

The CURSE

by Harry Noyes Pratt



“**J**ADE is an evil thing. I tell you, sir, that green stone holds all the wickedness of centuries. Did you know that nobody can say for sure where it comes from? No. That is part of the wickedness. Stone it is; a gem stone. Here and there it turns up, all over the world; in lost cities, in old graves. They find it, but always it has been in the hands of some artist out of those dim past centuries—carved, smoothed, polished. Some say all the jade in the world came from the furnaces of those evilly wise priests of the lost Atlantis, ages since. It may be so. I’ve seen jade that—

“Listen. I jumped ship that night at— well, never mind; it was one of those misbegotten ports on the coast of Yucatan. Just a scattered group of huts above a strip of white sand, with the green wall of the jungle coming down like a wave behind it. I swam ashore and lay hid there in a native hut until the ship had gone. The Indian hid me. Why not?”

of Ximu-tal



"The Indian was all for taking these things away from him."

That small silver coin was wealth to him. Or it would have been, if—yes, sir; money buys a lot in those out of the way places.

"When I woke up the *mozo* was talking to himself. I looked over from my corner and saw him sitting in the doorway. There were things scattered around him on the sand, and he was picking

them up one by one and talking to himself. Very well pleased he was, and why not; queer things for a *mozo* to have—white men's things—a canteen, a hat, a belt with a gun on it.

"The old fellow looked them over, laid them down. He picked up a drill coat and emptied out the pockets; a lot of stuff—notebooks, maps, one thing and an-

other. And then he picked up something that made me sit up; a bit of green, all cool-looking and transparent, like the sea out by the reef. 'Here,' I says, 'let's see that.'

"He didn't know I was awake, and it scared him. First off, he was all for putting everything away, but I talked him out of it; persuaded him; gave him another silver piece.

"You know what that green thing was? Jade. A little piece of green stone no bigger than my thumb, as cool to the touch as it looked, and smooth. I tell you, sir, there is nothing smoother than polished jade. Carved, it was. I couldn't make it out at first; then I saw. It was an elephant, fighting, trunk up and ears wide; and twined around him, choking him, was a snake. Think of it—a snake big enough to choke an elephant!

"The *mozo* put out his hand; he wanted that jade elephant back. 'Wait a bit,' I says. 'Where'd this come from?'

"That Indian shook his head, scared. He didn't want to talk; but when I hung onto the elephant he motioned over his shoulder at the jungle and muttered something. It sounded like 'Ximu-tal.'

"'Ximu-tal?' I says. 'What's that?' And finally I got out of him that Ximu-tal was one of the old gods; or maybe just a high priest, a big medicine man, ages before this Indian's people had come to the coast. 'Where?' I said, but he wouldn't tell me.

"I handed the jade piece back to him, hating to let go of it. It's like that with jade, you want to hang onto it, smoothing of it. . . . And then I lay down and pretended to go to sleep again. I wasn't asleep, though. I was watching that *mozo* to see where he'd hide the stuff. And I was thinking. Funny that an Indian

would have a white man's outfit like that. I kept wondering where he got it, and how.

"I saw where he hid it, in the thatch of the wall. The old fellow lay down right in front of it, but after awhile when I was sure he was asleep I got out of the hut and went around outside where I could burrow in and get it. I felt better when I got that belt around me and the gun against my leg. Bad customers, sometimes, those coast Indians. Treacherous; yes, sir.

"I was sitting there, back inside, looking over the maps and things, when the *mozo* woke up. They didn't mean much to me, those maps, not knowing the lay of the country. One of the notebooks had pictures, sketched in, and one of them was of a stone building, sort of a temple, on a little hill. What made me notice it was the way it had a big snake around it, carved in the stone.

"The Indian was all for taking those things away from me. Kept after me, ugly. I didn't have any more silver. Finally I had to persuade him with the gun, hitting him over the head with the butt. I didn't want to shoot him; the whole village would have been in on top of me. I tied him up and leaned him against a wall. He wouldn't talk; just sat there looking at me with his eyes glinting at me, hard, like brown glass. I was glad he was tied up, I tell you, sir. They are treacherous devils, those Indians.

"But he had to talk. I made him. I had to know. That jade elephant was in my pocket, under my thumb. I had to know where it came from. And the *mozo* knew, I could see that. There was a little fire in the hut. I shoved some coals over against his feet and let him think about it—hot coals.

"I slipped out of the village that night. The Indian had a little *boucan* hung up; there was a little fruit. I took that, slung in a net over my shoulder. I left the *mozo* tied up and gagged. He couldn't have followed me, though; not far. No. . . .

"JUST inside the green wall of jungle I found the road he'd told about, a stone road running away from the coast straight as a string. Sometime that had been a great road, I tell you, sir; stone blocks laid wide enough for two or three to walk abreast. They had great engineers, the old boys who built those lost cities. Why, I saw later on—but never mind that.

"Three days I followed that road, and didn't make three times that many miles. The jungle had taken it, smothered it. Trees grew against the stones, across them, between them. Vines wove green nets until you couldn't see beyond arm's reach. And the stone blocks, big as a wagon-bed, were torn up and tossed aside by the roots that reached in between and under. And all the time I had a queer feeling that the jungle was alive, growing up behind me as fast as I was cutting it away in front. I knew I was watched, too. No, it wasn't the Indians. I wasn't worrying about the Indians. The way that *mozo* had talked I knew they wouldn't come that road. Snakes, he'd said, but I didn't see any; not many, anyway.

"The fourth morning I came into more of an open. The jungle wasn't quite so thick. I tell you, I was glad! My hand was one blister and my arm an ache from using the machete so much to cut my way through. My food was gone, too, and my water; and so when the trees opened up

a little and I could see around, I was glad.

"It was a queer place that road had brought me to. A stone city that covered acres and acres, and not a soul living in it. Can you believe it? No, sir, not a living soul. Great walls hundreds of feet long, all carved with queer heads and curly-cues. On the biggest building there were heads that looked like elephants. Think of that; elephants in a jungle where no one had ever seen an elephant. But on all the other buildings—over the big arches of the doorways, along the tops of the walls, twined about carved heads of queer-looking men—were snakes cut from the stone. It got so after awhile it seemed like they were alive. Oh, it was a bad place! And everywhere—in the streets, in the houses, on the walls—were trees growing, hundreds of years old.

"I was looking for that little hill with the snake temple on top of it that I'd found in the notebook, and by and by I found it. The hill was a pyramid. Did you know those old engineers built pyramids, like the Egyptians did? Yes. Some say both came from the same stock, from that same sunken island where they made the jade. . . .

"There were wide stone steps running up on all four sides of the pyramid to the temple on top, and I climbed up. I could see someone had been here not very long ago, and I knew for sure this was the place. From what that Indian had told me, and what I could make out from the notebook and maps, I knew pretty well what to look for. And I found it—a big stone block in the floor of the temple propped up with a rock, with a dark hole under it.

"I didn't like the looks of that hole. No, sir! I went outside and looked at the stone snake that ran like a balustrade all

around the temple, and I liked it less than ever. Then my fingers touched that jade elephant in my pocket and the smooth feel of it made me go on. I made up some bundles of dry wood, rolled tight, for torches, and started down the hole.

"The white man, whoever he was, had worked hard. I wondered how he knew where to dig. The old passage had been full of dirt and little rocks, and he had carried it all out, burrowing. He must have been a worker, that fellow. I lit one of my torches and crawled down.

"There was one bad place. A big rock in the top of the passage had started to fall in and the white man had propped it up with a thick stick. Just room to edge by, with dirt and little rocks dropping if you just touched that stick. I didn't like it; no, sir!

"Stooped over, bent double, I went down that passage. First thing I knew, there I was in a room. I was below the level of the city, by then; 'way down beneath the hill in the virgin rock. Part of the wall looked like rock that water has worn, and part of it had been cut away and smoothed off.

"First off, I thought this was as far as I could go. There was just this room, a score of feet, maybe, across. Not a sign, anywhere, of an opening except that low doorway where I'd come in. Silent, it was; still. You've thought you knew what silence was, maybe—out in the woods, or at night. There never was anything as still and silent as that low room down under Ximu-tal's temple. It was a stillness that you could feel, if you know what I mean; soft and gentle at first, but pushing and pushing until you'd feel you couldn't stand it any longer. Just wear you out, it would, with its soft pushing.

"I couldn't find any way beyond, and yet I knew there must be. That Indian had said—— It was then I noticed it, that carved snake of Ximu-tal's. It was like that great carved snake around the temple above, only not quite the same. This looked a lot older. The old fellow that cut it there in the living rock of that cave didn't know his job as well as the one that came later, but you knew what he meant it for. Oh, I knew what it was! That head. . . .

"I SAW the tail of it first. That sculptor fellow had carved it so that it hung down the wall and out upon the floor. I lighted up another of my torches and followed the body of the snake, winding along the wall, over and above the door where I'd come in; right around that room until it came back to the side where the tail was. And there was the head. God, what a head! The old artist had taken a knob of stone on the wall and cut it into the head of a snake with jaws wide open, just like the serpent was coming for you, ready to strike.

"They'd painted that snake. Green it was, head to tail, all the length of it. And between the open jaws, back in the throat, it was red like a flame. But it was the eyes—I tell you, sir, those eyes were alive, bright and hard and glistening; pieces of jade as big as my hand, round and polished.

"Beneath the snake's head on one of the stone blocks of the floor was carved something; some of that picture stuff. It was one of those old hieroglyphs that not one of these blessed science sharps has been able to read—not one of them.

"I couldn't read it, but I knew what it meant. Just as plain as could be it told me to turn around and go, and never

come back. I looked from the picture writing to the head of that emerald snake and my heart was like water. I knew, if I didn't do what that old priest chap Ximu-tal was telling me, that his snake would get me. Yes, sir, I knew it.

"I was going. I tell you I was going, when my thumb hit upon the little jade elephant in my pocket, cool and smooth. And then I couldn't go. I had to see it through. It was like the snake was warning me to pull out, and the elephant was telling me to stay. And I stayed.

"I knelt there by that picture writing, just under the head of Ximu-tal's snake, and felt the carving over with my fingers. I could see someone had been there before me, doing that same thing; disturbing the dust that had lain there nobody knows how long.

"I knew I was on the right track. I felt the carving over. There was a snake running through, and I had a thought. I pressed on the head of the snake. I pulled on it. Something I did, and one end of that stone block swung up.

"A queer, wicked smell came from that black hole; a strange smell, I didn't know what. But I took the last of my torches and went down. All the way down those stone steps, all the way along the passage that slanted off into the rock, I knew—mind you, I knew!—that at the end I was going to hit upon something wickeder and more evil than anything I had ever seen. But I went.

"Pretty soon away off there in front of me I saw a light; a little flickering light like a green flame. I came to a doorway, and put my torch through, and saw what it was. I'll tell you, but you won't believe me; nobody would.

"It was a round room, deep down there in the living rock beneath that dead city;

a big, round room with a vaulted ceiling. It was like I was on the inside of half a hollow ball. Out there in the middle, just in front of me, was a stone coffin, with more of that picture stuff on it. Ximutal's coffin, it was; huge and heavy. And on top of the stone lid was a green snake. That was what I had seen like green flame ahead of me, the upraised head of that snake of Ximu-tal's.

"I blew my torch into burning—my last torch it was, too—and went over to the coffin. There was something under my feet, brittle things that snapped under me like dried sticks, but I couldn't stop to look. God, what a thing that was, that jade snake on Ximu-tal's coffin! Big. My two arms wouldn't go around that piece, I tell you; and cold and translucent as green ice.

"But that wasn't it, not the size of it. It was what it *was*. There was the snake and the elephant again, but they weren't fighting. No, they weren't fighting any more. The elephant was down, dead—crushed in the folds of that great snake. Think what a snake must be to crush an elephant that way!

"Oh, it was a wicked thing, that snake, head up, jaws wide. And yet the beauty of it, the evil loveliness of that snake as it reared above the stone coffin! My hands ached for it. I wanted to feel the cool smoothness of it flowing over my fingers, up my arms. And I was afraid. I knew that if I touched the snake of Ximu-tal as the other man had—I could see where his fingers had smoothed the dust from it—I was done. I wanted it; and I was afraid. My fingers went out to it—slow—slow. . . .

"Did you ever stand—in the dark, maybe, or in a lonely place of the moun-
(Continued on page 282)

The Curse of Ximu-tal

(Continued from page 161)

tains—and know that you were not alone? Eh? That was the way it was with me. I wasn't alone! Not any longer. Somewhere in the shadows just out of reach of my torch it was waiting for me. I knew.

"And all at once it came to me that the room was no longer still. I didn't know what it was. It sounded like the slow running back of a wave over the pebbles. It was a sound that went with the smell of the place; a sound that whispered with the voice of all the evil of thousands and thousands of years.

"The sound was all around me, coming in from the dark shadows of the walls. I blew my torch into flame, half burned as it was, and held it high over my head, sparks dropping down on me like rain.

"And I saw it. All about the room, flowing over the stone floor like a green river, was the body of a snake. I tell you, sir, that snake was old. Big as my leg, it was; thickening and pulsing and lengthening out; tightening and drawing closer in to the coffin of Ximu-tal, and me; mak-

ing a coil all the way around that room. I didn't see the snake's head at first, off in the shadows; just that thick green cable of a body as it pulsed and flowed.

"I was weak as water. I knew I was done, finished. I knew that Ximu-tal's snake was going to crush me against that stone coffin, just as he had crushed the other white man. I knew that my bones were going to join his there on the floor of the great room—when the snake was done. Just like that other white man—only there wasn't any *mozo* with me to carry my canteen and gun back to his hut.

"I hadn't thought of that gun before. I wouldn't have had the guts to get it out now, but my fingers were on that bit of jade in my pocket, that fighting elephant. It was like it was whispering to me, telling me to fight. I got the heavy gun in my hand. The snake was close now, the green folds two deep all around where I stood backed up against old Ximu-tal's coffin.

"And then I saw the head. Floating in the air it was, that head, just like the carved head in the chamber above. Close. The jaws were open, and I could see that fiery patch of red in its throat, eyes of jade above. Fire and ice, and both wicked as hell.

I SHOT, five times I shot, straight at that hungry, flaming throat. I hit it, too. God, the anger of that snake! Writhing, smashing, swinging—I tell you, sir, I don't know how I got away. Ximu-tal's coffin went over, wrecked, with a crash that shook the stone floor under my feet. Something splintered like breaking glass, and a green spark flashed by me, the broken head of the jade snake. Even then I felt bad to think of that beautiful jade carving all broken and smashed.

"I was in the passage, Ximu-tal's great snake coming after me, blood dripping from its angry jaws. The gun was empty. The trigger clicked once, twice, on the empty chamber, and I threw the gun at that bloody head. I had nothing else; nothing but the stub of my burned-out torch. And I threw that back as I ran; threw it back like a crimson ribbon down the black passage.

"All the long way up I could hear Ximu-tal's snake coming, like the flowing of water over pebbles. And I ran. God, how I ran! I threw off my coat, my gun belt. I tell you, sir, I was afraid as I never had been afraid before.

"I ran. Up through the dark, up into that chamber with the carved snake of Ximu-tal running about it, the carved head ready to strike. I thought it would strike. I could not stir the carven stone of the floor. I ran on, feeling with my hands along the wall for that blessed way out, finding it, and scrambling up the dug passage, bumping my head, stumbling;

all the time hearing behind me the dreadful flowing of the angry snake.

"I tell you, sir, I was desperate. It was terrible; the soft, pressing darkness that held me back as I ran, and behind me, closer and closer, the coming of that great green snake of Ximu-tal's. All this time I had in my hand that tiny piece of jade, the carven elephant fighting the serpent. I did not know that I held it. I do not know, sir, how it found its way to my fingers, but I held it. And now I turned and threw it. I threw it with all my strength into the thick darkness where the old priest's snake was coming.

"It was then my shoulder in the darkness hit the stake that other man had put in the passage to prop up the rock in the roof. I struck it, and knocked it down with the weight of my body. I was running, and I was afraid, and I hit it hard.

The stake came down, and I fell over it.

"Behind me, just at my feet, the big rock fell down from the roof; and like water the little rocks and sand flowed after it, faster and faster. The sand poured over my feet as I lay there, trembling.

"No, sir, I do not know how I got out of there. I do not know how I got out of that dead city where warfare had been between Ximu-tal of the snake, and the priests of the elephant. I do not know how long I wandered in the jungle until I came to the plantation. They did not believe me when I told of the snake—of the two snakes—of Ximu-tal.

"Jade is an evil thing. I tell you, sir, it holds all the wickedness of all the ages since it was made in the furnaces of those evil priests of the lost Atlantis. But I'd like to see that great carved piece again."