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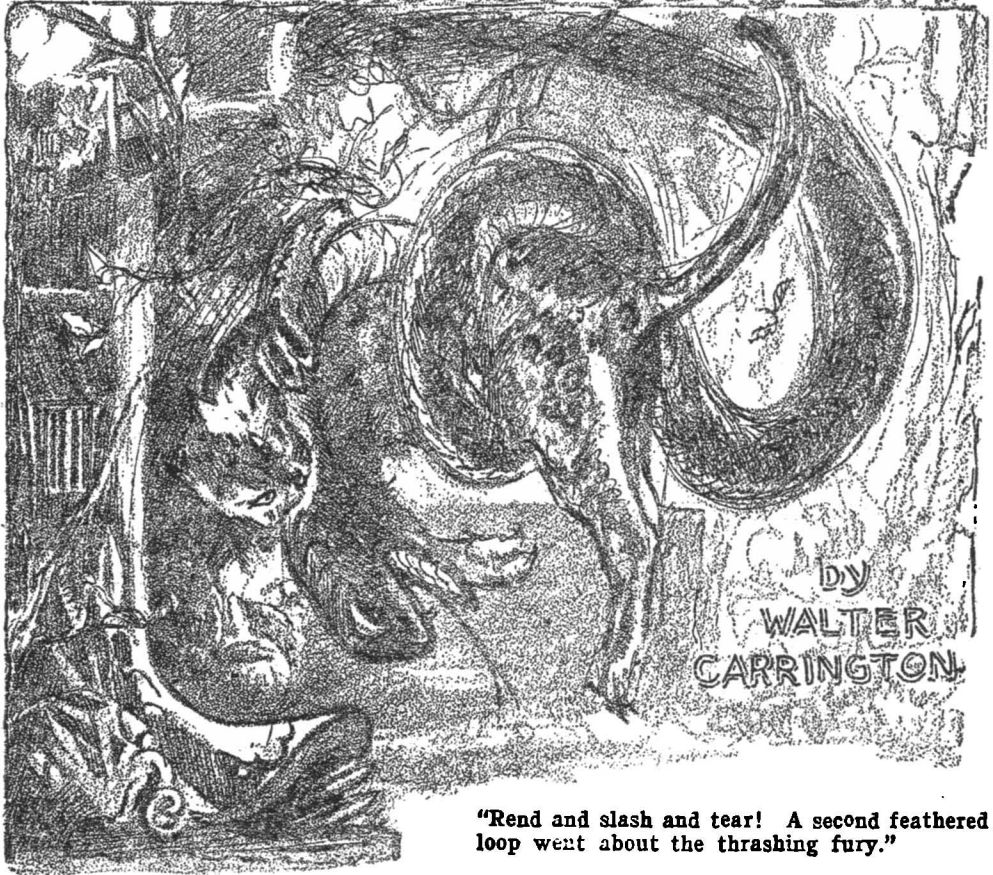
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The FEATHERED SERPENT



"Rend and slash and tear! A second feathered loop went about the thrashing fury."

THE screech of a jaguar came from the depths of the Chiapas jungle that, sweating under a green moon, crowded to the black waters of the Usumacinta River.

Young Hammond of the red head noted that the Indian porters, camped at a little distance, were quickly astir. Miguel, the guide, was among them, ordering more wood for the fire that had been lighted to frighten away the wild beasts. The Mexican, his squat, muscular form silhouetted against the leaping flames, stood watching a porter fan to life the fire that had died to embers.

From the Indians' camp stole the Dillinghams' head porter—a darker shadow in the shadows of drooping palms and taller growths. He halted at the edge of the machete-cleared space, just outside the radius of fire-light. Miguel joined him, and the two men talked in a jargon of Mexican-Indian terms that Miguel employed with the Indians. Then, as silently as he had emerged from the covert, the native slipped away.

The screech sounded again—like the cry of a woman in mortal agony. Hammond peered through the shadows at the tents of the Dillingham outfit; his glance lingered on the small

tent that sheltered Cyrene Cortelyou. He half started to his feet, the short hair prickling on the back of his neck. He brushed his hand across his eyes; the cold dew of fear wet his forehead. His eyes had not deceived him. There it was—the *Thing that no one else could see!*

Miguel crossed the firelit space and hunched himself on the ground, an arm's length from Hammond; the young scientist, with a furtive glance at the spot where the Thing had appeared, pulled himself together and addressed Miguel.

"Are Professor Dillingham and his son in their tents, Miguel?"

"*Si, Señor.*"

"And—Miss Cortelyou?"

Miguel hesitated. "*Si—of a certainty, Señor.*"

Halsey Hammond lost himself in a brief, glorious vision of Cyrene Cortelyou's golden beauty. Three days ago, he had not known that she was in the world. Three days ago, he was encamped, back there, with the scientific expedition. Three days ago he had not known—love! Now, how empty the world would be without it—and her!

He had first seen her coming toward him in the green dusk of the jungle, walking with her uncle and her cousin at the head of their Indian porters. Golden orchids depended from swaying branches above her tawny head; golden butterflies floated two and two across the faint game-trail along which she advanced. High among the towering palms, a bird sang to its mate—the call of love to love. And he had left his party to follow her; he would follow her all the days of his life.

"You know why I am going inland with the Dillinghams, Miguel?" Hammond did not wait for an answer, but spoke on. "You talked to their packers," he accused. "You were warned not to speak of what happened at the Temple of Xupa.

But you talked, and now the porters are threatening to desert the party. I understand their lingo. I am going with the Dillinghams and make sure that the men do *not* desert."

The jaguar's screech sounded for the third time, terror-striking, splitting the heavy silence. From the jungle, in the direction of the river, a bellowing bull-alligator flung back a challenge. The forest seemed to waken, to be alive with creatures of the night. A night that festered under the green moon, that strangled with its mingled odors of flower-scents and dank decay.

The Thing still lurked in the shadows. Hammond knew that it was there, though he no longer saw it. He shivered in the sweltering, airless night. Why had it been visible to no eyes save his own? *What was it?*

He braced himself, and steadying his voice with an effort spoke: "We shall start for the ruins early in the morning. The Temple of Xupa lies two days' march from here, in the Usumacinta valley, so the professor tells me——"

"*Señor!* I have been to that place—with the other one." Miguel rolled his eyes and crossed himself; his voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "Me, I will not go to the *teocalli* of that Temple. I have say that to the Señor Dillingham. Two, twice, I have say it. Would the Señor Hammon', then, disturb the dead? The dead like not to be disturb'. Always, for those who go to that place, to the Piedras Negras city of dead people, will be the Gray Death."

"Whatever came out of the sacred Temple, it didn't get *you*. Come, now! You imagined——"

"*Señor*, with my own eyes I saw it!"

"What did it look like?"

"*Madre de Dios!* I have not the words to tell. I ran—ran——"

"But you went back. The pro-

fessor says that the scientific notes were brought out—and a letter.”

“*Si, Señor.*”

“Did you see the Gray Death when you went back to search for the bodies?”

“No, *Señor.*”

“I believe, of course, that you *think* you saw—whatever it was that did for the men. A fellow could well believe anything in this cursed country.” He shuddered, remembering his experience of the past two nights. “It’s the green moonlight, and the queer shadows, and the evil scents—and sounds.”

Miguel brought his face close to Hammond’s face as he spoke, earnestly, a note of pleading in his voice, that he might be understood.

“*Señor, I saw!*”

“Very well, I’ll not dispute you. Tell the porters that I carry a charm against the Gray Death. Three white men will meet it and put an end to it. Good night!”

The charm? Truly, he had one—his love for the girl who, strangely, insisted on going to these weird ruins. He went to sleep with thoughts of Cyrene in his heart. Through his dreams he pursued ghostlike things, groping for them in a green fog.

The girl—he must save the girl! Slender arms outstretched, she implored his protection. The tawny hair was disordered; the terrified brown eyes were trying to tell him something that might not be put into words. The green fog thickened—thickened—

In a last, frantic effort to reach the girl, he lunged upright—and opened his eyes on a new day.

2

HAMMOND dressed quickly—khaki trousers and jacket, high, mosquito-proof, snake-proof boots—and went outside. Professor Dillingham and his son were washing themselves,

and an Indian brought water for Hammond from the black river that tunneled its way through solid walls of verdure. The professor blinked through owlsh spectacles at the younger man. A worried frown creased his brow.

“I fear that the thing I predicted has happened,” he said. “Cyrene is sunk in the sleep of exhaustion—almost a state of coma. She is of too fine, too delicate a nature to stand the hardships, the dangers, of such an expedition. But with her, love is as strong as death itself—it goes beyond the dissolution of the body.”

Hammond took the blow standing. He had not been told *why* the girl accompanied the party to the weird ruins in the Usumaciunta valley. It amounted to this, then: One she loved had perished by the Gray Death. Love was drawing her to the scene of the tragedy—a love that lasted after death. And yet he had seen that in her eyes, in the hour of their meeting, which had promised him heaven. Well, he could face hell—for her sake. She should go to the Temple. He would truly hold a charm—against the Gray Death.

These thoughts ran in his mind while he spoke commonplace regrets that Miss Cortelyou should have become over-tired. He even jested with Jack Dillingham, who was in appearance as like his father—owlsh spectacles, white pith sun-helmet, loose white ducks and all—as one grain of wheat is like another.

“This late start will give your porters the idea that you’re marking time. But it can’t be helped. I’m afraid you’ve been too easy with them. What they need is a good cussing now and then—or oftener.”

Jack grinned. “Just teach me a few of the most blighting ones in the Indian lingo.”

“I’ll attend to the cussing. Something told me, when I met your party, that you’d meet with a flock of trouble later on. There’s nothing

like having a red-headed man as a trouble-chaser. You'll see!"

Almost at once the trouble materialized. No sooner had Cyrene Cortelyou—a pale, heavy-eyed Cyrene—left her tent, and orders were given to break camp, than the sullen porters demanded a hearing. In the end, the white men owned themselves defeated. Not an Indian would stir until, negotiating through Miguel, it was settled that they were not to accompany the white men all the way to the Temple.

Miguel hinted that the Indians had no faith in the white man's "charm" over the evil spirits of the region. These evil spirits were unknown to the white men. How, then, could such a charm prevail?

"How far will they go?"

Miguel shrugged. "When we are in sight of the Temple, they stop, *Señor*. They make camp. The white men can go on. If they come back——" Again he shrugged.

"You think we will not come back?"

"*Quien sabe!*"

The professor spoke up: "The natives, as you must know, Mr. Hammond, are nothing if not superstitious. Anything they can't understand, in the way of bad luck, is laid to the working of evil spirits. I've argued the question over and over with myself, since we started on this trip—that there is no such thing as manifestation of evil spirits. And the next instant I'll be saying to myself: '*How do you know there are no manifestations?*' Poling day after day through that black tunnel of the river, with no signs of humans but the occasional miserable huddle of rotting cane huts, thatched with palm leaves, and with unguessed dangers on every side—I tell you, Hammond, it gets you. *It gets you!*"

The professor passed his hand over his eyes.

"I didn't sleep well last night.

You heard the jaguar, crying for her mate? Night after night I've heard it—like a woman's cry——"

"Dad, what's got you?" Jack cut in. "It must be the canned salmon. Or maybe it's the screeching parrots and the jabbering monkeys. They're bad enough; and the chiggers, fleas, ants, sandflies, snakes, and the devilish orchid flowers that look right at you——"

"A snake ruled the Temple of Xupa," said the professor, turning to Hammond. "A snake god—the great feathered serpent. Sacrifices were made to it. The sacrificial stone stands at the foot of a terraced flight of steps that leads down to the Usumacinta River—the black Usumacinta. The blood from the sacrificial stone ran down a channel to the water."

"Nice, cheerful sort of place," Hammond commented, and turned to see what had become of Cyrene.

A rude litter had been prepared for her. Hammond ran to help her to the canopied seat. The look in her eyes, the touch of her soft hand, gripped his heart.

A string of carved scarlet beads—like drops of blood against the blouse of golden-brown khaki—swung outward as she bent her head to enter the litter; it became entangled with an upthrusting branch of some thorny growth. Hammond freed the chain; he held it in his hand, examined minutely the exquisite carving (it was an excuse to be near her for a moment longer). . . . Afterward, picking up these beads, widely scattered, from the platform of the *teocalli* of the Temple of Xupa, his shaking hands searching out cracks and crevices of the worn stonework, his blood turned to ice-water and his heart was dust in his breast. . . .

Jack Dillingham joined them at this moment; he had seen Hammond's apparent interest in the chain.

"He gave it to her," the boy whis-

pered, as the procession got under way. "She always wears it."

MIGUEL led the way, the Indians following, a bobbing procession of peaked hats, broad of brim. Never once hesitating, he kept to his course. Palms lifted tufted tops high above the smaller growths that shut out the sunlight, making in effect a glimmering emerald twilight. Hibiscus blooms lighted the green dusk like flames. The screeching and chattering of parrots, gorgeously plumaged, flashing on the sight and away, the incessant warfare of monkeys whelmed the sound of swarming insect life. In the more open spaces, brilliant, jewel-winged butterflies flitted and floated. Flower-faces peered down from tree crotches at the adventurers; the air was drenched with perfume. Yet in all this beauty that charmed the eye, there was something sinister, ruthless.

Professor Dillingham's tall, lank figure was almost abreast of the guide; but Jack lagged sociably, talking to Hammond.

"Dad's been an armchair scientist—now he's having the time of his life. Oh, of course he is worried about Cyrene, but we believe this trip will put her straight again. The doctor thought it would. And of course the real reason for our going is the cases."

"The cases?"

"Yes. Zinc cases, wood-covered. You wonder what's packed away in 'em? If I told you that my father's friend, who explored the ruins of the Temple—Miguel brought out his notes and a letter—made molds of the hieroglyphics on the sacrificial stone, the great stone altar, the lintel of the doorway and the main stelæ, you'd wonder what I was talking about, wouldn't you?"

"I'm wondering," Hammond returned, "what is in those zinc cases?"

"Just what I said. In one case

alone there are the impressions taken from that weird sacrificial stone. Man, how many humans, do you imagine, were sacrificed there?"

Hammond shuddered, remembering Miguel's warning: "The dead, they like not to be disturb'."

"Well, these molds are worth all sorts of money. We're going to bring 'em out. Miguel must have had an idea, all along, that he could double-cross us and get away with it. I'm mighty glad we fell in with you. . . . Cyrene isn't interested in the cases. She insists that we put to death the thing that killed *him*. That's all she cares about."

As the way became rougher, Jack fell silent. The adventurers tripped over trailing bjuca vines and splashed through pools left by a tropical shower. Hammond was oppressed by a heavy feeling of apprehension which he could not shake off.

What did he know of this sinister country? How could he protect Cyrene against the mysterious Gray Death that lay in wait in the wilderness Temple? The dead—they did not like to be disturbed.

The steady march along jungle paths—a network of perplexing entwinement—was exhausting. The steaming heat of the tropics stifled. The dense thickets of vegetation, rising ten feet or more on each side these game trails, shut out any breath of air that might be stirring. And now a swampy stretch must be crossed. They would make camp, and go on in the morning.

ALL about the camp lay the great forest, steaming and sweltering. Fireflies lighted the darkness. The heavy scent of ghost-white floraponda cloyed the senses. Cyrene went early to her tent. As she lifted the flap, she turned and looked at Hammond. What was in that look? Her eyes, fear-haunted—did they question him? Warn him? Hammond's thoughts

were confused. He was sure of but one thing: He loved this girl; he would stand by her though the Gray Death should claim him at the end of the journey.

A flash of the campfire's leaping flames caught and held the picture of Cyrene, against the background of the night. The golden girl! About her round, smooth throat the carved beads showed redly—like drops of blood.

Professor Dillingham sat with his gaunt knees hunched to his chin; his owl spectacles glittered in the flickering light.

"I hope there are no jaguars in this vicinity. My sleep has been very much disturbed. A good night's rest would put me right." He got to his feet. "Tomorrow at this time, Hammond, nothing preventing, we'll see the moon rise over the Temple of Xupa. Good night!"

Jack drew nearer to Hammond, as if for company. The two men sat in silence while the moon swung up and up, bathing the land in a green flood of light. Finally he spoke in a low tone, not to disturb the professor, who tossed in his net-screened hammock.

"Hammond, as we narrow down to hours—so many before we reach the dead city of Piedras Negras and the Temple of Xupa—the more I really wonder what happened to those two white men. Professor Stuart's last note on his work ran something like this: 'Tomorrow I shall with my own hands begin to uncover the feathered serpent——'"

"Listen!" whispered Hammond. "The jaguar! It is here. It——" He broke off, to stare at Cyrene's tent; he clutched his companion's arm. "Do you see—anything?"

"Hammond, let's go to bed. We'll all be seeing things if we don't watch out. You're over-tired, and this queer country is on your nerves. If we had stuck to the river there would have been great danger from the

rapids; but what's the good of dodging danger and being scared to death?"

3

MORNING found them crossing the swampy tract. Rivulets coiled and circled about the roots of sago palms and yellow bamboo. Low-hanging limbs, swathed in vines that swung garlands of bloom over their heads, made progress difficult. In places they had to hew their way.

In the afternoon they began to climb the higher, unshaded trails, under a grueling sun. The white men had accustomed themselves to the certainty that, once in sight of their goal, they must go on without help. But when, from a rise, they looked down on the scattered ruins of the dead city Piedras Negras, it did not need Miguel's significant: "We make camp here, *Señor*," to bring the fact vividly home to them.

"My son seems to have considerable influence over the men," said the professor, taking charge of the situation. "I trust Miguel, up to a certain point. I think his tongue ran away with him—that he bragged to the porters just by way of showing himself the hero of an adventure. I don't agree with my son that he set out to double-cross us——"

"He knows he won't get paid if he can't hold the expedition together and bring us out; but can he hold it?" Jack questioned.

"It's our only chance, son. You and Miguel together must hold it. I propose that you and I, Hammond, go on, leaving my son and Miguel in charge of the camp. Cyrene, of course, will stay with her cousin."

"Why can't you stay here, Father, while Hammond and I go ahead?"

"Jack, our very lives depend on you. I don't need to tell you what it would mean if the porters stampered. Your party, Hammond, was

pulling up stakes and moving on, I think you said? No help within three days' march, and days of river travel; and how could we expect"—he lowered his voice, looked apprehensively in the direction of Cyrene's tent—"to reach the river with a helpless woman on our hands?"

"I agree with your father, Jack," said Hammond, soberly. "We will go down there and spy out the land. There will be just time, before the sun sets, to reach the Temple."

Hammond's blood was a-tingle. He gazed out over the level valley, islanded by irregular hummocks of lush vegetation that hid the ruins of the great prehistoric city from view. A strange excitement possessed him. Down there was the Gray Death. Fate had put him in the way of meeting it. He welcomed the chance.

"You see, Jack, it works this way. Your father and I camp over night at the Temple. Nothing happens to us. This gives the men confidence——"

"How do we know that nothing happens?" Jack stubbornly argued.

"Suppose we agree on some sort of a signal, son——"

"Professor Dillingham, please let me see the map—no, the other one," Hammond interposed. "The map of the dead city. Right! Now point out the exact location of the Temple the Xupa. Mm-m! Where are your binoculars?"

He stood—one of four helpless whites in a wilderness of savage beauty—with glasses trained on the ruins. His mind schemed and turned to find some means of coping with the situation. A white woman and three white men were dependent on ignorant, superstitious natives! But could he honestly say that superstition had not seeped into his own mind. *What lay down there?*

He handed the binoculars to Professor Dillingham. "The growth is so dense about the Temple that it

can't be seen from here. I thought we might signal by mirror flashes. Not a chance!"

"Three shots at sun-up—how would that do?" the professor suggested.

"It will have to do," Hammond replied, and turned to find Miguel, dark eyes intent in the shadow of his broad-brimmed hat, watching him.

Again the sense of danger; but Hammond would not give in to it. They were at journey's end. Before the break of another day, it might be, they would face the death and solve the mystery.

Hammond hurried the professor away, waiting only to pack such necessities as would insure their comfort for the night. He did not once glance in the direction of the little tent where Cyrene, spent, exhausted, lay in the trancelike sleep that once before had overcome her. As he fitted a double load to his back, he wondered—should he not come back—if she would ever know that he had done this thing for her.

They went down the rocky hill, directing their course toward the largest mound, a truncated pyramid. The professor talked incessantly, perhaps to keep up his courage. It was a sad thing that the life of the young student-scientist, Paul, should have been blotted out. A wonderful boy. Professor Stuart—well, Professor Stuart was getting on in years. Age, naturally, must make way for youth; and he had begun to train Paul to do his work after he was gone.

The heat and the hard going finally drove Professor Dillingham to silence.

THE way was comparatively open; no jungle growths shut them in. Heat-mist rose from the ground in waves, smiting their faces until they gasped for breath. Often, and more often, they lowered their packs to ease their aching shoulders.

Then, all at once, they were there, standing before the ruined Temple

that reared a weather-scarred, time-scarred front from the platform of a squat pyramid. The professor set his pack on the ground. He blinked behind his round spectacles.

"We-l-l, Hammond, w-we're here," he quavered.

"Yes," said Hammond, gravely, lowering his own pack. "See that your automatic is working, Professor. Mine is. Now come on!"

They ascended the broken steps. Between vine-draped columns, carved grotesquely, yawned an opening that gave on blackness. Details of the carvings on the outer walls were plainly visible, though it had been almost a year, the professor told Hammond, since Professor Stuart's native laborers had cleared the spot of crowding, choking tropical vegetation.

They saw the gigantic feathered serpent, a wonderful carving in stone, writhing toward the sacrificial stone on which lay the bound figure of a victim. Fettered captives filed past a judge; an executioner awaited them. Over all rose a most high god, frowning under his heavy head-dress.

Out of a tense silence Hammond spoke: "These stone things give me the shivers, even though they *are* stone——"

"Look! Look!" the professor cried, catching at his arm.

Hammond turned a quick, startled glance in the direction in which the professor had pointed. A dense mat of twisted vines hid the carvings at the far end of the building. The mid-section of the monster, the great feathered serpent, was lost to view behind the tangled mass that *moved as if it were alive!* He started forward, but the professor dragged at his arm.

"It's nothing, I dare say—monkeys, perhaps, moving about. Come! You realize how much daylight is left to us. We must make camp, and settle down for a night watch."

The setting sun drove crimson shafts of light through the leafy roof of the tall trees. They descended to where the outfit had been left, put up the shelter tent and built a fire.

Very little was said over the supper, which Hammond cooked. Hammond insisted on taking the first watch; and the professor was soon asleep under his mosquito-proof net.

HAMMOND crouched over the flickering fire, hours later. He was cold, though his body reeked with sweat. When the moon's first rays, like a greenish vapor, touched the tops of the towering palms, he faced the black portal of the Temple, and waited. What would come out of that portal between moonrise and sunrise?

Used as Hammond was to camp activities, the stillness troubled him. Not a sound. It was as if the wilderness held its breath, waiting. An enormous bat whizzed past his head as he sat with his back against the trunk of a palm; it hung for an instant, black on the green disk of the moon. The most high god frowned down as if in scorn at the little affairs of men. To Hammond's high-keyed imagination, the reek of things dead poured from the depths of the ancient Temple. . . . He dozed.

In the pale half-hour that precedes the sunrise, he awoke. The nerve-shattering screech of a jaguar brought him upright, alive and alert. Instinctively he looked for the Thing that, night after night, had stolen from Cyrene's tent. In the half-light he saw it—a shape half human, half animal. The flesh crawled on his bones.

4

THE professor's startled face appeared at the opening of the shelter-tent.

"I must have slept straight

through the night!" he exclaimed. "I——"

"Sh-h!" Hammond cautioned. "Something passed, just now." He waved his hand in the direction of the Temple steps. "There!"

The professor drew his automatic, and joined Hammond.

"We will go up there and see what it is. In this uncertain light, it will be hard to——"

The jaguar's challenge, sounding very near, again disturbed the stillness. They mounted the flight, and standing on the broken pave of the platform, looked about. A sudden flurry in the branches of a wide-spreading tree that tented the vine-tangle turned the men in that direction.

They saw the tawny body of the jaguar on a lower limb; she was tensed as if for a spring. Fangs bared, green eyes slitted, she crouched. For minutes as they watched, while the light brightened, the animal faced—what?

The great cat began to turn, slowly, smoothly, as if on a pivot. Its eyes followed the movement of something that flowed with the ease of water from limb to limb. A gray mottled shape, coil on coil.

"The Gray Death!" Hammond whispered, through stiff lips.

The cat turned its head, snarled. Hammond choked back an exclamation. Cyrene's wide brown eyes stared from the head of the Thing that was part beast, part human. Oh, he must be going mad! A red splash—like drops of blood—against the sleek, tawny fur——

"My God! Don't fire!" Hammond caught at the professor's lifted arm. "You might hit—her!"

The professor, dumfounded, lowered his weapon. His startled glance lingered briefly on Hammond's face, as if suspecting that his companion suddenly was bereft of

reason. It was plain to Hammond that the professor did not see that which, shuddering, *he* saw.

The serpent—the great feathered serpent! How could *she* cope with it? The reptile raised its flat head; it swung menacingly from side to side. Lightning was not quicker when the Gray Death threw a coil. . . . Could *he* do nothing? It seemed ages that he had stood there, in a strange, hypnotic trance.

The snake hissed a venomous warning. A tawny streak flashed through space. It met and grappled with the gray, feathered monster. Claw and teeth and fang they fought. The Gray Death threw its first loop. The jaguar slitted a length of mottled skin. Unless the reptile could throw the second coil, it could not tighten its hold on the maddened jaguar's body.

Rend and slash and tear! The second feathered loop went about the thrashing fury that was the jaguar. It tightened. A scream like the cry of a woman in mortal agony was wrenched from the struggling beast.

Broken branches whipped aside, a falling shower of leaves, convulsive writhings of the locked combatants——

The jaguar twisted her lithe body and fastened her teeth in the feathered neck of the reptile, at the base of the bony skull. Hammond, breathing like a spent runner, leaned forward. There was a mist before his eyes, a roaring in his ears. . . . *Something* thudded to the pave. . . . He dared not look. . . . Dimly, he heard the sound of three shots—the signal.

With head averted, so that he might not see the Thing that quivered in death agony under the spreading tree, he beckoned the professor.

"Go and meet them," he said. "Go!" he repeated, as the professor stared, uncomprehending. There was that in Hammond's face which compelled obedience.

HAMMOND'S face and hands were wet with icy perspiration as he set about his task. *He knew what he had to do.* It did not seem strange to him that the feathered serpent had disappeared. Wounded to death, it had crept into the jungle-growth. Where was the jaguar? He straightened, cautiously, made sure that the professor was on his way. The coast was clear, now. *No one must ever know!*

He must find them—the red beads! On hands and knees he sought them. They had lodged in cracks and hollows of the broken stonework. One by one he gathered them up, while the heart in his breast turned to dust. . . . His task was finished, now; and life, for him, was finished. Love that could break the bonds of flesh and space and spirit was everlasting. He sat on a fallen pillar and stared into space.

Voices roused him. He could not have told how long he had been sitting there—probably for hours. The sun was shining brightly. A procession of porters was coming out of the Temple; each man bore a box on his brawny shoulder.

Someone stood over Hammond. He looked up, his eyes dull with pain. It was Jack, talking excitedly, brandishing a small, rusty dagger. What was he saying?

“Cyrene vowed to kill the Gray Death; but the jaguar——”

“Where — is — Cyrene?” Hammond's pallid lips barely formed the words.

“They're bringing her in the litter. But look, Hammond! Paul's dagger! What a fight those men must have put up before the Gray Death got them!”

“The feathered serpent!” Hammond mumbled.

“*Feathered serpent!* Come, now, Hammond! You're seeing things. It's a reg'lar snake—big one, twenty feet if it's an inch.”

Hammond was not listening. Cyrene, assisted by her uncle, was mounting the steps of the *teocalli* . . . a pale, spent Cyrene. But there was that in her eyes, as he went to meet her, that promised him heaven.

The chain of red beads no longer circled the slim throat; the bond with the dead was broken.