

The Gold of the Gods

By

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The Gold of the Gods

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1. The Peruvian Dagger

"There's something weird and mysterious about the robbery, Kennedy. They took the very thing I treasure most of all, an ancient Peruvian dagger."

Professor Allan Norton was very much excited as he dropped into Craig's laboratory early that forenoon.

Norton, I may say, was one of the younger members of the faculty, like Kennedy. Already, however, he had made for himself a place as one of the foremost of South American explorers and archaeologists.

"How they got into the South American section of the Museum, though, I don't understand," he hurried on. "But, once in, that they should take the most valuable relic I brought back with me on this last expedition, I think certainly shows that it was a robbery with a deep-laid, premeditated purpose."

"Nothing else is gone?" queried Kennedy.

"Nothing," returned the professor. "That's the strangest part of it--to me. It was a peculiar dagger, too," he continued reminiscently. "I say that it was valuable, for on the blade were engraved some curious Inca characters. I wasn't able to take the time to decipher them, down there, for the age of the metal made them almost illegible. But now that I have all my stuff unpacked and arranged after my trip, I was just about to try--when along comes a thief and robs me. We can't have the University Museum broken into that way, you know, Kennedy."

"I should say not," readily assented Craig. "I'd like to look the place over."

"Just what I wanted," exclaimed Norton, heartily delighted, and leading the way.

We walked across the campus with him to the Museum, still chatting. Norton was a tall, spare man, wiry, precisely the type one would pick to make an explorer in a tropical climate. His features were sharp, suggesting a clear and penetrating mind and a disposition to make the most of everything, no matter how slight. Indeed that had been his history, I knew. He had come to college a couple of years before Kennedy and myself, almost penniless, and had worked his way through by doing everything from waiting on table to tutoring. To-day he stood forth as a shining example of self-made intellectual man, as cultured as if he had sprung from a race of scholars, as practical as if he had taken to mills rather than museums.

We entered a handsome white-marble building in the shape of a rectangle, facing the University Library, a building, by the way, which Norton had persuaded several wealthy trustees and other donors to erect. Kennedy at once began examining the section devoted to Latin America, going over everything very carefully.

I looked about, too. There were treasures from Mexico and Peru, from every romantic bit of the wonderful countries south of us-- blocks of porphyry with quaint grecques and hieroglyphic painting from Mitla, copper axes and pottery from Cuzco, sculptured stones and mosaics, jugs, cups, vases, little gods and great, sacrificial stones, a treasure house of Aztec and Inca lore--enough to keep one occupied for hours merely to look at.

Yet, I reflected, following Norton, in all this mass of material, the thief seemed to have selected one, apparently insignificant, dagger, the thing which Norton prized because, somehow, it bore on its blade something which he had not, as yet, been able to fathom.

Though Kennedy looked thoroughly and patiently, it seemed as though there was nothing there to tell any story of the robbery, and he turned his attention at last to other parts of the Museum. As he made his way about slowly, I noted that he was looking particularly into corners, behind cabinets, around angles. What he expected to find I could not even guess.

Further along and on the same side of the building we came to the section devoted to Egyptology. Kennedy paused. Standing there, upright against the wall, was a mummy case. To me, even now, the thing had a creepy look. Craig pushed aside the stone lid irreverently and gazed keenly into the uncanny depths of the stone sarcophagus. An instant later he was down on his hands and knees, carefully examining the interior by means of a pocket lens.

"I think I have made a start," he remarked, rising to his feet and facing us with an air of satisfaction.

We said nothing, and he pointed to some almost undiscernible marks in a thin layer of dust that had collected in the sarcophagus.

"If I'm not mistaken," he went on, "your thief got into the Museum during the daytime, and, when no one was looking, hid here. He must have stayed until the place was locked up at night. Then he could rob at his leisure, only taking care to confine his operations to the time between the rather infrequent rounds of the night watchman."

Kennedy bent down again. "Look," he indicated. "There are the marks of shoes in the dust, shoes with nails in the heels, of course. I shall have to compare the marks that I have found here with those I have collected, following out the method of the immortal Bertillon. Every make of shoes has its own peculiarities, both in the number and the arrangement of the nails. Offhand, however, I should say that these shoes were American-made--though that, of course, does not necessarily mean that an American wore them. I may even be able to determine which of a number of individual pairs of

shoes made the marks. I cannot tell that yet, until I study them. Walter, I wish you'd go over to my laboratory. In the second right-hand drawer of my desk you'll find a package of paper. I'd like to have it."

"Don't you think you ought to preserve the marks?" I heard Norton hint, as I left. He had been watching Kennedy in open-eyed amazement and interest.

"Exactly what I am sending Walter to do," he returned. "I have some specially prepared paper that will take those dust marks up and give me a perfect replica."

I hurried back as fast as I could, and Kennedy bent to the task of preserving the marks.

"Have you any idea who might have an object in stealing the dagger?" Kennedy asked, when he had finished.

Norton shrugged his shoulders. "I believe some weird superstitions were connected with it," he replied. "It had a three-sided blade, and, as I told you, both the blade and the hilt were covered with peculiar markings."

There seemed to be nothing more that could be discovered from a further examination of the Museum. It was plain enough that the thief must have let himself out of a side door which had a spring lock on it and closed itself. Not a mark or scratch was to be found on any of the window or door locks; nothing else seemed to have been disturbed.

Evidently the thief had been after that one, to him priceless, object. Having got it, he was content to get away, leaving untouched the other treasures, some of which were even intrinsically valuable for the metal and precious stones in them. The whole affair seemed so strange to me, however, that, somehow, I could not help wondering whether Norton had told us the whole or only half the story as he knew it about the dagger and its history.

Still talking with the archaeologist, Kennedy and I returned to his laboratory.

We had scarcely reached the door when we heard the telephone ringing insistently. I answered, and it happened to be a call for me. It was the editor of the Star endeavouring to catch me, before I started downtown to the office, in order to give me an assignment.

"That's strange," I exclaimed, hanging up the receiver and turning to Craig. "I've got to go out on a murder case--"

"An interesting case?" asked Craig, interrupting his own train of investigation with a flash of professional interest.

"Why, a man has been murdered in his apartment on Central Park, West, I believe. Luis de Mendoza is the name, and it seems--"

"Don Luis de Mendoza?" repeated Norton, with a startled exclamation. "Why, he was an influential Peruvian, a man of affairs in his country, and an accomplished scholar. I--I--if you don't mind, I'd like to go over with you. I know the Mendozas."

Kennedy was watching Norton's face keenly. "I think I'll go, too, Walter," he decided. "You won't lack assistants on this story, apparently."

"Perhaps you can be of some assistance to them, also," put in Norton to Kennedy, as we left.

It was only a short ride downtown, and our cab soon pulled up before a rather ornate entrance of a large apartment in one of the most exclusive sections of the city. We jumped out and entered, succeeding in making our way to the sixth floor, where Mendoza lived, without interference from the hallboy, who had been completely swamped by the rush that followed the excitement of finding one of the tenants murdered.

There was no missing the place. The hall had been taken over by the reporters, who had established themselves there, terrible as an army with concealed pads and pencils. From one of the morning men already there I learned that our old friend Dr. Leslie, the coroner, was already in charge.

Somehow, whether it was through Kennedy's acquaintance with Dr. Leslie or Norton's acquaintance with the Mendozas and the Spanish tongue, we found ourselves beyond the barrier of the door which shut out my rivals.

As we stood for a moment in a handsome and tastefully furnished living room a young lady passed through hurriedly. She paused in the middle of the room as she saw us and eyed us tremulously, as though to ask us why we had intruded. It was a rather awkward situation.

Quickly Norton came to the rescue. "I hope you will pardon me, Senorita," he bowed in perfect Spanish, "but--"

"Oh, Professor Norton, it is you!" she cried in English, recognizing him. "I'm so nervous that I didn't see you at first."

She glanced from him to us, inquiringly. I recollected that my editor had mentioned a daughter who might prove to be an interesting and important figure in the mystery. She spoke in an overwrought, agitated tone. I studied her furtively.

Inez de Mendoza was unmistakably beautiful, of the dark Spanish type, with soft brown eyes that appealed to one when she talked, and a figure which at any less tragic moment one might have been pardoned for admiring. Her soft olive skin, masses of dark hair, and lustrous, almost voluptuous, eyes contrasted wonderfully with the finely chiselled lines of her nose, the firm chin, and graceful throat and neck. Here one recognized a girl of

character and family in the depths of whose soul smouldered all the passion of a fiery race.

"I hope you will pardon me for intruding," Norton repeated. "Believe me, it is not with mere idle curiosity. Let me introduce my friend, Professor Kennedy, the scientific detective, of whom you have heard, no doubt. This is his assistant, Mr. Jameson, of the Star. I thought perhaps they might stand between you and that crowd in the hall," he added, motioning toward the reporters on the other side of the door. "You can trust them absolutely. I'm sure that if there is anything any of us can do to aid you in--in your trouble, you may be sure that we are at your service."

She looked about a moment in the presence of three strangers who had invaded the quietness of what had been, at least temporarily, home. She seemed to be seeking some one on whom to lean, as though some support had suddenly been knocked from under her, leaving her dazed at the change.

"Oh, madre de Dios!" she cried. "What shall I do? Oh, my father-- my poor father!"

Inez Mendoza was really a pathetic and appealing figure as she stood there in the room, alone.

Quickly she looked us over, as if, by some sort of occult intuition of woman, she were reading our souls. Then, instinctively almost, she turned to Kennedy. Kennedy seemed to recognize her need. Norton and I retired, somewhat more than figuratively.

"You--you are a detective?" she queried. "You can read mystery-- like a book?"

Kennedy smiled encouragingly. "Hardly as my friend Walter here often paints me," he returned. "Still, now and then, we are able to use the vast knowledge of wise men the world over to help those in trouble. Tell me--everything," he soothed, as though knowing that to talk would prove a safety-valve for her pent-up emotions. "Perhaps I can help you."

For a moment she did not know what to do. Then, almost before she knew it, apparently, she began to talk to him, forgetting that we were in the room.

"Tell me how the thing happened, all that you know, how you found it out," prompted Craig.

"Oh, it was midnight, last night; yes, late," she returned wildly. "I was sleeping when my maid, Juanita, wakened me and told me that Mr. Lockwood was in the living room and wanted to see me, must see me. I dressed hurriedly, for it came to me that something must be the matter. I think I must have come out sooner than they expected, for before they knew it I had run across the living room and looked through the door into the den, you call it, over there."

She pointed at a heavy door, but did not, evidently could not, let her eyes rest on it.

"There was my father, huddled in a chair, and blood had run out from an ugly wound in his side. I screamed and fell on my knees beside him. But," she shuddered, "it was too late. He was cold. He did not answer."

Kennedy said nothing, but let her weep into her dainty lace handkerchief, though the impulse was strong to do anything to calm her grief.

"Mr. Lockwood had come in to visit him on business, had found the door into the hall open, and entered. No one seemed to be about; but the lights were burning. He went on into the den. There was my father--"

She stopped, and could not go on at all for several minutes.

"And Mr. Lockwood, who is he?" asked Craig gently.

"My father and I, we have been in this country only a short time," she replied, trying to speak in good English in spite of her emotion, "with his partner in a--a mining venture-- Mr. Lockwood."

She paused again and hesitated, as though in this strange land of the north she had no idea of which way to turn for help. But once started, now, she did not stop again.

"Oh," she went on passionately, "I don't know what it was that came over my father. But lately he had been a changed man. Sometimes I thought he was--what you call--mad. I should have gone to see a doctor about him," she added wildly, her feelings getting the better of her. "But it is no longer a case for a doctor. It is a case for a detective--for some one who is more than a detective. You cannot bring him back, but--"

She could not go on. Yet her broken sentence spoke volumes, in her pleading, soft, musical voice, which was far more pleasing to the ear than that of the usual Latin-American.

I had heard that the women of Lima were famed for their beauty and melodious voices. Senorita Inez surely upheld their reputation.

There was an appealing look now in her soft deep-brown eyes, and her thin, delicate lips trembled as she hurried on with her strange story.

"I never saw my father in such a state before," she murmured. "For days all he had talked about was the 'big fish,' the peje grande, whatever that might mean--and the curse of Mansiche."

The recollection of the past few days seemed to be too much for her. Almost before we knew it, before Norton, who had started to ask her a question, could speak, she excused

herself and fled from the room, leaving only the indelible impression of loveliness and the appeal for help that was irresistible.

Kennedy turned to Norton. But just then the door to the den opened and we saw our friend Dr. Leslie. He saw us, too, and took a few steps in our direction.

"What--you here, Kennedy?" he greeted in surprise as Craig shook hands and introduced Norton. "And Jameson, too? Well, I think you've found a case at last that will baffle you."

As we talked he led the way across the living room and into the den from which he had just come.

"It is very strange," he said, telling at once all that he had been able to discover. "Senor Mendoza was discovered here about midnight last night by his partner, Mr. Lockwood. There seem to be no clues to how or by whom he was murdered. No locks had been broken. I have examined the hall-boy who was here last night. He seems to be off his post a good deal when it is late. He saw Mr. Lockwood come in, and took him in the elevator up to the sixth floor. After that we can find nothing but the open door into the apartment. It is not at all impossible that some one might have come in when the boy was off his post, have walked up, even have walked down, the stairs again. In fact, it must have been that way. No windows, not even on the fire-escape, have been tampered with. In fact, the murder must have been done by some one admitted to the apartment late by Mendoza himself."

We walked over to the couch on which lay the body covered by a sheet. Dr. Leslie drew down the sheet.

On the face was a most awful look, a terrible stare and contortion of the features, and a deep, almost purple, discoloration. The muscles were all tense and rigid. I shall never forget that face and its look, half of pain, half of fear, as if of something nameless.

Mendoza had been a heavy-set man, whose piercing black eyes beetled forth, in life, from under bushy brows. Even in death, barring that horrible look, he was rather distinguished-looking, and his close-cropped hair and moustache set him off as a man of affairs and consequence in his own country.

"Most peculiar, Kennedy," reiterated Dr. Leslie, pointing to the breast. "You see that wound? I can't quite determine whether that was the real cause of death or not. Of course, it's a bad wound, it's true. But there seems to be something else here, too. Look at the pupils of his eyes, how contracted they are. The lungs seem congested, too. He has all the marks of having been asphyxiated. Yet there are no indications on his throat of violence such as would be necessary if that were the case. There could have been no such thing as illuminating gas, nor have we found any trace of any receptacles which might have held poison. I can't seem to make it out."

Kennedy bent over the body and looked at it attentively for several minutes, while we stood back of him, scarcely uttering a word in the presence of this terrible thing.

Deftly Kennedy managed to extract a few drops of blood from about the wound and transfer them to a very small test-tube which he carried in a little emergency pocket-case in order to preserve material for future study.

"You say the dagger was triangular, Norton?" he asked finally, without looking up from his minute examination.

"Yes, with another blade that shot out automatically when you knew the secret of pressing the hilt in a certain way. The outside triangular blade separated into three to allow an inner blade to shoot out."

Kennedy had risen and, as Norton described the Inca dagger, looked from one to the other of us keenly.

"That blade was poisoned," he concluded quietly. "We have a clue to your missing dagger. Mendoza was murdered by it!"

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