

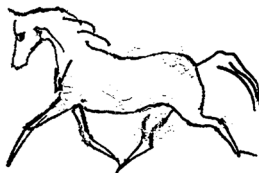
MONTEZUMA'S EMERALD



A Short Story by Gerald W. McFarland

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MONTENZUMA'S EMERALD

SYNOPSIS

Don Carlos Buenaventura, a brujo who has lived many lives, in his present (sixth) life is a resident of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The year is 1706, and Don Carlos is, to all but a handful of close friends, known as Don Alfonso Cabeza de Vaca, born to an aristocratic family, until recently personal secretary to the governor of New Mexico, and now a businessman investing in local real estate. The occasion for the telling of this story is a welcoming-back-to-health gathering for Inéz de Recalde, a woman with whom Carlos has had a challenging relationship that has evolved into love over the past two years. The centerpiece of this tale from Don Carlos's third life¹ is his encounter with Don Malvolio, a malign sorcerer whom Carlos had previously only known as the ancient enemy of the small brotherhood of benign sorcerers, the Sun Moiety, to which Carlos belongs. In *Montezuma's Emerald* Don Carlos meets Don Malvolio in the flesh for the first time, and the enmity between them becomes not abstract but personal, leading Malvolio to relentlessly pursue Carlos through subsequent lives.

1 Editor's note: Readers should bear in mind that our only source of information about the incidents described in *Montezuma's Emerald* is Don Carlos, a lover of tall tales, who was always more interested in conveying the lessons he had learned from his experiences than he was in pinning down precise factual information about them. However, the prevailing consensus among scholars who have studied the matter is that the most important events described in *Montezuma's Emerald* took place early in the first decade of the seventeenth century, probably in 1602 or 1603.

MONTEZUMA'S EMERALD

The happy occasion of Inéz's first night out after a long illness inspired Carlos to tell a story from his third life as a brujo. They had just finished dinner at the home of Pedro and María Gallegos, and Inéz was resting comfortably in a chair padded with blankets and with her feet up on a footstool. Pedro was Carlos's former manservant, and both he and María were privy to Don Carlos's secret identity as a brujo. They were among the few residents of Santa Fe, New Mexico who were aware that the man known within local society as Don Alfonso Cabeza de Vaca, formerly secretary to the governor and now a successful real estate investor, was in fact Don Carlos Buenaventura, a brujo of remarkable powers.

"I would enjoy hearing a story from one of your previous lives," Inéz said. "Didn't you once tell me that your first encounter with your enemy, Don Malvolio, had something to do with Montezuma, the last Aztec ruler?"

"Yes," Carlos replied, "and that's an excellent choice. It's a story that played out, for the most part, in a small place, but it had potential implications on a grand scale of continental power struggles. As background I should remind you that my first life as a brujo, the one in which I received my initial training in sorcery from Don Serafino Romero, took place in the late 1530s in the port city Cartagena in Gran Colombia. By a curious twist of fate that I've told you about in the story I call 'The Witch Doctor,' I began my second life in a most unpromising town, Buenaventura, another Gran Colombian seaport, but on the Pacific Coast and notable for its terrible climate, with high humidity and heavy rain nearly every day. The port was also subject to frequent pirate raids. More unfortunate for me than the climate and the pirate raids was the lack of any mentor with whom to continue my training in the Brujo's Way.

Frustrated by the deficiencies of my training, especially by the lack of any serious rationale for using my powers, I eventually decid-

ed to travel the whole width of the country to seek out Don Serafino, hoping he would still be in Cartagena. But more than twenty years had passed since my death there. When I reached Cartagena after a long and arduous overland journey, I managed to locate Sánchez, an old soldier now in his late fifties, who had been Don Serafino's assistant during my apprenticeship. His first words to me were, "It's about time you showed up. Nine months after your death we began to visit every local woman who had a baby that might be you returning to begin your second life as a brujo. Don Serafino determined that none of them was you, and for all these years we've wondered what became of you."

"And how would Don Serafino know whether a newborn infant was me?"

"I have no idea," Sánchez replied curtly. "As for Don Serafino, you've missed him by only four months. He said he had urgent business that required him to sail for Spain. I haven't heard from him since."

"Did he say when he would return?"

"No. He comes and goes as he pleases. In fact, he didn't say for certain that he was coming back. As you surely realize, he's an old man now, and the day he left for Spain, he looked at me steadily and said, 'Sánchez, I want you to know that I've accomplished everything I've felt a need to do. I have trained apprentices who will carry on my work and have mastered the practice of living with equanimity. If I die while on this trip, I'm quite content to do so without seeking to begin another life.'"

Carlos was shocked and saddened by the possibility that he might never see Don Serafino again. "I was hoping to continue my training," he said.

Sánchez clapped Carlos on the shoulder. "It's too bad your training was cut short by a fatal illness. Don Serafino remarked several times that he thought you had potential for even greater things. But you didn't reappear, and he couldn't wait forever for you to show up. However, he left a message for me to give you, if you ever came back to Cartagena."

Carlos's mood brightened at this news.

Sánchez resumed his account. "I expect you recall that Don Serafino recruited and trained a small group of apprentices approximately every twenty years. If you showed up, he wanted you to track down a brujo from his most recent group of apprentices. This is a

man named Agustin Linares, who has become a Catholic priest and, the last we heard, was living in or near Oaxaca in southern New Spain.”

“A priest?” I said. “But if this man is a student of Don Serafino’s, he’s a brujo.”

“Of course he’s a brujo, but that’s no reason for him not to become a priest. Brujos belonging to Don Serafino’s Sun Moiety lineage are trained to have impeccable ethics, and they are not required to have religious beliefs that would stand in the way of becoming priests.”

I thought about it. “Taking the identity of a priest would,” I agreed, “be a perfect profession through which a brujo could act on behalf of the good by practicing a benign form of sorcery without anyone suspecting that he was also a brujo.”

“Did Don Serafino,” I asked, “explain why I should hunt up Father Agustin?”

“Did you ever know Don Serafino to explain his thinking about anything? He just said that he’d sent Father Agustin to Oaxaca to find the person who had Montezuma’s Emerald.”

“Montezuma? The last emperor of the Aztecs?”

“Yes, and don’t ask me what that’s all about. He muttered something about Montezuma’s ghost, or maybe it was Montezuma’s curse, I’m not sure which. But I got the impression that locating Montezuma’s Emerald was a serious, possibly even dangerous, business and he was worried that Father Agustin might need help.”

“Worried? Because the task might be dangerous?”

“Because Father Agustin, unlike you, lacked skills as a warrior. Don Serafino and I tried tirelessly to teach him fencing, and how to make huge evasive leaps, and how to project blasts of invisible energy, but he failed to master any of those skills useful in combat.”

“Then why did Don Serafino keep him as a student?”

“He had a great talent for healing. Time and time again, just by laying his hands on injured or sick people, he brought them back to health. Don Serafino decided that he was a worthy representative of the Sun Moiety on that count alone. But we knew that if Father Agustin met a violent opponent, he wouldn’t be able to defend himself.”

I chose to stay in Cartagena for a while in hopes that Don Serafino would return. I waited four months in all, using my time to prepare for what Sánchez had said might be a dangerous endeavor. I

found several skilled fencers with whom to practice swordsmanship, something I'd been unable to pursue at a high level in Buenaventura. Soon I was once again in top form. I spent many days roaming the countryside around Cartagena, fine-tuning my technique of transformations. With Sánchez I reviewed what I'd learned from Don Serafino about intense awareness and reading auras. Although he did not consider himself a full-fledged brujo, he had helped Don Serafino train me and Father Agustin and had precise memories of the structure of the training. He also tutored me in what proved to be an exceedingly important skill for meeting the dangers ahead by helping me perfect my ability to project blasts of invisible energy that could knock down or even kill an enemy.

Sánchez finally insisted that I quit stalling. "It's time for you to leave for New Spain," he said, "and find Father Agustin. Don't forget to ask him about Montezuma."

I left Cartagena for Oaxaca in the spring of 1565. I was twenty-five at the time, full of youthful energy and eager for adventure. But fate conspired to delay me for many years from finding Father Agustin and asking him about Montezuma's Emerald, ghost, curse, or whatever it was Don Serafino wanted me to learn.

Before I reached Oaxaca, I was killed in a bizarre accident. I had taken a room in a tiny inn barely two days' travel from Oaxaca. A severe earthquake struck and the walls of the room in which I was sleeping collapsed on me, crushing every bone in my body. I had only the barest moment to prepare to enter the Great Soul Vat with a consciousness of my brujo self, so that I would be reborn with knowledge of my brujo identity and memories of my past lives.

My third life as a brujo began with my birth in a small village near Oaxaca to a generous and loving Indian couple. There's more to be said about them and my youth, but that's another story. Suffice it to say that they soon sensed that I was a brujo and encouraged my practice of the Brujo's Way, or at least what I recalled of it. I enjoyed my life with these dear people, and having forgotten for the moment about Father Agustin—the blow to my head when the inn's walls fell on me probably explains why I failed to remember him—I used my brujo skills to entertain myself, transforming myself into my favorite animal forms—hawks and owls—and further testing my abilities as a shape-shifter by becoming at various times a turtle, a parrot, and a dog. I again took up fencing and once more became a virtuoso practitioner.

"And you probably wooed every pretty girl you met," Inéz said.

"That goes without saying," Carlos admitted with a smile, "though I didn't want to make too much of those dalliances now that my heart belongs to you alone, my dear Inéz."

"Enough," Inéz replied. "Get back to your story."

"You interrupted me," he said mildly. "But to continue. I was in my early thirties before a chance meeting with an itinerant peddler reminded me why I'd come to southern New Spain. This peddler showed me some rough emeralds he wanted me to buy, and the sight of the emeralds brought Father Agustin Linares to mind. Once his name surfaced in my consciousness, I immediately set out for Oaxaca, which was only a short distance from my home village.

Upon reaching Oaxaca, I made inquiries into Father Agustin's whereabouts. Many people with whom I spoke had fond memories of him, and that was all. They claimed they couldn't tell me anything. The answer I received repeatedly was, "He left nearly a year ago, but I don't know where he went."

After a week of fruitless inquiries, including conversations with parish priests and an official of the local diocese, I happened to notice an old nun sweeping a side chapel at the church Father Agustin had once served. I approached her and introduced myself as a student of a teacher of Father Agustin's who had asked me to visit Father Agustin if I ever got to Oaxaca. "Would you know where he's gone?" I asked her.

Passing over my question, she inquired, "What was this teacher's name?"

"Don Serafino Romero."

A smile spread across her face. "Father Agustin often spoke with great affection of Father Serafino, who was, I believe, his confessor when he entered holy orders." (I had never heard Don Serafino referred to as a priest, but I supposed that it wasn't an entirely misleading description of his role as our spiritual mentor.)

I took a chance and said, "When Father Serafino urged me to visit Father Agustin, he particularly wanted me to ask if Father Agustin had learned anything more on the topic of Montezuma's Emerald."

Mention of Montezuma's name changed the tone of our conversation altogether. For reasons that didn't become clear until later,

a look of extreme seriousness came on Sister's face and she whispered to me, "What do you know about Montezuma?"

"Only that he was the last Aztec emperor. The rest I was supposed to learn from Father Agustin." (You'll notice that I was improvising here, but my statement apparently hit its mark.)

"You don't know the Legend of Montezuma's Emerald?" she asked, seemingly surprised at my ignorance.

"No," I said. "Should I?"

She accepted my response with a nod. "What you ought to know," she began, "is that when Montezuma first met Cortés, the Spanish warrior, he thought Cortés might be Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec god who'd left long ago on a raft of snakes, promising to return. Not long after Cortés arrived at Montezuma's court, he gave the emperor a necklace. According to the Legend of Montezuma, this necklace was made of cheap glass beads. Montezuma, not wanting to offend the returned deity, put it on, setting aside his own necklace, which had as its central stone a magnificent, clear, unflawed emerald, so large that it barely fit in a man's hand.

"The night before the fateful day on which he was killed, Montezuma had slept with one of his favorite concubines—he had many concubines and several wives—and gave her his emerald necklace for safekeeping. The Legend says that after her master's death, this concubine—her name is unknown—fled the city with the great emerald and passed it on to her eldest daughter, an offspring of Montezuma's seed."

She paused for a moment, providing an opening to ask a question that had been bothering me. "When I first mentioned Montezuma's Emerald, it seemed to me that a look of alarm came on your face. Although the story you've told me has a sad element, nothing you've said so far seems alarming."

"Perhaps you'll understand when I tell you that various stories circulate about the emerald. Many of them contradict each other, but all of them attribute great powers to it. One story is that if the possessor of the emerald rubs it with oil and says certain words, Montezuma's ghost will appear and grant the person three wishes. Another story has it that if the emerald remains in the hands of descendants of Montezuma, the Native people of what's now called New Spain will some day have the power to free their land from colonial rule. There are other stories too, but all of them agree that it would be exceedingly dangerous to have the emerald fall into the

hands of a person or persons who would misuse that power. Father Agustin believed that such a thing might be about to happen, and he hoped to prevent it."

"So did he have any idea where the emerald is today?" I asked.

"He investigated that question for many years," Sister replied. "Finally, about ten months ago, he said he had met a traveler who told him that a priest in a mission parish in the mountains far south of here might be able to provide some information about the emerald's whereabouts. Shortly after that, he left. It worries me that we haven't heard from Father Agustin since."

"Do you remember the place's name?"

"Chichicastenango."

Thanking Sister profusely, I immediately left Oaxaca for Chichicastenango, not the easiest place to reach. I acquired a horse and rode south for many weeks into a mountainous region marked by the great beauty of its high peaks. At one point the road I was on passed close to an active volcano, a thin stream of smoke coming from its center. Once I reached a still higher elevation, I came to a spot where a landslide had opened a view to the south. Ridge after ridge of mountains stretched out as far as I could see, and many of the highest peaks wore billowing, fog-colored shrouds.

I eventually entered an area in which everyone I met on the road was a Native person. It struck me that Spanish control of the region must be tenuous at best. That impression was confirmed when I reached Chichicastenango. It was a market day. A narrow lane, essentially the only one in town worthy to be called a street, led from the muddy road I'd been following to a church at the other end. Both sides of the lane were crowded with merchants offering many kinds of goods and customers negotiating purchases. Since I was an Indian myself, I had little difficulty mixing into the crowd, and although I lacked the distinctive woven shirt worn by men of the local community, no one paid me much attention. Apparently they were used to travelers coming to town.

I walked to the base of the steep steps that led to the church's front doors and saw clusters of Native people kneeling on the steps, laying out flowers, lighting candles and incense, and reciting prayers. But these were prayers in the local Native dialect to Mayan gods, not prayers in Spanish to a Catholic God. The same situation was evident inside the church. To be sure, a few Christian statues and a crucifix behind the altar indicated that Catholic Mass was offered here,

but the overwhelming impression was that Native belief and Native gods had an equal or even stronger presence in Chichicastenango.

I had no knowledge of the local Indian dialect, but fortunately I soon found a few people who spoke Spanish who told me where I could get something to eat. And within two hours of my arrival, I met a recently married Indian couple who spoke Spanish and whose names were Tito and Victoria Benitez. They were new arrivals in town, having moved from their former village only the previous week to occupy a small plot of land in the hills north of Chichicastenango that had been given them as a wedding present by a distant cousin. Tito was a tall, burly fellow; Victoria slight and quite short, though not unusually so for an Indian woman. It soon became apparent to me that Tito could use help clearing his land, and I asked if I could work for him in return for meals and a roof over my head. We reached an agreement along those lines that was to our mutual benefit.

I waited to ask after Father Agustin until I'd been to Mass at the local church. After attending three Masses during the week I arrived in town, all of which were celebrated by a priest of Native extraction, I began to suspect that Father Agustin, said to be a mestizo, was no longer in Chichicastenango.

My relationship with Tito and Victoria was by now on a firm footing, my standing in their eyes confirmed by my willingness to work hard, the fact that I had a horse, and my readiness to spend some of the pesos I'd brought with me to buy Tito corn and bean seed and a plow for his farm. Their trust emboldened me to ask my question. "In Oaxaca, where I stopped on my way here, an old woman told me to be sure to call on a Father Agustin, who she believed had moved to Chichicastenango, but I haven't seen him when I've gone to Mass."

The Benitezes looked at each other. "We haven't been here long," Tito said. "We don't know him."

I sensed that they were holding something back. "If you don't know him," I asked, "have you perhaps heard his name mentioned?"

Tito and Victoria again exchanged a look. After a long silence, Tito spoke up. "I've heard," he said, "that a mestizo priest named Father Agustin served the parish for half a year. We also heard that just before we arrived here, a man named Don Maximón Marando, the province's chief administrator, came to town with twelve soldiers and arrested Father Agustin for practicing witchcraft. He was taken

to Antigua, the capital city, to be examined for heresy. All the local people were very upset. As you've seen around and in the church, our religious customs are respected by the priests, and the Spanish authorities don't interfere with them. But if Father Agustin's tolerance of our prayers and rituals is considered heresy, we worry that Spanish officials will return and suppress our religious practices."

"From what you heard," I inquired, "did this priest do anyone harm?"

"Quite the contrary," Victoria declared. "We heard that he did many good deeds, healing the sick through prayer and the laying on of hands, and helping to resolve conflicts between husbands and wives who had complaints against each other." This, I thought, certainly sounded like the Father Agustin who was a student of my mentor, Don Serafino Romero.

"That name, Maximón, is a strange one," I observed, implicitly raising a question about it.

"Very strange for a Spaniard," Tito agreed. "It's the name of a Mayan god. People make offerings to him for good fortune, but he is also associated with witchcraft and evil. Sometimes his image takes the place of Judas Iscariot in Holy Week processions."

My eyes widened at this description. It added yet another sinister layer to what had happened to Father Agustin.

I had intended to leave for Antigua the next morning to learn more about Father Agustin's fate, but later that very evening Tito hesitantly approached me about a local problem. It seemed that an Indian crone, who, Tito believed, practiced black magic by casting spells and placing curses on her neighbors, had developed a grievance against a farmer whose farm was next door to the plot of land Tito and I were clearing. The farmer, Juan Alves, had been frightened when he found a dead crow hanging in the doorway to his house, and he had been even more upset when he discovered blood splattered across the path to his shallow well. Soon thereafter he'd become sick.

"This is the sort of thing that Father Agustin would have dealt with," Tito said. "The new priest refuses to intervene."

"I am not a priest," I told him. "But I will see what I can do," and I decided to visit the crone, whose Spanish name was Malena; I never learned her Native name. But before doing so, I went to see the sick farmer and examined the place where blood had been splattered on the path to his well. From the black aura of dark energies

still visible at the spot, it was clear that Malena had used magic to lay a curse on Alves.

I found Alves in his house, looking pale and sickly. "I can return you to good health in no time," I told him, hoping that my positive spirit would counter the effect that Malena's malice was having on him.

He asked, "What can you do? Do you have magic that can match Malena's?"

"Not exactly," I replied evasively. "But if you will lend me a shovel and some buckets, I will remove the blood that she spread across your path."

Although he clearly had doubts about my plan, he told me where to find the items I'd requested. I next went to the path where the blood had been spilled and dug up the blood-stained dirt. Before I was done, I had filled two buckets. "Tell me where this Malena lives," I told him, "and I'll take the blood-stained dirt to her."

He looked nervous, but he gave me good directions. The hut that Malena called her home was barely a mile down the road. I wondered if the real trouble wasn't about land. Perhaps she hoped to drive Alves away and acquire his land at a cheap price.

As I approached the doorway of Malena's house, an old hag stepped out of it and shouted, "Go away! I will do you great harm if you don't leave right now." She was short and thick-set and the expression on her face suggested an ugly disposition. She had several iridescent feathers stuck in her grizzled hair and wore a crow's feather on a cord around her neck.

Without hesitating I went on the offensive, drawing myself up to my full height and glaring at her. "Bah!" I growled. "Your magic is weak. I was able to remove the blood you spread on Señor Alves's path, and I have brought it back to you."

I swung one of the earth-filled buckets threateningly as I kept walking toward her. When I reached the doorway where she was standing, I shoved her aside. She howled in outrage as I dumped both of the buckets of dirt on the floor of her hut. "There!" I declared. "Your blood curse is now on you."

Having the curse turned back on her evidently frightened her, but as she moved away from me she hissed, "You will regret this."

"You are the one who's in danger," I told her sternly. "If you try to harm Alves again, or if you attempt to injure me, your curses will come back on you twofold. The best you can do is to yield to

my greater power. If you do so, I won't spread the word about the weakness of your magic, and since I'm sure you've angered many neighbors over the years, it wouldn't be good for you to have them learn that you are not as powerful as you pretend to be."

I was pleased that my suggestion that her neighbors might gang up on her seemed to give her pause. "If you'll remove this dirt from my house and dump it far away from here," she said, "I'll give Alves no more trouble."

"You'll have to put it back in the buckets yourself," I told her. "And I will take the dirt away only if you answer some questions of mine."

"What questions?"

"I arrived in town only a short time ago. I heard an odd story about a provincial official named Don Maximón, who came to town with soldiers, arrested a priest, and took him off to Antigua. What was that about?"

She gave me a cold stare. "Father Agustin was a heretic. He practiced witchcraft."

"So do you, and from what I've seen," I declared, "everyone in Chichicastenago openly prays to the old gods on the steps of the church and the priests don't object to that."

Her face became, if possible, harder than before and she said nothing.

"So what was the problem?" I insisted. "Are there so many witches in Chichicastenago that this official couldn't arrest all of them, so he arrested Father Agustin as an example?"

"No," she replied. "The priest had a secret Don Maximón wanted to learn."

"What secret?" I asked.

"If I told you what I know," she snapped, "it wouldn't be a secret. You are an outsider, and you have no right to know these things."

I felt a grudging admiration for her refusal to answer my question, and I decided not to press her further. By now she had collected most of the blood-stained dirt, but a few loose clods still lay on the floor. "You've missed some," I pointed out. I bent over to pick up the clods and put them in one of the buckets. She quickly leaned forward and tried to tap me on the top of my head with the crow's feather that was hanging around her neck. I grabbed her wrist and

jerked her off balance. "You could get hurt, very badly hurt," I told her, "if you try something like that again."

"You move more quickly than an ordinary man," she said sourly.

"Who said I was an ordinary man?" I replied with a laugh. "Now I am taking this dirt away. I warn you that if you bother Alves, me, or any friends of mine in the future, you'll suffer serious consequences."

With that threat I left, dumped the bloody dirt a good distance from any house, and went to see Alves. He seemed to be feeling much better and thanked me profusely.

"I have done you a great favor," I said. "Now I am asking for something in return. I have heard that a provincial official arrested the former village priest, Father Agustin, supposedly for witchcraft and heresy, but as far as I can tell, he wasn't any more heretical than everyone else in Chichicastenango. What else was involved?"

Alves looked torn between conflicting emotions, which I took to be a desire to answer his benefactor's question forthrightly and a wish that he hadn't been asked.

"Tell me what's going on," I insisted.

"Some people say," he replied, "that this Don Maximón kept asking about Montezuma's Emerald."

"Montezuma, the last ruler of the Aztec nation?"

"Yes," he said with the greatest reluctance.

"And who was he asking?"

"Some women."

"Women only?"

Alves's obvious discomfort, something resembling abject misery, was written all over his face. "If I tell you what I've heard, will you not reveal where you learned it?"

"All right," I agreed. "I won't tell anyone that you've told me these secrets."

"This Spanish official, Don Maximón, kept asking about Montezuma and his emerald. He even publically tortured several women, had them beaten with whips, shouting that they'd better tell him what they knew or he might have them executed. He questioned only women, which told us that he must know something about our secrets." Alves paused, as though he wished I would disappear.

I prompted him as gently as I could. "Please continue."

"I wouldn't say anything about our secrets," he replied, "except that you saved my life. I'm sure Father Agustin's arrest has something to do with the Legend of Montezuma's Emerald. Like the rest of the men in town I would know nothing about it had my aunt not told me when she was dying, delirious from a high fever. You may not know that the big lake near here, Atitlán, is the center of the universe. All the Indian girls who live in villages on the shores of the lake, as my aunt did when she was young, are told, as soon as they can be trusted with a secret, about Montezuma's Emerald, the power of which is said to underlie the health and well-being of all Indian people. It is entrusted to the care of a young virgin. This Don Maximón must know that a virgin is the guardian and suspect that she lives here, which is why he questioned only women."

"But," I objected, "Chichicastenango is not on the shores of Lake Atitlán."

"That's true," Alves agreed, "and women born in Chichicastenango probably aren't told all the details about the virgin guardian as my aunt was. This Spanish official, Don Maximón, may soon figure that out and begin to search for the emerald in villages closer to Atitlán."

"Where does Father Agustin fit in?" I asked.

"I don't know," Alves replied. "Possibly this Don Maximón assumed that some woman, as part of her confession to Father Agustin, might have mentioned the emerald, perhaps even named the girl who is its present protector. So he arrested our priest and took him to Antigua, where he'll probably be tortured to extract information."

"Ah," I said. "Thank you for telling me. Please be at peace knowing that I am an ally of yours and, as an Indian myself, of all Indian people."

With those words, I left Alves. I was now consumed by an urgent desire to reach Antigua as soon as possible. The fastest way to get there, I knew, would be to transform myself into a hawk and fly overland to the capital. I left my horse with Tito and Victoria, walked into a grove of cypress trees in back of their farm, and, leaving my clothes behind, changed into hawk form. My hope was to locate Father Agustin and find a way to speak with him, assuming he was still alive.

On the way to Antigua I flew over many mountainous valleys, several volcanoes, and dozens of rain-swollen streams. The same trip would have taken me much longer on horseback. Although Antigua

was the regional capital, it was only a small city. But some of the government buildings were handsome enough, their columned arcades a type of architecture I found particularly attractive. I looked for a place to land and begin my search.

"Did you have any sort of plan?" Inéz broke in to ask.

"Not really," Carlos admitted, using the interruption as a chance to refill his wine glass, refresh his throat, and gather his thoughts. "I trusted that opportunity would present itself."

Carlos resumed his narrative. "The first order of business was to find some clothing, since I had to leave my clothes behind." He laughed, and observed, "A hawk can't fly very well wearing a shirt, pants, and boots. Luckily, many peasants on the outskirts of town had left laundry drying outdoors. I helped myself to an outfit to cover my nakedness and stole a pair of sandals from a doorstep, pledging myself to return everything when I left the city.

"My next need was for more information. The problem was how to obtain it. If you want to find out about a priest, I thought, ask a priest or a monk. I went to a Benedictine monastery on the south side of Antigua and told the monk who came to the gate to greet me that I was a wandering seeker named Celino. I said I'd recently spent time at a monastery outside of Oaxaca and was on my way back there after visiting relatives in Chichicastenango. St. Benedict's Rule required monks of the order to offer hospitality to anyone who came to their doors, so your Carlos, alias Celino, now had a roof over his head and a source of regular, albeit frugal, meals.

During the first day at the monastery I joined the resident monks in prayer and did the household chores I was assigned. I enjoyed the routine of monastery life, going regularly to prayers, doing some work, and having time for quiet contemplation. It was a peaceful regime, but I didn't forget my secret purpose.

Late the first afternoon, while helping a young monk, Brother Placid, chop wood, I ventured to ask him, "I wonder if you know anything about a strange story that was circulating in Chichicastenango. People told me that not long ago a Spanish provincial official came to town accompanied by soldiers and arrested Father Agustin, a parish priest who was popular with the local Indians. Have you heard anything about that?"

"Yes," Brother Placid replied, "we heard that story. The priest was accused of heresy and he's been taken before the Inquisition."

"Do you know where he's being held?"

“Not for certain, but he’s probably in the dungeon under the Justice Building. That’s where persons accused of serious crimes are kept.”

Brother Placid and I went back to work without pursuing the topic further, but that night after Compline I slipped out of the monastery and went to the central part of the city, where the Justice Building was located. It wasn’t difficult to recognize, because over the entrance it had a carving of the scales of justice. No one seemed to be around except a porter at the front door. I walked to the back of the building. It didn’t take a sorcerer’s intuition to discern that the high stone wall with sharp spikes on its top enclosed the prison area. I undressed, hiding my sandals and clothes in a drainage ditch, and changed into a small owl. I flew to the top of the wall and saw, across a small courtyard, the back of the Justice Building. The windows in the upper stories were all dark; the only light came from a narrow window that seemed to be set into the foundation. This, I surmised, must be the window of the dungeon.

I flew down to the window, which in addition to being too narrow for anyone but a small child to squeeze through, had an iron grille over it. Nevertheless, I was able to see inside and make out the scene within.

The room, dimly lit by wall sconces, was a torture chamber. A wheel-shaped rack stood at one end of the cell. A blacksmith’s forge in the center had three branding irons heating in bright coals. Whips of various types, bladed instruments for inflicting pain, and hammers for crushing bones were mounted on the walls. There were three men in the room. One, who was handsome and well dressed, I took to be Don Maximón Marando, the provincial official who had ordered Father Agustin’s arrest. He was pacing back and forth along the length of a heavy bench on which was shackled the naked body of a thin man who was almost certainly Father Agustin. This man’s flesh was streaked with welts and blood, his eyes were closed, and it was clear that he was exhausted. The third person in the room was heavily built and well muscled, and from the whip he was holding in his hand I took him to be the torturer.

Don Maximón stopped pacing and looked down at Father Agustin irritably. He said in a loud voice. “For many days now we have tried mild means of persuasion—depriving you of food and sleep, and only occasionally turning to the scourge—in hopes that our kindness would encourage you to cooperate. Today we will put

your feet to the fire. If you do not answer my questions satisfactorily, we will strangle you, and this time we will not stop until you are dead. Is that clear?" Father Agustin did not respond.

Don Maximón glanced at the torturer, who went to the forge and returned with a glowing coal held in a pair of tongs. He pressed the burning coal against the sole of Father Agustin's right foot. A spasm ran through the priest's body but he didn't cry out.

"Answer me!" Don Maximón shouted. "Where is the emerald?" Father Agustin remained silent.

"Again," Don Maximón ordered the torturer, who moved the red-hot coal to another spot on the sole of Father Agustin's foot. The priest's body jerked, but he didn't speak.

"I know you are a brujo," Don Maximón said to him. "Are you using the emerald to enhance your brujo powers? Answer me!" The torturer applied the coal once more. Another twitch, and silence.

Don Maximón paced around the bench again, pondering something. He stopped and addressed the torturer. "Apolinar, I must ask you to leave the room for a moment."

When the door closed behind Apolinar, Don Maximón placed his hand gently on Father Agustin's shoulder and cajoled him in a soft voice. "My informants tell me that you are a student of Don Serafino and that he believed the emerald was in the keeping of a virgin, its powers slumbering. I know he sent you to find it. Did you find it, and awaken it?" Again, Father Agustin made no response.

Don Maximón shook his head. "Agustin, Agustin. Do you know the real nature of the emerald's powers? True, you are only a poor ignorant mestizo and a half-trained priest, but even you must sense the emerald's power. It can make what is above in Heaven answer to that which is here below on Earth. With it in our possession and working together, you and I can do great things, things that the mind of man has until now only dreamed of! Join me in this glorious endeavor, Agustin. Tell me where the emerald is." Bending close to Father Agustin's ear, he whispered, "Tell me!"

I thought I saw Father Agustin's lips move but I couldn't be sure. Then, as if the words had been somehow amplified, I seemed to hear Father Agustin say, "The emerald will consume you."

"Enough!" Don Maximón bellowed. "Apolinar, come in here!"

The door opened at once, as if Apolinar had been listening outside. Don Maximón glared at him. "The priest knows nothing! Put an end to him!"

The torturer went to the wall, took down a thin cord and a club and approached Father Agustin. He struck the priest's head a heavy blow that would have rendered him unconscious if he wasn't already so. Then he slipped the cord around Father Agustin's neck, crossed its ends, and twisted it fiercely.

I turned away from the sight. Although I did not see whether or not Father Agustin's soul had remained conscious and escaped intact as his body died, I doubted that it had. I was certain that he was unconscious when Apolinar garroted him. As for the last words I thought I'd heard him whisper to Don Maximón, I couldn't be sure that I had not simply imagined them in my head.

My fears were confirmed when I looked up and heard Don Maximón say, "There is no doubt that he died unconscious and that his soul did not escape aware of itself. He will not be reborn to bother us again. Count this day as a triumph because one less member of Serafino's little band is alive."

"Do you think," Apolinar asked, "that you've eliminated the last member of Don Serafino's Sun Moiety?"

Maximón laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure. Regardless, they are few in number to begin with, and every one we catch and kill is a heavy blow to them. There may be one or two left, but they are difficult to track down. Serafino is wily in his way, having dispersed his apprentices to widely separated places."

Apolinar's next statement sent a jolt through my body, although, given their preceding references to the hoped-for elimination of the Sun Moiety, it should have dawned on me sooner who Maximón really was. "Don Malvolio," Apolinar inquired, "may I ask what you intend to do now? I am, as always, at your service."

Maximón was annoyed. "Do not," he said coldly, "ever speak my secret name again. To you and everyone else I am Maximón. Forget that at your peril. As for what comes next, this foolish man led us to Chichicastenango and revealed to us the strong likelihood that Montezuma's Emerald is hidden in that town or nearby. We will return there to pursue our search in a rigorous way. We begin with the knowledge that the emerald was passed from Montezuma's favorite concubine to her daughter and down through the years to a succession of young women. Also, we know that the ones who are responsible for the jewel's safekeeping must be virgins—Virgin Guardians, they call themselves. Their never having expressed their female en-

ergies by lying with a man is crucial to keeping the emerald's great power dormant."

"And you, Master," Apolinar said, "have no intention of leaving those powers dormant."

"Certainly not!" Maximón exclaimed. "I look forward to the day when I hold Montezuma's Emerald in my hand and feel its power flowing into my body and mind. Remember how the Legend goes. Montezuma had been a great conqueror. He had extended the Aztec kingdom farther than any of his predecessors, and the emerald's powers underlay his success. When he set it aside to wear the shabby necklace that Cortés had given him, his own powers shrank drastically, and it was in that weakened condition that either the Spanish or the Aztecs—no one knows which—killed him. When I hold the great jewel in my hands, all it will take to make men, women, and even nations bend to my wishes will be for me to command them to do so in my mind's eye; nothing more than my thoughts will be required to have my will be done."

Maximón paused, and inhaled deeply. Apolinar took a small step backward. As if grasping for something to say, he asked, gesturing to Father Agustin, "What shall I tell the guards to do with this failed brujo?"

"Tell them to throw his corpse into the city's garbage pit to be food for the dogs. You and I, together with two dozen mounted soldiers, will be on our way at dawn to Chichicastenango to find the virgin who guards Montezuma's Emerald."

As a comrade of Father Agustin in the Sun Moiety, I was faced with a problem: how to be in two places at once. All my training had emphasized that the body of a dead brujo must be treated with the utmost respect. For me to show respect for Father Agustin, I would have to stay until the guards took the dead man's body to the city's garbage dump. Then I would need to find a way to retrieve it and give Father Agustin a decent burial.

But I'd also heard Maximón tell Apolinar that they were to leave for Chichicastenango at dawn. If I didn't leave Antigua soon, they would reach Chichicastenango to begin whatever mischief they intended before I could get back there.

I decided that giving Father Agustin a decent burial took precedence over anything else, and I figured out how to eliminate the necessity of waiting for the guards to remove Agustin's body. I returned to human form and went back to my lodgings at the Bene-

dictine abbey. The brothers were just getting up for Matins, the first office of the day, which took place at three in the morning. As soon as the service ended, I stepped forward and asked to speak with Reverend Father Sebastian, the abbey's prior. "I have learned," I explained, "that the body of a priest, Father Agustin of Oaxaca and Chichicastenango, who died last night after being charged with heresy and tortured—a charge to which he did not confess because it was untrue—is to be dumped into the city garbage pit later today and left to be eaten by dogs. Would you find it in your heart, out of respect for a fellow religious, to go to the prison at the Justice Building and ask for Father Agustin's body? Our Lord Jesus Christ was also executed as a criminal; yet the Roman authorities allowed his friends to give him a decent burial."

"Celino," Reverend Father replied, "we are careful not to annoy the authorities, but what you've suggested is consistent with our mission in the world. Are you suggesting that we speak with Don Maximón Marando, the chief administrator of the province?"

"That won't be necessary, or even possible," I said, "I've heard that he's leaving Antigua at dawn and has ordered the captain of the guards to take care of disposing of Father Agustin's remains."

"You seem very well informed," Father Sebastian remarked, "but I won't ask how you've learned these details. If you'll let me know as soon as Don Maximón leaves town, I will lead a delegation of monks to the prison after Lauds. I'm sure the guards, some of whom have friendly relations with the monastery, will honor our request."

Father Sebastian's surmise proved correct. The guards were glad not to make a trip to the city garbage pit and turned Father Agustin's corpse over to us. Once we'd taken Father Agustin's body back to the monastery, I assisted in the ritual of washing and anointing his corpse. Brother Placid and I then dug a grave for him in the monastery's cemetery and joined in the prayers led by Father Sebastian as we laid our priestly friend to rest.

Late that afternoon I spoke with Father Sebastian again. "Urgent business requires that I leave early tomorrow," I told him. "I am deeply grateful to you and your fellow monks for your hospitality and for helping me give Father Agustin an appropriate burial."

"You needn't answer, if you don't wish to," he said, "but I don't know anything of your relationship to Father Agustin."

"The less you know," I replied, "the better for me and possibly for you and the monks, especially if Don Maximón investigates how all this came about. For your ears only let me say that I came to Chichicastenango with a message from a mutual friend of mine and Father Agustín's. I deeply regret not having been able to deliver the message, especially due to the circumstances that prevented me from doing so."

Father Sebastian did not press me for more information, and after exchanging warm words of friendship, we each went about our appointed tasks. The next morning, shortly after dawn, I stealthily returned the clothes and sandals I'd purloined from various locations, changed into hawk form, and flew to Chichicastenango. Once I arrived at the cypress grove where I'd left my clothes, I changed into human form, dressed, and walked into town.

Don Maximón and his soldiers had made excellent time. I arrived at the town center to find that the normal market day had been disrupted by orders from Maximón. He had instructed his soldiers to herd all the shoppers and merchants up the street to the steps of the church. The soldiers then fanned out through the town and rounded up everyone else they found and brought them to the market area. I had been watching from a side street and was also caught in this roundup.

Soon all the residents of the town and many out-of-town visitors who had come to Chichicastenango for market day were assembled in front of the parish church. Don Maximón took a position at the top of the steps of the church and signaled for silence. "We, as provincial authorities and soldiers, have returned because we have not yet learned the whereabouts of the stolen treasure known as Montezuma's Emerald. We are going to conduct a house-to-house search of your homes. This will not be necessary, however, if someone will step forward and claim the very large reward we are offering for information leading to the recovery of this stolen jewel."

Maximón paused. No one stepped forward. "Very well," he went on. "Know that you have brought this on yourselves. Now each family is to choose one female member to assist my soldiers in searching her house. Every other man, woman, and child must remain here in the plaza until every house has been searched. Resistance will meet with forceful punishment. If the emerald is found, those in whose house it was discovered will wish they had aided us. The eldest man or woman in such a household will be taken to

Antigua and jailed until he or she rots and dies. All property of such criminals will be confiscated, and their houses razed. Everyone else in the household will be left with only the clothes on their backs, and anyone offering them food and shelter will also have their possessions confiscated.”

Since I had been staying with Tito and Victoria Benitez, I had to remain in the plaza while Victoria went to the Benitez house and watched as the soldiers searched it. I later learned that the soldiers were thorough, and destructive. They tore open straw-filled mattresses and spilled the stuffing around. They broke pots and ripped up floorboards (in the few houses that had board floors) and generally made a mess of every house. They also helped themselves to jewelry and money. I felt deeply resentful of these Spanish oppressors, but nothing practical could be done.

Back in the plaza conditions were truly miserable. People had to sit on the ground, and when it poured rain, as it did twice, the ground became mud and everyone was soaked to the skin. A shallow latrine was dug by men from the waiting group and people went off to it under the watchful eye of a guard who was posted there. Tito introduced me to some of his neighbors, who remained remarkably cheerful throughout. “They won’t find anything,” one commented, “because this famous jewel is a legend, not a reality.”

I mulled over some curious thoughts. I wondered what Don Serafino’s purpose had been in sending Father Agustin to locate Montezuma’s Emerald, and what he wanted of me when he sent me to find Father Agustin. Now that I knew what a powerful object this jewel was said to be, I began to wonder if Don Serafino had wanted it to empower his Sun Moiety of brujos. We were so few in number that I had often felt it was a form of profound delusion to think that we could make much of a difference in the world. But if Don Serafino had gained possession of the jewel, and if what Don Malvolio had said about its powers was correct, then my old mentor could have achieved great positive changes in the world simply by holding the jewel in his hand and thinking benign thoughts.

Or did he perhaps only want to prevent Don Malvolio from obtaining the emerald and using its powers to establish his domination over men, women, and even nations? I wasn’t sure what to think, and I certainly didn’t know what to do.

As I scanned the crowd in the plaza, my eyes kept coming back to a little Indian girl of six or seven. Perhaps it was just that

she was extremely pretty and seemed to radiate innocence and love toward everyone around her. As a consequence, she received hugs, kisses, and approving looks from many people. I noticed, too, that she was hiding something under her skirt, and now that I'd noticed it I remembered seeing her earlier with a stuffed doll in her hand. She obviously didn't want the doll to come to the attention of the soldiers, especially after reports began to filter back of searches in which everything of the sort had been torn apart.

I gradually made my way to her side. "Hello," I ventured, and was rewarded with a shy smile. I asked her name in the local language, in which I was already becoming fluent, but she said nothing. "My name is Carlos Buenaventura," I said, and, making a joke of my surname, I added, "but this isn't a very good adventure."

She smiled and replied, "I'm Alejandra."

An older woman rushed over to the child's side, not at all happy about our exchange. The woman put her hand on the child's shoulder and said, "Don't speak with strangers, Alejandra."

The child gave me a wary look and told the woman, "I'm sorry, Abuela."

I apologized and moved away.

Despite searching until the sun was about to set, the Spaniards failed to find Montezuma's Emerald. "You didn't find it," one brave man shouted, "because it's not here. You're chasing a phantom." A soldier rewarded the man for his outburst with a sharp blow to the ribs with the side of a broadsword.

Don Maximón again mounted the stairs. "We have not yet found the stolen jewel. Most of you will now be allowed to return to your homes and normal routines, but, because you've been uncooperative, there's a condition. You must turn over to us twelve young women who are virgins. We will hold them prisoner until someone, either openly or anonymously, tells us the location of Montezuma's Emerald."

A murmur of dismay ran through the crowd. Spanish soldiers were notorious for their abuse of Native women. Leaving twelve Indian virgins under the control of Spanish soldiers could only arouse horrific imaginings in the minds of the people. The crowd was growing restive, and the Spanish soldiers grouped themselves at the top of the church steps with their weapons at the ready. Tito, with whom I had earlier discussed the meaning of the name Maximón, leaned over and whispered to me. "One of the stories," he said, "about the

god Maximón is that he's lustful. It's said that he once raped every woman in a village while their menfolk were away in the fields. Having someone named Maximón in command of Spanish soldiers who are supposed to guard our young women is extremely worrisome."

I began to search my mind frantically for any way that I could use my brujo powers to disrupt the situation. My fear was occasioned by the possibility that Maximón/Malvolio's powers as a sorcerer would enable him to identify me as the source of any disruption that occurred. I had to act with great caution.

One brujo technique I'd learned was the capacity to strike an opponent with a blast of energy that looked like a lightning bolt. The dense clouds looming over us made it possible that such an event might be interpreted as a natural occurrence. Still, the timing and target had to be well chosen. I held back, waiting for the right moment.

Maximón unwittingly gave me my opportunity. He raised his voice and commanded the crowd, "Bring every virgin in the plaza forward and do so immediately!" This demand prompted an Indian woman on the side of the steps away from me to wail and faint. Everyone looked in her direction. That was all I needed.

I brought a burst of lightning down on the side of the steps closest to me. A small cluster of candles and flower offerings that had been placed on the spot burst into flame and pieces of debris flew in every direction, along with an impressive billowing cloud of smoke. Panic swept through the crowd, most of whom started running away from the place where my energy-bolt had struck. The Spanish soldiers' control over the crowd broke down completely. I joined in the general retreat and was pleased to see that the soldiers who'd been standing near me had backed away from the place where my lightning bolt had hit. Maximón/Malvolio was furious, shouting orders that couldn't be heard over the din and searching the scene with his eyes to try to find out what had happened. I ducked my head and positioned myself in the middle of the crowd so that I wouldn't be in his line of sight.

Chaos reigned. I heard many people in the fleeing crowd calling to one another that they were leaving town, escaping into the countryside or taking roads that led away from Chichicastenango. "The Spanish are few in number," one man shouted. "They can't catch many of us." I hoped he was right, but I was apprehensive about what a very angry Maximón/Malvolio might do. Perhaps,

I thought, my intervention had been unwise and would have very negative consequences for innocent people.

I hurried to the Benitez house, found my horse where I'd left her, and rode back toward the church. My goal was to identify myself as being from out of town and appearing to be just an ordinary Indian. I thought all the gloomy thoughts I could summon, hoping that they would change my aura to a dull brown that was common among many of the less healthy local residents. If this worked, there would be nothing in my aura that Maximón/Malvolio could recognize as a brujo's.

Maximón/Malvolio was standing on the church steps, angrily berating his minions. The soldiers cowered abjectly, and even Apolinar looked ill at ease.

I rode to the bottom of the church steps, dismounted, bowed my head as a show of respect, and said, "Honored Sirs. May I ask for your instructions?"

"You aren't to speak to me unless spoken to," Maximón/Malvolio barked, scarcely glancing in my direction.

I stood silent. "What do you want?" Apolinar asked.

"I am a visitor in town," I replied. "May I have permission to go to my temporary place of lodging?"

"Go on!" Maximón/Malvolio said dismissively. "But don't leave town without our consent." I went on my way confident that Maximón/Malvolio had no reason to connect me with the lightning-bolt incident. I also resolved not to test my luck too often.

The central part of Chichicastenango remained eerily quiet for the rest of that day and into the next. A few people drifted back, but many seemed to have left town altogether. As far as I could tell the choice to leave or stay depended mainly on how many animals—pigs, chickens, goats, and burros—one owned. Among those who had many domestic animals, at least one member of the family stayed around. My hosts, Tito and Victoria, had both remained because Tito had a great deal of work to do on his land to have it ready for planting season. I rode back to their place and told them I would stay to help.

Days passed. As I broke up clods, tore out brush, and helped Tito burn debris that we piled on the edge of his gradually expanding plot of cleared land, my mind kept drifting back to the little girl, Alejandra, whom I'd been drawn to in the crowd. From somewhere in the distant past I remembered that the name Alejandra was said to

mean protector. Was that significant or a simple coincidence? All I could say for sure was that she had been hiding something under her skirt the day the soldiers were searching everyone's houses.

Then I remembered something else. All residents of a particular town wore woven shirts and blouses made in the same colors and patterns. I hadn't placed any importance on it the day I'd first seen her, but now I remembered that Alejandra's blouse was of a different design and color than the ones typically worn by Chichicastenango residents. I described what I'd seen to Victoria, and she recognized the town that it indicated Alejandra was from.

"That's the style worn in Tito's and my former town, Sololá," she replied. "Tito and I have switched to wearing the Chichicastenango pattern now that this is our home. Sololá is a beautiful place. It's located on mountain slopes on the north side of Lake Atitlán and has a magnificent view of the lake and the deep valley it's in."

"Do you know a young girl named Alejandra?"

"Yes, I know who you mean; such a pretty little child, and inseparable from that doll she carries everywhere. She and her grandmother, whom Alejandra and everyone else calls Abuela, live in a house a mile to the north of Sololá. They come to Chichicastenango every market day to sell baskets that the grandmother makes."

"I saw Alejandra in the crowd in front of the church the other day, but I didn't notice that she was holding a doll."

"I'm surprised if that's the case," Victoria said. "I've never seen her without it."

"It's possible," I said, "that she was hiding it under her skirt."

"That's it!" Victoria exclaimed. "She must have heard that horrible Spanish official, Don Maximón, ordering his men to tear apart everyone's possessions to search for Montezuma's Emerald."

"Do you believe that the Legend is true and that the emerald might be here, as Don Maximón seems to believe?"

Victoria hesitated a moment before answering and then, without looking me directly in the eye, said, "Who can say what is true? Legends are powerful. But Chichicastenango, a Mayan town, strikes me as an odd place for an Aztec treasure to be found. Could it be here? I have no idea."

I sensed that she did have an idea, but I didn't press the point. "Then," I continued, "here's a question I'm sure you can answer. What day of the week is market day in Sololá?"

"Tomorrow, Tuesday. If you're going there, I have a small package I'd like you to deliver to Tito's mother. Señora Benitez sells sandals; she'll be running the only booth with sandals on display, so she won't be difficult to find." I was glad to have a reason to leave town that might pass muster with Maximón/Malvolio.

Frustrated that so many local residents had gone into hiding, Maximón/Malvolio had changed his tactics for questioning women about Montezuma's Emerald. Instead of requiring townspeople to turn over a dozen virgins to his soldiers, he asked the village priest to give him a list of all the unmarried women between twelve and twenty—not that there was any guarantee that they'd be virgins, but that was the group he identified as most likely to fit the Legend's description of the emerald's caretaker. He had only yesterday started questioning the young women on his list one by one.

On Tuesday morning I saddled my horse and rode toward the church at the end of Chichicastenango's only street to get Maximón/Malvolio's permission to go to Sololá. He emerged from the church at the very moment I reached its steps. Before I could speak, he shouted, "Hey you! Come over here and answer my questions."

I reined in my horse, dismounted, and addressed him respectfully. "What would you like to know, Excellency?"

"You told me that you're a visitor in town. What's your business here?"

My reply was an elaborate combination of fact and fiction. "I came here," I said, "because I heard that Chichicastenango is a village in which Mayan religion is still alive and practiced by many. Although I was raised a Catholic, my parents were of Mayan ancestry, and I came here in hopes that I could learn more about Mayan worship."

As he asked me his next question—"Did you have some notion of seeking Montezuma's Emerald?"—his eyes narrowed and he watched me closely.

"Truthfully, Your Excellency, I'd never heard of it until I heard you speaking about it at the public gathering that ended so suddenly."

"Very well," he said, almost disappointed, it seemed to me. "Go on your way."

"I hope I have your permission to go to market day at Sololá today. I promise to return by nightfall."

"Go!" he said, turning away from me.

The market at Sololá was bustling with vendors and shoppers when I arrived in the town at noon, the time signaled by the local church's bells ringing out the hour. I left my horse with a young boy who was sitting near the town fountain, promising to pay him well if he saw that she got enough water. I had no trouble finding Tito's mother and gave Señora Benitez the package Victoria had asked me to deliver to her. I told her that her son and daughter-in-law were in good health and, with some help from me, were making excellent progress clearing their land.

"But isn't there a lot of trouble at Chichicastenango?" she asked. "Some of us who go there for market day once a month have decided to avoid the place."

"That's probably wise. A provincial official has arrived to conduct an investigation based on his belief that someone locally may be hiding a jewel known as Montezuma's Emerald. I'm just a visitor in town but he stopped me in the street this morning and questioned me briefly."

Shaking her head, she commented, "The Spanish conquerors have always been after Native treasures, and this man must be upset that they can't find this valuable jewel."

There wasn't anything more to say, so I excused myself and crossed the plaza to a booth next to which I'd noticed Alejandra standing. She was looking very appealing in the colorful blouse worn locally. She was holding a small stuffed doll about eight inches high that was dressed in a tiny outfit identical to her own. "Good afternoon, Alejandra," I said. "Do you remember me from Chichicastenango?"

"Oh yes," she replied. "You're the stranger who made lightning strike the soldiers."

An extremely observant child, I thought to myself. Aloud I said, "Don't I wish I had that capacity! Those Spaniards were being very bad, weren't they?"

Before she could answer, her grandmother stepped between us. "Alejandra, you shouldn't speak with strange men without my permission."

The youngster responded contritely, "Yes, Abuela."

I hurried to apologize. "I didn't mean to give offense. I am living with Tito and Victoria Benitez, and Victoria told me she knew you from when they lived here. I had a package to deliver to Tito's

mother, and I stopped to say hello to Alejandra because we met in the midst of all that trouble caused by that Spaniard's bad behavior."

She eyed me suspiciously. "Yes, now that you mention it I remember that you spoke with Alejandra then. I also notice that just now you didn't show respect for an important official by referring to him by his proper title, Don Maximón."

"I suppose," I said, "it is foolish for an Indian to say so, but from what little I've seen of his actions, he doesn't deserve respect."

She nodded, but didn't say anything, so I plunged ahead. "I wonder whether you ever met or heard of Father Agustin Linares. I came to Chichicastenango in hopes of meeting him, only to find that he'd been arrested and taken to Antigua. I went to Antigua and learned that he'd died in prison."

"Ah," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Father Agustin was a good man. He respected Mayan religious practices. He came to Chichicastenango not long ago. Perhaps he had heard about Montezuma's Emerald and thought it might be hidden in this region. As you and I saw in Chichicastenango yesterday, that kind of rumor always causes bad things to happen. Don Maximón's brutality is only the latest example."

"I gather you don't believe the Legend of Montezuma's Emerald."

"Faugh!" she exclaimed. "It's only a story. Even if Montezuma had such a jewel, he was an Aztec, an enemy of our people, the Mayans. In this village we are K'aqchikel Mayans. We have nothing to do with the Aztecs."

"That fact," I suggested, "might make hiding the jewel among supposed enemies a very clever thing for Montezuma's concubine to do."

My mention of Montezuma's concubine caused Abuela to frown. "Who told you about the concubine?"

"While we were crowded together outside the church in Chichicastenango, I overheard a man say that according to the Legend, Montezuma left the emerald with his favorite concubine after he'd chosen instead to wear a cheap necklace made of glass beads that the Spanish had given him. I also heard that Montezuma's powers weakened as soon as he ceased wearing the emerald, and that after his death the concubine carried the emerald off, hid it, and later passed it on with a spell or curse, requiring that it be guarded by a young female virgin."

"That is only part of the curse," she declared. "The other part is that it must be kept out of the hands of men because they would try to use it to acquire power over men, women, and even nations." (That was the third time I'd heard the phrase 'men, women, and even nations', which suggested that it was an authentic part of the Legend.)

As I talked with Abuela, I was experiencing strange sensations. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the doll Alejandra was holding. I didn't have the ability to see through walls or even cloth, but I was able to detect energy emanating from hidden objects, and I definitely felt a strong pull coming from something hidden inside Alejandra's doll. The object radiated subtle energies that had grown increasingly more intense as I conversed with Abuela about Montezuma's Emerald. Was it possible, I wondered, as I had done earlier, that Alejandra, a girl whose name meant 'protector', was the guardian of Montezuma's Emerald?

Thoughts again raced through my head about all the good things I could do if I had the emerald. I could stop Malvolio's dark plots; I could right many wrongs—all, if the Legend were to be believed—simply by holding the jewel in the palm of my hand and projecting the thought that human beings treat each other compassionately. I'd never before been overcome by such longing, except, perhaps, in the first days of infatuation with a new love. So intense was my desire to possess the jewel that my hand began twitching slightly, as though it was preparing to act on its own, reaching out and grabbing the doll from the little girl.

At that very moment, Alejandra piped up, "Abuela, my doll is getting hot. She has a fever and it's getting worse and worse."

"We're going home, Alejandra," Abuela said, taking Alejandra's free hand and pulling the child into a position in back of her skirts. She gave me a sharp glance. "My granddaughter," she declared, "believes that you called down the lightning-bolt that held off Don Maximón and his soldiers long enough for us to flee from Chichicastenango. From that, I assumed you were his enemy, but you seem to have followed us here. What motive do you have for doing so?"

"None," I stammered. "Our meeting here is purely coincidental," although of course it was not. Still, I sincerely believed that I had good motives.

"If that's true," Abuela replied, "then you won't follow us now. Go back to Chichicastenango and don't return here." And she turned away from me. Dragging Alejandra along, she went down a lane that led away from the town plaza.

Looking back on what I did next, I can scarcely believe I was so dishonorable. Every bone in my body was crying out that I should follow the grandmother and the child. In response to this feeling, I created rationalizations for my actions. I could, I reasoned, protect Alejandra and the emerald only if I knew where she lived. The emerald's protector needed a protector. Malvolio would find her eventually, I concluded, and if the emerald fell into his hands, he would use it to cause great harm in the world.

Without questioning my motives further, I stepped into an alleyway out of sight of the market, took off my clothes and boots, and hid them in a woodpile. Then I changed myself into a nondescript brown dog, and trotted off in the direction that Abuela and Alejandra had taken.

It wasn't long before I saw them ahead, walking on a narrow path that led steadily up the side of the mountain. Soon a tiny house came into view. Abuela and Alejandra went inside. I had been hanging back, but I knew this was the crucial moment. If I made the wrong move, Abuela would drive me off.

The solution to my dilemma came in the form of a large rat that emerged from under the house. Alejandro saw it from a window. "Abuela!" she cried. "The rat has been stealing corn again!"

I leaped forward—it was a good thing neither Abuela nor Alejandra was in a position to see me jump because I crossed the distance more quickly than a normal dog could have done—and grabbed the rat. I shook it vigorously and broke its back. Abuela emerged from the house, and I went over to her and dropped my trophy at her feet. Alejandra came out too and exclaimed, "What a fine dog! That was such a big rat."

Abuela wasn't immediately won over. "Have you ever seen this dog before, Alejandra?" she asked.

"He looks like all the other dogs in towns around here," Alejandra replied, and when I lay down beside her and rolled over to present my belly for her to rub, she added, "Nice doggy!"

Throughout this whole episode, Alejandra had kept a firm grip on her doll. I felt an urgent desire to reach out and sniff the

doll, but I had the good sense to realize that doing so would have put Abuela, and perhaps Alejandra too, on guard. So I bided my time.

Alejandra brought me a bowl of water, which I lapped enthusiastically. She threw a stick of wood down the path, and I bounded after it, picked it up, and brought it back to her. "Oh! Smart dog!" she cried. "Abuela, can we keep him? I've never had a dog."

Too wise to accept or reject this proposal out of hand, Abuela said, "First, we'll need to take him to town and ask if he belongs to anyone. Come in and have some lunch. Is your doll any cooler?"

Alejandra frowned. "Not much. All that excitement must have alarmed her." Abuela did not look comforted by this news. I lay down near the doorstep and did my best to look friendly and harmless.

The trouble was that the minute I wasn't actively engaged in catching a rat or retrieving a stick, I was beset by a desire to see and hold Montezuma's Emerald, which I believed was concealed in Alejandra's doll. The same thoughts kept racing through my head over and over again. I could do so much good if I had this remarkable jewel in my possession. If I had it, Malvolio—I was now thinking of the sorcerer solely by his secret name—would not. And so on until I was almost dizzy.

After eating her lunch Alejandra came out and sat down next to me. She petted me and told me what a remarkably brave and wonderful dog I was. I admit that I found her flattery exceedingly pleasing. However, despite the fact that she let me put my head in her lap, she retained a habit of wariness. She kept her doll safely out of my reach. Once when I leaned over a little closer to the doll, she adjusted her position to move it away from me.

How I longed to grab the doll and run off with it! I was so close to it that I almost dissolved into whimpering, so much did I desire it. I pretended to sniff the doll at a distance and detected heat coming from it. I leaned forward a few inches, and Alejandra stopped me by putting her hand gently but firmly on my snout. "No, Doggy," she said. "You must not even think of sniffing or touching my doll."

I have no idea what I might have done next because I never got a chance to find out. My ears shot up at the sound of footsteps coming toward Abuela's house. I jumped up and trotted over to the path to see who was on it.

The sight that greeted my eyes could not have been more alarming. Approaching at a brisk pace on foot were Don Malvolio and his minion, Apolinar. Either they'd intuited that Alejandra's doll

was something they wanted, or someone else, perhaps under torture, had divulged information that led them to this little house in the hills above Sololá.

I barked loudly, which brought Abuela to the hut's door. Immediately upon seeing the approaching men, she whispered urgently to her granddaughter, "Alejandra, go to your hiding place!" Alejandra jumped up, dived into the house, and disappeared. Moving so quickly that Abuela didn't have a chance to stop me, I pushed past the old woman into the house. The light inside was dim, but my nose told me that Alejandra was hiding somewhere behind a blanket that was hanging over an alcove.

I went over to Abuela, who was still standing defensively in the doorway. I took her skirt in my teeth and tugged hard, trying to pull her inside. After some brief flustered resistance, she seemed to understand and moved quickly inside the house. Stepping fully into the doorway, I changed into human form.

The element of surprise worked to my advantage as Malvolio and Apolinar saw a naked man suddenly appear in a doorway previously occupied by an old woman and a nondescript brown dog. The sight stopped them in their tracks.

The first order of business, as I saw it, was to dispose of Apolinar, and I stepped out of the doorway and sent the strongest blast of invisible energy I could muster at him. He was thrown back into a large boulder he'd passed only a few steps earlier. If he wasn't dead, he would at least remain unconscious for some time. Malvolio was buffeted slightly by the energy blast and it took him a few seconds—though that was all—to size up the situation.

My hope was to draw him away from the house. With a great leap I pitched myself about twenty feet into a nearby clump of pine trees. Malvolio swung around and sent a bolt of sorcerer's energy in my direction, shattering a tree next to me into small shreds. I replied in kind, but he was incredibly quick of foot and managed to avoid its main force. He hurled another bolt of energy at me, but this time I was better prepared and responded with a technique that Sánchez and I had practiced—bolts of invisible energy had been Sánchez's main brujo-like skill—of putting up a shield that threw the approaching bolt back at its source. I caught Malvolio by surprise the first time, but either he'd known the same technique all along or intuited how it worked, because he did the same to me the next time

I struck at him. Bolts of energy flew back and forth, accompanied by loud sounds not unlike thunder.

I was getting nowhere in my attack, so after sending one more energy bolt back at him, I jumped behind the boulder against which Apolinar was slumped and, with a huge effort, rolled it toward Don Malvolio. I wasn't surprised when he deftly leapt out of its way, but as I had hoped, its approach distracted him momentarily, allowing me to hurl a rock about the size of a man's head at him. That missile caught him in the side and caused him to groan in pain.

But he was far from defeated, and I saw no way to press my advantage, slight as it was. For at least a half hour we continued to hurl lightning bolts, large boulders, and fallen tree limbs at each other. Both of us suffered cuts and bruises. It was a stalemate, neither of us able to gain a clear advantage.

My greatest skill as a brujo then as now was in transformations, and as the battle raged on I kept asking in the back of my mind if there was any way I could use a transformation to disable and kill Malvolio. Nothing came to mind. I felt myself tiring, even as Malvolio seemed to be as strong as ever.

I had been trying to stay away from Abuela's house, but now I moved toward it and dived inside through a window. As I did so I glimpsed Malvolio's face and saw a look of satisfaction come on it. He stepped forward, approaching the house in a watchful way. I guessed—actually, it would be more accurate to say that I hoped—he would use an energy bolt to smash the front wall of the house. I crawled to the middle of the room and prepared for his next move.

A moment later I saw that he was gathering himself to hurl a powerful blast of energy at the house. Before he could do so, I leaped forward and threw myself against the wall, bodily lifting it into the air and pitching it a good twenty feet toward where Malvolio was standing. Seeing the wall hurtling toward him, he turned and tried to outrun it, but only partly succeeded. The house wall fell heavily on him, pinning him underneath it with only his head protruding. His forehead had struck one of the boulders we'd been hurling at each other. He was lying face down, conscious, but barely so.

I paused to catch my breath, but took a moment too long to do so. Malvolio began to revive and was trying with some success to push himself up on his elbows despite the weight of the house wall on top of him. Before I could act, Abuela ran past me with a large knife in her hand. She grabbed Malvolio's hair, pulled his head back,

and slit his throat. Blood gushed from the wound. He died only a few seconds later but not before, as I saw all too clearly, he thrust his soul out of his body. He was dead, but the departure of his soul before his death meant that he would be born again with a consciousness of his identity as a sorcerer.

I toppled over in a deep faint. When I awoke, I found myself lying on my back, my nakedness covered with a towel. Abuela was bathing my wounds and little Alejandra, tears running down her cheeks, was holding my hand—and, in her other hand, holding her doll.

"I'm sorry about your house," I told Abuela.

"Shhh!" she replied. "We can't stay here, and we need to leave as soon as possible, because this man's soldiers will come looking for him."

Healing energy was flowing into my body from Alejandra's hand. "It might help if you held my dolly," she said, ready to hand it to me.

I'm embarrassed to admit how tempted I was to take the doll from her, so intense was my desire to possess it and the jewel I believed was hidden in it. After an inner struggle, I managed to restrain my desire and said, "Thank you, but it might be more effective if you held your doll while placing it next to my heart."

Very gently she did as I'd asked, and it felt as if my heart slowly opened and my whole body was flooded with joy and tenderness for every living being. Tears streamed down my face. Eventually I told Alejandra, "Thank you. I feel much better. You can remove your doll from my chest. It is a most precious doll, and you must always keep it safe."

Alejandra nodded gravely, her tears now dried, and did as I had asked. "You're a good man," Abuela said. "You saved our lives, and Alejandra's doll is safe too."

Back in Santa Fe a hundred years after these events, Don Carlos apologized to his friends for the length of his story about Montezuma's Emerald. "I've gone on long enough," he said. "Let me quickly summarize what came next. I soon regained my strength and was able to drag both Apolinar's and Malvolio's bodies to a nearby ravine, where I pitched them over the edge and watched as they tumbled down a hundred feet and were swallowed up in the thick vines at the bottom.

I warned Abuela and Alejandra that as soon as he was able Malvolio would come back to take revenge on them. Abuela assured me that she and Alejandra would be long gone by then. “Besides,” she added, “Alejandra is almost of the age at which she’s outgrown dolls and must give her doll to another little girl.”

I made my way back to Oaxaca and from there to the port of Veracruz, where I came down with a fever stemming from one of the wounds I’d received from Malvolio. It had been festering for weeks. I died in Veracruz in, if memory serves me correctly, 1603 at the age of thirty-seven.”

“Wait a minute!” Inéz said. “You can’t stop without telling whether Montezuma’s Emerald exists!” Everyone else nodded in agreement.

“Unfortunately,” Carlos replied, “I don’t know. I never saw it. Like the other chief characters in this story—Father Agustin and Don Malvolio—I was driven to act based on the idea that the jewel existed. Under the spell of this idea, I came to believe that Montezuma’s Emerald was inside Alejandra’s doll, but I have no proof that that was anything more than a figment of my imagination.”

“All that killing, torture, and meanness was driven by an idea rather than facts? That’s crazy!” Inéz exclaimed.

“True enough,” Carlos replied, “but I’m sure you’ll agree that ideas have great power, and that throughout human history, many terrible deeds have been done in pursuit of them.”

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Gerald W. McFarland was born in Oakland, California. After receiving his B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, he moved to New York City, where he completed his doctorate at Columbia University. He taught United States history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for forty-four years (1964-2008). During that time he published four nonfiction books on varied subjects in his field: Mugwump political reformers, families in

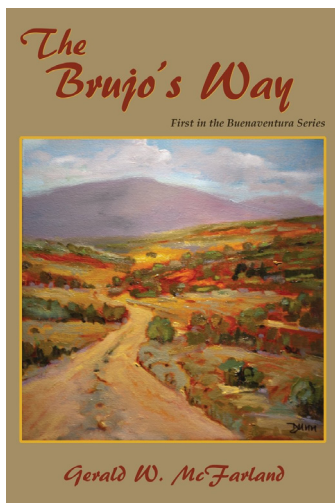
westward migration, a bizarre Vermont murder case, and Greenwich Village in the decades before World War I. He is the recipient of many honors, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. The Colonial Dames of America named his second book, *A Scattered People: An American Family Moves West*, one of the three best books in American history published in 1985. He and his wife live in a small town in Western Massachusetts.

For more information on the author and his publications, see:
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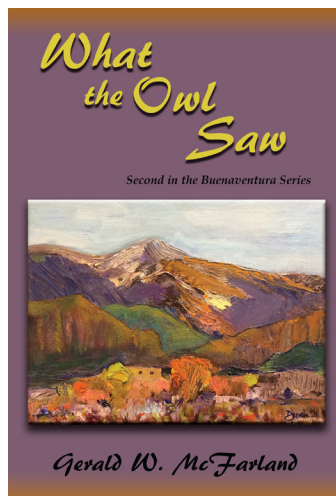
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More dangerous for Don Carlos is a friendship with three entertainers, a magician and two seductive dancers, recent arrivals in Santa Fe. They seem to have access to esoteric levels of consciousness, but he suspects they may be agents of Don Malvolio, an evil sorcerer and Carlos's enemy through many lifetimes. Only in the closing chapters is the truth about the threesome revealed, and in those same chapters, Don Carlos, flying a long distance in owl form, sees difficult truths about himself and about what he must do next in his pursuit of the path of knowledge he calls the Unknown Way.

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