

walls. The stars were large, keen and brilliant, but cold and steadfast. They did not dance nor twinkle in their adamantine setting. The furnace fire painted the faces of the men an Indian red, glanced on brightly coloured blanket and *serape*, but was eventually caught and absorbed in the waiting shadows of the black mountain, scarcely twenty feet from the furnace door. The low, half-sung, half-whispered foreign speech of the group, the roaring of the furnace, and the quick, sharp yelp of a coyote on the plain below, were the only sounds that broke the awful silence of the hills.

It was almost dawn when it was announced that the ore had fused. And it was high time, for the pot was slowly sinking into the fast-crumbling oven. Concho uttered a jubilant "God and Liberty," but Don Jose Wiles bade him be silent and bring stakes to support the pot. Then Don Jose bent over the seething mass. It was for a moment only. But in that moment this accomplished metallurgist, Mr. Joseph Wiles, had quietly dropped a silver half dollar into the pot!

Then he charged them to keep up the fires and went to sleep—all but one eye.

Dawn came with dull beacon fires on the near hill tops, and far in the East, roses over the Sierran snow. Birds twittered in the alder fringes a mile below, and the creaking of wagon wheels—the wagon itself a mere fleck of dust in the distant road—was heard distinctly. Then the melting pot was solemnly broken by Don Jose, and the glowing incandescent mass turned into the road to cool.

And then the metallurgist chipped a small fragment from the mass and pounded it, and chipped another smaller piece and pounded that, and then subjected it to acid and then treated it to a salt bath which became at once milky—and at last produced a white something—*mirabile dictu!*—two cents worth of silver!

Concho shouted with joy; the rest gazed at each other doubtfully and distrustfully. Companions in poverty, they began to diverge and suspect each other in prosperity. Wiles' left eye glanced ironically from the one to the other.

"Here is the hundred dollars, Don Jose," said Pedro, handing the gold to Wiles with a decidedly brusque intimation that the services and presence of a stranger were no longer required.

Wiles took the money with a gracious smile and a wink that sent Pedro's heart into his boots, and was turning away, when a cry from Manuel stopped him. "The pot—the pot—it has leaked! look! behold! see!"

He had been cleaning away the crumbled fragments of the furnace to get ready for breakfast, and had disclosed a shining pool of quicksilver!

Wiles started, cast a rapid glance around the group, saw in a flash that the metal was unknown to them—and then said quietly:

"It is not silver."

"Pardon, Señor—it is, and still molten,"

Wiles stooped and ran his fingers through the shining metal.

"Mother of God, what is it then—magic?"

"No, only base metal." But here Concho, emboldened by Wiles' experiment, attempted to seize a handful of the glittering mass, that instantly broke through his fingers in a thousand tiny spherules, and even sent a few globules up his shirt sleeves, until he danced around in mingled fear and childish pleasure.

"And it is not worth the taking," queried Pedro of Wiles.

Wiles right eye and bland face were turned toward the speaker, but his malevolent left was

glancing at the dull red-brown rock on the hillside.

"No!" and turning abruptly away, he proceeded to saddle his mule.

Manuel, Miguel and Pedro, left to themselves, began talking earnestly together, while Concho, now mindful of his crippled mule, made his way back to the trail where he had left her. But she was no longer there. Constant to her master through beatings and bullyings, she could not stand incivility and inattention. There are certain qualities of the sex that belong to all animated nature.

Inconsolable, footsore and remorseful, Concho returned to the camp and furnace, three miles across the rocky edge. But what was his astonishment on arriving to find the place deserted of man, mule and camp equipage. Concho called aloud. Only the echoing rocks grimly answered him. Was it a trick? Concho tried to laugh. Ah—yes—a good one—a joke—no—no—they had deserted him! And then poor Concho bowed his head to the ground, and falling on his face, cried as if his honest heart would break.

The tempest passed in a moment; it was not Concho's nature to suffer long nor brood over an injury. As he raised his head again his eye caught the shimmer of the quicksilver—that pool of merry antique metal that had so delighted him an hour before. In a few moments Concho was again disposing with it; chasing it here and there, rolling it in his palms and laughing with boy-like glee at its elusive freaks and fancies. "Ah! sprightly one—skipjack—there thou goest—come here. This way—now I have thee, little one—come *muchacha*—come and kiss me," until he had quite forgotten the defection of his companions. And even when he shouldered his sorry pack he was fain to carry his playmate away with him in his empty leathern flask.

And yet I fancy the sun looked kindly on him as he strode cheerily down the black mountain side, and his step was none the less free nor light that he carried with him neither the silver nor the crime of his late comrades.

### CHAPTER III.

#### WHO CLAIMED IT.

The fog had already closed in on Monterey, and was now rolling, a white, billowy sea above, that soon shut out the breakers below. Once or twice in descending the mountain Concho had overhung the cliff and looked down upon the curving horse-shoe of a bay below him—distant yet many miles. Earlier in the afternoon he had seen the gilt cross on the white-faced Mission flare in the sunlight, but now all was gone. By the time he reached the highway of the town it was quite dark, and he plunged into the first *fonda* at the wayside, and endeavoured to forget his woes and his weariness in *aguardiente*. But Concho's head ached, and he was so generally distressed that he bethought him of a *medico*—an American doctor—lately come into the town, who had once treated Concho and his mule with apparently the same medicine, and after the same heroic fashion. Concho reasoned, not illogically, that if he were to be physicked at all he ought to get the worth of his money. The grotesque extravagance of life, of fruit and vegetable, in California, was inconsistent with infinitesimal doses. In Concho's previous illness the Doctor had given him a dozen 4 gr. quinine powders. The following day the grateful Mexican walked into the doctor's office—cured. The doctor was gratified until, on examination, it appeared that to save trouble, and because his memory was poor, Concho had taken all the