

Concho crossed himself hastily. "Mother of God, it is magic!"

"It is chloride of silver, you darned fool."

Not content with this cheap experiment, the stranger then took Concho's breath away by reddening some litmus paper with the nitrate, and then completely knocked over the simple Mexican by restoring its colour by dipping it in the salt water.

"You shall try me this"—said Concho, offering his iron ore to the stranger—"you shall use the silver and the salt."

"Not so fast, my friend," answered the stranger; "in the first place this ore must be melted, and then a chip taken and put in a shape like this—and that is worth something, my Greaser cherub. No sir, a man don't spend a his youth at Freyburg and Heidelberg to throw away his science gratuitously on the first Greaser he meets."

"It will cost—eh—how much?" said the Mexican eagerly.

"Well, I should say it would take about a hundred dollars and expenses to—to find silver in that ore. But once you've got it there—you're all right for tons of it."

"You shall have it," said the now excited Mexican. "You shall have it of us—the four! You shall come to our camp and shall melt it—and show the silver and—enough! Come," and in his feverishness he clutched the hand of his companion as if to lead him forth at once.

"What are you going to do with your mule?" said the stranger.

"True, Holy Mother—what, indeed?"

"Look yer," said the stranger, with a grim smile, "she won't stray far, I'll be bound. I've an extra pack mule above here; you can ride on her, and lead me into camp, and to-morrow come back for your beast."

Poor honest Concho's heart sickened at the prospect of leaving behind the tried servant he had outburged so strongly a moment before, but the love of gold was uppermost. "I will come back to thee, little one, to-morrow, a rich man. Meanwhile, wait thou here, patient one. —*Adios*—thou smallest of mules—*Adios*!"

And seizing the stranger's hand he clambered up the rocky ledge until they reached the summit. Then the stranger turned and gave one sweep of his malevolent eye over the valley.

Wherefore, in after years, when their story was related, with the devotion of true Catholic pioneers, they named the mountain "*La Canada de la Visitacion del Diablo*," "The Gulch of the Visitation of the Devil," the same being now the boundary lines of one of the famous Mexican land grants.

CHAPTER II.

WHO FOUND IT.

Concho was so impatient to reach the camp and deliver his good news to his companions that more than once the stranger was obliged to command him to slacken his pace. "Is it not enough, you infernal Greaser, that you lame your own mule, but you must try your hand on mine?" he added with a grin and a slight lifting of his baleful eyelid.

When they had ridden a mile along the ridge they began to descend down towards the valley. Vegetation now sparingly bordered the trail, clumps of *chemtsal*, an occasional Manzanita bush, and one or two dwarfed "buckeyes" rooted their way between the interstices of the black-grey rock. Now and then, in crossing some dry gully worn by the overflow of winter torrents, from above the greyish rock gloom was relieved by dull red and brown masses of colour, and almost every overhanging

rock bore the mark of a miner's pick. Presently as they surrounded the curving flank of the mountain, from a rocky bench below them, a thin ghost-like stream of smoke seemed to be steadily drawn by invisible hands into the invisible ether. "It is the camp," said Concho, gleefully. "I will myself forward to prepare them for the stranger," and before his companion could detain him he had disappeared at a sharp canter around the curve of the trail.

Left to himself, the stranger took a more leisurely pace, which left him ample time for reflection. Scamp as he was, there was something in the simple credulity of poor Concho that made him uneasy. Not that his moral consciousness was touched, but he feared that Concho's companions might, knowing Concho's simplicity, instantly suspect him of trading upon it. He rode on in a deep study. Was he reviewing his past life? A vagabond by birth and education, a swindler by profession, an outcast by reputation, without absolutely turning his back upon respectability, he had trembled on the perilous ridge of criminality ever since his boyhood. He did not scruple to cheat these Mexicans—they were a degraded race—and for a moment he felt almost an accredited agent of progress and civilization. We never really understand the meaning of enlightenment until we begin to use it aggressively.

A few paces further on four figures appeared in the now gathering darkness of the trail. The stranger quickly recognized the beaming smile of Concho, foremost of the party. A quick glance at the faces of the others satisfied him that while they lacked Concho's good humour, they certainly did not surpass him in intellect. "Pedro" was a stout *vagüero*; "Manuel" was a slim half-breed, and ex-convert of the Mission of San Francisco; and "Miguel" a recent butcher of Monterey. Under the benign influences of Concho, that suspicion with which the ignorant regard strangers died away, and the whole party escorted the stranger—who had given his name as Mr. Joseph Wiles—to their camp-fire. So anxious were they to begin their experiments that even the instincts of hospitality were forgotten, and it was not until Mr. Wiles—now known as "Don Jose"—sharply reminded them that he wanted some "grub," that they came to their senses. When the frugal meal of *tortillas*, *frijoles*, salt pork and chocolate was over, an oven was built of the dark red rock brought from the ledge before them, and an earthenware jar, glazed by some peculiar local process, tightly fitted over it, and packed with clay and soda. A fire was speedily built of pine boughs continually brought from a wooded ravine below, and in a few moments the furnace was in full blast. Mr. Wiles did not participate in these active preparations, except to give occasional directions between his teeth, which were contemplatively fixed over a clay pipe as he lay comfortably on his back on the ground. Whatever enjoyment the rascal may have had in their useless labours he did not show it, but it was observed that his left eye often followed the broad figure of the ex-*vagüero*, Pedro, and often dwelt on that worthy's beetling brows and half-savage face. Meeting that baleful glance once Pedro growled out an oath, but could not resist a hideous fascination that caused him again and again to seek it.

The scene was weird enough without Wiles' eye to add to its wild picturesqueness. The mountain towered above—a heavy Rembrandtish mass of black shadow—shaped out here and there against a sky so inconceivably remote that the world-sick soul must have despaired of ever reaching so far, or of climbing its steel-blue

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