

The Opal Princess

Madge Macbeth

Illustrated by

Ralph Pallen Coleman

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THE OPAL PRINCESS

By MADGE MACBETH

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

Above, a great dome of scorching, copper-colored sky that seemed to sway and drag at the trees that rose to meet its edges, as a balloon strains at the strong pegs that moor it to the earth. Almost directly overhead, the sun—a cruel, malignant ball of flame, that looked (had any human eye been able to turn upward in that glare) like a hole cut in a piece of burnished metal, behind which the fires of a titanic furnace blazed.

Below, a dirty-gray, lifeless plain, a brutal contrast to the splendid tropical luxuriance that surrounded it, that struggled to its very edge as though trying to conceal its leprous blemish on the face of Nature from curious, prying eyes—an alkali desert, a veritable sepulchre, lying grim and relentless in the midst of vivid, throbbing, life.

Between the two, a slow-moving creature—staggering, stumbling, falling, crawling, muttering, mumbling, gasping, cursing, praying—a man. Not far above him, several black specks circled; a flock of greedy, hopeful buzzards.

The man was naked save for a cartridge-belt, a pair of trunks, boots and a hat. Piece by piece he had discarded his clothing during the journey across the desert. Even his water bottle was now to be discarded, “for,” he argued, logically, “why should I carry the damned thing when it is empty?”

He had intended to make a quart of water last, at least, until the middle of the afternoon, but, somehow, each mouthful of the tepid stuff became less satisfying than the last, and each five minutes added to the thickness of the alkali dust that gathered in his throat, and each step seemed to weight the bottle until it felt like a gallon cask hanging against his shoulders. He may have lifted it to his parched lips a little oftener than he realized, and he may have taken a mouthful instead of a sip. In addition to these tantalizing dribbles, he had used a drop—the merest drop—to wash the powder out of his eyes, fearing that presently the gathering film would blind him entirely and that, losing his sense of direction, he would wander around in a circle until, until . . . he provided a feast for those alert, expectant birds.

It was only after he had washed away the fine, stinging powder, that he discovered the bottle was empty. A slow cold horror crept over him.

“Leaked, by Heavens!” he cried, and tried to catch, with his swollen tongue, a single drop of water that trickled down beside his nose, leaving a

streak like a mahogany scar upon his dust-masked face.

Resolutely, he put the horror from him. At least he could see, and he looked to the West expecting that the dark wall of trees for which he was bound, was almost close enough to cast a protecting shadow over him.

Again, he uttered a sharp, choking sound; closed his eyes, opened them and stared through the wavering, sun-flecked mist. He was only half way across the plain, and he had been walking since early morning! In seven hours, he had covered but ten miles.

“Something’s wrong,” he told himself, and began to tremble. “Something’s all wrong. Either I’m not walking straight or this damned place is a tread-mill. *Ten miles more and no water!*”

He looked over his shoulder. The trees seemed distant but a stone’s throw. He looked ahead; they were far, far away, a black blur rocking in an amber haze. A paralyzing fear crazed him.

“I’ve gone mad or something,” he screamed. “I’ll not get there in time. Nancy . . . Nancy . . .”

The sound of that cry steadied him. He looked again. The focus changed. He was in the centre of the plain, his drawn face turned toward the West, where, over the irregular line of tree tops, a great blood-red flag suddenly raised itself, like the head of some savage beast sniffing the air for a scent of its prey. Torn between hope and doubt, the man stumbled forward.

Although few people had seen that flag, it was as familiar to the district as was the Stars and Stripes. And it was dreaded no less than the rattlesnake that formed its terrorizing design. This snake, executed in flaming orange, coiled, poised ready to strike, was an accurate pictorial description of Pedro Valcarez over whose camp it hung. There was not a man, woman or child within five hundred miles, who did not fear that name, who would have hesitated if it came to a choice between a rattlesnake and La Serpiente (The Serpent) as Pedro was often called. For a rattlesnake, deceitful, loathsome, deadly though it is, proclaims itself as such. It gives warning of its coming, its intent, and it cannot disguise itself as a harmless lizard.

Not that Valcarez could be charged with striking his victims unawares. His sign scrawled on a gatepost, door or saddle, was warning enough! It meant pillage, death—or worse. And unlike the rattle of the serpent, it was inescapable.

His disguises were numerous and impenetrable. Even his followers rarely recognized him. It was told that once he lived amongst them for a week disguised as a priest, and that he actually shamed them into periods of decent behavior by his pious example! Again, he was known to have stripped a certain home of all its treasures—including a fifteen-year old daughter—after having gained admission as an aged wayfarer. An old woman asking hospitality of a bride—a famous beauty, by the way—suddenly showed great strength of will and muscle, strangled the husband with his own sash and carried off the wife who was never heard of afterwards. And once, in Mexico City, Valcarez, with unparalleled impudence, presented himself at a brilliant and fashionable function, disguised as a lovely young woman. For a time he was unquestionably the belle of the evening, and half a dozen wealthy young rakes admitted that their heads were completely turned by the unknown beauty, who quite as deftly turned out their pockets. In the meantime, a confederate relieved the ladies of their jewelry, and the pair escaped with plunder aggregating about thirty thousand dollars . . . American money!

It was in Mexico City that Trevor first heard of The Serpent, and it was there that he heard also, of the Opal Princess.

Trevor was a Canadian who casually explained his presence in the country, as “linking up my home-folks”. With diplomacy seldom found save in those trained in the Service, he evaded direct questions and escaped the toils set for him by opposing factions. Neither Carranzistas nor Villistas succeeded in accomplishing his political conversion. He deplored their wasted efforts with engaging candor.

Apparently, he was making a pleasure trip through the country. He rode a good deal and would go any distance to visit a Canadian settler; though what he did when he got there, the spies of neither faction were able to find out. And since they failed to discover a misdemeanor small enough to justify even an arrest, we may conclude that his errands were not particularly dangerous! At any rate, they do not concern this story.

Alexander MacTavish welcomed Trevor with a demonstration of hospitality that was positively ferocious.

“Ye’ll bide wi’ me for six months, at least, lad,” he said. “A white mon . . . a Canadian. . . . Why, I canna tell ye how it makes me feel. . . .” His voice trailed off in a thick growl, but presently he went on, “I must hear all about Canada; whose private railway is subsidized by the Government, now? And is the Georgian Bay Canal built? And does the wheat come doon James Bay? And who’s . . . representin’ old Glengarry in the Hoose to-day?

Glengarry,” he repeated as though speaking the name of the woman he loved. “It seems as far away as Heaven, specially since Janet left me. Janet’s my girl, ye know. Married an Okanagan farmer this ten year, now. ’Course she writes to me, but then, ye know, laddie, weemen are the de’il to put sense into their letters. So now, for Heaven’s sake, talk . . . talk!”

He did, and so engagingly that MacTavish could not bear to lose a syllable, and accompanied his guest all the way to the border although his excuse for the trip was the buying of some trinket for his girl and her wee Sandy.

“Post ’em from God’s country,” he advised, “and I’ll know no harm will come to ’em. Don’t think it’s smugglin’ son. I wouldna ask ye to do that! It’s a matter of removin’ temptation from the officials who handle our Mexican mails. Nothing more valuable than a post card is safe!”

He led the way into a picturesquely dirty shop, whose proprietor looked like the original of the moving picture bandit.

At the Scot’s request, he displayed a quantity of jewelry; old, new, spurious, genuine. But MacTavish thrust it all away.

“Truck,” he pronounced, decisively. “Have ye no unset stones? I like to see what I’m gettin’ before it’s covered up with chunks of metal or this filigree stuff! I’ve got a mind,” he went on, speaking to Trevor, “to send her an opal. Never did hold wi’ superstitions; and ye know son, that pearls, and opals and rebels are Mexico’s most perfect productions. . . . So, amigo mio?”

The Mexican grinned and delving into what seemed like his very vitals, brought forth the most glorious opal it had ever been Trevor’s luck to see.

“Mon,” exclaimed MacTavish, lifting the burning, pulsing gem in his fingers as he might have lifted a glowing coal, “how did ye coom by it? Is the treasure of The Opal Princess discovered at last?”

“Quien sabe?” returned the discreet salesman, with a shrug.

A little later, having paid the owner more American dollars than that greasy rascal ever dreamed of possessing, and having bought the opal for about half of what he had expected to pay for it, MacTavish turned the packet over to Trevor with an injunction to keep it out of sight until he was clear of the country.

“I wouldna like to feel that I’d given ye a passport to Heaven,” he explained.

“Who is The Opal Princess,” interrupted Trevor, “and what Treasure was lost?”

“I’ll gi’ ye the story,” replied the other, “though how much is true, I canna tell. . . .” and in a thick, soft voice, rich with the accent of his forefathers, he began:—

About fifteen years ago, a foreigner—some say he was an Englishman, some a Spaniard and some a Jew—rode into Mexico City with a magnificent opal for sale. It’s size and quality were so remarkable that considerable curiosity was aroused, curiosity that the fellow absolutely refused to satisfy. He took his money and disappeared for six months. Then he turned up again with another stone, finer than the first one. When this happened the third time rumors began to gather. Nothing was too fantastic to have some supporters, but the general belief was that he had discovered a buried temple, and was appropriating what actually belonged to the State. Many advances were made to him. All were refused. He would neither take a partner, sell his secret nor tell where he derived his source of supply. Then he received threats. That’s the Mexican way. If you won’t give up your political convictions. Your money or your wife, peaceably, you will be coerced at the point of a repeater. Still, the fellow refused to treat with the covetous scoundrels. But one day they got him. Trailed him to a canyon and shot him full of holes. Officially you understand? Oh, yes! He was a Government suspect . . . not only robbing a temple but preparing to buy up the Army and start another revolution!

And they didn’t kill him all at once, either. They picked out sensitive but not fatal spots, and tried to make him talk between each little rally.

They failed. He took his secret to the martyr’s heaven, and I, for one, hope he was able to make some use of it there.

In the meantime, a half-breed—a *half-breed*, mind! happened accidentally to witness the slaughter. Guessing what the next move would be, he put the fear of God in his horse, set out to find the man’s cabin and warn his family. He found the cabin, for he knew where to look, but there wasn’t much of a family to warn; just a slip of a girl about three years old in charge of an ancient squaw.

Rimera—Luis Rimera, that was his name—told her what he had seen and advised a hurried flight. Then, without waiting to tear up the floor or do any searching on his own account, he snatched up the child and traveled without stop-over to his own home.

Well, the rest of the story is pretty much what you choose to make of it. Some say there wasn't any treasure—that the man's fortune lay in those half dozen opals he had sold; some say that Luis Rimerá, himself, discovered it but was afraid to offer the stones for sale. Still others think that it has not yet been discovered, and they cling to a superstitious belief, founded heaven knows upon what, that the girl will be given some sort of supernatural power to reveal the hiding-place to the man she loves.

Well, anyway, Nancy—that's her name, the only one she knows—was brought up by the Rimerás, who weren't very anxious to make her history public. Maybe they thought she would bring them luck; or that she would be worth something to them sooner or later. Maybe they were just decent Christians in their heathen way. However, as Nancy grew older and more conspicuously beautiful, it was impossible to keep her hidden. Her story leaked out, embellished, of course, and men traveled miles to see the girl, who, though living in the most primitive surroundings, might produce at a moment's notice, so to speak, a fortune of fabulous dimensions. She carried herself like a queen among a score of adoring tatterdemalion subjects, and she is known as far south as Mexico City as the Opal Princess.

The story faded as Trevor journeyed northward. At least, it became but part of a great mosaic of similar stories that blurred in his memory as he left the definitely-felt but difficulty-defined atmosphere of Mexico behind him. It was revived shortly after he crossed the border by the Opal Princess, herself.

Trevor made no effort to resist the hospitality of the Santa Teresa Mission. As he slipped from his horse and staggered slightly, the good little Padre said to himself:

“Too much bad water and too much sun. . . . He's in for a fever, likely.”

Trevor bore out the prophecy, handsomely. For ten days he floated in the midst of smoky-red clouds, and cried for water that was cool and wet. For ten days he begged relief from the dazzling glare and for air that did not smell of heat. Then, one evening, he opened his sunken eyes in a dim-lit room and saw her.

Her profile was framed by the window, against a background of swiftly-passing tropical twilight, and her great rust-brown eyes were fixed on a lonely star. She looked in the gathering dusk like a beautiful etching, yet Trevor could feel her color, her radiance. It pulsed through the room like music.

For a space he lay very still and watched her; then he asked weakly,

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

“I am helping the Padre take care of you,” she returned, in a voice warm with melody. “My name is Nancy.”

“Nancy?” some long-forgotten dream stirred. “Not the Opal Princess?”

“That is what I am sometimes called,” she answered.

“And your home? Your family—where are they?”

“The Mission is my home. My family is—how do you say, Senor?—scattered, and Luis Rimeria is dead.”

Love came to them swiftly, tempestuously. There was no denying, suppressing, resisting it. They were caught up as two leaves are whirled along by a mountain freshet, and borne to their inevitable destiny. Trevor realized for the first time the literalness of the phrase, “swept off his feet,” and for the first time he knew instinctively that he had met his mate. Nancy offered all that life could give; all that Heaven promised. To conceive of losing her was to invite supremest anguish.

Her love for Trevor was frankly idolatrous. She knew nothing of the deceits and artifices of women warped by the disadvantages of civilization. Love to her, was the flint struck by a divine hand, and the fires that it kindled were intended to burn radiantly—not to be extinguished. She was like the opal with which her fate was so strangely interwoven—passionate, vivid; beautiful in every shade of light, in every nuance, of shadow.



Two evenings later, as the three returned from Vespers, they found the coiled serpent of Pedro Valcarez drawn on the Mission door!

Three weeks from the night Trevor reached the Mission, he asked Padre Tomàs to marry them.

“I’m not quite sea-worthy, yet,” he said, “but I’ll gain strength as I travel north. Besides, I’ll have Nancy.”

The priest smoked several minutes in silence.

“Senor, you are quite—quite—sure?” he asked, in his quaint English. “Fever you know does not leave the system quickly, and it breeds strange fancies in the mind of the diseased. Senor Gilberto, I will speak plainly. In this climate, it is easy to love, especially for men of the North with their more sluggish dispositions. A kiss, a touch of the hand, even the flash of dark eyes, sets their blood on fire and fills them with desires that are savage. Is it not so? But like our tropical downpour, the force of their passion is soon spent. It can endure the test neither of time nor colder temperature.”

“How different in your country, Senor! How slowly, how gently love comes, and how easily controlled! You say, a year from to-day, we will marry. And if I have not secured the post by then, we will wait still another year. Suppose I ask you to wait a year for Nancy. How does it go, my son?”

“No . . . no,” cried Trevor. “I can’t wait . . . I love her!”

The priest spread out his hands.

“I do not question that,” he said, “but will your love, blossoming here like one of our forest flowers, thrive in your land of snow and ice? Or, will it shrivel? That is the point that concerns me, Senor Gilberto. Listen—Nancy is no ordinary waif. Can you not see? With only what little schooling I could give her, she is ‘educated.’ Without cultured associations, she is ‘refined.’ She is well-born, senor; her claim upon inheritance is strong. At the same time, she is unversed in the ways of conventional existence. Will you regret your impulsiveness when you see her contrasted with your friends?”

Trevor’s torrent of indignant denial made little impression upon the Padre.

“She has been sought before,” he went on, “and she will be sought again, quite as ardently as the heart of maiden could wish. And I would rather see her buried here in a mountain cabin, the equal of some honest fellow, than to know that she was the despised or tolerated inferior of some finer, grander household.”

Again Trevor protested until his strength failed and he sank exhausted on his couch.

“I am no child,” he panted, “nor am I swayed by every woman I set eyes upon! Nancy is the mate God made for me. *I know!*”

From behind a haze of smoke, Father Tomàs went on.

“Then there is another thing, a fable about some opals. Do you know, Senor, that there are many ignorant persons who believe that the man winning Nancy’s love, will discover those fictitious gems?”

Trevor could control his anger no longer.

“I resent your inference, sir,” he cried. “Unworthy as I am, understand that—even though I believed this tale—I am no fortune-hunter! Opals,” he repeated, hotly, “do you think Nancy would be any dearer, any more desirable to me, if she were *encased* in opals? I love her, I tell you! I would give my heart’s blood to spare her pain. I would endure torture, go through

ice and snow, the fires of Hell, to save her from harm! Must I rave on, or will you retract your beastly insinuations and objections?"

"There . . . there!" Padre Tomàs became suddenly as sympathetic, as tender as a woman. "You see, I love her, too, and my peace of mind would be destroyed forever, did I feel that I had not taken every precaution to insure her happiness. A week from to-day, time enough for you to think of traveling—Nancy shall be yours, providing that neither of you," the twinkling of his eyes contradicted the solemnity of his words, "has changed your mind!"

Two evenings later, as the three returned from vespers, they found the coiled serpent of Pedro Valcarez drawn on the Mission door!

For a space they stared speechless, then Trevor said:

"There is nothing to fear, beloved! La Serpiente has evidently heard of the opal I am taking into Canada for MacTavish. A few American dollars, and the matter is easily adjusted."

But the Padre, feeling the grip of her fingers on his arm, exclaimed:

"I doubt it, Senor! It is almost certain that Valcarez wishes to treat with me. Often of late, I have heard that the growing influence of the Mission finds no favor in his sight. I am not wholly unprepared for this visit."

Nancy, however, was not deceived.

"Let us go at once—to-night," she whispered, "as soon as it is dark. We can reach San Lorenzo Station in time for the morning train. Padre," she urged, "marry us now, quickly! You know that flight is our—is my—only chance!"

Swiftly, they made their simple preparations, knowing that in all likelihood, they were watched. Then, when darkness had dropped thickly over the little settlement, Padre Tomàs led them to the chapel and groped his way to the altar.

In suffocating blackness he began to repeat the marriage ceremony, while Trevor and Nancy stood just within reach of his hand. The night was ominously still. His whispers seemed to fill the room with an eerie, rustling sound. A board creaked. The hot air stirred. Each of the trio at the altar felt the clasp of a heavy hand, and there came an interruption in the steady flow of the priest's words.

"A thousand pardons, Padre," said a mocking voice, "but my time is precious too, and I must break into this pleasing ceremony—unless you

choose to continue it in my favour! What says the Princess? Will a few words mumbled by this milk-veined man make you feel more completely mine? Tst! Ricardo . . . do not permit the Englishman to gurgle. I do not like the sound! Canst thou not set the gag tighter? Felipe, hast made the man of God secure?"

"It is done, *jefe mio*," growled a voice.

"Good. Now a very small light, my comrades, and tie the pious Padre so that if he struggles, the cords of his own robe will choke him."

A single candle flared upon the altar. In its pale gleams six figures casting huge, distorted shadows, moved about their captives.

"As for you, Senor," said Valcarez, addressing Trevor with exaggerated gallantry, "a bride shall be provided for you. La Serpiente is no thief, gossip to the contrary! To be sure I take from you the Princess, but I give you in her stead—the Virgin. Fetch the statue, there, Ricardo, and bind her in the Senor's arms. So—excellent! I feel convinced that such an embrace will melt her plaster heart!"

The men stood about convulsed with silent laughter at the sight of Trevor straining to his breast a life-sized statue of the Holy Virgin. Valcarez, no less appreciative of the offensive spectacle, expressed his pleasure in foully blasphemous jesting.

In his arms lay Nancy. She was securely bound and as motionless as the statue; only her great eyes seemed to be alive, fire-hot and pulsing. La Serpiente looked down at her. Trevor could hear his heavy breathing, could see his clasp about her slender body tighten as he raised her slowly to meet his parted lips.

And thus he held her a long, long time, while the men stirred uneasily and whispered amongst themselves.

"Senor," he said at last, unfastening the front of Nancy's blouse, "*this* is where my bride will wear the symbol of her wifhood—not upon her finger, as you would have it. A gold bauble may be forgotten, lost, betrayed. But the brand of The Serpent will remain a vivid memory, aye—even to the brink of the grave. Here—" he touched her fair, rounded breast,—“shall the knowledge of my love first scorch her.”

Eons and eons of ghastly torment passed over Trevor. He felt as though each fibre of his body was being pulled asunder, as though each nerve lay

quivering under a red-hot flail, as though his throat had closed, cutting off his breath. He felt himself slipping into a yawning pit, and his body sagged drunkenly against the plaster Virgin.

When consciousness returned he and the Padre were alone. The strain his dead weight put upon the leather thongs that bound him, had not only stretched them but had pressed them into his wrists until the blood was drawn. This increased their elasticity, and by a superhuman ignoring of the pain, Gilbert Trevor contrived during the night, to work his lacerated hands free. Although he found them almost useless, he managed to remove his gag, and eventually to cut the cords that bound the unconscious priest. But more than that, he dared not stop to do. There was no time to be lost in saving Nancy!

He rushed back to the Mission, seized his revolver, filled a water bottle and went to look for the horses.

They were gone!

He had expected as much. Furthermore he was convinced that Valcarez had seen to it that no one in the settlement would dare lend or sell him an animal. So be it, he told himself, grimly. He would walk—not miles behind The Serpent through the forest, but cutting across the desert death-trap and, by the grace of God, reach the camp first!

Love—and hate—gave him a false strength. He broke into a swinging trot and left the little settlement rapidly behind him. He pushed into a dark grove, already steaming under the rays of a febrile sun, and he emerged almost an hour later, on the edge of the great alkali plain.

It was oval in shape; twenty miles in length and five or six miles wide, but its “shore-line” was so heavily indented that the circumference was roughly estimated at two hundred and fifty miles, and it was almost half this distance that Valcarez and his party must ride to reach his forest fastness.

A fastness it was in truth; practically unapproachable save by trails known only to the desperadoes. Following a false one was fatal, for it lured the unwelcome guest into bogs, into alligator-infested swamps, into cunningly-contrived pits, and many a man had lost his life in an effort to find that hidden camp and rescue some woman of his household.

The desert was regarded as an adequate barrier from the east. Besides, between it and the camp, there flowed a sluggish, tropical stream. It was well sentineled with alligators!

Trevor fixed his eyes upon the flag and moved resolutely forward. Living flames seemed to lick his flesh from every side. His shoulders were a mass of horrible blisters, his chest and back dry and shrivelled with the pitiless heat. He was denied the relief of perspiration, for he was covered white like a miller, with fine alkali powder that not only clogged his ears, hardened around his nostrils, ate into his throat and filmed his eyes, but even packed tight into the pores of his skin.

No words can describe his agony: the heat, the hunger, the thirst—the hideous, maddening thirst. It had become almost impossible for him to breathe through his nose, and each gasping gulp of air taken through his parched mouth, carried down into his throat enough biting dust to have almost strangled him under any other circumstances.

“Through the fires of Hell,” he muttered. “I said I would endure torture for her sake. . . . Fires of Hell. . . .”

He covered a great distance—perhaps a quarter of a mile, and then without warning, the desert became a turbulent, surging sea. He sank under the weight of a mountainous white-capped wave, and he struck out feebly as the choking spray dashed over him. He was tossed here and there, flung against sharp, submerged rocks that tore great patches off his body and left him raw, at the mercy of the salt sea. He screamed with pain, and found it desperate work to keep his head above water. A hundred times, he was tempted to give up the struggle and go down. But Nancy’s eyes looked into his as they had looked when she lay in Pedro’s arms, and he set his teeth in his stiff tongue and took one more stroke.

And the buzzards, wheeling tirelessly above his head, watched this strange creature who stirred up such terrific clouds of dust by thrashing senselessly about, face downwards, upon a bone-dry plain!

Trevor got to his feet without much of an idea where he was or why he was there. A blind instinct goaded him on, stumbling heavily towards the distant trees.

Presently, he found that he was not alone. Beside him walked a young girl; she was carrying her head in her hands. A second look at the face showed him that it was Nancy, and where her head should have been, there was a pyramid of flaming opals on top of which poised a rattlesnake ready to strike.

Trevor lunged at the hateful sight. It vanished. He was alone, hurrying through a hot, misty cloud that wrapped like a blanket around his head and smelled of ether.

He couldn't balance himself very well upon it. It tipped first one way, then another. It opened at his feet and flung him down into fiery pits, it formed into steep inclines up which he had to claw his way, sometimes on all fours. Once, lying at full length upon a perpendicular wall of dust, a rattlesnake crawled away almost from beneath him. He sat up and hurled handfuls of powder and curses, after it.

His revolver and the heavy cartridge-belt became a frightful burden. With every step their weight increased until Trevor felt that he carried a red-hot band of iron about his waist. The temptation to discard it was almost irresistible. At times, he forgot why he wanted the thing, and it was then that instinct triumphed over reason. Again he remembered Pedro's hand on Nancy's breast, and a flame hotter than the rays of the sun seared him from head to foot.

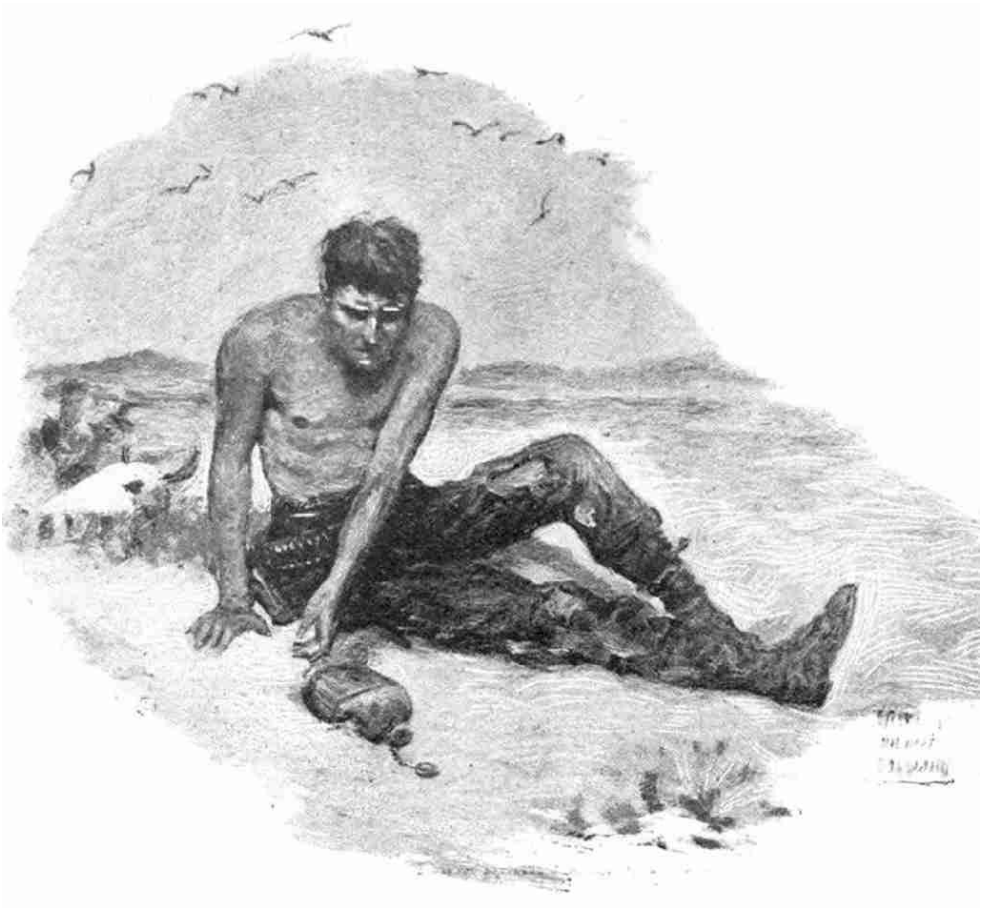
The wall of trees approached slowly. Over their blurred tops a ball of fire hung. It was on a level with Trevor's eyes; it expanded until it stretched along the whole horizon. He could see nothing else.

He tripped and fell. An iron post protruded a foot or more above the plain. Like a child lured from an important errand by a passing attraction, he set to work to investigate its purpose; it pleased him to hear the sharp clink of metal upon metal as he loosened it and let it drop back into place.

A few minutes' digging with the butt of his revolver and he uncovered a small tin box. His cry upon opening it was less of surprise than pain. A hundred suns turned their flaming rays upon him, a hundred balls of fire lay beneath his hand.

Red . . . what a red! He looked again to find that it had changed to a sharp, penetrating green, ice-cold and deep as the sea. The green gave way to blazing blue, and that in turn to orange.

"Opals, by God," croaked Trevor, thickly. "Nancy's opals. . . ." His mind groped but could not grasp a definite thought. "Nancy's opals . . . and love . . . I don't know . . . there was something. . . ."



“Leaked, by Heavens!” . . . and above circled those alert, expectant birds.

He closed the box and staggered to his feet, dizzily remembering that he must find Nancy somewhere. The trees almost cast a shadow over him now, and desperately he plunged towards them.

When almost across the dark line that cut off the white plain from the forest, a steep cliff rose before him. He simply couldn't make it; he leaned forward just a little and it received his body with scarcely a jar. His limbs relaxed and he lay quite still.

Lower and lower wheeled the birds, watching. The man did not move. Then with a flutter of closing wings, one lighted on his outspread hand and bit deep into the scar upon his wrist.

With a shriek of pain, Trevor struggled to his feet, while the black mass rose from the ground and separated into specks against the amber sky.

He could not see at all!

The dust mingling with what moisture had arisen in his eyes, had been converted into a fine sticky paste and his lids were sealed together beyond his power to open them!

For an instant black despair overwhelmed him. Blind . . . blind and within reach of success! Nancy was lost, and his fate had been shadowed already by the attack of the bird. His hand moved to the revolver dragging at his belt. At least he would not be eaten alive.

Then something stirred within the soul of Gilbert Trevor. It was the same thing that enabled his ancestors to cross the terrible, unknown seas; to hew their way through the grim forests of the north; to plod through rains and snow into the prairie wilderness; to survive blizzards on the mountain-tops and floods in the valleys; to conquer savages—beasts—pestilences of every kind; it was an immortal spark that defied extinction, that refused dominion even to Death itself!

Blind, choked with thirst, enfeebled with hunger, crazed with heat, he turned his disfigured face to the shadows of the trees and *pushed on!*

From that moment until he found himself lying on the bank of a forest stream, he had but a confused impression. He must have crawled most of the way—his body testified to that. And he must have drunk of his own blood, for the marks on his wrist were not those of a bird. And he must have lain some time half covered with water, for when consciousness returned, he was fairly free of the deadly alkali powder.

Instinct warned him of danger. He rolled quickly away, as a long, dark shape glided silently past, leaving only a few bubbles on the surface of the stream.

Miraculously, the water had refreshed him, and Trevor moved along the shore seeking some means of getting to the other side. He was well aware of the danger of swimming!

The forest was very still. Either he had entered it some distance from Pedro's camp, or the company waited in sullen silence for the coming of their Chief.

Still, he moved cautiously, watching the sky, watching the formless shadows creep out of the trees and ever alert for some way to cross the little river.

At last he found it; a slender pine fallen so that its crest was caught in a tangle of vines on the opposite side, and forming an arch rather than a bridge over the water. To climb in his weakened condition, to hang by his torn hands and his feet was one of those impossible things that certain types of men accomplish. And as the birds had watched his progress across the desert from overhead, so a dark, shining object watched his passage across the little river from below, watched, alert and hopeful. . . .

Exhausted, Trevor dropped on the other side, heedless of the thorns that pricked blood from his flesh in a score of places, and he lay there until the sky turned from blue to purple and a cluster of hot, apricot-colored stars leaped into view.

A cry rang out in the still air. It was caught up farther on, and yet farther. The forest shivered with hidden movement, sly confusion.

“Oo-oo-hoo-o!”

A sob of thankfulness rose to Trevor’s lips. He was in time. The cries were doubtless those of the returning party and sentries posted along the route. He commenced to work back toward the spot where he had entered the forest, guided by the babel of voices that now broke the stillness. His progress was painfully slow, for although there was light enough for him to avoid the trees that stood like endless lines of soldiers across his path, he could not escape the web of trailing vines that wound themselves about his feet and legs. He had a small pocket knife attached to his belt, but it was useless. Little enough impression could have been made upon that undergrowth with a *machete*.

At last, however, when panic was scattering his wits, Trevor caught a gleam of light through the trees, and the barbaric sight that was revealed to him from behind a screen of bushes, looked more like something one sees in a dream, or in delirium, than an actual vision.

A rough palisade enclosed the camp on three sides. The fourth, the river side—beyond which lay the desert—was open; evidently, in the opinion of Valcares, a route which need not be watched. Some fifteen or twenty cabins were ranged about the enclosure. In the centre stood one conspicuously larger and more sumptuous than the rest. By the light of winking candles, and glittering, jewelled lanterns. Trevor could distinguish in many of the houses, pieces of tapestry, rich damask hangings, the soft gleam of gold and silver.

A meal had just been eaten. There was a warm, sweetish odor in the night air, and a dozen men sprawled indolently on the ground, smoking to the accompaniment of invisible, clattering dishes.

Presently, Pedro appeared in the doorway of his home. He carried a golden goblet, probably filched from some *sanctuario religioso*, and having drained its contents, he tossed it over his shoulder to some one waiting within. He struck a deep-toned silver bell, hanging on the verandah, and magically the scene changed.

Men appeared with torches which they set in posts designed for that purpose. Women came into the court and disposed themselves on the ground like spectators at a play. Trevor was aware that they were naked to the waist, and that beneath their load of jewelry, each woman bore on her left breast the brand of the poised serpent.

Some were young; some were younger. Some were still beautiful; all had been. Upon a few faces there was a look of furtive pity—but, for the most part, they stared in front of them expressionless.

Then it seemed as though Trevor lying behind a screen of shrubs and vines, must have been discovered, for Valcarez strode directly toward the spot. He halted, however, some twenty paces distant, applied a match to a pile of faggots, and thrust into the leaping flames an object which he drew from his crimson sash. It looked something like a large toasting fork. But Trevor knew that it was not a toasting fork.

“Ricardo,” called The Serpent, “I am ready!”

Ricardo and the man Felipe led Nancy out of the large, pretentious house. Her face was dead white, but her eyes gleamed with an unquenchable fire. Erect she moved, her head held high, like a queen going to her coronation. No cringing, no hint of fear should add to Pedro’s triumph.

Trevor saw that she was bound—her hands behind her and a loose thong about her ankles. These fetters were removed however, before the men lashed her tight against a tree just in front of him. He could not see her face. Her back was towards him.

Until that moment he had formulated no plan for their escape. Now he began to think quickly. Wriggling noiselessly about, he collected all the stones and sticks within reach, and this done, he crawled so close to the tree that by stretching out his hand he could have touched the girl.

Cautiously, he opened his little knife, and even more carefully did he prepare his revolver for use. Then he lay still and waited.



Trevor watched the red-hot serpent until it was within three inches of Nancy's breast.

The stench of red-hot metal drifted to him. The flames had died down leaving only a bed of glowing embers, by the light of which he could see Valcares's wine-flushed face and the smouldering eyes he turned upon Nancy.

“My Opal Princess,” he said in tones which but for a ring of cruelty would have been caressing, “my fiercely unwilling bride! Have not food and wine mellowed your harsh mood? Will you not speak? No? Perhaps when my hot kiss has touched you”—he passed the branding iron slowly before her—“perhaps then, thou wilt open thy red lips, *mi encento!*”

With proud defiance Nancy faced him. Not a quiver betrayed the terrible anguish of her soul. Their eyes locked, flaming with passion; the one of hate, the other of lust. There was silence, then Valcares stepped a pace nearer, and spoke so that none save Nancy—and the unseen Trevor—could hear.

“*Yo te amo, nina tenaz!* (I love thee, relentless one!) For well upon a year I have dreamed night and day of possessing thee. Thou dost not believe! Ask Ricardo, there! He will tell thee how I passed the home of Luis Rimerá one day and saw thee; how I cared no more for the creature whose men were pursuing me, and gave her to my servant, Lorenzo. And thy face, pale like an opal, yet afire with blazing eyes, burned itself into my very soul! Had *el diablo del Norte* not come, I would have wooed thee, Nancy, and won thee—not as La Serpiente, but as any other man. All women fear, but every woman does not hate . . . Pedro Valcares!

“And yet,” he went on, “I have had to drag thee off by force! I have earned, from the first, thy fierce loathing. But hear me, mio Princesa, thy coldness, thy courage, thy scorn can never crush me! They but fan the flame of passion more brightly. How I shall love to conquer thee!”

He caught her pinioned arms and bent so close to her face that his breath stirred the dark tendrils of her hair. Still, she did not flinch. It was Trevor, who, finger on trigger, quivered so violently, that he thought the outlaw must have heard the rustling of the brush. But Pedro’s thoughts were concentrated upon Nancy.

“Conquer thee,” he repeated, hoarsely, “break thy resistance, crush thy spirit, watch thy slow yielding. And yet, my Princess, I would not have thee cowed and tame like the *basura* (trash) yonder. I would give thee to Ricardo, first!”

He thrust the iron into the fire once more.

“To-morrow, I will shave the soles of thy feet, amor mio, for fear thou might feel a longing to stray off into thy forest home. But now for the *ceremonia de matrimonio*—for thy symbol of wifehood, my queen!”

Trevor watched the red-hot serpent until it was within three inches of Nancy’s breast. Then he pulled the trigger, and almost at the same moment, ran the blade of his knife down the trunk of the tree.

“Dios mio!” A look of blank surprise crossed Pedro’s face. “He is there,” he cried, pointing to the wall of shrubs. “After him! Seize him! Return without him at the peril of . . . of . . . of . . .”

Then he sank without a sound at Nancy's feet, his branding iron eating its terrible pattern into his own breast.

More quickly than it takes to tell, Trevor began to hurl stones and sticks into the brush behind him. His ruse succeeded. Every man in the camp broke into the forest under the impression that he was following the fugitive. Women scattered in all directions. Doors were slammed, bolts shot into place. In a moment, the court was deserted.

"Quick!" cried Trevor, as he ran with Nancy across the clearing. "The horses . . . where are they?"

"In the enclosure, there! Take ours. They have not been ridden, and they will find their way home. We will be followed, of course."

"Not until morning, I think," answered the man. "They won't dare come back until assured that I have been—er—lost in the river. You see they don't realize Valcarez is dead. Where are the sentries?"

Nancy jerked her head in the direction of the river. "They came back with us," she said, "to see—to see the ceremony. Ah!"

"What is it?"

"Food. The very packet I prepared last night. It was lying here among the saddles."

A shot and a piercing cry startled them into momentary inactivity.

"Killing one another under the impression that they are shooting at me," remarked Trevor, with grim satisfaction. "Are you ready?"

For an instant she lay against his heart while he, forgetting the horror of the day, forgetting even their present danger, kissed her hair, her eyes, her lips. Then gently, he lifted her into the saddle, and flung himself upon his own horse.

Together they rode out of the palisade.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Opal Princess* by Madge Macbeth]