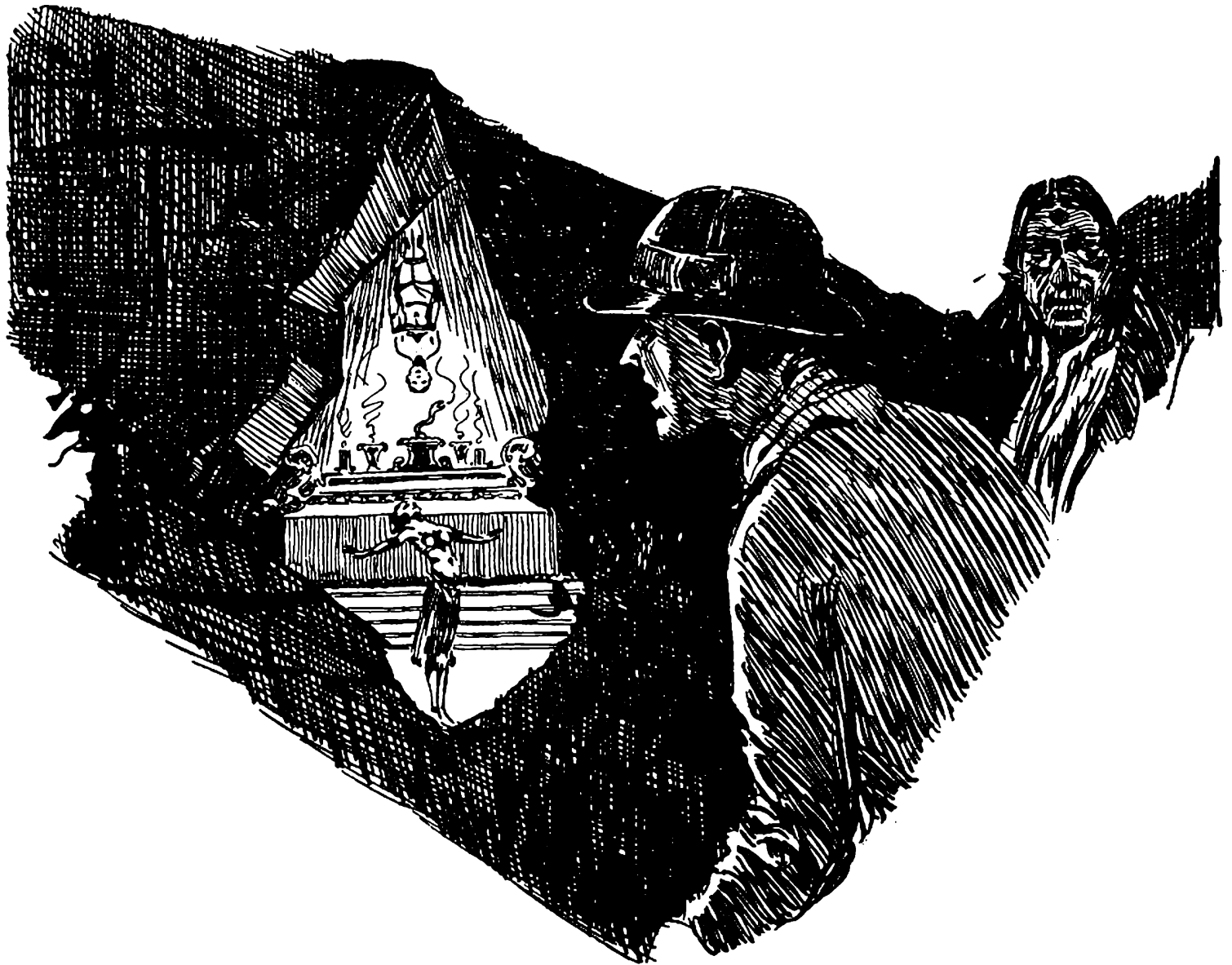


*A Weird Novelette  
of Devil Worship in Yucatan*

# THE COBRA LILY

By LEDYARD M. BAILEY



**T**HE veranda of the Country Club commanded a wide sweep of rolling wooded hills and neatly cropped fields, of twinkling water and gleaming sails. As Henry Adams Oakes paused in the doorway he thought it had never looked so lovely. 'A sharp tussle at tennis, handily won, a shower and as near a drink as the House Rules allowed had left him in a peaceful and receptive frame of mind.

The prospect seemed ill-fitted to treason, stratagems and spoils, but his eye turning to the nearer scene he discovered, at a table in the choicest corner of the veranda, "The Triple Alliance"—

three maids fair to look upon, whose smiles belied their sinister reputation in the matter of male heart-strings. His mother, with the primitive instinct for protecting her off-spring, was wont to remark that what made them dangerous was their practice of hunting in a pack, so that the quarry had less than a Chinaman's chance for his life. Mr. Oakes, however, did not content himself with sniffing the battle from afar, but promptly went over the top in an attempt to break their line.

Welcomed with the zest due to their lawful prey, he deftly conveyed the idea that he had room for one passenger in his runabout, and would be charmed

if they would detail one of their number to fill it. And, to forestall any prolonged debate and heartburnings, he suggested that they match coins to determine the winner. He said "winner" also "heartburnings," by way of a preliminary bombardment, to break the enemy's morale.

In any contest of mere wits he must have been hopelessly outclassed, but much practice in training camp and dug-out had given him a certain manual dexterity and speed which the ladies lacked. Once again he proved that the hand is quicker than the eye. Thus he made sure of Margaret Winthrop for his passenger, though it was quite

clear that neither of the other members of the Alliance had so intended.

Driving homeward in the pleasant coolness of sunset dusk, he found even more charm and ease for the eye in the seat beside him, and paid but casual attention to the road. So he was quite off guard when, as he slowed for a trolley crossing, a man stepped from the roadside bushes to his running board, stuck an unpleasant-looking automatic in his face, and ordered him to drive slow and stop under the first tree. Margaret caught her breath on a sharp exclamation of dismay and was gruffly told to "shut her trap!"—a remark which failed to please Mr. Oakes' nice sense of the courtesy due a lady.

Barring a change of expression which to his friends, would have signaled danger, he gave no apparent heed to anything but his car, and kept both hands on the wheel, but his left elbow suddenly flicked up and caught the man full on the point of his out-thrust jaw. It was a short arm jolt of the deadliest sort, and the footpad flopped to the pavement with an abandon which showed a total loss of interest in the proceedings.

Oakes, on the contrary, went into action on the instant, stopping the car, jerking open the door and stepping to the ground all in one motion. Running back to the senseless man, he dragged him out of the roadway, tossed his gun over the fence, and then bent over him for a moment, his hands moving swiftly, with a gleam of steel.

Margaret, twisted round in her seat, watched in round-eyed anxiety until he rejoined her, but as he put the car in motion she burst out, "what in the world were you doing to him?"

"Merely cut his suspenders and shoelaces," he answered coolly; "a little trick we learned in France. Takes all the fight out of 'em."

Margaret received this information with a gasp and then a burst of laughter so heartfelt that tears stood in her eyes, and Henry Adams was moved to pat her hand approvingly.

"Oh, dear!" she stammered at last, "who but you could have thought of that!"

As the car passed out of sight the footpad roused and sat up, feeling his chin with cautious fingers. Then, getting to his feet, he discovered his unfitness for either fight or flight, and, holding himself together, he shuffled back toward the trolley, cursing the vanishing car with marked sincerity and thoroughness.

IN THE car, Mr. Oakes abruptly cut across Margaret's final chuckle over his exploit.

"Peggy," he said, "I am going to Yucatan next week."

Margaret caught her breath again. For a drive which had begun so casually, this one seemed to have more than its share of thrills.

"Yucatan!" she said, rather faintly. "Just like that!"

Then, recovering herself, she went on: "Yucatan! And why Yucatan? Chewing gum?—or bananas?"

"Blossoms," said Henry Adams; "and cactus,—and chiggers."

Margaret made a shuddering face. "And raving mosquitoes," she added, "and man-eating ants—and crocodiles! And lovely Senoritas, with wonderful eyes and unspeakable tempers!"

It was Henry Adams' turn to chuckle. "Peggy," he said, "you move fast!"

She became suddenly serious. "Uncle Bob spent five years down in those parts," she said. "Horrible country! Are you really going?"

"I wrote to the Director of the Smithsonian ten days ago," said Oakes. "Offered to take an expedition into the back country at my own expense, provided the Government would guarantee passports and protection. I think he will take me up."

Margaret studied him for a long minute. It had been her habit since High School days to be rather fond of Henry Adams Oakes, III,—only son and worthy scion of an old Back Bay family. She knew of the stern purpose and industry with which he pursued his chosen vocation of tropical botany—so successfully that he had won recognition in high quarters before he was twenty-eight. And she knew why they had called him "Live" Oakes in Harvard, and later in the American Expeditionary Forces. He had a sort of gay recklessness and careless courage which had flowered oddly from the staid old Puritan stock. That Huguenot great-grandmother was responsible, probably. If he had made up his mind to go to Yucatan, he would go. And she had rather counted on him in certain plans for her winter at home. She heaved a little sigh.

"Some queer ruins in Yucatan, too," she said. "Older than the Aztecs."

Oakes looked at her. "How did you come to think of that?" he said. "That is one of the best reasons for going. Ruins are not in my line, exactly, but these certainly are all you say—queer! I have some photographs—temples, altars, great courtyards, curious and intricate carvings done by skilled arti-

sans—and all forgotten in the jungles centuries before ever Cortez found the Aztecs. I would like to know who made them, and why."

They had drawn up at Margaret's door before the talk ran out. They sat silent for a little. Then Margaret rose and stepped to the curb.

"Bring me back an altar, or something," she said lightly. "Thank you for the ride—and I shall never forget that poor abused hold-up man! Shall I see you before you go?"

"I hope so," said Oakes, lifting his cap: "but about that altar, now. Would it be any use—to me?"

"One never can tell," smiled Margaret displaying a deadly dimple: "If you cannot lead the lady to the altar, try fetching the altar to the lady. It will be a change of program, at least. And you know I love novelty."

And so left him, out-guessed as usual.

THE next morning Mrs. Oakes found her son rather more unsocial than is common even for the before-breakfast male, but with the calm assurance of motherhood she persisted in brightening his morning sunshine with coffee and conversation until the maid handed in a telegram. Then things began to happen.

One glance at the yellow sheet, and Henry Adams kicked away his chair, caught his mother and whirled her about the room in a jazz dance that left her breathless with laughter and protest. The Director of the Smithsonian had answered at last:

There followed days and nights of crowded preparations, and presently Oakes was waving the last good-byes from the rail of his steamer across that strip of dirty harbor water that widens so slowly, and yet so surely and finally. And as always, when men go down to the sea for their light-hearted daring of unknown perils, there were women's hearts faint with forebodings behind the brave smiles and misty eyes. Mrs. Oakes and Margaret Winthrop were very close in spirit as well as in body as they drove up town from the docks.

At dinner the first night out, Oakes was renewing an old troop-transport acquaintance with the smartly-uniformed Captain, when he became aware of a sudden lack of attention and found the keen, sun-wrinkled eyes fixed on something behind him, while the table chatter about them paused for a moment. Turning his head, he beheld a vision of tropical beauty in a bewildering Paris dinner gown, poised on the lowest step of the dining saloon stairway.

Waiting long enough to make sure that all eyes were upon her, the vision came pacing down the broad strip of carpet, straight to the Captain's table. As a dramatic entrance, it was a riot! The Captain came to his feet and Oakes rose with him, to be presented to Senorita Amalia de Quintana, who acknowledged the introduction with a blinding smile and accepted the chair at the Captain's right hand.

It seemed that the lady had looked over the list of eligibles and prepared her campaign, for she wasted no time on a survey of the other diners, but forthwith centered her fire on Mr. Oakes. It cannot be said that he offered a stubborn resistance. He was in love, as he acknowledged to himself, with Margaret Winthrop—ashore; but afloat was another story. He was an excellent sailor, the last of the shore lights were drowned astern, and there was a perfectly good moon.

As a steamer affinity, the Senorita left nothing to be desired—olive skin, black as to hair and glorious eyes, lithe and rounded of figure and always fetchingly turned out, she was good to look upon; and her tireless vivacity and gay chatter in Spanish, French and English, which she seemed to use with equal facility, her dancing and her delicious contralto voice made a quite irresistible ensemble.

She knew Paris better than Oakes himself, and was but newly returned from thence and on her way to visit her adored family at their ancient estate near Merida, in Yucatan. She was enchanted to learn that Senor Oakes was to visit her dear Yucatan, and he should not return until he had paid her a visit in her home, where he would find many rare plants to interest him—and perhaps other things.

Swinging about the promenade deck for morning exercise, leaning on the rail to watch the flying fish skitter from wave to wave, lounging in deck chairs under the after awnings, dancing, playing cards in the smoking-room, watching the milky gleam of the wake in the moonlight—it was a merry life and a short one, which was well perhaps for their future peace of mind.

One evening, renewing her fervid interest in his expedition, she demanded his note-book and pencil and drew for him a sketch of a strange plant, with thick sprawling leaves and a single tall, slender stalk, crowned with a heavy conical bud poised like the head of a serpent.

This, she told him, was the Serpent Flower of the Maya Indians, whose touch was death, and which played a

part in the weird and awful ceremonies attendant upon the worship of the Serpent God, still kept up in the ancient ruined temples, buried in the jungle. Her description was so vivid that Oakes was impressed in spite of his scientific skepticism; but when—pressed for further details—she declared that she had never seen the plant herself but was merely quoting her old Indian servants, he lost interest.

The night before landing was, by custom, set apart for the Captain's Ball, and the passengers appeared in such more or less elaborate fancy dress as they could improvise. The Senorita was the hit of the evening, in a costume as striking and exotic as herself—a curiously designed and decorated native dress, with a head-piece of flaring colors which somehow reminded Oakes of one of his cactus blossoms. Her dancing was superb and her partners many and eager.

As the evening drew to its close, flushed with success and excited by compliments, she conferred a moment with the leader of the orchestra, and presently the music paused and the cello and piano took up a strange, rhythmic beat of tom toms. The Senorita cleared a space about her and swung into a barbaric ceremonial dance, swaying and posturing to some imagined deity—so realistic and savage that some of her fellow passengers shivered even in the midst of their noisy applause. Smiling her acknowledgments, she excused herself from further dancing, and, taking Oakes' arm, led him to a shadowy corner of the deck for her farewells.

It was fortunate that Margaret Winthrop was no psychic, or she might have had a most disturbing vision of that shadowy corner. The Senorita made no secret of her infatuation, and Henry Adams was no Saint Anthony.

**T**HE next morning the steamer lay at her dock, and the Senorita was welcomed by her brother, a grave, handsome young gentleman of the same tropical complexion, and faultlessly turned out in a morning suit of the latest London cut. He led the way to a glittering French limousine, while the *mozos* looked after her mountain of luggage. Oakes, occupied with the details of getting his equipment off the ship, could only wave good-bye from the rail.

In the limousine, the Senorita immediately laid before her brother a proposal to which he listened in amazement and disgust, being nothing less than that he engage himself to Oakes as

guide and headman for his expedition, thus insuring not only his safety but the certainty that he would pay the promised visit to her home. Overruling his objections with an odd mixture of pleading and authority, she finally carried her point, putting him at the same time under pledge of secrecy as to his relationship to herself.

Thus it came about that there presented himself to Oakes at his hotel, one Benito Alvear, an uncommonly good-looking and intelligent native, who offered his services as guide and headman for the journey he understood Senor Oakes intended to make. He answered all questions satisfactorily, his references were of the best, and Oakes engaged him on the spot, much relieved to find so good a man, and suspecting nothing of the Senorita's little scheme.

Leaving the city with a mule train, on the second day out they embarked in a long native boat, with six Indians at the paddles, the baggage piled amidships, Benito standing in the prow and Oakes sitting in the stern, and made good progress up a sluggish, muddy river into the thickening fringes of the jungle.

Late that afternoon, as they rounded a bend in the stream, they struck, head on, a sunken log hidden under the muddy water, and Benito was thrown overboard. At the splash two huge crocodiles, sunning themselves on the bank, were galvanized into sudden action, and came boiling through the water to seize him.

He came up alongside, swimming frantically, the Indians screaming and beating the water with their paddles, and Oakes, leaning far out, caught him by the hair with one hand, emptied his automatic into the crocodiles, and dragged him in over the stern just in time.

The man got to his knees, his chest heaving and his eyes wide with terror, and watched for a moment the wounded reptiles thrashing and rolling in a smother of foam. Then he turned upon Oakes a long look full of strangely mingled emotions, muttered, "*Muchissimas gracias, Senor!*" made his way forward between the frightened peons, restored discipline with a harsh word or two, and got the boat under way again.

That evening they made camp on a strip of sandy bar laid down by the floods, and which the jungle had not had time to conquer. As Oakes sat before his tent, fighting off the clouds of insects with his pipe, and watching the river mists slowly dim the huge stars, Benito came out of the shadows and, to his vast surprise, suddenly knelt at his feet and in a voice vibrating with feel-

ing placed at his service the life he had saved.

Amazed and touched, Oakes refused to accept the offer, making light of his part in the adventure: but Benito was not to be dissuaded, declaring that he must be bound by the ancient law of his own people, the Mayas, and that thenceforward his life was at his master's disposal.

Impressed in spite of himself by the man's evident sincerity, made the more convincing by the setting of the dim, unknown river and the black, silent, listening jungle, Oakes at last accepted the situation, reflecting that the matter would right itself when he presently returned to civilization.

Three days later they left the boat, carefully concealed in the mouth of a little creek that tunneled the rank jungle growth, and working slowly and painfully to higher ground, made permanent camp on a swelling mountain spur, where they found an open space with grass and a spring of clear water.

Here Oakes set to work, collecting, sketching, photographing and analysing the plants and flowers, and entering the data in his note-books. Thus, presently, he came upon the Senorita's sketch and, smiling at the memories it called up, summoned Benito to look at it, asking if he had ever seen or heard of such a plant.

As the man leaned over the camp table, Oakes heard him catch his breath and felt him stiffen with shock, and, looking up, found him staring at the sketch and trembling with excitement and terror. He demanded to know where Oakes had secured it, and, being told, broke into a torrent of words strange to Oakes' ears, but which he readily assumed to be savage and heartfelt curses.

Astonished at the outbreak and beginning to think there might be some truth in the Senorita's fantastic yarn, he faced Benito sternly and demanded to be shown this wonderful plant.

The man refused with vehement protests and denials of any direct knowledge of its whereabouts, but, studying him keenly, Oakes at once decided he was lying, and, his curiosity now fully aroused, made up his mind to push the matter to an issue.

Waiting for the gust of passion to pass, he reminded Benito of his oath of service and demanded its fulfillment. At this there followed a poignant struggle between terror and loyalty which left the Indian shaken, but in the end submissive.

"It is Death, Senor!" he protested: "death not only to me but to yourself, and to every man of us."

But when Oakes coolly waved aside this direful threat, he accepted his fate with a gesture of true Indian fatalism and agreed to do what he could.

As dusk fell he brought to Oakes' tent an Indian costume and the juice of a nut, wherewith he stained his skin a light brown. Then, with strict injunctions as to silence and caution, he led the way into the jungle, avoiding the occasional faint trails, and at the end of an hour of breathless and noiseless travel they came suddenly face to face with a wall of great hewn stones, overrun with creepers and looming overhead.

Along this Benito slipped for a few yards to a crevice where one of the stones had fallen partially away, and into this he pushed Oakes and crouched beside him. Still with infinite caution, he pulled away a tangle of vines and a small loose stone, and Oakes found himself staring through a chink in the wall into a courtyard, dimly lighted by flaring torches.

The walls were ornamented by carvings in high relief, and directly before him was a great circular stone altar and in front of it a stone vase, both carved in the strange symbols which he had noted in the photographs, which seemed to writhe and coil in the flickering torch-light.

And in the vase was the Serpent Flower, its thick leaves sprawling over the rim and the single tall stalk, with its sinister snaky head, swaying gently to and fro.

Oakes stared fascinated at this vision, his pulses for once in his life pounding heavily and his breath caught with something of Benito's quivering terror of impending evil. The flower stalk seemed incredibly instinct with life, and so serpent-like that Oakes recalled instantly the wicked, poised, fighting posture of the great king cobra of East India.

"The Cobra!" he breathed. "The Cobra Lily!" and scientific interest and curiosity began to slacken his taut nerves.

He had time to note that the *motif* of all the carvings was the same, an endless variety of grotesque serpent heads and coils, and that a crowd of Indian worshippers was dimly revealed by the flickering torches.

Then came the muffled beat of tom-toms, the crowd stirred and their eyes gleamed as they turned to the entrance, and a procession paced slowly into view—priests, in elaborate and beautiful

regalia, leading a young boy, blindfolded and naked; a High Priestess in a costume vaguely familiar, guards and torch-bearers.

The priests led the boy to the altar, the tom-toms were hushed, and in silence the victim was laid flat on the altar, his feet toward the serpent flower, and bound securely by thongs passed through holes in the stone.

The silence, the deadly, sinister deliberation of the priests, the gleaming eyes of the worshippers, motionless and intent, the shifting flicker of the torch-light, now flaring up to throw everything into clear relief, now sinking to a dimness full of unseen terrors—all this plucked at Oakes' nerves until he had to clamp his self-control with both hands.

Benito beside him, tense with dread, breathed in his ear "Quiet, Senor, for your life!" Even the victim made no outcry, then nor later.

Then the tom-toms boomed again, the priests fell back, and the Priestess sprang into a wild ceremonial dance before the altar. Again there seemed something familiar in the dancing and the odd rhythm of the drums, and suddenly, as the dancer swayed backward with the light of the torches full on her face, Oakes, with a shock of amazement, recognized his beautiful friend, the Senorita!

The tom-toms boomed in quickening rhythm and the Priestess danced, posturing and gesturing before the altar and the Serpent Flower. And the altar slowly moved, tilting smoothly on a hidden pivot, until the boy hung upright, his naked breast level with the cobra head, which swayed more and more, turning with a deadly purpose toward the altar as the sunflower turns to the sun.

The Priestess flung out her arms in a gesture of fierce appeal, the tom-toms thundered and the swaying stem swung in a wider and wider arc, until suddenly the pointed serpent head met the naked breast of the victim. There sounded a puffing hiss, like some huge serpent, and it seemed to Oakes, watching with all his eyes, that something flicked from the wicked head of the flower. But on the instant the boy gasped, straining convulsed against his bonds, and shuddering from head to foot. Then his chin dropped to his chest and he hung limp.

The Priestess and the worshippers fell to their knees and faces, the torches were sharply extinguished, and Oakes found himself staring into black darkness, shaken and amazed.

Benito's hand closed on his arm, and they crept out of their crevice. The man was shivering from head to foot like a

frightened horse, but he led the way again through the black and stifling jungle, and they made their way back to camp with no alarms.

**I**N the morning sunshine, Oakes said to himself that such things could not be, and concluded that he had witnessed some clever trick of mesmerism such as the Hindu fakirs use. Also, he realized that in this strange plant he had perhaps made a discovery of the first importance from a botanical point of view, and he determined at all hazards to secure it for careful observation and analysis.

Benito, relieved for the moment from his fears, had gone about his daily routine in a stoical calm that gave no hint of any smouldering resentment; but when Oakes summoned him and announced his purpose, there ensued another outburst of passionate protest and pleading even more intense than yesterday's. Oakes, however, held coolly and steadily to his determination, and made merciless use of the power of life and death which the Indian's oath of service had placed in his hands.

And in the end the man submitted again, going about his preparations with the detached air of one under the shadow of death. At his insistence, Oakes broke camp and sent the bearers with all the baggage back to the boat to await his coming. Then he prepared a box slung between poles to receive the plant, and an hour before sunset followed Benito again through the jungle to the temple court.

In the light of day there were few traces of the night's ceremonies, but he noted the ashes and smudge of suddenly smothered torches, and on the altar a single smear of blood. The plant was in its vase, but the tall stalk had withered and fallen. Oakes examined it with caution. Benito at his side glancing about in an agony of apprehension and urging him to haste.

He saw at once that the flower stalk had been cut off close to its base, with a sharp, clean cut; and that the stem was hollow. But Benito's growing terror would not admit further delay. They removed the plant with its roots and soil from the vase and packed it in the box, and, carrying it between them, made what speed they could through the night and the jungle toward the boat.

As they paused for a moment's breathing space after hours of punishing toil, a sudden clamor of drums broke out far behind them, and then the deeper booming of what Oakes recognized as a signal drum. At the sound Benito became frantic, and urged him to leave the box

and run for life and he had to exert all his authority, backed by ferocious threats, to steady the man.

Just at dawn they reached the boat, and heard the signal drums answering from ahead and up the river. Once in the boat and out in the main stream, Benito recovered his courage and ably seconded Oakes in driving the rowers to their utmost.

Day and night they swept down stream, with never a stop for rest or food, the drums behind them spurring their weariness to fresh energy. And so on the second morning, as they swung round a long bend, Oakes' heart leaped exultantly at sight of the open sea, and of a small steamer moving down the coast. But Benito pointed ahead to puffs of smoke rising from the headland, and shouted a warning of ambush and the treachery of the crew.

Without an instant's hesitation, Oakes whipped out his automatic, forced his Indians one after the other to jump overboard and swim for shore, and he and Benito paddled the boat past the point, and out to sea. The steamer, a dirty little coastwise tramp, stopped at their signals, and after some parley they were picked up and found themselves in safety.

It seemed that the Serpent God had missed his stroke.

That night the temple court was lighted again and a conclave of priests gathered round the desecrated altar and the empty vase.

A litter, borne by runners panting with exhaustion, swept into the entrance and the Priestess joined the council, her glorious eyes blazing with fury as she saw the ravished vase and realized that her lover had at one stroke flouted both her God and her own passionate infatuation. A brief and stormy debate followed, and then, kneeling before the altar, the Priestess, at her own demand, took the oath to avenge the sacrilege and to bring back the Serpent Flower to its vase.

**O**N the fruit steamer to which the tramp presently transferred them, Oakes and Benito kept much to themselves. Out of sight of land, Benito's jungle terrors faded away, and Oakes found him for the most part an agreeable and interesting companion. He had traveled in Europe, and spoke good French and rather doubtful English. On some phases of the politics and resources of the Central American countries, he was a well-informed and entertaining talker. Oakes was more and more puzzled to reconcile the man's intelli-

gence and breeding with his devotion to the horrible devil worship of his people.

Of two subjects, however, he never spoke. One was the strange relationship between Oakes and himself which his oath of service had established—which he never mentioned and never forgot. The other was the Serpent Flower and its worship. All questions and surmises as to this were met by a stubborn silence, which Oakes found no means of breaking down save by an appeal to the compulsion of the oath—and this he had promised himself never to use again.

Oakes made no attempt to examine the plant on shipboard, and contented himself with protecting it as thoroughly as possible against the increasing coolness of the Northern seas. But he spent hours going over in his mind the horrid details of the sacrifice and the weird behavior of the plant itself.

He might, as a botanist, grant to a plant the power of what seemed like intelligent motion. Several species had it in some degree—the *Dionaea*, "Venus' Fly Trap," for example. And he was not prepared to deny that such a plant might distill at the tip of its flower bud a deadly alkaloid poison. The poor boy had seemed to be stricken with sudden death at its touch. But this horrible thing had been altogether too intelligent—too nicely attuned to the rhythm of the tom toms and the incantations of the priestess. And then that hiss! He had certainly heard it. Decidedly, he could not admit that any plant could hiss as well as strike. And yet he certainly saw it and heard it.

And if the priests had no inkling of his presence, hidden in his cranny of the wall, it was not likely he had been hypnotized. He cursed Benito's panic, which had hurried them away before he had any chance to study out a solution which a man might entertain outside of a lunatic asylum.

Arriving in Boston, Oakes' first concern was to remove the Cobra Lily from its box and as closely as might be to restore it to its native conditions—setting it in rich soil in a vase of artificial stone, and placing it in a corner of the conservatory where it could be at once protected and isolated by a waist-high railing. The flower stalk and bud were withered, and these he carefully removed for examination; but the roots and leaves seemed still full of life.

Benito assisted in looking after the plant, without apparent reluctance or anxiety. He accepted also the comforts and conventions of civilization with a readiness that added to Oakes' puzzlement, and fitted into his place as valet

and confidential man so smoothly that it was hard to recall him in the savage setting from which they had so lately emerged.

Mrs. Oakes had welcomed her wanderer with the eager warmth of mother love, tempered by anxiety over the hardships and dangers she divined he had met. For his part, he made light of these, recounting his adventures with a casual and humorous touch, but his mother was not to be deceived, though she had long since learned the folly of trying to coddle her strong-winged offspring.

Freed for the moment from further concern for his jungle treasure, Oakes telephoned to Margaret Winthrop and was filled with deep delight at the eager thrill of welcome in her voice and the readiness with which she canceled an engagement in order to be at home to him.

He found her in her own softly-lighted library with its friendly little fireplace all aglow, and she gave him both her hands in welcome, smiling at first. Then, as she noted the traces of strain and weariness in his face, her eyes grew misty and her smile quivered. And at that his hungry heart could no longer be denied and he swept her into his arms.

Presently she made him sit beside her in front of the fire, and listened to his Odyssey—which he recounted fairly enough, beginning with the part played by the Senorita as Circe. Margaret winced a bit at this, but was reassured and breathlessly absorbed by the scene in the temple, where Circe had ceased to be alluring, and had changed into a savage devotee of horrible devil worship.

"And so," he finished, "I didn't bring the altar to the lady, after all. There seemed to be no time for it."

"Oh, my dear!" breathed Margaret, "I cannot laugh about it even now—those fiends would have butchered you without mercy."

"Benito seemed to be sure of it," he answered; "but I do wish I knew how the devils worked their mummery with that plant." Then, after a moment: "Suppose we go back there on our honeymoon, and find out? The lady to the altar, after all?"

But his description had been too vivid. Margaret shivered at the mere idea.

"The altar in Saint George's is quite good enough for me," she said. "Scientific curiosity is all very well, but entirely out of place on a honeymoon."

After which they lost interest in the ancient rites of the Mayas—turning to the worship of a little god quite as ancient but much more agreeable.

NEXT day Oakes made a careful physical and chemical analysis of the dried bud of the Lily, and concluded that the keen-pointed outer petals carried slight traces of an alkaloid poison, which, however, he could not identify and which seemed to do no harm to the confiding guinea pig into whose system he injected a part of the solution.

He was therefore forced to reserve his opinion, in his report to the Smithsonian, and waited impatiently for his strange find to become reconciled to its new home, and to send up another flower stalk.

A few days later, at breakfast with his mother, he opened a very correct envelope addressed in a dashing deminine hand and found a cordial note from no less a personage than Amalia de Quintana herself, informing Mr. Oakes that she had come to Boston for a few weeks in the Conservatory of Music, and anticipated the pleasure of a renewal of their "too brief acquaintance."

Danger and intrigue breathed from this innocent missive, and Henry Adams sniffed them with joy—there was no excitement in too easy a victory. But when, a little later, he showed the note to Benito, he was startled at the effect. It served to bring back at a breath all his jungle terrors, and he pleaded passionately with Oakes to destroy all traces of the plant, and to leave Boston until the Senorita had returned to Yucatan.

Wholly in the dark as to any other relationship between them than that of priestess and devotee, Oakes sought to laugh the man out of his fears, pointing out that this was Boston—not Yucatan; but he failed to respond, finally taking refuge again in his stolid fatalism.

An hour later, passing into the conservatory for his daily inspection, Oakes found Benito standing before the Cobra Lily, staring at it with a sort of gloomy horror quite out of keeping with the placid manner he had lately worn. At Oakes' approach, he turned away without a word. The plant was flourishing now, and a new flower stalk was shooting up from its center. Oakes was pleased with its progress. Things were beginning to happen. The solution of the mystery could not be much longer delayed.

That afternoon he called on the Senorita at her apartment and was received with enthusiasm. She was once more the vivid and alluring mondaine, quite at home in all the settings of luxury and culture, and with never a hint of barbarous superstition about her. She sought at once to re-establish their friendship on its former footing, but, finding Oakes slow to respond, she mod-

erated her ardor, studying him keenly but maintaining her pose of cordial liking.

When he had taken leave, however, she promptly concluded that he was more interested in some other woman, and, adding to her motives for vengeance a flaming jealousy, she set herself to perfecting her campaign—utterly unconsciously that Oakes had witnessed the scene in the temple and identified her as the Priestess.

At tea with Margaret, Oakes showed her the Senorita's note and quieted her uneasiness at its implications by suggesting that they give a musicale for her at his home, and thus, as he put it, break the news to her gently. The project was characteristic of his recklessness and liking for direct action, and he counted upon thus bringing to the surface whatever secret and dangerous intrigue she might be plotting.

Accordingly, the Senorita was much charmed next morning by a box of roses with Senor Oakes' card and a polite note, asking to bring his mother to call, and offering to arrange a musicale for her, to permit their friends to share his own admiration for her voice. Nothing could have been more flattering to her slightly bruised complacency, or more exactly fitted to forward her plan for a secret and sudden vengeance, and she promptly accepted.

And the Serpent Flower, as if aware that its Priestess was at hand, thrust up its tall stalk and venomous head, and began again that gentle, poised swaying to and fro. Oakes, watching it with a mixture of scientific interest and uncomfortable fascination, was joined again by Benito, who noted its condition with open horror and renewed his plea that it should be destroyed forthwith. Nothing was further from Oakes' mind, and he tried to shame him out of his fears, at the same time warning him sternly not to interfere, whatever might happen.

AT the musicale, Mrs. Oakes and Margaret received the guests and welcomed the Senorita, most attractively gowned and mannered, and seeming thoroughly at home in such an atmosphere.

The men, as usual, were much taken with her looks and her gay chatter; but she was careful to meet the women also with an engaging warmth and appeal which gave Oakes to wonder afresh at her histrionic talent. She studied the situation warily in the midst of her gayety, and promptly decided that Margaret was the rival for whom her own advances had been flouted—marking her



accordingly to share in the vengeance of the Serpent God.

Before the music, Oakes conducted a party of his guests, including the Senorita and Margaret, through his conservatory and showed them some of his treasures. Coming at length to the serpent flower, he drew their attention to it as his latest and most unique discovery.

"The Cobra Lily, only living specimen now in captivity! Hands off, if you please!"

Watching the Senorita, he caught the flare of savage fury in her eyes at this flippant sacrilege, and felt his own nerves thrill with the coming conflict of wits and courage. She turned to him composedly, however, and congratulated him upon securing a specimen of so rare a plant, which she herself "knew only by description and had never seen."

She acquitted herself with great credit of her part in the music, and afterward in the dancing, which Oakes had arranged as a fitting close for the evening. Her partners were full of enthusiasm over her grace and her mastery of all the new steps, and she enjoyed their compliments with a light-hearted air which forbade any suspicion of the seething rage and hate beneath her lovely rounded bosom.

Oakes had one glimpse of Benito's face in the recess back of the music, and was struck by the tragic misery in his eyes as he watched her. Evidently the man was filled with dread of some horrible denouement.

Presently Oakes claimed another dance with his guest of honor, and as they passed the musicians he signaled the leader, and once again the dance music paused, and the cello sounded the vibrant throbbing of tom toms, while he whispered, holding her eyes with his own, "Doesn't that remind you of the Real Thing?" and smiled wickedly.

Her eyes flared and she brushed away his hands, but she managed to control her features, and pleading some trifling accident to her costume, excused herself and slipped away to the dressing-room.

Here she was free to throw off constraint for a moment and to give rein to her fury and to the bewilderment of the sudden suspicion that her secret was out.

"He knows!" she muttered, "and he laughs! He laughs! at me!" And her desperate purpose hardened for an immediate reprisal.

Returning to the guests, who were beginning to take their leave, she sought out Margaret and begged her to accompany her to the conservatory for a moment, to help her find an ornament she must have dropped there—

and so led her directly to the Serpent Flower, now poised once more for its stroke.

Oakes, missing them, followed headlong, shouting a warning, and at this the Senorita dropped all pretense, and seizing Margaret sought to thrust her into contact with the venomous head. The American girl, utterly bewildered by the sudden savagery of the attack, nevertheless twisted her body sharply aside and, trying to break the clutch of the fury's arms, bent her backward over the railing for a brief instant—and the swaying serpent head touched the Senorita's bare shoulder.

As Oakes reached them she released Margaret and clung a moment to the rail, glaring at the flower, her face a mask of horror and shudders rippling over her body; then her knees gave way and she sank to the floor at their feet.

While Margaret and Oakes still stood together, staring horrified at the huddled body, Benito ran in and threw himself down beside it, sobbing out, "Dios mio, Senor! She is my sister!"

Oakes, cursing his own recklessness and trembling at Margaret's narrow escape, held her until she had recovered herself, then, sending her to warn his mother and dismiss the guests, he helped Benito raise his sister and carry her to a couch in the laboratory.

She lived, but pulse and breathing were barely perceptible, and the hastily summoned physician found his stimulants of no slightest effect, nor could he discover any mark of injury save a tiny, reddened spot on the smooth skin of her shoulder.

Mrs. Oakes and Margaret got her to bed and a nurse was installed, but Benito, with a somber, wordless obstinacy, refused to leave her side for a moment. The doctor studied her carefully and reported to Oakes that he could make nothing of her condition beyond shock and profound coma, with no trace of any known poison or other definite cause. He could advise nothing for the time being, further than absolute quiet and ceaseless vigilance.

In the morning Oakes found Benito still crouched by the bedside, his eyes fixed upon his sister's calm and lovely face. The nurse whispered that he had scarcely changed position all night long. She had nothing to report on her patient's condition—her heart beat faintly and she breathed lightly, but there were no other signs of life.

With much difficulty Oakes persuaded Benito to leave her for a few minutes and accompany him to the laboratory. Here he formally released him from his oath of service, thanked

him warmly for his loyalty under such trying conditions, and offered to do anything in his power to help him or to restore his sister.

At this, Benito's stoicism gave way to an outburst of savage fury for which Oakes was not prepared. All his smooth veneer of civilization fell away, and he raged about the room like a trapped jaguar, cursing Oakes' inhuman recklessness and disregard of all his protests, the whole race of the hateful Gringos and their boasted science. Oakes watched him narrowly, on guard against violence, but sympathizing with the misery and despair which fed his fury.

In a few minutes, worn out by the tempest of emotion and the strain of the sleepless night, he threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his arms. Then Oakes slipped quietly out of the room, returning presently with hot coffee, which he succeeded after some trouble in getting him to drink.

As he recovered some measure of composure, Oakes renewed his offer, assuring him that anything he could suggest should be done. At last Benito shook off his depression, and answered that his only hope was to leave this horrible country and take his sister to her own people, who had a skill in such matters far beyond the resources of modern medical science. To this Oakes assented promptly, reinforced by the opinion of the doctor, who frankly admitted that he could do nothing but await developments.

While the preparations for the journey went forward, Oakes found time to remove the deadly bud of the serpent flower and subject it to an exhaustive analysis. At the end, he straightened up and stared at his results in complete bafflement. The bud contained no trace of any known poison.

NEXT morning he put the facts before the doctor, calling in a specialist in toxicology to confirm his results. The doctor, himself a famous authority, received the report calmly.

"I thought as much," he said, and asked a few keen questions about the history of the plant and the connection of the Senorita with its worship.

"It seems clear enough," he went on. "There is not the slightest evidence of any actual poison which could be responsible for our patient's condition. My examination of the lady herself and yours of the plant are entirely negative. But she knew, from those devilish ceremonies you have described, that the touch of the bud was certain death. She had an absolutely fixed conviction of

this. Therefore, when she felt the prick of its sharp tip on her shoulder, she knew herself instantly to be a dead woman—and she died, so far as her conscious, voluntary functions are concerned. But her involuntary, unconscious functions—heart and breathing—not sharing in her convictions, and not affected by any actual poison, still persist, and may do so indefinitely. A very unusual but quite typical case of complete auto-hypnosis."

Oakes drew a deep breath and looked at him steadily.

"But the poor lad on the altar," he said: "he died right enough, I'm sure of that."

"Quite possibly," said the doctor. "But your Cobra Lily didn't kill him. Don't forget that a good many sacred ceremonies are based on appearances rather than facts."

Oakes considered this. "And if we take the poor girl back?" he asked.

"It might do the trick," said the doctor. "The familiar ceremonies and sounds, and perhaps some ancient hypnotic powers of the priests—quite possibly they might release the inhibitions of her own making, and restore her immediately."

Oakes rose. "Thank you," he said. "And I am going back with them. I must save the lady if it is possible—and I want to find out what killed the boy."

The doctor nodded. "Fair enough," he said. "Only—watch your step, my boy. They seem to be rather abrupt and ruthless in their methods, from what you tell me."

AND so the Senorita, a beautiful living image of Death, motionless on her couch, guarded by the sleepless vigilance of her brother and the nurses whom Oakes had provided, went back to her own again. And with her went the Cobra Lily, strange and horrible familiar of the Serpent God of the Mayas, instinct with a venom which modern science could neither name nor cure.

Margaret, sobered by the tragedy of the Senorita's mysterious affliction, had conquered the protests of her heart and come to recognize the duty of her lover to do what he could to relieve the dreadful situation, even though she trembled at the risks he must run. And his mother, hiding her dismay behind smiling lips, sent her son into the danger he was bound to face with the quiet courage of her race and breeding.

Oakes had put at Benito's disposal every resource that money and intelligence could provide, and five days out from home the little party was trans-

ferred from the steamer to a powerful motor-boat, which was lying off the mouth of the river which offered the easiest approach to their goal. In this they made the trip up-river in some comfort, and so came at length and unmolested to the landing place, where the trail, already overgrown, led up through the jungle to Oakes' camp site, on the way to the temple court.

Here Benito drew Oakes aside.

"Senor," he said, "you are a brave man, and just—a true *Caballero*. Turn now and go back to your own people. You have saved my life, and you have done all in your power to save my sister. You released me from my oath of service—but it is not for you to release me, Senor. The oath stands. My life is yours, and I must protect your life with my own, to the last drop of my blood. But here, where we are about to go, no one can save you."

Oakes looked him in the eye. "Good man," he said quietly; "but—that is not my way. I must go through with it."

With that Benito had to be content, and presently the file of carriers was cutting its toilsome way up through the tangle of jungle growth. Oakes instructed the motor-boat engineer to stay where he was for two days—and after that to use his own judgment.

That night, in the ruined temple court, was played out the final scene in its Priestess' mission of vengeance. The carved walls gleamed and wavered again in the flaring light of the torches, and a group of priests waited in solemn council before the great stone altar and the empty vase.

Out of the darkness Benito entered at last, weary and broken, leading his party of bearers carrying his sister's body in a litter slung from poles, and the box containing the Serpent Flower. And behind the box strode Henry Adams Oakes going into action with his jaw set and his eyes vigilant. As he entered there was a little stir among the waiting priests, and two guards silently slipped between him and the entrance. There should be a reckoning with this Gringo robber a little later.

Benito knelt and made his plea to the council, and awaited the verdict with bowed head, expecting condemnation. The priests conferred, raised the body of their Priestess from its litter and bore it slowly to the altar, where they gathered closely about it, uniting in a low-toned chant and ritual. Others took the Serpent Flower from its casket and placed it once more in its great stone vase.

At a signal the tom toms sounded again, very softly, the rhythm of the serpent dance, the priests fell back from the altar, and slowly, slowly, the Priestess lifted her head, and her eyes gleamed in the torch light; slowly she raised herself upon her arms, rose to her knees upon the altar, and stared at the Serpent Flower in its vase, its tall stem fallen toward her as if making obeisance. A slow triumphant smile dawned upon her face, she made an imperious gesture and the priests circled the altar in a mad, swirling, twisting dance, the tom toms booming savagely.

She lifted her hand and the drums died, the dancers stood rooted. Then she saw Oakes standing beyond the vase, his guards beside him, and her smile was not good to see. The fury of jealousy and of vengeance flared up in her, unabated by the long days she had spent in the shadow of death. At her command the circle of priests opened and Oakes' guards pushed him forward. He struck off their hands and strode to the rim of the great altar, facing the Priestess.

She stared at him with glowing eyes. "Ah!" she murmured, "always cold, always brave, fearing neither God nor man—nor even woman. How I could have loved you! But you—you poor fool—you flouted me for that pale girl of your horrible North—a creature with iced water in her veins!"

She turned away her eyes and spoke rapidly, imperiously, in the harsh Indian tongue, to the knot of priests, who had closed about Oakes. Her furious eyes and passionate inflections and gestures made her meaning only too plain to him; she was charging him with sacrilege, with defiling her temple and stealing the sacred plant, and with attempting to destroy their Priestess through a cruel device, by the power of the Serpent Flower itself. And she finished by demanding that here and now, on this altar which he had desecrated, he should meet the vengeance of the Serpent God.

Her appeal roused the priests to a fury like her own. A dozen hands clutched Oakes and twisted him round to throw him upon the altar at the Priestess' knees.

Then Benito called out a warning, in a high, vibrating voice, and the priests paused. But the Priestess, her fury mounting at the interruption, blazed out at him in Spanish, calling him a dog, a slave to this Gringo, and no brother of hers; and lapsing again into the Indian speech, she ordered the priests to prepare the victim.



Oakes, his shoulders braced against the rim of the altar, slipped his right hand under his tunic to the heavy automatic in its scabbard beneath his left arm-pit. This reminded him of one of those nasty scimmages in the German dug-outs. If they were bound to have a killing, he would try to do his part.

As his fingers closed on the weapon, he glimpsed a sudden movement by Benito that fixed his attention. The man stepped backward to one of the guards and snatched from his hands what seemed to be a staff of bamboo, about six feet long. He threw this up to his lips, leveling it at the Priestess. There sounded above the hoarse breathing of the struggling men that same weird, puffing hiss which Oakes had heard once before, and something flickered like light past his head.

A harsh scream burst from the Priestess, a horrible, strangling shriek, and, twisting out of the slack hands of his captors, Oakes turned to see her clutching wildly at a tiny tuft of gay feathers which seemed to be stuck upon the creamy pallor of her full throat.

"Good God!" he gasped, "a blow-gun! I might have known!"

And on the word the Priestess sank face down upon the carved surface of her altar, all her fury drowned forever in the full tide of death. The awful *curari* poison gives no time for farewells.

IT SEEMED to Oakes that minutes passed while every man stood as if struck to stone. Then he found Benito by his side, his eyes blazing, but his breath coming in rending sobs.

"It was the only way!" he whispered. Then, laying one hand on the altar and putting the other on Oakes' shoulder, he cried out in Spanish, in his high, ringing voice:

"Sanctuary! my brothers. Sanctuary! My hand is on the altar! None

may touch me save the Serpent God himself!"

The priests gave back sullenly, their blood-lust slowly ebbing away. An aged man, frail but evidently of high authority among them, stepped between them and the two who leaned against the altar. To him Benito spoke in the Indian tongue, rapidly, with passionate sincerity, pointing to Oakes as the saviour of his life, to whose defense he was forever bound by their own Law—the Law of the Mayas. More he said as to the plant and its return, and the care of his sister, their Priestess. On that word his voice broke for a moment, then he drew himself up stoically and awaited the verdict.

The old priest turned slowly and spoke a few words to his colleagues. They fell away into two lines, leaving free passage to the entrance. He turned again and spoke in Spanish to Oakes.

"Go now, Senor!" he said: "Your folly has cost us a precious life, but your courage has saved another, and our own Law protects you. You are a fool, Senor—but a brave man."

Benito turned his eyes upon his sister's body.

"No, my son," said the old priest; "she belongs to us—she remains here! Go now—and make haste!"

The trail was broad and easy now, and they passed rapidly, watchful but unharmed, through that black and breathless jungle, which seemed to listen and whisper all about them. Soon after sunrise they reached the boat and got under way at once. Benito fell into a profound depression and refused to speak or to eat, all that day, sitting listlessly in the stern and watching his jungles pass away into dimness behind him.

But the next day, as the fast motor boat neared the mouth of the river, Oakes roused him with a hand on his shoulder.

"We part here, my friend," he said; "our score is even, my life for yours—but yours was the better courage. You must go back to your own people, and think of me only as your good friend, if ever you need one."

Benito stood up and their eyes met.

"A true *Caballero!*" he muttered, and held out his hand, the first time he had shaken hands as an equal.

They stood side by side without further words as the boat drew into the landing where Benito was to go ashore. Suddenly he turned to Oakes.

"I swear to you," he said, "that I never suspected any trick with the serpent flower. We have always believed in it. How did you know?"

Oakes smiled at him. "Gringo science," he answered, "and a chance to get close to it, thanks to you. I believe they run a bamboo rod through the stem and a man in the hollow bottom of the vase moves the bud back and forth in time with the signals. I own it fooled me that first time. It was only the hiss of the blow-gun"—

There he stopped. Benito's face quivered with the poignant memory that word called up. He nodded, turned away and as the boat swung to the landing stage, he stepped ashore in silence.

Only as the boat drew off again, he lifted his hat in the Latin fashion.

"Go with God, my friend!" he called, using the stately Spanish phrase.

An hour later, lying off the mouth of the river, Oakes saw a steamer sweep round the headland to the north—a great, white, shining ship. The motor-boat shot forward to meet it.

Behind him lay the jungle, with its beauty, its mystery, its savage tragedy and heartbreak. Coming toward him was the symbol and the promise of God's country.

Unconsciously, he stretched out his arms to it.

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