

THE TRAIL OF THE FEATHERED SERPENT by Rick Lai

He has been called the Splendid Golden Light, the Breather of Life and the First Being. His name among the Aztecs was Quetzalcoatl. The Mayan knew him as Kukulcan. Guatemalan Indians also called him Gucumatz. This mythological entity with the form of a feathered serpent was the primary deity of Central America before the Spanish conquest. A criminal adopted the name of this ancient god and made its image the symbol of destruction. This diabolical mastermind eluded capture by Scotland Yard, played a hidden role in the death of Doc Savage's father, and was brought to justice by The Shadow.

The title character of Edgar Wallace's *The Feathered Serpent* (1927) was a British millionaire who conducted philanthropic deeds in London's East End under the alias of William Lane, a mythical American. A female crook, Ella Creed, learned of Lane's activities and used her sultry charms to swindle the magnate. With the help of two male accomplices, Ella framed Lane for counterfeiting and robbed him of \$700,000. Ella also married the financier in his William Lane identity. Upon his release from prison after serving a term of five years as Lane, the ex-convict initiated a campaign of vengeance against Ella and her cohorts. These crimes rocked London in November 1925 (1). After murdering Ella's partners, Lane imprisoned Ella in a secret dungeon where she would have languished for the same period that he had endured in a British jail. However, Scotland Yard rescued Ella from Lane's clutches, and the self-appointed avenger was forced to flee Britain.

Lane was branded the Feathered Serpent by the press because he left a card bearing a picture of the god Quetzalcoatl at the scenes of his crimes. The millionaire was also an archeologist who had served on several expeditions to Central America. He had developed an obsession with Quetzalcoatl whom he originally viewed as a symbol of benevolence and charity. Due to a miscarriage of justice, the Feathered Serpent became for Lane the representation of violent retribution.

Edgar Wallace did not reveal the country in where the fugitive made his new habitat. A likely candidate could be found among the republics of Central America, the region where Lane had performed his inquiries into the history of the Aztecs and the Mayans. A newspaper reporter had been informed by Lane of the existence of secret societies that still worshipped Quetzalcoatl in Central America. Lane had also mentioned that criminal gangs in Mexico regarded the Feathered Serpent as a sort of fetish. Did Lane make contact with these underground groups and forge them into a powerful crime syndicate?

The answer to that question can be deduced from a careful examination of Street and Smith's great pulp heroes, Doc Savage and The Shadow. In his first adventure, *The Man of Bronze* (March 1933) by Lester Dent (writing as Kenneth Robeson), Doc Savage fought the Son of Kukulcan, the wearer of an elaborate costume resembling a Feathered Serpent. The Son of Kukulcan had uncovered the existence of the Valley of the Vanished, the secret refuge of a tribe of Mayan Indians. The schemer wanted to plunder the Valley's gold reserves, but the Mayans had already promised to share their riches with a renowned American explorer and surgeon, Dr. Clark Savage Sr. Pretending to be the divine offspring of the god Kukulcan, the super-criminal gained the allegiance of a fanatical warrior sect among the Mayans. The mastermind's Mayan agents murdered the

elder Savage with a poison known as the Red Death. The murdered man's son, Doc Savage, thwarted the Son of Kukulcan's plans and became the beneficiary of the Mayans' vast treasures. The Son of Kukulcan fell to his death in the mountains of the Valley of the Vanished. Consequently, Doc Savage was unable to interrogate the Son of Kukulcan in order to ascertain whether he owed allegiance to a greater criminal.

The Man of Bronze was set in a Central American republic whose true identity was cloaked under the alias of Hidalgo. The real name of Hidalgo is Guatemala (2). This identification is based on several factors that are mentioned in later Doc Savage novels, particularly *The Golden Peril* (December 1937) by Harold A. Davis and Lester Dent. Both Guatemala and Hidalgo have a large population of Mayan Indians. Guatemala was economically sound through most of the 1930's. In fact, it ran on a balanced budget from 1933 to 1944. In the Doc Savage novels, the economy of Hidalgo prospered because Doc Savage was sharing with the government the gold from the Valley of the Vanished. *The Golden Peril* cited construction projects in Hidalgo such as a new National Palace and a modern hospital that had parallels in real-life Guatemala.

While the locale of Doc Savage's adventure was disguised, there was no similar subterfuge when The Shadow duelled with a master criminal associated with the legend of the Feathered Serpent. This conflict transpired in Mexico as depicted in *Quetzal* (February 15, 1937) by Walter Gibson (writing as Maxwell Grant). Using a shortened version of Quetzalcoatl's name, the title character did not wear any costume. Instead, he made the Feathered Serpent a token of communication among his minions. The henchman of Quetzal carried coins and medallions depicting a winged reptile. Quetzal headed a freelance espionage ring that was prepared to sell the secret military plans of the United States and Mexico to an unscrupulous foreign power. The Shadow journeyed south of the border to frustrate Quetzal's sale. The crime-fighter escaped numerous assassination attempts by Quetzal's operatives especially the beautiful Dolores Borenza, an infamous international spy. In the climax of their struggle, Quetzal perished before the gunfire of The Shadow. As for the devilish Dolores, a Mexican sharpshooter's bullet claimed her life.

These two cases of Doc Savage and The Shadow suggest that William Lane was very active in the 1930's. Initially, Lane's crimes stemmed from a personal quest for justice, but society had transformed him into an embittered fugitive by preventing his vengeance on his female tormentor. The forces of law and order were diligently hounding him around the globe. The world in general became his enemy. Now it would feel his wrath. Using the funds with which he absconded from Britain, Lane established a new identity in Mexico

Scotland Yard had circulated Lane's description throughout Latin America. The criminal realized the necessity of altering his appearance. The Feathered Serpent was thin-faced and lean when he confronted Scotland Yard. By the time of his meeting, with The Shadow in December 1936 (3), the Serpent (alias Quetzal) was now board-faced and portly. Eleven years is sufficient time for such a transformation. Supplied with false papers by a skilled forger, the Englishman not only had a new name but a new nationality. During his sojourn in Mexico, the Serpent spoke English with an American accent just as he had done in his phony American identity of William Lane.

The Feathered Serpent established a crime network throughout Central America. His sinister syndicate was known as the Sons of the Feathered Serpent. In Mexico, the

head of this organization was called Quetzalcoatl or Quetzal for short. In Guatemala, he was known as Kukulcan and Gucumatz. During an archeological expedition before he embarked on a criminal career, the Feathered Serpent had heard rumors of the Valley of Vanished. He instructed his top operative in Guatemala, a corrupt politician, to spare no expense in gaining control of the Mayan gold reserves. This lieutenant was the Son of Kukulcan defeated by Doc Savage.

The financial expenditures incurred in the Guatemala fiasco put severe strains on the resources of the Sons of the Feathered Serpent. Quetzal's organization confined itself to more traditional crime for many years in an effort to replenish its treasury. When Quetzal came into contact with Dolores Borenza, she convinced him of the lucrative potential of the international espionage market. The Feathered Serpent branched out into the business of selling military secrets to the highest bidder.

Did the Sons of the Feathered Serpent have links to other criminal organizations? There is ample evidence that alliances were formed between Quetzal's secret society and the two most formidable confederations of crime on the planet.

The Red Death, the poison from *The Man of Bronze*, caused its victims to be covered with crimson spots on their skins. These symptoms are very similar to those caused by the deadly bite of the Scarlet Brides, venomous spiders employed by the Si-Fan in Sax Rohmer's *President Fu Manchu* (1936). Under the leadership of Dr. Fu Manchu, the Si-Fan was the most powerful criminal group in Asia. In *The Trail of Fu Manchu* (1934), the Si-Fan had ample access to curare, the Central American poison. The Si-Fan could have traded the venom of the Scarlet Brides to the Sons of the Feathered Serpent for curare.

The Red Death was derived from diseased birds. In some ways, it was similar to "parrot fever." The Son of Kukulcan boasted that a drunken scientist had developed the Red Death for him. The scientist was then murdered to maintain his silence. The Son of Kukulcan could have given the Scarlet Brides to the scientist. By incubating the venom of the spiders inside tropical birds, the scientist could have bred a mutant strain, the Red Death (4).

The Si-Fan was seeking to spread beyond Asia in the early 1930's. In *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), a novel set in the autumn of 1930 (5), the Si-Fan had gained dominance over the Leopard Men of Africa. *The Man of Bronze* took place in May 1931 (6). The poison deals with Quetzal could have been Fu Manchu's attempt to expand into Central America by enticing the Sons of the Feathered Serpent to join the Si-Fan. Fu Manchu had no interest in the gold of the Valley of the Vanished. He had discovered how to manufacture synthetic gold in vast quantities. In fact, Fu Manchu boasted that he had used his artificial gold to cause the Great Depression by manipulating financial markets. Despite this lack of interest in the Mayan gold, Fu Manchu would have viewed Quetzal's attack on the Valley of the Vanished as a valid test of the competence of the Sons of the Feathered Serpent. When Doc Savage triumphed, Fu Manchu recognized his association with the Sons of the Feathered Serpent as a failure (7). Quetzal and his subordinates were never invited to become part of the Si-Fan.

Yet they seem to have been incorporated into a rival syndicate by December 1936. The events of *Quetzal* followed immediately after The Shadow's case known as *Washington Crime* (April 1, 1937) (8). In that novel, The Shadow ended the career of another international spy, Hugo Creelon. Just after his victory over Creelon, The Shadow

found himself marked for death by Dolores Borenza and Quetzal's henchmen. Creelon discovered that The Shadow posed as Lamont Cranston. Without any explanation, Quetzal and Dolores Borenza were aware of the Cranston identity. Creelon must have informed Quetzal about the relationship between Cranston and The Shadow. Creelon and Quetzal were clearly allies.

Dolores Borenza pursued The Shadow with a vehement passion. It was as if she had a personal reason for hating The Shadow. Possibly The Shadow was responsible for her lover's death. However, it is unlikely that Dolores was romantically involved with Creelon. In *Washington Crime*, Creelon had to recruit a female agent, Nina Valencia, to assist in his schemes. He would not have needed Nina if Dolores was at his beck and call (9). Most probably Dolores had been the mistress of Gaspard Zemba (10), the international spy whom The Shadow defeated in Paris during August 1935. His demise was depicted in *Zemba* (December 1, 1935).

Zemba, Creelon, Quetzal and Borenza could all be members of a larger conspiracy. Evidence of a huge underworld combine can be found in both the adventures of The Shadow and Doc Savage. Darvin Rochelle, The Shadow's foe in *The Embassy Murders* (January 1, 1934), posed as the head of the International Peace Alliance. Rochelle's agents secretly promoted war not peace. In order to foment conflicts in South America, Rochelle's henchmen murdered diplomats and stole their top secret documents (11). The Leader, Doc Savage's adversary in *The Golden Peril*, was secretly an official of the League of Nations. He pretended to be the advocate of global harmony, but he was really stirring up trouble in South and Central America. Darvin Rochelle perished in November 1933, and the Leader was brought to justice in March 1937.

Rochelle professed to be his own master, but he most likely was the Leader's right-hand in a global conspiracy. Zemba, Creelon, Quetzal and Borenza also must have taken their orders from the Leader. Did this crime syndicate have a name? In the works of John Buchan, there is an enigmatic organization called the Krafthaus (German for "power-house") that was led in 1910 by a mastermind named Andrew Lumley. It was dedicated to the promotion of chaos throughout the world. Lumley's activities were documented in Buchan's *The Power House* (1916). A similar unnamed organization led by Dominick Medina appeared in Buchan's *The Three Hostages* (1924). Writing elsewhere (12), I have revealed that Lumley and Medina were aliases of relatives of Professor Moriarty, the great criminal topped by Sherlock Holmes in 1891. The Krafthaus arose from the ashes of the Professor's syndicate, but it is actually the incarnation of a much earlier secret society. Jean-Marc Lofficier has revealed that Moriarty's gang was in reality the Black Coats, a crime syndicate whose prior activities in the nineteenth century were depicted in novels by Paul Feval (13). The Krafthaus was just another alias for the Black Coats (14). With the demise of Dominick Medina, the Professor's nephew, in 1921, and the defection of Carl Peterson, the Professor's grandson, to the Si-Fan in 1922 (15), the Moriarty family lost control of the Black Coats. The Leader arose to control the clandestine order.

As the All-Father of the Black Coats, he presided over the secret society with a High Council that included Rochelle, Zemba, Borenza and others (16). With Rochelle's death in Washington D. C. during 1933, his seat on the High Council was assumed by Hugo Creelon. Zemba's demise at the hands of The Shadow in 1935 prompted Dolores Borenza to travel to Central America to find an adequate replacement. At the Leader's

bequest, she offered the position to Quetzal. The Sons of the Feathered Serpent became a subsidiary of the Black Coats.

Quetzal informed the Leader of the Valley of the Vanished. The Leader saw the opportunity to secure the gold reserves in order to destabilize financial global markets. After the deaths of Creelon, Quetzal and Borenza in December 1936, the Leader turned his attention to Guatemala. He launched a military assault on the Valley of the Vanished in March 1937. Doc Savage defeated this scheme, and the Leader was killed.

The Black Coats weren't finished with Doc Savage. The organization felt under the sway of two other members of the High Council, Carloff Traniv and Pecos Allbellin. As revealed in *The Munitions Master* (August 1938) by Harold A. Davis, Doc foiled their campaign to conquer the world. This battle transpired in May 1937. Traniv and Allbellin forced all their subordinates to wear radio belts that could receive a transmission capable of incinerating the wearer. Doc sabotaged the deadly duo's radio transmitter. Consequently, Traniv and Allbellin inadvertently liquidated their entire organization. Doc's triumph largely meant the demise of the Black Coats. Some factions independent of Traniv and Allbellin survived, but those groups felt under the domination of the Third Reich's espionage apparatus. With the defeat of Hitler, new criminal organizations such as Ernst Starvo Blofeld's SPECTRE emerged in the post-World War II era to supplant the prominence of the Black Coats.

Among all these giant of criminality, there were minor miscreants. One such hoodlum was Lee Clavier, who tangled with The Shadow in *No Time for Murder* (December 1944). Lee Clavier had a long history of banditry in Mexico. He tried to frighten his victims by sending them an image of the god Quetzalcoatl. In October 1943, he became involved in a murder in New York after having been presumed dead for years. Clavier was probably a minor member of the Sons of the Feathered Serpent. He must have left the organization after Quetzal's death. Thus, he did not become part of the ill-fated Black Coat assault led by Traniv and Allbellin.

Part of Quetzal's legacy was crooks like Clavier. Nevertheless, Quetzal could have left an entirely different legacy that wasn't evil. As demonstrated in Edgar Wallace's novel, the Feathered Serpent was quite willing to marry women in his false identity of William Lane. In a trip to the United States taken before or during World War I, the man posing as William Lane could easily have married an American woman. The first wife of William Lane must have died shortly after giving birth to a daughter. William Lane would have set aside a trust fund to have his daughter raised in America. The daughter of the Feathered Serpent was christened Margo Lane.

In 1940, Margo would meet The Shadow in a New York nightclub (17). Realizing that she was the daughter of a man whom he had killed, The Shadow assumed a protective attitude towards Margo. He eventually recruited her as an agent. Her father had been a good man who had become consumed by hatred and vengeance. The Shadow recognized the same propensity for good or evil in Margo. The crime-fighter took Margo under his wing to ensure that her fate would not be the same as her father.

NOTES

1. An early scene in *The Feathered Serpent* mentioned “the gray of a November afternoon” (chap. 2). A female character was told that she was “old-fashioned” for a person “living in 1925” (chap.4).
2. Lester Dent’s notes for *The Man of Bronze* indicate the Hidalgo was based on Nicaragua in his first Doc Savage novel. As the series progressed, Hidalgo began to resemble Guatemala.
3. The chronological placement of *Quetzal* and all other cited Shadow novels is based on my *Chronology of Shadows*.
4. There is another parallel involving drugs between the Fu Manchu and Doc Savage. Fu Manchu had a catalepsy-inducing drug. In *The Island of Fu Manchu* (1941), the drug was stated to have its origins in Egypt. In Sax Rohmer’s *The Golden Scorpion* (1919), the drug was given the conflicting origin of being distilled from the black scorpion of India. Doc Savage discovered a remote civilization of people descended from Egyptians in Lester Dent’s *Birds of Death* (October 1941). This lost tribe also had a catalepsy-inducing drug. These strange Egyptians worshipped a canary-type bird. These birds could have been the source of the drug. In ages past, they may have been bitten by Egyptian scorpions and somehow incubated the catalepsy-inducing drug. The descendants of the original birds must have been able to produce the drug naturally. Fu Manchu could have discovered these birds in Egypt. From his research in Egypt, he could have concluded that the venom of black scorpion of India was virtually identical to that of the arachnids that had inflected the original birds.
5. The chronology of *The Mask of Fu Manchu* is determined in Cay Van Ash’s “A Question of Time” from *The Rohmer Review* #17 (August 1977).
6. The chronological placement of all Doc Savage novels in this article is based on my book, *The Complete Chronology of Bronze* (1999).
7. Yet, the alliance may have been secretly profitable to the Si-Fan. Fu Manchu abducted scores of Western scientists using his catalepsy-inducing drug known as F. Katalepsis. Clark Savage Sr. may not have perished from the Red Death. Agents of Fu Manchu could have inflected Savage with both F. Katalepsis and an antidote for the Red Death. The alleged corpse of the elder Savage was then stolen by the Si-Fan and brought to the Far East.
8. Although published after *Quetzal*, Walter Gibson wrote *Washington Crime* first and then immediately followed it with *Quetzal*. I chronologically assigned *Washington Crime* to early December 1936.
9. Nina Valencia escaped retribution at the conclusion of *Washington Crime*. It’s possible that Walter Gibson had Nina Valencia and Dolores Borenza as the same female character in his original manuscripts. When the editorial decision was made to publish *Quetzal* before *Washington Crime*, the text could have been altered to transform one character into two different female spies. Both Nina Dolores had dark hair and olive skins. However, the published texts depicted Nina as handsome rather than beautiful (in the manner of Irma Peterson from the Bulldog Drummond novels). By contrast, Dolores was presented as simply beautiful.
10. Zemba was a brilliant master of disguise. He could only be recognized by a missing finger. His situation paralleled that of Carl Peterson, the chief villain of

- H. C. McNeile's Bulldog Drummond novels. Peterson could only be detected through a nervous habit of tapping his knee with a finger. Possibly Zemba heard of Peterson's eccentricity in the 1920's. Zemba might have made the mistake of boasting that he was a superior actor because his hands did not make unconscious movements. The insulted Peterson could have responded by cutting off Zemba finger.
11. The bodies of Rochelle's victims were destroyed in acid vats. Rochelle must have borrowed this idea from Henry Lakington, Carl Peterson's assistant in H. C. McNeile's *Bulldog Drummond* (1920).
 12. See my "The Secret History of Captain Nemo."
 13. The revelation that Moriarty belonged to the Black Coats was made in the graphic story *Le Dossier Homicron (The Homicron File)*, Part 3, *L'Ombre du Passé (The Shadow from the Past)*, in the magazine *Fantask* #3 (Semic, June 2001). The story was written by Jean-Marc Lofficier, and the art was done by Jean-Jacques Dzialowski. Paul Feval's Black Coat novels are currently being translated by Brian M. Stableford for publication by Black Coat Press.
 14. The connection between the Krafthaus and the Black Coats was implied in my short story, "The Lady in the Black Gloves," in *Tales of the Shadowmen, Volume 3: Dance Macabre* (Black Coat Press, 2007). In 1896, the Black Coats utilized a fashion firm called the House of Crafts as a front.
 15. See my "Partners in Crime: Fu Manchu and Carl Peterson." Peterson was identified as Professor Moriarty's grandson in Philip Jose Farmer's *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life* (1973, revised in 1975).
 16. Other members of the High Council were probably two villains from Doc Savage novels by Lester Dent. These criminals were the heads of international spy rings in *The Seven Agate Devils* (May 1936) and *Devil on the Moon* (March 1938). According to my *The Complete Chronology of Bronze*, *The Seven Agate Devils* transpired in October 1934, and *Devil on the Moon* happened in February 1937. Both criminals perished before the Leader's life was snuffed out.
 17. Margo actually met the real Lamont Cranston on a Caribbean cruise. When the ship docked in New York, she then encountered The Shadow impersonating Cranston at a nightclub. Details of the initial meeting between Margo and The Shadow are briefly given in Walter Gibson's *The Hydra* (December 1, 1942).