

Weird Tales

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SEABURY QUINN
CLARK ASHTON SMITH
ALEXANDRE DUMAS
BASSETT MORGAN
J PAUL SUTER
HAROLD WARD

*A SENSATIONAL
VAMPIRE STORY*
by Kirk Mashburn



Weird Tales

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The Vengeance of Ixmal

By KIRK MASHBURN

'An eery story of a vampire-haunted village, and living human sacrifices on an Aztec altar

BEFORE the fury of the Spaniard the might of proud Tapalapan crumbled. Her fate was even more direful than that of her sister cities in the ravished valley of Anahauc; her walls were broken and her people led away into bondage. Desolation sat upon her gates until they, too, crumbled and oblivion followed destruction and decay.

Of the glory that was Tapalapan's there remained, in time, only the earth-covered mounds of stone that were once her palaces and temples.

The bitter years trickled through the fingers of forgotten gods, until Tapalapan became no more than a vague and obscure name, even to the lowly dwellers in the few mean villages that were her



"There upon the mound with them, red-faced and fierce-eyed, Ixmâl stood, his face a livid mask of passion."

legacy. To the simple villagers who knew of them, the mounds and hillocks that marked the site of the ancient city were cursed with silence and with death; and with the curse that fell upon Tascala, who had been the daughter of a king in old Tapalapan.

In the fullness of time, scholars athirst for knowledge revived interest in the vanished glory of Anahauc. Learned men labored among the ruins of the valley;

and eventually a great museum in the North dispatched an expedition to unearth what traces of Tapalapan the hand of time and the vengeance of her conquerors had spared.

The directors of the northern museum chose carefully those who should conduct the expedition, although, it may be, the pointing finger of fate guided their choice in at least one instance. Three men met the final tests of the directorate,

and were dispatched upon the mission for which they qualified.

Doctor Perry Whitaker, the archeologist who had blazed the trail of exploration among the Mayan ruins of Yucatan and Quintana Roo, was the nominal head of the party. Greely, the photographer, who was a veteran globe-trotter and explorer incidentally to his passion for pictures of strange new scenes, came along with his insatiable camera. The last of the trio—he to whom the circling hand of destiny had pointed—was Walter Pembroke, ethnologist, traveler, scholarly adventurer. Because of his knowledge of the customs and language of the people with whom the party would come in contact, and because the vigor of his thirty-odd years weighed less heavily upon his shoulders than the nearly three score of Doctor Whitaker, Pembroke's was the tacitly accorded leadership in their venture.

The explorers, their equipment loaded upon the backs of diminutive but sturdy burros, and accompanied only by two Mexicans who had been employed in the railhead town of Celayos, marched more than three full days' journey across desolate, broken country. In this manner they arrived at the modern village of Santa Rosalia—modern, that is, solely in the chronological sense—which previously had been selected as a base of operations, due to its nearness to the ruins.

THE map of Mexico is not adorned with the name of the village of Santa Rosalia. The tiny *pueblo* boasted a church that was its one building of any pretensions, and about which clustered, haphazardly, a score or so of adobe hovels. There was no inn, and the houses of the villagers were shared with their beasts and fowls. Choice, as much as necessity, moved the Americans to pitch their tents for shelter while they rested and completed preparations for the work ahead.

Pembroke set about recruiting a force of laborers. Many of the shiftless *Indios* of the village were willing to use a pick and shovel in sporadic fashion, until the prospective scene of their labor was divulged. With one accord, the men of Santa Rosalia crossed themselves and refused to invade the ruins. Pressed for explanation, their swarthy faces assumed blank expressions; they shrugged their shoulders, pursed their lips, and muttered vaguely of a curse upon the ruins. More than that they would say nothing.

"There's a 'curse' that makes the ruins taboo to these Indians," Pembroke angrily informed Doctor Whitaker. "Here we are, with only Juan and Pablo, the two Mexicans we brought along from Celayos, and not a worthless *Indio* in this mud village can be bribed to wield a shovel."

Doctor Whitaker looked up, inquiringly.

"A curse?" he questioned. Pembroke nodded.

"That is as much as I can get from them." He made a gesture of disgust, running his fingers abstractedly through crisp, dark hair that had the bare suggestion of a wave. His wide-spaced eyes were likewise dark; and with his straight, thin-bridged nose and a skin tanned to swarthinness by the sun, Pembroke caused his elderly companion to make whimsical comparison to some young chieftain out of the past of Anahauc, returned to find no liking for this squalid hamlet of the present valley.

"If there is a curse," Pembroke contemptuously declared, "it's the curse of ultimate laziness on this *pueblo*—I don't blame Juan and Pablo for treating their local countrymen with such lofty disdain! Here, practically at the ruins, the source of the labor I had counted on proves nonexistent."

He broke off to stare out over the

wasted broken plain to where, a scant five or six miles distant, lay their objective—the humbled remnants of the once great city of the Aztec empire.

"It is too bad," Doctor Whitaker regretted, "that the village priest is absent. It may be that we could enlist his aid, and he would at least tell us what is wrong."

"It must be something special," Pembroke opined, "to make them so fearful of the ruins that they won't even talk about it. I'll have to try and discover just what their pet superstition is, and then perhaps we can exorcise their devils in some way."

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "the time lost and the expense of importing laborers would be too great. Besides, if we brought in Indians from another village, they probably would only succumb to the obsessions and fears of these natives."

"The half-breed *jefe político* has more intelligence than the rest," Pembroke speculated; "a little beating around the conversational bush may induce him to tell us what is the matter. He might even be persuaded to help us out of our difficulty."

AS PEMBROOKE said, the village magistrate was possessed of considerably more character and intelligence than most of the Santa Rosalians, but he was none too high a type of citizen, at that. However, the expedition's stores included a number of bottles of brandy and fiery tequila, and the mayor saw no reason for the unfriendly reception of a guest who brought such gifts. The half of his blood that was white responded warmly to the flattering equality of Pembroke's manner. After all, he reflected, why not? Was he not chief in Santa Rosalia, and a really very superior person, as this new friend so evidently perceived?

A few drinks of tequila, and it seemed

the most natural thing in the world for the *señor* to address him, the mayor, as *Don Tomás*. Again, why not?

Pembroke casually led up to the real object of his visit. An uneasy look appeared in the mayor's eyes.

"Of course, *Don Tomás*, such things appear childish to such men as *we*, but it is very annoying, nevertheless."

The *jefe político* squirmed uneasily. Pembroke poured another drink, adding:

"They will not even say why it is they fear so to disturb the ruins (which, after all, are only mounds of earth and stone), even in the light of day."

The mayor had no wish to incur the ridicule of this excellent *gringo*. Yet he felt that courtesy such as he had been shown deserved a timely warning of the fearsome secret of the ruins. Well, the best way was to tell what *los Indios* believed—and he need not say that he, *Don Tomás Molero*, believed with them! Which proved the astuteness of his guest.

Yes, a thousand thanks: *Don Tomás* would have another drink of the excellent liquor. Much fortified, he took a deep breath and told Pembroke the legend of the Princess Tascala, of the curse of Prince Hautepec, and of the fearful beings that were the horror of Tapalapan's sprawled ruins.

Pembroke heard him quietly to the end. He well knew the necessity of suppressing any sign of scorn or amusement. There was nothing, however, to prohibit him pouring out another drink for "*Don*" *Tomás*. . . .

"Is it not told that vampires, such as are said to infest the ruins, lie dead between sunup and sunset, *Don Tomás*?" The question was gravely put.

"*Sí*," confirmed the magistrate of Santa Rosalia—that fact was well known to all men, as witness even the practical *señor* from the North.

"Then why," the *señor* from the North

wanted to know, "why will your villagers not assist us? It is only in the broad light of the full day that we would ask their labor."

"Ah!" explained the mayor, emphasizing his point with a raised forefinger, "those who go to the ruins and return, by so doing make a clear trail to themselves for *los vampiros* to follow." He hesitated before adding, "All those who have gone we have later buried—when they were drained of their blood upon succeeding nights—with stakes driven through their hearts!"

"Don" Tomás sensed the incredulity behind Pembroke's polite mask.

"The priest buries them, *Señor*, and he consents to the act which is the only way to prevent the vampires' victims from becoming even as are they. Our *padre* is a Jesuit—an educated man—but he permits what I have told you. . . . *He knows!*"

"Only those who go to the ruins fall prey to the vampires?" Pembroke inquired.

"No, *Señor*," was the sad denial. "It is only that those who do go establish a—what do you call it: *contact?*—with the host of Tascala-the-damned. They are sure quarry, who may be commanded in their sleep to admit the vampires to their accursed feasting."

"Do the vampires come at other times than when the ruins are visited?" Pembroke, the ethnologist, had an added scientific interest in the folk-lore underlying the mestizo functionary's tale.

"Don" Tomás nodded gloomy affirmative.

"Aye," he said, "the accursed ones come often! Every village in this region pays them tribute. We nail strings of garlic—which the vampires detest—over our windows and drape it across our doors at night. Sometimes one is careless—and

later, perhaps, we bury that one with a stake in his heart."

Pembroke could not restrain an obvious comment:

"I should think you would abandon this village for some other place."

The mayor blinked in naïve and slightly alcoholic wonder at this observation. He spread his hands in a gesture of futility.

"Where would we go, *Señor*? We have always lived here, and our fathers lived here, and their fathers in their time. Is any place upon this earth free of the shadow of evil?"

Pembroke saw that he could expect no help from this quarter. The mayor believed his tale as thoroughly as any of his villagers. It would be useless to antagonize him by scoffing at his superstition, however, even while abandoning hope of assistance from the inhabitants of Santa Rosalia.

"Since we can get none of your people to assist us," the American decided, "it seems that we must send back to Celayos for men to take their places."

"Don" Tomás shrugged his shoulders. That, he intimated, was none of his affair; and it might be that *los vampiros*, being furnished with so many fresh victims, would leave his people in peace that much longer. Pembroke secured his ready promise that the villagers would refrain from discussing, with whatever laborers might be brought in from elsewhere, their own fear of the ruins.

PEMBROOKE sought Doctor Whitaker and Greely, who, after they had listened to the account of his talk with the *jefe politico*, agreed with him as to the necessity of obtaining laborers, white if possible, from Celayos or some other likely place.

In the meantime, it was decided that they themselves would make a prelimi-

nary survey of the ruins, preparatory to the speedy commencement of work, once help was sent for and obtained. Their plans made, and the evening meal disposed of, the trio of Americans yielded to the drowsiness that assailed them with the coming of night.

Pembrooke had scarcely stretched himself upon his camp bed, when it seemed that his eyes were weighted with lead, and an irresistible somnolence bore upon him. As he was about to lose consciousness in sleep, soft footsteps sounded from without, and there was a stirring of the tent flap.

Fully awake upon the instant, like the seasoned campaigner that he was, Pembrooke raised upon one elbow, his other hand reaching for the pistol beneath his pillow. Despite his ordinarily iron nerves, the lingering memory of the half-breed mayor's tale, told with such sincerity, caused a momentary tingling along his spine, and he could feel a prickling of the short hairs at the base of his neck.

The eery feeling lasted but a moment, however. Sharply he called:

"Who is it?" repeating the challenge in Spanish: "*Quien vive?*"

"So you are awake, my son?"

The answering voice, also in Spanish, was seasoned with the burden of years, but calm and clear. The voice added:

"This is Father Sebastiano—may I enter?"

"Assuredly, *Padre*," Pembrooke welcomed, lighting a lantern.

Father Sebastiano parted the flap and came into the tent. The lantern's yellow light revealed him as a tall, spare man, his thin face limned by not less than three-score years, but keen and intelligent. The hair upon his uncovered head was sparse and snow-white. Despite his all apparent age, there was vigor in his bearing, curiously combined with an air of patient resignation. Certain telltale evi-

dence of his features, and his darkly sallow skin, bespoke his mestizo origin.

"Do I intrude?" the priest inquired. "I am but shortly returned to the village, coming at this hour because I received word of your arrival, with information of your purpose. My people are but simple children, and I feared you might have encountered a rough welcome, coming with such intent." He finished, simply, "So I returned. I saw the light in your tent before you put it out, and thought perhaps to find you still awake."

"There has been no trouble from the villagers," Pembrooke assured, proffering a camp stool. "And there seems to be no objection to our explorations. Only, there is a concerted refusal to aid us—based, it seems, wholly upon superstitious fear of the ruins."

Father Sebastiano listened in silence, somewhat sadly, Pembrooke thought, as the American told him of his talk with the *jefe politico*.

"They are children, as I said before," sighed the priest when Pembrooke had finished. "It is true," he continued, "that there are numerous deaths among the people of this and neighboring villages, where the corpses seem dessicated, drained of blood. Whether the weakness preceding their deaths is caused by a form of anemia, or some other disease of which I am ignorant, I do not know. Although we are so few actual miles from the capital of our country, we are a primitive community, without even a competent man of medicine."

"Is it also true that they drive wooden stakes through the breasts of those who die in the manner you have described?" Pembrooke asked, curious.

"Yes," sadly answered the Jesuit. "It is one of the things I can not prevent, although I do not condone. In this poor country of ours, all who serve Holy Church know that the Indians defile the

true faith with the superstitions of their barbarous heritage."

"You believe it superstition, then—these legends of the vampires of the ruins? The mayor gave me to understand that you sympathized with the local beliefs."

"I am a servant of God!" sternly rebuked the priest. "How then should I believe in the possibility, much less the potency, of the foul curse of a never-existent demon-god of a heathen, blasphemous theology?"

A shade passed across Father Sebastiano's face. Hesitantly, almost fearfully, and speaking more to himself than to Pembroke, he startled the latter by adding:

"And yet . . . there are things, as fearsome as this, spoken of in Holy Writ: there are things that God, in his wisdom, has not vouchsafed to me. Sometimes . . . I do not know——"

He rose abruptly, repudiating his words with a vehement gesture.

"I am getting into my dotage! I assess penances to others, who need them less than I." He passed a thin hand wearily across his brow. "I am tired. . . . I should not have disturbed you, but I wished to know that strangers in our midst were well, before I slept. Rest well, my son, and God be with you."

With his parting benediction, Father Sebastiano lifted the tent flap, and stepped into the night.

"For all his priestly training, the good *padre* is, after all, half Indian," Pembroke mused, as he again extinguished his lantern. He slept undisturbed through the remaining hours until dawn.

THE following morning, Pembroke suggested moving camp to within the confines of the ruins, and the experiment of beginning work with only the assistance of Pablo and Juan. Doctor Whitaker, eager to begin the enterprise,

readily assented, and further agreed to a slight bonus in addition to the regular wages of the two Mexicans.

Once their decision was reached, the party was soon on its way across the rough country between the village and the ruins. They left Santa Rosalia to the accompaniment of silent, gloomy stares from the villagers, who obviously considered them fools marching deliberately to their doom.

Noon found their tents pitched within a stone's throw of the largest of the mounds comprising the ruins, which Doctor Whitaker surmised had probably been the great temple of the ancient city.

A supply of water had been their greatest concern, as they were able to bring with them from Santa Rosalia only two five-gallon casks of the precious fluid, strapped with other gear upon a burro. Pembroke, however, disposed of this worry by discovering a small natural reservoir, fed with fresh water from a clear little spring.

After the heat of early afternoon had in a measure abated, Doctor Whitaker set Juan and Pablo to clearing away the surface growth and rubble from what were clearly the ruins of a small building.

Many traces of other structures were more clearly exposed than had been expected, and Greely was busily at work with his camera. Pembroke and Doctor Whitaker spent the afternoon in beginning a survey to mark the sites promising the most profit to their limited means of examination.

Sunset found the party, Americans and Mexicans alike, weary from the exertions of the day. After the evening repast, it was not long until the camp lay wrapped in silence, the drab khaki tents standing starkly outlined against their uneven background, bathed in the silvery clear Mexican moonlight.

As the night wore on, clouds obscured the moon. Afar off, a coyote howled dis-

mally to the heedless stars. To one watching, it would have become apparent that dim forms moved among the canvas shelters in the ruins.

At the open entrance to the tent where Pembroke slept, a slightly built figure peered inside with panting eagerness. The figure glided into the shelter, bent low over the recumbent form of the heavily sleeping American, and paused, like a hunting cheetah who sensed the slipping of its leash.

The moon broke, momentarily, from behind the clouds that, all unnaturally in that arid sky, hung balefully about her face. The pale light, struggling through the open front of the tent, weirdly revealed the scene within. There seemed, also, to be an added ghostly radiance, emanating from no apparent source and confined to the enclosing canvas.

Above the sleeping Pembroke, her slender tapering fingers hooked into the semblance of poised talons, there bent the slender form of a strange, weird girl, who quivered as if with eagerness. The bending girl was beautiful, with an unholy beauty that was more repellent than mere ugliness, marred as it was with the obscene lust that distorted her perfect features. Her eyes, wide and faintly luminous, glared with cruel gloating, like those of a sleek and hungry leopardess about to seize her prey. Lips that, in their intended sweet repose, looked as if they might have been sculptured from coral by the loving hand of genius, writhed back from sharp white teeth like sentient things endowed with separate life and volition of their own.

The girl—if girl she was!—stooped yet lower, and in stooping, changed her screening posture so that the moon shone from behind her cloak, full upon Pembroke's face. With a low, choking cry, she drew back. For a moment she stood tense; then a name escaped the carmine

lips. It was a sound wrenched from the depths of anguish:

"Hautepec!"

Pembroke (as if he had lain heavily under a spell of slumber, and the cry was the charm that broke his enchantment) roused instantly, alert and reaching for his gun.

"Who is it?" he challenged, pistol leveled in his hand. Then he was aware that it was a woman who confronted him in the dimness of the tent's interior—a woman who stood as if stricken, shielding her face with her hands. A second strangled cry escaped from behind the screening fingers.

"Hautepec!"

Pembroke sprang from his cot, discarding his weapon in consideration of the intruder's sex. Swiftly he lit the lantern hanging from the ridgepole of the tent.

"What do you want?" he demanded roughly, turning again to his uninvited visitor. Slowly, as he looked, the frown of annoyance left his face; the grim lines about his mouth softened. There came into the eyes a look of bewilderment, surprize, and something that betokened, so it seemed, the groping of elusive memory. The girl—she could have counted hardly more than twenty years—had dropped her hands, and stood regarding him with wide, beseeching eyes.

"Who are you?" Pembroke again questioned. His eyes took in the girl's beauty, which had somehow lost its erstwhile underlying horror. He noted the soft rounding of her chin, the seductive turn of her throat and neck. Her hair, ebon as the wings of night, and so sleek that the lantern's light glanced off it like a nimbus about her head, was parted and drawn back over little ears, of which only the tips peeped shyly forth. A simple golden fillet held one great green stone above her forehead. Her skin was richly,

warmly golden, with an effect of clear transparency that heightened its loveliness. A nose, straight, but thin-bridged and delicately chiseled, proclaimed with pride, rather than betrayed, the ancient blood of Mexico.

The girl's garments were perhaps the strangest part of her strange self. A simple slip of what looked like soft white cotton fabric covered her slender body, from shoulders to half-way between knees and shapely ankles. The simplicity of the dress was relieved at neck and hem by rich and exquisite embroidery in green thread, in which were sewn, profusely, what might have been pearls and gems of green and red and turquoise blue. Sandals, that were little more than gilded soles, were bound with colored cord to tiny, high-arched bare feet.

All this Pembroke noted in one appraising glance. He felt a strange stirring, deep within himself, as of the awakening of tender but long-forgotten memories. There was something about this woman that, in the length of his swift appraisal, made his blood course faster—as there was also something that chilled him, even as his pulses leaped.

The girl spoke. Her voice, silvery clear and musical, flowed forth in a cascade of words. From her tones, it seemed that she entreated, and was by turns hopeful and despairing. Mostly, she was desperately imploring.

So Pembroke thought, understanding no part of what she said. The girl spoke in a language that was like none he knew; indeed, her words were akin to those of no tongue he had ever heard before. He shook his head to indicate his lack of understanding.

A LOOK of anguish swept into the girl's dark eyes at Pembroke's negative gesture, which gave way to bewilderment and, finally, to relieved compre-

hension. She glided swiftly forward and, before he was aware of her intention, drew Pembroke's head down with her hands, so that she could look deep into his eyes.

The American shuddered at her touch: there was a repellent coldness to the flesh that seemed so warm and golden. Ere he could draw back, the feeling passed. Instead, it seemed that the tent and all its fixtures were becoming dim and indistinct. They stood in the open, in the midst of the barren ruins.

There was no sign of the other tents, of his companions: he was alone with this strange and yet curiously familiar princess—it did not occur to him to wonder how he knew she was a princess, or aught else concerning her.

The girl, still gazing deeply into Pembroke's eyes, spoke again. This time her words fell upon understanding ears. Dimly, Pembroke was aware that the princess spoke in some strange tongue with which he had no prior acquaintance; yet he understood, as clearly as if her words were English.

"Hautepec," murmured the beautiful lips, "beloved, you have come at last!"

"Hautepec? Beloved?" Pembroke struggled with the haunting whispers of ghostly recollection.

"Do you not remember Tascala—have the passing cycles effaced even the memory from your heart?"

"Tascala?" Pembroke hoarsely echoed. There was an active familiarity about the name. It struck chords of fond remembrance; and at the same time it roused a surge of bitterness that caused Pembroke, involuntarily, to force the small, cold hands roughly from his face.

"Then you do remember?" whispered she who called herself Tascala, flinching at her repulse. "You remember—and will not forgive?"

"There is something that prompts me

to hate you . . . Tascalá." Pembroke brushed a hand wearily across his eyes. "Yet, I know I want to quench in your arms the fire that burns me at your nearness—to hold you close, and press your lips with mine until I bruise them—Tascalá!"

There was a low, joyous cry from Tascalá. She seized Pembroke's hand in both her own, so that once again he shuddered at the icy coldness of her fingers, even as her touch thrilled him.

"Come!" Tascalá urged. "Let me show you once again those things you have forgotten. You must know to understand, and understanding, you will forgive—you *must* forgive!"

Pembroke followed as she, one hand holding fast to his, led toward the mound that Doctor Whitaker thought had been the great temple. It seemed they climbed the massive pile; at least, Pembroke found himself atop it with the princess.

Strangely enough (and yet it seemed quite natural, too), he discovered that he really was not upon the summit of what had been the temple, after all, but within its base. Rather, he seemed to see within a room without actually being there: it was as if he were present in that part of him that saw, and heard, and understood, while he, embodied, was absent elsewhere. He knew, too, that these were the quarters of Ixmal, high priest of the temple.

The high priest sat upon a bench over which a costly feather mantle was carelessly draped. To Pembroke, whose senses only recorded the meaning of what he saw and heard, without emotion or analysis, it occasioned no surprise that the hawk-nosed, fierce-eyed Ixmal was perfectly familiar. *Had he not known him since infancy? Were they not, indeed, princes of the same great house?*

The high priest addressed an underling, who bent an attentive and obse-

quious ear. This under-priest was old; of it may have been that his face was seamed and lined and burnt with the sins that fired his sunken, evil eyes. The high priest spoke:

"You are skilled in such matters: Is there a drug to bend her will to mine?"

"The simplest of them all, Lord Ixmal," leered the under-priest. "There is the plant which, smoked and inhaled deeply into the lungs like ordinary *tabac*, both inspires the smoker with false courage or ferocity and, at the same time, subjects him—or *her!*—to the hypnotic influence of a stronger personality."

"Ah!" breathed the high priest. "Is it readily obtainable?"

"I have sufficient, and more than sufficient, Lord——"

"Popotchia," Ixmal interrupted his underling, "as is known to you, I have, with the aid of the Emperor Montezuma, forced our King Cacomac to enroll his daughter, the Princess Tascalá, as a priestess in the temple."

The priest, Popotchia, inclined his head.

"It is well known, Lord Ixmal," he smugly affirmed, "that the princess serves in the temple as a sign to the people that the royal family serves the gods with true devotion."

"Aye!" fiercely spoke the high priest. "The king secretly longs for a return to the unenlightened faith of our fathers: he would like to see our altars once more decked with flowers and laden with offerings of fruits, as in the days before the coming of the Aztecs brought us the true faith. The gods demand human sacrifices, not the fruits of the field!"

"And the spirits of the gods enter the sacrifices," smoothly supplemented Popotchia, "and partaking thereof imparts the attributes of gods to men."

"It is so!" Fanaticism burned in the high priest's angry eyes. "Partaking of

the consecrated food is mandatory, a necessary ceremony—and the king likes it not. The Princess Tascala, aided and encouraged by the Prince Hautepec, her suitor and my own kinsman, wholly refuses the sacred sustenance of our ritual."

"The people hold in great esteem the Princess Tascala—and the Lord Hautepec," Popotchla maliciously observed.

"True!" agreed Ixmal. "It is for that very reason that the princess must, by precept and example, encourage the people in the strict reverence of our gods. A man may not say of his worship: 'I will do *this*, because it seems good to me; but I will not do *that*, as it is contrary to my liking.' That is heresy, and presumption to the sacred function of the priesthood—it is blasphemy to the gods!"

"Aye! The princess must yield, even if we drive the devils from her mind with drugs!"

"And the Prince Hautepec?" slyly prompted Popotchla.

"Ah!" The exclamation was a snarl. "Hautepec dies upon the rock of sacrifice!" Higher leaped the flame of fanaticism in Ixmal's burning eyes. "The royal family and the nobles have bred heresy among the people, and they must atone with the sacrifice of one of their number—perhaps more!"

"I would see a strong Tapalapan, a Tapalapan in her rightful place at the head of the confederacy of Anahauc, instead of yielding that place to Mexico and acknowledging Montezuma's overlordship. . . . Yet how may that be, if the gods withhold favor, to punish a weak state for the heresy of her weak king? The gods must be served, and Tapalapan wax strong through their subvention."

The high priest fell silent; with a gesture he dismissed Popotchla. After the vulpine under-priest had slipped away, Ixmal sat wrapped in revery, brooding and absorbed in his scheming.

"Yea," he soliloquized, rousing after a moment, "Hautepec dies upon the altar! He is nephew to the king, and therefore eligible for election by the Council of Great Nobles which now openly favors him, to succeed his royal uncle. Never will a weakling among the puppet sons of Cacomic be chosen to follow after his impotent sire. And I, who must otherwise stand aside for Hautepec, could force my own election were he but removed! . . . If Ixmal serve the gods, and also serve himself thereby, shall blame attach to him for that?"

"Montezuma—himself a priest before he was called to be an emperor—will eagerly confirm the sentence of death by sacrifice, which my unanswerable charge of heresy shall force the courts to pass upon my rival. The emperor's policy, no less than his honest orthodoxy, must move him so. Montezuma rightly fears that Hautepec would prove a restive and ambitious vassal—nor suspects that I, to whom he lends support, will incline far less to vassalage!"

THE picture changed. It was almost midday, and the fierce sun of Anahauc beat down upon the summit of the temple, as the temple stood in its time of pride and arrogance.

Slowly, inexorably, the Lord of the Day climbed to his zenith. Golden rays, like searching fingers, crept toward a slit in the stone canopy upon the topmost platform of the great pyramidal *teocali* of sanguinary Mexitl, dread God of War. Tensely impatient, the red-robed and fanatical-eyed high priest waited, the sacrificial knife of polished obsidian half raised in eager readiness.

Between the twin square towers, fifty feet in height, that rose from the flat top of the temple and housed the grotesque images of its major deities, Cacomic, Lord of Tapalapan, sat in the midst of the re-

splendent nobles—and not a few of the ladies—of his court. Far below, close-packed about the pyramid's base, the expectant populace awaited the climax of the ghastly tableau poised above them.

Waited, also, the doomed figure—*that Pembroke knew to be himself!*—stretched upon his back across the war god's altar. A pair of black-robed priests, wild-eyed and with loose matted hair falling over their shoulders, each bore down upon an ankle of their victim. A similar pair held his arms spread wide and downward over the sides of the altar; while the fifth of the gruesome team cupped hands beneath his chin, pulling his head backward. The sacrifice was ready, his body arched over the convex stone, his heaved-up chest a taut offering to the high priest's office.

The man upon the altar, with a sudden mighty wrench of his arms, broke free of the restraining priests and sat upright upon the stone. He made no further move to escape, but sat with one arm outstretched, pointing accusingly at the red-robed priestess who had handed Ixmal the *itzli*, and who now stood behind the high priest, waiting with avid eyes in which there was yet a dulled but haunting horror. The priestess was Tascala—but a Tascala whose face was blank and void of feeling, with only her wild, drugged eyes alight. Before he could be borne down again, the prince upon the altar spoke, and there was something in his bearing that caused the priests to halt.

"I, Hautepec, Prince of Tapalapan and once a chief of the king's armies, do curse you with these last words of mine—Tascala!" His bitter face turned to the sky, he called:

"Hear me, a warrior, dread Mexitl! Take me as sacrifice, but seal my curse upon this woman: May her foul appetite become an ever greater lust! May she find no peace from her ravening, even in

the halls of the dead—may her unnatural hunger outlast Tapalapan and cheat her of the rest she shall long for in her tomb! Let her live through the cycles of eternity, a slave to her lust for the flesh and blood of mankind. May she be a thing of horror, and those upon whom she preys become as she, so that her name shall be a curse in the mouths of men!

"And as for Ixmal, who has never made false pretense to be my friend, nor disavowed his enmity for me as one who stood athwart the path of his ambition—him I leave to the doom of his own contriving. . . .

"A sign, O God of Warriors—a sign, and I will be your willing sacrifice!"

Strangely, while the company upon the platform of the temple stood rooted in their tracks, and the populace below murmured with awe and terror—a cloud overspread the fierce countenance of the sun. The heavens darkened, and a blanket of thicker, almost tangible blackness enveloped the summit of the *teocali*. Lightning played evilly between the towers of the temple; there were rustlings and movements within the sable murk about the altar—the sense and feel of a grim, terrible, amorphous Presence. A Voice, that was yet voiceless, beat upon the consciousness of those who were enveloped in the bank of darkness.

"I hear!" The formless words of the Presence smote with the thunder of silence. "I hear! And cursed be the Princess Tascala, with the curse of this man whom men name Hautepec."

"Forever, O Mexitl?" demanded the voice of the inflexible prince.

"The cycles of time turn within themselves—there is no Beginning, no Ending, no Forever," replied the wordless Voice. "Cursed be Tascala—*until Hautepec forgive her!*"

"It is forever!" fiercely, exultantly, cried the prince who sat upright upon the

altar. "Traitor to me, her affianced lover, abetter of false Ixmal who is traitor to her king and father! Forgive her? Never!"

"The sacrifice is acceptable," abruptly and grimly the Voice announced.

The black mists swirled and eddied, dissolved as abruptly as they had gathered. The burning, blinding light of day again bathed the temple. The priests upon the sacrificial platform recovered from their terror.

"The God accepts the sacrifice!" shouted Ixmal. Once more, the doomed Hautepec lay pinioned on the altar.

Now, at long last, the sunlight pierced the slit in the stone canopy, signaling the commencement of the sacrifices. A warm golden spot settled softly, caressingly, over the heart of the prince. The high priest's arm rose: there was a flash of light to mark the upward arc of the *itzli* in his hand. . . .

AGAIN the scene shifted. With weird insight and the eye of reincarnated memory, Pembroke watched as fragments of the past were re-enacted in swift, kaleidoscopic succession.

He saw Tascala, half crazed with the drug introduced into her tobacco, which she used as did most of the women of her class and nation—saw Tascala fiercely spurn Ixmal's lewd advances. Yet again, in another fragmentary picture, there was Tascala at the altar upon the temple's flat apex, violating all the set and rigorous ceremony of sacrifice and the limitations placed upon her sex, brushing Ixmal aside after the priest had plunged his knife into a victim and torn out his heart. He saw Tascala bend over the ensanguined orifice in the breast of the still quivering wretch upon the altar, while the company upon the *teocali* grew sick with horror. Her lips . . . writhed. . . .

In the flash of another picture, Tascala,

the light of sanity in her haunted and sunken eyes, drained a measure of what Pembroke instinctively knew was deadly venom. He saw her body later buried whole, instead of being cremated as was often done.

One final, fleeting picture: Tascala—though Tascala had been dead!—leaned in the night, gloating and vengeful, above the sleeping form of the high priest, Ixmal. . . .

After that, although how long afterward he did not know, Pembroke found himself once more upon the top of the great mound that was the ruined temple. Tascala was still there before him, and he fancied, dully, that she had just passed her cold hands across his brow. The yet clouded noon had now swung low across the sky.

"Have you seen, beloved? And seeing, have you understood? Have you understood how foul Ixmal drugged away my will—my very sanity—and sowed with his own will that dreadful seed that grew beyond what even he intended?" Tascala's voice trembled, broke.

"And you, Hautepec, you laid upon me the curse that made of me a thing of fear and horror. Ah, Hautepec! Have I not atoned? You have made me suffer ten thousand times ten thousandfold, tortures worse than all the Pits of Evil could offer. I suffer thus, and have suffered the anguish of your love lost to my poor drugged heart and mind, because you asked it of great Mexitl—I suffer thus, *until you forgive!*"

Her eyes burning with anguish and entreaty, Tascala held out her slim, rounded arms to Pembroke. He gazed at her with lurking horror in the depths of his own eyes; but there was pity, too—and something vastly more. He wanted, more than he had ever wanted anything, to feel this woman, soft and *warm*, held close in his arms. It seemed he had wanted her

for centuries: it explained, perhaps, why he had never loved another.

After all, he reasoned, swift thoughts surging in his brain that was once more and strangely clear: after all, was not he—if he had once been Hautepec—more responsible for her final evil fate than had been Ixmal? If his forgiveness could cleanse her, give her peace—*give her to him*—

"I forgive you!" The hoarse voice sounded to him like another's. "I—love—you, still!"

"Beloved!" Tascala sobbed with rapture, her arms opened wide to Pembroke. She took one impulsive step toward him, then paused, lifting her unearthly beautiful, radiant face to the night sky.

"Great Mexitl," cried the princess, in a voice that rang like the peal of an imperious silver bell, "dread God, hear thou this man! He forgives: lift thou the curse!"

Upon the heels of her words, great clouds of blackness swooped around and enveloped the summit of the mound, as they had cloaked the *teocali* on that day of ancient time. The dark mists seethed and billowed angrily; lightning flashes slithered uneasily about within their disturbed folds. Again there was the seeming of a dread Presence brooding in the caliginous dark.

"Dost thou hear, great Mexitl?" the clear, undaunted voice of the princess demanded.

"I hear," replied the voice of the Presence, speaking soundlessly as of yore. "I hear! But lift thou thine own curse—if thou canst! Take him in thy cold arms, and see if his forgiveness and thy love be stronger than his curse. The task is thine!" There was an evil, hidden humor in the monstrous, voiceless utterance.

As abruptly as it had come, the sable cloak of mist was gone. The moon had sunk but little lower.

Tascala raised her arms again to Pembroke.

"You have heard, beloved! Can you take me, as I am, in your arms and warm my cold body with your love? Then indeed shall the curse be lifted."

"Yes, Tascala!" Pembroke swept her into her arms; and so great was his hunger for her that her deathly coldness caused him no revulsion. And she was soft. He felt her exquisite body, her rounded breasts, melt against him as he drew her close. Her arms stole upward to his neck.

Then, from aside, a snarling voice spoke; and it seemed as if the words were thrown, so violently did they smite upon the ears of the pair who stood entwined.

"Stop, Tascala—fool!"

There upon the mound with them, red-robed and fierce-eyed, Ixmal stood, his face a livid mask of passion.

"Stop!" he repeated.

"Begone, Ixmal!" the princess commanded. "With the lifting of the curse, you shall be no more than dust. It is only through me, and through the curse that came to me of your evilness, that you have your foul life-in-death. You belong to the dust of Tapalapan!"

Ixmal laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"And you?" he jeered. "Do you not belong with that same dust?"

Pembroke felt Tascala flinch within his arms. She lifted fearful, startled eyes to his, in which apprehension matched her own. Her arms paused in their travel to his shoulders. Then all at once her face grew calm and quietly serene.

"I think not, Ixmal! I do not believe the gods jest with their promises, nor punish twice the same offense. If I forfeit this unreal survival of myself when I was called Tascala—it will but end one long

(Please turn to page 415).

The Vengeance of Ixmal

(Continued from page 309)

past cycle of my being. I know that love is of that part of me that can never lie with dust!"

"You shall not lift the curse," Ixmal grated, stepping closer.

QUICKLY, fearfully, as if afraid of being cheated at the last moment of centuries of waiting, Tascala slipped her arms about Pembroke's neck. A heavy, jewel-studded bracelet upon her wrist scratched his flesh cruelly at her sudden movement, so that he winced in pain. He felt the blood trickle from the wound down toward his shoulder.

"Blood!" Ixmal breathed into Tascala's ear, while he glared balefully and purposefully into Pembroke's eyes over her shoulder. "There is something better here than love, Tascala!"

Pembroke, numb under the more-than-natural force of the high priest's hypnotic eyes, could only stand helplessly with his arms about Tascala. He felt her stiffen in his embrace, saw her lips begin their hellish writhing, while Ixmal whispered abominations in her ear. He felt her icy breath coming closer on his neck.

A groan burst from Pembroke's dry throat, weighted with all the bitterness of his disappointment and horror in that moment. A tremor shook Tascala at the sound. He saw her face turn upward, slowly, jerkily, as if there were a weight that bore upon her head.

Ixmal yelled a command into her ear that Pembroke did not understand, but he felt Tascala's panting breath upon his throat. Then, as if whatever bond that held her had been burst, her lips moved swiftly toward him—and kissed him softly, full upon the mouth.

From Ixmal came one fiendish howl of frustration—choked in the middle, as if

his throat were suddenly full of dust. And dust was Ixmal: so swiftly did he shrink and shrivel and subside into a tiny powdered heap at their feet that neither Pembroke nor Tascala saw him vanish.

In his arms, Tascala looked into Pembroke's face with all the glory of a soul set free shining in her eyes. Her lips clung to his with an abandonment of passion, and they were soft, and sweet—and *warm!* Her body was close to his, and it, too, was warm with the fire of love and life.

One instant they stood, locked in the embrace four centuries had denied; one instant, while Tascala sobbed, "Beloved!" Then she was gone.

Pembroke was standing one moment with Tascala held against him; in the next, he looked stupidly and aghast at the empty circle of his arms, within which there was nothing but a few settling motes of dust that fluttered softly downward amidst the dying beams of the now unveiled moon. The dawn wind that crept in from across the desert stirred two little heaps of dust at his feet, sifting their particles gently across the top of what was once the great temple of Tapalapan. Littered ornaments—a golden fillet, set with one great emerald, a rough, bosselated and jeweled bracelet—lay dully with the dust.

"Tascala—Tascala!"

The cry was wrung in anguish from Pembroke, who stared unseeing at his empty arms. He knew, now, that Ixmal had been right, and Tascala, as well as the priest, rested at last with the ashes of what had been Tapalapan.

WEARILY, brokenly, Pembroke stumbled down the side of the ancient mound. Midway down the precipitous

slope, his ankle turned as the result of a careless step. Falling headlong, his forehead came in violent contact with the corner of an outcropping piece of stone. Limply, as if he had been a mere loose-jointed puppet, Pembroke rolled and bounced to the bottom of the steep declivity, as dawn flared behind the distant mountain tops.

His companions, Doctor Whitaker and Greely (themselves strangely wan and weak), found him when the morning sun had climbed into the sky.

Pembroke was one great mass of cuts and bruises; there was an angry contused wound upon his forehead, and his limbs were bent in abnormal and grotesque fashion. Doctor Whitaker dressed his cuts and tended his bruises as well as might be with the use of their first-aid kit; but it was all too apparent that Pembroke was in dire need of attention that could not be given him in camp. Accordingly they set out for Santa Rosalia.

When noon breathed its hot breath upon the village, Pembroke lay without moving, in a quiet room of Father Sebastiano's quarters. The priest watched and served, sharing his ministry with Greely and Doctor Whitaker. At length he shook his head.

"I am afraid, *Señores*," he whispered, "the doctor for whom we have sent to Celayos will not arrive in time, and I fear his skill would not suffice, even if he were here already. See how still this poor one lies, the vital spark so low he does not even moan."

The day wore wearily on; and sunset came before the doctor from Celayos. The fat village mayor stole into the room, to inquire again about the Señor Pembroke. A breeze stirred, crept in from the desert.

Pembroke, who had lain so still, without even a whimper passing the pale lips from which the priest now and again wiped the traces of a crimson trickle, sud-

denly moved his head. He made as if to extend his arms, though they responded but feebly to his efforts. Father Sebastiano bent over the bed, peering, and began to pray. Pembroke whispered clearly above the priest's droning:

"I am coming—*Tascalá!*" Then he was still again, and there was the seal of finality upon his stillness, now. One spark had died: or perhaps it but burned on, brighter, elsewhere. . . .

"Look!" hoarsely directed the mestizo mayor. His thick finger quivered, pointing at the wall above the bed. There was a faint shadow there, a shadow with the seeming of a slender, girlish outline. . . .

"There is a little tree in the courtyard, and the setting sun casts its shadow on the wall." Father Sebastiano's voice was sharper than it need have been: "Don" Tomás had made no comment upon the queer-ness of that shadow. The priest had looked for himself.

"Look!" again "Don" Tomás whispered: "Another shadow joins the first! *Tascalá has found her lover*—the curse is lifted!"

But the sun slipped suddenly away; and whatever shadows there may have been upon the wall, they seemed to have melted into the dusk.

Outside, the breeze that had come with sunset rustled softly through the foliage in the courtyard. The rotund mayor of Santa Rosalia crossed himself, furtively watching the others in the silent room. From the strained look in Father Sebastiano's eyes, from the odd way in which the two *norte americanos* exchanged startled glances, "Don" Tomás knew that they had, all of them, heard alike.

Through the open windows, it seemed that the rustling in the leaves outside made a low, glad whispering:

"*Tascalá! At last, my Love!*"

It may not have been the breeze that whispered.