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The MAGIC of CHAC-MOOL

BY CLYDE · CRISWELL



"He was dead when he left the plane."

1. *The Valet From the Jungle*

I HAD about outstayed my welcome in Merida, down in the toe of Mexico. For a time the gilded youth had gone mad over flying, like all the rich youngsters and sport-lovers in the principal towns clear back to Tia Juana, where I had started months before. But, as on each previous occasion, the local enthusiasm had suddenly evaporated—a racial trait. So after a week or two of poor business I was ready to continue my flight after pesos down farther into the Latin Americas.

Where I would end I didn't know, but Belize, I had decided, over in British Honduras, would be my next port o' call, ninety miles across the vegetable ocean of Yucatan. There was only one small sierra to go over,

and I'd make the journey in a couple of easy hops.

If it hadn't been for this situation I might not have fallen in so quickly with the little valet's mad scheme. But then again, I'd always been curious about the buried temples of the country, but had never visited any, and the prospect of seeing a ruin unknown to the world at large was irresistible—discounting the other features of his tale. All in all, I guess I'd have taken him up anyway.

He appeared on a fine afternoon for flying, but one entirely lacking in patrons. I saw staggering toward me over my flying-field the only disreputable Indian I had ever observed in those parts, where they're an amazingly clean lot—unlike most of the beggars west and north.

He wore a wrecked *serape* and some tattered rags, and wasn't much bigger than a gnome. When he drew nearer I saw he wasn't an Indian at all, but what was left of a white man suffering from a complicated and lamentable sunburn.

Of course when you're in odd corners of the world you can't be entirely upstage with another white man down on his luck, but as I waited and watched this visitor's erratic gait I resolved he should get only one *peso* from me, together with short shrift.

He tottered up, sagged against a wing, and made bleating noises.

"I've come," was my interpretation, "about a million miles of the worst traveling in the whole world, to find you, and take you back with me." Just that, instead of the expected touch.

"Me!" I laughed off my surprize. "You must think I like bad traveling too."

Febly he flapped a hand against the wing.

"It won't be bad going—in this. It'll be the prettiest sight you'd want, from above. It was on foot I come. But will you 'ear me out?"

"Sure!" I humored him, for though his voice was getting stronger he looked ready to break. "But first take this—go get yourself a flock of *frijoles* or *tamales*. Not *pulques*!" I added as an afterthought.

"I never drinks," he surprized me again, "and I've just had tiffin, but I've come a long ways, and I'd like to sit down."

So I boosted him into the passenger's seat, hopped into the pilot's, and told him to shoot.

"My name's Cleaver," he started off, "and though you mightn't think it from these here, I'm a valet. And I've been gentleman to some queer birds in my time, too, but nothing

to what I been valeting last—a *magician*, he is!"

"Magician?" I echoed politely. "What's his name? Maybe I've seen him perform somewhere."

"Impossible, if you'll excuse me. My gent's no music-'all bloke. He's in private life—a *real* magician!"

"You mean he's a rich amateur? Does tricks as a hobby?"

"No tricks, I'm telling you; he's the kind of magician Moses was, as turned walking-sticks to snykes—only my gent's no saint. He's a *black* magician—a *bad* 'un."

"Well, get on," I snapped at him. "Oh, I know you think I'm barmy, but wait——"

And on he went to tell me how, for some vague reason "out" of valeting, he had drifted about as a ship's steward, finally taking a berth on a fruit-boat from which his last master had rescued him, restoring him "to the practise of his profession." The new employer's name was odd enough: Sarazon; and Cleaver couldn't place him racially. He was some sort of foreigner, but spoke perfect English.

The little cockney had quit the boat with his new gentleman at Belize, from which city they immediately made their way north and west to take up residence at an inland plantation located on the River Hondo. Here the mysterious Sarazon outfitted for a protracted stay in the interior, and hired a half-dozen Indians as guides and boatmen.

Cleaver was hazy as to their wanderings after leaving the pleasant *hacienda*, of which he spoke with great regret, but I gathered that after much river travel northward they had followed small streams to the west, till they had won to a region where the Indians began showing great unwillingness to proceed. Eventually they were dismissed by Sarazon, who seemed to know where he was by means of an old chart he kept very much to himself.

THE spot where the two white men were thus left alone with their supplies was marked. he told me, by a sudden widening of the previously almost unnavigable stream, and by a huge, bare, black sand-bar, which he described as a perfect landing-field for a plane.

Their stuff had been put off on the bar, which was separated from the nearer bank only by a shallow ford. Their first camp was on the bar, but Sarazon had plunged directly into the jungle with his map, and after some search picked up a faintly defined trail that he told Cleaver had once been a stone causeway. This they cleared with machetes during several days, pushing always farther into the brush.

At this point in his narrative the little man asked for a fag, and lighted it with suppressed excitement.

"That Sarazon would never say a word abahit what he was after," he hurried on, "so it fair gave me a turn when we comes bingo on the first of the rooms. A big low barracks it was, with a wide stair going nowhere, all hidden under weeds, and having the steepest, narrowest steps I ever see. And all abahit us was more of 'em—fine 'ouses and palaces they'd been in their day. Right off he found us a regular suite of rooms up on a terrace like, and one of 'em I cleaned out, where with what was left of a roof, we had quite a plyce.

"We spent several days packing our luggage up from the sand-bar, and then settled down for what seemed keeps, though the old boy told me the Indians would come back for us before the rains. I wished I had never come, I did, what with the bats and all."

It was only too apparent that his memories were painful, as he described how day after day they had hacked their way about the ruins, Sarazon apparently in search of some certain temple.

"I knew when we found the house with the snykes it was the one he was after, he was that pleased. And right off we must begin hacking our way inside between a couple of big columns carved with scales, with snyke-heads on the ground and the tails strite up. All one morning we cut through that door, which was choeked with little roots no bigger'n pencils, and full of scorpions that swarmed at us with their tails strite up like the snykes beside the door.

"We finally got through, and there was a big hall, fairish clean, with a closed stone door right opposite us. Sarazon runs to it and turns round larfing, which I'd never seen him do before.

"This is the Temple of the Boas!" he shouts to me; 'and behind this door——' He taps on it—all carved it was, and looked to weigh a ton—he taps on it with his big knife, and then stops.

"Go on outside,' he says, 'and make tea; it's too dusty in here to eat lunch. I'll look around; you won't need to call me.'

"I went out glad enough, for I'd already a headache, and makes up our tea on the terrace, for as usual, we'd come up a stair to a sort of second floor.

"He comes out just as I'm ready for him, and can't eat quick enough. Then back we both go into that 'ole, and blarst me if he hadn't got the door open all by himself.

"There it swings, a foot thick, and the opening full of a yellow tangle like a lot of sponges—more roots, of course, and more scorpions.

"We cuts away again, and as the mess clears I know where my headache had come from, for an orful gas comes out gradual, worse than the stink of the bats when we cleaned our first rooms. I had to stop, and he made me go out and have more tea, and when I come back he was inside

with his big lantern, and after a bit I sees what's there.

"A dusty floor with some broken pots lying abaht, and a litter of bones in a corner. Some big green beads was scattered in the dust. He was stooped down by his lamp, looking at a big bright plate with a silly round face in the middle of it and what-nots around the edge.

"Well, sir, I've lived in some great houses in my time, and I knows a gold dinner service when I sees it. And solid gold it *was*, as anyone could have seen! My head was still going round, and when I see that it fair spun orf. I had been that simple, what with the bats and bugs and living like a bloomin' gipsy and all, I'd given up guessing what we was after. Now I realized it was *loot*, and that we'd *found* it!

"But I didn't see any more plates, and at first I didn't see what else there was. Then I made out that what I'd taken to be a back wall of largish bricks was reelly *stacked bullion*—yellow ingots, sir, if I drops dead—arf to the ceiling, and all raw gold, as I could see with one eye!

"I goes over to them, and after standing like a stiek for a bit, I reaches up to get one orf the top, when ole Sarazon looks up.

"Don't touch 'em!" he yells.

"I just wanted to have a closer look," I says a bit stiff, for I thought as we found the stuff together he'd have to do the right thing by me, even though I was only his man.

"If you touch that gold you die," he says cold as ice. "This is what I'm after, this only"—and he taps the big plate.

"What do you mean with your dying?" I asks, for I didn't need no threats to know my plyce, if he was going to be narsty.

"Oh, I won't kill you for it," he says, "but there's death in the stuff itself, make no mistyke; those who put it there had a way to protect it."

"How abaht that, then?" I asks, pointing to the plate in his hands. His face chynged, till I went cold all over.

"This," he says, 'is the breastplate of a high priest, and I've a certain right to it. It is all that we shall forget.' Then he waves me out, and tells me to go back to camp and start supper, and I leaves him there.

"THAT night I finally asked him if he reely don't mean to take that gold, and he tells me he's already forgotten it, and for me to do the same! Meant it, too! Well, I couldn't forget it, as you wouldn't neither, and after a few days I put it to him strite that since he had no use for the gold, how abaht me having a bit of it—not all, perhaps, but enough to give me a little something for my age.

"It was no use, and that's why I'm here. There's a cool million or more in English pounds waiting there to be taken away. It belongs to me as well as anybody; I was one of the two what found it, and since he won't have it, it's mine. But it's got to be taken out, and the air route is the only safe way. We can sail down there, take a load, bring it up north and hide it somewheres safe till we've moved it all, then sell a bit for capital to ship the lot out of this bleedin' country to the Stytes, where we can have protection."

"It sounds like a large order all round," I remarked after a breathless silence. Strangely enough, I never doubted his fantastic yarn for a moment, or questioned the fact of the gold. I was already addressed heart and soul to the adventure.

"But how did you get here, and why pick on me?" I wanted to know.

"Once I'd made up my mind to have the loot in spite of Sarazon, and after thinking up a hunderd plans, I suddenly got the idear of flying it out. It's the only way it could be done without the natives knowing.

"Ole Sarazon had got the habit of disappearing for days at a time, and I decided to start off soon as he left again. That'd give me several days, and after he'd get back he'd be expecting me to turn up for several more. Then if he starts down the river again by himself, thinking something has happened to me, so much the better; he'll never guess I'm coming back to the temple. He'll think the secret's safe, and so it will be—wiv us. We can take our sweet time. There may be more gold abaht the plyce, even."

"If what you saw is only still there, it'll be enough," I grinned. "But what will Sarazon do if *he's* still there? Or, rather, what do *we* do?"

"We holds him up wiv a pistol! He's got a gun, the only one we had between us, but it's only a light rifle for gyme; he don't lug it abaht, though he'd always hide it from me. But you gets the drop on him——"

"Oh, I do, do I?"

"——we gets the drop on him if he tries to stop us, and goes on wiv our plans. But I tell you he don't give a rap for the gold; if he sees we're set to take it, he won't say a word."

"How long since you left the camp?"

He groaned. "Oh, an eternity. Maybe ten days. I lost count—thought I was done for a score of times. I had to go north, since to show myself on the East Coast wivout him would have looked queer. I figured there must be a government flyer somewhere north that I could get the confidence of, and take a chance; I 'ad nothing to lose and we'd both have all to gain. I never 'oped to have the luck of finding a white man with a machine. I just kept going somewhere till I struck the railroad at a plyce called Taxicab; soon as I hit Merida I heard of you and legged it out 'ere. Now what do *you* say?"

That was his wild story, his crazy plan. But somehow it all seemed plausible. And he was so eager that he trembled. I put him out of his misery at once.

"I'm with you, Cleaver," I assured him. "Your temple can't be more than fifty miles south, if that, judging by your hitting the Yucatan line at Tzucacab. It must be somewhere along the border of Campeche and Quintant Roo. We'll get a map, figure it out, and hop off *pronto*—tomorrow at dawn. We'll hardly pick up your sand-bar the first shot, but we ought to find it eventually. Come along to my hotel."

I vaulted to the ground, but he remained seated. His trembling had ceased. Slowly a smile cracked through the appalling sunburn of his face.

"A million pounds!" he cackled happily. "Oh, my eye!" And standing up, he fell out into my astonished arms.

2. *The City That Forgot Time*

CLEAVER was almost jerking himself out of the safety straps, jabbing the air with one hand and punching out his eyes with my binoculars, held in the other. I knew what it meant—at last he had spotted his sand-bar. A sand-bar in an unmapped river, in the unknown interior of Yucatan! Like finding a needle in a haystack, but we had flown to it, that last day, as if drawn by a magnet.

I was almost as excited as the little cockney blighter himself; I shoved the stick smartly, and though we had then about five thousand feet—in order to command the vast territory we had been combing—we lost a lot of it in the next few seconds. Then, moderating my transports, I leveled out a trifle and we swooped down on the strangest landing I ever made.

Well, I made it nicely, and nothing to complain of in the field, either:

hard and firm and smooth as glass, and the right dimensions with enough to spare.

When we stopped rolling, neither of us moved for a while. It was all strange to me and a little queer, what with the story that had brought me there and the odd feeling I now had of having sailed that old boat of mine not only into the most mysterious jungle on earth but into a dim, past time as well.

Our course had lain over a terrain just saved from being flat—a veritable sea of softly rolling billows of foliage in greens and blues. Now, dropped into it, it was a different matter. The near bank was overhung with large trees, covered with orchids that, I reflected, would make a fortune in New York. Then I laughed: piker, thinking of peddling orchids!

Acrid odors welled round us in a soft, hot haze, and the chill of the upper air was so quickly dissipated that suddenly we both started shedding our straps and heavy togs. Parrots screamed and flung their bright wings obliquely across the bar, and against the brilliant green of leaves I saw the dead-black nest of an oriole, made of Spanish moss, and the gold coat of its owner.

Gold! A good omen! I leapt out.

"Can we make it today, Cleaver?"

He hopped down like a sparrow. "Why not? We should be there by sundown. And we'll take everything along."

In five minutes I was snapping my tarpaulins over the cockpits, and with one full and one flat pack apiece, and the one automatic strapped on my thigh, we dived into the brush.

We followed first a smooth-worn but faint jaguar trail, through vegetation not high, but most confoundedly prolific. Little Cleaver knew his way well, for he brought us without a pause to the more obvious clue of the ruined causeway, where a narrow path had been sliced through the

overgrowth, following the hummocky, grass-grown traces of hewn stone.

Just as the emerald dusk was blotting out the last faint blue haze of the afternoon, we came to the first of the ruins. We ascended to the terrace, dropped our packs, and Cleaver sent out a raucous halloo, which fell dead against the walls of darkening green, and remained unanswered, leaving a throbbing silence.

From a big tree near which I stood, that thrust itself half through a crumbling Cyclopean wall, the cloying scent of a hundred parasite flowers floated about me, and the petals of some unknown blossom, shattered by a frightened thing above, sifted slowly down through the gloom. Little dark-red lizards still darted over the loose-held bark, from which I fancied they took their coloring, for I noted that on a second near-by tree, silver-gray in tone, frisked others, ashen-hued like their background. I could see nothing of the buildings I knew lay all about us, but I felt the oppression of the doom that had come upon them, and upon their dwellers.

This had been a fabulous city, a city of temples and palaces and necropolises, a fantastic city of treasure, a tithe of which we were there to claim.

Then I attempted to visualize the figure of the enigmatic Sarazon, who had no desire for the riches he had yet known how to find, and I wondered what it was he sought in that inaccessible place, and whether he still prowled about those rotting piles, and what was to happen if we met. Vague as my evocation of him was, for Cleaver could say only that he was old and tall, it was still sinister, and I was not eager for that meeting. There was something terrifyingly inhuman about a man who had no use for a room full of gold.

I found myself shivering, but it was from the chill of the incontinent tropic night, which was smothering

us in black velvet. Looking up with a start, I saw points of silver winking in the filigree of leaves overhead, and turning at Cleaver's hail, I stumbled toward the ruddy glow of the fire he had built far down the terrace, against the ruined wall.

He was frying bacon in the doorway of the great chamber in which his master had established their camp, and as I entered he looked up with a crestfallen air.

"He's still here, I take it," he observed morosely. "His things is all abah. He must have been hard put to it to get along wivout me." This last he added with glum professional satisfaction.

"Where do you suppose he is?"

"How can I tell? He was always coming and going, quite like a spook." He peered uneasily into the outer night. "He might show up any minute. We'll just have to be on our guard." He turned the bacon expertly, and I sat down against the wide lintel, rich in the flickering light with ornate carvings in deep relief. In the dim interior I could discern upon the walls the faded remnants of painted decorations.

The outer hall had been well cleaned, but, after coffee, when I made a sketchy inspection of the inner suite in company with my pipe, I was glad I had lit my rank tobacco first. The air was foul with the droppings of bats, and the shaft of my flashlight glinted in myriad evil eyes and rows of teeth. The brutes milled about in swarms, and one of them flapped into my face, with a furious chittering and a puff of rotten breath. Hastily I returned to Cleaver, who was suspending two hammocks in the outermost chamber.

Immediately we turned in, and an occasional cockney snore told me my companion had gone at once to sleep. But though I was dead-tired I remained awake some little time.

The cooking-fire smoldered dully just outside the doorway, but gave no light. A moon had risen, and its shafts pierced the fronds that mantled our terrace. Soft and fragrant little gusts wandered in now and then, happily bringing no mosquitoes, but the traffic of the bats was incessant, and rarely there was a flapping of larger pinions that made me think uncomfortably of vampires. The melancholy pipes of nightjars sounded at intervals, and once I heard the far scream of a jaguar. I felt for my automatic, and fell asleep.

"YOUR coffee's ready, sir!" It was morning, and the sun was pouring into the door. We made a hasty breakfast, both of us eager to be about our business. Outside, the mists were rising, and already all was green and shimmering with heat.

Cleaver fairly scurried ahead of me down the steep, narrow stair into the jungle. Slashed branches and trodden grass showed the paths Sarazon and he had made about the hidden city, and we skirted ruin after ruin till at length we stood before the serpent doorway he had described to me in Merida.

"Here we are," the little man quavered, obviously very nervous, but entering the somewhat awesome portal without more ado.

The long, low, narrow apartment was surprisingly light, the sun flooding into the great door and striking upward from the floor of huge cut stones. A sculptured frieze of serpents undulated about the walls. At one side stood a stone table made of a six-inch slab resting on dwarfish yard-high figures with upturned supporting palms. I jumped a little, for on this table was a sculpture, large as life, of a male human form in a contorted attitude. It reclined on its back and elbows, the knees bent, the heels at the buttocks. It stared at me with a great stupid flat face, and

despite the growing heat of the morning and the sweat I was in from our hasty journey a chill bit into me. The dull malignancy of the thing was disquieting.

I made some exclamation, for Cleaver, who had gone directly to the great closed door opposite the entrance, turned quickly and followed my gaze. Then he dropped the crow-bars he carried with a clang, and darted to the side of the figure. He bent over it a moment, and then showed me a troubled face.

"Come 'ere," he whispered; "this 'ere's a puzzler; I don't like it, neither. Look at that!" He pointed to the image's middle, where the navel was hollowed into a saucerlike depression. I saw nothing but the grime of centuries, and said so.

"How abaht this?" He flicked a pinch of dust, and sniffed his fingers. "That's ashes—copal ashes—as they used for incense. This 'ere is Chac-Mool, and they burned it on 'im as a way of worship."

"Marvelous," I said; "to think those ashes have lain there for a thousand years!"

"That's just what I don't like. Once or twice before when I've come 'ere, thinking abaht the gold, I've smelt these strong, and they looked fresh, somehow. I've never caught them 'ot, but you might say they was a bit warm. Now, for instance. See for yourself."

I sifted a little of the silt through my fingers. It was certainly not cool.

"Don't you smell something?"

I did, and the faint scent was giving me a headache.

"Sarazon told me," Cleaver went on uneasily, "that the Indians used to believe Chac-Mool 'ere came alive at night. *That's* all right, but I don't like 'im 'aving fresh incense on 'is belly. It looks like something else was alive around 'ere besides 'im." His slurred speech, as usual, betrayed his excitement.

"How about Sarazon himself? Maybe he burns it to the old gods. You say he believes in all that sort of thing."

"Perhaps; but there were times 'e wasn't out of my sight, and after, I'd come 'ere, and there'd be this smell in the air. I spoke of it to him, and he said it was the old copal, getting stirred up by the winds."

"Well, it's odd enough, but how about tackling that door?" I suggested impatiently.

"Right-o!" he agreed instantly, and we started to work.

We started, and we worked, and we both got headaches—the sort I used to get from dynamite fumes—and we drank quarts of coffee to fight the headaches; and then we fought that door again, but that was all, except that we broke most of our tools. I wished I had brought dynamite, and reproached Cleaver for giving me a wrong impression.

"You say that Sarazon opened this damn safe while you were making tea outside?"

"So he did, and never turned an 'air. And I'm thinking that only he can open it now."

"Rats," I snorted, for my temper was frayed; "what's he got that we haven't, except maybe brains?"

"He's got *magic!*" the cockney solemnly averred. Then we went outside and collapsed on the terrace, and drank more coffee, and cursed. But I had ideas due to that mention of magic, and we wasted the afternoon testing those ideas.

We went over the walls and floor inch by inch looking for some clue to the mechanics of that door. I jumped and bounced on every separate slab of the floor, and hammered every illogical boss of the sculptured reliefs, hoping to start the lever that I am still sure existed somewhere. Sarazon had opened the door, and quickly. There must be a way. We never found it.

The violet dusk crept into the chamber and finally drove us forth. As we went out through the debris of roots still clinging to the door, a lot of big, flat, crablike spiders were beginning to waken for the night, and their bright pin-point eyes glittered in the gloom. I felt that Chac-Mool was sneering behind me, but I didn't look back. I felt hellishly frustrated and tired, and a tick had established himself in my left calf. I didn't enjoy our evening meal and we simply couldn't go any more coffee. So to our hammocks with splitting heads. This gold might take some getting, was my last thought.

THE next morning I went alone, the river trail being well defined, to see if the airplane was safe. It was; snug in its tarps, but looking weirdly incongruous on that sand-bar. Cleaver was making a round of the various ruins to seek traces of Sarazon. We had agreed he was probably necessary to open that door. If he failed to appear, or couldn't be made to oblige us, we'd have to fly out and come back with dynamite. I didn't want to risk any flights not actually resultful of golden cargo, so we pecked away at the treasury now and then in a desultory fashion, and waited for Sarazon.

There was a natural well, or *cenote*, against one ruined temple, similar to smaller ones I'd seen in Merida, and I bathed with delight in its crystal-clear, cold waters. They looked stagnant and roiled, but it was only the perfumed pollen from the thousands of orchids and lilies that smothered the large trees overhanging the pool. Cleaver refused to join me in these revels, insisting that horrible monsters lurked in the dark depths. I never saw anything worse than a snake with large mottles of green and yellow and chocolate.

The real monsters, it seemed to me, were all outside the water: for there

were the big armored ants whose sting could produce fever and death; the giant red scorpions; the hideous spiders; and more formidable than all, a ghastly unclassified beetle two inches long at his worst, with a poisonous proboscis. The first one that punctured me I slew, and as there was no irritation I forgot my wound—for twenty-four hours. Then it began to suppurate, and I was glad of our medicine kit. Fortunately these creatures prefaced their attack with a booming noise, and could thus be detected in time. I saw in them a horrible resemblance to a certain long-nosed god sculptured everywhere about the ruins, whose nose was like an elephant's trunk. His appalling visage was set on every side, with its grinning jagged teeth, and eyes of rounded stones tenoned in, but often fallen from their hollow sockets. The beaked beetles seemed made in his very image, loosed upon us to drive us from his dusty houses, and under that bright sun I had often to shake off a thrill of superstitious dread.

So it was I preferred the pool, which I reached by a steep, grassy slope that had once been a stair. I came to suspect in that pool not monsters, but catfish; and having brought tackle, I set about catching some one afternoon. The depths were filled with snags, and I detached several rotted branches. This began to bore me, and I dozed for awhile, to awake at the boom of a warrior beetle. I killed him, and found my hook engaged.

At length I landed a mass of decayed twigs and leaves, tangled about a small, thin-walled skull—unmistakably a girl's. The delicate sutures were almost separate, and the tiny, perfect teeth showed she had died somewhere in her teens. I lost myself in pity and conjecture over that frail tenebrous of secrets before restoring it gently to the waters, but I fished no more.

Days passed, and I grew to feel at home in that bright-colored world of showy flowers and vines and brilliant-hued birds. We wandered about, almost always together, for Cleaver didn't want to meet Sarazon alone. Anyway, I had the automatic, and we had determined to get the drop on our man at the moment of encounter. And thus it finally befell.

3. Sarazon

WE HAD supped, the fateful night, and were in our hammocks, sleepily chatting. Cleaver grew silent, and I lay listening to the insect choir and waiting for a jaguar's howl to break the monotony. Suddenly there was a dull and heavy detonation somewhere in the bowels of the ruin. I tumbled out in my impeding blankets and to my feet. Cleaver ran to my side, draped, I saw by my flash, in his bedding.

"A falling wall!" I whispered.

"Maybe. But put out that light. Wyte!"

In darkness we shivered. I kept my straining eyes on the faintly discernible purple square of the entrance. Minutes passed, and I looked round for the cockney, but saw nothing. Puzzled, I reached out, for I knew he had not moved away from me, and touched him. He jerked, and the pale mask of his face veered to mine. *He had been turned toward the inner door.* And in that moment I turned too, and so remained. For something was moving in the inner chambers—moving on feet. Of course we inspected those noisome lairs each night; had done so that evening as usual, and knew there was nothing there but the bats. Yet thence proceeded, beyond a doubt, the noise, and, a little later, *the light!*

It flickered palely, a gleam against one polished jamb of the far door of the room beyond ours, and waxed jerkily brighter. Cleaver clutched at me, but I shook him aside. To be

candid, I was relieved: this light had a human origin, anyhow; the noise, therefore, didn't mean that Chac-Mool was walking about.

"It's Sarazon!" hissed Cleaver. "It can't be nothing else!"

The light was suddenly brighter; it flooded that far door, became a dazzling disk, and over it swam a face.

"It's *him!*" There were relief and apprehension in Cleaver's whisper, but I tapped him for silence, and dropping my blankets, stole quickly to the inner door. This was Sarazon's surprizing homecoming, but it must be he who was most to be surprized.

Hidden behind the door jamb, my automatic waiting, I tried to see what manner of man was approaching. He was inordinately tall, it seemed, and cadaverous; the little light reflected on his face was from below, and threw gaunt shadows on jowl and cheeks and into the eye-sockets. Indeed, if his light hadn't obviously been an electric lantern, I'd have thought him a walking specter, as slowly, deliberately, he shuffled nearer, bats wheeling about his head. I drew back, and waited breathless.

The light began to brighten our chamber. Cleaver scuttled out of sight. A minute later Sarazon entered, and stopped, towering above me.

"Hands up, Sarazon!" I called out at once. With another man I should have stayed where I was, but from all I'd heard I rather expected the reputed wizard to vanish: so I sprang to him and poked my weapon into his side. My free hand I fixed firmly into a rough tweed coat. Over my shoulder I barked, "Come and take this light!"

From his great height the man looked down at my five-foot-ten, his spare frame tensely braced against my grip. But when Cleaver ran forward he relaxed.

"So you've come back," he said casually as he handed the lantern to the little cockney, who stood embar-

rapped before him. "Well, Cleaver, it would have been better for you had you died in the jungle; I'm really sorry you didn't."

"We don't mean you no 'arm, sir," Cleaver said humbly. "All we want is the gold, and you don't want that."

"You were told enough to forget that. If you were to take it we should all of us leave our bones here."

"Sit down, Sarazon," I put in. "We may as well be pleasant about this little affair. How pleasant depends on you. I've yet to see the gold, and there it seems you must help me. But naturally, you must be obliging." I stepped back and waved the gray barrel suggestively. Cleaver had placed the lamp in a corner, and now he deferentially fetched a folding stool, part of their original equipment.

Sarazon seated himself and gave his entire attention to me. I returned the stare. Cadaverous to a degree, he was yet a figure of patent power. In the movements of his emaciated body was a curious youthfulness, though his shock of white hair and wasted features gave an effect of immense age. The cold, faded eyes, set very far apart, gleamed over me in a frozen contempt. Here was plainly no charlatan, but a mystic, perhaps a fanatic. He spoke, judicially.

"I should have given more thought to Cleaver's disappearance, but I was occupied with other matters. Had I considered it sufficiently, you wouldn't have me at this disadvantage. But I never expected to be confronted with firearms, or to be disturbed at all. For the moment your modern methods must prevail. But Cleaver might better have died in the jungle; I'm sorry he didn't."

"Y'are, are ye?" sneered the cockney, beginning to take heart as he saw Sarazon accepting the situation.

"Yes, idiot," snapped his former

master, "for it is now quite plain just what form your death will take, and the jungle would have been better."

He spoke with so much conviction that I myself was chilled. Glancing at the valet, I saw he was horribly shaken.

"Puttin' a corse on me, eh?" he snarled. "Well, watch out! My pal 'ere won't see me done in." This last was, I felt with a sense of pity, an abject appeal to me.

"Cleaver must come to no harm," I told the cold gray eyes. "As he says, we mean you none, and if you'll open that door for us we'll leave you in peace. But open the door you shall; you must understand we're utterly determined on that."

"Oh, I'll open it. I realize you can't be persuaded. I shan't waste a word. But it's a stupid business, and will probably be fatal to all of us. Cleaver is already as good as dead."

This was gruesome talk, and affected me almost as badly as its victim. "Make coffee," I directed. "We'll be awake all night, by turns. I'll take first watch and then nap till morning. Naturally our host, who is now our guest, is entitled to one hammock, and there are only two."

So it was arranged. Sarazon silently accepted his own blankets, and disposed himself in one of the canvas slings without comment or delay. I believe he was instantly asleep. Where he had been, on what errand, and what the manner of his return, were questions never to be put. I drank the coffee, made Cleaver stow himself away, and with a fire to combat the chill and afford light, mounted guard. After some hours I roused Cleaver from his troubled dreams and took my turn at sleep.

MORNING and coffee odors awoke me. The perfumed mists were slowly rising under the sun. Sarazon went on sleeping as we discussed him,

but our plans were simple and all for immediate action, so the three of us breakfasted together, and set out at once for the Temple of the Boas. He was impassively taciturn. When we started he doffed his tweed coat, and it was evident that he wore under his flannel shirt a large disk, no doubt the gold priest's breastplate of which Cleaver had spoken. A very queer business all round, I reflected, as we made our way in single file through the still-damp foliage. I brought up the rear and kept a most wary eye on Sarazon, but we arrived at the portal of the giant serpents without incident.

Silently we passed within. I stopped at the door, but Cleaver danced over to the treasury in mad excitement.

"Open it, sir; open it!" he begged and commanded.

"You will both have to leave me alone," Sarazon replied quietly. "A matter of minutes only." I moved as if to go out, but Cleaver was shrilly indignant. "No, you don't! We don't leave you out of our sight. Go ahead and open 'er. Myke 'im do it!"—to me.

Sarazon glared at the little man, but I slapped the weapon on my thigh. "We must insist," I smiled.

The gaunt man glared at us, then slowly strolled down the room. I'll admit I was never so curious in my life. I watched his every move; so did Cleaver. We had put in a lot of heart-breaking work on the puzzle of that door, and aside from getting at the gold were keen to learn its secret.

Sarazon turned, paced slowly back, and thus went to and fro. Our silly heads wagged after him. After a little of this he raised his arms and began chanting, but so softly that I could scarcely hear. Very slowly, pausing often in his stride, but always chanting, he approached Chac-Mool. Then suddenly he stopped before the figure, and cried out with startling

loudness. Our eyes glued to his broad back, we waited breathless.

Straightening up, he turned to us, and his long right arm shot out. We swung round, gasped: the great door stood open, and beyond, the shadows waited! From a litter of hacked roots adhering to the frame a few distracted scorpions scuttled, tails in air.

"'Ow did you do it?" shrilled Cleaver; "you've got to tell——"

"The door is open; I'll tell you nothing!" Sarazon cut in.

I was piqued at the ease with which he solved what had so baffled us, and at his cleverness in fixing our attention on his abracadabra so that we shouldn't see just when the door opened. But what did it matter? The door gaped, and striding over, I sent my flash boring into the semi-gloom. The headachy fumes we had previously suffered were overpoweringly pungent.

"There they are!" screamed Cleaver at my elbow, and darted inside. I saw the gold was actually there—a solid wall of it, how deep there was no telling. In the beam of my flash Cleaver clawed at the upper tier, but I gave him only half an eye, and waited. Sarazon I watched like a hawk, my hand at my holster. I wasn't going to have that door close as quickly as it had opened, and trap one or both of us. But the tall mystic leant against Chac-Mool's couch, and made no move.

So a couple of minutes passed, and then Cleaver, very red-faced, came staggering out with two huge ingots, which he thudded down at my feet. A glance showed me that save for the dusty faces which had been exposed, they were bright as though fresh from the mint. And a glance was all they got, for the next moment Cleaver sagged heavily against me and crumpled to the floor. I didn't even question if he were dead: it was already awfully evident. If you've ever seen a photographic print black-

en from too much exposure, you'll know what I mean.

"What——" I began, silly from the shock, but Sarazon came forward.

"You see," he said unemotionally; "he had better have died in the jungle. And now you'll leave the rest alone? We'll replace these, and go."

Dazed, I watched him bend down and pick up the heavy bars. I was sick, but I was sicker with hate of this man who had let another go straight to his death.

"Why did you let him kill himself?" I demanded.

He rose, holding the ingots. "Could I have convinced him?" he asked with simple justness. He was right there; he would have wasted his words.

"But how dare you handle them? They killed him fast enough. If you can do it safely you could have told him——"

"I was under no obligation to him," he said harshly now. "I am under none to you. You specified I had only to open the door, and nothing but Cleaver's death could convince you the gold were best left alone."

My headache was maddening me. I remembered the gold plate Sarazon had taken from the trove, and which he still apparently wore.

"You took what you wanted," I rasped, pointing to his midriff, where the disk was plainly outlined. "Now I'm taking mine. But since you know so much you'll show me the trick of handling these, or you'll go to join Cleaver!" I lunged out my automatic. He saw I could not be opposed.

"They're harmless," he said, "once they're taken out. But he who moves them first—any of them—well, look at Cleaver." I had looked once at Cleaver; that was enough. Sarazon went on: "This city, this gold, was known to a Spanish explorer two

hundred years ago; I possess his map; he learned these things; thus I know them. Are you convinced?"

"Why didn't the Spaniard take the gold?"

"He sought other things, as I do," Sarazon replied. "Besides, there were still priests of the old cults about the ruins in those days."

"Well," I told him, "since these two bars you have are denatured, I'll trouble you for them. As for the rest, I'm convinced; and I'll leave you to your ruins."

I seized one of the bars, not without qualms, for I couldn't tell how much of truth Sarazon had uttered. He surrendered it without a word. It was amazingly heavy, and I was wondering how I was to manage two of them and my gun, when Sarazon stepped back from me with a cry, his gaze going past me. I spun round, but kept him covered, for this might be the old dodge of "Look out behind!"

There in the doorway, with the sun behind him, around him, radiating from him in a thousand prismatic rays, stood an Indian—but such an Indian!

He was superb—and awesome. A head-dress, tier over tier of jeweled feathers, filled the upper doorway. Under it was a face of wrinkles and blazing ancient eyes and foot-long gold mustachios. There were gold plaques over his ears, and he wore a great gold breastlet on which I saw a round and grinning face. His withered arms were weighted with wide gold bracelets, and he held a great golden baton with an owl's head. He moved, and there was a soft tinkle of gold about his ankles; he raised his arm, and there was a dull rattle and clink. He gestured slowly, and there was no mistaking his meaning.

Sarazon deliberately turned, and swinging his bar of gold twice, loosed it to fall with a crash inside the door of the vault. Then he spread out

his hands, empty, and bowed his head. I clutched my gold and my gun, and waited for the vision to turn to me. But of me it took no notice. It pointed to Sarazon's breast, and made again that gesture of throwing away. Again Sarazon spread out his empty hands. Then somehow the gleaming figure was upon him, and tapped him upon the chest with the baton, and there was a dulled clang like a cracked gong. Then Sarazon, the imperturbable, went mad.

"No!" he cried, with a terrible voice, and sprang past the figure to the door. My impression as I followed him was that the Indian had got between him and me. I know I fired at it as I leapt, but whether my bullet went through it, as I myself seemed to go through it, I don't know. Those gorgeous feathers filled the door, but I was through them, and safely outside with my bar of gold. Ahead of me Sarazon was running obliquely down the steep steps of the terrace. I dropped after him, and we crashed almost together into the home trail.

"Keep going!" I panted at his back; "but stop at the camp. I'll fly you out!" He pounded on.

WE MADE the far ruin after a brisk trot. That Sarazon had seen fit to run shook my nerve. All I had seen was one mummied old Indian, and he might well be dead by now. True, I had looked back hastily at the edge of the terrace, and whether he really stood between the giant serpents or it was the glitter of the sun on the carvings, I wasn't sure. But I suppose where there was one Indian there must be more, and there were only two of us now. I had to halt Sarazon at our camp terrace, or he would have kept going.

"Have to get our flying togs!" I gasped, and took the lead. He followed me up the steep, narrow risers without a word. I dashed ahead, grabbed the outfits, and flung a set

to him. We helped each other into the coats and scrambled down the stairs again. We had crammed on the helmets, but I couldn't adjust mine, hampered as I was with gold and gun.

Fatigue and the irregular path of the causeway perforce slowed us down. But with the plane only one lap away I began to feel safer.

"These make fine armor," I wheezed, "against the Indians' arrows!"

Sarazon answered me seriously. "There are no Indians, no arrows. Only the Priest of Ah-Puch!"

I stopped short, and clutching Sarazon, halted him. "If there's only the priest, why are we running? I think I got him anyway." I shifted the ingot to my other shoulder, for it was getting intolerably weighty.

"We can not stay, and we had best hurry!" he answered, with such convincingness that I waved him on. I meant to have it all out with him later; he'd have to tell me what it was all about. "Your bullet," added Sarazon over his shoulder, "was wasted."

I gave it up, and we scrambled on, till at last we were on the jaguar trail, and then, in a final spurt, at the sand-bar.

We splashed through the ford, and I drew in a great lungful of relief as I saw the plane was undisturbed. I ripped off the tarps and carefully lowered the ingot into the cockpit. Sarazon I had to heave into the passenger's seat, for he was far spent. Then, making my adjustments, I dashed to the bow and spun the prop. With a miss or so she began singing, as I ducked under the wing and jumped up to my seat.

Gayly we taxied down the hard-packed bar. I pulled back on the stick and lifted the plane off the ground, and up we went, not in a

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The Magic of Chac-Mool

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clean climbing turn, but in a series of zooms, with a sharp bank now and then. I had to hop the trees of the far bank the first time round, then I gave her the full gun and made ragged circles around the bar with only a few hundred feet of altitude instead of a decent thousand or so. She hadn't her usual pep, that was plain; and I grabbed the oil can and made a few adjustments, analyzing the distinct components of her deep roar. My eyes on Sarazon ahead of me, I screamed at him to fix his safety belt, but he was hugging the gunwale and peering over so fixedly that I snatched a glance too.

There below us, at the edge of the jaguar trail, stood the Priest of Ah-Pueh, dazzling in the sun against the dark greenery. He was looking up at us with arms outstretched.

I grinned down at the tiny helpless creature, leveled off, and then flew level—fairly level, you might say, for at once she began missing, and my grin was wiped off. She bucked along, losing headway, and it was then that Sarazon sprang to his feet and threw out his arms in a wild gesture back toward the figure far down behind us.

I swear it was a full minute before the motor ceased its thunder that he toppled out. And I'll swear that before he fell he was dead—for a ghastly blue tint seemed suddenly to suffuse his face, and then he slumped. We were over the jungle as it happened, and he vanished into the green like a diver into the sea. Then, as I gaped down, the motor went dead.

Frantically though I worked before she lost headway, there was nothing for it but to get back to the bar if I was lucky enough not to lose control entirely. So I dived, dived like a

vulture on its prey, till the wires howled in a mad crescendo. Then I checked sharply, took one dizzy bank round toward the bar and swooped along with only a foot or two of altitude to try for a landing. Just clearing the big trees again, I made it, a little bumpy, and lurched down along the bar to a full stop right before the Priest of Ah-Puch.

His arms were lowered, now, and somehow I was glad of it. I had the oddest fear that he would point that owl-headed baton at me. Idiotically I felt it had something to do with the blue blight that had stricken Sarazon. But as the High Priest stepped softly into the ruffles of the ford and approached the plane, I remembered my automatic, and grasped it stealthily. Then I remembered, too, that I had already shot this creature, and that it hadn't seemed to take. I waited.

He came up to the plane and stood below me, and simply held out his hands, together, palms up. It was the attitude of the squat figures that held up Chac-Mool's table, a posture to sustain a heavy weight.

I looked for a long moment at his gold mustachios, and then I bent down, got the gold bar at my feet, heaved it over the side, and gently lowered it into his hands.

Then suddenly I felt beaten, and lost, and lonely, and I thought of Cleaver and Sarazon, who had bought that gold for me with their lives, but whose lives that gold could not buy back. My head fell for a second; when I looked up, the Priest of Ah-Puch had gone back into the jungle.

Then, incredibly, came the deep-throated normal roar of my motor, and the old crate was sizzling down the bar. Faster and faster she sped, till I had a bare second to lift her off the sands. She leaped into the air like a kid's kite in a sudden squall, and I thundered away—away toward Belize, for that might as well be my next port o' call.