

Weird Tales

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE



**TEQUILA
THE GOLDEN**
A COMPLETE
NOVELETTE
by
**RAMÓN
de las
CUEVAS**

NOVEMBER, 1924

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ANDREW
BROSNATCH

Weird Tales

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TEOQUITLA THE GOLDEN

A
COMPLETE NOVELETTE

by
RAMÓN de las CUEVAS



THE GOOD ship *Tivives* had rounded the white beaches and whiter lighthouse of Cape Maisi—had passed the stark wreck of the Norwegian fruiter—“*el vapor perdido*,” so many years a landmark of the easternmost point of Cuba—and had definitely turned her prow westward along the southern coast, scheduled to make Santiago at daybreak en route to Guatemala and Honduras. The last rays of a setting sun illumined the great cliffs back of Ovando and Punta Negra, their black cave-mouths showing in sharp contrast, like the eyeholes of a skull.

Dr. Branson turned to his new friend, Lewis, who lolled in a deck-chair beside him. “I’ll bet,” he suggested, “the old Indians used to have great times up in those caves before Brother Columbus butted in!”

“Yes,” agreed his companion, “the Cronistas tell us that the Taino tribes held some of their most important ceremonies in caves.”

The doctor stared.

“What do you know about the Cronistas?” he demanded.

“Oh, my work lies along those lines,” laughed the other. “I’ve had to pore over old Las Casas, Oviedo, and the other early Spanish historians of the New World many a time. I’m on my way now to Guatemala to study some of the ruined cities. Yes, I know many have done this before me, but I can as-

sure you there is still lots to learn. I only wish my wife were along, and she would be, but she can’t get away. She likes Aztec work better than Maya, however, and her knowledge in that field is simply uncanny. I can’t make out where she got it all; in fact, it was our common interest in such things that brought us together in the first place. There is only one thing on which we do not agree—she has too much respect for the old Aztec priests and conjurors. She insists their powers were real, and that they possessed wonderful drugs unknown to the modern world.”

“I read a story not long ago,” returned the doctor, “about a white man, an explorer in the highlands of Venezuela, who got a taste of Indian ‘medicine’ that was a little bit too strong for him. It seems he had fooled around with some decolleté Indian lady back there in the hills until she fell in love with him, and then when he proposed to skip the country, she felt naturally peeved and slipped something into his supper that made his skin turn permanently black, and the story says he’s there yet, ashamed to come out. I have had no adventures of my own in this line, but I used to know an old Aztec Indian when we lived in Mexico City, who spun me a lot of curious yarns. He claimed that the old priests of his people had wonderful power—could even change men into women. Do you believe that?”

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lewis.

Then, after a moment's thought: "Yet I don't know," he said. "In this age of wonders it isn't safe to say anything is impossible. Why, just a little while before I sailed, the papers carried a story about some doctor, out in Chicago, I think it was, who had actually changed a female pigeon into a male by injections of some sort, and predicted that human reversals of sex in both directions might someday be expected."

"I know a story that will beat that," rejoined the doctor. "I have the manuscript with me in my suit-case. Let me get it."

He returned in a moment with a package.

"Before I open it," he continued, "let me say I can't vouch for its truth, but you can judge for yourself when you hear it. Let me first tell you how the manuscript came into my hands.

"My wife and I were living in Vera Cruz at the time—I had quite a practice then. Our home was one of those old-time Spanish houses with great high ceilings and a patio full of palms and flowers, not far from the Paseo—you know the type. One evening we were sitting in the archway, which opened to the street, waiting for supper, when an old beggar-woman (or what we thought was one) limped up—we supposed to ask for a *limosna*, or to sell us lottery tickets. But instead she inquired in Spanish, "Does the American doctor live here?" When I assured her that I, myself, was the American doctor, the poor creature surprised us by slumping down in a faint.

"We carried her into the house and laid her on a couch, and found that her face was covered with a blood-stained mask or bandage made of rags, her head swathed in an old bandana, with a dirty blanket over all. Removing these some-

what gingerly to give her air, we met with a great surprise. Before us lay, instead of the diseased old beggar we expected to see, a young and handsome woman. Her golden hair in a thick braid was coiled about her head; in her ears were beautiful earrings of gold, made in the form of little Aztec idols with turquoise eyes; but most astonishing of all, she wore a large, heavy nose-ring of gold, something I had never seen in Mexico before, and never anywhere on a white woman. Her face and neck were clean, a great contrast to her filthy hands and to her travel-stained, bare ankles and sandal-clad feet.

"We had hardly noticed all this when she opened her eyes and gave us another surprise by asking faintly in English, 'Where am I?'

"'In Doctor Branson's house.'

"She raised her head, then sat up and looked about her.

"'May I ask who you are?' I continued.

"'My name,' she hesitated, 'is R—I mean Maria, Teo—that is, Dorada de Rey.'

"Then as an afterthought, she added, with an air of embarrassment that puzzled us, 'Señora or—Mrs., if you please.'

"'What is your nationality, Mrs. Rey?' I demanded. 'You are fairer than most Spanish people seen in this part of the world, although I admit there are some *rubias*.'

"'I am an American!' she announced proudly.

"'Then, how, please, did you come by that Spanish name, and where did you get those most unusual ornaments which are neither Spanish nor American?'

"'Oh, the nose-ring,' she cried, and put her hand to it: 'I had forgotten. want you to help me take it off, Doctor. Yes, it must come off before we do anything else. Oh, how I used to hate that

thing! Guess you will have to cut it. I'll tell you everything later.'

"I examined the ornament and was puzzled to find it apparently seamless, yet it passed directly through a hole in the septum of the nose. So I cut it with a hack-saw, bent the ends apart, and drew it out.

"How did you get this thing on, Mrs. Rey?" I queried. "It was one solid piece without any seam so far as I can see."

"That is a part of the mystery," she replied, "that even I can't explain. But, please, can't you give me just a little bite to eat? I'm starving, and—I'm—afraid I'll faint again if you don't. I—I—can pay you with this gold jewelry if you like. You have a bath-room, of course? Next to food I think I need a bath more than anything else in the world."

"The maid brought her coffee and bread, as supper was not yet ready, and she really did eat as if famished.

"Now I feel better," she announced. "Oh, don't look at me like that, I'm perfectly all right. Now, how about the bath—may I? And could Mrs. Branson lend me an old wrapper or something until I can buy clothes of my own? I'd like to see these rags burned. If you are afraid I might steal something, Mrs. Branson can watch me in the bath-room and while I'm dressing. In fact, I wish she would."

"Mrs. Branson went with her.

"My wife came back a few minutes later, however. 'She's all right,' she reported. 'Somehow, I trust her. I have laid out some real pretty things for her to wear.'

TIME passed, and still more time, plenty for even a woman to bathe and dress. Supper was getting cold, but still our mysterious guest failed to appear. At last my wife could stand it no

longer, and made a dash for the bedroom, where she had left the clothing. She told me later that she had found Mrs. Rey, in tears, sitting on the floor, with the garments piled around her.

"Oh, Mrs. Branson," she sobbed, "I have lived with people who do not dress this way, for years, and I don't know how to put on these clothes, especially that!" (She pointed to the corset). "And which is front and which is back of these other things? If I put anything on wrong and anyone noticed it, I think I'd die of mortification. And my hair—I have worn it loose or done up in Indian fashion for so long, I don't know any other style, except the way it is now, which I invented myself. Won't you help me, please?"

"After another half-hour or three-quarters, both appeared. Mrs. Rey was really handsome, when properly gowned. She still wore her quaint earrings and I now noticed a wedding-ring on her finger.

"We were eager, of course, to hear her story, but she avoided the subject until after supper. At last she began:

"I know you are aching to hear my story, but I have thought over the whole thing carefully, and I can't—I just simply can't—tell you everything, for I know you could not possibly believe me. I have the whole story written out, though, except the last part—this I will finish and leave the whole thing for you to read after I have gone. I could not stand having you read it while I am here.

"I can say, though, that I have passed through a terrible experience, which has robbed me, in a way, of my identity; it was a dreadful illness. After that I lived for years among the Indians back in the mountains, in an isolated village of the Aztecs. That is where I got the ornaments you think so curious.

I selected the name, Maria, myself, as my real first name was lost; among the Indians I was known as Teoquilla; in Spanish, *la Dorada*, the Golden One, on account of my hair; and the name of Rey I got from my poor husband, Juan Rey. He was killed by bandits a few hours after our marriage. I barely escaped from them myself. I put on the disguise you saw me wear and, having heard that an American doctor lived at Vera Cruz, I begged my way here—it must be hundreds of miles—and that's all true, as far as it goes. No, I can't tell you any more, and I could not think of letting you read my full story with me here. You must wait until after I am gone.

"Now let me ask you a question or two. Did you ever know a man named Robert Sanderson?"

"I started up.

"Sanderson," I cried, "the explorer? The American boy who went back into the mountains four years ago to study the Indians, and was never seen again? Of course, I knew Sanderson. Why, the poor fellow stayed a week right in this house. And you! Now that I look at you, you look enough like him to be his twin sister. Where is he?"

"She flushed slightly.

"He is dead," she replied, very softly. "No, I am not his sister, but we were—somewhat related. So it is four years!"

"She looked at me gravely.

"You lived here then, didn't you? And one night after Mrs. Branson had gone to bed Sanderson sat right in that chair smoking one cigarette after another, while he told you about the girl in Chicago, and the girl in Boston, and the girl in New York, the girl in Progreso—yes, and the girl in Mexico City, too, didn't he? Poor fellow, how he

despised them all! But yet, he *would* play with them.

"And the day before he left he told you: 'A fellow never knows what may happen on a trip like this; I am not afraid of the Indians, but there are bandits all through the mountains, and this chronic revolution makes the banks dangerous. Guess I'll cache my gold reserve around here somewhere, so I'll have funds if anything happens. I'll never tell anyone where it is unless I intend them to have it, so don't worry.' Didn't he say that?"

"That's about what he said," I replied, wondering.

"Well," she said, "tomorrow I'll take you two with me for a little walk, and I'll get that gold. It's mine now, and it's going to carry me back to the States."

"I could not protest, because I knew from what poor Sanderson had said at the time, he never would have told her where it was unless he meant her to have it. Besides, the family resemblance was striking.

"Next morning Mrs. Rey led us straight to the place beyond the outskirts of the city where the little box was hidden, and before she opened it, told us exactly what it would contain.

"That afternoon she and my wife went shopping. Mrs. Branson reported that it fell to her to do all the buying for Mrs. Rey did not even know her sizes, nor the names of many of the garments, and only showed preferences when it came to color. After their return Mrs. Branson spent a long time with our guest, showing her how to wear the different articles, and teaching her their names in English, and in Spanish; also giving her another lesson in hair-dressing, and initiating her into the mysteries of hats and veils.

"Mrs. Rey looked stunning that evening at supper, for her fair skin, blue eyes, and yellow hair, not to mention the golden earrings, made a striking contrast with the black gown she had chosen, out of respect, we supposed, for the late Señor Rey.

"She asked about conditions in the States and was astonished to learn that America was at war, no word of which had reached her mountain retreat. This led to a conference as to how we could get her back into the States without a passport, especially as she could give no clear account of her past, nor her exact birthplace. Finally we decided to give to the authorities practically the story she had told us. She had suffered a severe illness which had destroyed most of her memories of previous events, but she still remembered that she was born and raised in the United States. She had married a Señor Juan Rey, later killed by bandits, leaving her alone. She had made her escape from the interior of Mexico, and only wanted to get back to the land of her birth. On this basis, with a certificate from me that she was now of sound mind, we succeeded in fixing up her papers so that the American Consul thought she would pass.

"While all this was in progress she spent her leisure hours in writing the rest of her story 'to put with the first part,' she said.

"Finally she sailed, after trying (in vain) to induce us to accept money for our hospitality. She left me the package with her story, and you can well imagine how we rushed back to the house to open the package before her ship was out of sight."

By this time the gorgeous Cuban sunset had faded, so the pair withdrew their chairs to a place near one of the ship's electric lights where it was possible to read. The doctor opened his package.

"The first part," he said, "is, you see, written on long folded strips of native maguey paper, the same as the old Aztecs used. I say written, but it is really printed, with paint, not ink, laid on with a fine brush. Look at the date in Aztec hieroglyphics! The second part is written on sheets of paper furnished to Mrs. Rey by Mrs. Branson. Well, here goes!"

He began to read.

THE STORY OF TEOQUITLA

THIS is written in a quiet corner of the Great House of the temple-women where I shall come every day for the purpose when I am not on duty. The house stands behind the temple-pyramid of Centeotl in the City of Nahuatlán, in the Hidden Valley, the last stand of the Aztec nation. I could tell exactly where it lies, but I dare not, for fear that this manuscript may find its way outside someday, and might lead strangers into the happy valley to the destruction of this splendid people, whose only outstanding fault, so far as I can discover, is their addiction to human sacrifice. As for myself, I expect to spend the rest of my life here, and contentedly enough, and I am writing these lines merely to leave a record of my strange history after I am dead. If the whites ever do penetrate this valley and read its records, they may learn from this one the fate of Robert Sanderson, the young American explorer, who journeyed into the mountains of Mexico, never to return.

For I am, or I was, Robert Sanderson. Who I am now I hardly know. Here they call me "Teoquitla" or "Golden," on account of my hair, and this is the only name I have any title to at present.

All my life, before I came here, I despised women, but I loved to play with them, and when I got sick of them, which

always happened sooner or later, I simply quit them and never gave the matter another thought. When I was little more than a boy I could already boast of five or six affairs of this sort. Something about me seemed to attract women. Perhaps I was not to blame altogether, for my mother eloped with a German waiter when I was six years old, leaving my father three young children to bring up alone. My mother's sisters would have none of us, and the less said of my stepmother, the better. So much for that.

Somehow I managed to get a college education, starting off in agriculture, intending to become a teacher in this line. But I was finally drawn into the study of ancient America, through my reading while gathering material for a paper on the "Origin of Indian Corn," and after my graduation I was lucky enough to find a job on the staff of a well-known museum—I won't name it. Those who knew Sanderson know which it was.

One day a report was brought to us of an isolated settlement of Nahua or Aztec Indians far back in the mountains of Mexico, a settlement where, it was said, some of the ancient ceremonies were still enacted, and where the people probably used more native utensils and knew more of the "old road" than in any other Aztec community. The museum decided to investigate, and to this end I spent one winter in Mexico City studying the Aztec language (I was already familiar with Spanish), returning to the States in the spring. Back to Mexico I came the following September, ready to live among the Indians, to put on record all the ancient knowledge they had to offer, and to collect examples of their native handiwork. I spent months among them, recording everything they would tell me, but I always felt that they were holding something back. Once in

a while I heard guarded references to "the city" or "the valley," and somehow grasped the fact that somewhere, not far away, lived a colony of Aztecs who followed the old customs even more closely. Sometimes the village would be almost empty for days. I felt the people had gone somewhere to take part in some ancient rite or other, but not one of them, friendly though they were, would tell me a word about where they had gone.

Still I filled a dozen notebooks with information they gave me. It breaks my heart even yet to think those books are lost forever. Finally I finished my work and made my preparations to leave the country. All would have been well if I had followed the advice my friend, Dr. Branson, gave me (he is an American I met in Vera Cruz): "Let their women alone, Bob. *Adios!*"

Well I remember those parting words. But I didn't heed them. The young daughter of the Aztec couple at whose house I boarded had been away to school and could talk good Spanish, and this singled her out from all the rest for me. It was the same old story. She called herself Conchita in Spanish—a handsome creature, taller and more buxom than most of those mountain women. I suppose I jollied her along as I had done the others before her, let her think I intended to marry her, and all that—oh, how can I write it? I had been tired of her sometime before I left, but took good care not to show it. I wanted to get away without a scene, but somehow she got wind of my plans. The day before I intended to leave she greeted me with joy as I came into the house.

"Oh, my beloved!" she cried, "isn't it wonderful? They say we are starting tomorrow for the United States! Why didn't you tell me, *mi corazón*, so I could get my things ready? As it is, I'll have to go just as I am. But you can buy me

some pretty dresses in Mexico City, can't you, dear?"

I disengaged her arms from my neck—a scene after all! I was tired of her anyhow.

"You're not going!" I said shortly.

Her bright face fell.

"Then when are you coming back to me, my heart?" she quavered.

Annoyed, I started to leave the house.

"I'm not coming back!" I replied.

She grasped my arm, her eyes were streaming.

"But—but what of me, Señor—your betrothed, your *prometida*? What of—you know what I whispered to you only yesterday."

"Oh, go to Hell!" I shouted in a rage, and burst out of the door, leaving her alone in the house.

Perhaps I was as angry at myself as I was at her. I made arrangements that afternoon for mules to carry my baggage, my manuscripts, my specimens, and myself down to the railroad, and by the time I returned to the house some hours had passed. To my astonishment, as I approached, I saw that someone had set all my things on the ground outside. I tried to enter the house that had been my home so long, but Conchita's father blocked me at the door.

"Conchita," he said, "has hanged herself! Just now we found her, already she is cold!" and he pushed me outside.

That appalled even me. I gathered my manuscripts, and a few more valuable things, leaving the rest, and hurried back to the mule-owner's home, begging him to start with me at once. Darkness had fallen, and something told me not to let the dawn of another day find me up in those hills. I did not get far, however. In the middle of a dark canyon my mule suddenly fell over some unseen obstruction; I was thrown sprawling; and be-

fore I could get to my feet or draw my weapon, I was set upon from all sides.

Bound, gagged, blindfolded in an instant—all I knew was that I was being carried somewhere, none too tenderly, over rough and rocky ground, it seemed, for hours. Then a rope was tied about my body and I was lowered down, down, how far I knew not, but finally I brought up sharply against the bottom. Rough hands seized me and tore off rope, blindfold, and gag.

In the light of flaring torches I saw that a crowd of Indians stood around me. My heart almost stopped beating when I saw that they carried spears and shields, and were dressed as warriors of ancient Mexico in the days of Montezuma. My first act was to call for help at the top of my voice. This drew a shout of laughter from my audience.

"Yell all you wish," said one whom I judged to be the leader from his great headdress of swaying green feathers. "Yell until you are tired. You are ours now and none but Aztec ears shall ever hear your voice again."

"What are you going to do with me?" I queried.

No answer.

"Take him to the House of Chains," said the leader. "We will fix him there."

"Fix him?" I thought.

They dragged me along through the bushes for a way, then into a stone walled, thatched hut. In one end I could dimly see a great brown wooden chest decked with hieroglyphic carvings of ancient Aztec style, in itself an archeological treasure, which aroused my interest, in spite of my desperate plight.

An Indian opened the chest and drew forth two pairs of heavy iron shackles with long chains, of old Spanish make, the kind that had to be riveted and not locked.

"We will chain his legs first," he said.

"Don't put those things on me," I cried in panic. "I'll promise you I won't try to get away!"

The leader laughed.

"We know you won't get away," he assured me, "with or without these chains. But you will wear them nevertheless. The first white men that came to this country bound our chiefs with such things; and we give every white man who falls a prisoner in our hands a dose of his own medicine. But these chains are the only works of the invader you will see in this valley, for here we live our own life, free in the last unconquered domain of the Montezumas."

After some discussion as to whether it would be best to leave my leather putties on, they finally decided to remove them. While four or five jovial young ruffians sat on me to hold me down, my legs were first untied, the leggings taken off, and then the shackles were riveted fast upon my ankles. My wrists they fettered then in similar manner.

"Now!" said the leader, as they finished, "you will find water in the brook out there. Wander where you will, try to escape to your heart's content, but always come back to this house when you want something to eat."

The torches vanished, and there I was, alone and manacled, in the dark. For a while I lay thinking it all over, shivering in the chill night air, my chains rattling at every movement. Still I did not realize, even then, just how serious a scrape I was in. Finally, tired beyond words, I fell asleep.

IT WAS broad daylight when I awoke.

I got up and found that, although my fetters were heavy, the long chain between the circlets allowed me considerable freedom of movement. Then I thanked God they were not like modern

handcuffs with only two or three links between, and I hobbled out of the house, feeling better, but still stiff with cold. The hut stood on a knoll overlooking a wild and beautiful valley, now partly hidden by morning mists, above which mountains raised their dim blue peaks in every direction; but I noticed that those to the west seemed farther away, and decided that the valley must extend in that direction.

I went down to the brook and drank. The water was cool and clear. Looking back of the hut toward the north I saw, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, a sheer cliff several hundred feet high, which seemed to extend as an unbroken wall east and west, as far as I could see.

"Here," I thought, "is where I was let down last night."

I tried to reach the base of the cliff, but the dragging chain caught so much in the bushes and rocks, that I could make no headway. So I adjourned to the hut and found that meantime someone had kindly brought me an earthen bowl of *atole* or corn mush, for my breakfast, plus a wooden spoon. Having consumed the food, I found a piece of native rope with which I fastened my shackle chain loosely to my belt; this kept it from dragging and catching, and so I made better progress in trying to walk. I must say, though, that even with this rope, I found exploring in irons to be slow and grilling work.

To make a long story short, I followed the brook downstream to the eastward, hoping to find a cleft, or at least, a cave in the cliff, through which it escaped from the valley; but instead, I discovered that it merely lost itself in a pile of huge rocks at the base of the precipice, sinking down into some subterranean channel without leaving an opening big enough for a rat to crawl through. Then

I followed the cliffs in both directions as far as I could. They were all the same, without a break.

My food was brought to me every day, just enough to keep me going; but every night, in that mountain country, without a rag of bedding, I nearly perished from the cold, and was always astonished when daylight came to find no ice or snow outside. I think the month was March or April.

After a few days I discovered that I must give up my explorations, for an unexpected reason: my ankles and wrists became so sore from the rubbing of the iron circlets that they were positively raw, and it was agony to try to travel. I did my best to get my fetters off, but without the slightest success. In my search for some tool with which to cut the rivets, I opened the great brown chest, but found nothing there but eight or ten more sets of chains, a few rivets, and some rags.

I took these rags and two handkerchiefs I found in my pockets, washed them in the brook, and dried them, and wrapped strips torn from them about the wrists and ankles to form a sort of padding. This made the chains more endurable while I remained quiet, but the rags stuck to the soles that soon formed, and very little movement was needed to tear the sores open again.

I was thus obliged by my fetters to lie in the hut, and the time passed very slowly and miserably for a number of days. The man who brought my rations would answer no questions, and there was nothing to do all day but eat, sleep, and watch the little lizards playing on the wall. Never in the North have I suffered from cold as I did at night in that hut. I could not sleep then, and the dark hours were endless and full of misery.

AT LAST came a welcome relief: one morning I was aroused from a doze by the shuffle of sandaled feet, and peered out of the door just as a band of warriors drew up in front of the hut. My trained eye marked their feathered shields, and their jaguar-skin clothing, for all the world like fur union-suits, with tails hanging down behind, and their hoods, made of skins from the animals' heads—ears, teeth, and all, so arranged that each man seemed to be peering out from between the jaws of a jaguar. The leader was similarly equipped, except for his nodding plume of green feathers, and his handsomer shield, which bore in addition to the patterns worked in small bright-colored feathers, several half-moons of beaten gold. He poked me in the ribs with his war-club and delivered a set speech, the gist of which was that I was commanded to appear before Montezuma without delay.

"Where?" I demanded. "In the Aztec Land of Spirits? Montezuma has only been dead three or four hundred years, I believe."

Green Feathers scowled, and the scowl did not improve the appearance of his painted features, glaring out from between the jaws of his jaguar hood.

"You will find that our Montezuma is very much alive," he brawled. "As far as the hereafter is concerned, you are likely to visit that unknown country very soon."

I looked at his war-club. It was long and flat, with a row of razor-sharp flakes of volcanic glass set along each edge. I cast my eye upon his companions' weapons. The long flint-headed spears had a nasty look. I decided to go along and to keep a civil tongue in my head.

I had gone but a few steps before the sores on my wrists and ankles were all raw again, and the trip along that trail

westward was so miserable that I took little notice of my surroundings. I dimly remember passing occasional huts and patches of cultivated ground, but recall nothing distinctly until we paused in the brow of a declivity.

"Look!" commanded the leader, "Nahuatlan!"

I raised my eyes, and beheld, spread out before me, what I later learned was indeed Nahuatlan, the last city of the Aztec nation. The plain below seemed covered with little white-walled, thatched houses, but in the midst of them rose a cluster of great flat-topped pyramids crowned with stately buildings, glaring white in the brilliant mountain sunlight. As I stood, the faint and distant boom of a great *teponazti* drum caught my ear, and the far-away notes of a wild chant. I had barely time to notice that there were other large buildings clustering about the base of the pyramids, when we were marched forward again, down the hill.

Soon we entered the city, and threaded our way through its narrow streets, where never a horse had set foot, nor a wheeled vehicle been seen. People stared as I was marched along, chains clanking, and many followed us, until by the time we reached a sort of public square, there was quite a crowd. Then I saw the pyramids at close range. There were four of them, one on each side of the great plaza. The lowest pyramid, which at the same time seemed to support the largest edifice, lay toward the west, and to this we marched, the crowd at our heels.

They did not follow us up the broad steps to the flat summit, however, and soon I found myself entering a magnificent building, which I thought must be the palace itself.

I have confused impressions of brilliantly frescoed walls—elaborate carv-

ings—glimpses of rich hangings—the glint of silver and gold; but my only clear remembrance is the moment when I met face to face the arbiter of my fate, Montezuma himself.

He sat on his richly carved throne under a gorgeous canopy, surrounded by his officials, who were gaudy in embroidered robes, in fantastic headdresses, in paint and quetzal feathers. Montezuma's own visible dress was very simple, merely a finely woven mantle of blue and white, with a narrow red border, knotted at his right shoulder, and his only insignia of royal rank was a plain headband of thin beaten gold, rising to a little peak in front, and his gold-trimmed sandals. He seemed just a kindly, handsome, light complexioned, intelligent Indian in his late thirties.

Briefly the captain of guard related the story of Conchita, saying in conclusion, "And so, oh Chieftain, I accuse this man of dishonoring an Aztec woman, and of causing the death of an Aztec. Here he stands, a white man, in chains before you, waiting your judgment, just as some of our ancient leaders were compelled to stand before their white conquerors."

Montezuma looked at me. His eyes bored into my soul, and for the first time I began to realize my responsibility for Conchita's fate, and to appreciate my present dreadful predicament.

"Do you deny this?" he asked.

I shook my head dumbly.

At last he spoke again, and coldly: "The punishment for dishonoring an Aztec woman is, that you shall be offered up as a human sacrifice to the goddess Centeotl, the All-mother. For causing the death of an Aztec the penalty is that you shall be offered as a human sacrifice to the god of war, Huitzilopochtli."

My legs gave way beneath me, and only the guards saved me from falling.

After I had recovered somewhat he continued:

"You would naturally suffer the second penalty, which is the greater; but as the unfortunate girl really met death by her own hand, although you were the cause, we can allow you to choose. You may pick the lesser penalty if you like, yet, many men prefer Huitzilpochtli."

"What—happens," I gasped, "with Huitzil-o-pochtli?" although from my reading of Aztec history I thought I knew only too well.

My worst fears were confirmed when he replied, "To make it short, you will be first dressed in the garb of the god for a certain time; then you will be laid on an altar, and your heart will be cut out with a flint knife, and, still throbbing; laid at the feet of Huitzilpochtli's image."

I controlled myself with an effort.

"And—and—Centeotl?" I faltered, for I had never heard that human sacrifice was made to her.

"You will be first dressed in the garb of the goddess for a while," was the answer, "then you will be laid on an altar and certain substances will be injected into your blood, which will give you great pain, and which will cause a great change to come over you. You will suffer many days."

"But—but—will—I, will I live?"

"Yes, you will live."

"Will the pain last always?"

"No, you will get well."

"And I shall not be crazy?"

"No, mind and body will be perfectly healthy."

"Then offer me to the goddess Centeotl!"

I felt in my heart that while there was life there was hope. "A great change" sounded ominous, but not so much so as stark death.

MONTEZUMA looked at me again, a curious interest growing in his eyes. Then he commanded: "Remove his chains! Dress and mask him to represent the goddess Centeotl, keep him in her temple, feed him, honor him, address him as the goddess herself, until the Day of Sacrifice. When he is properly prepared, let me know, and I will give orders for the ceremony."

In a daze I was led down the steps of the pyramid, and, chains clanking, across the plaza and up the steeper steps of another higher one, to the south, and finally into what seemed to be a temple. At the back of the main chamber stood the carved figure of a goddess, with ears of corn in her hands.

Eight women, dressed all alike, in white, with flowing hair, were decorating the temple with fresh green corn leaves. They finished as we entered, and as they were leaving I observed that in the nose of each was a large heavy gold ring, much like those I had noticed worn by the women of the San Blas Indians near Panama; but never before had I seen a Nahuatl wearing such a thing.

These women looked at me and seemed to be suppressing smiles with difficulty. As they passed out I heard them whisper and titter. Personally, I did not see anything funny in the sight of a man being prepared for human sacrifice.

Eight men, evidently priests, marched out from some inner room at this juncture, carrying vestments which they deposited on the floor about me. In the meantime my guards laid aside their weapons, and with rude chisels cut or forced apart the copper rivets and removed my shackles—a wonderful relief, for the sores on my wrists and ankles were worse than ever, and were steadily dripping blood.

Like many another prisoner, by this time, I had resolved to placate my captors as much as possible by good behavior, so I stood meekly while the busy priests stripped off my garments; shaved off hair and beard with razors of volcanic glass, and after washing me carefully, anointed me with some clinging perfume. This done, a man whom I took to be the chief priest, appeared, clad in a splendid feather mantle, and wearing an elaborate headdress. In his hand he bore a long poniard of bone, carved on the handle with a figure of the goddess. Suddenly two priests seized my ears, and before I knew what was happening, the poniard had been thrust through both lobes, one after the other, and the holes stopped with what, later, felt like greasy cotton strings.

But the greatest ordeal was when they dressed me in the garments of the goddess, which, I remember, were pale salmon color, with red trimming. Well I recall the square of red on the front of the blouse, on which a flower with four petals was embroidered in white. Most boys have masqueraded in their sister's petticoats, at some time or other, but I had always so disliked women that this kind of fun never appealed to me. To be obliged to wear woman's dress was a bitter pill. Still, I was thankful that the vestments were not those of Huitzilopochtli, for those would have meant death. Finally they fitted on me a wig of black hair arranged in three little clubs, one in back and one at each temple, sticking it fast upon my head with some messy sort of glue or gum, and tied over my face a light wooden mask carved to represent the kindly features of the goddess. Next came her cylindrical cap of heavy, stiff cotton cloth. Well I remember it! It looked like a white, brimless stovepipe hat, with a border of embroidered red triangles

around the bottom, pointing upward. After they had hung about my neck a long necklace of large beads, each carved to represent an ear of corn, the chief priest addressed me.

"Never remove the mask," he admonished, "except after dark, and not then, except when alone in your sleeping quarters. You now represent the goddess; her spirit is in you. Your word, to a great extent, is law here in the temple, but, of course, you must follow the rules laid down for you, and there are some changes that cannot be made, even for you. Your food, for instance, is prepared especially for you, and you must eat no other.

"Every day before the sun has reached the meridian, you must sit a while on your throne and receive the people. Whatever they ask you, answer from your heart, as well as you can. After the sun has passed the middle and starts down toward the west, your bearers will wait upon you, and will carry you anywhere you wish to go. As you travel, look the crops over and bless them; but always come back to your temple to sleep where your priests may guard you. The under dress—the white slip—of the goddess has been sewed upon you. Do not try to take it off. When it is soiled your priests will remove it, will bathe you, and will sew a fresh undergarment upon you. These rules shall hold good until you are laid upon the altar. What happens afterward will depend on your conduct now. Remember! Eat no food except what is furnished you here. Never remove the mask in daylight. Answer to your best ability the questions your worshippers may ask you—and may the goddess truly inspire you! I have spoken."

A fire blazed before the idol—I later learned it was never allowed to go out. On this, while I watched, the priests

burned my familiar khaki clothing, piece by piece. As the last disappeared the chief priest chanted, "Here vanishes—the last tie—with the outside world—from this moment he—belongs absolutely—to the goddess—and to Nahuatlan."

I watched and listened sadly.

While the priests were showing me around my new home, several young men, neophytes I suppose, hung a curtain in front of the statue of the goddess, before which they erected a platform, and placed a throne upon it. Here the next morning I seated myself, a living idol, and here my worshipers came to bow down before me. That night I slept warm, at any rate.

I WILL pass over rapidly the twenty or thirty days that followed. They were busy ones for me, and I had little time to think of my troubles. Sometimes I really enjoyed my power, brief though I knew it to be. Every morning I sat on my throne and advised the people about their crops, thanking fortune for my agricultural courses in college and my knowledge of the Aztec language. Questions on children I had to answer on a basis of common sense only, but I think I did pretty well, on the whole.

Every afternoon, if I wished it, I was carried forth in my litter, decked with fresh green corn leaves and bean vines, decorated with artificial squash flowers. On these rides I soon found, as I had before suspected, that the valley, the last stand of the Montezumas, was entirely surrounded by perpendicular cliffs hundreds of feet high. It was an *hoyo*, such as I had seen in the mountains of Pinar del Rio, in Cuba, but on a much larger scale. I also noted that it was a little terrestrial paradise, and I blessed the crops faithfully, using a regular formula I invented myself.

My powers in the temple were great, but occasionally my orders struck an obstruction. One day I asked the chief priest, "Who are those women, dressed all alike in white, who clean and decorate my temple every day?"

"They are the noble temple-women, oh, goddess," was the reply. "They live in that great building back of your temple-pyramid."

"Why do different women come every day?" I persisted.

"There are many in the Great House where they live together, a house no man may enter, so many that each day a fresh eight take their turn until all have served. Then they begin again."

"Well, I do not admire their nose-rings. Tell the women who are to work here tomorrow to leave their nose-rings behind in their Great House and appear here without them."

"Ah, goddess, that is one thing we cannot do, even for you. The rings are the badges of the noble temple-women of Centeotl. They are fastened in their noses, and could never be removed without cutting. I shall tell the women to serve the temple no more while you are with us if you wish; but the nose-rings may never be removed while they live and remain temple-women."

"Never mind, then," I answered, "let them continue to serve the temple."

Nevertheless I looked at the women as little as possible. The sight of those glistening nose-rings irritated me. I hated them! Little I knew what was coming.

There was one horrible experience which will linger long in my memory. I shudder today at the thought of it. The weather had become warmer, and some of the days were really hot. It was after a day of this kind that I slipped out of the stuffy temple to sit on the top step of the pyramid with the priests, who

were enjoying the cool evening breeze, sweet with the perfume of the forest, which had begun to sweep down the valley after sunset. As we sat we noticed that someone was building a fire on the summit of the pyramid to the north, on the opposite side of the square from us; soon it burned brightly and illumined the whole plaza; then we heard a loud voice shouting some sort of announcement. It was too far off to catch the words, but immediately after we heard shrill whoops, and the sound of drumming, and the wild, fierce notes of a war song, which kept up with little interruption until daylight. In the morning I took my place on the throne as usual, but no worshipers came to my temple, and I began to realize that something out of the ordinary must be in the wind.

In the afternoon I directed my bearers to carry me about the city, while I tried to fathom what it was all about. I dared not ask outright, for fear of losing my reputation as an oracle.

I noticed especially that many fully armed warriors were wandering about, some in jaguar-skins, such as my guard had worn, some in other dress, but all carried shields, and all were provided with spears, war-clubs, or bows and arrows. Many were merely painted, like Sioux, but others wore wooden helmets or masks representing the heads of jaguars, rattlesnakes, or nameless but terrifying monsters. It was easy to distinguish the chiefs by their towering headdresses, rich with turquoise and gold, bright with quetzal feathers, and by the special beauty of their wooden shields incrustated with artistic patterns in turquoise. Some even carried their magnificent feather standards strapped to their backs.

Later I noticed something that aroused my curiosity more than ever. This was

a number of countrymen, carrying bulky burdens, working their way through the crowds toward the north pyramid. I made my bearers carry me closer, and found that the burdens were wicker cages, and that the cages were full of live partridges.

That night my priests told me the truth—that a victim was to be sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli on the morrow. Little I slept for the drumming, and when morning came I had hardly eaten my breakfast in my quarters, dressed and put on my mask, when I was called forth and informed that I had to take part in the ceremony.

Next thing I knew I was being carried on my litter through a crowd of people, across the plaza to the north temple-pyramid, dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the war god, and his companion, Tlaloc, the god of waters. Here my priests assisted me up the steps and posted me on the flat top of the pyramid, facing the temple, between the head of the stairs and a stone altar of ominous aspect, black with what looked to be dried blood.

After I had taken my post I had just time to notice that blue wisps of incense-smoke were drifting out of the temple door, and that the whole top of the pyramid was dotted with the pitiful little bodies of the partridges, headless and bleeding, when a thunder of drums burst from the temple, and a chorus of blood-curdling screams; then from the door came rushing eight nearly naked men painted solid black, their heads concealed in horrible skull-masks, while from their shoulders fluttered mantles made of human skins, complete even to fingers and toes. They dragged among them a poor unfortunate dressed in the finery of Huitzilopochtli.

Arriving at the altar, in one dreadful instant they had torn his vestments from

his body and flung them in rags to the winds; in another they had thrown the poor fellow, apparently a Mexican, breast up, spread-eagled, upon the altar. The priests seized his hands and feet, and grasped them firmly; one clapped a heavy horseshoe-shaped collar of stone across his throat, which held his head immovable.

At this moment I remembered my part and began to wail and protest in as woman-like manner as I could master, taking the part of Centeotl, who was supposed to hate bloodshed. Again the drums roared. From the temple door sprang another horrible skull-headed figure, painted a glaring red, who swooped toward the victim on the altar like an eagle out of the sky. In his hand he gripped a huge flint knife. Again, remembering my cue, I stepped forward as if to protect the victim, but the red horror threw me violently aside. I had barely recovered my balance when he sprang upon his prey, slashed open his breast, and with a few swift movements tore out his heart, which he raised heavenward with a triumphant scream.

The world swam round before me. I dimly remember that the bleeding body was hurled down the steps of the pyramid, while the shrieking demons rushed to lay the still palpitating heart at the feet of the idol in the temple.

I made my way, trembling, down the steps, slipping and sliding in the pools of blood, down to my litter, and I did not breathe freely again until I was back on my couch in my own temple, weak and sick at heart.

TIME passed. One day the chief priest examined my ears, and finding the holes healed, drew forth the greasy strings. Retiring for a moment, he came back with an exquisite little box incrusting with turquoise.

"It's for you, oh, goddess," he told me, bowing low. "Open it."

Inside lay a pair of beautifully wrought earrings of gold, each a little image of Centeotl, with eyes of turquoise.

"Aren't they beautiful?" he asked.

I said nothing, for I knew he meant to please me, and I let him fix them in my ears, although my heart was rebellious, as he tapped away with a little hammer.

"They are your reward," he said, "and will show forever that you most faithfully performed your duties while impersonating the goddess. That is the most beautiful pair I ever saw bestowed. Montezuma ordered them made especially for you, when he heard how well you had acted the part."

I thanked him as graciously as I could, but as the heavy pendants tugged at my ears with every movement, I wondered, "What next?" Later I essayed to remove one to look at it, but it was firmly fastened. The little riveting hammer had done its work well.

Next day the chief priest addressed me again.

"Goddess," he said, "your time among us is nearly ended—and we are sorry to see you go. I told Montezuma yesterday that you are ready. So prepare your soul for the sacrifice tomorrow."

"Must I die?" I quavered, thinking of the horrible scene I had witnessed on the pyramid of Huitzilopochtli.

"No," was the answer; "many times you have been told, 'no.' Not if you are brave and can endure pain. Your conduct in office as the goddess has been the best anyone remembers."

In the morning a great bustle and dragging of heavy objects outside the temple aroused me. I put on my mask and looked out. An altar of wood was being erected between the temple door

and the steps. It was covered with carvings of ears of corn, squashes, and pods of beans, but alas! it curved upward in the middle and was shaped like the fatal altar of Huitzilopochtli! It was evidently meant for a human victim. My heart sank. Had I been deceived, after all?

Sick in soul and body I went back to my couch and lay there in a sort of stupor, unable even to think, awaiting the end. After a while the priests, their bodies and faces painted green, with headresses of nodding corn-leaves, and sashes of bean vines, came to get me. Gently they led me forth, and I noted that the chief priest carried an instrument shaped like a miniature hoe, with a sharp little blade of black obsidian.

We took our stand between the new altar and the temple, our back to the door. When I ventured to raise my eyes I was shocked to see, standing on the other side of the altar, a man clad and masked to represent Huitzilopochtli, the blood-thirsty war god, while behind him stood his demon skull-headed priests. The red one caught me looking at him and fiendishly brandished his great flint knife at me. I gave myself up for lost as the hideous crew set up again their blood-curdling yell. But as their outcry died down, sweet singing sounded from our temple, and out danced a line of temple-women, clad in white, wreathed in bean vines and carrying green stalks of corn, except the first eight, who were armed with tubes of cane, terminating in gourds painted green. From each gourd protruded a little spike (I learned afterward that it was a quill, always kept turned upward). As these eight danced past, between us and the altar, I thought I heard some liquid splashing about in the gourds. Suddenly the eight women made a pretended attack on the impersonator

of Huitzilopochtli and his skull-headed demons, who fled before them, running shrieking down the steps of our pyramid, across the plaza, through the crowd, and up the steps to their own temple. I loved these women at that moment, for I felt that now, for the present at least, my heart was safe from that flint knife. As the women continued singing the priests gently stripped the outer garments of the goddess from me, cut loose the underslip, and removed the cap, the mask, and the wig, which had been previously loosened. Finally I stood stark naked before them all, the only remnant of my former glory being the earrings, which were not disturbed.

They laid me on the altar, spread-eagled on my back, as had been the other victim. Priests held my limbs and head with a grip like steel.

The chief priest approached then with his little obsidian-pointed hoe, and, standing by my side, began to speak. My feelings were such that I did not grasp his meaning at the time, but from hearing the same speech repeated a year or so later over another victim, I learned its almost word for word.

"The goddess Centeotl," he began, "whom we also call Tonacayowa, the nourisher, is the Mother Spirit of all the world. She makes our crops prosper she makes our families grow, she stands for peace, for life, for happiness, for increase.

"In the bodies of men and women alike she has set out two kinds of plants, as in a garden; but in men one sort of plants has been permitted to grow, while the other sort is dormant; and in women the first sort is sleeping, the second growing. What man can look at his own naked breast and deny that he himself has the seeds of womankind dormant within him?

"In sacrificing to Centeotl a man who has dishonored an Aztec woman and has thus degraded his manhood, we do not take his life. That would offend the goddess.

"Such a man has misused and degraded the plants in his garden. What do we do? With the aid of a secret preparation handed down to us from past ages, originally from the goddess herself, we destroy all these worse than useless plants, and coax the other kind of plants, now dormant in his body, to grow in their place. But we do not destroy the garden itself, we do not take his life."

He began to sing and march around the altar, at the end of every verse stopping to cut through my quivering skin with the obsidian hoe, until eight punctures had been made in limbs and body, four on a side; then into these bleeding cuts the eight temple-women thrust the quills of their instruments. At a signal they all began to blow into their cane tubes, forcing the fluid from the gourds into my body. In an instant my veins seemed full of liquid fire—worse and worse the torment grew—I was burning up! Then came the pains darting through my body, worse and worse, and worse. It was too much for mortal to endure. I found myself whirling down, down into blackness and oblivion.

I HAVE dim memories of weeks, perhaps months, of burning fevers, awful pains, apparently unending back-aches, and through it all—women, women everywhere. Finally my brain cleared a little, and I found myself lying on a couch, in a great hall full of similar couches. At first I thought it was a hospital.

Women were indeed everywhere, resting on the couches, dressing, moving

about. With a sinking feeling of the heart, I noticed that all wore the hated nose-ring. Then it dawned on me that I must be in the Great House of the temple-women, where, I had been told, no man might enter.

I beckoned one of the women to me and asked her, "Why am I here in the house of the women?"

My voice seemed unnaturally high-pitched as I spoke. She laid a gentle hand on my head.

"Haven't you learned that you are now one of us?"

I struggled to rise, but fell back from weakness.

"What do you mean?" I gasped.

"Just this," she answered gently, "you have been very sick and a great change has come over you. You will find out just what it is after a while."

She started to move off, but I detained her with a weak hand.

"Tell me what happened to me," I begged.

"Well, for one thing, sores broke out all over you, then you were covered with scabs. Oh, you were very sick, and, ugh! how you smelt! Then the scabs came off and with them came every hair on your head, your face, and your body, and I think, every bit of your old skin. Your new skin looks fine and nice; the hair on your head has begun to come back; it will be very pretty, I think, but it is different in color from ours."

"What color is it?" I asked.

"Yellow. Already we have named you Teoquitla, the Golden."

My original hair had been light brown. I lay still for a while, trying to digest all this information, then felt of my head. It was covered with a silky short hair. I passed my hand over my cheek. It was as smooth as a baby's, without a trace of beard.

As the days passed and I grew stronger and could attend more and more to my own wants, I found, indeed, that a great change had come over me, and I learned the nature of that change. The shock almost robbed me of reason. I was dazed. It seemed impossible that I, who had always despised women, should become—should come to this! I was desperate, like a wild animal in a cage, dashing himself against the bars. Oh, if I could only burst out of this hateful body! Awakening in the morning I would hope that it was only a dream, only to find, perhaps, some new evidence, overlooked before, confirming the bitter fact. The full force of my punishment, however, did not strike me until a week or so later, when I was able to walk about without difficulty, and one day Montezuma sent for me.

Before, I had wrapped a blanket about me as I moved about the building; but now the women washed me, and dressed me in the white slip, the long skirt, and the loose, short-sleeved blouse, the regulation costume of a Nahua woman. I had worn women's dress before while impersonating the goddess; then, however, I knew I was only man masquerading, but this! It was my worst moment. I wanted to protest, but, knowing what I had discovered, I could find no ground for complaint. Almost as hard for me was the moment I stepped out of the building and faced the public gaze for the first time, unmasked, in such a garb, and knowing what I knew.

All the temple-women went with me into Montezuma's presence, and when he commanded, "Let the new sister stand forth!" they pushed me forward. I heard him laugh, but I could not raise my eyes from the floor, from shame.

"Well," he elucked. "I hardly recognized you! Look at me, woman!"

I wanted to shout "I am not a woman!" but remembered certain things and desisted. Anyhow, I raised my eyes, and gave his smiling face a fleeting glance. He laughed again and said:

"Crime has been punished; the same offense can never be repeated. Centeotl is great for here, instead of a rotting corpse we have a useful and good-looking human being as ready to take full part in life as before, although in a different capacity. Perhaps now, my friend, you will realize a woman's point of view, and despise her no more! Priests, who watched over this person, taking the part of the goddess, was the work well done?"

"It was, oh, chieftain," came the answer like a chorus. "Never was it done better!"

"Noble temple-women, wearers of the golden badge of service, what has, her conduct been since this woman came among you?"

"The best," chorused the women.

"Is she worthy to become a noble temple-woman?"

"She is!" was the enthusiastic reply.

"Bring out the golden badge of service," was the command.

The chief priest, whom I well remembered, stepped forward, with the same old carved bone poniard in one hand, and in the other, a large thick nose-ring of gold.

"No, no!" I cried, and looked about desperately for some avenue of escape. "Not that! Not to me! I hate them!"

Willing hands held me, but the chief priest hesitated.

"This is a much sought honor," he began.

"Go ahead and put it on her by force," commanded Montezuma. "She may not appreciate it now, but she will later."

I struggled, but they were too many for me. To my own surprise I burst out crying. Again the chief priest hesitated, moved perhaps by my tears, for he had been a friend of mine.

"Go ahead, what are you waiting for?" demanded the now impatient chieftain.

Two women held my head, others my limbs; at the first touch of the poniard the pain was so exquisite that I must have fainted, for a moment later it seemed I was being helped to my feet and the hateful ring was in place, my poor nose throbbing painfully. They must have soldered the ends together somehow while I lay there, because after the hole had healed I turned it round and round before my obsidian mirror and could find no seam in it.

"Now you look better," laughed Montezuma.

My shawl had fallen from my head in my struggles, and he saw my hair.

"What a beautiful color!" he exclaimed, then to the sisters: "When her hair grows long bring her to me again. What happens then, sister, will depend on your conduct meantime. Go, Teoquitla, work, and be happy, noble temple-woman!"

We filed out, but I covered my face and the awful ring with my shawl all the way home, and the instant I got into the house I carried my bedding to a little storeroom, where I could be alone and nurse my poor sore nose, which for a while became so swollen I could not breathe through it. Some of the girls took pity on me and brought me my food, but I had to raise the ring with one hand while I fed myself with the other, and every movement of it was painful.

In time the hole healed, the swelling abated, and the ring swung free without soreness. Finally I ventured out of my

cubby-hole, but always I kept my face and the ring hidden, and stayed apart from the others.

The sisters stood this for a while, but at last one of them snatched the shawl from my head.

"What is the matter with you?" she cried. "You are not better than any of us, even if your hair is yellow and your skin pink and white! ('Pink and white—good lord!' I thought). Perhaps you are ashamed because you used to be a man. What for? There are two or three others here, but I'll bet you can't pick them out now. Most of us always were women, and worked hard for the honor of joining this sisterhood. I know I did. Or perhaps you are ashamed of your nose-ring. What a silly woman! When you go out among our Nahua people you will find that everyone, when they see you wear it, will give you all respect and honor."

And so I found it in time—the ring was useful as a badge, and often I even forgot I had it on. Nevertheless in my heart I have always hated it.

FOR POLICY'S sake I strove to do what was expected of me at all times, however bitter and resentful I felt at heart, but many an hour I spent, when alone, brooding miserably, searching for some way out. At one time I thought I saw a ray of hope. If the priests could change me into—this—with their secret drugs, why could they not change me back again to what I was before? Perhaps some day I might persuade them.

But this was a vain hope. By carefully worded questions I learned that, while certain natural women had been, for punishment, transformed into men, the process was much more dangerous and difficult, and was seldom attempted, and a "sacrificed woman," such as I, could not be changed at all. Why? The priests believe that a natural woman

has the "plants" of manhood dormant within her, which can be called into life when her feminine qualities are destroyed; but a "sacrificed" woman has no such sleeping masculine "plants" to fall back on—all that was masculine in her was demolished at the sacrifice. Finally I gave up, and settled down into a condition of dumb despair. For months I felt like a prisoner sentenced for life.

Yet I was well in body! Conditions about me were pleasant, and after a while I began to notice a change in my outlook, a sort of renewal of hope. But not for a return of things as they had been—that I abandoned forever. Finally I began to think: why should I not live out a contented and useful life in my new capacity? Others were doing it all around me. I was not handicapped in any way as compared to them.

For, while I had lost the benefit of Robert Sanderson's identity and his worldly connections, I still possessed his mind, his education, his memories of past events, his experience, all of which, I felt, might, some day, prove of benefit. I studied my new gifts and how to make the best of them, and as the months grew into years, I learned to accommodate myself to my new life. And I have at last even come to realize myself that my punishment has been a just one, and has fitted my offense in a most appropriate fashion, although, if anything, it is too light, for I am alive and well, while poor Conchita is dead. I cannot help wondering if science will some day re-discover this old Aztec secret, and then, perhaps, the penalty I suffered will become the rule in cases like mine. If that day ever comes, one great cause of human misery will be nearly, if not quite, cleared away.

Now, I can truthfully say. I really enjoy our life here. We are well fed, and are always treated with the highest re-

spect. Our duties are light. Each day eight of us serve the temple; eight grind corn, cook, and wash dishes for the rest; eight sweep and cure for our Great House; the others, off duty, are free to do as they please. But, of course, each of us washes her own clothing. In my spare time I have studied many of the old Aztec manuscripts stored in the several temples and in Montezuma's palace; the priests have helped me; and some of the old writing I have turned into English for my own amusement; also I have written this story of my life.

Many things I have learned by asking questions—among them what would have become of me if I had not acted the part of the goddess so well. They say I would have been sold as a slave after the sacrifice and the change, either inside the valley, or through the hands of Aztecs outside, to the white-slave trade of Mexico City. I must say I shuddered when they told me, but gave thanks in my heart that I had chosen to act as I did. Of necessity I have learned to grind corn on a metate, to cook in Aztec style, to spin, to weave, to sew, to embroider, and even to make pottery. Now I am trying to master the difficult art of featherwork, of fastening tiny colored feathers in patterns on a fabric, to make the gorgeous robes worn here by priests and nobles.

We take part in the three great ceremonies of Centeotl that take place every year, which are really beautiful; we bless the fields at planting time and at harvest; and we give thanks to the goddess for its bounty.

Sometimes we are given part in the rites of Tezcatlipoca, chief of all the gods, in his great temple on the highest pyramid of all, which raises its lofty summit to the east of the plaza. In front of the temple is an altar plainly intended for human sacrifice, but never

have I seen a victim laid upon it, and both altar and pyramid are free from stains of blood. Perhaps the priests have found that bloodshed is not pleasing to the chief of all the gods.

Many other things, of which I have read in the chronicles of the conquest of Mexico, seem to have died out too—there is no temple here to Quetzalcoatl, the god of the air, who was once so popular, and the many minor gods seem now to live only in the legends of the past. Even the ceremonies that remain seem to have changed with the centuries, and now differ somewhat from those described by the Spanish conquerors in the days of Cortez.

Occasionally we visit the blood-stained pyramid to the north, and its temple, where stand side by side, the idols of my old enemy Huitzilopochtli, the war god, and his grim companion, the god of waters, Tlaloc. I don't mind old Tlaloc; he looks rather stupid, with his dense expression and his great round eyes. Judging from his statue, he either has enormous misshapen teeth, or is carrying something in his mouth—I never could make out which. But I can't stand his partner. Old Huitzil's bloodthirsty face glares at you from between the jaws of a helmet carved to represent the head of a monster, and his hands are full of painful-looking weapons. And—and the stone at his feet is black with caked, dried blood, where the dripping hearts have quivered out their last beats.

We are never called upon to take part in any ceremonies here, for our goddess, Centeotl, and Huitzilopochtli are opposites and enemies. She represents peace and increase; he, war and destruction. Anyhow, Huitzilopochtli has his own white-clad temple-women. They wear no nose-rings, however, and only serve for a year. I doubt if any woman could stand such service longer.

I never go to this temple alone, for I think if I should meet one of those skull-headed priests in a lonely corridor, I'd die of fright. My blood runs cold when I think of the red one and his great, dripping flint knife.

I HAVE been looking in my obsidian mirror again. Do you know, I have grown quite plump? Rounded paddings of flesh have hidden the harsh outlines of a skeleton built for a man, and some changes may have taken place in my very bones—I know they ached terribly enough when I was sick. But my hands and feet will always be a little too large. I suppose, and there are probably other proportions that are not what they should be. Yet I must admit that my skin is fine, my complexion bright, my lips red, and my hair long and golden. I must be quite good looking, or I would be if it were not for this awful nose-ring. I'm disgustingly healthy, and my appetite is positively piggish. All this, I think, is helping reconcile me to my fate, although at first I resented bitterly the appearance of each new feminine charm. I laugh now, recalling my disgust when someone informed me, for the first time, that my skin was "pink and white." Now, other things being equal, I'm glad it is, and I'm thankful, if the change had to come, that they made a good job of it.

Montezuma told me, the last time he caught me poring over the old Aztec books in his library, that I should be also thankful for the chance to start life anew, with a clean slate. One thing I know: my interest in present events is crowding out the memories of the past, and I'm too healthy to spend much time in brooding.

A little while ago I asked one of the sisters if temple-women ever marry.

"Yes," she replied, "but our chance is slight. You see, the only man considered

good enough for us is Montezuma himself. It was better in the old days when it was the custom for the chieftain to have many wives; but our Montezuma is already almost in middle age, and he is still unmarried."

She looked me over.

"You, sister, have the best chance of any of us, I think. You are the prettiest, and besides, your coloring is so different that you stand out from the rest of us. And I overheard Montezuma telling someone just the other day how smart you are, and how much you know of the ancient writings. Yes, and now that I think of it, I've noticed that he has eyes only for you when we dance before him."

I'll admit that I have noticed something like that myself, and it worries me. I have a premonition that my peaceful life here in the Great House will not last much longer. As for Montezuma, although I have seen a great deal of him lately, he makes me—oh, nervous, I guess I should call it—or embarrassed, or something. I can hardly get up nerve to look at him.

With this refuge, I have never thought of escape, not since the change, no matter how much I raged, or how I resented my fate. At first it was shame for my new status in life. I would have committed suicide if anyone had suggested sending me out of the valley. Later it has been, aside from my contentment and my interests here, because I know that my identity is lost and that outside I would be just a girl alone, without family, without standing, without even a past, for nobody could believe such a story.

Later. Montezuma has just sent for me to come to his palace—alone! I don't know what to think. I can't see how I could marry Montezuma, although I respect and admire him. I don't know

why, but I just can't think of it! Perhaps I shall have to. Oh, I must go.

(This ends the manuscript printed by hand on Aztec maguery paper. The remaining pages are written in ink on ordinary paper furnished by Mrs. Branson, at our home.)

WELL! Before I start for the States I must finish my story for Dr. Branson:

When Montezuma saw me enter the audience hall he sent away all his attendants, and himself let down the door-curtains. We were alone. With his own hands he took the shawl from my head and loosed my yellow hair, which was now long, and pretty enough, I admit.

"Like gold!" he cried, "my Teoquiltla!"

He clasped me in his arms; I knew not what to say or do. Fear of the unknown—shame—a lingering distaste for taking a woman's part in so full a measure—were being swallowed up in a strange wild exultation of spirit I had never felt before.

He held me out at arm's length and looked at me.

"Woman!" he cried, "you are beautiful! You are worthy! I love you! Will you marry me?"

In a weak voice I ventured, "Chief-tain, you are lord of Nahuatlán. You know you can do with me what you will."

"No, no," he almost shouted, "Listen! Don't you *want* to marry me?"

"Chief," I whispered, "I would rather remain a simple temple-woman."

I got no farther. Before I knew it I was in his arms again, smothered with kisses. In a moment, in spite of myself, all opposition was swept away. I was won.

A thought came to me through a confusion of mind and sense—where from I knew not; perhaps, now that I con-

sider it, it was an instinctive precaution to save myself from the fate I had, in past years, dealt out to others.

"My chief," I faltered, "you respect me because I have lived uprightly since—since I became a temple-woman?"

"Yes, my own."

"Among my people," I continued, "an upright woman is always married by the ceremonies of our religion. If I consent, my chief, will you wed me by the white man's law?"

"How can I?" he cried. "I am not supposed to leave this valley, the last bit left of my ancestors' domain, and we have sworn that no white priest can enter here and live."

I said nothing.

He pondered a while.

"My own," he said at last, "you know we are in touch with Nahua people outside this valley. By their aid we might slip out, you and I, in disguise, of course, be married, come back here, and nobody will be the wiser. Our Nahua ceremony can come later. I must admit I've been outside before, several times. Once I even went as far as Mexico City, to behold the wonders brought in by the invader. I can trust the men at the ropes not to give us away. We shall start tonight. Better get your things together now!"

Again he kissed me.

But when I brought my armful of belongings from the Great House he told me to leave them in a certain chest in the palace.

"For," he said, "this will be your home when we get back, and we had best carry as little as possible."

"My chief," I replied, "there is one little roll of papers I should like to take with me. Among them is the story of my life, and if anything should happen—"

He stopped my mouth with a kiss.

"Take it, of course!" he said.

Thus encouraged, I ventured, "Dear chief, will you take this ring out of my nose? It will attract a great deal of attention outside, for nobody wears them there; and as you know, I have never liked it. Besides," I added in a whisper, "it gets in the way when you kiss me."

"No, dear one!" was the prompt and firm response, "I love to see you wear it, for it makes me realize that you really can be mine; that you really belong to the Nahua nation, in spite of your foreign beauty, you glorious creature of seashell and coral, of turquoise eyes beneath a crown of golden hair!"

And he proceeded to demonstrate that after all, a nose-ring is not such a serious obstacle. I surely loved this man, for at his words I resigned myself to wear the nose-ring forever, without another thought. Indeed, when Dr. Branson took it off me the other evening, it made me heartsick to see it go. But poor dear Montezuma was wrong about my looks. I am not, and never was, half as good-looking as he thought.

We reached the brink of the cliff in safety and made our way to the home of one of the "outside" Nahuas, where we stayed until suitable clothes of more modern style could be found for us. Montezuma was easily provided for, but I, being taller and larger than most Nahua women, was hard to fit. Finally a costume was found for me.

"We had to go to the Aztec settlement for these clothes," I was told. "They belonged to a young woman who died some years ago. Her parents had kept them."

The garments looked strangely familiar. Could they have been Conchita's? As the women helped me on with them I recalled that she, too, had been taller and larger than the average. An inde-

scribable fear gripped my heart. But no other clothes could be found for me; time was pressing, and I was obliged to wear them.

Someone offered Montezuma a revolver.

"Better take it, chieftain. The country is in turmoil; there is killing, robbing and burning everywhere."

Montezuma made a wry face.

"I never learned to use the things," he said. "The throwing stick and its spears, the weapons of our ancestors, have always been good enough for me. I'll take a knife, though, if you have one."

As there were no Christian ministers of any kind in that remote district, we set out for the lowlands on borrowed mules, riding through the very canyon where I had been captured. The thought of being outside the valley roused neither embarrassment nor enthusiasm in me, for I was too absorbed in our errand, and too anxious for Montezuma's safety to pay much attention to anything else.

At last we reached a good sized town, which, of course, must be nameless, and were fortunate enough to find a Protestant minister who was willing to marry us in real American style, ring and all, although I admit a Catholic would have done about as well.

THE CEREMONY, the start homeward, seem like a dream to me now. Poor Montezuma! All traces in me of my old self had vanished, for, proud and happy, but acutely conscious of my wedding ring and my new dignity, I rode along beside my husband. Robert Sanderson and Conchita's clothing were alike forgotten. We had been married under the names, assumed on a moment's notice, of Juan Rey and Maria Dorada, so as I rode my heart was singing, "Now I am Señora Maria Dorada de Rey! Or,

I am Roberta de Montezuma, Queen of Nahuatlan and rightful Queen of Mexico!"

I stole a look at Montezuma, at his dear, strong face, his clear skin, warm with the ruddy copper of ancient America, at his bright brown eyes, his glossy black hair, at his head, carried so proudly. He looked every inch a ruler, and he was mine!

By nightfall we had reached a little town in the foothills and put up at an old-fashioned inn. I can see the sign now: "La Mascota-Fonday Posada," painted on the wall above the doorway. We were given a good room, unusually comfortable and homelike for a country inn, and peaceful. I looked up at the stars as we crossed the patio. How brilliant and beautiful they looked against the black velvet of the heavens!

Once inside our room, the door closed and locked, my husband lifted the shawl from my head and loosed my hair. He folded me in his arms.

"My Golden Queen!" he murmured.

I glanced at our image in the mirror. A pretty picture we made. As I looked, I caught the gleam of my wedding ring. I cuddled a little closer.

Suddenly we were shocked by yells—shrieks—shots! Somebody shouted.

"Run! Bandits! El Lobo the Killer!"

The patio echoed to the clatter of a hundred hoofs! Montezuma whisked out his knife and stepped forward, just as our door was burst open, disclosing burly figures, pistols in hand.

"Shoot that damn Indian—he looks dangerous," growled a gruff voice in Spanish. "Then get their money and come on—we'll catch the woman later!"

Montezuma sprang toward them, but shots rang out. I saw him tottering, falling down through the smoke. With reeling senses I hid my face in my hands to shut out the dreadful sight. A quick

search for our money, a curse at finding so little, and the fiends had gone—but my king lay stretched on the floor, before me. An instant later his dear head was on my lap—I was smoothing his hair—calling on him by name—begging him to open his eyes. At last the lids parted slightly. He spoke in a husky whisper: "Go, dear one! Go to your own people. I—I am dying."

"No, my chieftain," I answered between sobs—"you must live! But whatever happens I shall go back to our valley, where I belong!"

This roused him. He tried to raise himself.

"No, no," he cried; "they will say you lured me outside to my death. They will kill you! Run, my treasure—get away before those wolves come back!"

"Oh," I wept, "it is all my fault—"

"There, there—" his voice was fainter again. "How could you know? Farewell my—"

His head fell back as a gush of blood burst from his mouth.

In a panic I screamed for help—for a doctor—but no one answered. I looked again at his face—it was changing. Tearing open his shirt, I listened for his brave heart. It beat no more.

I stepped to the door. The patio was empty, still as the grave. I rushed out to the archway opening on the street and found it alight with the glare of burning buildings. Far up toward the other end of town I heard shots and a woman's scream.

Back to the room I ran, resolved to stay with him, whatever happened. Then I remembered his last wish, and thought of the return of—the Wolves. I knelt a moment beside his dear body—and took my farewell. A moment later I was running down the street, away from the shots, keeping in the shadows. Reaching

the open country I slackened my speed. I was not used to running—not in skirts.

A light ahead caused me to pause, ready to seek a hiding place in the bushes, but I heard no sound. Creeping forward I found the light came from the smoldering ruins of a farmhouse. I looked around and saw a fodder stack with a fence around it. This had not caught fire, and in it I hid myself. Before I covered my head I looked at the stars. There they still shone, bright and beautiful, in a sky of black velvet.

At daybreak I emerged, of course, sleepless, and found a path that had led from the house to a spring—this I followed, and drank deep. Near the spring, out of sight of the road, I tried to get my faculties together, to study the situation. I looked down at myself, clad in what must have been poor Conchita's best. The front of the dress was covered with blood—my husband's.

An idea struck me. Could this be part of my punishment, meted out by a greater and sterner judge than Montezuma? Like Conchita, I had been robbed of my heart's desire, just as it seemed within reach; but unlike Conchita, I was not brave enough to die. But why should poor Montezuma have met such a fate?

My thoughts were brought back to earth by the sound of hoof-beats out on the road. I crouched until they had passed, and then I made my plans.

On the bushes about the spring hung various ragged feminine garments, left to dry by some poor woman after she had washed them the day before. Perhaps even now her pitiful corpse was roasting in that smoldering ruin. I put on the shapeless rags, leaving my own clothing or Conchita's, on the bushes in payment, in case the woman should come back. With a razor-sharp flake struck from a piece of flint, a trick I had

learned in the Hidden Valley, I cut other rags into the form of a bandage or mask to hide my face, with its conspicuous nose-ring. The ring I knew I could not get off without mutilating my nose. This I could hardly afford to do. On second thought, I smeared the bandage with blood drawn from a finger by the aid of the same flint. My hair I braided and coiled around my head, hiding it and the earrings with a faded bandana handkerchief tied under my chin, then covered everything with a ragged blanket. Sadly pulling off my wedding ring, I strung it on a strip of rag around my neck. The next step was to get my hands and ankles as dirty as possible, then to tie on my feet an old pair of sandals, that I had found hanging on the fence about the fodder stack.

Making sure that the manuscripts were safely ensconced in the bosom of the tattered dress, I picked up a stick to serve as a cane, and after a little practice I managed to bend my back and hobble along very much like an old beggar-woman.

And so I came to you, begging my way, and praying that you still lived in Vera Cruz. Instead of avoiding notice, I appeared to seek it, pushing myself in wherever I could, and telling everyone that I was old Maria Perez, that I had a dreadful sore on my face, that the Virgin had told me in a vision that an American doctor at Vera Cruz could cure me. Would the *senores* help me along with *una limosna, por la santissima Virgen*? Oh, no, I could not possibly show the sore—it was most disgusting to look upon. And besides, I had vowed to the Virgin never to stop traveling and never to show the sore until I reached the American doctor. People believed me, and here I am!

Later. What my future will be in the States, Lord only knows; but with the

“loss of memory” excuse to cover my tracks, and with the credentials you have given me, I may be able to fit in somewhere, especially on account of the war, which should make jobs enough for everyone. But think of our country sending an army overseas, and me, young and strong, out of soldiering forever! I wonder how New York will look through my new eyes, or rather, from my new point of view. I’ll bet the Fifth Avenue shops will be more entertaining to me now than the burlesque shows which amused Robert Sanderson, deceased!

Anyhow, whatever success I may win I shall owe entirely to you, dear friend. Who but you and your good wife could have started me on the new road? You have my deepest gratitude, and I shall be always,

Most Thankfully Yours,
Maria Dorada de Rey,
alias Teoquilita.

P. S. I wish I dared call myself Roberta Sanderson de Montezuma, but I haven’t the nerve! M. D. R.

AS THE good doctor finished reading he looked up at his friend, and was startled to note that Lewis’ face was set and pale as death, as he stared off across the moonlit Caribbean.

“Why!” cried the doctor, “do you know Mrs. Rey?”

“Well,” the American gulped, “I do—or rather I thought I did. You see, she’s my wife!”

After a long silence, the doctor said softly, “I carried that manuscript up to the States on this last trip, to return it to Mrs. Rey, if I could find her, but I could get no trace of her. I reckon it belongs to you.”

Lewis took the package, regarded it a minute, and, rising, stepped to the rail. A second later it was floating sternward, dancing on the waves in the moonlight. The two men clasped hands silently.