

# THE STORY OF A MINE..

## PART I.

### CHAPTER I.

#### WHO SOUGHT IT.

It was a steep trail leading over the Monterey Coast Range. Concho was very tired, Concho was very dusty, Concho was very much disgusted. To Concho's mind there was but one relief for these insurmountable difficulties, and that lay in a leathern bottle slung over the *machillas* of his saddle. Concho raised the bottle to his lips, took a long draught, made a wry face and ejaculated:

"Carajo!"

It appeared that the bottle did not contain *aguariente*, but had lately been filled in a tavern near *Tres Pinos* by an Irishman who sold bad American whiskey under that pleasing Castilian title. Nevertheless, Concho had already nearly emptied the bottle, and it fell back against the saddle as yellow and flaccid as his own cheeks. Thus reinforced Concho turned to look at the valley behind him, from which he had climbed since noon. It was a sterile waste, bordered here and there by arable fringes and *valdas* of meadow land, but in the main dusty, dry and forbidding. His eye rested for a moment on a low white cloud line on the eastern horizon, but so mocking and unsubstantial that it seemed to come and go as he gazed. Concho struck his forehead and winked his hot eyelids. Was it the Sierras or the cursed American whiskey?

Again he recommenced the ascent. At times the half-worn, half-visible trail became utterly lost in the bare black-out-crop of the ridge, but his sagacious mule soon found it again, until, stepping upon a loose boulder, she slipped and fell. In vain Concho tried to lift her from out the ruin of camp kettles, prospecting pans and picks; she remained quietly recumbent, occasionally raising her head as if to contemplatively glance over the arid plain below. Then he had recourse to useless blows. Then he essayed profanity of a secular kind, such as "Assassin," "Thief," "Beast with a Pig's Head," "Food for the Bull's Horns," but with no effect.

Then he had recourse to the curse ecclesiastical:

"Ah, Judas Iscariot! is it thus, renegade and traitor, thou leavest me, thy master, a league from camp and supper waiting? Stealer of the Sacrament, get up!"

Still no effect. Concho began to feel uneasy; never before had a mule of pious lineage failed to respond to this kind of exhortation. He made one more desperate attempt:

"Ah, defiler of the altar! lie not there! Look! he threw his hand into the air, extending the fingers suddenly. "Behold, fiend! I exorcise thee! Ha! tremblest! Look but a little now—see! Apostate! I—I—excommunicate thee—*Mula!*"

"What are you kicking up such a devil of a row down there for?" said a gruff voice from the rocks above.

Concho shuddered. Could it be that the

devil was really going to fly away with his mule? He dared not look up.

"Come now," continued the voice, "you just let up on that mule, you d—d old Greaser. Don't you see she's slipped her shoulder?"

Alarmed as Concho was at the information, he could not help feeling to a certain extent relieved. She was lamed, but had not lost her standing as a good Catholic.

He ventured to lift his eyes. A stranger—an *Americano* from his dress and accent—was descending the rocks toward him. He was a slight built man with a dark, smooth face, that would have been quite commonplace and inexpressive but for his left eye, in which all that was villainous in him apparently entered. Shut that eye, and you had the features and expression of an ordinary man; cover up those features, and the eye shone out like Eblis' own. Nature had apparently observed this too, and had, by a paralysis of the nerve, ironically dropped the corner of the upper lid over it like a curtain, laughed at her handiwork and turned him loose to prey upon a credulous world.

"What are you doing here?" said the stranger after he had assisted Concho in bringing the mule to her feet, and a helpless halt.

"Prospecting, *Senor*."

The stranger turned his respectable right eye towards Concho, while his left looked unutterable scorn and wickedness over the landscape.

"Prospecting! what for?"

"Gold and silver, *Senor*—yet for silver most."

"Alone?"

"Of us there are four."

The stranger looked around.

"In camp—a league beyond," explained the Mexican.

"Found anything?"

"Of this—much." Concho took from his saddle bags a lump of greyish iron ore, studded here and there with star points of pyrites. The stranger said nothing, but his eye looked a diabolical suggestion.

"You are lucky, friend Greaser,"

"Eh?"

"It is silver."

"How know you this?"

"It is my business. I'm a metallurgist."

"And you can say what shall be silver and what is not."

"Yes—see here!" The stranger took from his saddle-bags a little leather case containing some half-dozen phials. One, enwrapped in dark blue paper, he held up to Concho.

"This contains a preparation of silver."

Concho's eyes sparkled, but he looked doubtfully at the stranger.

"Get me some water in your pan."

Concho emptied his water-bottle in his prospecting pan and handed it to the stranger. He dipped a dried blade of grass in the bottle and then let a drop fall from its tip in the water. The water remained unchanged.

"Now throw a little salt in the water," said the stranger.

Concho did so. Instantly a white film appeared on the surface, and presently the whole mass assumed a milky hue.