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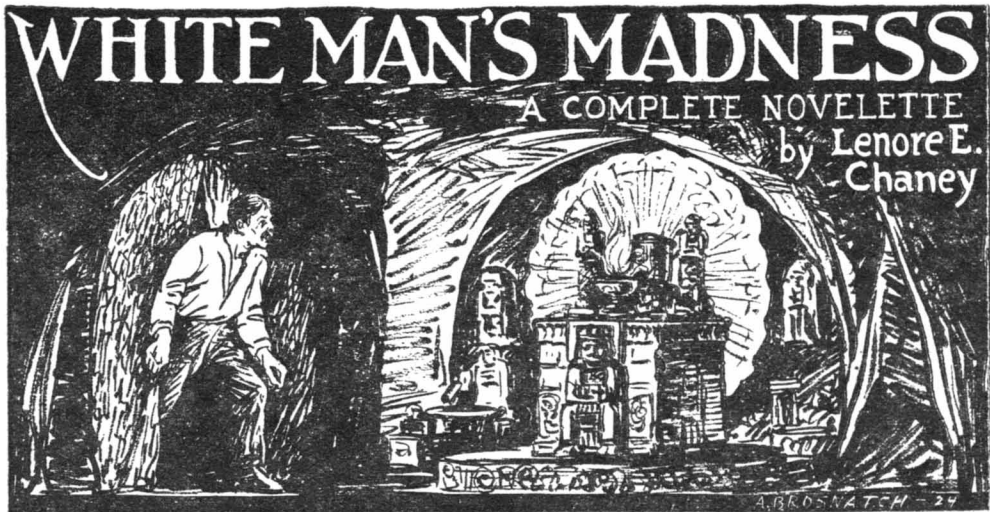
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HOUR after hour John Martin staggered up the steep trail, singing bits of ribald songs picked up here and there throughout a rather free and easy past. Occasionally he paused to curse the patient pack-mule that labored along in his wake, or to shout back jests and words of encouragement to the man behind him. Answers to these jests had grown briefer and briefer as the day wore on, for Jackson was not in a frivolous mood.

A little wind began to filter down upon them from the high passes up ahead, and Martin shivered now and then and drank deeply of the flask that he carried in the bosom of his shirt.

At last, as he rounded a point where the trail crept like a thread around the granite breast of the mountain, he was met by a blast so keen, so bitterly cold, that it went through him like the thrust of a knife blade, chilling the very marrow of his bones. Months of dissipation in the dives and barrooms of the coast towns had shaken him out of the strength and vigor which was his rightful heritage, and his heart was jumping like a trip-hammer as he paused and stared irresolutely ahead. As far as the eye could reach, that trail ran on

and on, climbing steadily higher in long, slow spirals. In the end it seemed to lead nowhere—it only went on and on, grim and relentless as fate itself. As far as his dazed and uncertain sight could reach, there was no sign of life or human habitation, in this inhospitable part of the Peruvian Andes.

As he stood still, looking from side to side, his right hand fumbled almost automatically to the bosom of his shirt and brought forth the flask, which he tilted to his lips. A surprised exclamation broke from him as the upturned bottle yielded no drop of the precious fluid upon which he had traveled for the past six days.

“Now, wha’ you know about that?” he inquired, with a drunken leer at the august peak above him. “Wha’ you know about that? The damned thing’s empty again! Got to fill her up from the keg—never did see such a bottle—always empty—empty—empty. Here you—now where the devil did that mule go?”

He turned and peered behind him: there was no sign of the burdened mule nor of Jackson, his fellow-traveler.

“Slow as cold molasses,” he grumbled, as he stood waiting for them to come up. “Can’t make no headway

with a fellow like Jackson—grumbling and growling and dragging along.”

For fully ten minutes he stood still, leaning heavily against the rocky wall that lined the narrow trail. He was tired—it was good to rest, even for a moment. But presently, as no sign of either Jackson or the mule appeared, he turned and went back along the narrow, ledgelike trail, and as he went the fumes of alcohol lifted a little from his deadened brain, and he cursed Jackson passionately for delaying their journey. But nowhere was there any sign of either Jackson or the mule.

Suddenly he came to a little path that led off from the main trail up a deep ravine, which cut into the side of the mountain, and which he had not noticed when he had passed it some time before. He stopped at the juncture of the two trails and called.

“Jackson — hoor-aye — Jackson!” and waited anxiously a moment before repeating the call.

There was no answer.

Again and again he called. His own words echoed strangely back to him, but there was no answering shout.

“It stands to reason he must have gone off the trail here,” he mused aloud, as he considered the situation. “And yet—he can’t have gotten very far—strange he’s out of hearing so soon. I’ll have to go up here a ways after him, I guess.”

He hurried along up the new trail, which he could barely discern in the gathering dusk, and as he went he paused again and again to call out. There was no answer.

He walked faster and faster, breaking now and then into little runs until his laboring heart and gasping breath slackened his pace, for the little fear, that had been only a trifling uncertainty at first, was growing by leaps and bounds within him, clutching with horrible fingers at his quivering

brain. His head ached and his blood-shot eyes burned like flames.

Suddenly he stopped. What a fool he had been to leave the main trail! Jackson had simply turned around and gone back, as he had threatened all day to do, for Jackson had long since sickened of their drunken compact to explore the ruined village of which their Indian guide had told such glittering tales. It was like Jackson’s cursed selfishness to steal away with the pack-mule and all the supplies. Martin remembered now how Jackson had glared at him in that silly quarrel when they stopped for lunch. They had been good friends and boon companions when they loaded up the pack-mule and started out on this trip, and when their spirits had flagged or their limbs wearied they had had plenty of *chicha* to pour its fiery courage into their deadening veins. On the second day their guide had left them, promising to join them later in the day; and though he had not come they had kept on, with the curious persistency of drunken men, and fools, making only a few miles a day, but well satisfied since the supply of *chicha* was inexhaustible. Jackson had wearied first of this foolish expedition; besides, it was growing colder and colder as they climbed higher, and the journey that was to have taken three days at best had already taken six. And now Jackson had made good his threat and turned back, taking with him what remained of their scanty supplies, as well as the blankets and bedding.

As these thoughts ran through Martin’s mind, he had already turned around and was running back down the trail. How easy it was to go down hill again; no wonder Jackson had turned back! What fools they had been in the first place to set out with that Indian! Martin remembered now how the fellow’s eyes had gleamed as he urged the undertaking upon him. Why, he had practically talked them into the whole thing, hint-

ing at treasure and leading them off the main trail on to this obscure one, on which they had met not a single traveler during the whole of their journey.

That Indian had been a traitor!

MARTIN saw it all now, as he ran along the trail, hurrying to catch up with Jackson before the night fell. He was anxious to talk over with Jackson the duplicity of that Indian, who had been angered, perhaps, at their familiarity with his daughter.

"You never know about these damned *cholas*," he muttered aloud, as he trotted heavily along. "For all he seemed as soft as butter, that fellow was ready to stick a knife into us all the while. Only it was like his damned impudence to choose this way instead, sending us off up here on a wild goose chase, hoping we'd fall off some of these cliffs and break our necks. Wait till I get back to Huanuco—I'll fix that greaser! Funny—I surely have come back as far as I went up—the other trail ought to show up about here somewheres."

He stopped and looked about him. Nowhere could he see a familiar landmark. He seemed to remember that the ravine had been steep and narrow at the point where it intersected the main trail. He saw now that the ravine had widened out—he could not see the side-walls in the deepening twilight. He seemed to be in a sort of spoon-shaped depression in the mountainside; the trail that he had followed he had lost somewhere, perhaps when he started back, for he saw that what he had taken for a trail was a mere runaway that the mountain deer had made, running in steep zigzags from one grazing ground to another. There was no real trail in sight. He could not tell whether he was above or below the main trail up which he had labored earlier in the day.

He was lost!

Lost! He repeated the word again and again, trying to grasp the meaning, and all the time, round and round in the recesses of his mind, fear ran swiftly, recalling stories of other men lost in the Andes and of what had happened to them in the end. He had laughed at these stories in the snug warmth of cheerful barrooms and club lounges, but he did not laugh now as, with white face and trembling limbs, he stopped and peered anxiously into the shadows.

All the food, the blankets and even the firearms had been packed on the back of the mule, for they had found it steep going up the rocky trails and they had stripped down to shirt and trousers. Even Martin's coat had been hooked over the horn of the pack saddle. Last night he had been cold, wrapped in that coat and two blankets besides. What would it be like tonight, still higher up and with neither coat nor blankets to shelter him from the wind that slipped down from those snow-covered peaks up above?

As he thought of these things he was conscious for the first time of the awful silence that reigned about him. Not a whisper, not a sound anywhere, except the sound of his own labored breathing, which sounded harshly in his ears. Involuntarily he tried to muffle that panting breath. The effort made his ears ring and he staggered slightly, as a sudden nausea came over him. He had talked and sung songs while Jackson ate lunch. So long as he had plenty of the ever-potent *chicha* he had wanted nothing else, but now his stomach felt weak and empty.

He went forward a few steps, feeling his way along. If only he could find some place to take shelter for the night, in the morning he would find his way back to the main trail and follow Jackson. But the bare slopes of the mountain offered no shelter—the best he could do would be a fire under some rock. He tried to keep

down the panic that grew and grew within him. He was afraid, horribly afraid; but he must not acknowledge it, even to himself, lest that little spark of self-control desert him utterly. He must not think of what it meant to be lost in this wilderness, of the slow starvation for food and water, the cold and the utter loneliness. He must not think of his own pitiful insignificance in the face of these awful solitudes; he must not think of the thousand and one dangers that lay about him. He raised his chin and tried to square back his drooping shoulders to make a pretense of the courage that he did not feel.

A little sound from the rear made him wheel suddenly and peer anxiously back into the shadows of the ravine behind him. Then, seeing nothing, he went on again. A moment later he wheeled again. Had he heard, or had he imagined, a soft pad-pad of some creature that followed silently along his trail? In spite of his caution his footsteps quickened, and with a little smothered sob he broke into a run, cursing his stupidity for unbuckling the gun from his belt earlier in the day.

He halted, choking for breath, and turned again and listened. There was no sound from along his path. Whatever it was that had followed was gone. He could go no farther—a rock ahead, jutting sharply out of the side of the mountain, offered the only shelter in sight. He felt in his pockets: there was a handful of matches, enough to insure a fire for several days. He looked about for fuel. Earlier in the day he had seen plenty of the resinous little *tola* bushes, which made so bright a fire, and now he looked about in the fading light, eagerly collecting a little bundle of fagots. With infinite patience and care he arranged his fuel and a moment later the flame flared up. His spirits instantly lifted with the mounting blaze. Fire—what a won-

derful thing it was: the gift of the gods to men!

He must not let it die down—in his anxiety to get it started he had not collected sufficient fuel, and the dried *tola* burned quickly—too quickly. He hurried about looking for larger wood, but on this side of the mountain there was so little that would burn. One clump of bushes promised well, and he hurried toward it eagerly. He did not see until too late, that the supposed bush was really the top of a *quecuar* tree that grew out of the side of a deep fissure in the mountainside. Before he could stop himself, his momentum carried him over the edge of the chasm, and he fell, clutching at the air as his body shot downward. And as he fell a last despairing cry burst from him.

“The fire!” he cried. “The fire!”

Hours later he came back to consciousness for a moment.

He was being lifted up and placed upon a litter of some sort. A groan of agony came from his lips, and instantly he felt a hand, as soft and light as thistledown, laid upon his forehead, and a woman’s voice, infinitely tender, murmuring over him. Then the black cloud slipped down again over his brain and he knew no more.

2

HE AWOKED to find himself lying on a rude bunk against the side of a stone hut, and through the open door the sun streamed in, warm and cheering. He was dazed for a moment, and tried to rise to his feet, but instantly sank back again upon his pillow. Then he discovered that his left leg was in splints from the hip down and that his left shoulder was tightly bandaged. The memory of his plunge down the abyss came back to him; he had broken a leg and perhaps dislocated a shoulder in a fall that might easily have cost him his life. His head ached and he felt the fever

throbbing through his tortured body; he closed his eyes again and moaned aloud.

Instantly he felt that soft hand again on his forehead, and a low voice, vaguely familiar, sounded in his ears.

"Ah, the señor is awake at last," she said in Quichua. "He would like a cool drink, perhaps?"

He opened his eyes and looked up at her.

"Water, water!" he begged. "I am so thirsty—so thirsty!"

"Si, señor, I know," she answered, deftly slipping her firm round arm under his head, as she held a cup to his parched lips. "Just a little while and you will be better. Drink deep—that is well! It is the good cold water that shall make the fever fly away."

He sank back to his pillow with a sigh of relief, and in a moment had drifted away again into oblivion.

When he awoke it was evening. Through the open door of the hut he could see the long, dark shadows that lay over the mountains, and he shivered a little. He felt stronger now—the fever and the pain had both subsided, and his mind was clearer than it had been for days.

Where was he? Who were these people who had picked him up and carried him here? Who was the woman who had been with them and who had given him the drink of water a little while ago?

He lay upon a bed made thick and soft with the fleece of many sheep, and a warm, thick blanket covered him lightly. For a long time he was fain to lie quietly and as comfortably as the pain would permit, but his mind was restless by nature, and his curiosity was aroused. At his side stood a rude table, and on it rested the cup from which he had drunk. His eyes fell upon it as they roved about the room. He started and gave an exclamation of surprize, for the cup, curiously shaped and somewhat battered, was made of gold. He had

heard many tales of the fabulous riches of some of the mountain tribes in the Andes, and his blood quickened at the thoughts that rose up within him at sight of that cup of gold. He coughed, stirring noisily.

Instantly from the door of the hut came that voice, like a silver bell.

"Ah, again the señor wakes, is it not? Perhaps he is again thirsty?"

He smiled up at her and nodded assent.

"I would like another drink. That cold water tastes very good to me."

She laughed merrily, as she held the cup to his lips.

"The señor is so very thirsty today, but tomorrow he will be so much better. Then he will beg for food, but now, the water is enough, is it not? Rest you quietly now; in a little while our dear *Ulca* will come again to see how well I have taken care of you."

"But wait—don't go," Martin begged, as she turned away again. "Tell me, how did I come here? How did you happen to find me? I didn't think there was a human being within a hundred miles of me when I fell."

She shook her head doubtfully, but turned back and seated herself at his side.

"I do not think I should stay to talk with you now, for you are to keep very quiet, you know. Still, there is so little to tell. My brothers and I, we were returning from a visit to a neighboring village. We lingered long and so, in order to hurry, we took a short cut across the canyon, because we are good climbers and we do not mind when the way is steep and rough. As we came along I heard a noise, as if one groaned. I insisted on stopping to look—my brothers laughed at me and said I dreamed; but I would not go on until we had searched. Then we found you, lying crumpled up at the foot of the cliff. You had fallen from high above, and I do not see why you were not killed, but so it was. We made a litter from

two branches and my cape, and we carried you here, where our good *Uilca*, the very wisest one in all the world, he bound your poor leg into splints and bandaged your shoulder, and in time he will make you quite well again. And because we found you, my brothers and I are to be your nurses—that is, if I do not disobey the order to keep you quiet. If I should talk more I should be sent away and one of the old women set to watch in my place.”

“I will be quiet,” Martin promised hastily, and she laughed at the anxiety in his voice. “Don’t let anyone else come—I want you to be my only nurse.”

“Do not fear,” she laughed. “I will not permit anyone else to care for you, for did I not find you myself? Close your eyes and sleep again. Only while we sleep do the sick bodies grow well and strong again.”

Martin obediently closed his eyes but he did not sleep. From time to time he stole glances at the slender figure of the girl beside him. She had the lissome grace of the wild creatures of the woods; she sat limply as if every muscle were utterly relaxed; and yet he knew that at the slightest sound she would be instantly alert and poised for action. She was dressed in a soft, clinging garment of cream-colored woolen material, and around her waist was a girdle made of golden links, fastened with a flat disk, curiously carved. Gold, and more gold—was it so cheap with this tribe that the girls made belts of the precious metal?

Martin had had some little experience with the Indian women who frequented the coast towns, and was familiar with their love of bright colors and gay adornment. But this girl was not like other Indian women—at least like none that he had seen. She was tall and straight, her back unbowed by burden carrying, and her clear-cut, sensitive features were vaguely familiar to him, but for a

long time he could not place the type. Her eyes were large and dark, heavily fringed with curling black lashes, and when she looked at him their slumbrous depths lighted luminously. All at once he remembered: he had seen these same features during years of wanderings in the East—the Aryan Brahmins of India. But what had given this daughter of the Peruvian wilds the form and features of the best product of the Aryan race? How came India to Peru?

As he lay turning this over in his mind, footsteps approached and an old man, clad in a long dark robe of llama hair, entered the hut. At sight of him the girl sprang to her feet and made a little obeisance; evidently this was the priest of whom she had spoken. Martin watched the pair curiously as the girl, in some strange dialect which he had never heard before, began eagerly speaking. Evidently she was describing his own condition, for the priest nodded once or twice in apparent satisfaction, before he threw off his outer garment and turned to his patient. Like the girl he wore around his waist the heavy girdle of gold links, except that his were heavier and the buckle at the center was set with green stones.

“YOU find yourself better?” the priest inquired of Martin, speaking in the common language of the mountains. “I am glad to see that our rude surgery is, after all, proving satisfactory.”

“For which I am indeed grateful,” Martin answered. “Indeed, I cannot begin to express my gratitude to you and these kind people who have saved my life.”

“Life is dear to every living creature,” the old man answered, as he deftly examined the dressing of the wrenched shoulder. “And yet, my son, that life is only of real value which serves mankind. I trust that your life is of that nature.”

Martin flushed red under the scrutiny of those keen eyes. He had not expected so searching a reply to his conventional remark, and he found himself at a loss for an answer. Seeing this, the priest went on:

"You are an American; is it not so?"

"Yes, an American mining engineer. I have been employed until recently at the Sunuco mines. My name is Martin—John Martin."

"You were found in a strange place for an American mining engineer," the priest replied. "How came you so far away from the beaten tracks of the white men?"

Martin hesitated. Evidently he was to be required to give an account of himself, and he realized that it would be very difficult to deceive this apparently simple old man. More difficult, however, would it be to explain truly the drunken stupidity which had landed him in his present predicament.

"I was traveling with a friend of mine; we planned to explore some ruins in this vicinity, of which we had been told by an Indian guide in Huanuco, who started us on our journey and pointed out the trail which was to lead us directly to the ruins. I believe now that the fellow deceived us. At any rate we did not find the ruins, and we traveled six days instead of the three that he promised would be sufficient."

"And your friend—where is he now?"

"I do not know," Martin answered with a touch of impatience. "He was behind me, with the pack-mule that carried our camp supplies. I must have gone too fast for him—at any rate I suddenly missed both of them, and I had turned back to look for them when I got off the trail. I followed a side trail, thinking Jackson had turned up it, and when I tried to find my way back I found myself lost. It was getting dark and I was trying

to find wood for a fire when I fell. That's the whole story."

The moment the last words were out of his mouth Martin realized that they had been a mistake. In some indefinable way the priest's manner had changed from the open friendliness with which he had first greeted him to a certain chilly politeness that told Martin plainer than words that the old man believed him to be lying. At any rate he asked no more questions, but busied himself in making his patient as comfortable as possible.

As the priest stooped to help the sick man shift his position, Martin saw a heavy gold chain around his neck, from which dangled a pendant, as the old man bent forward. Martin gave a gasp of astonishment and delight as he saw that pendant, and his eyes gleamed like fire. It was an emerald, the largest one he had ever seen, roughly cut in the shape of a heart, and from the center there shone a tiny point of flame, as if a small diamond had been set within the very center of the green stone.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Martin ejaculated, and then bit his lips in annoyance. Why had he spoken? The priest turned inquiring eyes to his, and then, seeing his eager glance, looked down at the pendant and hastily slipped it inside of the folds of his tunic, looking suspiciously at Martin's burning eyes as he did so.

"It is nothing," he answered sharply, "only a little bit of green crystal, whose only value is in its meaning. 'In the heart of life the divine fire burns. May you meditate upon that message, my son, until I come again.'"

With a word to the girl he turned and went out of the hut, and she followed him.

Martin was glad to be left alone for a moment, for he was trembling violently and he needed time to compose himself.

Who were these people?

Ever since he came to Peru, Martin had heard tales of strange mountain tribes, old in the land when the Incas reigned, long before Pizarro and his cut-throats had set foot on these shores. He had heard tales of fabulous riches that they had hidden away in mountain temples, riches that had hitherto proved utterly beyond the reach of the white adventurer. And now he, Martin, practically an out-cast among his own people, was thrown by an accident among one of these very tribes, a tribe which used vessels of gold for common household use and whose priest wore a fortune around his neck in a single pendant.

This was luck which he must take care not to spoil by giving away his real design. The priest was no fool, and neither was the girl. He would be very careful.

He smiled when he thought of the girl, and his eyes kindled. How easy it was to read her simple heart, already infatuated with the white man that fate had cast at her feet! He supposed Indian maidens were fully as romantic as white ones—nature used the same methods in all climes.

But the thought that sent the blood coursing through his veins was the thought of a green, heart-shaped stone, with a tiny flame at its core.

"In the heart of life the divine fire burns."

3

FOR some days Martin found his entire attention absorbed by the demands of his pain-racked body. He had not only the slowly-knitting leg, but the complete nervous and physical collapse which followed the shock of the fall, as well as the aftermath of his prolonged spree. But slowly his brain cleared and his nerves grew steady, and his native strength came back little by little, so that each day saw an increase in strength and vigor.

While a great part of the nursing devolved upon the young brothers, yet a large part of each day the girl spent

at his side, and these were bright hours for Martin. She was beautiful, full of natural grace and poise, and Martin forgot everything as he looked at her except the light shining in her dark eyes and the touch of her soft hand. Under his ardent glances, her eyes drooped and a dusky rose crept into her cheeks.

One day, when Martin was able to move about for the first time, he leaned upon her arm as he made the first uncertain steps. After a few moments he was obliged to rest, and as he sank down upon his couch again he drew her down with him, pressing a hot kiss upon her round, bare arm.

"I love you! I love you, Taia!" he whispered hoarsely. "I love you."

Two large tears gathered in her great dark eyes, but she did not draw away. Instead she dropped upon her knees by his couch and pillowed his head against her breast.

"I know, I know," she murmured. "I know, beloved. It is written in the stars that we should love each other."

"Then why do you weep, dearest?" he asked, as his arms went around her slim figure. "Are you not happy that we love each other? It is not a time for tears."

"I do not know," she answered simply. "I am happy, and I am sad also. From the beginning, when I saw you lying there so white and still, I loved you, and I knew that you would love me in return. Of course I am happy in that love, and yet pain lies close to my heart, for now I shall be Taia no longer. I am Taia only so long as my heart is for my own blood; now that a stranger and a white man has taken possession of it I am Taia no longer."

Something in the mournful repetition sent a little shiver down Martin's spine. Many women had loved Martin, to their sorrow, but none had been like unto this girl. For a moment his heart smote him, but she was so beautiful! The touch of her warm

young body, vibrant with life and love, made him tremble with delight.

"Are you sorry that you love a white man, dear?" he queried, half playfully, secure in his Anglo-Saxon superiority.

Her reply shocked him a little.

"Oh, if only you were Indian!" she ejaculated. "If you were Indian you would be like a god. But do not fear, I will love you just the same. It shall make no difference to me at all; I promise to forget that you are white."

He smiled ruefully, and changed the subject.

"But tell me what you meant about changing your name," he asked. "Do married women change their names in this tribe?"

"Ah, no! But I am not like other women in this tribe—I am Taia!" she answered proudly. "I am the One Set Aside—but now, alas, I will no longer be so."

"Listen," she continued, seeing his perplexity. "I will tell you how it is. You must know that my people are very, very long in this land. Long ago, in a time when the white race lived like beasts in their northern caves, then did my forefathers come to this land. They came from a land very rich in wisdom and all the arts that make life beautiful, and in this land they set up temples and halls of learning, and from the homeland came great teachers who instructed the people. Then at last there came a great earthquake, which rocked and twisted the whole earth until there was not a land untouched by it, and after the earthquake came great ocean waves, which swept all before them. For many months our people took refuge in their highest temples and prayed without ceasing. When at last all was quiet again, the homeland had disappeared, completely swallowed up by the sea, with all its great cities, its monuments of beauty and its wise men.

"The few who were in this land, cut off from the home which had been the very center of their lives, still remained loyal to the teaching that had been given them, worshiping their god in the temples as before, only now no teachers came to teach and explain the true doctrine. Then, many years later, when this land was rich and prosperous, came the white men, bringing sorrow in their train. They rifled our temples of gold, but they laughed at the golden teaching, which would have made their hearts glad and their lives beautiful. My people were scattered, as you know, but I shall not dwell upon that unhappy time.

"The priest of our tribe was a wise man, and he drew his little flock away to these mountains. Here we guard our sheep and till the soil of the rich valleys where the grain grows high, and here we have lived in peace for fully five hundred years. And because we have kept the faith, it is promised that there shall be born to this very tribe a great teacher, greater even than the teachers of the olden time. And when he comes, so great will be the power of his wisdom that all the world will listen to his words, even the white man, who will turn to the worship of the true law. In that day the great golden altars will be set up again in the sight of men, and the great golden disk will gather the rays of the sun itself and reflect them into the heart of the world. Oh, what a wonderful time that will be—how happy!"

Martin, watching the color come and go in her cheeks, thought he had never seen so beautiful a picture.

"But what has all this to do with your name, dearest?" he queried idly. She sighed as she answered.

"Do you not see? To each of the maidens of our tribe is born the hope that she may bear the body which this great one will use. From the beginning was I trained and taught to serve in the temple, because of a dream that

my mother dreamed at my birth. I was called Taia, which is to say, 'The mother of the worshiper of the sun,' and I was bound about with this golden chain to signify that I was bound to the service of my people. But love laughs at chains, and so my heart has broken through its fetters, dear as they were, and has lit itself at the flame of your love. Loving you I can never be betrothed to one of our own blood, and the great one comes never to mixed blood. So it is written.

"But think not that I grieve, dear one. For you I gladly give up the dreams of my mother, and lay aside this golden girdle. Another will be chosen in my place to serve in the temple and await the call, which may come, nay, which *will* come, soon. But I will make my home in your heart, beloved, and pray that in another life we may be of one blood."

Martin could hardly repress a smile at her earnestness. To him the tale was the tale of a child, but it would not do to let Taia know this. Under the fervor of his caresses she was soon smiling again, and when she presently left him there was no cloud on her brow.

After she had left him, Martin lay and considered the situation that her words had revealed. There was evidently a hidden temple, as he had suspected, where these people worshiped—a temple whose great golden altars were hidden away against that time when their god should come again. He conjured up a vision of that temple, somewhere in these mountain fastnesses, and his blood beat through his veins in a fever of desire.

GOLD! Gold! The fabled treasures of the Incas paled beside the picture that this simple Indian girl had unwittingly drawn for him. To her the gold evidently meant nothing; all her attention was centered upon the teaching; but to Martin the story brought, not a vision of a spiritual

teacher, but dreams of the capitals of Europe, whose innermost portals would be opened wide for him if only he could lay hands upon this treasure.

He was really attracted by the girl, for women were his second great weakness, and he was a born lover. When he had begun this love making, the girl's loveliness had been sufficient attraction, but now there was added another and a greater reason. The girl loved him, she would deny him nothing. Given plenty of time, he would win his way into her innermost soul, so that she would hold no secrets that she did not willingly share with him. It was pitifully easy, for she knew nothing of the hesitations and evasions of her more civilized sisters. To her the path of love led straight to the doorway of marriage, and marriage surely meant giving all.

A few days later she appeared, closely followed by the *Uilca*. Martin saw at once by the latter's stern and forbidding countenance that Taia had confessed her love, and that the confession had not brought pleasure to the priest. He braced himself for a struggle, as the old man went directly to the point.

"I am told that you wish to wed this maiden. Is that true?"

"I do," Martin answered, a little nervously.

He had not originally meant anything so serious, but these savage customs were not binding in civilized lands. The priest considered him somberly.

"It is not well for a maiden to go outside her race when she seeks a husband," he said. "Do you understand, that in lifting your eyes to this woman you must forsake your own people and become one of us? Perhaps you wish time to consider these things?"

Martin paused, the barest fraction of a moment. He could have laughed aloud at the old man's assumption that he was "lifting his eyes" when he took an Indian girl for a wife. But

he had no mind to let any such thing interfere with his plan.

"I understand all this," he answered steadily. "I still wish Taia for my wife."

Without another word the priest turned and left them, motioning them to await his return. Presently he came back again, followed by the two brothers of Taia and several of the Indians of the village. Joining the hands of the two, he went rapidly through a sort of ritual, of which Martin could understand only a word here and there. Then he took from around Taia's slim throat a golden chain, from which hung the familiar golden disk, and this he hung around Martin's own neck, and lifting Martin's right hand he laid it upon the girl's bowed head.

"You are now one," he said. "Walk together in the law. Take heed lest sorrow come through fault of your own, since sorrow earned is sorrow doubled."

Turning gravely, he walked out of the hut, followed by the others, and Taia and Martin were left alone. The girl was pale, and Martin kissed the heavy-lidded eyes and begged her to smile again, but the grim manner of the priest had put a chill upon her spirits which nothing but love could lift again.

4

THE days that followed were the happiest days that Martin had ever known. Spring was well advanced in the mountains, and daily he walked abroad, leaning upon Taia's arm and drinking in the beauty and wonder of the world. Soon he had no real need of her assistance, so quickly did his own strength return, but still he leaned upon her, because he saw that it gave her such pleasure to feel herself of service to him. When they walked forth over the carpet of wild flowers that everywhere spread before them, she was as gay and happy as a little child.

But presently, underneath Martin's smiling exterior, a fever of impatience began growing. Although he was still young, he had long ago left the days of innocence behind him, and the sweetness of this quiet life began to pall upon him. Again and again he tried to lead the conversation back to the subject of the hidden temple, for after all, that was the thing that was keeping him in this stupid Indian village.

But Taia, who was eager to anticipate his every other wish, would not speak of the one subject upon which his heart was set. As his impatience grew, his temper waxed short, and presently, before three weeks had passed from the day of their marriage, he spoke sharply to her, so that she turned away to hide the tears.

He was quick to beg her pardon for this lapse, for some instinct told him that she was not a woman who could be brow-beaten into submission. Only love could win her to his will.

One day, after Martin had definitely thrown away his cane, they walked far up the mountainside and sat down an overhanging ledge. Below them lay the high plateau with the village near its upper end, while the flocks grazed peacefully on the grassy slopes below.

Martin watched them idly; he had no interest in flocks and herds. Taia, however, was a born herdsman, and talked incessantly of the flocks and the good pasture, which made them fat and frisky. Martin wished she would talk of something else.

"Is it not wonderful?" she exclaimed for the tenth time. "One, two, three years and everything goes well with the flocks. Plenty of grass, no sickness, no trouble, everything so happy! When you are quite well, beloved, then you will go out with the other men and watch the flocks, is it not so? I shall be so happy when you are quite as the others, only I know you are so clever and so brave,

you will soon be a leader among them. Strict account is being kept of our flocks now, for does not one-third of all our family stock belong to you? Are you not proud of a wife who brings you so much wealth?"

He smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I do not give a rap about your sheep," he returned, and then, seeing how crestfallen she looked, he added quickly, "I only care about your own bright eyes and your pretty smile. They are worth more to me than many sheep."

She dimpled with pleasure at the compliment, and laid her cheek against his shoulder in a childish caress.

"Ah, yes, I know!" she returned softly. "You are filled with such beautiful thoughts, so loving always, that you do not think often of the other things. And yet I think that it is good for the family that one of us shall be fond of the sheep, and so we shall always have plenty of everything that we need. I know you care only for love, but I shall look after all things for you, for have you not given up everything, friends and home and people, for me?"

He was quick to seize the opening.

"Tell me, Taia," he said, slipping an arm around her and drawing her close, "tell me more about this religion of yours. Why am I not taken to the temple you told me about? Am I not truly one of your people now? I should go where my wife goes, it seems to me."

"Everywhere I go, there shall you go also," she answered gravely. "But I go no more to the temple, since I am your wife. Think not, beloved, that you alone have paid a price for our love. Because of it, I go no more to the holy places of my people."

Martin started.

"But why?" he persisted. "Why should you give up your religion, and remain away from your temple? Why

do we not go together? Thus do husbands and wives in my country."

"Thus do we also," she returned proudly, "when husband and wife are Indian. But it is forbidden that any stranger should set foot in our temples. Listen, I will explain once for all, and then we will speak of these things no more. For our law is not of my making, nor even of the *Utica* who now leads us, but comes from the past and cannot be changed by the desires of our hearts.

"Once our temples were open to all who came to bow their knees at our altars. All in this land worshiped the sun god, and seeing that there was a certain metal in the earth which shone like the sun itself, my people made many beautiful works of art and our temples were filled with rare and wonderful treasures.

"Then came the white men, and the sight of the golden vessels upon our altars wrought in them a kind of madness, so that they turned and slew all about them and laid waste the land. My people fled to the mountains as the sheep flee before the wolf-pack, knowing not which way to turn.

"Then came one of the wise men of our people and he explained what had happened. Because the white man would not listen to the teaching of the great law, they were stricken with a kind of frenzy at sight of the gold, which is the symbol of the god, and they remained under the curse of that frenzy so long as the gold remained in their sight. So our people hid away the gold in secret places and covered the entrances of the mines from which it was taken, so that the eye of the white man no longer fell upon the thing that made him mad. And sure enough, when the gold was hidden from sight, then peace and quiet came again and all was well. But such is the power of that strange disease over the white race that even now, after all these years, if one of them were to discover the hidden

treasure, then war and bloodshed would burst forth over all this land, and my people would be hunted down like dogs. And therefore, though I love you more dearly than life itself, dearest, yet I must obey the law of my people. Oh, I know what you would say, that you are not like those others. I know that you would not willingly bring pain and suffering upon us for the sake of the senseless metal that is like any other stone, save only that it shines more brightly. But you are a white man—the madness might seize upon even you, for in that old day none was immune. But let us not think of these things, for I fear that I do wrong even to discuss it with you, except that I want you to understand that it is for very love of you that I save you from the great curse that would surely come upon you should you persist in seeking this forbidden knowledge. Forget it—sweep your mind clean of all these thoughts, which come only to destroy our peace. Have we not everything in the world to make us happy? Why should you seek further?"

"Nonsense!" Martin returned huskily. "That story of the madness is a child's tale—a myth. At any rate you ought to trust me—if you really love me."

She drew away from him, and her voice was cold as she answered:

"It is not a good thing to question the love of the woman who has given herself to you. Let us go down."

Martin smothered the curse that rose to his lips and turned and followed her. He must not lose his temper, but such provocation tried his greatest powers of self-control. His only hope lay in this stubborn, ignorant Indian woman, to whom the legends of her tribe were of more importance than anything he could say or do.

THEN began days of secret torture, when the humdrum life of the village wore upon his nerves like a file.

For days Taia was strangely cold and distant, but he set himself deliberately to win her back again, and before long he was rewarded by seeing her full of love and happiness again. He seemed to have entirely forgotten the subject of their quarrel, making no further references to the topic that had distressed her.

He watched the villagers as they came and went about their affairs. He explored every path, that led away over the plateau, and sat for hours on ledges overlooking the plain, seeking to discover where they went, and whether any went secretly. But the Indians were open and frank in all their movements; their ways were simple and easily followed. He could discover no mystery here.

Behind the village a well-beaten path led to the deep pool, at the bottom of a high waterfall, from which the village took its water. Farther down, the stream broadened out and ran peacefully between wide banks, and here the flocks came to drink. Martin used often to go and sit by that pool and ponder over the problem that vexed him. He studied the steep cliffs above, over which the water fell; they seemed utterly inaccessible for human feet. The plateau widened out below the village, though the mountains were close on either side. Somewhere, either to the right or to the left, there must lie the secret trail that led to the temple.

Try as he would, he could not discover that any of the Indians ever left the village, and yet he knew that they did go, and often. Then one night, turning restlessly from side to side upon his bed, he heard a sound outside on the path. Instantly he was quiet, listening. By dint of almost breathless concentration he made out the sound: moccasin-clad feet were slipping past the hut, but he could not detect whither they went, and he dared not move lest he awaken Taia. But the first mystery was solved: they went to worship before their shrine in

the darkness of the first hours of the morning. Or else—why had he not thought of that before?—they went to greet the morning sun, and the temple must lie some distance away.

For days thereafter Martin was in a fever of excitement. He felt himself near the goal. It maddened him to reflect that the very children about him held the secret, and held it as well as any adult. These Indians, quiet and placid, looking at him with their opaque eyes, which baffled every attempt to read their meaning, came in the end to fill him with fury. He hated them, men, women and children, the while he ate their bread, but most of all he hated the old priest, for some instinct told him that the priest knew him for what he was: despite every effort of his will Martin could not force himself to meet those piercing eyes which seemed able to probe his innermost soul. When they met, as they did many times a day, Martin bowed coldly and turned away, giving the old man no chance for conversation.

Time was passing on winged feet, and still he was kept chained to inaction. He dared not make a false move, and he could not make a direct one. He became moody and silent, and Taia's face grew sad as she began to realize that he was in heart and spirit an alien among her people. She was too simple, however, to realize that he felt himself above the people of her tribe; she had a naive pride in the glories of her own race, which was amusing to Martin, but he was seldom in the mood to smile at it.

One day, after a sleepless night, he rose and walked toward the hills alone. Something must be done soon; he simply could not bear this life much longer. Rage, smoldering in the depths of his being, threatened to burst into a flame that would destroy everything. His only salvation was to get away as much as possible, to brood secretly over what he had come

to consider the bitter wrong that was being done to him.

He sat down at last to rest, high up on the mountain overlooking the valley. He meant to climb up to the peak above the waterfall, but his leg was not quite up to so great a strain yet. As he sat staring moodily before him, he heard a noise in a thicket near him, and turned to see one of the village children, a crippled boy of about twelve years of age, regarding him solemnly with wide, questioning eyes.

"Hello, Roca," he called out indifferently. "What are you doing away up here?"

The boy flushed and half turned away, and something in his hesitation brought Martin suddenly alert, suspicious. What was the boy doing up here? Was he trailing Martin or was he, perchance, returning from—?

With his most engaging smile he motioned the boy to a seat by his side and began to talk lightly of many things. Roca, diffident and shy at first, was soon chatting gayly, sitting alongside Martin on the ledge and flinging pebbles into the abyss, while Martin told him stories of the great world outside.

Suddenly Martin threw an arm around his shoulders and said:

"Now, Roca, tell me: where is the path that leads to the temple? Tell me, and I will make you a kite that shall soar as high as the *alcamari*, above the very tops of the mountains."

He felt the slight body stiffen inside his encircling arm, but the boy made no answer. The long strain of repression was slipping now, and Martin trembled as his clasp tightened cruelly around the thin shoulders and his voice grew sharp.

"Speak up, I tell you! I'm tired of this damned nonsense. Where do you go, at night, when you creep away in the darkness? Where do they all go? Talk quickly, or I will find a way to make you speak."

The boy quivered and shrank away from the menace in Martin's voice, but he did not speak.

Then the long pent-up fury burst forth, for the man had gone mad through the passion of thwarted desire. For all the centuries of civilization have but served to lay a thin veneer over the cruelty of the savage, and, given sufficient prodding, the beast within breaks forth now and then, either in organized fiendishness, as in the public Inquisition, or in private deviltry that finds no historian ready to record it.

An hour later, spent and a little sick, Martin staggered down the trail alone, and he did not yet know the secret of the path. As he went along he thought of what Taia had said of the madness in the white man's brain. It had seized upon him, Martin, even as it had seized upon Pizarro's men, five hundred years before.

5

THE next morning Martin kept his bed, pleading illness. Somehow he could not bear to walk abroad, to face those placid Indians. Taia accepted with tender solicitude his explanation that he had strained his leg the day before, and busied herself in making him comfortable, until he begged her to go away and leave him alone.

About 10 o'clock she came rushing into the hut, weeping bitterly.

"Oh, a terrible thing has happened!" she cried. "A great sorrow: my brother's child, Roca—he has not come back. All night he has been out on the mountain: something has befallen him! His mother thought nothing of it at first, for he is often out late; but never, never did he stay away all night! Even now the men are searching for him. If only you would rise and go with them! You are so clever, you would be sure to find him."

A spasm of pain crossed Martin's face. Taia instantly dropped down at his side, and laid her cheek against his.

"There; I forget that you are ill. Rest you quietly—I will explain to the others. Besides, I will go in your place—I loved him more than all the rest."

Martin murmured a few words of sympathy, but his lips were stiff and he sighed with relief when she was gone. He had no fear that the search would be successful. But he could not banish a vision of a pair of haunting dark eyes, filled with tears like the eyes of a wounded doe.

"Oh, to get away—to get away from it all!" he cried over and over to himself. To get away from these damned mountains, from these silent, wooden-faced people, this constant pretense, pretense, pretense! If only he could discover the treasure and steal away with it, they would not be really injured, while his life would be made glorious and triumphant. But if the very children could not be tortured into betraying the secret, what chance had he with the adults? He felt beaten and hopeless—desperate.

As he had foreseen, there was no trace found of the boy Roca, though the search went on for days. Finally one night, Martin, tossing restlessly on his bed, heard again those faint footfalls passing the hut. This time there were many of them, so many that it seemed as if the whole village must be on its way to the temple. As he listened he was aware that Taia was awake at his side, softly sobbing under her breath. He lay very still; he did not want to talk to her now, and presently he knew that she slept again. He dared not rise and try to follow the worshipers, for she would be awake in an instant if he stirred, and so he was forced to lie quietly while another opportunity slipped by him.

"Where did they go? Where did they go?"

Over and over he asked the question, and was not aware that the words slipped from his lips aloud. Suddenly Taia stirred, moaned a little and murmured.

"They go to pray for the soul of Roca in the temple! They go—"

The murmur died away into silence.

Martin lay transfixed with wonder. She had answered his question in her sleep, without knowing that she did so.

Ah! Long he had waited, but it had come at last, the way to his goal. Already his quick mind was busy with its plans: what had been once by accident should be again by design.

The next morning he was like another man, bubbling over with good humor, so that Taia smiled again in spite of her bereavement, and kissed him lovingly as he started away for his morning walk.

"You are well again, is it not?" she questioned eagerly. "Only do not go too far today—you will get too tired again, as you did before. Be careful; promise me."

"Do not fear," he replied, lightly. "This time I go only as far as the herders' huts, where the sheep are turned out of the night pens. I am at last going to begin my work as a shepherd of the flocks."

She clapped her hands with delight at his words.

"Really? How happy that makes me, to hear you speak so! Be sure that my brothers see you working, and the other men as well. They will see that you are not lazy at all—you have only been ill."

Martin guessed readily enough that there had been some comments upon his idleness among the Indians, but he realized for the first time how much Taia must have suffered from the criticisms which he had ignored. It was highly important that

Taia's mind should be quite easy about him now. He must have her utmost confidence, and he set himself skilfully to win it, sure of success.

Throughout the long summer days he followed the flocks, easily mastering the trick of turning them hither and yon at his pleasure. It was a lazy life, almost as lazy as his former one had been, for the boy who attended him did most of the work. But it satisfied Taia.

And when the night shut down and Taia lay sleeping quietly in his arms, every night he whispered over and over, softly yet insistently:

"Where is the path to the temple? Where is the path to the temple?"

For many, many nights there was no answer, but he did not lose patience. Then, at last, she stirred fitfully in her sleep, murmuring low, broken words. He could barely catch their import, but it was enough.

All day he went about like a man in a dream. Taia had gone with some of the other women on an expedition into the mountains in search of certain medicinal herbs, and when she returned at night she was weary and a little pale. Martin scarcely looked at her. She had ceased to figure in his thought; she had served his purpose, and the incident was closed. His kiss, as he bade her good night, was cold and perfunctory; her eyes darkened with sadness and her lips trembled, but she said nothing. Already she realized that the love of the white man was as fickle as a spring zephyr.

Martin sat at the door of the hut, after she had gone to bed, staring out into the soft darkness. His impatience was mounting with every passing moment, and yet he had need for the greatest caution now, lest a false step ruin everything. He must leave the village unseen, just before midnight, giving himself time to get to the temple and away again before the morning worshippers appeared.

Twice as he sat there waiting, the old priest passed him, going about the village upon his own affairs. Martin watched him covertly, and finally slipped his stool inside the shadows of the hut, so that the old man would think he had gone to bed. He did not like those keen, prying eyes, which seemed able to read his most secret thoughts.

When at last he considered it safe, he rose and wrapped his thick cape of vicuna hair about him and slipped away in the darkness. It was typical of the man that he did not cast one fleeting, farewell glance back upon the woman whose love and devotion had saved his life.

UP the familiar path he went swiftly and surely, to where the great pool lay at the base of the waterfall. He paused for a moment and looked behind. All was silence and darkness.

Then he stepped quickly behind a great clump of bushes, which grew at the edge of the water, so close that the water of the fall sprayed over it as it fell. Martin almost laughed aloud at the utter simplicity of the thing. The broad path, worn by many, many feet, led just here, where the ground was tramped hard and firm, for it was just at this point that the villagers stood to dip the water from the deep pool. Martin had stood here himself a hundred times, had dipped water again and again upon this very spot and never dreamed that behind the innocent clump of shrubs lay the entrance to the desire of his heart.

Now he slipped quickly behind the bushes. Deep down, half buried in the foliage, there was a rectangular opening into the face of the cliff. Martin stooped and crawled through; he found himself at the bottom of a long flight of narrow stairs cut from the solid rock. Here and there, as he climbed, he saw that narrow fissures in the roof of the passageway let in air, and sometimes he caught a

glimpse of the starlit sky. The stairs under his feet were worn smooth. Through hundreds of years had the devotees of that strange cult been passing up and down this subterranean way.

On and on he climbed, most of the way leading upward, but now and then long stretches ran fairly level. He hurried, but he had grown soft through the weeks of his idleness and he found himself panting for breath and obliged to stop often to rest. Yet he must reach the temple and get away again before the priest came for the morning service, and he drove his weary body forward with the lash of his will.

Suddenly, just when he felt himself unable to go farther, the passageway opened out into a great square chamber, hollowed out of the solid rock. He recognized it, from pictures that he had seen of the old temples, as the anteroom where the people gathered for the outer service.

From the ceiling of this room hung dozens of lamps from which wicks set in oil sent out a flickering light. The lamps were curiously wrought, with fine tracing and delicate cut work. Each would be a museum piece of rare value.

The room itself was bare of furniture. Evidently the audience knelt upon the stone floor throughout the service. In the middle of the wall nearest the opening through which Martin had come, a spring of clear, sparkling water gushed out of the rocky wall. The water fell into a deep niche, which had been hollowed out of the wall, and the overflow was carried away by hidden drainage pipes. Before this niche two tall golden lamps burned brightly.

With a little gesture of delight Martin ran to the spring and buried his hot face in the cold water, drinking deeply again and again. The long, hard climb had parched his throat and the cool water was like nectar.

Then he turned again to the wonder-world about him. In the center of the wall opposite the entrance was an opening, draped with a curtain of gold mesh so finely wrought that he crumpled it in his hand like a piece of woolen cloth, yet it was so heavy that he knew it for purest gold.

Through the opening he stepped into the holy place of the temple, and as he did so he cried aloud with wonder and delight. He had been prepared for treasure, but his wildest dreams had not pictured anything half so wonderful as the sight that now greeted his eyes.

Against the opposite wall a great gleaming golden disk, so wide that Martin's two arms outstretched could not have spanned it, made a shining background for the great altar, wrought of solid gold, which stood before it. On the altar itself, in the center, stood a great brazier, of a workmanship so fine that Martin gasped as he looked at it, and in the brazier a fire burned, fed automatically from two little reservoirs of powdered wood. Everything upon the altar was gold—lamps, vessels of all kinds, wrought with such skill and such richness of design that any one of them was worth a king's ransom.

The light from the fire in the brazier was reflected a hundred times from the dazzling surface of the great golden disk, the symbol of the sun god, and Martin's eyes began to burn and his head to ache as he ran from one thing to another in an excitement that was rapidly mounting to a delirium. He laughed aloud again and again, as he spread his cape out in the center of the floor and began to pile vessel after vessel in a heap in the center. He chose swiftly here and there, trying to select the heaviest and therefore the most valuable. All the time he was talking to himself as he worked, running to and fro, tearing golden figures from their niches and ravishing the altar of its golden treas-

ure. He did not notice that his head was pounding with pain and that his eyes burned like twin flames. He was not conscious of his body at all; he saw only this golden treasure—gold, gold, gold, everywhere. He piled it up until upon the floor he had a heap which three men could not have lifted.

Still there remained twice as much more. He ran to the great golden brazier and tried to lift it from its place. He staggered and almost fell, and for a moment a terrible nausea overcame him. He leaned against the altar, panting for breath, and gradually his legs crumpled under him and he slipped down upon the floor, with his head upon the edge of the pile of treasure.

"Been working too hard—overstrained myself!" he gasped, and then a cry of agony burst from his lips as the pain gripped his vitals, twisting him about on the rocky floor while the sweat poured out upon his blanched forehead.

WHILE he lay thus the curtain at the doorway lifted and the old *Ulca* stepped softly into the room. Martin was too far gone now to feel either surprize or dismay at this interruption; strangely enough the very gold itself no longer seemed important to him. A film was drifting over his eyes; he did not care that the priest was rapidly replacing each golden vessel in its accustomed place, nor protest when the pile which he had gathered so feverishly a little while before was completely depleted.

A last spasm of agony burst over him. He cried aloud, "Help! Help!" then shuddered and lay still.

The priest stood looking down at him, and his eyes were full of pity, though his lips were stern.

"Alas!" he murmured. "There is no help for the one who drinks from the guardian spring. White man's madness—ever it leads to sorrow and to death."