





By the great, gold disc of the Sun God, the old priest offered prayer
For the safety of the temple and the treasure guarded there.
In the spacious, gold-walled forecourt not a vagrant wind gust stirred;
But the flame leaped high on the altar to show that the god had heard.
A gold and emerald serpent flashed in the crystal air,
And the flame shone bright on the serpent,
The green-eyed Golden Serpent,
Kukulcan's feathered serpent
That bound the priest's white hair.

From the steamy, hostile shadows of the circling jungle shade
Strode Pedro de Salvarez, the Spanish renegade,
And a score of scarecrow troopers followed Pedro, one by one,
Each bent with a bulky bundle and dragging a useless gun.
Their heads were hot with fever, their nerves were jungle-frayed;
But their dull eyes gleamed at the temple,
The lofty, ancient temple,
The golden, jeweled temple,
Clean-set in the jungle jade.

Don Pedro hailed the temple and his voice rang bold and strong
(Though he'd scarce had breath for cursing his men as they marched along).
In the throats of a hundred singers the sacred chanting ceased As they thronged the broad
stone stairway to listen to their priest. "Strangers in shining armor, what seek ye from
afar?
Come you in friendly fashion, or come you here for war?"

Don Pedro lifted his helmet, a handsome rogue and young;
His hair was golden-tawny, and he spoke the Mayan tongue.
Don Pedro pointed westward where, black on the sunset glow,
Loomed the naked, cone-shaped summit of a smoking volcano.

“We come from the Land of Sunrise at the Sun God’s own behest
To seek the flaming mountain with the plume of smoke on its crest;
We must climb to the thunder mountain where the fires burn red in the gloom
And sweep the throat of the crater with the Sun God’s magic broom.
The Sun God bids you help us to win this sacred quest,
For we need the dust from the mountain,
The yellow rust from the mountain,
The sulphur crust from the mountain
Where the Sun God’s flames flower best.”



They were feasted on figs and melons, on goat meat and maize-meal pone;
They were given rooms in the palace where they could rest alone,
With cushions of Quetzal feathers and mats for the hardwood floors,
And cooling draughts for their fever, and healing salves for their sores;
The sores from their jungle journey, their cuts from the mountain stone,
For the raw sores under their armor,
The festering sores from their armor,
Where their heavy packs on their armor
Had galled the flesh to the bone.

Their simplest household vessel was fashioned of beaten gold.
Don Pedro stared at the treasure and his eyes gleamed crafty cold.
But he proffered the priest a cassock of satin, white as milk,
And he gave the priest’s young daughter a shawl of crimson silk.

Child gay, the priest’s young daughter danced in the sunlight there,
With her white robe molding her beauty, with a crimson bloom in her hair,
And the shawl, like a crimson flower, danced from her finger tips.
Don Pedro gazed on her beauty and moistened his thin, red lips.

At dusk he summoned the troopers. “Hark ye, and mark this straight
We are here to gather sulphur; the women and gold must wait.
Gunpowder means life and riches; when once our guns can shoot,
We can take our choice of the maidens and raid the temple loot.
Till then, keep your hands from the women and your eyes from the gold,” he said,
“For the man who touches either will wish that he were dead!”

They gained the Mayans’ favor and they won the old priest’s trust,
While half a hundred warriors helped gather the sulphur dust.
Black charcoal burned in an oven, saltpeter out of their packs,

And yellow flowers of sulphur, wet-mixed with a battle axe
On a great stone slab in the court-yard, slow dried in the western sun,
With plaited cotton fuses—the Spaniards' task was done.

They had seen a lake from the mountain, whence a river flowed to sea;
They had made a dozen bateaux to travel easily.
They had emptied their packs of trinkets for gifts to the friendly tribe;
They had called this a gift of friendship, but they knew it to be a bribe.

Their boats were moored and ready, with food and with powder stored,
When, buckled in burnished armor and bearing his gun and sword,
Don Pedro mounted the temple with his men and the old high priest.
(The tribe at the distant lakeside prepared the farewell feast.)
Beside the ancient altar where the sacred wine was poured,
Bird-light, stood the old priest's daughter,
Natla, the priest's young daughter,
And Spaniards and priest and daughter
Were alone with the treasure hoard.

By the Golden Disc of the Sun God, the old priest offered prayer
For the journey of Don Pedro and his soldiers gathered there.
'Round the topmost outside altar not a vagrant wind gust stirred;
But the flame leaped high on the altar to show that the god had heard.
A gold and emerald serpent flashed in the crystal air,
And the flame gleamed bright on the serpent,
The green-eyed Golden Serpent,
Kukulcan's feathered serpent
That bound the priest's white hair.

Don Pedro listened in silence and marked how Natla stood
By the outmost edge of the temple on the ring of polished wood
Above the Well of the Maidens, with a crimson bloom in her hair,
With the crimson shawl swirled 'round her, and her arms upraised in prayer.
The pulse of her radiant beauty was a fever in his blood,
And his eyes were the eyes of a serpent,
A treacherous, lusting serpent,
A venomous, coiling serpent,
In a face like a cobra's hood.

Above the golden altar a wheeling vulture flew,
A jet-black splash of warning against the sky's warm blue.
Don Pedro scowled at his matchlock and blew his fuse a-glow,
And saw that his soldiers' fuses were sputtering in a row.
"Oh, priest, you have helped us labor where the Sun God's fires burn;
Your heart met ours with kindness—this we would now return.
You have guessed by our Sun God's tokens, I am more than half divine;

He has bidden me wed your daughter, raising her rank to mine.
He bids you give for her dowry the gold from the hidden room—
And to prove the truth of his message, behold his flame flower's bloom!"

Don Pedro blew on his fuse-end till the smouldering cord blazed red;
With a flaming, thunderous clamor, he shot the vulture dead.
It fell like a spinning meteor where the ancient priest had stood—
And the flame on the Sun God's altar was quenched by vulture blood!

There was death on the sunlit altar, and death on the old priest's face,
And death in the eyes of Natla, still as a stone in her place.
The line of the Spanish soldiers shivered uneasily;
Don Pedro laughed in the stillness and his voice died eerily.

Back to the line of soldiers he passed his empty gun,
Snatching another swiftly. "Well, old Priest of the Sun,
See how your god has spoken!" His words rang full and bold.
"Wed me the maid in haste now, and lead my men to the gold.
The gold that is Natla's dowry, the gold of the setting sun,
For I must be gone by sunset,
Back to the lake by sunset,
Down for the sea by sunset,
Now that my work is done."

The old priest's eyes were afire but his voice was icy cold.
"So? You would steal my daughter and raid the Sun God's gold?
Murderous, thieving rascals, by your own rash lies undone,
Never for you, my Natla; she is pledged to the Son of the Sun!
Never for you, our treasure. Yet, I would spare you pain.
Get you hence to your vessels—and do not come again!"

Don Pedro glared at the altar; his face was foul with greed.
"Curse on your Son of the Sun God and on all of your stingy breed!
Never for him, my Natla!" His thin lips snarled apart,
And death from a flame flower's passion burst through the maiden's heart.

Out from the topmost rampart of the temple wall she fell,
Like a crumpled, crimson petal dropped from a golden shell;
Up from the Well of the Maidens, a single bell-note tolled. . . .
The old priest faced her slayer. "I will show you the hidden gold,"
He swayed, but his voice was steady and rang like the tolling bell.
"You may take your will of the treasure,
The heaps of the glistening treasure,
The coffers of jeweled treasure—
But you take its curse as well!"

Past the Golden Disc of the Sun God, across the temple floor,
He led the traitor Spaniards to the secret treasure store.
“There are your blood-won trinkets, take what your hearts desire.
Choose—but be swift, oh, fools; I must light the altar fire!”

They stared at the dazzling riches in the golden colonnade,
Caskets of rainbow jewels, vessels of carven jade;
They threw aside their weapons for ease to carry more—
And the old priest touched a lever, set flush with the chamber door,
The masked and hidden lever that the ancient priests had made,
He touched the serpent lever,
The golden serpent lever,
The winged serpent lever
That sprang the ambushade.

From out of the cloistered arches where age-long they had slept,
From every chink and cranny, the golden serpents crept;
They circled the treasure chamber like a softly murmuring breath,
And swooped on the looting Spaniards in a cloud of winged death.

It was dawn in the Mayan temple when the Sun God’s flaming wheel
Pierced through the temple shadows to mounds of burnished steel
Where the gold-mad, treacherous Spaniards, with jewels clutched to their breasts,
Lay prone on the golden vessels, stark dead on the treasure chests.
With their dead eyes glazed in horror that death could not conceal,
They gazed on the crusted serpents,
Kukulcan’s stinging serpents,
At the buried fangs of the serpents
In throat and thigh and heel.

Not a whisper crept from the chamber to where the old priest stood;
But a flame leaped high on the altar that was purged of vulture blood!

