my party through an expedition of at least two months, within which period I felt I would have succeeded, or failing in my quest, would return to the village.

Then, having written a long letter to Fray Jose, in which I told him of the results of my visit to Katchilcan and of my plans, I left the village and with my little party headed for the distant mountains.

For the first few days it was fairly easy traveling. But as we began to ascend the mountains the trails became fewer and finally vanished; the country became wilder and we were obliged to proceed wholly by general direction and the easiest route. Often large streams, deep ravines or impassable cliffs barred our way and we were compelled to make long detours. But we were making headway. Higher and higher the summits of the mountains loomed ahead and ever steeper became our way. Not a sign of a human being had we seen since leaving the open plain and then one day we came suddenly upon the ruins of what once had been an immense temple.

Its presence revived my hopes. Here was proof that the district had once been inhabited by the Mayas, and very carefully I examined the sculptured lintels of the doorways searching for possible date glyphs. The greater portion of the carved characters had been chipped, flaked and almost obliterated by time and the elements, but among them I found two that proved the structure belonged to the Old Empire. It was a most reassuring discovery, for if there was any truth in the old legend, if the Mayas had migrated northwesterly toward Mictolan, their migration had undoubtedly consumed many years and in all probability they had erected monuments and temples along their route.

This supposition seemed to be confirmed as almost daily we came upon monuments, some rudely carved rocks, others stellae covered with symbols and figures, and at other times the remains of buildings. Often, as I examined these I marveled at thought of the stupendous labor which must have been expended in cutting the great stone blocks, the long periods of time that must have been required to carve the intricate, ornate sculptures that covered every square inch of their surfaces; and the ever-present mystery of how

such work was accomplished came back to me more forcibly than ever before.

By what means, by what magic had the ancient people accomplished feats in stone-cutting, in rock sculpture which we, with modern steel tools and machinery could not duplicate in years of unrelenting labor? Was I destined to solve the riddle? What a scientific triumph it would be if I should succeed in finding an isolated, hidden city of the Mayas, a spot where they still carried on their ancient arts, where I actually could watch and study the process or the means by which they accomplished their amazing feats.

Filled with such thoughts and conjecture, possessed with a strange feeling of assurance, I led my Indians onward, until, on the nineteenth day after leaving the village, we toiled slowly up a steep mountain side covered with a dense forest. Then, abruptly, the jungle ended and we halted gazing in amazement. Before us the flat mountain top had been cleared of trees and brush and in the centre of the open space stood a low massive building of a type I had never before seen.

Filled with interest and curiosity, and at the time giving no thought to the peculiar fact that the vegetation had been cleared away, I hurried forward, intent only on examining the strange temple. It was in remarkably good condition, and anxious to examine its interior, I stepped through the doorway flanked by carved stone columns representing conventionalized jaguars with serpents' heads. A strange odor filled the place. Sniffing rather suspiciously, striving to identify the smell, I stood motionless, waiting for my eyes to adjust themselves to the semi-darkness. Then suddenly I realized what it was; it was the odor of burning flesh!

What could it mean? Was it possible that?—yes, it must be—the temple must have been recently used. Instantly memory of the clearing, the condition of the ancient building swept over me. The temple was still in use. Somewhere, very recently a sacrifice had been made upon the altar within the building. Somewhere in the vicinity there must be In-

dians who still worshipped their gods in the old temple.

I glanced about. Opposite to where I stood was a second doorway. I stepped toward it. The smell of burning flesh was stronger. I reached the doorway, peered within and halted in my tracks, staring agape, incredulously at what I saw.

On a raised dais was a gigantic image of the god Zotzilha, grotesquely hideous, with his death's head, his outspread bat-like wings, his misshapen body. Before the image upon a sacrificial altar of polished jasper was the half-consumed body of a girl resting on the dull red embers of a fire. But I scarcely saw the god or the sacrifice, for prostrate before the idol and the altar were a dozen naked Indians.

To have entered that sacred spot would have been to meet instant death; and only the fact that the savages' attentions were riveted upon the stone god had prevented me from being seen. At any instant I might be discovered. Quickly, with fast-beating heart, I stepped back. My elbow brushed against the wall, a fragment of dislodged masonry rattled to the floor, and instantly at the sound, every Indian turned in my direction. With savage shouts they leaped to their feet and rushed at me. Why I was not struck down, killed or terribly wounded and offered as a sacrifice to their outraged god I shall never know. Perhaps they desired to take me alive in order to torture me. Perchance I was the first white man they had ever seen and were in some awe or fear of me. But whatever the reason I was not harmed.

Before I could make a move to resist I was overpowered, although to have attempted resistance would have been hopeless. Then, quickly I was bound and trussed up, and with triumphant shouts my captors dragged me into the sacrificial room and threw me upon the stone flagging before the altar with its gruesome sacrifice.

Was this to be the end of my quest? Was I doomed to be sacrificed upon the jasper altar? Yet even in my extremity and my terror—for I frankly admit I was terrified—I found myself speculating upon the identity of my captors.

In fact, I began to wonder if they might not be the people I had come to find; if, through the centuries, they had not degenerated, reverted to semi-savagery, and if the hidden city was not a myth and the old temple all that remained of what had once been a large settlement.

My speculations were cut short by the Indian who appeared to be the priest or chief, for he wore numerous gold ornaments, a feather headdress and, if anything, was more savage in appearance than his fellows. He stormed at me angrily but I could not understand a word of what he said. I spoke to him in Zutugil, in Nahuatl and in Spanish but my words evidently were as meaningless to him as his to me. Scowling and glaring at me he sprang forward, seized me by the shoulders and shook me furiously, and as he did so the copy of my codex fell from the breast pocket of my coat. Instantly he pounced upon it and I mentally thanked Heaven that it was not the original, even though at that moment there seemed little chance that the document would ever be of service to me.

For a brief moment the savage stared at the strip of papyrus. Then, with a wild cry, he leaped at me, a long-bladed obsidian knife gleaming in his upraised hand. I felt certain my last moment had come. But instead of plunging the weapon into my throat or breast, he slashed through the cords that bound me and falling to his knees prostrated himself before me.

Rising to my feet I glanced about. All the Indians were on their knees, their foreheads touching the floor. Whoever they were, whatever their race, they recognized the codex and knew its meaning. The book of Kukulcan had saved my life.

Slowly the Indians rose, glancing apprehensively at me, regarding me as if I were a superior being, which is exactly what I seemed to them. But I had no desire to remain in that chamber reeking of human sacrifice. Picking up the copy of the codex, I strode to the door and into the open air followed by the silent, half-terrified, half-wondering but

wholly respectful and subdued savages.

To my utter dismay, my Indians were nowhere to be seen. Only my bags and packages remained, scattered about where they had been dropped and abandoned by the carriers. No doubt they had heard the savage yells from within the temple, and having no desire to become martyrs in my behalf, they had taken to their heels, for which I could not blame them.

But their hurried exit had left me in a nice fix. What was I to do? Without porters to transport my outfit I could not go on. I could not go back. I was stranded, deserted among those wild savage Indians of the mountains.

The chief solved the problem. Timidly approaching me, he pointed to the abandoned dunnage and by graphic gestures indicated the flight of my men. Then he pointed at his companions, grinned, again pointed at the baggage, and swinging about, waved his hands in the direction of the higher mountains towering against the sky. No one could have misunderstood his meaning. He realized what had occurred and he was offering to send his tribesmen with me to serve as porters. Perhaps he felt that he would be honored by serving me, and very probably he felt that he must make amends for the treatment I had received at his hands.

At any rate, I indicated my acceptance of his offer, and springing forward he himself shouldered the largest of my packages as his fellows almost fought for the opportunity of carrying the others. I had no idea where these savages lived, whether they had a village near, whether they had come from some distant spot to worship in the temple. Neither did I know how they knew my purpose or my route, unless the chief had deciphered the codex. But they seemed instinctively to know the direction to follow, and thinking that possibly they had some inkling of the location of Mictolan, I followed after.

For three days we climbed mountains, descended precipitous slopes, waded rushing streams and struggled through dense jungles. I could not converse with the Indians other-

wise than by signs, but we managed to get along. They made the camps, secured game, caught fish, cooked the food and carried the burdens. And when, on one occasion, we came upon a tapir and whipping out my revolver I shot the beast, I had ample evidence that they never before had been in contact with white men. With wild cries they dropped their loads, fell upon the ground and fairly grovelled at my feet.

When, after some difficulty, I got them up and they examined the dead animal they instantly prostrated themselves a second time. Obviously they had never seen or heard firearms, and thereafter I had only to touch the butt of my weapon to cause them to shake with terror and bob their heads to the earth. For the first time in all my wanderings and my experiences among Indians, I fully realized how the old Dons must have felt and what power they must have held by virtue of their firearms.

Two days after this incident we topped a rise, and before us, looming clear against the horizon, I saw two great conical peaks. For a space I gazed at them, and then as a thin column of vapor drifted from the peak to the right, the words of Katchilcan came vividly to my mind. In enumerating the dangers that must be met in order to reach Mictolan, he had mentioned the "two blazing mountains". Was it possible that the two volcanoes before me were these? Was I upon the right track? Was I nearing my goal?

My hopes rose. Unless the old Maya priest possessed actual knowledge how had he guessed there were two active volcanoes here? He had declared it was so written in the codex, but I had not noticed symbols of volcanoes. I examined the paper again while the Indians grovelled on the earth at mere sight of it. Katchilcan was right! Half-hidden by involved decorations and symbols were the twin cones topped with conventionalized flames like scarlet tobacco leaves. I think my heart skipped a beat or two as I recognized them. I was on the right track and if there was any truth in the Book of Kukulcan, the secret city of Mictolan lay just beyond

those smoking cones on the horizon.

Gazing at them I wondered about the other perils Katchilcan had declared beset the way to the hidden city. Were they also actualities? Was there a Valley of Death, a Tunnel of Serpents, a Pit of Crocodiles and all the rest? I laughed at myself for even speculating upon such nonsense. No doubt they were all fanciful allegories. How could there be eight deserts in this well-watered, forested land? How could there be raging whirlwinds, demons and fiends? Volcanoes, snakes, crocodiles, caves, bridges, yes; but the others—nonsense!

Three days later half of the Indians deserted me during the night. But the chief remained. Ever since he had seen the codex he had acted as if he considered himself my slave. He fairly shook with terror when he tried to explain that he knew nothing of the desertion of his men, and to show his desire to make up for it, he ordered the remaining Indians to carry double burdens and loaded his own back until he was bent nearly double.

But it was impossible to proceed in that manner. No matter how willing the Indians might be, no human beings could traverse the country with such overloads. A few hours proved this. One of the men tripped and fell, and unable to recover himself with his burden, he plunged over the verge of a cliff into the roaring torrent in the depths of the ravine below. And each moment the traveling was becoming worse and more dangerous. The loss of the burden carried by the unfortunate Indian was very serious. With him had gone my hammocks, most of my supplies. It was far better to abandon half the baggage and carry the other half in safety than to lose an entire load at one time.

I ordered the men to halt, unpacked the bundles, redistributed the contents and repacked enough of the most essential things to load the men to the limit of what might safely be carried. It left me woefully short, but not so badly off as I would have been with my original carriers along. The chief with his savages could live off the country; I had

only my personal wants to look after, and I felt so confident that I would reach Mictolan or would prove the city did not exist by the time I reached the volcanoes, that I felt little worry about running short of actual necessities.

The ravine into which the Indian had fallen to his death was impassable, and hoping to find a spot where we could descend, we followed along its brink. At last, after miles of tramping, we reached a spot where, during some period of heavy rains, a tree had been uprooted and the water, rushing into the cavity left by its fall, had formed a gulley leading down the side of the cañon. Slipping, stumbling, sliding, we managed to descend to the bed of the stream fully two hundred feet below, only to find we were no better off than before, for the opposite side of the cañon was utterly impassable. There was nothing to be done but to follow the roaring rushing river until an exit could be found, and in the semi-twilight of the cañon's depths we toiled on. Often wading, sometimes up to our armpits in water, we made our slow and weary way upstream.

Sundown found us still within the cañon whose sides appeared higher, more precipitous than ever. It was a dismal, oppressive spot and I could see that the Indians were nervous and ill at ease. But there was no other course than to spend the night where we were and to camp in the cañon.

A few yards above the level of the stream we found a large cave-like recess where an immense boulder had fallen from the cañon's side, and in this shelter we prepared to pass the night. There were plenty of dry branches scattered along the brink of the river; a cheery fire was soon blazing; fish which the Indians had shot with their long arrows were soon broiling and the men's first fears appeared to have been forgotten.

With the roar of the stream in my ears I fell asleep. How long I slept I cannot say, but I was awakened by a blinding flash and a deafening report. Flash after flash illuminated the blackness, the thunder pealed and reverberated from the rocky sides of the cañon, and above the

roar of the river I could hear the thrashing of leaves and branches and the torrential downpour of rain. Then to my ears came a new and a louder sound; a steady dull rumble that momentarily increased. For a moment I was at a loss to account for it. Then it dawned upon me and with the realization came deadly gripping fear.

A flood was descending upon us! The river, swollen by the heavy rain, had risen in the narrow confines of the cañon and was sweeping towards us. In a few moments more we would be engulfed, swallowed up, utterly destroyed. The Indians already had realized the peril. With wild cries of terror some leaped from the shelter of the cave and dashed madly down stream. In vain I shouted to them, trying to make them understand that their actions were suicidal. My voice was drowned by the almost ceaseless thunder and the ever-increasing roar of the onrushing flood. Others of the Indians, digging their toes into crevices in the cliff, clinging with their fingers, struggled to climb beyond reach of the hungry waters. But the cliffside was slippery and water-soaked, and with heartrending screams they fell back, rolled down the bank and vanished in the blackness of the cañon's depths.

Only the chief now remained. Gabbling at me, gesturing wildly, he tried his best to convey some message that to him seemed vital. Then, finding it utterly impossible to make me understand, he sprang forward, tapped my coat and slipping his hand into my pocket drew out the copy of the codex. I was so dazed, so terrified and my mind was in such a turmoil striving to formulate some plan of saving myself from seemingly certain death that I scarcely noted the chief's action. Then, as the thunder of the oncoming flood drowned all other sounds, and I realized all was lost, my mind abruptly calmed and functioned clearly and I saw the chief as though in a dream.

He was standing at the front of the cave, his lips moving, and although I could hear no sound yet I knew that he was shouting. For a moment I assumed that he was

chanting his death song, but as a flash of lightning revealed him clearly I saw with amazement that in his outstretched hands he held the copy of the codex. Instantly I divined his purpose. He was about to cast it into the boiling, rising stream with the superstitious belief that it would subdue the flood. I half-started to spring forward and seize the paper. Then I laughed hoarsely, hysterically. Let him sacrifice it! It would be of no further use to me; in a moment more we would both be swept to our deaths.

Still he held the codex. Why did he wait? Almost fascinated I watched him. The air vibrated to the terrific flood now raging in the cañon and the very ground shook and trembled beneath my feet. In the darkness the upflung, churning waves loomed ghastly white. Now the hissing raging maelstrom was curling about the chief's feet. Yet still he remained there, holding aloft the fluttering paper, shouting or chanting or praying—I know not which. A few seconds more and the irresistible tide would rush into the cavern and overwhelm us.

Then a strange, an incredible thing happened. Below the Indian's outstretched hands holding the paper spread between them, the water seemed suddenly to recede; the roar diminished, and thunder died away in the distance. Slowly but steadily the raging torrent dropped back toward the river bed. The deafening turmoil subsided to the normal rush of the stream, and the chief, turning, folded the codex and returned it to me. We were saved, saved as if by a miracle.

No doubt it was a mere coincidence, for assuredly the copy of the codex and the chief's invocations had nothing to do with it. The flood had merely reached its apex before it could wash into the cave and destroy us. But to the Indian's mind the Book of Kukulcan was responsible. Even the forces of nature must bow to the will of the Plumed Serpent-god. And somehow, despite my common sense and my reasoning, I could not overcome the feeling that there was something about the phenomenon savoring of the truly supernatural.

Morning dawned at last to find us two alone, marooned in the cañon with only a fraction of our supplies remaining. We were in a truly desperate situation. Our only course, our only chance was to go back the way we had come, but we soon discovered that even that was impossible. The gulley which we had descended had vanished and only a smooth precipice marked the spot where it had been. But the chief appeared unperturbed. Perhaps he still had sublime faith in the power of the codex to safeguard us; perhaps it was merely the stoicism of his race. Gesturing in the direction of down stream he shouldered his load and led the way.

A mile farther on we came upon the body of one of the Indians, battered, mangled, the flesh torn in shreds from the bones. Three others were found later, and as we passed the last—for we could not bury the bodies in that bare rocky cañon—a sudden thought flashed through my mind. The Valley of Death! Was this it? Were the words of Katchilcan being borne out? I shuddered a bit at the thought and his words came vividly back to me.

"But for him who holds the Book of Kukulcan the way will be made easy."

Surely, if ever a place could be called the Valley of Death, this terrible cañon deserved the name, and assuredly to the chief and myself the way had been "made easy" as compared with the fate of the four Indians. But would the "way be made easy" for the rest of the journey? Would we ever find a way out of that fearsome Valley of Death?

CHAPTER 4

THE TUNNEL OF THE SERPENTS

M

Y MISGIVINGS WERE SOON VERIFIED. THE CANON narrowed and swung sharply to one side, and rounding the bend we halted in dismay. Before us the walls met in a sheer cliff. At its base was a yawning black opening into which the river poured like a gigantic millrace. The way was barred, we were in a cul-de-sac, trapped.

Only one slim chance of escaping from the cañon now remained. That was to retrace our steps, follow up the stream and trust to finding some lower spot, some slope or side gulley, near the head of the cañon. The chief realized our predicament as quickly as I did. Without a word he wheeled and led the way up stream. Wearily, slowly, for walking over the water-worn ledges and loose cobblestones was torture, we stumbled up the cañon, our backs aching with our burdens. Mile after mile we traveled, not halting even for a midday meal, for our one thought, our sole desire was to escape from that dismal Valley of Death before darkness overtook us and we were compelled to spend another night in the fearful place. The cañon seemed endless, although in reality it was not more than twenty miles in length, and it was mid-afternoon before we passed the cave that had been our shelter the night before.

Hurrying, stumbling, slipping, cursing as the way became rougher and the grade steeper, we forced our bruised and blistered feet onward. The walls of the great cleft drew nearer and nearer together until they seemed to overhang

our heads, and we were in semi-darkness in the depths. Presently, from ahead, came a new sound, a low reverberating roar, and a mile or so farther on we came in view of the head of the cañon. Once more our hearts sank in dismay. Once more we were faced with a mighty wall of rock down which the stream poured in a series of foaming cataracts. There seemed no escape, no exit.

But as I gazed at the flashing roaring falls a faint hope rose in me. On either side of the descending water the cliff had been worn and cut into rough irregular masses. It might be possible to ascend the precipice at that spot. I tried to explain the idea to the chief, to indicate my intention, and presently he grasped my meaning and nodded. But to climb that perpendicular wall even with the rough crags for footholds would be utterly impossible with heavy packs upon our shoulders. We would be compelled to abandon our loads or else resign ourselves to remaining and dying like trapped rats in the cañon.

Ripping open the packages, I filled my pockets with the most essential things, made other necessities into two small bundles, and strapping these to our shoulders we commenced the difficult and perilous ascent. It was terrible work. The rock was rotten and at any instant might give way and precipitate us to the crags below. Inch by inch we struggled upward, often so close to the falls that we were drenched, at other times crawling far to one side, clinging with fingers and toes, our hands torn and bleeding, yet slowly making headway. Twenty, forty, fifty feet we toiled upward and reached a narrow ledge or shelf running diagonally across the face of the cliff. To the right the ledge dwindled away to nothing; above us there was not a crevice, not a finger hold visible, and to the left the rock shelf vanished beneath the column of water plunging from above. Our only chance was to pass beneath the falls and trust to our finding a passable way on the farther side.

There was no time to lose. The bottom of the cañon was already hidden in blackness, the sun had set and to be

caught by darkness while still upon the face of the cliff would mean certain death. Flattening ourselves against the rocky wall, edging onward with the utmost caution, we crept along the narrow ledge and beneath the cataract. Spray and dripping water drenched me to the skin and poured from the naked body of my companion; the rock underfoot was slippery with slime and moss, but the ledge widened as we proceeded. We were half way through, the worst of the passage was over, when with my outstretched left hand I felt the solid rock come to an end, and an instant later, I found myself at the entrance to a dark cavern in the cliff.

I peered within. All was blackness, but here at least was a refuge where we might pass the night. It was a dismal hole, but far better to cower within its shelter than to attempt to scale the remainder of the cliff in the darkness. Utterly done, famished and spent I stepped into the cave, threw down my pack and dropped to the floor of the cavern. Like my own shadow, the chief did likewise.

Presently, having regained our breaths and rested, I struck a light and gazed about. By the first glimmer of the match I could see nothing. Evidently the cave was large, and it appeared to be fairly dry, but close to the entrance, water dripped and splattered in from the cataract. On hands and knees, feeling our way, fearing we might come upon a chasm or an abrupt drop, we crawled farther into the cave. Then, having gained a spot beyond reach of the spray and water, we rummaged in the packs and ravenously devoured most of the few scraps of dried meat, the sour tortillas and the parched corn they contained. To build a fire was impossible. We had no fuel, nothing that could be burned, and in the dense blackness we threw ourselves upon the bare rocky floor and dropped instantly to sleep.

I awoke cramped, aching in every joint and muscle. But it was broad daylight outside the cavern, a soft light streamed into the entrance, and by its faint illumination I could distinguish our surroundings. Less than a yard above our heads was the irregularly arched roof, on either side were smooth

water-worn rock walls, but in the rear the tunnel-like cave was shrouded by impenetrable blackness. Everything about the place, the smoothly-cut walls, roof and floor, the absence of all litter and debris, the shape of the cavern, indicated that it once had formed a subterranean channel for the river or for a portion of it. Perhaps even now it formed an overflow for the waters when in flood, and as this dawned upon me I was buoyed up by a new hope. Perhaps, possibly, the cavern might connect with the open air. By following it we might find an exit far above the falls.

There were a thousand chances against it, to be sure. We might find the cave ended in narrow cracks and fissures; it might lead to a perpendicular shaft or giant pot hole or it might bring us to the verge of an underground pool or stream. But the slender chance was worth trying and, having breakfasted upon the last of our provisions, we started on our exploration of the tunnel.

For an hour or more we crept forward. The cave remained the same size, sloping gradually upward, and my hopes that it might lead us to freedom increased as we proceeded. And when, after what seemed endless crawling, we caught a glimpse of faint light far ahead, I felt certain we would soon be safe in the outer air. Brighter and brighter the light became and we hurried onward until we could see that the light came from above and illuminated a mass of fallen rock that half-filled the tunnel before us.

As we reached the debris and I started to scramble over the stones, the air suddenly vibrated with a strange whirring sound that seemed to issue from every side. For an instant I hesitated, listening, wondering what it could be, yet vaguely conscious of having heard the same sound before.

The next moment I leaped back with a startled cry. From a crevice among the rocks, a great flat, arrow-shaped head had darted forth, had struck viciously at me and had missed me by the fraction of an inch. Now I knew what that whirring sound presaged. The place was a den of immense rattlesnakes!

The chief was fairly shaking with terror, his eyes rolling wildly as he glanced furtively to right and left, seeking some spot where his naked skin would be out of reach of the angry serpents now wriggling, coiling, swarming among the rocks above us. A wave of strange superstitious fear swept over me and I shivered. Again the prophecy of Kukulcan had been borne out, for here indeed was the Tunnel of the Serpents!

To turn and go back was useless, for the way led only to the dismal cañon, and even had we wished to do so we could not retrace our way, for already dozens of the great diamond-marked snakes were coiled with threatening, swaying heads and vibrating rattles behind us. Yet to go forward appeared equally impossible. We could not even remain where we were for at any instant a deadly serpent might appear from the crevices beneath our feet. Whichever way we turned we seemed doomed to a terrible death.

And then a seeming miracle happened. There was a sharp squeal, dirt and pebbles rattled down from above, and the next moment a peccary tumbled into the tunnel. Snorting, squealing, leaping about, the angry, terrified wild pig dashed hither and thither, wholly oblivious of our presence, every bristle on his thick neck on end, his tusks clashing, his wicked eyes gleaming, froth drooling from his upcurled lips. The deadly enemies of all snakes, fearless in attacking the most venomous serpents, the peccaries will go out of their way to kill snakes and appear to go absolutely mad when they are near them. And this peccary had accidentally, or perhaps intentionally, slipped into a den filled with snakes.

In a perfect frenzy he dashed at every serpent in sight, moving with incredible speed, slashing at them with his razor-edged tusks, leaping upon them with his sharp-pointed hoofs. In less time than it takes to tell of it, the place was filled with dead and dying, mangled and headless serpents, while those remaining alive had their attentions fully occupied with the peccary maddened by his insatiable lust to kill.

Springing forward, we reached the opening, and grasp-

ing roots, digging our hands and toes into the decomposed rock, we scrambled up and drew ourselves panting upon the ground under the forest trees.

For a time the grunts and squeals of the peccary came from the depths of the pit whence we had emerged, but gradually they ceased. Crawling to the verge of the hole I peered down, but the creature to whom we owed our lives had vanished. Perchance he knew another way out, perhaps he had dashed down the tunnel to the waterfall and had scrambled up some narrow trail that only a peccary could follow. But to the chief there was only one explanation of the creature's providential arrival on the scene and its disappearance as soon as we had been saved. To his primitive mind the peccary was the direct instrument of Kukulcan, a god or a good spirit in porcine form. Plucking a sharp thorn from a nearby vine, he pierced his tongue, smeared the blood from the wound upon a pebble and cast the stone into the rattlesnakes' den. He had paid his debt by making a blood sacrifice to his gods.

We were still in imminent peril even if in the open air once again. We were in the heart of an unknown forest, completely at a loss as to which way to turn, and without food or supplies. I was ravenously hungry and doubtless the chief was as famished as myself. The first thing to be done was to secure something to eat, and to accomplish this in a tropical forest is not a simple matter by any means. Had the chief possessed weapons he no doubt could have secured game of some sort in a short time, but he had lost his bow and arrows somewhere in the cañon; he could not use my revolver, and our only chance appeared to lie in stalking some bird or quadruped that I could shoot. And I well knew from past experiences that game is invariably scarcest when it is needed the most.

Luck, however, was with us still. We flushed a big wild turkey from her nest and as she ruffled her feathers and gobbled defiance at us I brought her down with an easy shot. Also, to my delight, although it mattered little to my Indian

comrade, the eggs had not commenced to incubate. I still had matches in a watertight case and presently a fire was blazing and the odor of broiling turkey filled our nostrils.

It was while we were dining on the scorched but delicious-tasting meat, that I made a discovery. Hitherto I had been unable to make headway in my efforts to converse with my companion. I had tried repeatedly to learn something of his dialect, but without success, although I had acquired a few simple words and now and then caught the meaning of what he said. I had tried every Indian language I could remember but not one conveyed any meaning to him, and I had abandoned all expectations of ever getting beyond a crude sort of sign language for our intercourse.

But as I gnawed a drumstick of the turkey it brought to memory a meal I had once eaten under somewhat similar circumstances in Honduras, years previously. And with that memory came sudden recollection of the Tecun dialect I had once known. A few of the words and phrases came back to me and without any expectation that he would understand them, I repeated them to the chief. He dropped the bone he was gnawing, a gleam of understanding lit up his face and to my utter surprise and great delight he answered me in Tecun.

No one who has never been alone with a fellow man and unable to converse with him can appreciate what it meant to me to be able to talk with the savage beside me. To be sure, his knowledge of the Tecun language was almost as limited as my own, but we could understand each other, we could express thoughts, could ask and answer questions and could even converse to a limited extent and on simple topics. The chief was as pleased as I was.

He informed me his name was Maliche, that he and his tribe dwelt in a large village near the "Great Water" which I assumed was Lake Itzaltango, and that they had been returning from a battle with the Mitzes and were celebrating their victory by sacrificing one of their captives, when I had come upon them in the ancient temple. I tried my

best to learn if he and his people belonged to the Maya race, if he believed in the Mayan gods, but my command of the Tecun was far too slight. But from the manner in which he had behaved when he had first seen the copy of the codex, and his actions when the flood had swept through the cañon, I felt certain that the deities of the Mayas were his gods and that his ancestors had been under Mayan rule even if not of the Maya race. But it was far more important for us to find food and to proceed on our way than to discuss racial affinities and religions.

The first of our two problems was soon solved by Maliche. In less than an hour he had fashioned a rude but strong and serviceable bow and several long arrows of cane tipped with hard palm wood. If I had had any doubts as to the ability of my companion to supply us with food by means of his hastily contrived weapons, they would have been dispelled promptly, for within twenty minutes after we started on our way he had killed a small deer.

But even the savage instinct and the attainments of Maliche could not solve the question of the route we were to follow. It is true that our course had been toward the northwest previous to reaching the cañon, and it was a simple matter to continue in that direction. But we had no means of knowing whether we were five, fifteen or fifty miles north, south, east or west of the spot where we had descended into the Valley of Death as I now mentally called it.

Strangely enough, it never once occurred to me to turn back, to try to retrace our way toward civilization. For some reason I seemed to be urged onward, drawn as if by some magnet or force, and to this day that, to my mind, was perhaps the most remarkable feature of the entire astounding and incomprehensible adventure.

To proceed through an unknown country with no outfit, no comforts, with practically none of the necessities of life, with no provisions except what game we might secure on our way; to wander aimlessly for an unknown and probably mythical goal, would have been nothing short of mad-

ness if viewed from a point of common sense. Yet I, an old hand at tropical exploration, with years of experience in the "bush" was doing what, in any other, I should have condemned as suicidal. Yet at the time I was filled with a sublime confidence and faith. Except when face to face with some imminent peril, I felt no fear of the outcome; and looking back upon those days and weeks of wanderings, I feel positive that some power far greater than my own volition led me on. It may sound ridiculous, fanciful, superstitious, even incredible. But in view of the many seemingly incredible events that followed, nothing to me will ever appear incredible or impossible again.

But I am getting away from my story and must go back to the point where Maliche and I were wandering through the vast forests of the mountains.

Had we been able to obtain a view of the surrounding country we might have caught a glimpse of the twin volcanoes which, as I have said, I felt convinced were the two "blazing mountains" of the codex. But we were hemmed in by ridges higher than the one we were on, and, moreover, we were steadily descending, getting deeper and deeper between the surrounding mountains.

By mid-afternoon we were in a valley covered with a dense jungle and clumps of giant bamboos. The ground was wet and soggy; here and there were pools of stagnant water, and often we were forced to make long detours around impassable swamps. To camp in such a location was out of the question and we pushed on as rapidly as possible, hoping to reach higher and drier land before nightfall. Suddenly Maliche, who was leading, sprang back with a half-smothered cry of mingled fear and surprise.

Reaching his side I peered ahead. Stretching from the edge of the bamboo thicket through which we had forced our way, was a small lake, its waters inky-black and as smooth as oil, a dismal, ominous-looking pool made far more dismal and ominous by the presence of a huge stone image rising from the very center of the lake. Instantly I recog-

nized it. The recumbent figure with flexed knees, upraised head and with hands resting upon the stomach was unmistakable. It was a colossal image of Chac-Mool, the rain-god of the Mayas. But it was different from any statue of Chac-Mool I had ever seen, for it rested upon the back of an enormous stone crocodile with open, hideous jaws and upraised tail startlingly life-like in its details.

Fascinated by the marvel of the stupendous piece of sculpture, for it appeared to have been cut from a solid mass of living rock that jutted from the surface of the lake, I stared at it, only half aware that Maliche had prostrated himself before it. The next moment I leaped back with a warning shout of terror.

Within a dozen feet of where we stood, the black surface of the water had broken, an enormous head with unwinking green eyes and long jaws set with gleaming teeth had appeared, and with a rush the huge saurian had dashed at me. I scarcely had time to seize the praying Indian by his hair and drag him to one side as, carried half his twenty-foot length out of water by the force of his rush, the crocodile's jaws clashed together within six inches of the chief's legs.

The horrible monster was not alone. Everywhere the placid black surface of the lake was being churned into waves by dozens, scores, hundreds of immense, ravenous crocodiles all rushing towards us. We were not safe even on land. Snapping their jaws, lashing out with their ponderous tails, waddling over the muddy ground faster than I would have believed possible, the horde of great reptiles came for us.

I turned and ran as I had never run before. Bursting through bamboo thickets, torn by thorns, cut and slashed by razor-grass, stumbling, plunging into the mire, tripping over snake-like vines and roots, we raced for dry land and only ceased when we had gained the hillside and dropped down exhausted, out of possible reach of the demoniacal beasts still thrashing and snapping in the dense jungle beneath us.

Truly old Katchilcan had been right when he had said "great bars were placed in the way to Mictolan." And an involuntary shudder ran through me, a strange sensation caused my scalp to tingle, as I thought how accurately all he had said had been borne out so far.

The Valley of Death, the Tunnel of the Serpents, the Pit of Zotional (the sacred crocodile-god) all had been met exactly as foretold, exactly as was written in the codex!

Was it possible, I wondered, could it be possible that all the rest would prove true also? I shook off the foolish superstitious idea with an effort and strove to use my common sense. Everything so far might have been merely coincidences. The cañon was a valley of death only when in flood and because the Indians had lost their lives there. Practically every underground tunnel and cave might harbor snakes, and crocodiles swarmed in every forest pool and large stream. Yet there was that image of Chac-Mool upon the giant stone saurian's back and I knew, without even looking at my copy of the codex, that it bore the symbol of Chac-Mool above the figure of a conventionalized crocodile, and finally, there were the twin active "blazing mountains" I had seen.

Still, the rest, the eight deserts, the whirlwind, the demon, the fiend and the other supernatural things must be utter nonsense. For that matter—I laughed at my foolish fears as it occurred to me—the Pool of the Crocodiles was no real bar to our progress for we could go around it easily enough. So, casting aside all surmises and half formed fears, I rose, told Maliche we would camp on the mountain side, and led the way to a spot where a spring gushed from between the rocks and the wide-spreading roots of a giant tree afforded excellent shelter from possible showers or prowling wild beasts.

CHAPTER 5

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL

HAD BEEN OVERCONFIDENT WHEN I HAD ASSUMED THAT it would be not only possible but easy to go around the lake and that it was no real bar to our progress. Everywhere the water extended for miles among the clumps of giant bamboos and dense brushy jungle, and we gave it a wide berth, keeping well to the hillside and dry ground and searching for a spot where we might cross the valley. But in this we failed utterly.

The water dwindled to a narrow lagoon barely fifty feet in width and then expanded into a second and even larger lake whose shores rose in precipitous cliffs. It would have been a simple matter to have waded across the narrow estuary had it not been for the crocodiles, but their presence was attested by the snouts, backs and eyes of the saurians that everywhere dotted the surface of the water like half-submerged logs. There was, however, one way of crossing the accursed spot. An immense tree had toppled from the mountainside and had fallen athwart the black pool, its topmost branches resting on the farther shore. But it was a ticklish bridge at best, for it was round and slippery; and its lower surface was partly submerged, so that if one crossed by it one's feet would be scarcely a yard above the water with its watchful, lurking monsters waiting with hungry jaws.

For an hour or more we waited, striving to summon up sufficient courage to attempt the crossing, until at last, unable

to endure the inaction longer, I rose, removed my shoes, and telling Maliche I was going to risk it, I slipped as silently as possible towards the roots of the fallen tree.

Realizing that if I were to reach the opposite shore in safety I must make a dash for it, I paused for a moment, breathing deeply, and then with a silent prayer and with eyes fixed on the farther bank I took my life in my hands, or rather in my feet, and raced over the log. A dozen times I slipped and barely escaped plunging into the water; a dozen times I had an almost irresistible temptation to glance to one side or the other, to look at the water and its swarming reptiles, but I knew that to do so would be fatal and I steeled myself against it. My ears sensed the splashing of scores of tails, the vicious snapping of countless terrible jaws, and the log seemed endless. But at last, with panting breath and pounding heart I covered the last few yards of the natural bridge, stumbled through the tangle of dead branches and dropped faint and trembling, upon the opposite bank.

A moment later Maliche joined me. Slowly, one by one, the baffled crocodiles sank from sight, and thankful indeed that we survived, we resumed our way.

Several hours later we reached the summit of the mountains and to my delight I saw the twin peaks of the volcanoes looming sharp and clear a little to the east. Pointing to these landmarks I told Maliche our route led toward them, and to make my meaning clearer I showed him the codex with the "blazing mountains" indicated upon it.

Instantly he burst into a torrent of wild, incomprehensible words, shaking his head, gesturing excitedly while his eyes were wide with terror.

Even when he had calmed down a bit and tried to explain in Tecun I could not make head nor tail of what he was saying. But when I asked him bluntly if he was afraid to go on, and informed him I was going anyway, he shook his head, declared he was my slave and my shadow, and stoutly denied all dread.

Poor, good, faithful Maliche! Savage cannibal though

he was, yet he was as brave, as true, as fine a man as ever lived. To him I owe a debt of gratitude I can never repay, for without him and his companionship all my efforts would have been in vain and I could not have survived. Had I but known what he was striving to tell me, had I understood his own dialect, much that followed might have been avoided. Yet perhaps it was all in the plan, all a part of the destiny that beckoned me on with an intangible but overwhelming power towards those smoking cones to the east.

All that day we marched steadily onward, traversing rolling hills covered with forest, meeting with no adventures, fortunate in securing game, and with the twin cones always in sight. For two more days this continued. The land was almost park-like in its beauty, its open glades, its flashing streams, its wealth of exotic flowers and bright-hued birds. We fared well, the weather was ideal and all our past sufferings and perils became dim memories like bad dreams.

But on the third day the surroundings underwent a great change. The forest gave place to scrubby jungle; the soft moist earth was replaced by rough, rocky sterile ground: great boulders were to be seen scattered about, and in places we crossed bare areas of jagged broken rock. Rapidly the vegetation became more and more sparse while the rock-strewn areas grew wider. Aloes, cacti and spiny plants took the place of vines, shrubs and trees, and by midday we came to the last of the vegetation and halted at the edge of a vast barren expanse of raw red rock, immense black boulders, and dunes of glaring multicolored sand.

I had thought that a desert could not exist in this land, but here before us was a veritable desert—a burned out, cinder-blasted, lava-covered plain that had been devastated by some ancient eruption of the volcanoes now within a dozen miles of where we stood. And as I gazed at the arid expanse I once more felt that strange tingling of my scalp, that chilling indescribable fear of the supernatural, as I recalled the words of old Katchilcan:

“ . . . and beyond the Pit of the great Zotional, even

then one must cross the eight deserts."

Once again I laughed my fears away. There was nothing strange, nothing supernatural about this cinder-covered plain and lava flow. It was exactly the same sort of formation I had seen scores of times in our Northwestern United States. Provided with plenty of water and food anyone could cross it for it was barely ten miles in width, a few hours' tramp to the farther side, and there was only one desert, not eight.

However, to attempt a crossing so late in the day would be foolish, I decided. It would be far wiser to rest, camp for the night and start out fresh at dawn before the cinders and lava scintillated with the heat and glare of the tropical sun. Moreover, and this thought drove any lingering foolish fears from my mind, the fact that everything so far had agreed perfectly with Katchilcan's words and with the codex, pointed toward my ultimate success and the actual existence of Mictolan, although I very much doubted if I would find the hidden city still inhabited.

Far more probable, I thought, it would be in ruins, for in the two thousand years and more that had passed since the Book of Kukulcan was made, there was every chance that the inhabitants would have died out, migrated to other localities, been decimated by wars or would have reverted to a nomadic, semi-savage life. Cut off from the rest of their race, no longer under the rule of the ancient Mayan Empire and outside the influence of the culture and civilization of their fellows there was scarcely a chance that the colony—provided it ever had existed—had survived as an entity or at least as a civilized community, for twenty centuries and more. The whole known history of the Mayas was against it. The empire had fallen and had vanished through the feuds and jealousies of various leaders, the priest-clans and political wars, and I felt positive that the same causes and the same racial traits that had resulted in the abandonment of Copan, Chichen-Itza, Lubantum and other great Maya cities would also have resulted in the abandonment of Mic-

tolan, if there had been such a city.

These thoughts and conjectures occupied my mind while Maliche was absent searching for water, for there was none near the spot where we planned to camp at the edge of the desert. In an hour or two he returned with two large gourds or calabashes filled with water from a stream we had passed several miles back. Although the desert area was small, yet I felt that it would be wise to carry a supply of water with us and the gourds would serve excellently as canteens.

The night passed uneventfully and before the sun had risen we were up and tramping across the barren waste toward the dim shapes of the volcanoes whose summits emitted a soft red glow against the rapidly-paling sky. The air was fresh and cool, and even though the sharp fragments of rock and the loose ash of the desert were hard on our feet it was rather a welcome change after the interminable jungles.

Maliche, however, was very nervous and ill at ease and as the sun rose higher he glanced apprehensively about, kept close to my side and seemed filled with some dread fear. Possibly, I thought, it was merely the Indian's inherent dread of the unknown, perhaps it was merely superstition or again it might be the effect of strangeness, the novelty of a desert, to a man accustomed all his lifetime to the forests and jungles.

Of course, as the sun rose higher and higher we suffered from the heat and glare, but we were making excellent progress and I flattered myself that we would be at the farther side of the desert before the hottest part of the day. But although we tramped for hours, although the sun reached the zenith and swung toward the west, although the ashes under our blistered feet felt like redhot metal while the air was like the blast from a furnace and our eyes ached and blurred with the blinding glare, we seemed no nearer the distant volcanoes, while the farther side of the desert seemed ever to recede as we advanced. Our throats were parched and dry and the lukewarm water in the gourds

seemed only to add to our thirst. Still we kept doggedly on, and by the middle of the afternoon we could see that we were making progress, that the green hills far behind us were faint and hazy in the distance, that the vegetation ahead was nearer, clearer, although the twin cones appeared as far away as ever.

Not until the sun was sinking below the horizon did we reach the edge of the fearful place and the vegetation beyond it. But the spot which from a distance had appeared green and cool was little better than the desert itself, for it proved merely a growth of harsh dry grass, dull-green cacti, stiff-leaved yuccas and a few spiny-stemmed stunted palms. Farther in the growth was a trifle thicker, greener and more promising, but there was no trace of water and the few drops remaining in our calabashes barely moistened our dry and dusty mouths.

Maliche, however, possessed all the instincts of the primitive savage, the ability to make the most of Nature's scantiest resources, and while I am certain that he had never before been in want of water nor had been in a desert district, yet he at once rose to meet our emergency. Cutting off the top of a huge barrel-cactus, and scooping out the pithy interior, he soon had several quarts of clear, fairly cool sap which although slightly bitter was the most delicious draught that ever passed my lips. Too tired to proceed another step, we stopped where we were, ate what little remained of our tainted meat and slept on the bare sand.

We awoke at dawn with aching limbs and swollen feet and with only the cactus sap to allay our hunger. But we felt that the worst was over and buoyed up with expectations of finding water and game, and with cheering thoughts of once again traveling through cool shady forests, we resumed our journey. But we had not covered two hundred yards when the thorny growth thinned out and before us stretched a second ash-covered plain. Weary, hungry, blistered and burned as we were, there was no choice but to continue. The plain before us was much smaller than the one we had

crossed, and having filled our gourds with the cactus juice, we grimly faced the burned-out world and the sufferings we knew were ahead of us.

By noonday we had crossed it, only to find that beyond the narrow strip of thorny growth was still another desert. But we were somewhat better off now. Maliche had stalked and killed a gopher-like animal that resembled a giant prairie dog, we had found a few cactus fruits that were edible, and by a stroke of luck I discovered a hollow in the sand filled with the eggs of some big lizard. With our hunger satisfied we felt far better, and as the barren waste ahead appeared very small we decided to attempt the crossing before dark.

The next few days were a nightmare. I lost all track of time and will never know how many days passed as we fought our way onward, or whether we crossed eight or eighty deserts. They seemed interminable, endless, each promising to be the last only to deceive us as another appeared ahead. And still those silent smoking peaks with their baleful glare at night seemed as distant as ever. My brain reeled, visions hovered before my bloodshot smarting eyes and my entire body felt shrivelled, dried, dessicated.

We ate anything and everything that came our way—lizards, snakes, horned toads and insects. Maliche's ribs and joints appeared on the point of breaking through his skin; my face and hands were raw and streamers of dead skin hung in shreds from my neck and wrists. But still we kept on, dragged ever forward as if by a magnet; and at last, more dead than alive we came to the end of the hellish wastes of ash and lava and reached the naked rocky ridges that led up to the flanks of the mighty volcanoes now towering close at hand. Dragging ourselves up the steep slope we found a green swale where a stream flowed between the frowning cliffs and with our last remaining strength we gained the bank and plunged into the water.

For hours we lay there, our burned, tortured bodies laved by the cool water, absorbing it, reveling in it, until at

last, refreshed and with our smarting raw flesh eased and comforted, hunger forced us to emerge and search for food.

Had I been alone I might well have starved to death, but Maliche seemed actually to be able to scent game if it were near, and he soon secured two pheasant-like birds while I felt quite proud of myself for having captured a number of big crayfish from beneath the stones in the river's bed.

We had been through a terrible ordeal, and I thanked God that the "whirlwind that cut the rocks" had been spared us, even though all the other terrors of Katchilcan's story had materialized according to schedule but—I smiled grimly at the thought—if our crossing of the "eight deserts" had been "made easy", Heaven pity anyone who found the crossing hard.

And once more, as my mind dwelt upon the strange and inexplicable way in which Katchilcan had foretold the difficulties and perils I would face, I glanced apprehensively about and shivered at thought of what might yet bar my way. Despite my common sense and reason and my constant efforts to convince myself otherwise, I was becoming imbued with the idea, actually obsessed with the conviction that the Book of Kukulcan would be borne out to the letter, to the most minute detail. And there was still plenty of time for even more terrifying things to happen.

But whatever might be in store there seemed nothing threatening about the spot where we were, and I cannot describe the delight, the comfort and the luxury of the soft green foliage, the cool moss-covered earth and the babbling of the stream after those nightmarish days of endless sand, lava and blistering blazing sun.

With our stomachs well filled with good food, with our weary limbs rested and with the musical sound of the brook and the chirping of insects in our ears, we stretched ourselves upon the soft earth and slept.

With a start, an involuntary yell, I leaped up, dazed, bewildered, trembling. Was it a nightmare or a reality that had awakened me, terrified me? Maliche, too, was awake.

He also was shaking, glancing about with terror on his face. Had the same thing aroused him, to leave him weak, filled with nameless dread, or had my yell and my movements aroused him? With stammering tongue I started to question him. But the words died on my lips, my face blanched and I fairly cowered as the still night air was rent by a blood-curdling, piercing, demoniacal scream, from somewhere in the blackness.

As the terrible, unearthly, banshee-like wail died down in a long-drawn, quavering howl I could hear Maliche's teeth chattering, and chills ran up and down my own spine. What was it? What dread creature had emitted that awful sound? I had heard jaguars, pumas, ocelots, every wild beast and bird of America, utter their cries, but none were like this. Nothing, no sound or cry I had ever heard held in it the weird, ghastly, supernatural quality of that shrieking wail. Then, once again, the night was shattered by that cry that might well have come from a tortured soul in Purgatory.

I had an insane desire to cover my head, to flatten myself upon the ground, to stuff my ears to shut out that unearthly sound that rose and fell and seemed to issue from every side. Maliche was almost mad with terror. Babbling and mouthing he grovelled on the earth, moaning and groaning as if in bodily agony, and screaming, "Izputeque! Izputeque!"

I shuddered at his words and felt deathly cold. Izputeque, the mythological demon of the Aztecs! Could it be possible—with a tremendous effort I steadied my nerves, controlled my unreasoning fears. A demon, nonsense! It was merely some wild beast or bird, its weird cry magnified and rendered more unearthly by the surrounding cliffs. And even as I reassured myself, I was suddenly aware of a movement in the darkness overhead, and I glanced up with fear-wide eyes. I froze with terror.

Above us, moving swiftly, silently back and forth, a great black shadow against a starlight sky, was an immense shape—a monstrous something with huge eyes that glowed

like green fire. Maliche saw it at the same instant. With a scream of abject terror he flung himself on the earth. "Izputeque!" he whimpered. "Izputeque!"

Like a volplaning airplane the thing swooped toward us, uttering that blood-freezing shriek as it came. In a frenzy of fear, powerless to move, bereft of thought, I unconsciously whipped out my revolver, and as fast as I could press trigger, fired all six shots at the horrible thing. As the reports of the shots thundered and echoed from the surrounding cliffs, a scream more horrible than those that had gone before came from the huge, winged thing. I felt a rush of wind, then there came a terrific crash, and all was still.

Trembling, shaken, wide-eyed we sat there. But only the chirping of insects, the burbling of the stream, the soft sighing of the night wind and the occasional cry of an owl broke the silence. Whatever the terrible thing was, it was not super-natural. It had not been immune to soft-nosed .45 calibre bullets, and somewhere in the dark shadows it was lying crushed and forever stilled.

But there was no more sleep for us that night, and neither of us could summon up enough courage to venture into the darkness to investigate the fallen demon of the night.

CHAPTER 6

ALONE

W

ITH THE DAWNING OF ANOTHER DAY, OUR COURAGE returned. As soon as it was light enough to see we rose and peered about—still a bit fearfully—in search of the living nightmare I had shot down. We did not have far to seek. A few rods from where we stood, a confused, black mass jutted up from the ground, looking so much like the wreck of a cracked-up airplane that for a moment I felt sure I had inadvertently brought down an aircraft. But as we cautiously approached it, I saw it was no machine of fabric and metal, but the body of a gigantic beast. With amazed eyes, half-incredulously, I stepped nearer and examined it, while Maliche, all his superstitions aroused, fell on his knees and bowed his head to the earth. I could not believe my eyes, could not credit my senses, and yet there was no doubt about it.

The broken motionless thing was a gigantic pterodactyl! There were the great bat-like membranous wings now crumpled, torn and twisted. There was the long skinny neck ending in the immense scaly head with six-foot, sharp-toothed jaws. There were the huge, baleful, staring green eyes now glazed in death, and there were the powerful, longclawed, alligator-like feet. The thing was a survivor of long-past ages, a flesh and blood fossil! I had killed a monster that was supposed to have become extinct hundreds of thousands of years before! I had brought down a specimen that—had I had the means of preserving it—would have brought me a fortune, that would have made me famous.

As I gazed at the gigantic, horrible looking, but now harmless thing, I bitterly regretted that it must lie there and rot, that it should provide many a meal for the hungry vultures already circling overhead, that it would be forever lost to science and that—if I ever succeeded in reaching civilization—my story would unquestionably be scoffed at and I would be dubbed a liar. I would have given much for a camera, even for the possibility of preserving a portion of the monstrous thing.

Even in death it was horrible, uncanny, fiendish, and with a start I remembered Maliche's terrified words of the night—"Izputeque!" and the words of Katchilcan; "and one must face the demon Izputeque." Was this fearsome prehistoric creature the demon? Was it possible he might have existed, might have haunted this spot for centuries? Was it possible he had been here when the Book of Kukulcan was made? Or were there others; had the things survived here when in all other parts of the world they had become extinct? And would the "Fiend Neztpehua" eventuate? Would it prove to be some weird, monstrous, prehistoric leftover?

There was no use in speculating, but with that crumbled pterodactyl lying on the ground before me almost anything seemed possible, even probable. To Maliche, however, the creature was far more than a dead winged lizard. To him it was the incarnate form of his demon-like god, Izputeque, and he was muttering prayers and making a blood offering to it as I turned away.

Our route that day was directly toward the nearer of the two volcanoes whose rumblings were now distinctly audible. By following the narrow valley between the rocky ridges the way was fairly easy, for there was no jungle. There were few patches of forest, and it was much like walking through an immense park. Game, however, was very scarce and with the exception of a few small birds we saw no forms of animal life. But there were plenty of fish and crayfish in the stream and we did not worry over our food supply. Before sundown we had ascended for more than a

thousand feet and could look back over a vast extent of the country with the glaring red, white and yellow deserts spread like a map below us. Nothing disturbed our rest that night, and feeling that the worst part of our journey was over, we resumed our march the next morning.

As we climbed higher and higher the country became rougher and wilder. Great jagged black crags rose on every side; long debris slopes of gleaming obsidian broke the green of the hillsides; the stream tumbled in flashing cascades down the outjutting ledges; and ever louder and louder was the dull, rumbling, growling roar within the bowels of the volcano under our feet. During that afternoon we came upon many other signs of the volcano's activity. Springs of hot water bubbled from sulphur- and lime-encrusted pools, sulphurous vapors rose from fissures and fumeroles, and in one spot a group of splendid geysers shot their fountains of steam and water fifty feet in air. Further upward progress now became impossible, and swinging westward we followed along a ridge or plateau that encircled the mountain like a gigantic terrace.

It struck me as very strange that Maliche should show no fear of the volcano or the natural phenomena, but when I questioned him he replied that there was a similar smoking mountain near his home and that he was familiar with such sights. But, he added, he was sure this volcano was the home of very terrible gods. Had we not heard and seen the demon Izputeque? And at any moment other demoniacal beings might appear. But the white man's magic, the thunder and lightning from his magic tube, were more powerful than the evil gods, and, moreover, the white man carried the Book of Kukulcan which would safeguard us, so why should he fear?

Brave, trusting Maliche! All too soon he was destined to learn how futile were the white man's "magic" and the codex in which he had such sublime faith.

We had now circled about the first volcano and had reached the pass leading between the two cones. Here there

was a dense forest, the tangled interlaced tops of the trees forming a dense canopy of foliage that shut out the sunlight, and in the semi-twilight we pressed onward between the immense tree trunks that rose like the fluted columns of some vast cathedral.

Soon after we entered this forest Maliche shot a small deer and as we had been on rather slender rations since the previous day, we stopped then and there, cooked and ate a hearty meal, and prepared to remain and rest there until the next morning.

Presently Maliche rose, and remarking that he was going on a hunt to secure food for the morrow, he vanished among the trees. That was the last time I ever saw him alive. Perhaps half an hour after he had left me, I was startled by a faint far-away scream, the terrified cry of a human being, and I sprang to my feet, alert, listening, filled with forebodings.

Then, once again, I heard that scream of mortal terror or agony, I knew not which, cut abruptly short by a faint, choking groan. Something terrible had happened. Leaping forward, I dashed through the forest in the direction whence the sound had come. Presently I saw a lighter area ahead, the trees thinned and before me stretched an open space in the forest.

At the sight that met my eyes, the blood seemed to congeal in my veins, and a cry of horror escaped from my lips. Squatting in the center of the open space was the most monstrous, the most horrible, the most repulsive being that ever the eyes of man have looked upon.

At first sight I had thought the thing a hideous sculptured stone idol. There, fully thirty feet above the ground, was the great misshapen, grotesque head, a head adorned with an upstanding crest of huge spikes, a head with bestial fiery red eyes, with a gaping cavernous mouth armed with immense, curved white fangs. There was the great monolithic body of dull green, covered with intricate geometric patterns in relief. There were the crooked short arms with

talons in place of fingers, and there were the columnar bowed legs, all as massive, as hard, as unreal as any sculptured Mayan god. But the illusion was only momentary. Behind the terrifying monster extended a gigantic scaly tail, the huge corpse-white paunch rose and fell as the thing breathed, the scarlet eyes moved from side to side. The stupendous, indescribably horrible thing was alive, a creature of flesh and blood! I felt sick, faint, nauseated as my bewildered brain and horror-filled eyes took in the scene. In one gigantic front foot, clasped tightly against its chest, the monster held the body of Maliche!

Blood dripped down the livid white belly and crimson foam drooled from the huge mouth, as the fiendish thing masticated something in its titanic jaws. The next instant I realized what it was crunching between its terrible teeth. The mangled decapitated body of the Indian told the story. It was Maliche's head!

Madness, berserk fury took the place of my fear, my horror, my nausea at the sight. For a moment I was mad, crazed, utterly bereft of reason. With a hoarse shout, a savage yell, I drew my pistol and fired at the breast of the cannibalistic demon before me. But I might as well have fired at a monument of solid rock. The bony scales of the monster's body were as impervious to my bullets as plates of steel.

Possibly he did not even feel them. But my shout, the report of my pistol, distracted his attention from his gruesome, repulsive meal. Slowly, as if trying to locate the sound, he ceased chewing, turned his head and peered toward me with one gleaming eye. At that instant I fired my last shot. I saw the baleful eye vanish in a blur of red as my final bullet ploughed its way in, and I gave vent to a wild shout of triumph.

For an instant I thought my lucky shot had killed the monster. His head sagged, his front foot relaxed, the torn and bleeding body of Maliche dropped unheeded to the ground, and the gigantic creature swayed unsteadily.

But the next second I realized my mistake. I realized that my bullet had only momentarily stunned and confused the terrible beast. With a hoarse bellow he dropped to all fours, swung his head quickly to right and left and then, evidently locating me, he leaped with a prodigious bound directly at me. But I had already turned to run. I heard the colossal thing crash against a tree, I heard him panting, bellowing with pain and baffled rage; but I did not turn, did not glance back. Realizing even in my mad terror and my extremity that such an enormous beast would find it difficult to make speed among the trees, I dodged between the trunks, plunging deeper and deeper into the forest, paying no heed to direction.

In my rear I could still hear the monster in pursuit, crashing, hurtling into the trees, roaring hoarsely, shaking the very ground with his thundering tons of infuriated flesh. He was like a whole herd of elephants charging through the forest. Small trees went down like straws before his onrush, and only the fact that he was half-blinded and unable to see me as long as I kept to the right, and was therefore obliged to keep his head turned to avoid blundering into trees, saved me from Maliche's fate.

Even as it was, I barely held my own, barely kept my scant two hundred feet in advance of my terrible pursuer. And each minute, each second I was growing weaker, becoming more and more spent. My breath wheezed in my throat, my lungs seemed bursting, a mist swam before my eyes. Soon I knew I must slow down, must stop. At any moment my heavy feet might trip upon a root and the next instant the terrible beast would be upon me.

Then, as I felt I must give up, as I had made up my mind to slip another cartridge into my pistol, and end my life rather than be torn to pieces, the forest came to an end and, unable to check my headway, I slipped, plunged head-first and rolled head-over-heels down a sharp, bare slope. Dazed, frightened, my eyes blinded with dust, my mouth and nostrils filled with choking powder, dimly aware of blister-

ing, burning heat, I brought up with a jarring, sickening thud against a mass of rock.

Bruised, shaken, sputtering, I spat the sand from my mouth, wiped the dust from my eyes and glanced about. I was sprawled upon a ledge of rock surrounded by coarse grass and stunted trees at the foot of a long steep slope of glaring white sand. Here and there slender columns of steam rose from it. Dull yellow patches of sulphur dotted its surface, and an uneven, irregular furrow marked the course of my fall. At the summit of the slope rose the forest trees and, issuing from them, was the gigantic monster still in pursuit.

But I could not move, could not make an effort to escape. I was utterly done, utterly exhausted. I felt for my pistol, but the holster was empty. In a moment more the colossal beast would come sliding, bounding upon me.

Fascinated, I stared at him. One glance he gave about, and then with a bound, he was on the slope. My heart seemed to stop beating; numbing terror paralyzed me. But I need not have feared. Little did I know the character of that declivity of white, innocent-appearing sand. Instead of racing down the slope, the monster sank into it as though it had been liquid. He thrashed, lashed with his enormous tail and struggled madly. But only to bury himself deeper and deeper. The soft, fine, almost impalpable dust could not support his weight when he was stationary. It gave way beneath him, closed in clouds above him. It was like a quicksand, and presently only the tip of his upflung tail and the thrashing, gnashing jaws were visible. Then they disappeared, and an amazing phenomenon occurred. Up from the spot where he vanished, a great column of steam shot fifty feet in the air, hissing and roaring. The next instant it subsided, and only the smooth unbroken slope remained.

It was uncanny, awe-inspiring, and I felt a chill of unreasoning superstitious fear of the supernatural as the geyser burst from the spot where the creature had disap-

peared as if some evil spirit had escaped in a cloud of steam from its reptilian body. Yet I knew it was a perfectly natural occurrence, that the slope was merely a thin strata of volcanic ash, a superficial crust covering the boiling, steaming heated mass beneath which would burst out wherever the crust might be broken. My own body as I had rolled rapidly down the declivity had not broken through the surface. I had moved too swiftly even to be burned by the hot ashes, but the weight of the great lizard as it landed on the slope had spelled the monster's doom.

My own position was precarious enough. By chance I had rolled onto an outcrop of rock but all about me was the powdery dust and jets of scalding water and steam. And Maliche was dead. I was alone. "My God!" I exclaimed as sudden realization came to me. I was in the "realm of hot ashes" of the prophecy. And surely if ever there was a fiend Neztpehua the monstrous dinosaur would have filled the bill to perfection. I was convinced it was so, positive that the dinosaur had been there since the days of Kukulcan.

Perhaps I was light-headed from my terror and my flight to escape from the creature, perhaps my everstrained nerves and brain had affected me, but whatever the reason, I was filled with a strange elation, an unaccountable joy that everything had come out precisely as it had been foretold. I had met every peril, every danger of which Katchilcan had warned me and even if my way had not been "made easy" in a literal sense, yet I had come unharmed through it all. I was convinced that some unknown, benign power must be watching over me, guiding me. Was it possible that there *was* some occult magic in the Book of Kukulcan? I strove to reason, I tried to convince myself it was all sheer nonsense and superstition. But I could not shake off the feeling, and I could not mentally or logically argue against obvious facts. Indeed, so fully had the conviction taken possession of me that I felt sure that I would yet find the Cave of the Bats, the Bridge of Life, and would enter the secret city of Mictolan.

But first I must escape from the crater. As I have said, the spot where I had so fortunately been arrested in my involuntary descent was rocky and sustained a growth of coarse grass and a few gnarled and stunted trees. This was not surprising, for in many craters, especially in the West Indies, I had seen the same forms of vegetation growing in the sand and sulphur-impregnated deposits surrounded by steam and boiling water. But was there any possible way of leaving the oasis-like spot and crossing the treacherous, deadly waste to solid ground?

As I rose and pushed through the thin growth, taking great care not to step into a pool of scalding water, I gave a cry of delight for lying among the bits of rock was my revolver. Reloading the empty chambers and replacing it in the holster I passed through the scrub and reaching the farther side carefully surveyed the place, searching for a passage out. I was at the bottom of an immense crater—I recall that at the time it reminded me of the titanic pit of a gigantic ant-lion and that I thanked Heaven there had been no such voracious creature lurking in the bottom ready to gobble up any unfortunate who came tumbling into its waiting jaws.

On one side was the slope down which I had fallen; on two other sides were perpendicular rock walls seamed with golden-yellow sulphur veins, but on the fourth side the crater wall was broken down and filled with masses of loose stones between which grew scarlet-flowered weeds, climbing cacti and coarse brake-like ferns. It was the only passable exit, and crawling carefully over the loose and treacherous rocks, I surmounted the barrier and to my delight found that the brush-covered mountain side stretched away to a green, wooded valley far below.

As I moved easily down the hillside many thoughts and conjectures filled my mind. Would I be able to sustain life without Maliche to aid me? Would I—even if I did reach the hidden city—be able to return to my fellows and to civilization? What earthly purpose would be served if after

journeying so far, having undergone so much, I found the city only to spend the rest of my days there? And in that case of what value would be my precious codex?

I laughed grimly to myself as I mentally reviewed the strange sequence of events that had followed in such an unbroken chain since my visit to that little shop in far-off Vigo. From the moment I had first seen the faded, ancient document the entire course of my life, yes, even my mental processes, had been altered. I had been obsessed, bewitched with the thing. Why hadn't I been content to dispose of it for what it would bring—a far greater sum than I ever before had possessed at one time—instead of travelling here, there and everywhere searching for someone who could interpret it?

And, even at the eleventh hour, why hadn't I been satisfied with Katchilcan's information and interpretation instead of plunging into the wilderness on this crazy-headed chase for the mythical city of Mictolan. Why? But I could find no answer other than it was fate, destiny, that I had come honestly into possession of the Book of Kukulcan and had therefore to bring the long-awaited token to the Mayas in the hidden city.

And the dinosaur! Were there other, perhaps even more terrible prehistoric creatures in this land? I had had proof that pterodactyls and dinosaurs still survived there. Was it not possible there were others of their kinds, or even more ferocious fossils? A Triceratops would be a most unpleasant "demon" to meet, an Iguanodon might be even worse. It behooved me to go carefully, to watch my step, to pass my nights where I would be safe from attack. And that reminded me that it was high time I found such a spot, for the sun had set behind the volcanic peaks and darkness was near at hand.

It would have been a simple matter to have found a place in which to sleep, for the rocks on either side of the valley were full of fissures and caves, but I was hungry and thirsty, and I could see no prospect of either water or food

in the immediate vicinity. Below me, to the right, the vegetation was fresher and greener. Possibly water might be there, and keeping a sharp watch for game or edible berries or fruits, I hurried toward the spot.

As I had hoped, a tiny stream trickled among the rocks and I found a recess in a ledge that formed a secure resting place. But I went supperless to bed and hunger prevented me from sleeping much that night.

The next morning, however, I was in better luck, for I came upon a coati or raccoon and secured him with a shot from my revolver and, a little later, I found a huge land tortoise. I dined sumptuously, and feeling much better, swung on down the valley. I was now well beyond the volcanoes and I had an intangible premonition that I was nearing the end of my journey. One thing puzzled me, why was the country uninhabited? I had seen no signs of Indians, not even a ruin, a monument or an inscribed stone since passing the statue of Chac-Mool in the pool of the crocodiles. If in the long ago the Mayas had passed this way, surely, I thought, they would have left some traces of their presence. Hardly had the thought crossed my mind, when, rising above the trees ahead, I saw the remains of stone buildings.

The ruins proved to be in bad shape, with the walls fallen apart, but they were unquestionably ancient Mayan, although there were some features that aroused my wonder. In several places were sculptured symbols and figures wholly unlike any I had ever seen, and in one of the doorways was a true arch. The Mayas, I knew had never, as far as known, discovered the arch, but joined their walls either by "stepping in" the stones until they met, or connected them by means of wooden beams or by lintels of stone. Yet here was an arch, although without a keystone, formed of stones cemented together, and that still remained intact although the walls about it had crumbled and fallen away.

I had made an epochal discovery even if it was of little

value to the world of science under the existing circumstances, but it whetted my desire to find the hidden city. If the ruins I was examining were the remains of the work of the people of Mictolan (and I felt certain they were) then these people had developed far beyond the other Mayas and during the many centuries which had passed since they had been separated from the rest of their race, they might well have reached astounding heights and have made most remarkable discoveries.

Thus speculating, I continued on my way and a little later came upon an immense stone monument half-buried in the earth. One portion of its upper surface was elaborately carved with beautiful bas-reliefs, but the rest of it was unmarked and the plain smooth stone merged evenly into the sculptured portion. There was every gradation from the deeply cut figures to shallow carvings, from these to mere incised outlines and from these to the smooth stone. And there were no tool marks upon it, nothing to indicate that the design had been chiseled or chipped away.

Here was a puzzle, and eagerly I examined the other visible surfaces of the monolith. All were exactly the same. It was precisely as if the immense column had been steel and had been dipped into some acid that had deeply etched the submerged portion, leaving the rest untouched. Of course I well knew that nothing of this sort had occurred and merely thought of it as an appropriate simile. But the mystery of how or by what means the Mayas had accomplished their marvelous sculptures had always been a fascinating problem to me, and I had never before seen, or even heard of, a stone column that was partially carved as was this one. However, it proved that the Mayas had been in the valley, and from time to time for several hours thereafter, I came upon other remains left by the ancient race. I was more certain than ever that I was nearing the end of my journey, and I felt that at almost any moment I might come within sight of Mictolan.

CHAPTER 7

THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT

THE VALLEY HAD BECOME NARROWER AND DEEPER WITH precipitous cliffs on either side, and as I emerged from a fairly dense patch of forest I found my farther progress barred by a sheer wall of rock. But my bitter disappointment and chagrin at thus finding it impossible to continue on my way, was forgotten as I gazed at the rocky rampart before me. Cut into the surface of the dull red stone was the huge figure of a Maya god.

So deeply sculptured was the image that it appeared more like a separate monolith set into a recess than a part of the cliff itself. It was a most marvelous piece of work, the most superb example of Mayan art that I had ever seen. The elaborate headdress of quetzal feathers and entwined rattlesnakes would have identified it as a representation of Kukulcan, even without the bearded face, the long robe covered with intricate designs, the symbols of the sacred quetzal and the two-headed serpents and the whirling wind symbols. Fascinated, I stared at it, taking in its every detail and searching for date-glyphs. But not a single cartouche enclosing numerical symbols could be seen.

"By jove!" I cried as my roving eyes rested upon the oval pendant ear ornaments. Upon them, so cleverly placed that they appeared merely ornamental patterns, were columns of tiny cartouches with the inscriptions for which I had been searching. But from where I stood I could make nothing of them for they were fully thirty feet above my

head. Forgetting all else in my desire to examine, and if possible, decipher the date, I clambered upon the sculptured legs of the image, and finding a foothold on the god's ceremonial staff, I grasped the arm to draw myself still farther up. As I did so, I felt the immense mass of rock sway, my feet slipped. I clutched wildly at the stone arm, uttered one terrified yell and fell crashing to the earth below.

Dazed and stunned but luckily unhurt, I sat up and stared dumbly, incredulously at the colossal image above me. Standing out at right angles to the cliff, staring down at me from directly above my head, was the huge stone face of the god, while in place of the flowing robe and sandalled feet, a black opening yawned in the face of the precipice.

I gasped. The gigantic carving was movable. My weight or my grasp upon its arm had swung the upper portion forward and outward and had disclosed a hidden opening, a secret door! What did it mean? What lay within the dark portal in the cliff? That it was something of the utmost importance, something inexpressably sacred or precious was certain. To have carved that gigantic figure, to have designed the mechanism, to have balanced the many tons of stone so perfectly that it could be swung at a touch must have been a herculean, a most difficult task requiring the labor of years; a work that never would have been undertaken except for some most vital and important reason. And the fact that the massive pivoted door had been formed in the likeness of Kukulcan pointed to the secrets within the opening being associated with that deity. Perhaps—my pulse quickened at the thought and a thrill coursed through my nerves—perhaps I was at the threshold of Mictolan, at the portal of the hidden city I sought!

Half-fearfully I peered within the opening. All was impenetrable blackness. If I entered the mysterious chamber I would require a light, and I hurried to the nearby trees and searched for inflammable material for a torch. I hoped to find a gum-elemi tree, but not finding this I turned to a wax-palm, gathered a quantity of the oily, waxy fruits,

wrapped them tightly in the dry bark I tore from the palm's trunk, and had a torch which I knew would burn with a brilliant flame for fully two hours. But as I had no idea of how long I might be within the place and had no desire to be caught without a light, I prepared three more of the torches.

Lighting one of these I stepped, a bit hesitatingly I admit, within the mysterious aperture. The next instant I sprang back. How was I to know that the massive door might not close behind me? The thing had opened to my weight or the pressure of my hand, I was not quite positive which, and there might be some mechanism so arranged that the moment I entered the place the titanic statue would swing back into its original position. To be thus trapped in that black hole would be a horrible fate, and very cautiously, very watchfully, I examined the sides of the opening, and the visible portions of the image both inside and outside, but could detect no mechanism, no mechanical device. As far as I could determine, the entire monolith was hung upon a pivot or on trunnions and so nicely balanced that the added weight of a man would swing the upper portion of the enormous mass of stone forward.

It could thus be operated from the outside, but the inner surface was plain smooth stone with no means provided for swinging the image. Whoever had designed and placed it there had not intended that it should be moved from within the opening. Yet an accident might happen. A mass of rock so perfectly and delicately balanced might swing to with a jar, a sudden gust of wind; most certainly with an earthquake. If I wished to feel certain of keeping my line of retreat open, I must find some means of preventing the ponderous door from closing.

This was not a difficult matter. There were masses of loose rock fragments all about, and by dint of hard work and blistered hands I managed to roll several good-sized boulders into the opening, and placed them against the inner surface of the rock about the doorway. Then, to make

assurance doubly sure, I dragged a large log inside the portal and placed it across the entrance. Even the immense weight of the huge image would not be sufficient to permit it to close the aperture with these obstacles in its way, and confident that I could now retrace my way at any time, I held my blazing torch aloft and stepped into the dark mysterious chamber.

That I was in a vast natural cavern was obvious, for the walls were rough and water-worn, stalagmites covered the floor, and far above my head pendant stalactites reflected the flare of my torch. The place was immense and I could see only a small portion of the floor and a small part of the walls as lighting my way by the torch I followed the wall to the right.

I had proceeded several hundred yards when, staring from the blackness before me, I saw a pair of glowing red eyes! Beyond them were others—ten, twenty, a whole line of eyes, gleaming like living coals in the darkness beyond the light thrown by my torch. Fear gripped me. Lurking there in the shadows were wild beasts, savage creatures, perhaps, and—I shivered at the thought—possibly as horrible and as monstrous as the repulsive reptile that had killed Maliche.

What a fool I had been to enter the place! In the glare of the torch I was plainly visible to the things crouching there, while they were invisible to me. Even if I drew my pistol and fired at those baleful staring eyes I could not hope to kill or maim more than one or two and there were dozens lurking there. And if I turned and ran they might be upon me in an instant. I felt paralyzed, unable to move.

Something rustled, something was creeping stealthily along the walls! A cold chill ran up and down my back and my scalp tingled. There was a rush of air, a soft swishing sound and some dreadful invisible thing brushed against my shoulder. I uttered a piercing shriek and leaped aside, trembling from head to foot. But the eyes still remained there, fixed, immovable, staring.

They fascinated me. Unable to take my gaze from them, yet shaking with terror, shrinking from dread of that invisible moving something, I took two, four, six steps forward. Then a wild, maniacal, hysterical laugh came from my lips. Ranged along the cavern wall was a row of squat, grotesque figures, their lifeless eyes set with jewels! I had been terrified by the reflection of my own torch! Yet something, some living thing had touched me and again I shuddered.

Fearfully I peered about, but all was as silent as the grave. I stepped close to the images and the next instant gasped and stood staring. They were not idols of carved stone as I had thought. They were corpses—mummies! There was no doubt about it. The dried skin drawn tightly across the skulls, the grinning jaws, the hair—all were real. Overcoming my momentary dread and amazement I examined them closely. Upon their heads were elaborate crowns of gold and feathers, huge golden discs hung over the ears, upon the shriveled chests were necklaces of jade, crystal, turquoise, lapis-lazuli, carnelian and gold; the shrunken bodies were wrapped in cotton robes woven in intricate colorful patterns. Unquestionably they were mummies of ancient Maya chiefs or priests, and unique, marvelous specimens.

Before me was a fortune in gold and gems, several fortunes if I could have transported the mummies to the outer world where museums would have paid any price for them. But like everything else of value that I had found, like my unique codex they were worthless to me.

But other thoughts than these were rushing through my brain as I gazed at those dessicated remains of long-dead Mayas. Was I in the tomb of the kings of Mictolan? Were the ruins I had passed all that remained of the hidden city? Or did the mythical place still exist somewhere in the vicinity? It was all conjecture and turning from the silent dead, I continued on my exploration of the cavern.

Presently, wondering how far I had progressed, I turned and glanced back toward the entrance. I could not believe

my eyes. The opening had vanished!

Only a few moments before it had been there, a square of light in the blackness. Now there was no sign of it. I blinked, rubbed my eyes, stared. But the opening was gone. Was it possible the statue had fallen back into place? No, I could not believe that. If that had occurred I would have felt the jar, would have heard the crash as it struck the stones and the log of my barricade. And I felt positive that it could not have closed tightly enough to blot out all light from without. I felt equally certain I had not turned a corner, had passed no outjutting portion of the wall which might conceal the entrance. Possibly, I thought, one of the stalagmites, or perhaps a mass or column of rock in the centre of the cave might be between me and the opening. I stepped first to one side, then to the other. But all was blackness; not a sign of the doorway was to be seen.

With a tremendous effort I conquered my desire to rush madly in the direction of the opening. With all my will power I forced myself to remain reasonably calm, to think, to use my brains. I reasoned with myself that the entrance must be there, that it could not have vanished without cause. My only course, I told myself, was to carefully retrace my steps, locate the mummies, follow the wall and reach the spot where I had stood when I last saw the doorway. But I soon discovered that to do this was impossible. I could not find the wall, I could not even find the mummies! Somehow, somewhere I had got turned around, had lost my sense of direction. Wildly I searched about but whichever way I turned I found only vast, empty black space. I was hopelessly lost! Lost in the great cavern with the Mayas' dead!

Suddenly I again heard that weird terrifying swishing sound and once more that invisible ghostly hand touched me! Screaming, I leaped aside. A cold soft hand passed across my face, on every side I heard low moans, whisperings, the swishing of unseen draperies, the passing of invisible bodies! I wonder I did not go raving mad. I shrieked,

cowered, waving my flaming torch wildly and threw myself upon the cavern floor. Something soft, moving, horrible fell upon my back. Madly, maniacally I grappled with it. The ghastly thing struggled in my grasp and sharp claws tore at me, white teeth were buried in my flesh.

Sudden realization dawned upon me and peal after peal of hysterical laughter echoed through the cavern. The awful things were no ghosts, no spirits, no supernatural things. They were bats!

With the reaction of my tensed, shattered nerves came a flash of memory. The Cave of the Bats! Could this be it? Was this the place Katchilcan had mentioned? Was I on the right trail? Was the end of my journey near? Was the road to Mictolan through this vast cavern?

I felt certain this was the case, that I was in the Cave of the Bats of the codex and the prophecy, and forgetting all my fears, all my terror of the circling, rustling, twittering myriads of bats, forgetting that I was lost, that the entrance to the cavern had vanished, I rose to my feet and peered about. If I were right in my surmise, if this were the Cave of the Bats of Katchilcan's legend, then somewhere near at hand should be the "Bridge of Light", whatever that might be. But where, in what direction? How could I find it?

One thing was certain. To stand there idly, gazing into the blackness while my torch burned out was useless. It was getting me nowhere. And inasmuch as I had no idea from which direction I had come, nor which way to go, one way was as good as another. If I walked in a straight line in any direction I must eventually reach a wall, for no cavern is endless, and once I found the wall I could follow along it until I came to the entrance or to some other exit, for there must be another else the bats could not enter. Moreover, the air was clear, sweet and fresh.

That fact gave me an idea. If there was a circulation of air there must be a current, a draught which I could follow to an opening. I held my torch as high as I could reach,

steadying it, watching the flame and the oily smoke. Yes, there *was* a draught, for the smoke drifted to one side and the flames flared in the same direction. Elated, feeling confident I could now find my way out, I stepped forward, stopping frequently to steady the torch and check up my direction.

As I proceeded, the draught became stronger, the smoke drew ahead of me and the flames flickered and flared. Soon I did not even have to hold the torch aloft for the sooty smoke swirling before me led me on, and I made rapid progress.

Ever the bats hovered and flitted about me, often they brushed my body, my head or even my face; but although I instinctively drew away and shuddered at their touch, yet now that I knew they were merely bats, and seemingly harmless bats at that, I laughed to myself at thought of the mad terror they had inspired so short a time before.

How far I followed the smoke of the torch, I do not know. Whether I walked in a more or less straight line, whether I turned countless corners, whether I ascended or descended I cannot say. I lost all sense of time, all idea of distance, all sense of direction, and I thanked Heaven I had brought more than one torch. My first flickered and died. I lit another and that, too, burned away, and as I lit the third and last I hoped against hope that before it failed me I might find an exit from the accursed place.

Terror beyond words to express filled me as I watched that last torch burning steadily, inexorably down. One-third, one-half was consumed. In less than half an hour it would be finished. My fate seemed sealed if I did not reach an opening within the next thirty minutes.

Strange, confused, incongruous thoughts filled my mind while my feet hurried me on. All that had transpired since I had landed at Vigo passed before my mental vision like a moving picture.

I saw the little quay with the red-sailed fishing smacks moored beside it, the rocky hillside with the tall square

houses, the lounging, red-sashed, beretted boatmen; the Avenida with its stream of motor cars and creaking wine carts; the little Plazuela de Tres Santos. The image of paunchy, tousel-headed, greasy Salceda rose before me. As in a dream I saw myself haggling with him over the old books, heard his suave, flowery words, even smelled the odor of garlic that exuded from him.

In the flickering torch and swirling smoke I seemed to see the figures, the strange symbols of the mysterious codex. In turn I visualized the squat, massive, smoke-blackened British Museum, Doctor Joyce with his trim gray Vandyke beard; New York with its thunder of traffic, its roar, its skyscrapers; the great plaza of Mexico; Cervantes bending above my codex, his keen black eyes gleaming with interest, his swarthy face alight. Before me, like a wraith in the glare of my torch, I again saw jolly-faced rotund Fray Jose.

I passed like a disembodied spirit through the little Mayan village and heard Katchilcan's droning voice relating the ancient prophecy in the soft guttural Zutugil dialect.

As plainly as though it were actually before my eyes, I saw the nude body of the Indian girl, charred and seared upon the altar of the temple of the mountain. I seemed to feel the bonds cutting into my flesh, to see the flash of Maliche's upraised obsidian knife. Then the terrible cañon, the Valley of Death, the horrible Tunnel of Serpents, the nightmarish Pool of the Crocodiles.

Again, in my strangely disordered mind, I traversed the scorching, glaring deserts; in my ears rang the unearthly cry of the great pterodactyl. I shuddered as the vision of the awful dinosaur with Maliche's headless body in his talons rose before me. All had come to pass; all that the prophecy had foretold, all that was written and pictured in the Book of Kukulcan had been borne out, and now I was in the Cave of the Bats, was racing onward, following the streaming smoke of my last torch.

No doubt it was the hypnotic effect of gazing steadily

at the light that produced the visions; yet I was not dreaming. I was fully awake. One portion of my brain was normal, living in the present, alive to my dangers, to the rapidly diminishing torch; the other half seemed detached, moving back through time, seeing each and every detail of all that I had passed through.

So thoroughly aware was I that the mental visions were not realities that when I saw a strangely greenish wavering light, I felt it was a part of the phantasma of my brain.

But the next moment I knew it was no vision. All about me the cavern was bathed in a peculiar glow, a soft light that seemed to change from green to blue, to purple, to pink, to red, to yellow—to pass through every color of the spectrum exactly like the lights thrown upon the curtain of a theatre by multicolored electric lights. With a sharp cry, as the last flicker of the torch burned my fingers, I cast it aside. No need of it now. I could see plainly. The cavern had narrowed. The roof was barely ten feet above my head, the walls were within reach of my outstretched hands. I was in a tunnel, and before me, streaming through a semi-circular opening, was the remarkable prismatic glow.

I was safe. I had found an exit. Before me was the open air. I dashed forward toward the opening, gave a horrified yell and checked myself in the nick of time. Beyond the opening yawned a vast, black, fathomless abyss!

Another yard and I would have plunged headlong to my death in the awful depths. I shuddered and clung to the rocks as I gazed from the opening to the tunnel. Beneath me was a seemingly bottomless chasm, a great rift in the mountain, its sheer walls lost in the deep blue hazy shadows thousands of feet below the spot where I stood. Still trembling at my narrow escape I looked up. Above my head the walls rose for hundreds, thousands of feet until they seemed to meet. To right and left the stupendous precipices extended as far as eye could see into the bowels of the mountains. I was trapped, trapped as effectively as though I were still within the vast black cavern.

Yet, I scarcely noticed these things, I hardly realized the predicament I was in, for the marvelous inexplicable phenomena that confronted me held all my attention, all my thoughts. Across the vast rift from where I stood, perhaps two hundred feet distant, was a second opening in the precipice, and from below this, streaming across the chasm as though projected from some titanic searchlight, was a great beam of vari-colored light that shimmered, flashed with rainbow hues, and glowed with transcending beauty. It seemed almost like a solid thing, like a giant beam of transparent iridescent glass spanning the chasm. It was the most marvelous sight I had ever seen.

As I gazed upon it fascinated, forgetting all else, filled with awe and admiration, I gaped and stared with incredulous, unbelieving eyes. Outlined in the opposite opening, seeming to materialize from the light, appeared a woman!

Every detail of her face, her figure, her garments was clearly visible. Gazing at her I felt certain that she must be a vision, a figment of my overtaxed brain, for surely no mortal woman of flesh and blood could be so beautiful. I felt a sharp stab of anguish, of intense sorrow that it must be so, for the moment she had appeared I had been filled with an indescribable yearning, a strange emotion such as I had never known. Her perfect features, her softly rounded breasts, her graceful arms and tapering limbs seemed moulded from solid gold. Her hair, lustrous and black, hung below her waist in two long plaits interwoven with strands of gold and pearls. Her eyes, large, soft, fathomless, gazed at me with undisguised delight and her scarlet lips parted in a welcoming smile. Upon her head was a diadem of mosaic set with turquoises, rubies and pearls, while her only garment was a skirt of soft, semi-transparent cloth richly embroidered with gold and bordered with feather-work in red, white and green. Upon her tiny feet were sandals fastened with golden lacings and about her slender neck was a gold chain bearing a jewelled pendant that rested in the curve of her breasts and rose and fell and flashed like living fire as she breathed.

As I noted this, a great wave of exultation and inexpressible joy surged through my veins, for now I knew that she was real, a living breathing human being and no unearthly vision or figment of my overwrought brain. And with realization of this I knew that I loved her, loved her madly, passionately. Yet she was as irrevocably separated from me, as far beyond my reach as though she had been on another planet.

For a moment she stood, framed in the black opening so near and yet so far away, her wonderful eyes fixed upon me, compelling, seeming almost to speak. Then, lifting her arms she held them toward me. A madness burned in my brain. My temples throbbed. I longed to throw myself into those outstretched arms, to hold her close, to pour words of love into her ears, to feel her lips against mine, for something in her gesture told me that she was fully aware of the sudden, amazing emotion that almost overwhelmed me, and that she welcomed my love. Then she spoke. I saw her lips move. Her words, soft, musical but unintelligible floated to my ears across that awful abyss. I shook my head, maddened almost beyond control to find myself unable to understand her.

And then, with a little gesture of despair, with a contemptuous toss of her head, she stepped forward, stepped over the verge of that terrible chasm! I was too horrified, too overcome, too numbed with horror, to utter a sound.

Then my horror changed to wonder, to incredulous, inexpressible amazement. The girl had not fallen, had not plunged downward to a fearful death. She was floating through air, coming toward me. Could it be possible, could it be real? She was walking upon that beam of light!

Was I dreaming? Had I gone mad? Was it a delusion, a vision of my brain? The next moment she was beside me, and as I seized her in my arms, and felt the kisses upon her unresisting lips, and her soft arms stole about my neck, I knew that it was no vision, no dream. She, at least, was very real.

CHAPTER 8

THE HIDDEN CITY



ERY GENTLY SHE DREW HERSELF FROM MY EMBRACE, HER starry eyes aglow, and spoke; to my surprise and delight, using a dialect of Zutugil, and fervently I thanked heaven—and Fray Jose—that I had learned that tongue.

"My lord has been long in coming," she said. "Long have we awaited him. For many Tuns and Katuns, yes, even for many Baktuns, have the maidens of Kinich-Ahau awaited thy coming at the Bridge of Light."

Bridge of Light! At her words comprehension dawned upon me. Strange I had not thought of it before—in Zutugil, light and life were synonymous, the same word served for both—the bridge of life of the prophecy was the bridge of light the girl had crossed!

"But to me, Itza, has come the honor of welcoming my lord," she continued, "and blessed by the gods am I. And"—she dropped her eyes and blushed—"I am glad to find you good to look upon my lord. I had thought to see my lord ugly—even with the savage face and great teeth of the images, and at times I feared and thought perchance my lord might even suck my blood or devour me, as Kinchi Haman says the gods are wont to do. But my lord is kind and gentle and he honors and blesses me with caresses, and"—her golden skin flushed rosily and her eyelids dropped—"and, the caresses of my lord are very sweet. . . ."

At last, with a deep sigh, she again released herself. "We must go to Kinchi Haman, my lord," she said. "He

would be angry indeed if he knew I were detaining my lord. Let us delay no longer."

Holding my hand, she led me toward the chasm. But as I glanced into the terrible abyss spanned by that shimmering beam of light, I drew back. There are limits to human faith, to credulity, and though I had seen Itza walk safely across the Bridge of Light, and though I knew she was no wraith, no spirit, no supernatural being, no figment of my imagination, yet to believe that I could do the same was utterly beyond me. By what magic, by what mysterious unknown power she had accomplished the seemingly impossible feat I did not know, could not imagine, but that the streaming light would support *my* weight was unthinkable, utterly preposterous.

Itza looked at me with surprise in her glorious eyes. "Does my lord fear?" she asked. Then, with a merry rippling laugh: "Fear not to follow me, my lord," she said, and stepped forward. I gasped, took a step forward to restrain her, but she was out of reach, walking upon that multicolored light, leaving me alone within the entrance to the cavern. Better to be dashed to my death than to lose Itza, and fully expecting to feel myself hurtling through space, I leaped after her.

Miracle of miracles! My feet trod upon an invisible something as firm as the rock itself. In a moment I was at Itza's side. In a moment more we had crossed the chasm and stood within the opening at the opposite cliff. I had crossed the Bridge of Light, had accomplished the utterly impossible!

In impassioned words, with husky voice I told her of my love, whispered soft Zutugil endearments in her ears and declared, as I believed and as I still believe, that Fate had drawn me hither and Destiny had guided and guarded me that I might find and have her.

"And I, too, love thee, my lord," she whispered. "Aye, I love thee more than life. Blessed am I above all women that my lord should love me, but mortal woman cannot mate

with the sons of the gods, my lord, and Kinchi Haman has chosen me to be the bride of Kinich Ahau with the coming of the next moon of the Tonalmatl."

"Curse your Kinchi Haman, whoever he may be!" I exclaimed. "I'll have something to say about whose bride you are to be, my Itza, my beloved one! And as for being a son of the gods! I am as much a mortal as thyself."

Itza drew away, her eyes frightened, wide. "Hush!" she warned me in a terrified whisper. "Curse not the great high-priest, my lord. And say not that you are mortal. Aye, I know you come in the form of man, for so it has been foretold, but even Kukulcan walked the earth in the form of a man and thou, my lord, art his son. But we must make haste, my lord. Already the sun seeks the nether world, so let us hurry onward to my people and to Kinchi Haman."

Still holding my hand, she led me down the rocky passage, while all about us the strange light glowed. Whence it came I could not discover. I could see no device, no contrivance, no source to account for the light. Even where it streamed across the chasm, where it formed that miraculous bridge of light, it seemed to issue from the solid rock. It was all incomprehensible, incredible.

The only real, natural, understandable thing I had seen was Itza, and while she was real and natural and lovable enough, if incredibly beautiful, yet some of her words were incomprehensible to me. That she had mistaken me for a god, for the descendant of the Plumed-Serpent, was not surprising. She and her people, of course, knew of the ancient prophecy; they had—as she herself had said—been long awaiting the appearance of some messenger bearing the token, the symbol of the Book of Kukulcan; and when she had seen me, a white man and bearded, she had naturally thought me either the bearded god himself or one of his sons.

But who was this high-priest Kinchi Haman whom she both revered and feared? Who was this Kinich Ahau, whom she was to wed at the next new cycle of Tonalmatl? Well,

I'd soon know, and would have something to say about whom she was to wed. And if Itza's people looked upon me as an incarnated god, as the son of Kukulcan, what I had to say would carry weight. Even a high-priest would hardly dare defy the son of the Plumed Serpent, the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan. And even if he did, I'd have Itza for myself despite him and his fellows. If it came to a matter of force, I was quite prepared to slay the priest with my own hands.

So elated was I, so filled with my new found happiness, so overwhelmingly in love with Itza, that no thought of danger; no thought of failure entered my mind. I felt able to cope with anything, to overcome anything, to defy the world if necessary. Nothing mattered but Itza, and I drew her to me and kissed her head, her neck, her upturned lips as we hurried on.

But despite my obsession I noted some details of our surroundings. I saw that the tunnel had been cut by hand for tool marks were everywhere visible upon the walls and roof, and at frequent intervals the rock was covered with sculptured figures and glyphs. In places, too, it led downward in a series of steps. Descending one of these flights of stone stairs and turning sharply to the left, we came abruptly to the end of the passage with an arched opening framing a section of a gorgeous sunset with golden and crimson clouds above a purple range of lofty mountains.

As we reached the exit and I gazed upon the scene spread before me, I uttered an involuntary cry of admiration. Never had I beheld a more beautiful picture. Enclosed within an encircling ring of towering mountains was a valley perhaps thirty miles in diameter, a valley richly verdant, with patches of dark woodland, lush green meadows and with a broad tranquil river winding through the centre and shimmering in the fading light of the setting sun. Fields of golden-yellow maize, snowy cotton and tobacco alternated with acres of flowers—crimson, white, pink, mauve and scarlet, causing the cultivated lands to resemble a vast multi-colored crazy-quilt. In every direction straight roads, bor-

dered by stone walls and shade trees, divided the entire valley into regular, symmetrical squares, and from where we stood a broad highway led, straight as an arrow, to the great city that occupied the very centre of the valley. My long search was at an end. I had reached the city of Mictolan!

Hundreds of low, one-storied houses glowed in the rosy light of sunset. Here and there a taller, more imposing building rose above the others; four magnificent temples with enormous intricate roof-combs towered, on their lofty pyramidal mounds, far above the lesser structures, and even higher than these, surmounting an enormous "kus" or pyramid fully two hundred feet in height, with its gleaming painted roof-comb soaring another hundred feet in air, was a magnificent temple rising from the huge open plaza in the centre of the city.

From where we stood I could see the tiny forms of people moving about: strolling through the streets, lolling on the flat roofs of their houses, plodding from their labors in the fields toward thatched cottages embowered in flowering shrubs and trees. But all was silent, so still that it seemed more like a picture thrown upon a screen than a reality.

And as the last light of the sun faded and was gone, and twilight descended on the valley, a strange effulgence, the same luminous glow that had illuminated the tunnel, overspread the city and the valley, seeming to come from nowhere, to be conjured from the air, and bathing the entire scene in a soft mysterious bluish light.

Itza's touch drew my eyes from the wondrous picture, and again I crushed her to me, drank deep of the sweetness of her lips and sensed the intense thrill of her responsive passion. Then, side by side, we stepped from the opening in the mountainside, and in the strange, soft purplish-blue luminescence moved onward along the highway leading to the city. Our presence had already been noted. Before we had proceeded one hundred feet the faint far-away sounds of horns, booming drums and shouting voices were borne to us,

and from the summit of one of the temples lambent flames shot to the zenith, shifting from gold to white, to red, to green like a display of the Aurora.

Ahead of us the wide road was filled with hurrying, thronging, shouting people. Men, women and children came dancing, laughing towards us. All were golden-skinned, all were clad in richly-woven cotton garments, all were figures that might have stepped bodily from some ancient Maya sculpture. Prostrating themselves as we approached, strewing the roadway with gorgeous flowers, chanting songs, they formed a lane through which we passed. Now and then I caught a word or a few sentences, amid the confusion of shouts, laughter and songs.

"He comes!" they cried. "The bearer of the symbol comes!" "Look upon the son of Kukulcan!" "Beseech his blessings!" "Itza leads him to us!" "Blessed by the gods is Itza!" "Our day is at hand!" "Behold the deliverance of Mictolan!" "Welcome to thee, O son of the Plumed Serpent!" "Lo, the prophecy has been fulfilled!" Then, as we passed where the crowd was yet closer, I heard someone exclaim: "May he who bears the token choose Itza for his bride!"

"Hush! Speak not so," warned another. "Know you not she is betrothed to Kinich Ahau? She weds at the coming of Tonalmatl."

"And what of that?" demanded the first speaker. At his words my heart warmed to him and I stared at the sea of faces and quickly identified him—a tall serious-looking young fellow in a dark red costume and a plumed golden casque. "What of that?" he repeated. "Who dares to say the bearer of the token nay? Can aught prevail against the power of the son of Kukulcan?" The reply was lost as we passed on and the welcoming din increased. Never had a man a more whole-hearted, a more vociferous or a more triumphant welcome than was accorded me as I entered the hidden city of Mictolan.

Itza touched my arm. "Look, my lord!" she exclaimed

in a whisper. "He comes. Kinchi Haman comes forth to welcome thee. My task is done, my lord. I must leave thee now. But O, my lord, that I might forever be at thy side. And thy caresses are very sweet, my lord!"

I grasped her, almost roughly, by the arm. "Go not!" I commanded her. "Thy tasks are but just begun. I, too, desire thee to be forever beside me and none—no, not even your Kinchi Haman, dare dispute the commands of the one who bears the token of Kukulcan."

A troubled, half-frightened expression swept over Itza's face, but she smiled, glanced trustfully at me and made no further effort to leave me as we halted and awaited an approaching procession.

In the lead, clearing the street of the crowds and forcing the people back by means of heavy wooden staves, were several dozen Indians clad only in loin-cloths but wearing tight-fitting leather caps adorned with blue feathers. Behind these marched several columns of warriors in robes of quilted cotton, their heads covered by polished copper helmets bearing nodding plumes of red, white and green. Each carried a long bronze-headed lance and a round shield decorated with mosaic symbols of the Plumed Serpent god. Following these was a band playing upon double-ended drums, pottery whistles and long reed pipes, while back of the musicians was a group of long-robed, long-haired men ablaze with gold and jewelled ornaments who surrounded a marvelous litter borne on the shoulders of eight men. Even in the soft subdued light, which resembled bright moonlight, the palanquin scintillated and sparkled with iridescent hues as though sprinkled with diamond dust. But at the time I scarcely glanced at the gem-encrusted golden litter, for my eyes were fixed upon its occupant, the high-priest of Mictolan, Kinchi Haman.

Never had I seen a more repugnant, a more repulsive human being. He seemed a fiend in human form if ever there was one, and he was scarcely human at that. His face was indescribably horrible, for some affection or disease

had eaten away the cheeks and nose until the jaw bones were exposed, giving him the appearance of a living death's head. Above the yawning black hole that should have been a nose, his malignant eyes burned in deep bony sockets. A shock of coarse hair, bleached red by lye, grew low on his artificially-flattened forehead and hung about his shoulders. And although I was not aware of it at that time, he was a hunchback with weak bowed legs and long gorilla-like arms. He was attired in a long black robe with a border of symbols in the sacred red, white and green; an immense carved emerald was suspended by a heavy gold chain about his neck, and upon his head was a narrow golden band bearing two long tail feathers of the sacred Quetzal trogan.

As he saw Itza standing beside me his eyes flashed, his lips drew back over his fleshless jaws and discolored teeth and he was the personification of fury.

"Back to your home, Betrothed of Kinich Ahau!" he snarled. "How dare ye walk in the presence of Him Who Comes, shameless one that thou art?"

With terror on her face, Itza shrank back, but I tightened my hold upon her arm. "Have no fear, beloved," I whispered.

The high-priest seemed insane with fury as he saw the girl make no move to obey his orders. "You dare defy me?" he screamed, half-rising from his litter and quivering with rage. "Have a care that thou art not flayed alive and wed in blood to Xipe instead of becoming the bride of Kinich Ahau." Then, turning to his soldiers, "Seize her! Beat her until she falls," he ordered.

Two of the men stepped forward, fear of approaching me plain on their stern faces, yet even more fearful of disobeying the monstrous, hideous fiendish priest.

"Stand back!" I warned them, drawing Itza to my side. "He who dares lay hand upon the maiden Itza dies by the curse of Kukulkan."

Instantly the warriors drew back, and still holding Itza, who was trembling with terror, I strode directly toward the

raging, infuriated priest. My only course was to bluff, to overawe him. From the moment I had first seen Kinchi Haman I had sensed that he and I were fated to clash, that either his power or mine must prevail. And there was no better time than the present to determine once and for all who was to wield the power. Like all the others he undoubtedly believed me a demi-god, the son of Kukulcan, the Plumed Serpent, or at least his chosen messenger and I felt that in this belief lay my trump card. But would his fears of offending the gods override his vicious, cruel nature, his dread of losing prestige? I would soon know the answer.

Looking him up and down contemptuously, and then staring into his bloodshot, wicked eyes with a savage frown on my brows, I stepped to within a yard of where he sat, huddled in his litter, the living counterpart of a hideously distorted idol.

"And who art thou to defy the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan?" I demanded. "A strange welcome you give to the bearer of the sacred token, O, Kinchi Haman. Know you, misshapen one, that I, the long-expected one, choose to have this maiden Itza remain beside me. More, O, priest of Mictolan, I, not Kinich Ahau, shall wed the maiden. Disobey my wishes, little priest, and the lightning and thunder shall destroy you and your people at my command."

At my words, a deep half-moan, half sigh arose from the assembled throng. Through their priest they had offended me, the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan, and dire vengeance might fall upon them at any moment, and with groans and supplications they prostrated themselves upon the earth. But my words affected the priest in a wholly different manner. Despite his cruel, vindictive nature he was a brave man, and, so I suspected, he was not as superstitious as his people. Although I could see that he was terrified at heart and recoiled before me, yet he was not willing to acknowledge his defeat so readily.

"Thou speakest boldly," he muttered, his eyes ablaze, "but what proof have I that thou art the bearer of the token.

And even if thou art, it is I, Kinchi Haman, who rules here. The maiden, I say, is to wed Kinich Ahau." Then, to his guards, "Seize her, I command you. The one who falters dies the seven deaths." A burly fellow sprang toward Itza at the priest's words. There was no time for argument, no time for anything but drastic action. I must prove my words, must make good my threat. I drew my revolver, fired from the hip and the soldier plunged forward on his face. But his death was scarcely noticed by the amazed, horror-stricken terrified people. Yells, screams, groans came from them as they grovelled in the dust, while the priest, leaping from his litter, threw himself at my feet chattering, babbling incomprehensible gibberish and pleading for mercy.

I had won the day. To be sure it had been at the cost of a man's life, and I deeply regretted having been compelled to kill the fellow who, after all, was only obeying the priest's orders. But it could not be helped, and I felt that his death had doubtless saved many lives, including Itza's and my own, that would have been sacrificed had I not at once asserted myself.

Placing my foot upon the neck of the prostrate priest—a somewhat theatrical pose, I admit, but appropriate under the circumstances, I harangued the people. Timidly, fearfully they raised their heads at sound of my voice and with frightened eyes gazed at me, fairly trembling with dread of another demonstration of my power over thunder and lightning.

"People of Mictolan!" I cried. "Arise and fear not. I, the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan, come to you in friendship and in peace. Bear witness, O, People of Mictolan, that Kinchi Haman defied me who brings the token, and now behold him humbled in the dust. He has been spared death by my magic because he is of the priesthood of Kinich Ahau; but no other who defies me shall be spared, and even Kinchi Haman will feel the vengeance of the Plumed Serpent if he bows not to my will. And bear witness, O People of Mictolan, that the maiden Itza weds with me and not with

Kinich Ahau. Should ill befall her, should harm come to her, the vengeance of Kukulcan will fall heavy upon the city and its people."

A mighty sigh came from the lips of the vast throng. "Thy will shall be the law, O, son of Kukulcan," they chanted almost as with one voice. "Thy words shall be obeyed."

"Arise, Kinchi Haman," I commanded the still-groveling priest, removing my foot. "You heard my words. Bear them well in mind, most ugly one." Shaking in abject terror, the priest managed to regain his feet, but despite his physical and his superstitious fear, malignant hatred and vindictiveness blazed in his sunken eyes, although his words were humble, apologetic, as he begged forgiveness for having defied me.

"You asked, O, priest, what proof you had that I am the bearer of the symbol," I said. "Is not my presence here enough? Who but the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan could pass the Valley of Death, the Tunnel of the Serpents, the Pool of the Crocodiles, the Eight Deserts and the Whirlwind, the Fiend Neztpehua, the Demon Izputeque, the Blazing Mountains, The Realm of Hot Ashes, the Cave of the Bats and the Bridge of Light? But that none may doubt, here, O priest, is further proof."

As I spoke I handed him the copy of the codex. Every neck was craned forward, every breath was held as the priest studied the document. Dropping to his knees, he knocked his forehead in the dust of the roadway.

"O, great and mighty son of Kukulcan!" he cried, as he again rose. "Son of mighty Gucumatz the Lord of Thunder and the Heavens, we do you homage. At your feet we prostrate ourselves and our gods bow before you. Your will is law and your breath is our life. Great is our rejoicing that you have come to us of Mictolan at last. Mighty will be our praise to Kinich Ahau, Lord of the Sun, in gratitude for your coming, and great will be the sacrifices on our altars. One hundred fair maidens shall be wed to Kinich Ahau on the moon of Tonamatl, and—"

"Stop!" I commanded, interrupting his words. "There will be no sacrifices. Know ye not that Kukulcan in the long ago ordered that the people of Xibalba, the Kingdom of the Great Snake, were to make no human sacrifices? Know ye not that it was disobedience of this command that caused Kukulcan to desert your people, to hide his face for many Baktuns; that in punishment the people of Xibalba were destroyed and only those within the city of Mictolan were saved? Yet thou, Kinchi Haman, would disobey that order in the presence of the son of Kukulcan! Have a care that the vengeance of the Lord of Thunder falls not upon thy head, O, priest."

He glowered, I saw that in him I had an implacable enemy. But he was far too fearful of my weapon, too awed by my presence to protest, too much in dread of public resentment to do otherwise than accede. Though he might curse me inwardly, for he was a cruel and bloodthirsty rascal, yet his words were suave and humble enough.

"It shall be as my lord wishes," he declared. "He is the son of Kukulcan. He is our master and even the gods bow to his will. But my lord tires for he has come far. His place awaits him as it has been awaiting his coming for many Katuns in the past. Come, my lord, to the temple of the Plumed Serpent where you may rest and eat."

Turning, he signalled to his litter-bearers who came forward with his gorgeous gem-covered palanquin, and with it another even more wonderful which had been brought for my own use. With a quick motion I lifted Itza, seated her in the golden vehicle, and took my place by her side. I glanced at the priest and shuddered at the hideous, intense expression of hatred and fury which, for a brief instant showed upon his face as he saw the girl beside me in the litter.

"You and I are coming to grips mighty soon, old rascal," I muttered to myself as the bearers lifted my litter to their shoulders and started forward. "And," I added mentally, "the sooner you start trouble, the sooner your career will be over, you old faker."

CHAPTER 9

PRINCE ACZOPIL

RECLINING UPON ROBES OF THE MOST MAGNIFICENT feather-work, within the litter of richly-carved wood covered with gold plates and studded with precious stones, Itza and I were carried upon the shoulders of gorgeously-clad nobles, while on every side the throngs cheered, shouted greetings, threw flowers before us and, falling into line in our rear, formed a colorful, noisy procession.

Before us was the high-priest in his litter, with the royal guard and the band leading the way toward the central plaza and the great temple. As we passed slowly along the broad avenue my scientific interest was at fever pitch. No archeologist, no ethnologist ever before had such an opportunity. I had stepped back through countless centuries into the very heart of the ancient Mayas' civilization. The people, their costumes, the litter in which I rode, all were so marvelous, so strange, such a revelation that I scarcely could realize it was all real, that I was not dreaming.

And perhaps strangest of all was that diffused, inexplicable light that illuminated the valley, and the still stranger, more puzzling multicolored lambent beams that emanated from the temples. What were they? What was the source of the glow? How was it produced? I could find no answer. It was utterly beyond me, wholly inexplicable; and I determined that my first care would be to investigate these phenomena.

Then I beheld another wonder. When I had first seen

the valley from a distance, I had seen fields of maize, potatoes, vegetables and flowers, and there had seemed nothing unusual about them. But now, as we passed between the fields, I gazed in amazement, for the maize was fully twenty feet in height, I saw a melon as large as a barrel, and every fruit, plant, flower and vegetable was of equally gigantic proportions. Never had eyes of a white man seen such stupendous growths. Many of the ripening ears of corn were two feet in length with each kernel over an inch in diameter, and freshly-dug sweet potatoes lying on the earth were as large as my body. Here in this valley the agriculturalists had wrought miracles. What was the cause of such marvels? Was it the result of the light, the fact that there was no darkness, no night here? I did not know, but later I found that this was the primary reason, although the quality and origin of the light had much to do with the matter.

As I speculated upon such wonders and problems that everywhere confronted me, we reached the plaza, a huge open space bordered with immense trees and flowering shrubs above which the vast pile of the temple towered high into the air. Thrice around the base of the mighty stone-faced pyramidal mound we were carried, and then up another broad paved avenue. Here, between rows of splendid buildings, typically Mayan except for the fact that many had arched doorways, the procession moved slowly toward an imposing elaborately-sculptured edifice which I assumed was a palace.

Reaching this the litters were lowered to the ground, and the hideous, hunchbacked, skeleton-jawed priest, with many obeisances and elaborate phrases of welcome (which were belied by his smouldering vengeful eyes and savage expression) bade me enter, informing me that the palace was to be my home. Itza, trembling and hesitant, drew back as the priest glared at her; but fearing to allow her to leave me even for an instant, I led her with me into the building.

It was a truly magnificent place, its outer walls a marvel of stone carvings, its inner walls covered with marvelous

frescoes of gods, heroes, priests, semi-human personages, beasts, reptiles and symbols, the whole so cleverly and artistically combined as to form a symmetrical design. Everywhere the red, white and green of the Plumed Serpent cult predominated, and everywhere Kukulcan in all his manifold forms and symbols appeared in the sculptures and frescoes. Even the portal, flanked by two immense stone columns, carved in the form of conventionalized serpents, with feathered bodies, indicated that the palace was dedicated to the serpent-god, and as I passed through the first chamber I felt convinced that the building had been erected, in the dim and distant past, to prove a home for the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan when he should arrive.

Flowers were everywhere. From incense burners of solid gold and silver sweet-scented smoke arose, and from an inner room came the sounds of low music and singing. Forming a lane through which we walked, were several dozen young girls who cast flowers before us, and passing through a second doorway we entered a large room, its floor covered with feather robes, skins, rush mats and great cushions, while low ornate tables groaned with the weight of golden and silver vessels filled with huge luscious fruits. Grim armed guards wearing golden casques and breastplates were stationed about the walls; men, evidently servants or slaves, stood about awaiting orders, and from an immense golden bowl a most appetizing odor arose. Not until then did I fully realize how hungry I was. I had eaten nothing for nearly thirty hours, but the excitement of the day and evening had driven all thoughts of food from my mind. But now I felt famished, and throwing myself upon a heap of robes and cushions with Itza beside me, I ate ravenously of the thick, rich stew that was served in deep silver dishes.

Explaining that he had religious duties to attend to, the high-priest withdrew, but there was little privacy, for nobles, officials and other prominent personages constantly appeared, bringing gifts, paying homage and welcoming the supposed son of Kukulcan. Among these visitors I noticed the young

man to whom I had been attracted because of his remarks in regard to Itza and myself when we had first arrived in the city. Pointing him out I asked her who he was.

"He is the Prince Aczopil, my lord," she told me. "Were it not for Kinchi Haman he would be the king of Mictolan. When our good king Tutil-Nima died, two Tuns past, Kinchi Haman declared himself both king and priest."

Instantly I knew that in the deposed prince I would find a true friend and ally, for from the few words he had uttered, and which I had overheard, coupled with what Itza told me, I felt sure the Prince Aczopil was no friend of the high-priest. And if he had a household and a wife, mother or sisters, it might solve my problems as to what to do with Itza until we could be married. She could not remain with me in the palace (although she had expressed her willingness to do so and saw no reason why she should not) and I had no intention of permitting her to return to the home of the maidens of Kinich Ahau, the Vestal Virgins of the temple, where she would be in the power of the rascally old priest.

"Is the Prince Aczopil married?" I asked her. "Has he sisters or a mother?"

"Yes, my lord," she replied. "He is wed with the Princess Tutuil, and dwells with his sister, the Princess Mitchi-Ina."

My mind was made up, and I beckoned to the Prince who was near us.

"Greetings, Prince of Mictolan," I exclaimed, as rather hesitatingly and obviously overwhelmed at being so honored, he approached. "To the son of King Tutuil-Nima, the son of Kukulcan gives welcome as to a brother." I continued, "You, O, Prince, shall be my friend and counsellor, and into the care of you and of the Princess Tutuil and Princess Mitchi-Ina I give the maiden Itza, that she may be safe from harm until such time as she shall be my bride. Look to it, O, Prince, that no harm befalls her, and guard her as you would your life."

Never have I seen a man so completely overcome with

mingled delight and surprise. To his mind he was being favored by a divine being, by the son of the Plumed Serpent, and had been honored above all others, above even the high-priest. I had known instinctively that in Kinchi-Haman I had an implacable, relentless and unprincipled enemy, and I knew just as certainly and instinctively that in Prince Aczopil I had a true, staunch friend, a man upon whom I could rely and who, no doubt, held a vast amount of power and influence among the people, even though he was not officially their monarch.

Falling upon his knees before me, he poured out a torrent of words of gratitude and pledged himself and all his family to guard and protect Itza. She, poor girl, was almost heartbroken at being compelled to leave me even for the night; but she had no fear, for she trusted Aczopil implicitly, and after an affectionate farewell, I gave her into the Prince's care. Then, having managed to dismiss all my visitors as well as my far too numerous attendants, I threw myself upon the soft rugs and cushions and instantly fell into dreamless sleep.

The next morning I was up early, having been awakened by the servants moving about, and had scarcely finished my breakfast when the old priest put in his appearance. He seemed far more affable than on the preceding evening and to my relief he did not enquire as to the whereabouts of Itza, although I felt certain that he knew all that had transpired. The servants and the palace guards were all of his choosing, and unquestionably kept him advised of my every move and word. But I did not plan to be forever surrounded by the priest's spies and intended to make a change very soon and to surround myself with men and women who were loyal to Prince Aczopil.

Neither was I hoodwinked by Kinchi Haman's assumed friendliness, for he could not control the tone of his voice nor hide the expression of his eyes. Yet I could scarcely blame him for feeling peeved and far from friendly toward me, for I had defied him, I had humbled him before his

people, I had forbidden him to hold human sacrifices, although I doubted if he had obeyed me in this matter; I had elevated the deposed Prince to a place of the highest honor, and I had snatched Itza from the old scoundrel's clutches.

Had he truly believed me to be divine or the descendant of Kukulcan, all this might have been borne with good grace and no resentment, for to be superseded by a divinity or even a semi-divinity would have been expected. But somehow, from the moment when he first had defied me, I had felt positive that he was fully aware of the fact that I was a mere mortal and a member of an alien race, for despite his horrible appearance, his mutilations and his deformities he was a most keen and intelligent, as well as a very crafty scoundrel.

While he dared not incur the risk of bringing down the wrath of the people by denouncing me as an imposter, although he was compelled to acknowledge that I possessed the symbol and had come unscathed through all the perils as was foretold in the prophecy, even though he was in mortal dread of my seemingly magic control of thunder and lightning, yet aside from his natural superstitions and perhaps some lingering doubts, he was convinced that I was not all that I represented myself, or rather what the people had assumed me to be.

Had he felt otherwise he never would have behaved as he had. He would have prostrated himself before me, he would have welcomed me and would have bowed without question to my wishes and commands, and would not even have questioned my choice of making Itza my wife. Why or how his well-founded suspicions had been aroused I do not know, but on this first morning, as he conversed and asked veiled questions, I knew perfectly well that he was endeavoring to confirm his suspicions. Fortunately I had memorized the ancient prophecy as told me by Katchilcan, and I took pains to refer to it as we talked. But I inwardly feared that he might produce a codex or some form of picture-writing for me to read. And when he asked abruptly

how soon I would lead his people from the valley of Mictolan, as foretold in the Book of Kukulcan, I was in a blue funk, as the British say.

In the first place I had no intention of fulfilling that part of the contract. In the second place, even had I desired to do so, it would not have been feasible and would surely have resulted in sufferings and deaths, for the Mayas would have been wholly at a loss and a disadvantage in the outside world. No doubt when Kukulcan (for I was now as firm a believer in the Plumed Serpent as was any Maya) had segregated the people in the hidden city, and had foretold that they would one day come forth and repossess the land, he had expected that they would increase and multiply enormously and that there would be only a handful of enemies to overcome. But as far as I could judge, the population of the valley had increased little, if at all. There were, I estimated, not more than ten thousand inhabitants at the most, so that portion of the prophecy had failed to materialize and had been rendered impractical. However, I had no intention of mentioning this to the high-priest. Whether I was a divinity or not, I had come, so he and his people believed, as the promised messenger with the purpose of leading the Mictolans forth to regain their lost lands and their lost power. My only play, therefore, was to procrastinate and delay, to find some plausible excuse for remaining in the city until I could slip away with Itza.

This plan of procedure not having occurred to me before, I was in a quandary. But my mind worked quickly and I doubt if Kinchi-Haman even noticed my momentary hesitation.

There were many matters to be attended to before the people left the valley, I told him. I had been instructed by Kukulcan to investigate all things and all conditions at Mictolan before I ventured anything, and I had been charged to make sure all of the Plumed Serpent's ancient laws and orders had been carried out, because, I added, unless the people of Mictolan were living and worshipping in strict

accordance with Kukulcan's wishes, their deliverance would not be possible.

I saw the priest wince at these words which had come to me like an inspiration. He well knew that he, at least, had not followed the laws of the ancient Mayas; that he had perverted the religion, had usurped the throne and powers of the king, and had been a law unto himself. And when, ignoring his suggestion that I should conduct my observations in his company, I announced my intention of making my investigations in my own way, I saw by his expression and his blazing eyes that he was prepared to go to any extremes, to stop at nothing in order to prevent me from learning the true facts. But he did not press the matter further. Then I had a shot at him myself by blandly informing him that I desired to meet the King of Mictolan, and that I had felt insulted at the monarch's failure to visit and welcome me.

The old fellow was frightened, I could see. But he recovered himself very quickly. The king, he declared, had died two years previously, and as the people had been unable to agree upon a successor they had appointed him, Kinchi Haman, to act as regent. Of course I pretended to accept this explanation at its face value; but he was far from being at ease, and presently, pleading religious duties, he left me, much to my delight.

Hardly had the priest departed when Prince Aczopil arrived with Itza. She seemed even more beautiful than before and rushed to my arms with a happy cry. Holding her close, I received the salutations of the Prince, told him I wished him to dismiss the present retinue of the palace and provide persons of his own selection, and then, feeling perfect confidence in him, I told him of my suspicions of the high-priest.

I did not regret having confided in him, for he was as frank with me as I had been with him. He told me he had no doubt that Kinchi Haman was my enemy, although he assured me that the priest would not dare do anything to

arouse the wrath or enmity of the son of Kukulcan, for of course the Prince believed me such; but, he added, it might be a different matter with Kinchi Haman's attitude towards him and his friends.

However, he had no fear of the priest, he declared. The royalist party was very strong and powerful, and with me as his friend he feared nothing and he even doubted if the old fellow would dare defy me by showing enmity toward the Prince as long as I favored and honored him. Also, he confirmed my suspicions regarding the behavior of the priest. Kinchi Haman had been running things to suit himself. He had offered human sacrifices upon the altars of the temples, he had oppressed the people, he had boldly declared himself supreme, and he had become overbearingly cruel, ruthless and vindictive.

As the Prince talked and acquainted me with conditions and affairs in the valley, I learned of the terrible fate to which Kinchi Haman had doomed my beloved Itza. She had spoke of being betrothed to Kinich Ahau, of being pledged to wed him on the moon of Tonalmatl; but what this meant, what its significance, had not occurred to me. Obsessed with my love for her, and with so much else to occupy my mind and thoughts, I had failed to realize the true import of her words. But now, as Aczopil referred to the matter, I wondered that I could have been so dull.

Kinich Ahau was the Sun God. Itza was or rather had been a Virgin of the Sun, and she had been selected to wed the god in symbolic manner by being cast alive into the yawning black depths of the sacred well!

Cold shivers raced up and down my spine at mere thought of such a fate befalling her, and I fervently thanked God that I had come to Mictolan in time to save her. She had spoken of it calmly, quite as a matter of course, but I realized later that this was only natural. To her and to her fellow maidens of the city it would have been a great honor, for they had been taught to believe that by thus dying in the sacred well they become the mates of the Sun God, that they

would dwell forever in paradise, and hence it was a martyrdom they sought with religious fervor.

But Itza was very human and very feminine. Once her love had been aroused her religious fanaticism had dwindled swiftly, and she was as anxious to live and to become my bride as she had previously been anxious to meet death in order to become the bride of Kinich Ahau. I drew her closer to me as I thought of those other virgins who were doomed to be cast into that hideous well, and then and there I determined that they should not be killed. Even though the sacrifice of the Virgins of the Sun was a sacred, universal part of the Maya's religion, it should not take place while I was in Mictolan, no, not even if I were forced to hurl the priest himself into the depths to prevent it.

However, the day of the sacrifice was distant. Only on the moon of the cycle of Tonalmatl were the virgins wed to the Sun God, and that would not be for several months. Much might happen during that interval. Telling the Prince I wished to see the city, I asked him to accompany me, and with Itza clinging to my hand, we left the palace.

That day was one of most amazing discoveries, of incredible surprises far beyond my wildest dreams. I was quite prepared to find these Mayas had advanced far beyond their state of civilization at the time of the conquest, and the fact that they had discovered the arch and had developed many arts to such a high degree, confirmed my assumption. But I had never imagined for a moment that they had advanced to such astounding heights in certain directions, or that it was possible for a race to acquire a knowledge of forces unknown to other races, and yet remain so primitive, so archaic in other lines. That to me was, as it still is, the most incredible and astonishing feature of the Mictolan people.

Here was a race, or rather a community, still in many respects no nearer the highest civilization than their ancestors centuries earlier had been, a people without the knowledge of the wheel, a race ignorant of steel, a community cut off

from the entire world, following an immeasurably ancient religion, yet controlling forces of which we, the most highly advanced of known races, know almost nothing.

Yet, in a way, this might have been expected. I knew that the ancient Mayas, ages before the dawn of the Christian era, had developed the most perfect numerical system in the world; that they had invented a calendar more accurate than all others prior to the revised Gregorian calendar; that they had possessed an intimate knowledge of astronomy; that their glyphed or written language was without a parallel in all the world, and yet they had never discovered how to construct an arch.

All these facts were common knowledge to every student of American archeology and were inexplicable puzzles, mysteries as great as how the Mayas produced their amazing stone sculptures, how they worked the hardest of gems and precious stones, how they accomplished many of their feats.

But in Mictolan their strange paradoxical development had gone far beyond the bounds of imagination. They still used their ancient system of mathematics, their equally ancient calendrical system by means of which any date within a period of five million years could be established, and they still employed their glyph writing. Had they possessed wheels, had they discovered the use of iron or steel, had they even acquired a knowledge of machinery, chemistry or electricity, I should not have been so greatly astonished. But though they had none of these, they possessed an intimate knowledge of matters largely undreamed of, unsuspected by most other races on earth, a familiarity with matters that appeared downright uncanny, supernatural and utterly beyond relief.

CHAPTER 10

THE PRINCE'S REVELATION

I HAD ALREADY SURMISED THAT THE GIANT SIZE OF THE vegetable growths might be due to the fact that there was no darkness in the valley. But it was the source of the light, rather than the illumination, that was responsible, and this source was one of the most outstanding of my many discoveries. Moreover, the source of the light was the source of nearly all the puzzling and amazing things that I observed, and once I had learned what it was I had the answer to all the riddles.

It was radium, or rather a radio-active mineral which apparently existed in vast quantities in a certain section of the valley. How the people had discovered its properties and possibilities and had learned to make use of this wonderful material, I cannot say. But as I shall point out, certain things which I discovered led me to believe that for countless centuries it had been used by the Mayas for certain purposes.

The presence of this mineral, and its uses, was my first epochal discovery, and as I say, it explained many previously inexplicable matters. We had passed beyond the city proper and had wandered across the fields, when, gazing across the valley to the east, I noticed a barren, arid, desolate area. Calling the Prince's attention to the spot I asked him about it. To my astonishment he replied that it was "the sacred place of the gods who cut the stones".

I felt sure that I was on the verge of some marvelous

discovery, and I started toward the spot despite the protests of Aczopil who appeared to have a superstitious terror of the place. Itza also held back, evidently in fear, but neither of the two could give a lucid or intelligible reason for their dread. The gods or spirits (the two are synonymous in the Zutugil language) were most powerful, they declared. They brought illness and death upon all who invaded their domain, and although they were the ones "who carved the stones" they must be paid for their work by human lives. And, added the Prince, for many Katuns the people had not employed them to cut stones as the toll of lives was too great, but had used painted stones instead. Indeed, he declared, at one period of the dim past so many lives had been exacted by "those who carved the stones" that the city had been very nearly depopulated. At that time, he informed me, the people did not know why they sickened and died, but a wise priest named Tutul Hunac, had made a great sacrifice to the god Hunabku who had revealed the cause of the deaths.

Here was a real mystery. I had noticed that there were many buildings and monuments covered with painted or frescoed designs, that all the sculptures appeared very ancient, and I had wondered about it. And now Prince Aczopil was telling me a strange, involved story, some legend or myth no doubt, to account for it. All that he said merely made me more intent than ever to learn what it all meant and who or what were the "gods who cut the stones". Laughing at his fears, reminding him that I, the son of Kukulcan, was more powerful than his evil gods, and bidding him remain behind with Itaz, for I took no chances of exposing her to danger real or fancied, I hurried toward the dismal-looking spot.

I had never seen anything just like it. It appeared to be an expanse of black clay-like material, the decomposed debris that had fallen from a vein on the hillside above it; and scattered all about, were immense blocks and columns of squared stone. As I examined these I found that the surfaces of some were coated with a peculiar gum-like material laid on

in complicated patterns. One of these rested at the very edge of the black deposit and as I stooped over it, I uttered an involuntary exclamation of amazement. Wherever the stone had touched the blackish clay, the surface of the block had been deeply cut or eaten away, leaving the portions coated with gum in high relief.

Sudden realization flashed upon me. Now I knew the meaning of "the gods who carved the stones".

The forbidding black clay itself was the Prince's "gods"! It possessed some power or property to eat into the solid rock as acid eats into metal. The entire mystery of how the Mayas accomplished their marvelous sculptures was solved. The stone monuments, the facades of their buildings, the huge stellae had not been carved by human hands. They had been etched on a titanic scale by means of this strange, black, mineral substance.

What was it? What terrible corrosive quality did it possess? I shuddered and drew back. A substance that could eat into the hard rock was to be given a wide berth. No wonder the Prince and Itza had feared this spot.

Then I remembered his story of the toll of lives exacted by the "gods who carved the rock." It was clear enough now. All who had come into contact with the terrible mineral had been destroyed. Hundreds, thousands perhaps, must have been employed in hauling the countless masses of stones to this spot, painting the lacquered designs upon the surfaces of the rock, placing the stones in the corrosive clay, turning them about, withdrawing them after they had been etched and then cleaning them. And all of these men who had touched the incredibly powerful material had succumbed to its effects!

I felt almost nauseated as I mentally pictured the agonies they must have endured while their flesh and bones had been eaten away as if by fire. Perhaps even the emanations of the stuff were dangerous or deadly, and I retreated hurriedly as this possibility occurred to me. Then, as I recalled that the Prince had stated the valley had been almost depopulated

by the stone-cutting "gods" I remembered the words of the ancient prophecy—

"The people shall wither and die. Those who carved the stones and placed the images shall vanish!"

Here was the explanation, the solution of the mystery of the strange disappearance of the Mayas! They had been destroyed, wiped out by the very means they had employed to produce their greatest monuments! I am convinced that this was the case. If the horrible stuff existed here, if the people had employed it for etching the stone sculptures, it must have existed elsewhere and must have been used in other localities. The fact that no one had discovered its presence meant nothing. Perhaps, during the centuries, it had disintegrated or disappeared. Perhaps it still existed in some remote, hidden or unexplored areas. But that it had been the prime factor in the destruction of the Mayan Empire and civilization I felt positive.

In Mictolan the segregated survivors of the race had come close to utter annihilation by the material. They had escaped extermination only through the wisdom of the priest, Tutul Hunac, who put an end to etching the stones. Elsewhere, no doubt, the people had gone blindly on in their superstitious belief that the "gods" demanded human lives in return for carving the stones, until the race had been decimated and reduced to a mere handful of survivors.

What could the material be? What mineral could possess such powers. Suddenly a wild idea occurred to me. Was it—could it contain radium? Was the black mineral exuding from the mountain side a substance resembling pitchblende? It had all the visible earmarks of that wonderful ore. And there was that puzzling unaccountable fluorescent light that illuminated the valley.

Had the people of Mictolan blindly harnessed the powers and properties of the atom? Had they acquired a knowledge of forces of which even we had not dreamed? Was I on the verge of discoveries even more remarkable, more incredible than any I had already made? My brain whirled, my

thoughts ran wild as I gave my imagination and my speculations full rein. But I was soon to learn that the actualities were far beyond my wildest dreams.

Returning to Itza and Aczopil, who were greatly relieved at seeing me alive and unharmed, I plied the Prince with questions. But he could give me little intelligible information. The light, he declared was a "gift of the gods", and had always lit the valley; but only the high-priest knew the secret of the source of the flames from the temples.

Then, somewhat hesitantly and with furtive glances about, he added that the priest knew many other secrets and possessed powers unknown to all other men.

"Aye, even power over the Monster of Sacrifices," Itza declared in affrighted tones.

"Monster of Sacrifices?" I reiterated. "Who or what, my beloved, is this monster of whom you speak?"

"I cannot say, my lord," she replied. "Only Kinchi-Haman may look upon the monster and live. For all others it means death. And each month a youth or a maiden must be sacrificed unto him."

"Hmm," I muttered, "I must investigate this. There is no monster that the son of Kukulcan may not look upon." But as I spoke I wondered what the old faker had up his sleeve, for it sounded amazingly like the old Minotaur myth.

"Where does this monster dwell?" I asked.

"Within the innermost temple," Aczopil told me. "Where no one but the high-priest may enter."

"The son of Kukulcan may enter all places," I reminded him. "I shall look upon the monster and shall destroy him, for the law of Kukulcan forbids the sacrifice of human lives."

The faces of Itza and the Prince paled. "But, my lord," cried Aczopil, "though it is a monster, yet it is a god and cannot be destroyed!"

I laughed. "God or not, I shall destroy it," I assured him.

For a few moments the Prince seemed lost in thought.

Then: "My lord," he said earnestly, "until now I have not spoken of it, but the words of my lord now force me to speak out. We of the House of Nima-Kiche, had a prophecy given unto us in the long ago. From the lips of my father, Tutil-Nima, I heard it, even as he heard it from the lips of his father, Xima-Tutil, and as each eldest son has heard it from his father's lips since the days when it was given unto our house. To none others should this prophecy be revealed until the House of Nima-Kiche no longer ruled in Mictolan, and to the city should come one who would again raise our House to power.

"And, so says the prophecy, he should be a stranger and should cast down our enemies, and he should mate with a maiden of the Itzaes and should destroy the Monster of the Sacrifices. Therefore, my lord, when I looked upon you as you passed with the maiden Itza by your side, I know that the stranger of our prophecy had arrived. And now you say you will destroy the Monster of the Sacrifices, so I know that the time has come to reveal to you the prophecy of the House of Nima-Kiche.

"Blame not me, my lord, for the words of the prophecy if they offend you, for the words are not mine, but have come down through many Baktuns, even from the days of Tohil the Rumbler. It is even more ancient than the Book of Kukulcan, my lord.

"In this prophecy it is foretold that the land of Kiche Maya should be overrun by strangers with white skins and bearded faces, and that the Kingdom of Zibalba should be destroyed, that new gods should be set up, and only in the city of Mictolan should the House of Nima-Kiche survive. Also, it was said in the prophecy that Kukulcan should never return unto his people, but that the bearer of his token and his Book should be a stranger and a mortal, and one who possessed the power of the stranger's gods. It was foretold also that the people of Mictolan should forever remain within the city, that there should be war and battle, that the stranger's gods should prevail and the priests of the cult

of the black Enchuah should be cast down, and that the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan should wed with a maiden of the House of Itza and should depart from Mictolan and the House of Nima Kiche should again rule in the land.

"Much of the prophecy has already come to pass, my lord, so I know that it is a true prophecy and that it shall be fulfilled, even as foretold."

Itza had listened, wide-eyed and with bated breath, to the words of the Prince. As he ceased speaking she flung herself into my arms. "Oh, my lord, my loved one!" she cried. "Is it true? Is my lord a mortal like myself? Then, my lord, I may wed thee without fear, and great indeed will be my happiness!"

I nodded affirmation as I held her close. "Even as the prophecy says, it is so," I assured her. Then I turned to Aczopil. "Then, from the very first you, my brother, have known I am no son of Kukulcan?" I said. "Think you Kinchi Haman knows of your prophecy?"

The Prince looked greatly troubled. "Who can say?" he replied. "He has great wisdom and knows many things. It is said that he dons the cloak of darkness and, unseen by men, wanders at will listening to all. But what does it matter, my lord? The prophecy says he will be overthrown, that you shall triumph, and as it is foretold so must it come to pass."

His faith in the prophecy was sublime, yet I could not blame him for placing absolute confidence in it, for I had seen the prophecy of Kukulcan fulfilled to the letter, and much of Aczopil's prophecy had already come true. I was not superstitious, I certainly did not believe in prophecies or in anything of an occult nature, yet—well, I could not deny the truth of what I actually had seen and had experienced, and I realized that I was beginning to believe that the ancient Mayas possessed some power of divining the future which is unknown to us of today. But I was not enough of a fatalist nor sufficiently convinced of the truth of the entire prophecy to place complete faith in it.

There was no use worrying over what might or might not happen, however. The revelations of the Prince had cleared the air and I was really greatly relieved, for I would no longer be compelled to pose as a divinity with him, and no longer would Itza regard me as a superior being. And as Aczopil assured me that the greater portion of the people were loyal to him and his House, and secretly hated and despised Kinchi-Haman, I felt that no matter what difficulties might arise I could depend upon having a large majority on my side.

Had I been in a position to follow out my own wishes I would have left the Mictolans to solve their problems as best they might and in their own way, and would have seized the first opportunity to clear out, taking Itza with me. But such a course was wholly impossible. Even alone there was not one chance in thousands that I ever could reach civilization. The mere thought of the horrors, the sufferings and the dangers I would face appalled me. And to expose the woman whom I loved more than my own life to almost certain death and to the most terrible hardships and sufferings was not to be thought of for a moment.

Far better I decided, to remain forever in the valley with Itza as my wife, to pass my remaining days cut off from my fellows and from civilization, rather than to attempt flight. Moreover, I reflected, once rid of the high-priest and with Aczopil reigning as king, life in Mictolan with Itza would be about as pleasant and enjoyable an existence as any man had a right to expect. In fact I had even begun to have dreams of my future in the valley, vague thoughts of things I might accomplish, the modernities I might establish, the busy interesting life I would lead, teaching the Mictolans, helping them onward, watching the development of their new civilization, while I taught them about machinery, electricity, about innumerable simple matters of which they knew nothing whatsoever.

As my mind was mulling over such matters we had circled the valley and had reached the main avenue leading to

the tunnel through which I had entered Mictolan. Filled with the most intense curiosity to see that marvelous Bridge of Light once more, I expressed my wishes to my companions.

At Itza's answer I halted, astounded, incredulous. There was no Bridge of Light, she declared. It had ceased to exist as soon as I had reached the valley. It had been there only to afford me passage!

It seemed incredible. How and by whom could it have been destroyed? I could not believe her. I felt sure the thing was a natural, a mysterious, an inexplicable phenomenon, and that she was merely repeating some ancient myth or prophecy. Determined to learn the truth, to discover the source, the cause of the luminous bridge, I hurried toward the opening in the mountain side. The way was still illuminated by the soft glow, and having discovered the bed of radioactive clay, as I believed it to be, I assumed the light came from some similar material in the rock.

When at last we came to the vast chasm, I stopped in utter amazement. It yawned before us, terrific, black, bottomless, with no sign of the gleaming, multicolored beam of effulgence spanning its depths like a bridge built of a rainbow. But my amazement, my wonder, was forgotten in my realization of what it meant. All retreat from the valley was cut off! No matter what happened, I was doomed forever to remain in Mictolan.

I had no doubt that Kinchi-Haman was responsible. Somehow, by some unknown power, he could control the Bridge of Light. He suspected me. He had no desire that I should escape, until such time as he saw fit to lead his people from the valley. And I was convinced that he would never do that, that he had no faith in the prophecy and that he knew more of the outside world than I suspected or that anyone dreamed of.

To be sure, he had been as terrified of my pistol as any of his people, and I felt sure he was wholly unfamiliar with firearms; but that did not prove that he had not, by some means, learned that the white men had overrun the land,

that it would be impossible for the people ever to regain their country and to restore the old order of things as provided in the Book of Kukulcan. Knowing this, he intended to keep me a prisoner and, by cutting off all possible means of escape, to put an effectual stop to his people attempting to leave the valley.

Intuitively I had been suspicious of him from the very first, intuitively I had felt that he did not believe me other than a mortal, a stranger; but even my intuition fell far short of the truth.

A new thought came to me. I turned to the Prince. "How will the people of Mictolan go forth when the time shall come as foretold in the Book of Kukulcan? Surely the Bridge of Light will then return?"

Aczopil's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Does my lord not know?" he exclaimed. "Does not the Book of Kukulcan tell the people that they shall go forth by another road? Does it not show the symbol by which they shall know that way? Always, from my father and from the priests, I have heard that the Book of Kukulcan holds the secret of the other road."

I chuckled inwardly. Despite his absolute faith in the prophecy of his own House, yet he believed equally in the prophecy of Kukulcan. Yet one was diametrically opposed to the other, and if one was borne out the other must of a certainty fail to come true. But I did not mention this logical reasoning to the Prince.

"I know nothing of the other road or the symbols," I told him as I took the copy of the codex from my pocket. "Look you, Aczopil. Do *you* see the symbol of which you speak?"

He studied the codex intently, and Itza, who was as interested as either of us, examined it also.

"I see it! It is here!" she exclaimed excitedly. "See, my lord, it is here—the symbol of Kukulcan together with a foot and the reed of promise."

"Aye, thou art right, little sister," agreed the Prince.

"But," with a note of disappointment in his tones, "a portion of the Book is missing. It does not tell which way one turns to find the symbol. It says not whether the road is to the north, east, south or west. But that matters not, for we will go to the sorcerer, Nohul-Voh, and by his powers he shall show us the way."

Itza drew back. "Oh, I do not like Nohul-Voh!" she cried. "He is most wicked and makes spells and does strange things. It is said—" her voice fell to a mere whisper "—that he even takes on the form of a great bat. I fear him greatly, my lord."

I laughed and kissed her. "Fear not, beloved," I reassured her. "Your Nohul-Voh will not harm the betrothed of the son of Kukulcan, and to him as to all others save Aczopil and you, that is what I am and shall remain."

The Prince smiled. "Nohul-Voh is a true follower of the House of my fathers," he stated. "His hatred of Kinchi-Haman is great indeed. Often have I sought his advice, though never will he show to me his smoke of magic."

"Then by all means let us visit your sorcerer friend," I said. "But if you would please me, do not call me 'Lord' Aczopil; nor thee, my Itza."

Itza flushed and smiled, and the Prince grinned. "Does my brother know he already has another name among my people?" he asked. "Everywhere they speak of you as Itzimin-Chac (thunder and lightning). Would it please my brother if I called him Itzimin?"

"It will serve most excellently," I told him.

"And most fitting," smiled Itza, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she glanced up at me. "Is not Itzimin-Chac the master of Itza, the sky? And thou art both master and lover to me!"

"Aye, a very terrible master!" I laughed. "Do you not fear my black anger and my roaring?"

"No more than the sky fears the thunder," she declared laughing gaily. "Does not the sky always triumph and rule the thunder and quiet his roarings in the end?"

"As you, little tease, shall forever rule and quiet me," I declared.

The Prince chuckled. "That, Itzimin, is the most certain of all things," he said. "Was there ever a man who truly could rule a woman?"

"That," I replied, "is a question you might well ask Nohul-Voh."

CHAPTER 11

THE SORCERER

THE HOME OF NOHUL-VOH THE SORCERER, ON THE outskirts of the city, was a strange cylindrical structure of massive stones built upon a low mound in the center of a field overgrown with gigantic weeds, herbs and flowers. Not a door nor a window was visible, but at several places the walls were pierced by narrow vertical openings like the arrow slits in ancient castles of Europe.

As we approached the sorcerer's dwelling Aczopil nudged me. "It is a favorable time," he announced in lowered tones. "Nohul-Voh is in his field gathering his magic herbs. I feared we might find him busy with the spirits or the stars."

Moving slowly about and almost completely hidden by the huge plants, was a stooping very elderly man. He was draped in a robe of black, ornamented with weird symbols and figures in many colors. Long tangled snowy hair fell like a thick mane about his shoulders, but as his back was toward us his features were invisible. Without speaking, as noiselessly as possible, we approached him. And so unexpected was it that I actually jumped when he spoke.

"Welcome, bearer of the Book of Kukulcan," he rumbled in a deep voice that seemed scarcely human, and without turning or glancing up. "And welcome to thee, Prince Aczopil, and to thee, Itza, maid of Kinich Ahua. I have been awaiting you," he continued. "Aye, expecting you since first you set forth this morning, Itzimin, and passing the Place Where the Gods Cut the Stones, you learned their

secret; since you came to where the Bridge of Light is no more. And well I knew that you would come hither to Nohul-Voh to seek word of the Road of the Symbol."

I could scarcely believe my ears or credit my senses. How in the name of all things did the old sorcerer know of our movements, our words, even our thoughts? Did he truly possess some weird, occult, uncanny power? I felt Itza shudder as she snuggled closer to me, and I confess I felt a most peculiar chilly sensation myself.

Presently the sorcerer straightened up, turned, and approached us. I had expected to see a seamed, wrinkled, toothless, ancient man. His snowy-white hair had indicated great age, and Aczopil had told me that Nohul Voh had been an old sorcerer in the days of his father's father's father. But his face was that of a young man, almost youthful, with smooth clear skin, bright eyes and as untouched by time as the features of the Prince beside me. Yet there was something about Nohul-Voh's face, something in his eyes, that gave the impression of great wisdom and a knowledge beyond that of other men. And as he gazed steadfastly at me I felt that he was looking into my inmost soul and was reading my most secret thoughts.

"My lord has come to Nohul-Voh to learn of the Road of the Symbols," he said in his strangely deep voice. "He has come with the last son of the House of Nima-Kiche and with the maiden my lord desires to wed. It is well. The Kinchi-Haman plans and plots, but he can learn nothing of the book of the future from Nohul-Voh. Yet unto Itzimin-Chac I will reveal much. Come, my lord."

Turning, he led the way through the tangle of huge weeds to the base of the mound, where, opening a massive wooden door, he stood aside, signalled for us to enter, and closed and fastened the portal behind us. For a few steps he led the way through a narrow dark passage. Then, suddenly and without warning, a soft clear light filled the place and I stared about dumbfounded. Had I been suddenly transported to the laboratory of an alchemist of the Middle

Ages, I could not have been more astonished at what I saw.

We were in a large room, and everywhere the walls were hung with mystical figures on sheets of vellum, with bundles of dried plants and herbs, the skulls of men and beasts, stuffed birds, reptiles and quadrupeds, while on stands or tables were strange utensils and countless oddly shaped vessels.

Hanging near the ceiling in the center of the room was a sphere that glowed like a miniature moon and illuminated the entire chamber. Directly underneath this was a stone table covered with sheets of papyrus bearing innumerable diagrams, symbols and Maya characters, together with various metal instruments and an abacus-like affair, and at one side of the room a pottery vessel most remarkably like a retort, simmered over a charcoal brazier.

Opposite this was a column of carved stone perhaps three feet in height by four feet in diameter and with upright metal rods about its circumference. Suspended without visible support above this, was a ball of polished green material which rotated slowly, swinging in a circle above the top of the stone column and touching one after another of the rods which emitted a low musical note at each contact. Fascinated, I stared at the strange affair and stepped closer. What held that sphere of green suspended in mid-air? What unseen, unknown force kept it ceaselessly rotating, following an orbit? Then I noticed that the smoothed surface of the top of the stone column was covered with incised lines and glyphs and that at the base of each rod was an astronomical symbol. But before I could make head or tail of the remarkable device, before I could frame a question, the sorcerer spoke.

"My lord doubts the power of Nohul-Voh," he said. "He thinks the future may not be read even though the past may be known. He says in his heart there is no magic, nothing that cannot be explained, nothing that is not a law of the gods. My lord Itzimin-Chac is right. There is no magic, nothing that is beyond the rules of nature and the gods. But

there is wisdom, there is knowledge that some may possess but of which others know nothing. My lord has knowledge of making the lightning and thunder serve him at his will, yet even I, Nohul-Voh have no knowledge of that. Yet I have knowledge of how to make forces serve me and of which my lord knows nothing. My lord knows not why the ball of green moves about, he cannot read the meanings of its motions. But to me it is clear, as clear as the thoughts of those whose minds I desire to read, as clear as the past that I read in the smoke that the Prince Aczopil calls magic.

"To no living man or woman has been given the power to look into the future, for to know what the future holds would bring unhappiness and fear. Yet there are certain matters which are destined to come to pass that may be known to those who possess the wisdom and the knowledge to read them, and unto my lord who bears the Book of Kukulcan I will reveal some things that he desires to learn. But only to my lord alone. Remain with the maiden here, O Prince, while Itzimin-Chac learns what I may reveal."

As he spoke, the sorcerer stepped to the solid stone wall and, apparently of its own volition, a massive block of stone moved noiselessly aside, revealing a secret doorway, and beckoning me to follow him, Nohul-Voh stepped into the aperture. I found myself in a second smaller room illuminated by means of the same mysterious light emanating from a globe or sphere suspended from the ceiling. Smiling, and bidding me be seated upon a massive stone chair, Nohul-Voh stepped to a magnificent ceremonial incense-burner of immense size.

"First, my lord, you must have faith," he announced, his eyes fixed upon mine. "In your heart I have read your doubts, so I must convince you, even against your own will. Unto you I will tell matters of the past of which you and you alone know the truth.

"I see you conversing with one of my race whose name is Katchilcan," he began in a droning voice. "I see you in an ancient forsaken temple seized and bound by savages. I

see you surrounded by raging waters in the Valley of Death and passing with the chief Maliche through the Tunnel of the Serpents, crossing the Pit of the Crocodiles and traversing the Eight Deserts. I see you fleeing from a monster that destroyed the chieftain in the Realm of Hot Ashes, and I see you within the Cave of the Bats, wandering in the darkness, until you came forth to find the maiden Itza awaiting you at the chasm of the Bridge of Light."

I was amazed, astounded. I felt as though I had been speaking my own thoughts aloud. But I had seen some truly remarkable demonstrations of mind reading or mental telepathy, both among primitive tribes and civilized white men and there was nothing the sorcerer had told me which had not been impressed upon my own consciousness. But had he read my thoughts?

He had said he saw me conversing with Katchilcan. Why had he selected that incident as his starting point? Did he know what had gone before, could he tell me where I had found the codex? And with that thought I realized for the first time that if Nohul-Voh could read my mind, if he knew I had sought out Katchilcan to interpret it for me, then he must be fully aware that I was an ordinary mortal and not the son of Kukulcan. But I would put him to a test to learn just how much he did know. "It is all as you say," I assured him. "But tell me, Nohul-Voh, whence came I to the village of Katchilcan?"

He shook his white head. "To all things there is a limit fixed," he replied. "Does the loftiest mountain reach to the moon? Does the eagle perch upon the stars? Does the maize grow to the mountain's height? Does man live forever? No, my lord, even knowledge has its limits fixed by the gods. Whence you came unto the village of Katchilcan I know not. Neither do I know when or how you came to possess the Book of Kukulcan. But that you came by it honestly I do know, for otherwise your way would not have been made easy, as was foretold by the prophecy. Is my lord ready to believe what I may show him of the future?"

I was even more amazed at his words than I would have been had he told me of my every movement and every action since I had entered Salceda's shop in Vigo. For it was obvious that he had not read my thoughts, or if he had he had been able to follow my mind only for the time since I had set out on my quest for the hidden city. I began to have a rather strange even if unfounded feeling that perhaps the Book of Kukulcan had something to do with this mysterious business. Such an idea was ridiculous of course, quite impossible and beyond all limits of common sense, but I had seen and experienced so much that was seemingly impossible and incredible that I was fast getting to the point where I was about ready to believe anything.

However, the sorcerer had admitted that there was no such thing as magic, nothing that was not in accord with Nature's laws, so however or by what means he had such an intimate knowledge of my movements it most assuredly was not by any supernatural or occult power. But would he be able to look into the future, to foretell even some events which had not yet transpired? Was it possible that he had accomplished what countless men had dreamed of doing? Memories of wild theories of the fourth dimension, of an infra-red world, of spiritual manifestations raced through my bewildered brain. At last I found my voice.

"I am convinced, O, Nohul-Voh," I told him. "Whatsoever you may reveal to me, I will believe."

He smiled. "Then, behold!" he exclaimed, removing the cover from the incense-burner and stepping quickly to one side. For a brief moment I saw nothing. Then a thin, luminous wisp, resembling smoke seen in the beam of light thrown by a powerful searchlight, drifted upward from the great earthenware vessel. Slowly it spread, undulating and unfolding, mushrooming out until it formed a great cloud completely concealing the portion of the room beyond it. I watched it, gazing at it with fascination, not knowing what to expect. Lighter and darker areas appeared upon the now stationary mass of vapor. Gradually patches of brown, green

and blue materialized and slowly, little by little, like a dissolving view reversed, a picture developed before my eyes.

Instantly I recognized the place as the valley beyond the Cave of the Bats. There were the towering mountains, and the cliff with the huge image of Kukulcan carved deeply in the rock. I had the strange sensation of approaching it, of drifting toward it without effort or volition on my part. The hills and the valley came nearer and nearer. A stream dashed, foaming, through the valley. Beside a shaded pool a bare ledge jutted up, and upon the surface of the water-smoothed rock I saw the symbol that Itza had discovered in my codex—the symbol of Kukulcan, the foot and the reed.

Now the scene was fading away. The stream broadened into a river. The mountains became lower. I seemed floating upon the tranquil river in a boat, and before me rose a mountainside, a terrible precipice. At the base the river vanished in a black, arched tunnel. It raced toward me. Suddenly the smoke screen turned inky black. Then a speck of light appeared upon it. Rapidly it increased in size. A vast expanse of sparkling blue water appeared, gleaming under a sun-bright sky. Above its farther shores rose wooded hills, purple in the distance. Close to where I seemed to float upon the surface of the lake a rocky island rose, and clearly visible upon the surface of a water-washed cliff I saw the symbol once more. Slowly the picture faded, once more the glowing vapor rolled and writhed. It thinned, broke into wisps, and stepping forward quickly, Nohul-Voh replaced the cover on the huge urn. I lay back, feeling strangely weak.

"My lord has seen the Road of the Symbol?"

At his words I seemed to come out of a trance. I laughed almost hysterically. "And to what purpose?" I asked. "I have seen neither the beginning nor the end."

"The end, I cannot show," he declared, shaking his mane of white hair. "And the beginning is here in Mictolan. Across the Bridge of Light and through the Cave of the Bats."

"Then, O, Nohul-Voh, I have learned nothing," I exclaimed. "With no Bridge of Light to cross, of what value is the road beyond?"

He came toward me, seated himself close to me and spoke earnestly.

"My son," he said, "perhaps Kinchi-Haman knows the secret of the Bridge of Light. But it will come again as always from the beginning it has come and gone.

"When the many-colored flames rise from the temples, then, my son, you may know that the Bridge of Light spans the chasm.

"Watch for those flames, my lord, and when they rise, hurry with the maiden and cross on that bridge of light without delay. Woe to you should the flames cease when you and the maid are midway from rock to rock!"

"And cannot you, who can read the future, say whether that may or may not happen?" I demanded, a note of sarcasm in my voice.

"It would be of no avail, rather a hindrance, could I reveal it," he replied. "If I should say unto you that death awaited you and the maiden, it would cause you pain and suffering and life would not be worth the living. Should I tell you that you would cross in safety, and you believed me, you would have no uncertainty of the future and life would lose its greatest zest. Nay, my son, of the future I will not speak. But of the past or rather of the present I would say a word. I said I knew you had come by honest means to be the holder of the Book of Kukulcan. I said I knew not whence you came. But this I know. You are not of my race, are not the son of Kukulcan. No, start not, it matters nothing. In the prophecy it is not said that the symbols should be brought by a man of the Kitche-Maya nor of the House of Kukulcan, but by a stranger. And also I know that the people of Mictolan will not be brought forth by you, my lord. Long ago has the allotted time passed.

"There is much in the ancient prophecy that none but I, Nohul-Voh, can read.

"Nay, even Kinchi-Haman knows it not, for while much of the Book of Kukulcan is written in the Itzae symbols, yet much was written for secrecy in the symbols of Ziyán Caan, known only to the House of Cocomé-Voh, of which I, Nohul-Voh, am the last.

"And in that secret writing it is foretold, that if the messenger comes not with the symbol by the end of the thirteenth Katun, the power of the Kiche Maya will be forever at an end."

I gasped. The thirteenth Katun! I had made a rapid mental calculation as he spoke. That was somewhere about the twelfth century A. D. I had come a mere matter of nearly eight centuries too late!

But Nohul-Voh was again speaking. "But even though Kinchi-Haman knows not this," he was saying, "he knows that the bearer of the symbol foretold in the prophecy must bear upon his breast the mark of the House of Tutul-Zius, and my lord bears not that mark. He dares not ask my lord, yet he but half believes, and he plots and schemes to see, and thus learn the truth. And though I can reveal nothing of the future, even to you, my lord, yet I am your friend and the friend of the Prince Aczopil and I would see the downfall of Kinchi-Haman, and, if my lord consents, I will place upon his breast the secret mark of the Tutul-Zius that is known only to those of the inner circles. And thus may Kinchi-Haman be betrayed."

I laughed. "Then, O, Nohul-Voh, it must assuredly be written in the book of the future that I shall bear that mark placed upon my breast by your hand, and who can escape Fate. So be it, O, Great Sorcerer of the House of Cocomé-Voh."

CHAPTER 12

THE TEMPLE OF THE PLUMED SERPENT

A

AS I BARED MY CHEST AND THE SORCERER PROCEEDED TO tattoo the secret and essential design upon my skin, my mind was in something of a chaos, filled with speculations, striving to account for what I had seen and heard. How had Nohul-Voh produced that picture in the smoke, the vision of the valley and that symbol upon the rock which neither he nor I had ever seen? Had he hypnotized me into thinking I saw it? Was it all some cleverly arranged hallucination?

Suddenly a possible solution dawned upon me. The missing portion of the codex! The sorcerer was very familiar with the document, he knew the meaning of the secret symbols. Was it not probable that the missing portion had shown the location of the road or had indicated the spots where certain symbols were to be found? If so, and Nohul-Voh was aware of this, he might have transferred that knowledge to me while I was in a state of semi-hypnosis induced by gazing so intently at the smoke. Perhaps that was the true explanation, perhaps not. That I cannot say, for all I actually know is what took place as I have related.

"It is done, my lord," the sorcerer announced presently. "Speak no word of this matter to anyone and permit no one to look upon the mark within eight days. Rub it each morning and each evening with this unguent—" he handed me a small onyx jar containing an aromatic salve, "and in a week's time no one, not even Kinchi-Haman, would believe my lord had not borne the symbol as foretold in the prophecy."

When I rejoined Itza and Aczopil in the outer chamber, neither suspected that my chest had been decorated with a beautifully tattooed clan-mark of the Tutul-Zius, although I felt as if a live and active scorpion had been confined under my shirt.

Itza, poor girl, had been greatly worried at my long absence, and as I entered the room she uttered a glad cry and rushed to my arms. She was very nervous, for like all of her race she had the superstitious fear of all things savoring of the unknown, and for more than two hours she had been regaled by Aczopil's highly-colored tales of the weird doings of the sorcerer.

The Prince, however, did not appear to have worried over my prolonged session with Nohul-Voh. "Truly," he exclaimed with a laugh, "Nohul-Voh has had time to show you the past and the future from the beginning of time until the end of all things. Twenty times and more has the green ball moved throughout its circuit."

I stepped closer to the puzzling sphere, still swinging slowly around the circumference of the top of the column, and although I examined it from every possible angle, I could see no support, nothing that held it suspended, no connection with any other object. It seemed actually to float in mid air.

"My lord Itzimin wonders at the ball of time," observed the sorcerer who was watching me, an amused smile upon his face. "Fear not," he added, "touch it if you so desire, my lord."

I most certainly did so desire, and taking him at his word I cautiously touched the gleaming green sphere. I had expected that my touch would stop it or at least disturb its regular motion. Judge of my utter amazement when it swung past my hand without veering the fraction of an inch from its circuit! With all my strength I pushed against it, but I might as well have pushed against one of the massive stones in the wall of the room. It was immovable, as firmly fixed as though it were held by steel rods.

Nohul-Voh chuckled, Aczopil laughed, and Itza stared, half-frightened, at such seeming magic. I could scarcely credit my senses, for it seemed impossible, absolutely contrary to all known laws of physics. All that had transpired previously, all the other wonders I had seen or had experienced were nothing by comparison with this phenomenon. I had already solved the mystery of the smoke picture to my own satisfaction, but there was no question of auto-suggestion, hypnosis or thought transference about this floating, silently-rotating sphere of green that could not be forced or diverted from its course.

Nohul-Voh appeared to read my thoughts. "Yet it is merely the law of the gods," he assured me. "Do not stars float in the sky? Do not the sun and the moon move across the heavens? Can they be stopped; can they be moved aside? And the law of the gods that keeps the sun, the moon and the stars in their places keeps also the ball of green in its place. My lord Itzimin has great knowledge of matters of which I know nothing. I possess knowledge of which my lord knows as little. In the days to come each shall impart to the other that which it is desirable to know. Come unto me whenever you so desire, Itzimin-Chac, and you shall learn much from Nohul-Voh and shall teach me much, for so it is written in the Book of Destiny. May great happiness be yours, my lord, and yours, my daughter, and yours O, Prince."

As he spoke, the door swung open, and bidding Nohul-Voh farewell, we stepped from his strange dwelling into the brilliant sunshine.

Clear-cut against the deep blue sky the temple rose in a silhouette of silvery-white, but no multicolored flames were flashing toward the zenith from its lofty summit, and I wondered again what produced them, how they were controlled. Perhaps the sorcerer could have told me. I regretted I had not asked him and made up my mind to revisit him at the earliest opportunity and learn all he could tell me.

I found the high-priest awaiting me in my palace, and

while he glared savagely at Itza, he spoke quietly and courteously. The people, he said, awaited the son of Kukulcan within the temple, and the gods awaited me that I should lead the people of Mictolan in worship. It was high time I did so, he added. Would I go with him and conduct the ceremony of the setting sun?

My heart sank. The wily old rascal had me in a trap. As the semi-divine bearer of the symbol and the descendant of the Plumed Serpent, I was the supreme head of the cult of Kukulcan, and as such I outranked all other priests. But I did not have the least idea of the ceremonies, the ritual or the worship of the cult, other than it called for elaborate rites, for offerings, for prayers and chants in the sacred language of the cult, and that it entailed self-sacrifices of blood-letting on the part of its priests. But how, at what points in the ceremonies were the prayers, sacrifices and other rites demanded? If I attempted it, my every move, my every word would betray me, and the priest would know I was an imposter. Yet if I refused, both he and his people would know something was amiss.

All these thoughts flashed through my mind in an instant. Then I had an inspiration. I would bluff the old rascal, catch him in his own trap. He was trying to force me to betray myself by taking part in a ceremony of which I was ignorant. I would compel *him* to betray *himself* and would make him the laughing stock of his people.

I nodded my assent. "It is indeed time, O, Kinchi-Haman, priest of Kinich-Ahau," I said solemnly. "I shall be glad to give thanks to the gods for their favors, and to my father Kukulcan. Knowest thou the ritual beloved by the Mighty Serpent?"

An evil grin made his skeleton jaws more hideous than ever. "I, high-priest of Mictolan, know all the ceremonies," he declared. "Am I not Kinchi-Haman, priest of the Supreme God?"

I shook my head dubiously and looked very serious. "Of Kinich-Ahau, Lord of the Sun, thou art a high-priest in

truth," I said in judicial tones. "But perchance in the many Katuns that have sped since my father walked with the Kiche-Maya, much has been forgotten. Does not the prophecy say that the old gods shall be forgotten? That the religion shall be perverted? Even you—" I strode forward, pointed an accusing finger at him and thundered the words, "even you, O, Priest, have caused human sacrifices to be made in the temple of the Plumed Serpent! And thy face is that of Uayayab,—He By Whom The Year Is Poisoned! Aye, it is high time that the son of Kukulcan should come forth to thy temples to redeem the people of Mictolan. And thou, O, Kinchi-Haman, thou who claimest to know *all* the rituals, shall stand beside me before the gods and shall aid me in my ceremonies and my offerings. Take heed that no false move, no wrong word, no mistake is made by thee or upon thy head, as the false betrayer of his teachings, shall fall the vengeance of Kukulcan."

Terror filled the eyes of the priest as I stood over him, threatening, reviling, shaking my fist at him. He cowered back, his ghastly death's head face blanched, and his teeth chattered. My random words and accusations had hit the mark somewhere. Still in doubt as to my true status, he was overcome with superstitious dread. He was by no means certain that I did not know more of the rituals of Kukulcan than himself, and at my assured, confident tones, my scathing denunciation, he had become even less certain, had begun to doubt his own knowledge, and had lost all his self-assurance.

In his ambition, his desire for power, and in his ruthless tyranny he had usurped the powers of the priesthood of cults other than his own. He had installed himself as high-priest of all the Mayan gods, although he knew, as well as I and all students of Maya mythology knew, that the priests of the Plumed Serpent cult were apart from all others, a distinct order possessing secret rituals and amenable only to the high-priests of their own cult. He had been able to hoodwink the people and to pretend that by favor of the gods he had

been appointed supreme head of the entire religion. But, so he thought, he had not fooled me. At my words his crafty, ever-suspicious mind had jumped to the conclusion that I knew secrets of the ceremonies of Kukulcan of which he was in ignorance, and he was quaking with fear that he had entangled himself in a net from which he would find difficulty in escaping. He glanced furtively about, babbling that he must attend to his own temple and conduct its ceremonies. But I shook my head decisively and refused to listen to his pleas.

"Come, time passes," I commanded him. "Today Kinich-Ahau must be content with the offices of the little priests. Kukulcan demands your presence. Lead the way, O, Kinchi-Haman."

There was nothing he could do but to obey. Still trembling and terrified he led the way to the waiting litters, and, surrounded by the plumed guards and richly-clad nobles, we were carried to the great temple of the Plumed Serpent. Everywhere, crowding the great plaza, filling the streets, covering the flat house-tops were throngs of people, all awaiting me, eager to witness the ceremony of the setting Sun conducted by the Son of Kukulcan before the sacred altar of his divine father.

Up the broad stone stairs of the great pyramid we ascended. Thrice about the terrace at its summit we passed, and then, descending from our litters, I followed Kinchi-Haman into the narrow, tapering doorway of the temple proper. My every sense was on the alert and my nerves were keyed up, for I was rapidly approaching a climax that would either result in my death or would raise me to supreme power, and it behooved me to take advantage of every opportunity in my favor.

I noted every detail of my surroundings, took in everything, and despite the danger I was in, despite the terrific strain I was under and the dangerous part I was about to play, I found my scientific interest in my surroundings were rapidly overriding all other considerations. Scores, hundreds

of times I had delved and wandered among the ruins of ancient Mayan temples. The form, the entrance, the narrow yard-wide passageway, the sculptures upon the stones, the frescoes on the walls, the stepped-in ceiling—all were familiar.

But never before had an archeologist seen the interior of a Maya temple as it was when in daily use. No other scientist had ever seen one of the temples when it was occupied, when it contained the fittings, furnishings and ceremonial objects devoted to the worship of the almost unknown Mayan deities. And so little was known regarding the Mayas and their religion, that no one, not even Joyce, Morley, Saville or even Cervantes, had been able to imagine or re-visualize such details. Yet here was I following the high-priest through a labyrinth of narrow corridors within a temple filled with objects such as no museum in the world possessed. Wonderful tapestries, textiles and feather pictures adorned the walls. In tiny niches were images of gods, divinities, sacred birds, beasts and reptiles of solid gold, jade, lapis, crystal and amethyst.

A strange, soft, bluish light, like that of moonbeams, illuminated the windowless corridors. Upon the stone floors were carpets of woven matting, and sweet-smelling aromatic incense floated from mosaic-covered burners. Everywhere the sacred red, white and green of Kukulcan were used to the exclusion of all other colors; everywhere the manifold forms of the Plumed Serpent predominated in the pictures and decorative motifs, and in one room were thousands of stuffed or mummified Quetzal trogons, the sacred birds in whose form Kukulcan or Quetzalcoatl first appeared, according to Maya mythology.

Presently we entered a long, high, narrow chamber. Numerous stone and ornate chests were standing about, all filled with priceless ornaments, magnificent robes, feather crowns, and ceremonial objects. Which were the ones I should use? To hesitate was to be lost, for the priest was already attiring himself in his ceremonial robes and was

watching my every move. I must act quickly, surely and must not show the least hesitation. Across my mind flashed the memory of Professor Cervantes' most prized possession, a painted and sculptured door-lintel from Chichen-Itza with its figure of a high-priest of Kukulkan. And, coincidentally with this memory came the mental picture of old Katchilcan as I had seen him when attired for the ceremony of the sunset. Every detail was photographed upon my brain. I saw every ornament, every object as plainly as though it were before my eyes.

I turned savagely upon the priest. "Since when has the misshapen priest of Kinich-Ahau been paramount in the temple of Kukulkan?" I demanded in furious tones. "I am master here! Thou art but a menial, a slave! Bring to me the robes, the crown, the sacred objects that I may attire myself for worship."

He fairly cringed. Once more I had bluffed him. With babbled incoherent excuses he scurried about, bringing gorgeous robes, sandals and crown. I studied each article as he presented it, racking my memory to be sure it was the correct one. Twice I hurled the objects from me and berated him. One, an elaborate feather headdress was made of blue and yellow plumes; the other was a great golden disk bearing the symbol of Itzama the Moon God. Whether Kinchi-Haman tried to trick me, whether in his haste and his nervousness he merely made mistakes, or whether he did not know the true significance of the objects I cannot say. But whatever the case, my prompt rejection of the wrong articles must have convinced him that I was very familiar with the ceremonial costume the occasion demanded.

At last I was fully attired. In one hand I grasped the double-headed serpent staff of turquoise mosaic, in the other I held the feather-woven basket containing the implements for blood-letting. I smiled to myself, for as far as appearances went I might have been the vitalized figure from some prehistoric Mayan monument.

The priest led the way from the robing chamber and

as we passed through another room we were joined by a dozen or more youths clad in the tricolored robes of the Serpent God. In another chamber twenty virgins of the temple stepped into line with the procession, and with measured tread, with voices blending in a low chant, with waving green plumes and gleaming golden ornaments we issued from the temple door and looked down upon the multitude beneath us.

High above our heads the temple walls and lofty roof-comb gleamed like molten gold in the rays of the sinking sun. Below us the plaza and the city were soft with dusky purple shadows, and as we appeared the cheers of thousands floated to us in a mighty wave of sound. Slowly we marched around the broad stone parapet. The virgins and acolytes prostrated themselves, and the priest halted and made obeisance at the foot of a short flight of steps that led to a huge sculptured altar above which towered a gigantic stone image of the Plumed Serpent, a lordly imposing statue with benign bearded face gazing steadfastly into the east.

My heart pounded in my breast, and despite every effort of my will I was nervous, shaky, filled with forebodings. The moment had arrived. Could I go through with the plan I had formed? Could I dominate the priest and the throngs of watching, waiting people. Then thoughts of Itza swept through my troubled brain. Somewhere far beneath me in that vast crowd, she and Aczopil were watching me. For her sake, for her love I must triumph.

No longer did I hesitate. A great hush had fallen upon the scene and not a sound broke the intense silence. Stepping past the prostrate high-priest, I mounted the first step, faced the huge image, bowed, and at the top of my lungs shouted in English: "Good evening, old fellow! What do you think of your self-appointed son, Kukulcan?"

I wheeled in time to see Kinchi-Haman glance up with an amazed, half-terrified, half-incredulous expression on his mutilated face. Never before had he or anyone present heard a word of English from my lips. To him as to all the people

my words were utterly incomprehensible, and instantly everyone was convinced that I had used the secret ceremonial language of the cult of the Plumed Serpent. Below me, everywhere, the people were prostrate, their faces hidden in the dust. Once more I shouted, this time in Zutigil, for I did not intend that the populace should miss any of the events to follow:

"Rise, O, people of Mictolan!" I cried. "Rise and look upon the ceremony of the setting sun." Then, to impress them the more I added in English. "And upon the setting of the high-priest."

Slowly, half-fearfully, the people regained their feet and gazed upward with wondering, awed faces. Once more I turned, and deliberately and confidently ascended the steps until I stood directly before the great statue whose knees were on a level with my head.

I am not a particularly religious man, I belong to no definite sect, but I respect faith and religion in others no matter what its form. Irrespective of their superstitious beliefs and the fact that they were pagans, the people of the city had gathered for the purpose of worship. To them the place where I stood was sacred, and in their eyes I was a holy being, a high-priest of their religion. My flippant words of a few moments before had been thoughtlessly uttered, the first words that came to my lips as I faced the image of Kukulcan. But now that I was upon the altar itself, upon the most sacred of spots, nothing was farther from my mind than to be flippant, blasphemous or by word or act to desecrate the temple or that would arouse the resentment of the people even were they able to understand what I said. They had gathered to hear me give thanks to their gods and I did not intend to disappoint them.

Kneeling in sight of all, I repeated the Lord's Prayer, and, to the best of my ability, gave fervent thanks to God for His mercies and prayed that He might guard and protect Itza and that He would not desert us in our time of need.

Then, feeling I had done my duty, I rose. The sun was sinking behind the mountains to the west, and I realized that I must bring the ceremony to a prompt conclusion, with a fitting climax. The time had come for me to assert myself, to humble the rascally, hideous old priest.

"Behold, O, Kinchi-Haman!" I cried in Zutugil so all might hear. "Behold, the sun sinks. Kinich-Ahau hides his face and visits the nether world. But he goes without seeing his priest by the side of the son of Kukulcan. Did you not say that you know the ritual of the Plumed Serpent? Did I not warn you that there was much you did not know? Did I not caution you to make no mistake, to not fail to utter the right words? Yet you have done nothing, nothing but to hide your face that is like that of Uayayab, the Poisoner of the Year. You have not joined with me in prayer. You have made no move to render thanks unto the mighty Kukulcan. False you are, false to your trust, false to your faith, false to your gods!

"But the Plumed Serpent is ever merciful. Though he well might bring vengeance down upon you, yet he will be satisfied with less. He calls for the blood sacrifice of atonement, O, Kinchi-Haman, for the blood of the high-priest of Kinich-Ahau. Come hither and give the blood that Kukulcan demands!"

Speechless, trembling, urged on by the jeers, the angry shouts and cries of the multitude, fearing to disobey one who seemed on such familiar terms with the giant god, Kinchi-Haman fairly crawled up the stairs to my feet.

Silently I handed him the basket with the thorn-covered cord, the obsidian knives and the golden bowl for sacrificial blood-letting. In the crimson light of the dying sun he looked like a fiend incarnate. But the eyes of thousands were upon him, and I stood beside him, stern and threatening before the bearded god. With trembling fingers he pierced his ears with the keen lancet; with sweat pouring from his brow he drew the sharp thorns of the cord across his tongue. In the golden salver he caught the dripping blood and, groan-

ing with pain, he placed the offering at the feet of the great image.

"And now, O, Kinchi-Haman," I shouted, "that your repentance may be complete, remain here at the feet of Kukulcan until Kinich-Ahau, Lord of Day, again smiles upon Mictolan."

A thunderous cheer arose from the crowds below, and without so much as glancing back at the disgraced, humiliated priest, I descended the steps, marched at the head of the procession of virgins and acolytes to the temple door, passed through the corridors to the inner chamber, removed my ceremonial costume and descended to the plaza where I found Itza eagerly awaiting me.

My triumph had been complete. If any members of the community had doubted my status previously, all such doubts had been dispelled, for the very strangeness of my actions, the unintelligible words I had uttered, and finally my contemptuous treatment of their feared and hated priest had firmly convinced everyone that I was truly the son of Kukulcan. They were Indians and they reasoned in accordance with Indian psychology. Anything they did not understand must be divine, supernatural or magical. My English words had been meaningless to them, hence they must be understood by the gods and by their chosen priests. My ceremony of the setting sun had been wholly unlike any they had ever witnessed, therefore it must be the proper ritual and Kinchi-Haman must have been deceiving them with his ceremonies. And as the priest had obeyed my orders, I must perforce be the mightier—and he had bowed to my superior wisdom and power with the gods.

Of all the people, the Prince was, perhaps, the most amazed and impressed. As we walked toward the palace, for I had dismissed my litter-bearers—he was unusually silent, and stared at me with a puzzled, incredulous expression on his face. But when we reached my quarters and we three were alone, he spoke.

"Itzimin," he exclaimed. "I cannot understand it. When

I told you the prophecy of my House, and frankly said I knew that you are a mortal, and no son of the gods, you told me it was so. Yet now, Itzimin, you appear upon the temple, you speak the tongue of the sacred ceremonies, and Kinchi-Haman humbles himself before you."

Itza also seemed greatly troubled and perplexed, and declared she was filled with sorrow at the thought that I might be other than an ordinary man. I laughed at Aczopil's serious looks and words, kissed away Itza's doubts and fears and reassured the Prince.

"You are both right and wrong, my brother," I told him. "As you well know, I am of another race than yours, and those of my race worship another God in other ways than those of the Kiche-Maya. The God of my people welcomes the prayers and the offerings of all, whether they be priests or not, and upon the altar of Kukulcan I repeated the prayers that I and my people render to our God, and in the language that my people use. And Kinchi-Haman bowed to me by the will of the God of my people, who is the greatest of all Gods."

Aczopil nodded, and for a time was silent, lost in thought. Suddenly Itza lifted her head from where it nestled on my shoulder, and smiled up into my eyes.

"Tell me, Itzimin, my beloved, of this God of your people," she begged. "Truly He must be great and good and powerful above all other gods. Did not Kukulcan permit you to worship this God of yours upon his own altar? Did not Kinchi-Haman tremble before Him? And you, Itzimin, are the greatest and the best of all men, so your God must be the greatest and best of all gods, and I desire to know Him and to worship Him."

"Yes, Itzimin, my brother, tell us of your God," added the Prince.

I am no theologian, and I fear I made rather a mess of trying to explain the tenets of the Christian faith to Aczopil and Itza. To people who for countless generations have been accustomed to an involved mythology with a multitude of

deities, a religion with a single God is a most difficult matter to comprehend. Moreover, the Zutigil language was woefully lacking in words to properly express my meaning or to describe many details of the Christian faith. But when I ended my dissertation and the Prince spoke, I felt certain he and Itza had grasped the fundamental principles of my religion.

"It seems, Itzimin," he said, choosing his words and speaking slowly, "that your God is much like our Hunabku, the Invisible and Supreme One. To him all our other gods bow down. He rules the earth, the heavens and the air, yet never is he seen. And like your God, who sent His son to walk upon earth and teach the people, so our Hunabku sent his son Kukulcan to walk among the Kiche-Maya and to teach our father's fathers. So perchance, Itzimin, your God and the supreme god of my people may be the same, and I for one see little difference which one we worship, for both your God and Hanabku are the source of all things."

I nodded my assent. I had no desire to try my hand at missionary work, for to start religious questions was to stir up trouble, and trouble of any sort I wished to avoid by all possible means.

CHAPTER 13

THE MYSTERY OF THE GREEN SPHERE

HERE WAS ONE MAN IN MICTOLAN WHO HAD NOT BEEN fooled by my involuntary role as a priest of Kukulcan. Old Nohul-Voh chuckled over it when I next saw him.

"I know not what words you spoke, Itzimin-Chac," he said. "But I know well that it was not the ritual of Kukulcan. Neither did my lord conduct the ceremony of the setting sun as is provided by the religion of the Kiche-Maya. Mayhap there is no man or woman in Mictolan who knows how it should be done, and of a surety Kinchi-Haman does not know all the ritual. It is many Katuns since a true priest of the Itzaes held sway in the temple of the Plumed Serpent, and still longer since one of the Tutul-Zius prayed at the altar of Kukulcan. But I, Nohul-Voh, am as familiar with the ceremonies as was Kachiquel-Zius when he was high-priest in the holy city of Chichen Itza in the long-dead past.

"But also I know that my lord is not the son of Kukulcan, and that the symbol of the Tutul-Zius Clan upon your breast was placed there by my own hands. So between us two it will ever remain a secret, and it matters not for it was surely foretold in the Book of the Future."

To relate all or even the greater portion of my conversations with the sorcerer, to tell in detail of my many experiences, my adventures and my activities or to describe all of my discoveries during the weeks that followed my triumph over Kinchi-Haman, would be monotonous and of little interest. Moreover, many were of little or no importance, and

finally, to tell the truth, I cannot for the life of me feel sure of the chronological order of the innumerable events nor the reasons and causes that led to them. As for my archeological and ethnological discoveries, these will be fully dealt with and described at length in my forthcoming volume—"New Light on the Civilization and Religion of the Maya", which deals with the scientific aspects of Mictolan and its people.

The high-priest seemed to have been completely squelched. I saw little of him and he was most servile and conciliatory when we met. Nevertheless that was a fly in my ointment, as the saying goes. Once I had assumed the part of the son of Kukulcan, there was no way of getting out of it, and each morning and evening I was obliged to ascend to the temple and go through the ceremonies before the image of my supposed ancestor. Naturally the rituals I inaugurated were most revolutionary, but as I found I was compelled to do something that savored of religious devotions, I decided to carry out the service of the Christian Church as far as my limited knowledge permitted.

Unquestionably any minister or priest of any Christian sect would have been most properly shocked and scandalized, had he seen or heard me. In fact I fear that even jolly, broad-minded Padre José would have frowned upon me, for the services I conducted were a most hopeless hodge-podge of the Baptist, Roman Catholic, Congregational, Episcopalian and half a dozen other denominations. From each I selected the most impressive and spectacular features I could remember, and if the good points of each did not bear fruit and win converts to the Christian faith it was not the fault of my devotions, for I was very much in earnest, very serious, and had no thought of sacrilege nor of burlesquing any church.

That this new form of religion appealed to the people was obvious, for the temple of Kukulcan became the most popular of all, and the attendance at the other temples fell off appreciably. Although previously this might have caused

Kinchi-Haman to fairly writhe in fury and to plot most horrible reprisals upon me, I now had little fear of him.

In due time and when Nohul-Voh had approved of it, I had, quite as if by accident, managed to let the priest catch a glimpse of my bare chest, and by the way in which he had started and his eyes had widened, I knew that he had recognized the secret clan mark of the Tutul-Zius and that all doubts of my identity had been instantly cast aside.

Much of my time was spent with the old sorcerer, for he not only aroused my curiosity and wonder, but my scientific interests as well. Moreover, we had become great friends, for I had taken a real liking for him the first time I met him and he appeared to reciprocate my feelings. This was not strange for not only was he a firm friend and a loyal supporter of Prince Aczopil, who was my confidant and most intimate associate (aside from Itza) but in addition we were kindred spirits, fellow scientists, for Nohul-Voh was a truly great scientist, a sage versed in lore unknown to the rest of the world and familiar with secrets of nature which no other man had ever learned.

If, as he claimed, he was several centuries of age, it is not surprising that he should have acquired a vast amount of knowledge, the truly remarkable part of it being the fact that his knowledge had been developed along lines largely untouched and undreamed of by scientists of the outside world. Rather, perhaps, I should say along lines that had been forgotten and lost in the dim past of his race, for he assured me that in the days of his youth all the wise men or sorcerers of his people had been familiar with forces and principles which he, the last of his clan of the sorcerer cult, had developed and perfected. All, according to him had been able to read the past and to foretell something of the future. In fact, he declared that it was mainly their prophecies which had led to the fall of the Mayan Empire and the vanishing of the Mayas' civilization. Having been told they were destined to be wiped out, that their empire was doomed to fall, the people had become hopeless and bowing

to destiny, had made no effort to struggle against fate.

That a man of Nohul-Voh's calibre and wisdom should have any faith in prophecies or the ability of anyone to foretell the future, struck me as most astonishing. To be sure, a great deal that had been foretold in the Book of Kukulcan had taken place exactly as prophesied, yet I had not yet been converted to a faith in such prognostications, and told myself that it was just a matter of a number of remarkable coincidences.

"How," I asked him, "could the people struggle against fate or what the future held if that future was to be? If they had struggled and had survived then the reading of the future would have been proved false."

Nohul-Voh shook his white head.

"No," he argued. "In the first place the Book of the Future gave no time. It might have been ten years or one thousand years before it came to pass. And do not all men struggle daily to live, to go on, to perform worthy deeds although they know that in the end they must die?"

"But if the Book of the Future is true, then it must have foretold that the Kiche-Maya were fated to give up the struggle," I persisted.

"That is as it may be," he declared. "Even I do not know all there is to know of these matters."

It was hopeless to argue with him for despite his scientific knowledge he was very superstitious and was Indian at heart and in his psychology. But he confirmed my suspicion that the Mayas had been decimated by using the radioactive clay for etching their stone sculptures. Nearly all those who had handled the stuff or the freshly etched stones had become afflicted with a terrible malady. They withered away, their teeth dropped out of their jaws, their bones dissolved and they died in agony. A few had survived for years, and still fewer recovered, deformed and mutilated but otherwise sound and healthy.

One of these was Kinchi-Haman, who, so Nohul-Voh added, was typical of all who recovered, for all appeared to

be affected mentally and were cruel, vindictive and ruthless. This had been another factor in the downfall of the Mayas, the sorcerer explained. Men who previously had been humane, wise and benign priests and rulers became maniacal in their warped natures. They oppressed the people, ordered wholesale sacrifices, made war upon their neighbors. Fathers fought sons, and brothers fought brothers.

"But that," he sighed, "was also foretold in the Book of Kukulcan."

As I had suspected, it was the presence of this mineral in the valley which had been responsible for the near-extirpation of the people of Mictolan, but despite the fact that the radioactive material had brought death and destruction to the race, it had resulted in great blessings in the end, for the people had discovered that when it was combined with certain other substances it was not only harmless but even beneficial. In its natural form as it occurred in the rocks, it illuminated the caverns and the interiors of the temples, and even cast that puzzling half-light over the entire valley.

Nohul-Voh, so he informed me, had learned how to harness and control the material and to make use of its mysterious and almost uncanny powers. This amazed me although I had already half-suspected it, for I could not account for his spheres of gleaming light that illuminated his windowless residence except by radioactivity. Yet it seemed incredible that these Indians, who had not even discovered the principle of the wheel, who knew nothing of iron, who had not availed themselves of water or wind power, and who possessed no machinery, no mechanical devices, could have mastered even in part the powerful, elusive, terrible force of the atom.

Very painstakingly the old sorcerer tried to explain it to me. The harmless ore which occurred everywhere in the rocks of the valley, and which as nearly as I could determine was some form of uranium, when placed near a very rare green rock would affect the latter very much as the negative

pole of a electro-magnet affects a mass of iron. As he spoke of this, Nohul-Voh indicated the mysterious green sphere rotating about the top of the stone column and touching one after another of the metal rods. Moreover, so he declared, no man possessed sufficient strength to move the green rock either closer to or farther from the material, a fact which I had already demonstrated to my own satisfaction. But the old sorcerer had discovered that certain metals neutralized the strange magnetic affect of the ore and that by placing rods of these metals near the green mineral the latter would move towards them. As the sphere struck a rod, the elasticity of the metal caused it to recoil or bounce back in the direction of the next rod. By careful tests and exhaustive experiments and calculations, the sorcerer had succeeded in so arranging the rods that the sphere of green rock would travel ceaselessly in a circle above the column of stone containing masses of the radioactive ore.

At first thought this seemed so at variance with anything I had ever known that it appeared incredible; but even while Nohul-Voh was explaining it to me I realized that it was not so remarkable after all, for in its way the rotating sphere and the metal rods, even the ore itself, formed a device not so very different in principle from an electric motor. The ore represented the electricity or magnetic field, the sphere served in place of the rotor, the rods were the brushes. In fact about the only difference was that the sorcerer's device was actuated by a negative or repellant force.

But Nohul-Voh had adapted his apparatus to serve a very different purpose from that of a motor. He was not interested in developing power, he was not mechanically-minded, but he was a deep student of astronomy and the rotating sphere of a green stone had paved the way for the most astonishing astronomical device that human eyes had ever seen. How many years he had devoted to patient, painstaking experiments, careful tests and observations and endless calculations, I cannot say. But by dint of perserverance

and the knowledge he possessed he had succeeded in so spacing and placing the metal rods that the rotating sphere moved from one to the other touching them at definite intervals and emitting musical metallic sounds as regular as the ticking of a clock. Moreover, he had provided fifty rods, and as the sphere made the complete circuit of the column 24,000 times between one sunrise and the next, it formed an accurate timepiece, for Nohul-Voh's day or the revolution of the earth on its axis, was divided into twenty-four hours which were divided into fifty periods or "minutes" of 20 periods or "seconds" each.

But the sorcerer had gone much farther than this. He had made calculations and measurements, had checked up accurately on his observations and eventually had converted his time machine into a miniature solar system by means of which he could at any time determine the solstices, the eclipses, the positions of the planets and the various constellations. And all such calculations had been vastly simplified by the fact that he was working on the ancient Mayan vigesimal mathematical system, the most perfect numerical system ever devised by man.

Moreover, and this amazed me as much as anything I had seen or heard, Nohul-Voh was perfectly aware that the earth was round! Reasoning backward from his device he had become convinced that our planet is spherical, that the other celestial bodies are spheres, and he was keen to learn from me what lay upon the other portions of our earth.

But what struck me as the most astonishing feature of his apparatus was the fact that to all intents and purposes it was perpetual motion. I tried to point this out to him, to impress him with the marvel of his discovery, but he seemed to regard it as a matter of course.

"Do not the sun, the moon and the stars move on forever?" he said. "It is the law of the gods, so why should not the green ball move on forever, ruled by the laws of the gods likewise?"

I could think of no adequate or satisfactory answer.

Why not, to be sure? Nevertheless, to me, who had always regarded perpetual motion, or to better express it, motion without loss of energy, as an impossible dream, his endlessly-rotating sphere was a marvelous and fascinating thing. I examined and studied it from every angle, but could make neither head nor tail of it. All I knew was that it was so. It was inexplicable, but whatever the answer, here was demonstrated a power or a force which properly applied and put to useful purposes, would revolutionize the mechanical world. But unless the principle could be determined so that it could be understood and harnessed it was no more than an interesting scientific toy.

For hours, night after night, I lay awake, cudgelling my brains, formulating theories, striving to recall all I had ever learned of physics, electricity, chemistry and other sciences; hoping somehow or by some means to hit upon the principle or an hypothesis that would fit in with the conditions. Yet no sooner had I worked out some theory than I found it faulty or inadequate.

Eventually I came to the conclusion that the principle involved was the electronic flow between the uranium ore and the green stone. In a way it was, perhaps, similar to the flow of electrons between the filament and the plate in a radio tube, and that the sphere was held in position by a stream of invisible electrons that formed a band of waves, something like magnetic waves, and the green material being polarized was forced to rotate. Each time it touched a metal rod, I reasoned, a current or wave of electrons rushed back to the radioactive mineral in the column and allowed the sphere to move on to the next rod. What a power this would prove if placed at the disposal of civilized, mechanically minded men! No power needed to generate the primary force. No appreciable loss of the basic energy. No frictional loss and practically no wear and tear.

In my imagination I could visualize the world's industries increased thousands of times, completely revolutionized by such a source of almost inexhaustible power. It would

be the greatest boon to mankind in the history of the world, yet it was an impossibility, a mere dream as far as its industrial value was concerned.

Nohul-Voh had told me that the green mineral was extremely rare, that his sphere and a few small fragments were all that was in existence as far as he knew, and that these had been handed down from father to son of his family for countless generations, for thousands of years and the original source of the stone was unknown. But, he added, according to legend and tradition, the pieces were bits of a most sacred image which, in the very dawn of their history, had been worshipped by the Mayas. Always, he declared, it had been credited with magical powers. Always each sorcerer of his clan had prized the stuff, guarded it, but only he had discovered its amazing properties. And probably, I thought, nowhere else but in this valley of Mictolan was there the peculiar radio-active mineral that was needed to produce the results.

But even if it were visionary, it was fascinating to speculate upon its possibilities, and, with my mind filled with it, constantly dwelling upon it, I began to wonder if the Bridge of Light was not also a variation of the same force. I questioned Nohul Voh, but he could give me little information.

Always, from the very beginning, he repeated, the Bridge of Light had been there—had not the Mayas crossed it when they had first entered the valley? And that it had some connection with the flames from the temple summit he felt sure, for always these rose, like banners against the sky, when the bridge spanned the chasm and vanished as the bridge vanished. Also, he felt sure, the high-priest knew the secret of the bridge—might even control it—but no one other than the Kinchi Haman himself was permitted within the most innermost sacred precincts of the temple where dwelt the "Monster of Sacrifices," and so no one had ever learned the secret of the marvelous bridge. Even the sorcerer's ability to read the past and future, even his almost

miraculous uncanny power, had not enabled him to learn this secret of the high-priest.

"What," I asked him, "is this Monster of Sacrifices? Is he a beast or a man or merely a stone image? I have pledged myself to destroy the thing and I am anxious to learn more of it."

"That, Itzimin, I cannot say," replied the sorcerer. "Even when our fathers' fathers' fathers came to Mictolan, a temple stood above the place of this Monster, and, so our legends say, the priests who came here and entered the ancient temple, found the Monster dwelling within and attended by an aged priest of another race than that of the Kiche-Maya.

"It was his people who had made the great image at the entrance to the Cave of the Bats. The mummies of his kings were those within the cave. His people had built the temple, but he alone of all his race survived. Before he died he revealed all that he knew to the high-priest of Kinich-Ahau and delegated to him the care of the sacred Monster, and no doubt imparted to him the secret of the temple's flames. That, my lord, is all I know. Even my powers and my knowledge cannot pierce the walls and learn the secrets hidden in the inner temple of Kinich-Ahau, God of Light and Life. And to attempt to enter bodily would be sacrilege and would bring down the wrath of the gods."

I smiled inwardly at the old fellow's psychology. "Yet you have no love for Kinchi-Haman," I reminded him. "You would humiliate him and destroy him. You deceive him by causing him to believe that I am the son of Kukulcan. Is that not also sacrilege?"

"No," he declared, "for Kinchi-Haman is a man like ourselves. Aside from his official status he is merely a mortal, a most cruel, vindictive and undesirable mortal, and it is as a mortal that I hate and despise him. But within the sacred precincts of his temple I would not raise my hand to do him harm."

"And what if Kinchi-Haman were to die?" I persisted.

"Die he must—or be destroyed. Who would then take his place?"

Nohul-Voh showed no surprise at my question. On the contrary he was surprised that I did not know the answer. "Why you, my lord!" he exclaimed. "Although Kinich-Ahau, Lord of Day, rules above all other gods in the heavens, yet Mictolan is a city of Kukulcan and herein the Plumed Serpent reigns supreme. Though the priest of Kinich-Ahau may not rightly become the priest of Kukulcan, even though Kinchi-Haman in his conceit and power did so contrary to law, yet the priest head of the Tutul-Zius may become high-priest of Kinich-Ahau. So should Kinchi-Haman pass on, you, Itzimin-Chac, would be supreme in all things in Mictolan."

"But," I protested, "I am no priest, I am not of the Tutul-Zius clan, I am not even a Maya."

"That matters not at all," he assured me. "Does not our history tell us that Kukulcan himself was a man of another race than ours? Was not the founder of the House of Tutul-Zius a warrior and not a priest? Is not my lord the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan? And has not my lord proved that he is inspired by the gods? Does he not give us a new ritual that is pleasing to the Plumed Serpent and his people?"

I laughed. "Nevertheless I fear I would be a most sorry priest of Kinich-Ahau, should Kinchi-Haman die and fail to reveal to me the secrets of the inner temple."

"To him who has much knowledge more will be given," he declared. "Fear not, for when the time comes the gods will impart to you the necessary wisdom."

However, I had no intention of remaining indefinitely in Mictolan even if I were fated to become its ruler, its high priest, the supreme head of the city and its people and its religious orders. At the first opportunity presenting itself, the moment the Bridge of Light spanned the chasm, I would flee with Itza and leave Mictolan forever, even if we were not married. That formality could be attended to when—

if ever—we reached civilization. And, after our departure, the people could settle their religious and temporal affairs to suit themselves, though I hoped the Prince Aczopil would be restored to his throne.

That I had not already married Itza was not my fault or hers. I had discovered that only the high-priest could perform the ceremony, and Kinchi-Haman refused to do so. She, he declared, had broken her vows as a Virgin of the Sun. She was to his mind, and in the eyes of the gods, an outcast, as far as religion was concerned, and as a priest of Kinchi-Ahau he could not marry an excommunicant. To do so would be to insult his god. I threatened, argued, commanded, but though he trembled with fear, though he acknowledged my power, though he cowered and cringed, he was adamant.

Perhaps the old villain was sincere in his stand; possible in his innermost soul he really believed he was true to his faith. I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. But I felt that it was only a pose, that he was taking this means of revenging himself upon me, and I would willingly have killed him on the spot, if doing so would have helped matters any. But I knew—as he did also—that killing him would merely make matters worse. I would be his successor. I could not marry Itza to myself, for in the eyes of the law and of the people's faith, she was a Virgin of the Sun and could not wed a priest of the Sun, and unless I married her before I stepped into Kinchi-Haman's shoes, she could never, legally, be my wife.

But had I known what he was planning and plotting in his crafty, cruel brain; had I realized what was in store for us, and had I been more familiar with the laws and the religion, I would have put an end to him then and there, even though my act prevented my beloved Itza from ever being more than my mistress.

But even Nohul Voh could not read the thoughts of the priest—or if he could foresee the future in this instance, he refused to divulge it to me. So, telling Itza and Aczopil of

my plans, I waited and watched for the reappearance of the Bridge of Light.

Repeatedly, too, I made my way to the chasm and spent hours examining the spot where the amazing bridge had spanned the abyss, hoping thereby to obtain some clue or inkling of the phenomenon, perhaps even to solve its secret. At risk of my life, I lay upon the very brink of the precipice, and leaning far over, examined the surface of the rock. But I could see no device, no apparatus that hinted at the origin or the operation of the miraculous thing. There was, however, a cavity or rather a group of small cavities a few feet below the verge of the cliff, and by listening intently, I could detect a peculiar hissing sound like escaping steam from within the holes. Also, I discovered that a draught or stream of air issued from them, for when I lowered a bit of rag attached to a cord, it was blown outward as though an immense fan operated within the aperture in the rock.

That these holes and this jet of air had some connection with the bridge I felt sure, but rack my brains and puzzle my mind as I might, I could not see what the connection was or how a stream of light—even if it issued from the holes—could provide a firm span over which human beings could walk in safety.

Indeed, it seemed so utterly preposterous, so contrary to all laws of physics and of common sense, that at times I almost believed it was a figment of my imagination, that I had dreamed of it and actually had entered the valley by some other route. Yet Itza, the Prince, Nohul-Voh and everyone else knew of the Bridge of Light; with the exception of the sorcerer all regarded it as quite to be expected, as a supernatural manifestation, and no one, not even Nohul-Voh, seemed to think it so very remarkable. In fact he and the others looked upon things that were everyday matters to me as far greater marvels than the Bridge of Light. Indeed, my own amazement, my own wonder that such an inexplicable thing as that span of light could exist was far less than their astonishment at such a simple matter as the wheel.

CHAPTER 14

INNOVATIONS

A

AS I HAD AGREED TO DO, I TOLD NOHUL-VOH MANY things and taught him much in return for the knowledge and the facts he imparted to me. No doubt he felt that he had much the best of the bargain, for he was fascinated and intensely interested in my descriptions of other lands, the great oceans, other races of men and of our civilization. Of course there was much of this which he could not grasp, for many of our everyday affairs are based upon principles, forces and mechanics of which he was entirely ignorant. Not until I endeavored to explain matters to him did I fully realize this fact or the difficulties I faced.

I could not make him understand steam, electricity or the simplest forms of chemistry. I could not describe anything that depended upon steel or iron, for there were no words for these in his language, the substances being unknown to the Mayas. Neither could I properly describe our means of travel, our industries, our daily life because all of these matters are more or less dependant upon the principle of the wheel, and the wheel was unknown to Nohul-Voh and his people.

I drew sketches of various objects, which delighted him immensely for he, like all his race, was an excellent artist, and as a result he could visualize the reality by studying a drawing, far more readily and intelligently than by the most minute description. But despite the fact that he thus acquired a perfect impression of the appearance of our

houses, our people and our dress, our trains, aircraft, motor vehicles and innumerable other objects, yet to him they were the more incomprehensible and incredible because of the ever-present wheel.

The only way in which I could make matters clear was to give him a demonstration of this simple but most important of man's inventions, and I set about doing so. It may seem an easy matter to make a wheel; but let my readers try to do so without the aid of any steel or iron tool other than a pocket knife, and see how simple it is.

Here, however, I must digress to mention the wonder that my knife had aroused. My revolver, of course, had been regarded with awe and terror, for to the Mictolans it was the abiding place of a caged or captive god of thunder and lightning; and quite aware of the power it gave me and the fear it inspired, I had kept it hidden from sight in its holster. But my knife was a necessity. I used it constantly, and the people never tired of watching me, gazing with fascinated eyes as I cut a stick or pared my nails with the keen blade. Hence it had been a fairly simple matter to demonstrate the properties of steel to Nohul-Voh.

The wheel, however, was a very different matter. Had I possessed a watch I could have demonstrated the wheel very quickly, but my watch had been lost somewhere during my wanderings—probably when I slid into the crater as I fled from the dinosaur; and my entire possessions consisted of my pistol, my cartridges, my pipe, my knife, a lead pencil and the ragged clothes on my back. Why I had not discarded my pipe, I cannot say. My tobacco had been exhausted weeks before I reached the Cave of the Bats, yet I still retained it, and I had been very thankful that I had, for the people of Mictolan were inveterate tobacco addicts. They smoked both cigars and pipes; and only a habitual pipe-smoker can appreciate the satisfaction and enjoyment I felt when, after weeks of forced abstinence, I again puffed away at my battered old briar.

But I am getting away from my story and the difficul-

ties I encountered in my efforts to make the first wheel ever seen in Mictolan. The simplest method, I decided, was to cut a section of a log and fit an axle in its centre, a method used by many primitive as well as civilized races. But even to cut a section of a log by means of stone and bronze implements, or by burning it off, is a most laborious and slow operation. However, I decided that a model on a small scale would serve my purpose, and selecting a stick of soft wood I began whittling at it with my knife.

I had cut about half-way through when a woman passed. As she stopped to gaze at the marvel of my knife, I noticed that she was spinning cotton. The next instant I tossed away the stick and roared with laughter at my own stupidity. Why hadn't I thought of it before? The spindle she was using—the spindles used by every woman in the valley—was a short round stick with a hook at one end and a metal or bone disk at the other. Here was a wheel ready-made, even fitted to an axle! Telling the woman to bring me two spindles of identical size and material, I hurried her off.

While I awaited her return I pondered on the strangeness of the fact that for countless centuries these people, as well as many other American races, had been using such spindles, yet never in all the thousands of years that had passed, had any aboriginal American realized that the most basic of mechanical inventions was in daily use. It seems almost incredible that the American races had not discovered the wheel by accident; that sometime, someone dropping a spindle, had not seen it roll and had not grasped the principle. Yet I myself had failed to grasp the wheel analogy of the spindles, even though I had been cudgelling my brains to devise a way of making a wheel. How many great and epochal discoveries might still remain, undreamed of unrecognized under our very eyes, I reflected.

My thoughts along these lines were interrupted by the woman with the desired spindles. I called to Nohul-Voh who as usual was busy among his herbs and weeds, and fit

ting both spindle disks to one stick I placed the affair upon the ground and rolled it along. For a brief instant the sorcerer and the woman stared at it in utter amazement. The next second they uttered shouts of delight, and dropping to his knees Nohul-Voh examined, rolled, turned and played with the contrivance like a child with a new toy.

But I had only begun my demonstration. Two more spindles having been secured, I fastened a bit of wood to the axles, placed some pebbles upon it and pushed the laden vehicle along. Never have I seen human beings more excited than were the sorcerer and the woman who formed my audience. They fairly shrieked with delight, trundled the crude cart back and forth, pushed each other aside in their eagerness to use it, and gabbled and chattered like magpies. Several passers-by stopped, people in nearby fields came hurrying to see what all the excitement was about, and in a few minutes I was surrounded by a crowd of jabbering, laughing, marveling people.

Then, having once grasped the idea of a wheeled vehicle, they lost no time in putting it to practical use. Within twenty-four hours there was scarcely a man, woman or even a child in Mictolan who did not possess a wheeled vehicle of some description. At first they made only miniatures, copying precisely the crude model I had made, but when I had explained that size had nothing to do with the new marvel, and had helped them a bit, clumsy carts and wheelbarrows of practical size came rapidly into use.

Never have I found greater pleasure and amusement than I experienced while teaching the people the innumerable useful purposes the wheel would serve. I showed them how to pivot the front axle of four-wheeled carts, how to grease the axles, how to construct mills for grinding their giant maize, and I even succeeded in teaching them the principle and construction of the block and tackle and the windlass.

Then came my greatest triumph, a wind-mill. To be sure, my first was only a model atop of a post in Nohul-

Voh's field, yet it called upon all my ingenuity to make this. It was no more than a toy, but to the sorcerer and the people it was the most astonishing thing they had ever seen. For hours at a time they would stand entranced, watching it whirl in the breeze, swinging from side to side as the wind veered; wrapped in awed, silent wonder of the thing.

Nohul-Voh was the most fascinated and astonished of them all. He could make nothing of it; the source or rather the principle of its motion was as inexplicable to him as his green sphere had been to me, and I marvelled that a man of such superior wisdom and intellect should be unable to reason out the puzzle. But it was in perfect accord with all contradictory psychologies of the Mictolan people, or for that matter, the Mayas as a whole. Probably no race in the entire world presented more paradoxical, inexplicable features and characters than the Mayas. They developed the most perfect arithmetical system the world has ever known, they devised a calendar more accurate than any ever invented prior to the Gregorian, they possessed a written or rather a sculptured language, perhaps the most remarkable in the world's history, yet they failed utterly to discover the most elementary facts of chemistry, physics, mechanics and other sciences, although they had an intimate and accurate knowledge of astronomy.

The people of Mictolan had progressed far beyond others of their race. They had learned to make use of the radioactive ore that abounded in the neighboring mountains; Nohul-Voh had devised his amazing astronomical machine and could look into the past and, so he claimed, into the future. They—or their priest rather—had, as I had reason to believe, learned the secret of that amazing Bridge of Light. By the use of chemical salts which they gathered they had produced cultivated plants of gigantic size. Yet aside from this one attainment, I could not see that any of their feats was of the slightest practical value to the community. They tilled their fields and garnered their crops with crude sticks and stone, or soft metal-tipped implements;

they wove their cotton on simple hand looms; all work was accomplished by hand; and aside from the priests, the nobles and a favored few, not a man or woman in the valley could either read or write the Maya characters or symbols.

It was my realization of all this, the fact that in so many ways the people were little in advance of primitive savages, that filled me with an ambition to give them a boost toward a higher civilization and more modern ways. My highly satisfactory and successful demonstration of the wheel filled me with a desire to do more, to see just how mechanically-minded the people were, once they grasped an idea, and I became almost fascinated with thoughts of what might be accomplished. I determined to construct windmills of practical size, to build water-wheels capable of operating simple machinery, and in this new-found interest I lost all thought of leaving the valley for some time to come.

I realized I could not go very far in my mechanization of Mictolan single-handed and enlisted the cooperation of Prince Aczopil and Nohul-Voh. I explained my ideas to the old sorcerer and was really amazed to see how quickly he saw what I was driving at. Once the mechanical side of his mentality was aroused he was an apt and enthusiastic pupil and learned rapidly. He might have puzzled his brains for years striving to figure out how the model windmill worked, but it didn't take him three minutes to master the principle once I had explained it to him. And he was an excellent mechanic and artizan, as was Aczopil also. Indeed, like the majority of Indians, the Mictolan people were born craftsmen and most painstaking and patient workers, and they could perform wonders and produce miraculous results, considering their crude, primitive, inefficient tools.

Very rapidly a six-foot windmill grew into being under my guidance, and while a vast amount of patience and perseverance was required before I succeeded in getting the various rods, cranks and other metal portions fabricated from copper, silver and even gold, yet the final result was far beyond my expectations.

I had given little thought to what sort of a machine I would install for a demonstration of wind power. The simplest was, of course, a pump, but on the other hand a mill of some description, a pair of rollers, or a couple of mill stones for grinding maize, would be far more useful and impressive. But there were many serious obstacles to be met and overcome in the construction of even the simplest mill. It would necessitate gears and gears were out of the question. So having pondered deeply on the matter, I finally decided upon a pump. To be sure, a pump was not needed, for the stream ran past the town, and ollas and pots on the backs or shoulders of the women had served every purpose for the transportation of water for uncounted centuries. Still a town pump was not a bad idea, and as the breeze blew continually across the valley, my wind-driven power plant would seldom fail. So the wind-mill was erected near the stream, and a pump was rigged up.

This crude makeshift would have brought roars of derisive laughter from any real mechanic, but as the final connections were made and the big wheel commenced to revolve, the people crowding about fell upon their faces and made obeisance to what to them seemed actuated by the gods. And when, a few moments later, a stream of water began to gush from the pump's spout, pandemonium broke loose. Pushing, shoving, struggling, laughing, splashed with water and mud, the women milled and crowded and struggled to fill their ollas and jars at the miraculous stream brought by the God of Air from the river to their doors. Like so many children they filled their vessels, emptied them and refilled them for the sheer delight of watching the water pour gurgling into the empty jars.

In a few hours the novelty wore off; in a day or two the pump was accepted as much a part of the city's daily life as was anything else; and while the wind mill was always referred to as Mulac or the God of Wind, and although offerings of fruits and flowers were daily placed at its base, yet

apparently the people never actually regarded it as a deity or a god.

This first mechanical experiment was such an immense success and gave me such a sense of self-satisfaction at having really created something worth while that I at once set about to construct a water-wheel. This was a far more ambitious undertaking, and I spent some time weighing the advantages and disadvantages of various types of simple wheels. As there was an abundance of water and a natural fall where the stream tumbled over a six-foot ledge, I finally decided to construct a back-pitch wheel as being the simplest. When I say "simplest" I use the word in a comparative sense only, for more than two weeks of work and worry were consumed in making it. But in the end I had the satisfaction of looking upon a water-wheel such as no human eyes had ever before seen. Its metal fastenings, the heavy bands about its clumsy wooden axle, the collars that secured the spokes in place, all were of silver, while its thirty-five paddles or buckets were made of solid gold!

Meanwhile work on the wooden gears and the massive stone rollers had been proceeding steadily and by the time the heavy cumbersome wheel had been set up the various units of the mill had been completed. I had no intention of using wooden gear-wheels, for I well knew they would never stand the strain put upon them, and I had them made merely to serve as patterns with which to make moulds for casting metal gears. For the moulds I used clay which was thoroughly dried and burned and for casting I employed an alloy of copper and silver, a sort of bronze, which was used by the people for various purposes and was the hardest metal obtainable in the valley.

At last all was completed, and when the sluice-way was opened, and the great wheel commenced ponderously to revolve, and the uneven gears meshed and groaned, and I dumped a basket of corn between the rollers and the pulverized kernels cascaded into the hopper below, the ovation accorded the seeming miracle exceeded my wildest expecta-

tions. The people seemed actually to have gone mad. They fought and struggled to bathe in the water that flowed down the tail-race from beneath the wheel; they shoved and pushed to snatch a handful of the ground corn and they cast flowers, fruits, ornaments and their most prized possessions into the sluice-way.

Even Itza and the Prince, both of whom knew it was nothing more than a contraption of wood and metal, were awed and made obeisance to it, while old Nohul-Voh, who had himself help to build it and understood it perfectly, held up his arms, threw back his leonine mane and chanted praises and thanks to Chac-Mool, the God of Waters, for such a manifestation of his favor to the people of Mictolan.

Most surprising of all, Kinchi-Haman had come to witness the new marvel; but no sign of pleasure, no delight, not even surprise was visible upon his horrible features. His eyes burned, I saw his hands clench and unclench, and I knew that my success had merely added to his hatred and his jealousy. But the high-priest was no longer of any great importance to anyone. The people who had formerly lived in fear of him had lost all dread of him. His temple was almost deserted during his ceremonies and the majority of the inhabitants of the valley even failed to make obeisance to him when he appeared, and paid no more attention to his presence than if he had been an ordinary citizen. Ever since I had first humiliated him at the temple of Kukulcan, Kinchi-Haman's power and prestige had been on the wane and he had lost all respect, all power to instill fear or obedience on the part of the people. Hence I could not blame him for detesting me, for being consumed with jealousy, and I rather pitied him. But it was his own fault. Had he been reasonable, decent, open and above board such conditions as existed never would have occurred. But from the very first he had been tyrannical, overbearing, jealous and threatening.

However, neither the people nor I had any time to bother our heads over Kinchi-Haman. The Mictolans had

gone mechanics-mad. Wonderful imitators that they were, they worked like beavers making windmills and water-wheels for their own use, and in an incredibly short time the valley was dotted with windmills; at every available point on the river and its tributaries a water-wheel rumbled and ground the maize. Hand-carts and barrows were trundled through the streets and across the fields, and I was besieged with requests, prayers and supplications to show new wonders to the people.

As I gazed across the valley and saw these signs of a dawning use of labor-saving devices, I chuckled at my thoughts. What an incongruous, paradoxical, ridiculous situation it was. Here were people going mad with wonder and excitement over the most primitive methods of utilizing the most obvious natural forces, while all about them, unnoticed and undeveloped were forces ten thousand times more powerful and economical, which would have caused as much excitement and wonder in my land among my race as the crude wind and water motors had produced in this land among the members of this race.

Would these people, I wondered, ever learn to adapt the unknown forces of uranium to mechanical needs? In long years to come would they go through the slow, tedious evolution of wind, water, steam, electricity and in the end discover the terrific forces they had neglected and overlooked? Would some future Mictolanian rediscover the inventions of Nohul-Voh and immortalize the defunct sorcerer as the greatest scientist of his race? Or would some brilliant genius realize the natural forces of the valley, solve the problem of controlling them, and in a single day, metaphorically speaking, jump his people ages ahead of all other races?

Who could say? Who could foretell what might happen? Possibly old Nohul-Voh if he could see ahead as he claimed. But when I half-jokingly asked him if his Book of the Future had prophesied the wheels and mills he shook his head and admitted it had not. But as usual he was ready with an explanation.

"The Book of the Future holds only those matters which relate to the Kiche-Maya," he declared. "These things are of another race. Just as I cannot look into your past before you spoke with Katchilcan, neither can I read the future beyond the Road of the Symbols. Neither can I read the future that is within the mind of a man of another race than mine."

I smiled. "You draw a very fine line, Nohul-Voh," I told him. "Although these things are of my race, as you say, yet now they have to do with your people, hence they should have been revealed to you."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who can say?" he replied. "It is the will of the gods that it is so."

I had already noticed that there was an abundance of iron ore in the valley, there was plenty of limestone, and I had no doubt that I could build a furnace and smelt the ore. But there was a simpler way to obtain metallic iron. For endless centuries the natives had smelted gold, silver and copper, and whenever they had done so they had unwittingly smelted a small quantity of iron at the same time, for all their ores contained some iron. In the bottom of every crucible of other metal there must have been a tiny iron button, and why or how they had overlooked these bits of a much harder and more useful metal was a puzzle I could not explain. But I felt certain the iron must have been there and an examination of the accumulation of broken and discarded clay crucibles and slag confirmed my assumption. It was slow work picking over the refuse dumps and separating the little nodules of iron, but I employed boys to do it, and so greatly were they impressed by what I had already done that they regarded the tedious work as the greatest privilege and vied with one another to secure the greatest quantities of the desired metal.

As soon as I had obtained a fairly adequate supply, the rest was very simple, for the iron was easily refined, welded and forged, and to my surprise and delight I discovered that it contained some alloy or property which rendered it

capable of taking a good temper and edge almost like genuine steel.

But I was bitterly disappointed at the cool reception accorded the new metal. Gold, silver and copper had answered all the requirements of the people for countless generations. They had not lived long enough in the mechanical age to appreciate the value of a harder metal. They had abandoned stone cutting long ago, and while the iron tools I fashioned were immeasurably superior to anything they had known for cutting and working wood, yet they did not impress the people as being either remarkable or amazing, and while they were quick to adopt them they regarded them as a matter of course. No doubt this was because they realized that iron, like the other metals, was a natural product of the earth, whereas the mills and wheels were the product of man. But even if my iron tools and implements did not excite the wonder I had expected I felt that I had done the people a good turn. Moreover, I made good use of the metal myself.

During all this time I had, in the back of my brain, been mulling over the matter of leaving Mictolan with Itza. In fact I had been making certain preparations for the long, difficult and hazardous journey we would be compelled to face and had accumulated a large supply of torches to light our way through the Cave of the Bats, as well as a number of pairs of sandals and moccasin-like shoes of plaited fibre for our use on the long trek before us.

The matter of providing food had worried me a great deal for I had no idea how long we might be on our journey, always assuming we managed to reach some settlement, and while we could carry a fairly large supply of parched corn and cassava meal the amount we could transport would never last us for the weeks or perhaps months, we might be wandering through the mountains. And even if we found game plentiful I had no means of securing it for I had barely a dozen pistol cartridges left and these must be reserved for emergencies and self protection.

The only solution to the problem was a bow and arrows and fish hooks; and as bows and arrows were in universal use in the valley I spent much of my time acquiring skill as an archer. But even when I had become quite a skilled marksman I did not feel over-optimistic about killing big game with the primitive weapons, especially as those used in Mictolan were far from powerful or efficient. There were no wild animals larger than foxes in the valley and while the weak bows and wood or copper tipped arrows served the local hunters for bringing down birds and small game, they were not at all suited for killing deer, jaguars, tapir or other creatures we might meet.

But with iron at my disposal I felt that I could provide myself with really efficient weapons as well as with fish hooks, spears or javelins, a machete or sword and a small axe or hatchet. To be sure, I had never learned the tool-makers' or blacksmiths' trades, and had never had experience in iron work; but I felt that it was a question of common sense and hard work and that practice would make perfect.

My first attempts resulted in lamentably crude products, as might have been expected; but eventually I succeeded in making some really excellent arrow-heads, a couple of lance-heads, two clumsy but efficient hatchets and a roughly forged but serviceable bush-knife or machete. My hardest job was making fish-hooks. I had always regarded fish-hooks as simple things and had never given a passing thought as to how they were made. But when I came to try my hand at it, I realized that a fish-hook is, in its way, a true masterpiece. Had I possessed wire or a means of making it my task would have been much simpler, but with billets of iron only I had all my work cut out for me. However, in the end I managed to fabricate some barbed objects that might have passed for fish-hooks, and having tested them out on the denizens of the local streams and found them efficient, I felt satisfied.

It was at this period, while busily engaged in my metal work, that I fully realized what a vast advance had been made when man stepped from the bronze into the iron age,

and how each step in human progress had been made both easier and greater by the use of the metal. Now that iron and forged steel were available I could foresee machinery, steam engines, yes, even electricity possible, and in my day dreams I could visualize the valley humming with industry, with mills, factories, perhaps even a railway or motor-propelled vehicles.

I laughed to myself at thought of how absolutely amazed some future explorer would be should he chance to reach Mictolan and found the remnants of the Mayas operating steam engines, using electricity, employing harvesters, cultivators and machine looms, yet in other ways living as did their ancestors centuries before the Spanish conquest. It might be merely a dream, a wild flight of my imagination, yet anything seemed within the bounds of possibility and only time and patience and a desire for lightening human labor were needed to make such a vision a reality.

But much as I would have enjoyed watching the progress of the Mictolans, and greatly as I would have relished helping them on their way, I had neither desire nor intention of spending much more time in the valley. And, after all, I thought, would not such innovations prove a curse rather than a blessing to the people? Were they really any better off, any happier now that they had wheeled vehicles and their primitive wind and water mills, than they had been previously? I could not see that they were. Their every need, every want had been fully satisfied; their lives had been happy, content and busy, and I could not perceive whereby I had added in the slightest degree to their well-being and their happiness by teaching them what I had.

There was only one matter which I felt as an exception, one innovation I had shown them which had undoubtedly benefitted them, and this was, perhaps, the simplest thing of all—the means of making fire by flint and steel. Hitherto their only method of kindling a fire had been by the bow-drill, and the far quicker, easier and more reliable flint and steel was a real godsend to them.

When I had first demonstrated the method I had expected the people would regard it as a magical or supernatural thing, but in this I was greatly mistaken. The stone and the metal were both natural products and while the on-lookers marveled at my ability and superior knowledge in knowing how to produce fire in this way, they accepted it in much the same manner as they had accepted iron.

It must not be assumed that I devoted all my time and energies to my various experiments, demonstrations and mechanical devices. I thoroughly explored the valley and convinced myself that there was no possible egress other than by ways of the Bridge of Light across the chasm. I had my daily religious duties to attend to. I visited and conversed with the people and studied their habits, their psychologies, their beliefs and their arts and crafts. I spent many hours with Nohul-Voh, and of course I devoted a great deal of my time to Itza. She was very anxious to learn English, and being, like all her race, a born linguist and very quick to learn, she proved an apt pupil and in a remarkably short time was able to read, write and speak my language. Very delightful were the hours I devoted to teaching her, reproving her for mistakes by kisses, laughing merrily with her over her funny efforts to pronounce the new sounds, guiding her slender little fingers as she tried to form the various strange letters. It was a wonderful satisfaction to be able to converse with Itza in a dialect that no one else could understand; to be able to exchange our thoughts, our hopes, our desire and to make love without being overheard.

Moreover, the fact that she could understand and converse in the strange language which the people believed was the secret dialect of the Tutul-Zius, raised Itza tremendously in the estimation of the Mictolans. To them she was now semi-divine. She was the chosen mate of the son of Kukulcan, she conversed with him in the language of the gods, she could read the magic, sacred writing of Itzimin-Chac as I was now known to everyone, and as a result she was accorded the homage, the respect and the reverence due a queen

and a goddess.

I wanted for nothing; there was no earthly reason why I should not have been absolutely happy and content and willing to remain forever with Itza in the lovely valley. I had neither kith nor kin to worry over my absence or to worry me. Among my own people I would be compelled to struggle, forced to work in order to maintain even a modest existence; I could never hope for great wealth, position or prominence but would remain merely a somewhat obscure unit among millions of my fellows. Here in Mictolan my life was easy, work was a recreation rather than a necessity; I had everything man could ask—wealth, position, power and, most precious and desirable of all, a loving, devoted and most beautiful companion.

Why, I asked myself a thousand times, could I not be content? Why not be fully satisfied to remain in the valley, to accept conditions as they were, to forget the outside world and resign myself to remaining the virtual ruler of these lovable, peaceful, simple people? It was not that I lacked anything, that I was not happy, that I could not marry Itza, for I had long since cast aside the obstacle of that formality as being nonsensical and unreasonable, an illogical impediment to our complete happiness. The ceremony of Kinchi-Haman, even had he been willing to go through with it, would have no true significance to me or to my people, and even had we been married according to the ritual of the Mictolan faith I should have insisted upon a Christian wedding if we ever managed to reach the outside world. Arguing to myself along these lines, I had scrapped all my obsolete, narrow-minded, puritanical conventions and ideas and had taken Itza for my bride by the simple Scotch custom of declaring her my wife in the presence of the Prince and his sisters, and had then announced it from the temple.

I therefore had no valid reason, no sane and sensible excuse for wishing to leave the valley, and strive as I might to analyze my mind, to learn from my inner consciousness why I still longed to return to civilization and my native land,

I could not discover the true reason. Yet I did long for the outside world with all its problems, its struggles, its politics and strife, its crimes and sordidness. But such is human nature. I had passed through hardships, sufferings and the greatest perils in order to reach Mictolan. I had found love, happiness, wealth, power—everything man strives for and holds dear, and yet I was now becoming as anxious to leave the place as I had been to reach it.

Very probably it was merely the inherited, ineradicable homing instinct of human beings that seems common to all living creatures. Perhaps, on the other hand, some unrecognized sixth sense or intuition warned me of impending disaster. Possibly it may be that my scientific instincts and my desire to give the world the benefit of my discoveries was the underlying cause of my unrest, or it may have been due to a combination of all. However that may be, I felt that I had acquired practically all the ethnological and archeological knowledge possible, that there was little remaining to be done and that as soon as the Bridge of Light returned—as it must—we would slip quietly away. I fully realized that the people might raise serious objections to losing their demi-god who, so they still believed, had come to Mictolan to lead their exodus from the valley.

Only one matter really troubled me. Would I be justified in allowing Itza to undertake such a journey as I knew must lie ahead? Could I permit her to face the hardships, the dangers, the terrors of such a trip with the chance that we might both leave our bones somewhere in the vast unexplored wilderness? But when I spoke of this to her she merely laughed and kissed me and declared that she was anxious to see my land and my people as I had been to find Mictolan, and that with me by her side she could endure anything and feared nothing. Always, then, at the back of my brain was the longing to escape, and hardly an hour passed that I did not glance expectantly at the temple, hoping each time to see the lambent fire that would mark the time for my safe escape with Itza.

CHAPTER 15

NOHUL-VOH'S WARNING

I HAD BEGUN TO THINK THAT THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT HAD vanished forever. That as soon as I had appeared as the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan, the amazing span had ceased to exist, or that old Kinchi-Haman—if as I suspected he controlled it—had some ulterior motive in preventing me or anyone else from leaving the valley. Although I had seen so many inexplicable and incredible happenings, although I had had indisputable proofs of the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies, I had not yet become so convinced of their inspired origin or so weaned from my faith in hard and fast scientific facts, that I could accept matters as did the Mayas.

Although I did not pretend—even to my own mind—to explain many things, especially the Bridge of Light, yet not for a moment did I believe it supernatural. Either it was some natural, if inexplicable and entirely new, phenomenon, or else it was some equally inexplicable device of man.

In the first case it must be subject to natural laws; in the second it must be operated, produced by some one possessing its secret. Everyone agreed that the phenomenon had appeared and disappeared repeatedly in the past, hence if it were a natural thing there was every reason to believe that it would continue to appear and vanish. If natural and controlled by nature's forces, then the fact that it had ceased to exist just after I arrived was merely a coincidence. Moreover, if natural, and if it followed the ordinary and accepted

laws of natural phenomena, there was every reason to expect that the periods of its existence and non-existence would be definite, well-established cycles. On the other hand, if it were a man-made and man-operated thing, it had unquestionably been cut off purposely as soon as I had passed over it, and its periods of existence in the past would have been, in all probability, irregular and erratic.

I was surprised that I had not thought of making a systematic study of its past, but I would lose no time in doing so now. Neither the prince, nor Itza, nor the princess could give me any definite information on the matter, but old Nohul-Voh, I felt sure, would be able to help me. We had become very friendly, really chummy in fact, and he had long before cast aside his assumed shell of mystery, and had been remarkably frank with me in regard to his knowledge and his powers. Only on the matter of his Book of the Past and Book of the Future, as he called them, was he reticent. He would divulge nothing of this matter, but I had become convinced that this was because of his inability to explain it rather than because of disinclination.

In fact, I firmly believe that—as I had thought in the beginning—it was some form of hypnotism, mental telepathy or mind-reading, which was as much a mystery to him as to anyone else. In all other matters he was frank with me. His mysterious sphere he had explained to the best of his ability, though even this was a mystery to him. Naturally he knew nothing about atoms or electrons, or ether waves, and hence he could not readily grasp the theory I had formulated to account for it. He had stumbled upon the force, had adapted it to his uses, and there he had stopped. It was the same with all his other knowledge and discoveries.

He possessed a vast knowledge of medicinal herbs, but he had no conception of chemistry. He extracted curative salts and drugs from earths and minerals, but he could not explain their nature, was entirely ignorant of the difference between acids and alkalis, and he knew nothing of the laws and theories of chemical reactions. He had discovered that

the radioactive mineral, in combination with certain ores, emitted a brilliant, apparently perpetual light, but he was unaware that the light was the result of the decomposition of the metallic element, radium.

But regardless of all this, in spite of the fact that the old sorcerer was, scientifically speaking, as ignorant as any of his people, still he was a veritable storehouse of the history, the traditions, the legends and the records of his race. That he was extremely old was certain. That he had discovered the elixir of perpetual youth, as he claimed, seemed quite possible and even probable, when I looked upon his youthful face, his active muscular body and his snow-white hair. That he had always looked exactly the same, from the time of the earliest recollections of the oldest inhabitants of Mictolan, all agreed, and all declared also, that he had been the same in the days of their fathers and their fathers' fathers *ad infinitum*. But I knew, from long experience, how difficult, almost impossible, it is to disentangle fact and fiction in Indian traditions and memories, and whether he was a century or ten centuries of age, I could not hazard a guess.

However that might be, there was no question that he had been the official keeper of the Mayan records, the astronomer, the soothsayer, the sage, the historian of the people of Mictolan for innumerable years. He had explained his method of making astronomical observations through the carefully calculated and accurately placed slits in his tower, and I had been astounded at his deep knowledge of the planets, the constellations and the celestial universe. Though, as I have said, he had adapted his green sphere apparatus to serve as a working model of the earth and its rotation, orbit and relation to the planets, and from this was able to work out problems by which he checked up on the Mayan calendar, yet he verified his calculations by observations of the heavenly bodies, and by the crudest and simplest of instruments.

And he proved conclusively to me that the results were amazingly accurate. The Mayan calendrical system, as I

already knew, was perhaps one of the greatest achievements of any race, and was considered superior to anything of the sort previous to that in use by ourselves at the present time. But I had never before fully realized how truly astonishing it was, the more especially in view of the manner in which it was worked out and checked for errors. To read of a thing, to see characters, dates and figures cut in cold stone, is one thing; but to stand beside a living man of a supposedly vanished race, and have him explain and demonstrate the same facts, is quite another.

As old Nohul-Voh patiently explained the meaning and the calculations of the twenty Mayan days and their names, the solar year of 360 days, with the addition of the five "un-lucky days" of *Uayeb*, and the relationship of the divine year of Tonalmatl with the civic year, matters that had been confused and hazy before became clear and simple. It was the same with the Calendar Round and the Initial Days of the years, the Tuns, Katuns and Baktuns, the Long Count and the system of numerical glyphs. And his method of using the planet Venus for checking up on his observations was astounding and intensely interesting. By observing the periods elapsing between the appearances of this planet as the morning star, star-periods of almost precisely 584 days—he knew that when the planet had appeared five times its appearance should tally with the eight years of 365 days each of his calendar. His arithmetical method of working out the Venus and calendrical coincidences was truly remarkable, both for its accuracy and its simplicity, and as I watched him, I began to appreciate the superiority of the Mayan vigesimal system over our decimal system, and realized how non-essential were the complicated higher mathematics employed by our scientists and astronomers.

Taking the Venus period or cycle of 584 days as a basis, he divided it by the twenty day signs of the Mayan month which gave him twenty-nine with a remainder of four. Hence every Venus cycle ended with a day-sign four days later than that preceding it. Then, dividing twenty by the

four, he found five day signs were enough to serve as symbols for the termination of Venus-cycles, and as the day signs were always combined with numerals from one to thirteen, and thirteen divides 584 with a remainder of twelve, the terminal day of each Venus cycle was recognizable by its number being one less than the preceding one. Hence, as he pointed out, five times thirteen, or 65 Venus-cycles, must elapse before the same day name and number symbol could recur as an ending date to a Venus-period. Thus 65 Venus cycles would equal two calendar Rounds of 52 years each or 104 years, and once in 104 years the Venus Count, the Calendar Count, and the Year Count would coincide to a day and hour.

All of this dissertation on Nohul-Voh's astronomical knowledge and ability may appear to have no connection with my anxiety to find the Bridge of Light once more streaming across the chasm that barred escape from Mictolan. But, as a matter of fact, it had a most important bearing upon the matter. A man who nightly studied the heavens, who kept all the calendrical records, must, I believed, have observed when and how often and for how long a period the tell-tale flames from the great temple of the sun had flared against the sky.

He could scarcely have avoided doing so, and his memory was so remarkable, that I felt sure that even if he had not recorded the dates of the occurrences, he could recall them. So, filled with my new scheme of establishing some definite facts regarding the incredible phenomenon, I asked if he could give me information or data bearing on the subject.

"My son," he said, after a moment's thought, "from the very beginning of time the Bridge of Light must have spanned the chasm. Does not the Book of Kukulcan speak of it? When I, a youth, came to Mictolan with those others who founded the city, we crossed the Bridge of Light, as I have said, and found the fires coming from the ancient temple wherein was the last priest of a vanished people.

Ever since that distant time the Bridge of Light has come and gone, as no doubt it came and went for ages before the survivors of the Empire of the Great Serpent came unto Mictolan.

"In my mind the times of its coming and its going are not fixed. To me it meant nothing. But much that has fled my memory during the Katuns that have passed has been set down by me, for who knows when the word let fall in jest may prove the greatest truth? Who can say that the stone tossed carelessly in air may not bring down the winging bird? Who can foretell that the seed, dropped by mischance, may not bring forth the greatest yield of grain? Perchance, among my records and my writings, I may find that which, noted and forgotten as of no worth, may be the answer that you so much desire."

Rising, he bent over a pile, made up of papyrus covered with picture symbols and characters, of clay tablets and slabs of thin stone bearing the familiar cartouches of Mayan inscriptions and dates, and of strips of bark-cloth on which were mystic figures, diagrams and drawings.

"And will not your Book of the Past tell you more readily what you seek?" I asked, half-jestingly.

He shook his head. "Nay, Itzimin-Chac," he replied. "The Book of the Past, even as the Book of the Future, deals not with matters here in Mictolan. Never do they reveal events within this valley. Why, I do not know. When you gazed upon the magic smoke and saw the road of the symbol you saw nothing of the valley, nothing of the Bridge of Light. When I watched you coming hither I saw nothing of your arrival after you entered the Cave of the Bats. All within the valley is black. Could I but see into the future or the past here in Mictolan, then, my son, would I know at what time the Bridge of Light would again give footing for my lord's passage with his bride; then would I know the secret of the Bridge of Light; then could I see the Monster of Sacrifices, and then, my son, could I see what Kinchi-Haman plots and plans for your downfall and could warn

you. But all within the valley is hidden from my sight. Ah, here, my son, is what I seek."

Although Nohul-Voh had kept no consecutive records of the phenomenon he had mentioned, the appearance of the flames from the temple at various times—no doubt he had found they interfered with his observations and had cursed them roundly at the time—and with a little calculation he was able to fix their dates beyond any question. For a number of years, as nearly as we could judge, the appearances and disappearances of the Bridge of Light had been almost uniform. The temple flames would appear, would flare steadily for forty days (two Mayan months) and would subside for thirty-two days.

Then came a record where for six months or 120 days they had burned steadily.

"I remember the time now," declared Nohul-Voh. "See, the date is 2 Ahau 13 Tzec 2 Ahau. We took it for a sign that the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan was on his way; but I gazed into the Books of the Past and Future and saw him not."

"Two Ahau, 13 Tzec 2 Ahau!" I made a swift mental calculation. Good Lord! That was somewhere between A. D. 220 and 240! Impossible! Over sixteen hundred years ago! The old fellow was romancing; he could not—no living man could have been alive then!

But he was speaking again. "And then," he went on, studying his tablets, "for twenty Tuns (years) no light burned above the temple, and I, who know the secret writings of the prophecy, knew that the messenger of Kukulcan would never come unto Mictolan, for the appointed time had passed."

"Great Scott!" I thought to myself, "the old fellow actually believes he was alive then." For, up to the time I had never really taken his tale of extreme age seriously. Rather I regarded it as a sort of allegorical statement, a way of implying that he did not know his own age, that his clan or profession had always existed among the Mayas.

"And yet once more, the Bridge appeared," he continued. "And for long it spanned the chasm, and Maidens of Kinich-Ahau were kept ever on guard to welcome the bearer of the symbols. But it came and went, always irregularly, though always the flames blazed from the temples upon the coming of the moon of the spring Tonalmatl. Nay, my son, not once has it failed to appear upon that date. Well I know, for that day to me is most important in my observations, and always upon that night the moon is dimmed and the night brightened by the flames from the temple. Well do I have cause to remember that, my son. And so, though you may feel that the Bridge of Light has gone forever, yet would I prepare myself and hold myself in readiness for its coming, for upon the eve of the Tonalmatl it will once more span the chasm to the Cave of the Bats."

I had learned nothing, I knew no more than before—unless I believed in the certainty of the bridge appearing at the Tonalmatl moon. Whether it was a natural phenomenon or a device whose secret was known only to the priest was still a mystery. If Nohul-Voh's records were right, it had appeared and disappeared in regular cycles at one time and so might have been natural, but on the other hand it had afterwards become most erratic.

Personally, I had no great faith in the Bridge of Light putting in its appearance at the time of the Spring Festival, the beginning of the Religious Year. But the sorcerer seemed confident of it, and at all events I was ready and waiting. Then I recalled his other words—what he had said about Kinchi-Haman plotting my downfall and warning me. Strange how the rascally priest was forever cropping up to trouble me. I had almost forgotten he existed, and now Nohul-Voh's vague hints brought him vividly to my mind.

What did the sorcerer know? What did he suspect? What did he mean? I felt quite certain that he knew or suspected a great deal more than he had told me.

But in that case, being a friend of mine and an acknowledged enemy of Kinchi-Haman, why didn't he tell me all he

knew or guessed? And what could Kinchi-Haman do, after all? He didn't amount to a row of pins in the estimation of the people, I felt certain. He dared not bring down their wrath by injuring me personally, I felt convinced. And I gave him credit for having enough acumen and enough knowledge of my intentions to know that I was as anxious to get away from the valley, as he was to be rid of me. If he had any control over the Bridge of Light all he had to do was to start it going and he'd never set eyes on me again.

How could I be sure he was not up to something? I had no means of knowing how many secret followers he had—even in his vast temple and its associated palaces, monasteries, nunneries and other buildings there were hundreds of fanatical followers of his cult. He possessed a large force of soldiers pledged to the service of Kinich-Ahau, the Sun God, and, if he decided to carry matters with a high hand, he could no doubt get control of the city, make away with me and my friends and defy the people. But I knew he was superstitious, that in his own way and at heart he was deeply, fanatically religious, that he now accepted me as a lineal descendant of Kukulcan and therefore semi-divine and probably immortal, and I could not see that he could possibly gain anything by not minding his own business.

All these thoughts rushed through my mind in a far shorter time than it takes to tell. I plied Nohul-Voh with questions, begged him to reveal anything he knew regarding the priest's plots, asked him what he suspected.

"I know nothing, my son," he declared, "but I suspect much. Does the farmer trust the fox among his fowls? Does the hawk nest with the doves? Does the snake move in a straight line? Do melons grow on corn stalks? No, Itzimin! As the gods made them, so will they be, and they have made Kinchi-Haman as deformed in brain as in body. Always has he been plotting and planning ill to someone. Always he gloats on suffering and on blood. He never forgives and never forgets.

"When I see the river run uphill, when I see fish fly

in the air, then and not until then will I believe Kinchi-Haman no longer plots and schemes harm to someone. But what it is or when or how, I cannot say. But remember, my son, the fox sleeps with his nose to the wind; the gopher rests at the mouth of his hole."

So the old fellow was merely suspicious after all—suspicious only because he mistrusted the priest. He had nothing to base his suspicions on.

Nohul-Voh seemed to read my thoughts. He was gazing fixedly, steadily at me. "My son," he said, a serious note in his voice, "a crackling twig frightens the hare but the tiger pays no heed to a falling tree. My lord feels secure in his strength, but the tallest tree is struck first by the lightning. You say to yourself: 'Nohul-Voh fears without reason.' You think in your mind: 'Kinchi-Haman dares do no harm unto me.' Perhaps it is so—often what we most fear is our least danger—but there are many in Mictolan who still are true to the priest of Kinich-Ahau; there are many whom he can rely upon, and while the scorpion still has his sting, one should beware of him. Greatly have you injured Kinchi-Haman. You have humbled his pride, you have robbed him of the Virgin he had selected as a bride for Kinich-Ahau. You have honored the Prince Aczopil; you have made the Temple of the Plumed Serpent greater than that of the Lord of Day.

"And there is another thing, O, Itzimin-Chac, a matter of which I have not spoken. In the annals of the House of Tutul Zius is an ancient legend—perhaps a prophecy—which says that in the end, one of the Tutul Zius clan shall battle with one of the clan of the Ipa Hanacs, and there shall be bloodshed and death, and the Ipa Hanac shall be slain by the hand of the son of the Tutul Zius. And the legend tells, my lord, that the battle shall be because of a maiden and of a sacrifice, and that it shall take place on the day of Tonalmatl. Though you are not of the Tutul Zius clan, yet do you bear the symbol upon your breast.

Kinchi-Haman is of the clan of Ipa Hanac, and—the day of the Tonalmatl is but two days distant.”

Something in his tones, in his words, frightened me. Why had he never told me this before? Was it an ancient legend or was it his way of warning me of some impending calamity? Whichever it was, it had aroused my lingering suspicions, my half-formed fears. I had seen too many of the legends and prophecies fulfilled to treat the tale as of no consequence. The instant he had mentioned a maiden, the sacrifice, the day of Tonalmatl, I had thought of danger threatening Itza, of the almost forgotten sacrifices held by the old priest. Was it not possible—even probable—that he was planning to injure my beloved one in revenge for having cheated his beastly god of her sacrifice? It would be a revenge, a diabolical way of getting back at me, well worthy of his warped, vindictive, inhuman brain.

What if the legend or prophecy or whatever it was said the priest would die? It did not say that that would save the woman. Of what use to kill the priest if Itza were injured or destroyed? The very thought of harm coming to her drove me frantic. Unconsciously, unreasonably perhaps, I had assumed that the tale referred to me. Nohul-Voh had hinted it broadly enough. Not for a moment did it occur to me that the legend, if legend it were, might refer to some other member of the Tutul Zius clan, to some other Ipa Hanac, to some woman other than Itza. But forewarned is forearmed. I would rush to Itza, I would guard her, watch her, remain by her side every moment until after the Tonalmatl had passed.

I sprang to my feet, rushed toward the door. Before I had taken two strides, racing footsteps sounded in the outer passage, and wild-eyed, panting, pale, Aczopil dashed into the room.

“Itza!” he gasped. “Itza! She is gone—vanished!”

I staggered back, faint, weak, too horrified, too overwhelmed to speak. Nohul Voh's warning had come too late. The blow had fallen!

CHAPTER 16

THE MONSTER OF SACRIFICES

A

AS IF IN A TRANCE, I HEARD ACZOPIL STAMMER OUT THE terrible news. She had been alone in the palace with the princesses, Tutuil and Mitchi-Ina. She had left them to go into the patio to gather flowers. A moment later they had heard a piercing scream, and, rushing to the patio followed by the attendants, they had found it empty. Terrified, they had searched the palace from end to end, but no trace of my beloved one could be found. The guards, ever posted at the doorways, had not seen her pass. Several servants had seen her enter the patio, but no one had seen her leave it. She had vanished, disappeared as completely, as mysteriously, as though she had dissolved in air. A terrified servant had found the Prince, he had rushed to the palace, had learned of the terrible catastrophe, and had dashed to Nohul-Voh's to tell me.

The sorcerer's voice brought me to my senses. "My lord," he said, placing his hand upon my shoulder, "the serpent has struck, but his head shall be crushed beneath your heel. Upon your breast is the symbol of the Tutul Zius; bear your blow like a son of that clan, for it is written in the Book of Fate that you shall triumph in the end. And let not your brain be clouded nor your actions stayed by fear for the maiden Itza. No harm will befall her before the day of Tonalmatl.

"Seek her, Itzimin, even though the way leads unto the inner precincts of the Temple of the Sun, for in Mictolan,

even the portals of Kinich-Ahau cannot bar the way to the betrayed bearer of the Book of Kukulcan. But beware, my lord, that you crush not the serpent ere you have bared the secrets of his den. And seek not rashly and alone, for the venom of the serpent is deadly and he strikes most surely in the dark. Now go, Itzimin, for with you go the favor of the gods and the prayers of Nohul-Voh. The clan of Ipa-Hanac draws near to its end."

The words of the old sorcerer reassured me. He said Itza was in no danger until the day of Tonalmatl. In that case I had thirty-six hours in which to find and rescue her, time enough to search very nook and corner in the whole of Mictolan, even the inner temples, as Nohul-Voh suggested.

Telling Aczopil to join me with his own retainers, and to spread the news of Itza's disappearance and to promise immense rewards for news of her, I dashed to the palace. Everyone was excited, confused, terrified, and they chattered, moaned, lamented, besought mercy and pleaded for forgiveness at the same time. Impatient, maddened at the loss of time, I managed to quiet them at last, to make them understand there was no blame attached to anyone, and to get some order out of chaos and some sort of a connected and intelligible account of what had happened. But there were no details, nothing added to what the Prince had told me.

Itza had vanished. She certainly had not left the palace by either of the two doors. But how, by what mysterious means could she have disappeared from the open flower-filled patio within a few yards of scores of attendants? Unless there was a secret exit, a hidden doorway, it seemed supernatural. And I could find no trace of such an opening. The flowers, shrubs and trees were undisturbed. The smooth paths revealed no sign of a trapdoor, and the ornate sculptured fountain in the centre splashed and tinkled as usual. But the question of how Itza had gone was of far less importance than where she was. Regardless of the manner in which she had vanished, or by whose hands, she must be

somewhere within the city, and I would find her, rescue her, if I had to raze every building to do so.

Summoning my bodyguard of picked warriors, who heretofore had been wholly ornamental, I joined Aczopil, who arrived with a crowd of his friends and retainers. Already the news of my loss had spread like wildfire through the city. Crowds thronged and milled about, some shouting vengeance on those who were responsible; others awed, terrified, declaring Itza had been carried off by some spirit or devil; others declaring the Sun God had taken her for his bride; others consoling me, still others volunteering their services. Somehow the rumor had spread that Kinchi-Haman was at the bottom of the trouble and among the curses, prayers, shouts and disputes, I heard many of the throng crying for the blood of the priest, demanding that he be seized and tortured. Quarrels arose, the people split into factions—one for Kinchi-Haman, the other for me—and in a moment the streets became a riot, a pandemonium.

But we paid no heed to the excited, struggling, arguing mob. Let them settle it as they might, let them break one another's heads, if they wanted to. Itza must be found, and at the head of our men, Aczopil and I hurried toward the Temple of Kinich-Ahau. Into the great court we poured, thrusting aside the temple guards, disarming them, binding them.

Ordering a party of our men to search every outbuilding, to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the place, we dashed up the short flight of steps to the great sculptured doorway. A stalwart guard barred our way only to fall, gasping, from the savage blow of Aczopil's war club. A frightened dishevelled priest sprang forward and with up-raised arms forbade us to enter.

"Back!" he shouted, "Back, defilers of the Temple of the Lord of Day! What seek you here with noise and violence?"

I laughed hoarsely, wildly. "I seek the misshapen, evil thing you call your priest!" I cried. "Kinchi-Haman, Poi-

soner of the Year. Aside, man, or your spirit joins that of your guard yonder! This day Kinich-Ahau bows to the will of Kukulcan."

"Kinchi-Haman is not within the temple," stammered the terrified priest. "Not since the ceremony of the Rising Sun has he been here. Turn back, O, Itzimin-Chac, and bring not the vengeance of the All Powerful upon you and yours!"

"That for your god and his vengeance!" I cried, snapping my fingers in his face. "You lie! Kinchi-Haman *is* within."

With a quick motion I seized him by the long hair, swung him to one side, and followed by the Prince and a scant half dozen of my men, burst into the temple. Cries, shouts, curses came from the throng of priests, servants, acolytes and attendants as, glancing to right and left, into passages and rooms, we hurried on. Which way should we turn? Where should we seek? The place was a labyrinth of passages, of narrow halls, of cell-like rooms, a veritable warren, a miniature city within the vast pyramidal Kus.

A cry from Aczopil caused me to wheel. We were alone. Our men, filled with superstitious fears at entering the sacred temple, had deserted us.

But neither the Prince nor I thought for an instant of turning back. Somewhere within the temple was the high priest; never once did we doubt that he knew of Itza's whereabouts, and our only thoughts were to find him, threaten him, wring the truth from his grinning, hideous mouth. On every side were enemies, fanatical, outraged priests and temple servitors, buzzing like angry bees but, unarmed as they were, fearing to throw themselves upon us, contenting themselves with threats of their gods' vengeance, by calling down curses and maledictions upon us. We paid little heed to them. I felt sure that we would not find either Itza or the high priest in this part of the vast structure. He would be hiding—like the cowardly, lurking reptile he was—in some secret, innermost lair. But where? We were wasting time

seeking blindly for a way to reach him. We might wander for hours aimlessly and be no nearer to our quarry.

Roughly I seized a scowling, threatening priest and shook him until his teeth chattered. Then, holding my dreaded pistol at his head, I ordered him to lead us to the quarters of the high-priest. Hardly able to speak for terror, with shaking knees, he babbled that he could not, that the punishment of the gods would fall upon him if he did so.

"The curses of Kukulcan will fall upon you and all within the temple, if you do not!" I hissed at him. "And the thunder of Itzimin-Chac will kill you where you stand!"

Pitifully he begged for mercy, implored me to spare him. But before I could reply, before I could repeat a threat, Aczopil's spear flashed by my eyes and buried its silver point in the fellow's throat. Leaping forward with uplifted spear, the Prince seized a fat, elderly priest whose ornate robes showed him to be of an exalted order. Prodding him with his weapon, threatening him with the most horrible and unspeakable tortures Aczopil urged him forward. But little urging was required, for the mere sight of my revolver and the dead priest upon the stone flagging had proved too much for the old fellow. The vengeance of his gods might eventually descend upon our heads, but it would be of little satisfaction to him if he was lying stark and stiff when the gods saw fit to act. And the outraged gods seemed very slow.

Babbling incoherently, vowing over and over again that Kinchi-Haman was not in the temple, he led the way at the tip of the Prince's spear. Up a flight of steps, through a narrow passage between rows of giant magnificently-sculptured stone images he stumbled on with us close at his heels. Even in the midst of my distress and anxiety, and obsessed with the one idea of rescuing my adored Itza, I half-consciously noticed that the temple was immeasurably ancient, that it was unlike anything hitherto known in America, and that the outer Maya portion must have been erected over the original prehistoric structure. Dimly, as though it were

a fragment of some dream, I recalled the words of Nohul Voh:

"When our fathers' fathers' fathers came to Mictolan a temple stood here and the Monster of the Sacrifices dwelt within it."

The sorcerer had told the truth about the ancient temple. What manner of monster had lurked within it in centuries past and, if I were to believe Nohul-Voh and all the others, still had its den here? Could it be possible that some weird, terrible prehistoric reptile, some sole survivor of the monsters of the past had lived on for centuries, thousands of years within the temple? Memory of the dinosaurs I had seen on my way to Mictolan made it easy to accept this possibility.

I knew that the radioactive mineral in the valley induced gigantic growth in vegetation, old Nohul-Voh claimed to be many centuries of age; and I remembered a scientific paper I had read in which the author advanced the theory that the abundance of potassium, radium and other radioactive minerals in the earth millions of years past had been responsible for the great number and stupendous size of the dinosaurs and other reptiles. Was it not possible that under the influence of the radioactive mineral, and cared for and fed by the priests, some grotesque, horrible beast might have survived?

Then a terrible sickening fear chilled my heart. Whatever the thing might be, it was the Monster of Sacrifices, and Itza had told me that the fiendish thing was fed with maidens thrown to it by the high-priest. Perhaps Kinchi-Haman had seized her, my Itza, to fill the maw of some horrible, loathsome creature! But Nohul-Voh had assured me she would be safe until the day of Tonalmatl. Could I have perfect faith in him? How did he know?

Then, suddenly, like a ray of blinding light, the truth came to me. The day of Tonalmatl, the day of the spring florescence, the day of the sacrifice of girls married symbolically, by death, to the Sun God! Itza herself had been the

chosen one! The villainous, bloodthirsty high-priest had abducted her, had stolen her to sacrifice her to his pagan god by hurling her into the sacred well as he had planned to do before my arrival in the valley.

In that way he could avenge himself upon me and would appease his god at the same time. Nohul-Voh must have suspected it, and that was why he had felt so certain that Itza would be unharmed until the day of Tonalmatl.

My face blanched and my head reeled at the mere thought of my beloved Itza meeting such a terrible fate. I groaned aloud. Yet there was some consolation in the thought, for if she was destined for the sacrifice the fanatical priest would not dare harm a hair of her head, would not dare anger his god by defiling Itza with his touch, until the appointed time. And I still had nearly thirty-six hours before that time arrived.

As these thoughts had been racing through my mind, we had been hurrying onward, led by the panting, paunchy, terrified priest. How many steps we ascended, how many stairways we descended, how many doors we entered, I shall never know. But at last, falling upon his knees and grovelling at our feet, the priest pointed to a closed door a short distance ahead and in a paroxysm of terror whispered that the sacred quarters of Kinchi-Haman were beyond the portal.

Brushing the fellow aside, we sprang forward and hurled ourselves upon the door. It swung wide and with ready weapons we dashed into the room. It was empty! We stared about. Everywhere were signs of recent occupancy and hurried departure. There were discarded garments we recognized as those belonging to the high-priest. In one corner was his couch, tumbled and mussed as when last used. Furnishings, clothing, papyrus books were scattered all about. Obviously our quarry had made a hurried exit, no doubt fleeing at our approach. But how, where had he gone? His disappearance was as mysterious and inexplicable as the manner in which Itza had vanished, for aside from the por-

tal we had entered, neither a door nor a window was visible!

I could tell by Aczopil's expression that he was nervous, that his superstitious fears had been aroused. I could scarcely blame him, for I felt rather creepy myself. Itza had vanished almost supernaturally, and here, in this room in the heart of the temple, the high priest had vanished just as mysteriously. But it would never do to let the Prince become terrified, for I counted upon him, must have him by my side.

I laughed until the empty room echoed with my forced merriment. "The snake has fled," I cried. "And why not? The door was open. Fools we are to stand here gaping. Come, my brother, we will find him yet!"

The expression of nameless dread left the face of my companion and his half-formed superstitious fears were stilled. I had spoken confidently, but in my own mind I felt certain that Kinchi-Haman had *not* fled by way of the door. Somewhere within his room there must be a secret opening, a hidden exit. Madly, feverishly I pulled down hangings, yanked rugs from the floor, tossed the furnishing about. Suddenly I stopped, motionless, listening. From somewhere, apparently beneath my feet, came a strange rumbling, growling, ominous roar.

Aczopil heard it also. Terror filled his eyes and his mouth gaped. I felt my scalp tingle, cold chills ran up and down my spine. Was it?—Yes, it could be nothing else; it must be the Monster of Sacrifices! Somewhere close at hand, the Thing, whatever it was, was roaring, howling like a lost soul. Where was the monster? I glanced fearfully about, half-expecting to see some horribly fantastic, ghastly nightmarish creature spring upon us from some hidden doorway.

Then common sense came to my rescue. Whatever it might be, wherever it was, it was not where it could reach the sanctum of the high-priest. He was not the type of man to take any chances and no doubt he had the monster securely caged, for if it devoured human beings it was not

exactly the sort of beast to be kept as a pet. Reassuring and calming the Prince with such arguments, we again fell to work searching the chamber for a concealed doorway, while in the back of my mind was a determination to destroy the ghastly monster as soon as I had finished with Kinchi Haman.

I had a half-formed idea of throwing the high-priest to the beast, for so maddened was I at his escape and at the loss of Itza, that, had I been able to lay my hands upon him, I would have gloated at seeing him torn to shreds by his Monster of Sacrifices.

A shout from Aczopil brought me to his side at a bound. He had pushed a huge golden image to one side, and by doing so had revealed a dark opening in the wall. Without the least hesitation we entered. From somewhere far ahead a glimmer of light showed, and by means of this faint illumination we saw a flight of steep, narrow stairs leading downwards in a spiral.

Down, down, we went. I felt as if we must be descending into the very bowels of the earth, and each moment that horrible banshee-like wailing and terrifying howling of the monster became louder and louder and increased in volume. What terrible, unimaginable thing *could* it be? I could think of nothing but some stupendous, prehistoric beast such as I had imagined might survive here. Was Itza here, near this awful thing, crazed with the terror of its infernal din as she awaited the fate of sacrifice? I ground my teeth in inexpressible rage at Kinchi-Haman at the thought. I could imagine him gloating over her screams and shrieks, driving her mad by threatening to feed her to the ravenous monster.

Let me at him! Let me get my grip upon his twisted body and I would teach him what terror meant!

Suddenly we came into brilliant light and halted in our tracks, staring dumbfounded at what we saw. We were in a vast circular chamber of polished black rock. From far above light streamed down. Before us in the very centre of the floor was a round hole or shaft, its rim raised a few

feet and glistening with red, yellow and green crystals. Up from this crater-like hole rose a column of thin yellowish vapor, while from the unseen depths came that ear-splitting, awful, demoniacal howling. I glanced up, gaped, and stared in wonder. Fully two hundred feet above our heads was a square of blue sky half-hidden by wavering lambent flames!

Instantly I realized what it meant and sudden understanding flashed through my brain. From the depths of the earth beneath the temple this geyser of inflammable gas rose to the temple top, where, ignited by the sacred fires ceaselessly burning there, it spread its flaming banners against the sky. If Nohul-Voh was right, then the Bridge of Light now spanned the chasm!

But of what use to me? Itza, my Itza was gone? By the irony of fate the way to escape had come when I could not use it.

Filled with bitterness, torn with heart-breaking misery, I half-consciously stepped forward and leaning over, glanced into the pit. A horrified cry escaped from my lips. Below me, perhaps twenty feet from where I stood, a broad shelf encircled the shaft. And upon it, twisted, contorted, ghastly, were dozens of human skeletons and human bodies! And still farther down, belching, roaring, howling from a great arched opening in one side of the pit and disappearing in a similar opening on the other side, was a column of luminous liquid or vapor like the jet of flame from a stupendous, titanic blow torch. Fascinated, I gazed. With dread of what I *might* see, I peered at those grisly ghastly bodies, until I was convinced that all had been there for many days—weeks. Then, and not till then did full comprehension come to me.

This was the Monster of Sacrifices! This shrieking, howling torrent of gas or vapor or whatever it was, was the Thing I had pictured as some loathsome, horrible beast! Those mouldering bodies and whitening bones were the victims of sacrifices to the phenomenon! I laughed madly, hysterically as the tension on my nerves was released. To the

Prince, who feared I had gone mad, I explained. Incredulously he listened to my words and then, as he, too, understood, his maniacal laughter mingled with my own.

Suddenly I sprang to my feet with a triumphant shout. Now everything was clear. The Bridge of Light! The roaring horizontal column of vapor below us! They were one and the same! Through some subterranean passageway, the hissing, bellowing gas traveled to the chasm; the rocks there were filled with the radio-active ore; the gas was ionized, and as it spouted across the abyss, the molecules, the atoms that had been liquid became electrified ions, solids—countless billions of infinitesimal bits of metal or mineral, moving, to be sure, streaming across the chasm, but under such pressure, so closely packed, that they formed a span as strong and unyielding as solid metal! It seemed incredible, but it was fact, I felt sure. Even a column of water, under pressure, will support a great weight, seems to become almost solid, and this great stream of electrified ions was ten thousand, a million times more solid than water.

And how natural, how easily explained everything was after all! No wonder the flames flared from the temple top when the Bridge of Light appeared. These two were one and the same thing in different forms. When the vast stream of gas rushed across the pit before us, its escaping vapors rose up and flamed at the temple-summit. Kinchi-Haman had nothing to do with it. There was nothing mysterious, nothing secret about it. It was merely a natural force, a phenomenon of nature.

At any other time I would have been elated, overjoyed at my discovery, at my solution of the seeming mysteries. At any other time I would have rushed to the chasm, and with Itza by my side, would have sped across the Bridge of Light and would have left Mictolan forever.

But now, now what did it matter? Nothing mattered as long as I had lost Itza. I must find her, *would* find her! But one great worry, one immense load was off my mind.

I felt sure she had not been sacrificed to Kinchi-Haman's Monster of the temple.

Equally, I felt sure, she had not passed this way. Yet both Aczopil and myself were certain that Itza was somewhere within the precincts of the temple, and our only course was to hurry back, retrace our steps to the quarters of the high-priest and search systematically. There was no time to be lost, for several hours had sped already and sunset and darkness were approaching. Back up those winding interminable stairs we ran until breathless and, with aching tortured muscles we neared the top.

Just ahead of us we could see the opening to the priest's room, when in the deep shadows my eyes caught a glint of light reflected from some object beside the stairway. My groping hands found it and I gave vent to a glad triumphant shout. It was a link of gold chain and I recognized it instantly. I would have known it anywhere, for it was a fragment of a chain I had given to Itza! And it had been caught, jammed in a crevice, in the crack of a cleverly-hidden door!

We had found the trail. Itza had been brought this way. Her chain, dislodged by her struggles or perhaps swinging loosely, had been caught in the door as it was closed. Somewhere behind that concealed portal we would find her. Feverishly we searched for some fastening, some handle, for the stone door fitted the surrounding masonry so closely it was impossible to secure a grip upon it. Presently the Prince uttered an exclamation. "Wait," he cried, as he dashed up the few remaining steps to the doorway of the priest's room. I saw him reach within the doorway, and grasping the golden idol, draw it towards him, and as he did so the solid stone swung back before me!

Cautiously, feeling our way, with our weapons in readiness for instant use, we crept along the dark and narrow passageway. For what seemed miles we followed it, searching with eyes and fingers for doorways or passages leading from the damp, low-roofed tunnel. At last our ears caught the sound of falling water; the floor became wet and slip-

pery; narrow uncertain streaks of light showed through cracks in the rocky walls and we came to a halt at the end of the passage.

Somewhere overhead water gurgled and splashed, but on every side we were surrounded by black stone walls. Yet the place must have an exit, the long, carefully made tunnel must lead somewhere. Inch by inch we examined the damp walls and slimy floor. Then, as I straightened up, my head bumped against some projection. With a cry of pain I stepped back and glanced up to see a bar of metal projecting from the rock. I grasped it, tugged at it. Slowly and smoothly it moved. A blaze of light nearly blinded us and a wide opening showed above our heads. I grasped the edge, swung myself up and stared dumbfounded, incredulously.

I was standing in the patio of my own palace!

CHAPTER 17

THE SORCERER'S MAGIC

THE MYSTERY OF ITZA'S DISAPPEARANCE WAS SOLVED. A segment of the circular flagging surrounding the fountain was movable and could be opened by means of the lever within the tunnel. It worked smoothly, silently, and Itza, busy with the flowers, had been seized and dragged into the tunnel before she had time to utter more than one shrill scream. But knowing how she had been abducted did not help matters any. We were no nearer finding her now than we had been before, and we had lost precious time wandering underground only to find ourselves back in my own patio. I swore, cursed and raved in my extremity and impotent rage.

There was nothing to be done other than go to the deserted quarters of the high-priest and from there institute a systematic, minute search of every room, passage and chamber within the vast structure. For us to undertake this task alone would be almost hopeless, practically suicidal, for I had no doubt that when we again entered the temple we would find the priests and attendants armed and would meet with a warm reception. Against their numbers we two would have no chance, and to blindly sacrifice myself and the Prince would be to leave Itza to her fate at the hands of Kinchi-Haman.

Moreover, we two could not hope to find her in the mazes of the temple before it was too late. Doubtless the place was full of secret passages and hidden doors, for we already knew of two and where there were two there must be more.

Under such conditions we might easily pass within a few yards of my beloved one and never know it, or she might be carried from her hiding place to some room we had already searched. If we were to have any chance of success we would need a large force of reliable men, and we had already found that my own guards and the retainers of the Prince would desert us or die rather than force their way into the inner precincts of the Temple of the Sun. Yet we must have men, for I was determined to find Kinchi-Haman even if to do so meant searching every nook and cranny of the temple, and if need be, tearing the place to bits.

Neither would this have been such an impossible feat as might be imagined. By closing the outlet at the top of the building, thus confining the gas from the awful pit, and then igniting it, the whole structure would be blown to bits. And I made a mental vow that if I discovered Itza was dead I would wreak terrible vengeance by blasting the temple and its inmates into fragments. That such wild thoughts should have possessed me, that for one moment I should have contemplated the wholesale destruction of men and women who were in no way responsible for my bereavement, proves the mental torture I was suffering, that I was doubtless temporarily insane with grief and desperation. Indeed, at that time I would have stopped at nothing and would have destroyed the entire city, if doing so would have restored Itza to my arms.

Aczopil recalled me to my sober senses. He reminded me that the sun was setting, that we were wasting time doing nothing. The ruddy glare of the sinking sun brought a new thought, a faint hope to me. Would Kinchi-Haman appear before the altar of his temple to conduct the ceremony of the Setting Sun? Would his religious fanaticism overcome his fear of my vengeance? Would he appear and defy me?

Again the Prince's words brought me back to earth. "Itzimin," he said speaking in earnest tones, "you must carry out the ritual of Kukulcan. If you fail the people in this they will turn against you, will lose faith in you and will

swing to Kinchi-Haman. It is hard, I know, for I am your friend and your brother and know how you are suffering, how your soul is tortured, Itzimin. But also I know my people better than do you. To find Itza we must have men, we must have support and the faith and confidence of the people. If they do not see you upon the altar of the Plumed Serpent they will say the God of Day has cast you down for violating the sanctity of his temple. But if you appear they will feel that your god is greater and more powerful than the god of Kinchi-Haman.

"Moreover, Itzimin, from your place before the altar on the temple you may call down the wrath of Kukulcan upon Kinchi-Haman, and all who have a part in the tragedy that has befallen. Aye, my brother, and you may also promise great honors and the favor of the Plumed Serpent to those who are loyal and who aid us. Do you not see this, Itzimin?"

I saw, and I understood. At first, as he had spoken, I had been filled with anger to think that he, my best and closest friend, should even suggest such a thing. But as he had continued I had realized the truth of his words, the importance of sacrificing my own feelings in order to impress the public, the loss to my prestige and my cause if I failed to carry out my role as priest of the Plumed Serpent, and the opportunity it would afford for me to denounce the high-priest and to promise rewards to all who remained loyal to Aczopil and myself.

So, despite my tortured mind and breaking heart, stifling my grief, my rage and my impatience to continue the search for Itza, I summoned my guard, entered my litter and accompanied by the Prince started toward the temple as usual. At my appearance the crowd thronging the streets gazed at me in wide-eyed amazement. What magic was this? They knew the Prince and I had forced our way into the Temple of the Sun, our faint-hearted men had reported our rash and sacrilegious act, we had never emerged from the temple's doors, yet here we were, being carried in my golden litter toward my own temple, unharmed, ap-

parently as calm and untroubled as ever. For a brief space the people stared speechless, unable to credit their own senses. Then wild cheers, cries of delight, triumphant shouts from thousands of throats rose in a deafening roar.

"The son of Kukulcan!" they fairly screamed. "The Serpent God is the Great God!" "Itzimin-Chac walks with the gods!" "The bearer of the token is immortal!" "Those who walk with Itzimin-Chac have the favor of Kukulcan!" "The power of Kinchi-Haman is broken!" "Where is the hunchback priest?" "Death to him who would injure the Great One!"

Yes, Aczopil had been right. My appearance was a master stroke and Kinchi-Haman was losing ground rapidly. From the temple I would exhort, threaten, make promises to the populace. I would work upon their excitable, superstitious natures, and would rouse them to the point where they would follow me blindly into the innermost sanctums of the Temple of the Sun.

Yet there were many who still favored Kinchi-Haman, for I could hear their shouts and cries mingling with the others. They seemed greatly in minority, however, and I also noticed that those who remained loyal to the priest were those of the poorest, most ignorant type, the ragtag and bobtail, the ragamuffins and gutter-sweepings of the city, so to speak.

As reaching the temple I mounted the stairway to the terrace, a terrible thought crossed my mind. Perhaps Kinchi-Haman had left the valley. Perhaps he had fled, carrying my Itza with him. With a tremendous effort I thrust the thought from me. No, I assured myself, he was still in the city, and I felt a strong premonition, a strange confidence that both he and Itza were very near at hand. But would he appear upon his temple? Dared he defy me?

Half-hoping that he would, for then I would know he was within reach and that Itza was hidden near, I peered across at the Temple of the Sun with the raging, blazing gas jet flaring at its summit. But no signs of life appeared upon

it, no procession wound its way about the great terrace at the top of the pyramidal base. For once the Sun God was not to be honored by the ancient ceremony as the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

How I went through with that ritual I do not know. What I said I cannot recall. To me it was a terrible nightmare, apart from my conscious, tortured mind. But my words, my scathing denunciation of the deformed priest and his deeds, my vows of vengeance, my pleas for support and my exaltations of my own God (whom the people assumed was Kukulcan), my promises of rewards for those who were loyal and obeyed me, must have had the desired effect, for a thunder of applause rose on the still evening air. And the fact that Kinchi-Haman had not appeared, that no ceremony was taking place at the temple of Kinich-Ahau, had an even greater effect than my words. To their minds his omission of the ritual was conclusive evidence of the triumph of the Plumed Serpent. Rumors were spread that the high-priest had been destroyed by mysterious means, that the Sun God himself frowned upon the rascally priest.

Then, at the very moment when I felt we had triumphed, wild cries, excited shouts arose from the crowd and all eyes were turned toward the Temple of the Sun. Standing before the great altar, clearly outlined in the glare of the gas flames above, looking like a fiend from Hell, was Kinchi-Haman, his arms upraised, a triumphant grin on his hideous face.

Utterly bereft of reason and beside myself with fury at sight of him; without stopping to think of consequences, heedless of the fact that he was more than three hundred yards from me, I drew my pistol from beneath my robes and fired.

At the flash and roar of the discharge, shrieks, wails, terrified cries arose from the assembled multitude and with one accord the people flung themselves prostrate upon the earth. I scarcely realized this. My eyes had been fixed upon the distant priest, and at the report of my weapon I

had seen him reel to one side and disappear. Had I killed him? Had my bullet by merest chance found its mark? Full realization of what this meant swept over me, for if I had killed him I had perhaps destroyed the one man who knew where Itza was confined.

But even so there was one great satisfaction. Kinchi-Haman had not fled from Mictolan, hence Itza must still be in the city. And if the high-priest had died at my hand then she would be saved from the sacrifice of the Tonalmatl, for until a successor had been chosen no one but Kinchi-Haman could cast the doomed victim into the sacred well.

Moreover, if I had killed him, even if he were badly wounded, there was no better time to search for her than at the present moment, for the Temple of the Sun would be in an uproar, the attendants and priests disorganized, terrified and with all their faculties centered upon the high-priest, Itza would be unguarded and forgotten in the excitement.

Tearing off my ceremonial costume, I dashed down to the entrance where Aczopil was awaiting me. The plaza was almost deserted, only my personal guards and those of the Prince remaining. The crowds, awed and terrified at the flash and report of my revolver, horrified and frightened at seeing Kinchi-Haman fall, fully believing that the vengeance of Kukulcan had descended upon the high-priest, had fled to their homes seeking to hide themselves from the fury of the outraged god. Even our soldiers were quaking with terror. It was bad enough to have the two most exalted beings at daggers points, to have the public divided into factions and ready at any instant to break into open hostilities. But to have their two most powerful deities, their two greatest gods at war was too awful. No one dared guess where such conditions might end, what terrible calamity might be the result of one god striking down the high-priest of another.

But my rash act in shooting at Kinchi-Haman had one good result, for the soldiers, as well as the majority of the populace, were now absolutely convinced that the Plumed

Serpent was the all-powerful god. They had seen the thunder and lightning fell the priest of Kinich-Ahau upon the very altar of the God of Day. His god had not protected him, had wrought no reprisal upon me. Hence to their minds, Kinich-Ahau bowed to Kukulcan and they were prepared to follow me wherever I might lead them. And without a moment's loss of time I led them directly to the Temple of the Sun. No one disputed our way, the door was unguarded and the passages deserted.

I dashed up the steps of the pyramid and mounted to the altar, but there was no trace of the body of the high-priest, no tell-tale blood stains that I could detect. But I did find the spatter of lead where my pistol bullet had struck the sculptured stonework directly back of where Kinchi-Haman had stood. The Prince had followed me, and now he glanced furtively about. His superstitions were again aroused, for to him it savored of mystery or magic. Even to me it seemed inexplicable. But there was no time to bother our heads over such matters. Our job was to search for Itza in the interior of the temple.

Systematically we went through the rooms, the passages, the maze of cells, chambers and vaults that honey-combed the great pyramid. But there was no trace of Itza, no trace of Kinchi-Haman, not a living soul anywhere.

What had happened? What had become of the scores of priests, guards and attendants? Where had they gone? It was uncanny, mysterious, wholly inexplicable. Utterly discouraged, weary, with eyes aching and reddened from lack of sleep, we stumbled from the empty temple to find the sun rising above the lofty mountain ranges to the east. Hopeless and despondent, with heavy hearts and bowed heads, we made our weary way to the palace where we found Nohul-Voh awaiting us.

"Itzimin, my lord!" he exclaimed supporting me with his arm. "Long have I awaited your coming. By the sadness on your face I know you have no news of her whom you seek. But fear not, she is still unharmed. I have much

to reveal unto you but first you must eat and rest, for you will need all your strength. Much must be done this day, for with the setting of the sun tonight the Tonalmatl begins."

I started. Only twelve hours remained! I had counted upon the death or injury of Kinchi-Haman saving Itza from sacrifice, but something in the words of the sorcerer told me that hope was vain. Nohul-Voh must have read my thoughts. He smiled reassuringly.

"Fear not, my lord," he said. "Have faith in the prophecy and in Fate. Though the Tonalmatl begins tonight by the stars, yet not until Itzamna, the Moon God, greets his lord, Kinich-Ahau with the dawning of tomorrow will the feast of Tonalmatl commence. Ask no questions now, Itzimin, but eat, and you too, O, Prince, rest and eat for much strength will you also require for what lies before you."

Not until we had eaten, although it was with difficulty I forced food down my throat despite my famished state, would the sorcerer speak again. Then, as we rested our weary bodies among the cushions, he drew close.

"Tell to me all that has transpired," he said.

Briefly I related what we had done and what we had discovered.

He nodded. "Kinchi-Haman still lives," he announced. "He hides from your wrath and with him are those of the temple, for he hopes that by giving many brides to Kinich-Ahau he may win the favor of the god and so triumph over you and all who are your friends, and to make his god supreme in Mictolan. Until the time of the sacrifice he and his fellows fear to show themselves for they dread the power of the thunder that kills in the hands of Itzimin-Chac. Already—"

"I've searched the temple and he is not there," I exclaimed impatiently, interrupting his words.

He smiled enigmatically. "You have searched a *part* of the temple," he said. "It was of this that I have waited long to speak, my lord. Did you not search the chamber of Kinchi-Haman, only to find it empty? Did you not by mere

chance find the secret doorway wherein was caught the bit of Itza's chain? Have I not searched the skies for many years, yet each night I find new stars. Has my lord measured the length of the pyramid on the *outside* and then paced its length *within*?"

I leaped up, electrified by his words. Fool that I had been not to have thought of this! The base of the pyramid was enormous, covering many acres of ground. How could I be sure there were not two, three, a dozen portions separated by secret doors or perhaps reached by tunnels such as the one that led to my own patio?

"Has my lord yet seen the home of the Virgins of the Sun?" demanded the sorcerer. "Have you yet found the inner chamber wherein the golden image of Kinich-Ahau is worshipped by Kinchi-Haman and his priests? Yet, Itzimin, these and many other things are known to be within the temple. If my lord has searched the place and not yet discovered such, then—"

An oath, perhaps luckily in English, cut his sentence short. Dolt, idiot that I was! I had been wasting precious hours wandering, searching the most obvious and unimportant portion of the temple. Why hadn't Aczopil reminded me of these other chambers and passageways we had not found? I started for the door, but the sorcerer checked me.

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "To beat with your bare hands upon stone walls will merely bruise your flesh," he continued. "Does the rabbit strive to push over the tree to secure its fruit? Does the swallow attempt to fly through the mountain? Very crafty is Kinchi-Haman, my lord, and only he knows the secret of the moving stones that seal the doorway to the inner temple. For days, months, years you might seek for it in vain, so cleverly is it hidden. But there is a means, known only to Nohul-Voh, and here, Itzimin, is the key to that way."

From beneath his robes he produced a bamboo tube with carved stoppers at the ends. Carefully removing one of these, he disclosed what appeared to be a stick of some red-

dish clay curiously mottled with yellowish flakes, much like a stick of ornamental red sealing wax filled with flakes of mica.

I reached for it the better to examine it, but the sorcerer checked me in time.

"Beware, touch it not!" he warned me. "Resting within the bamboo it is harmless, but touch it and your flesh will be seared to the bone. It is the magic that will reveal to your eyes the secret door of the inner temple."

I was puzzled. What did he mean? How could this thing, whatever it might be, that he handled so gingerly, reveal a hidden doorway?

But he was again speaking, giving me instructions. "Together with the Prince Aczopil and your men enter the temple once more," he said. "But first measure the length and breadth of the pyramid on the outside, and having entered, pace its length and breadth within. By this means you shall learn where stands the wall in which is the secret door. Then, knowing this, unstop the end of this bamboo tube and hold it above the seams and joints of the stones. Thus will it reveal to your eyes which is the door and which is the solid wall. And having thus found what you seek, the rest lies in your hands, Itzimin-Chac. Lose no more time, my lord, for the hours pass and never do they return. Nay, even the magic of Nohul-Voh cannot stay the hours in their flight."

Handing me the alleged miraculous or perhaps better magic, tube, he rose to go. But as he reached the door he turned. "Preserve well what I have given you," he admonished me. "In time of need it may serve as well for a weapon as for finding the secret doorway. And, mayhap, when you have rescued the maiden and with her leave Mictolan, it may serve you well within the Cave of the Bats."

For a space I remained motionless, speechless, pondering on the strange words of the sorcerer and staring wonderingly at the innocent-looking object in my hand. Had I not known Nohul-Voh so well, I should have thought him mad. How could this thing reveal a door in a rock wall? How

could it serve as a weapon, unless I used it as a club? Of what earthly use could it be if—and the *if* loomed very large indeed—I ever should succeed in rescuing Itza and with her reached the Cave of the Bats?

The words of Aczopil broke in upon my thoughts. "Let us go," he exclaimed. "Great indeed is the wisdom of Nohul-Voh. With his help we shall find Itza."

Calling our men together we hurried to the great pyramid, and very carefully we paced the base along two sides. Then, entering the deserted passages, we repeated the operation. It was no easy matter to accomplish this and I fumed and fretted at the time we consumed. In no spot could we pace the entire length or width for walls, corners, partitions and columns intervened, but by measuring one room or passage, allowing for the thickness of the walls, measuring the next chamber and so on we at last satisfied ourselves that the width of the interior was so nearly the same as the outside dimension that no large secret chambers could be there. But the inner length fell far short of that on the outside. In fact it was not one half as great, and we knew that somewhere beyond the sculpture-covered wall that blocked us, Kinchi-Haman with his followers and Itza were concealed.

Wondering, awed, uneasy and nervous, the men gathered about us at our commands. Then, skeptically, having no faith whatever in the sorcerer's magic tube, I unstopped the bamboo and pointed the open end at the massive wall of masonry. An exclamation of amazement escaped from my lips. The Prince started and leaped back. Before us a large circular area of the rock glowed with brilliant red light! It was exactly as if I held a powerful electric torch fitted with a red bulb focussed upon the rock, yet no light, no rays streamed from the uncanny tube in my hand.

Deep drawn breaths of wonder came forth from the soldiers as, still marveling, still amazed, I moved the tube back and forth, up and down, searching the stonework for some indications of a doorway. Every minute detail of the wall was clearly illuminated. Of course, I thought, this was

what Nohul-Voh had meant—that the tube would give us light to find the door there in the dark shadows of the passageway within the temple. Probably, I surmised, there was nothing mysterious nor remarkable about the thing, merely some radium compound—he had warned me it would burn flesh—but if so, then how could the bamboo serve me as a weapon? Perhaps, it was—

My thoughts were rudely shattered by Aczopil who sprang forward with a sharp ejaculation. Under the glare from the bamboo tube a beautiful bas-relief was outlined, glowing as redly as if carved upon the surface of a gigantic ruby. It was a huge sculpture covering the faces of a dozen or more of the great stone blocks which were so perfectly joined that the seams were scarcely visible.

All this I took in at a single glance. Then I saw what had attracted the attention of my companion and had brought that cry of amazement from his lips. As sharp and clearly defined as if painted in black pigment upon the stones, was the outline of a rectangle!

"Look, Itzimin, the door!" exclaimed the Prince. Staring, I stepped closer and reached out my hand, feeling with my fingers for the wide crevice which appeared to be there. But my fingers touched solid rock. There was no crack, no crevice! What did it mean? What magic was this? That a door was there in the wall before us we could not doubt, but it was a door invisible without the glow from the tube, a door undetectable by touch yet outlined in its entirety by the strange powers of the tube. Nohul-Voh was right. The thing had revealed the hidden door.

But how? Even in my mad desire to force the portal, I found myself wondering, striving in my mind to solve the puzzle. Then, as I moved the tube about, focusing the glow here and there, following along the black outlines of the hermetically sealed opening, a glimmering of understanding came to me. Wherever there was solid rock, wherever there was mortar or cement the mysterious compound within the tube (which I now felt positive must be a form of radium)

caused a red glow. But where there was a crack or a crevice, an opening too minute to be seen or felt, a black line was revealed. And with this sane and sensible solution of the seeming magic, came recollection of the strange effects and the brilliant fluorescent colors of many minerals when subjected to ultra-violet or infra-red rays.

My thoughts along these lines were cut short by a new discovery. As the emanations from the tube played upon the floor close to the wall, a smaller black rectangle was revealed. Directly above this, upon the wall the foot of the carved god was outlined in black, and the ornate sandal-fastening showed as a solid black mass.

With a quick motion Aczopil grasped the ring-shaped ornament. The god's foot swung inward, and with a slight grating sound the rectangular stone in the floor moved upward, revealing a cavity containing a metal lever. Bending down I grasped it, pulled upon it. It moved smoothly, readily, and slowly the outlined section of the wall vanished before our wondering eyes.

CHAPTER 18

THE END OF KINCHI-HAMAN

B

BEFORE US WAS A DARK PASSAGEWAY. FLASHING THE strange red glow from my bamboo tube upon the stone walls and floor, with our nerves tense, treading noiselessly we moved forward while at our heels crowded our men, their sharp indrawn breaths telling of the nameless dread which filled their hearts. A dozen paces and the tunnel turned abruptly to the right and a short distance ahead we saw a glimmer of light.

Very cautiously we crept forward. A heavy cloth drapery hung across the passageway, and from beyond this came the sounds of voices. With trembling fingers I carefully moved one edge of the curtain aside and looked into a large, brilliant-lit room. Stalwart temple guards stood about; a dozen black-robed priests filled the chamber, and, seated in a throne-like stone chair and addressing the others in earnest tones, was Kinchi-Haman!

At sight of the hideous priest who was responsible for all my troubles insane fury swept over me. All caution and common sense fled from my mind, and with a savage jerk I tore the drapery aside and sprang into the room with the Prince beside me. Instantly all was confusion. Had we materialized from thin air, the occupants of the chamber could not have been more utterly amazed. Deathly fear distorted the features of Kinchi-Haman; the terrified priests shrieked and cowered back, struggling and fighting to retreat; and

springing from his seat Kinchi-Haman sheltered himself behind the milling, close-packed men.

Furious, with all my senses focussed upon reaching him, I rushed at them. Two guards sprang forward with up-raised weapons. One fell to a savage thrust of Aczopil's spear as the other hurled himself at me.

I swung the heavy machete I had forged, but before I could strike an amazing thing happened. Before my astonished eyes the golden cuirass of the guard seemed to burst into flame and with a scream of agony he staggered back, his weapon dropped from his hand and with a crash he sank lifeless to the stone floor. A nauseating odor of burning flesh filled the room. Where the golden breastplate had covered the guard's breast a horrible, scorched, blackened cavity showed on the dead man's chest, and shapeless blobs of molten gold smoked upon the flagging.

Screams, shrieks, cries of horror and maniacal terror came from the struggling priests. The remaining guards threw aside their weapons and fled. Here indeed was magic—death instantaneous, terrible, invisible. No wonder Nohul-Voh had said the tube would serve me well as a weapon. It was hellish. Solid metal burst into flame and ran like water beneath its glow and beneath its mysterious invisible rays human flesh was burned to a crisp. I shuddered as I glanced at the terrible thing in my hand and at the seared, distorted, ghastly body of the dead guard at my feet, and I mentally thanked God that in using the tube I had not inadvertently turned it upon the Prince, upon my own flesh or upon one of our men. Even in that brief space of time that I stood there, too astonished at the seeming magic of the thing to move, I wondered why the rays from the thing had not melted and destroyed the metal ring and bars that operated the secret doorway.

Yet all these thoughts flitted through my brain in the fraction of a second, and springing over the body of the guard, hurling the priest aside, striking to right and left, I forced my way through the huddled fear-maddened throng

searching for Kinchi-Haman. I was conscious of the Prince beside me, and from the sounds in our rear I knew our men were close behind. When at last, literally treading priests under foot, we reached the farther side of the room, Kinchi-Haman had vanished.

There was only one visible exit, a narrow doorway packed, jammed by the stampeding fear-maddened priests. Seizing them by the hair, jerking them aside by their garments, we cleared a passage and reaching the door raced down the corridor beyond. Ahead of us we heard the sounds of running feet. Into dark doorways and openings darted the fleeing priests and guards as we approached, but though we searched hastily in each chamber we found no trace of Kinchi-Haman.

On we dashed. Somewhere beyond was the man we sought. Misshapen, dwarfed he surely could not run fast and we must soon overtake him. A startled yell came from Aczopil who was in advance. Abruptly he checked his onward rush and sprang back, colliding with me, and as we rolled upon the floor over us tripped our frightened but still faithful men. At the same instant a metallic clang echoed through the passage and within a few feet of us a massive metal gate dropped like a portcullis, barring the corridor against us.

For a moment we stared, dazed, balked. Then with a wild hope I seized the bamboo tube that had fallen from my hand, jerked out the stopper and springing forward pointed it at the metal bars. Instantly they glowed and almost like bars of wax they melted and vanished. Once again our way was clear and onward we rushed. Before us rose a flight of steps and scrambling like a gigantic spider up the stairway we saw the high-priest. A moment more and he would gain the doorway at the top of the steps and we would be too late. Drawing my revolver I fired as I raced on. Like a clap of thunder the report roared in deafening echoes in the narrow passageway and sulphurous smoke filled the air. The next second we reached the stairs but

Kinchi-Haman had once more escaped us.

But the door through which he had fled had been left ajar and swung open at a touch. We found ourselves in a circular room resembling the bottom of a well, for it extended upwards to vast heights, perhaps to the very summit of the temple. The walls everywhere were covered with beautiful frescoes of gods, symbols, priests, sacrifices and Mayan writing. The huge stone flags that formed the floor were so laid that their joints formed lines radiating from the centre of the chamber where a circular row of tapering polished columns of blue stone inlaid with gold rose for fifty feet or more to support an ornate canopy of intricately-wrought silver.

In the very centre of the circle was a dais of blood-red stone, and seated upon this was the image of a hideous, bestial god; a thing with human body and limbs, leering savage eyes, huge gleaming fangs projecting from half opened jaws and a slavering protruding tongue. In place of ears were the heads of rattlesnakes, the nose was an eagle's beak and in one claw-like hand the horrible statue held a human heart while the other hand grasped a distorted human head. The image was carved from a single great block of black stone, and covering the chest was an immense gleaming gem-studded disk of gold bearing a human face surrounded by rays—the symbol of the sun.

Instantly as I had entered the room I had realized that we were within the most sacred, mysterious forbidden shrine in the very centre of the temple and that the repulsive image before us was that of Kinich-Ahau, the Sun God. Aczopil, awed, filled with superstitious fears had immediately prostrated himself. Our men had cast themselves prone upon the floor and were babbling words of repentance, prayers for forgiveness and were half-crazed with fear of the vengeance which might descend upon us for having entered this most holy spot.

I gave scant heed to them. Kinchi-Haman had entered the place, yet he was nowhere to be seen. But though I

searched everywhere, tearing aside draperies, peering beneath the raised dais, I could detect no opening, no exit other than the door through which we had entered. Cursing, seething with rage I moved about the walls turning the glow from my tube upon the stones, but no tell-tale dark lines were revealed. I turned on the Prince, shook him roughly, spoke to him sharply, scathingly. Trembling with fear, casting furtive glances at the monstrous god as if expecting to see it come to life, he rose to his feet and joined me in my search. We called to our men, ordered them to rise and help us, but to no avail. In the presence of the black god they were useless, utterly bereft of all their senses other than fear.

Inch by inch we went over the floor examining every stone and joint with the red rays, but our search was futile. Checkmated, beginning to feel as did Aczopol and the men, that Kinchi-Haman had vanished by supernatural means, I stared about not knowing which way to turn. I had searched everywhere, but, I suddenly realized, I had *not* searched the idol itself!

I sprang forward, playing the red glow of my tube over the dais, over the god's feet, his legs, his back while with blanched, awe-struck faces the men watched me. Never had such a sacrilege been committed. Why did the vindictive god permit such liberties? Why wasn't I struck down, instantly destroyed? To them there could be but one answer. The son of Kukulcan, the Bearer of the Symbol; Itzimin-Chac, Controller of Thunder and Lightning; Wielder of the Consuming Fire, must be greater, more powerful than Kinich-Ahau. He submitted to my will, he dared not protest. In my service they were safe, and slowly, half-fearfully they rose, grasped their weapons and watched my every move.

I had gone over every portion of the image within my reach, and in order to draw myself onto his knees I grasped the flexed right arm. At my touch it moved and instantly I remembered the great image at the entrance to the Cave of Bats. Very cautiously I tugged at the arm of the Sun God

for there was no knowing how the mechanism operated or what might or might not happen. Neither was I certain whether I should move the arm up, down or sidewise. Deep indrawn breaths of wonder and fear came from the men. Aczopil stared wide-eyed.

Slowly the arm swung and as it moved the golden disk upon the idol's chest revolved and the entire statue and dais slid to one side. I leaped down from my perch. Where the image had stood was an opening in the floor with stone steps leading downward. Kinchi-Haman had escaped that way, and we had wasted valuable, precious time in solving the mystery of his disappearance.

Shouting to the others to follow me, I sprang down the steps. Close at my heels came the Prince, but the men remained behind. They had reached the ultimate limit of their courage and I knew that to attempt to force them to accompany us would be useless; it would merely waste more of our time, and with no fear of the cowardly high-priest who fled at our approach I hurried on. We had not proceeded one hundred feet when we came into a sudden blaze of light and found ourselves in the open air. On every side rose high, massive walls. Far above our heads was the summit of the temple with its wavering gaseous flames. To right and left were low rambling buildings with outward sloping walls and doorways. Beyond, and facing us was a low mound before an image of the Sun God.

All these details I took in at a glance as I dashed toward the nearest doorway, that of the building on my left. As the carved wooden portal swung open, shrieks, screams and shrill cries arose and I halted in my tracks at the sight which greeted me.

The place was filled with women! Half-naked, some nude, others clad in single garments of white, they crowded back, wild-eyed, shrieking hysterically. Instantly I realized who they were and why they were herded there. They were Virgins of the Sun, girls doomed to sacrifice, to be given in that awful symbolic wedding as brides to the Sun God.

Maidens who before the evening of another day would be cast into the sacred well, if Kinchi-Haman lived that long.

A single swift glance assured me the high-priest was not there and that my Itza was not one of the terrified girls. Where was she? Where was Kinchi-Haman? We tried to make the poor creatures understand, strove to reassure them, calm their fears. Presently they ceased their screams, but they were still panicky, panting, as wild-eyed and breathless as so many frightened deer. Again and again I asked them if they had seen Kinchi-Haman, if they had seen Itza. But there was no reply. They might as well have been deaf and dumb.

Aczopil had better success. Very quietly and soothingly he put his questions and presently a tall, queenly-looking girl recognized him. With a great effort she managed to control her voice and speak coherently.

"She—Itza—she is there," she stammered, pointing with trembling hand to the right, "Kinchi-Haman, he, too, is there. He, he prepares the—the others—those who will be the first of Kinich-Ahau's brides."

Before her last words were uttered I had dashed to the door. Behind me Aczopil raced, panting, as I rushed for the building on the right. My Itza there! There with that hideous, bestial, devilish priest! Hot blood rushed through my veins, my brain seemed on fire. I longed to tear that priest limb from limb with my own hands, to torture him, kill him by inches. For the time being I had become transformed into a wild beast, a veritable savage.

We found the door fastened, hurled ourselves upon it, battered at it, hacked at it while dimly from within came screams and piercing shrieks. I thought I recognized Itza's voice and madly, impotently I threw myself at the door.

The Prince seized me, shook me. "The magic tube!" he yelled into my ears. "Quick! See, the hinges are of metal!"

His words brought me back to my senses. Unstopping the bamboo I pointed it at the massive metal fastenings,

trembling with fear that the thing would prove useless. But my dread was uncalled for. Like ice under the rays of the sun the metal fused, the heavy door sagged. With a splintering crash it fell and we sprang through the opening. Figures materialized from nowhere. I saw weapons flash, I heard Aczopil utter a savage cry. I felt my clumsy machete bite into yielding flesh. Then a searing pain shot through my left arm and with the stabbing agony of the wound my brain cleared.

Instantly I remembered my bamboo tube and dropping my sword I drew the stopper and swung the thing about. In the darkness dazzling spots and flashes of blinding incandescence appeared as the invisible rays played upon weapons, breast plates, metal caps and shields. Agonized yells and groans came from every side and the horrible smell of burning flesh filled our nostrils. Falling, writhing ghastly forms were dimly visible by the reflected light from molten metal. Then only the last sobbing moans of dying men, the faint sound of frying, sizzling human flesh—and silence.

I shouted to Aczopil, fearful that he had been cut down, dreading that in the darkness and confusion I might have destroyed him with my terrible ray. But his response came from close at hand; he was alive, unhurt. Leaping over the bodies, guided by a faint glimmer of light, we dashed aside a hanging and, blinking, half-blinded by the sudden light, stood staring about a small cell-like chamber. Objects of wearing apparel were strewn everywhere; a jar of water had been upset, remains of food were scattered over the floor and tapestries upon the walls had been torn down. Everything indicated a struggle had taken place within the room, but there was no human being to be seen.

With a choking cry I leaped forward. Gleaming amid the tumbled cushions and coverings of a couch was the gold chain whose missing links had been caught in the secret doorway in the tunnel leading to my palace. Itza had been here! She had fought. The screams I had heard had been

from her lips. Where, Oh God! Where was she now? Had—

A faint smothered cry came from the rear of the room, seemingly from behind a tapestry on the wall. With a yell of rage, shouting, "Itza! Itza!" I dashed across the chamber, swept the hanging aside and sprang through the narrow doorway it concealed. A dozen strides along a passage and I was in the open air. And at the scene which met my horrified eyes I felt deathly weak and sick, my blood seemed to congeal in my veins, my heart seemed to cease beating. I felt powerless to move, paralyzed, rooted to the spot.

Within thirty paces of where I stood was the image of the Sun God above the low mound I had already noticed. At its feet, bound, gagged and helpless lay Itza, while standing over her, gloating, hideous, clad in his sacrificial robes, his arms uplifted as though exhorting the monstrous god before him, was Kinchi-Haman, a long bladed obsidian knife gripped in one hand.

"The sacrifice!" gasped Aczopil who had reached my side.

His words broke the awful spell that held me powerless, and galvanized me into life and understanding. An instant before I had been bereft of all thought, overwhelmed with unspeakable horror. But now my brain felt abnormally clear and calm. To cry out, to make a sudden move would mean instant death for Itza. There was one chance only that I might yet save her from the horrible fate that threatened her. Noiselessly I drew my revolver from its holster. Slowly, with steady hand I raised the weapon until the ivory bead upon the barrel covered the priest's back. With a mental prayer to God that I might not miss, I pressed the trigger.

A piercing shriek drowned the roar of the report. Through the haze of powder smoke I saw the priest double up. The knife fell flashing from his hand. He swayed, half-turned, reeled backward and with a second wild despairing scream vanished utterly!

But I was already half way across the intervening space,

dashing toward the mound where Itza lay stretched upon the altar on the farther side. There was a sharp warning cry from Aczopil, his fingers gripped my collar and I was jerked half-choked and gasping to one side. And in the nick of time! Almost at my feet, concealed by the circular mound, yawned a seemingly bottomless pit, black, ominous, awesome. The Prince had saved my life. Another stride and I would have plunged into the depths of the sacred well, into the gruesome waters that had closed forever over Kinchi-Haman.

CHAPTER 19

LONG LIVE THE KING!

ITZA WAS UNCONSCIOUS BUT UNHARMED. SHE HAD MERELY fainted, and fortunately she had been spared the maddening horror of lying on the altar and the awful suspense of awaiting the deadly blow of the sacrificial knife. Swiftly I tore away the choking gag that bruised her sweet lips, and slashed through the cords that cut deeply into her tender wrists and ankles.

Lifting her limp form tenderly, I carried her into the house of the Virgins of the Sun, and when, presently, her senses returned, she found herself in my arms and looked into eyes which, like her own, were dim with tears of happiness.

Aczopil, who was almost as happy as myself, smiled at her, while all about us the Virgins of the Sun hovered half-timidly and murmured words of sympathy and delight, for having been told of Kinchi-Haman's death, and assured that sacrifices to the Sun God were forever at an end, they had forgotten their fears and devoted themselves to chafing Itza's hands and bathing her forehead.

For a time we two were oblivious of everything but our own great inexpressible joy. We were in a world of our own, a world unknown to all but reunited lovers, until Itza noticed my lacerated, bleeding arm—which I had completely forgotten—and instantly she was all solicitude and pity. By the time the wound had been washed and bandaged, Itza declared she was as strong as ever, and accompanied

by the freed girls, who would never become the brides of Kinich-Ahau, we retraced our way through the secret passages of the great temple.

As we passed once more through the circular room with its monstrous image of the Sun God, I delayed a moment, and having swung the massive idol into place, I turned the rays of Nohul-Voh's tube upon the golden disc on the statue's chest. Before the amazed eyes of Itza and the girls, the metal fused and melted and forever closed the only way that led to the dismal well which formed the grave of Kinchi-Haman.

Out from the temple and into the waning sunlight of the afternoon we came at last, to find our men, shamefaced and cowering, surrounded by an awed, half-curious and half-terrified throng awaiting they knew not what. From the lips of our wild-eyed men they had heard how we had forced our way into the holy of holies, how I had desecrated the sacred image; and had the Sun God appeared in person, had the sun itself descended to earth or had the temple crumbled to ruins to wreak vengeance such demonstrations of divine wrath would not have surprised the people in the least. But they were dumbfounded with amazement and wonder when they saw us reappear, unharmed and with Itza and the Virgins of the Sun.

For several moments every sound, every voice was hushed, and then as it dawned upon the people that we were alive, real and not visions or wraiths, a mighty cheer arose from thousands of throats and with one accord the people prostrated themselves before us. And as the released girls searched for relatives and loved ones, and spread the news of Kinchi-Haman's end, shouts of joy and cries of delight mingled in a bedlam of sound. It was as if some terrible curse or incubus had been lifted from the city, and as the joyous happy people pressed about us, we were forced to summon our guards in order to form a passage way for us through the throngs to the palace.

Behind us rose the great silent temple. From its summit

the lambent banners of fire beckoned to me to be on my way, pointed toward the spot where I knew the Bridge of Light still spanned the chasm. The way was clear; I was impatient to be gone. I knew that any time the flaming signal might fade, the bridge might vanish, yet I could not leave. I was utterly exhausted, done. I had been under a terrific strain, my wounded arm ached and throbbed, and the reaction, now that it was all over and Itza was safe and in no further danger, left me weak, unnerved and utterly spent.

And there was Itza. Hardships, suffering, dangers known and unknown must be faced and overcome if we fled the valley and forced a way out to civilization, even though we found the way of the Symbols. A woman of my own race would have had no chance of getting through, and even Itza, a Maya, an Indian, would find it so difficult, would have to endure so much that, at times, I had abandoned all thoughts of attempting it and had resigned myself to remaining forever in Mictolan. And she had suffered, had been under a strain that had left her as unfitted for such an undertaking as myself. Until we had rested, had regained strength and nerves, nothing could be done. Better to remain for the rest of my life in Mictolan with Itza than to lose her and perish in the unknown wilderness.

But there was one thing I was determined I would do before I threw my weary, aching body upon my couch and sought the rest, the blessed unconsciousness of sleep, that my throbbing head and burning eyes craved beyond all else. It was the eve of Tonalmatl, the most sacred, most holy day of the year, and the people would be gathering, hopefully, faithfully, expectantly awaiting the ceremony of the Setting Sun on this last evening of the dying year. If I failed them at this critical moment, who could say what dire results might follow?

They were restless, keyed up, in that tense psychological state where riot, revolt, unreasoning mob violence might leap into flame at the first spark. Within the past few hours their traditions, their beliefs, their superstitions—even their

religion—had been turned topsy-turvy. Their greatest temple had been desecrated, their Sun God defied, their high priest killed. Events had occurred too rapidly, revolutionary inexplicable things had followed one another too quickly for the people to be able to collect their thoughts, to reason, to fully realize what had happened. They were confused, astounded, amazed, frightened. They were for us at the moment, though in their superstitious minds they regarded me as the all-powerful, incarnated representative of the mighty Kukulkan, and felt relieved that the bloody tyrannical priest Kinich-Ahau had been destroyed. Yet they might swing the other way on the slightest provocation.

If I failed to appear upon the temple, if I failed to maintain my power and my ascendancy, they might turn again to their Sun God. They might reason that their gods had deserted them, that Kinich-Ahau was angered at the death of his priest and at being cheated of his virginal brides, and they might seek to appease him by wholesale sacrifices—even by seizing Itza.

Moreover, though I am rather loath to admit it, and although I may lay myself open to charges of paganism and blasphemy, I felt a strong desire to stand before that lofty altar and give thanks to my God for His guidance and His protection, for His infinite mercy in having restored my beloved Itza safe and unharmed to my arms.

No doubt, to those who have never been in such a situation, but are accustomed to praying in the dim sanctity of their churches, and who regard any faith but their own as infidel, the mere thought of offering prayers and thanks to God before a pagan altar at the feet of a pagan idol will seem horrifying and blasphemous. But to one who has dwelt long among those of other religions than one's own, who has learned how deep-seated and sublime is their faith, how rigorously and unalterably they strive to live up to its tenets and how absolute is their trust in their own gods, one religion seems about as good as another. Although I had no tendency to lean toward the religion and the gods of Mictolan, and

had no faith in Kukulcan or Kinich-Ahau, yet I realized that, to the people of the valley, the temples were as hallowed and sacred as our churches and cathedrals are to us.

A Protestant may not believe in the Roman Catholic Church, a Hebrew may not believe in Christ, a Christian may not believe in Mahomet, a Mohammedan may not believe in Buddha, yet each respects the places of worship of the others. Though an adherent of any one of these faiths may scoff at or revile the others' religions, yet he feels, when he enters the church, mosque or temple of the others that he is in a sacred spot. Despite himself he will be awed and impressed. Thus it was with me when I stood above the city before the altar of the temple of the Plumed Serpent.

There was something inexpressibly sublime and impressive about the place. Standing there on the narrow terrace of the towering pile that had been erected centuries before the dawn of Christianity, before the image of the god who had been worshipped by millions before the birth of Moses, one seemed apart from the rest of the world, lifted above the petty things of life, exalted, nearer to one's Creator, closer to God. And as with weary steps I toiled up the ascent and at last stood at the temple top bathed in the glory of the setting sun, and gazed across the fair green valley and the silent peaceful city, and looked down upon the shadowy sea of upturned expectant faces, a great peace came to me. The world for all its faults was very, very beautiful. It was good to be alive, to feel there was one you loved and who loved you in return; that there were those to whom you were very dear, to whom you meant so much.

Dropping to my knees, I poured out my thanks to God, prayed that He might guide and protect us, and besought His blessings and His mercy for the coming year. Then, rising, I addressed the hushed and silent crowd below. Tomorrow, I reminded them, would be the day of Tonalmatl. The cruel sacrifices of Kinich-Ahau the Sun God were done away with forever; the inhuman priest had been swallowed up in his own sacred well. The gods had forsaken him as all pres-

ent knew. They had shown that his rituals and sacrifices were wrong, and as I spoke I pointed dramatically to the silent, deserted Temple of the Sun where no priest stood outlined in the glare of the wavering lambent flames at the summit.

"O, people of Mictolan," I cried. "Let peace and happiness come to all with the dawning of the Tonalmatl! Let this be a day of thanksgiving and of joy. Forget the past and Kinchi-Haman, and celebrate the coming of the New Year by placing Prince Aczopil upon the throne of Mictolan."

For a space there was absolute silence. Then a thunderous cheer arose, and as the last crimson glow of sunset faded from the sky, I descended the temple stairs, reached the plaza, and staggered like a drunken man toward my waiting litter. A dozen eager, willing arms caught me and lifted me. Dimly, as in a dream I felt myself sink among the soft robes and cushions. I felt the swaying lulling motion of my hurrying bearers and then—oblivion.

When I again opened my eyes, nearly twenty-four hours had passed. Itza was by my side, starry-eyed, beautiful, watchfully tender. I drew her to me and for long lay there, silent, perfectly at peace, sublimely happy at the presence of her yielding body, the gentle throbbing of her heart against my breast, the warm sweet touch of her lips.

At last, gently releasing herself, she spoke, asking me how I felt, if my arm pained me, if I were rested, if I were not hungry. For answer I sprang up, seized her with my good arm, hugged her until she begged for mercy, and told her I was hungry enough to eat her up. I felt like a new man. I was rested, strong; my nerves were as steady as ever, and I ate ravenously, like a famished wolf. And though my wounded left arm still pained and throbbed it was much improved, and I could even use it to some extent. Had I slept long? I asked between mouthfuls. Where was the Prince? Had Nohul-Voh been to call? Had anything occurred while I had been dead to the world?

Itza laughed gaily, merrily and her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Has anything occurred?" she reiterated. "Does my Itzimin think the whole world awaits his awakening with bated breath? Does my lord think he can sleep from sundown until the next afternoon without anything occurring?"

Then, snuggling closer and ceasing her teasing, she chattered all the news. Yes, Nohul-Voh had called. He had dressed my arm and had assured Itza it would be healed and well in a few days and had promised to come again. The Prince; well, the Prince had been far too busy to call. But she forgot; there was no longer a Prince. It was King Aczopil now. The people had obeyed my wishes, they had demanded that Aczopil should become their ruler, and though he had begged that they should wait until I could be present at the coronation, they insisted that as I had called upon them to make him king on the morning of Tonalmatl, they must obey me or Kukulcan might be offended. The coronation of a king in Mictolan was not, it appeared, a very formal, complicated nor long-drawn-out ceremony, although it was as spectacular, as vividly described by Itza, as the crowning of a monarch in any land.

I regretted that I had not been present to witness the affair, but I was very glad that it had not been delayed on my account. When dealing with Indians delays are always dangerous; there is nothing like striking when the iron is hot, and as Itza prattled on I was delighted to learn that the new king had already asserted his authority in the right direction. He had announced that with the beginning of his reign, Kukulcan should become the paramount god of Mictolan, although the people would be at liberty to worship Kinich-Ahau and the priests of the Sun-God cult might still conduct ceremonies in their temple. But all the old practices of Kinchi-Haman's regime were at an end. There would be no secrets within the temple all of which must be open to the public, and no more human sacrifices would be permitted.

These were very drastic measures, and Aczopil alone might have met with serious opposition. But he made Nohul-

Voh his Prime Minister, and the people were filled with superstitious awe of the sorcerer. They feared his mysterious powers almost as much as they feared their gods, and the old fellow took full advantage of this in asserting his authority. He had always been an enemy of Kinchi-Haman, for being of the House of Cocomé-Voh, and of the Tutul-Zius Clan, he was preeminently by descent, tradition and faith a member of the cult of the Plumed Serpent and regarded Kinich-Ahau, the Sun God as a secondary deity. As he had told me, Mictolan originally had been dedicated to Kukulcan; for generations its tutelary deity had been the Plumed Serpent, and not until Kinchi-Haman rose to power through his machinations and ruthless acts had the Sun God been raised to prominence as the Supreme God.

From the beginning I had suspected that the underlying purpose of Nohul-Voh had been to restore the old order of things, and now that Kinchi-Haman had met his just deserts and the legitimate king ruled in the valley and the sorcerer found himself the right hand man of the monarch, he asserted himself in no measured terms. He had thundered at the people, had related his prophecies, had declared that my coming had been to reestablish the supremacy of Kukulcan and that the death of the high-priest had been vengeance on the part of the Plumed Serpent.

Moreover, he had assured the people that I had destroyed the Monster of Sacrifices; he told them Kinchi-Haman had lied to them and deceived them, that while posing as a priest of the Sun God he secretly had offered sacrifices to the false gods of those who had dwelt in the valley before the arrival of the Mayas, and he had ended by predicting the most dire calamities and most awful results if the people failed to obey their new king.

As Itza related all this, I began to feel that I had become most hopelessly entangled in a net of circumstances which I had unwittingly helped to weave. I had become, willy-nilly, the high-priest of Kukulcan. The only other clerics of the Plumed Serpent cult were the acolytes and

lay-brothers (if I may use that term) of the temple, and if Kukulcan was to be *the* god of Mictolan they would naturally expect to have the ceremonies continued with pomp and regularity. But I had no desire and no intention of devoting my life to acting as a Mayan high-priest. I planned to leave the valley with Itza in a few days, provided she was willing, and I began to wonder if I would meet with opposition on the part of Aczopil and Nohul-Voh.

I was still puzzling my brains as to how I could manage matters when the newly-crowned king and his Prime Minister arrived. They repeated all that Itza had already told me, but with more minute details, and of course congratulated me upon my rapid recovery. That Aczopil could have gone through so much without showing a trace of physical exhaustion, and with only a few hours sleep had carried out the duties and ceremonies of the day, amazed me more than anything that had occurred during my long slumber. However, he had not been under the mental strain I had suffered, and he possessed the wiry, tireless almost incredible endurance of the Indian which no white man can hope to equal. Having congratulated him and Nohul-Voh, I voiced my approval of the new rules he had promulgated.

The sorcerer smiled and chuckled. "He merely followed out your desires," he reminded me. "Did you not tell us of the one God of your faith? Did you not give the rituals of your faith when upon the temple, although the people thought you spoke in the secret tongue of the Plumed Serpent cult? Only we three and the maiden Itza knew the truth. And did you not overthrow the power of Kinich-Ahau and destroy Kinchi-Haman with your thunder-tube, and defy the Sun God within the sanctity of his own temple?"

"The wise man observes and gives thought," he continued. "The fool stubs his toe against the rock. Does not the farmer nourish the sweetest of the fruit? Does he not remove the thorn vine that tears his flesh? Does the woodsman stand in the path of the falling tree? Does one not know that when the sun shines the rains will cease? And can one

man, my lord, serve two masters? Nay, Itzimin. Always in the world is one thing stronger or better than another. Always there is the good and the bad. Always there is a right and wrong. Always some one must bow to someone more powerful. Though the wrong may endure for a time, and the bad may be so twisted as to seem good, always in the end that which is good, that which is right, that which is strongest shall endure.

"Much have you told me of your people, much that seems beyond belief. Safely you came through the dangers that barred the way to Mictolan, although you are not of the Kiche-Maya. And you have triumphed over Kinchi-Haman, and through you, King Aczopil is ruler over Mictolan. Only in one way could you have done all this, my lord. Only by the help of the one God you worship. So I, Nohul-Voh, who am wise and have lived through many Katuns, and Aczopil my king, who knows your heart, both know that your God must be the greatest god and that to us He is known as Kukulcan."

I was both dazed and astonished at this long and surprising declaration of the old sorcerer. That he had become convinced that I must be under divine protection, that he, as well as others, should have concluded that my God must be most powerful to have guarded me from the vengeance of Kinich-Ahau, would not have been surprising. Indeed it would have been precisely in accordance with their logic and psychology. But that Nohul-Voh and Aczopil should have decided to adopt the God I worshipped, that to all intents and purposes they should have cast aside their ancient Sun God and thus completely revolutionize their religion and mythology, and that by some incomprehensible manner of reasoning they should have identified the Plumed Serpent as God Almighty, was all actually astounding.

To a missionary, to good jolly Padre José, in fact, it would have been most gratifying to learn that the people had been so won over from their heathen practices and multiplicity of pagan gods. But I was no missionary. My reli-

gious activities had been forced upon me, and my sole interest in the Mictolans' spiritual past, present or future lay in whether or not I had been appointed the head of their new church without having been consulted in the matter; whether I was expected to continue to act the part of high-priest, or whether I were free to follow my own inclinations.

I was on the point of asking the question and having it settled then and there when Nohul-Voh answered it for me. He had examined and dressed the wound in my arm and having declared it would be completely healed in three or four days he had turned to go. Then, glancing keenly at me, "My lord," he said, "although the Monster of Sacrifices will never again devour a maiden of Mictolan, yet the flames still stream from the summit of the temple. The Bridge of Light spans the chasm. The Way of the Symbols is open, Itzimin."

There was no mistaking the meaning of his words. The hint was broad and plain enough. I was free to go, free to leave the valley at any time. In fact something in his tones gave me the impression that he was rather anxious for me to clear out. What did it mean? Had he read my thoughts? Did he merely remember that I had expressed a wish to leave and that I could never be happy in Mictolan? Or had he decided that my presence was not wholly desirable, that eventually I might be selected as the supreme ruler of the valley?

I couldn't say and I didn't care. If Itza was willing, if she still wished to leave her home and go with me in an attempt to reach the outside world, we would start as soon as possible. But if she hesitated, if she wavered, I would remain, would forever abandon all thoughts of leaving, for I would far rather spend the remainder of my life in Mictolan than to make her unhappy, to cause her to pine for the valley and her people, to have her regret her decision. After all, I thought, it would be no great hardship for me to remain there. I had Itza, I would have plenty to occupy my mind and keep me busy and interested. I would be rich, influential and would occupy a far higher and more impor-

tant position than I could ever hope to attain among my own people.

Why, after all, I asked myself, did I want to leave? But I couldn't find a really satisfactory answer. Not because I was homesick, not that I so much desired the company of my own race. I had been too much of a wanderer, had made my home in too many lands, among too many diverse and alien people to miss either my homeland or my fellow countrymen or to be actuated by any sentimental or patriotic motives. For that matter I had no real home. I had lived all over the world, and one city or one country was as much my home as another even if I had been born an American. Nowhere had I family or relatives, nowhere but in Mictolan had I a heart interest or truer, dearer friends. But whatever the reason, the longing was there, and I secretly hoped and prayed that Itza would consent to deserting the valley.

I need not have doubted, for she was as anxious to go as I was to have her. Indeed she was, if anything, more enthusiastic over the prospect of leaving. I was fully aware of the dangers, hardships, the sufferings that would face us. I could foresee the weary miles, the dense jungles, the terrific mountains, the impassable streams, the vast wilderness we would be compelled to traverse. Even if we should find the semi-mythical Way of the Symbols, in which I had little faith, it would be no picnic to wander for days and weeks through unexplored territory to some remote outpost of civilization. But Itza was ignorant of all this. She had neither kith nor kin in Mictolan, for she was an orphan; she had no ties other than her devotion for me to bind her, and to tell the truth, her past experiences had not been conducive to the development of any great attachment to her native valley or her own people.

Oddly enough, now that she had expressed her desire to leave, I found myself trying to dissuade her. I pointed out all the difficulties and the dangers ahead. I tried to picture her life among strangers, aliens. I dilated upon the dreary winters, the bitter cold of my own land. But the

more I said the more determined (woman-like) she was to go. She declared she knew she would enjoy life among strange people in a strange land. With me to love her and to be loved by her she would be happy anywhere.

After all, I could not blame her. Her entire life, short as it was, had been spent in the little valley. All she knew, all she could imagine of the world was what she could see, hear and know in Mictolan. Beyond the valley was another world, a vast unknown universe as filled with real and imaginary marvels as another planet would have been to me.

I would have started off that very day had my arm been fully recovered, but to set out with a partially crippled arm would have been more than foolhardy, even on an ordinary expedition into the jungles. To attempt such a dangerous, desperate venture unless in perfect physical condition would have been nothing less than suicidal. So, resigning myself to fate, I waited for the days to pass until my wound should be healed and my arm as strong as ever. As Nohul-Voh had said, the deep cut healed perfectly in three days, but it was ten days before I regained full use and strength of my arm.

Meanwhile I had not remained idle. I had spent many hours with Nohul-Voh, I had been with Aczopil a great deal, and I had devoted considerable time to adding to the mechanical advancement of the people. One thing I had accomplished which pleased and amazed them immensely, was to cast a good-sized bronze bell for the temple. In fact, it had proved a much easier job than I had expected. The people were excellent metal workers, there was an abundance of copper and silver, and it was merely a matter of making a mould and smelting sufficient of the copper-silver alloy in several hundred crucibles at one time. Bells of small size and of the sleigh-bell type were common and were made of copper, silver and gold, but no one had ever before seen a large bell or one of conventional form. Hence they had no idea what we were making, and in order to surprise and impress them the more, I kept the matter a secret until the bell had been finished. Then, with infinite labor and trouble it

had been hauled and hoisted up the pyramid to the temple where it had been hung beside the altar.

When all was in readiness, and standing upon the altar, I seized the heavy copper maul I had provided and with all my strength swung it against the bell, and the deep melodious tones rang out across the valley. The people rushed, crowding to the streets and stared in dumb wonder.

For a time many could not locate the source of the strange sounds, and jumped about, staring and rubbing their eyes and peering into the sky striving to see the thing which emitted the unknown notes. Presently, however, all discovered the truth and with wild shouts of joy cried that their new god was talking to them. Indeed, to them this ringing musical voice of their deity was far more impressive and more convincing than any prayers or rituals any of their priests—or I myself—had ever uttered.

The fact that the sounds were meaningless made no difference; they were no more unintelligible than my own words had been, and to have the god speak to them directly, instead of through the medium of a human being, impressed them beyond belief. Moreover it solved the problem of selecting a priest to take my place after I had gone, a problem which had been discussed at great length by Aczopil, Nohul-Voh and myself. But now there was no need of a priest, for any acolyte or temple attendant could pound upon the great bell at sunrise and sunset.

Only once more did I ascend to the temple altar. Perhaps I did wrong, perhaps I may be severely criticized. However that may be, I was seized with the idea of planting the symbol of Christianity on the spot where I had so often recited Christian prayers. Often have I wondered since then what would be surmised if, at some far distant time in the future, explorers or archeologists should reach Mictolan, and upon the deserted forgotten temple of the Plumed Serpent, they should find a bronze bell and a Christian cross beside the great stone image of Kukulcan.

When at last my arm was perfectly strong there was

nothing more to delay our leaving the valley and bid farewell to Mictolan. The flames still streamed from the temple of Kinich-Ahau, the Bridge of Light still spanned the chasm at the Cave of the Bats. We planned to leave secretly, however, to slip away without attracting the attention of the people and without their knowledge. There were three good reasons for this. In the first place, the people might object to me deserting them. In the second place, there was the prophecy foretelling that the bearer of the Book of Kukulcan would lead the people from Mictolan in order to reestablish the ancient empire of the Kiche-Maya, and hence they might insist upon accompanying me. In the third place Nohul-Voh naively suggested that my mysterious disappearance would be thoroughly in keeping with my supposedly divine character and would do much to strengthen the people's faith in Kukulcan.

So, accompanied by Aczopil and the old sorcerer, who insisted upon seeing us off, we left the palace before dawn, and silently and unseen hurried along that broad straight avenue down which I had come with Itza so many months before. How the others felt as we walked through the chill air on that memorable morning, I do not know. But I for one felt more excited, more keyed up than ever in my life before. I was starting on a strange and perilous adventure, and with me I was taking Itza, taking her into dangers no one could foresee.

As I gazed about at the familiar scene, at the flat-roofed houses, the green fields and giant vegetables, at the frowning mountains that concealed the valley's secret from the world, at the lofty temples spectral in the morning mist, a lump rose in my throat and I felt (strange thought that it was) much as I imagine a man must feel when going to his execution. I was leaving all this forever, and suddenly it all seemed very dear indeed to me. Even the spidery windmills, incongruous things in this isolated spot, seemed like old familiar friends, and had Itza at that moment changed her mind, I most gladly would have turned back. But she

was all excitement, all gaiety, all agog with the thrill and spirit of adventure.

At last we reached the tunnel. From where I had hidden them several days previously, I took my torches and my pack of provisions and strapped them on my back. Then, to my astonishment, Itza, with a merry laugh, rolled a rock to one side and dragging out a second pack, adjusted it on her own lovely shoulders. In vain I protested. It was nothing, she hardly felt it, she declared. And, she reminded me, we might need it. Why should her Itzimin carry all the burdens? Was she not to eat her share of food? Why then should she not carry her share? Nohul-Voh and the king agreed with her and as it was useless to argue against the three, I gave in. A dozen paces more and before us was the abysmal chasm spanned by the dazzling, iridescent, wondrous Bridge of Light. Fear, mistrust and doubt filled me. I had crossed it before, yet now it seemed as if it was beyond my powers to step from the firm hard stone onto that tenuous, transparent glow.

But Itza had no such fears. Swiftly she embraced King Aczopil, then threw her arms about Nohul-Voh and planted a farewell kiss upon his cheek, and with a merry laugh and a wave of her hand stepped confidently from the verge of the rock. My heart skipped a beat, and I uttered an involuntary cry as she did so. It seemed impossible that she would not be dashed to death in the abyss. But no; she might have been treading solid metal. Lightly she ran forward, calling me to follow. With a last clasp of my hand I stammered farewells to my two friends, and with gritted teeth and summoning all my courage, I stepped onto the incredible bridge and hurried after Itza.

A moment more and she sprang upon the ledge on the farther side. Turning, she waved her hand to the two men. Ten feet, five, three, separated me from her. Another stride and I would be beside her. And then, suddenly, without warning, the thing vanished under my feet!

As if in a horrible nightmare I felt myself dropping

into eternity. A wild despairing shriek came from my lips. I clutched wildly. My fingers gripped the rock, my toes dug into a crevice. With all my strength I fought to drag myself up. But the precipice was undercut and I could exert no leverage. I felt myself slipping, going. Then hands gripped my hair; my scalp seemed about to be torn from my head. With a last convulsive kick, a supreme effort, I felt my chest upon the ledge. Faint, half-senseless, with half my body and my legs dangling over the awful chasm, I was powerless to move another inch. But Itza's fingers were twisted firmly in my long hair. She had braced herself against an outjutting ledge, and she was by no means a puny weakling. Panting, tugging—each jerk bringing agonized groans from my lips—she dragged me to safety at last.

I had escaped an awful death by the narrowest margin. Had the Bridge of Light failed ten, five seconds—even one second sooner, nothing could have prevented my being hurled to the depths of the abyss. I shuddered as I thought of it, shuddered still more at thought of what would have happened had the bridge ceased while Itza was crossing, if it had vanished with Itza on one side and me on the other. And I thanked God that my left arm had not gone back on me. But I owed my life to Itza, to Itza whom I had thought too weak to withstand the dangers to be faced! She had dropped beside me and, woman-like now that the peril was past, she had burst into tears, sobbing out how terrified she had been, begging me to tell her if I were injured, pleading she was so sorry she had hurt me.

Controlling my shaken nerves, pulling myself together with an effort, I scrambled to my feet, raised her tenderly, and laughing at her fears stifled her sobs with kisses. Steeling myself to see that horrible chasm, I looked across to where Aczopil and Nohul-Voh still stood. Then, waving our hands to them, shouting that all was well, we turned and entered the Cave of the Bats.

We had left Mictolan forever. There was no going back.

CHAPTER 20

THE WAY OF THE SYMBOLS



HERE IS LITTLE MORE TO RELATE, FOR OUR ADVENTURES really ended when we crossed the Bridge of Light. I had come through the Cave of the Bats in the dark, lost, wandering aimlessly, and by mere luck or chance, or possibly guided by Destiny, I had found the exit where Itza and I now stood. But now I had enough excellent torches to last for hours, and lighting one of these, I held it up and peered about.

I had no idea of the direction whence I had come through the cave, whether I had turned, doubled on my tracks, moved in circles or had followed a reasonably straight course. I was not even sure how far I had come or how long I had wandered through the great cavern. I decided therefore that the surest and safest, even if not the shortest, method of finding the entrance would be to follow the wall of the cave. I felt confident there were no other exits, for had such existed the people would not have devoted so much time and labor to concealing the entrance by means of the great tilting image of Kukulcan.

We had not proceeded more than forty or fifty feet, with Itza clinging to me and trembling with vague fears of the dismal place, when I found my scheme wholly impracticable. There was no wall. Huge stalactites and stalagmites joined to form a labyrinth of grottoes, narrow passages, galleries and corridors leading for unknown distances. The mountain was literally honeycombed with a maze of tunnels

and caves. Any one of the countless openings might lead to the entrance, and to explore them all would take months—perhaps years. More than ever did I realize how fortune or Fate or Providence had guided my footsteps before, and how difficult we would find it to cross the cave and reach the entrance, if in fact, we ever succeeded in doing so.

I halted, striving to collect my thoughts, to reason calmly, to concentrate and to recall every detail of my former wanderings in the cave. The opening through which we had come was still visible, the morning sun streaming into it, and as nearly as I could calculate it faced southeast. I revisualized the surroundings of the tilting idol at the other entrance and felt sure it faced to the north. I possess a somewhat unusual sense of direction, and I felt certain that I was not mistaken in this. In that case, one entrance would be almost directly opposite the other. Of course, it might be far to one side or the other, far to the east or west, but if we followed a straight route toward the north we must eventually reach the limits of the cavern, and even if we failed to see the light that indicated the opening we could move to right or left until we located it. It would not be a difficult matter to follow a fairly straight line, by noting some peculiarity of a stone column ahead of us, and sighting back to the still-visible entrance, we could move forward. Then we could select another column ahead, smudge the one beside which we stood with smoke, and move on to the next. Moreover, there were so many columns that it would be simple and easy to align our course even after we lost sight of the entrance behind us.

Chatting to Itza to encourage her, and explaining my scheme to her, we started on. It was slow work and we had to use great care, but all seemed to be going well. We had proceeded for at least an hour, and I felt that at any time we might catch a glimpse of the light from the entrance ahead, when Itza uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"The symbol!" she cried. "See Itzimin, there upon the stone!"

I peered at the spot she indicated. She was right. Clearly outlined on the surface of an upjutting mass of rock was the deeply-cut symbol of Kukulcan together with the reed and the foot. But it pointed at right angles to the course we were following!

I was puzzled. Had we lost our way, had we become confused; was the symbol right or did it point the way to some other exit? Should we follow it, perhaps only to find that during the centuries that had passed since it had been cut, the entrance it led to had been blocked by debris? Or should we ignore the symbol and continue on our course? Then I remembered that in the vision or dream or state of hypnosis which I had experienced when at Nohul-Voh's home, the same symbol was cut in the valley near the giant tilting image. That, then, must be the only exit, and the symbols must lead to it, provided of course my strange visionary view of the valley had been anything more than a dream.

But if so, how, where could we find the next mark? If we left the spot, if we wandered about hunting here, there and everywhere, searching for the next symbol and failed to locate it, could we ever hope to find our way back to the spot where we now stood, could we again proceed in the straight line we were following? My torch illuminated only a small area of the cavern; we would have to search very carefully, very slowly for the marks, and there was the chance, almost the certainty, in fact, that many if not most of the symbols had been covered with the stalactite material during countless centuries.

Suddenly memory of Nohul-Voh's enigmatical words flashed through my mind, the words he had spoken when he had given me the bamboo tube that had served me so well and so mysteriously in the temple.

"It may serve you well within the Cave of the Bats," he had said.

Strange that I should have forgotten it. But what had the sorcerer meant? Had he merely uttered generalities,

meaning it might answer as a torch to light our way, or was there a deeper, hidden meaning in his words?

I couldn't see how the thing would serve us in our present quandary, but Itza, who was ever in awe of Nohul-Voh and his great knowledge and seemingly magic powers, insisted that it would help us. Curious to learn what the result would be, I dug the tube from the contents of my pack, unstopped one end and flashed its rays upon the rock with the carved symbol. As the red glare suffused the stone, I jumped as if I had sat upon a lively hornet, and stood gaping in amazement. The symbol stood out in brilliant green light or fluorescence, and leading from it down the side of the rock, across the cavern floor, and disappearing between the stone columns in the blackness beyond, was a row of shining green arrows!

Itza cried out with delight and clapped her hands at my surprise and her own triumph. Hadn't she said so? she asked me. Hadn't she known that Nohul-Voh had spoken the truth? I admitted it, and following the arrows, we hurried on. Suddenly I burst into a peal of laughter. It all seemed so ridiculously familiar.

"Follow the green arrows." I could almost imagine myself in the subway at Times Square in New York, glancing at the green guiding line as I hurried toward the Lexington Avenue trains! But of course I couldn't explain this to Itza, and she glanced at me apprehensively as if wondering if by any chance I had suddenly lost my mind.

As we followed the arrows and the symbols which appeared from time to time, I realized how little chance we would have had if we had tried to find the entrance by moving in a straight line across the cavern. The marks turned, twisted, zig-zagged, swung to left and right, and even doubled back on their course. I lost all sense of direction, but at last, far ahead, a patch of light glimmered in the blackness, and a few moments later we stood at the opening.

The stones and the log I had placed there months before

were still in position, and passing through the aperture beneath the image, we were once more in the blessed sunshine in the fair green valley. I looked up at the huge image leaning far forward as if about to fall upon its knees. A grave question was in my mind. Should I leave the entrance open so that any man who chanced to pass that way might enter and reaching the chasm might be mistaken for an emissary and finding the Bridge of Light, might reach Mictolan? Or should I remove the props, swing the image back into position and close the entrance?

Visions of Mictolan and the peaceful happy existence of its people rose before me. I saw Aczopil ruling wisely and well. I saw the lofty temples and in imagination heard the pealing of the great bell. Then I visualized the valley overrun with men of my own race, exploited by rough, unprincipled miners; imagined the Mayas degraded, oppressed, debauched with the rum and the vices of the civilized white men. Better by far that it should remain forever unknown, inaccessible to the rest of the world.

Cautiously I removed the wedges and logs, carefully I climbed up the mighty image studying it, examining it, until at last I found the secret of its mechanism and slowly, smoothly, with scarcely a jar it swung back into place, sealing the entrance to the Cave of the Bats.

We had little trouble in finding the symbol on the rock beside the stream, for my memory of the mysterious vision in the house of Nohul-Voh was very vivid, and I recognized every landmark I had seen in the seemingly magic smoke picture. The rushing brook was exactly as I had seen it; there was the placid shaded pool, and even before I saw the sculptured symbol, I felt certain it would be there cut deeply into the water-worn surface of the rock. Beside the pool we rested for the afternoon and night, for my nerves were still a bit shaky, and I knew that Itza, unaccustomed to long walks with a pack upon her shoulders, was weary although she would not admit it.

Even this first glimpse of the outside world was fas-

cinatingly strange to her. The verdure, the rolling green hills, the distant hazy-blue ranges, the dense jungle, all were different from anything in her native valley. She insisted upon bathing in the clear calm pool. It was an inviting spot with its crystal water, its bottom of white and red pebbles and its little crescent of sandy beach. I longed for a swim myself and having ascertained that there were no crocodiles or other dangerous creatures in the pool, we plunged in and for an hour or more dove, swam, splashed and frolicked and had a glorious time.

Refreshed and with keen appetites we emerged at last. I was anxious to conserve our stock of provisions in case of emergencies that might arise, and I felt certain there must be fish in the stream. So while Itza dried herself, like the golden statue of a dryad in the sunshine, I tried my luck with my hand-made hooks and line. No skill was needed to capture the denizens of that brook, for the fish seemed anxious to be caught, and in scarcely as many minutes I had a dozen beauties flapping on the grass.

We dined royally and, having rested and smoked, I busied myself rigging up a palm-leaf shelter for the night. As we were doing this, for Itza was more expert at such matters than I was, she touched my arm and pointed silently to where an unsuspecting deer had stepped from the jungle and was gazing at us curiously. That night we dined on broiled venison, and spent the evening "babricotting" the rest of the meat over a smoky fire. We now had plenty of food to last us for several days, even if no other game should be found, and I had no further fear of going hungry for some time to come.

The sun was just topping the mountains when we set out the next morning, following the course of the stream, and as light hearted and gay as a couple of school children. By noonday, when we again stopped to rest and eat, the brook had widened to a fair-sized river. This offered much easier travel than by foot, and I searched for material suitable for a raft or boat of some sort. It was then that for the

first time, I fully realized that I actually had looked into the future, or at least had by some mysterious means, been enabled to view the route we had followed.

Nonsense! I said to myself. How could I have seen a place I had never visited? By some form of auto-suggestion or thought transference, Nohul-Voh might have caused me to think I saw the valley near the cliff with the huge idol. As for the symbol on the rock beside the pool, he must have known it was there and transferred his knowledge to my mind, or for that matter I might have seen it and scarcely have noticed it when I had wandered through the valley on my way to Mictolan. But whatever power the sorcerer possessed, by whatever means he had caused me to see the valley and the symbol, there was no question that he had saved us from suffering and very probably from death.

In the tropics it is usually a simple matter to build a craft that is buoyant, easily handled and capable of supporting a considerable load in fairly calm water. There are always bamboos or cork-like balsa trees within easy reach when in jungle country, and where there are lakes or backwaters, there are the giant hollow reeds that, tied in bundles and lashed together, may be used to construct the light, seaworthy strange craft known as "balsas" by the Indians who use them exclusively upon the waters of Lake Titicaca.

And here, close to the stream where we rested, were bamboos, balsa trees and an abundance of reeds. Itza fell to with a will and worked like the proverbial beaver. Her strength and endurance was a constant source of surprise to me, for she did not give the impression of being an unusually strong woman, but as she had demonstrated by dragging me to safety when the Bridge of Light had collapsed, the soft curves and contours of her body and limbs covered muscles almost equal to my own, and she possessed the remarkable endurance of her race. And when it came to performing any task that demanded primitive methods or native skill, she was immeasurably superior to me, despite the fact that I had always prided myself upon my knowl-

edge and experience of woodcraft.

With her help we soon had several good-sized balsa logs ready, and by sundown we had practically completed a sort of combination raft and catamaran which would, I felt certain, serve us on the river as long as we did not meet rapids or falls. The next morning we added the finishing touches to our primitive craft and embarking shoved it into the stream.

Thereafter, for day after day we drifted swiftly and easily down river with scarcely an effort on our part and without an adventure worth the recording. Twice, as we swept past cliffs, we saw the symbols pointing onward and knew that by chance or by Fate we were following the right course, the Way of the Symbols, depicted in the ancient codex.

Each day as we drifted on, the mountains receded and became lower. Each day the river broadened, and I was constantly expecting to see Indian villages or huts, and I was vastly surprised to find the country apparently uninhabited. But game was abundant, the stream teemed with fish, and while Itza missed the vegetable diet to which she had always been accustomed, still she made no complaints and remained well and strong. Often she laughingly twitted me for having pictured such bugbears of dangers and hardships as I had described to her when in Mictolan. Since leaving the Cave of the Bats our journey had all been easy, safe, and glorious fun for her. But, as I reminded her, we were not yet at the end of our journey.

Then one day, sweeping around a great bend of the stream, we saw the mountain side stretching across the valley ahead. I knitted my brows in a puzzled frown. Where did the river find an exit? We seemed to be moving swiftly into a *cul-de-sac*, for search the mountains as I might I could detect no break, no cañon, no pass through which the stream might flow. Was it possible that it emptied into some great lake still hidden from view? Was it possible that it plunged into some enormous fissure? Could it be—! My fruitless

conjectures came to an abrupt end as drifting around another bend I saw before us a great black archway at the base of the mountain with the river flowing directly into the tunnel-like opening!

Luckily I had seen it in time. With every ounce of my strength I urged the clumsy craft toward the river bank and succeeded in beaching it and making it fast. The rest of the day I devoted to a thorough search of the valley, but on every side the mountains rose in precipitous, impassable cliffs. We were in a blind cañon with only two exits—one the river whence we had come, the other the yawning black hole into which the river flowed.

To think of risking our lives by navigating that Stygian stream through the bowels of the mountains caused me to shudder. Yet there seemed no other course to follow. With an effort I strove to reason with myself. We need not be in darkness for there was an abundance of material for making torches. And unless there were rapids or falls somewhere within the tunnel, or at its other end, there would be no danger other than the chance that the water might fill the tunnel farther on. But after all, there was small chance of this, for the stream was far below its rainy season level and I could see no indications that it had ever reached the top of the opening as it surely would have done if the tunnel was anywhere near filled at low water. And as the stream flowed smoothly into the hole, with no visible increase in its current, there seemed little likelihood that there was broken water or cataracts farther on. But I was taking no chances. Wading into the shoal water until we were a short distance within the opening, we both listened intently. There was no roaring, no rumbling sound to indicate cataracts or rapids, just the low, rushing, steady sound of the smoothly flowing stream. Unless the tunnel was far longer than I supposed and there were falls so far distant that we could not hear them, it seemed safe.

And then, as we retraced our way toward dry land, I glanced up and cried out in surprise and relief. Partly ob-

scured by clinging vines and moss, but still recognizable, unmistakable, was the symbol, cut into the rock beside the river and pointing directly at the opening of the tunnel.

That was enough. The Way of the Symbols lay through the mountain, and with all my fears cast to the winds, we hurriedly prepared torches, pushed our craft from shore and headed for the great arched opening. It was a strange, weird scene as with lighted torches we swept through the cavern, the ruddy glare reflected from the damp walls in a myriad of hues as though the rocks were studded with countless gems. But within five minutes the walls vanished, no sign of rock could be seen on either side or over head, and I laughed aloud at my recent fears that the tunnel might be too small to permit our passage. It was a vast cavern, vast as I knew from the echoes of my laughter.

Yet scarcely had the echoes died away when ahead of us we saw a glimmer of light. Rapidly it increased in size and more quickly than I can write it down, we were swept from the tunnel and drifted gently upon the surface of a good-sized lake. We glanced back at the water-cut exit whence we had come to see the familiar symbol clear and distinct in the rock above the opening. But Itza's eyes, roving about, had seen something far more interesting and important.

"Look, look, Itzimin!" she cried excitedly. "Houses, people!"

I shaded my eyes and stared incredulously. But there was no doubt of it. Less than half a mile distant a village stood at the edge of the lake, and people were moving back and forth upon the beach. That they would prove to be Indians was certain. But would they be friendly or hostile?

However, there was nothing we could do, for the natives had already seen us and several canoes were coming swiftly toward us. As they drew near I was greatly relieved to see that they wore hats, that they were dressed in coarse native cotton shirts and, yes, there was no doubt about it, one fellow had on a pair of pants. That settled it, and I

had no further fears as to our reception. In fact as they approached us they appeared to be far more afraid of us than we had been of them.

I shouted to them in Zutugil, but my words seemed only to frighten them the more. Then I tried Spanish, and with shouts of delight they replied in the same language. They were friendly, half-civilized, simple and harmless people, and ten minutes later we were in the village, objects of the most intense curiosity on the part of the inhabitants. But when, by chance, they caught a glimpse of the tattooed symbol on my chest their curiosity changed instantly to wonder and adoration. They might be Spanish-speaking, degenerate, semi-Christianized, half-civilized members of their race, but they still recognized the mark of the ancient Maya priest-kings and revered those who bore the clan symbol. At this juncture, while the Indians were kow-towing and prostrating themselves before me, Itza bent toward me and whispered a question that brought roars of laughter from my lips.

"Are these people of your race, Itzimin?" she inquired.

To me there was something extremely ludicrous in her question, in her mistaking members of her own race for Anglo-Saxons. But after all, why not? They were no more like the people of Mictolan than—well, I was about to say like me; but honestly, of the two, I verily believe that, being a civilized man who had "gone native" as one might say, I looked far more like one of the villagers than any man of Mictolan.

For a moment Itza looked hurt at my merriment over her quite natural and innocent question, but when I had explained, she regarded it as a good joke and laughed gaily herself. And as the Indians felt that there must be something funny, and that it would be discourtesy to their distinguished guest not to show their appreciation of it, they also burst into peals and roars of hilarious laughter.

In reply to my queries, they informed me that there was a white man in another village three days' walk to the south. He was, they added, a Padre, although why I, a mem-

ber of the exalted, almost sacred Tutul-Zius clan, should wish to find a white man or civilization was quite incomprehensible to them. The fact that we were within three days' tramp of a village where there was a Christian priest was not so surprising to me as might be thought, for it is a most remote Indian village indeed that is too far away to have its Padre, and I knew that we had traveled far and deviously from the valley of Mictolan. The hidden city might be two hundred or three hundred miles distant, and in that wilderness of unexplored mountains such a spot as Mictolan might be hidden forever, even if within one hundred miles of the settlements and railways.

"How is this village called, wherein dwells the white Padre?" I asked my informant who appeared to be the cacique of the village by the lake.

"It is called the village of Xibaltango, my lord," he replied.

I gasped, speechless with amazement. Xibaltango within three days march of where I sat! Jolly good-natured, roly-poly Padre Jose barely sixty miles distant! I could scarcely believe my ears. But very possibly there was more than one village named Xibaltango.

"Know you how this Padre calls himself?" I queried.

"Of a truth, most certainly, my lord," declared the Indian. "All the world knows that. All know him as the Padre José."

There could be no doubt about it. By some whim of Fate, chance, Providence or Destiny, the way of the Symbols had led us, relatively speaking, to the front door of good Padre José.

Three days later we stood before him, and the amazed, incredulous, utterly flabbergasted expression that swept over his ruddy jovial face when he recognized me, is beyond words to describe.

"*Santísima Madre!*" he cried, devoutly crossing himself at his involuntary exclamation. "It is the Señor Americano!

It is the Señor who had the codex and who went to Katchilcan! But, Señor, that is impossible! It is a miracle, an apparition! He—the Señor, you—were killed, destroyed, murdered by the *Indios Bravos*. I had word from Katchilcan that his—the Señor's, your bearers returned with the tale. I have said masses, prayers, and have burned candles for the repose of your—the Señor Americano's soul. I have done penance for having sent you—him, into the wilderness. *Dio mio*, it cannot be so. It is not—tell me it is true!"

I assured him that it was true, that I was very much alive, that I never had been killed.

He heaved an immense sigh of vast relief. Then, with a twinkle in his eye: "And the Señorita? Is she, the pretty one—also real or is she perhaps, an apparition?"

"She, also, is most real, *mi Padre*," I told him. "It is a long, long story and greatly, I know, it will interest and amaze you. But first of all, I would ask that you convince yourself that we are both of flesh and blood by making us man and wife."

He pursed his lips and whistled. Placing the tips of his pudgy fingers together, cocking his head first on one side and then the other, he surveyed us critically. Then, abruptly, he burst out laughing.

"Señor Americano," he exclaimed. "Many, very many strange things have I heard of the Norte-Americanos and their ways, much that I could not believe. But the strangest, most incredible of all is what I hear from your own lips. You come to me with a so-strange codex. I sent you to learn the Zutugil, and having done so you journey to see Katchilcan. He tells you some tale and you vanish in the wilderness. You are killed, destroyed, I pray for the repose of your soul, though for all I know you are a heretic.

"The months pass. Then suddenly, from nowhere, a spirit, a ghost, an apparition, you appear. You have been transformed. You are no longer an *Americano*. You are, you have become an *Indio*, a savage, and—*Madre de Dios*, yes, an ancient Maya; a figure from that mysterious codex

come to life. By your hand you lead an Indian girl, a most beautiful *muchacha*, an Indian such as I, who thought I knew all the tribes, have never seen. Do you tell me where you have been, Señor? Do you relate your tale? Do you explain why or how you still live? Do you mention your codex? No, no indeed! Your first words are—"Marry me to this maiden!"

"It is sublime, marvelous! If I had any doubts before, I have none now. Never, not for one moment! No one but an *Americano*, a *Yanqui*, could be quite so mad! But madness may be contagious. I am satisfied to hear your story, I am aflame with curiosity. So I, too, will become mad and will marry you, baptize you, will make you both good *Católicos* so I may do so. Only in that way can I get the story, Señor. That I can see. But," he added as if to himself, "very greatly do I doubt if in the eyes of God, you will be any more man and wife than you are now."

To Itza that extemporaneous baptism, and the brief ceremony that made us legally man and wife, was all a most impressive and wonderful affair. Aside from myself, Padre José was the only white man she had ever seen, and never having seen me except when bearded, tanned and unkempt, the fat, jolly, smooth-faced priest appeared like a being of a totally different race. To her, too, the little adobe church must have appeared a most poor and tawdry "temple."

And while, for her benefit, Padre José used the Zutugil dialect in the ceremonies, she went through it as if in a dream or a daze, and I doubt if she really understood what it meant or what it was about. In fact, much later, she confided to me that at the time she thought it some mystic rite that all my race went through when they returned from distant places, and that the ring (which the priest had produced from the Lord knows where) had been placed upon her finger as a mark to show that she was my property.

But there was one thing she *did* understand. She instantly recognized the cross above the little altar, and she realized that the figure of the Saviour was an image of my

people's God. Falling upon her knees before the altar, she murmured the Lord's Prayer I had taught her, and then, switching to her own tongue, gave thanks to Kukulcan!

Greatly touched was the jolly Padre at this, although he placed his hand over his lips and his merry eyes crinkled at the corners when—like the little heathen she was—Itza addressed herself to the Plumed Serpent God.

Thus we came to the end of our wanderings. I might continue to write pages describing Itza's wonder at all she saw, her amazement at the people, the cities, steamships and railways, the motor cars and air-planes, at everything. But all that is quite apart from my story, and by the time we reached New York, Itza, ever adaptable and quick to learn, was outwardly at least, as much the product of twentieth century civilization and fashions as any one of the thousands of women upon the streets and avenues of the metropolis.

In a city where all races mix and mingle, her glowing golden skin and lustrous hair attracted no attention, but many an admiring glance was cast at her unusual features and her superb figure. The great cities, however held no more charms for her than for me. They amazed, astounded and terrified her. She longed for sunshine, verdure, mountains and quiet; the surroundings and the home of my dreams.

And at last, thanks to the codex that had led me to Itza through such strange adventures, I found myself in a position to make those dreams come true. No wonder old Katchilcan had said he would give half of his life to possess the Book of Kukulcan. How true were his words as I recalled them:

"To him who has the Book, and comes by it by honest means, his way shall be made easy and he shall gain great peace and happiness and he shall abide forevermore with the gods."

And as I prepare to lay aside my pen, and Itza rises and with smiling lips and eyes, comes toward me, I know that, for me at least, the promise of the ancient prophecy has been more than fulfilled.

There is one more paragraph I must add. I have hesitated hitherto to write this story of Mictolan. I realized that to do so would be to attract the attention of promoters, speculators, exploiters. And I realized that even if I had closed the entrance to the Cave of the Bats, even if the Bridge of Light never again spanned the chasm, even if I refused to divulge the exact location of the valley, it would be found as soon as the world learned the riches of the place. An airplane could locate it easily; no matter how inaccessible it might be overland, helicopters could land in the valley. And for the same reason I had pledged my scientific friends to absolute secrecy regarding the origin of the priceless Nohu-lite.

But now all is changed. Mictolan, I am afraid, has forever vanished from the face of the world. Soon after the terrific and disastrous earthquakes that shook Guatemala four months ago, a government airplane, carrying relief to one of the stricken cities, reported passing over an immense lake filling what was apparently the crater of an enormous extinct volcano. The lake, so the observer reported, showed indications of having recently been formed. Dead uprooted trees still floated upon its surface and, projecting a few feet above the surface of the water were the summits of two ancient Mayan temples. In every detail the description and the location of the lake coincide with Mictolan, and I fear that Mictolan, with all its people, was completely destroyed, completely submerged by the great cataclysm of nature.

THE END

THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT

by

A. HYATT VERRILL

A AGAINST a background of tropical jungles, colorful Mayan ruins and a strange and fascinating city of the ancient Mayas, still alive and flourishing in the heart of Guatemala, this gripping science novel runs its course. Beginning in Vigo, Spain, events move swiftly, and strange adventures follow each other in rapid succession.

An ancient Mayan codex, a priceless example of picture writing twenty centuries old, leads the reader through a maze of danger to the fabulous city, Mictolan. In the words of the ancient Maya chief Katchilcan:

"To reach it one must pass through the Valley of Death, the Tunnel of Serpents, the Pit of the great Crocodile. And even having passed such perils, one must cross the eight deserts with the raging whirlwind that cuts solid rock and must face the demon Ixputeque and the fiend Neztpehua in the realm of hot ashes and the two blazing mountains; and at last must enter the Cave of the Bats and cross the Bridge of Light."

Mictolan, where the major portion of the action occurs in a city hidden behind almost insurmountable barriers, where the civilization of the Mayas has flourished without external influence for two thousand years. The result is a startling blend of superstition and super-science, a civilization without benefit of the wheel—yet one which has explored the mysteries of the atom.

A. Hyatt Verrill has drawn heavily upon his intimate knowledge of the Mayas in the writing of this highly entertaining yet informative novel of science.

Jacket Design by EDD CARTIER

FANTASY PRESS
READING, PENNSYLVANIA

NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS FROM
FANTASY PRESS

Spacehounds of IPC	by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.—\$3.00
The Forbidden Garden	by John Taine—\$3.00
The Black Flame	by Stanley G. Weinbaum—\$3.00
Triplanetary	by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.—\$3.00
Beyond This Horizon	by Robert A. Heinlein—\$3.00
Sinister Barrier	by Eric Frank Russell—\$3.00
Skylark Three	by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.—\$3.00
Divide and Rule	by L. Sprague deCamp—\$3.00
Darker Than You Think	by Jack Williamson—\$3.00
Skylark of Valeron	by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.—\$3.00
A Martian Odyssey and Others . . .	by Stanley G. Weinbaum—\$3.00
Seven Out of Time	by Arthur Leo Zagat—\$3.00
The Incredible Planet	by John W. Campbell, Jr.—\$3.00
First Lensman	by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.—\$3.00
Masters of Time	by A. E. van Vogt—\$3.00
The Bridge of Light	by A. Hyatt Verrill—\$3.00
The Cometeers	by Jack Williamson—\$3.00
Genus Homo	by L. Sprague deCamp and P. S. Miller—\$3.00
Galactic Patrol	by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.—\$3.00
The Moon Is Hell!	by John W. Campbell, Jr.—\$3.00
Dreadful Sanctuary	by Eric Frank Russell—\$3.00

FANTASY PRESS
READING, PENNSYLVANIA
Catalogue on Request