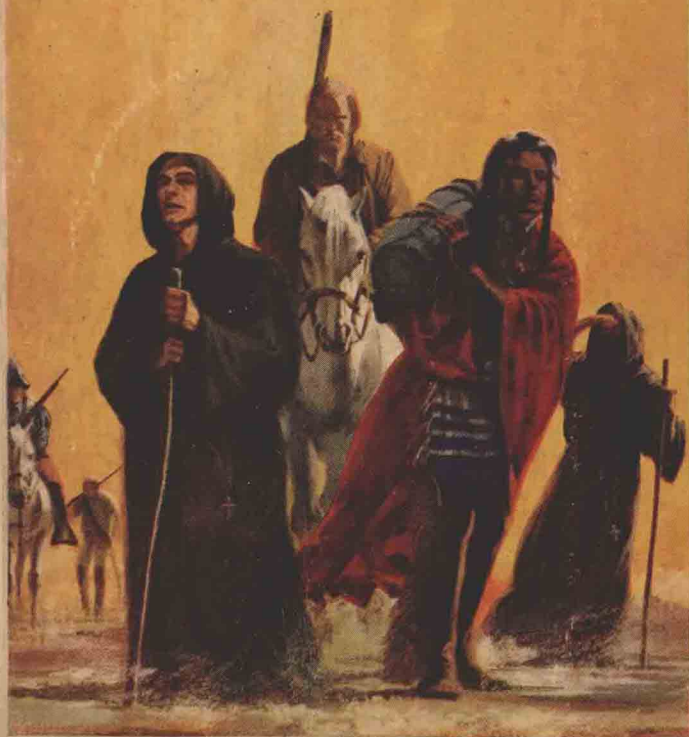




**A NOVEL BY WALLACE THOMPSON**

Across the deserts of 18th century California, two priests leading a rabble of soldiery fight against thirst, Indians, and temptation of the flesh.

# **THE SACRILEGIOUS SHORE**



## THE SACRILEGIOUS SHORE

A novel set in the late-seventeenth century when Spain was sending priests and soldiers to Mexico in increasing numbers to garner souls for the Church and gold for the King's treasure chests. It is the story of a march through unknown scorching deserts and mountains of unexplored California to found a new settlement.

"Mr. Thompson has created a grim drama . . . this is not just another 'historical novel', for the material is eternal."

To Lee and Helen Niebel



# *The Sacrilegious Shore*

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WALLACE THOMPSON

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## FOREWORD

THE Mexico of Montezuma fell to Cortez in 1521, only 29 years after the stubborn visionary from Genoa discovered America. By 1536 avarice had driven the Spanish gold seekers to the shores of the Pacific, where Cortez ordered a ship built to explore the Vermilion Sea, the narrow gulf that separates the peninsula of Lower California from the mainland of Mexico. The search for souls along with the search for treasure, brought the Church and the military into close alliance, and together they conquered what remained of heathen Mexico, penetrating to the north and west until they had placed all the lands along the Vermilion Sea under the flag of Spain and the cross of Rome. There they stopped for a while, enervated by the backwash of conquest.

The greed of the royal court in Madrid soon drained Mexico of much of her wealth. The gold of the Aztecs was melted down into bars and shipped to Europe. The silver mines were soon exhausted. Expeditions were sent to the north, into Arizona and New Mexico and even as far as Kansas, in search of the Seven Cities of Cibola, where the streets were paved with gold and jewels lay scattered about the earth, waiting to be picked up. But nothing was found, and those who had inherited the exhausted Mexico that had become New Spain grew restless when they heard tales of the wealth their predecessors had found.

To the west, shimmering through heat waves across the Vermilion Sea, lay the mysterious peninsula, still virgin, still a temptation for those who dreamed of gold or of countless souls to be saved. Long ago in Spain a novelist had written of a Queen named Califa and of her distant kingdom of California, and somehow legend became intermingled with truth and the desolate land across the gulf was named California and there were stories of gold there, and a great city ruled by Amazons . . . Cabrillo had skirted the Pacific side of the peninsula in 1542 and several expeditions had sailed far up the Vermilion Sea searching for a northwest passage but until the end of the 17th century the peninsula itself lay unexplored, a dessicated

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skeleton of rock and sand that lay grinning in the sun with a death's-head smile.

In 1697 the first permanent settlement in Lower California was founded by Jesuit fathers at Loreto, on the gulf coast of the peninsula. A church was built of stone and a few incredibly primitive Indians were persuaded to abandon their nomadic ways and accept the Church's regular dole of food in exchange for baptism and participation in a ritual that none of them understood. But beyond this foothold, over the mountains called the Giantess, lay the still unknown, the unexplored, the beckoning land of heart's desire.

## CHAPTER ONE

THE most memorable aspect of Topolobampo was the smell of rotting fish. It penetrated everywhere, from the hard, sandy beach through the town to the desert beyond, relieved only when the wind shifted from northwest to east. But the east wind was no more welcome than the west, for in place of the putrescent odour it swept in stifling blasts laden with sand and dust through the village. Then the heat increased until the wind shifted back again to the west, but with the cooler air from the sea the odour of rotting fish returned, so that it was impossible to say which wind was worse.

The natives, however, did not seem to notice the smells of their village. In fact they seemed to thrive on them, for the second evening after the newcomers arrived two boats returned from a day of fishing on the Vermilion Sea and dumped onto the shore the remains of a catch so large that the town could not possibly consume it all. But no one seemed concerned that the fish on the beach would rot. They were left to decay in the sun or float in the shallow bay on the incoming tide, contested only by the village mongrels, a horde of black flies and *zopilotes* wheeling in the empty sky.

Topolobampo in the year 1702 was little more than a few adobe houses and a stone church encircled along the shore by makeshift huts constructed of sticks, sage and the grotesque skeletons of giant cactus. It sat in isolation beside a placid bay, a tiny cluster of dwellings on the edge of the immense coastal desert cut off from the more civilized interior by a vast and hostile wilderness of mountain and desert. Topolobampo's sun was a summer sun, no matter what the season. It parched the waterless shore, blazing in a cloudless sky, and was reflected back upon the village from the still mirror of the bay. In the desert behind the town, ravine-gutted and pierced with jagged outcroppings of rock, grew a jungle of underbrush and cactus, an eerie wasteland of immense thick-armed *cardon* and ghostly chaparral that grew higher than a man's head. From the rooftops of the village and from the beach the distant



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purple crest of the Sierra Madre Occidental could be seen, sometimes capped with transient clouds.

To the sensitive eye of Father Jakob Bernhard Hamich, Topolobampo had been a considerable disappointment. He had read accounts of it a number of times before leaving Europe and had heard it mentioned in Genoa, Cadiz and Mexico City. The books had told of a thriving port, a hub of commerce and the capital city of an entire province. In Genoa and Cadiz he had heard that it was a prosperous town, in Mexico it was described with less enthusiasm and in Guadalajara with a great deal more realism, but he had never expected to find it as he had. Although he had arrived in Topolobampo with mixed feelings, thankful for the sight of a harbour and of any settlement at all after weeks in the desert, he could not subdue his disappointment at his first sight of the town. The meanest hamlet in Westphalia had more to offer than this "great seaport and centre of commerce" on the western shore of Mexico.

To Father Hamich a more illogical place for a town could hardly be imagined. There was an excellent harbour, to be sure, but there was no agriculture to speak of, only a few patchwork fields of corn, melons, beans and squash that served to supplement the staples brought in by mule-back from the cities to the southeast. The desert hinterland was too barren and dry to supply much grazing for livestock. Fish were as abundant in the sea as game was scarce on land, yet there was no wealth to be had from fishing, for there were few consumers. The climate was unpleasant and there were none of the attractions and diversions offered by Mexico City or Guadalajara – or even some of the lesser towns – to break the endless monotony of day after stifling day.

Father Hamich knew well that he had not volunteered to come to the New World expecting to find civilization and the culture of Europe, yet he could not help comparing what he found with what he had left behind. In spite of long mental discipline, in spite of hard-won conviction that he would not be disturbed no matter what his preconceived ideas of the New World might turn out to be in reality, he could not suppress his disappointment. If this was Topolobampo, the capital of a province and the principal port north of Acapulco, what would Loreto be like? He hesitated to guess, feeling that it would be far

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better if when he reached the shore of California he might land there with an open mind.

Now his stay in Topolobampo was almost over, for he would begin the last part of his journey in the morning. The party he had led from Guadalajara had been delayed for almost a week by an unexpected cloudburst in the *barranca* country north of Ahuacatlan, and upon arrival in Topolobampo he had discovered that they could safely remain there only a few days before sailing across the Vermilion Sea to California, for the season of the terrible *chubascos* had almost begun. Now that he was about to leave Topolobampo, however, Father Hamich was sorry, not because he had grown to like the town any more during his three days of residence but because he wished he might have more time to become accustomed to the climate and the people before embarking for Loreto. There was another reason too, a reason he was reluctant to admit to himself but which he gradually came to recognize as true: he was not yet ready to go.

During his sixteen months of travel, during the long sea voyage and the waiting months in Cadiz, Mexico City and in Guadalajara it had never seemed possible that his goal might someday be imminent. There was always another month, another week or a few more days before reaching the next stopping place, and then more weeks of weary travel. But now he was almost there; it was just across the narrow sea. Already the boats were being readied to sail in the morning, at high tide shortly after dawn. He was to sail with them in a role he had anticipated for many months, as the temporal and spiritual leader of an expedition to found a mission in the unknown interior of California. But now that the moment to embark had almost come he was not yet prepared to go.

It was almost sunset. The sun perched brilliantly over the bright surface of the bay, flooding the sky with a reddish light. The town was beginning to stir after a suffocating day, and the afternoon silence was broken by the homely sounds of domesticity. With a western breeze came the rich stink of mangrove swamps and following its course, riding upon it, swarms of gnats hummed across the dusty town. From the beach came the persistent shriek of a windlass turning over and over, stopping and then starting up again. Flocks of birds chattered in thickets at the

desert's edge. Overhead the air teemed with bats, their thin cries barely audible as they flitted across the darkening sky. From high over the church came the raucous caw-cawing of crows, answered distantly by the sharp bay of a coyote.

Father Hamich walked slowly past the town's four houses towards the beach, absently acknowledging the bows and salutes of those he passed, listening to the mournful repetition of the coyote's cry. He was struck by the unreality of the scene, a scene too primitive, too harsh for the Northern eye. It was much like some imaginative description from a book of travel. He had seen a great deal of the world in his sixteen months since leaving Germany, but until now he had not felt such a strong sensation of alienness. How different this was from his native land.

He wandered towards the bay, forced at first to squint into the sun and then shade his eyes with his hand. He was a big man, with big hands and feet and a large frame that had once been too fleshy but that now, after his long and tedious journey, had lost its excess weight. Those who saw him for the first time took him for a man of great strength, and in actuality he was extremely strong. But his size and vigour were sometimes disconcerting to him. He considered them an encumbrance, for he felt that a man did not need physical strength in order to serve God. His height, although not unusual in Germany, was often a cause of embarrassment in this country of diminutive men. His Jesuit cassock too made him look bigger than he actually was, accentuating his height and the breadth of his shoulders. His hair was brown and thinning and his skin, even after months of exposure to a tropic sun, was much lighter than that of the average Andalusian, so that on the frontier, even more so than in Italy, Spain or in Mexico City, he became the object of much curiosity.

He was certain by this time that he would never become used to being stared at. Often, much to his annoyance, he was followed by children or even by grown men. But even more annoying was the fact that, because of his size, his fair hair and light skin, people to whom he spoke were sometimes awed by him, or, worse still, mistrusted him, as if they were either frightened or at a loss to know what to say to such a foreign-looking man. Despite what the scriptures told them they seemed amazed to discover that

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God had created men in sizes and colours different from themselves.

He was almost to the beach, still half lost in thought, when he glanced up to see Father Nieto coming towards him. The Spaniard was walking slowly, his head turned back to watch the activities along the shore, his feet dragging through the sand as if he were weary of lifting them and putting them down. Then he stumbled and in regaining his balance buried his sandals in the dust.

With a sigh Father Nieto stopped to take each sandal off and shake the dirt from it while balancing on the opposite foot. He did not notice Father Hamich, nor did he seem to notice anything else. As soon as his sandals were on again he proceeded on his way.

The German stepped to one side, expecting to talk with his colleague a moment. But Father Nieto, when he finally saw him, passed by with only a curt greeting, as if he were too embarrassed at having almost bumped into him to stop and talk. Quickly, with deliberate steps, he hurried on towards the church, his cassock held high above his ankles.

Father Hamich looked after him, unconsciously shaking his head. A strange and mysterious man ... He wondered if he would ever get to know him well. But he felt that if he did not know him well by this time perhaps he would never know him, for they had been together constantly during twelve long weeks on the trail from Guadalajara. Father Nieto had been a difficult man to understand. But even so, and even though he had done strange and even eccentric things during their enforced companionship, he had never before been unfriendly.

Upon their arrival in Topolobampo, however, Nieto had suddenly changed. He had become cool and aloof, and his coolness seemed to increase with each passing day. Father Hamich was disturbed by it, yet he could not convince himself that he alone was the cause of his colleague's unfriendliness. Something in Topolobampo had changed him, had caused him to withdraw more and more into himself until in only a few days he seemed like a different person. But what was responsible for his change Father Hamich could only guess.

As Hamich watched him now Father Nieto stopped at the door of an Indian hut to peer inside. He made no

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attempt to conceal his curiosity, nor did he seem to be aware of the possibility that his superior might be watching him. He nodded to someone inside the hut, then seemed suddenly upset by what he saw. With a shudder, crossing himself quickly, he hurried on towards the church even faster than before.

Father Hamich stood looking after him until he had disappeared into the graveyard behind the church. Perhaps he had had too much sun, Hamich thought, grasping for some explanation for his strange behaviour. Yet he knew that it was not the sun.

After a moment Father Hamich went on. Soon he came to the two crudely-built galliots that had been beached in the shallow water of the bay. The mast on each ship was a single pine log roughly hewn, looking as if it had simply been trimmed of its branches and hoisted into place. Some of the rough planks that formed the galliots' hulls were beginning to rot, and here and there a peg was loose or missing and whole strips of caulking were gone. Where their undersides were exposed to the air the priest could see barnacles clinging to the sodden wood amidst a thick green slime. They were awkward ships, small and primitive, appearing hardly seaworthy enough to sail across the bay. Yet along with several other galliots at another port and two or three row-boats they comprised the whole of His Majesty the King of Spain's fleet on the Vermilion Sea.

Indian porters clad in an array of cast-off clothing or in almost nothing at all were bringing supplies from the storehouse and the church. Although the tide was out the boats were partially submerged in shallow water, and the porters had to wade a short distance into the bay before they could place their burdens in a basket that was hauled up by men on board the galliots.

The smell of fish was so strong that Father Hamich involuntarily pinched his nostrils closed with his fingers. He walked as near the water as he could so that the damp sand might cool the soles of his sandals. Ripples moved in and out in sudden rushes, sucking about the prows of the boats and pushing arcs of foam across the wet sand. Pieces of dead fish floated back and forth on miniature waves.

Beside the larger of the galliots two men were deep in conversation. At first Father Hamich could see only one

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of them, for the second and smaller man was completely hidden behind the bulk of Ignacio Morales, the corporal who had been in charge of the soldiers escorting the two priests from Guadalajara. Morales, who looked even fatter now than he had while on the trail, brushed a halo of flies away from his head and let his hand drop limply as if a great weight were attached to it. He was laughing at something the second man was saying. Then he shifted his weight and bent to scratch his leg and Father Hamich saw that the man behind him was the ships' pilot.

The pilot was a man of medium height, slender and wiry, with jet black hair, beard and eyebrows and the nut-brown skin of a man who spent much of his time at sea. He gestured emphatically as he spoke, sometimes brushing the end of his coarse and unkempt beard with the back of his hand as if to verify to himself that it was still there. Besides him fat Morales, though the same height, seemed twice his size. The pilot continued to press his point, so absorbed in what he was saying that he did not notice Father Hamich until he was almost upon them.

The pilot turned, surprised at first, and then in a serious tone asked the priest how he had found the town.

"There is not much to see," Hamich replied. He spoke hesitantly, conscious of his German accent as he remembered the pilot's previous amusement at his use of the Spanish tongue.

"No, there is not much. But you will find even less in Loreto. There is as little there as there is here. I prefer Topolobampo myself. At least here you sometimes meet travellers going to the missions in Sonora. In Loreto there is nothing."

Father Hamich did not reply. He smiled gravely and turned to look across the bay.

"Does that disappoint you, Father?" the pilot asked.

"No."

"It is good of you to say that. It is rare for us to have a visitor from a more civilized land who does not despise our way of life. We have a saying that one has to be born in hell to be able to appreciate it."

"Have you lived in Topolobampo all your life?" Father Hamich asked, for lack of anything better to say.

"No. I come from Culiacan, to the south. But there it

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is no better than here. There are no prosperous towns in Nayarit either."

"I did not come to Mexico expecting to find prosperous towns."

The pilot smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "You were wise to prepare yourself, Father. But I do not think the other priest prepared himself so wisely," he said, looking towards the church.

Father Hamich was displeased at his remark, surprised for some reason that Father Nieto's strangeness should have been noticed by someone other than himself. He did not like the prospect of criticism when they had only been there three days - or that there should be criticism at all, for that matter.

The pilot looked at Morales with a half smile on his lips. "There are no prosperous towns at all in this part of the world. In California there is Loreto, and beyond that - nothing."

"Then you know the interior of California," Father Hamich said.

"Not well; no. Once I went inland, for half a day's march. That was all. But I know the coast well. I have been all along the coast of California for three days' journey south of Loreto and a day's journey north. I know the country well, but I have never seen a gold mine or any forests or rivers. All the stories told about the riches of California are lies. It is the most miserable land I have ever seen, even more miserable than this." He made a sweep with his arm that was meant to include all the hinterland behind them.

"And the natives?" Father Hamich asked. "What sort of people are they? Are they at all like the Indians here on the mainland?"

"They are even more miserable than the land itself."

"The stories were different in Guadalajara," Morales said. "In Guadalajara they tell of a race of tall men and a kingdom of Amazons. All of them wear gold and silver ornaments studded with precious stones."

The pilot spat. "Who in Guadalajara has been to California to see for himself?"

"I will tell them the truth when I return," Morales said.

An Indian porter coming down the slope of the beach shouted as the bundle of cotton cloth he was carrying

began to slip from his grasp. The pilot stepped quickly to one side and caught the bundle as it fell. He propped it on the Indian's shoulders again and when it was balanced raised his bare foot and kicked the porter so hard he was almost knocked down. Then he came back to Morales and the priest, wiping his hands on his flanks.

"No one knows the real truth about California," he said with a knowing look. "Some people say it is an island and others say it isn't. For my part I say that it is, for I know a man who has sailed around it." He lowered his voice until it was almost a whisper. "In the north it is different from the part I have seen, though. I have heard the Indians talk about white men living in the north, men much like ourselves, in great cities. Whether there is gold there or not, I do not know, but I have seen bracelets of gold that the Indians said came from the north."

"Where did you see them?" Morales asked anxiously. "In Loreto?"

"No. Not in Loreto. West of Loreto, when I went inland."

"Did you get some gold for yourself? Did you bring any back?"

The pilot shook his head slowly and put a finger to the side of his angular nose. "No. Of course not. How could I? There were a hundred Indians there, two hundred perhaps, and I had only my guides. They let me look at their gold but they would not trade it for anything, not even my knife. The Indians in California are stupid. They are almost like animals." He leaned forward, rubbing his finger up and down along his nose. "They threatened to kill me. We had to leave in a hurry, but I did find out where the bracelets came from."

"Where?" Morales asked. "From where?"

"From the north. Far to the north, where a great river wide enough to carry a hundred ships flows to the ocean and the forests are filled with deer and bear."

"It seems there are tales even this close to California," Father Hamich said.

The pilot stepped back, offended and angry. "I saw the gold with my own eyes, Father!"

"Then it must be real," Hamich replied, trying to catch the pilot's mobile eyes. "If it is true, God grant that this



land to the north may never be found. Where there is gold the devil follows."

The pilot looked puzzled but did not reply. He turned away nervously. "They're bringing planks for the mules already. Tell the fools to take them back!" he shouted to no one in particular. "We're not going to load the animals until after supper." Then, as if in response to his own instructions, he went to meet the porters who were coming down the beach with planks on their shoulders, waving his arms and cursing at them.

Morales grinned at Father Hamich, bowed his head, excused himself and went to follow the pilot.

Father Hamich turned towards the bay, trying to cast off a vague sense of uneasiness by losing himself in contemplation of the pink sky. Night was coming on rapidly. Despite his many months in southern latitudes he had not yet grown accustomed to the abruptness of change from night to day, or from day to night. There was nothing here of the subtle, lingering twilight of the north, the calm, peaceful hour that to him was the best time of day, the time for meditation and prayer when God seemed nearest to His children on earth. Nor was dawn the same. The soft, cool mornings of a German summer had always evoked in him a sense of peace and a feeling of nearness to God, as God, with a tender hand, awakened the earth from its night's rest. In Mexico there was no time to meditate about the miracle of the earth's awakening, for dawn came on so quickly that it was full day before he had time to fall on his knees.

He watched the sky as it darkened, the reddish tint in the west fading as night descended upon it. For a short while only a dim horizon line separated sea and sky. Then that too was gone, and night enveloped the earth.

A bell began to ring, faintly at first and then with more intensity. Echoing, echoing, it filled the air with comforting sound, a civilized sound that proclaimed to the dead land that even here, at the far end of the earth, the teachings of Christ had come.

After supper the loading continued. The last of the provisions were put aboard, all but the valuable robes and ornaments that were destined for Loreto's church. An amber moon had appeared in the east, illuminating the shore with a delicate light.