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*by*

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**GREAT  
STORIES**

*by*

RALPH MILNE FARLEY \* DON WILCOX  
ED EARL REPP \* EDWIN K. SLOAT

VOLUME 13  
NUMBER 7

AMAZING  
STORIES

JULY  
1939

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*Title:* Pe-Ra, Daughter of the Sun

*Date of first publication:* 1939

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*Illustrator:* Leo Morey (1899-1965)

*Date first posted:* March 19, 2023

*Date last updated:* March 29, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230335

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A snaky head and neck appeared out of the water and Davis lashed at it with his fist

# PE-RA, *DAUGHTER OF THE SUN*

By  
RALPH MILNE FARLEY

First published *Amazing Stories*, July 1939.

*Seven ordeals of death faced David Davis in this strange valley of the flaming god.*

## CHAPTER I

### The Hidden Valley

David Davis sat slouched over his glass of pulque in a smoky corner of Mexican Pete's dingy Tia Juana cafe. A three-days' growth of blond stubble glinted on his hollow cheeks. Suddenly he drew himself erect and leaned forward in the gloom, to catch the conversation of two prosperous-looking Americans.

"I tell you, Jordan," one of them was saying, "what we need is a good aviator, and damn quick, too. Senator Ashurst is likely to put it over this time, and we want to get in on the ground floor."

Davis drained the last drops of his liquor in one fiery gulp, got up, pulled his frayed coat to a semblance of smoothness, squared his once athletic shoulders, and approached the other table. He hoped that, in the dusk, his two compatriots would not notice his whiskers and his poverty-stricken appearance.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I happened to overhear you mention the need of a flier. I am a master pilot, temporarily out of work because of the recession."

"Well, well!" boomed the man named Jordan. "Speak of the devil, and he bobs right up! Sit down, young man, and tell us about yourself. Hey, waiter—or whatever you call yourself in Spanish—some aguardiente for our friend!"

"No thank you, Sir," said Davis, taking a seat. "When there's flying in prospect, I quit drinking."

"An excellent idea!" Jordan boomed. "Well, young man, I'm Erasmus Jordan, the Seattle lumber king. Ever hear tell of me?"

Davis nodded, and his blue eyes widened with respect.

"I certainly have. Where big timber is the subject, the name of Erasmus Jordan is always mentioned."

Much pleased, the millionaire continued, "This is my lawyer, Harvey Black. Harvey has just been telling me Senator Ashurst is going to revive his attempt to get the United States to buy the peninsula of Lower California off of Mexico. Great idea!"

"Yes," the Attorney cut in. "The Senator says that Lower California, while merely a useless vermiform appendix to Mexico, is the Achilles heel of the United States—our most vulnerable spot. The Japs are already colonizing it, especially at Magdalena harbor. And certainly we ought to own the mouth of our own Colorado River. Mexico has neglected the peninsula. But it is full of natural resources and, under American domination, could be colonized by the unemployed, and made to blossom like the rose."<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] We reproduce here the contents of a letter from Senator Henry F. Ashurst, regarding this matter.—Ed.

Dear Sir:

I learn that you are about to publish a story by Ralph Milne Farley, dealing with a project which I have repeatedly urged on the floor of the United States Senate, namely that this country purchase Lower California from the Mexican Government. My views on this subject are still as follows:

The peninsula of Lower California is a vermiform appendix to Mexico. It is the heel—the Achilles heel—to the United States.

The Mexican Republic is both unwilling and unable to police the domain, and is unable to resist aggressions from or settlements on the peninsula by oriental powers, hence a base of supplies or of military and naval operations could be established there with comparative ease and secrecy.

Our duty is plain. In these troublous times we in charge of the Nation's destiny, holding the most sacred deposit ever confided to human hands, should not shirk or shrink. If we perform these duties, glory will be our portion; if we fail, it will be to our shame. There is no remorse so deep, so poignant, so inveterate, as that which comes from the consciousness that we have failed at a supreme crisis to avail ourselves of an opportunity to perform a real and needful public service to our country, and there is no happiness more sustaining, more enduring, or more unselfish than the consciousness that we have met in a worthy manner the responsibilities upon us.

Fortune, success, and opportunity soar aloft on high and rapid wing. They must be seized as they pass by. It is a difficult task to overtake them once they have left us behind, or found us asleep or afraid.

Sincerely yours,  
Henry F. Ashurst.

Jordan supplemented, "We believe that this time Ashurst will succeed. America will have to seize lower California when we fight Japan in the next war. Might as well annex it now peaceably."

"But what has this to do with your needing a pilot?" Davis interposed, a puzzled frown on his gaunt features.

"Well," Jordan replied, "I want to get in and pick out the best sites before the U.S.A. annexes the place. So I want someone to make an aerial survey for me. Think you could do it, young feller?"

"You bet I could!"

"But, Mr. Jordan," Lawyer Black objected, "you don't know anything about this young man. Not even his name."

"My name is David Davis."

"A good American name! And I like your face. You're hired."

---

The engine of Dave's amphibian coughed. It had coughed before on this long flight; but not the present sickening sound, the sound which every flier knows and dreads, and which means but one thing: "out of gas!"

"It can't possibly be so!" he exclaimed. For he had filled up at a coast town just an hour ago, and the gauge still showed nearly full.

Then his engine died completely. He gave her the gun, but it was no use. Feed pipe plugged, probably. If he could find a landing place, he would soon restore his gas-supply, and be up and away again.



He glanced at the desolate rocks below him, but no water did he see; not even a level space; nothing but jagged crags. A pretty ending this, for a trip which had started out so jauntily!

A week ago, in this amphibian, fully equipped and provisioned, David Davis had set off on the exploring trip for Millionaire Jordan.

He had found a number of small mountain lakes which had possibilities, and had even landed in one or two of them; yet still he had kept on, partly because he hoped to find something even better for his patron, but chiefly because it felt so good to have his hands and feet on the controls of a plane once more, after all these months of inaction. He had traveled in a leisurely fashion, zigzagging back and forth across the mountain ranges, spending several nights in various towns on each coast, and was just now on his way inland from such a stop, when his motor had gone dead.

No level land nor water was in sight, but to the left of him the mountains seemed a bit less high than elsewhere. So he put his machine into as flat a glide as possible, and turned her nose in that direction. Perhaps he would be able to skim the successive ridges, and finally reach the Gulf of California in safety.

He barely cleared the first ridge; then, to his despair, he saw that he was in the center of a circular range of serrated peaks, which at no other place was as low as where he had just crossed. This circle was twenty miles or so in diameter, and nowhere within it could he see any spot which appeared to be level enough for landing.

Lower and lower the plane sank in its onward rush. Close ahead rose a small hill, the flattest he had yet seen, but as he approached it, he suddenly saw that this apparent flat plateau was but the narrow rim of a crater-like hollow.

Too late to turn back now, he barely skimmed this rim, and found himself within the crater, which was about three miles across.

On all sides towered precipitous cliffs. But in the exact center of the depression there lay a small lake, large enough for landing. With a sigh of relief, Davis nosed down, and soon was floating placidly on the glassy surface of the water.

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As soon as the amphibian was beached, he set about investigating his gas supply. He found the tank bone dry, and the gauge cleverly wedged with a sliver of wood. Undoubtedly the scoundrelly coast Mexican, who was supposed to have refueled the ship, had thought more of a few filthy pesos than he had of the Americano's life.

In despair, Davis looked around him. His plane was now useless, the crags on every side seemed absolutely unscalable, and even if he succeeded in surmounting them, how could he ever live to cross the many miles of bad-lands which lay beyond!

Yet where he was now marooned was not at all terrifying. The little lake was an azure gem. Its several islands were each large enough to hold a house and quite sizable grounds. The shores sloped up gradually to the foot of the surrounding cliffs. There were beaches of white sand, marshes of sedge, rolling meadows, and thick groves of hardwood. Plovers teetered along the beaches; a flock of ducks swam around the end of one of the islands; a fish jumped; a rabbit hopped out of one of the groves and started nibbling on some succulent herb; a quail piped in the distance; and somewhere a loon screamed. This was indeed a bit of paradise. No one would ever suspect its existence, in the midst of these desert mountains! For a moment Davis forgot his predicament, in his ecstasy at having discovered just the type of site which old Jordan had deputed him to find.

His reverie was interrupted by seeing a dozen nearly naked warriors, armed with spears, emerging from a nearby grove. Leading them was a young man wearing a cape of iridescent feathers, and a grotesque lacquered headdress with long plumes. Instinctively Davis reached for his automatic, but the approaching natives dropped their spears to the ground, and knelt on the white sand, their foreheads on their knees, their arms extended toward him.

“Cusahl quottle! Cusahl quottle!” they were clicking in awed tones; or so the words sounded to the amazed American.

And then in a flash it came over him that these sounds were probably the proper pronunciation of “Quetzalcoatl,” the name of the ancient golden-haired deity of the Mayans of Central America: Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent.

These ignorant natives thought that he was their god. Small wonder! For his hair was yellow, and his eyes blue, like those of the god, and he too had flown down to them on a winged dragon out of the sky. He had read novels based on exactly that plot.

“What next?” he wondered, racking his brains for a memory of the next conventional step taken by the pseudo-gods of such novels.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a tall white-bearded white-robed figure, emerging from the same grove from which the twelve savages and their leader had appeared. This newcomer majestically approached the scene without the least hint of servility or superstitious awe in his bearing.

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For a moment he surveyed the cringing group on the sand; then spoke imperious words in a strange clicking guttural tongue. The man with the feathered cape and lacquered headdress arose with evident embarrassment, and muttered something about “Quetzalcoatl.”

Again the bearded newcomer spoke, and his voice was full of anger. The natives meekly rose to their feet, and picked up their spears. The aviator nervously fingered his automatic. He seemed to be in for some sort of trouble. Gone were all his dreams of becoming a god to these primitive people.

“My son,” said the majestic old man in halting Spanish, a language with which Davis was fortunately acquainted, “you have committed a great sacrilege by permitting my ignorant followers to worship you as Quetzalcoatl, messenger of Ra, the flaming god.”

“But I am lost. My plane is out of gas,” stammered the aviator.

“You shall be our guest—for the present,” announced the old man ominously. “Meanwhile be so good as to let me take care of your ‘gun’ for you.”

“And if I refuse?” asked Davis, backing away a bit.

A few sharp clicking words from the old man, and the twelve spearmen raised their spears. Their plumed leader, however, slunk away with a very black look at Davis.

“You will *not* refuse,” said the old man calmly.

Davis ran his eyes over the resolute savages in front of him. He had only seven shots in the chamber of his automatic. Seven shots. Seven dead enemies—possibly. What would the other six do, while he was reloading? If he shot their venerable leader first, they might run. Or, fanatically, they might stand their ground.

“You win!” said he, in English, handing over the gun.

“And now please to accompany me,” said the old man. “Your ‘plane’ will be safe for the present.”

With one last lingering look at his amphibian, Davis fell into step beside his host, and together they set off toward the nearby grove of trees, followed by the squad of twelve



spearman.

Through the wood they passed, upon a well defined path, emerging at the other side upon a rolling meadow which lay along the foot of the cliffs.

And such cliffs! The entire lower portion of their face, which heretofore had been masked from Davis's gaze by the grove of trees, was covered with grotesque Mayan carvings, and dotted with the entrances to many caves. A road ran along the foot of the cliff, and down this road to the right they passed, while scores of men in loin-cloths, blanketed women, and naked children turned out to stare at them as they went by. Occasionally there would be heard some muttered comment, which invariably included the word "Quetzalcoatl"; but each such comment would be instantly silenced by a peremptory expletive and angry glance from the white-bearded old man.

The road was of sand, until they came to a stretch of fine jet-black volcanic cinders. Davis was just noticing this when the road came to an abrupt stop at the edge of a patch of neatly trimmed grass, which his captors carefully avoided.

"Summer greens still too wet to play," Davis laughed to himself. "Wish I'd brought my golf-clubs."

Beyond the "putting green," the road was of red clay for a short distance, and then became the conventional white sand again.

If it hadn't been for the peculiar mental associations called to mind by the "putting-green," Dave probably would not have really noticed this peculiar road at all.

Finally the road passed some neatly tilled fields; and at last the party halted in front of a very ornately carved portion of cliff, and the old man dismissed his spearman, and approached a large cave-mouth.

Now that the guards were gone, why not suddenly grapple with the old man, wrench the automatic from his grasp, shoot him down, and then by signs indicate to the native population that he, Quetzalcoatl, had called down the lightnings of Heaven to slay this defamer of the messenger of the true god? For, regardless of the bits of modern knowledge which the old man inexplicably possessed, Davis was convinced that the bulk of the native population had never before seen either firearms or an airplane, and that they all instinctively took his seemingly miraculous arrival and his yellow hair as an indication that he had indeed come from the sun.

And then, framed in the cave-mouth, Davis saw a girl!

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A sleeveless doeskin tunic, gathered in at her slim waist, hung down to just above her neatly rounded knees. The soft folds of this garment accentuated every curve of her radiant girlish body. Her face was as exquisitely chiseled as a cameo. Her skin had the healthy tan of a Caucasian, rather than the copper color of an Indian, or the adobe brown of a Mexican. Her blue-black hair, neatly parted in the middle, and surmounted by a single vermilion flamingo-feather, hung in two long thick braids in front of her shoulders. Her arms, legs, and feet were bare and without ornaments.

She paid no attention to David Davis. Calling out "Vatel" in a glad little silver voice, she ran nimbly from the cave and nestled in the arms of the white-robed old man.

The old man replied in a few crooning words, quite a contrast to the imperious tones which he had used to Davis and to the naked savages. Then his tone changed from endearment to ordinary conversational, at which the girl turned to face their guest with a few strange syllables, evidently of greeting.

“This is my grand-daughter, named Pe-Ra, ‘Child of the Sun’,” explained the old man. “She say, ‘Welcome to our home.’ She says it in Mayan, for she cannot speak the Spanish.”

“Ah, but I can speak it a little, Vatel,” interjected Pe-Ra, dimpling.

“Muy poquito, querida,” replied her grandfather. Then to Davis, “Enter our home, and may the flaming god shine upon our guest.”

Somehow this struck an ominous note. “I hope, sir,” Davis inquired, “that I am not to be offered as a sacrifice to your flaming god.”

“Heaven forbid!” replied his host. “For we practice the ancient rite of Mu, the motherland, unsullied by any modern barbarisms.”

Not quite convinced, Davis entered the cave. It was high and vaulted, hewed out of solid rock. It was decorated in barbaric splendor, with mural carvings and paintings, skins of animals, and woven blankets and tapestries of gaudy colors; and was lit by many open-wick pottery lamps, which strangely smelt of kerosene.

Seating Davis on a low divan, with Pe-Ra beside him, the venerable host withdrew. They sat, for a few moments, in embarrassed silence. Then Davis put some simple question in Spanish; the girl answered, and soon they were carrying on a conversation quite voluble considering that Spanish was a language that was native to neither of them.

From Pe-Ra, Davis learned that this people had lived here for thousands of years, ever since coming from some mythical country known as “the motherland.” Pe-Ra knew that there was a world outside this valley, but none of her people had ever been to this outer world, as the cliffs which surround the valley were unscalable. Their community was made up of the priests and their families, the spearmen who kept order and slew whatever wild beasts emerged from the jungles across the lake, the workers who tilled the fields and wove and mined, and the slaves who attended the priests. Altogether there were about a thousand people in the community. They worshiped Ra, the flaming god, and Quetzalcoatl, his human incarnation and messenger. Vatel, the girl’s grandfather, was High Priest of Ra, and hence was both spiritual and temporal head of the community.

Then Davis told Pe-Ra about America.

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The old priest was gone for nearly an hour. By the time he returned, the American man and the Mayan girl had become well acquainted.

Vatel announced his presence by abruptly remarking, “Young man, if your stay with us was to be merely temporary, you could be our guest. But, as the misfortune to your plane dooms you to remain in this valley forever—”

“Forever?” Davis exclaimed, horrified.

“Yes, forever,” replied his host, with sickening finality, “for there is no way out of this valley, and—”

“You have oil here,” Davis interrupted. “Perhaps I can make gasoline from it, and—”

“As I was saying,” the old man suavely cut in, “even *if* there were a way out, it is inadvisable that the outer world should ever know of this valley. Your fellow countrymen might teach my peaceful people about guns and war. It would be better that you stay with us. And so you must take your proper place in our community. As you are not of our race, that proper place is that of slave.”

“Vatel!” remonstrated the girl.

Her grandfather made some remark in Mayan, to which she replied in the same language.

Then, in Spanish, she spoke to Davis, “Vatel says that I may have you for my personal slave, which will be fun, if you will tell me more stories of your strange country.”

Davis grinned. “I’m willing to give it a try,” said he.

“You will continue as our guest for this one meal,” Vatel announced. Dinner was then brought by a dark-skinned youth, who was addressed as Miguel.

The viands were modern and well cooked: soup, fowl, stewed greens, a root vegetable, papayas, and wine. They were served in plates of carved gold, and cups and bowls of brilliantly decorated pottery.

As he ate, Davie Davis turned over a number of thoughts in his mind. If this valley were truly inescapable, how was it that the old Mayan priest could speak Spanish so fluently, and knew all about firearms and airplanes, and owned a slave named Miguel, evidently a Mexican. Surely there was something phony here somehow! Well, it would pay to appear to fall in with their plans, and meanwhile keep his eyes open.

After the meal, Davis was turned over to Miguel, who was instructed to quarter and equip him as befitted a slave of the High Priest. The equipment consisted of a sleeveless shirt, bound in at the waist by a short skirt wound round and round like a Scotch kilt. Miguel wore the same. The quarters, to Davis’s relief, consisted of an ample cave room to himself, with one window, just over the main door to Vatel’s cave.

After arranging the gaudy sleeping rugs, and changing his clothes, and hanging his discarded American garments on pegs, Davis walked downstairs and out the main mouth of the cave. There beside the opening stood Pe-Ra talking with the same ornately garbed young man who had led the spearmen on the American’s first arrival. He was still wearing his iridescent feathered cape, but was holding his lacquered headdress on one arm. His face was handsome, sneering, and cruel.

Something about this man’s bearing toward the girl—a proprietary attitude—irritated Davis immensely.

The warrior scowled at Davis, and then put some question to the girl in the native tongue, to which she replied, with a little toss of her head.

Then turning to Davis, she said imperiously in Spanish, “This is my especial friend, named Cumcuz. Serve him as you would serve me. Now go!”

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Humbly Davis withdrew. Having nothing particular to do, he sought out Miguel. The young Mexican proved to be quite willing to talk. Cumcuz, he said, was a minor priest. All of the priesthood except old Vatel, and even Vatel on occasion, wore the gaudy headdress and feathered cape. Miguel himself had been born in one of the coast towns of Lower California; but ten years ago at the age of eight he had been kidnapped by a slaving raid led by Vatel. Practically all the slaves of this community were Mexicans, or of Mexican descent, and had been recruited in this manner.

“Then there *is* a way out of this valley!” exclaimed Davis, eagerly.

“Certainly,” replied Miguel, but without enthusiasm. “Everyone knows *that*. But no one, except old Vatel and the other chief priests, knows the exact location of the secret passage which leads to the outer world. They always blindfold the warriors whom they take with them, and the slaves whom they bring back.”

“Miguel,” exclaimed the American, clapping his fellow slave on the shoulder, “you and I are going to find that passage, and get out of here!”

“Do you really think so?” asked the Mexican eagerly.

“Surest thing you know!” Davis confidently replied, although in his heart he didn’t feel so confident.

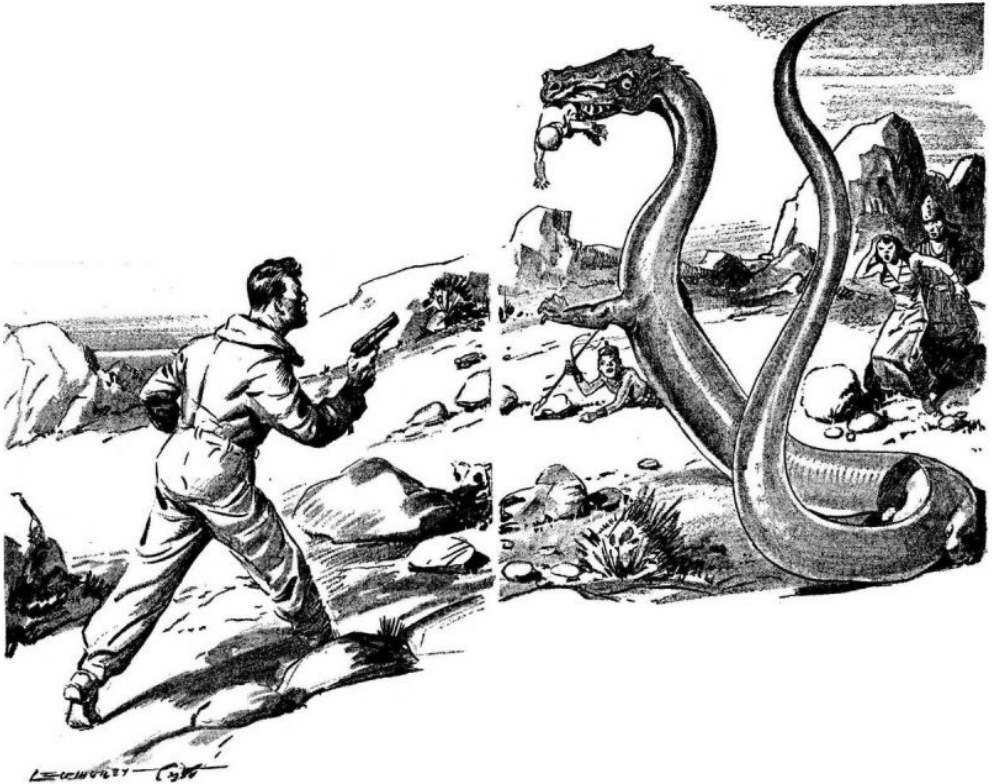
The Mexican looked at him with dog-like devotion. “If we only could!”

## CHAPTER II

### Trouble in the Valley

That night, after pondering for a while, Davis slept dreamlessly on his pile of blankets, for he had had a full and tiring day. He awoke in the gray light of early dawn, to the clangor of a metallic gong which blared throughout the valley. Crawling sleepily to his window, he beheld all the populace swarming out of their caves and lining up at the foot of the cliffs; so, full of curiosity, he slipped on his sleeveless shirt, wound his short skirt about his waist, and joined the throng.

Whatever was the matter, it certainly was not a fire, nor an attack, nor anything of that sort, for no one seemed in the least excited. And yet all of them were staring fixedly across the lake.



Davis took careful aim at the spot where he judged the teaspoonful of brains to be, and fired.

The sky at the opposite rim of the encircling cliffs gradually pinkened, until finally the edge of the sun's disk appeared. At this sight, everyone prostrated himself on his face, with his arms stretched in adoration toward the flaming god, while Vatel intoned a chant in the Mayan

tongue, until the entire disk of the sun was visible. Then all the people arose and went to their caves. A simple, but impressive, ceremony.

Davis was helping Miguel serve breakfast, when cries and shouts of excitement were heard outside. Leaping up from his seat, old Vatel rushed to the cave-mouth, followed by his establishment.

Outside, women were wailing. Several spearmen, directed by men in lacquered headdresses and feathered capes, were holding in their grasp another spearman, who was trying to escape them.

At a few snapped words of inquiry from Vatel, a chorus of explanations was babbled in Mayan.

Forgetting his servile position, Davis asked, "What is it, Sir?"

Vatel turned toward him with a shrug of resignation. "A serpent from the jungles across the lake has stolen a child. It would be suicide to follow. See, they are restraining the child's father."

"Give me my gun," begged Davis. "It's a forty-five, and would stop anything that lives."

"No! No!" interposed Pe-Ra, anxiously.

"Would it matter what becomes of me?" Davis asked her.

"Certainly," she replied, tossing her head, "for no one cares to lose a good slave."

Vatel looked searchingly at the two of them. "Here is the gun," he said, producing it unexpectedly from the folds of his toga. "Release the spearman! Go, you two, and may the blessings of Ra go with you."

The struggling spearman was released. Snatching up his spear, he raced off to the left around the margin of the lake, and the American followed him, brandishing the automatic.

They had not gone far when they overtook a huge snake-like quadruped waddling ponderously away from them, with a squalling child held tightly in its repulsive ophidian jaws.

Rushing fearlessly up to the reptile, the frantic father thrust his spear into its side, whereupon it dropped the child, wheeled with unexpected speed, felled the native with a side swipe of its head, and then planted one forepaw firmly upon his body.

With a guttural hiss, it then extended its neck tentatively toward Davis. Stepping back a pace, the young man took careful aim with his automatic toward the spot where he judged the teaspoonful of brains to be, and fired. The leaden slug crushed the skull for a space as big as a human fist, whereupon the beast began to thrash around like a scotched snake. Braving these death throes, Davis leaped in and seized the unconscious form of his ally.

But a stroke of the huge tail knocked them both flat upon the ground. However, the reptile's efforts seemed evidently directed by no conscious purpose; and so Davis, although badly bruised and nearly winded, was able laboriously to drag the warrior's body to safety. Then drawing the warrior's copper sword from its sheath, Davis crawled back again to the thrashing serpent, and started hacking at its neck just behind its crushed skull, for he was determined to take no chance of its reviving.

As the keen copper blade penetrated the nape of the reptile's neck, it suddenly galvanized into action again. Taken completely by surprise, Davis went down beneath its onslaught.

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The next thing that he knew was a confused babble of voices all about him. He was lying where he had fallen, but his head rested on the lap of Miguel, his fellow-slave, who was bathing his face with water. Nearby stood Pe-Ra and her grandfather, looking down at him

with expressions of keen admiration. A native woman was hugging a little child passionately in her arms, while beside her stood a grinning spearman, feeling of his bruises. The decapitated body of the huge saurian lay nearby, still twitching slightly.

Around this group stood a crowd of priests and natives and slaves, and among them Davis caught sight of the scowling face of Cumcuz.

Vatel directed the spearmen to construct a litter of spears, and the hero was borne back in triumph to the caves.

His wounds proved not to be serious. The next day he was on his feet again, although limping somewhat. The father of the rescued child called upon him; and, through the medium of Miguel as interpreter, expressed his undying gratitude, which—so Miguel explained—caused the spearman considerable embarrassment, due to the fact that Davis was, after all, only a slave.

During the succeeding days, Davis was much in the company of the beautiful Pe-Ra, who was most solicitous of his wounds. He told her a great deal about the outer world, and she thrilled at these tales, and longed to see the America which he described.

“I’ll take you there some day,” he asserted, with a show of confidence which he did not feel.

She smiled eagerly; then sobered and said, “But how? For no one can ever leave this valley.”

Davis did not press the point, for fear that she might tell her grandfather. Instead he turned the subject to the monster which he had subdued. Pe-Ra explained that the jungles and marshes over across the lake were filled with these beasts and with others even more terrible.

“Why not smoke them out, drive them into a corral, and slaughter them?” he proposed. “It would be quite easy.”

The girl agreed with him. But when they broached the matter to old Vatel, he enigmatically replied, “They have their uses, and must not be disturbed.”

Under the able tuition of the girl, Davis began the study of Mayan, which he found to be an extremely simple language. But Cumcuz claimed as much as possible of Pe-Ra’s time, and subjected his American rival to many minor indignities and insults, in an evident attempt to incite the slave to some act of violence; but Davis, seeing the point, bore all these indignities and insults with a maddening imperturbable grin. And whenever Cumcuz was busy with his military or priestly duties, Davis spent this time with Pe-Ra.

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The girl was surprisingly modern in her outlook. Her sense of humor was inexhaustible and rather impish; and, finding in Dave a ready listener and a kindred spirit, she poked fun at everything and everybody about her.

Especially was she fed-up with the pomposity of the priesthood, excepting of course her grandfather. She confided to Davis a ribald poem, which she had composed about the twelve leaders of the hierarchy:

*“First Vatel, white-bearded, whom I adore;  
Then sour old Coh, who’s a bully and bore;  
Then Petl, who has that big wart on his nose;  
Then Poco, who waddles, with broad duck-like toes;  
And Ixl, whose beard is as black as a crow; . . .”*



And so on. Davis learned it from her, and would chuckle heartily to himself at the aptness of the lines, whenever he saw one of the twelve chief priests.

He had been in the valley of the ancient sun-worshippers about a month, when there recurred to him a question, of which he had not thought since his first conversation with old Vatel. What was the oil which these Mayans burned in their pottery lamps? Undoubtedly some sort of high-grade crude petroleum. If so, couldn't he refine it, until it became gasoline? Gasoline which he could use in his still intact airplane, to escape from this prison!

True, it was a beautiful valley. True, it held the prettiest and most attractive girl whom he had ever known. But it was a prison nevertheless, and so he was determined to escape from it. Furthermore he certainly owed a duty to millionaire Jordan, his patron, who must by now be wondering and worrying what had become of him.

With this in view, but concealing his purpose, he approached Vatel, and inquired about this oil. The old priest, with perfect frankness, told him that it came from a sacred well in one of the caves. Certain minor priests had the duty of purifying the oil, by straining it through filters which contained successive layers of charcoal and woodash. On Davis's expressing a willingness to work part-time in the laboratory of these priests, he was permitted to do so.

Now to manufacture gasoline! But first to frame-up some kind of an excuse for doing so. So he informed Vatel that he planned to arrange a new and better variety of lamp, for which it would be necessary to transform the fluid.

Fortunately he found that not only did the Mayans know the lost art of tempering copper, but also that they could render copper extremely malleable when desired. In fact, the manufacture of copper-piping was already one of their accomplishments.

So he made a gasoline lantern after the general nature of the flares used in circuses; and also built a still, from which he was able to produce—in a rather hit or miss manner—distillates of various and varying gravities, running all the way from kerosene to naphtha. Finally, with much practice and infinite patience, assisted by the hydrometer from the battery-tester of his plane, he learned how to regulate the temperature of distillation to a sufficient degree so as to produce a fluid roughly resembling that which he desired. This he stored in quantities in earthenware jugs in his own quarters.

And all the time he vaguely wondered why keen old Vatel so calmly permitted him to manufacture and store up this means of escape. Did not Vatel know that this was fuel for the plane? Did not Vatel remember the suggestion which Davis had let drop on the first day of his imprisonment?

But did Davis really want to get away from Pe-Ra after all? Why not take her with him? She had always displayed an interest in the airplane; the prospects of a trip in it would certainly delight her.

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It was Miguel, his fellow slave, who first set his mind working along practical lines. "My friend," the Mexican suddenly said one day when they happened to be alone together in the servants' quarters of Vatel's household, "you love the lady Pe-Ra, do you not?"

"Why—why—certainly not!" Davis stammered.

"Ah, my friend," Miguel said, grinning, "you reveal yourself. And why not! She is a lady here, and you are a gentleman on the outside. When we leave this accursed valley together, you and I, let us take her with us."

But Davis shook his head sadly. "In the outside world I am 'caballero,' yes," he replied, "but here in this valley I am merely a slave. And it is *here* that I must win Pe-Ra."

“Then why not join the priesthood?” suggested Miguel. “Even the lowest priest would be eligible to the hand of Pe-Ra.”

“But surely a slave cannot become a priest!”

“*Anyone* can become a priest,” the Mexican asserted, “if he can survive the seven mysteries.”

But when Davis approached Vatel on the matter, the old man explained that “the seven mysteries” were more than a mere formal initiation or test of fitness. Rather they were a series of ordeals, in each of which a gruesome death would ensue unless the candidate were duly informed in advance just what to do at every turn. Accordingly a friend was always detailed as “conductor” for each *favored* candidate. Thus it was that the priesthood kept its ranks free from all slaves and workers.

“But you, my son, we shall gladly welcome,” Vatel assured him, “for you have won our respect, and you have earned promotion by your skill in our laboratories. In a few days, you may begin the initiations.”

Overjoyed, Davis told Pe-Ra. But as yet he did not dare even to hint to her why he was taking this step.

Nor did she give any indication that she understood his motives. “I shall lose a faithful slave,” she said with a hint of sadness. Then in a worried tone, “And I shall fear for you at every turn. Death is the penalty for the slightest misstep.”

Quite evidently she did not know that the tests were all a fake for those whom the hierarchy favored.

Yet in spite of Davis’s confidence that this was so, the fears of both Pe-Ra and Miguel began to play on his nerves. Vatel set a date three days off for the initiation, and Davis spent as much of the interim as possible in the company of Pe-Ra. Clung to her almost, with a growing horror of never seeing her again.

## CHAPTER III

### Rites of the Priesthood

On the day set for the commencement of the rites, he came clad only in a loin-cloth to an appointed spot in one of the groves, where stood a group of priests all in full regalia of lacquered headdress and feathered cape. There old Vatel broke the glad tidings that he had thoughtfully picked Cumcuz as “conductor” to lead Davis safely through the seven ordeals.

The two young men glared at each other. Then the initiation began.

First, the entire gathering of priests prostrated themselves, and prayed to the flaming sun.

Then Vatel announced, “The first degree, O David, is one of purification and preparation. As soon as we priests withdraw, you must embark upon a pilgrimage. You must cross a river of mud, and a river of blood, and then successively traverse four roads: one white, one red, one green, and one black. At the end of the black road, you will find us awaiting you. May the spirit of Ra go with you.”

The priests then withdrew, all except Cumcuz. He grinned maliciously and shrugged his shoulders. “Go ahead,” he commanded.

“But how?” asked Davis. “You are supposed to tell me what to do.”

Cumcuz shrugged again. “Yes. But, if I do *not* instruct you, how can you prove that I didn’t? It will merely be the word of a slave against the word of a priest.”

“All right,” Davis retorted, his eyes snapping. “But let me warn you that if I get through these seven ordeals alive, I’m going to take this out of you.”

Cumcuz shrugged again. “I shall not worry. There’s not a chance for you, without my help.”

“Okeh. Where is the river of mud?”

“It’s up to you to produce it,” replied Cumcuz. Then bit his lip.

“*Produce* it, eh?” said Davis to himself. Then aloud, “Very well. Come on.”

So he strode out of the grove to one of the nearby ploughed fields. A native woman was passing by, carrying an urn of water. Davis hailed her, and seized her urn. Pouring the water on the ground, he waded in the resulting mud, and then turned toward his conductor, with a malicious gleam in his eye.

“Now lend me the sword which hangs at your side,” he requested, “and we’ll *produce* a river of blood for me to wade in.”

Cumcuz paled and fell back a pace.

“Aha!” laughed Davis. “So I’ve guessed right again! You ought to practice poker, my friend.” Then, with a sudden leap, he flung himself upon his enemy, knocking off the latter’s red helmet, and forcing him backward.

But Cumcuz drew his blade and lunged. Then the two of them went down together in a heap. An instant later the copper sword had been wrenched from its owner’s grasp, and Davis sat astride his rival, thoroughly enjoying the other’s terror. Then he noticed the blood streaming from a wound in his own left arm.

“Don’t be afraid,” he laughed. “The river of blood has arrived without your help.”

He arose and permitted Cumcuz too, to scramble to his feet.

Dripping quite a puddle of blood in one spot, Davis paddled around in it with his bare feet for a moment, and then announced, “Both rivers have now been crossed, Cumcuz. Where are

the four paths?"

"Find them for yourself," growled the young Mayan, picking up his lacquered headdress and dusting it off.

"Oh, very well," replied Davis, suddenly remembering the supposed putting-green, which he had seen on the day of his arrival. "You run home and change. Your pretty cape is filthy. I'll manage, without your help."

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Then contemptuously tossing the copper sword back to its owner, he set out on a dog-trot toward the white sand road, and the red clay road, and the bit of carefully tended green lawn, and the road of black cinders. At the end of the black road, he found awaiting him thirteen priests, now wearing masks, instead of headdresses.

"Where is your conductor?" asked the priest on the extreme left, in a voice which Davis recognized as that of Vatel.

"I'm sorry, sir," he replied, "but I accidentally splashed some mud and blood on him, and so he's gone home to change."

"You did not need to cut yourself quite so badly," remarked Vatel solicitously. "Well, to proceed. Bow low in reverence before the King." As Vatel said this, he indicated the central figure of the thirteen. Cleverly disguised though it was, this central figure was quite evidently not a living man, but rather an image of wood.

Weak from loss of blood, indignant at the treacherous treatment which Cumcuz had accorded him, Davis felt a sudden flare-up of sturdy Americanism. Commit idolatry? Never!

"I'll not do it!" he shouted defiantly.

To his intense surprise, a murmur of approval ran through the priests, and Vatel asserted, "Well spoken, my son. Thus do you show your discernment that this is but a statue of wood, and not a king." A pause. Then, "Now salute each priest in turn, and by name."

Davis stared at the twelve masked men. Except for slight differences in height, they were identical in appearance. They wore identical masks and feathered capes and knee-length skirts. Doubtless Cumcuz had been supposed to inform him as to their names and order of arrangement.

And then he noticed the splay-feet of the fourth priest from the left. And a bit of bushy black beard projecting below the mask of the fifth. The voice of the one on the extreme left had been that of Vatel.

A silly tune began to ring in Davis's ears. A ribald verse which Pe-Ra, the beautiful, had taught him. How did the words go?

*"First Vatel, white-bearded, whom I adore;  
Then sour old Coh, who's a bully and a bore;  
Then Petl, who has that big wart on his nose;  
Then Poco, who waddles, with broad duck-like toes;  
And Ixl, whose beard is as black as a crow; . . ."*

And so on. Bowing low before the high priest, Davis said, "Vatel, I salute you."

Then rapidly he saluted Coh, Petl, Poco, Ixl, and the rest in order. As he finished, Cumcuz in a clean cape and skirt joined the group. He scowled blackly, as Davis flashed him a look of triumph. So far, so good.

"And now, my son," announced old Vatel, pointing to an ornately carved stone chair, "we invite you to take the seat of honor amongst us."

Tired and faint though he was, Davis hesitated. Ought he to accept or decline the proffered seat? Instinctively his eyes sought those of Cumcuz, but that individual merely shrugged his shoulders. No help lay in that quarter.

Perhaps someone planned to pull the chair out from under him, although it looked solid enough. Davis walked slowly around it, to make sure. And as he passed behind it, he saw a cavity beneath the seat, filled with glowing coals.

Turning toward Cumcuz with an exaggerated bow, he said, "My conductor, in gratitude for all that you have done for me this day, I yield the seat of honor to you."

The sarcasm in his tone was lost on all but Cumcuz, who muttered, "That's not the answer which I told him."

"No?" asked Vatel mildly. "But it will serve. The important thing is that he should decline to sit in the presence of his betters."

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The twelve priests then unmasked. The first degree of the initiation was at an end. Vatel outlined for him the six remaining degrees, concluding with: "If you fail in any test, you must be put to death in the morning. Think you that you can survive these ordeals?"

"I can try," he replied.

On his return to his quarters, Miguel bound up his lacerated arm, and he was permitted a brief rest.

Just before sunset, he was led out again for the second ordeal, "The House of Darkness." This was a small stone hut, heavily guarded, in which he was told he must spend the night. A lighted pine torch was presented to him with much ceremony, and he was instructed to return it *unconsumed* in the morning. Also he was told *not* to extinguish it.

Here was a dilemma! If he put out the flame, he would be put to death for disobedience. But, if he didn't put out the flame, the torch would become consumed, the test would fail, and he would be put to death for his failure. Moodily he stuck the butt-end of the torch into the dirt floor in the middle of the hut, and sat staring at it, hoping for an idea. There must be some very simple solution, which Cumcuz was supposed to have imparted to him.

He hoped that the torch would blow out of its own accord. But the night was calm, and the flame burned steadily, without even a flicker. Besides, if the wind were to blow it out, how could he prove that he had not put it out himself?

As he sat thus in growing despair, Cumcuz in full regalia entered the hut to gloat over him. "Stand up in the presence of your betters," growled the soldier-priest.

Goaded to desperation, Davis sprung upon his tormentor for the second time that day. And this time he succeeded in seizing the wrist of Cumcuz, just as the latter was drawing his sword. Wrenching the blade from him, Davis drove him into one corner.

Noticing how Cumcuz avoided the flaring torch as he backed into the corner, Davis snatched it up with his left hand, and began to poke it at the edges of the priest's precious feather cape; until Cumcuz suddenly grabbed the brand and extinguished it against the dirt floor.

Davis burst into an hysterical laugh of relief. "My second ordeal is solved," he cried. "The torch is out, and yet I did not extinguish it."

But Cumcuz was rapidly recovering his poise. "How can you prove that you didn't?" he sneered. "It will be merely the word of a slave against the word of a priest."

At that instant, several figures darkened the doorway. The guard. "O Sir!" exclaimed one of them, addressing Cumcuz with evident concern, "are you all right? We heard sounds of a

scuffle, and saw you snatch the torch from the neophyte, and extinguish it against the dirt of the floor.”

Thus Davis had his witnesses!

“There was no scuffle,” Cumcuz haughtily asserted. “It was all a part of the ritual.” Then with dignity he withdrew.

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Davis curled up in a corner and laughed himself to sleep. In the morning, when the priests came, he presented the unburnt torch to Vatel, and explained that a friend had extinguished it for him.

Having had a good night’s rest, he spent most of the next day in the company of Pe-Ra, who seemed much pleased that he had progressed thus far in safety. Yet it was a sober day for both of them, the girl being oppressed by general forebodings, and the young man by the very definite knowledge that Cumcuz, supposedly his friend and advisor, could be depended upon to gum the works at every step. Davis refrained from telling Pe-Ra of the treachery of Cumcuz; for an exaggerated American idea of fairplay kept him from whining.

That evening there began the third degree, “The House of Spears.” The idea was for the candidate to spend the night in another small stone hut. He was adjured to communicate with no one, and to accept aid from no one. He must not leave the hut. And yet he must produce during the night four pots of flowers, namely: a white daisy, a red cactus, a grass flower, and a black indian-pipe.

To add to his difficulties, he would be attacked by an expert spearman, against whom he would have to defend himself with like weapon. And he knew nothing about spearmanship!

Cumcuz was to be his opponent. Old Vatel whispered this to him, with the evident intention of reassuring him.

As soon as Davis had been led to “The House of Spears,” and the senior priests had prayed to the setting sun and had withdrawn, Cumcuz appeared, stripped to the waist, carrying two spears and eager to get on with the test. He handed one of the spears to Davis, and ordered him to guard himself. Then they crossed weapons in the gathering darkness.

Undoubtedly Cumcuz could have impaled his opponent at the very start, but he preferred to play with him as a cat plays with a mouse. This hut was considerably larger than “The House of Darkness” had been, and Cumcuz drove Davis slowly backward round and round the enclosure, occasionally ostentatiously pricking him with the copper spear-tip. Try as Davis would, he could not come anywhere near touching the warrior.

Finally Cumcuz, with an adroit twist, wrested the weapon from Davis’s hands. Exhausted, Davis staggered back into a corner, and spread his arms against the walls to steady himself. His enemy with weapon poised, calmly surveyed him.

As Davis gathered his courage for one frantic bare-handed spring at his armed adversary, his fingers touched a loose stone in the wall against which he leaned. With a pretended sob, as of terror, he turned his face toward the wall and cowered against it. Then, tearing the stone from its place with both hands, he wheeled suddenly and flung it in the face of the startled Mayan.

Unexpected though this maneuver was, it did not take Cumcuz wholly by surprise. His spear had already been raised for a drive, and drive it he did, straight at the neophyte.

But the swing of Davis’s body, as he cast the stone, carried him down out of range. The spear passed just above his left shoulder, grazing him with its shaft.

The stone struck Cumcuz in the chest, spilling him over backward, and in an instant Davis had leaped astride of the prostrate form. His rival was at his mercy! But to kill Cumcuz might spoil everything. Davis must continue the initiation, and let Cumcuz live.

As the Mayan groaned for breath, Davis tore strips from the skirt of Cumcuz and securely bound the latter's hands and feet; then trussed him up with the shaft of a spear beneath his knees and above his elbows, gagged him, and rolled him over into a corner.

As soon as Cumcuz became conscious again, Davis began prodding him with the point of the other spear, to induce him to produce the four pots of flowers. But the fellow certainly had courage, for he refused to talk. So finally Davis desisted, and sat down in another corner to think. How could he produce four particular kinds of flowers, before morning, and without leaving the hut, or accepting help from anyone, or even communicating with anyone?

At last an idea came. The fact that he had been forbidden to leave or to accept outside aid pointed clearly to the probability that the flowers were somewhere within the hut. But where?

It was now too dark for him to make any systematic search. He must therefore stay awake, and begin hunting for the concealed flowers before the priests came in the morning.

The next thing that he knew, it was daylight. Cumcuz lay asleep, trussed up in one corner.

In an instant Davis was wide awake. Frantically he stared about his prison.

His eyes fell upon the niche from which he had wrenched the stone to throw at Cumcuz. And there stood four potted plants, with white, red, green, and black flowers respectively! Saved!

This, then, was the meaning of the loose stone! This, then, was the secret which his conductor was supposed to have revealed to him.

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With a broad grin, he took out the four pots, and replaced the stone. Then he wakened and unbound his victim.

"Get out of here," he commanded, "before Vatel comes and finds that you have been cheating me."

Perhaps he was being a quixotic fool not to expose his rival, and thus secure a new conductor. But, on the other hand, Cumcuz might succeed in avoiding the accusations, and might even cause the initiation to stop. Better to continue as at present than to attempt the dubious course of making accusation against a favored votary of the flaming god.

The priests arrived, and the flowers were duly presented.

Again Davis spent the day with Pe-Ra, and again he refrained from telling the girl about the perfidy of Cumcuz. But, feeling the pressing need of some confidant, he did tell Miguel, first pledging him to silence. Of course, he did not reveal any of the details of the initiation, but merely that Cumcuz had been double-crossing him.

Pe-Ra seemed very close to Davis that day. They talked of the outer world from which he had come, and of the luxuries and beauties which it held.

"I wish that I could see it," breathed Pe-Ra wistfully.

Forgetting his menial position, he replied, "You could, dear, if—"

Instantly she drew away from him, exclaiming, "Who are you, a mere slave, to address thus Pe-Ra, direct descendant of the sun-god himself? I shall tell my grandfather, and he will punish your insolence, and put a stop to your initiation." She stamped her bare little foot in a rage.

Davis, too, lost his temper. "I dare you to tell your grandfather!" he exclaimed. "If you don't tell him, I will."



“Thus repeating the insult?”

Instantly he sobered. “No. I shan’t subject you to that. I know what! Tonight is ‘The House of the Tiger.’ I’ll let the tiger eat me, and thus put an end to all your annoyance.”

She grinned impishly. “You have your dates mixed. Tonight is ‘The House of Ice.’”

“Very well, then,” he retorted. “I’ll freeze to death.”

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” she advised him. Then sobering, “But just the same, you’ve bitterly insulted me. I’ll walk home alone.”

He did not see her again that day.

That evening the priests led him to “The House of Ice,” a small hut of hollow tile, close to the face of the cliff. From a frigid mountain torrent a sluice was arranged so that icy water could be diverted at will, to circulate through the tiles. Into this hut Davis crawled through a small low opening, which was then blocked by closely-mortised pieces of brick. The interior was so small that he could not even stand erect.

As the last block was slid into place, old Vatel informed him jovially, “All you have to do, my son, is to keep from freezing to death.”

It was hot and stuffy inside; probably the danger was of some other sort.

Then he heard the swishing of water through the tiles. The stored-up heat rapidly departed. In a few moments it was positively chilly.

He tried to exercise, but the small size of his prison cramped him so as to render exercise impossible. Soon he was exhausted, and the place kept on getting colder and colder. He tried to roll himself into a ball, so as to conserve as much as possible of his body heat, but wherever his naked skin touched the tiles the cold became almost unbearable.

At last his hands and feet became numb. The numbness spread.

With a tremendous effort of will, he strove to think. Let’s see, nothing had been said about his having to stay in this “House of Ice.” Perhaps he could dislodge some of the doorway bricks and crawl out, before it was too late. So he groped about, in a half-hearted attempt at finding where the entrance had been.

But his fingers proved too numb. After all, it was not as cold in there as he had thought. He was cozy and warm now; he dropped off to sleep.

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Hours later he awakened in pitch darkness. The air about him was close and stuffy; his body felt cramped and lame; his mind was in a daze.

He stretched out one arm; his fist struck against hard stone. He sat up abruptly; his head bumped a splitting blow. Instantly his mind cleared. He knew now where he was, he was in “The House of Ice,” and he had not died—yet.

Voices approached. He heard Vatel exclaim in a tone of dismay, “The bricks of the doorway are intact! He is dead! Are you sure that you told him the secret of how to dislodge them?”

Then the oily voice of Cumcuz, protesting that he had most certainly done so, but that the neophyte had proved to be very slow at understanding.

“Such a stupid fool as he would have been no credit to the priesthood,” concluded Cumcuz smugly.

Then a third voice, exclaiming, “Look, someone has turned off the sluice.”

Then Cumcuz remonstrating, “If he lives because of the help of friends, it ought not to count.”

“If he lives, he lives,” asserted Vatel. “All that the ordeal of ‘The House of Ice’ calls for, is that the candidate survive.”

The bricks of the door were then removed, and David Davis crawled out to salute the rising sun.

Cumcuz, with a bitter scowl, walked away, but the others all warmly congratulated the neophyte.

“Why did you not remove the bricks?” complained old Vatel with real concern in his voice. “Did not Cumcuz explain it to you?”

“Yes,” lied Davis, “he did.” Then a bit maliciously, remembering his rival’s comments about him, “But he’s not much good as an explainer.”

“Should you like someone else as your conductor for the remaining three ordeals?” asked Coh.

For a moment, tired and discouraged, Davis was tempted to agree. Then his sporting instinct asserted itself. He would beat Cumcuz at his own game. He would see this thing through to the finish. Setting his jaw, he replied, “I prefer to depend on Cumcuz. He has been a great help and inspiration to me.”

A warm bath and breakfast put him in shape again. Then, to his joy, Pe-Ra requisitioned him for a walk. For a while they strode on in silence; it was good just to be tolerated, after their spat the day before.

Finally the girl inquired, “How did you succeed last night?”

“Not very well,” Davis replied a bit bitterly. “I made a flop of what I was supposed to do. But some friend turned off the ice-water, and thus saved my life.”

“It was I,” she asserted with a smile.

He halted and stared at her. “You!” he exclaimed. “Then you really would care if I were to be killed?”

She scornfully tossed her head. “Now don’t be disrespectful again. It is merely that I owe a certain loyalty to a member of my retinue.”

Davis grimaced. Then changed the subject. “But how did you know what to do?”

“Quite simple,” she replied. “From Miguel’s secretive attitude I gathered that Cumcuz wasn’t—well—being as helpful to you as he might. So I sounded Cumcuz out, and he told me that this ‘House of Ice’ ordeal was the simplest of the seven, and that he had carefully explained to you what to do; but that you were too stupid to understand, and so would freeze. As soon as he had gone, I sneaked out in the moonlight, and diverted the sluice. Simple, wasn’t it?”

“I owe you my life!” said Davis devoutly. “Weren’t you afraid that the monsters would come from the jungles across the lake, and catch you in the darkness?”

“Certainly not!” she began, “for I, like Grandfather, know that—Oh, but I mustn’t tell you, for it’s a secret.”

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That evening began the fifth ordeal, namely “The House of the Tiger.”

To Davis’s surprise, Cumcuz seemed quite friendly to him, saying, “I am truly repentant that I have not helped you as I was supposed to do. I was jealous of you. Now, however, I realize how I have wronged Pe-Ra in this, for such a noble lady could not be interested in a mere slave. She has at last definitely promised to marry *me*, and has asked me as a special favor to play square with you from now on.”

“Very kind of her, I’m sure,” growled Davis.

“And so,” the handsome Mayan suavely continued, “I shall now tell you how to survive the ordeal of the Tiger. You will be locked into a prison, surrounded by four cages. The only way out is through a cage; but do not try to escape, or you will be devoured. Finally the grating to one of the cages will open. When that happens, you must rush in past the tiger. In the right-hand far corner, you will find a sword and a net. These weapons will enable you to kill the tiger, and then escape through the rear door of his cage.”

Davis thanked his informant civilly enough; but kept his fingers crossed, remembering: “Fear the Greeks, even when they bear gifts.”

The usual preliminary prayers were said, and the novice was led to a square flat-roofed stone building, with four L's. At the end of each of these L's there was a closed heavy wooden door, but the party did not attempt to enter through any of these. Instead they mounted the roof by means of ladders.

Vatel explained, “To pass this test satisfactorily you must get out of this house through the door in the rear of one of the tiger-cages. If necessary and convenient, you may kill one of the tigers.”

Then in the exact center of the roof, the priests removed a trap-door, and lowered Davis into the dark depths below.

As he passed down through the opening, his conductor leaned toward him and whispered in a voice quite audible to all the surrounding priests, “Remember! Don't open any of the gratings. Wait for one of them to be opened for you. Especially don't open two of them.”

Davis's feet touched the floor. The cover was slammed shut above him.

In the dim evening twilight he could see that the central portion of the building, in which he now stood, had a barred door in the center of each of its four walls. Walking over to one of the gratings, he peered through it. Inside the cage, pacing up and down, was a huge jaguar. The beast trotted up, sniffed at him, and tentatively extended a paw.

Davis peered past the tiger. In the gathering gloom he couldn't see the coveted weapons. Perhaps, however, this was the wrong cage; so he peered through the bars of each of the others in turn. Like the first, each held a jaguar; but it was too dark to make out anything else.

As he was studying the last of the cages, the grating which separated it from his room began slowly to rise. Then, with a roar, the beast came charging out.

Davis stood still, until the jaguar was almost upon him; then sidestepped nimbly to the shelter of the dividing wall. The beast's rush carried it well into the center room, and before it could turn, Davis had darted through the cage-opening.

But there was no net and no sword in the right far corner!

Perhaps he had remembered wrong. Perhaps Cumcuz had said the *left* far corner. But there were no weapons there either.

He turned to face the jaguar, now crawling stealthily back toward him. And as he gazed, fascinated, at this approaching menace, his glance lifted for a moment, and he saw that the grating of the opposite cage was slowly rising. In a few minutes he would have two fierce carnivores at his throat.

The parting words of the treacherous Cumcuz flashed into his mind: “Don't open any of the gratings. . . . Especially don't open *two* of them.” These words, spoken loudly enough to be heard by the priests of Ra, were to be Cumcuz's alibi. Everyone would believe that Davis had become rattled, had misunderstood the very clear directions, and *had* opened two of the doors himself, instead of waiting for *one* door to be opened for him. Undoubtedly the net and the sword had been carefully placed in one of the *other* two cages.

Well, there was nothing to do now but face the oncoming death with bare hands, and pray for some lucky break.

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The jaguar sprang! As it hurtled through the air, Davis ducked and flattened himself upon the ground, with the result that the beast crashed its head against the wall, momentarily stunning it. As the man scrambled to his feet, the second jaguar charged.

This time Davis was unable to avoid the rush, and went down.

As he came to his senses again, one of the two beasts was crouching near by, but seeming hardly to notice him. Much relieved, he rose unsteadily to his hands and knees, and started to crawl slowly away. But at this, the jaguar pounced upon him, and rolled him over and over very roughly several times with its paws. Then it resumed its nonchalant crouch.

The cat-and-mouse game; there was no chance of escape! But Davis's mind had sufficiently cleared by now, so that he had sense enough not to play any such game. Instead he stretched himself out on the floor, covered his face with his arms, and lay as quiet as possible.

For a time the huge carnivore acted completely oblivious of his presence; then it arose majestically, stretched itself, and poked him roughly with one paw.

But just at this juncture a change came over the beast. It planted its forepaws on its victim, it stiffened, it bristled, it raised its massive head aloft, it growled.

Surreptitiously uncovering his face, Davis glanced around. The second jaguar was crawling slowly toward them. With a roar, it sprang; and in an instant the two beasts were rolling over and over on the floor in each other's grasp, scratching and biting and snarling.

Davis rose cautiously to his feet, but the warring great cats paid him no attention. Slowly he tiptoed along the wall. Groping, he found the door. Passing his hands frantically up and down its surface, he located each of the huge bolts which held it, and shot them back one by one. The door swung open. In an instant he was outside in the dim blue tropical twilight, and had slammed and bolted the door behind him, while still the great cats fought for the victim which had escaped them.

He had passed the fifth ordeal. Cumcuz had overplayed. Davis limped home to bed.

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He overslept in his own comfortable quarters, missed morning sun-worship, and finally limped out to find all the household lamenting his untimely decease. He claimed that the loosing of the two tigers had been a bright idea of his own; and Cumcuz did not dispute him.

Pe-Ra was much embarrassed at being caught red-eyed and weeping, and refused to have anything to do with him. Furthermore Davis had to do penance all day, for missing sun-worship.

That evening began the sixth ordeal, "The House of Fire." The idea was for Davis to be shut up securely in a small brick hut, upon which large quantities of dry brush had been piled. The brush was then to be lighted, and the intense heat would roast to a crisp any living thing that remained inside.

After the usual prayers, Vatel admonished the candidate, "The sixth ordeal is trial by fire. You are forbidden to come out through the door of this house until morning. Then you may emerge—if you still live."

As Davis entered the doorway, Cumcuz in full regalia majestically drew near and whispered in his ear, ostensibly to give him the instructions which should save him from being roasted alive.

But actually all that the sinister Mayan said was, “This time I give you neither true or false advice. Figure this ordeal out for yourself—if you can.”

With a smile, as though thanking his conductor, Davis whispered back, “I have already survived five of the ordeals, by the grace of Ra. If I survive the remaining two, look out!”

“You won’t,” whispered Cumcuz with a confident grin.

Then the door—a copper door this time—closed upon the American, leaving him in utter darkness.

Presently he heard the crackling of flames. But, suppressing a maniacal desire to beat upon the door and scream, he forced himself to sit calmly down and reason about his predicament.

His mind ran rapidly over the preceding tests. Difficult though each of them had seemed, the solution of each had been absurdly easy. The clue to “The House of Fire” was probably equally simple. Let’s see. What had Cumcuz said to him? Cumcuz was a poor poker-player. Davis now ran over the recent words of his rival, but they appeared to hold no clue.

What, then, had *Vatel* said? “You are forbidden to come out through the door.” He had not been forbidden to leave the hut, but merely to leave it *through the door*.

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Jumping to his feet he began searching for some other exit. But by now the walls were far too hot for him to touch, and the darkness was so intense as to preclude exploring them by sight. There was no indication of any crack anywhere except around the copper door, and that means of exit was prohibited.

The heat was rapidly becoming unbearable. Better to lose his priesthood and even Pe-Ra, than to die in this furnace! So he flung himself against the copper door, only to rebound with skin seared and sizzling, where arm and shoulder had momentarily touched the hot metal. Then reeling and gasping, he dropped to the stone floor.

For a short time the flagging remained blessedly cool to his touch, but gradually the hot air descended until even the floor began to turn warm. The air was stifling—almost impossible to breathe. He had to keep his nose very close to the floor, in order to draw breath at all. And, as he lay thus, it seemed to him there was a little breeze!

Instantly his mind became alert. This cool air must come from somewhere in the floor, for on the outside all was flames. Frantically he searched. He found a crack. All around the crack he groped, until he was able to dislodge a small tile. Reaching into the hole thus made, he got a good grip on the edge of a large slab about a yard in diameter, and felt it give. Then, braving the fierce heat of the upper air of his prison, he stood erect, gripped the edge of the slab once more, and raised it from its place. An upward rush of cool invigorating air assailed him.

Dropping prone upon the pavement, he reached down with one arm. A flight of steps!

Down these steps he crawled. No longer did the heat of the fires above disturb him. Down, down, he crawled, until his foot struck water, icy water. There he bathed and drank. Then crawled back up again, until he reached a level of about the right temperature, where he squatted to await the dawn.

Off and on during the night, he would move a step or two higher, until along toward morning he found himself back in “The House of Fire,” now merely comfortably warm. Then he replaced the slab over the mouth of the hidden well, and lay down on the pavement to sleep until the priests came for him at daybreak.

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Vatel raised his eyebrows disapprovingly at Davis’s scorched arm and shoulder, but nothing was said about it. The candidate had survived the ordeal, and that was all that was

required of him.

After sun-worship Miguel salved and bandaged the burns, and then Pe-Ra sent for Davis. "Why have you avoided me?" she asked, although it had been *she* who had avoided *him*.

"Because you are to marry Cumcuz," he growled, looking at her eyes.

For a moment she showed surprise, but quickly masked her feelings and said, "What if I am? You are still my slave, and should attend on me."

All that day she kept him busy with tiring tasks, until by evening he would far rather have sought rest in bed than to go on with his initiation. But he had no choice. So once more, for the seventh and last time, he presented himself before Vatel and his gaudily bedecked fellow priests.

The last and final degree was to be "The House of Camazotz, God of Bats."

Said Vatel, indicating a little road leading off through the woods, "This path you must tread alone. It leads to a house of utter horror. Within that house dangers, many and various, will beset you on every side at every hour of the night; but you must walk through them all, to the other end of the house. If you survive, the flaming god himself will come at last in person to greet you. Be not asleep when he comes."

So Davis set out trudging down the little path. But at his side swaggered Cumcuz, his feathered cape thrown back over his broad shoulders, the plumes of his intricately carved red headdress bobbing jauntily.

"I see," Davis drily remarked, "that 'walking alone' does not deprive me of the friendly guidance of my conductor."

"Enough of that!" Cumcuz snarled. "I have come merely to see that you commit no deception. You have been much too clever in the ordeals so far."

"Thanks for the compliment," the American jauntily replied. "I had credited myself merely with good luck."

"The House of the Bat" was a large and rambling building. Davis peered through the door, down a winding passage in the fast fading twilight.

"Well, good-bye," said Cumcuz, with an evil glint in his eye.

Suddenly Davis had a bright idea. Wheeling, he seized Cumcuz by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his skirt and thrust him through the doorway. The Mayan shrieked in terror. Then, as his feet touched the floor just beyond the threshold, a whole section of the floor dropped away, revealing a dark ominous pit.

Davis braced himself against one side of the door-casing, and barely saved Cumcuz from shooting down feet foremost into the hole. Then carefully he hauled the limp and frightened man back across the threshold, and relieved him of his copper sword.

"What's in that hole?" demanded the American, poking his victim with the point of the sword.

"Spears," replied Cumcuz. "Points up." Then opened his mouth as though to call for help.

"None of that!" snapped Davis, giving an extra poke. "Um. So *this* is what 'The House of the Bat' is like. Every move I make, something will fly out and hit me, or collapse, or blow off my hat, just like in 'The Pit' at Coney Island. Well, for once my conductor is going to conduct me. Come on!" And he prodded Cumcuz up to the doorway. "Now," he announced, "take off your fancy hat and cape, and pull out those spears."

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With much prodding, Davis finally induced Cumcuz to lean over into the hole (while Davis held onto his heels), and uproot the spears one by one. Then the two men crawled down

into the hole, and there Davis gagged and trussed Cumcuz securely with strips from the latter's own skirt.

Not once throughout that long night did the American relax his vigilance. His prisoner, however, slept fitfully.

As soon as the first light of the morning brightened the sky, Davis roused and released his prisoner. "Come on," he said, "and do some more conducting! But no treachery! The first false step, and I shall run this sword into you."

Grumblingly the Mayan acquiesced. Slowly and cautiously he led the way, stepping carefully here, avoiding stepping there, now crouching, now turning some knob or button. And every motion that he made was carefully duplicated by the man who accompanied him.

But Cumcuz had the advantage of knowing thoroughly the route which he was traversing. And so when finally he suddenly leapt forward out of reach of Davis's sword, the latter was taken wholly by surprise. His natural impulse led him to leap after the fleeing Mayan; as he did so, a spear darted out of the wall beside him, at about the level of his waist. A sharp pain shot through his back, as the spear impaled him. Then he fainted from pain and horror.

The next thing that he heard was a kindly voice intoning, "Look up, my son, and behold your God."

So this was Heaven, was it? Davis opened his eyes, but could not look up, for he was suspended somehow by his back, with head and legs both hanging down. He struggled, but could not move. Then he remembered. The spear! He had been impaled by a spear!

White-robed figures crowded about him. Hands fumbled at his bloody loin-cloth, and undid it. He collapsed to the floor. Hands assisted him to stand. He blinked his eyes again and looked up, straight into the blazing face of the sun, just rising over the crater rim, and shining full upon him through an opening in the roof of "The House of the Bat." Truly the flaming god had come in person to greet him, and his ordeals were at an end.

"A narrow escape, my son," remarked old Vatel. "Did you forget part of your instructions?"

"Oh, no," Davis glibly replied, "but Cumcuz was walking a bit too fast for me, and I guess I didn't quite keep up with him. But why am I not dead from this spear?"

"Although it cut your back pretty badly," reported the chief priest, "it impaled merely your loin-cloth."

Davis laughed with relief, then scanned the crowd for signs of Cumcuz. But that scoundrel was nowhere to be seen.

Then the priests led the American to the temple, where he was consecrated to the service of Ra, the sun god, and was given a hummingbird cape and lacquer helmet as befitted his new station.



## CHAPTER IV

### Death Sentence

The wound in his back laid him up for several days, during which Miguel poulticed him with native herbs, and Pe-Ra came frequently, but rather aloofly, to see him. Finally he was up again, as well as ever.

Unfortunately a coolness seemed to have sprung up between Pe-Ra and him, so that he almost wished that he was back in his old status as her slave. Furthermore his temple-duties now took up far more of his time than any labors which had been imposed upon him while a servant.

Cumcuz, on the other hand, spent more time in the company of the princess than ever before. But why not, since he was affianced to her? And, for that same reason, Davis finally abandoned the idea of giving Cumcuz the promised thrashing.

He devoted his efforts to the manufacture of gasoline, and presently had enough stored up in earthenware bottles to fill the tank of his plane. As soon as opportunity should offer, he planned to fly away from this valley, taking his friend Miguel with him. Perhaps in time he could forget the beautiful Pe-Ra.

One evening, about two weeks after he had been elevated to the priesthood of the flaming god, Miguel came to him with the information that Vatel was about to set out on a slaving expedition. Instantly Davis conceived the idea of following the party, in an attempt at finding the ground route which led out of the crater-valley. For, although he was chiefly relying on his plane as a means of escape, it would be well to have other means to fall back upon, should the first choice fail. So, shedding his feathered cap, as his tanned skin would be less conspicuous, Davis sneaked out into the darkness.

The night was overcast. A hot breeze blew steadily through the crater, while overhead a stiffer gale howled among the crags. Noting that the entrance to the temple cave was lighted with flares, Davis crept over to it and hid in a clump of bushes just out of range of the light.

Soon Vatel and nine other important members of the hierarchy emerged, each leading one blindfolded spearman by the arm. All twenty men were inconspicuously clad like Mexican peons. Turning to the left, the party proceeded around the edge of the lake, just where Davis had pursued the child-eating lizard many days ago. Keeping under cover, Davis followed the procession.

Not a beast showed its head. Strange, thought Davis.

Finally the vegetation became so thick that the spy could no longer keep under cover. So, after giving the expedition sufficient time to get safely ahead, he came out of his hiding and followed in their footsteps.

But as he was sneaking softly along, the moon unexpectedly emerged from the clouds above, and instantly something sprang upon him from behind.

But it was not one of the dinosaur-beasts of this jungle. It was a man. Davis wrenched himself free, and wheeled upon his attacker.

"You?" exclaimed both men simultaneously. Cumcuz in feather cape and lacquered headdress, and Davis naked to the skin, glared at each other in surprise.

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Cumcuz alone was armed, and was quick to take advantage of that fact. Whipping his keen copper sword from its scabbard, he raised it menacingly. Davis, unarmed, had no hope of besting a swordsman. The jungle on each side was too dense for escape. And if he fled down the trail, he would come upon Vatel and his party, and be captured by them.

Besides, what good would either fight or flight do him now? For, unless he killed Cumcuz, Cumcuz could testify to his spying trip. And killing Cumcuz was out of the question, for that would break the heart of Pe-Ra. Accordingly Davis surrendered, and permitted himself to be led back to the settlement, where he was locked in a cell for the night.

The next morning he was dragged before Coh, who was now Acting High Priest in the absence of Vatel. The trial was brief. Cumcuz testified that he had been guarding the departure of the slaving party, lest any unauthorized persons follow them and thus learn of the secret passage out of the valley, and had seen Davis sneaking after them.

Davis did not deny the accusation. His only defense was that he had as good a right to know this secret as Cumcuz, inasmuch as they were both priests of the same rank. But in this he soon found that he was in error; even Cumcuz was not permitted to go beyond a certain point, and Davis had been about to press on further than that.

So the verdict of grim old Coh was “guilty”; and the sentence was “death,” death in true Mayan fashion by having his heart ripped out on the altar of the flaming god. For, although human sacrifice *as such* was prohibited, the sacrifice of criminals was still permitted.

The execution was set for sunrise the following morning, to take place in the presence of the entire community. The convicted man asked to be permitted to say good-bye to Pe-Ra and Miguel, his only two friends; but even this was denied him.

“They can see you, when you are stretched on the altar tomorrow morning,” Coh grimly declared. “That will be sufficient.”

Cumcuz was named to wield the knife upon the sacrificial altar, in special recognition of his service in apprehending the spy. Meanwhile the victim was securely locked in a cell in the deep recesses of the temple cave.

It was dark in the cell, lit only by the vagrant beams of one open-wick crude-oil lamp, hung in the corridor outside. Back and forth in the corridor in front of the cell door there paced a bronzed spearman. About once an hour the guard was changed.

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Thus the day dragged on. Sunk in despair, Davis scarcely touched the food which was brought to him, and scarcely heeded the periodic relieving of the guard. It all seemed so unreal! An American citizen about to be offered as a human sacrifice on the altar of the sun god, by a prehistoric race, within only a few miles of civilization!

His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a voice. The guard was speaking to him, although in a whisper. “Sir, a life for a life.” Davis pricked up his ears. The spearman continued, “You saved my child from the monster; so now I stand ready to save you in turn, if you will tell me how.”

Instantly Davis was on the alert, his mind racing. “Can you get word to Miguel, Vatel’s slave?”

“Most certainly. I can see him myself as soon as I go off duty here.”

“What time is it now?”

“Mid-afternoon.”

“Do you come on guard here again?”

“Yes, along toward morning.”

“Good!” said Davis. “Then tell Miguel to take my bottles of magic water, which are stored in my quarters, and pour them into my flying dragon. He will know the proper place, for I have coached him. Then tell him to await me, with two capes, helmets, and skirts, near the plane shortly after the time that you come on guard again.”

“It shall be done,” replied the spearman. “Even though Ra himself blast me for my impiety.”

Davis warmly pressed the man’s hand through the bars of the cell. Then, gloomy no more, he lay down to rest. Freedom was ahead of him at last!

But soon there came a pang. Freedom meant that he should never again see Pe-Ra. Would life without her be worthwhile? Yes, he reluctantly admitted, it would. Life is always worthwhile, and *life* without Pe-Ra would be far better than *death* without her. With these thoughts, he fell into a troubled and nightmarish sleep.

He awoke to the prodding of a spear-butt.

“Get up!” said a voice in the flickering lamp-lit darkness.

Instantly Davis was on his feet. “Yes?” said he.

“The magic water has been fed to your flying dragon,” whispered the guard, “and Miguel is here.”

“Here?” exclaimed Davis. “But I said for him to meet me at the plane!”

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Davis looked out into the corridor through the cell door which the guard held open for him. Beyond the door there stood *two* figures in cape and headdress. And the foremost was that of a small slim man, whom the prisoner did not recognize.

“You are not Miguel!” he exclaimed. “Who *are* you?”

“Sh!” replied the unknown. It was the voice of Pe-Ra!

“You?” he cried. “Why did you risk coming here?”

“Because Miguel does not know all the secret passages. But come! There is no time to waste. Put these on, quickly.”

So saying, she handed him a headdress and cape and skirt. These he hastily donned.

Then he turned to the guard, and pressed his hand. “But you? How can you ever explain my departure?”

“Say that the flying dragon of the sun-god came and rescued him,” Pe-Ra suggested. Then to Davis, “Everyone here, except grandfather, has believed that you might turn out to be Quetzalcoatl, after all. A story of miraculous escape will hold them all until grandfather returns. Then *he* can be depended upon to protect the guard, and to punish Coh for assuming to deal out death in his absence.”

Pe-Ra, Davis, and Miguel—for the other figure was he—hurried off down the corridor. Through many a pitch-dark winding passageway the girl led the two men. Up stairs, down ramps, around corners and through doors finally emerging from the face of the honeycombed cliff into the star-lit night. Ahead of them lay the rippling lake, beyond it the jungles and black ramparts of the other side of the valley, and above that the greying sky of early morning.

“We must hurry,” breathed Pe-Ra, “for the flaming god will soon be here.”

At the edge of the lake stood the amphibian plane, but guarded by a spearman! Here was a complication! How could they hope to wrest the plane from this soldier, without his giving the alarm and summoning aid?

Pe-Ra had anticipated this difficulty. Motioning her two companions to remain where they were, she alone approached the spearman.

“Who is there?” he challenged, raising his spear menacingly aloft.

“Know you not Pe-Ra, granddaughter of your High Priest?” she imperiously replied. “Go to your quarters. We three will take your place for the rest of this watch.”

Bowing low and saluting, the spearman withdrew. Davis and Miguel hurried forward.

Dawn was rapidly breaking. The blatant notes of the morning gong blared throughout the little valley. Habit-ridden, Pe-Ra and Miguel prostrated themselves upon the sand, facing the rising sun.

For a moment Davis hesitated. Then he too bowed in worship. It was a waste of precious time; but he could not afford to antagonize the religious prejudices of Pe-Ra at this juncture. And so, impatiently, he waited until the whole flaming orb of the sun-god had cleared the further rim of the crater valley.

Then he sprang to his feet, and inspected his plane. Everything appeared to be intact. A strong smell of gasoline pervaded the air. He adjusted his spark and gas, pumped up his pressure tank, and spun the propellers.

With a few coughs and then a roar, the engine responded. Affrighted, Pe-Ra and Miguel drew back. Then reassured by Davis’s fearlessness, they stepped forward again.

Davis motioned the young Mexican to the observer’s seat. Then he clasped the girl’s hand in both of his. “Good-by, Pe-Ra,” he exclaimed in a choking voice. “It must be that you care for me a little, or you would not have risked your own life to save me. Forgive me for telling you again that I love you, and that I shall love you always!”

She looked up at him with tears in her soft brown eyes. Then suddenly she flung her arms around his neck. “David,” she breathed, “I love you. Take me with you.”

But Miguel cut-in with a warning shout. “Here comes Cumcuz!”

Cumcuz and a squad of spearmen were emerging from the nearby wood on a run.

Pushing Pe-Ra in beside the Mexican, Davis clambered into the driver’s seat, accelerated the motor, and piloted the machine along the surface of the lake and then up into the air.

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The engine was functioning perfectly, and he headed across the lake for the opposite rim of the crater, while the outwitted Cumcuz stood on the beach behind, and shook his fist.

“We made it!” Davis shouted.

But his joy was short-lived. His engine sputtered and missed. It was the fatal out-of-gas sound. Instantly he nosed down to the surface of the lake. The plane slid over the water until its prow rested against the jungle shores on the opposite side from the Mayan community. Then he hurriedly inspected his feed-lines.

The trouble was readily evident: a small nail-hole in the bottom of the gas-tank, which was now bone dry. No wonder Vatel had not been concerned with Davis’s distillation of gasoline, for the wily old priest had taken pains to see that the plane should make no getaway until he himself should be ready to use it.

With a few bitter words, Davis told his companions the trouble. Then suddenly he brightened.

“Come on!” he exclaimed. “The secret passage!”

“But the beasts!” Pe-Ra and Miguel objected in unison. At that instant an ugly head, on a long snakelike neck, reared itself out of the water beside them.

“Speak of the devil—,” muttered Davis, dealing the creature a blow on the snout with his fist. The reptile hissed and disappeared beneath the waves.

Then a war-canoe rounded one of the islands behind them, with Cumcuz in full regalia in the stern.

But before the canoe came within a hundred yards, a saurian arose from the depths to attack it. Fascinated, Pe-Ra and Davis and Miguel watched the fight, which was long and bloody. The paddlers attacked it with spears and swords, but two were seized and dragged overboard to their deaths before the rest finally overcame it. Then, in spite of threats and maledictions from Cumcuz, the paddlers turned their craft around and departed.

“Saved for the present!” Pe-Ra exclaimed.

“But what good will it do us?” Davis bitterly replied. “We can’t go ashore, for fear of the dragons. Eventually your people will recover courage and attack us again.”

“They will probably wait until night,” the girl asserted, “for Cumcuz knows that the dragons never stay out at night. And so, even if we succeed in warding off the dragons all day, Cumcuz will surely get us at nightfall.”

So *this* was Vatel’s secret of the dragons! “We can escape at sundown through the secret passage!” Davis exulted.

“Look out!” shouted Miguel.

A snaky head and neck appeared out of the water a short distance away—but did not approach them. Then another and another, until the stranded airplane was surrounded by the prehistoric beasts.

Davis exclaimed in English. “I wish I had my gun!”

Pe-Ra replied in Mayan, “I heard you say ‘gun.’ Is this what you mean?” And she produced, from beneath the folds of the feather cape which she was wearing, his long-lost automatic. “Vatel left it behind, and I thought you might need it,” she explained.

Davis extracted the clip, and looked at it. It was full! With renewed hope and confidence, he replaced the clip, and faced the besieging cordon of beasts.

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The beasts drew slowly nearer. Davis waited until one of them was almost upon him; then fired at its head. Blood spurted from the wound, and the wounded beast and its fellows recoiled and sank beneath the waves.

The day wore on. After an interval, the dinosaurs reappeared, drew nearer, and again were repelled by a single shot from the American automatic.

This performance was repeated again and again.

Finally Davis was reduced to but a single cartridge. Gradually the snaky heads converged all about them, and this time Davis let them converge. But he watched them intently, ever on the alert to shoot when shooting should finally become the only course left open. In fact, he watched the reptiles so intently that he did not notice anything else which was taking place upon the surface of the lake, until Miguel suddenly called out, “Look! Cumcuz is returning!”

The war canoe was again pushing its prow around one end of the nearby island.

Miguel’s shout startled the lizard beasts, and several of them rushed forward, but Davis coolly fired his last shot at the nearest, and the whole foul brood sank once more beneath the surface of the little lake. The canoe did not draw any nearer, however.

“They are waiting for the night,” the American suggested. “As soon as the sun sets and the dragons retire, Cumcuz plans to rush us.”

“If he does,” the girl grimly replied, “I hope my grandfather learns of it, for then Cumcuz will meet the fate which he planned for you. It is reason to let the common people know that the dragons are harmless at night.”

“Well, they aren’t exactly harmless just now,” Davis drily remarked, as several black snouts emerged from the water scarcely fifty feet away.

The reptiles were evidently becoming accustomed to his pistol-shots, for this time they had not stayed under water as long as before. And this time there were no bullets left to ward them off.

Nearer and nearer drew the dragons, until at last one of them craned its neck over the cockpit, and made a grab at Pe-Ra. Davis promptly swung his empty automatic, and caught the beast a crushing blow on the end of its ugly snout, at which it recoiled hissing. Then a shriek from the girl, as another reptile reached over and seized Davis’s wrist in its teeth. His gun dropped clattering to the deck of the plane, and bounced off into the lake.

He rained blow after blow with his left fist upon the head that held him, but it refused to let go. Miguel and Pe-Ra could not come to his aid, for they were hard put to it to avoid being seized themselves by the slimy creatures which now began swarming over the disabled plane. And so Davis, fighting and kicking, was slowly hauled out of the cockpit into the water.

“Courage, Pe-Ra!” were his last words, as he was dragged beneath the surface.

He held his breath, until his lungs nearly burst; but just as he could stand the suffocation no longer, the grip upon his wrist let go. He struck out for the surface.

First he drew a long agonized breath; then shook the water from his eyes, and looked around.

“David!” called a glad feminine voice.

Not a reptile in sight! Pe-Ra and Miguel unharmed in the plane! The flaming god had just sunk out of sight behind the cliffs of the Mayan village over across the lake, his red rays painting the face of the wall before them just beyond the jungle. It was night—the beasts were powerless!

With a few swift strokes, Davis reached the plane, and helped Pe-Ra out into the water. The young Mexican followed. In another instant the three of them had scrambled ashore, and were tearing their way through the matted vegetation of the jungle.

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They found a trail through the bushes. Frantically they followed it. In the deepening twilight they reached a cleft in the face of the cliff. They groped their way in and through.

At last a hot wind blew in their faces, and they looked up upon the starlit sky. They were out of the secret valley at last! Across the barren rocks in front of them there led a well marked trail.

The moon rose. Davis and Pe-Ra were walking hand in hand, and suddenly he felt her grip tighten in his. They halted.

“Look!” she said, pointing ahead where the trail ran like a silver ribbon, distinct in the moonlight. A party of men, clothed like Mexican peons, were approaching them up the trail. Vatel and his slaving party, returning!

“Down!” whispered Davis, and the three of them dropped to their hands and knees, and then slunk off to one side until they were hidden behind a pile of boulders.

A slight rattle of pebbles behind them caused them to look back. A score of spearmen, led by two men in capes and plumed headdresses, emerged from the cleft in the rock wall, and took cover on each side of the trail.

“An ambush!” whispered Davis. “We must warn Vatel. With all his own spearmen blindfolded, he will be no match for them.”

“It will mean slavery again for you, David,” the girl whispered back.

“We must warn Vatel!” Davis doggedly repeated, jumping up and racing down the trail. Pe-Ra and Miguel raced after him, and behind them charged the two renegade priests and their retinue, abandoning their now useless ambush.

Warned in time, old Vatel unblinded his soldiers and his prisoners. He and his nine priests and ten spearmen, fearlessly met the onslaught. Davis snatched up a spear, which had been dropped in the first attack, and joined the fray. Miguel rounded up his kidnapped fellow-Mexicans, and led them back to fight for Vatel.

The two leaders of the enemy went down, one of them at a spear-thrust from Davis himself. Their surviving henchmen fought fiercely, knowing that death on the altar would be the penalty for surrender, but finally the last of them succumbed. Pe-Ra flung herself into her grandfather’s arms.

The two slain leaders of the enemy turned out to be Cumcuz and Coh. It was Cumcuz whom Davis himself had killed. Shedding not a tear for the dead, Pe-Ra then explained to her grandfather all that had taken place in his absence.

For their part in the battle, the Mexicans were set free; and, led by Miguel, returned down the trail. Reblindfolding the remaining spearmen, Vatel entered the cleft in the rocks.

Back to the valley again for David Davis, to be immured for the rest of his life, perhaps reduced to slavery again, or even sacrificed to the flaming god, as the penalty for having revealed the secret that the dinosaurs were harmless at night, and for having left the hidden valley without permission!

But Vatel proved grateful and reasonable. “There is no need for my granddaughter to ruin the whole rest of the long life which she has ahead, just to spend a few more years with an old man to whom she has already given so much. So, David, as soon as she can be married to you according to the ancient rites of Ra, take your flying dragon and leave us, as Quetzalcoatl left us, centuries ago. And may the blessings of Ra go with you.”

So, in due time, David Davis and his bride flew back to civilization together. One of the other oases which Davis had noted was reported to Erasmus Jordan for colonizing, and the privacy of Vatel’s hidden valley remained inviolate.

THE END

[End of Pe-Ra, Daughter of the Sun by Ralph Milne Farley]